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STRANGE GUARDIAN

By CARTER CRITZ

Year after year, the mysterious man dogged her footsteps for some reason of his own—and Betty couldn't shake him!

BETTY TALBOT saw him approaching, and instantly some instinct warned her he meant trouble. He was an unsavory looking character in a droopy hat and droopier pants. His shoes were run down and the shoulder lining of his coat showed through a big rip. She looked around, hoping that Peter might appear, though it was still ten minutes before he was due, and Peter was always right on time. She wished she'd selected a busier and brighter corner for the rendezvous.

The man walked directly up to her. He had one hand in his pocket and there was a malicious grin on his face. "Lady," he said in a whiskey tenor, "you got two bits for a hungry man?"

She opened her purse, thinking she was going to get out of this easier than she

expected. The moment her purse was open, the man pulled his hand out of his pocket, and it held a knife. He touched a button and the blade sprang out with a shudderingly sinister click.

"Lady," he whispered, "you just give me the bag and then keep your trap shut. You squawk and I'll sink the shiv—"

Where the burly man materialized from Betty didn't know, but he was there, standing directly behind the bum with the knife and his big hand came down on the bum's shoulder with a bone crushing slap.

The bum swung around, very fast. The knife darted out, but that big hand caught his wrist and gave it an expert twist. The bum screamed as bone cracked. The knife hit the sidewalk and the big man kicked it into the

gutter. Then he pulled back a fist and made the bum's face more lopsided than nature had intended. Finally he booted him, hard, and sent him whimpering down the dismal street.

The big man came back to where Betty stood. He removed his hat. "I'd pick better spots than this to meet the boy friend," he said softly. "And, incidentally, here he comes now, only he's about two minutes too late."

The big man started to turn away, but the girl seized his arm. "No—wait," she said. "I want an answer to all this. I know who you are, but I want to know why you've followed me for three long years—why you've never been more than a block away from me at any time."

The big man smiled. It was a nice smile, Betty decided and, at close range, he wasn't bad looking. About thirty-five, she judged, though a furrowed forehead and haunted eyes made him look a bit older.

He said, "Well, it seemed like a good idea. Especially tonight—or don't you agree?"

Peter came hurrying up then. The girl went to him. She quickly explained what had happened. "This gentleman," she pointed to the burly man, "really saved my life, or my sanity at any rate. Peter—this is John Algar."

Peter Lindsay whistled sharply. "John Algar, the ex-cop who killed—"

"Yes, he killed my father," Betty admitted. "Some day I'll tell you about it. Well, Mr. Algar, I hope my fiancé meets with your approval. You seem to think it necessary to approve everything I do."

"He's a nice lad," Algar said softly. "And don't think I didn't check on him. Good night, Miss Talbot. Night, Peter Lindsay."

HE TURNED and walked slowly away, but at the corner he stopped, lit a cigarette and leaned against a store window. Betty gave an exasperated sigh, took Peter's arm and they walked off.

Algar straightened up and began

following them.

"What in the world," Peter asked, "is this all about? Do you mean to say that man has followed you—us—every time we've been out together?"

"Depend upon it, darling. Mostly I never see him, but he's always there. A year ago he snatched me out of the path of a drunken driver. Before that I worked in a small office where the boss thought his hired help—female—ought to work overtime. I steered clear of him until one night when I simply couldn't. Algar broke down the door and nearly killed the man."

"But why?" Peter asked.

"It's quite a story," she said. "Three years ago John Algar was a detective sergeant. He worked with my father who was a lieutenant of detectives. Algar hated my father though I've never known why. One night they had a showdown. It was in a vacant building. They found Algar wounded and badly beaten. The bullet in him matched those fired by my father's service pistol.

"My father was found in our home. It was only two doors away from the vacant building. Dad was dead. He'd apparently been shot in the vacant building and managed to stagger home where he thought there'd be help or at least a telephone. The bullet in him came from Algar's gun."

Peter shook his head. "Ghastly! Now, I suppose, this Algar is trying to make amends for what he did. Don't tell me he's still a cop?"

