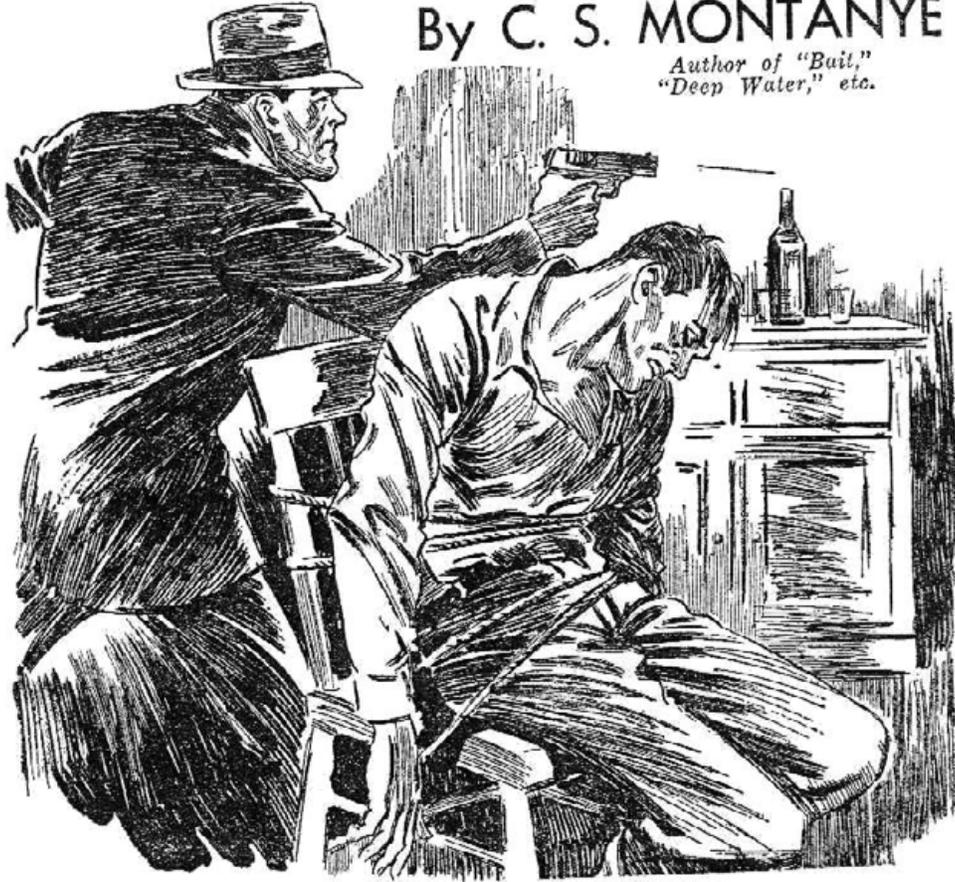


In Deep Purple

By C. S. MONTANYE

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"Deep Water," etc.



Right in the line of fire, Chundler fainted

To Smash a Desperate Gang, Stan Castle Sets a Grim Murderer to Catch Himself!

STAN CASTLE flopped his valise on the bed in the hotel room. He jerked the window shades even, glanced at the hissing radiator, opened the closet door. He had just hung up his hat and coat when the telephone rang.

"Yeah, Castle speaking," he said. "Who? . . . Sure, send him up. Send him right up. . . ."

A slow smile began to crack Castle's usually expressionless face. Mort Dryden was calling at the Atlas Hotel to see him. That was the payoff, a natural.

Castle laughed under his breath. The rats were getting nervous. The proof was that Dryden was coming to him when he, the D. A.'s right-hand man, was supposed to be in Grand City on a secret, undercover mission.

A knock sounded on the door. When Castle opened it, Mort Dryden came in slowly. He was a thick-set, beefy individual with a beet-red complexion, bright blue eyes, a small, petulant mouth and the torso of a wrestler.

"You're Dryden?" Castle said. He

smiled again. "I didn't expect you around so soon."

"I don't waste time," Dryden retorted, helping himself to the room's only chair.

The blue eyes wandered over Castle's slim, youthful figure. Castle thought he detected a sneer in the expression that crossed the man's florid face.

"What do you want?" he asked abruptly.

Dryden pushed out his muscular legs. He was wearing thick rubber-soled shoes. He put his hat in his lap and Castle glanced at his fingers, restless on the brim.

"I want to have a talk with you when you've got time. I guess you know what it's about."

"I've got time now," Castle said. "Let's hear it."

"But I haven't. Make it nine tonight at the Harlequin. A taxi'll get you there."

