

DETECTIVE TALES

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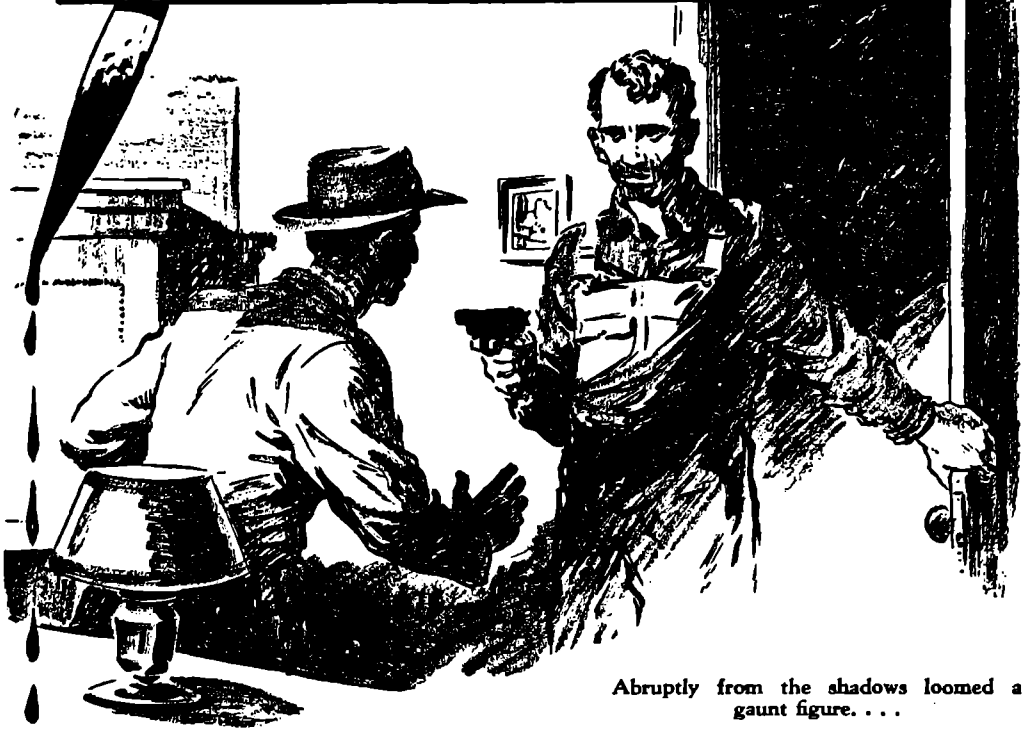
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KILLERS' REUNION

By FRANCIS K. ALLAN



Abruptly from the shadows loomed a gaunt figure. . . .

When a dead man stalked the city streets, sowing in his wake a crop of destruction and murder, Eddie Simmons stumbled in panic along the crimson trail, dreading to meet this strange juggernaut of death. . . . And dreading even more missing it!

THE light of dawn was growing when Eddie Simmons, late of the *Evening Star*, walked slowly home along Nineteenth Street in New York City. He walked slowly because he could still feel the rye whiskey, and because he was very discouraged.

The evening before, he had been fired.

According to Price, the managing-editor, Eddie was a little shrimp with too many big ideas! Price was right in calling Eddie little. He was five-six and weighed a hundred and twenty. Price didn't understand about the ideas, Eddie argued gloomily to himself. It was the duty of a good crime-reporter to be a detective.

That was the way matters stood with Eddie as he walked wearily along Nineteenth Street at six o'clock the morning after. He paused to survey a help-wanted sign in a gloomy furniture store. He sighed. And that was when he saw her.

Eddie had a good eye for beauty, and this

girl was beautiful. Her golden hair glistened like soft fire. He watched her crossing the street. She paused at the dusty dark doorway of an abandoned-looking loft-building. She squared her shoulders in determination, then pushed open the door and vanished into darkness.

He sighed again. Then he saw the man—tall and grey-faced, wearing a limp trench-coat and a black hat drawn low. Hands in his pockets, he was moving swiftly, on tip-toe. His eyes were locked on the building, on the door the girl had entered.

