



NEW DETECTIVE

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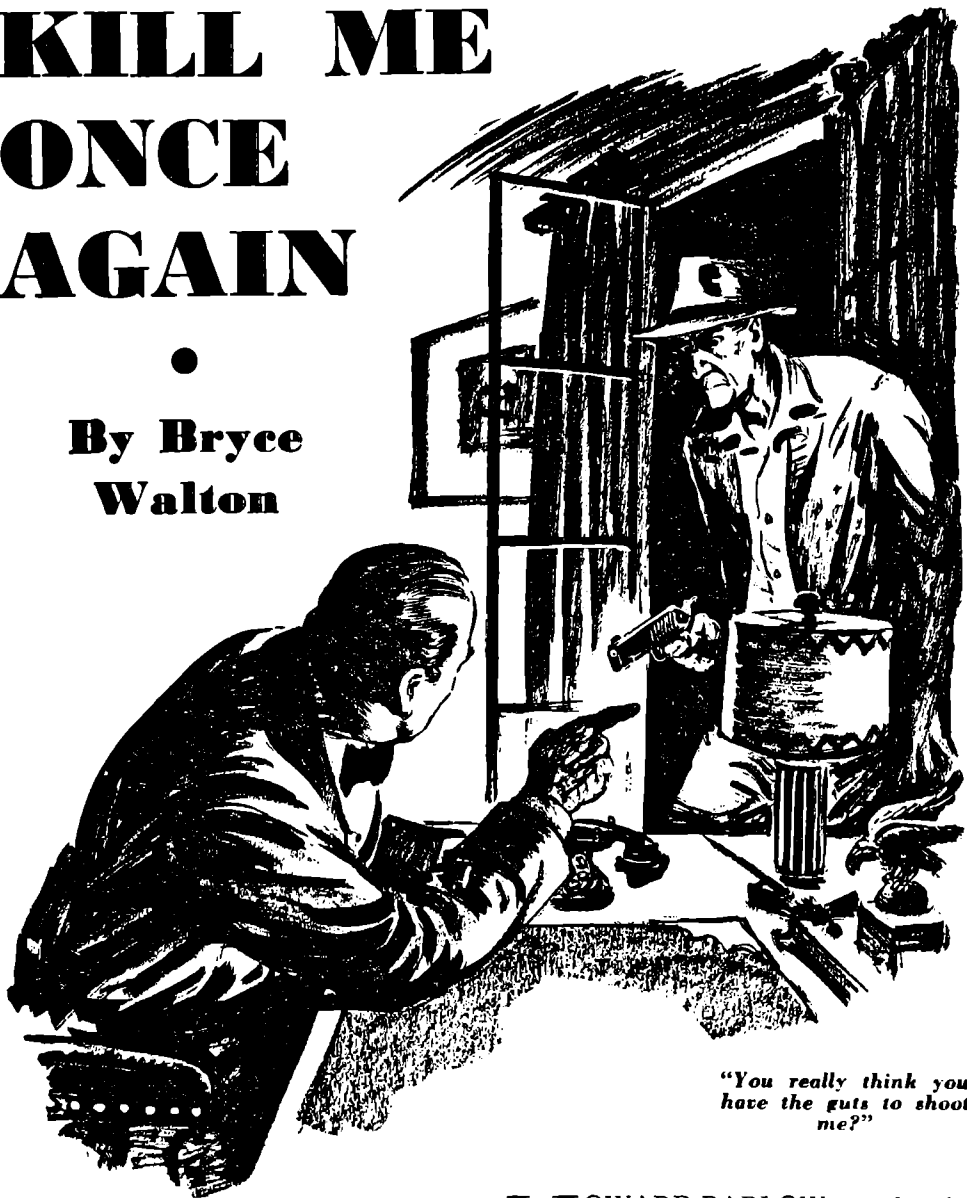
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KILL ME ONCE AGAIN

•
By Bryce
Walton



*"You really think you
have the guts to shoot
me?"*

"Too dumb to live—too yellow to die . . ." his victim's last words pursued him as he fled into the strange half world of mortal terror—where a man may perish—yet live to pay the price of murder!

