Ten Detective Aces, August 1935

The Masked Scourge

Thrilling "Moon Man" Novel

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Hard-boiled, leather-jawed Detective Lieutenant Gil McEwen lifted a silk dress out of a washbowl of blood-tinted water. "This belongs to the Moon Man's woman!" he grated. Little did he know that six feet away, behind a secret panel, stood his own daughter. Sue McEwen was stricken with terror lest that silken frock, bought for her honeymoon, would be the net that drew to the electric chair the one she was to marry, Detective Sergeant Steve Thatcher—the Moon Man.

CHAPTER I

THE ORCHID CLUE

SLOWLY, silently, the stocky man climbed the ladder of the fire-escape. He huddled on the platform, listened tensely through the window, heard quick footfalls in the room.

Bending far down, he peered through the narrow crack at the bottom of the drawn blind and watched the man who was nervously pacing back and forth, back and forth—a pallid-faced man gripping a revolver in one claw hand.

The hands of the clock on the desk were closing on midnight. A squat, black safe sat in the corner, its door closed.

The lean shadow of the pacing man fell across it again and again. Several times he paused and coughed, and the spasms shook his gaunt body. He jerked when the telephone jangled.

"Yes, yes, it's here. I've got it," he snapped into the transmitter. "It's up to you—what do I care? All right—if you're not here in twenty minutes, don't come." He clashed the receiver down and coughed

again violently.

These things the furtive man on the platform of the fire-escape saw and heard. He straightened, and soundlessly went down the iron flights. He stepped from the lowest section to the top of a car parked in the alley. Slipping behind the wheel, he prodded the idling motor. He did not drive far. He swung out of the alley, around the corner, and stopped.

The glow of the dash limned his scarred face, showed that he had a cauliflower ear and no neck, as he wrote quickly on a slip of paper. He approached the softly lighted entrance of the popular night club called the Garden of Eden. He seemed no different than thousands of other taxi drivers to the doorman when he said: .

"Please give this to Mr. Thatcher."

At one of the floor-side tables in the Garden of Eden, Stephen Thatcher, detective sergeant, son of the chief of police, was sitting with the very pretty young woman whom he was engaged to marry—Sue McEwen, only daughter of Detective Lieutenant Gilbert McEwen, - ace sleuth of the Great City plainclothes division. As swinging dance music filled the air, he said:

"Gil's expecting the move, but I think he's playing a wrong hunch. He's watching Graube's office, but Graube uses his apartment for big deals. It's directly behind this place, across the alley. If—" He glanced up as the head waiter extended a folded bit of paper and said:

"For you, Mr. Thatcher."

Steve Thatcher read three words which told him much: *Graube is waiting.* He smiled tightly, crumpled the slip and murmured: "Please excuse me, Sue." Her hand clasped his anxiously and her eyes searched his clean-cut face. He added: "Don't worry, I'll be right back," and strode with long, firm strides along the gleaming dance floor.

He was conscious that Sue's worried eyes were following him. He smiled when Ernst Fiermo, the owner of the night club, who was standing near the entrance, said:. "That certainly was a big robbery last night, Mr. Thatcher!" Stepping out, he noted as he walked past the line that, as he expected, none of the drivers of the waiting cabs had a cauliflower ear.

He turned the corner, turned again into the alley. In the gloom beneath the fire-escape a taxi was waiting, lights out. The neckless, stocky driver slipped from it as Thatcher approached. Without speaking, he reached into the cab, lifted out a small black case, and clicked it open. He peered up the fire-escape at the blinded window as the driver exclaimed:

"Boss, this is getting me. Every time I see one of those damn' things, my flesh crawls. I dream about 'em. God, Boss, I wish you'd play it safe!"

Thatcher asked quietly: "One of what things, Angel?"

"Those warnings!"

The stocky man pointed to the white square tacked to the telephone pole that rose at the rear of the apartment building. On it was a startling drawing of a figure seated in a massive chair. Heavy cables snaking from the chair proclaimed it to be the dread instrument of capital punishment.

A strong hand was pictured gripping a knife switch and throwing the deadly current on. Great black words declared: THE MOON MAN MUST PAY! Smaller type signed the promise: *Peter Thatcher, Chief, Great City Police Department.*

The figure strapped in the chair was one which every man and woman in the metropolis could recognize at a glance, one that haunted the detectives and patrolmen who had vainly sought, month after month, the notorious crook it depicted. The figure was wearing a dead-black robe. Its head was a featureless ball. The likeness was that of the infamous criminal known as the Moon Man.

Steve Thatcher smiled as he peered at it. "A good idea of McEwen's," he said grimly, "plastering those posters all over town, Angel. A move to break the Moon Man's morale—to throw such fear into him that he'll make a fatal slip and get grabbed. But—perhaps it won't work."

As he spoke he lifted a long black robe from the black case, and shook it over his shoulders. He pulled on black gloves. While the stocky man in taxi driver's outfit watched, he lifted the hinged hemispheres of a silver glass mask and fitted them together over his head. One moment wrought a weird transformation.

In the darkness of the alley Steve Thatcher, detective sergeant, vanished, and the Moon Man appeared.

THE Moon Man tensed to climb to the top of the taxi—and abruptly paused.

Light footfalls were echoing between the walls of the alley. A girl, her slender figure silhouetted against the light of the street beyond, was hurrying toward the cab. The Moon Man's breath soughed quickly past the deflector inside his spherical mask as a breathy, anxious call reached him:

"Steve! Wait!" Sue McEwen's hand trembled on the Moon Man's black sleeved arm and she gazed imploringly at the baffling globular mask. "I'm afraid, Steve! What—what are you going to do?"

The Moon Man's silver head twinkled as he gazed at the girl's white face, at the stocky man disguised in taxi driver's uniform. Ned Dargan, ex-pug, had dared the law at the Moon Man's side from the beginning. Headquarters listed innumerable crimes against them.

A continual manhunt was in progress for them both. All men on the police force had standing orders to shoot them on sight, to capture them at all costs. Yet, tonight, the Moon Man was about to carry out a new, daring coup.

Sue McEwen had loyally kept the secret that Steve Thatcher was the Moon Man. She realized that he repeatedly challenged the written law only in order to serve the higher commands of human necessity and mercy. She knew that every cent of his loot was distributed by Dargan to the needy. But even more profoundly than Dargan, she realized what utter tragedy must result if ever the Moon Man were unmasked.

It would break the heart of kindly old Peter Thatcher, the chief of police, to learn that his son was the notorious criminal. It would crush the tough, grizzled McEwen. It would completely destroy all the dreams of happiness which the girl shared with

Steve Thatcher. It would mean heartbreak, dishonor —and death in the electric chair for the man Sue McEwen loved. Anxiously, suspecting that again Thatcher was defying McEwen, in spite of the thousands of placards that were scattered about the city, the girl had hastened after him. Now her fingers trembled on his black arm and her eyes pleaded.

The Moon Man could see the whiteness of her face, the tremor of her lips, though his face was completely hidden from her. The Argus glass of his mask was opaque as a mirror to her widened eyes, but to his it was clear as finest crystal. His voice sounded muffled inside his mask as he quickly explained:

“Sue, last night three crooks shot the messenger who was carrying fifty thousands in bonds from Wilkinson & Company to the Day and Night National. They killed the messenger and got away with the securities, At this minute Gil is watching Nick Graube’s office, expecting the loot to be turned over to him, a fence who handles hot stuff at twenty cents on the dollar.”

“But, Steve—"

“Gil’s playing the wrong angle. Graube’s in his apartment, upstairs. The crooks are bringing the hot bonds to him tonight to sell. Graube is waiting now with ten thousand, ready to pay. There are sick and starving families in this city, Sue, who deserve that money far more than those three crooks or that fence. I'm going to see that they get it.”

“You’re running such a horrible risk, Steve!” the girl protested.

“Perhaps—but I'm going through with it,” the hollow voice of the Moon Man persisted. ‘“Please go back, Sue, and wait. Angel—after me. We haven’t a moment to waste.”

The girl watched in an agony of anxiety as the Moon Man lifted himself easily to the top of the cab. She followed his move to the lowest platform of the fire-escape. She saw him climbing the iron steps slowly, soundlessly, while Ned Dargan crept after him. She did not go back to the night club. She remained in the gloom of the alley and watched, her heart pounding with dread.

The ghostly figure of the Moon Man paused on the platform outside the window of Nick Graube, fence. His silver head glittered as he peered through the crack of the blind and saw that the bedroom was now empty. An open connecting door told him that Graube was in the next room, awaiting the arrival of the bond thieves. The Moon Man’s hidden eyes turned to the black front of the safe in the corner.

Inside it, he was certain, were the ten thousand dollars he had marked for his loot.

THE Moon Man’s black-gloved hand slipped in and out of a slit in the side of his robe. He withdrew a diamond glass-cutter, a small suction cup attached to the end of a short rod. He traced a white, curved line, almost soundlessly, on the pane in front of the window catch. He affixed the cup; and one sharp blow cracked the semicircular section out. He drew it away, reached inside, loosened the catch; and his silver head bowed as he listened.

