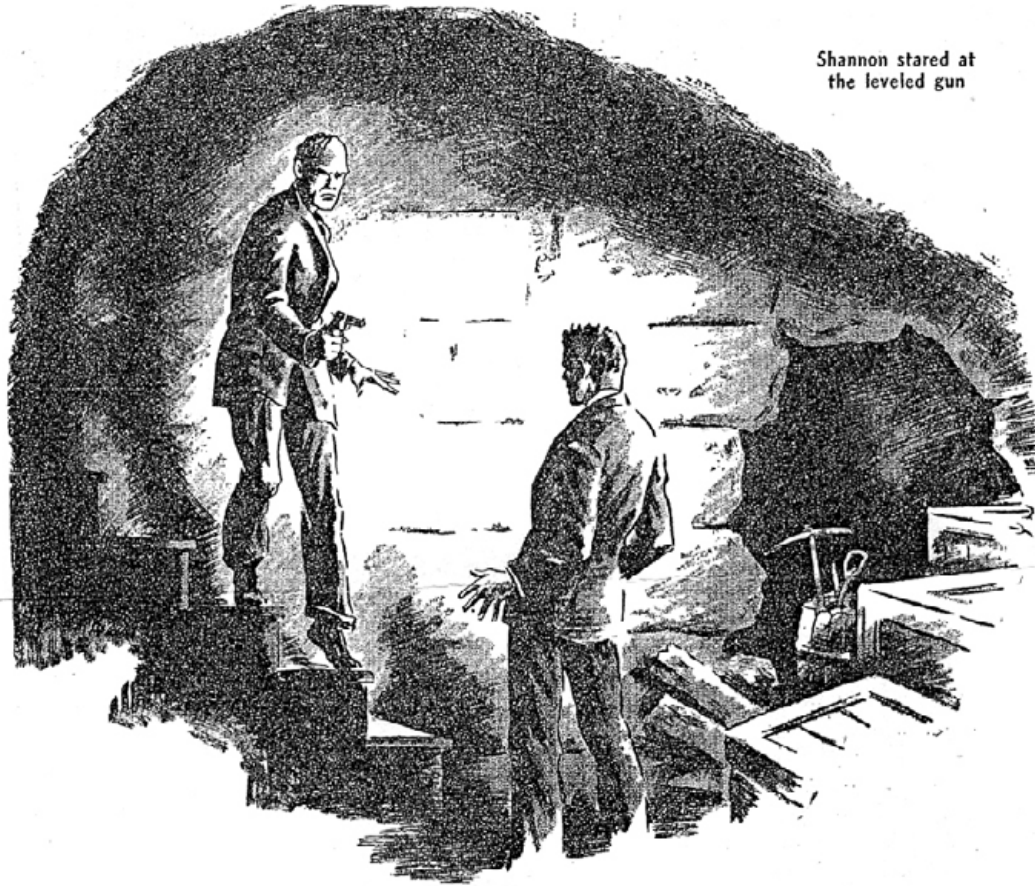


BLIND SPOT

By NORMAN A. DANIELS



Shannon stared at the leveled gun

There, in that loot-filled cave, Shannon gets the evidence he needs—but will he live long enough to make use of it?

CHAPTER I

NO PART OF CRIME

JIM SHANNON let himself into the little cottage which had been left to him when his parents died. He was feeling low, as he always did after an evening with Doris Randall.

Not that Doris wasn't good company and a swell number, and Shannon knew very well he was in love with her—but it always seemed that Phil should have been there, in his rightful place as head of the house.

Doris and Phil had been married before

he'd been sent abroad on a trek that started in Sicily and ended in Berlin. But Phil was dead now—and the manner of his death still branded a scar on Doris' heart.

Shannon was just short of thirty, slim, not too tall. He wasn't handsome by a long shot, but Doris always said she liked the way his eyes crinkled and the way he laughed and that was good enough for Shannon.

He sat down and began thinking. Even though he tried not to, he never could help it. Phil Randall had died a thief, pursued by police, but there wasn't a living soul who could have made Jim Shannon believe Phil was a crook. No matter how strong the

evidence was, he knew better. Shannon maintained that when you share fox holes with a guy, you get to know what he's really like and Phil was no crook.

The jangling of the doorbell made Shannon jump, as if he resented this intrusion into his thoughts. He looked at the mantel clock and saw that it was after midnight. He wondered who could be calling at this hour and he hurried to the door to find out.

Mac stood there, his big face grinning as usual. Mac Corby who, with Phil Randall and Shannon had formed an indomitable triumvirate which—they swore—had won the war.

Mac said, "Figured you might be in bed, Jim. Can I come in?"

Shannon opened the door wider. "When I say 'No' to anything you want, Mac, I'll be out of my mind. Even my life belongs to you."

"Aw, nuts," Mac said with that enormous show of pleasure that only his ugly face could produce. "I keep telling you, Jim, lugging you away from the front was nothing. Any guy would have done it."

"Yeah, but that 'any guy' happened to be you and I'd have died if you hadn't carried me to a field hospital. With enough slugs and shells whizzing around to discourage anybody."

MAC sat down and twirled his battered hat. "How're things, Jim?" he asked.

Shannon shrugged. "Not bad, not good. Good enough—I make a living, but I'd like it better if there weren't so many gas stations. How's it with you? Or don't people buy gravestones any more?"

"Some do—some don't," Mac said morosely. "I need dough, Jim."

Shannon wagged his head. "I've got a couple of hundred bucks you can have."

"I don't mean that kind of dough. I mean big stuff Jim; I can lay my hands on better

than a hundred grand in gems which can be peddled easy."

Shannon stared at him. "What?" he asked. "Did I hear you right?"

Mac leaned forward. "Look, neither of us are getting any place. You with your two-by-four gas station. Me with a stone cutting place that doesn't make enough to buy me cakes."

"I thought you were so busy you had to work half the night," Shannon said.

"That was phony, Jim. Right up to now, that is. But tonight it'll payoff."