Something in the man's movements arrested Eddie's eyes. There was a hard, grim silence in the face. There was the stealth of a stalking animal in the taut body.

The man touched the door. Slowly he edged it open. His hand slid from his pocket. Eddie saw two things: First, something small and dark dropped unnoticed to the pavement. Second, he saw the gleaming barrel of a pistol in the man's hand.

The man vanished.

EDDIE'S brows went up. His tired eyes lost their dullness, began to sparkle. The truth of it was that Eddie had always been a detective at heart—a detective without a case or client. In imagination, he had trapped a dozen ruthless killers—had saved countless lives—through acts of daring. But . . . it had always been just a dream and Eddie Simmons now was just a little tired guy . . . without a job. . . .

He watched the aged building into which the girl and man had gone. Abruptly he stiffened.

A side door down the service-alley of the building was opening. The girl appeared. She was walking slowly, stiffly.

Close behind her walked a man. Eddie's eyes narrowed. It was not the same man who had followed her. A dark blue Homburg was on his head, and a fringe of grey hair showed about his temples. His face was sharp and handsome, and one of his hands cupped the girl's elbow. Eddie saw them turn the distant corner into Fifth Avenue. They were gone.

He looked again at the building, then crossed the street. He bent down to pick up the small object the first man had dropped. It was a leather glasses-case. The glasses were gone, but on the case Eddie saw:

HAUGHTON WELLES
THE TARRYMORE ARMS
MADISON AVENUE, N. Y.

He moved his hand toward the rusty knob of the door. Slowly he stepped into a dank hallway. There was no light, save for a greyish glow that spread down the dusty stairs

from above. Dust made a veneer on the floor, and only on the stairs was the veneer broken.

It's been a long time since anybody was in here—except two people climbing these stairs, Eddie realized. He listened. No sound reached his ears. A faint coolness stirred down his spine. He approached the stairs. He climbed past the second floor; there again the veneer of dust was unbroken. He passed the third floor. He reached the fourth. And here at the hallway, both pairs of footprints left the stairs and turned into the hall.

Eddie turned the corner. "D—damn!" he gasped. He froze. He swallowed. Gingerly, he advanced—one step, another, another . . . down the long length of the hall. There, at the last door, lay the crumpled, unconscious figure of the grey-faced man.

EDDIE swallowed again and knelt down, touching the man's shoulder. The man groaned thickly. His long head rolled slightly, and Eddie saw the ragged gash and the swelling bruise across the bony temple. Blood ran down the lines of the face, and stained the expensive shirt and tweed suit. Just beyond the man's limp fingers lay a pistol. And, half-tucked in his pocket, was a folded piece of paper.

Eddie hesitated and then unfolded it to read typed words:

Dear Haughton,

I expected you to try to follow. I am not a fool. You have only made it harder on yourself. I know who the girl is. Who she really is—understand? You will hear from me. Do not try to move it from your apartment.

"Uh . . . oooo," the man groaned heavily. Eddie quickly returned the paper to the man's pocket. He watched the eyes flicker open, stare at him blankly. They roamed to the ceiling and down the dirty walls. Slowly they cleared into a steely blue-grey.

Abruptly the man pushed himself up into a sitting position. Eddie swallowed for a third time as he saw the man's fingers silently close on the gun.

"Who are you?" the man asked coldly.

"Simmons. Eddie Simmons—that's my name," Eddie explained quickly. "You don't—don't need that gun on me," he added. "I just—just noticed you coming in and then I seen—saw that girl leave with the other guy and I thought it looked funny and I—"

Then the man noticed the paper in his pocket. He opened it slowly, with an eye on Eddie. Eddie saw the grey face drain, the muscles cord in the throat. The man cursed. Violently he heaved himself up, his inward turmoil suddenly giving him a maniac's vigor.

"Where is she?" he roared. He gripped

Eddie's shoulders. "Where did he take her? Where's Lorere? Tell me, damn you!"

