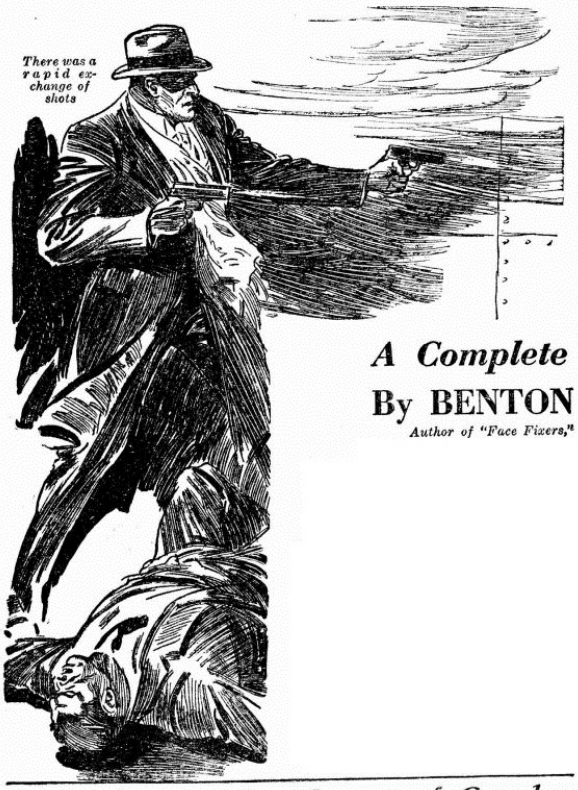
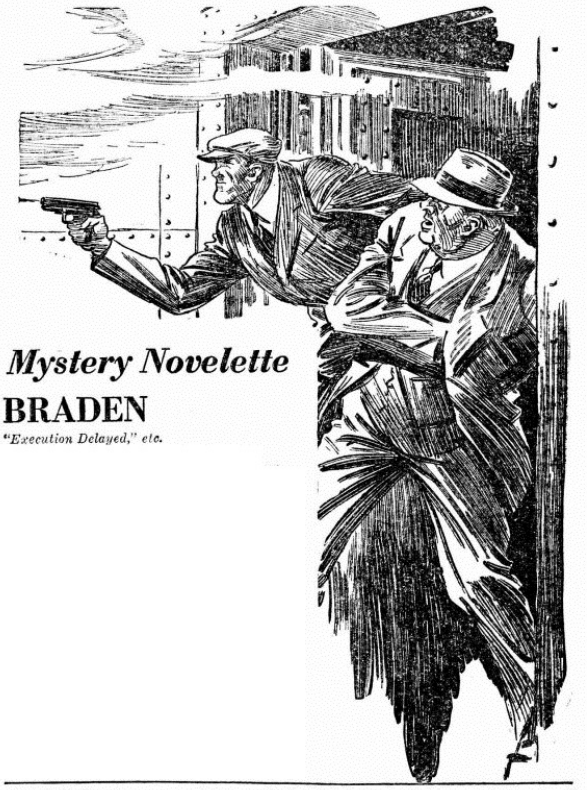
MISTER FINIS *Meets a* RAJAH



A Complete

By BENTON

Author of "Face Fixers,"



Mystery Novelette

BRADEN

"Execution Delayed," etc.

Again the Mysterious Scourge of Gangdom

Whirls into a Breath-Taking Crime Hunt!

CHAPTER I
A DEAD MAN

JOBBER LEGG moved like a shadow through the narrow streets and murky alleys of the underworld district that had well earned the name of Street of Evil. His eyes were grim and eager in the knowledge that he was at last in a position to strike at Big Max Garst, the vicious mob leader. Jobber and his loyal friend and servant, Kimmel, had watched the Garst mob for weeks. Now Jobber was sure that he had better than an even chance to learn some of the details of the coup that he knew; Big Max was planning.

Jobber stopped and looked back into the gloom with keen, searching eyes. For a moment he thought he saw a figure moving, a feminine figure. He frowned deeply as it occurred to him that it might be the figure of the girl of mystery who called herself Sheba Green.

Jobber Legg had no desire to be followed this night. Least of all by the wise and alluring Sheba. The girl was almost a complete enigma to Jobber.

Sheba Green seemed to be everywhere, to know everything that went on in the underworld. Indeed, it was her business to know. She sold information to crooks. Never to the cops. She was a personage of some power and was able to move through the warrens of the underworld with perfect freedom, her person inviolate.

On certain occasions Jobber had paid

her for information. And he had paid her for silence? For Sheba Green, other than Kimmel, was the only person in the world who knew that Jobber Legg, who posed as a cheap gunman, was really John Kent, a wealthy young bachelor who occupied a luxurious apartment on the Avenue and who was welcome in the socially distinguished homes of the city.

Beyond that, Sheba shared the secret that John Kent, alias Jobber Legg, was also the almost legendary Mister Finis, who on rare and appropriate occasions, managed to appear from nowhere with his flaming guns and deal death and destruction to leaders in the underworld.

Sheba knew too much!

At times greed seemed to be her controlling passion. Jobber Legg wondered if she would ever succumb to that greed and sell him out. He knew that the underworld was ready to pay any price to learn the identity of Mister Finis. The underworld had sworn a fate far worse than death for the avenger who dared to use against it the same tactics that it used against society. The cops, too, were out to put an end to the activities of Mister Finis because he scorned the slow processes of the law.

BUT the people covertly applauded him because the thunderbolts that he unleashed struck chilling fear into the hearts of the most savage criminals.

Jobber Legg, staring back into the blackness, saw no further movement. He concluded that his imagination had played him a trick. He skulked on through the alley. He moved slowly and warily now because he was approaching the dilapidated structure where Big Max Garst's mob would soon make rendezvous.

The building he approached was a very old three storied brick house. The lower two floors were deserted, the doors of the rooms nailed tight.

It was a large room on the third floor that Big Max used for the meetings. The house was unapproachable by roofs, having a vacant lot on each side.

