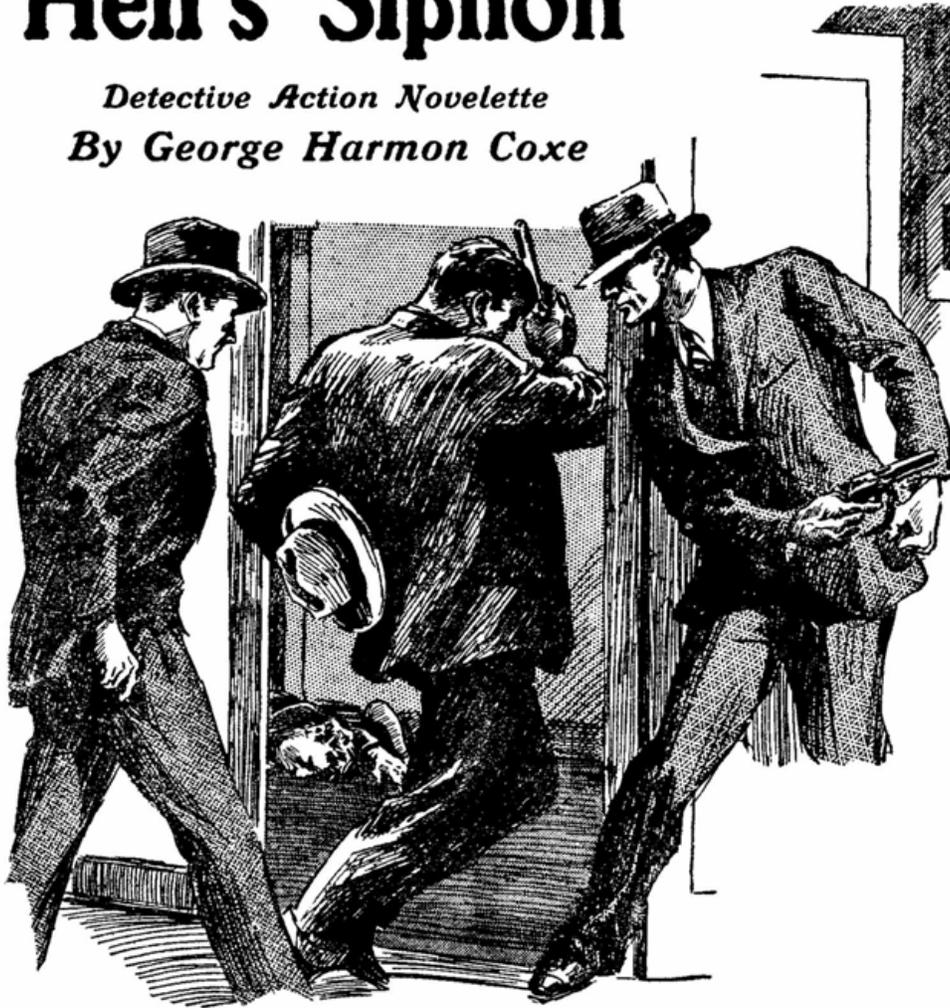


Hell's Siphon

Detective Action Novelette
By George Harmon Coxe



Hell's lid blew off when Detective Nason found his old buddy, Patrolman Donigan, had been shot in the back. But doom's worst stroke was to discover hot jewels on the copper's corpse. And when Nason triggered to clear Donigan's name, he was piloting himself toward another dishonored grave.

CHAPTER I DEATH FOR ONE

THE police touring car stopped with a jerk and both front doors swung wide. Jack Nason, First Grade Detective from the Central Office, slid from under the wheel, ran around behind the car and sprinted into the black mouth of the alley a stride or two in back of Detective Carrigan who had leaped to the sidewalk from the opposite door.

Racing heels clicked on the cobblestone

flooring, echoed hollowly from unseen walls until Nason jerked out his pocket flashlight. Then a yellow cone stabbed the darkness, picking out a vague, dark-suited form fifty feet beyond.

The form took shape as he pounded on, and the rays of the flashlight picked out metal buttons, a badge, a whitish oval that became the face of Sergeant Kenny of the precinct station.

"In here," Kenny said, holstering his gun and pushing on a door at his side.

An orange rectangle slashed across the alley floor and up the grimy brick wall opposite. Kenny

stepped into the light and the brogue of his ancestors was in his thick voice.

“Alpert’s jewelry store. It’s Donigan—and Sam Steig.”

Nason said: “Donigan?” incredulously; then repeated the word in hollow tones as he pushed into the room with Carrigan at his heels.

A single overhead bulb made the enclosure—a storeroom filled with cardboard cartons and dusty shelves—all highlights and shadows. Kenny continued to a doorway beyond and stepped aside.

A canvas curtain which closed off the front of the store had been dropped a foot or so in front of a huge wall safe. Nearby was a long table, flanked by three chairs. On the floor, one outflung hand hidden by the shadow of the table, sprawled the body of Sam Steig.

Nason saw him but vaguely. His eyes, his thoughts, were on a second crumpled and inert form a few feet away; a young-looking, curly-headed figure who wore the blue of a police uniform.

“When Donigan didn’t ring in”—Kenny nodded at the uniformed figure—“I came out to look for him.” The voice seemed chagrined. “Thought maybe he was celebrating again. He was workin’ off some punishment duty for being drunk a while back.”

Nason said: “Donigan,” again. Spoke the word in an absent, toneless voice.

It wasn’t just the macabre picture of death. He’d seen enough of this sort of thing to accept it as part of his job. But Donigan—this was different. He’d been to Police Academy with Donigan. Lately, since Nason had been moved to the detective bureau at headquarters, their paths had not crossed so frequently. But they were still friends. Donigan—warmhearted, happy-go-lucky Irishman.

Nason cast aside his bitter thoughts with an effort and knelt beside his friend, felt for a pulse, dropped the limp wrist. Turning, but without getting off his one knee, he searched for a spark of life in the other man. Suddenly he muttered an oath.

“This guy’s still alive.” He looked at Carrigan. “Get on the phone. When you finish get Alpert down here.”

KENNY pushed aside the canvas curtain and went into the front part of the store with Carrigan. Nason, concentrating on his new job

now, made a careful inspection of the space behind the curtain.

The safe had been opened. In place of the combination was a gaping hole; around this the metal looked as if it had been sprayed with blue-gray paint, the result of the intense heat of the acetylene torch which, with its torpedo-like fuel container, stood nearby.

His ordinarily good-natured face was grim as he stood there, a well set-up fellow of average height; young, competent, clean-looking. After a moment he took off his hat and opened his topcoat. He ran a forefinger around the inside of the damp sweatband, and the shadows cast by his straight brows made his eyes as black as his hair.

Finally he replaced the hat and gave his attention to the man beside the table, recalled what he knew about the fellow.

Sam Steig was the sort of individual who, in a small town, would hang around the pool room and corner drugstore. He was a big man, about thirty-five; a former second-rate boxer. After leaving the ring he had become a bodyguard. And for the past six months he had been working as nightwatchman and guard for Alpert’s jewelry store.