"Listen, I—I don't know—know nothing!" Eddie choked. "I was just watching when you came in! I saw a man leave with this girl!"

The man cursed. He hurled Eddie against the wall and stumbled swiftly down the hall, thundered down the stairs.

When his footsteps faded and a door slammed downstairs, Eddie pulled himself up. His heart was pounding. And he was angry. It was a sensation he had almost forgotten. It heated his blood. And then it iced. He started thinking.

He retraced his steps to the stairs and looked at the footprints in the dust. None went up the stairs. None left the hall at any of the seven doors along the corridor. He followed the footsteps back to that last door where the man had lain. He turned the knob. His eyes widened. The door opened upon a narrow rear stairway. And there, upon the dust mantle, were the footsteps of the man and the girl. Eddie used that stairway to descend, and leave the vacant building himself.

Slowly he turned homeward again, but the interlude in the hall stayed vivid in his mind. The gun—he could see it now. The fury of the man's words—he could hear it now.

"Lorere," he said, Eddie recalled. "*Where is Lorere? Where did he take her. . .*" Eddie stopped as though a wall blocked his way. "Lorere . . . not . . . no!" he breathed. "It couldn't be—"

He began to walk more swiftly.

TWENTY minutes later he found Detective Abberson at the Myrtle Street Station. First he asked Abby about his children, about his wife, and then his sick brother. Finally, vaguely he said:

"Abby, didn't there used to be a guy around named Lorere?"

"Huh," the detective grunted, "Duke Lorere! He was the smartest, slickest jewel thief that ever worked the East coast. He was an artist."

"Whatever happened to him?"

"Murdered. Two years ago this fall. They never pinned it on anybody. They found his remains in a lime grave in New Jersey." Abby nodded reflectively. "Funny way for him to die—in a lime hole. . . ."

"Got a picture of him around?"

"Oh, maybe." Abby rose lazily and waddled away. Presently he returned with a small photograph. Eddie took it.

He felt a wave of blood hit his cheeks, and the breath dried out in his throat. "Yeah," he spoke distantly. But his heart was pounding. He knew. He *knew!*

Duke Lorere, the fabulous jewel-thief, was

not dead! He was alive! He had been with the girl when they left the building and vanished on Fifth Avenue.

"What's the matter with you?" Abby was speaking, "You're looking funny."

"Oh, I'm just tired." Eddie muttered. He waited around a few minutes more, then left. He walked slowly, thinking.

He was afraid, for Eddie was just a little guy who'd taken a lot of pushing. And he was worried, too. The hardest part of all was coming. He had to tell Wyn about his job. . . .

She was worried when he opened the door of the small apartment. He could see she hadn't slept much. He kissed her. For a moment he wanted to hold her close, to bury his face in the dark waves of her hair. He did none of those things.

"I . . . I had to work last night." It was the first lie he'd told her in many years. "I didn't even have time to telephone."

"Was it something important, Eddie?" she wondered eagerly.

"Oh, I don't know. It . . ." He stopped. "It could be," he said.

"Maybe IT's going to come true," she said softly.

IT was something like a dream. IT was the day when Eddie would be promoted. IT was an assistant city-editor's job. IT was a raise.

IT will never come true, Eddie whispered to himself. He knew it. He knew he wasn't smart. He was only what Wyn believed in, and Wyn couldn't see him straight. Love got in her eyes. Right now, he thought, she doesn't know. . . .

Suddenly he was angry at himself! He was no longer frightened. He was sorry for Wyn, but . . .

"Eddie! Where are you going?" she asked in surprise.

"I've still got to work," he said strangely. "The job I was on last night—it's not finished." He kissed her again and closed the door before he had to say any more.

On the street he drew the glasses-case from his pocket. The Tarrymore Arms . . . Madison Avenue. . . .

Perhaps he was a fool. But he didn't care just then. The bus stopped and he got on. It was strange, then. . . . It was like he had boarded a bus bound for another world. A thrill of sharpness tingled in his veins. He wasn't a fired, tired little guy.