He heard no sound. He slid the sash

upward slowly, noiselessly. He raised the blind. Cautiously, like a black ghost, he drifted into the bedroom and stood beside the desk. Graube, he knew, was somewhere beyond the connecting door; he heard wheezing, quick breathing. There was a sputtering sound, as of a pen skipping across paper, as the Moon Man crouched in front of the safe.

His black-gloved fingers worked nimbly while Dargan watched breathlessly from the fire-escape platform. His glittering head bent as he listened to the almost inaudible fall of tumblers. Back and forth he twisted the dial of the old safe. He thrust at the handle, and it gave. He opened the door and reached inside to a green packet bound with rubber bands—ten thousand dollars in currency.

The loot vanished inside his loose black robe as the Moon Man straightened. He listened. There was no sound of a scratching pen in the next room now. The wheezing breathing was quicker, tighter. A guttural moan reached the Moon Man's ears: "Oh, God—God!" Puzzled, anxious, the notorious criminal drifted toward the connecting door. He dared peer through — and his blood froze.

He saw Nick Graube seated at a table —and one of Graube's lean hands was pressing a revolver to his temple. He saw a man in the act of committing suicide. The unexpected sight froze him an instant while Graube's fingers tightened on the trigger of the glittering gun. Suddenly the Moon Man took a long, swift stride through the door.

"Drop that!"

Even as an instinctive, jerking response came from Graube, the room rocked with the explosion. Flame singed the hair at Graube's temple. Powder smoke gusted before the fence's popping eyes. The Moon Man's move was swift; his hand gripped Graube's wrist with lightning speed; but the drilling bullet sent blood gushing down the man's pallid face.

The Moon Man stood breathless, stunned, as Graube rolled limp from the chair and sprawled on the floor.

"Boss!"

The husky, alarmed call came from Ned Dargan as he scrambled off the fire-escape platform, into the room. He jerked to a stop, staring at the man on the floor, at the black apparition of the Moon Man bending. Smoke wafted in the air as the Moon Man's breath beat inside his mask, as his globular head bent above the table..

A sheet of paper lay there, black scrawled. The invisible eyes of the Moon Man read it swiftly:

Dearest Sarah:

Please forgive me for doing this. I com never get well, I would only be a burden on you. I have thought of suicide for months and now I know it is the only way. God bless you— NICK.

The Moon Man's eyes darted when a startling step sounded at the hallway door. He jerked up as the knob twisted. His automatic flicked level as the door swung wide. A man appeared. He stopped short just over the sill, thin-faced, rat eyed, cruel-lipped. His hand slipped instinctively inside his tuxedo coat— toward a shoulder holster—as the Moon Man's muffed

command sounded:

"Back! Get back!"

His black robe flapped as he took swift strides forward. The glitter of his automatic forced the man in tuxedo to recoil. His night-dark hand gripped the knob as he gasped over his shoulder to Dargan: "Angel! Get down—fast!" He backed from the door, gun leveled, conscious of Dargan's frantic move behind him. Abruptly he whirled and darted after Dargan to the fire-escape platform.

They sped down the flight—and stopped short, seeing a bright gleam on the next platform. The window beside it was open. A woman was peering out. She stared aghast at the apparition on the iron steps, the being enveloped in black with a head that was a shining, silver sphere. Again the hollow command came:

"Get back!"

The woman uttered a whimpering cry and recoiled. The Moon Man bounded from platform to platform. From the lowest he swung swiftly to the top of the taxi. As he dropped to the pavement, as Dargan sprang down beside him, a gasp of dismay echoed inside the globular mask.

Sue McEwen was standing beside the car, staring at him in terrified speechlessness.

The Moon Man's moves were swift. He lifted the fragile mask from his head and put it in the case. He snatched the black gloves from his hands. He whipped the black robe over his head. He closed the case while Dargan slipped behind the wheel and surged the motor. "Fast, Angel —to the house!" He reached for Sue's arm as the taxi lurched away.

He hurried with the girl to the entrance of the alleyway as Dargan sent the cab rushing in the opposite direction. He paused, breathing hotly, knowing that Sue's anxious eyes were searching his, as the taxi whirled from sight. He started away, and heard a woman's frantic voice echoing from the open, lighted window beneath the apartment in which a dead man lay.

"The Moon Man—the Moon Man was here!"

WHEN they approached the entrance of the Garden of Eden, Thatcher forced himself and Sue to walk casually. Their smiles were strained as they entered the soft lights and returned to their table. His pulse still pounding, Thatcher circled Sue's slender waist with his arm, and they danced. Couples stepped rhythmically around them, as the girl whispered anxiously :

"Steve, I—I heard the shot What happened, darling? Did you— "Not here," Thatcher cautioned. "Act it out. Nothing's happened—nothing."

It was almost half an hour later that they left their table. Sue drew her fur-collared cape snugly across her shoulders while Thatcher exchanged a check for his Homburg. Fiermo, the night club owner, hurrying close, asked him excitedly:

"Mr. Thatcher—have you heard about the murder?"

Thatcher echoed tightly: "Murder ?"

"It happened only a few minutes ago! Nick Graube—in the apartment just across the alley. The police are there now. I just heard it on the radio. They're looking—"

“Murder?” Thatcher repeated huskily. “Did the announcement say that?”

“That’s not all, Mr. Thatcher! The Moon Man did it! The Moon Man robbed Graube’s safe and killed him!”

Thatcher straightened. He mumbled an answer and his hand closed hard on Sue’s arm. Her quivering lips suppressed a sob as he led her to a taxi, a cab driven by a man who did not have a cauliflower ear.

“Steve! Oh, Steve! You—"

“It was suicide, Sue,” Thatcher answered in a breath. “I saw Graube do it.

He left a note to his wife that will prove it. You won’t mind going home alone, will you, darling? Gil’s probably at Graube’s apartment and I've got to see him.”

His signal sent the cab off. Sue’s eyes turned anxiously back to him as he hurried around the corner. He hastened into the apartment building on the next street; an elevator lifted him to the level of Graube’s rooms. He found patrolmen on duty at the door. He stepped through and heard the familiar rasping tones cf the veteran detective on the force, the sworn nemesis of the Moon Man, Gil McEwen.

“Plain as day, by damn!” McEwen was snarling. “Not a shadow of a doubt about it! By damn, the Moon Man can’t get away with this!”

McEwen grunted a greeting at Thatcher as he paced from room to room. Two other plain-clothes men were standing beside the fallen body of Nick Graube. Thatcher peered at the top of the table, where he had seen the scrawled letter, but now there was nothing.

“You’re sure,” he asked the grim McEwen; “it was murder?”

“What else?” McEwen snapped. “Murder and robbery. I've already checked up. Graube drew ten grand out of the Day and Night National today. It must have been in that safe, but now it’s gone. The Moon Man grabbed it, and killed Graube getting it.”

“How can you be sure—"

“He was seen! The woman in the apartment below saw him skipping, by damn, and phoned headquarters. She spotted the Moon Man! He tried to make it look like suicide, but he’s not fooling me, by damn! I'm combing this town for him now. The dragnet’s out. This time, by damn, I'm going to make my promise good. I’'m going to see the Moon Man get the chair!” :

“Gil,” Thatcher asked tightly, “by any chance did Graube leave a letter—one that might show he did kill himself ?”

“A letter? No. Steve, why the devil are you asking about a letter?”

“It would prove suicide if Graube left__"

“Nothing like it, by damn! I tell you, - there’s no doubt of it. Graube was murdered, and the Moon Man murdered him.” McEwen’s steely eyes glittered. “What’s more, Steve, I've got a new lead to that fancy crook. There’s a woman working with him. Not only Dargan, but a woman! I’'m playing that lead for all it’s worth. I'm going to find that woman, and through her I'm going to grab the Moon Man!”

Thatcher's throat went dry and tight. “What makes you think there’s a woman involved, Gil?”

"Because, down there at the bottom of the fire-escape, I found this!"

McEwen held it triumphantly in his extended hand—an orchid. Its fragile leaves were crushed. Its delicate color was blackened by a foot that had trampled it in the grit of the alley, and the imprint was of a woman's small high heel. Thatcher peered at the orchid clue and his heart became ice.

Tonight, before they had gone to the Garden of Eden, Steve Thatcher had presented that orchid to Sue McEwen.

CHAPTER II

SUICIDE BARGAIN

STEVE THATCHER left his roadster at the curb beside the turreted headquarters building, strode through warm morning sunshine, climbed worn wooden stairs, pushed into his office. Sue McEwen turned from the window to face him, a deep concern shining in her eyes. She came to him quickly; her arms tightened around him. He held her close as she breathlessly asked:

"Steve, what can we do? Dad has the whole force organized and searching for —us both. Suppose he traces the orchid? I'm not worried for myself, but if dad learns I lost it, he'll know—he'll know it's you!"

Thatcher forced a smile. "That clue won't get him very far, Sue—I'm sure of it. Keep your chin up. Don't worry. 1 think we're safe, but—" His voice faded and his eyes narrowed. "Graube left a note speaking of suicide. It clears me absolutely, But Gil didn't find it and—"

He broke off as the telephone rang. A quiet, tense voice on the wire tightened Thatcher's nerves. It was disguised, but he recognized the tones of Ned Dargan.