Dryden got up, still turning the brim of his hat in his fingers. Then he suddenly grew conscious of Castle's intent scrutiny of his hands. He flipped his hat on, put a cigarette in his mouth and nodded.

"Okay?" he asked.

"Okay," Castle agreed.

Dryden opened the door himself. Standing in the doorway, he spoke softly.

"I can do you just as much good as you can do me. Catch?"

He laughed significantly and went out. Castle remained deep in thought. Dryden's last remark echoed through his mind. He shrugged his broad, well-tailored shoulders and looked at his watch. It was seven-twenty. He figured on grabbing a bite to eat. Then he'd set the first stone in the foundation of what he had come to Grand City to build.

THREE quarters of an hour later, a cab took Castle through the desultory drizzle of snow. It was dark in the neighborhood that lay beyond the

brilliantly lit shopping and business district. The stores were still open because it was Saturday night.

The wind kicked down the side streets. When the cab turned east, Castle saw the frozen width of the river whose source was in Illinois. Two more blocks, then the cab pulled in before a huddle of buildings. In the center was a two-story garage.

Castle took his feet off the floor heater. He told his driver to wait.

The double steel doors were closed, locked. But there was an entrance to the left. It led into an office where he saw vague figures through a frost-rimed window.

His gloved hand shoved between the buttons of his heavy coat. The flat gun he carried in a leather shoulder holster pressed lightly but comfortingly against him. He opened the door and walked into an overheated room.

Two men faced each other, talking. A kerosene oil stove smelled up the air it had already made sweaty.

"I'm looking for Sid Chandler," Castle stated. "I understand he works here."

One man took his heels from the edge of the desk. He scraped his chair back, got up and opened a fireproof door in the rear of the room.

"Hey, Sid," he called. "Somebody wants to see you."

A minute or two passed before Chandler came in. He was a thin, anemic youth with a pasty complexion and furtive eyes. He wore hip boots and a greasy sweater. He needed a haircut, particularly on the back and sides of his neck, where his blond hair hung clown in yellow wisps.

He blinked. His narrow eyes turned from the man who had called him, slid over to Castle.

"I want to see you a few minutes," Stan Castle said without preliminaries. "I've come over from Gramby. I'm a

friend of Walker's."

Chandler's weak mouth closed. The furtive eyes widened. He looked at the man who had summoned him.

"Can I get an hour off, Mr. King?"

Castle let Chandler get in the waiting taxi first. He pulled the door shut, told the driver to roll them around for awhile. Then he shoved the glass partition closed.

"We can talk here," he said to the scared youth beside him. "What have you got to tell me?"

The stoolie lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. He kept glancing at Castle's shadowy face and then at the window next to him.

"There's a guy here called Lake, Jeff Lake. He hangs around Mort Dryden's bowling alley. He fits the description pretty well, but he's a smart bird. He hasn't dropped anything. He might be the party you want, but I ain't sure. I'm sorry I can't pin him down. I can't peg him for you."

"He might be Finn?" Castle demanded. "Yeah."

"What does he do? Where does he live?"

"He don't do nothing that I can find out. I've seen him in Dryden's office, just laying around. He's got a room up on the third floor there. He's a smart guy, I'm telling you."

"A little smarter than you," Castle snapped back.

Chandler made no reply. He kept dragging on his cigarette, blowing out thin vaporish smoke. Castle stirred impatiently. The D. A. had planted Chandler in Grand City when he had first been tipped that Ed Finn had a girl friend there.

CASTLE felt a jar of disappointment. Without Finn, the elaborate machinery of the law was stalled. District Attorney Peter Walsh was successfully

smashing the organization to atoms. But the atoms could reunite, Castle knew, unless the brains of the outfit was found and dragged in.

The taxi drove him back to the garage. Castle let Chandler out.

"I might need you later," he said. "What's your phone number? Where can I get in touch with you?"

The stoolie wrote an address on the back of one of the garage's printed cards. Castle put it in his pocket.

"I'm sorry I couldn't do better," Chandler said humbly. "As I say, this lug Lake knows his way around. Besides, I had to be careful. Dryden's no dummy either. He's tough. He'd bump me in a minute if he thought I tied in with you."

"Okay," Castle replied shortly.

He drove off through the wet snow, his temples throbbing with mounting anger. He had counted on Sid Chandler's coming across with the necessary information. His thoughts turned to Dryden, and that made his face grow hot. What did Dryden think he was—some kind of a chump who could be ordered around?