Jobber and Kimmel had watched the mob assemble there before. A guard was posted in the short first floor hall while the meetings were in progress. Big Max was doubtless confident that no one could enter the house without challenge.

No later than this morning Jobber had forced open one of the doors on the first floor that opened into the hall. He had removed the boards and nails that fastened it and substituted a latch bolt that could only be opened from the inside. He had loosened the boards at the single window so that entry would not be difficult.

He crept across the vacant lot at the west side of the house, reached the window, and noiselessly raised himself to the sill and crawled inside. Dusk had settled only half an hour since. It was a little after seven o'clock. Jobber knew that he would have about thirty minutes to wait, assuming that the mob met each time at the same hour.

He was wrong there. He had hardly crossed the room when he hoard feet scraping on the floor of the short hall, heard the mutter of deep voices. He waited in silence a few minutes more. Again he heard men moving through the hall. A harsh voice spoke in a slightly raised tone. Jobber guessed that instructions were being given to the man who was to stand guard there. A minute later the stairs creaked. Then silence, except that the guard in the hall coughed a little at intervals.

Jobber waited a few minutes. He had no assurance that all the mob was assembled but, he reasoned, he could delay no longer. He slid back the latch that held the door, opened it slowly, inch by inch.

His eyes had become accustomed to the blackness of the room. The hall was dark,

too, but it was not the pitchy blackness of the room. Jobber peered into the hall, saw the figure that stood not three feet to his right, facing the street, leaning against the wall.

Jobber already had the blackjack in his hand. He took one long noiseless step, swung his weapon. He caught the guard as he collapsed and lowered him to the floor. He dragged the man into the room, bound and gagged him with materials placed there that morning.

BACK in the hall, he stepped to the doorway and raised a handkerchief above his head, quickly lowered it. His man, Kimmel, came gliding from across the street. Not a word passed between them. Kimmel, a gun in each hand, took his place in the hall. Jobber began a cautious ascent of the stairs.

He breathed more easily as he passed the second floor landing. He had not been sure about that. He reached the third floor. On down the hall he saw dim light shining through an open door. He smiled grimly. It was a temptation to appear in that doorway with guns in his hands and shoot down the mobsters who were so reckless as to draw against him.

As Mister Finis he might easily have done that. But the code of John Kent placed upon him certain restrictions. It permitted him only to attack criminals who were engaged in the commission of a crime and to kill only when his own life was at stake. As Jobber Legg he knew that Big Max was planning a major crime. The Street of Evil whispered that Big Max was ready to strike at once, and that the crime would be both spectacular and daring. Big Max had boasted that he and his men would clean up enough to fix them for keeps.

Jobber Legg was burning with curiosity to find out the nature of this impending crime. He and Kimmel had shadowed members of Big Max's mob for weeks, had listened to the gossip of the Street. Jobber knew it was now or never.

He did not move toward that lighted door. Instead, he turned to his right and mounted a third flight of stairs, stairs that led to the roof, the roof that was inaccessible from any adjoining structure.

In another minute he was slowly bending his body forward and gazing down through the steel framework of a skylight into the lighted room below. Big Max, confident that he was protected from interference, had chosen that airy room for these warm and sultry nights.

Half of the panes of glass that had been set in the steel framework had been broken out. Jobber had an unobstructed view of the greater portion of the room below. There was a table directly beneath his eyes. About it were seated six men. The wide, bulky shoulders of Big Max and the large mass of rope colored hair were unmistakable. Jobber was able to identify two other members of the mob. The faces of the other three were not visible to him.

Big Max was removing an envelope from his pocket. He opened it, removed a large sheet of paper, unfolded it, and spread it out on the table.

Jobber's eyes gleamed. He saw that it was some kind of a map. Jobber meant, at any risk, to get a good look at that map. Big Max was a little to Jobber's left. Jobber began to crawl along the edge of the skylight.

His left hand suddenly came in contact with something soft. It was cloth. Jobber moved his hand and explored. His gasp was almost audible. His hand felt flesh. Jobber jerked a pencil flashlight from his pocket, shaded its beam with his hands, and stared.

The narrow shaft of light was centered on the face of a man. In that first instant Jobber knew that the man was dead. He knew that he had never seen the face before. He knew now why the stairs had creaked so

heavily when he had been hidden in the first floor room. Big Max and his men had carried the body up with them a few minutes before.

Swiftly Jobber went through the pockets of the man's suit. There was nothing in them. He used his light again guardedly. It was not a cheap suit that the victim was clad in. Jobber thrust his fingers into the inside coat pocket, held it open while he played his light on it. There was a name written there on a small white strip of cloth that had been sewed into the pocket. The name was J. C. Winterhauser. The name meant nothing to Jobber. Yet, he was quite sure that the death of this man was a link in the crime that Big Max was about to execute. Jobber's eyes were anxious, excited. Big Max, with the map before him, was speaking slowly and forcefully. Jobber had to hear what was being said.

CHAPTER II
THE MYSTERIOUS MAP

JOBBER crawled over the body and moved along the skylight until he was directly over Big Max. The five men were leaning over the table, paying avid attention to every word that fell from Big Max's lips.

"Get it?" Big Max's voice rumbled. "Ain't it the sweetest lineup that a mob ever tumbled into. If we take this trick we can live the life of Riley for a hundred years. And we can't miss! It's a sure thing. An inside job and covered both ways. I gotta laugh when I think of how easy it's gonna be."

"It's apples, all right, Max," a hoarse voice agreed. "But how come you got next to a setup like that? How can you be sure you're right?"

"That's somethin' I was comin' to," Big Max chuckled. "I ain't sore because maybe some of you figure I wasn't smart enough to figure this out all by myself. Hell, I wasn't. The guy that doped this out has seventeen different kinds of grey matter. He's got more brains in a minute than I'd have in seven lifetimes. I got a right to be proud that he picked my mob to do the rough stuff. It proves we're big time guys now."

"You're sure this bird is on the level?" the hoarse voice asked tensely.

"Of course he's on the level! Wait till you hear his name. I ain't told you before because he didn't want it even breathed he was in these parts. He even insisted that I shouldn't tell you at all. But you know me! I don't hold nothin' back from my pals when we go into action. And you'd never guess who the guy is that's playin' ball with us on this job."

