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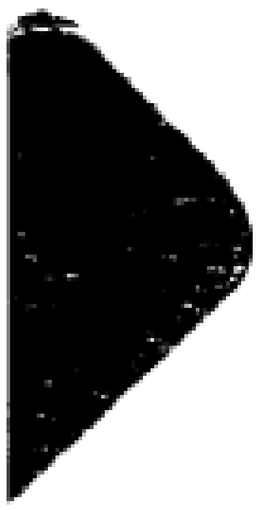

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SIX SECONDS OF DARKNESS

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SIX SECONDS OF DARKNESS

BY

OCTAVUS ROY COHEN

GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

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TO MY FRIEND
ROBERT H. DAVIS

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SIX SECONDS OF DARKNESS

CHAPTER I

THE old-timer at the telephone board made a casual entry on the report sheet spread before him, relighted his offensively fragrant pipe, and swung his swivel chair around idly.

"That was O'Rafferty on nine," he reported. "All's quiet."

Desk Sergeant Larry O'Brien grinned cheerfully through the haze of rancid smoke.

"As I was afther sayin'," he remarked, "ye cannot always sometimes tell. 'Tis these clear and aisy nights which beget action for us poor coppers. Ye wouldn't be afther thinkin' by the quietude which has gripped us hereabouts these past sivin

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days that there's a bombshell sizzlin' under headquarters waitin' to be busted."

The other answered sagely:

"That all depends on how much you've been talking to reporters, Larry. They've been asking so many questions and taking so many notes that I'm afraid to say me name's Farris. They're wise that something's up."

"Bad cess to 'em—the whole beloved lot. There's Stinson of the *News*—him that's so thin he could sit on a dime an' ye'd shtill be able to read 'In God We Trust'—he wanted to know was *I* in on the graft?"

"And you told him——"

"I'm afther givin' nothin' away, me bhye. I merely raymarked that I'm no special pals with Barret Rollins, an' that Police Commissioner Clement Hall ap-p'inted me personally."

Farris lowered his voice discreetly and hitched his chair confidentially closer.

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"They're wise, ain't they? The whole crowd?"

"To pwhat?"

"That Rollins is in the middle of the fireworks? That Hamilton's been trying to get him ever since Hall became interested in this Civic Reform League? I don't see," he complained, "why they always start in on the police when they decide a city needs cleanin' up?"

"Logic, most likely. And as for Robbins, he don't be afther lovin' Commissioner Hall nor Mister Edward J. Hamilton anny more than they're lovin' him; which is considerable less than none at all. An' he's a good detictive, too; he's keen, an' he's got a good head on a pair of hefty shoulders. But, Al, me bhye, Oi'm thinkin' Oi'd rather be a disk sergeant right this minute than Mister Barret Rollins, chief av detictives. An'—well, speakin' av angels—or divils——"

The street door swung back and a man

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of medium height briefly acknowledged the salute of the gray-haired doorman. The newcomer swung across to the desk and nodded a curt greeting.

"O'Brien," he said, "how goes it?"

"So-so, chief. How's the bhye?"

"Well enough. Anything new tonight?"

"Everything's dead. Nothing stirring anywhere except a stiff was drug out av the river an' carried to Carson's undertaking joint. What's new with you?"

"Nothing, nothing at all. I'll be going into the office yonder for a smoke and a bit of a snooze. If you want me——" He waved his hand airily.

O'Brien's eyes followed the man with interest as he walked across the room toward the little door which opened into his private office. Barrett Rollins radiated strength and physical ability in every well-knit line of his stocky figure. His unusual breadth and depth of chest conveyed

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an impression of lack of height to which a tape measure easily gave the lie. Nor was his face that of the average plain-clothes man; the eyes were a bit too close set, perhaps, but they were level eyes—eyes blessed with the rare faculty of penetration. The brain behind those eyes was alert and ruthless.

He had worked himself to his present position as chief of the plain-clothes force by dint of sheer ability. A little political pull may have helped here and there, but that assistance had been inconsiderable. He was an efficient man, greatest testimony to which was given by the unanimous praise of his worst enemies—who, by the way, numbered legion. He was a martinet; unbending, inexorable, heartless. His third degree was a classic.

Larry O'Brien chuckled softly as he chewed the stub of a dilapidated cigar.

"And to think of *him*," he remarked, "bein' squeezed between th' thumb an'

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forefinger of a little, undersized runt of a reformer like Edward Hamilton. Hamilton's said he's ready to turn things loose an' tear 'em up, an' he never makes a statement unless——"

The telephone on his desk jangled sharply. Farris groaned audibly as he lifted himself from the depths of his swivel chair and the sergeant motioned him back to rest.

"Oi'll be afther answerin' it mesilf," he said, and then, lifting the receiver: "P'lice headquarters."

From the other end of the wire came the curt, incisive tones of Police Commissioner Clement Hall, the real czar of the department under the city's new form of government.

"Sergeant O'Brien?"

"Yis, sor. Misther Hall, isn't it?"

"Yes. Is Rollins there?"

"Yis, sor."

"Tell him to take two of his best men,

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Hawkins and Cartwright, if they're there, and hustle to the home of Edward J. Hamilton in Chief Rariden's automobile."

"The chief's auto ain't here, sor."

"A taxicab, then," came the impatient snap. "Hurry! That's the thing I'm after."

"And whin they get there, sor?"

The commissioner's usually placid voice quivered with excitement:

"Hamilton has been murdered!"

"*Pwhatt?* Edward Hamilton?"

"Yes. Tell Rollins to drop everything else and stick on that case until he gets the man. Tell him I know nothing about it except that Mrs. Faber, Hamilton's housekeeper, just telephoned me that Hamilton had been shot. I'm coming right down to headquarters. Tell Rollins to keep in touch with me. I want speed; understand? And I want him to catch the man who did it!"

The receiver clicked on the hook, and

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Sergeant Larry O'Brien dazedly followed suit at his end. Farris had risen and was standing at the sergeant's elbow, his old eyes on fire with excitement.

"What's thát, O'Brien—what's that?"