Nason dropped beside the limp figure and opened the coat, and a vest that was sodden with blood. Steig had been shot twice in the chest and only the closest scrutiny revealed the faint movement of the breast that hoarded the spark of life.

Carrigan and Kenny came back behind the canvas curtain. Paying them no attention, Nason moved to Donigan’s body and unbuttoned the tunic. He saw then that the policeman had been shot in the back. There was no hole in the chest and the bullet was still in the body. And the service revolver was still in its holster.

“He never had a chance to use it,” he said grimly.

“Well, that’s damn funny,” Kenny growled.

Nason’s deft fingers continued their exploration until they touched a tissue paper packet in the breast pocket of the shirt. Withdrawing this, he unfolded the paper until with startling suddenness, his palm was filled with a half-dozen unset diamonds that glittered and sparkled in the tepid light of the room.

For an interminable moment no one spoke. Nason felt his nerves jerk taut as his jaw sagged. Finally Kenny cursed once and Carrigan wheezed:

"For hell's sake, what—"

"Take a look at Steig's gun!" Nason snapped. "How many times was it fired?"

When Kenny said: "Once," Nason stood up. He did not speak for a moment, but there was a weird curve to his lips that pulled them back against his teeth.

"His gun was in his holster," Carrigan said slowly, in the absent tones of a man talking to himself, "and those stones in an inside pocket—" His voice got thin and hard. "Hell, you don't think he—"

"Who cares what I think?" Nason said bitterly. "Get on the phone. It'll be plenty of grief no matter how you figure it."

LEUTENANT FITZPATRICK was a lanky, red-headed, sharp-tongued cop with cold gray eyes and a lean, hawk-like face that was twisted in a scowl as he spoke to the ambulance interne.

"Well, how about it? Is he gonna live? Do we get to talk to him?"

The interne, a sandy-haired fellow with glasses, shrugged in a gesture of weariness.

"I don't think he's got a chance, no. But he might come around for a while."

The examiner's physician, who had been making an inspection of Donigan's body, extended a partly-flattened lead slug to Fitzpatrick.

"This one was easy," he said brusquely. "Just under the skin above the heart."

Fitzpatrick weighted the bullet in his palm, scowled down at it and said nothing. As the examiner's man began to pack his bag, Nason said:

"I'd have somebody from Ballistics check that with Steig's gun."

The lieutenant's brows arched above cold gray eyes. "You think Steig shot him? Why?"

"We looked the room over. There's no sign of any other slug. And there's no blood. Steig shot at something. If he'd hit one of the guys that cracked the box we ought to see some blood. If he missed we would've found the bullet."

Fitzpatrick's forehead was like a washboard. He said nothing, watched the ambulance assistants put Steig on a stretcher, until the back door banged open and footsteps scurried across the floor.

Moe Alpert rushed through the narrow inner doorway an instant later and came to an abrupt stop just across the threshold. He was plump, curly-headed, smartly dressed, with a diamond as big as

his knuckle winking from a little finger. His face was sweaty, fatty, with the look of a man who lives and eats well but not too wisely.

As he burst into excited speech, directing his remarks to Fitzpatrick, Nason watched him and made an effort to recall the man's history.

Aside from one breath of suspicion which tagged him "fence" some years ago, his record was clean. There was no black mark against his name, and for the past five years he had made money in this jewelry store which specialized in installment selling; made money, friends, and lived the life of a man who likes bright lights and entertainment.

"You got any insurance?" Fitzpatrick was saying.

"No—no. Most of my stuff is cheap—for the fifty cents a week buyer." Alpert took off his derby and nervously wiped sweat from his glistening forehead and the bald spot at his crown. "But some things I have are worth money. Diamonds that—"

"Then how come you didn't insure 'em?"

"Too expensive," groaned Alpert. "Until these jewel breaks started six months ago, I didn't need insurance. Then"—his shrewd eyes narrowed as he surveyed Fitzpatrick—"all the time I think you fellows will get the crooks. So I hire Steig—until you do get 'em."

"Nuts!" rapped Fitzpatrick. He glared around the dim confines of the room and continued as though talking to himself. "Three jewel breaks in six months. Each one as clean as a whistle. And now this."

He took the packet of diamonds Nason had turned over to him from his breast pocket, held them up for Alpert to see.

"These yours?" he growled.

Alpert blinked, extended a trembling hand. "I don't know. I'll see." He started for the safe, but the lieutenant grabbed his arm.

"Never mind—now. They're yours all right." He swore once, then told the story he and Nason had pieced together in short, clipped sentences.

Alpert said: "Oh—" which was all he could manage for the moment.

"Check up and see if anything else is missing," Fitzpatrick ordered. "And keep your mouth shut till we find out where we are."

He started to curse again, broke off suddenly, said: "What a smell this'll make if it's what I'm thinking it might be. Diamonds in his pocket, his gun in his holster and the nightwatchman's bullet in

his back.”

CHAPTER II
CAMERA FOR DEATH

THEY stood around the bed in that bare hospital room, Alpert, Fitzpatrick, Carrigan and Nason, and watched the house surgeon turn away from the still form of Sam Steig.

“I’ve done all I dare do now.”

“But”—Fitzpatrick scowled and his voice was arbitrary—“can’t you give him a shot in the arm or something, so maybe he can talk?”

“It would be fatal.” The surgeon moved towards the door. “As it is, he has a chance. In a few hours”—the man spread his hands—“he may be able to talk—safely.”

The surgeon shut the door gently as he went out.

Alpert rubbed his hands and shook his head sadly. “I guess I’ll go home now. Is there anything more I can do to—”

“It’d be a break for the force,” Fitzpatrick said, “if you didn’t tell the reporters all you knew. Tell ‘em to come to me till we find out where we are.”

Alpert said: “Sure,” and went out.

Nason leaned against the wall beside the door and watched Steig, his mind busy with the details that had come to light since they had left the jewelry store. Alpert had stated that aside from the diamonds found on Donigan, there was another package of stones missing, worth about forty thousand dollars.

Nason’s thoughts checked when a nurse entered the room and said there was a telephone call for Fitzpatrick. The lieutenant was gone but a minute, and when he re-entered the room he said: “That does it,” bitterly.

“The slug we got from Donigan was fired from Steig’s gun.” He began to pace the floor. “Donigan was hard up, and he wasn’t in such good standing. Drunk in uniform a while back, and for that he got twenty days suspension and one hundred and twenty hours of punishment duty. I wish to hell they’d kicked him off the force.”

Nason’s face flushed and he checked an angry reply. He did not speak until he had his emotions under control. Then he said, stubbornly: “Donigan was no crook. I knew him.”

Fitzpatrick gave him a scornful glance. “Nobody could’ve broken in that store if Steig didn’t want to open up. But he knew Donigan, and

he’d open up for him. And then Donigan must’ve held him up and let the gang in with the torch. One of the hoods shot Steig. They probably thought he was dead.

“They went to work on the safe, got the diamonds and gave Donigan his cut. They probably beat it and left Donigan behind to *discover* the break and give the alarm. But they muffed one thing. Steig wasn’t dead. He had enough left to pull his gun and shoot Donigan when he wasn’t looking.”

