

*When the detective answered that mystery message, he discovered he'd made a death's-head rendezvous. For the Grim Reaper had the house staked out for a . . .*

# Corpse Trio

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*He was lying on an old bedstead.*

**P**IPER got out of his car, then stood with two fingers pressing his lip against his teeth, his eyes roving through the darkness, his ears trying to pick up some sound. It wasn't right that Baner's house should be without lights, considering that Baner had phoned and asked him to come over.

He watched the side and front of the dark house as he went near it. Of course it could be that a fuse had blown.

A quick springy run brought him to the

front door. It was locked, and everything within was quiet. Piper jumped off the end of the porch. Along the black side of the house, he tried thumbs under one window after another. The fourth window yielded.

Pursing his lips, whistling soundlessly, Piper flattened himself against the wall. The window was going up because someone on the inside was pushing it up.

A long leg came out, then a head, shoulders and body. With one leg in the house, the man pulled the window down,

dropped to the ground and started to close the window.

Piper stuck his gun in the fellow's kidney. The tall spare form let out a wild yelp, whirled on him and started to fight. Piper caught a glimpse of the white face. He didn't shoot, he knew the man.

They went down and rolled on the ground. Twice, Piper called him by name: "Floyd, Floyd, Floyd Knox."

But Knox was too crazy with fear to understand. He struck Piper in the face, got a knee in Piper's stomach, and sprang up after dealing him a final punch in the nose. Cursing, Piper rolled over, pulled up his gun and lined it on the running figure.

But he couldn't shoot Floyd. He got up and ran like hell after him.

The crashing to his left told him that Knox was running through the head-high clump of flowerless lilac bushes. Turning on his heel, Piper dived in after him and ran into a whack on the forehead that stopped him as if he had run into a wall.

He was uneasy in his helplessness. As a sleeper will fret and moan about a toothache, Piper was subconsciously aware of intense suffering. Scalding tears seemed to be flowing inside him. And well they might. Floyd Knox was his brother-in-law, the father of two boys Piper was crazy about.

Piper became drowsily aware of a drilling, as if a dentist were working on his teeth. Fighting, he got up, carefully balancing his head, which felt split and might fall off his shoulders in two halves.

The *brr, brr, brr*, went on, and then he identified it as the muffled ringing of the bell within Baner's house. Staggering out of the bushes, he cracked and broke branches, stood swaying. The bell had stopped now, some one was running off the porch to him.

"Who is that?" a man demanded, stopping a couple of feet away in the

darkness.

Piper gathered the words in the back of his throat, made an effort, and spit them out: "Tom Piper."

"Oh." The man came closer, flung out an arm and steadied Piper. "What's the matter with you?" The voice became worried. "And I can't get into the house. What's wrong here?"

Piper couldn't see him, but he knew it was Andrew Clark. He shook his head, figuring Clark couldn't see that either, and trudged toward the house.

Piper leaned against the wall, and as his head cleared a bit, he said: "Let's try the window."

Clumsily, he began at the first, moved to the second. He could make out the blurred shape of Clark, scuttling to one, then another window.

"Piper, this one opens," Clark shouted. "Give me a lift."

Clark had his arms hooked over the sill. His face was level with it. Piper pushed him away, hauled himself easily inside, and weaved across the room. He found the switch, and turned the lights on.

Everything looked all right. The wall-panel in front of the safe was not tightly closed, but the safe door was shut. The furniture was undisturbed.

He was aware of the upper half of Clark's face above the sill, the eyes tensely following him. On tiptoe, Clark was trying to pull himself up, to see better into the room.

Piper gestured, and went down the hall to the front door. He pulled back the bolt and admitted Clark.

They looked at each other, Clark's face pulled tight, shiny with expectancy, and his eyes glowing with the eagerness of a boy's. He removed his hat, and except for a center knot of curly graying hair his scalp was shiny, too.

Together they searched the ground

floor. Piper wanted to see whatever there was as soon as Clark saw it. He did not have to worry though, about Clark straying off on his own. Clark stuck with him, trotting at his elbow and peering into the rooms past Piper's arm as Piper put lights on.