He was Eddie Simmons, and he knew that Duke Lorere was alive!

THE Tarrymore Arms was a massive, chill building. The dark walls of the lobby seemed to frown at Eddie as he moved slowly over the thick carpet. On the directory-board he found the name:

HAUGHTON N. WELLES . . . APARTMENT 5-B.

The one elevator was up, but at the end of a corridor Eddie saw a metal stairway curving upward. Quietly he tip-toed upward. At the fifth floor he moved down the hall. He stopped suddenly as a bent, bony figure backed out of a closet. As the man straightened, Eddie stared at him.

He was the dirtiest man Eddie had seen in a long time. His hair was dark and matted with soot. His grimy cheeks were sunken, and his chin almost met the tip of his nose. His dull eyes blinked.

"G'morning," he grunted. From the closet he pulled a mop and broom, then shuffled away. Eddie breathed a sigh of relief. He continued on to door 5-B. He drew a deep breath and knocked. There was no answer.

Eddie's fingers were damp and trembling as he pulled his key-ring from his pocket. Cautiously he selected a skeleton key, fitted it to the key hole. His heart leaped as he felt the lock turning. Gently the door swung inward upon a shadowy, gloomy room. Quickly he locked it behind him. He stood, scarcely breathing, in the cold austere living room of Haughton Welles' apartment.

The furniture was massive and dark. There was an air of emptiness in the apartment. "Like a kind of a morgue," Eddie whispered to himself. "Creepy. . ."

He tip-toed across the room and peered

into a hall. He tried a closed door. It was locked. Eddie hesitated. The note had said there was something here—something that was not to be moved. . . .

He looked into the small neat kitchen, into the bath. The same air of emptiness hung in every room, but nowhere was there anything unusual. He returned to the locked door. He knelt down and peered through the key-hole. He saw the outline of a desk, of bookcases, a rug, a—

"Oh . . . God!" he choked. He froze. He felt his stomach tighten inside him. He felt the impulse to run, to shout.

He made himself take out his keys again. At last he opened the door. He edged forward until he stood just above the body of a round-headed, plump little man. The eyes were sunken and hollow. There was a ghastly purple-greyness to the flesh, and on the rug was the dried stain of blood.

It was one of the few corpses Eddie had ever seen, but he knew that this man had been dead for many hours.

He clenched his fist and swallowed heavily. Slowly he advanced and knelt down. He searched the man's pockets. He studied the identification card in the bill-fold. The name was Zefri Gaings. The address was the Gaings Watch and Jewelry Shop, Madison Avenue, N. Y. He found a small blunt automatic in one pocket, and a watch. As he lifted it, he noticed its feel—like a toy-watch, very light.

He opened the case, and blinked. The case was hollow, lined with blue velvet. There were two diamonds.

Eddie turned the body. The death wound was a neat, deep gash from a knife, squarely between Gaings' shoulders. Just as the body rolled back to the rug, Eddie saw the gleam of metal. He moved the body again and thrust his hand under the back. He lifted out a key—a hotel key with a number-plate attached:

ROOM 375 CONROE HOTEL.

Maybe the killer dropped it! Eddie realized sharply. He knifed Gaings! His key fell. Gaings fell on it. The killer didn't notice! And, if the killer doesn't know where he lost the key, maybe he hasn't moved from the Conroe!

HE STOPPED as he heard a drawling voice speaking in the hall: "G'morning, Mister Wellth," the voice was lisping. Footsteps echoed along the corridor. Eddie straightened. His frantic eyes raked the room. He heard a key grating at the front door. Swiftly he tip-toed out of the room. Just as the door from the hall opened, he huddled down in a dark corner behind a huge sofa.

Steps started across the room after the door was locked. There was a harsh, choking gasp. "Open! Somebody's been in there!" Eddie peered around the corner of the couch. He saw the hard-faced man rush to the door of the room, his eyes were tortured. His hand, half out of the pocket of his coat, nervously fingered his gun. He seemed to listen. He tip-toed through the apartment.