"No; they fired him off the force and arrested him, but he told a story of meeting Dad in that building on some case Dad was handling. Algar said he was hit over the head the moment he entered and that's all he ever knew. Obviously, it was a lie, but the burden of proof was upon the police and they had nothing to counter Algar's story."

"They had the matching bullet from Algar's gun," Peter grunted.

She nodded. “Yes, I thought of that, but I suppose policemen protect one another even when something as bad as this happened. Right after Algar got out of the hospital and was fired, he began watching me. And he’s never stopped.”

“I can stop him,” Peter offered, none too hopefully. He recalled that Algar was a powerful looking man and Peter was just average in build and none too handy with his fists.

She shook her head. “I’d rather you didn’t.”

“But he killed your father—murdered him.”

“Perhaps. Peter, so many things have happened since then and all the good ones were John Algar’s doings. Naturally I quit my job after he beat up the boss. Algar found me another, the one I have now with Greg Shelton and his import-export business. I don’t know how Algar arranged it, but he did. And there are so many other things.”

Peter lit a cigarette and took her elbow when they reached a curb. “Darn funny way to go about things though. And did you hear him say I was all right? Do you suppose he actually checked on me?”

“I know he did. Once, two years ago, there was a boy I liked very much. Algar told me he wasn’t very good and why he thought so. The boy persisted in trying to see me until one night when he met Algar. I—never saw him again.”

Peter exhaled and then submitted to a grin. “I guess it’s a darn good thing I’m pure, otherwise Algar would probably wrap me around the nearest lamp post. Well, let’s forget your strange guardian and have dinner.”

THEY went to a movie later and when they emerged at eleven o’clock, they both had a glimpse of the strange guardian—only a glimpse though because he seemed to have a knack for fading out of sight like some

reluctant wraith. Peter led Betty to a small public park and they sat down in the shadow of a statue.

“Ordinarily,” Peter said, “I wouldn’t like invading a park at this hour, but I’ll bet your watchdog is on duty. It does give you a feeling of security at that. Anyway, I’ve things to talk about, Betty. Serious things. By straining your imagination can you guess what I mean?”

She smiled and moved a little closer to him, snuggling into the protection of his arm. “I’ve been wondering when you’d get around to talking over our wedding, Peter. I’m all ears and impatience.”

He kissed her on the tip of the nose and felt a little funny about it, knowing that a pair of quiet, somber gray eyes were watching every move they made.

“Betty, I saved it as a surprise. I’m being promoted next week to assistant manager with a nice hike in pay—enough to support an apartment and a wife. We could be married in about a month or two.”

She sighed contentedly. “I’ve been saving a surprise too. My boss, Mr. Shelton, told me only last week that he would present us with a nice little home on Long Island, furnished down to toothpicks in the pantry. In exchange he wants the old house where I live now. The firm is going to tear it down and build a new office structure. He’ll also give me a certain amount of cash besides the new house. Does that make you as happy as your promotion has made me?”

“We’re a couple of lucky people,” Peter said. “Very lucky. Most of all because we found one another. Now it seems everybody is trying to help us out. Okay, so we’ll take advantage of all the offers. When will it be, Betty?”

“Next month. On my birthday so you won’t have to buy but one present for both anniversaries. I do think of you, Peter.”

“What a girl,” he chuckled. “Practical

as all get out too.”

“But the present,” she teased, “will have to be twice as good. I’m so darn happy. And so glad to be moving out of that dismal old house where I’ve lived since I was a little girl. It was all Dad left me, but it’s been a roof over my head, at least. Oh, I forgot to tell you, John Algar used to actually sneak into the house right after Dad died and put ten dollar bills around so I’d find them. He’s the most amazing man.”

They arose shortly afterward and walked slowly out to the avenue. They both heard the crackle of brush as a heavy person followed them at a distance and well off the path. They walked East until they reached Betty’s neighborhood, a district rapidly turning into a slum area. She pointed out the spot where her father had been shot. It was now a wholesale fruit market.