“There’ll be another way to figure it,” Nason said grimly.

“If there is, we’d better find it. Because if we don’t the press’ll play it as it looks. Three slick jewel breaks. It’ll be tough enough without smearing a crooked cop over the front page. But—” He threw up his hands, let them slap against his thighs.

“You two”—he nodded to Nason and Carrigan—“stay here. Steig’s our best chance. One of you stick in the room all the time.”

NASON paced the floor for several minutes after Fitzpatrick left. Carrigan was in the corridor outside the door, ready to answer any telephone calls, or witness anything Steig might say if he recovered consciousness. After a while, Nason stepped over to the chair on the other side of the bed and stared down at Steig’s clothing which had been draped over the chair back. With no particular motive in mind, he began to search the pockets.

He found a knife, some loose keys, two dollar bills and a handful of change. There was a dirty handkerchief, a crumpled pack of cigarettes, a folder of matches, a bill from a dry-cleaning establishment. There was just one piece of jewelry—a watch.

Nason inspected it idly. It was of the thick, elaborately engraved style in vogue some years ago. He pressed on the stem to open the front lid; then, prompted by idle curiosity, he wedged his thumbnail in the back and pried open the case.

Stuck there loosely was a photograph which was cut to fit the case, a photograph of Steig and a tall girl who stood close together on some beach, an arm around each other’s waist. The girl’s face was vaguely familiar, but Nason could not place it at the moment, so he grunted softly, replaced the watch, keeping the picture. Walking around the bed, he pulled up the other chair and sat down.

He watched Steig, but his thoughts were of Donigan. He was still young enough, Nason was, to have a few illusions; and he found it hard to make himself believe the story as Fitzpatrick saw it. There were crooked cops; there would always be crooked cops. Nason knew that. In any body of men the size of the city force, there was bound to be some chiselers, men of little honor or scruples. These, in the course of events, were generally weeded out; were dismissed, or left of their own accord.

But Donigan— The drunkenness episode was different. Nason had talked with him afterward, had thought it was just what Donigan needed to teach him a lesson. He was an orphan. But there was a younger sister Donigan was putting through school. He was young, a bit wild, and full of the joy of living.

Voices in the hall checked his reverie. He moved to the door as a knock sounded and Carrigan said:

"Hey, Jack. There's a button-pusher from the *Courier* out here."

Nason put his hand on the knob, hesitated, his lean face cracked in a scowl.

He had long since learned that the press was both an asset and a liability—depending on whether the representative was for you, or against you. Even when he could not give out information he knew enough to kid the reporters and cameramen along.

Right now, irritation gripped him. He did not want to be bothered; he did not intend to allow any pictures taken. But these photographers had a job to do, and it paid to be decent. He opened the door.

Nason did not recognize the man who stood in the opening. He was a tall, well-dressed youth with a pimply face and a tiny mustache. His voice, when he spoke, was thin, feminine.

"How about a picture?"

"No."

"Just one shot. What the hell. Give a guy a break."

"No." Nason's dark eyes flashed from the youth's face to the camera in his hand, to the bulky plate case slung over one shoulder. "No pictures. If anything breaks you'll get it along with the rest of the boys."

Nason hesitated, instinct flashing a vague warning. His brows drew down and his voice got hard, skeptical. "You must be new at the *Courier*.

Got a card?"

"Sure." The youth let the plate case slip from his shoulder, and as he spoke his hand went into his coat pocket and came out with the familiar yellow police card issued *Courier* men. On it was pasted the miniature photograph of the owner, and Nason glanced down at it as the fellow pushed by him and stepped into the room.

Nason instinctively put out a hand to bar the youth's progress. His eyes were still on the photographer's card, and he stiffened and felt an instantaneous tingling at his nerve ends at what he saw.

The picture on the police card showed a man who wore glasses.

What happened after that could not have taken more than two or three seconds. Yet it was as though time stood still, so detailed was the action in his brain.

HE was dimly conscious of another bulkier figure slipping into the doorway as he spun towards the pimply-faced youth. Then the fellow dropped the camera, and his hand, a blur of motion, held a heavy automatic against Nason's side.

"Steady, punk! This'll rip a big hole in you."

Nason's brain stuck on his first thought: The other men in the diamond robbery—come back to make sure there was no witness. He went cold, then hot again as despair, then rage, gripped him. After that he moved instinctively, without conscious thought.

His hand whipped to the automatic in his side and his hot fingers gripped the cold steel. He twisted with catlike quickness and the youth cursed. Then the movement behind him, from that bulkier shape at the door, flashed a warning which came too late.

Something hard smashed down on his head. He felt his knees buckle and his pain-ridden brain gripped one thought—where was Carrigan?

Nason hit the floor on his hands and knees. He was still partly conscious; he heard voices that sounded thin and far away, voices that were choked off in a roar that pounded at his ears and seemed to jar the very floor of the room. A door slammed; then Nason was fighting his way to his feet.

His eyes would not focus properly as he straightened up. His head was splitting and spinning dizzily, his stomach quivering with nausea. Yet his right hand went to his holster, and

he lurched drunkenly in the direction of the door, stumbled over the plate case and fell heavily.

This time the shock of the fall helped clear his brain. When he got to his feet again, his thoughts were once more logical and lucid, so that a grim bitterness gripped him.

His sweeping glance checked an instant on the form on the bed as he flung open the door. Steig's motionless position was unchanged. But in the center of the forehead was a red-rimmed hole that had not been there before.

Nason saw Carrigan as he leaped into the hall, saw him jack-knifed on the floor, his back against the near wall, his felt hat caught on one humped knee. Opposite, a door to a sun porch was open, and Nason dashed through it, his stride unchecked.

His eyes, unaccustomed to the darkness, betrayed him for a moment and he brought up sharply against the railing. At the same instant an automobile engine roared to life far down across the gently sloping lawn, roared to life and accelerated to a pulsing, rhythmic beat.

For seconds Nason stood there, his thighs pressed tightly against the iron railing. The chilled breeze, slanting in from the East, steadied him, left his body as cold as his thoughts. Overhead a drab, sullen night sky frowned down on him as he holstered his gun and turned wearily away.

Three white-faced and excited nurses were helping Carrigan to his feet. Nason grabbed the fellow's arm and jerked him through the doorway into Steig's room. The nurses pressed in behind him but he turned angrily, rapped: "Get out!"

There was a jumbled protest and he steadied his voice.

"The house doctor—get him here! Quick!"

He shut the door and leaned back against it. Carrigan was rubbing his head and staring wide-eyed at Steig; and he kept saying: "Oh!" over and over.

Nason bent down and picked up the camera. As he did so he saw the yellow card the pimply-faced youth had dropped. It was a *Courier* card, all right. But the picture on it was of a round-faced fellow with glasses; the name was Thomas Walcott.

"It's my fault," Carrigan said hoarsely. "I fell for it. There was two of 'em. One had a camera and a big case. They acted all right until after I called you. Then the skinny guy opened the door, and the other mug sorta pulled me to one side. He did it gentle-like—until I reached for the guy at the door.

Then I guess he cracked down on me. I don't remember."

Carrigan shook his head sadly and his thin face was lined with worry. "They'll break me for this."