Eddie waited silently, and for the first time he noticed that he still held Gaings' blunt automatic in his hand. Gingerly he dropped it in his pocket. The shrill ring of the telephone blasted through the silence.

Welles moved into the hall. "Hello? . . . Oh." His voice dropped to a raw whisper. "Where is she, Lorere?" he breathed. "What? . . . No! I'll pay! I swear I'll pay! . . . No, I swear I won't try to move it! I—how much?" There was a pause. "But, Lorere!" Welles choked. "That—that five grand she gave you is all—all the cash I've got now! . . . Yes, but . . . Give me three hours! I'll get it! . . . Yes, I'll be here!" Welles hung up and dialed again.

"Marlin?" Eddie listened. "Marlin, this is Haughton. I've got to have twenty grand in three hours! In *cash*. Send it to my apartment . . . No, I can't explain. I . . . I can't. Send me the money—"

While Welles was talking, Eddie carefully crawled along the wall, unlocked the hall-door, and slipped out. He hurried to the rear stairs and started down. He met the dirty, hunch-shouldered janitor coming up. The dull eyes blinked at him vacantly.

"G'morning," the man said listlessly. Eddie paused.

"How long have you been working here, Sam?" he wondered.

"Name is Rothcoe," the man said toothlessly. "I don't work nowhere tho long. Gueth it'th been about two month here." He kept staring stupidly at Eddie. Eddie spoke slowly:

"I guess you know Mr. Welles. Who is he?"

"Wellth? Oh, him," Roscoe remembered. "Don't know. Theems like he'th kind of a lawyer. I don't know." He rubbed his dirty cheek.

"Did you ever see a pretty girl with him? A girl with gold hair?"

"Oh." Roscoe grinned a crooked, secretive grin. "Her—he thayth it'th hith thecretary. I theen her a lot."

"His secretary," Eddie mused. And he remembered what the note had said: *I know who the girl is. Who she really is—understand?* He nodded to Roscoe and hurried on down the stairs. He found the address of the Conroe Hotel.

IT WAS a small shabby place. The lobby was drab. Eddie stopped at the house telephone and called room 375. There was no answer. He climbed the stairs. As he walked, he felt the weight of the gun in his pocket. Along the third floor hall were many doors. The mingled music from radios wandered to his ears. The roar from the El thundered through the windows. He knocked at door 375. No answer. . . .

He tried his skeleton key again and stepped into a small bleak room. Upon a table was an unfinished solitaire lay-out. Three empty brandy bottles stood against the wall. The window-shade was drawn, and the mid-morning sunlight sent a muted olive light through the green material. Eddie locked the door behind him, slipped the safety from the automatic, and placed it on the corner of the dresser. He searched the empty drawers. He found nothing around the bed. He opened the closet. There hung three custom-tailored suits, a half-dozen expensive pairs of shoes, and two hats. On the shelf were perhaps a dozen good-shirts. Eddie smiled softly to himself.

"Those clothes are too good for this hotel."

He searched through the suits. He found only matches, half a pack of imported cigarettes, and a handkerchief. He frowned. He studied the shoes. Upon one pair was a faint dusty stain around the soles. That was all.

He sighed, listened toward the hall, then tip-toed to the bath-room. There he found nothing but a few very dirty and grimy towels wadded on the floor. He opened the medicine-cabinet. There was a faint metallic gleam

from the half-closed end of a tooth-paste box. He opened the box.

"It—the death knife!" he whispered. Into the palm of his hand slid a slender ivory-handled dagger. Upon the blade was the dark stain of dry blood. Eddie stared thoughtfully at the floor. His fingers tingled as he held the knife. Slowly his eyes widened. Suddenly he gasped.

"Maybe! Maybe!" he whispered excitedly. He fumbled the knife back into the box, pushed it back into the medicine-cabinet, and tip-toed swiftly from the room.

When he reached the street, he hailed a cab. "The Tarrymore Arms on Madison Avenue," he ordered swiftly. He leaned back and mopped his damp face. He retraced his thoughts again. His heart began to pound! He was right! He knew he was right! It grew into a thundering chant in his brain. His feet urged the cab faster.

