

Merchant of Madness

By W. Chambers Ward



Gripping
Novelette

In the deathlike stiffness four men waited—a senator, a police captain, and two G-men—waited for the senator to go stark, raving mad. It was only a matter of minutes now, and always the invisible master of madness had kept his weird promise.

THE clock's stubby hands showed five minutes to ten. Each dragging minute increased the tension that hovered in the room. They all felt it, and unconsciously their eyes kept going to the clock. Senator Robbins was jumping at every sudden sound.

Special Agent Steve Dustin drifted slowly to a seat by the window. His lean body seemed relaxed, his face almost sullen. George Ritchner, rookie in the F. B. I. and assigned to his first job under Dustin, had moved his chair quietly until it faced the door. He was sitting erect on the edge of the

chair, rubbing the palms of his hands against his thighs.

“Five minutes. Five minutes,” the senator muttered over and over. His voice had lost its resonance, and his movements were jerky, nervous, as he walked aimlessly about the room.

Sergeant Mack, of the city police, moved his bulk heavily, flicked a string of ashes from a fat stomach. “Will you sit down?” he said, and his voice was harsh and came from deep in his throat. “Nothing can get in with my men out there. With me here, nothing can hurt you if it is in. So hang onto yourself. In another half hour you’ll be in bed forgetting the whole thing.”

“Yes, yes, of course.” The senator laughed; the sound was tight, nervous. “It’s ridiculous. That’s what it is, ridiculous.”

“No,” Dustin said, “a threat of death is anything but that. Thaddeus Brock went insane yesterday and killed his family. The note said that you would do the same thing if you didn’t pay a hundred thousand dollars by ten o’clock. Sure, we think it was a crank letter, but we aren’t going to take a chance on a thing like that”

Sergeant Mack grunted. “Like I been telling you, senator, it’s nothing to worry about. It seems like every time somebody dies, a wise guy will send out a note trying to scare a fortune out of the first guy he thinks of.”

“I know nothing will happen, but it’s damned hard calling that kind of a bluff.” The senator was watching the clock face. “Three more minutes. Shall we have another drink?”

He strode to the small bar. Glass tinkled under his shaking hands, liquor spilled as he tossed the drink down his throat. Then he began pacing the length of the room with hard, choppy strides.

“You know, it’s damned funny about Thaddeus Brock,” Sergeant Hack said

slowly. “The way he went nuts, I mean. He was a friend of mine, besides being one of the best circuit judges we ever had, and as sane a man as you’d ever see. Then, blooey, he goes off his base just like that. He got a gun and walked in and shot his wife and girl. He just stood there in the doorway and—”

“Stop it! Stop it!” The senator’s voice was shrill, his face white, twisted. “Will you stop it before you drive me insane?”

The senator went to the desk, sat down and moved papers aimlessly. A heavy gust of wind drove hard against the window, rain rattled like shot across the glass. The senator jumped to his feet at the sudden sound, and his hands were clawing at his throat. Then his eyes saw the clock, jerked wide.

“Look!” He pointed with a shaking hand. “It’s—it’s less than a minute!”

DUSTIN spoke quietly. “Sit down, senator; try and get a grip on yourself. Sure, it’s less than a minute; it’s going to be ten before you know it, and then it will be over.”

The senator sat down slowly, his eyes never leaving the clock. His shoulders were heaving as he breathed, small drops of perspiration were running unnoticed down his face.

The telephone on the senator’s desk jangled softly. The senator reached for the instrument quickly. “Hello.”

Dustin barked: “Drop it!”

The senator released the phone slowly and stared at Dustin. Dustin’s voice was sharp. “Leave it alone. It might be some sort of—”

The clock interrupted by slowly chiming ten o’clock.

The last note died away and the men held their breaths unconsciously for a long moment. The only sound in the room was the rattle of rain against the window and the

moan of the wind around the house. Then Mack expelled his breath gustily. The senator laughed suddenly, shrilly, a quick, high burst, and reached for a drink. He gulped it quickly.

Ritchner shifted uneasily. A movement outside the window attracted Dustin's attention. He watched tensely for a moment, then saw that it was a stray dog. He was turning back-when he heard a startled cry from Mack.

"Hey!"

The sound of Mack's voice was suddenly drowned by a high-pitched, laughing scream. The scream was unutterably horrible, the tearing cry of a madman. A madman suddenly gone wild with an uncontrollable desire to kill. The sound came from the senator. His face was a twisted, hellish mask of wide, staring eyes and screaming mouth. He was pointing a gun at Mack, and before Dustin could move, he fired rapidly into Mack's belly.

Dustin lunged across the room. The senator screamed again and turned the gun to Dustin. Dustin lurched sideways, the gun spurted flame, and Dustin fell behind the desk. Dustin jerked his gun from his shoulder holster and crawled rapidly to one side. He was pulling himself up when the deep, reverberating roar of Ritchner's heavy .45 shook the room.

The senator stumbled, fell, then staggered up and rocked toward Ritchner. Ritchner's face was white, frantic, as he fingered the trigger. The tremendous blast of sound seemed to beat the senator back. He crumpled, his body limp, unmoving, and a large red stain spread rapidly across his shirt front.

Dustin turned to Mack. Mack was on the floor, his hands laced tightly to his belly as though to keep back his life that ebbed redly through his fingers. His face was twisted with pain, his eyes wide and

unbelieving.

Dustin barked: "Get a doctor. George, call the office. Use the phone downstairs."

He knelt beside Mack, tried to pull Mack's hands away. Mack shook his head. "I don't hurt much ... kind of numb. Can you beat it ... he ... shot me...."

And then Mack died.

Dustin pushed himself to his feet "Never mind the doctor, George," he said, before he remembered Ritchner had gone downstairs. The door bounced open in front of three plain-clothes men. The man in front stopped short, his eyes bulging.

"What the hell—"

"Better call your office;" Dustin said. "Mack's dead. The senator's dead. Use the phone downstairs."

One of the cops went downstairs, the others stared numbly at Mack's body. The taller of the two cops muttered inaudible sounds over and over in a flat, emotionless voice.

A city squad car came first, then the government men who were led by a chunky, grey-haired man. Dustin turned to him. "It's the phone, John, be damned careful of it. I don't know how or why, but it has to be. George and I will report in at the office."