"Who?" the five men chorused.

Big Max leaned back in his chair. He was enjoying the drama that he knew he was about to create.

"Frenchie Delott!" he said.

The magic in that name affected Jobber Legg as well as the men in the room below. Frenchie Delott! What crook hadn't heard that name? What big shot of the underworld didn't bow to Frenchie Delott as the smartest, most ruthless man in his line? Frenchie Delott would sneer at loot of less than half a million. A holdup or a snatch he would have considered crude and primitive crime. Frenchie used brains.

Jobber Legg knew that he was hot on a clever and unusual crime. Feverishly he jerked from his pocket the glasses that he always carried. He focused them on the map below. If he could only get one good look at that map! But the method was hopeless. The paper through the glasses was only a blur.

But Jobber had come prepared. He had known that it would be more than likely that he would be confronted with a similar situation to this. He took from another pocket a small box. In it was a small object attacked to a long piece of

thin cord. He held it in his hand and waited. Big Max had his finger on the map.

"It's all set out here, and we can't go wrong. I got a complete map of the first floor of the house and the notes in the corner that Frenchie prepared tells us exactly what we're gonna be up against. I already told Corbett what his job is. He'll be planted right there," he pointed to a spot on the map, and waiting for us. It couldn't be no easier. We gotta hand it to Frenchie Delott. It took brains to dope this out."

"Does Frenchie himself think it's gonna be as easy as you do, Max?" the man on his left asked.

"He says it's a cinch! All but the timing. He warned me time and time again about that. It's all timed right down to the last T. We can't make any slip-ups on that. The gong strikes at midnight—right on the dot at midnight. We can't be a minute off or somethin' might go wrong. But, hell, that's easy enough. If we're too dumb to read our watches we ought to get rooked."

"Just how much is the loot gonna be?"

MAX leaned back in his chair again. "I don't know," he said solemnly. "Nobody knows just how much junk there is in that dump. The papers have, at various times, guessed from one to five millions. Even Frenchie Delott don't know that. But it's plenty. Plenty so that we can give Frenchie half and still split a big fortune among us."

"What's the difference if we do run into a little trouble?" the thin faced man at the end of the table said harshly. Jobber knew his name was Gimp Sturms. "For a wad like that we can afford to take chances—and gun everybody out that gets in our way."

"Right, Gimp," Big Max chuckled. "It's the chance that only comes once in a lifetime to guys like us. Now do you all understand? If you got any more questions to ask you'd better pipe up now."

Jobber was moving hastily. He sensed that the meeting might break up at any moment now. Big Max might reach out, fold the map, put it back in the envelope and put it in his pocket.

Jobber was lowering his slender cord through the skylight. There was a little leaden weight on the end of that cord. Around the lead was wrapped a bit of sponge, and on the sponge was glue. The sponge down three feet, Jobber had to stop and untangle a bit of the cord.

His lips twisted bitterly as Big Max reached out his right hand and took hold of the map. He folded it and placed it in the envelope. Just, then the thin faced man at the end of the table spoke to him. Big Max turned, removed his hand, and left the envelope lying on the table.

Jobber had untangled his cord. He leaned far over the open triangle of the section of the skylight and poised the weighted end of the cord. His eyes glittered with hope and anxiety as the bit of sponge sank lower and lower.

It was almost above Big Max's eyes as Big Max turned back and looked again to his right. Jobber squinted his eyes and took a final sight.

Then with a sudden movement he thrust down his arms to their full length. The weighted sponge struck squarely on the envelope. Jobber let it rest for only a fraction of a second. Then he hauled up fast.

The man across the table from Big Max yelled and grabbed for the envelope. But the glue held, and the envelope fluttered upward as Jobber frantically hauled. The men below were on their feet. Guns were being jerked from their holsters.

Two of those guns roared as Jobber jerked the envelope through the skylight. The shots were wild. Glass crashed in the remaining segments of panes that had held to the steel frame throughout the years. But Jobber was already back, crouching out of the

line of fire.

"He's on the roof!" Big Max was bawling. "He can't get away! Everybody! Up after him! Nail him and leave him up there to rot with the other one!"

Feet scrambled and chairs were overturned as Big Max led the mad rush for the door. They were shouting and cursing as they raced through the hall that led to the stairs.

Jobber Legg waited coolly for five seconds. Then he leaped back to the skylight and peered down. The room was deserted. Jobber had already torn the envelope from the sponge and thrust it into his right hand coat pocket. He moved with the agility of a great cat, caught the steel frame with both hands, swung himself down into the room below. He hung there for an instant, listened to the feet of Big Max and his men as they raced up the stairs to the roof.

Jobber dropped and landed lightly in the center of the table. He seized the electric lamp that rested on one corner of the table and hurled it through the single window of the room. The room was in darkness as the glass shattered.

He raced into the hall as orange flames burst from the skylight above him. Big Max's men were firing blindly, desperately, in the hope a wild shot would bring down their quarry.

JOBBER LEGG was grinning as he reached the stairs that led below. He heard Big Max roaring orders to go back down the stairs. Some of the men had anticipated that order. They were tumbling down the third flight as Jobber was going down the second flight. Jobber turned the corner of the second floor landing, wheeled and waited. He fired a single shot upward as he saw two faint shadows reach the landing above.

Guns threw lead down at him as Big Max and the others joined the two on the third floor landing. Jobber sensed that someone was already testing the stairs. Jobber exposed himself a little. Coolly he raked the stairway above him. He smiled as the shadows above vanished. Even Big Max, in his blind rage, would not dare to try the stairs in the face of that steady, blistering fire.

Jobber turned, and without holstering his guns, leaped down the steps to the first floor landing. Kimmel was waiting there for him, the darkness concealing the relief that shone in his face.

Jobber opened the door of the room by which he had entered the building. He took Kimmel by the arm. "This way, Kimmel." Jobber paused and closed the hall door as he shoved Kimmel into the room. "I got more than I hoped for—a map in my pocket," he gasped, breathing heavily. "Now, follow me, Kimmel. Through the window. The mob will try the stairs in a minute. But we'll be well away by that time."