**I**T was in bed upstairs that they located Baner. He was trussed up, and there were ropes to keep him from getting off the bed. He was dressed, except that his feet were bare.

Clark emitted a sharp, stricken cry and shuddered against Piper's side. Piper trudged to the bed, leaned against the tall mahogany post and looked at the scarred feet, the stench of burned flesh making his head swim.

Callous as the thought was, he decided that Baner had not been tortured much. It was the knife that had killed him; his throat was cut, and the knife was standing in his chest. If there can be any expression on the face of a man murdered in that manner, then Piper decided that Baner's look was more one of incredulity, than of pain.

"We'll have to get the police," Clark squeaked.

Piper went downstairs and telephoned them.

Until they came, he held his wetted handkerchief to the swelling on the front of his head. Even yet, he had not made the decision he had to make. It would sound odd that he had said nothing to Clark about Floyd Knox, but that did not matter. It was what he was going to say, or not say, to the police, that mattered.

Clark answered the door at the first ring. Piper moved the handkerchief off one eye, saw a grim-faced man stare in at him, a man with the intent face of one constantly striving to make good at his job and suspicious that everyone was trying to

frustrate him. That was Gurrin. Piper did not know him well—they had been introduced, seen each other a couple of times, and that was all. Piper thought he was a detective sergeant, but wasn't sure. Gurrin had never been in one of his cases.

Clark poured out an excited story.

Gurrin cut him short, found out about Baner's body. Clark was gestured to stay in the room with Piper. A policeman was told off to watch them, and the cavalcade went up the carpeted stairs.

**G**URRIN came down again, finally. His dark face was purposeful, red about the nose, as if some one had mistaken it for a nutmeg and started to use a grater on it.

"Well?" He put fists on hips, stood over Piper. "I got socked on the head," Piper moaned. Gurrin growled, and Piper knew that would not be enough. "Baner sent for me. Just asked me to come over, like that. I saw the house was dark. Nobody around. I thought I heard some one in the bushes. I jumped off the porch, ran into them, and my head tells you the rest of the story."

Gurrin scowled. "You tell me, never mind your head. You must have had a chance to see something. Why'd you bring him here?" Gurrin gestured at Clark, demanded: "What's your name?"

"Andrew Clark. Piper didn't bring me. I came here on business. I was ringing the bell, when—"

"What business?" Gurrin croaked.

"You mean you haven't heard of Clark's Candy Novelties?" Clark was taken aback, his stout face had the expression of a man who discovers he's wasting his time on a know-nothing.

"Never mind what I heard," Gurrin interpreted the look, and his anger rose. "You make this whole thing clear to me. Now. In a couple of sentences."

Clark flung his shoulders and head back and glanced toward the door much as to say this was the end, he was leaving. But there were two cops and a husky detective besides Gurrin to argue that point.

Clark snapped: "I'm in the candy business. So was Baner. We've been discussing a merger lately. I have a bigger business, and a better executive head"—Clark tossed the head—"but Baner was a good man in his way, too. I would have been glad to have him come in with me."

"All right," Gurrin said impatiently. "You came here to see him about that."

"Yes." Clark stared at him with a certain vindictive happiness. "And I saw a man leaving here. He drove away just as I came up. If you would have let me say so—"

"Shut up!" Gurrin choked. "Why didn't you stop him? Who was he, where did he go?"

Piper felt Gurrin's eyes on him. Piper watched Clark. There was a tense expectancy as if they were all separated by panes of glass that would be shattered any moment.

"Why should I stop him?" Clark puffed, flung his arms about, bouncing them off his sides. "How was I to know he had done anything? He was Floyd Knox. He was in several times, asking me for a job. Advertising man. I was in my car. I did call to him, but he drove off like a madman."

Clark stuck a finger at Piper. "He ought to know him. Knox is Piper's brother-in-law, at least that's what Piper told me."

Gurrin glared at Piper. "Get up!"

Piper got up. "I've told you all I know," Piper said.

The words were blurted before he realized what they meant, what a position they put him in.

Gurrin studied him. "Heaven help you," Gurrin said passionately, "if I ever find out that you know more. So Baner sent for you. Can you prove that?"