It was still a half hour before his date with Dryden. Castle told the driver to take him to the Harlequin. He settled back farther on the seat, trying to shake off the resentment that gripped him.

The Harlequin was a night spot on the fringe of the amusement center. It was wedged in between a warehouse and a department store, and it blazed with light. Castle paid off the toll on the meter and went in.

It was the kind of place he had expected—garish, tawdry, with the usual bar, the usual drinking customers, the usual cheap floor show and noisy swing band. He sat down at a table in a corner, ordered a drink, tried to ignore a singer whose hair was as brassy as her voice. She was warbling some ditty about a

rendezvous in Paris.

Now and then Castle heard what sounded like distant thunder through the music. It interested him. He stopped a waiter.

"What's back of this building? What's that noise I hear every few minutes?"

"That's the bowling alley on the other street," the waiter said. "Dryden's place."

Castle nodded. "Thanks."

The hands of his watch crawled toward nine. He kept an eye on the main door. There was no sign of the man who had made the appointment with him. After awhile he got up and paid his check. He went out and walked around the block.

The bowling alley occupied a stucco-fronted building on the street, paralleling the nightery he had just left. No one paid any attention to him as he went up the stairs. The alleys were on the second floor. They were crowded. Two teams were rolling off the final frames of a match. Castle glanced in briefly, turned and went on up to the third floor.

A NUMBER of doors were stretched out along a wide, jute-carpeted corridor. While he hesitated, one opened and a man came out. He looked like a Swede with his high cheekbones and yellow hair.

"I'm looking for Jeff Lake. Where's his room?" Castle asked.

"In there." The man jerked a thumb and went down the stairs.

Castle knocked on the indicated door. There was no answer. Below, the slam and crash of falling pins was constant. He dropped a hand to the knob. It turned under his fingers.

Castle pushed the door partially open. The room inside was dark, except where the window let in faint light from the street.

The heavy smell of cigars cloyed the

air. He struck a match, cupping it in his hand and holding it away from him. Its flicker came up. Abruptly, his nerves whipped and tightened.

Castle shut the door and turned on a lamp that the glow of the match had marked. He bent over, his eyes narrowing, his mouth a thin streak. A man lay half across the bed, flat on his back. His glazed eyes were turned toward the ceiling. The agony of his last moments glared out of the ghastly grimace frozen on his face.

Coolly, Castle estimated him at medium height and weight. He had dark, oily hair. He wore trousers and a white cotton jersey. A clean, heavily starched white shirt was draped on the footboard of the bed, a loud silk tie beside it.

Stan Castle bent closer. The man's skull had been crushed in at a point above the right ear. Blood stained the counterpane on which he was lying. Castle's intent eyes moved down to the man's throat. On either side of the windpipe bloomed the clear marks of relentless fingers. Against the white skin, dark bruises stood out as though painted there. Castle reached out and touched the dead man's arm. From the warmth of it, not much time had elapsed since he had been killed.

Again the dull flare of anger blazed in Castle's veins. If this man was the Ed Finn he had come to get, he had been neatly cheated. By whom? He studied the finger bruises for another long minute.

Then he turned out the light, closed the door behind him and went down the stairs.

It was twenty minutes after nine. The snow had melted and the gutters were brimming. He walked back to the Harlequin. Standing in the small front foyer, he tried without success to find Dryden. But the room was crowded with a dancing mob of people.

A hard-panned man in a tight-fitting

tuxedo came up to him.

"Table?"

"I'm looking for Mort Dryden."

THE man gave him a cold stare. "Your name Castle?" he rasped. "Mr. Dryden was here at nine o'clock. He told me to tell you he couldn't wait. He said he'd get in touch with you tomorrow morning at your hotel."

Castle nodded. He went back to the wet street. He had to wait ten minutes before an empty cab came along. He climbed in and gave the address of the garage where Sid Chandler worked. But when the cab pulled in at the building, the light in the office was out and the place closed.

"You can't get in there," the taxi driver called to him. "I could have told you that before."

Castle went back and got in the cab. He fished out the card Chandler had given him. Holding it in the meter's light, he read out the address to the hackie.

They lunged into high, the windshield wipers clicking. It was warmer, and the fluttering snow had turned to driving rain. Castle sat in a brown study until, after a time, he found himself entering a cheap, congested neighborhood.

The cab angled in before a wooden building that looked like a barracks. Castle told the man to wait and ran up to ring the front door bell. He pressed the button twice before a frowsy woman admitted him to a chilly hall. She wore a buttoned sweater over a faded woolen dress. Her gray hair was put up in metal curlers.