Twenty minutes later he hurried down the fifth-floor hall and knocked at Haughton Welles' door. After a few seconds the lock turned and the grim tired-faced man peered out.

"What do you want? Who are—oh," he recognized.

"Wait! Don't slam the door!" Eddie shoved a foot into the crack. "I've got to talk to you! About the girl! I've got to tell you!" That stopped Welles' brusque movement. His eyes widened cautiously. Gradually he let the door open. Eddie slipped in. Instantly Welles closed the door. Eddie faced him, and Welles dropped his hand to his pocket.

"What about her?" he asked in measured coldness.

EDDIE swallowed. Now it was going to be bluff, and he'd never bluffed in his life. He tried to bring a faint smile to his lips. Slowly he lit a cigarette and leaned back against the wall.

"I'll begin by telling you my name again. I'm Eddie Simmons. My business," he said flatly, "is private investigation."

"I don't need a private dick," Welles snapped bluntly.

Eddie cocked a brow. "Not if I could locate the girl?"

Welles' eyes narrowed. Uneasily they studied Eddie's face. "I don't think you know where she is," he said carefully.

"I know that Duke Lorere is not dead. I know that he is blackmailing you. I know that Lorere has her. And I know where Duke Lorere is staying!" Eddie climaxed.

Welles' jaw sagged. His lips parted. "You . . . know? Where? How do you know? Where is he staying?" The questions were frantic.

"How?" Eddie smiled again. "Well, I found his room in a hotel. I found his clothes and

custom-made shirts. At least, I assume they are his. Didn't Lorere kill Gaings?"

"You know about Gaings?" Welles breathed. His face was suddenly ashen and white. No longer did he stand erect and cool. He hunched forward and his mouth twitched. "You . . . how did you know?"

"Look," Eddie said slowly, "I've told you enough. You know I'm not bluffing. Now you're going to tell me! First, I want to know the whole story—about the girl, Lorere, and Gaings. If you work with me, I think I can save the girl. Is it worth it?"

"Worth it?" The words were soft. Welles seemed to curl them over his lips. "Worth it," he echoed. "Yes. It's worth it," he whispered. He sagged down in a chair. His body, his face was suddenly old and tired and resigned. "She is my daughter," he said emptily. "No one knows but me. She does not know. Only I know and . . . somehow Lorere has learned." He paused, shot Eddie a sidelong glance.

"Where is Lorere's hide-out?" he queried softly, intently.

Eddie opened his mouth, about to reveal the hotel's name and room-number. Then he checked himself. He was not ready to play that card.

But Welles played his own card next—it was the gun in his hand. "Tell me," he persisted softly.

Eddie stared in numb bitterness at the gun. He had misplayed his hand. He had failed. And then, suddenly, Eddie thought of Gaings. And, just as suddenly, he realized Welles hadn't killed Gaings. The game had reached the bluffing stage.

"Put away that gun, Mr. Welles," he said loudly. "You aren't going to kill me. If you do, the cops will pin the Gaings job on you, as well as my murder. If you don't—" he lifted his hands—"we can pin the Gaings murder where it belongs . . . on Lorere!"

Their eyes held steadily for a long moment. Then Welles' face seemed to sag. His eyes closed—the gun fell to the floor.

"I can't—can't stand this killing," he whispered.

Eddie drew a shaky breath. "That's better. Now talk—and talk fast! And don't miss a trick. Remember, you're only filling in details—for I know most of this."

Welles let his hands fall heavily on the arms of his chair. His voice was low and bitter.