"Let's have it from the beginning," Shannon suggested. "You sound as if you're planning some kind of a crime and that I won't believe."

"Jim," Mac leaned forward, "I learned to hate cops after what happened to Phil. We know he didn't rob the safe of that check cashing place next door to mine. Sure, we know it, but the cops won't believe us. Did they give Phil a break? They said he sneaked into the place after hours, unlocked the safe and took thirty grand out of it. Then he got into his car when the cops came to question him, and tried to get away. That's what they said."

"It's ancient history," Shannon told him.

"Not for me it isn't. So the cops spotted him, chased him and started shooting. Phil's car went through the railing of that bridge. They hauled him out, hours later, and he was dead. But they didn't find the dough, Jim, and yet they plastered his memory with the name of a thief."

Shannon sighed. "Okay, we never believed Phil did that, but everybody else did except Doris."

"Sure, and it nearly killed her, Jim. That's what I'm getting at. I hate cops and I haven't got much respect for any mollicoddle laws. I say take what you see in front of your face."

Shannon suddenly realized that Mac Corby was grimly serious. "Spill it, Mac," he

urged. "What are you up to?"

"Listen," Mac dropped his voice to a whisper, "you know that jewelry store next door to my shop?"

"Sure—Inness and Anderson's place. Why?"

"It's a successful business, Jim. They keep better than a hundred grand in jewels in their safe."

"So what?" Shannon wanted to know.

"So during those nights I pretended to be busy, I dug a tunnel under the wall and I busted through the jewelry shop floor. Oh, I fixed it so nobody could notice. I used to be a tile setter and the jewelry store floor is made of tile."

"Holy smokes," Shannon cried. "You intend to rob the safe."

"It'll be a cinch. The only burglar alarms are on the doors and windows. The one on the safe I can disconnect any time at all. But I need your help, Jim."

"Oh, no," Shannon shouted. "Not me. I'm not getting into anything like that."

"Hundred grand." Mac licked his lips. "Or maybe better and I know how to get rid of them."

"No," Shannon said grimly. "I don't want any part of it."

Mac shrugged. "Okay, Jim. I just thought I'd ask. Me—I'm sick of being small time."

Shannon was thinking fast. He knew better than try to persuade Mac he was wrong. Shannon had had several experiences with that and Mac could become surly, angry and even dangerous.

Shannon asked, "Mac, if you dug a tunnel under the jewelry store, what did you do with all the dirt? You couldn't just heave it in the cellar."

Mac grinned again, amiably, because he liked to boast. "Remember that old jalopy of a truck I bought? Well, it was a cinch. I took some of those big packing cases that my stones come in. I filled 'em up and carted 'em off. Right out the front door like they

were stones for a cemetery. I dumped the dirt, brought the empty boxes back and after a few weeks, there was the tunnel."

"Smart," Shannon admitted, still thinking hard. There had to be a way out of this. "When do you plan to tackle the job?"

"Tonight," Mac said eagerly, "Look, I already been in the place. It was easy to bust through the floor, I know tile, see? I removed some of it and when I left, I just cemented it back. I know how to make cement that freezes quick and looks old."

Shannon scowled. There didn't seem to be any way out except one. "But the jewels must be kept in a safe, Mac."

"They are. That's why I need you. You were one of the best sappers in the army. You know explosives. Now I got me some T.N.T. cached in my place. Everything is ready. We can blow the door, grab the stuff. Then maybe smash a window or the front door to make it look like somebody just busted in. But we go down the tunnel and seal up the floor. Then we fill in the tunnel later, while the cops go nuts trying to find the guy who pulled the job."

"You have everything thought out," Shannon said slowly.

"Sure I have. Took weeks but it'll be worth it. How about it, Jim?"

SHANNON got up. "Not a chance, Mac. What's more, you're not going to do it either."

Mac's face clouded with anger. "Listen, if you go to the cops, so help me, I'll kill you. . . ."

"I'm not going to the cops," Shannon told him.

"What then?" Mac Corby wanted to know.

Shannon said, "This!" and he aimed a punch at Mac's chin. It connected beautifully because Mac was unprepared. He slid sideways off his chair, fell on the floor and stayed there. Shannon knelt beside him. Mac

was out cold and he'd stay that way for a while.

Shannon seized his hat and coat. Then he hesitated a moment. Perhaps if he called the jewelers and told them Mac had discovered this tunnel, but had nothing to do with it himself, he might get away with it. The firm of Inness and Anderson ought to be so grateful that they wouldn't ask too many questions. Shannon picked up the phone book and found the number of Edward Inness.

He dialed it, heard the phone ring and ring, but there was no answer. Then he tried George Anderson's phone and got a quick reply.

Shannon said, "Look, Mr. Anderson, there's going to be an attempt to blow your safe, maybe tonight. Meet me in front of your store as fast as you can get there and I'll explain."

"I'll be there," Anderson said dourly. "But, I warn you, this better not be any joke."

Shannon examined Mac Corby again. He was sleeping like a baby. He left him on the floor, hurried out of the house and got into his old car parked in front. He pulled away from the curb fast, headed across town and really gave it the gun.

His mind was too intent on his problems. What he must tell Anderson, and how he could square himself with Mac. That would be very difficult. Shannon never saw the police car as it pulled out of a side street. Not until he was too close to stop and the police driver had started his siren in order to arouse Shannon.

There was a terrific crash. Shannon was thrown forward and his forehead hit the windshield. There was a ghastly pressure against his ribs and a moment later he blacked out.

CHAPTER II

THE TWELVE UNBELIEVERS

HOURS later Jim Shannon had recovered consciousness in the hospital and was able to have a visitor. The man who came in was gray haired, slim and easy going.

"I'm Lieutenant Mike Branden," he said. "Do you feel like talking?"

Shannon tried to wriggle into a sitting position, but he didn't quite make it. He said, "Look, about the accident. It was my fault, but I was in a hurry to—to—"

Branden rolled a cold cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. "I'm not interested in the accident, Mr. Shannon. I'm not from any traffic detail. I'm a homicide detective."