HOWARD BARLOW stared at the ceiling. It was yellow and old and spotted with grease. He could feel his heart grinding painfully, and inside of his head images kept stirring round and round, whirling faster and faster. He had too much imagination, that was it. Too much for a dumbhead. He could imagine how Daniel Yankovitch was feeling now in death row, waiting for the gas chamber.

That was no good, imagining that kind

of thing. Besides, the more he thought about it, the more vivid the image was, until now he could see Yankovitch sitting behind bars on a bare cot, sitting there waiting and waiting to die. He could feel the way Yankovitch was feeling.

It would be bad enough to be waiting for a room you couldn't get out of to be filled with gas if you really had killed somebody. But Yankovitch hadn't killed anybody.

No one knew that fact any better than Barlow did.

Barlow beat his fist against the crusted iron bedpost. He tried to swallow but something gagged in his throat. He had cut his hand, but he didn't feel anything though, not on the outside. Only on the inside did he feel anything. A cold charge of fear awakened his body slightly. He pictured Yankovitch sitting in a tiny room with no doors or windows in it, strapped in a chair maybe, waiting to die in the dark for something he'd never done, something he probably didn't even know anything about.

Barlow had been in this cheap room for a long time, with only a few sandwiches to eat, and more bourbon than he could remember. He couldn't stay here much longer. There was only one thing for him to do. He had to save Daniel Yankovitch, and there was only one way to do it.

He sank back on the bed and closed his eyes, and the sweat ran down his body onto the soaked, dirty sheets. He'd never intended to kill the assistant district attorney. That was the hellish part of it. He'd just gone there to tell Mardin how much he hated him and what he thought of him and maybe how much he would like to kill him, but he'd never intended to do it. . . .

BARLOW had stopped outside the French windows of the Mardins' big home in Beverly Hills and looked in. The windows were wide open and there were no screens. The place was a setup for any-

body who was interested, and Barlow happened to know there were no burglar alarms or traps or radar systems set up. And there was Bill Mardin sitting in there on a chaise lounge, reading something.

Hate flickered in Barlow's eyes as he hunched inside his soiled trenchcoat and looked at Mardin sitting there. Mardin was wearing a rich looking jacket of some kind. It was the color of dark wine, and the room was so big that the fireplace burning in it seemed a long, long way off in the darkness beyond where Mardin sat.

Barlow's feet didn't make any sound on the rich, soft lawn surrounding the mansion. On the other side of him a huge swimming pool was like green glass. He stepped forward, stopped. For a moment he thought he heard someone, but then he knew it was only his nerves. His nerves hadn't been much since they'd let him out of San Quentin. He'd been nursing the bottle and paying homage to the parole officer, and in between times he'd sat in bars somewhere and thought about a lot of things.

The place was sure wide open. Mardin had nerve. He had a lot of enemies, but there he sat, and anyone could walk right in there and blast him to hell, where he belonged. No one who had a job like Mardin's ought to live. No one who was a man would do what Mardin did. Mardin sent guys up because it was his job, and he didn't give a damn whether you were guilty or not, or how guilty you were if you were.

Barlow watched Mardin get up, stretch, yawn, walk to a big black desk and turn on a desk lamp and sit down and shuffle absently through papers. Then Barlow jumped in through the French windows and stood right there, up close to the desk. He was a gaunt figure standing there, his straw-colored hair awry, his face the color of milk, his black eyes like two pieces of charcoal.

Mardin looked up casually. "We usu-

ally use the door," he said softly. He was fat and sure of himself, and the desk lamp on his face left the rest of him obscure, so that his teeth and his blue eyes and his shiny, well-kept cheeks were like a picture spotted in a dim gallery.

"You're a dirty rotten louse," Barlow said.

"What else do you have to say, Barlow? I'm awfully busy. I have a lot to do."