"There's hell broke loose!" came back the sharp answer. "Orderly!"

The young policeman on duty answered the call immediately. He had heard just enough of the conversation to comprehend its import.

"Yes, sir?"

"Call Chief Rollins—quick!" Then, turning back to Farris: "Hamilton killed! Holy, sufferin' mackerel!"

Rollins came out of his private office on the jump. His little eyes were blazing, and his manner radiated the competence which had carried him to his present position of eminence on the police force.

"What's this? Hamilton killed?"

"Deader'n a doornail!" snapped

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O'Brien. "Hall wants you to take Hawkins and Cartwright and stick around there until you get the guy. Didn't tell me anything. Says the housekeeper telephoned him. He's coming down here, and is afther wantin' you to keep in touch with us. He's liable to stop in there, so ye'd better hurry."

"I'll hurry. Orderly! Hike upstairs and tell Cartwright and Hawkins to come running." He viciously bit off the end of a black cigar. "Good Lord! Hamilton killed!"

In an unbelievably short time the two plain-clothes officers presented themselves at the desk. Rollins briefly ordered them to follow. The faces of the three men detailed to the case were studies in concentration and bewilderment. Nor could they conceal the excitement which gripped them. That Edward Hamilton of all men should have been murdered at this

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particular time; Edward Hamilton, civic reformer, broker, social leader! And evidently in his own home!

Even before the door had closed behind them policemen appeared from the dormitories upstairs in various stages of disarray, begging for news. To all of them O'Brien made the same answer. He knew nothing except that Hamilton had been murdered. How or why or when he did not know. As to the place of the crime, he judged it had been at Hamilton's home. Policemen gathered in knots and discussed the case excitedly, robbing themselves of well-earned sleep that they might miss no detail of the case as it was telephoned in. One by one they went up-stairs to make themselves presentable, only to return and lounge about the grim room, speculating on the whys and wherefores.

Edward J. Hamilton occupied a unique position in the city's life. A bachelor at forty, his household had no other members

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except his ward, a girl of about nineteen years of age, and one of the city's most popular débutantes, and a Mrs. Faber, who for many years had held the position of housekeeper.

Years before he had retired from the active business life of the city, although his retirement had been more a figure of speech than an actual fact. He was financially interested in most of the city's largest enterprises; he was on the directorates of the First National Bank and of a large lumber corporation. He was socially in demand—a thorough cosmopolite, a polished gentleman, a patron of the arts; a man known for his gentleness of disposition, his lovableness of character, his unflagging devotion to duty, and, above all, for his fearlessness.

Of enemies he had many; no man of decided character is ever entirely free from enemies, but they respected him. During recent years public office had been thrust

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at him, and he had steadfastly declined. But lately he had forged to the front of the stage with the organization of the Civic Reform League—a body of leading citizens who recognized the rottenness in Denmark and had decided to weed their municipal garden. It was at head of such a body of men that one who knew Hamilton would expect to find him. And there he was!

His murder, coming at this time, was nothing less than sensational. No single event could have so shaken the city. The veriest novice of the police force felt himself on his toes, for it was public knowledge that the force had been slated to receive the first broadside from the guns of the Civic Reform League, captained by the dead man. It was up to the department to make good, to do its bit to neutralize the sentiment against it by prompt and efficient action in discovering and apprehending the culprit.

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The clock over the sergeant's desk slowly struck ten, and with the striking came the first of the calls from the policemen on the various beats about the city, giving their hourly report. At five minutes past ten a handsome limousine whirred up to the door of police headquarters. It jerked to a protesting stop with a loud screeching of brakes. Immediately the officers about the walls rose to their feet and massed together, staring toward the door.

In the stark glare of the single carbon lamp which glowed in the doorway, the figure of a woman appeared. She jumped from the driver's seat of the big car, gathered her skirts about her, and half walked, half ran, across the sidewalk and into the police station.

She entered the room and paused in uncertainty. Larry O'Brien, rising to his feet, appraised her swiftly with his keen Irish eyes.

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He saw a girl of about nineteen years of age, a girl with rose-red cheeks and now-pallid lips, flashing black eyes and raven hair. She was of medium height, slender, and, even in the tempest of emotion by which she was plainly gripped, wonderfully graceful. Her bosom rose and fell unevenly; the folds of her wrap fell back, disclosing a costly evening dress. The young policeman in the corner who had patrolled the beat on which the murder had that night occurred stifled an exclamation of surprise, but did not succeed in holding back the girl's name:

"*Miss Duval!*"

A gasp went up from the policemen. They surged closer to the desk. Sergeant O'Brien rasped them back and bowed to the girl:

"Yes, miss?"

She stared about her in bewilderment.

"This—this is police headquarters?"

"Yes, ma'am."

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"I want to see the chief."

"I'm sorry, miss, he isn't here."

It was plain that she was on the verge of hysteria. With a filmy bit of lacy handkerchief she dashed the tears from her eyes.

"I must see him, I tell you! I am Eunice Duval, Mr. Hamilton's ward. Mr. Hamilton has just been—been—killed!"

O'Brien lowered his voice, trying futilely to quiet her agitation:

"Yes, ma'am; we've just heard it. Don't you worry none, ma'am, we've got our best men out on the case, an' we'll catch the man that did it. Bad cess to th' spalpeen."

The girl stopped short and stared at him. Then she broke into a laugh; a laugh which was not good to hear—a loud laugh, gratingly harsh.

"*You'll* catch the one who did it? Who—who? You?"

O'Brien was nonplussed and not a little embarrassed. A woman in hysterics!

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"Keep a holt on yersilf, ma'am. I'm Sergint O'Brien—Larry O'Brien, at yer service, ma'am. If ye'll have a chair I'll——"

She stared at him as though transfixed. Then her hands went to her bosom, and she threw back her head once more. Peal after peal of laughter rang out; the laughter of uncontrolled hysteria. Larry O'Brien, mumbling to the saints for help, deserted his post at the desk and rounded the railing to her side. One of the patrolmen—a man of family—diagnosed the case and sent out a hurry call for a flask of whisky.