The grey-haired man's eyes were running rapidly around the room. "I'll tend to it, Steve," he said crisply, "you go on ahead."

Dustin heard him giving quiet orders as he went down the stairs. George Ritchner fell in step with him wordlessly. Ritchner's face was stiff, white, and his eyes were glassy. When they were outside Ritchner said, "Wait a minute," and walked into the trees.

The hard tightness around Dustin's eyes eased a little as he watched Ritchner's back. It was replaced by a softness and a tiredness and Dustin felt old, worn. Ritchner

came back, his face ashen, and he was wiping his lips with a handkerchief.

“Sorry,” he said, his eyes avoiding Dustin. “I guess I can’t take it.”

“Forget it” Dustin said gruffly, “you got a right to feel that way.”

And then, when they were getting into the car, Dustin said softly to himself:

“Baptism of fire....”

EARLY MORNING SUNLIGHT slanted through the high window and spilled in a yellow wedge across the shoulders of the Divisional Chief of the F. B. I. Big Bill Davis was a man of about forty years whose clothes, revealing a tendency toward black and white, fitted him neatly. His black eyes and stubborn chin were pointed across the desk at Steve Dustin.

“You were right about the phone, Steve. John found a rig in the base that broke a small glass vial. It was fixed so it couldn’t break until a few minutes till ten. Whoever wrote the note just called the senator at ten, and when the senator lifted the receiver, he got it.

“The butler remembers a guy who claimed to be from the telephone company who said he was supposed to fix the phone. He had the credentials, so the butler let him in. All the butler can remember is that he looked like some kind of a foreigner, which isn’t a hell of a lot.”

Deep lines creased Davis’ forehead, his voice was raw with nerve tension. “What did he get, Steve? What on this earth could he get that would turn him into a raving maniac?”

Dustin’s shoulders slumped tiredly. His eyes were burning feverishly. “It’s got me beat. John’s the best chemist in the F. B. I., and he couldn’t find a thing in that glass vial. It’s something new, chief, something we’ve never seen before. The possibilities of the thing are tremendous.”

Dustin leaned across the desk, his voice dropping. “Look, chief, go easy on George, will you? It was a hell of a shock to him, that thing last night, and it damn near finished him. He did a fine job, pulled me out of a hell of a hole. He thinks he was responsible for the senator answering that phone.”

“Forget it. George will make a good man. He’ll work with you from now on—”

The buzzer on the inter-office phone interrupted him. Davis flicked the switch. “Yes?”

The clerk’s voice came crisply. “A Mr. Trask to see you, sir. A Mr. Sidney Trask.”

“Send him in.”

The door opened, and a tall man stood hesitantly in the entrance. His lean face was deeply tanned and made a striking contrast with his pure white hair. He was carefully dressed from his soft black hat which he held in his hands to his long, sharply pointed shoes. His voice held a slight guttural accent.

“Gentlemen, I am Sidney Trask.”

Davis introduced himself and Dustin. Then Trask asked: “May I bring my fiancée in!”

“Certainly.”

The woman was young, with the color of youth in the smooth curve of her cheek and in her full red lips. Her eyes were a deep blue, and her teeth, when she smiled, were small and even. She smiled faintly, when Trask introduced her, then sat quietly through the conversation that followed.

Trask pulled a newspaper from his pocket, laid it on the desk. “I came because of the deaths of Thaddeus Brock and Senator Robbins. I know why they went insane.”

DAVIS jumped to his feet. “Why?” Trask said: “Z-gas.”

Dustin and Davis leaned forward tensely, their eyes on the apologetic face of Sidney Trask. "What is this Z-gas?"

"I'm extremely sorry about this matter. I feel that it is my fault these people died. When I think of what is to come—well, frankly, I am on the verge of a nervous breakdown." He patted his suddenly damp forehead with a large, silk handkerchief.

Davis' voice was quiet, soothing. "I didn't mean to upset you, Mr. Trask. Perhaps it would be better if you told us in your own way."

Trask worked the handkerchief between nervous hands. As he talked, his voice was shaky, and at times barely audible.

"I am a chemist. Together with my associate, Ivar Strand—my fiancée's father—I have been working for the past two years in developing a weapon that would end an war.

"We worked on the assumption that if one country had a weapon with which they could easily defeat any other country, it would end war. Certainly, no country would attack if they knew they would be defeated within the first few days. Needless to say, we were going to give this weapon to the United States."

Davis murmured: "Of course."

"The first two years of our work were fruitless. Then, at the end of the third year, we discovered the liquid. This liquid, if injected into a man's blood, would cause him to go insane. Realizing that the liquid as a weapon would be useless, we went further and found a compound that would change the liquid to a gas."

"How does it happen that this gas was given to Brock and Bobbins, if you discovered it?"

Trask's voice broke, his face flushed. "That is why we feel responsible for their deaths. In the course of our work, it was

necessary for us to have quantities of the liquid and the compound always on hand. We were stupidly absorbed in our experiments and failed to take the proper precautions. Some of it was stolen."

"Stolen? How much?"

Trask's voice was barely a whisper. "A lot. Enough to affect half the population of this city."

"Lord!" Davis swore. "Half the population.... But what about gas masks?"

"There aren't any. This gas will penetrate any known filter. That's what we've been working on, but thus far have failed."

Dustin asked: "Who do you think stole it?"

"Quite a few people knew about it though none of them would steal it"

Trask wrinkled his forehead in thought "I don't know who would possibly do such a thing." Then his face brightened. "It might have been—yes, of course, it probably was that Oriental person."

"Who?"

"It was that Oriental who tried to purchase the formula. I recall it very well now. He was a sinister person, and he made veiled threats when I refused to sell."

"His name, man. What was his name?"

"What was it? Oh, yes, Ling. That's it Ah Ling."

"Ling! You hear that, Steve, he says it was Ling." Davis' face was suddenly alive. "Take the wrecking crew and go get that son-of—pardon me, Miss Strand—get that guy and bring him here."

Dustin said, "Right" and headed for the door.

"Oh, Steve!" Davis called after him. "Send George in on your way out"

STEVE DUSTIN found Ritchner in the laboratory, his eye screwed to a microscope.