"That's about all," Barlow said. His hands clenched and he could feel the sweat running in two separate streams down his face, like tears. The hate was burning in him, and he could feel the sensation he had felt before when he had shot that man, Cranston, at that beer brawl. A feeling as though he were teetering on the edge of a black pool.

"Then good night," Mardin said.

"I said that was about all," Barlow repeated. "What I'd like to do is kill you."

"A lot of people would like to do that to me, Barlow."

"Aren't you afraid maybe somebody will sometime?"

Mardin shrugged. "I wouldn't be where I am today if I was afraid of shadows." The light shone on his wine-red jacket. "Why worry about it? The percentages are with me. That's why I never take precautions like some cheap hood and have the place festooned with bodyguards loafing all over. You know why the percentages are with me, Barlow?"

"Why?"

"Because there are so few people who have the guts to kill anybody. It does take guts."

Barlow felt electric shocks running down his arms, tingling in his wrists. He had that funny ringing sensation in his head, the same as he always had when he'd been on the bottle too long. He wanted to lean against something. He stood there.

He said, "Listen, Mardin. You sent

me up to San Quentin for life, and I rotted in there for ten years, and finally when it was too late I got let out on good behavior. I rotted in there because a man can't stay alive in there for ten years. It finished me. I know it now and I've tried to get going again, but I can't. I can't do anything anymore. And you did it to me."

"You did it to yourself."

"You did it not because you had anything personal against me. Hell no! You just did it because it was your job. It helped pay for some of this beautiful stuff you're living in. I saw that pool out there. I guess that's it, when you finally got a pool."

"That's it all right, Barlow. It's a beautiful pool. I thought about you sometimes when I was swimming in it on hot days."

BARLOW SHIVERED. His jowls darkened, his mouth pressed thin by the powerful clamp of his jaws. A trickle of sweat slid past his eye and outlined his white cheek.

"A good lawyer could have got me off, Mardin. You know that. I was all liquored up. And I didn't know what I was doing, and this guy was making passes at this girl. I told him to lay off and he pulled a knife on me. The girl dragged this gun out from behind the bar and shoved it at me, and the next thing I know this guy, Cranston, was on the floor, bleeding and dying. It was self defense. Back in Kansas I had trouble that way. But most of the time I was all right. Ten years in San Quentin is too long, and maybe I'll be going back one of these days, because now I can't make it out here. They're going to take me back. I know it! Mardin, I'd like to kill you!"

Mardin smiled. His lips were soft and wet and very red and curved like a woman's.

"Could you?"

"I want to kill you. I'd like nothing better than to blow you to hell!"

Barlow licked his lips slowly as the gun slid across the desk toward him, butt first. It was a big .45 automatic, its blue steel shining in the lamplight like the skin of a big wet snake.

"You really think you have the guts to shoot me, Barlow?"

Barlow couldn't say anything. He didn't look at Mardin's face, only at the gun sliding toward him slowly, stopping. It was only a couple of inches from his hand. The consciousness of sweat running down his face loosened a nervous flush along his back that prickled painfully.

He heard Mardin's soft chuckling laugh. "You're scared, Barlow. Guys like you don't have any real guts. You never did anything but loaf around unless you were liquored up, as you said yourself."

The gun blurred slightly and Barlow felt his knees going to rubber and he concentrated on standing there. His throat was dry, swelling, and he watched the glow of the lamp on the blue steel of the automatic with a dumb absorption.

"I'm all alone here," Mardin said softly, "except for a caretaker way over on the other side of the grounds, and it would take him some time to get over here. No servants here tonight, nobody at all. Just you and I. You could pick up the gun and kill me. If you had the guts."

Barlow's body was stiff all over. He was afraid to move. Only his lips parted slightly. "I've never had much brains," he said. "I've always been a damn Kansas dumbhead, that's been my trouble. I always worked somewhere and sometimes on Saturday night I got liquored up and had myself a time. Sometimes I got into a fight or something, but I never went out looking to hurt anybody. Why'd you make it so hard for me, Mardin?"