"Take it aisy, now, ma'am," soothed O'Brien. "'Tis a terrible thing, to be sure, but we'll catch the guy."

The laughter stopped as abruptly and as eerily as it had started. For a minute the girl tried to speak—but the words seemed to choke her.

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"You—you can call back the men you —you sent on the case," she said.

"Call them back? Ye're not falin' well, miss."

"No. Can't you understand what I came here for? I came here to give myself up! *I killed Mr. Hamilton!*"

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CHAPTER II

A POLICEMAN in the crowd said "Oh!" very suddenly, and another one broke in with a hoarse "Shut up!" Farris, the old-timer, mechanically took down the report of the patrolman on beat sixteen. The orderly produced a chair as though by magic, and into it Eunice Duval sank gratefully.

Not even the sensational news of Hamilton's death had created the stir in the minds of the policemen which was begotten by the confession of the girl that she was guilty of the crime. It was Larry O'Brien who first regained a semblance of his poise, and he forced a light laugh to his lips.

"Av course," he said in what he fondly believed to be a calm and matter-of-fact

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tone, "that's different. There bein' extenuatin' circumstances——"

The girl looked up quickly.

"There—there weren't," she said simply. "I—I just shot him."

"Ah, g'wan wid yez! He was thryin' to attack ye——" O'Brien was talking more to soothe her than to arrive at any definite conclusion, but she had grown suddenly calmer.

"No, he wasn't attacking—me. I—well, I've told you. I shot him, and—I've given myself up."

"But surely——"

"I'm afraid I don't want to say anything else right now. I believe there's no bail in mur—in such cases as this—and I'd rather you put me—wherever you're going to put me. I'm very tired."

Larry scratched his head in bewilderment.

"If it was silf-definse, now——"

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"I'm afraid it wasn't. And I'd prefer not to say anything else."

"If there's something we can be afther doin'—"

Another car whirred to a stop outside, and a slender man, clean-shaven and rather boyish of appearance, entered the hall. There was something aggressive in his calm blue eyes and in the carriage of his small, well-set frame. Some of the policemen, seeing him, jerked to attention and touched their hands to the visors of their caps. But O'Brien was too dazed even for that.

"Good avenin', sor!" was his greeting.

Police Commissioner Clement Hall looked up sharply. Then his eyes lighted on the pitiful figure of the girl in evening dress. Instantly his frigidity of manner dropped, and he took her hand in both of his.

"Eunice! You've given us a frightful scare. I stopped at the house, and

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they told me that you had gone somewhere in the car."

"Yes; I came here to tell——"

"They knew about it, my girl. Mrs. Faber telephoned me, and I got in touch with them. We'll go back——"

"No—I'm going to stay."

"No, you'd better come back; or, if you don't want to return to the house, you can come with me. Mrs. Hall will look after you for a few days."

"You don't understand," she explained slowly. "I'm a prisoner."

"A prisoner?" Hall forced a smile to his lips. "I'm afraid the—er—a tragedy has worked on your nerves."

"My nerves are—very good. You see, I—I——" She was shaken with a sudden paroxysm of sobs, and the police commissioner turned dazedly to Larry O'Brien.

"What is she talking about?"

"That I dunno, sor, excipt that she came in here a bit agone all shook up like ye see

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her now, sor, and says that she killed Mr. Hamilton!"

"What? Good God!" Hall stared in amazement, and then voiced the thought that was uppermost in the minds of each: "It's ridiculous!"

"I said as much, sor; but she says she shot him——"

"I shot him," said Eunice dully. "Just a little while ago. I came right down in the car to give myself up."

"Here!" Hall placed his hands paternally on her shoulders. "You are unnerved, and I'm afraid—not quite yourself. You know that you didn't shoot Mr. Hamilton."

Again she was calm, although her body was still wracked by an occasional sob.

"You mean that you think I did not—even after I say that I did? That is very foolish, Mr. Hall. I shot Mr. Hamilton."

"Come home with me——"

"Won't you understand? They are to

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hold me here. They can't let me go. There's no bail in such cases as this. I admit that I am unstrung, but I haven't lost my senses. I shot Mr. Hamilton less than an hour ago. You can tell the detectives to come back. I—I—shot him—in the dark!"

"In the dark?"

She passed a tired hand across her forehead.

"The lights went out—for about six seconds. But I'd rather not discuss it now. I wish you'd call Mr. Denson. He is my lawyer as well as Mr. Hamilton's. I'd rather tell him about it. I have a very bad headache."

Hall stared at her, pop-eyed.

"O'Brien," he snapped, "telephone Samuel R. Denson to come here immediately. Say Miss Duval is here and wants to see him. At once, you understand. And now, Eunice, let me beg you to be careful of your words. I am sure that

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there is some dreadful mistake. You couldn't have killed Mr. Hamilton——"

"I did," she repeated monotonously. "I killed him. I'd rather not talk about it now. I'm very tired. Won't you ask them to put me somewhere—by myself? Please—you don't understand—and I'd rather not discuss it now."

"Very well; I'll take you to the chief's office and try to make you comfortable. I am sure that there is a mistake somewhere. You had no motive."

"Yes, I had a motive."

"And it was?" eagerly.

"I'd rather not talk about it now, if you please. Won't you take me to that—that —room?"

He offered her his arm in his most courtly fashion, and together they crossed to the door of the chief's office. Once in there, she sank down on the couch.

"Now please go, Mr. Hall."

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"But, Eunice——"

"Go—please. I'd rather be alone."

"You must tell me."

"I will tell no one anything. Just let me know when Mr. Denson comes. I've said all I care to say—now."

Hall shook his head.

"I—I—am all up in the air. I'll wait here at the station, of course. If you need me or want me, you can press that button. And when Mr. Denson comes I'll send him in."

"Thank you," she answered in a tired little voice. "There's nothing you can do—really. Perhaps they might let Mrs. Faber stay here with me. If you'll just send her down——"

"I'll be waiting here, and of course she can come."

"I wish you wouldn't see me any more tonight, Mr. Hall. I appreciate your—your—kindness, but really I'd rather not.