Ritchner's necktie was under his ear, his short hair was standing upright. His face held a flushed, defeated look.

"It's uncanny, Steve," Ritchner said when he saw Dustin. "I'm damned if I can see what there is about that phone that could make a guy go nuts."

Dustin grinned. "Forget it for a while. The chief wants you in his office."

Ritchner scrambled down off the stool and grabbed his coat. He was going through the door with one arm in a coat sleeve when Dustin called him back.

"Wait a minute. You can't go looking like that. There's a lady in there, a very beautiful lady." Dustin jerked his necktie straight and was reaching for his hair, when Ritchner danced away.

"Here, cut it out. What the hell! You want a bust on the nose?"

Dustin laughed. "Okay, handsome, get going."

Ritchner's face was suddenly serious. "On the level, Steve, why don't I go with you?"

"No particular reason. Only because it's orders. And orders in the F. B. I. are obeyed without question."

Ritchner said, "Right, boss. Sorry," and went through the door.

Dustin picked up the wrecking crew in the basement garage. They were young men, tall, broad-shouldered, with a quietness about them and a grimness in their eyes. The previous forays with Ah Ling reeled through Dustin's mind as they traveled toward the waterfront.

Ah Ling was responsible for most of the dope and a good deal of the racketeering on the coast. The department was sure of that, but they had no proof that would stand in front of a jury. Undercover men, raids and months of ceaseless effort had failed against Ling's cleverness. He always came out from under.

That was the thing that grated on Dustin's nerves and sent a red mist before his eyes when he thought of it. That, and his veiled sarcasm, and his smug confidence that he could always outwit the G-men.

But his sarcasm wasn't veiled when the wrecking crew surrounded his place and broke in the doors. His smug look changed to a smouldering heat in his black eyes when they started chopping walls and ripping flooring in search of the gas.

His meticulous clothes were ruffled, his smooth black hair was hanging in his face. Though his skin was yellow, his eyes slanted, his voice was the same as that of any American gutter rat.

"Call those punks off. I tell you there's no gas here. Sure, I tried to buy it. Sure. Sure. Hell, yes, I tried to buy it. I could have sold it for more money than you boy scouts would see in a lifetime. But does that mean I stole it? His voice went shrill. "Will you call those rats off?"

Dustin's face was sullen, his brown eyes held yellow flecks of rage. Unhurriedly he swung his open hand. His hard knuckles cracked dully against Ling's face. Ling staggered back, his hands held tightly to his face, and blood seeped through his fingers from his nose. Tears formed in his eyes.

"You—hit me," Ling muttered hoarsely. "You'll die for this, you hear?" His voice rose to a scream. "You'll die—"

Dustin walked to him slowly. His hand reached up and caught Ling's wrist, jerked it down. Then it flashed into Ling's face again. That time it was closed.

Ling fell backward over a chair, rolled to his side and began sobbing. Dustin stood over him, his hands hanging limply, his shoulders bunched.

"Get up!" Dustin rasped through his teeth. "Get up. We're going out of here. Get up!"

Ling scrambled to his feet, away

from Dustin. He sidled toward the door, his eyes held tightly to Dustin's face. He ran the back of his hand under his nose in a quick motion, and began backing down the corridor toward the entrance.

Dustin barked: "Turn around! Now walk out that door and get in the car."

Ling jumped and his hands went above his head. He went through the door, and as he walked, his head was half turned, watching Dustin over his shoulder.

THE LATE afternoon traffic was just beginning to thicken as Dustin drove slowly across town.

"Damn that Ling," he said, more to himself than to Ritchner, who sat beside him. "He can't get away with that every time. One of these days I'm going to get something on that yellow devil, and when I do, there won't be enough left to hang."

"Beats me," Ritchner offered. "The boys must have torn that place apart. Besides not finding the gas, they didn't find anything else that would hold him."

"That's it. That's it exactly. So we had to let him go. It's a hell of a business when a guy like that can run around loose."

Ritchner didn't answer that, and they drove across the river in silence. When they were headed out through the East Side, Ritchner squirmed in his seat a little and then said slowly:

"You know, Steve, there's something queer about that girl. What I mean is, something's bothering her. I wish I knew what it was. She's a queen, Steve."

Dustin grinned a little. "You must have got pretty clubby with her while I was away."

Ritchner flushed. "Aw, t'hell with you, you big slug. It was business, see, all business. Sure, I got to talking to her and showing her around when Trask was talking to the chief. Well, maybe I could go for her,

she's my type. But that isn't what I'm getting at. The girl's afraid of something, deathly afraid. It's in her eyes, and the way she acts."

"What's she afraid of?"

"That's what I'm wondering. You see, whenever I'd ask her certain things she'd shut up like a clam and get white. Things like when I asked her where her father was from, and how long had he been working for Trask. Just making conversation, see, but she'd shut right up, or change the subject."

Dustin eased the car into the curb. "Well, maybe you'll get a chance to go into it more with her now. This is Trask's laboratory. We're going up there and take a look at it"

Ritchner was shaking his head when he followed Dustin into the building. When they were in the elevator on their way to the top floor he was muttering.

"What's a girl like that got to be afraid of? She's going to be married, isn't she? She's got money, hasn't she?"

"There's plenty of things besides having a man and money that frighten a pretty girl," Dustin said. He pushed on a door marked Trask and Strand, and they found themselves in a small office. They waited several seconds, then Ritchner said:

"Nobody home, I guess."

"Maybe not, but we'll take a look around anyhow."

The next room was long, lighted by a skylight in the center, and narrow. On either side were work benches covered with test tubes, gas burners, odd-shaped bottles and an intricate network of glass tubing.

Dustin made his way down the aisle, his eyes running over the equipment, but he touched nothing. About half the length of the room from the door they were stopped abruptly by a thumping sound that came from the far end of the laboratory.

“What’s that?”

“There’s only one way to find out,”
Dustin said.

His hand slipped to the butt of his revolver, and he slid forward on the balls of his feet toward the small door at the end of the room. His hand caught the knob and he jerked it open and stepped back in one motion.