Piper shook his head.

"And you don't know what for?" Gurrin sneered. "What would Baner have wanted with a private dick? You can't even guess. Hmm! Baner dead, you caught near the house, and your brother-in-law seen escaping."

"I wasn't *caught*."

"Give us the full particulars about Knox."

Piper gave them, and Gurrin detailed a couple of men to get out on the trail, to broadcast a wide alarm.

"You might as well talk," Gurrin returned to him. "Baner had something. Knox tortured him, murdered him for it. What was it, Piper? What was Knox trying to get?"

"How do I know?" Piper turned on Clark. "How good is Clark's identification, how sure—"

"Never mind that angle." Gurrin gave him a hard shove in the chest. "We'll take care of that. You keep your mind on the questions I ask you."

"Take it easy," Piper bridled. "And with your hands especially. I don't take a pushing around."

Gurrin's hand flashed out quickly. Piper stumbled back, and sat down hard in a chair. Instantly, Gurrin rapped his knuckles on Piper's sore forehead.

"That lump could be bigger," Gurrin suggested.

Piper came up like out of a cannon. A cop caught his arms, one of the dicks got him by the throat.

"Use your head a little, Gurrin," Piper shouted. "If Baner was tortured for something, what happened? Can you find where it looks as if anything is missing? Why was he killed? You can see for

yourself that he probably took the torture without talking. Even without getting what he wanted, the man killed Baner. Why?"

"We're not taking your word for it that Knox didn't get what he wanted. But supposing he didn't, what of it?"

"I'm not taking anyone's word"—Piper swung his eyes at Clark—"that Knox was here."

"See here," Clark shouted, "are you trying to call me a liar, Piper? I've seen enough of Knox, trying to get a job from me. He tried to talk me into hiring him, said Baner was putting on an advertising campaign that would drive me out of business if I didn't hire someone smart, like himself. I guess he was trying to get a job from Baner too. Acted mighty desperate—"

"Nuts!" Piper interrupted. "You trying to say Knox came here and attempted to torture Baner into giving him a job?"

"I'm not *trying*"—Clark's eyes watered with anger—"to say anything. I'm merely reporting my observations and experiences. If you're too much of a coward to look the facts in the face, that's just too bad. I'm not changing my story for anyone. Don't look at me like that, I don't scare easily, let me tell you."

Piper shrugged. "Let go of me," he told the cop.

Gurrin nodded, and the cop released him.

"Since my brother-in-law has been brought into this," Piper announced, "I suppose you can understand that I'll want to clear him. In my opinion, whoever tortured Baner was scared off the job before he could get what he wanted. He killed Baner—"

"It still looks like Knox," Gurrin interrupted gutturally. "Maybe you didn't come here with Knox. But you rang the bell, scared—"

Words trembled on Piper's lips. He all but said he did not ring the bell. His brain raced ahead, foresaw that if he divulged that, Gurrin would hound him till he revealed more.

"I don't see it that way," Piper persisted doggedly. "The murderer killed Baner probably because Baner was not going to give information. Baner undoubtedly told this man that I was coming. Baner thought that would save his life. Instead, the killer became desperate. Maybe Baner was foolish enough even to say that he recognized his assailant. After that, Baner had to die."

Gurrin wrinkled his nose, jerked his thumb to the door.

THE cops took Piper downtown. Piper rode out a stiff session of questioning, then he was left alone for a while and he tried to think the thing out. The consequence of the thinking was that he realized he'd been a fool to lie about Floyd. If Floyd had killed Baner, there was no out for Floyd. He, himself, would turn Floyd in, once he was satisfied about that. And it looked bad. The police had not yet located Floyd.

Luckily there were those at headquarters who thought better of Piper than Gurrin did. It was done over Gurrin's head, and with reluctance, but after an hour Piper was told he could go. That meant stay where he could be found any minute day or night. But he was grateful. It was more of a break than he had expected.

He rode out to his sister's house. It was a rather shabby-looking affair. Piper sighed. Floyd was a good guy, he meant well and he was keen at advertising. He didn't get the breaks, was all. The last couple of years, he'd been out of work nearly all the time. Piper had given him

everything he could, encouragement, money, introductions. Nothing helped.