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Oh, you *must* understand that I'd rather not be bothered! It was all so quick and so—so—horrible! Go, please."

The police commissioner made his way into the main room slowly. He was frowning with bewilderment. The thing was beyond his powers of comprehension. He could not understand the girl. Undoubtedly she had shot Hamilton—her reiteration was too sincere. But how? Or why? Above all—*why?*

Hall had known Hamilton intimately for twenty years. He had known Eunice since her birth. He had watched her grow through a skinny-legged girlhood to a magnificent maturity. He had been present at the guardianship proceedings after the death of her parents, when, by the will of her father, Hamilton was made the girl's guardian and trustee of her considerable estate.

That she instinctively disliked Hamilton he had realized, but a mere dis-

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like does not usually lead to tragedy. They had never gotten along well together —despite the fact that the dead man had been passionately fond of his young ward. As for her dislike for the man she had killed, that had dated back to childhood, and ripened with the passing of years. She had tolerated him because of her legal status in his household, but she made no secret of her aversion. And now—— Why, the thing was inconceivable.

The group of thoroughly excited policemen divided into little knots as Hall appeared. Then one of them came forward and touched his cap.

"Mr. Carroll is here, sir. He says you telephoned him."

"Yes. Show him into the office of the chief of detectives."

Glad that he had something definite to do, Hall made his way to the room of the chief of detectives, after first instructing O'Brien to do nothing except by his orders.

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Once in the room, he telephoned to Mrs. Faber, housekeeper for the dead man, and requested that she come to police headquarters at once. Then he waited for David Carroll. Clement Hall had great faith in Carroll, but he knew that the man faced a difficult assignment, an unusual task—that of plumbing the depths of the mad impulse which must have prompted Eunice Duval to the shooting of her guardian.

The door opened and Carroll entered, entered so silently that for a moment Hall was not fully conscious of his presence. The police commissioner laughed shortly.

"If I didn't know you better, Carroll, I'd say that that was a pose of yours—that damnable pussy-footed way you have of getting about. I don't wonder they call you Silent Carroll. Sit down."

The detective obeyed. Slumped down in the easy-chair by the side of the chief's desk, he looked anything other than a fa-

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mous detective. His pink-cheeked, boyish face gave the lie to the actuality of his thirty-eight years, his narrow shoulders gave no hint of the wiry strength they possessed, his baby blue eyes were partly veiled by silky lashes. David Carroll would have passed for anything anywhere save a detective. He was immaculately dressed in the latest tight-fitting clothes, his shoes were narrow and pointed, he carried a light cane and wore his hair pompadoured.

Yet David Carroll was known in six States as one of the cleverest of private detectives. His inoffensive appearance, which had proved a handicap to confidence at the outset of his career, was not his greatest asset. He had a way of insinuating himself into one's consciousness without saying a word or making a physical motion. One could easily fancy him a college senior, or a cub of a lawyer; but a detective, never.

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Immediately on hearing of Hamilton's murder, Hall had telephoned Carroll. The men had worked together in the past, and Carroll's assistance had been enlisted by the Civic Reform League during the past few months for the purpose of collecting data against certain members of the police force and the city-hall officials. For that reason, if for no other, the man was intensely unpopular at headquarters; yet he carried himself with an attitude of confidence which begot respect even where it inspired fear. Hall leaned forward and launched into his story; the news of Hamilton's killing, the telephoning to the police department, and the assignment of Rollins to cover the case; then the startling confession of Eunice Duval. Finally he finished.

"I had intended putting you in charge of the case over Rollins' head," he said, "but of course Miss Duval's confession alters matters. I'll have to engage you pri-

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vately to collect evidence which will result in her acquittal at the inevitable trial. You have met her yourself, and you know it is absurd to think that she would have killed Hamilton without good and sufficient motive—though what that motive could have been, God only knows. The man was my friend, and, while he was the victim of a terrific temper and strong passions, he was a gentleman, and I cannot imagine him giving cause for such a thing —especially to Eunice Duval."

Carroll was not given to prodigality of words. His questions came slowly, drawlingly:

"Why 'especially Eunice Duval'?"

"Because——" Hall flushed. "The man was a bachelor, you know. And I fancy that he was very much in love with Eunice. Her father had been his best friend—it had been one of those rare friendships which did not founder when both men fell in love with the same

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woman. Duval won her, and it seemed that the affair cemented their affection. Eunice is a replica of her mother, but Hamilton, poor fellow, never felt toward her as a father toward a daughter, although he tried to make her think so. It is another case of—well—he fell in love with the reincarnation of the mother and his best friend."

"She didn't like him?"

"No. Instinct probably. She must have guessed that he loved her—as a lover loves, and not as a father. She barely tolerated him. He has spoken to me of the matter many times. It worried him. There was no outspoken dislike, but her attitude has always been such that he has been forced to remain constantly on his best behaviour in her presence. Can't you understand the utter absurdity of her plea that she killed him? There is a mistake, there *must* be!"

"Hmm!" Carroll thrummed idly on

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the arm of his chair. "I'd suggest that you put me in charge of the case."

"Over Rollins?"

"Over Rollins or not at all."

"But I'm more interested in freeing Miss Duval."

"You're convinced that the truth will clear her, are you not?"

"Yes."

"Then let me discover the truth."

"You have a theory?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to permit me to remain silent. I do not care to voice unsubstantiated opinions. I know nothing of the case."

"But surely you can tell me——"

"Nothing!"

The eyes of the two men met; Hall's black and penetrating, Carroll's boyishly blue and almost stony in their blankness. Hall shrugged resignedly.

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"It's a go. You're in charge. I'll notify the chief of police as soon as he gets back to the city—I've wired for him—and I'll tell Barrett Rollins personally. Which reminds me that I'd better telephone him to come in. There's no use to have him continue nosing about Hamilton's home. The coroner's probably there by this time, and I'd better go there myself. Mrs. Faber is leaving to come down here."

Carroll rose languidly.

"Think I'll go with you. You say Miss Duval doesn't wish to make a statement now?"