BULGING EYES peered at him from behind thick glasses of the man who lay on the floor of the closet. Gurgling sounds slipped through the gag tied across his mouth, and he struggled against the ropes that bound his hands and feet. Dustin pulled him out and untied the gag. The man coughed fitfully as Dustin worked with the ropes. He sat up and began rubbing his wrists. He was a small man, in a wrinkled smock, and his voice held a tense shrillness.

“Oh, it was terrible! Terrible! Those men—” He shuddered and darted frightened eyes around the room. Then he looked up suddenly. “I must call the police. I must call the police.” He got up and hobbled toward the phone.

“Not so fast,” Dustin said. “Maybe we can help you.”

“Who are you? Who are you?” he blurted, suddenly aware they were strangers to him.

“We’re from the Department of Justice. You say some men came here and tied you up?”

“Oh. Government men. That’s fine. That’s fine. Sidney must have told you everything. I’m Ivar Strand. We have worked together on the development of the gas. It’s wonderful. No, it’s terrible. All those people dying because of it.” He was suddenly on the verge of tears.

“Get hold of yourself. What about these men? Did you know them?”

“No, I didn’t know them. Of course I

didn’t know them. I had never seen them before. They came so suddenly and demanded the gas. I told them it wasn’t here, and they tied me up and put me in the closet. I could hear them searching the laboratory. They were Chinese, or something. Must have been Chinese.”

“Father! What are you saying?” The men turned and saw Ellen Strand in the doorway. Her eyes were large, frightened, and the back of her hand was held to her mouth. She ran to Strand.

Strand’s small, grey hands patted her. “There, there, it was nothing. Nothing at all. I was just telling these men about something that happened to me once. Oh, pardon me, do you gentlemen know my—”

“Of course, I’ve met them,” the girl interrupted. “Now tell me what happened. Was it about the gas?”

“Well, yes. It’s nothing to fret yourself about, dear. Some men came in and tied me up and searched the laboratory. They didn’t hurt me one particle. See, not one particle. Now you run along while I talk to these men.”

“I will not,” the girl snapped. “You’re coming home with me this minute.”

The phone rang in the outer office and Strand went to answer it.

The girl turned to Ritchner. “Oh, please won’t you make him come home with me? He’s so frail, his heart, the least excitement makes him ill. He—”

“It’s for Mr. Dustin,” Strand called from the office.

BIG BILL DAVIS’ voice rattled in the receiver. “Steve, get this. Paul Stark Semlar just got one of those notes. I want you and George to go over there and bring him here. His place is only a short way from there. It’s the Halsted Arms, on Tenth and Maple. Make it fast, and for heaven’s sake, get him here alive.”

Dustin clipped: "Right, chief, we're on our way." He jammed the instrument back on the desk and turned to Strand. "You'll have to go down and make a full report at the office. George, come on, we've got a call."

Ritchner followed him into the hall. As they waited for the elevator Ritchner asked, "Who is it this time?"

"Paul Stark Semlar."

Ritchner whistled. "Whew! They're shooting high."

Dustin grunted. They were going down Twenty-first Street when Ritchner spoke again. "It looks like some of Ling's boys knocked over Strand."

"Maybe, but I doubt it. The whole thing stinks. Strand was lying from scratch."

"Lying? How?"

"If there were any Chinese there, they did a hell of a job tying Strand. He could have gotten loose any time. I think he tied himself. And then, the laboratory, wasn't searched, because there wasn't a thing out of place or broken."

Ritchner wrinkled his forehead. "Well, if you put it that way, I guess it does. Say he did, what could he gain by it?"

"He might have been trying to tie something to Ling. Your guess is as good as mine. But get this, George: Strand and that girl are mixed into this thing some way and it isn't on our side either."

"Five gets you ten, the girl isn't," Ritchner snapped. "You can say her old man is; but you haven't got a thing on the girl."

"I've got a hunch that I'll risk five bucks on. You've got a bet, rookie, five bucks for ten. Besides that, the loser buys the best dinner in town. Right?"

"I'll take that, mister, and that dinner'll cost you plenty."

Dustin parked the car a half block from the Halsted Arms entrance. Ritchner was getting out when a woman charged

down the sidewalk toward him. She was running with short, choppy strides and looking back over her shoulder. She slammed into Ritchner, and Ritchner staggered back. She looked at him with wide, staring eyes, then threw her arms around his neck and screamed.

Her scream was one of fear, but the scream that came from the entrance to the Halsted Arms was the scream of a madman. It started with a burst of wild uncontrollable laughter and rose to a throat-tearing scream of madness. Then came the sharp crack of an automatic.

The surging crowd cleared, and Dustin saw the figure of a large, redheaded man standing in the center of the walk holding a gun in his hand. The redheaded man tipped back his head and that horrible cry came, that demented scream of the completely insane.

A cop was lying across the curb, his face twisted with pain and his hand moving slowly as he tried to raise his service revolver. Dustin broke into a run, jerked to a stop as the redheaded man raised his gun to fire at the cop.

Dustin lined his sights, his finger squeezing the trigger. Then he cursed and dived to one side to avoid the frightened, rush of a woman. He heard Ritchner yelling behind him. The redheaded man fired again.

The sound of his gun blended with the deeper roar of the cop's heavier revolver, and in the scream of the redheaded man was an overtone of pain. As Dustin watched him, he folded slowly until his hands touched the walk. Then he toppled forward. The cop rolled, the gun slid from his hand, and his body slumped into the gutter.

DUSTIN fought his way to the redheaded man's side. The man had turned on his back, as he died, and now a flow of blood reddened the white of his shirt. There was a

dark bruise on his temple, and on his neck Dustin found a slight swelling with a small dot in the center.

A fat man rolled the cop out of the gutter, then lifted wide eyes and a face that was pasty white. "He's—he's dead!" the fat man gibbered. He turned, suddenly, and fought his way through the crowd.

The bull voice of a cop came from the outer fringe of the crowd. Dustin got to his feet and pushed his way to the curb. Ritchner panted to a stop beside him.

"Are we going up to his room, Steve?"

"No need of it He was slugged," Dustin clipped. "Slugged and stuck with a hypodermic." He started for the car, then stopped abruptly. Ritchner bumped into him and they both froze.