"Homicide?" Shannon's eyes grew wide. "Did I kill any cops?"

"No, the cops weren't hurt. But a man named George Anderson was. He was shot to death—murdered!"

Shannon did sit upright this time, despite the swimming sensation in his head. "Murdered! Lieutenant, what happened? I was going to meet Anderson. That's why I was in such a hurry."

"Begin at the beginning," Branden urged.

Shannon told him the whole story. There was no use keeping anything back now, even if Mac Corby was sent to jail for planning the burglary.

"So I slugged him," he concluded. "Mac always had a glass jaw and when he got knocked out, he usually stayed that way for an hour."

Branden said, "The jewelry store safe was blown open and Anderson killed at twelve-forty. At that time you were being taken to the hospital so you're cleared. But we found Mac Corby wandering about near his home. You see, we discovered the tunnel and went looking for him."

Shannon did some rapid figuring. "It happened at twelve-forty. I knocked Mac out around twelve-thirty. Maybe even a little

later than that. I called Anderson right afterwards. He can—no. No, he can't very well back up my story, can he?"

"Not with two forty-fives in his skull, he can't," Branden said. "And you might as well know—the slugs came from a gun with Mac's prints on it and which he identified as a gun he'd brought back from the war."

"But he couldn't have killed that jeweler," Shannon protested. "He was unconscious at twelve-thirty. It wasn't possible for him to have gone from my house to the jewelry store in ten minutes. He's innocent."

Branden sighed deeply. "If it wasn't for all the evidence we've got, I'd be inclined to believe you. Now it begins to look as if you two were in cahoots. Something went wrong with your plans when you smacked the police car and Mac just carried on."

"I tell you that's wrong," Shannon said excitedly. "It has to be wrong. I can prove it."

"By only your story?" Branden shook his head slowly. "It won't work. I'll admit that Mac told the same story, but it sounds cooked up. And then, Mac saved your life. He told us that. So you'd try to save his, though I can't see how you could have cooked up the alibi yarn. Anyway, it's up to a jury now. Mac is going to be tried for first degree murder."

Shannon was the principal witness for the defense three months later and even as he told his story, he realized that nobody believed him. After the District Attorney got through pulling it to pieces, Shannon was positive.

The jury was out two hours. Twelve men who refused to believe a word he'd said. They obviously sympathized with Jim, knowing he owed his life to Mac, but they had no sympathy for Mac. Shannon sat there listening to the sentence being pronounced and feeling cold as ice inside. They whisked

Mac Corby away without letting Shannon talk to him.

The courtroom was about cleared, but Shannon just sat there, stunned, even though he had known the outcome. Someone dropped into the seat beside him.

Lieutenant Branden said, "I'm sorry, Jim. I know how you must feel."

SHANNON took a long breath. "Lieutenant, Mac is innocent. I know that. I'm not guessing—I'm positive. This is one time the law convicted an innocent man and if somebody doesn't do something about it, they'll execute an innocent man."

"You're the only one who thinks so, Jim. Look at the evidence. The murder gun was Mac's. We traced the T.N.T. by its bottle—and Mac bought it. The tunnel led from his store to the jewelry shop. His prints were on the gun and he had prepared the robbery. He even admitted that."

"Okay," Shannon said. "But how come Anderson was at the store at twelve-forty in the morning? Answer that one!"

"I can't, Jim. It's the one thing I can't account for, unless part of your story was true and you had called him to go to the store. But you said you hit Mac and knocked him out. There were no marks on him."

"Look at me, Lieutenant," Shannon begged. "I'm a little guy. I don't pack a wallop, but it didn't take much to knock Mac out. I saw it happen two or three times when we were in the army. I knew how he'd fall."

Branden shrugged and arose. "I'm not the jury, Jim. I wish there was something I could do. Especially as I don't share the belief some folks have, that you were in on the scheme, but you had a lucky accident on your way there. I don't know. There were three of you—close pals. Mac is going to fry for murder. Phil Randall was killed running from the cops after he'd stolen a lot of money. You're the only one left."

Shannon spoke very slowly. "Lieutenant, you're a good guy and a square cop, but don't say that Phil was a crook. I'm sure Mac didn't kill Anderson, but I'm even surer that Phil didn't steal that money."

"All right," Branden said. "I like people who stick by their friends. If there's anything I can do, just call on me, Jim."

"There'll be a favor," Shannon said grimly. "I'll call on you to arrest the man who killed Anderson and looted that jewelry store. Because even if everybody else in the world considers this a closed case, I know it isn't. Because I know Mac couldn't have killed Anderson and I'm going to prove it."

Shannon first went to check on his gas station, which he'd turned over to an employee to run. Things were okay so he proceeded to Mac Corby's old tombstone cutting place. There, in a row, he looked at the check cashing place which Phil Randall had managed. Then there was Mac's place and finally the jewelry store of Inness and Anderson. It looked like a hoodoo neighborhood to him. Death had visited two of those places—violently.

Shannon walked into the jewelry store. Edward Inness came forward with a welcoming smile which faded the moment he recognized Shannon.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Look," Shannon said, "what's the use getting sore at me? I told the truth at that trial and I tried to do you and Anderson a favor by telling you the place was going to be burglarized. Now I want to try and prove it happened just as I say it did."

"You're a liar," Inness said. "Oh, I don't blame you for trying to help Corby, seeing he saved your neck once. But he killed the best friend I ever had. I've no sympathy for him and precious little for you. Now what do you want?"

"Would you show me the spot where Mac broke through your tile floor from the tunnel?"

"I don't know why I should, but if it'll get rid of you, come on."

Inness walked briskly to a spot almost in front of the big vault, now supplied with a new door. He pointed at the floor.

Shannon bent and studied the tile. It looked as if it had been recently reset. He straightened, glanced at the safe and then took a notebook and a metal pencil from his pocket. He began making a sketch of the premises.