"Oh, Tom!" Nancy cried at sight of him. "Tom, what have they done to you?"

Piper winked. "I just passed another grade, that bump's my diploma. Cops been here, Nan?"

She nodded, led him into the kitchen quietly. "I just got the children back to sleep." She poured him coffee. "Tom, can't you tell me something?"

"Don't ask questions, sis," Piper warned over the coffee cup. "There's liable to be cops in the woodwork."

"But, Tom, I'm so terribly worried. Floyd was desperate, he—"

Piper was about to say he hoped she hadn't told *that* to the cops. Instead, he asked what Floyd had been up to lately.

"Floyd's been trying to get a job with Baner," she twisted the flowered apron in her hands. "He's been working day and night for a week on some sort of advertising contest Baner had. Oh, not a public contest. Just a contest that Baner was putting on to fill a position. The man who gave Baner the correct answers to a lot of questions was to get the job. Floyd went out to mail his answers tonight. He told me he would mail the package, and then take a short ride."

Her chin trembled, and tears filled her eyes. "He's never come back."

"Now, now, Nan." Piper put his arms about her. "Be a good soldier. Honestly, I'll let you know the minute I get anything. You got to go to bed, get some rest."

She nodded, but he left the house knowing that there would be no rest for her till Floyd returned. Piper shook his head. A whole lot would have to be unraveled before Floyd came marching back this way.

**H**E went to the Baner house again. His car was still parked at the curb.

Inside the lighted house, a cop walked about the front room, swinging his nightstick and chewing gum. Except for the cop, there was nothing to signify that anything had happened here tonight.

Piper drove his car a short distance and decided he'd have to swallow his pride. Reluctantly, he went to a phone and called Gurrin, asking him if anything had turned up yet.

Gurrin hung up on him. Piper tried someone else in the department.

"Piper," his informant answered, "Gurrin wouldn't like me to tell you this, and I wouldn't like what would happen to me. But they found Knox's car."

"Where?"

"Sumpter and Cleveland Streets."

"Thanks. Maybe sometime I can make this up. You keep quiet about it, and Gurrin will never know from me where I learned this."

Sumpter and Cleveland Streets was in a neighborhood less than a mile away. Piper drove past.

Floyd's shabby roadster was standing at the curb, near the corner. The section looked deserted, but Piper knew there were cops ready to jump the first person who attempted to get into that car. Well, maybe Floyd would come back to it, but he wasn't betting on it.

What he wanted was to find a cab rank. He drove up Cleveland Street and down, but there was no cab rank for a radius of a dozen blocks. Cleveland Street, however, carried a lot of cruising hacks. Coming and going, many of them used this street. That wasn't helping Piper.

What he wanted to find was the cabbie who had picked up a fare hereabouts. If there was a cab rank, he could have struck around and asked all the drivers. As it was, the cabbie who had been flagged down on Cleveland Street might not pass through again for days, or, he might be going by

right now.

Piper gave it up, returned to the telephone and called Gurrin.

“Don’t hang up this time, either,” Piper ordered. “Use your head. I was just out to Cleveland and Sumpter Streets. I saw a roadster I identified as Floyd’s.”

Gurrin laughed scornfully, then growled: “Somebody tipped you to that. If I get the louse— To hell with you, Piper. You’re walking around free. Okay. You better enjoy it. Because when I get my hands on Knox, he’s going to talk. He’s going to mention your name, I promise you that. I promise myself that.”

“Okay, Gurrin.” Piper gripped the phone, “I know why I’m loose. The idea is that sooner or later I’ll contact Floyd, or Floyd will come to me. Well, I don’t know where Floyd is. And if you think he’s going to come near me while cops follow me, you’re making a mistake. But have it your own way. All I’ve got is an idea for you.”

“It must be good,” Gurrin scoffed. “Tell it to the marines.”

“Damn you,” Piper shouted, “don’t hang up. You’ve got to contact the cab companies, you’ve got to locate the cabbie who picked up a fare in the vicinity of Cleveland and Sumpter Streets.”