He listened to the ex-pug whisper:

"Look at the personals in the morning Record!"

Thatcher held the line as he flattened the newspaper on his desk. On its front page were great black headlines:

MOON MAN MURDERS FENCE
POLICE HUNT WOMAN ACCOMPLICE

He turned to the personal column quickly and his finger paused on the notice which quickened his pulse:

XY—Have note clearing you. Business deal necessary. Address Box 216R.

Thatcher's mind speeded. He said cautiously into the transmitter: "We've got to follow it up. Get a letter to that box, asking terms. Address answer to John Wilson, General Delivery." Hurry it!"

"Okay!"

Thatcher's lips pressed hard as he turned to face the girl. Grimly he declared: "That explains it! The man who came into the room while I was there, I forced him out, but he came back. He's got the suicide note. He's planning to use it for blackmail. I've got to see it through, Sue. There's no other way of clearing myself."

"Steve, darling—please be careful!"

Thatcher's lips curved wryly. "I have more reason now to be careful than ever

before, Sue. Not on my account—for your sake. No matter what happens, I'm going to keep you covered. That's a promise!"

He strode to the door labeled *Chief of Police*, and Sue followed. He pushed in and saw Gil McEwen pacing the floor, gnawing on an unlighted cigar. The grizzled veteran's greeting was only a flashing glance. Kindly faced, white-haired Peter Thatcher, sitting in his padded swivel chair behind his ancient desk, gave his son and the girl an affable greeting. McEwen paused and glared at the desk, at a crushed orchid which lay there.

"A sweet job—tracing that damn' flower!" he growled. "It'll probably end up nowhere, but it's proof there's a woman working with the Moon Man. That's how I'm going to get him. And when I do, by damn, that woman's going to the chair along with the Moon Man!"

Sue's face went white. Steve Thatcher's eyes rose to two placards on the wall. One was a replica of that he had seen on the telephone pole in the alley the previous night, the drawing of the Moon Man in the electric chair. The other—

McEwen's growling voice continued. "This is the second time we've spotted a woman with the Moon Man. Last month, when I thought I had him cornered in the warehouse on the river, Dargan and a woman beat it out of there in a roadster This time she's in deeper. She's going to get the chair because she's an accomplice to the crime of murder!"

Thatcher's aching eyes were directed at the second placard. It announced:

$25,000 REWARD!

A box of boldface type declared:

This amount, contributed by the Commerce Club and other local organizations, is offered for the capture of the criminal known as the Moon Man. It will be paid promptly upon the apprehension of the Moon Man to the person seizing him or supplying information which leads to his conviction for his many crimes.

And again the name signed was that of the chief of police, the kindly old father of the man who was that notorious criminal.

"If the Moon Man thinks he can keep on getting away with it," McEwen grated, "just let him go ahead! Over and over again I've sworn to get him— and I still swear it! No matter who he is! I''m going to see that crook fry, I tell you —no matter who he is!"

Steve Thatcher said tightly: "There's no doubt of it, Gil. The day's coming when you're going to send the Moon Man to the chair, and it may be very soon."

THATCHER eased from the office as McEwen's heels continued to hammer the floor. Sue's hand clung to his arm snugly while they went down the worn stairs. He led her to her car and as she took the wheel, he whispered:

"Sit tight, Sue, and say nothing. The suicide note will blow the murder charge to pieces. I'll stop at nothing to get it. Don't worry, darling. We'll—"

"But Steve." The girl's voice was a strained whisper; her eyes shone with worry. "You're facing far worse danger than ever before. The rewards—everybody

coveting that money and willing to turn you in if they get a chance. Oh, Steve, if it happens now—"

"Chin up," Thatcher urged her again. "I've got to play it through, Sue, regardless."

He watched the girl drive away, and grim determination filled him that she must never be suspected of connection with the Moon Man. Lips pressed tight, he crossed the street, sidled into a telephone booth, and dialed a number. It was one known only to him and Dargan and Sue—that of the phone in the far-away house which was serving now as the Moon Man's hideaway. The voice of the ex-pug answered the distant ring.

"Angel!"

"Boss! Listen, Boss! I wrote the message and took it right to the newspaper office. There's no telling when it'll be picked up, but whoever put the notice in the paper is playing for big stakes. What can you do, Boss, if they—"

"I'm going to get that letter at any cost, Angel," Thatcher declared. "For Sue's sake. It's the only possible way of clearing her of suspicion of murder. I'm going to the postoffice now—"

"Boss! Whoever it is—what happened ?"

Thatcher explained quickly. "Graube had an appointment with one of the crooks who pulled the bond robbery. You made sure of that. The man who came into the room while I was there is one of them. He came back, grabbed the letter, and slipped out again before McEwen arrived. He'll hold it over me for big money—"

"Gosh, Boss, we've got the ten thousand from Graube's safe, but that's all. If they ask for more—"

"No matter what the price is, Angel, I'm going to get that letter! Stay where vou are. Wait for another call. I'm following it through now."

Thatcher sidled from the booth, and walked quickly in the direction of the post office. He was prepared to wait until an answer from the unknown blackmailer reached him; but he gambled that they were ready for quick action. He searched the broad steps of the federal building as he approached it; he made sure the general delivery window was not being watched. Of the clerk behind the grille, he asked:

"Anything for John Wilson?"

A letter was put in his hand. "This was just handed in," the clerk said as Thatcher turned away. Sharp glances searching the lobby, he ripped the envelope. He saw one brief, printed line without signature: *Call City 5678*.

Thatcher stepped into a telephone booth. He called City 5678. A cautious, low voice answered. He said tightly:

"I'm calling about the letter." The reply was quick, rushing:

"You got ten grand last night. We want it. Get this straight. Ten o'clock tonight, sharp. Make it on. the dot, or you won't connect. Tony's place, on Church street, the rear entrance. Come alone. Bring the ten grand and you'll get the letter. Try any tricky moves, and you'll get a bullet. Tracing this call won't get you anywhere. It's a drug-store phone and I'm skipping now. Got that, Mr. Moon Man?"

"Yes."

The connection broke. Steve Thatcher

left the telephone booth with eyes shining darkly, with lips pressed to a line. He went slowly down the stone steps of the post office, chilled by the whispering coldness of the voice that had demanded blood money. His mind throbbed with the hope that this dangerous move would clear him and the girl he loved of the charge of murder.

CHURCH STREET was narrow, dark, flanked by low, sooty buildings. It skirted a warehouse district. It was cobble-stoned, dirty, lonesome. The glaring neon lights of a pool hall and the sign above the entrance of Tony's Bar threw a gaudy light upon the fronts of other buildings which were bleakly empty.

A taxi stood lightless near the alley that ran beside Tony's. Ned Dargan, at the wheel, peered into the deep gloom and glanced anxiously at his watch. The orders of the Boss had stationed him here an hour ago. He had been alertly watching the rear door of the dive. Dread filled him as he waited; and his eyes went again and again to two placards tacked on a telephone pole at the alley entrance.

One pictured the Moon Man strapped into the electric chair; and each glance at it froze Dargan's heart. The other proclaimed the offer of a fortune in rewards for the Moon Man's capture; and Dargan's eyes narrowed in grim thought each time he noted the tempting figures.

When his watch indicated nine forty-five—fifteen minutes until the zero hour—Dargan saw the dark figure of a man striding toward the front of Tony's. The glare of the bulbs lighted a thin, evil face.

Dargan's heart stopped, for he recognized the malevolent features of the man he had seen in Graube's apartment, the man who had stolen the suicide letter. His hand went cold to the butt of his revolver as the unknown crook stepped into the bleak darkness of the alley.

Steps gritted. A knock sounded. A door opened, flashlight across the alley, and closed. Dargan's eyes narrowed grimly as he slipped from the wheel and listened.

Slow, quiet steps carried him through the darkness of the alley. He drifted to a stop, peering at the black rear entrance of Tony's. He glided past, toward a window which was painted over. A dull green glow reflected in his eyes as he crouched to listen.

He heard a low, cautious voice asking:

"If anybody spotted you, Jaxen—"

Another interrupted. "What the hell we got to be afraid of ? Nobody connects us with the job last night. When we hand the Moon Man over, we'll collect plenty and the cops'll give us a vote of thanks!"

A third said huskily: "He's a tricky customer. He might pull something—"

"Let him try it," the voice of Jaxen interrupted again. "The reward cards don't say he has to be taken alive, do they? He's worth just as much to the cops with bullets in his heart. Get out of sight. Get set. He knows he's got to play ball with us, and he's almost due."

"You got the letter?"

Jaxen's husky voice answered: "Sure I've got it, And I'm keeping it."

Another of the trio blurted: "God, Max! If he gets onto it—"

A sneer rang in Jaxen's voice. "Do I have to spell it out to you? The letter is bait the Moon Man can't resist. He's bringing ten grand with him. He's worth twenty-five more to the cops. That makes thirty-five grand we stand to collect— and there's three of us against the Moon Man's one. Quit talking, and get set!"