"Nuts!" rapped Nason through stiff lips.

"They'll break me," chanted Carrigan.

"If they break you, they break me," raged Nason. "They were smart, that's all. They had the camera and case to front for them; they had a police card. They got you to call me—to get me off guard. Then the skinny guy came in with the sales talk to build me up for the fall. And the other guy took care of you."

Nason spat out a bitter curse, looked down at the police card. "I'll want to have a talk with Tommy Walcott and—" He broke off as a sudden flash of inspiration came to him.

Stepping over to Steig's coat, he took out the watch, opened the back and removed the picture. Carrigan was still staring at the hole in the man's forehead, but Nason said:

"She might be a lead—this dame. If I can find her. And if those hoods got Walcott's camera, maybe he can help. It's about all we got."

CHAPTER III

CRIME CALLS LATE

LEUTENANT FITZPATRICK'S mouth was shut so tightly he appeared to be without lips. His voice was thin, cutting.

"We either find those two torpedoes, or the force takes it on the chin. When the papers get through, the public'll think every damn one of us is a lousy crook."

"And if we do find them"—Captain Bacorn, a thick-set veteran with walrus mustache and a heavy red nose, pushed back in his chair behind his desk, his small deep-set eyes alternating between the raging Fitzpatrick and the grim, set face of Nason—"and they talk, and the story is what you think it is, Fitz, it'll be swell, huh? About Donigan."

"It doesn't have to be Fitzpatrick's way," Nason argued.

"He had the diamonds on him—tucked in his shirt pocket," Bacorn said levelly.

"They could've been planted."

"But why? And how about the gun—still in the holster? Hell"—Bacorn spread his hands—"I don't want to believe it, but I know how it'll look."

Fitzpatrick glared at a round-faced, bespectacled youth who stood beside the closed door of the office. "And you, Walcott, what a spot you put us in," he said to the photographer.

"What a spot I put myself in." Walcott blinked his blue eyes and pushed back a battered felt hat that looked ten years old, a perfect companion piece to his baggy suit. "But what the hell."

He rubbed a pudgy hand over his freckled face.

"I was having a drink in the Greek's about 12:30 on my way back to the office. I noticed these two guys—they were only a couple tables away. One of 'em went out for a minute, and when he came back they went into a huddle.

"They came over and began to kid me, asked me to take their pictures. They acted sorta boiled. One of 'em bought a drink. I said I had to be going, and they went out with me, still acting half-shot, and curious. I remember we passed an alley on the way back to the Avenue. Then socko. I wake up flat on my back."

Walcott grinned ruefully, took off his hat and touched a finger to a swelling over one ear. "That's their trademark."

Carrigan said: "It's my fault; I should—"

"Your fault, hell!" lipped Fitzpatrick. "If it's anybody's fault—" he broke off and glanced at Nason, his eyes sardonic slits. "*You're* the one that let that hood in the room. The sorta personality that makes news, huh? Well, it'll take more than personality this time."

Nason flushed as anger streaked through his brain. He knew what the lieutenant referred to, but before he could dwell on the subject Bacorn said:

"This isn't getting us anywhere. What do you want to do, Fitz?"

"Go down to the Greek's and see if I can get a line on those two hoods," grated Fitzpatrick. "There were no prints on the safe or on the torch that was left behind. We're tryin' to trace it, but it'll be a miracle if we get anywhere with that angle."

He nodded to Carrigan. "Come on."

WHEN the door closed Bacorn again cleared his throat and looked up at Nason through bushy brows without lifting his head.

"Fitz lives and thinks and breathes police work," Bacorn said thoughtfully. "He's all shot over how it's gonna look—about Donigan." He hesitated a moment, adding absently: "The sort of

personality that makes news."

Bacorn said something else, but Nason did not catch it, because his brain vortexed around that phrase.

It all went back to the fact that Nason had always played ball with newspapermen. On more than one occasion he had received valuable tips, and he played this source of information just as he played any other—for information—not publicity. He knew that the more contacts a detective has, the more tips he gets. And that more cases are solved on tips than in any other way.

On two occasions, he had been lucky enough to help solve cases that, for the very nature of the crime, had been heavily publicized, even before he was assigned to them. And it was in writing up one of these, that some reporter in describing his work had said: "He has the sort of personality that makes news."

That phrase cost Nason a lot of good-natured razzing. He continued to play ball with the press; the press played ball with him. They liked him. And now this reputation had boomeranged. A pseudo-photographer had tricked him and murdered the State's witness. He was conscious that Bacorn was talking.

"There's a lot of truth in what Fitzpatrick said."

"What?" grunted Nason.

"That you'd need more personality this time."

Bacorn's voice was sharp, but not unkind. "I know you played the publicity angle for the tips it would get you. But you've got a reputation—and it's gonna look different tomorrow in black and white."

Bacorn scowled until his brows drew together. "We find a cop with a pocket full of diamonds, his gun in his holster and a bullet in his back from the man who was guarding the store. Then we let some hoods come in and knock off this witness under police guard. The papers'll ride the D.A. and the Commissioner will ride the Super and me and—well—" Bacorn slid his palms across the desk top. "If you figure on any future in this business, you'd better get started. Because you'll be walking a beat if you don't show something."

Nason moved to the door. "Okay," he said grimly. "You've all got Donigan figured a lousy crook. And if somebody doesn't show something it looks like that's the way it's going down in the books."

In the downstairs hall, Walcott, who had tagged

along behind Nason, struggling with his camera and plate case, said:

“Where you goin’?”

Nason stopped suddenly, his mind fastening on the one clue that he alone had. He took out the little photograph of Steig and the girl on the beach.

“Know her?”

Walcott set down the plate case, took the photograph, finally said: “Sure. Rita Jordan. Works down at the *Cafe Royale*—hostess.”

“The value of publicity,” snorted Nason starting off again.

“But—” sputtered Walcott, “what you gonna do?”

“Try and hang on to my job.”

“You’n me.” Walcott swung up the plate case.

“You,” growled Nason. “You’ve caused enough trouble. G’wan back to your rag and—”

“Go back for what? Unless you get lucky and I get some pictures I’ve no more job than a rabbit. I stick with you.”

THE hands of the huge electric clock that glared down on Boylston Street, pointed to 1:25. Nason, slouched back on the seat, stared morosely out of the taxi window at the deserted sidewalks and hollow-eyed window fronts; and the reflection of corner streetlights swept a face that was somber and knotted at the corners of his jaws. He had not spoken a word since they had talked with the manager of the *Cafe Royale* and discovered Rita Jordan’s address.

Walcott squirmed on the seat and peered through the semi-darkness at Nason.

“Now we got her address, what’re you gonna prove?”

Nason told Walcott where he got the picture, added: “She must’ve known Steig pretty well. Maybe she knows things about him. What the hell.” The voice was brusque. “I’m grabbin’ at straws.”

Nason let the few facts he had on the case parade before his mind’s-eye in single file. There was no use thinking much about the robbery or the diamonds in Donigan’s pocket now. His only chance was to find the two hoods. Simple as hell. Just find them and there would be some sort of an answer.