Through the back end of a taxi caught in the snarl of cars, and looking back at Dustin with wide, staring eyes, was the face of Sidney Trask.

Dustin roared, "Hey!" and dived into the traffic. It began moving before Dustin could reach the taxi, and the cab swung into an intersection and raced away. Dustin looked wildly around, then jumped on the running board of a coupe.

"Follow that cab!"

The traffic jammed up again, and before the coupe could move, the cab was out of sight Dustin stepped down off the running board, said, "Never mind, skip it," to the man in the car, and turned to Ritchner.

"Let's get out of here."

Ten minutes later Dustin was striding into the division office of the F.B.I. His eyes were bleak, bitter. He stopped in front of the clerk's desk.

"Get out a call for Sidney Trask."

The clerk jerked his head toward the inner office. "He's in there now with the chief."

Dustin said, "The hell he is!"

explosively, and wheeled through the door into Davis' office.

Sidney Trask looked up as Dustin stopped in the doorway. He was sitting in a chair beside Davis' desk, nervously twisting a black felt hat. His face was strained, his eyes haggard, worried.

"Why didn't you stop?" Dustin asked flatly.

"I—I was so upset when I saw what happened, I couldn't think," Trask stuttered. His face flushed, and his eyes dropped to his pointed shoes.

"Mr. Trask was telling me about it," Davis broke in smoothly. "You see Paul Stark Semlar was the man who was financing Trask's experiments. They have been friends for years, and Trask was reporting to Semlar the events of the past few days. Semlar told him that he had received the note. Trask advised him to notify us. Trask was going back after some papers he had forgotten in Semlar's apartment, when Semlar was killed."

"Yes, that's right," Trask said. "The note said definitely that if Semlar notified the police, he would be killed. It's my fault. I told him—"

"Nonsense," Davis broke in. "Now you go home and rest. Maybe you would feel better if we sent a man with you?"

"No, no, you mustn't. I've caused too much trouble already. I'll just go."

Davis waited until he had left, then said, "What happened, Steve?"

STEVE'S voice was quiet and bitter as he told him. When he had finished, Davis cursed: "Damn it all, we've got to find that gas. Do you realize that it won't be long before that guy realizes the power he has in his hands? When he does—"

"I know, chief, we'll get it. I think I've got something now." Dustin told him of what they had found in Trask's laboratory.

“You’re right, there is something there,” Davis said. “Bill Dougherty has been tailing Ellen Strand, and he called in and said he had followed her to Ling’s place. She only stayed there long enough to find out the place was empty, then went home. That ties her to Ling, and checks the angle about the raid on the laboratory being faked.”

Dustin got up. “I’m going to have a talk with that girl now.”

Dustin found Ritchner bending over the desk telephone in the outer office. He made gestures at Dustin, and Dustin stopped and waited for him to finish.

Ritchner’s face was flushed, his eyes bright. “Guess who that was. Ellen Strand. She wants to see me about something. Says it’s very important.”

“Come on,” Dustin said. “That’s where we’re going.”

“Are you sure the girl called from here?”

“That’s what she said.”

“Well, she’s not here now. Let’s take a look, anyway.” He moved along the walk, stepping quietly. The doorknob turned easily in his hand, and the door squeaked a little as he pushed it.

They stood inside with the door closed. Dustin got a small flash from his pocket and a thin pencil-like beam showed a small hall, a flight of stairs at the far end, a doorway on his left, and an archway on the right.

Dustin walked to the arch, his flash playing ahead of him. He stopped abruptly and fumbled for the wall switch. Light spilled from a chandelier into a chaotic mass of wrecked furniture. The davenport cushions had been slashed, the backs torn away, and dumped against the wall. Books were spilled from the cases, the window blinds pulled down and torn away.

Dustin stood in the archway, his eyes

When they were in the car Dustin asked Ritchner; “Well, are you about ready to buy that dinner?”

“Why?”

“Dougherty followed her to Ling’s place. That ties her to Ling.”

“That isn’t enough. You’ve got to prove she has a connection. Just seeing her there doesn’t mean anything.”

“All right,” Dustin answered, “I will.”

It was dark when they stopped in front of Strand’s house. The house was the same as every other house in the block. Small, neat with clipped shrubs dotting a small lawn. The only difference was the rest of the houses cast yellow light through drawn shades, and Strand’s house was dark.

Dustin stood for a long moment on the walk leading, to the house. He spoke softly to Ritchner.

running across the shattered room. Little muscles jumped along his jaw, and his eyes were hard, bright. Ritchner gasped when he saw the stain in the center of the rug.

THE STAIN was sticky, when Dustin touched it, and dully red. It spread in a circle. Smaller drops made a trail away from it toward the back of the house. Near the stain was the dumped contents of a woman’s purse. Powder, lipstick, and small change spilled across the floor.

“That’s hers! That purse! She must be dead!”

“Easy, George, easy. It’s her purse, but that’s all we know. Call the office and find out if Dougherty has reported in. Tell the chief what we’ve found. I’m going to look around.”

Ritchner went to the phone that was in the hall by the stairs. Dustin followed the trail of blood across the floor. He used his flashlight when it led him out of the room, and he followed it through the dining room

and into the kitchen. He was in the center of the kitchen when a sudden rush from one side made him spin quickly.

He swung the flashlight toward the charging figure and lurched sideways. His hand clawed for his shoulder holster. The light caught a brief glimpse of slanting, beady black eyes, of yellow skin and snarling mouth. The figure drove low into Dustin's hips.

Dustin was caught off balance and driven hard against the wall. The flashlight skittered out of his hand, the room was instantly dark. As Dustin fell, the thought of Z-gas flashed through his mind. Sudden pains surged through him, and he held his breath as he fought. Something struck the side of his head, a fan of lights burst back of his eyes. His hands slipped from his opponent, and the man scrambled to his feet, jerked the back door open and vanished.

Dustin pushed himself to unsteady feet, shook his head and lunged after him. His feet hit the small sidewalk and he rocked across it into some shrubbery. He was running when he heard the car's motor bellow to life, and as he reached the alley gate he saw the car jounce into the next street and disappear.

"Steve! Steve! Where are you?" Ritchner shouted from the back porch. Dustin heard his feet running toward him and called:

"It's all right He got away."