A cold chill pervaded Ned Dargan's stocky body as he drew away from the window. Grim fury speeded his blood in his veins as he passed the black door. Once in the light near his cab, a glance at his watch told him that it was almost ten. His eyes narrowed alertly on the erect figure striding quickly toward him in the gloom.

Steve Thatcher paused near the cab. Dargan stepped close with breath beating hotly. As Thatcher reached for the black case, the ex-pug's hand shot out to grip his wrist.

"Boss! You can't do it! You can't risk it! They're planning to grab you for the rewards."

Thatcher froze. "What, Angel?" he asked huskily. "How do you know?"

Dargan's words rushed. "I saw the three of them go into the back room, Boss, one at a time. I slipped back and heard 'em talking. They've got the letter, but they're not going to give it to you. They're after the ten thousand and the rewards. They won't stop at killing you to collect!"

Thatcher declared grimly: "I've got to get that letter, Angel."

"God, Boss! Don't you understand?"

Dargan's hand tightened imploringly on Thatcher's arm. "There are three of them waiting in there—killers. Going after that letter now, it's suicide. Don't risk it, Boss, for God's sake! Let the murder charge ride, and stay clear."

"You're forgetting something, Angel," Thatcher said quietly. "Sue's involved. I can't—"

"Then—listen, Boss!" Dargan was pleading desperately. "Let me go in there instead of you. Let me wear the robe and the mask. They won't know the difference. I'll try to grab that letter and—"

"Bless you, Angel, but it's my job, and mine alone. Let you face those three killers? No, Angel. That's final."

"Boss! It doesn't matter about me. If they grab me, if they turn me in—"

"It would mean the chair for you, Angel. No!"

"But you'd still be covered, Boss! It would keep your dad from finding out—and McEwen. Think of it, Boss—if they learn! You can't take the chance of wrecking your whole life—and Sue's. Boss, you can't!"

Thatcher smiled tightly. "You're a friend in a million, Angel. But the risk is mine. Keep the car running—and wait."

"It's suicide, Boss—suicide!"

Thatcher did not answer that. Eyes shining grimly, hand closed hard on the handle of the black case, he turned into the darkness of the alley and took long, silent strides toward the black door.

CHAPTER III

COUNTERFEIT CROOK

NED DARGAN glided after Steve Thatcher. He heard vague, furtive

movements in the deep shadows as he drifted to a stop in the green shine from the window across the alley. He watched Thatcher open the black case and lift out the black robe, and his heart beat heavily with dread.

"I'm not going to let you go in there, Boss," he said in a tight whisper. "I''m not going to let you run that chance!"

He saw the robe drop and envelope Thatcher's body. He watched Thatcher reach into the case again and pull on night-black gloves.

"I''ll do anything to keep you out of there, Boss! I''m asking you again. Don't try it!"

"My job, Angel."

Dargan's thick hands curled into fists, the hard fists of a trained fighter. His jaw muscles lumped and instinctively his head lowered. When Thatcher stooped again toward the case, to lift the fragile mask of Argus glass, Dargan's hand gripped his shoulder. Thatcher straightened, surprised, to see the ex-pug's square face thrust close.

"You're not going in, Boss!"

"I''m going—now."

"You're not going in!"

Dargan's blow was black lightning. His clubbed fist whizzed toward Thatcher's face. Thatcher side-stepped with a gasp, seizing Dargan's wrist. The desperate ex-pug sent a second blow hissing, straight from the shoulder. It clicked behind Thatcher's ear; and a soft moan broke from his lips. He pitched and fell into the black grit.

He lay still.

"Oh, God, Boss!" Dargan blurted.

He peered at Thatcher, eyes burning, face haggard. He stooped, made certain that Thatcher was unconscious. He glanced at the gleaming dial of his watch and noted that only a few minutes remained until ten o'clock. "Oh, God!" he blurted again; and he started at a lope along the dark wall.

He paused, heart trip-hammering, near the mouth of the alley. The windows of the building opposite Tony's were black and grimy. Dargan cupped hands, peered through into the empty rooms. He tried a window and found it caught.

He gripped the barrel of his revolver and struck once, sharply, at the pane in front of the latch. He reached through, released it, flattened against the wall, listened with caught breath.

He raised the sash, then whirled and trotted back along the alley. Thatcher responded limply as he snatched the gloves away, worked the robe off. He lifted Thatcher into his arms and staggered toward the open window. He crawled through, pulled the unconscious man into the cold dankness of a black room and lowered him to a littered floor.

The creeping hands of his watch urged "him to desperate haste. His anxiety to keep Thatcher out of the trap at all costs sent him crawling out the window. He darted to the waiting taxi, started the motor, left it idling, then shifted the front seat away and took a roll of tire tape from the tool receptacle. Returning the seat, he ducked back through the window.

Thatcher lay unconscious while Dargan, with frantic haste, bound his ankles and his wrists behind him with

black, sticky bands of tape. He crawled out of the window, lowered it, skirted through the shadows to the spot where the open case lay. He took up the black robe and shook it over his shoulders. He tugged the black gloves over his hands. With utmost care he lifted the hinged hemispheres of fragile glass and fitted them together over his head.

Dargan straightened, hand gripping his revolver inside the robe, transformed into the phantom being known as the Moon Man.

DARGAN stole across the alley to the black door. He peeled back the black sleeve and saw that the hands of his watch were indicating precisely ten. His black-covered fingers gripped the knob and twisted it. His breath sighed swiftly past the deflector inside the silver sphere when he felt it give. The way was open —into a death trap.

He paused, finger tightening on the trigger of his revolver. It was covered in one pocket of the black robe; the bundle of ten thousand dollars in currency was in the other. The globular head of the ghostly figure bowed as he peered into the ominous darkness of a hallway. He stepped in quickly, closed the door behind him, listened.

He heard steps. His black hand reached toward the knob of another door under which a dim line of light shone. Suddenly, with a quick movement, he stepped through. A glare stung his eyes as he poised just beyond the sill, peering through the sheen of the mask at the rat-eyed man who spun to face him.

They faced each other during a moment of tight silence. Within the glass shell, Dargan's alert eyes darted right and left. He saw two closed doors, and sensed that men were hiding behind them. The lean-faced man—Jaxen—was alone in the room with Dargan, and now a sly, thin smile was curving his cruel lips. He asked harshly:

"Not so anxious to take a murder rap, are you, My. Moon Man?"

The hollow voice of the phantom figure answered: "I've come for the letter."

"Let's see the ten grand."

Dargan's nerves drew burningly tight as he slipped the bundle of currency out of the pocket of the robe and lifted it in his left hand. He sensed, rather than heard, a furtive movement in the hallway behind him and felt that one of the killers had shifted to cut off his retreat. Peering at the blinking rat eyes of Jaxen, he asked in a whisper:

"The letter?"

Levelly Jaxen said: "I've changed my mind about the price. If you want it, it'll cost you fifty."

Dargan blurted: "I—I haven't got that much!"

"Make it thirty-five."

"You'll take ten and—"

"You'll take the murder rap!"

Swift, menacing movement came from three points simultaneously, as though Jaxen's words were a signal. A door at the side of the room flashed open and a fat-faced man appeared gripping an automatic. The door behind Dargan snapped wide and a third evil-faced man charged in with gun

swinging. Jaxen's hand darted inside his coat, toward an arm-pitted weapon. At the same instant these three moves occurred—and Dargan's answered.

His revolver crashed, sending a slug through the smoking fabric of the robe pocket. He leaped as a choking yell broke from Jaxen's lips, as the guns of the two other killers cracked. A lash of pain whipped across Dargan's left arm as he spun and fired twice more, swiftly. His one bullet sped to the light bulb overhead and his second flashed through spattering glass and darkness.

Guns blasted again, slamming bullets into the wall where Dargan had crouched. Desperately he ducked, reaching toward the spot where Jaxen had fallen. His gloved hand closed hard on a coat and he poised to back toward the door on the far side of the room. A moment of tight silence followed; and suddenly Dargan lurched, pulling Jaxen with him. The rustle was a warning that sent bullets cracking again through the darkness.

Dargan's heart raced as he lurched across the sill with Jaxen and slammed the connecting door shut. With frantic quickness, he probed his gloved hand into the inner pocket of the fallen man's coat.

He felt a crumple of paper; he tore it away. Bullets splintered through the closed connecting door, and he retreated with the paper clutched in fingers wet with blood. Quick steps in the hall told him that the two killers were shifting again to trap him in this room.

He reopened the connecting door. He sped into the darkness where the gun fight had begun. He heard a guttural "Watch 'em both!" as he groped to a chair and lifted it high. One powerful swing sent green-painted glass crashing into the alleyway. Dargan ducked through, jagged fragments in the frame ripping the black robe, clutching the letter, and whirled to face the window as he swiftly backed.

Excited voices reaching from the front room of Tony's warned him that the shots had raised an alarm. He realized that a few seconds might bring swift prowl cars speeding into Church Street.

He saw black figures spring through an open door into the alley as he darted to the taxi. He fired twice swiftly, whirled around the car, slipped beneath the wheel.