The best lead was through the Greek’s—where the gunmen had picked up Walcott. But if there was anything there, Fitzpatrick would find it. He might have a nasty tongue, but he was a damn good

cop.

So that left Rita Jordan. Aside from her there was just one thing—one vague question in the back of Nason’s brain. He did not know what the question was. But it was there, some place.

The cab slowed down in a quiet, darkened street, lined with three and four-story red brick houses which had been remodeled into cheap apartments. In another moment the driver said: “This is it.”

Nason and Walcott got out, and Nason told the driver to wait.

THE house was of three stories, sandwiched in between two slightly taller buildings, all alike architecturally. They climbed narrow stone steps, moved into a darkened vestibule and the wind whipped in behind them, tugging at their coattails. A faint smell of fried food and dusty corners hung in the air as Nason struck a match and studied the row of mail boxes on the wall to learn that Rita Jordan had apartment 3-B.

Nason had to knock three times on the door on the right side of the third floor hall before a thick, contralto voice said: “Who is it?”

Nason nudged Walcott, who blurted: “Tommy Walcott.”

A key scratched in the lock. The door opened a two-inch crack and a slab of light slid out and divided Walcott’s face. The voice said: “This is a swell time to come calling.”

Walcott pushed gently on the door. “I want to talk to you a minute.”

Nason studied the girl. With the light behind her, he could not see much of her face. But he saw that she was tall, dark-haired; that she wore filmy pajamas and some sort of a silk robe.

“Who’s your friend?” she asked.

“He’s from the office,” lied Walcott. Then, his voice growing petulant. “All right. Drag up a chair and we’ll talk in the hall.”

The girl laughed abruptly.

“You’ve got plenty of nerve to—”

“You gotta have nerve or they shove you around.”

“All right.” The girl stood back from the door. “But don’t think you’re going to stay long. I need my sleep.”

Nason followed Walcott into the room. The girl turned on a top-heavy lamp. He saw then that the silk wrapper she wore was red, and spotted with

stains. She had apparently gone to bed with her makeup on. It gave a feverish tinge to her skin. At that, she was attractive. She had a nice build and she looked as if she could add up to ten.

Nason dropped on the davenport and Rita Jordan said: "Well, now that you woke me up."

"You a friend of Sam Steig's?" Nason asked easily.

"Maybe." The girl's manner was at once skeptical and on the defensive.

"Know him pretty well?"

Rita Jordan glanced at Walcott. "What is this?" she asked irritably.

Nason took out his shield, flashed it in his palm.

The girl said: "Oh," and her eyes went as round as her mouth.

Nason said: "Who did Steig pal around with?"

"Why do you want to know?" The girl's eyes narrowed again. "What's he done?" Her voice was anxious now, but she turned again to Walcott and tried to make it matter-of-fact. "A fine pal you turned out to be."

Nason said: "Who'd he run with? He must have some friends."

"Certainly he has friends." The girl stopped, glared at Nason, then turned to the door and grabbed at the knob. "Get out. I don't have to talk to you."

Nason stood up. Walking slowly up to the girl, he deliberately took her wrist and pulled her hand from the knob. She jerked back.

"You can't get away with this. I've got friends to take care of me."

Nason studied her a moment, then moved to the center of the room. He took the little photograph out of his pocket, held it up for the girl to see.

Instantly her face paled and there was a breathless quality to her words.

"Where'd you get that?"

"You were pretty good friends, weren't you?"

"Where did you get it?" This in a low frightened tone.

"Out of his watch."

"But—"

"Down in the City Hospital." Nason made his voice deliberately hard and cutting. "He was shot in Alpert's. They took him to the hospital. A couple hoods broke in and gunned him out. I was wondering if you knew any of his *friends*."

"You lie!" Rita Jordan whispered the words, and her face paled so that the old makeup stood out

like fever blotches.

Nason's voice was low and even as he waited for the reaction. "He oughta be in the morgue by now."

HE knew, as he spoke, that he had come to the right place. The girl was in love with Steig. She was hard, matter-of-fact, not easy to bluff. But the veneer was scraped clean now. And what he saw was a woman afraid; frightened nearly to hysteria.

Her hand came to her breast, clutched the fabric of her robe. Then she screamed.

Nason started for her. He heard Walcott's muffled curse. He took just one step when the door opened, slapped against the girl's back and knocked her aside.

In the half-light of the background, he saw two men. Or rather, he knew they were there. His eyes were fixed on the snouty muzzle of the automatic, held waist high. For a second he watched it move towards him. Then he brought his eyes up.

The pimply-faced youth, his little mustache curved like his lips in a leering smile, stared back at him. Behind him, closing and locking the door, was a bull-necked fellow with thick black hair and a nose that was flattened and twisted.

At no time in those two or three seconds did Nason have a chance to go for his gun—and he was experienced enough to know when to draw, and when not to. So he smiled purposely and made his voice bored, indulgent.

"I've been looking for you."

"Imagine that." The pimply-faced youth advanced a step, called over his shoulder to his companion. "Get his gun, Hymie!"

Hymie shuffled forward, a squat, long-armed figure. Circling behind Nason, he removed the service revolver.

The pimply-faced youth's glance slid sideways to Walcott, and then to Rita Jordan, who stood like a statue in chalk, one arm crossed tightly to her breast. He grinned at Walcott.

"We didn't get a chance to thank you for the camera, punk. Get over there with your copper friend."

Walcott blinked, seemed unable to fully grasp what had happened. He moved slowly, protestingly, and the pimply-faced youth reached out and slapped him with the barrel of the automatic. Walcott cursed and spun about. This

time the barrel of the gun crashed down on his head with a sickening thud. His hat flew off and he crumpled and went down on his face, joint by joint.

Nason had moved with the blow. But Hymie was still behind him. The gun jammed against his spine and he stiffened there with the sweat breaking out on his forehead.

Hymie grunted in satisfaction. "Now what, Leo?"

The thin youth glanced at Rita Jordan, reached out and took her by the arm. "Get some clothes on, sweetheart, we're goin' places."

Color, oozing slowly back into the girl's face, kept pace with her composure. She seemed to make a desperate effort to mask her feelings, her voice.

"Sure."

She started for the doorway to an inner hall, but Leo said: "Wait a minute."

She stopped.

Leo grunted, nodded at his companion. "I'll watch the dick, Hymie. Go with her."

"I'll go alone," the girl snapped.

"You'll go with Hymie," Leo said, grinning derisively. "And if there's any windows you can get out of in that room of yours, he's gonna stay with you. You can dress in your closet if you're so modest."

The girl's eyes filled with scorn and loathing, and Nason saw this and felt a certain grudging respect for her.

Leo said: "We should let you give us the slip, huh?" He chuckled. "Get started. We ain't got forever you know."

Hymie grinned and shuffled off down the hall after the girl.

CHAPTER IV THE HOSPITAL CLUE

RITA JORDAN was dressed in a tight-fitting blue dress when she came back into the living room with Hymie five minutes later.

Leo nodded in approval. "Now watch 'em both, Hymie. I think I'd better make a call."