The house was old fashioned with a brick front, concrete steps to the door with iron railings as protection. Peter Lindsay kissed her good night but stayed close by until she had unlocked the door, stepped inside and locked it again with a bolt. Then he ambled casually away, looking rather curiously for signs of John Algar. He saw none because John Algar chose that he not be seen.

Peter was much too far away to hear Betty’s scream, muted by the doors and windows of her home. John Algar heard it and a .9 millimeter Mauser appeared in his hand. He crossed the street in a dozen long leaps, raced up the steps and was pounding at the door within one minute after Betty’s first scream was heard.

She opened the door and gave a startled gasp. Her face looked waxen, her eyes were too wide and she showed even white teeth in a grimace of terror.

“What is it? What happened?” Algar demanded and elbowed past her as she spoke.

“It’s—in the back room—Dad’s room,” she said hoarsely. “A—a dead man is

in there. I know he’s dead. It’s awful.”

“Stay right beside me,” Algar cautioned. “Close the door and bolt it. The place has been looted, hasn’t it?”

“Yes. Yes. You don’t think I’m so careless a housekeeper as to let my home go like—like this.” She attempted a smile. It didn’t come off at all.

ALGAR peered into a dimly lighted living room. Everything was wrecked. Chair covers were slashed, the rug torn up, pictures removed from the walls and smashed. The other rooms had been similarly gutted. At the end of the corridor there were bright lights coming from an open door. Algar had a question in his eyes when he looked at Betty and she nodded mutely.

“You don’t have to go in,” he said. “But if you hear anyone moving about—yell your head off.”

The gun still in his hand, Algar entered the room. The man who lay huddled against one wall, with his face turned toward it, was a small person, not more than five-feet-four or five. His clothes were shabby, his eerily twisted foot showed a shoe sole with a hole almost through. His hands were grubby, and the nails peeled down by nervous teeth. His face showed ratlike, when Algar turned him over. Even his teeth were ratlike, with the front ones protruding slightly. He’d been stabbed. A single upward thrust directly below the heart. Whoever used that knife knew just where to plant it.

Algar searched him and the only significant thing he discovered was the fact that the man had been searched before. Algar walked out into the hallway where Betty was waiting. He took her arm and led her into the dining room straight toward a linen closet there. He opened the linen closet door, gave her a shove and slammed the door in her face. She heard the key turn in the outside of the lock.

For a moment Betty was too stunned to react. Then she screamed and kicked the door. She pounded it with her small fists. In between all this racket she heard Algar swiftly mount the stairs to the second floor. In five minutes he was back and had the door open.

“I don’t know what you’re up to, Mr. Algar,” she said with righteous anger, “but it’s bad enough when my house is looted and a dead man is found here without having you lock me in the closet and snoop around yourself.”

Algar smiled at her. She was rather amazed to notice that he didn’t look very old at all. In fact he was young and he had a pleasant smile.

“I’m sorry, Miss Talbot. And despite the fact that I’ve probably made you very angry, I want you to promise not to tell the police I was here. I assure you this is for your own good.”

She glanced with scary eyes toward the room at the end of the hall. “I—I don’t suppose it makes much difference whether you were here or not. But what happened? What in the world is this all about?”

He shrugged and reached for a cigarette. She rejected his offer of one. He said, “Looks to me like a couple of plain punks broke into your house and started to loot it. They had a fight over something and one of them got himself knocked off. It’s done every day in the polite society we call the underworld. That’s all there is to it, Miss Talbot.”

“Then—I’d better phone the police.”

“Naturally, unless you like spending the night in a house with a dead man. I’ll stay here until we hear the radio cars coming. Go ahead, get on the phone.”

Neither of them spoke again. A siren howled three minutes after she had completed the phone call to Headquarters. Algar went out and walked rapidly across the street. She saw

him under a street lamp, and then he vanished completely.

Betty didn’t sleep that night, though a police guard was left downstairs to allay her terrors. She kept thinking of John Algar, of the fact that he was supposed to have murdered her father and for the first time she wondered how a man like Algar could kill anyone.