"So she says. I've telephoned for Mr. Denson, her lawyer. Probably after she sees him she'll be willing to give us details regarding the shooting. Until then—you know, old man, these things are the basis of your profession, but the thing has hit me all of a heap. And, funny as it sounds, I'm not nearly so shocked by the death of my friend as I am by the confession of his

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ward. Of course you can't appreciate——"

"I believe I can," smiled Carroll. "I'm human, you see—quite human."

"Yes," slowly, "*sometimes* I believe you are. At other times I am not quite sure that you are not a fish."

The men walked into the main hall to receive the report of Sergeant Larry O'Brien that Mrs. Faber had arrived and had taken charge of Eunice in the private office of the chief. In response to Hall's query, via a patrolman, as to whether she cared to see him, Eunice sent word that she would have no statement to make until after she had seen Mr. Denson, except that she repeated the statement that she had killed Hamilton.

Hall shrugged and turned to Carroll.

"You see, she is very insistent."

"Yes," returned Carroll significantly, "very!"

"And now," continued the commis-

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sioner, "to telephone Rollins. Hello! What's this?"

"This" was a narrow-shouldered, sunken-chested, rather wild-eyed old man who slouched into headquarters from the street. His watery eyes blinked in the glare of the brilliant light, and he eyed the crowd of uniformed men dazedly. From Sergeant O'Brien came a muttered:

"The' owld geezer looks half cracked."

The old man, apparently upward of sixty years of age, appeared bewildered. He shifted uncertainly from one foot to the other, undecided as to what to do next. Then he timidly inquired for the chief of police.

"Not in the city," answered one of the policemen. "What do you want?"

"Who—who is in charge here?" faltered the old fellow.

The policeman designated Commissioner Hall, and immediately the newcomer turned toward him. His weak eyes

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roved here and there about the room, apparently unable to come to rest for any time on any definite object. Hall turned away quickly.

"Take charge of him, O'Brien. I haven't time to waste with——"

"I want to see you, sir," said the little fellow. "My name is Badger, Frederick Badger."

Hall's subconscious mind vaguely recalled that the name was not unfamiliar. Frederick Badger. Badger? Where had he heard the name before?

He turned to the old man and touched him gently on the shoulder.

"I'm the police commissioner. You wanted to see me privately?"

"Yes, sir; if you're in charge here."

"I am. Come this way. Come along, Carroll."

He led the way to the policemen's rest room, Badger following him timidly, Carroll bringing up the rear. Hall closed the

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door carefully and faced the little fellow.

"What is it you wish?"

Badger cleared his throat; he was very ill at ease.

"I guess you've heard my name from Mr. Hamilton, sir; haven't you?"

Hamilton! Why, of course. Hamilton had spoken of some one named Badger. Hall scrutinized the man with interest. Why had he mentioned Hamilton, of all people?

"Well——" started Hall somewhat brusquely, and then, at sight of the man's pitiful dejection, he softened his tone considerably. "What can I do for you?"

By way of answer, the queer little fellow dived down into a capacious pocket of his frayed summer coat. And then Hall started back with an exclamation of surprise, for from its depths Frederick Badger produced an ugly revolver. Quite calmly he extended it to Hall.

"That's it, sir."

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"That's—that's—what?"

"The revolver, sir. The one I used."

"Used for what?" Hall dimly realized that the little old man was driving at something in connection with the Hamilton killing.

"Didn't you know that Mr. Hamilton had been killed?" he inquired anxiously, as though surprised that the police department should have so long remained in ignorance of an important occurrence.

"Yes, yes—we know that Mr. Hamilton is dead. But what have you and this gun to do with it."

The answer of Mr. Frederick Badger was quite naïve.

"You see," he explained slowly, "*that* is the revolver I used when I killed him!" . .

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CHAPTER III

FOR a few seconds Hall was stunned by the import of the words of the simple little man. Then he was conscious of an insane desire to laugh aloud. He glanced at David Carroll, and saw the little detective staring keenly from his fishy eyes at the latest personage to hold the centre of the stage in the tragedy.

Then gradually Hall began to understand what the confession of Frederick Badger might mean to the girl in the other room who had also confessed to the crime. If Badger had killed Hamilton, then it followed as a matter of course that the girl had not done so. Somewhere, somehow, there was a mistake. Then he was conscious of the fact that Badger was talking.

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"He wouldn't give me my due," he was explaining painstakingly, "and I told him I was going to kill him, so I did it."

Carroll took the revolver and "broke" it with a deft motion. Four loaded cartridges and one exploded shell clattered to the floor. The empty shell was picked up by the boyish-looking detective, and he smelled it.

"Recent," was all he said. Badger gazed at him in surprise.

"Of course," he explained. "I killed him less than an hour ago and walked right down here to give myself up."

Commissioner Hall faced the little man curiously.

"You are quite sure that you killed him?"

"Of course I killed him. I told him I was going to, and I did. I left his house about eight o'clock, went down to a pawnshop on Halsey Street near Oak and bought that revolver and the bullets."

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Immediately Carroll made his way to a telephone. Within three minutes he was back.

"That part of the story is true. It's Simpson's pawnshop, and he remembers the sale distinctly. One of those bullets has been fired since the revolver was bought." He examined the gun closely. "It's a regulation police revolver, too."

"How can that be?" questioned Hall sharply.

"Some discharged policeman, probably, pawned his service revolver."

"Then the case is simple," snapped Hall hopefully. "The bullet which really killed him can be identified by its size. If this old man did it, it will be proven beyond a doubt by the size of the bullet found at the autopsy."

"If I killed him?" echoed Badger. "Don't you understand?—I *did* kill him. That's what I came here to tell you. I bought the revolver and went back there

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through the garden and stood on the veranda and killed him—in the dark!"

"You——" Hall slapped his hand against his knee. "By George, Carroll, that's the second person who has made some reference to killing Hamilton 'in the dark'!"

Badger seemed a bit dazed at the refusal of these men to take his confession of murder quite seriously. Carroll was silent, tight-lipped, keenly observant—the lethal weapon held in his right hand.