"Who was it? What's happened?"

"One of Ling's punks jumped me in the kitchen." Then he was conscious of a warm trickle running down the side of his face. He dabbed it with a handkerchief. "He slugged me."

Ritchner held his light against Dustin's face. "Gripes, he did! Come in and I'll fix it up."

"Just a minute. Give me that light" He swung the light to the walk and found

the end of the trail of blood. It stopped where the sidewalk ran into the alley. Against the board fence they found a man's hat.

"That hat belongs to Bill Dougherty," Dustin said bitterly. "They killed him in there, then hauled him away. Let's go inside."

Ritchner went back to the telephone, and Dustin began a search of the house. He started on the second floor bedrooms and worked his way to the basement. In a waste basket in one of the bedrooms he found a newspaper. In a small fruit closet in the basement, on a shelf that Dustin had to stretch to reach, he found a white shoe box. Dust was heavy on the floor and Dustin stared a long time at the footprint he found there.

Upstairs again, he put the things he had found on a table. In the shoe box was a small bottle of colorless liquid labeled Z-FLUID and a box of white powder. "My guess," he said to Ritchner, "is that this powder and liquid are the makings of Z-gas. This newspaper has the letters cut from the headlines. Letters like those used in the extortion notes. Do you know what that means?"

"You mean Strand is the guy?" Ritchner said slowly.

"Looks like it."

RITCHNER reached into his pocket and placed two small, waxed cylinders and a slip of paper beside the rest of the articles. Dustin prodded the cylinders with a forefinger. "They look like pipe filters, only bigger around and not quite as long. "Where'd you get them?"

"From the lining of her purse. That paper has Ling's address on it"

"It's tough, George."

"I don't believe it, Steve. She couldn't" His voice was tight. "All right, I

can see you think I'm screwy, but I think she's square. And I'll keep thinking so until I find her."

He turned and went to the telephone. Dustin heard him give orders for a pickup call for Ellen Strand and her father. The tightness in Ritchner's voice when he said, "Ellen Strand," and the way the words stuck in his throat made Dustin feel suddenly old. Old, tired, sick of the business, and wondering, then, if it wouldn't be a good idea if he had a drink. A lot of drinks.

Ritchner came back to the table, his eyes hot, feverish. "Give me these, Steve," he said, picking up the cylinders and the paper. "I'll give them back when we find the girl. Maybe it's a hunch, but I think I can find her. What do you say?"

Before Dustin could answer, they heard cars screeching to a stop in front of the house. Dustin said: "That'll be John and the wrecking crew. Sure, George, take them. And listen, I hope you're right about her."

Ritchner's voice was husky. "Thanks, boss." He pivoted and left the room.

The grey-haired man came in followed by three of his men. "Trouble follows you, Stevie. Every place you go somebody dies." He said it jokingly.

Dustin didn't take it that way. He ran the back of his hand across his eyes, shook his head. "You're right. John. Every place, somebody dies."

Dustin was moving toward the door when the phone rang. He said, "I'll get it," and picked up the instrument

"Listen, Steve," it was Big Bill Davis talking, "Ivar Strand just called from his laboratory. He's scared silly about something. Sure, I know George just put in a pickup call for him. That's why I called you. You know what to expect, and then, he asked for you particularly."

"I'll go over."

In the car, two things bothered Dustin: the footprints and the small, waxed cylinders. Two things besides the fact that Strand's call looked like a trap.

Dustin parked the car as close to the laboratory as he could get and he was striding up the sidewalk when he heard a voice call his name. His hand found his gun, his muscles tensed. Then he relaxed. Sidney Trask stopped in front of him.

"This is fortunate, finding you here. Were you going to the laboratory? Good, I'll go along with you."

Dustin followed Trask into the building's entrance, and when they were in the elevator, Trask's voice held a raw edge of nervousness.

"I wanted to see you. It's about Ivor. I'm worried about him. He's been acting so queer. Tonight he called me and asked me to come here. He wouldn't say why, he just insisted that I come."

"Is that all that worries you?"

"No. I—I hesitate to say more. There's nothing definite. No real evidence that he is connected with these tragedies, but it's just the way he acts."

Dustin stopped in front of the door to the office. His hand closed on the butt of his gun, and he turned the knob slowly and slid through.

"Why, he isn't here!" Trask exclaimed. "The laboratory is dark."

Dustin clipped: "Be quiet"

HE WALKED across the office toward the entrance of the laboratory. He had just reached the door when Trask stepped up from behind him, said, "Here, let me turn on the lights," and snapped the switch.

Dustin couldn't stop him, so he jerked sideways as the lights went on. At the same instant a flash came from the end of the laboratory. Dustin felt a tug at his coat collar, heard the thud of a bullet on the wall

behind him, as he dived for the floor.

He rolled quickly, the lights went out, and he snapped a shot at the point where he had seen the flash.

Trask's voice was yelling in the darkness behind him. "From the window. It came from the window!"

Dustin lunged across the laboratory to the window at the far end. The window was open and he peered down the fire escape. The thick, velvet blackness between the two buildings made it impossible for Dustin to see into the alley. He listened intently for a moment, then turned.

"Switch on the lights," he said to Trask. "He's gone."

He heard Trask fumbling for the switch. The light revealed Trask crouched against the wall. His eyes were wide and he was shaking visibly.

"Why did he do it?" Trask asked hoarsely. "Why did he try to kill us?"

Dustin was fingering the torn place made by the bullet in his coat collar. "You figure it out," he said irritably, "he's your partner."

Dustin stared at the window, at the wall next to it. He went to the wall and found a bullet hole gouged into the wood paneling.

He spun quickly. "Let's go down to headquarters."

Trask was saying, "I turned the light off as quickly as I could. To think Ivar could possibly do such a thing—"

But Dustin wasn't listening. His mind was suddenly filled with George Ritchner, a frightened girl, and the black, shoe-button eyes of Ah Ling. . . .

Big Bill Davis was waiting for them when they got to the office. His eyes were blazing, his face was set in stiff planes.

"Do you know why Bill Dougherty didn't call in?" he snapped. "Do you know why there wasn't a body in Strand's living

room?"