But he’d been booted off the force for it and police boards don’t become that drastic unless there is sufficient evidence to back up the suspicions—perhaps not enough to convict a man in court, but enough for the Board to act upon.

She knew it would be impossible for her to spend another night in this house alone. Those men, the victim and the murderer, had been after something. She didn’t know what it was. Not a single thing was missing so far as she could determine.

The police gave the whole affair a polite brushoff as just another killing due to a quarrel between burglars. They hauled away the corpse, spread fingerprint powder all around, took a lot of pictures and that was all. Nobody commented much; nobody was especially interested.

NEXT morning Betty dressed and hastily applied makeup. Peter probably would know nothing about this, but she usually met him and they walked to work together. They worked in the same block. The sleepy policeman was glad to go off this detail. Betty walked rapidly toward the corner where she usually met Peter, and he was waiting. He seemed like a strong haven to her.

They ate breakfast together and she told him the whole story. Peter was shocked. “Betty—do you think Algar did it?”

“Algar?” she cried in reproach. “Oh, Peter, you know very well he never does anything, but follow me around. And he did save me from a serious predicament last night.”

"I do mean Algar," he insisted. "We never saw him after that. We thought we heard him in the park, but we could have been mistaken. I don't know how he is involved, maybe not at all, but he must have some very important reason for scarcely letting you out of his sight, for locking you in the linen closet. And he was in the neighborhood last night. He heard you scream."

"He is always nearby, Peter. And why would he have ransacked my home and killed that man? No, I'd swear he was as surprised as I when I first saw the dead man."

Peter sighed. "Oh, I'm sorry. Guess I'm a little jealous of him. If he'd wanted to sack your house, he could have done so a hundred times. But one thing I'm certain of, you don't spend another night in that house."

"Where will I go? I've looked and looked, Peter. I can get a little room somewhere, but that isn't living."

"Greg Shelton promised you a brand new house—promised it to us, though I've never met the man. It's quite likely all ready for you. Betty, I don't intend to be a firm or domineering husband after we are married, but I must insist that we see Shelton today, this morning, and find out if you can take possession at once."

"I wouldn't mind that." She attempted a smile. "Peter, I've hardly known a moment's peace since Dad was killed. I've always had a feeling that—that things weren't right. And then Mr. Algar, following me all around. Oh, I don't know what to think."

"Algar will stop shadowing you after we're married," Peter swore. "From then on it will be my job, and he'll like it or get himself into a mess of trouble. Come on, let's go see Mr. Shelton right away. I've been wanting to meet him."

Greg Shelton was a big man without being enormously fat. With six-feet-two of frame to carry around two hundred and twenty odd pounds, he managed it very well. His

cheeks were smooth and pink. He shook hands with Peter.

"You're getting a prize," he chuckled. "In fact, you wouldn't be getting Betty at all if I were twenty years younger and not married. I read a small item in the newspaper about the dead man you found in your house, Betty. It's a rather horrible thing to encounter. The house—well, after two violent deaths in it—won't be a comfortable home."

"That's what we came about," Peter said. "Betty tells me you want to buy the property and in its place give her a new honeymoon bungalow. I think it's a grand offer, Mr. Shelton. I've been trying to persuade Betty that she ought to take you up on it at once. That is, if the place is ready."

"It's been ready for about a week," Shelton said. "Complete to silverware and linen. You won't have to take a thing out of the old house except your personal belongings, Betty. I thought you might like to start off with a clean slate, but now, after what happened last night, I'm certain you want nothing which will associate itself with that house."

SHELTON had the papers drawn up. Betty signed them blindly, through tears of happiness. She was given a crisp new document stating that she owned, in its entirety, one new dwelling. There was also a substantial check that made her blink away a few tears.

That noon she didn't feel like eating. Too many things had occurred. She wanted nothing more than a walk in the sunlight, perhaps a few minutes in the park where she could sit and dream.

John Algar appeared out of nowhere and sat down beside her on the bench. Here, in the strong sunlight, she had her best look at him to date and she rather liked what she saw. He smiled a little and kept rotating his gray hat around one finger.

