

**DETECTIVE BOOK MAGAZINE'S
\$2.00 BOOKLENGTH NOVEL**

THE TRIPLE CROSS

by **JOE BARRY**

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HE came to in a hospital, recovering from a bullet-crease. He learned he was Rush Henry, a private dick—and a fast man with a gun, a buck or a gal. It was all a little hard to believe. But, when he walked out into the street and the guns began to bang and the fists went smack and the knives flickered, he saw it didn't make any difference what he thought. He was up to his neck in a bucket of blood and, if he wanted to go on being anybody, his only chance was to make like Rush Henry, a private dick—but fast!

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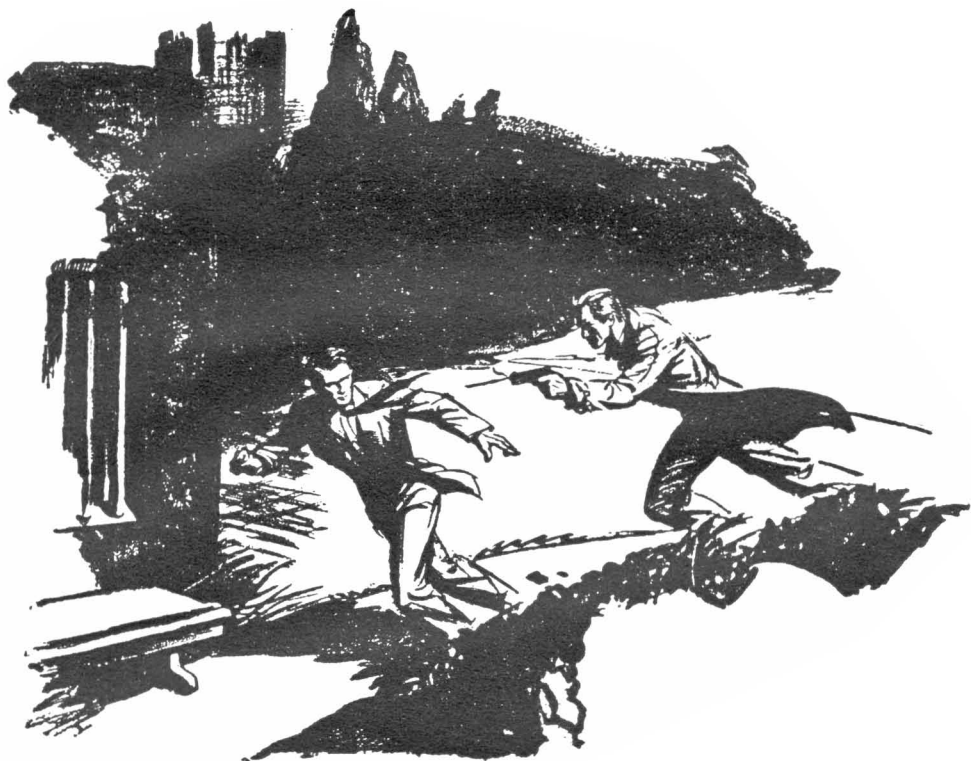
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PASSPORT TO HELL

By JOHN STARR



Big John Stanislaw wanted out. The heat was on—and he had the perfect set-up for a first-class lam. All he needed was three corpses to offer the gods of chance.

STANISLAW was never a gunman, yet he was packing a flat automatic now in an armpit holster. Stanislaw was not a nervous man—his calm was notorious—yet now the fingers of his hands twitched and he paced the room like a caged jungle cat. Stanislaw did not smoke or drink, but he would have paid ten thousand dollars tonight—ten grand, cash, on the line—for the solace that nicotine or whiskey sometimes bring to a man.

He paced the room up and down. Back and across. His hands kept twisting and his face was a tense mask.

Now he said, "Are you sure the money is safe—that it is there—that I can get it?"

And he said again, "Nobody knows. . . ."

Are you sure nobody knows?"

When his words died in silence, he cursed. He whirled, and his shaking hands were talons. He cried out, "Answer me, Marlock. You damned old buzzard, speak to me!"

Marlock did not raise his head from the papers over which his pen rasped. Saul Marlock was a lawyer—one of the greatest, they called him—and he had seen the mask stripped from many a man before. He growled in his deep and resonant voice, "Shut up, you fool, or we'll both be crazy."

Scratch, scratch, went his pen on the paper.

The blood of that inner excitement

drained out of Stanislaw's face, and he halted abruptly in his pacing. His dark eyes narrowed, and glared at Marlock's back hunched over the table, at the seamed buzzard neck under the fringe of Marlock's white hair. In Marlock's voice John Stanislaw had felt the bite of sardonic laughter, and to Stanislaw laughter was poison. Sneers he could stand for, and spoken insult, but the men who laughed at Stanislaw paid for their mirth in coin that was unpleasant.

But Marlock's mirth now was good poison. Stanislaw saw that he was indeed a fool—idiotic—a coward like a woman. His actions did not suit him. John Stanislaw's jaw tightened and he tore his eyes away from Marlock's bent back. He stalked to the window and stared blindly into a night pregnant with rain. His fingers drummed a tattoo on the pane. Then gradually Stanislaw came back to himself. The drum of his fingers slackened pace. His hand relaxed. He stood erect, chest out, and breathed deeply until the rage and blind fear had abated. Until he became John Stanislaw again—the Mr. S. that the Big Street knew, calm, suave, imperturbable.

He said over his shoulder, voice steady, "Thank you, Marlock."

Yet he did not forgive the lawyer for his unseen and silent laughter. Nor did his fear leave him, though now he had it safely hidden. His fear would not vanish until this night was safely over. Tonight John Stanislaw was shooting the works in the most daring, most heedless gamble of his dark and twisted career.

Tonight—within the hour . . .

John Stanislaw looked down on the lights of the city twelve stories below, and the thin, sardonic smile that many men knew touched his lips for a moment. That was the Main Stem down there—a winding, glowing snake in the misty dark. Over beyond was the deeper blot of the Park. Farther away, tall spires lifted their burning peaks into the dim sky. . . . New York—bright metropolis of the world! Broadway—the Great White Way!

Hot trumpets and strip dancers, Stanis-

law thought to himself. Orange-drink stands and bus-loads of boobs. Four-flushers in full-dress—come-on men—song hawkers and hustlers. 50 dazzling dancing mates 50—a dime a throw and not worth a dime a dozen. No cover charge. . . .

"Sucker's paradise," Stanislaw muttered aloud, and his dark smile widened without mirth.