Mardin looked up through the lamplight a long time at Barlow's white, thin face. Slowly he shook his head. "If you

weren't so dumb, like you say, I'd explain it. But then I wouldn't have to, because if you weren't so dumb you wouldn't be here. There's a lot of swimming pools paved with guys like you, Barlow."

"Damn you! Don't say anymore!" Barlow whispered. "I'm leaving. I just come here to tell you to go to hell, that's all. I didn't come here to—"

Mardin laughed again. Then he said, "What are you afraid of? The gas chamber? You afraid of dying? Why, Barlow? What does a dumbhead like you have to bother about that for? This is real living." Mardin waved a fat hand around him. "All this and the pool. This is living, and you'll never have it. You've never lived and you never will, because you don't have the stuff it takes to live. You don't even have the stuff it takes to die decently. I deserve to get killed by you, don't I, Barlow? I've done you a real nasty turn, sure. And you stand there sweating because you want to kill me but don't have the guts, just because you're scared! You've always been scared. You're too dumb to live. And you're too scared to die!"

Barlow's body seemed to loosen all over and fell into a kind of crouch. Tiredness and torn nerves became alive and throbbed in his back, in the exhausted hamstrings of his thighs. His limbs twitched and he heard a sound trickle out of his lips, and was dumbly surprised to know he had made it.

He yelled. It wasn't a word. It was a sound, a harsh, prolonged animal roar of pain and rage and final humiliation. He felt the gun in his hand, felt it plunge forward and heard the wash of deafening sound beat back around him as he pulled the trigger. He squeezed it again and again. Mardin's face lost its expression and turned into clay. His hands flopped forward on the desk, then his head thudded down between his hands.

Barlow shivered as he stood there, and

the gun was lead in his hand, then he turned and ran crazily out across the damp rich lawn. He hesitated by the swimming pool. For a moment he saw it on a sunny afternoon, the girls lying there in their yellow and white suits, the contrast against smooth copper skins. Then he threw the gun into the water and kept on running.

FIRST HE had waited for them to pick him up, and that hadn't been so bad, not at first. But nobody picked him up. He reported to the parole officer and nobody said anything. And then it got real bad for Barlow. He saw the papers and he read them. Someone else had been arrested and was being tried for the murder of Bill Mardin.

Someone named Daniel Yankovitch, another dumb guy who had been prowling around the grounds to pull a burglary and had been trapped by the caretaker, who had heard the shots fired by Barlow. In trying desperately to escape, Daniel Yankovitch had fallen into the swimming pool. He hadn't been able to swim. Half drowned, he had been in no condition to try to escape when he was dragged out. He denied killing Mardin, anybody. He denied in the desperate, frantic way an innocent man would deny killing anybody. He acted like a crazy man.

He lay there in that cheap room at Fifth and Main Streets and stared at the yellow wallpaper, and finally he started seeing images roving around on it. He started seeing Yankovitch's face in it. It got so he didn't have to look at the papers at all except maybe to glance at the headlines. He could see Yankovitch's face in the wallpaper, screaming that he wasn't guilty, and finally he could hear his voice when he screamed.

It went on for a long time. He got to seeing the face and hearing the screams of innocence at night, and he couldn't sleep.

It reached the point where Barlow knew he would never sleep again, not unless he did the only thing he could do to keep Yankovitch from going to the gas chamber.

It had been a sensational murder. Not because of Yankovitch of course, because he wasn't anybody at all. But because of the community standing of Bill Mardin, the good solid citizen. One of the daily papers headlined something about the trial almost every day, and for a long time Barlow hadn't been able to read anything but the headlines, and even the headlines blurred much of the time.

But they told Barlow enough. The last big story had said that Yankovitch had been found guilty of first degree murder and was going to be taken care of by the state for it. And Barlow had seen the front page spread, the pictures, the last time he bothered to look. There was Yankovitch, a scrawny, beat-out guy with a balding head, his wrist chained up to the wrist of another prisoner for the one way ride up north.