"What are you up to?" Inness shouted in his ear.

ENGROSSED though Shannon was in what he was doing, the loud voice startled him. As he swung around, the pencil dropped out of his hand and hit the tile. It gave a hollow ring. He picked up the pencil, stepped a few feet to the right and dropped it deliberately. This time there was no hollow sound.

Inness said, "The tunnel is still open. It's hollow under those tiles, but they're supported underneath. They wouldn't seal up the tunnel until after the trial."

"I'll have it sealed," Shannon said. "Mac turned his keys over to me. Look, Mr. Inness, where were you the night it happened? I telephoned your home."

"You heard me tell the jury that I sleep with a phone on a night table beside my bed. It didn't ring, because you never called me. Now get out of here."

"I'm going, Mr. Inness. I don't like your company any more than you like mine. Though what you're beefing about I don't know. The jewelry may not have been found, but you were insured."

Inness stuck his skinny face close to Shannon's and there was hatred burning in his eyes. "You were in on the plan. Mac pulled the trigger, but you knew what was going to happen so you're as guilty as he is. You helped kill my partner. Now get out, before I kill you—because that's what I feel

like doing.”

Shannon didn't doubt it. He got out as fast as he decently could and still retain some of his dignity. He went next door and let himself into Mac's place. The tombstones added a macabre touch which seemed to go perfectly with the whole picture.

Shannon went down cellar, turned on the lights and saw the opening of the cave. He wriggled into it and shuddered. Back in the cellar he noticed how Mac had cleverly removed a section of wall in one large chunk so that it could be put back and no trace of the exit ever noticed. There wasn't even a sign of the two or three tons of dirt which Mac must have excavated.

Shannon had some desk work to do in conjunction with Mac's business affairs and by the time he finished taking care of this, it was dark. He locked up the place and went to where his car was parked in a private parking lot behind the building.

He drove away slowly, immersed in thought. He needed someone to talk to; someone who would listen. Shannon headed for Doris Randall's house near the outskirts of town.

When he was almost there, he became aware of headlights in his rear view mirror. They always stayed exactly the same distance behind. He shrugged, calling himself a fool. Who'd want to follow him?

Yet the car persisted and the idea became stronger until the headlights suddenly pulled out, a horn sounded and the car started to pass. It was a bright yellow taxicab. Any suspicion which Shannon had, now vanished and he settled back comfortably.

There were two explosions, two streaks of red flame. Shannon didn't hear any bullets smack, but he knew when someone was shooting at him. The driver of the car had taken a pair of pot shots and now the cab was spurting to get away.

Shannon stepped on it. Gun or no gun, he meant to find out who was trying to kill him,

and why. His old sedan couldn't hope to overtake the taxi, but it had enough power so that it would not get too far ahead. Either that or the cab was actually slowed down some from its previous top speed.

Soon, Shannon was quite certain the driver wasn't giving that cab its full power. They reached the mountains edging the city and Shannon's old job was poor on hills. The sleek cab should have gotten away from him there, but it didn't.

THEY topped the ridge and started the long, winding descent. Now Shannon thought he saw his chance. Any car, no matter how old, can make time downhill. His foot pushed the gas pedal hard and the sedan began to travel faster. As gravity took over, the speedometer began climbing fast. The taxi driver never let him get too close until they were a third of the way down. Then it seemed to be having trouble and weaved a little.

Shannon thought he saw his chance. He pulled to the left of the road. If necessary he meant to stop the cab by crashing it. He was doing sixty-five now, but that was slow compared to what he'd be doing in about one minute.

The distance closed for about half a mile and then the taxi spurted forward just as he turned a sharp bend. Shannon's foot tensed to grow heavier on the gas, but he hesitated. Just the merest fraction of a second, yet it saved his life.

The cab had been playing tag too long. There was a reason behind it. Why should the driver let him get that close—and then spurt away? The curve loomed up. Shannon started slamming on the brakes, but something told him not to. Instead he eased them so that by the time he was halfway around the bend, he had slowed up somewhat.

When the brake rods broke, he wasn't traveling at breakneck speed. Yet there was

no chance of going on without brakes. As he felt the brake pedal die under his foot, he turned the wheel slowly. The car went onto the soft shoulders, across them and headed toward an abyss which ran all along the sides of this road.

But there were trees and brush blocking the way to the edge of the cliff. Shannon deliberately steered for one tree and side-swiped it. The impact turned the car half around. Heavy brush caught at it. The car rocked crazily but stayed on all tires by some miracle. Shannon opened the door to jump, but it wasn't necessary. He was securely caught in the brush.

He mopped his face and neck. They were soaking wet. He tried to light a cigarette, but his hand couldn't hold the match steady enough until some moments had passed. Then he sat smoking and wondering about it.

The driver of that cab had taken two shots at him, purposely missed, and lured him into a chase. Somebody had monkeyed with the brakes.

He made sure of it with the aid of a flashlight. It was no accident. But who, he asked himself, had a reason for murdering him? Who—except the real burglar who had taken Mac Corby's place?

There was quiet, if grim, satisfaction in Shannon's heart as he extricated the car, kept in second gear, and turned back toward town.

He had somebody worried.

CHAPTER III

SECOND ATTEMPT

DORIS served him coffee, hot and strong, and it made him feel better. She was a little slip of a girl, but pretty as a Dresden doll. And she liked Shannon. He knew it, but he also knew that she needed time. Phil had been dead only a few months.

She sat down across the kitchen table

from him, "But why would anyone want to kill you, Jim?"

"Because that someone is afraid I'll prove Mac is innocent. And I will, Doris. I won't stop no matter what they try against me next."

She shook her head slowly from side to side. "Jim, you tried to prove Phil's innocence too. But in everyone's eyes except yours and mine, Phil is guilty. Don't set your hopes too high with Mac."

"I'm clearing him," Shannon said firmly. "I know he's not guilty. Now hold it—I also know Phil didn't steal that money and some day we'll prove that too."