Still clutching the paper in a blood-wet hand, still masked by the globe of silver glass, Dargan spurted the cab away with roaring engine.

SUE McEWEN stood in front of the mirror in her bedroom and adjusted a silk dress on her slender figure., She had just taken it from the box on the bed marked with the name of Claire Astor, modiste. It had been made to her order, and it was an extravagance; but it was a dress, she hoped, which she might wear soon on a honeymoon with Steve Thatcher.

Sue turned to listen. Downstairs the radio was playing, but the dance music had ceased abruptly with the clang of a bell.

"A special news dispatch through the courtesy of the Press Radio Bureau."

The announcement carried clearly up the stairs. "A new alarm has sent the police department, with all reserves, into an even more urgent search for the Moon Man. He is reported to have appeared

tonight in the rear room of a bar on Church Street. He took part in a gun fight with three men, one of whom was badly injured."

Sue, listening anxiously, took slow steps down the stairs.

"Lieutenant McEwen, the sworn enemy of the Moon Man, has ordered the most thorough search of the city in the history of the police department. At the same time he is holding the three men who took part in the gun battle with the Moon Man. They are suspected of committing the daring bond robbery two nights ago. The Moon Man escaped the scene of the fight, but it is known that he is seriously wounded, for a trail of blood marked his flight to a waiting car."

Seriously wounded! The words chilled Sue McEwen. She hurried into the living room, snatched up the telephone. She quickly dialed a number—that of the house which was serving now as the Moon Man's hideaway. She heard the distant bell ring and ring again, but there was no answer.

"Steve!" blurted from her trembling lips.

Repeatedly the phone in the Moon Man's hideaway purred summons, but there was no response. Eyes shining with agony, the girl broke the connection. Again she spun the dial, this time flicking off the number of the police headquarters, She asked the phone Sergeant breathlessly: "Let me speak with Steve Thatcher!"

"He isn't here, Miss McEwen. Don't know where he is."

"Then—connect me with my father!"

"He's out, too, on the Church Street shooting, but we're expecting him back at any minute. Shall I have him call you when he comes—"

The girl broke the connection and hurried up the stairs. She thrust into her polo coat and ran down again affixing a pert felt hat to her head. She burst out the door; frantic anxiety possessed her as she backed her coupé into the street. By the shortest way, she began driving toward the house which served as the secret rendezvous of the Moon Man.

Ironically, the most direct route led her past the brick headquarters building. She peered up at the lighted windows, wondering wretchedly if there might be word now from Steve Thatcher: but she pressed the accelerator again. She could not dream that, at that very moment, in the chief's office, her father was seizing upon a new lead to the Moon Man.

McEwen had come tramping into headquarters only a moment previous, gnawing on a cigar. Charging into the chief's office, he had found a uniformed patrolman waiting. Patrolman Wilks began talking excitedly as McEwen strode past and took up the telephone. What Patrolman Wilks said quickened McEwen's pulse and interested him so keenly that he put the instrument down again. He asked with a snap:

"What makes you think you've spotted the Moon Man's hideaway?"

Part of the relentless detective's citywide campaign to trap the notorious criminal had been the setting of a watch on all office buildings, apartment houses and homes. He had issued standing orders that all tour patrolmen and prowl-car men were

to take notice of new tenants on their beats.

Large order that it was, the movements of vans and interviews with building superintendents aided in the search. Patrolman Wilks had taken part in the still manhunt because no member of the force was excepted by McEwen's inexorable orders.

Now Wilks was saying: "A little house on Grosvenor Street, lieutenant. Two weeks ago there was a 'for rent' sign on the front lawn, and now it's gone, but apparently nobody's moved in. I checked up today, but none of the neighbors have seen anybody around the place. There are lights in it at night. I checked up even farther with the renting agent, and it looks mighty suspicious."

"Well?" McEwen grated.

"The name on the lease is Wilson—John Wilson—but none of the John Wilsons in town know anything about it. It's a false name. The queerest thing is, the rent was paid in advance for six months. I tried the bell tonight, early, but nobody answered, then I took a look in the garage. Funny thing, there was a taxi in it."

"What!" McEwen sprang to his feet.

"By damn! A taxi was seen beating it away from Graube's place last night after the killing! Didn't you know that, Wilks? By damn! You've got it! That's the Moon Man's hideaway. By damn, I'm taking a look at that place right now myself!"

McEwen charged out the door, gnawing savagely on his cigar, bellowing the names of plain-clothes men, completely unaware that at that moment his daughter was driving toward the rendezvous of the criminal he had sworn to send to the chair.

CHAPTER IV

MOON MAN'S WOMAN

SUE MCEWEN rolled her coupé slowly past the dark house which was the Moon Man's hideout. She saw no glimmer of light in its windows, no hint that it was occupied. Cautiously she continued past the corner; she stopped the car in deep shadows. Walking quickly, searching the street, she hurried back toward the house.

She made certain that it was not being watched before she turned to the door. She took a key from her purse— one of only three in the world that fitted this lock—and stepped into the dark hall. "Steve!" she called anxiously into the blackness. "Steve!"

Her voice echoed from bare rooms. Quickly she made a circuit of the ground floor. "Steve—it's Sue!" she called again, and a note of hysteria crept into her voice. She ran up the stairs, snapping other switches. Each of the rooms she looked into was empty. The bathroom was empty. The closets were empty. The girl's anxiety became a burning torture.

Following a last hope that Steve Thatcher might be in the house, too desperately hurt to be able to answer, she ran down the steps and stepped into the front room. She pried with her fingers at the frame of a closet door. She pulled, and a whole section of wall swung out, based by wainscoting and topped by molding, disclosing an empty space beyond.

Ned Dargan, under Steve Thatcher's orders, had constructed this hidden door. It covered a cavity which once had been another closet, which now was used for the storing of the Moon Man's loot and regalia.

It was cunningly concealed. The girl would never have suspected its presence if Thatcher had not shown it to her. She opened it with the agonized hope that he might be inside—because she was consumed with an anxiety to find him—but the hidden space was empty.

She closed it carefully, and turned away white-faced, fingers tightly entwined. She moved back and forth nervously, waiting, hoping that either Thatcher or Dargan would come, hoping that the telephone might ring, hoping for the safety of the man she loved. She lost all thought of her own danger in her almost hysterical Thatcher. She moved in and out of the rooms, her lips trembling, her heart pounding heavily, until suddenly it almost stopped. At the rear entrance she heard a stumbling step. She hastened into the kitchen breathlessly and saw a shadow moving, swaying, over the panes of the back door. She started toward it as the latch clicked back, as a stocky figure lurched into the room. She blurted "Angel!" and Dargan drew up, his breath beating, clutching his left arm with his crimsoned right hand.

"You're hurt, Angel!"

The girl pulled him toward the light and stared in dismay. Dargan's fingers were dripping scarlet drops. His whole lower arm was glistening with red. His face was white with the exhaustion brought by loss of blood; his eyes were dim. He had knotted a handkerchief around his biceps; he had used his revolver to tighten the tourniquet; but still the wound was flowing.

"Never mind me, Sue!" Dargan blurted. "It's not bad, if it would only stop bleeding. Look—look at this. See if it's —"' Dargan swayed as he extended a crumpled, red-spotted bit of paper toward the girl. He would have plunged to the floor if the girl had not supported him. She took the red-flecked wad of paper, but gave it no glance in her anxiety for Dargan. She looked closely at his wound as he braced against the door frame and exclaimed in horror:

"Angel! The bullet cut partly through an artery. You've got to have a doctor."

"I can't—I can't!" Dargan gasped. "A doc would report it. It'd bring the cops. You can fix it up, Sue. Sure you can. God, if it would only stop bleeding!"

"Come upstairs, Angel. Hurry!" The girl seized Dargan's right arm and helped him along the hall. "Steve—have you seen Steve? There's a report that he was wounded, but—"

"He's—okay, Sue. I stopped him from going after the letter." Dargan was laboring up the flight, step by step, his lungs working like bellows. "I had to knock him out to do it—tie him up. I put on the robe and mask and went after the letter."

"Angel! Then it was you and not Steve —"

Dargan lurched from the head of the stairs to the door of the bath. "I think I''ve got it! I tried to read it, but I can hardly

see. Look at it, Sue! Is it— is it—"

The girl uncrumpled the sheet and read scrawled words in the bright light of the bathroom:

Dearest Sarah:—Please forgive me for doing this. I have thought of suicide for months.

Then it was you and not Her eyes rose shining with frantic relief and she blurted: "It is! It's the suicide note!"

Dargan's head was lolling. "God, I'm glad!" he blurted. "God, I'm glad I got it for the Boss! He's—clear—" He grasped the letter, thrust it into his pocket, then clawed at the wall, and slid to his knees, while Sue tried desperately to keep him on his feet. He braced up, fighting unconsciousness and mumbled again, "God, I'm glad!"