There were more stories after that, but Barlow didn't look anymore. He knew the exact day and hour when Yankovitch was going to die in the gas chamber and he stayed there in the small room and thought about it.

He'd been there too long, thinking about it. Tomorrow night was the night when Yankovitch would die, and Barlow wouldn't be able to live after that either, he knew that now. He'd been liquored up good for a long time now, real good, but he hadn't been able to just lie back and let Yankovitch die.

Now he was moaning deliriously, shivering under his blanket. His face was white, and his thin red mouth had turned a leaden pink, and was pinched at the corners.

Then he sat up slowly and swung his shaking legs to the floor. Incidents, unpleasant fragments of his life, churned

turgidly in his brain like a pot of thick stew coming to a boil. He remembered childhood incidents. He'd been a soft-hearted dumbhead anyhow.

The room was filled with grey, damp shadow, and outside in the rainy night a neon sign blinked at him over the top of a dirty, gleaming tar-papered roof. He had the shakes real bad. It took him a long time to get into his clothes and it took him even longer to get over to the Lincoln Heights Police Station.

He told his name to a desk sergeant who in turn said his name was O'Brien. O'Brien was reading a magazine and he was sleepy. He looked up once, then down again and kept on reading. All Barlow could see was the top of the sergeant's blond head. He was a young guy, big in the shoulders with a heavy nose and thick lips. He had asked absently what Barlow wanted.

It had been building up a long time. He couldn't help it now when it came out of him all at once and he started to cry. It embarrassed him, but he went right ahead talking and crying, and it was funny, but he kept on talking about all kinds of things that didn't seem to have anything to do with what he really was here to tell.

The sergeant said, "Come on, fella! What do you want?"

Barlow got it out then. He told the sergeant. And the sergeant looked up. "What was that, fella?" he asked.

"I said I killed Bill Mardin. Daniel Yankovitch didn't kill him. I did!"

"You killed Bill Mardin, huh?" The sergeant turned and winked at a plain-clothes cop, or a detective probably, who sat at a nearby desk with his feet propped up on top of it. He had a long cigarette between his fingers. He was a small, lean man with a face the color of suntan oil, and eyes that had been looking at Barlow steadily with a dark, hard brightness.

"Hey, Dent. This guy killed Bill Mardin."

Dent didn't wink. He didn't say anything.

The sergeant said, "Dent, everybody around the City Hall's been making a big mistake. It was this guy who killed Mardin. He says so himself."

Dent didn't say anything. He just kept on looking at Barlow steadily.

"That's right!" Barlow said. "I killed him!"

"Sure you did," the sergeant said. "Why don't you go somewhere and sleep it off, fella? You're past the elephant and snake stage. Go on, get out of here."

"But I did kill him!" Barlow said. "I would've told you sooner. I wanted to. I couldn't, that's all. Now I'm telling you. If you'll take it down or something I'll tell you how I did it. I went out there—"

"You know, that's sure strange," the sergeant said. "But we proved that Daniel Yankovitch killed Bill Mardin. When did you kill him, Mr. Barlow? Before or after Yankovitch did?"

The sergeant put the magazine away and leaned back and yawned. His chest swelled and almost burst the tailor-made uniform. He had been to college and had played football and had all he wanted to eat all of his life. Dent seemed different. The sergeant's eyelashes were white and his eyes were lidded as he looked up at Barlow.

To keep from falling, Barlow leaned against the desk. "I tell you I did kill him! Honest to God I did it!"

"Sure you did it," grinned the sergeant. "You know, every time there's a murder you'd be surprised how many letters and phone calls and personal appearances there are—all because so many people did it. It's psychological."

"Listen—" Barlow whispered.

"We got a police psychiatrist here. You know what he says? He says everybody's got a guilt complex. Everybody thinks he's done something wrong sometime and ought to get punished for it. So every

time there's a murder, a lot of people always come around wanting to be punished." His voice sounded softer now. "Look, fella. It's okay. You been hitting the bottle too heavy and you need to sack in for a long time. If you'll just walk out of here and won't cause any trouble, it's okay."