He found the window, raised it, pushed Kimmel through ahead of him. Together they sped across the vacant lot, made the alley in the rear and turned to the left. They heard shouts and shots from the old house they had just left—but Jobber was slowing to a walk and smiling his triumph.

"I'm patting myself on the back a little for pulling that trick," he exulted to Kimmel. "I don't know just what I've got but I'm sure it's the tip-off to a big—"

Jobber's smile faded as he reached for the right hand pocket of his coat. He stopped and a miserable groan slipped from his lips. The envelope for which he had risked so much was gone!

He stood there in the darkness for a full minute before he told Kimmel what had happened. He searched his clothes thoroughly in spite of the fact that he was quite sure the envelope had been in the right hand pocket of his coat. At first he was determined to return and look for the envelope but Kimmel took a

firm stand against such foolhardiness.

"I guess you're right, Kimmel." He shrugged his disgust. "It would be too much like stepping into a hornet's nest. Anyway, Big Max and his mob will search the house from cellar to attic and they're bound to find the envelope in that room. I know that a major crime is to be committed at midnight, that Big Max and his mob are going to commit it.

"I also know that Frenchie Delott is behind the whole thing and that means a daring stroke with much loot at stake. Even if we are too late to step in on them we'll know where the trail leads. It should be the easiest thing in the world to close in on them, once we learn the stunt they have pulled. Not that I'm giving up. It's just possible that we may be able to get set for them yet. It's hardly eight. That gives us at least four hours."

CHAPTER III
ENTER SHEBA GREEN

JOHN KENT had been in his apartment on the Avenue less than thirty minutes. During that time the shabby clothes, the matted hair, the darkly stained face and the snarl of Jobber Legg had disappeared. He paced slowly up and down the living room, a puzzled expression on his well molded, youthful face. Kimmel, seated in a chair near the door, watched him expectantly.

"I can't find a starting point," Kent muttered, as much to himself as to Kimmel. "If Big Max Garst were alone on this job I'd know about what to expect. A daring stickup, a rough and ready crime. But Frenchie Delott is known to have a weakness for crimes involving gems. It may be that he has planned to wreck one of the vaults of the downtown jewelry concerns. But there are a hundred such vaults. It's like trying to find the proverbial needle in the—"

He broke off as the front door buzzer sounded. Kimmel rose and glided through the foyer to the door. Kent heard a short and brief argument.

He turned and a light frown spread over his features. Sheba Green stood in the doorway. Kimmel, a look of distaste on his face was standing just behind her.

Sheba Green looked amused. Without invitation she crossed to a table, took a cigarette from a lacquered case, lighted it, and seated herself comfortably in a silk upholstered chair. Kent stared a little. This was a Sheba Green that the Street of Evil never saw. The cheap dress that she ordinarily wore was gone. Her white shoulders gleamed above an evening dress that suggested roses and silver. Kent could find no fault in her appearance. She would have passed inspection in any gathering.

"I suppose, Sheba," Kent murmured, "that this is just an informal call."

"You might call it that," she replied, smiling. "I really dropped in to give you a hint, a hint as to what will happen if Big Max Garst gets his hands on you."

Kent started a little and his eyes narrowed. "You have an annoying habit of talking in riddles, Sheba," he said lightly. "I'm a bit out of touch with the affairs of the street. Why should Big Max Garst have it in for me?"

Her laugh was musical—and ironic. "On second thought he doesn't have it in for you, John Kent. His anger is centered on a rather despicable character who calls himself Jobber Legg. It seems that Big Max had a meeting with his mob a short while ago. This Jobber Legg, always a very nosey individual, managed to be present. And he managed to get hold of a map that—"

"So it was you, Sheba, that was following me tonight?" Kent interrupted, his voice harshly accusing.

"And why not?" she countered, her

eyes twinkling at his discomfiture. "Word reached me a few days ago that Jobber Legg was asking questions, that he was becoming very much interested in the affairs of Big Max. You know I'm curious. And that I always have an eye open for business. It seemed that somewhere along the line an opportunity would arise for me to make an honest dollar. So when I saw you skulking through the alleys of the Street tonight I decided I might as well follow you to see what was going on."

"And you were right on my heels when I entered the house? You followed me in?" he challenged.

"Yes. It looked for a minute as though I had made a tragic mistake. I stood by the window for awhile. My curiosity got the better of me. I crawled through the window. The first thing I knew hell broke loose above. There was a lot of shooting. For the moment I lost my head. I jumped back in a corner and stood there, shivering. Then two men came into the room. They stopped by the door a moment and—"

"Sheba!" Kent's eyes were dark and furious. "You got my map! You picked my pocket as I stood inside the door for a moment and spoke to Kimmel. You stole my map!"

"Your map?" She accented the first word, her tone taunting. "I was under the impression that your title to it was extremely faulty. From all that I saw and heard I was firmly convinced that the map belonged to Big Max, and that Jobber Legg had committed a rather low bit of thievery. I understand that Jobber fished it from right in front of Big Max's eyes with a bit of stickum on the end of a string. Of course I couldn't be absolutely sure that the map belonged to Big_"

"How much, Sheba?" Kent's tone was caustic as he thought he detected the gleaming greed in her eyes. "How much for the map?"

SHE leaned back in her chair, drew deeply on her cigarette, blew a heavy cloud of smoke toward the ceiling.

"I'm sorry," she said, and her voice was mocking. "Very sorry that I am not able to take your money and deliver the man to you. I've already disposed of it."

"You—"

"I sold it back to Big Max Garst for three hundred dollars. You know my motto. Quick deals and small profits!"

Kent gazed at her for a full minute, bitter disappointment in his face. Sheba tossed her head and laughed delightedly.

"Perhaps it will be a good lesson for you, John Kent," she said. "No one should ever be careless with important papers. But you can't complain. The map didn't belong to you and you're not out anything."