"I am no lawyer. Oh, I took a law degree. I accept a few cases to keep up a front. Actually I am a—a broker in stolen jewels. I am the head of an international syndicate. I have been for years. I . . . It was money! I always wanted money. You see?" The words began to pour out now, as though some long-rotting dam had burst. "Gaings was one of our out-

lets. He sold in small quantities. And Lorere was . . . years ago, he was our chief source of stolen stones. He was the greatest jewel thief of the twenties and thirties. He trained a few men and women to work with him. But then—it was two years ago—he got into trouble. It was just an income-tax charge, but it was an opening wedge to make him talk. We knew we were wrecked if he ever told his story. We . . .” Welles mopped his face. He stumbled on. “I did something I’d never done before. I planned his murder. I hired a gunman to kill him. I . . . Then something went wrong. Lorere must have heard of my plan. He outsmarted the gunman. On the selected night, he and the gunman disappeared. Neither was heard of again until two months ago when Lorere contacted me—and blackmailed me! He’d killed the gunman and buried him in the lime-grave in New Jersey! He’d planted his own ring and watch and belt-buckle in the grave. The gunman’s remains were identified as Lorere’s. And then he came back! And he *knew I’d plotted his murder!*” Welles choked.

“What happened?” Eddie prompted breathlessly.

“I PAID ten thousand in blackmail. I tried to fight back. I couldn’t trace Lorere, couldn’t find where he was staying! I knew he would bleed me to death. I refused last week to pay. And so . . . last night I was called to Brooklyn. It was a fake call. The person did not meet me. When I returned here, the body—Gaings’ body—was in that room! And one minute after I arrived, Lorere called me. He said he was watching every move I made! He said I would pay what he asked, or the police would be sent to this apartment! He said they would find proof that I was the murderer. He said they’d learn where I’d been staying the last four days—in some hotel in this town, he said. They’d find my clothes and the death weapon hidden there and—”

“Wait!” Eddie exploded. “Your clothes have been stolen? You’ve been out of town four days?”

“Some shorts, hats, three suits, and some shoes of mine are missing. And I have been out of town. Furthermore, if I tried to use it as an alibi to fight Lorere, I’d have to reveal that I’d been in Philadelphia selling stolen diamonds. I couldn’t. I was trapped. I—”

“But you don’t *know* where this room in this certain hotel is?” Eddie demanded sharply. Welles shook his head. “All right,” Eddie said, “you came back to this apartment after a fake call to Brooklyn. You found Gaings’ corpse. Then what?”

“I was directed to send five thousand dollars to an address and certain room on Nine-

teenth Street this morning. I was to send it by my secretary—my daughter. I did. I followed her, hoping to trap Lorere. But he got the drop on me, slugged me, and took her. Now he’s demanding more money for her safe return. And he’ll send the cops here to find Gaings, too! He won’t let me move the corpse if I could! He seems to know every move I make! I—oh, God, I don’t know what to do! I’m going crazy! I—”

“Why did you send your daughter into this mess?”

“I didn’t know Lorere knew who she actually was. You see, when she was a baby and her mother died, I put her in a home. I didn’t want her to ever learn about me—what I did. But when she came to New York to get a job, I managed to have her apply to me. I wanted to see her, know her. But she’s never known who I really am or what I really did. I’ve never wanted her to know. She’s innocent of any part in this. But Lorere has learned about her!”

“If I can save her, you’ll tell this story to the police?” Eddie asked. “You’ve got nothing to lose. That corpse is on your hands. Lorere is determined to wreck you. . .”

Welles blinked his haggard eyes. “If you can save her, I—I will tell the truth to the police.”

Eddie mashed out his cigarette. “Call the manager. Tell him a pipe has broken. Ask him to send up the janitor.”

Welles’ jaw sagged. Eddie gestured. “Go on. Make the call.”

Welles shrugged and stalked from the room. He vanished down the hall. Eddie waited to hear the click of the dial. He heard nothing but a muted sigh. He frowned. He started toward the hall. Abruptly, out of the half-shadows, loomed the gaunt and dirty figure of Roscoe. Toothlessly and thinly he smiled, and the gun in his hand levelled on Eddie’s head.

“SO you wanted the janitor,” he said softly.

“You’ve got him. Or rather, he’s got you.” The man’s grin vanished into a grey bleakness. “Don’t try to draw your little gun,” he murmured.

“But you . . . how did you—and Welles—” Eddie gasped.