Barlow yelled hoarsely. He grabbed the sergeant by the coat lapels and yelled in his face how he had killed Mardin. The sergeant flipped a heavy arm across and numbness ran up Barlow's arm and the sergeant stood up quickly.

Barlow flung himself across the desk. He scarcely felt the impact of the sergeant's fist, but it was something considerable and well placed. And Barlow woke up much later in the drunk tank where some peculiar character was rubbing his forehead and murmuring prayers for his salvation. Bums in various stages of drunkenness were sprawled all over.

The character with the long red beard and a burlap sack around him was still rubbing Barlow's forehead, but Barlow sat up. Pain exploded in his head and subsided to a dull, dizzy throbbing.

"You know why I get myself put in here all the time?" the bearded man said. "I'll tell you, son. So I can save souls. This is the place to do it, and I can save yours. You want your soul saved, don't you, son?"

Barlow pushed the beard aside and staggered across the tank to the bars. He yelled wildly at the guard, who told him to pipe down. Barlow turned around. "What time is it?" he whispered.

It was five in the morning.

BARLOW sat down on an iron cot and stared at the concrete floor. He closed his eyes, but it didn't do any good. He could see the scrawny, balding Yankovitch in death row, waiting in a lonely cell to be taken away to the gas chamber.

He could feel the way Yankovitch felt. He wanted to scream. He put his hand over his mouth and rocked back and forth. He got up and stood there, staring wildly around at the faces and the bodies and at the bearded man.

"I killed Bill Mardin!" Barlow shouted. "I told the police, but they won't believe me! He's going to die tonight, for something I done! I've got to make them believe me!"

A few drunks laughed. Barlow yelled and there were more and louder laughs. It seemed to get louder and louder, and Barlow fell down on the floor and covered his ears. After a while he sat up and then went over to the bars and called to the guard.

The guard came back and looked at him with marked disinterest. "I want to talk to Sam Dent," Barlow said.

"Why?"

"About a case he's working on. He told me to see him this morning." He didn't know why he'd said that, except that somehow he had an idea Dent might help him. Dent hadn't winked, nor said anything one way or the other.

The guard nodded. "I'll tell Dent. I'm sure he'll be overjoyed at the invitation, Mr. Barlow. However, Dent happens to be off duty right now, and he won't be back until this afternoon."

"But couldn't you phone him? It's a matter of life or death!"

The guard nodded. "I know, Mr. Barlow. You killed Bill Mardin. It's hell, isn't it, sitting around waiting for an innocent guy to die for a murder you did? It's really hell. Everytime I've had to do it I've had it rough; it's damn near driven me crazy."

Barlow stumbled back away from the bars and sat down. He lay down then and shut his eyes, tight. In the darkness he saw Yankovitch sitting in a little square box of a room, waiting to die.

"Listen, Yankovitch," Barlow whis-

pered "I'm doing everything I can. I'm trying to tell them the truth. I'll get it across to them before they kill you. Honest I will, Yankovitch. Listen, you got to believe me! I'm doing everything I can!"

He decided after a while to take it easy and be quiet. Maybe that way they would let him out sometime during the day, because the tanks were overcrowded. If he were outside maybe he could do something, at least he'd have a lot better chance of doing something.

Finally they did let him out. It was raining outside, and he walked around a while until he was soaked to the skin. Finally he looked up Dent's name in the directory and dialed the number.

It was five-thirty. Yankovitch didn't have very long. It probably seemed so much shorter than it really was, to him.

A woman answered the phone, and Barlow asked to speak to Mr. Dent. He waited for a hundred years while Dent was being called to the phone. The inside of the phone booth was like a damp oven, and the smell of his wet clothes and hair was a fog around him.

He heard Dent's voice. It was a very calm voice, like his face.

"Mr. Dent. This is Howard Barlow. Now wait a minute. I haven't been drinking. Don't hang up on me, please. I haven't touched a drop today. I'm sober. You got to believe I'm sober, Dent!"