Once again the police commissioner took stock of the latest figure in the sensational case. The man seemed even smaller, weaker, and more dejected than when he exploded his confession of the crime to which some one else had already confessed. He was, above all things, meek; meek and intensely out of place. But he was determined that he had killed Hamilton, and with cause! That "with cause" feature of the confession impressed Clement Hall.

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Eunice Duval had refused to give details.

"Suppose you tell us what happened tonight, Mr. Badger," he suggested. "Start at the beginning and tell us everything."

The old man spread his skinny fingers in a helpless gesture.

"There isn't anything to tell except that I killed him and ran away."

"You ran away?"

"Yes."

"If you intended to come down here and confess to the crime, why did you run away?"

"I was frightened. The noise scared me—the noise and the dark."

Here Carroll interrupted, his voice soft and soothing:

"What do you mean by repeating that you shot him in the dark? Where was he when you shot?"

"In his living room on the other side of the big table. I was on the veranda by the window."

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"You shot through the window?"

"Yes. It was half open. One side of it was open."

"Now what about the darkness? You've said twice that you shot in the dark."

Badger passed a trembling hand across his forehead.

"That's the funny part of it. I took careful aim at Mr. Hamilton, and just before I pulled the trigger the lights went out."

"The lights in the room where he was standing?"

"Yes, sir; they all went out and the room was very dark. Then, in about five seconds, they flashed on again, and I saw him falling, and I ran away."

"Did you hear anything else—another shot?"

"I don't know. You see, I wasn't thinking about anything except myself. There might have been another shot."

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"Would you have heard it if there had been?"

Badger stared at him blankly.

"Maybe; I don't know."

Hall was settled back in his chair, listening amazedly to the dialogue. The thing was ludicrous—Carroll, who looked like a fussy college boy and was a truly great detective, discussing a case with a watery-eyed, harmless-appearing old man who confessed to murder. The thing was not at all as it should have been; there was as little of the detective in Carroll's appearance as there was of the murderer in Badger's.

Of one thing Hall was already convinced, that, whether or not Badger had killed Hamilton, he was not quite sane. There was an occasional gleam in his weak old eyes when Hamilton's name was mentioned that denoted a mild form of mania. Carroll continued his questioning.

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"Now suppose you tell us, Mr. Badger," he said quietly, "why you killed Mr. Hamilton?"

"Because I told him I was going to."

"When did you tell him that?"

"Tonight about eight o'clock. He laughed at me and told me not to let a little thing make me try anything foolish. Then I went down to the pawnshop and bought the revolver and went back and shot him in the dark."

In the dark! In the dark! Eunice had spoken of shooting "in the dark."

"Why," persisted Carroll easily, "did you tell Mr. Hamilton that you were going to kill him?"

"Because he stole my money."

"Hamilton stole your money?" burst in Hall brusquely. "That's ridiculous! The man was worth a fortune."

Again that flash of fury in Badger's eyes —a fire spark that died out almost as soon as born.

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"I don't care how much he had," he insisted. "He stole my money."

"When?"

"Fifteen years ago."

"Damned rot!" chortled Hall. "This man is crazy!"

"Just a minute, Mr. Hall," interrupted Carroll. "Tell us all about it, Mr. Badger."

"He took my money—it was on a proposition to develop oil lands. Then he said he sent down an engineer and the engineer said there wasn't any oil there. But I knew—I knew——" Badger rose to his feet, and as he talked his manner became more violent and his voice rose to a crescendo. "I know how these rich men get rich! They steal their money from us poor people. He took all my money, and I know there was oil there. He said there wasn't, and all my money was gone. I asked him to give it back to me, and he said he was sorry, but that he had lost three

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times as much as I had. And there *was* oil there—there was oil on the land when I bought it." The old man had worked himself into a frenzy. He gesticulated wildly and paced the room. "Oh, he had it coming to him! For fifteen years I have visited him two or three times a week; I've warned him and I've threatened him. I told him that he couldn't get away with it. But he's got a stone heart. He didn't have any right to live. Tonight he laughed at me and said I was a 'poor nut.' Me, whose money he stole. And I told him I was going to kill him—and——" Suddenly the frenzy of passion disappeared. In the fraction of an instant he was metamorphosed from the victim of a monomania to his natural, harmless, helpless, inoffensive self. "And so I went to the pawnshop and bought the revolver and went back to the house and killed him. And then I came down here and gave myself up."

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"Do you realize what this means for you?"

Badger shrugged.

"There wasn't anything in life for me, anyway. And maybe it'll teach these rich people a lesson. I told him I was going to kill him, and then I went right down to the pawnshop——"

"Yes, yes; we understand that. We'll hold you now. I'm sorry you had to shoot him——"

Again Badger was on his feet.

"He stole my money! He stole it!"

Carroll reached over to the desk at which Hall was sitting and pressed a buzzer.

"Put him in charge of one of your best men personally," he ordered. "See to it that he is allowed to speak to no one. Not even to Rollins."

When Badger had been led away and the two men were alone, Hall lighted a cigar and puffed violently for a few minutes.

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"Of course it's damned rot!" he said at length.

"What?" queried the detective in a mild tone.

"That fool notion that Hamilton stole his money. More than probably he went to Hamilton with some wildcat scheme and got some of Hamilton's money in on it. And of course—— Oh, damn it all, anyway! It's my opinion that the man is crazy."

Carroll's answer was as calm and steady as though he were remarking on the weather:

"Undoubtedly he is. But crazy men can kill people."

"Of course he killed—but Eunice said *she* killed him."

"H'mph! Suppose you go in and tell Miss Eunice that this man has confessed and see what she says. Ask her first if she knows who Badger is?"

"If she'll see me." Hall started for the

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door. "I can't make head or tail of it. I'll tell her, though."

His knock was answered by Mrs. Faber, and only after pleading with the girl through her did Eunice consent to speak to him.

He found her lying on the couch staring, dry-eyed, at the ceiling. Her face was pallid, and one hand hung limply over the side of the couch. She spoke without turning her head:

"What is it, Mr. Hall?"