“You call that an idea?” Gurrin shouted back. “What do you think we’ve been doing? You think like a—”

“Just a moment,” Piper called. “Here’s the description. Man, about forty-five, five feet seven. Powerful, somewhat stout. Wearing a dark brown suit, dark hat. Has gray hair, not much of it, curly.”

Gurrin didn’t answer right away. “Is this one of your tricks?” he demanded. “That’s not Knox. I don’t know who—” Then he got it. “Say, have you gone batty?”

“Will you do it?”

“I most certainly will not. Just because

you’re screwy, don’t think I am. Don’t bother me again, Piper, or I’ll have you brought in, I don’t care who tries to talk me out of it.”

Gurrin hung up.

Piper went out and sat in his car. For a minute he considered trying to contact the cab companies himself in an effort to find the hacker who had picked up a fare somewhere near Floyd’s car.

He shook his head. He could never do it; it would take days. And right now, minutes counted. Something had happened to Floyd, and if things weren’t straightened out, much worse was going to happen to Floyd.

**P**IPER drove to Clark’s house. Roughly, Clark’s house, Baner’s house, and the position of Floyd’s abandoned car formed a triangle, about two miles on each side.

Clark was still up and dressed, there was nothing about him to suggest that he even owned a bed, much less that he was thinking of getting into it.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

“Just a little talk.” Piper forced his way in, sat in a chair as Clark banged and locked the front door, strode into the room after him. “Clark, I’d like to hear your story again.”

“I’m not telling that story to anyone but the police,” Clark replied determinedly. “You heard it once. It hasn’t changed. Besides, Gurrin told me not to change it. So you’re wasting your time, Piper.”

“Maybe,” Piper shrugged. “I still want to hear it again.”

“You get out of here.” Clark shook a finger. “I’ll call the police and have you put out, Piper. I’m warning you. Get out of this house, or I’ll make more trouble for you than what you have now.”

“I don’t think you’ll call the police,”

Piper said easily, with much more confidence than he felt.

Clark shot him a calculating stare, opened his mouth, then turned and went to a far, dark corner of the room. Glass clinked after a minute, then Clark shut a drawer and came forward with a glass in his hand. He drank, set the glass down, and stood with his hands in the pockets of his jacket.

"I'll give you till—"

"Don't bother counting," Piper advised. "You won't send for the police. I'll tell you why, too. Your story has a bad mistake. The time element sticks out like a sore thumb."

Clark said nothing.

"I wasn't paying much attention to time tonight," Piper continued. "I'm not sure when I arrived at Baner's, or at what time I came to. But I do know that I was knocked out too thoroughly to have been unconscious the short while that you try to make me think I was."

"I haven't tried to make you think anything."

"No? Well, I was unconscious too long for you to have seen Floyd drive away and for me to have regained consciousness by the time you got to Baner's front door. I was out far longer than that. I'll tell you how long I was unconscious."

Piper rose out of his chair. "Long enough for you to force Floyd to go somewhere with you. Then you drove his car to Sumpter and Cleveland Streets, and left it. You were back at Baner's, ringing the bell by the time I came out of my coma."

Clark's eyes shone so that the gleam hid whatever expression there was in them. "You're raving. That blow on the head must have unsettled your brains. I have nothing to say."

"Not even"—Piper strode towards him—"when I say I have the cab driver

who picked you up and drove you back to Baner's?"

Clark swallowed. His bald head, about the island of gray hair, his whole tight face, all shone as if an invisible hand and rag were miraculously waxing them.

"I don't know exactly how your mind worked," Piper admitted, "but I consider that you make a mistake. You got Floyd and you took him away. In my opinion, you should have taken him in your car and left his.

"But that would have been suspicious—a fugitive would hardly abandon his car and run on foot. So you took him in his car. You had to come back for your own. And as long as you were back at Baner's, you thought you would make it look good by ringing his bell, by letting me find you there.

"It looked good and it sounded smart. It's even what I might have done myself, in your situation, but it was a mistake. Because you left a back trail. You had to get back to Baner's quickly, before your car was discovered there, so you took a cab. That cabbie—"

"Stand back away from me, you fool," Clark ordered. "I've had a gun on you the past five minutes. I think you're a liar. I don't believe you've found that cab driver at all. Put your hands up."