"You're sober," Dent said.

Barlow tried to keep the trembling out of his voice. He had a tough time keeping a hold on the receiver. "Dent, I've got to talk to you. You can think I'm crazy or anything else, but just give me a chance. Don't tell anyone else. Just you and me. Yankovitch is going to die at midnight, and I've got to stop it. If you'll listen to me, I can prove I killed Mardin. I can tell you how I did it and everything."

"All right," Dent said after a brief pause.

Barlow sighed. "Do you want me to come out there to your place?"

"No. Where you calling from?"

Barlow told him. Dent said to meet him at a restaurant a block away.

"Hurry up," Barlow said. "We don't have much time."

DENT ordered coffee and they took it over to a small table by the big, rain-washed front window. When Barlow lifted the cup, he spilled coffee over the table. He sat the cup down and mopped at the coffee with a napkin and tipped over the sugar bowl. He didn't try to clean up the sugar. Dent looked at him without much of an expression on his face. He wasn't big and meaty like Mardin had been, or the sergeant, Barlow thought. *That's what we got in common. He hasn't had it so easy either.*

Barlow told him how it was. And he went on talking, trying to keep his voice from getting too high and Dent sat there listening closely, without nodding or saying anything.

After Barlow finished, Dent smudged his cigarette out. "You say you shot Mardin with his own automatic? That Mardin gave you the automatic and told you to kill him with it?"

"No. He dared me, see?" Barlow slowly licked his lips, and nodded again. "Lord help me if he didn't! That's what happened. I know it sounds crazy, but why would I cook up a crazy story like that? He kept digging me and digging and digging and then he handed me the gun and kept telling me how I didn't have the guts to kill him, and something happened to me. I grabbed up the gun and shot him. Hell—I emptied it into him!"

"And then you threw the automatic into the swimming pool?"

"Yes, yes, that's right, Dent!"

Dent got up. "I'm sorry, Barlow. Maybe you dug up too crazy a story."

"You don't believe me either?"

"Where you staying?" Dent asked.

Barlow didn't look up. He kept on staring at the blurred images of people walking past the rain-washed glass. His gaunt features hung even more slack now, his mouth open, his lower lip drooping. He was breathing with a regular panting rhythm.

When the detective repeated the question, Barlow told him where he stayed, the hotel and the room number. The small room, the one with the greasy yellow wallpaper on the ceiling. It was a room he wasn't ever going back to, but he didn't tell the detective that.

"It's crazy, but maybe I'll inquire a little about it," Dent said. "I'll contact you at your room if something happens to turn up."

"Sure." Barlow knew Dent was kidding, that this was a brushoff. And now Barlow knew nobody would ever believe the truth, no matter what he did. Yankovitch was going to die at midnight and there wasn't a thing Barlow could do about it.

There was only something Barlow could do about Barlow. But that was all.

He watched Dent walk through the revolving doors and saw his figure blur through the glass. After that for a while he didn't see anything. He got up and cast off into the stream of hurrying pedestrian traffic and it caught him up and whirled him along.

He didn't know where the stream was going, and for a while he didn't care. Some guys were rich enough and powerful enough that they could do something in a place like this, pull wires, pay off somebody. But none of them had a name that sounded anything like Howard Barlow.

He gasped as though he were very tired as he was jostled along, taking deep, useless breaths of the wet, sullen air and shambling forward, stumbling now and

then on nothing, bumping into people.

HE WALKED for a long time and he saw a clock in a jewelry store window, and it was eleven-thirty. The bright light from the window lanced like splinters into the tender flesh of his eyeballs, danced about the base of his brain in reddened, choleric circles. He stumbled away from the window and drifted down Fifth Street, away from Main.

By the time he reached the high concrete jump-off where the big red Pacific Electric car ran down below, he felt so dizzy on his feet he had to lean on the wet rail, and his hands seemed to have the spongy, powerless sensation of a man awakening in the morning, unable to grasp anything.