Marlock said, "Be with you in three minutes."

Scratch . . . scratch whispered the pen.

IN the dusky glass of the window Stanislaw saw that his tie was askew, and he adjusted it carefully. He smoothed his sleek hair, arranged the satin lapels of his evening coat. In the dark mirror he studied himself and the picture pleased him. He had not gone soft and fat as he once had feared. There were lines in his face, but handball and fencing had kept his belly flat and hard. His eyes were clear. At thirty-two he still had the prime of his life before him.

He jerked his vest down smooth, twitched again at his tie. The prime of life—and from this night on John Stanislaw would enjoy it.

Only three men knew it—three men in all the world—but tonight Mr. S. was quitting the racket. Breaking it off clean, once and for all. Stanislaw's eyes followed to the spot where his Casa Casanova added a red gleam to Broadway's glitter. Tomorrow somebody else would be grabbing the owner's cut on the society take up there. Somebody else would be paying off the bartenders at Tenth and Charles after tomorrow. Somebody else could have the cash and the grief, for Mr. S.—John Stanislaw of the onyx studs and the onyx eyes—would be dead.

The tabloid rags would be screaming the news in scareheads. *Death Trumps Boss Gambler*. Winchell would be wise-cracking about it—professing vaguely-told information. The boys would be loading up to muscle in on the floating dice take-off. Stool-pigeons and the plain-clothes squad would be running their tails off. There would be a funeral with plenty of swank. The Commissioner of Police would issue a statement.

Tonight John Stanislaw would die in the eyes of the world.

"*Requiescat in pace!*" murmured John Stanislaw. He smiled at the smiling image in the dark window. He bowed mockingly. "We who are about to die salute you."

From the street below taxis hooted a faint, sardonic echo.

SAUL MARLOCK was scrubbing the ink stains from his fingers with the damp edge of a towel. "I am doing this foolishness merely to humor you—understand that, Stanislaw." It was the third time he had made approximately the same statement.

Stanislaw nodded, staring down at the papers on the table.

"For the first time in thirty years I have been my own clerk," Marlock went on. He laughed. "It reminded me of other days. I aspired to be district attorney once, did you know that, Stanislaw?"

Stanislaw said, "You're getting paid for it. The fewer that know about this the less the chance of a leak. I'm taking the chances—what are *you* squawking about!"

Marlock lit a long cigar and sat down. He looked at his watch and yawned.

"I have made a list of everything for your information," he said. "The money has been transferred according to your directions as the records there will show. You have letters of credit on the best banking houses in Vienna, Liverpool, Hamburg and Madrid. You have deposit vaults in Oslo and Copenhagen. And if you follow the system I have worked out for you there can be no trace. That I will guarantee, Stanislaw—the rest is up to you."

John Stanislaw was studying the papers, adding rapidly on a pad. "These totals are screwy—or I can't count," he said after a moment.

"I told you I was taking my fee in advance," Marlock reminded. "I didn't note it there, but I have transferred the Trans Marine bonds to cover my—er—unusual exertions during the past two weeks. The transfer is there—predated, of course—for your signature."

Stanislaw turned to stare at him with narrowed eyes. "Those bonds are worth a hundred thousand," he stated flatly.

"Not quite that, but almost," Marlock admitted. He spoke casually.

Their glances met and held, and John Stanislaw was the first to turn his eyes away. He pretended to study the transfer form that Marlock pushed in front of him, but again he had to fight back the surge of rage that was rising. He realized suddenly that he had always hated the cold power of Marlock's voice—the grim certainty of Marlock's old and ugly face. Under the table his hand clenched and trembled.

Laugh number two, eh?

Okay, pal . . . 'Sta bueno, you damn' old buzzard!

"Use that purple pen," Marlock advised calmly. "It contains a special ink that will dry to correspond with the date of the transfer. Even under microscopic analysis."

Stanislaw took the pen in his left hand and signed *N. S. Rogers* with smooth, swinging strokes. *N. S. Rogers* was one of five dummy names under which he concealed his finances. It had taken Stanislaw almost three months of practice before his other hand was trained, but Stanislaw had conquered that difficulty with the thoroughness that was typical of him. He blew on the signature until it was dry and passed the transfer to Marlock. The lawyer put it in his pocket and looked at his watch again.

"Well, I go to my righteous bed," he said. "Goodbye, Stanislaw, and good luck. You'll need it."

He ground out the glowing end of his cigar, but Stanislaw said, "Wait a minute, Saul. The Greek is calling me at twelve sharp—bringing Cameron up here. Why don't you take a look at him?"

Marlock shook his head. "I knew his father too well," Marlock said, and his voice was a slap in the face. "No, thanks. I aim to stay clear of that end of it, even if the kid's going to die anyway."

"Then have one drink to my success," Stanislaw invited. "Just one."

Marlock hesitated, shrugged. "Brandy and soda," he said.

He was humming tonelessly, chair tilted back, when Stanislaw returned from the kitchenette with a bottle and glasses and a siphon. Stanislaw went out again for a bowl of ice cubes. He had taken off his coat. He wore a heavy silk lounging robe, now, and the flat automatic had been transferred to one of its red pockets.

The clock on the dresser said it would be midnight in four minutes.

STANISLAW seemed more cheerful as he built the drinks. Brandy and soda for Marlock. Plain soda with lemon for himself. His voice had a new note in it as he talked.

"I'll make it clean, Saul," he said. "Wait and see. He's my size, my coloring. He'll be wearing my clothes—in my car—my watch—my silver-initial stick. . . ."

Marlock nodded, his seamed face inscrutable.

"Car total loss. Occupant burned beyond recognition," he droned, as if he read from a newspaper account.

Stanislaw shrugged. He went on talking, his words flowing more swiftly as if by convincing Marlock he added to his own conviction.

"Why should they doubt?" he asked. "How can they check?" And he went on to tell Marlock things the lawyer already knew. No dentist had ever made a chart of Stanislaw's teeth. The finger prints of John Stanislaw that had been taken six years before had mysteriously disappeared from Headquarters files. Three or four men—men of importance, beyond reproach—could truthfully testify that Stanislaw had been nervously apprehensive of some such thing for weeks. There could be no check on Cameron—an absolute stranger, spending his first day in town. No relative, and his coming to New York secret even to his few friends.

"It's a dream," Stanislaw said, his voice harsh with excitement. "A hundred to one shot. What else can anybody figure except that they've finally taken John Stanislaw for a ride?"