"I'm afraid not, Jim," she said quietly. "You see, I've been hoping that some of the money they say Phil stole would turn up. They told me he had it in a suitcase when he ran away and that it must have fallen out of the car after he plunged into the river. They say it was taken by the current and may never be found. But if some of that money showed up now, then that would prove Phil hadn't taken it."

"I know," Shannon said gravely. "I've been hoping the same thing. More than half the dough was fresh from the bank, in its original wrappers and the serial numbers are on file. But it hasn't turned up. Look—the night Phil went off in his car, just what happened?"

"I've told you a dozen times, Jim. He got a phone call, just before dinner. I was busy in the kitchen and I don't know who called, but Phil yelled in that he'd be back soon. I heard him drive away and—and he never came back. Then the police came looking for him. Later they told me he'd been spotted, chased and he—drove through the bridge railing."

"Phil's case is so much like Mac's," Shannon mused. "Everything pointed to Mac and everything points to Phil. He was the only person who knew the combination of the safe, and it was opened by the

combination. Circumstantial evidence in both cases—but the strong kind that convicts.”

Doris said, “Jim, forget Phil for awhile. Save Mac, if he is innocent. After all, Phil can’t come back, but Mac is still alive.”

“Doris,” Shannon said with a frown, “after Phil was—well, after it was over, the police questioned Mac for days. Do you think he knows anything about it?”

“Why should he?” Doris asked. “They picked on Mac because his place is next door to where Phil worked, I guess.”

Shannon nodded. “I suppose that’s it. But I just got wondering if there is any connection between the two affairs. Now Mac was framed. I know it. So what if he does know something about Phil but doesn’t realize it. You know, he may have seen something, heard something and attached no significance to it.”

Doris’ eyes suddenly lighted up. “And Mac was framed for this murder to get rid of him before he realizes that he knows the truth about Phil. Oh, Jim, it might be. It just might be.”

“Let’s not get up any hopes,” Shannon warned. “It’s a long time before they execute Mac. We can’t waste any of it, but we don’t have to rush and miss what we’re after, either. I’m going home and try to think this all out. See you tomorrow, maybe?”

“Any time, Jim,” she said. “You know that.”

He drove home in gear because of his lack of brakes. In the morning he meant to repair them. He spent four solid hours trying to think this out, but there seemed to be no answer.

Finally he yawned and decided that he might do better with a rested brain. He put out the lights, got into pajamas and went to brush his teeth. He idly reached for the brush in its rack, spread paste on it and half raised the brush to his mouth.

Then he hesitated. That brush had been a bright red. Some sort of plastic. And it was a new brush, only used once or twice. This morning it had been its familiar red color but now, all around the part which sealed the bristles, it was a dull yellow as if the color had been bleached out of it.

HE TURNED the brush upside down and sniffed of the back. There was a dull, musty odor to it. Shannon moistened his finger, touched it to the back of the brush and then gingerly tasted of the colorless stuff which adhered to his finger. It had a pungent taste and sent crackles of acid-like pain through the membranes of his mouth.

That brush was covered with poison. If the chemical hadn’t destroyed the color, he might have plunged it into his mouth. The toothpaste might have concealed the foreign taste and smell and he’d be dead.

Shannon broke out in a cold sweat. This time he never hesitated. He ran to the front of the house, called Police Headquarters and made them promise to wake Lieutenant Branden up and send him out at once.

Branden listened to his story. He examined the tooth brush and carefully wrapped it up for analysis. That cold cigar was still between his teeth. But it was clamped tight now and not rolling around. Something bothered Lieutenant Branden.

“Two attempts on your life,” he mused. “The first one we can’t actually prove even though the brakes on your car were tampered with. The second one we can prove.”

“What are you going to do about it?” Shannon asked.

“I don’t know, Jim. But if I were you, I wouldn’t go poking about.”

“Can’t you see now that Mac is innocent? Lieutenant, what’s the matter with you people? Mac’s life doesn’t seem to be worth a dime. You don’t seem to care if he lives or dies.”

Branden said, "Jim, you're a nice fellow, but you've got a blind spot."

"What do you mean, blind spot? Blind to what?"

"Mac saved your life. Because he did that, you can't assume that he's no good, that he can't be a murderer. Look, Jim, a man does funny things on a battlefield. But that doesn't make him a saint in mufti. Mac had a police record before he went to war. It's not a nice record. It adds up like so many other records I've watched. It leads to murder and the chair."

Shannon slumped lower in his chair. "I can see you're not going to try and prove his innocence, Lieutenant. You or any other cop. But I know he's not guilty. I've got the facts, even if I can't prove them now. I'll poke all I like. Somebody's got to save him from that walk to the chair."

"You might wind up behind a nice big eight-ball," Branden warned.

"I can take care of myself."

"You might find out things you wish you didn't know," Branden went on.

"You're crazy, Lieutenant. Well, I'm finished. From here on, I'll handle this my own way. You and all the other cops can—"

Branden chuckled. "I've been told to go there so often it'll probably seem like a familiar place when I get there. So long, Jim. Watch yourself. I mean that!"

"A lot you care," Shannon grumbled. "But you'll change your tune when I bring in the real murderer of Anderson. And I will."

Shannon spent the rest of the night walking the floor. After what had happened, he couldn't sleep. By morning he was fog-eyed and his brain was deathly tired. He ate something for breakfast and fell asleep on the kitchen table.

When he awoke, it was afternoon. He shook himself to get rid of the cobwebs of an unsatisfactory rest, stretched to get the kinks out of his system and then got dressed. But

he had a real course of action in his mind and he went to work at once.

FIRST he visited Mrs. George Anderson, the widow of the murdered jeweler. She was willing to co-operate.

"I'd hate to have an innocent man die for the murder of my husband," she said. "I'd hate even more to have the real murderer walking around free."

"Good," Shannon said. "Somebody tried to kill me twice. The only reason for that can be because I've sworn not to stop until I prove Mac isn't guilty. So it's safe to assume that the actual guilty person is trying to rub me out."