He heard the clackity-clackity-clackity hum of the big car bearing toward him, the beam of yellow light swinging around, brushing him, sweeping around and ahead, and the car rushing past in a burst of streaming steel. He sighed hoarsely as the rush of wind seemed to suck him down.

He stood there for two hundred years, and a man came by and Barlow asked him what time it was, and the man said it was five minutes to twelve.

Barlow didn't have to close his eyes. He could see Yankovitch now, his image glowing up there in the somber gray that was closing down all around him. He was in that little box of a room now. Just Daniel Yankovitch, all alone. What kind of a room was it? Barlow didn't know, but he could imagine how it was. Very small maybe, and no sound at all in it, and there Yankovitch sat all alone.

Everyone had to die sometime, but no one was supposed to die that way. Not so alone.

Barlow leaned over the rail as the Pacific Electric car swung in fast from the other way on the nearer track. The rain was like a grey curtain, and he could see the rails shining down there.

He climbed through.

The detective hollered, "Hey!" He rushed out of the rain and grabbed Barlow by the collar just as he jumped. He dragged him back through the rails, screaming and kicking.

DENT TOOK the automatic out of his coat pocket as he talked to Doctor Summers.

"You say Barlow's really insane now," Dent said. "What's the matter with him?"

The doctor shrugged. "A form of schizophrenia, escape from reality. There's a form of catatonia involved also. He just refuses to want to live."

"Has he said anything?"

"A few times. We gave him a shot of amytal. He told us not to worry about him—that he was dead."

"Dead!"

"Yes. He said he died two nights ago at midnight, when Daniel Yankovitch died."

"Is there a chance of curing him?"

"Maybe. Insulin shock. And maybe the right words, if they could penetrate, might do it, be just as great a shock. He really hears, but his mind won't let him recognize the fact that he hears, you see."

Dent rubbed his fingers over the automatic. His voice was very low. "He's got to be cured, Doc. And I'm going to do everything I can to see that he is cured. If it takes money, I'll see that you get the money too. I consider it a personal responsibility. I'll stay with it until he comes out of it if it takes the rest of my life. Can I see him now?"

Doctor Summers nodded. "Go on in. But I doubt if he'll even recognize that anybody's there."

Dent went in and stood by Barlow's bed. Barlow lay there, looking up at the ceiling. His gaunt face was the color of chalk and there was no expression on it at all.

Dent held out the automatic. "I'm sorry as hell, Barlow," he whispered. "They drained the pool and the caretaker found the automatic, and I got it from him. I called your place and I got over there but you weren't there. Lucky I had that other dick tail you after you left the restaurant."

Barlow didn't say anything. Under the sheet his body was deathly still.

"Barlow. Don't pretend you don't hear me. You hear me all right. You told it straight the way you saw it and now I know how it was."

He moved the blue steel across Barlow's eyes. "You got to listen to me. Don't pretend you don't hear me. We had all the evidence in the world against Yankovitch. He killed Mardin all right. You hear that? He killed Mardin! He confessed just before he went to the gas chamber. He killed him because Mardin sent his brother to another state execution a year ago. It was a revenge killing!"

Barlow's eyes didn't move. He stared at the ceiling.

Dent swallowed hard. "Barlow, listen to this. You got to get this. You got to understand what I'm saying! This Mardin was a real funny guy. I'm just beginning to realize what a funny duck he really was. You know why he handed you this automatic and goaded you into firing it? Get this—Yankovitch was hiding outside those french windows, and he heard the whole thing. Right after you emptied this gun at Mardin, Yankovitch came in and put six slugs into him.

"But, Barlow, listen to me! Listen to me! The gun Mardin handed you was loaded with blanks! You hear me? It was loaded with blanks! It was a gag. It was Mardin's idea of a real funny gag!"

And when he looked down at Barlow's face this time, there were tears in Barlow's eyes.

Behind him, Dent heard the doctor say softly, "I guess he'll come out of it now. He heard you."