Marlock sipped at his drink before replying. "You still have your getaway," he reminded. "I have arranged it care-

fully—the plane, your passage on the *Siberia*, fake passports, all that. And yet . . . I don't think you'll make it. It's too much like a story book. Too fantastic."

He finished his drink and arose. He looked at Stanislaw standing there and smiled. Marlock understood what John Stanislaw was up against, and the feeling of one fighting man for another warmed his heart to the gambler for an instant.

Of all the carrion crew that lived by its wits from other men's work, Stanislaw was the gamest, he thought. For months now, this sleek, dark man facing Marlock had been waging a losing battle with overwhelming force. As Public Enemy Number Four—duly chronicled in the press—John Stanislaw had been a target for the Federal investigators who were ferreting out Income Tax frauds. And they had fastened their hooks in Stanislaw, even as they had in the other big fish of the underworld. Stanislaw had seen the careful cases of other bright-light moguls crashed on the rocks of inexorable law. He knew he was up against a game where all his bribery, all Marlock's legal tricks, were of no avail.

"Six years," the Judge had said to Haggerman's brilliant array of lawyers. Six years and a heavy fine. They had pronounced the same sentence in Chicago, in Detroit. And try and beat them! Publicity made it impossible that these raps should fail to stand up.

Others had fought and lost. Stanislaw was taking their lesson to heart—was running while there was still a chance.

Because the chance was so desperate, Marlock forgot for a moment the inherent antagonism that had always flourished between them. He put out his hand and Stanislaw took it.

"It's too bad you didn't get a better break, John," Marlock said. He was thinking of what Stanislaw might have been if the cards of Fate had fallen differently. "If you had something better than paper and watches to mark your grave you might get away with it. I—"

Stanislaw was still holding the lawyer's hand in his cold palm. "I have something better," the gambler said slowly. "Two aces in the hole. Besides those other

things, I'll leave The Greek there for them."

Marlock's fingers stiffened and he tried to draw his hand away.

"The Greek . . . ?"

The Greek was John Stanislaw's right-hand man—his one friend, his shadow from the early days. The man closest to the famous gambler. Rumor said they came from the same small town in the West. Men said the Greek was the one living thing—except for his well-known dogs—that John Stanislaw loved. . . .

The telephone shrilled like a brazen, shrieking voice in the silence.

"The Greek—" John Stanislaw said. "That will leave only *two* who know, Marlock."

He released the lawyer's hand as the telephone jangled again. "That'll be The Greek calling now," Stanislaw said. "Answer it, won't you?"

Marlock must have known then what Stanislaw planned, for it was written in the madness of the gambler's eyes, in the crouching tenseness of his body, in that stiffened arm that hid its hand in the pocket of Stanislaw's dressing robe. Marlock was a criminal lawyer—a reader of men—and though Stanislaw had never killed before, had been known, indeed, to avoid violence—Marlock *must* have marked the murder lust that swept the man now.

Yet Marlock just stared at him, seamed face drained of color and loose-lipped jaw sagging in disbelief. As if some power beyond his will directed it, Marlock turned. His hand reached out for the clanging phone.

Stanislaw's gun had a silencer. He had intended to shoot the lawyer, trusting the ringing phone to drown out the sound. He had timed it all, arranged it all very carefully in his mind. Yet as their talk had gone on some instinct changed the gambler's plan. The silken cord that tied his dressing robe at the waist was loose. Now it dangled in his left hand, unseen. As Marlock turned, Stanislaw whipped up that cord in both hands and leaped. The silken rope jerked on Marlock's neck and the force of the spring bore them both to the lounge nearby.

Stanislaw had planned it so.

The cry of fear that had been choked up in Marlock's throat broke out now, but it was only a gasping whisper. His legs threshed, and he tried to claw with his hands. But Stanislaw bore him down. His knees pressed into Marlock's back. The tendons in the gambler's strong arms were rigid with the strain. His face was the fearful, lustful mask of a devil.

In the silence the clock ticked. One minute after twelve, its hand stated.

II

STEVE CAMERON rattled the dice in his hand. His eyes were fever-bright, and excitement made his voice shrill.

"Eighty bucks open," he said. "Hop on me, gamblers."

A coffee-brown dandy from Harlem dropped a yellow bill on the long, banked table. He picked up two tens and smoothed them as he waited for the roll. Steve breathed into his clenched hand and the dice chattered. He sent them galloping with a back-hand cast, and turned up an ace and a trey.

"Little Joe from Kokomo!" he cried, and he cradled the dice again in his hot palm. He flashed a glance at The Greek who was still standing behind him, but he could awaken no response to his excitement in that dark, saturnine face. Three hundred was probably small change to a big shot like The Greek. But it was heavy dough to Steve Cameron.

Little Joe. . . . Come out you Joe. . . .

Steve rolled a nine on the next throw; then four eights in succession. The man next to him offered three to two that he wouldn't, but Steve shook his head. On the sixth cast he rolled out a pair of deuces, and passed the dice.

"It's almost twelve," Steve explained, nodding toward the clock, "and I never could lay up a dime on Friday. My bad luck day."

No one listened to what he was saying. No one spoke, or seemed to notice he was out of the game. They'd have torn the roof off if he'd tried to ease out like

that down in Mercer County, Steve thought. But this was different—this was the Main Stem, the Big Place. . . .

"Small town boy makes good," he said to The Greek, tapping his newly won roll with the back of his hand. "Three hundred even, after givin' you your ten back."

The Greek grunted and moved back from the press of the craps-shooters. He tucked the ten negligently into an upper pocket of his white-piped vest. He made no sign to Steve Cameron, but there was a command to follow in the way he turned toward the door.

In the outer room were pool tables, at least thirty of them. There were blackboards for tomorrow's entries on the wall. Near the long lunch-bar was an array of phone booths. The Greek disappeared in one while Steve drank a glass of milk.

"No answer," The Greek said when he came out. He shrugged. Steve did not know what he was talking about.

They passed down a bright hallway, so narrow they had to walk in single file. An alcove opened at the end of it, where a man sat in a green chair near the thick, green ice-box door. This man rose as they came along the hall and nodded to The Greek. He tapped twice on the door, and waited a moment before he manipulated the series of bolts that made it secure.

There was another guard outside, and another array of locks for his attention. They could hear them clicking as they passed down the narrow, carpeted stairs that led to the street.

"You'd think it was the Mint back there," Steve said over his shoulder. He was feeling pretty swell.

"They cannot even open the place without twenty thousand in the box," The Greek said in his thin, dry voice. "On big nights their take will run fifty Gs. That is important money in these days. There are too many crazy kids on the make these days for a business man to take a chance."