SUE McEWEN worked swiftly. She brought bandages from the medicine chest and knotted loops above Dargan's streaming wound. With the tube of a toothbrush, she twisted it tight, until the flesh swelled around the strips and the bleeding stopped. :

She plastered adhesive tape over the tube to keep it in place, and bathed the gash with astringent antiseptic. She powdered it with a surgical dressing, then bound it snugly with more bandage. Dargan's eyes, clinging to her face, shone with pathetic gratitude. ' "I—I'd rather take the hot-squat myself than see the Boss get grabbed!" he blurted. "Gosh, you're swell, doing this for me. I guess—I guess I'd be a goner without—"

"You've got to have medical care, Angel," the girl told him desperately. "No matter how dangerous it is, you've got to have it."

Dargan gripped the edge of the bathtub and pulled himself up. He straddled, balancing himself, weakened. "Later—later," he mumbled. "I left the Boss tied _up. I've got to get him loose. If—if the cops found him there, how could he explain it? I've got to get him loose and—"

"Angel, where is he? I'll go. I'll do it. You've got to get into bed and—"

Dargan's head wagged stubbornly. "No. Might—might get you into trouble. Me—it doesn't matter. I'll get him loose, and come back—"

"Tell me where he is, Angel!"

"I—I can make it—all right."

Even as he spoke, he sagged against the door. Again the girl supported him. She struggled with him across the hallway, to the bedroom. She steered him to the cot and he sank upon it weakly. He lay sprawled, eyes closed, breathing rapidly, as she bent over him.

"Angel—tell me where Steve is!"

She heard only an incoherent mumble from Dargan's colorless lips. She shook him and repeated her question, but aroused only a moan. Anxiously she straightened, baffled, her consuming worry increasing.

Turning to leave Dargan, she glanced down and blurted an exclamation of dismay. She had not noticed until now that Dargan's blood had made a ghastly blot on her dress.

Believing that Dargan must rest at all costs, trying to assure herself that Steve . Thatcher was not in danger, she stepped

into the bathroom. She pulled the dress over her shoulders and ran the bowl full of cold water.

She immersed it, rubbing the stains, and the water became red. She was still attempting to remove the blots when a strange premonition came to her. She straightened, hurried into the bedroom, and stopped short.

Dargan was not now lying on the cot.

"Angel!" She called as she spun to the head of the stairs. "Angel, you can't go!" She hurried down the flight, along the hallway. She saw the kitchen door standing open and knew that Dargan had stolen out that way. She was hurrying toward it when gruff voices outside startled her. One, clearer than the others, rasped :

"Watch it front and back! Keep the doors and windows covered! We're going in!"

She recognized the voice of her father.

Ned Dargan also heard the grim, grating tones of Gil McEwen. He had struggled from the bed and down the stairs, once Sue had left him alone, because he was determined that she should not endanger herself by going with him to Steve Thatcher. Slipping out the rear door, he had seen dark figures moving silently toward the yard.

He had dragged himself over the rear fence; he was huddling now in thick darkness. Heart hammering, throat tight, he watched the plain-clothes men led by McEwen surround the house, while Sue McEwen was still inside it.

Huddled down in agony, Dargan kept his position. He saw McEwen quietly enter the rear door. He saw lights snap on and heard the tramping of other men entering from the front. He heard them climb the stairs and come back.

During an eternity of agony he waited, straining to listen through the pounding in his ears. At last he heard a phrase that brought a surge of momentary relief through his tortured body.

"Nobody in here."

Dargan knew that those words could mean only one thing, that Sue McEwen, seeing the approach of the headquarters men, had slipped into the secret closet, that she was hiding there now while her father grimly searched.

CROUCHING low, Dargan crept away from the fence, along the driveway of the house which sat backed to the Moon Man's hideaway. He had left his taxi in the next street, fearing that prowl cars might have trailed him, hoping in this way to divert suspicion from the true location of the Moon Man's place. The ex-pug's brain buzzed as he hurried along the sidewalk to the cab and climbed behind the wheel, The weakness brought upon him by the loss of blood was a force pushing him toward unconsciousness, a force he fought with all his will as he sent the cab humming along the streets. His left arm was swollen and throbbing around the tourniquet.

Lights bleared before his eyes and the car swerved as he sought Church Street. He turned into it cautiously, numbed nerves warily tight, and peered into the darkness shrouding the empty store into which he had dragged Steve Thatcher.

Rolling past, he saw policemen

through the windows of Tony's bar. Glimpsing no activity in the alley, he drew to the curb and slipped from the wheel. He stumbled and sprawled; he drew up and forced himself on through whirling lights and baffling shadows. He stole into the alley and sought his way blindly to the window.

He was scarcely aware of his own actions as he slid the sash up. He spilled down into the dank room and vaguely heard a startled exclamation: "Angel!" He muttered an answer and peered, but he could see nothing of Steve Thatcher in the gloom. Bracing against the wall, he slipped the sash down once more against the chance of discovery. He turned back, took one sliding step, and dropped.

"Angel!"

Steve Thatcher lay on the littered floor, helplessly bound by the sticky bands of tire tape. Consciousness had returned to him slowly. He had heard shots as if far away, the powerful roar of a motor that swiftly diminished, while he lay pinioned, Again and again he had tried to break free, but the strength of the tape frustrated his attempts, while police had hurried into the alleyway and Thatcher had heard gruff voices speaking the name of the Moon Man. Now he strained up, peering at Dargan.

" Angel!"

Dargan's head raised weakly. He pulled himself to hands and knees and crawled toward Thatcher. He slumped down again, breathing hotly, and his hands groped toward the bands that shackled Thatcher's wrists.

"Boss!" His voice was a mere breath.

"Boss—McEwen's found the—hideaway!

I got out—before he came, but Sue's there, Boss! She's there—and McEwen's searching it!"

"God, Angel!" Thatcher felt Dargan's fingers fumbling at the tape. "Get me loose! If McEwen's found her—"'

"She—she's out of sight, Boss!" Dargan pulled slowly at the end of the tape and it peeled down with a sticky sound.

"She slipped—into the closet. I know — she did. God, Boss, if McEwen finds it, if he sees her there—"'

"Get the tape off, Angel! Quick!"

"I'm tryin', Boss!" Dargan was striving his utmost to unwind the stubborn bands with fingers that were numb and scarcely controllable. "I—I got the letter, Boss! It's here—in my pocket, the suicide letter. God, I'm sorry—I had to hit, you, but—I couldn't let you—"

"Angel!" :

Steve Thatcher felt the stiff fingers of Dargan drop away from the circles of tape. He waited tensely for Dargan to try again, but during a long moment he felt no touch. He squirmed around, and peered at the limp ex-pug lying in the dirty litter. Dargan's hand was extended, but unmoving, Unconsciousness had claimed him.

"Angel!"

The name brought no response from Dargan. Desperately Thatcher pulled himself to a sitting position. He felt the loose end of the tape dangling, and = 21 caught at it with his fingers. He pulled at it frantically, and felt it yield.

Inch by inch, he peeled it down, while

a consuming anxiety filled him, concern for Sue. His muscles burned with tension, his teeth bared under drawn lips with the effort he made to free himself. Suddenly a breath broke from his aching lungs and he wrenched his wrists apart.

"Angel!"

He bent over Dargan, saw the seriousness of Dargan's wound. He realized that medical aid was a vital necessity to the ex-pug, that it must be obtained with the utmost care in order not to betray Dargan's identity as the Moon Man's accomplice.

He stripped the tape from his ankles, hurried to the window, peered out the grimy panes. He found the blackness empty and silent; he raised the sash and crawled out.

He hurried breathlessly to Dargan's taxi. Under the front seat he found the black robe wrapped around the fragile mask of Argus glass. He bundled the regalia beneath his arm—a burden which would damn him if he were seen with it — and hurried through the darkness toward the spot where he had left his roadster.

It was a car used by the Moon Man in the execution of his daring exploits. Now Steve Thatcher turned it humming toward the discovered hideaway.

CHAPTER V

MCEWEN SEARCHES

GIL MCEWEN stood straddled in the front room of the raided house on Grosvenor Street, His gray eyes glittered like burnished steel. His gaze was as stinging as the lash of a whip as it passed over the faces of the headquarters men. He spoke with tense restraint.

"Listen. We've been trying to grab the Moon Man month after month for years. He's slipped us repeatedly, laughed in our faces, challenged us, and got away with it. We're making it hotter for him than ever before. We've got to grab him this time, by damn!"

His men, led by the dogged Mark Keanan, who was as grimly determined as McEwen to capture the Moon Man, nodded determined agreement to that statement.

"This is his hideaway," McEwen grated on. "Apparently neither the Moon Man nor Dargan nor his woman is here.

They must have spotted us coming and skipped. Whatever the reason is why this place is empty, we're going over it with microscopes. There must be a clue to the identity of the Moon Man here, and we're going to find it, by damn!"

Again tight nods.

"Maybe nobody spotted us coming. Maybe this place is empty for some other reason. They beat it out of here in a hurry, leaving the lights on and the rear door open, but they may come back. After we search this place from top to bottom, we're going to leave it just as it was and wait. If the Moon Man or Dargan or his woman comes back here then—they're grabbed!"

McEwen drove his teeth deep into a fresh cigar and crackled a final order:

"Start hunting!"