He picked up the telephone receiver, dialed a number. A moment later he said: "Hello—Leo. Yeah. Yeah, we got her. But get this: that dick and the photographer were here ahead of us. They were putting the bee on her when we got here. I don't know. No. But she screamed about something just as we came in."

Leo fell silent for a few seconds, nodding his head slightly as he listened. "Okay," he said finally. "Sure. How much time do you want? Fifteen minutes. Okay." He hung up.

There was a peculiar smile on his lips now; a peculiar, pitiless look in his little eyes as he faced Nason, and the detective sensed the answer.

Fifteen minutes. For somebody to fix plans—or frame an alibi probably. He knew too much now. And the hoods could not take chances on how much Rita Jordan had talked. And that went for Walcott, too. The thought sent a quick chill through his veins. He glanced down at the youth. Blood stained the brown hair. He had not moved an inch since he fell. Nason looked up again, and smiled.

"Whose move is it?"

"Not yours, copper." Leo's merciless expression was unchanged. He turned to Hymie. "Take her along. I gotta wait about fifteen minutes."

Rita Jordan gave Nason a frightened, half-appealing look as she went through the door with Hymie's hairy hand on her arm. The door closed and Nason looked back at Leo.

"It's pretty tough," he said slowly, "knocking off a cop and a reporter."

"So they tell me," said Leo insolently. "But they don't put any more volts in the chair for that than for anything else. I shoulda let you have it there in the hospital."

Nason sat erect in the straight-backed chair for several minutes before he spoke. He knew that in some way Donigan had been framed. Just why, he did not know, and this bothered him. His bitterness was like a cancerous growth in his brain.

A half-hour before he had set out from headquarters with his only hope of solution the finding of the two gunmen. And he had found them; or they had found him. And now he was worse off than before.

It was not him alone now. Walcott would have to pay the penalty along with him. And then Rita Jordan. Nason felt that the girl, too, was marked for death.

He cocked one eyebrow at Leo, who stood over by the windows, watching the street below with occasional quick side glances. "So you framed Donigan, hunh?"

Leo grinned and remained silent.

Nason shrugged and hooked his thumbs in his vest pockets. "What I can't figure is how you knew Steig was still alive." He was shooting in the dark

now, but he tried to make his voice idly curious.

"You must've hung around that alley and followed the ambulance to the hospital; or maybe called up—"

Nason stiffened there on the chair as his mind trapped the idea. That question that had lain dormant for so long at the back of his head. He did not have the answer yet. But he felt sure he knew what it would be. And if he was right—

"Sure," said Leo, "what about it?"

Nason stood up and stretched nonchalantly. The thoughts which had vortexed in his brain for so long began to fall into an orderly sequence. Much of his idea was still hunch, still a matter of conjecture. Only—unless he had a chance to follow through, Donigan would be branded a crook forever.

LEO glanced at his strap watch uneasily, shifted his automatic slightly. Nason took a step forward, towards the center of the room and put his fists on his hips.

Leo's brows lifted. "You wouldn't want to start something, would you?"

"Me?" Nason jabbed a thumb at his chest and looked surprised. "Don't be foolish."

"Then go back and sit down."

Nason grinned with that tight, weird smile at his lips and remained motionless. Leo's pimply face flushed and he moved forward with a threatening set to his shoulders. He started to step over Walcott's body, seemed to think better of it. He detoured and walked around in front of the photographer.

Then it happened.

Leo had nearly passed out of Walcott's reach when that hand shot up. It was the first movement Walcott had made since he fell, and he was lying on his face, his eyes apparently closed, so that the element of surprise was all in his favor. He could not hold Leo, but this hand caught one ankle long enough to trip him off balance.

Leo cursed shrilly and went to one knee. Before he could swing the automatic around, Nason hit him; hit him with a lunging dive that brought his shoulder into the gunman's neck.

They went down together, arms and legs thrashing. The automatic flew from Leo's grasp, smacked against the wall and bounced back towards him. Nason, rolling clear, concentrated on that gun. His forward momentum, as he bowled

Leo over, carried him on a few feet, and he snatched up the automatic as he twisted to his knees.

Walcott was struggling to his feet. Leo, swinging a wild right as Nason turned to face him, made one more last, desperate lunge. Then the detective whipped the gun down on the unprotected head.

Leo, on one knee, started to sag and his breath whistled through his teeth. Nason cocked his arms once more. The gun came down in a short, vicious arc. There was a quick, crunching sound. Leo went over on his back, his arm outflung. One leg drew up, straightened. The other twitched once. He did not move again. He did not look as if he would ever move.

Nason watched the gunman for a moment, then turned to Walcott. The photographer had a handkerchief in his hand now, was dabbing at the bloody spot on his head. He said: "You hit that guy like you was mad," thickly.

Nason grunted. "Nice work. How long you been around?"

"When Hymie took the girl out, I guess. I didn't figure we had much chance against that gun unless—"

"You newspaper guys," Nason said grimly, "don't do so bad."

He slipped the automatic in his coat pocket, crossed quickly to the telephone, snapped up the receiver and dialed the operator.

"City Hospital. Sure. I know they got a number. Get it. Police business."

After a moment he got his number. Then it took him some minutes before he could reach the party he wanted. When he did, he spoke crisply, a bit profanely for a few seconds, hung up.

He picked up his hat and started for the door, and Walcott said: "What're you gonna do with this guy?"

"Leave him," lipped Nason. "He won't be goin' places alone. We'll send for him."

THE taxi driver was asleep when they got downstairs. He started to protest Nason's rude method of wakening him, but something in the detective's manner stopped him.

Nason gave an address off Commonwealth Avenue and as soon as the cab started, Walcott said:

"What's out there?" His voice got eager,

excited. "I can tell you've got something by the look on your pan. Is that where Hymie and the girl went?" Then, without waiting for an answer: "How do you know?"

"I don't"

"You're a hell of a dick."

"You heard me call the hospital."

"What about it?"

"How did those two torpedoes know where Steig was?"

"They coulda followed the ambulance. I heard you say that yourself, when I was playin' 'possum."

"Yeah. And boy was I dumb to think that."

Nason's voice got sarcastic, mocking. "They could've followed the ambulance. Then they could've gone to the Greek's, decided to go back and rub him out, got the idea of getting your camera to front for 'em."

"Sure," grunted Walcott. "Why not?"

"Then how did they know which room to go to? How'd they know just what room Steig had?"

"Hell, they could've asked."

"Yeh," rapped Nason. "They could've asked. *Only they didn't!*"

"They didn't?" echoed Walcott hollowly. "Then—"

"I got the reception room girl on the telephone. She remembers those guys coming in. But they breezed right past her. She's sure of it."

"Hell!" wheezed Walcott, jerking erect on the seat. "Then somebody tipped 'em off."

"Sure." Nason cursed softly. "Carrigan, Alpert, Fitzpatrick and me in the room with Steig."

"It coulda been somebody in the hospital."

"It could, but it wasn't. I had the girl check with the operator. Nobody called in about Steig until after the shooting."

"*Alpert!*" Walcott said hoarsely.

Nason said: "He must've called those two hoods at the Greek's just after he left the hospital. You happened to be there when the call came. And somebody—Leo, probably—flashed the idea of using your camera and card."