"All right," she conceded. "I can realize that. But who is it?"

"Inness heard me swear I'd find the truth."

"Inness! My husband's partner? But I'm sure—"

"Look, Mrs. Anderson, Inness browbeat me just a little too much. Okay, Mac planned the robbery and meant to carry it through, but he didn't. He built this tunnel until he had cleared away the foundation under the tile floor of the store. It was still cleared away when I was in there yesterday and I dropped a metal pencil on the tile. Where the tunnel was, the floor gave off a hollow ring."

"But I don't see what that has to do with it?"

"Let me go on, Mrs. Anderson. Suppose someone else dropped something on that same floor and got wondering. Suppose he found out there was a tunnel and that a burglary was scheduled. Then he decided to pull the job himself. Mac would be blamed. Everything would point to him."

"Inness rob his own store?" Mrs. Anderson exclaimed.

"Why not? The stuff was insured. That way he'd get the insurance money and have the jewels too."

“But I can’t believe. . . . Wait! Let me think! Inness bought out my husband’s share of the business right after he was killed. He paid me in cash. But I remember my husband telling me that Inness was almost broke. Still, there was the insurance money.”

“That would have gone to pay for the stock. Most of it was on consignment. Inness is a spender, isn’t he?”

“His wife is. She lives way beyond their means and Inness himself is no miser. You might be right, but—no. Oh no! He and my husband were more than partners. They were friends. Inness wouldn’t have killed George.”

“He might have,” Shannon insisted. “I telephoned Inness first and he didn’t answer the phone. Yet he says he wasn’t out that evening. I know I called him, so he must be lying. So I called your husband next and he said he’d go right down.”

“Yes, I can vouch for that,” Mrs. Anderson agreed. “He told me about your phone call.”

“But Inness was already at the store, setting the stage. Your husband walked in unexpectedly and knew what Inness was up to, so Inness had to kill him.”

“My,” she exclaimed, “you’re a regular detective, Mr. Shannon. Are you sure you’re really not one?”

“Listen,” Shannon said grimly, “I hate cops. I haven’t an ounce of respect left for any of them. They’d let Mac go to the chair because they’re too lazy to work and prove he isn’t guilty. Well, I’m not and I’m going to Mac’s old stone-cutting place and see if I can find anything. Inness sounds like the best bet, but I’ve got to prove it. I’ll have to get overwhelming evidence to make those cops wake up.”

“I don’t like your attitude about the police,” Mrs. Anderson said. “I think they’ve done all they can. But you’re upset because Mac is your friend so I don’t blame you. Just be careful, young man. Inness has a vicious

temper.”

“So,” Shannon said, “have I.”

He had repaired his car so he could travel rapidly to Mac’s gravestone cutting place. He had Mac’s keys and let himself in quickly. He went to the cellar and began looking. He scoured every inch of the place, but there wasn’t a thing.

Back in Mac’s untidy little office he sat down behind the desk. Mac had sworn he kept that murder gun in his office. Therefore the murderer could have found it and taken it along, just in case something happened.

Savagely Shannon jerked open the desk drawers. He didn’t know what he was really after, but he knew he was about at the end of his rope. If this place contained no clue, Mac would die.

IN THE middle drawer he discovered a **I**replevin notice. A finance company had taken back the truck they’d sold to Mac. Shannon felt sorry for the poor guy all over again. Then he noticed the date of that action. It was weeks ago.

Yet Mac had told him he used that truck to haul away the dirt from the tunnel and he hadn’t dug that all those weeks past. There was too much of a chance of discovery. Besides, once it had been dug, Mac would have been impatient to get his hands on those jewels. Shannon put a cigarette between his lips and forgot to light it.

If Mac didn’t have the truck, how had he disposed of all that dirt? Why, he told himself, that truck had been taken away from Mac even before Phil was killed. The tunnel couldn’t possibly have been left that long.

Shannon jumped to his feet. Something was awfully wrong, and not just with the Anderson murder. He hurried to the cellar door, went down the steps and started examining the walls. If the dirt from the tunnel to the jewelry store hadn’t been taken away, as Mac had said, then it must be somewhere in the cellar.

Shannon examined the further wall very carefully. The one which was opposite the office where Phil had worked. Shannon thought back rapidly. Mac's place was the only one with a cellar. It had comprised the original building and when it had been enlarged years ago, they hadn't bothered to dig cellars for either the jewelry store or the office.

Shannon began dumping big, empty crates around. Under one of them he found shovels, picks and cutting tools. He picked up one of the cutters. Its edges still had cement adhering to it.

He went to the wall, jabbed it with the chisel-like instrument. He found a section of wall, which, when chipped away, showed fresh cement beneath. But when he cut through the outer layers of other walls, the underlying cement was old and gray.

Shannon got one of the picks then and attacked that fresh wall. It gave way easily before his attacks, until he had cut out a circular section up to a point where the old wall showed through around the edges.

Behind the cutout section was dirt, not hard packed as it should have been with the years. It was loose. He began shoveling this away. His energy was too great. In his hurry, he broke the shovel. He flung aside the broken handle and went over to the packing cases to get another.

He kicked savagely at one of the cases to get it out of the way. The wood cracked and broke. Something spilled out onto the floor. Something that picked up the rays of the overhead light and turned them into millions of smaller and brighter rays.

Shannon gave a shout, pulled away more of the case and found that beneath the excelsior and debris it contained, were gems. Diamonds, rubies and pearls. There were jewel studded wrist watches. This was the loot taken from the jewelry store.

Shannon's sudden desire to cheer gave way to soberer thought and what he still had

to do. He got the shovel and returned to the wall where he resumed digging out the loose earth.

He found a tin box buried about ten feet beyond the wall. He opened it and inside, neatly stacked, were brand new bills still bound by the bank's paper sleeves. He had found more than the stolen gems. He'd discovered part of the loot which Phil Randall had been accused of making off with. The money which was supposed to be at the bottom of the river.