His men moved quickly into all parts of the house. Two of them went down into the cellar. Another began a new

examination of the rooms on the ground floor. McEwen and Keanan tramped up the stairs and took deep interest in the one furnished room. That it was Dargan's, they could not doubt. Returning to the hallway, McEwen stooped to study fresh red spots on the floor. They led from the stairway, into the bathroom. He stepped into the bath and exclaimed:

"By damn!"

In red water in the washbowl, he saw an island of floating silk., He lifted it carefully, squeezed water from it, let it slip and slide into the shape of a dress.

Gnawing his cigar excitedly, he wrung more water from it, held it up again. He peered at Keanan with glittering eyes and exclaimed:

"This belongs to the Moon Man's woman!"

Keanan observed: "That's queer. There isn't any other stuff belonging to a woman in the house. She was here, all right, but she can't be living in this place."

McEwen held the sodden dress and tramped back down the stairs. His men were returning from scattered parts of the house. The detective who had searched the lower floor was blinking in puzzlement. The two who had hunted in the cellar shrugged as they approached McEwen. In a muttering chorus, they gave their reports.

"Nobody below."

"Not a soul on this floor."

"Nobody upstairs or in the attic."

McEwen glared at them. "A fine bunch of detectives you are! Nobody in the place, eh? Nobody anywhere. You're all a bunch of correspondence school dicks, by damn! There is *somebody* in this house. I'm absolutely certain of it, by damn!"

They stared at McEwen in bewilderment.

"A woman was here. She got blood on her dress. She took it off to wash out the stain. Maybe you think she beat it out of here without any dress—but I don't. She's here—in this house, hiding! You birds have got to find her!"

The words reached muffled into the concealed space that once had been a closet. They rang mockingly in the ears of Sue McEwen as she stood in the black cavity. Seeing men closing around the house from both front and back, she had slipped into it as the only possible means of concealing herself.

In her desperate haste she had not had time to reach the bathroom for her dress, though she had snatched up hat and coat. The coat was draped over her shoulders now, covering her blue slip; the hat was clenched in one tight hand. In the smothering gloom, she heard again the rasping voice of her father.

"The Moon Man's woman is somewhere in this house, and you're going to hunt until you find her!"

STEVE THATCHER had driven rapidly from Church Street. He knew that in the residential section, in which his hideaway was located, there were few stores and these few would not be open at this late hour. He swung to the curb at a corner, while still a mile from his destination, and stepped into a pharmacy.

Quickly he consulted the directory and called a number. The voice that answered was a girl's: "Fairview Sanitarium."

"Dr. Keller, please."

Thatcher strove to control his feverish agitation as he waited. The voice that answered at last stated that Dr. Keller was speaking. Thatcher forced his voice to seem casual.

"Steve Thatcher talking, doctor."

"Why, hello, Steve! What can I do for you?"

Thatcher answered earnestly: "One of the boys on the force—Mike Houston — was wounded this evening. He doesn't think it's serious, but his brachial artery was partially severed. He's very weak from loss of blood and he needs the best care."

"I'll be glad to do all I can, Steve."

"He—he's an active sort, who won't stay in bed," Thatcher went on. "If there's anything doing, he insists on mixing in. That's why I want him in your place, where it's quiet. I want him kept away from telephone calls, nobody to know where he is except me. He's in pretty bad shape and—"

"Bring him right out, Steve," the physician answered. "I'll assure you I'll do as you wish."

"Thanks," Thatcher said tightly, "If -

23

"Coming."

He left the booth quickly, returned to his roadster, started off again. The remaining mile to the house on Grosvenor Street was endless. As he neared, Thatcher clicked the lights of the car out, rolled over the pavement near the curb.

Keeping in the tree shadows, he braked just past the corner. He let the motor whisper at idling, and walked quickly, quietly, toward the house that had served as the Moon Man's hideaway.

Keeping himself covered, he peered at the windows. He could see nothing; the blinds were drawn. Making sure that no one was outside, that McEwen and the detectives were within doors, he ventured long, low strides to the porch. He crept up the steps; he stationed himself near the entrance. He knew that if he were spotted now, he could pass off his coming with a ready excuse; but it would rob him of the opportunity to act as the Moon Man.

Through the door McEwen's rasping tones carried. "By damn, if anybody tells me again that there's nobody here, I'll break him off the force! Keep hunting! Keep going over this house until there's not a crack you haven't looked into!"

The grating words brought Steve Thatcher cold satisfaction. They meant that the secret panel had not yet been discovered, that Sue was still hiding in the darkness of the cavity. He turned back, crept off the porch, peered up and down the street.

Near the far corner he saw two sedans, the police cars that had brought McEwen and the men to the house. They were pointed in the same direction as his waiting roadster. A daring plan began to form in the mind of Steve Thatcher as he turned quietly away.

He slipped behind the wheel of his roadster, freed the brakes, and let it roll. The idling motor murmured an almost inaudible sound as the car moved along the curb. Thatcher watched the dark windows of the hideaway and coasted slowly until he reached deep shadows

under a tree near the edge of the yard. There he braked. He slipped out, carrying under his arm the black bundle of the Moon Man's regalia.

McEwen's rasping tones, carrying out, told him that the search for Sue was still in progress.

He lowered the bundle, kept to the edge of the lawn, skirted to the rear of the house. He heard movements inside the kitchen, knew that men were searching it, and waited. When the sounds moved forward, he darted to the rear door. Cautiously listening, heart pounding, he opened it a crack. He reached through, drew the key away, closed the door, inserted the key in the outer hole, silently turned it.

He sped back to the roadster. He took up the bundle, unrolled the black robe, shook it over his shoulders. He pulled the black gloves on his hands and in them lifted the precious mask of Argus glass, He fitted the globe together over his head and stood motionless, an automatic gripped and leveled.

From the thickness of the shadow, the Moon Man watched his raided headquarters.

IN the living room Gil McEwen was bending over the table on which he had unrolled the wet dress. He did not dream that, within six feet of him, hidden by a composition panel, his daughter was standing in darkness, listening with growing terror. His gray eyes narrowed as he examined the garment.

"Claire Astor," he read from the label.

"That's a high-class place. They'll be able to identify this. They can tell me who bought it—and, by damn, that will identify the Moon Man's woman!"

Keanan, standing grim-faced beside McEwen, declared: "You've got her, Gil."

"Damn' right, I've got her! And through her, I've got the Moon Man!

This is the end of that fancy crook, by damn! I've said it a thousand times, Keanan, and I say it again, I'm going to send the Moon Man to the chair, by damn, no matter who he is!"

"That girl," Keanan suggested shrewdly, "might be an otherwise respectable person, maybe the daughter of a well-known family, might even be connected with the force."

McEwen's eyes narrowed. "The law's the law," he stated flatly. "She's an accessory to the crime of murder. The same goes for her as for the Moon Man. No matter who she might be, she's going to get the works!"

Standing tensely erect, trembling, inside the secret closet, Sue McEwen heard —and her heart stopped.

Again McEwen's men began returning to the room. They blinked, looked sheepish, shrugged. McEwen glared at them, toothed his cigar, and growled: "Well?"

"Maybe we're a bunch of rookies, Gil," one of them remarked, "but none of us can find any hiding place in this house."

McEwen snarled: "All right! I'll look myself, You birds find yourselves places to slip into, in case somebody comes back to this place. At the first alarm, get out of sight. Keanan, you keep an eye on the front of this place, but stay inside. What

are you standing around like a bunch of wooden Indians for? Move!"

Frowning, the men shifted to positions which Keanan efficiently assigned them. One stood near the door of a closet in the hallway. Another stepped into the kitchen and snapped the light out.

A third mounted to the head of the stairs and stationed himself there. Keanan took a position in the dark hall, peeled the blind aside, and peered out the pane. McEwen gave a grunt of satisfaction,

"This room," he declared, staring around, "is as good a place to start as any."

He stared at the walls. He peered at the floor. His keen eyes studied every square inch as he moved slowly from the side windows inward. There was silence as McEwen followed down his grim conviction that the Moon Man's woman was hiding somewhere within this house. He crept into the corner where there was no piece of furniture; and suddenly his eyes sharpened. He stooped, teeth driven deep in his cigar, and peered at faint, curved scratches on the varnish.

He straightened, stepped back, glanced at the sections of wall on both sides of the closet. His cigar shifted thoughtfully from one corner of his mouth to the other. Very quietly, but not so quietly that Sue McEwen could not hear, he bade the detective in the hallway: "Michael, come here."

Michael came. McEwen's stubby forefinger pointed toward the floor.

"Look at those scratches. They're curved, like the scratches a door might make swinging open if it scraped the floor. Is that right, Michael? Do you agree with me?"

Michael, very thoughtfully studying the marks, answered: "Looks like you're right, Gil."

McEwen bade: "Now step back here.

Look at that section of wall on the far side of the closet. Then look at this section, between the closet door and the corner. Does it seem to you, Michael, that this section right in front of us stands out about half an inch farther than the other ?" Michael blurted: "It does, Gil! There, you can tell it on the door frame! The edge is thicker on the far side than it is on this! Looks like half an inch thickness on this side laid over the real wall!"