“I’ve been listening. I came in by the fire-escape. And Welles is unconscious,” Roscoe explained ironically. “He didn’t see me when I hit him. He’ll never know who Lorere is, now.”

“You—you—you can’t kill me!” Eddie choked. “You—”

“On the contrary, I can. I think I shall.” Roscoe’s eyes narrowed curiously. “But I’m wondering about something. . . . Just how did you know that I was Duke Lorere?”

"I—in that room at the Conroe. . . . The towels were so dirty. But the clothes were very expensive. It wasn't right that a guy would get that dirty in those clothes—and the clothes weren't dirty, anywhere." Eddie swallowed. He felt sweat slipping down his cheeks, and his throat was dry. Frantically he kept talking: "I remembered how dirty you were. Then I saw that glass of water in the medicine-cabinet. I remembered how sunken your cheeks were. All of a sudden I thought: That's where you'd kept your false-teeth at night when you stayed in that room. You kept yourself dirty when you were here so Welles wouldn't recognize. I got to thinking. You were almost too dumb and stupid looking. But Lorere was very smart. If you wanted to disguise yourself, wouldn't you go to the other extreme like that?"

The man smiled gently. "Not bad, for a little guy like you. And you're right—I stole Welles' clothes. When I left work here, I

he leaped, he screamed with all the terror in him. He heard the gun blasting into his face. He felt a needle of hot fire race through his shoulder. He felt his arms drive into Lorere's chest.

Wildly, frantically he gripped and twisted. He tried to bite—to kick. A sinewy arm locked about his head, twisted, and crushed down. Then came the second roaring thunder. A tearing wave of pain cut through Eddie's ribs. He felt his body, his nerves stagger. He felt a blackness cross like a cloud through his head. He felt himself falling. He crumpled on the floor.

He heard a voice. It seemed to drift in from far away. He tried to see. Across the rim of his vision drifted the figure of Haughton Welles. The man leaned in the hall-doorway. A gun was in his hand. Blood streamed across his face, but his gun was lifting. Before it was up, Eddie heard Lorere's gun blasting out again! He saw Welles stagger backward.

slipped in the back way at the Conroe. When I got to the room, I bathed, put on Welles' clothes, and left by the front way.

I put the Conroe Hotel key under the corpse where the police were to find it when I was ready. They would go there, find the death knife, Welles' clothes, and they would find witnesses to say that Welles had been seen leaving that hotel. All quite logical. And that is just what will happen . . . after he has paid all he can for protection." The man smiled, but suddenly the smile was insane with hatred.

"You—you're mad! Listen, you—you can't get away—"

"Oh, but I will. And I'm not a bit mad. "Now, I must ask you to step into the study with the corpse."

Eddie choked. His muscles refused to move. He felt himself trembling, shaking. He tried to speak. His tongue was thick and hot.

"Move! Move, damn you!" Lorere whispered. "Move or—" He stopped. A choking cough came from down the hall. Lorere cursed savagely. Welles was regaining consciousness. Lorere was desperate. Eddie knew. He had to kill and get out. . . .

Eddie saw the gun come swinging back upon him. He closed his eyes. He leaped. As

Eddie twisted feebly. He found the automatic in his pocket. With his last margin of consciousness, he levelled the gun. Into his wavering sight swam the figure of Lorere. Eddie waited one last instant. The gun froze on Lorere's head.

Eddie fired.

HE wasn't just a tired little guy without a job, anymore. He was Eddie Simmons, and he knew where he was going when he left the hospital that day in September. You see, he'd always dreamed about being a private-detective. . . .

Yes, he told the reporters, it had been a hard case. In fact, a dangerous case, he admitted. No, he'd never been afraid, though it had been touch-and-go for a minute, he remembered. Yes, he understood he was to get a five thousand dollar reward. And yes, it was too bad Welles and Lorere hadn't been captured alive. . . .

But inside, Eddie knew it was better that way. He never told them that the pretty girl with the golden hair was really Kathryn Welles. After all, she was innocent. He was glad she'd been found unhurt, for she was the only one worth saving. He left it at that. . . .