He spoke with just the faintest trace of accent, spacing his words precisely as if he had to stop to think between them. Apparently the subject interested The Greek for it was the first time Steve Cameron had heard him string more than

three words together.

Down on the street a legless beggar propelled himself through the thinning crowd. A beggar with a forced and sickly smile twisting his face. A leashed terrier pup beside him barked for attention at trained intervals. Steve Cameron dropped a quarter in the cup.

"For luck," he told The Greek.

The Greek blew smoke from his nostrils expressively.

A DRIZZLE of rain blurred Broadway now as the Yellow pulled up at the green-and-gold marquee of the Park Manor. A flunkey in green-and-gold opened and closed the taxi door. A bright electric clock marked the time as twelve-ten, but it seemed to Steve Cameron he had been in this town for months rather than the six brief hours since The Greek had met him at the station. He felt on top of the world. He had not coughed in a long time, and the dull burn in his chest was forgotten. All set. And he told himself that from here on in there would be no small-time stuff for Steve Cameron. Big shot or bust—blue chips or nothing. . . .

He felt The Greek's fingers clench on his arm, turned as a figure came toward them out of the doorway's shadow. This man was smiling, and he spoke to The Greek in a low voice. The Greek did not look at him or stop. His grip on Steve's arm tightened, and they spun fast through the revolving doors. But the man caught up with them before they had taken six steps across the lobby.

He said, "What's the hurry boys? Ain't gone high-hat, have you?"

He was tall and thin and swarthy. The collar of his light topcoat was pulled up around his chin, and his black, pull-down hat was dripping. His voice was unpleasant.

The Greek said, "Hello, Nick. Did not see you. How are tricks?" and tried to keep on moving toward the elevators. But the tall man blocked the way.

"Take it easy," he said slowly. "It's early yet." His eyes studied The Greek intently. "I came all the way in from Croton just to have a talk with you or Stanislaw. Nasty night, too, for driving."

He made a sweep with his hat so that a spray of water sprinkled on the tile floor. Steve Cameron saw hair that was startling in its whiteness above the man's dark face. A purple birthmark covered the left side of his forehead almost to the ear, but you couldn't see it when he had his hat on. He continued to smile pleasantly—a smile that was mostly a show of white, even teeth.

The Greek scowled. "Well—?"

The man with the white hair said, "Stanislaw's dogs are both dead. Poisoned. I got it straight and I'm curious. You know me, Hippolite. If there's something on why don't you deal the Old Colonel in from scratch? Make it easier for everybody."

The Greek said, "Drop that Hippolite stuff, Nick. The dogs are all right. You are utsnay. Lay off the tea."

"They're dead — poisoned," the white-haired man corrected. "They train those police dogs, too, not to take food from strangers. Stanislaw's place at Croton is guarded like a fort, and it must have been an inside job. Stanislaw treated them like they were his kids. Now they're wiped out. Who done it—why? Why ain't Stanislaw squawking about it? What's he going to do about it? What's up? . . . I want to know."

Steve Cameron remembered then. There had been pictures of those dogs in the roto section plenty of times. Worth thousands—prize dogs from Germany. He looked at The Greek and saw that The Greek was nervous.

The white-haired man said, "I've been trying to get Stanislaw since ten o'clock. His phone don't answer. The clerk says he ain't here, and he ain't at any of the other spots. I got a hunch and I'm asking questions. What's on the fire? Who gave Stanislaw's pups the works?"

The Greek growled, "Aw, lay off." and bit at his lip. "What is it to you, anyway?"

"It's my job," the white-haired man said. "The Commissioner's idea, you know is to stop crime before it starts. You read that in the papers. That's why he created this confidential little squad I'm on. Now, personally, I like to see you boys settle your own little troubles. It

saves time and money. Every time one of you bites the dust, it's one less I got to worry about. But I got to see that Rongetti looks good. I want a promotion next year. So when anything breaks I want to be in on it. If somebody's after Stanislaw's hide I want to be on the inside. If Mr. S. is on the warpath I want to know what all the shooting's about. I sleep better when I got all the details. I ain't after anything on Mr. S. Them Federals have got him plenty and he knows it. You don't have to worry about me, so come on, Hippolite, let's you and me be buddies. What happened to the Big Shot's bow-wows?"

The Greek cursed under his breath and his face was furious. His thin voice was barbed with anger. "Why don't you grow up, Nick?" he asked. "Get wise and roll your hoop in some other alley. Lay off me, see, or one of these nights . . ."

The man with the white hair nodded. "Yeah, I know. Some night like this one—some nice night for murder. But it won't be any dumb heel like you, muscle-bound, that will slip Rongetti his Mickey Finn . . . Who's the punk?"

The Greek said to Steve, "Never mind, never mind. Just Nick Rongetti blowing off his mouth. Just a dumb cop, kid, a clown flatfoot putting his act on." He reached out a hairy paw and moved the white-haired man out of the way.

Rongetti kept on smiling. Just before the elevator doors closed, Steve saw him sitting in a chair that covered the elevator exits. He was looking at them over the edge of a newspaper.

THE Greek knocked twice on the door of 1132, and knocked again before there was an answer. A voice asked, "Yeah—who is it?"

The Greek said, "It's all right—it's me. Open up, Joe."

A door chain rattled and a man looked out at them. He grunted and let them into a large, bare room. A bed in one corner—lounge near the windows—a table and chair under the center light.

Joe was a tall-blond man in shirt-sleeves. He nodded toward a closed door. "Been

waitin' for you twenty minutes. Old Man Marlock's in there with him now."

There was a bottle of rye on the table and the Greek poured a stiff one into a water-glass. Joe went back to his half-finished game of Canfield. Steve Cameron thought longingly of a cigarette. He sat on the arm of the lounge where he could look out the window.

Down there below him the lights of the park gleamed in the misty night. That long, gleaming snake winding through the dark was Broadway—bright lights and hot music, good-looking women and big money. Steve Cameron drank it in with his eyes, and again his hunch burned hot in him. He was going to get well—get some sun and burn those bugs out of his chest. He was going to be a big shot in New York—one of the biggest. He'd have money, plenty of it, and women, and fine clothes. The name of Lucky Steve Cameron was going to mean something.

Some day—some way.

Hard work? Sure, it meant hard work. But Steve Cameron was used to that. His life had been nothing else but hard work ever since he could remember. That State school, for instance, where they'd dragged him out at five to sweat in the tobacco bottoms. The endless day in the mines when he'd broken his back, almost, for thirty bucks a week. That sixteen-hour shift stuff at the garage . . . Hard work? Hell, Steve Cameron had been weaned on it.