Dustin's eyes smouldered behind half-closed lids. "Go on. Why?"

"Because they found him out on Riverside Drive with his throat cut from ear to ear! You hear that? From ear to ear!" his voice lowered. "Where's Strand?"

Dustin told him in terse, clipped sentences. When he had finished, Davis put his elbows on the desk, ran stiff fingers through his hair.

"You've got to find him, Steve. You've got to find Strand before George turns up with his throat cut."

Dustin leaned forward. "That's why I came in. Where is George?"

"He came here from Strand's and got a note left here for him by Ellen Strand. There were two little cylinders with the note. Do you know what they are?"

"No. We found a couple out at Strand's. I left them on the table."

"I had Bushnell follow him when he left. Bushnell called in and said he had followed George over on the East Side where George waited in front of a drug store. A couple of guys stuck guns in George's back and shoved him into a car before Bushnell could get close. The car got away clear."

Suddenly Davis was aware of Trask standing by the door nervously staring at the tips of his pointed shoes. "I thought I told you to go home and stay there."

Trask jumped. "I—I—Ivar called and told me to go to the laboratory. I went there and—"

"I know. I know. Go home, and this time stay there. I'll send a man to watch your house so you won't get your throat cut."

Trask left hurriedly and Davis turned to Dustin. His voice was quiet, steady. "Have we got anything, Steve? Anything at all?"

Dustin slid out of his chair, his face wooden. I've got it all, but they've got George. Give me four hours, and if I don't clean this nest up, you can have my badge. Have a couple of the boys go out to that laboratory and..."

He talked rapidly for two minutes and then, when he had left, Davis' eyes were no longer dazed but gleaming brightly as he rapped sharp orders and reached for his coat.

DUSTIN pulled back in the shadows as he saw the dark figure slither out of the shrubbery and onto the back porch of Strand's house. Dustin let his breath out heavily and whispered to the man beside him.

"I knew he would make a try to get that evidence. He'll be out in a couple of minutes, then I'm following him. Stay 'way back, when you come after me. Make a mess of this, and it's the end of George."

"Right, Steve, and when you get where he's going, we stay out till you signal."

"There he is," Dustin said as the figure appeared again on the porch. "Watch yourself," and then Dustin was gone, sliding through the shadows after the dark figure.

Dustin cut through to the alley and then to the street back of Strand's house. He ran his car out of a private driveway, and a man stepped from the shadows.

"Straight north, Steve. It's a black coupe. License number, 316-412."

Dustin gunned the car after a red tail-light that flickered far up the street. He followed it west toward the river, among looming warehouses and dark, untenanted factories.

The black coupe stopped in front of one of the warehouses, and Dustin kept going, made two left turns and stopped in back of the same building. He waited in the shadows until he saw a car nose across the

intersection above him. He knew, then, that his men had followed and were waiting.

He put an extra gun in his pocket and walked along the railroad track that ran into the warehouse yard until he found a chute that led into the building basement. The chute had been used for incoming freight, and the door was broken. Dustin managed to unfasten it and slide down into the musty darkness.

He stood there for a long moment, holding his breath. A sound came from somewhere above, then, muffled by the walls, but clear because of its terrible shrillness. It was the high-pitched, laughing scream of a man who had breathed Z-gas.

It was the cry of a devil gone mad, of a slobbering maniac insane with a lust for blood. Dustin froze as he heard it, and the darkness around him seemed filled with the sound. His stomach crawled, his palms were suddenly slippery as they clenched on the gun butts. He knew then that the cry had come from George Ritchner.

Dustin stood rigid, his body frozen as long as the cry lasted. It broke, finally, died to muffled sobs. The quick, light tapping of a woman's feet echoed across the floor above him, followed by the heavy pound of a man's shoe. A shrill, fear-wracked scream of a woman rose until it was a thin, scratching sound. A scuffle of feet, then, and the scream choked off.

Dustin jerked his light free, its narrow beam found a door across the room. Dustin went through the door and ran quietly along a narrow aisle between stacked boxes and bales. He found stairs, climbed them, and then stood motionless as he waited for his eyes to become adjusted to the darkness.

HE BEGAN moving cautiously along a runway, his hands gripping his guns. Then he stopped. Ahead of him a board squeaked,

then another, and it was quiet again. Dustin put one gun in his pocket, got his flash and held it ready as he cat-footed toward the wood.

He had gone five steps when he jerked to a stop again. This time it was George Ritchner laughing that mad, hideous cry. Dustin's jaws clamped tightly, his body sweating. The sound began to fade, and Dustin was relaxing when a hot, panting fury dropped on his shoulders.

Dustin pitched forward under the sudden shock. His gun skittered out of his hand as he fell. A flash of pain ran through his left arm as it folded under him. He squirmed under the clawing fury that was driving at his throat.

Hard, locking, hammer-like blows pounded his forearm, his head and shoulders. His arm dropped, a blaze of light seared across his eyeballs and a blackness clouded into his brain.

He was dimly aware of ropes biting his wrists and ankles and then of being dragged across the floor. A door opened, and he was thrown roughly in the center of a blaze of light. He remained motionless, opened his eyes a little at a time. In front of him was the snarling face of Ah Ling. In back of Ling, bound and gagged, was Ivar Strand.

Ling straightened, snarled at some one behind Dustin. "You fools! Why did you bring him in here? Take him out!"

Hands grabbed him again, and Dustin felt himself dragged through the door. One of the men who dragged him stopped abruptly, whispered:

"It is the G-man who raided the master's warehouse. It would please the master if we were to put him with the demented one. Yes, it is a fit punishment."

They carried him up a flight of stairs, and with each step the sound of Ritchner's laugh came closer. One of the men carrying

Dustin said:

"Take cars. The insane one has guns. Raise the trap, then drop him quickly."

Dustin pitched through the opening in the floor with a sickening rush. His feet hit, he twisted his body as the sudden roar of gunfire filled the room. Bright orange-blue tongues leaped out of the darkness, and the roar pounded his eardrums.

Ritchner's laughter shrieked wildly and the guns blazed again. Dustin yelled:

"George! George! Listen to me!"