“A lot has happened since last night,” he commented.

“Almost too much,” she told him. “Mr. Shelton bought the old place and gave me a brand new one. It’s fully equipped, and I don’t have to move a thing. I’m a very lucky girl, and humble enough to know it.”

“You’re a very nice girl. As for your luck, I pray it will hold out. Betty, I want you to do something rather strange and ask no questions as to why or wherefore. I want you to tell Shelton that you won’t be out of the old house for another week and that there are certain articles of your father’s you wish to take with you.”

“But there are no such articles.”

“You can pretend there are. Say there is a secretary, a big desk, some cartons of books stored in the attic. If he presses you, agree to leave the house tomorrow, but insist on taking these things with you and on spending the night there. Will you do this—for me? And for yourself?”

“I—don’t think I should,” she protested, knowing very well she’d obey him. “Mr. Shelton has been so kind and Peter—well, he naturally wants me out of that old house.”

“Mr. Shelton is perhaps the kindest man on the face of the earth and no better lad than Peter lives and breathes. But, everyone isn’t kind and good and considerate. There are people with evil intent, and I’ve got to get rid of them for good. Otherwise, your life will always be in danger. And Betty—I won’t be able to tag you around until I’m old and feeble.”

“Is that why you’ve followed me? To protect me?”

“Yes, and I’ve never been very certain from what. Now I think I know. If you let me down, the three years I’ve spent near you will have been wasted. You’ve got to believe me.”

She arose. “I—must go back. I don’t know what I’ll do, Mr. Algar. You’re such a

strange man with such hidden motives.”

“Just tell Shelton you are going to spend one more night in the house and get together some of your father’s things. That’s all I ask.”

“I—guess it’s all right,” she agreed hesitantly. “I really don’t know why I should be doing this for you. I ought to hate the sight of you. You did kill my father. Your gun shot him.”

“My gun shot him,” Algar declared slowly. “Other than that I admit nothing, and I shall depend upon you, Betty. I know you’ll do it. A man can’t follow a girl around for three long years without learning something of her nature and character. You trust me because you feel I am to be trusted, no matter what my history has been.”

He walked rapidly away from her. She returned to the office and saw Shelton when he returned from lunch. He didn’t like the idea, but finally consented.

“After all,” he argued, “you signed over the house and its contents. It’s a rather horrible place at best and I intend to tear it down. Betty, you may have your way but, because I now own the house and everything in it, I must insist that I be present tonight when you select those things of your father’s which you wish to take with you.”

Betty told Peter about it when they met for dinner. He was amazed at Algar’s commands and even more astonished at Shelton’s insistence on being at the house tonight.

“I’m going to be there too,” he said. “After all, we’re as good as married. There might be something I can do to protect your interests though, frankly, you pretty much signed them away today. Let’s hurry dinner and get over to the house.”

SHELTON arrived at eight He was alone and he scowled at Peter, but made no comments on his presence. Betty showed Shelton a small

secretary and a medium sized desk which she wanted to take. And there were some pictures of her father in police uniform, a few citations and the sealed cartons of books in the attic.

"I shall have to examine the books and the contents of the desk and secretary," Shelton said. "It's merely a matter of form. Peter, you might as well be of some help. Go to the attic and lug those boxes down here."

Peter trotted up the stairs. Shelton hurried to the front door and slid the bolt home. Then he returned to the living room and advanced on Betty.

He said, "Betty, I think you're suspicious I'm up to something. What, exactly do you think? Talk fast. I don't favor having Peter here as a witness. What do you know?"

"Why—why ... nothing. I—I..."

He slapped her very hard, without the slightest warning. She stumbled a few feet, struck a chair and sat down heavily into it. Shelton came toward her again, his fists doubled this time.

"Talk," he said menacingly, "or, by heavens, I'll beat that pretty face of yours into something even that goofy-eyed Peter will abhor. What do you know?"

"Please, Mr. Shelton." She held her hands up before her face. "Please, I don't know what you're talking about. Please don't hit me. Please!"