But down there below him now was Broadway—the Main Drag. In that next room was John Stanislaw—better known as Mr. S., and still better known as the Big Shot. Mr. S. had sent for Steve Cameron. Mr. S. could use him because this job needed a man who was absolutely unknown to the gambling fraternity. And Steve Cameron could use Mr. S. John Stanislaw was passing him his big chance, and Steve Cameron wasn't going to fumble it.

The sign was right. His hunch told him that the Cameron luck was due to climb out from behind the eight ball.

He walked over to the table where Joe was riffing his solitaire deck. He smiled to himself as he saw the shoulder-hol-

stered automatic that peeped out from Joe's unbuttoned vest. Steve Cameron had been taught to have little respect for gunmen. Men with brains—the big timers—hired guns; they did not wear them.

He said to Joe: "Don't you know it's bad luck to shuffle a deck endways? I can cut a higher card than you for a saw-buck."

Joe lifted a heavy face and went on riffing the cards. "Call your gambler off," he said to the Greek, and the Greek laughed. They started a three-handed game of blackjack, and Steve was exactly even when the adjoining door opened and Steve saw John Stanislaw for the first time.

His chair almost toppled as Steve Cameron leaped to his feet.

He saw a man of medium height, darkly handsome, dressed in immaculate evening clothes. A man whose face looked no older than Steve Cameron's own, but who held himself with the sureness and the poise that marks your man-of-the-world. Steve Cameron saw before him the kind of man he hoped to be some day.

Stanislaw held out his hand as he came forward. He said heartily, "I'm glad to see you, Cameron."

Steve mumbled something. He smiled as Stanislaw smiled. Steve liked the depth and warmth of Mr. Stanislaw's voice. He liked the cool and steady grip of the man's hand.

Stanislaw said to the blond man, "You can scram now, Joe. Everything all right out here?"

Joe nodded. "That phone's been clicking over there, but I wadded the bell and didn't answer. Everything's jake. Good night, boss. Good night."

The Greek double-locked the door after him.

"Come on inside here," Stanislaw invited. "My private office. We got a lot of things to settle and not much time to settle them."

He beckoned the Greek to follow after.

They went into the other room, a room lavishly furnished with leather chairs and a long divan. No bed. Steve wondered where the Marlock Joe talked about had disappeared to, but he asked no questions.

III

THERE never was a man like Johnny Stanislaw, the Greek thought to himself, and there never would be another. He was made out of a mould reserved for only the toughest clay, and then the mould was broken.

Smooth? There was none so smooth as Stanislaw. Listen to him now talking to that boy like a father. Look at that smile on him—like in a picture.

Tough? They did not come any tougher. See how calm he is—how nerveless. That man Stanislaw—aces, all aces!

Even when he was so young, Johnny Stanislaw was that way. He never worked in the fields like the others. He would laugh at their rough hands and their sweating and call them boobs. "A strong back and a weak mind," he would say. While the others worked he read books and fiddled on his violin. He was always better dressed, even though his father's farm was not big, and his father not as rich as the father of Hippolite Zenopolis.

But that was his fate. Hippolite Zenopolis, whom Broadway knew as the Greek, had never begrudged Stanislaw his little airs. They were part of the man, and the Greek loved them.

He kept his face stiff, like a mask, while the other two talked there in that room. He did not speak. He was content to watch Stanislaw in his greatest piece of acting. If he smiled now and then, the smile was inside where no one could see it.

Stanislaw's smooth voice went on: "Your father was my friend—the straightest man I ever knew. If I can help you I am glad to do it for the sake of his memory. And I want you to remember this: I am not acting in a spirit of charity. I am not charitable. You can be of real value to me out there. I need a man like you. You will earn every penny you get from me."

Hot stuff, eh? Believe you, that Stanislaw can talk to 'em!

The Greek remembered Steve Cameron's father—the thin guy who worked for Joe Madden. He was a good dealer, too, but a sap just the same. The dolls

got him. And he was always having hunches on the gee-gees at Pimlico and Havre de Grace. Picking his horses because of their names—and him on the inside, remember!

"Hunch players sleep in the gutter," Stanislaw always said. Well, Old Man Cameron didn't miss it far. He was blind and broke, they said, when it came time to bury him.

Now the Kid's voice came, nervous and sincere:

"I won't forget. I'll remember it until the day I die. I'll make good for you out there. I'll get well. And some day I'll be a man like you are. I have had that in my mind since the first time I saw you."

The Greek shielded his face with cupped hands as he lit a cigaret. "Until the day I die. . . ." He did not want to look at Stanislaw with those words still in the air, or he might go soft. His eyes might betray him.

It was good to think now that this Cameron would have died in a couple of months or so, anyway, if Stanislaw had never met him. It was not really murder—just giving Fate a little boost from behind.

The Greek sniffed smoke from his nostrils.

They had come across this Cameron in a funny way. They had gone to White Sulphur for a couple of weeks when Stanislaw needed a rest. Down to some swell joint with stinking water and high-hat babies riding horseback and shooting golf. A sort of hick place, too—nothing at all like Miami.

They were driving back in the Hispano, and the detours were fierce. Terrible roads—no wonder they lost the way. They ended up next morning with a busted spring at one of those wide places in the road that was called a town. They were tired and hungry and sore.

"Bear down on that horn," Stanislaw growled when they came to the dinky garage.

The Greek bore down and the sound seemed to fill the mountain silence. This Cameron kid came out and looked at them. He recognized Stanislaw right off the bat and called him by name. And right then

and there, first thing, in the Greek's private opinion, Stanislaw got the idea they were working out tonight. It must have come to him hot, just like that.

For he didn't growl any more, even when they had to wait twelve hours for a new spring to be hauled in. He talked soft, and laughed. He ate with Cameron and pumped him. Learned his whole story about his father and all. The Kid even had clips of Stanislaw's picture and newspaper guff about him.

The fact that Cameron was sick was obvious. Stanislaw spotted it right off, and the Kid admitted the local doctor said he was in a bad way. He needed the dry air of the West—but try and get it with no scratch in your pocket. It was the old sob story, and Stanislaw went for it because the layout was made to order.

He told the Kid to stick it out until he could make a few arrangements. When things were right he'd wire enough jack for Cameron to come to New York. Just the money—no message. Cameron wasn't to say a word—it was big stuff, a secret job. The Kid was impressed. He promised. And you could tell he was the kind that kept a promise.