"Where can I find Sid Chandler?" Castle said. "I understand he lives here."

TWO watery eyes looked at him suspiciously. The woman took a ball of a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped her nose.

She sniffled from the cold she had, but over the handkerchief she still stared at Castle.

"You a friend of his?" she demanded in a shrill voice.

"Yes. I want to see him. Where is he?"

The woman took a step closer to him. She breathed, wheezing.

"He went out not ten minutes ago. It looked kind of funny to me. A couple of men stopped here and asked for him. I went upstairs to his room. Mr. Chandler was getting ready to turn in—he works hard down at the garage, so he always gets to bed early. He put on his coat and came down with me. I don't know what the men said to him, but he went out with them."

"What's funny about that?" Castle asked impatiently.

"The way they stood there—waiting. You should've heard how quiet and hard they talked. Then Sid—Mr. Chandler, I mean—just nodded and put on his hat and coat. One man had his hand in his overcoat pocket. I've been thinking maybe there was a gun in it—"

"All right. Thanks," Castle cut her short. "If he should come back within the next twenty minutes—" He broke off, abandoning the idea of having Chandler call him at the Atlas Hotel. "Never mind. I'll check up on him."

BACK in the taxi, Castle told the driver to take him to the bowling alley. He smoked one cigarette after another, his thoughts zigzagging back and forth over the events of the night. When he reached his destination he found the building in darkness. The street door was unlocked.

For the second time he went up the stairs. On the first landing Castle stopped. Above, he heard low voices, footsteps. Castle glanced around in the gloom. There was a darker, shadowy recess alongside the staircase. He drew into it, flattening

himself against the wainscoted wall.

The descending tread on the stairs was heavy. A grunt sounded. Then a smothered oath.

“This stiff’s heavy as hell,” a man said.

“Prop him up more,” another voice snapped angrily. “You’re throwing all the weight on me. Jav ought to have the car ready. When we go out we’ve got to make it look natural. Just in case—”

“Like he was plastered.” The man laughed under his breath. “And us, we’re a coupla pals taking him home.”

They went on down the stairs. Stan Castle moved out from his concealment. The lower door opened and shut. He turned to the stairs and continued climbing to the top floor.

He stood in the murk, his mind working fast. Flashes of thought tensed him. The powerful organization the D.A. was wrecking . . . Intimidation and murder. What he had come to Grand City to accomplish. . . .

The blaze of anger aroused by the futility of his errand dwindled quickly.

Somewhere down the corridor, new sounds beat in on his speculations. They were curious sounds, something like a slapping thump and then an animal-like whining. They came again and again. After them came a pause, a grumble of voices, then the sounds again, always in the same sequence.

Castle slid out of his overcoat, stuffed his gloves in the pockets. He bundled the garment on the banister rail.

He had no trouble locating the room from which the odd sounds emanated. It was almost at the end of the passage, to the left.

Castle opened the door. He hesitated an instant when he saw what was inside. The room was large enough for the four men in it. Two of them stood over Sid Chandler. The stoolie was tied in a rocking

chair. He was gagged and his blond hair hung down his sweaty forehead in long, wet locks.

A man in shirt sleeves, a cigar tucked in one corner of his ugly, cruel mouth, stood with arm raised over Chandler. He held a couple of feet of rubber hose. The one beside him puffed on a cigarette and looked on casually. The fourth man in the room was Dryden. He lounged in a chair that he had tipped against one wall. His bright blue eyes were watchfully interested under the down-snapped brim of his felt hat.

“Well,” Dryden said, when Castle let the door swing shut, “it’s my friend from the hotel. Sorry I missed you at the Harlequin.”

“So am I,” Castle said.

CHANDLER’S haunted, agonized eyes peered up in mute entreaty. Dryden’s chair came down with a bang. He got up and laughed.

“I told Abe over at the nightery to tell you I’d call around in the morning. Okay,” he said to the man with the rubber hose. “You can put him in the other room for a while.”

He nodded toward Chandler carelessly. Castle felt ice water run down the length of his spine.

“Just a minute,” he said easily. “What goes on here? Looks like you’ve given this guy a pretty good going-over.”

Dryden shrugged his bulky shoulders.

“Sure,” he grinned, “but it ain’t a patch on what he’s going to get.”

“Cross you?” Castle inquired casually.

“A lousy pigeon,” Dryden answered contemptuously. “Why, this punk would sell his own grandmother if he got paid enough. Do you know what we found out? He’s working for the D.A. of this county! Working for *him* against *me*! Imagine.”