Kent turned in disgust and walked slowly across the room. He suddenly whirled and pointed a forefinger at her.

"But you looked at the map, Sheba. And I'll wager my life that you inspected that map closely before you sold it back to Big Max!"

She smiled broadly. "Now that you remind me of it, I believe I did, John. It seems to me that I have a distinct recollection of—"

"Name your price, Sheba! I want to know what was written on the corner of the map."

"I always try to be reasonable in my demands," she said archly. "Let's see. I charged Big Max three hundred for the map. I should say that half that much, a hundred and fifty, would be a fair—"

"Get the money, Kimmel!" Kent ordered shortly. Kimmel disappeared into the hall that led to the rear of the apartment. He returned quickly, counted bills into Sheba Green's waiting hand.

"Thank you," she acknowledged cheerfully. "I'll tell you what I remember about the map. It was the plan of a house.

There was one room in that house that seemed, from marks on the map, to be particularly important."

"Whose house?" Kent demanded eagerly.

"I don't know. But," she added quickly as she saw the disappointment in his face, "there was an address printed at the corner of the map. It was 1819 Leverly Place."

"Leverly Place. I know most of the homes on that street," Kent mused thoughtfully, "but I can't place that number. Get our cross-index, Kimmel!"

"There was one other note in the corner that you might be interested in," Sheba went on. "It was: 'Corbett inside, guard'."

"Nothing else?" Kent urged.

"Nothing but some marks I didn't understand. That's all I can tell you about the map. But I know that one of Big Max's men saw your face. Jobber's face, rather, as you jerked the envelope up through the skylight. I told Big Max that I saw you drop the envelope as you ran from the house and that I picked it up. He figured that you didn't have time to look at it, that you had all your trouble for nothing."

"The house in Leverly Place," Kimmel announced, looking up from the index, "belongs to Custer Simms."

"Simms?" Kent repeated blankly. "I don't believe I've ever heard the name."

"But that won't cramp your style much, will it, John?" Sheba chuckled. "I wouldn't be surprised that you'd find out several things about Mr. Simms in the next few hours—and pass the information on to the notorious Mister Finis!"

Kent flushed a little. "I don't know, Sheba. I'm afraid I'm condemned to a quiet evening at home tonight."

"We'll see," she chuckled as she rose.

"I knew it!" Kent said darkly. "You're planning to watch every move I make. How much, Sheba? How much for your promise not to trail me tonight, for your promise not to skulk about the house at Leverly Place tonight?"

She stared in surprise at him for a moment, seemed about to refuse to quote him a price. Then her eyes sparkled.

"A hundred," she offered. "Give me a hundred and I'll promise not to trail you or skulk about that house tonight."

"Go ahead and give her the money, Kimmel."

Sheba drew her cape about her shoulders and strolled to the door, waited until Kimmel had placed the money in her hand. Then she murmured a cheerful "good night" and hurried from the apartment.

"I don't trust her," Kimmel said darkly. "She's only waiting to get her price. Some day she'll sell you out—tell the mobsters just who Mister Finis is! And that will mean—sure death!"

"Possibly," Kent agreed mildly. "It's possible that Sheba might sell me out to Big Max tonight. But—what can we do about it?"

"Nothing!" Kimmel said gloomily. "Nothing!"

"But we have plenty to do tonight, Kimmel," Kent said quickly. "I lied a bit for Sheba's benefit. Custer Simms and I are not altogether unacquainted. We meet in the same clubs rather often. The minute his name was mentioned I began to have an inkling of Big Max's scheme. Simms is a very wealthy man and the ruling passion of his life is gems. He's traveled the earth to add to his collections."

"I've heard of him," Kimmel said. "The papers write him up every time he comes back from one of his trips."

"Right. You remember the Culette diamond necklace, Kimmel, that my mother left me. I showed it to Simms once, asked his opinion on it. He said that he had never seen finer, more exquisitely cut gems. He wanted to buy them from me. I refused to sell for sentimental reasons. That gives me an idea."

"What?" Kimmel asked.

But Kent seemed not to have heard him. He strode up and down the room for five minutes. Then he stopped abruptly.

"We'll have to hurry, Kimmel!" he said sharply. "Help me get into evening clothes!"

CHAPTER IV
THE MAHARAJAH

IT was exactly ten-thirty when John Kent gave his card to the butler at the Simms home. The butler left him standing in the long, lofty hall and disappeared through a door at the right which Kent knew led into a large drawing room. In a moment Custer Simms—short, slender, pleasant faced—came hurrying into the hall. "Hello, Kent," he said warmly, his hand outstretched. "I'm very glad to see you. Come right on in. Expecting company in a half hour or so. But that makes no difference."

"I just happened to be driving by," Kent said casually as they entered the drawing room, arm in arm. "Guessed from the lights that you were at home this evening. I recalled that you wanted me to sell you the Culette diamond necklace a couple of years ago. At that time I wasn't in the mood to dispose of them."

"I'd still like to have the Culette diamonds," Simms said quickly. "They were cut by a real artist. You'd like to sell them now?"

"Not exactly." Kent paused as though he were embarrassed. "You see, I want to make a gift to a certain young lady. She doesn't care for diamonds. It occurred to me that you might be able to make me a trade, pearls for instance. She likes pearls. Or emeralds."

"Splendid!" Simms ejaculated. "I don't believe I'll have any trouble making a trade with you. I can assure you that you won't get the worst of it, either. I mean as a matter of dollars and cents."

"I know that, Simms. That's why I decided to come to you rather than a jeweler. And I don't doubt that you have a better selection than most business concerns."

"I have," Simms smiled. "I'll show you some pearls and emeralds that few people are privileged to see."

"Fine. You just name a time that is convenient to you when I may see them."

Custer Simms hesitated for a moment and looked thoughtful. "Why not?" he finally asked himself aloud. "Of course. You may see them tonight. But not until midnight."

He laughed as Kent looked puzzled. "Come with me, Kent, and I'll explain."

Simms led the way back into the hall. They turned to the right. Ten feet further Simms turned into a narrow corridor that ran to the left. On fifteen more feet was a door. He took a key from his pocket and unlocked the door.