So—bang!—the money goes out. Sent from Chicago, too, by that smart Johnny Stanislaw. And here's Cameron with too bright eyes, laughing now with Stanislaw.

Brains—that's what does it!

THE talk, talk, talk was beginning to get on Stanislaw's nerves, but he held himself in. He must be calm, easy, suave—the genial Mr. S. that the Street knew. He must laugh, take things easy. Though he felt like shouting aloud and running—running to any place where it was dark and he could hide. Anywhere away from this room.

But he must go on. He was talking about his place in Reno, a sucker joint in which he owned a quarter share.

"You will register at some good hotel," he was saying, "and get out in the sun all day. Take it easy. Drop in at the place occasionally and keep your eyes open. Get to be known there. Never mention my name. Do not write to me. But get the figures on the average play—roughly,

of course—and have them ready when I send for them."

Steve Cameron nodded. He understood.

"It may take you two months. Maybe longer. And if things are what I figure I may find a place for you out there until the doctors say you're sound again. But that comes later. Everything clear so far?"

Steve nodded again, for he did not trust his voice. Stanislaw's hand clapped him lightly on the shoulder, and the gambler smiled.

"Bueno, Kid. Then we're all set. I wanted you to come up here tonight because I thought we'd throw a little going away party for you. We'll sleep at my place tonight. Tomorrow we'll have my specialist give you a final once-over. Your train leaves in the afternoon. You feel good enough to step out a little—an hour or so at some of the clubs?"

Steve Cameron did what Stanislaw had expected. He glanced from the gambler's immaculate evening clothes to his own blue serge. His eyes fell. Stanislaw laughed and felt better. Now it was working.

In ten minutes—

"I thought of clothes," he said quietly. "You and I are about the same size, and I have a closet full of things there. You can get your own stuff tomorrow, but in the meantime—" He waved his hand toward the door of the closet.

Steve Cameron could feel the red flush of pleasure creep up in his cheeks. He mumbled something—words that were incoherent—and he saw Stanislaw look at the Greek with what might have been a smile.

Then they were all stripping clothes from wooden hangers. Stanislaw put the studs in a shirt—onyx studs—black as the eyes of Mr. S. of Broadway. The Greek was clowning with a too-small opera hat perched on his bald dome. All of them were laughing senselessly and Steve Cameron's laughter was louder than the rest.

John Stanislaw gave him one of his own cigaret cases to carry for swank. Gave him an opera cane with a silver knob for a handle. Stanislaw helped him on with a Chesterfield overcoat and adjusted the

dark, collapsible hat at the proper angle. The Greek tied his white necktie. Even the patent-leather shoes.

They stood behind him as he studied himself in the dressing glass, laughing as he laughed, bowing when he tipped his hat to them in the mirror. They were all acting as if they were drunk or something.

Then Stanislaw gave him the money. Out of a well-filled billfold he took crisp bills one by one. Ten of them, each one a hundred-dollar certificate.

"You may want to tip the entertainers," Stanislaw said. "Or maybe on the train you will need spending money. There'll be more where that came from in the morning."

He did not mention that he had asked for those particular bills at his bank that afternoon. The teller who passed them out had recorded their numbers at Stanislaw's request. The gambler had told a tale of an attempted trap for a black-mailer.

Now he reached down and took Steve Cameron's hand. He put the money in it. Steve said, "Here—I can't—"

Stanislaw made a gesture, waved him down.

"But I can't," Steve said again. He felt like a heel. "It would be bad luck—make thirteen hundred—"

Stanislaw peered at him queerly and the Greek's face wore an odd grin. But Mr. S. did not argue the point. He clipped one of the bills into his coat and crammed the others into the top pocket of Steve's Chesterfield. He looked at his watch, glanced flashingly at Steve with a look that covered him from head to heel. Nodded.

"Let's scam," he clipped. "Let's go places."

Steve whirled the black opera stick. "Let's go down so I can give that dopey detective a look—the nutty one that asked about the dogs."

As soon as the words were uttered, Steve Cameron knew he had said the wrong thing. The Greek growled in his throat, and his lips twisted. Stanislaw looked at him with a blank face in which his eyes were dark and sinister pools. The pupils expanded until there seemed

no white left. Then he whirled soundlessly and his stick lashed out at the Greek's face. Straight across the mouth it caught him, and a dark welt of blood sprang up on the Greek's cheek.

Stanislaw's breath rasped in the silence.

For a moment they glared at each other. The blood ran down the Greek's chin, ran down his neck to crimson his collar, but he made no move to wipe it away. Steve Cameron could see the stick in Stanislaw's hand quiver with little trembling jerks, yet when the gambler spoke his voice was quiet. The words came fast.

"Who was it?"

"Rongetti."

"Alone?"

The Greek nodded.

"What did he want?"

"He wanted to know why your dogs were poisoned."

The stick in Stanislaw's hand jerked and he swung abruptly away. He stared across the room blankly, then covered his eyes with his hand.

"All right—all right," he said. "I'll give him that information. You two go on out here—" he gestured—"and drag out the delivery entrance. Pack your stuff in that bag, Cameron, and take it along now. You can change at my place in the morning. I'll see you at the garage in ten minutes."

"Are the—did they poison the pups, boss?" The Greek asked in a clipped edged voice.

Stanislaw shook his head. "No." But both of them knew he was lying.

He unlocked a door in the inner room and Steve and the Greek went out into another angle of the hallway. They heard the click of metal as Stanislaw secured the lock behind them.

IV

RONGETTI liked to say, when he was out on a little party or shooting the breeze with the boys in the back room, that a guy with a single-track mind came to bat with two strikes on him and one foot in the water bucket. He liked to talk about his own method of keeping three

or four things cooking under his hat at the same time. If anyone had told him he was one of the most stubborn heads this side of Singapore he would have called that man a liar.

"*Por Baccho!*" he would shout, "*Diantre!* An open mind with no half-baked ideas. An eye to see quick and legs to jump quick. That's all a detective needs. And that's me—Nick Rongetti!"

He used the words of his mother tongue only when he was excited.

Now he sat in the glittering lobby of the Park Manor playing one of his favorite games. He had shifted to a seat that was partly shaded by a potted palm, but he still had his newspaper. With part of his consciousness he tried to keep a watch on the scattered passengers who came out of the down-elevators while his eyes read the type in front of him. Every now and then he would glance up hurriedly, then cast his eyes down again. Now he read:

New York, Dec. 12 (A. P.)