The taxi slowed down and Nason rapped on the glass partition and said: "Pull on up to the corner."

THE two men walked back to the marquee of a modern brick apartment house in the middle of the block. There was no name on the wide, chromium-trimmed doors, but in the rubber mat

which crossed the sidewalk were white letters which spelled: *The Ellington*.

At that hour there was no doorman, and Nason crossed the spacious entryway to the sunken lobby. A sleepy-eyed clerk blinked at them from his desk on the left wall, but Nason paid him no attention, continuing on to the elevators with Walcott, still lugging his camera and plate case, at his heels.

The elevator boy furnished the information that Alpert had apartment 4-F, and they went up. It was the last apartment on the left side of a thickly-carpeted hall, and as Nason stopped in front of the pastel-gray door, he sobered slightly as he analyzed his hunch.

In his own mind he was certain that Alpert had been connected with Steig's death. But even so, there was no proof; and the only chance was to bluff his way through—or find Alpert and Hymie and Rita Jordan. He turned to Walcott, spoke in quick, low tones.

"If Alpert is here alone, it may be a bust. I may have to get rough, and it'll be a mess if I don't produce."

"Yeah," whispered Walcott. "But suppose Hymie is in there?"

"That'll be swell."

"But the heat might go on. You oughta have some help. Why don't you call headquarters and—"

"And get 'em down here on a false alarm?" grunted Nason. "I'm in bad enough as it is."

He hesitated, glanced up and down the hall. There was a window at the rear end, and he stepped to it, opened it and looked out. Faintly outlined against the rear of the building was a network of fire escape, a branch of which apparently scaled the side of Alpert's living room—some room, at least, where the light was on.

He made his plan then, because he knew the truth of what Walcott had said. He might need help. He pulled the youth close.

"I'll give you a couple of minutes to get down in the alley here. Watch this window. If I move the shade, beat it for a telephone and get Fitz down here—I'll need him. If you don't see anything you'll know I've drawn a blank."

"And then what?"

"Then"—a wry grin twisted Nason's somber face—"we'll leave town together."

He gave Walcott a push, watched him until the elevator door closed behind his back. He waited a full two minutes longer; then he pressed the

mother-of-pearl button at the side of the door, and slid his right hand into his pocket, fitted it around the cool metal of Leo's automatic.

A moment later he heard the soft tread of footsteps, realized that if Alpert asked who he was, and he gave his name, it might ruin his scheme. A sudden burst of inspiration gave him the name of Alpert's lawyer.

A voice said: "Who is it?"

Nason spoke quickly, from way down in his throat. "Sol Hirschbaum."

The knob turned and Nason waited until the door started to open. He moved with it, slapping his shoulder against the panel. The door gave a foot or so, caught against some object; Nason's weight crashed into this object, knocked it aside as he barged forward.

Alpert was slammed against the wall of a tiny entryway. Beyond him, at the far side of an expensively-furnished and softly lighted living room, sat Rita Jordan. The bull-necked Hymie had spun towards the door, was clawing at his shoulder-holster.

Nason said: "Take it out, Hymie, and see what it gets you."

Hymie hesitated with his hand at his lapel, met Nason's hostile gaze for an instant, dropped the hand. Nason poked the white-faced and astounded Alpert with his gun, said: "Get in there," as he closed and locked the door.

Alpert backed into the living room, his hands half-raised, although nothing had been said about them. A frightened expression twisted his fatty face now, and his thick-lipped mouth hung open. He kept backing until he felt the divan against the calves of his legs; then he dropped down on it beside Rita Jordan.

Nason gave the girl a quick, searching glance. She sat stiffly erect on the edge of the divan, her hands tightly twisted together in her lap. Her eyes were wide and round, and there was fear in their depths.

Nason moved slowly across the room to the windows. He saw that the first one, by the fire escape, was open, that a faint draft was sucking the drawn shade outward. Reaching down, he raised the shade halfway, glanced out; then he turned to face Hymie, and Moe Alpert.

CHAPTER V DRINK TO THE DEVIL

H YMIE continued to stand in the middle of the room, his thick homely face sullen and malignant, until Nason said: "Just stand right there," and went around behind him and took his gun. Slipping it into a pocket of his coat, he moved away, added, "Now sit down with your pal—so I can watch the both of you."

For a few seconds, while Nason studied Alpert and Hymie, he considered the time element. It would take Walcott two or three minutes to find a telephone at this hour; it would take another eight or ten minutes before Fitzpatrick could get here. Say twelve minutes altogether. He decided to use the time to try and plug the gaps in his half-completed theory of what had happened.

"You've been pretty lucky tonight," he said finally, looking at Rita Jordan.

"I know it." The girl's voice was jerky, uncertain. "I—I think they were going to kill me."

"So," went on Nason, "if I were you, I'd come clean. I want to know where you fit. You and Steig—"

"We were going to be married," the girl said, her voice flat and hopeless. "Only I wasn't satisfied. I knew he worked for Alpert, but he always had a lot of money—and he would not tell me where he got it. I was afraid that after we were married, maybe something would happen. I didn't know what—only I was afraid."

The girl hesitated a moment, continued in the same low tone.

"But he promised me we could go away. To Philadelphia—I've got a brother there. Sam said he'd tell Alpert he was going to leave next week and—"

"Oh—" Nason's voice held a thin, metallic ring, and a mirthless smile tugged at his lips. "Maybe I get it now." He looked at Alpert. "I guess you are the reason those other three jewel breaks were so neat."

"You could be your own fence, huh? And Steig was in on it with you—your guard. But you were afraid to let him go. So you figured a way to rub him out. You told him you were going to rob your own store to make it look like you were just another victim. But your real reason was to put him out of the way."

"You're nuts." Alpert licked his lips. "I don't

know what you're talking about."

"You know, all right," Nason said ominously. "And I know you put the finger on Steig in the hospital." He went on to explain how he had checked up with the clerk at the hospital. "And if these two hoods had asked what room Steig had, you'd been clean on this. But when you called 'em at the Greek's, you gave 'em the room number."

NASON moved slowly forward, his dark eyes hard and glaring. "One of your punks planted those stones on Donigan."

"No," wheezed Alpert. "You got me wrong." His eyes were shifty now, his forehead moist with sweat. "Why should anybody do that?"

"I can guess that part, too—now," Nason answered. "You imported Hymie and Leo—you don't need to worry about him anymore—and you told Steig they'd do the job and leave him tied in a chair. Maybe slug him a bit to make it look better. Only you knew they were going to *rub Steig out when they finished*."

"Donigan surprised the break. The trouble was"—Nason's voice thinned out—"he thought Steig would be on his side. He turned his back and Steig, the rat, shot him. It was either that or go to jail when your punks talked. And Steig didn't know then that he was on the spot."

"Then," Nason's lips pulled back, "I've got an idea somebody called you and told you what had happened. It would look funny, a cop who was on to that kind of a job being shot in the back. The first thing we'd think of was that somebody he'd trusted shot him—which had to be Steig."