"You've never seen my vault, have you, Kent?" He opened the door and switched on lights.

The room was about twelve feet square. The wall of the farther side seemed to be of solid steel. In it was an ordinary vault door with what appeared to be an ordinary combination lock.

"I can't open the safe except at certain times when the time lock is set," Simms went on in explanation. "The safe sets inside the vault. It happens that the clocks are set for midnight—exactly. Because of a special appointment I have made. There's no reason why you can't join me and my other guest at that time."

"I'D be delighted," Kent assured him. "I've heard much about your collections and this impregnable vault in which you keep them."

"I believe it is impregnable," Simms smiled. "The only chance I take is when I open it. I always choose unusual hours for those occasions and take precautions to see that the secret is kept by invited guests. Tonight I am entertaining a very famous personage. One of the greatest owners and experts on rare gems in the world—The Maharajah of Singhol. You may have noticed the news of his arrival in the papers."

"I did," Kent confirmed. "I believe he is staying in some state at the Regent Savoy."

"Right. I called on him this morning, invited him to inspect my stuff. He is a real lover of gems; he accepted eagerly. And agreed to come in the utmost secrecy. He was educated in England and is very democratic. He realized that I couldn't make a show of it here, receive him in state. He is going to slip out of the hotel about eleven and come alone. You shall stay, Kent. Meet the Maharajah and see my collection."

"I'm very grateful for the opportunity," Kent said quickly.

Simms glanced at his watch. "It's getting along toward eleven," he said. "I might as well open the door of the outside vault now so I won't be bothered later."

He stepped forward and knelt before the steel door, began to twirl the dial.

He opened the door, stepped into the vault and pressed a light switch.

There was an open space about seven feet square at the front of the vault. In the rear part of the vault a massive safe of glistening metal was built into a floor that also seemed to be constructed of steel.

"We're all set now," Simms said. "It will take me only a minute to open the safe after the time lock goes off at midnight."

He stepped back and closed the door of the vault, but did not spin the dial. The butler appeared in the doorway at that instant.

"The man from the Ward agency is here," he announced.

"Wait here, Kent," Simms said. "I'll be right back." He followed the butler into the corridor.

KENT moved swiftly. He went to the door and looked to the right. He glided quickly down to the end of the corridor. He threw aside heavy drapes, saw the window. He released the heavy catch on the window, raised the lower sash a fraction of an inch. In another fifteen seconds he was back in the vault room.

He had moved none too quickly. Custer Simms appeared almost immediately. He was followed by a stocky, heavy faced man.

"As a precaution I always have a man from the Ward Protective Agency present," Simms explained to Kent. "He can give a quick alarm if anything goes wrong." He turned to the man. "We have an hour or so, yet. You can make yourself comfortable here, Winterhauser."

Winterhauser! Kent fought to keep his face expressionless. Yet only three hours ago he had looked into the face of a dead man whose coat bore a label on which was written "J. C. Winterhauser." The stocky man was evidently Corbett, noted on the map as an "inside guard," if Sheba had read correctly.

Simms had already taken Kent by the arm and was conducting him back to the drawing room. The butler opened the front door as they stepped into the hall.

Simms rushed forward and greeted the dark-skinned man who entered the door. He was of medium height, very slender, clad in somber black except for the turban that was twisted about his head. Simms turned and ushered his guest toward the door of the drawing room where Kent stood waiting.

"Kent, I want to present you to my very distinguished guest, the Maharajah of—"

"Just make it plain Mr. Singhol," the Maharajah interrupted pleasantly. "I am not

going to insist on formality. I am very democratic tonight. I left my apartment at the hotel by means of a freight lift, sneaked out in order that I might come alone and in secret. I think I deceived your smart newspaper men although they usually watch me very closely." He spoke easily although precisely and with a certain sibilancy peculiar to the Indian.

"As a matter of fact," he continued as they seated themselves in the drawing room, "the royal robes are getting a bit thin. My grandfather now was a real Maharajah. He had the power of life and death over millions of people. But I? I am only a puppet. A British administrator tells me what I may and may not do. Is it any wonder that I devote myself to precious jewels? And to travel?" He shrugged his shoulders as he put the question.

"I'll venture that you'd not trade your stones for the full powers that your grandfather exercised, though," Simms said.

"No," he agreed promptly. "I would rather have one flawless, perfectly cut diamond than all the power in the world."

"Mr. Kent is an old friend of mine," Simms explained to the Maharajah. "He happened to be passing by and dropped in. I have invited him to stay until midnight and join us in the vault."

"I am charmed," the Maharajah smiled. "Is he also one of us? A lover of gems?"

"Not exactly. But he happens to be the owner of a diamond necklace that is of more than ordinary interest. Not in its value but in the way the stones are cut. The diamonds are small but perfect and cut in a delicate, fragile design that fascinates one. I wish we had your necklace here, Kent."

"I think I can arrange it," Kent replied quickly. "The necklace is at my apartment. I can easily get it and make it back here by midnight or a few minutes after. If you will only—"

He stopped speaking as voices, slightly raised in argument, sounded in the hall. A moment later the butler appeared in the doorway.

"There is a reporter for the *Times Journal* at the door," he stammered. "A young lady. I'm having a bit of a time getting rid of her."

"Tell her to leave instantly," Simms ordered.

"I did, sir, but she refused. She said, using her own words, that there was something up here, and that if I didn't let her in she'd call her paper and have a yardful of reporters and cameramen here in no time. I didn't think you'd want that."

"Heavens, no!" Simms exclaimed. He pondered a minute. Then rose and went into the hall. He returned with a smile on his face. "I decided to let her join us rather than let her carry out her threat. She appears to be an extraordinary young woman, both capable and attractive."

He waited until the young lady appeared in the doorway. Kent gasped as Simms presented her to the Maharajah. The capable and attractive young lady was the ubiquitous Sheba Green. Simms turned to Kent.

"But I've met Mr. Kent before," she said with huge enjoyment before Simms could speak. "I've met him several times before. We really are quite well acquainted."