The startling theory that no woman attains real beauty until the age of 35 was expounded here recently by Mme. Helena Rubinoff, celebrated cosmetic stylist.

"I am not decrying youth," she said. "I love it. It is fresh, charming, gay, inspirational. It is always surrounded with the promise of beauty. But always that promise is in the future.

"A woman may be beautiful from 35 to 70, and I have seen many of them at each extreme. Before 35, she can be charming, pretty, promising; but only when Time has laid its softening hand on Youth—when experience, love, suffering has ripened the green peach—can there be completion and loveliness."

"Nuts, Madame Rubinoff," Rongetti thought to himself. "Give me the young ones."

More pep in them. . . .

He turned the page and looked up quickly as a square, dark figure hurried out toward the doors. Nope, false alarm. Too fat for the Greek. A salesman, most likely, trying to make the one o'clock from La Guardia.

He turned another page. "Hallowell's Ascot Superba IV Wins Kennel Club Blue" . . . Now who in the name of ten thousand devils would want to kill dogs like that pair of Stanislaw's? And how would they go about it if they wanted to? Maybe he was a dope for worrying about

it—maybe not. It was a bad night outside and the Park Manor was as good a spot as any . . .

He became aware suddenly that someone was standing near him and he turned his head to look behind. He met John Stanislaw's dark, sardonic smile, and dropped the paper in his lap. His own grin matched the gambler's, though Rongetti was startled. Stanislaw had on a dark overcoat, white muffler, silk topper. He stood with his hands in his pockets.

"Looking for me, Nick?"

Rongetti shrugged.

"Heard you were. Something about my dogs, wasn't it?"

Rongetti said, "Why don't you give me a break? If there's nothing doing I can go home and grab some shut-eye. But I want to know first why your dogs was poisoned—who done it—what's it all about, Stanislaw?"

Stanislaw's hand came out of one pocket with a pair of white gloves. He began to put them on.

"Billy Rose did it—he and Cardinal Spellman. They brewed the poison in a graveyard in the dark of the moon. Joe Stalin flew them over my place and they squirted it down with eye-droppers."

Rongetti said, "You're just a barrel of boffs. Now go into your adagio." He was studying Stanislaw's face, but the gambler had him buffaloed.

"Why did they bump the hounds?" was all Rongetti could ask. He knew it sounded silly, but he figured to keep asking.

Stanislaw tapped his topper with two fingers.

"Taking a little trip on business, Nick," he said patronizingly. "Be back in half an hour. Stick around and maybe I can help you."

"How do I know you'll be back?"

Stanislaw smiled again.

"Why should I lie to you?" he asked. He tossed something that jangled into the detective's lap. "Here's the key to my place. There's some rye and cigars up there. Make yourself at home if you want to."

He turned, sauntered away. Rongetti saw him signal the taxi-starter, heard the starter's whistle shrill. He jingled the key

in his hand. On the metal tab he read the number "1132." He sat there for five minutes, thinking it over.

"What in the name of the devil?" Rongetti puzzled. The sensible thing to do was to hand the key in at the desk and pile into the hay. That dog stuff was screwy. But...

"Damned if I do," Rongetti muttered. "Mister Gambler, I just call your little bluff." Jingling the key in his hand, he headed for the elevators.

The key fitted 1132 all right, but the door would open only a couple of inches. An inside chain held it. Rongetti shouted "Hey!" but there was no answer. He tried to reach in through the crack but the bolt was too complicated and his fingers could barely reach it, although he spent five minutes trying. He broke a fingernail and cursed. He turned away indecisively and then he thought of Stanislaw's cocky smile. He lunged suddenly against the door and wood splintered. Again he drove with his shoulder and almost fell as it gave in. He felt along the wall for the light switch and snapped it on. He waited to see if the noise had aroused anyone in the hall, but no customers. Carefully he closed the door.

There was rye on the table in the first room, but Rongetti ignored it. He went through the whole place, turning on the lights, even in the closets and the kitchenette. There were two doors that seemed locked, but he was in no hurry. In the kitchenette he found Stanislaw's brandy. He took the bottle along with some ice and siphon of soda. He lit one of Stanislaw's cigars from a humidor on a carved desk and sat down comfortably on the lounge. He smoked, walked around some, looked out the window.

When he finished his cigar he went over and had another try at the two doors that would not open. Just for luck he peered through the keyhole of the first and saw the shaded lights of the hall. Okay, just a get-out in case of emergency. There was no keyhole in the second door, though. And Rongetti was puzzled. He worked the handle and nothing happened. Then he fiddled with a little latch below and tugged at the knob again.

The "door" almost fell down on him. It was one of those in-a-door beds. It came down with a rush and something soft and yielding squirmed out at Rongetti. He struck blindly, instinctively, and his fist felt flesh.

He saw the body of Saul Marlock.

Dead...

Strangled!

RONGETTI growled into the phone, "And put some snap in it, baby. Rush—get it?" He waited a few seconds; then: "Rongetti calling from the Park Manor. Room 1132. Get 'em over here fast. It's murder—Saul Marlock's been strangled with a red silk sash. Better call all stations to pick up John Stanislaw and the Greek for questioning."

He jiggled the receiver, then asked for the desk. "Send the house detective up to 1132. Make it fast," he said and hung up quickly.

He was lighting another cigar when the house detective came in. Rongetti knew him, which saved argument. He said:

"Take charge here until Sergeant Farrell comes. He's on the way. Saul Marlock's been murdered and hell's to pay. Tell Farrell I'm on a hot trail. I'll call him."

He banged out the door. While he waited for the elevator he tried to figure it out, but nothing made sense. If Stanislaw had known that Marlock was dead up there he'd never have given up the keys like that. And why in the hell should Stanislaw bump his lawyer anyway? Marlock was the one man standing between the gambler and that coming Federal rap.

He got in the elevator and he thought, "Who poisoned Stanislaw's dogs. Why?" And no matter how he turned it over he always came back to that question. It was like an echo in his brain:

Who killed Stanislaw's police dogs?

Find that out, Rongetti, and you got something.

He hurried through the lobby and pulled the taxi-starter aside. "Who got Stanislaw for a fare half an hour ago?"

The starter looked bewildered.

"Shake it up. Think!" Rongetti growled. And he dug his fingers into the man's arm fiercely. They went together down the line of the hotel taxi stand, but the man who had picked up Stanislaw was out on another fare.

Rongetti stood in the rain and cursed in Italian while they all looked at him. One driver volunteered that it must have been just a short trip because Joe was back again in a few minutes. But that was all they had to offer.