McEwen stepped forward. He raised his hand. He whacked his knuckles sharply against the papered composition board.

He rapped again, again—and each time the result was a dull sound. Michael, knuckling the opposite panel, got the result of firm, solid cracks. McEwen's fist pounded again—a knocking that echoed like the knell of doom in the ears of the frantic, imprisoned Sue McEwen.

"Hollow!" McEwen snapped. "I thought so! That's a secret panel! There's a space hidden behind it! The Moon Man's woman must be hiding in it now! Get at it, Michael! Help me find out how it opens! By damn!"

Sue McEwen, her heart speeding, agony numbing her mind, pressing her trembling fingers hard to her lips to suppress a cry of horror, heard her father's rushing words break off abruptly. She heard Keanan's voice in a sudden, hoarse whisper. She heard words that brought the name of the man she loved rushing

silently, in terror, to her quivering lips:

"The Moon Man! Outside! Heading toward the front door now!"

CHAPTER VI

DEAD MAN'S WORD

THE Moon Man had appeared like a phantom in the dim light of the open lawn. He had glimpsed a flicker of light through the pane of the entrance, and he knew that he had been spotted. Deliberately, daring the danger he knew lay within the walls of this house, he drifted slowly toward the door.

His silver head bowed and he listened intently through his shell mask, and he heard no sound. The very silence told him that the men inside were waiting—waiting for him to enter the set trap. And still he moved directly, soundlessly, toward the door behind which risk of discovery threatened, and all the tragedy that must inevitably follow.

His black-gloved hand closed hard on the knob. He opened the door an inch, then another. His fingers stole in. The tumbler lock which he had affixed to the the entrance was a reinforcement of the ordinary device with which it had been originally equipped. The Moon Man silently drew out the key, silently inserted it in the outer hole, and opened the door wider.

Light gleamed from the living room, but there was no sound, no slightest movement, not a suggestion that anyone was present. In the shine the Moon Man poised, knowing that grim men with ready guns were waiting to spring upon him.

His long robe rustled faintly as he strode to the rear of the hall. He knew that his movements were so silent that none of the hidden detectives could be sure he had entered, and he watched warily that none of them glimpsed him.

Deftly, nerves singing tight, he turned the key in the closed door that gave into the kitchen. He twisted the key in anther door which opened into a closet in the hallway. He sensed that at least one man, perhaps two, were stationed at the head of the stairs, and against these, he could not bar the way; but he moved back swiftly. He darted into the living room, toward the corner and the hidden panel behind which Sue McEwen was standing.

Again he turned a key—in the lock of the closet—without a sound. With desperate haste, he pried at the edge of the frame. On concealed hinges the hidden door swung. Light fanned in on the white, drawn face of Sue McEwen. She stared breathlessly, and sidled out, too terrified even to whisper a warning. The Moon Man gestured, but she held back with a desperate shake of her head, pointing to the wet dress on the table.

As she took it into her cold hand, a board creaked. The stairs rasped under the weight of a man coming down. Swiftly the Moon Man's hand went to the light switch.

The click brought blackness and a bellow from the stairs, a snarling order in the voice of Gil McEwen.

"Close in! We've got him!"

The Moon Man's automatic cracked defiance. Flame darted out of the darkness and a bullet cracked into the wall. The

Moon Man backed, left hand gripping Sue's trembling arm. Again he snapped out a bullet as the girl jerked open the entrance.

She sprang out. He whirled after her.

He flashed the door shut an instant after he sped another bullet through the darkness and with frantic swiftness twisted the key in the lock.

"Grab him! He's getting away!"

A bullet from inside spanged to the pane of the entrance and glass flew. The Moon Man and the girl, springing off the porch, heard muffled shouting voices and a pounding of fists from the men balked by locked doors.

He sped into the shadow near his roadster and glimpsed McEwen reaching out through the broken front door, striving desperately to open it. The grizzled detective's police positive crashed twice and bullets flicked through the leaves.

"Run to your car, Sue!" the Moon Man's muffled whisper rushed. "I'll follow!"

He forced the girl to hurry through the darkness as he whirled to the far side of the roadster. He bent through the door he had left open. His one hand thrust the clutch pedal down; his other meshed the gears in high, then darted to the hand throttle and twisted it full on. He let the clutch back as the engine roared, then whirled and sped crouching through the shadow of a hedge.

McEwen bellowed "After him!" as he saw the roadster spurt off. He wheeled back, grasped up a chair, hurled it viciously through a window of the living room. Keanan and another man scrambled after him as he spilled out. He bounded to the sidewalk, glowered at the roadster roaring down the street, aimed and fired three times. His bullet ripped through the top, low over the back of the seat, as McEwen sprinted toward the police cars.

He had the engine of his sedan snarling when Keanan and the second detective clambered in. He blurted: "Look at 'it. He's hit!" He sent the car leaping from the curb. The Moon Man's roadster was sliding along the gutter crazily. It swerved out, lurched back, climbed the curb, ran off. Suddenly, as McEwen chased at top speed, it drove with a resounding crash into a parked car and bucked a wrenching stop.

McEwen slammed on the brakes, leaped out, thrust his service gat into the darkness beneath the roadster's bullet-punctured top. He stared and snarled. Keanan, crowding behind him, moaned. The third man's jaw dropped in wonderment. McEwen blurted in impotent rage: "By damn! Oh, by damn!"

The roadster was empty.

GIL McEWEN sat slumped at his desk in police headquarters next morning, glaring at a letter that had come in the morning's mail, making growling noises in his throat. He kept staring at that letter when the door opened and scarcely heard the weary Keanan announce:

"Those three slick customers have come clean, Gil, Jaxen and the others. I played 'em against each other, and they all opened up. They've got the bonds. The case is cracked. Funny thing about that. If the Moon Man hadn't mixed in with 'em,

and buried a bullet in Jaxen, we never would have grabbed 'em."

McEwen growled "Okay," and kept staring at the letter. He glanced up when the door opened again, saw Steve Thatcher and Sue McEwen come m, and heaved an exhausted sigh.

"Hell!" he said. "I spent two hours this morning with that snooty dame Claire Astor, trying to find out who she sold that dress to. Of course, I couldn't show it to her. The Moon Man slipped off with it. All she could say was: 'Really, Mr. McEwen, if that's the best description you can give me. I simply can't tell you a thing.'"

Thatcher, smiling broadly, said:

"When it comes to describing a crook, you can do it down to the last wrinkle in his face even if it was twenty years since you saw him, but when it comes to describing a girl's dress, you're not so good —is that it?"

"What the hell more could I say, except that it had some kind of funny flower on it, and a kind of a doodad on the belt, with a whatsis on the shoulder, and stuff like that. By damn! If you'd seen that dress before the Moon Man got away with it, you'd have been able to tell her exactly what it was, Sue!"

"I think," Sue said quietly, "perhaps you're right."

"Now that lead's no good!" McEwen blurted. "The orchid clue is no good. Hundreds of women had 'em in town that night and there's no way of tracing 'em. Dargan's out of sight again, the Moon Man melted into thin air, and the woman rode off on a witch's broom. That damn' fancy crook is driving me screwy, and now I've got to strike off the murder charge against him!"

"Why, Gil?" Thatcher asked quietly.

"Because," McEwen snapped, '"of this!"

"This" was the letter which McEwen had received in the first morning's mail.

It was typewritten and it read briefly:

My dear McEwen:

In connection with your groundless accusation that I am guilty of murdering one Nick Graube, please note the enclosed with the utmost care.

Yours sincerely, MM

The enclosed was a sheet of paper stained with blood, that once had been crumpled in a desperately clenched hand —the note written by the fence announcing his suicidal intention before he had turned the gun upon his own temple.

McEwen's fist slammed down. "But that doesn't mean I'm not going after the Moon Man just as hard as ever! That doesn't mean I'm not going to keep on looking for the woman who's worked with him. I'm going to find her. I swear it! I'm going to find them both, and when I do, they'll get the chair!"

McEwen chewed dejectedly on his cigar, as Steve Thatcher and the girl went out. They stepped into Thatcher's office. He lifted the telephone. He called the number of the Fairview Sanitarium, asked for Dr. Keller, and asked anxiously:

"How's your new patient this morning, doctor ?"

"Resting easily, recovering rapidly.

His arm is patched up and he's had a

transfusion. He’s a tough customer, that young man. It might have killed a weaker chap. I'm following your orders and keeping him strictly isolated.”

“Take the best care of him, doctor,”

Thatcher urged. “He’s a mighty valuable man, and the best friend I've got!”

He smiled at Sue; she went quickly into his arms. Her lips were warm upon his; he held her close. As her head rested snugly on his shoulder, he asked quietly: “What did you do with that very charming dress, darling ?”

“Burned it,” she answered. “In the furnace this morning. It broke my heart, Steve. It was the nicest dress I ever had, and I wanted it for our honeymoon.”

“Sacrificed,” Thatcher observed wryly, “to an excellent cause. I'll get you another —the best you can find.”

“No, Steve!” the girl exclaimed, her arms tightening around him. “Just any old dress will do, cheap, ordinary, anything. Never again am I going to buy an exclusive model, darling—never!”