Piper put them up, shoulder high. "Then I am correct."

"I'm saying nothing," Clark barked. "I just don't want your ideas to go any further. And they won't. It's easy, very easy, to get rid of you."

"Another error," Piper shook his head. "Do you think Gurrin let me go, without having me followed? There are probably at least two detectives outside who know I am in here. If you shoot that gun. . . ." Piper walked towards him.

Clark tilted up the corner of his jacket, the nose of the gun tenting the gray

material.

"It's just those detectives and Gurrin's suspicions of you that will make this so easy," Clark laughed mirthlessly. "I'm shooting you in self-defense, Piper. You tried to bully me into denying that I saw Floyd Knox at Baner's. You threatened me. And when I told you I would stick to the truth—well, you got shot in the fight."

Piper realized that he was in a spot. He had expected Clark to resist more, to try to squirm out of the facts. Clark's quick capitulation had taken him by surprise. Piper felt hot and sweaty.

**H**E should have taken into account that Clark was a man of quick decisions. Look how Clark had been torturing Baner one minute, and had cut his throat the next, probably just because Clark had realized Baner was not going to give in.

Piper glanced about the room. It was a large room, and the center was clear. All the furniture was against the wall, the nearest piece of it some distance away. There was nothing to dive behind, nothing that he could upset in the hopes of distracting Clark's attention.

And worse, it was likely that there were no detectives following him any longer. Because he had told Gurrin that Floyd would stay away while there were detectives about, Gurrin might have ordered the shadowers to lay off for a while.

Clark was watching him, a smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. "You don't like it, do you, Piper? Are you scared?"

Piper heaved his shoulders. "I don't know. I suppose I am—"

"How did you think you'd die," Clark laughed, "in your business?"

"Like this, I guess," Piper's forehead furrowed. "It wouldn't be so bad if I were accomplishing something. If I were saving

Floyd . . . Clark, is he alive?"

"Shooting you through my pocket will make it look as if it were a desperate, unpremeditated act," Clark mused aloud. "The only thing I could do to save myself. "Good-bye—"

The doorbell rang. Clark pulled his mouth into a horrible shape. He must have looked like that, Piper reflected, when he was torturing Baner, when he drew the knife across Baner's throat.

"Go to the door," Clark ordered. "No! Stand where you are, there's still time to kill you. Now you get it." Clark screamed: "*Help!*"

Piper threw himself to the floor. He heard a voice from the dark depths of the room, boom. "Here's help, Clark," but he saw that nonetheless Clark's eyes were following him.

Piper rolled and twisted. Then Clark's gun roared, flame danced about the cloth of his coat. Piper heard the bullet smack the waxed floor inches from him.

Whirling, Clark faced back where the voice had come from. Piper jerked up into a crouch, hurled himself forward as Clark's gun belched again. He hit Clark's knees, spilled him ever backwards. A licking, orange flame blossomed from the rear of the room, a bullet sang over their heads.

"Don't shoot," Piper howled, grabbing Clark's wrist and throat.

Gurrin came forward. The front door broke in and detectives dashed into the room.

"You dope!" Gurrin shouted, "you almost got yourself killed, jumping him like that."

"I have to have him alive," Piper panted. "Clark"—he dragged him to his feet—"where's Floyd?"

Clark was too flabbergasted to talk. He stared at all of them and his head shook from side to side. The tightness went out

of his face; it became a loose, sagging face that moved as he shook his head.

But he made a last effort. "I've been—I've been abused." Clark looked desperately at Gurrin. "I know nothing."

"Where is that cabbie?" Gurrin demanded.

They brought a small dark man in. He took a hard, long look at Clark, said: "Yeah, that's the guy. But you didn't ask me about him the first time, you asked—"

"That's enough," Gurrin roared. "Take him out. Hold him."

"So you did take my tip!" Piper exclaimed.

"I'm here, ain't I?" Gurrin glowered. "We saw the fix this guy had you in. I went round the back to take him from that way. Come on, Clark, why did you kill Baner?"