He swept her covering hands away and slapped her again, harder than the first time. Then, his hand was back for another blow and froze there.

A very quiet voice said, "That'll do, Shelton. That's quite enough. Turn around and keep your hands away from your pockets. That bulge is a shoulder clip. Go for it if you like, but you'll be dead before your hands touch the gun butt."

Shelton straightened up, turned very slowly and faced John Algar. The ex-detective said, "I've been in the house for some time. I knew very well you'd hardly permit Miss

Talbot to move out with anything in which the rocks could be hidden.

"I know a great deal, Mr. Shelton. I know that you have been an international jewel smuggler for years. I know you brought a neat load of stuff over three years ago, right after the war ended. But it slipped out of your hands. I know it's here, in this house and that you have been aware of that fact for some time.

"I suspect you were here last night, searching the place with that poor fool who burglarized the house and whom you later on murdered for no more reason than to frighten Miss Talbot into leaving."

Shelton smiled confidently. "You know a great deal, Algar. For a killer you're a very wise guy, but I'll bet you don't know there's a gun trained on your back at this very moment."

Algar bit his lip. He glanced at Betty, who was looking behind him. "How about that, Betty?" he asked.

She moved her lips, but no words came. She tried again and got a single word out. "Peter!"

"I thought so." Algar let go of his gun. It hit the floor with a thump and Shelton hastily scooped it up. He poked it deep into Algar's stomach and forced him into a chair beside Betty.

Peter Lindsay didn't look quite so innocent now. His eyes were narrowed in hatred and there was an obvious sneer on his handsome face. He lined up beside Shelton.

Peter said, "Everything is under control, Mr. Shelton. I had an idea Algar was behind all this. He's been wise to you right along, but without enough evidence to take any action on. That's why I sort of lingered in the hallway. The poor fool was hiding in the basement"

SHELTON nodded. He spoke directly to Algar. "Now listen, copper, I'm going to ask

you a question. If you refuse to answer or give me an evasive reply, I'll slug Betty hard enough to break her beautiful jaw. And every time you go mum, I'll slug her again. Where is the stuff Lieutenant Talbot got that day?"

Algar spoke tightly. "If you lay a hand on her, Shelton, I'll kill you. If I knew where the stuff was, I'd have gotten it long ago. Do I look like an idiot?"

Shelton poised his fist. Peter blocked the blow that started toward Betty's face. "Save it, Shelton. Have your fun afterwards. Betty hasn't the faintest idea as to what this is all about, but Algar knows exactly where the stuff is hidden. Last night, when Betty found that man dead and Algar came into the house, he locked her in a closet and ran upstairs. That's where it's hidden. He went to make certain."

Shelton smiled a cold, furious smile. "So. Then our job is quite simple. Watch him, Peter. Shoot him if he makes a move. I'm going to break Betty's arm for a starter."

Algar sighed. "What's the use. A man who doesn't know when he's beaten is crazy. Yes, the stuff is upstairs. For three years I've followed Betty around and watched this house. Waiting for the killer to try and find the stuff."

"You held off a long time. So long that I suspect you weren't sure, until recently, that Lieutenant Talbot ever got his hands on the rocks. Talbot got the stuff. He found it that night in the vacant building next door. It's hidden upstairs."

"Watch Betty," Shelton said. "Algar, walk ahead of me and show me where it's hidden. If you're co-operative, nothing will happen to you or Betty. Take care now, Pete. She may be more dangerous than you think."

"Her?" Peter laughed. "She's a plain jane who'd fall for any line. Any old line. Take him upstairs and get the stuff. I don't even care if you bring him down again."

Poked by the gun, Algar left the room,

walked up the stairs and down a corridor to the last room. He entered, turned on the lights and went directly to a large, silent clock on the mantelpiece of an old fireplace. He opened the glass over the face, turned the hands and there was a click. A cleverly concealed drawer slid out of the bottom.