"Of course," Kent said a little awkwardly, his face a bit red. "I'm very glad to see you again, Miss-Miss—"

"Jones," she gushed. "Surely you haven't forgotten me. I'm one of the Jones twins. I'm the one that works on the *Times Journal*."

"I remember you perfectly," Kent chuckled. "And how did you guess that there was news in this house tonight?" But if he thought that would confuse Sheba he was disappointed.

"Why, I've been keeping an eye on the

Maharajah ever since he arrived in town," she answered quickly. "The editor left him to me. I bribed maids and porters in the hotel. One of the porters phoned me that he had slipped out of the hotel alone. The porter heard the address the Maharajah gave the taxi driver. Simple, wasn't it?"

"These American reporters!" the Maharajah exclaimed. "It is impossible to defeat them."

Kent moved toward the door. "I'll run along and get my necklace," he told Simms. "Be back just as soon as I can make it."

CHAPTER V
MR. FINIS CALLS

KENT'S eyes were sober and thoughtful as he left the house. He would have liked to have chased Sheba Green from that house but she was the one person in the world that he dared not denounce. What kind of a game was she playing tonight? Was Kimmel right? Had Sheba sold him out and thrown in with Big Max Garst for a share of the loot they expected to take tonight? Sheba had rattled off her story about the Maharajah without moving an eyelash. Either she was in with Big Max or she was a very, very clever girl who could think like lightning in a pinch.

Kent frowned darkly as he climbed into his car. In a very short time he would have all the answers to the questions that surged in his mind. He glanced at his watch, then started his motor. He drove slowly, making a circuit of perhaps ten blocks. When he parked his car again he was hardly two blocks from the house of Ouster Simms.

He put on a very thin black topcoat. In each pocket he slipped a heavy automatic and two extra clips. He got out of his car, walked to the next corner, crossed the street and faded into the shadows between two large houses. He moved slowly, warily, picking his way diagonally across the block.

IN three minutes he was crouching beneath a window. He took a thin black silk mask from his pocket and adjusted it across the upper part of his face. With his right hand he reached up to the window. The lower sash was as he had left it a short time before, raised just enough to permit him to slip his fingers between it and the sill.

Again he glanced at the glowing hands of his wristwatch. It was very close to midnight. He put the fingers of both hands beneath the window and began to push it steadily upward. He raised it two feet.

The heavy drapes inside cut off his vision. But the murmur of voices reached his ears. Then he heard the clear musical laugh of Sheba Green.

Sheba was rising from her chair as she uttered that laugh. She turned her shapely shoulders and strolled carelessly into the hall. It was just two minutes to twelve.

Custer Simms looked at his watch and got to his feet. "I think," he said to his guest, "that we might as well go to the vault room. The time lock will go off on the second. By the time we get there I should be able to open the safe."

The Maharajah nodded and rose. "Just as you say, my friend. I am—"

At that instant there was a crash at the front door. Feet pounded into the hall. Before Simms or the Maharajah could take more than a step they were staring at the muzzles of the guns of Big Max Garst and four of his men.

"Stick 'em up!" Big Max bellowed. "Stick 'em up or we'll mow you down!"

Sheba Green, in the Hall, collapsed at the first word. She went to her knees, then stretched out on the floor in what appeared to be a dead faint. The butler, at the far side of the drawing room, dropped the tray with three glasses on it, and shot his hands upward as

high as he could reach.

Big Max's eyes settled on Simms. "We got you on the hip, Simms," he gloated, "and you might as well make the best of it. We know your safe is set to open at midnight and we're gonna clean it out for you. Jerky! Gus. Tie 'em up!"

Two men moved from behind Big Max and ran into the room. They had cords and cloth in their hands. They forced Simms and the Maharajah to lie down on the floor. In a minute both men were bound and gagged. The butler received the same treatment.

A third man had stooped over the prostrate form of Sheba Green. He grinned as he tied her ankles together, looped a cord about her body and arms, and thrust a gag into her mouth. She was lying flat on her face, and breathed easy again when the thug strode off without recognizing her.

"Leave 'em right where they are," Big Max ordered. "Things are breakin' pretty enough. Come on!" He started through the hall, his four men trooping along at his heels.

"It's a cinch!" Big Max exulted as they turned into the vault room corridor. "Corbett got to a phone right after he come in. Said the vault was already open. We'll look the box over, then shove Simms in here and make him open it. It's just midnight and we got plenty of—"

He stopped and stared as he stepped into the vault room. "Where's that heel of a Corbett?" he grated. "I told him to stick right here."

Big Max rushed across the room and seized the lever that controlled the vault door, turned it, and pulled. The vault door swung open. A light flamed from the ceiling of the vault as the door opened. Big Max cried out and leaped back.

He stared. Stared at the man in evening dress who stood before that light, stared at the masked face and the menacing automatics. Max's eyes bulged as he saw that the menacing figure was standing astride the unconscious form of Corbett, the fake guard.

"Who—who—" Big Max gulped and shrank backward.

"I am sometimes called Mister Finis, Max," came the steely answer.

Big Max yelled and leaped to his right. One of the men behind him whipped up a gun and fired. And then the room was filled with a deafening roar. Big Max and his men leaped from side to side, snapping shot after shot into the interior of the vault.

THE guns of Mister Finis were not idle either. After the first shot he had smashed out the light above his head. Now he sprang from one side of the vault to the other, firing steadily, surely, at the fleeting portions of bodies that came within his view.

Big Max shouted and cursed, exhorted his men with the promise of the riches that lay within the vault.

Mister Finis was fighting with his back to the wall. Fighting with the skill that had come to him in years of daily practice on his private range, with the confidence of one who knows that every bit of lead is reaching the mark toward which it is aimed. He knew that three of Big Max's men were down already. They returned his fire wildly, not daring to stand and face him.

His close quarters were reeking with the acrid smell of powder. Outside he saw, in the haze, a sharp face, another gun turning, in a quick jerk, toward him. And again Mister Finis squeezed his trigger and saw the man drop like a plummet.