Shannon knew the truth then. It was a painful discovery and he had a decision to make now. A serious one. He turned, put the money-box back, shoveled earth on top of it and then headed for the stairs.

Inness, the jeweler, was halfway down them and he held a gun in his hand. Shannon backed away slowly, his arms raising as he did so.

CHAPTER IV

THE BRILLIANT LIGHT OF TRUTH

INNESS spoke in calm level tones, almost without emotion.

"I thought you'd come back here," Inness said. "I've been watching you. Sticking your nose into things that don't concern you. I know what Mrs. Anderson probably told you too when you visited her."

Shannon said, "I'm going to put my hands down. I'm not carrying a gun, but I don't intend to let a rotten murderer make me do anything I don't want to do."

"So you're calling me a murderer now," Inness smiled. "Whom did I kill? My partner? But a man has been convicted of killing him so how could I have done it?"

"You did," Shannon said. "And you hid the loot because after you killed Anderson, the stuff you stole from yourself wasn't as important as saving your own neck. If the gems were discovered, they'd be in Mac's

cellar and with all the other evidence they'd become just another strap to pin him to the chair."

"I'm going to take those gems now," Inness said. "And I'm not worried about you. Because, my nosy friend, you won't tell anyone."

"How will you explain my death then?" Shannon asked. "That's going to be a tough one."

"See the tunnel still under my shop?" Inness pointed with his eyes. "You're going into it, Shannon. When you're deep inside it, I'll kill you. Then I'll break through the floor again. I shall say that I was in my shop when you tried the same trick Mac did. You'll be a burglar. You wanted money to help pay for Mac's defense. Any reason—you even wanted to get back at me. It's enough that you'll be found dead in the act of burglarizing my store."

"You're a fool, Inness," Shannon said. "It won't work. They won't believe you."

"Get inside the tunnel," Inness barked. "Or so help me, I'll kill you where you stand and then set the stage the way I want it set." Shannon needed time. Inness meant exactly what he said. The scheme was poor, but maybe the guy was just nuts enough to think it would work. Shannon backed toward the tunnel. He reached it and there was nothing to do but step inside.

Behind him, Inness now held a flashlight. Its beam kept Shannon in full view, even swept past him. Once again he saw something glisten. It was a pint bottle, perched on a shelf hollowed out of the side of the tunnel wall. Suddenly Shannon knew what Inness actually meant to do.

Inness laughed. "That's T.N.T., Shannon. The stuff Mac had in the cellar. Yes, I knew what he was up to. You got wise when you heard the hollow sound on the tile floor. That's how I found out too. I entered Mac's place and discovered everything set up. So I decided to use the idea for myself. I

trailed him, saw him go to your home and I knew the time was right."

"And now," Shannon said, "I'm going to be blown to bits in this tunnel."

"It will be a quick death. By the time anyone gets here, I'll escape, reach my home and my wife will provide me with a good alibi. You see I am quite clever. I only needed half of the stuff, but I had no idea then how useful the remainder was going to be."

"You belong in an insane asylum," Shannon called back to him.

"Why? Because I'm clever? Shannon, the police convicted Mac of a crime he meant to do but didn't. They'll say you tried the same thing, to get back at me. They'll say you were careless and the T.N.T. exploded. Really now, you'd have been better off if you hadn't stopped your car or somehow discovered the poison I placed on your tooth brush. Because now you have to face death again and this time I won't miss."

Shannon turned. He'd given Inness too much time. There wasn't a chance of attacking now from inside the tunnel. Inness was leveling the gun, sighting it slightly above Shannon's head. He could see the killer's finger tighten on the trigger. Shannon braced himself.

There was a shot. Somehow it didn't sound as loud as he thought it would. Shannon cowered against the cave wall. Then he saw something very strange happen. First of all, no bullet whizzed by him and Inness was crumpling, as if the bullet had struck him. While Shannon watched, the killer hit the floor and stayed there. The back of his head was covered with blood.

SHANNON gave a wild shout and hurried out of the cave. Lieutenant Branden stood on the stairs, a smoking gun still in his hand.

"It's a good thing," Branden said somewhat glumly, "that Mrs. Anderson

phoned me tonight, and told about your interview with her. I figured you'd come here so I did too, just in time to see Inness unlock the front door with a key."

Shannon said, "Thanks, Lieutenant. After what I said about you—and thought about all cops in general, I didn't deserve the break. But I'm grateful anyway."

Branden knelt beside Inness and examined him quickly. "He's a goner. I aimed for the head, knowing I had to kill him instantly, or he might have blown up the place. So you found the stolen stuff, eh?"

"I found it," Shannon said. "Inness must have hidden it there."

"Inness?" Branden asked. "What makes you think it was Inness?"

"Because he said so. You must have heard him say so."

"But I didn't," Branden replied. "Jim, your friend Mac had time to hide the stuff here. We figured he might have and that's why we didn't touch—"

"You didn't what?" Shannon yelled. "You knew that stuff was there all the time and you said nothing, not even at the trial?"

"We hoped, if Mac was innocent, someone might come for the stuff. But, it's clear nobody did."

"What are you getting at, Lieutenant?"

"Me? Nothing. Not a thing, Jim. This won't clear Mac. Won't make an iota of difference. He swiped it, killed Anderson and hid the loot in his own cellar, that's all."

"And you really believe it?" Shannon demanded.

"Why not? It's all there. But tell me something. Why were you digging in that wall? It leads to the office where Phil worked, doesn't it?"

Shannon gulped. "I—was looking for those jewels. I thought maybe if Mac was guilty, he hid them, so I started tearing the place down."

"Too bad I didn't hear the confession, if there was one, Jim. You see, we analyzed the

stuff on your tooth brush and it was poison all right. Enough to kill a horse and it just so happened it was the same kind that jewelers use for certain cleaning purposes. Also, we know a taxi, like the one you described, was stolen around the time somebody tried to kill you."