The guns bellowed, and Dustin heard the bullets striking the walls. Ritchner's laughter lowered to a snuffling, and Dustin could hear feet moving cautiously toward him. Dustin lay unable to move; sweat was running from his face, his stomach crawling inside him. He ran his tongue over dry lips, his voice was hoarse.

"George ... George. . . ."

The guns blazed, the hot tongues of fire seemed to reach out toward him, and Ritchner was laughing again. Suddenly the laughter stopped and a hot whisper came to Dustin:

"Scream, Steve. Scream like I shot you!"

There had been a scream building in Dustin's throat because of the strain, and it was easy to scream. He did, and it gurgled off as though blood had filled his throat, and Ritchner laughed wildly, madly, but there was a different note in it.

Then Dustin felt hands running over him, heard Ritchner whispering: "Are you all right, Steve? Are you all right?"

Dustin's voice came from a tight throat. "Sure, I'm all right. Thank heavens, you are. I knew about those filters, but with that act you put on, I wasn't sure. Get me out of these ropes."

"I had to do it. He thought I had the gas. As long as he kept thinking so, Ellen and I had a chance."

“Where is she?”

“Here.” Then he whispered into the darkness. “Ellen, come here. It’s Steve.”

Dustin heard a rustle in the corner, and the girl was beside him. Dustin said: “Good, kid, we’ll have you out of this before you know it.”

The girl asked, “Have you seen father?”

Dustin didn’t answer her, but spoke to George. “Can we get out of this place?”

“It’s a storage bin. The only way out is through the trapdoor. Maybe you could reach it if you got on my shoulders.”

Dustin said, “Let’s go. Give me one of these guns.”

RITCHNER gave him the gun and Dustin climbed to Ritchner’s shoulders. He pushed the trap up and pulled his body through. He hung there, and Ritchner jumped and caught his hand and Dustin held on until Ritchner could pull himself up.

A sudden clamor of gunfire and voices shouting came from the far end of the building. “The boys are coming in,” Dustin clipped, “Strand and Ling were in a room downstairs. Come on.”

When they were halfway down the stairs the lights throughout the building came on. Dustin stumbled in the sudden glare and raced toward the room where he had seen Ling and Strand.

The door bounced open, and Ling lunged through, the black glitter of an automatic in his hand. He saw Dustin and fired rapidly. Too rapidly for accuracy. Dustin fingered the trigger of his own gun. Ling crumpled in the doorway, his gun thudding to the floor.

Dustin jumped across his body and saw Ivar Strand backed against the wall, his eyes wide and his face a white mask of fear. He turned, when he saw Dustin, and ran for the door. Dustin leaped after him, caught his

shoulder and jerked him back. Strand fell and lay whimpering on the floor. Dustin’s voice was flat, cold.

“You damn fool. Go out there and you’re sure to get killed. Get Ling’s gun and go up there with Ellen. Don’t let anybody near her.”

Strand scrambled to his feet, got the gun and headed for the stairs. Dustin turned, snapped at Ritchner. “All right, let’s clean this up.”

He started down the runway. Suddenly from behind one of the boxes a flying figure burst out and ran toward him.

“Mr. Dustin! Mr. Dustin!”

Sidney Trask’s face was contorted with fear, and he was shaking visibly when he fell on his knees in front of Dustin. His mouth was slack, his lips ashen, trembling.

“Get me out of here! They’ll kill me.”

Dustin looked at him for a moment, little muscles jerking along his jaw. Then he pulled back his fist and drove it with the full weight of his shoulder into Trask’s face. Trask flopped backwards, his hands held to his bleeding mouth. His eyes wide, amazed, on Dustin’s face.

Dustin reached down, snapped handcuffs on his wrists.

The firing in the far end of the warehouse stopped, and Big Bill Davis came up herding three Chinese. He looked at Trask, then at Dustin.

“All right,” he said, “add it up.”

Dustin fumbled for his pipe. His eyes were suddenly tired and his voice husky. “All Ling wanted was the formula for the gas. Trask, of course, was trying to extort money, and Ling was willing to play along with Trask so he—Ling—could get the formula. Things like letting Trask go on with his killing, and then at the last, letting him keep George, the girl and Strand here at the warehouse.”

“When did you get the idea that it was Trask and not Ling?”

“Ling’s men were always around after the killings. It looks like if Ling killed them, his men wouldn’t hang around afterward. Then, when Trask planted the gas in Strand’s place he put the things higher than Strand could reach without standing on something, and he left a print of those long, narrow-pointed shoes of his in the dust on the floor.

“Then Trask tried to spot me in the laboratory with a gun hooked to a photo-electric cell. He turned on the light and said the shot came from the window. I had fired at the flash and my bullet hit the wall. I don’t miss like that, not by ten feet, so I figured the gun was in the wall.”

“You were right. The boys found the gun after you’d left.”

“The reason he wanted me dead was because George and I were the only ones who knew about those waxed cylinders. You know, he said there wasn’t a gas mask that would work against Z-gas, but he was lying. These cylinders were filters that fit in the nostrils and work perfectly as long as you don’t breathe through your mouth. Strand knew about them, but Trask made him keep quiet by telling him he would give the girl Z-gas. Therefore, Strand, realizing that Trask might harm his daughter, attempted to

throw suspicion of the whole setup on Ling by tying himself up in the laboratory and telling us that several Chinamen had raided the place.

“So I knew that Trask was the man, but he had George and the girl, and I couldn’t move until they were safe. Then when Trask heard me say those cylinders were out at Strand’s house, it was certain he’d make a try at getting them. He did, but didn’t find them, so he came here to get rid of George and the girl. He had Ling put them in that bin and then he gave them a shot of the gas. The gas didn’t hurt them because they had the filters, but they put on an act to make him think it did. Then he was going back to administer the gas to Strand, because he knew that when the girl went raving mad, Strand would realize that he had done it. However, I got him before he could reach Strand.”

Bill Davis stood up, said: “Well, that’s it. Take him out, boys. You coming, Steve?”

Dustin smiled slowly and looked at Ritchner. “No, chief, I think George and Ellen and I are going to hunt up an all-night restaurant where I’m going to buy them two of the town’s best dinners.”

Ritchner grinned. “And they better be good, boss. They better be good!”