THEY had to give Clark a drink, a big one, before he understood what had happened. They convinced him that they had enough to hang him out of hand. Then the truth came out of him easy and fast, as if it were greased.

"I got into the house," Clark trembled. "I knocked Baner out, and took him upstairs where he wouldn't be interrupted. I tried to make him give me the combination of his safe. He wouldn't do it. He said Piper was coming. I knew I had to work fast. I went down to get a knife from the kitchen, and I saw Knox at the safe.

"I got the knife and hurried back. But I only meant to threaten Baner, I swear." Clark clutched Gurrin's lapels. "I had a mask on, I was sure Baner didn't recognize me. I swear I was only going to threaten him. Until"—Clark stood with his mouth hanging open—"until he told me he knew me. Then—"

Gurrin rushed him off with a backhand whack that smashed him against the wall. "Why did you do it?"

"I owed him money," Clark cowered. "So much money! I was going to lose my business. He gave me till tonight to pay." Clark began to weep. "And when he said he recognized me, he told me he'd sent for Piper because he thought I might try some trick."

Piper knocked Clark's hands down. "Where is Floyd?"

Clark shook his head.

"I think you owe me a little something." Piper stared steadily at Gurrin. "Leave me alone with him."

Gurrin hesitated. He looked at Clark, back at Piper, then signaled his men to get out of the room.

Clark saw the gesture, took one look at Piper, and slid away, pointing at the floor.

They found Floyd in the cellar, on an old bedstead. He was an example of what Clark would have done to Baner had there been time. Piper dropped to his knees beside the lacerated, burned figure.

Floyd was unconscious, just coming to—which was why Clark had stopped working him over. As Gurrin looked, there was a deep rumbling in his chest. He spat, cursed, and sent a cop to get an ambulance.

Floyd's eyes fluttered open. "Tom!" He stared at Piper. "Tom, what did I do to you? I lost my head, Tom."

"That doesn't count, Floyd, forget it. What did Clark do to you?"

"He tried to torture the combination to Baner's safe out of me," Floyd cried. "Tom, I was a criminal tonight. I tried to get into Baner's safe myself. I didn't mean to steal anything, but it was wrong. And when I realized how wrong it was, I tried to make up for it by refusing to tell Clark the combination because I knew he was going to rob Baner."

"Sure." Piper comforted him all he could. "Tell it from the beginning, Floyd."

It took a minute for Floyd to start, and

he passed out a couple of times, but he insisted on telling it.

THE day before in Baner's office, Floyd had seen a little black notebook. It contained the combination of Baner's safe. Though he but glimpsed it, the combination was burned indelibly into Floyd's brain. After he had mailed the contest answers to Baner, the suspense became too much for him. After all the long months of trying to get a job, he felt that he would go crazy, waiting to learn if he was going to be hired by Baner.

He had to know if he had sent in the correct answers. He couldn't get the combination of Baner's safe out of his mind. So he had gone to Baner's house. There hadn't been any lights, not downstairs at any rate. But while working on the safe, he had heard some one upstairs. He had fled from the house.

After the fight with Piper, Floyd had run to his car. Clark stuck a gun in him and compelled him to drive. Floyd landed in Clark's cellar. Clark wanted the combination of the safe. Clark wanted to return to Baner's house that night and get his notes of indebtedness before the police

found them. Unless Floyd told him the combination, Clark was finished.

Floyd refused to tell. While he'd been in the cellar, waiting for Clark to come back, he'd had plenty of time to think things over and he'd made up his mind not to tell.

"Didn't Clark tell you he had murdered Baner?" Piper asked.

"No!" Floyd cried. "You mean Clark killed him because I would not tell?"

Piper answered quickly:

"No. Clark saw you at the safe. He killed Baner then because Baner had recognized him in spite of a mask. Clark came down to get you, but you were outside, fighting with me. After our battle, Clark got hold of you."

"Oh, oh." Floyd's battered face showed relief as he sank into unconsciousness again.

The ambulance men hastily carried him out.

"Gurrin, you going to squeeze him for the safe business?" Piper asked.

Gurrin started up the cellar stairs.

"I think Floyd paid for whatever he did, Piper."