“No!” Stan Castle exclaimed.

“Yeah,” Dryden snapped.

Castle’s eyes moved in Chandler’s direction.

“I suppose he knows something about Jeff Lake’s bump. Did I say Lake? My error. I meant Eddie Finn.”

Not a muscle flickered in Dryden’s masklike red face. His lower lip protruded slightly. He continued in the same quiet, almost jesting tone.

“So Jeff’s out? That is news. Big news, but kind of sad for that D.A. What’s he going to do with his case now?”

“I don’t imagine it will suffer much.” Castle smiled thinly. “Not a great deal, anyhow. Finn was only second fiddle in the band. Walker’s after the guy with the baton, the party who makes the music. In our line, when we gun for the important person, we pick out someone secondary and build him up so the one we want doesn’t get too cagey. A pretty good method. It hasn’t failed so far and it looks like it clicks again.”

Dryden’s lower lip came out further. The man with the hose had stepped around the back of the rocking chair. The other lounged against a table, one hand in his pocket.

“Clever people,” Dryden said.

“We try to be.” Stan Castle’s alert glance darted from one to the other. “For instance, belling Sid like a lamb, to bring on the wolves. Planting him down there with Abe King to get through to you. Making Chandler believe it was Finn we were after all the time. Not a bad setup when you analyze it. Or don’t you think so?”

HE SENSED rather than saw the gun that came out in the hand of the one by the table. Castle’s own flat automatic was between his fingers like a flash of lightning. He squeezed the trigger before the other could aim and level. The man

screamed with pain. His gun flew out of his shattered hand. Castle ducked back behind him. The hood with the hose fired two slugs. They missed Castle by a yard.

Dryden had backed up. He went into action with a long-barreled .45. Swift jets of flame blasted out. Castle realized that even with a lead-breaker in front of him he could be punctured. The bullets could easily tear through the man he held before him as a shield.

He fired over his protector’s shoulder. In his grip, the man was quivering like a bowl of jelly. It was tough on Sid Chandler. The stoolie was tied down directly in the line of fire. He seemed to have shrunken into himself, cowering in the rocking chair, eyes frantic with terror.

Castle’s third shot caught Dryden in the chest. The burly man reeled away from the wall. He lifted a foot, as if feeling for a step that wasn’t there. When he put his heavy rubber-soled shoe down, his leg kept right on going. It buckled under him like wheat cut by a reaper. The .45 spilled out of his hand.

The man with the hose snatched it up and fired from a half-crouching posture. His aim was good. The thug Castle clung to gave a convulsive leap and almost broke out of his grip. Dryden was still clawing the floor, spitting blood.

Castle poured lead at the only antagonist left. He jammed his shots home in rhythmical succession, picking out the spots he wanted to pierce. It gave him a fantastic satisfaction to see how unerring his quick aim was.

There were people coming up the stairs. They pounded down the hall to the door. When they tore it open, though, they stood back, huddling on the threshold. A blue uniform shoved to the front. Behind it was the gray of a State Trooper where his rain poncho bulged open. Light glinted on guns. Everybody in the world seemed to

be there, all shouting and cursing at once.

Castle tossed his smoking automatic aside. His living shield collapsed, gurgling. Castle lowered him into a chair and went to meet the law.

"Never mind these two," he said curtly. "Get Dryden to a hospital and pull that slug out of him. We want him—for murder—and a few other things!"

"How about this lug?" the trooper snapped, bending over Chandler. "He's out cold."

"Fainted. He's not dead." Castle pushed a way through the mob still piling up at the door. "Where's a telephone? I've got to make a call in a hurry—"

HE SCRUBBED at a smear of blood on his sleeve while he waited for the operator to put through his person-to-person call. He straightened his necktie with one hand, leaning over the glass counter in the darkened bowling alley. The wires hummed and buzzed in his ear.

His evening-long anger had entirely disappeared.

He felt oddly exhilarated, soothed and uplifted.

After a space he heard Peter Walker's slow, methodical drawl come over the wire.

"It's cleaned up, D.A.," Stan Castle said. "We've got Mort Dryden—on an operating table. I let him have it high and picked the place. He'll be good as new pretty soon, and you've got a swell charge to hold him on. It's murder—Finn's murder."

Walker asked some questions. Men were coming down the stairs outside. Castle had to let them go by before he could continue.

"Dryden is minus the third finger on his right hand," he explained. "They've dumped Finn somewhere, but we'll get him back. When we do, we'll find Dryden's fingermarks on his throat—five on one side of the windpipe, four on the other side, all done in deep purple!"