"So you planted the stones and put Donigan's gun back in his holster to make it look as if Donigan was the crook and Steig was honest—when we found him dead; to make us think just what Fitzpatrick did think. So that—"

A sudden gasp from Rita Jordan that was like a half-stifled scream, tensed Nason's muscles. Then a rough voice said:

"All right. Drop it!"

For a fraction of a second Nason hesitated. The voice came from behind—there was a doorway here, he remembered, which led to the apartment's other rooms. He glanced over his shoulder. The man in the doorway who held the heavy automatic was thin, swart, black-eyed. A stranger. He was smiling now and perfect white teeth flashed in the overhead light.

Nason dropped the gun. It hit the side of his shoe as it fell, and he forced a smile, spoke to Alpert. "So I was wrong about one part? You imported three hoods instead of two."

Moe Alpert recovered his composure in a few seconds. A sly smile filmed his puffy face and he stood up, nodding in approval.

"That was fine, Lascell. And a break—you bein' in the kitchen after a drink." He wiped sweat from his forehead. "You shoulda come sooner. I thought you died or something."

He started towards the inner doorway. "I think I'll get that drink. I need something."

Nason, standing a few feet in front of the divan with Lascell at his side and Hymie facing him, watched Alpert leave the room and return a few seconds later with a tray. There were four glasses, a bottle of rye, some cracked ice and a siphon of soda. Alpert put the tray on a little table at one end of the divan, and began to pour whisky.

Looking questioningly at Nason as he siphoned soda, he said: "Have one?"

Hymie growled an oath, said, "To hell with all this crap. When do we lay this guy away?"

"Right now," Alpert drained his glass and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "Only you gotta do it without much noise."

Lascell said: "Get a towel, Hymie."

Nason felt the sweat come out on his lip, and spring from the roots of his hair. He tried to keep his voice level.

"So I had it figured after all."

"You were close enough," Alpert said, and his voice got harsh and resentful.

"We had a good set-up for that punk, Steig. He came in handy for a while. Only the doll here"—he nodded to Rita Jordan—"talked him soft. He was going to quit—and he started to get tough about his share. And I hadn't even got rid of the stuff on the last break."

Continuing to fight for time, Nason said, hurriedly: "You won't get away with it."

"Sure we will," Alpert said without the faintest trace of emotion. "We'll dump you. Then we'll put out the dame's lights. The boys'll leave town—"

"There's still Leo," Nason lied. "We got him down at headquarters."

"If you have," Lascell leered, "he won't talk. With you gone there's no witness against him."

"There's Walcott."

"We'll take care of him, too," said Alpert. "If

we have to.”

Lascell finished wrapping the towel around the muzzle of his gun. Nason glanced quickly about. Lascell was three feet to one side, next to Alpert. Hymie stood over by the white-faced and terrified girl on the divan.

Nason felt the pressure of Hymie's gun in the pocket of his coat. Whether it was overconfidence, or just plain oversight on Alpert's part, that gun had not been taken from him. One thing was certain. He had nothing to lose.

He saw Lascell's gun come up, saw Alpert stand aside. He looked over at the girl who sat rigidly erect, her mouth half-open. Then he said, keeping his voice as level as he could:

“I guess I'd better get my drink while I can.”

“Never mind!” Lascell ordered.

Nason did not dare look at the gunman. Concentrating on his job he picked up a glass, quickly poured whiskey and began to squirt soda from the siphon.

“If this is going to be my last drink—”

He glanced up, grinned at Lascell. Then, moving as he talked, he twisted his wrist sharply and shot the driving stream of soda into Lascell's face. The gunman cursed as the charged water slapped against the bridge of his nose and filled his eyes. Momentarily blinded, he ducked, turned his head.

Pivoting and still holding to the handle of the bottle, Nason hurled it at Hymie and jerked at the gun in his pocket. He saw the heavy bottle smash into Hymie's forehead, heard the crash as it shattered, saw the fellow start to sag. Then his gun was out.

LASCCELL lost another second trying to free his automatic from the towel. In the final instant that the gun flashed upward, Nason squeezed the trigger. Recoil was a welcome slap at his wrist. The gun roared and Lascell's body jerked under the impact of the slug, and he fired once, wildly, before he dropped the gun.

Nason kept turning, but before he could face Alpert he saw the compact automatic swing up in the man's fat hand.

He sensed that he was going to be hit. He felt his nerves instinctively set themselves for the shock, and he tried to twist to one side as he fired. Alpert's gun crashed first. Nason saw the faint flash of orange flame, felt the searing pain at the

side of his neck. Then the roar of his heavier gun blotted out the sound of the little automatic.

Surprise flooded Alpert's face. He staggered, tried to bring the gun up again. This time Nason fired deliberately. And at the moment, strangely enough, he found himself thinking of Donigan who had died without a chance from a bullet in his back.

Lascell was already on the floor. Alpert's hand came down. His fingers relaxed and the gun thudded to the carpet. For another second or two he swayed drunkenly on his widespread feet. Then he went down on his knees and fell over on his face.

Nason jerked his gaze from the picture of death. Rita Jordan pressed white-knuckled fists to the side of her cheeks and stared wildly at Hymie who was lying on his face, with glass fragments scattered about him, his hair soaked with blood and water.

Nason lowered his gun. Powder smoke choked the stale air. He blew out his breath and felt a sudden weakness undermine his tension. He stood there motionless with the sweat coming out on his face and the blood seeping down to wet his collar until a sudden noise broke the silence behind him.

Spinning about with his gun up, he was just in time to see Walcott topple in through the window from the fire escape and sprawl to the floor on top of his plate case.

Nason cursed softly, relaxed. Walcott rose, eyes wide and popping behind his glasses. His mouth sagged.

“Boy,” he breathed. “How you go. I heard the shots and I—” He pulled out his tripod, and his voice was choked with admiration and eagerness as he added: “With what I'm going to get I'll have a job again.”

LIEUTENANT Fitzpatrick stood spread-legged in the center of the room until Nason finished his story. Then he shook his head from side to side and said:

“What an idea! If Steig had been finished in the first place, we'd've been licked.”

His eyes narrowed as he hesitated. “At that, if you hadn't thought to check with the hospital girl—” He pursed his lips. “That was smart.”

Nason said, “It took me long enough to think of it.”

He sat in a chair by the door now, a handkerchief pressed to the side of his neck. “But there had to be some angle, because I knew Donigan. He never was a crook.”

Fitzpatrick's keen eyes held a look of respect. "Okay. You were right and I was wrong. I'm damned glad of it."

He glanced at the two plainclothesmen who were inspecting the bodies; at the now conscious and glowering Hymie; at the girl.

"Alpert and Lascell won't give us any more trouble. We'll get Hymie and this punk, Leo—if he's still alive—for the hospital kill. And Donigan"—Fitzpatrick shook his head again—"boy, am I glad he was an honest cop.

"Anyway," he said, "I was right about one thing. You had to show more than personality. It wasn't personality that got you out of this jam."

"Personality, hell!" grunted Walcott, slipping another plate holder into his camera. "I think they must've got him sore. And when he gets sore he gets tough."

"I wasn't sore," Nason said quietly, in the tone of a man who, unaware of his surroundings, was thinking of other things. "Donigan never had a chance. I had one and I took it."