"I hate to bother you, Eunice; but there's been a terrible mistake somewhere, and I want you to help me out. Tell me first, do you know of a man named Frederick Badger?"

She turned her face to the wall.

"I thought you wanted to see me about something important, Mr. Hall. I'm not at all well, and I wish——"

"But this is important; really it is. Do you know of him?"

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"Of course I do!" she said somewhat sharply. "He's been bothering Mr.—Mr.—Hamilton for years. They were in some business deal together. Mr. Hamilton thought he was crazy."

"I see."

"And now, if that's all you wanted to know, I wish you'd go. I don't want to see any one except Mr. Denson. He hasn't come yet, has he?"

"No. Eunice, please, won't you take a friend's advice and retract your confession?"

"Of course not! I killed him. That's all I have to say."

"But you did *not* kill him," said Hall desperately. "That man has already confessed to Mr. Hamilton's murder!"

The effect of his words was electrical. The girl's figure stiffened, grew rigid; then in a flash she was on her feet, bosom heaving, eyes flashing, fists clenched.

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"You're lying! You know you are lying!"

Hall gave back a step.

"Eunice! You know I'm not. He has confessed to the killing."

"It's a lie!" A pause, and then: "What man?"

"Frederick Badger!"

"*O-o-o-h!*" As suddenly as she had risen, she relaxed. The light died from her eyes. She crumpled on the couch. "Why—why—didn't you say *that?*"

"I did. I explained. That's why I asked you who he was. If you'll withdraw your confession now we'll probably let you go home. Badger killed him."

She turned her haggard face to him.

"I told you Badger is crazy. I repeat it. He didn't kill Mr. Hamilton. I did —shot him with his own revolver!"

"But, Eunice——"

"Mrs. Faber," she said weakly, "please make Mr. Hall go. He means well, but I

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can't stand much more of this. I—I'll go to pieces again in a minute."

Hall was hurt. He bowed in the girl's direction.

"I'll go, Mrs. Faber, but there is a mistake. She didn't kill Mr. Hamilton. This man Badger insists that he did. He bought a revolver and went there and shot him——"

The eyes of the little housekeeper lighted.

"That explains the second shot."

"What second shot?"

"There were two shots, sir. I was in my room in bed. I heard a shot—that echoed all around. Then there was another shot. I put my wrapper on, and when I got downstairs Mr. Hamilton was —was——" She glanced significantly toward the huddled figure of the girl on the couch. "You understand, sir."

"Yes, I understand. I think I do. The shot that echoed was the one from in-

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side the room. The other was from outside. What a mess!"

He left the two women together and told his story to Carroll.

"That simplifies things," said Carroll. "We'll have an autopsy performed and discover whether Hamilton was killed by a bullet from a police revolver. Badger's weapon was undoubtedly one."

Hall shook his head.

"They're performing the autopsy now," he said, "but that will tell us nothing. The girl says she used Hamilton's revolver. That revolver was a present to him from me—and it was the duplicate of the one Badger used!"

Hall shook his head.

"That makes it a little harder. And Miss Duval still refuses to go into details?"

"Yes. She insists on seeing Denson first. I can't blame her. Poor little kid,

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she's gone through hell this night. She's a wreck. And now I haven't yet telephoned Rollins." He turned to the instrument on his desk, but Carroll stopped him.

"Don't; not yet. Let him work over the ground. Maybe he'll run across something which will prove which one really killed him."

"Ye-e-s; perhaps he will. I'm almost afraid that he will."

Carroll looked up sharply.

"I see you think the girl's bullet did it?" he said interrogatively.

Hall flushed dully.

"I think nothing," he said curtly. "However, I'll let Rollins remain."

For some minutes they sat quietly, Hall puffing on a cigar and Carroll raptly contemplating the glowing end of a Turkish cigarette. Then there was a violent knock at the door.

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"Come in!" And in response to Hall's command a young officer burst into the room.

"A young man to see you immediately, Mr. Hall—he says you know him; his name is Harrelson—Vincent Harrelson."

Hall felt Carroll's eyes upon him, and he gave answer to the unspoken query:

"Yes, it's Vincent Harrelson, the artist. I think—mind you, I don't know—that he was secretly engaged to Eunice."

"A-a-h! Let's go see what he wants."

Again the man they saw did not fit into the picture. Artist he was, but not at all the painter depicted in fiction. He was more than six feet in height, broad of shoulder and very deep of chest. His big, soft, brown eyes contained a strange light; there was suppressed excitement in his manner. He made his way immediately to Hall.

"They told me the chief of police was out of the city and that you were here," he

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said swiftly, the words almost tumbling over one another. "You know who I am —and you know something about family conditions——"

"Yes, I understand."

"I just came in to give myself up, sir. About an hour ago I quarreled with Mr. Hamilton—and *I killed him!*"

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CHAPTER IV.

OUT of the stillness which followed the young man's announcement came the mumbled words of a policeman:

"Begorra, this murder is just one damned confession after another!" Then some one said: "Hush, you fool!" and there was quiet again.

Clement Hall was too startled for immediate speech. His jaw dropped and his figure slumped limply. The young man stared at him in surprise, and then curiously at David Carroll, who was eyeing him with a deliberation which brought a slow flush of anger to the young artist's face. He fidgeted uncomfortably. Finally he broke out irritably:

"What are *you* staring at? And why?"

By way of answer Carroll flipped back

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the lapel of his coat, disclosing his badge. Harrelson subsided. Carroll spoke softly:

"This way, young man, and you, too, commissioner, if you please."

A battery of curious eyes followed their progress across the sombre hall, and as the door of the rest room closed behind them a bedlam of comment and conjecture broke loose.

The case had piled sensation on sensation until it had long since passed the point of plausibility. Larry O'Brien waxed garrulous.

"Be all the saints, 'tis spooky! Usually whin a murder is done we hunt for the guilty. This time we have two guilty wans and have to hunt for the innocent. Bedad, they lied whin they said that wonders have ceased!"

Meanwhile, in the rest room, David Carroll was questioning Vincent Harrelson in his habitual calm, unperturbed way. His first effort was to discover if the young man

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knew that any one else had confessed.