Algar said, "I knew it was here. Lieutenant Talbot took this clock from a dope peddler long ago. The peddler used it to hide his supply of stuff, and I reasoned that Talbot would use it for the same purpose. Tell me something, Shelton. Was Talbot a crook? Was he working for you and pulling a double cross?"

Shelton laughed. "No—he was tipped off by a stool pigeon who was taken good care of later on. Hurry up and get that stuff out of there."

Algar sighed. "Thanks. For a long time I thought Talbot was trying to get rich fast, but he was apparently playing it solo. The night it happened I trailed him and got rapped on the head by you and your men. Then you shot Talbot with my gun, knowing we were not exactly friends. But Talbot didn't die right away. He got clear with the smuggled gems you were after, stumbled to this house of his right next door and managed to hide the gems before he died."

"Very interesting," Shelton grumbled. "You're stalling. Get busy!"

Algar dug a hand into the clock. Fingers closed around a gun hidden there. He said, "I can feel the sack of gems. They're stuck."

Shelton pressed closer, looking over Algar's shoulder.

DOWNSTAIRS, Betty heard two quick shots and then the sound of a body hitting the floor. The victim clawed at the boards and took his time about dying or passing out. Peter laughed harshly.

"That's the finish of your shadow."

Which means Shelton got the stuff. I'm sorry and all that, Betty. You wouldn't have been a bad wife."

There were deliberate steps descending the staircase and a hoarse laugh.

Then Algar walked into the room and there was a gun in his fist. He said, "Peter, you're covered. Shelton isn't dead. I didn't want him to die. I'm not so fussy about you. Will you drop the gun or take a bullet through the back? I'm very obliging."

Peter drew himself erect. "I should have known better than to trust Shelton. You'd never have got my gun away from me."

"Shelton is still hanging onto his gun. Last night I put mine in the hiding place because I figured something like this might happen. It's a Mauser, Peter. It makes a very big hole in a man."

Peter spun around. There were two shots. He fired neither one of them. He stood there, swaying a little, his gun slanted toward the floor. He was trying to bring it up. Trying with all his strength, but there wasn't much left in him. He went down slowly, and the gun hit the floor. He was dead when he finally lay huddled at Betty's feet.

Algar used the phone after that. He took Betty into another room. Police came, in droves this time. Algar talked long and earnestly to an Inspector. Shelton talked too, in between groans.

Algar walked into the room where Betty sat, silent and terrified. He opened his hand, and showed her a gold badge. "I got it back, Betty—a little rusty, but some polish will shine her up nice and proper. You see, I didn't kill your father. We just had a grudge against one another and those crooks made it pay off. Your father was on the trail of some smuggled stones and found them, but the crooks got there too fast. I played it wrong. Your father died, and I made up my mind to

stick close until those killers figured it was safe to start hunting the stuff."

She bowed her head. "I can hardly believe it. Peter and all."

Algar sat down beside her. "I knew he was a crook. I really checked on him after you two met. I traced him back for three years, but not an inch further. He might as well have been born then for all his record showed. I thought he might be one means of getting you out of this house. Shelton gained your trust, made a nice deal so he'd come into possession of the place and could tear it down if he liked."

"And you got me a job with Shelton so it would be easier for him to operate?"

"He was afraid to make a move," Algar explained. "And he wasn't too certain about things. I got tired of waiting so I wrangled a job for you so he'd have a made-to-order opportunity to take a chance. I had to make him show his hand—to clear myself."

She leaned back and her eyes were dry now. "I don't know what to do, John. Everything is so upset."

He said, "Why Betty, it's quite simple. Shelton deeded a new house to you. It's yours. I'm going to miss trailing you. A fellow can't help but get to like a girl he has been following for three years."

"I don't want you to follow me again," she said severely. "Not ever again, John Algar."

He turned away slowly. "That's your privilege, Miss Talbot. Well, I'm a cop again. I never stopped being a cop."

She said, "I want you to walk beside me from now on, John. Always beside me. A girl can't have a fellow tagging after her for three long years without—well—getting to like him a little. And need him a lot."

Algar turned around swiftly.