"And you still believe Inness didn't pull that job and murder Anderson?"

"Well," Branden said, "maybe there's a little doubt, but the jury had none. Like Inness said Mac hid the jewels here and maybe you came to bust into the place as an act of revenge. Also, to save the hide of the guy who saved your life, you planted the poison on your own tooth brush. After all, you didn't swallow any of the stuff."

"Anything else?" Shannon asked softly.

"No. Mac had every chance. Did you notice the lawyer he had? One of the most expensive in the business. Know what he charged Mac? Twelve grand. Know something else? Mac paid him—in cash. Told him where the dough was in a safe deposit vault."

"I see," Shannon said even more softly. "At least, I think I do."

"Too bad your other pal, Phil, didn't have that kind of dough and lived. He might have cleared himself. Come to think of it, about twelve or thirteen grand of the dough Phil is supposed to have stolen, was in untraceable bills. The others are all on file."

"What if they turned up?" Shannon asked.

"The guy who passed it would find himself in an awful hot spot, Jim. They'd clear Phil, of course. Matter of fact, we never were too sure he did it. According to his wife's story he received a phone call and went right out. It must have been a friendly call because he said nothing to his wife. There was an alarm out for him right after that and when his car was spotted, our boys tried to make him stop. He wouldn't. Funny thing though—they never saw him. Never

saw who was behind the wheel.”

“He wasn’t behind the wheel, Lieutenant,” Shannon said.

THE police lieutenant nodded. “Odd, but I got the same idea. Just before the crash, the car got out of sight of the boys who were following it. I looked the scene over and I found a spot where it seemed like somebody had jumped. A big guy, with big feet. He could have had Phil in the car, knocked cold, and sent Phil and the car into the river.”

“We can’t prove it though,” Shannon said.

“No—we can’t. We had Mac in for questioning on that one. You see, if Phil didn’t do it, somebody who had a chance to catch the combination of the safe must have pulled it. Mac was always hanging around. We questioned him for days. Didn’t he ever tell you?”

“Uh-uh,” Shannon said. “He could have worked the same trick that was used in robbing the jewelry store.”

“You know what happened,” Branden said grimly. “Exactly what happened.”

Shannon hesitated a moment. “I—suppose I do.”

“How’s that blind spot now, Jim?”

“It’s gone. There’s a dazzling white light instead.”

“Good. I’m mighty glad. Now suppose you tell me exactly what you found—or know.”

Shannon nodded. “I don’t have to hold back any more, Lieutenant. I don’t owe Mac a thing. But he didn’t kill the jeweler. It happened this way. Mac did get the combination to the safe in Phil’s office. He built a tunnel under that office, robbed the safe and then he made it look like an inside job.”

“You can add to that,” Branden said, “the fact that he did a very good job of it too.”

Shannon went on as if he hadn’t been

interrupted. “Mac then telephoned Phil and got him to meet him in a hurry. Then he—he killed Phil. He put the body in Phil’s car and drove around until the car was spotted. There was an alarm out for it.”

“Yes,” Branden said. “That’s the way it must have happened.”

“He let a police car chase him, got out of sight of the cops and turned the car so it would crash through the bridge rail. Mac jumped—and took the money with him.”

“Can you prove it?” Branden asked. “That’s what bothers me.”

“I found the money in this cellar,” Shannon said. “Mac was afraid to spend the new bills, though he used the older ones to pay for his defense.”

“Turn those bills over to me,” Branden said, “and you’ll absolve Phil.”

“I’m going to, Lieutenant. So Mac got away with murder but that wasn’t enough. A trick that worked once should work again. When he dug the tunnel under Phil’s office, he had to carry the dirt out and he did, using a truck he owned. He even bragged about using that truck to me. Only he said he used it to remove the dirt he dug from the tunnel under the jewelry store. When I found out the truck had been taken away from him before he started digging the second tunnel, I knew he was lying.”

“So there were two tunnels—one for each crime,” Branden said. “And the dirt from the second was used to fill in the tunnel under Phil’s office.”

“That’s it,” Shannon said. “You heard Inness tell what happened after that. He found the tunnel, set up the crime for his own profit and arranged for Mac to be blamed. Mac didn’t kill Anderson, whether you heard Inness’ confession or not.”

BRANDEN sighed deeply. “Maybe being a cop so long has made me too tough. I knew Mac had killed Phil though I couldn’t prove it. So I didn’t much care if he died an

innocent man—for the murder of Anderson which he didn't do. But I was wrong. I forgot that if Mac did die for that crime, the real murderer of Anderson would be free. Well, I think we can convict Mac now of murdering Phil."

"That's all I want," Shannon said. "To prove Phil's innocence. And, in a more minor view, to show I wasn't lying when I alibied Mac."

"You've done it," Branden said quietly.

"Then why did you tell me you didn't hear Inness confess? Why did you say nothing happened to prove Mac innocent?"

"All right," Branden said, "I did hear Inness confess and I know just how it all happened too. Inness discovered the tunnel. He started following Mac around and when he knew Mac was ready to pull the job, Inness intended to pull it first. But when you knocked Mac out, Inness realized his chance had come. So he hurried to the jewelry shop, broke into the tunnel, blew the vault and hid

the gems in Mac's cellar. But you had phoned Anderson and he arrived in time to see what was going on so Inness killed him."

"Now you admit it," Shannon exhaled slowly. "Why didn't you admit it before? I almost had heart failure thinking that Phil wasn't going to be absolved and Mac would die for a crime Inness committed."

"And I'd have let him die just that way." Branden shrugged. "I didn't know how you felt about things, Jim. Mac saved your life—you could have saved his by destroying the money he took from Phil's safe. It was that blind spot again. I couldn't see much difference in who Mac died for killing, Phil or Anderson, so long as he murdered one of them."

"It makes all the difference in the world," Shannon said.

"Sure it does," Branden admitted. "But I told you I've been in this business too long. I had a blind spot too—bigger than yours."