"You say you killed Hamilton?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"We quarreled when I visited his house tonight. We have quarreled several times before. It is strictly a personal matter. I believe Mr. Hall was sufficiently intimate at Hamilton's home to understand."

Hall nodded.

"I believe I do."

"You shot him in cold blood?" asked Carroll deliberately.

The young man leaped to his feet.

"Good God, no! We quarreled bitterly and he lost his head. He hit me here." Harrelson exhibited a red spot on his left cheek. "I grappled with him and he tore loose. We were in the library then. He dashed to the table, picked up a paper weight, and would have thrown it at me, but I held him. When finally I let

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him go—and it is more than possible that I handled him a bit roughly—he ran into the next room and took a revolver from the drawer of the table. I grabbed his wrist and got the revolver away from him. Then it went off—how, I don't know. He fell, and that's all."

"That's *all?*"

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

The young man straightened nervously.

"Say, look here, what are you driving at? I've told you that was all!"

Apparently Carroll was looking at a set of dominoes spread out on the table before him. His next remark was as casual as a comment on an item in the day's news:

"How about the switching off of the lights?"

But, disinterested as he seemed, he did not miss the sudden pallor of Harrelson's cheeks. The young man opened his mouth to speak, closed it again, and rose.

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"I don't know what you're talking about, and I refuse to say anything further!"

Carroll's voice grew cold as steel.

"What about the switching off of the lights?" he snapped. "And who fired the other shot?"

Harrelson gripped the edge of his chair.

"I have nothing further to say at this time. I've told you I killed Mr. Hamilton, and that's all I'm going to tell you. I wish you'd put me in a cell or wherever I am to be put."

"You're a very foolish young man," said Carroll. "If I were you——"

"You're not. And I'll be exceedingly obliged if you'll keep your advice to yourself."

Clement Hall touched the artist on the arm.

"He's trying to help you, Mr. Harrelson."

"I haven't asked for help from any one.

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I've come down here to give myself up for killing a man. The duty of the police department is very plain. There's nothing else to the case."

"You're mistaken, Mr. Harrelson," said Carroll in his characteristically friendly manner. "I am in charge of this case, and I know several things about it which you think I do not know. Since you have seen fit to assume a hostile attitude, I will not mince matters. Put in plain English, your story is false as to several salient facts. I happen to know that just before Mr. Hamilton was shot the lights went out. They remained out for about six seconds. Then they snapped on again. Therefore, we are presented with one very pertinent question: Who switched those lights off and who switched them on again, and why? Have you anything to say about that?"

Harrelson looked up sullenly.

"Nothing."

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"Item number one," retorted Carroll with sudden and incisive coldness. "Item number two is the fact that there were two shots, one evidently in the dark and one immediately after the lights were switched on. Which shot, if you please, did you fire?"

"I fired the shot which killed Mr. Hamilton," came the stolid answer.

"You are quite sure?"

"You can prove it easily enough. Get the bullet which killed him and see if it does not fit his revolver. That will answer you. I don't know anything about any second shot."

"You mean you won't tell?"

"Have it your own way. I've said all I intend to."

"Who else was in the room at the time of the shooting?"

"I have nothing more to say."

Carroll smiled.

"That answer is perfectly satisfactory."

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Then to Hall: "I will hold this young man in one of the cells under special guard. No one is to be allowed to discuss the case with him. Is that satisfactory?"

"You're in charge, Carroll. My interest is far more personal than official."

A sergeant was called and the prisoner placed in his charge with instructions not to discuss any phase of the case with him. Once alone, the two men faced each other and Carroll laughed shortly.

"It *is* a poser," he admitted. "The most interesting case I have ever worked. The usual order of things is reversed. We have three people claiming guilt for a crime which only one could have committed. H'mph! That young man is very —er—tart."

"Temperament!" snorted Hall. "He's an artist!"

"And, I believe you said, engaged to Miss Duval?"

"That's the bone of contention between

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him and Hamilton. Hamilton, I suspect, was deeply in love with Miss Duval; and even under normal circumstances he would not have been overly fond of the man whom she happened to love. That, then, was the case between them basically.

"But Hamilton was superconscientious. I believe he was broad enough to have sanctioned her marriage with Harrelson had he found no fault with the young man personally. But whether it was true or not, whether or not it was just—he was sincere in the belief that Harrelson was after Miss Duval's money, that he was worthless personally, that he was lazy, and that he was rather much of a Lothario."

"Hmm! His temperament—would it be of the kind——"

"I know exactly what you are thinking; you're wondering whether he would be quixotic enough to surrender himself for a crime the girl had committed? Isn't that it?"

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"Yes."

"I don't know. He might and he might not. On the other hand, he has exhibited a certain strength of character in giving himself up at all, especially if a rigid investigation would have implicated her. He could have gotten away."

"I'm not so sure," said Carroll slowly. "And remember this, that if he told us the strict and whole truth—which he quite evidently did not—no jury in the world would convict him of anything. But there is something wrong somewhere. He may have lied as to the darkness and the second shot in order to shield the girl. On the other hand, he may have killed the man himself, formulated this self-defence story, and thought to bluff it out. I don't know the significance of the sudden darkness at the time of the shooting, but that it did have something to do with it I am sure."

"That whole phase of it," snapped Hall

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somewhat irritably, "strikes me as silly. Who would have turned out the lights in the room at that particular time, and why? Certainly it was no time for domestic pyrotechnics. And, besides, while we are discussing whether Miss Duval or Harrelson may be the guilty one, we have completely forgotten old man Badger, the one person who has supplied confession, motive, evidence, and testimony."

"No-o, Mr. Hall—I hadn't quite forgotten Badger. Without him the case is complicated enough. With him—it is—er—interesting, very interesting. I suggest that you telephone Doctor Robinson; he should have found the bullet by this time."

Doctor Robinson had found the bullet, and Doctor Robinson was desirous of coming down to see Mr. Hall immediately. He came, and a quick and thorough examination showed that the lethal bullet was of the same calibre as that used in the offi-

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