As he fired Big Max Garst dove across the room and out the door.

He made no effort to shoot. His only concern now was to get himself out of range of the deadly fire that came from the vault. He made the corridor a fraction of a second before Mister Finis could swing his gun. Mister Finis was out of the vault, leaping

toward that door. He reached it, sprang into the corridor in time to see Big Max leaping through the open window at the end of the corridor. Mister Finis grinned mirthlessly and went after him.

He turned as he reached the window and shot out the ceiling light in the corridor. Then he put a hand on the sill and swung through the window, landed lightly on the grass outside.

Orange flame blazed from the hedge ahead of him. Mister Finis crouched, fired two blind shots at the hedge, and ran forward. He dropped to his knees as he reached the hedge. He listened intently, heard no sound. His eyes, unaccustomed to the darkness, could see nothing.

He slipped the thin topcoat from his shoulders, hung the collar over the muzzle of the gun in his left hand. He raised himself a little, pushed the coat over the hedge, slowly moved it outward. Big Max, crouched on the opposite side of the hedge some twenty feet away, saw that moving shadow. He bared his teeth and aimed carefully.

Mister Finis felt the coat jerking under the impact of the slugs from Big Max's exploding gun. Mister Finis leaned over the hedge. The gun in his right hand fired once. Then he ran down the hedge. For perhaps thirty seconds he knelt over the body of Big Max. Then he moved swiftly across the lawns toward his car.

For five minutes he drove like a robot. His face was creased in a thoughtful frown. Finally he smiled grimly. He parked, went into a drug store, and phoned. Then he drove back to the Simms house.

He shrugged as he saw that the police were already in the house. He walked through the open door. Simms saw him and shouted, "You missed it, Kent! We were held up! A gang tried to rob my vault. But Mister Finis stopped them!"

"That's what this girl says. But does she know what she's talking about?" Inspector Crane put that question. He was looking at Sheba Green who was standing between Simms and the Maharajah.

"I'm sure it was Mister Finis!" Sheba said without looking at Kent. "You see, I was in the hall when the bandits rushed in. I saw their guns and fainted." Kent couldn't suppress a smile at that. "I fainted and fell flat," she went on. "My head was just even with the corridor that leads to the vault. When I came to, there was a battle going on in the vault room. A moment later a man ran out, sprinted down the corridor and jumped through the window.

"A second man ran after him. He was in full dress. He had a mask over his eyes. I knew it was Mister Finis. I've read all about Mister Finis and I'm sure I can't be mistaken."

"She's right!" A detective, who had just come in, said tersely. "We just found Big Max Garst out there by a hedge. He was dead. His shirt front was opened and there was a three and a naught on his chest. Thirty! That's why the papers nicknamed him Mister Finis, you know."

"You're wanted on the phone, Inspector!" someone called out. Inspector Crane pushed his way into the hall, seized the phone.

The Maharajah turned to Custer Simms. "I'm very sorry that I must leave," he said smoothly. "But this publicity will not be pleasant for me. The British government will criticize me for becoming involved—"

"No apologies," Simms smiled. "You'd better hurry. The reporters will be swarming in—"

"I'm most pleased to have met you, Mr. Singhol," Kent interrupted as he seized the Maharajah's hand and began to pump it vigorously. "I'm extremely sorry that you have been subjected to this annoyance."

The Maharajah looked annoyed, tried to withdraw his hand, but Kent held on and

continued to shake with excessive friendliness.

Inspector Crane was shouting as he burst back into the drawing room. He rushed at the Maharajah and tore the turban from his head.

"The Maharajah of Singhol, eh?" he yelled. "Well, this Mister Finis just phoned in and tipped Headquarters that you are a phony. And by Heavens! He was right. You're Frenchie Delott!"

"You must be mistaken," Custer Simms frowned. "I examined some of his papers and—"

"No mistake about it!" Inspector Crane yelled. "See that scar over his right ear. It was that stain on his face and that turban that fooled me. He's Frenchie Delott! Internationally known as the greatest jewel robber in the world! And this is just the kind of a job he would be trying to pull. We got you right this time, Frenchie!"

"Nuts!" Frenchie said in great disgust. "I should have known better than to tie up with a dumb yegg like Big Max Garst."

SHEBA GREEN sat beside John Kent as he drove the coupe away from the Simms house.

"You put me on the spot with your smart question," she chided him. "I had to do some quick guessing. I had already guessed a bit when I saw the fake Maharajah get out of a taxi and enter the house just ahead of me."

"You crossed me yourself," Kent accused. "You took my hundred bucks and promised not to—"

"—not to trail you or skulk about the Simms house. I didn't. I knew the address before you did and didn't have to trail you. And I didn't skulk. I marched right up to the front door and walked in, and if I misrepresented a little, it was my affair. How did you guess that the Maharajah was a fake?"

"Because I hadn't seen anything of Frenchie Delott. I knew he wasn't in the bunch that came with Big Max. He wasn't the guard that I knocked out and dragged into the vault with me. Yet I knew that Frenchie wasn't the kind to stay completely in the background. I knew he was somewhere on the job. I puzzled it out while I was driving around after the fight. The Hindu was the only person left that I hadn't accounted for. He had to be Frenchie. I phoned the cops, knowing that they would soon find out. I held on to him until Inspector Crane jerked the turban off his head."

"I'LL bet," she laughed, "you thought I was selling you out to Big Max when I marched in and joined the party."

"The idea did occur to me, Sheba." he admitted.

"I can't quite make up my mind to do that," she said, her eyes sparkling, mischievous. "Of course, I could get a very tidy sum for telling what I know about Mister Finis to the right parties. But, for the present, I've decided to just chisel a little bit, from time to time. Now tonight, for instance, I believe that there is a grand band opening at the Tower Club. I could do with something to eat—and I might dance a little if I were urged. I'm not hinting, you understand, but—"

"I just had an idea, Sheba," he chuckled. "What do you say that we take in the Tower Club tonight?"

"I'd be thrilled, John. I'll bet you planned it all ahead of time—just as a little surprise for me."