A department car pulled up and Detective Sergeant Farrell got out. The police surgeon was with him and two or three others. Two reporters piled out of a taxi. Rongetti called, "It's a coroner's case, Doc," and pulled Farrell aside. He tried to tell him exactly what had happened that evening, but his words didn't give the right picture. Farrell asked if he'd had a drink too many and went on into the lobby.

Rongetti stood there in the rain.

The driver of the department car was still in the front seat, but he opened the door now and stood under the hotel marquee. Rongetti looked at him—at the car. He walked over.

"Tell Farrell I want this car," he said. "Put in a call for another."

"But—"

"Nuts," Rongetti said, and he scrambled in and banged the door. His own car was in a garage six blocks away. He threw the switch, whined the starter.

"What in hell will I tell Farrell?" the driver yelled at him.

"Tell him I've gone to find the guy that bumped Stanislaw's dogs," Rongetti shouted into the roar of the motor.

V

STANISLAW'S big black Hispano purred along through the drizzling dark. Its hooded lights cut the gloom of the road with twin white beams. The glare of the city was behind them. It was a bad night—late—and they had but little traffic on the Sawmill River Road.

The Greek was at the wheel, dark face set, narrowed eyes probing the murk

ahead. The dried blood Stanislaw's lashing stick had drawn was still on his chin. He had not spoken since they left the Park Manor.

Beside him Steve Cameron sat. His arms were folded across his chest, and his eyes were bright, though he was beginning to feel a little tired. The train ride—the excitement—had taken something out of him. Yet he sat erect and hummed under his breath—a sonorous mountain-song. His father's good-luck song:

"Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble,
tremble, tremble—
Was you there when they rolled that stone
away?"

He kept the tempo by tapping his feet softly on the carpeted floor-boards.

Stanislaw was in the rear. He lounged in one corner, feet outstretched, staring blankly through the bullet-proof window. He had his collar pulled up around his throat though the car was warm. The darkness rushed by, rain splattered on the glass, and Stanislaw was as near the breaking point as ever a man can be.

Faces seemed to be charging at him out of the speeding gloom. Marlock's face, seamed and old and frightened. Rongetti's white grin and the purple blot on his forehead. The welted mask of the Greek. Steve Cameron's thin, boyish smile. They darted past and came back again. And voices whispered:

"Car badly burned. Occupant beyond recognition."

"Some day I'll be a man like you, Mr. Stanislaw."

"Who poisoned the dogs? Why? Let me in on it."

Stanislaw buried his face deeper into the white folds of his muffler. He was afraid—and for the first time in all of his planning he admitted it to himself. Marlock had been right. The whole thing was too fantastic . . . but there was no backing out now. His chips were in the pot and no matter what cards he held he'd have to play them.

He saw his own mistakes, now. Saw them clearly. There was no sense in poisoning the dogs. None at all. Yet at the time he had thought it clever to leave

no one living thing behind that could betray him. Not even a dog to sniff at burned flesh and deny mutely that this was his master.

The idea was silly—childish. He must have been mad to think of it.

His hands clenched.

And the killing of Marlock was a mad-man's trick, too, though an hour before it had seemed logical. Stanislaw, of course, did not intend to make his escape by the route Marlock had planned for him. That was only a blind. He had made his own plans secretly—plans that involved a dark hop in a plane that was even now warming its motor ten miles away. A fast jump to a hidden hideaway in Maine where everything was all set for him. Then Canada, and later across the Pacific under papers that were fool-proof.

He clenched his hands. The game wasn't lost yet. He could still make it.

He growled, "Can that crazy singing."

The lights of a little town whirled by. Four miles to go.

Stanislaw felt reassuringly of the automatic in his pocket. His fingers searched to see that the safety was off. His toe tapped lightly against the tin of gasoline the Greek had provided. Four little miles. . . . Forget what's happened behind you, Stanislaw, and take care of the road ahead!

He rubbed Rongetti out of his mind. Giving that stupid detective the keys had been a desperate gamble, but no use to worry on that score now. He had made the play on instinct, because he wanted Rongetti out of the way for half an hour. Most likely the detective would just wait around until he got tired. Even if he did go prowling, it was a thousand to one against him spotting Marlock. And all trails would end with what they found in the ruins of Stanislaw's motor.

The big Hisso slowed as the Greek twisted her off into the dark and silent side road that led to the place they had planned. Stanislaw sat erect and straightened his shoulders. A pulse throbbled at his temples, but his mind was clear and through his whole body flowed some emotion that made him keen and alert.

The drizzle of rain had ceased, but the

night was still murky. In the lights of the big car, the roadside brush sparkled with moisture. Here came the upgrade that ended at the little bend they had picked. In a minute now the Greek would slow her down, would pull up and ask Cameron to take a look at the inner rear tire. Cameron would open the door and the Greek would do his stuff. And with the Greek's third shot Stanislaw would go into action.

The Greek would never know what happened.

Slam-slam—then open up the gasoline and toss a match in with them. Then over the hill a hundred yards to where the Ford was hidden. Down the old wagon road without lights. Then the plane, and it was all over.

The end of Mr. S. On to Canada. . . .

Stanislaw concealed his hands in a fold of his coat as he adjusted the silencer to the automatic. He leaned forward until he could see the Greek's face in the rear-view mirror. They were moving up the hill now, and Stanislaw, in the mirror, saw the whites of the Greek's eyes as they glanced to the right, then rolled up to spot him. The automatic was free in Stanislaw's hand, concealed in the dark. He crouched on the edge of the seat, muscles tensed. His eyes were wide, fixed as in a hypnotist's stare on the two heads that loomed in the faint glow of the dashlight.

The Hisso breasted the rise and the Greek twisted her, throttling down. Slowly the car rolled . . . slower. Stanislaw's hand gripping the automatic's black butt, trembled. His breath seemed frozen in his lungs. He saw the Greek look at Cameron, saw his bruised lips move—but his brain was humming and the words were soundless.

Cameron's hand reached for the latch of the door, twisted at it. . . .

And with the next second hell broke loose in the big, black, bullet-proof Hisso that was once the pride of John Stanislaw!

It is doubtful if Stanislaw ever knew what happened or why. He did not see the two black objects that were there in the headlight beam for his eyes and his mind were elsewhere. Nor did the Greek see them. With one hand he was clawing his hush-gun while his other groped for

the hand brake. The car was still rolling along.

Creeping slowly . . .

But Steve Cameron saw them as he turned the latch—both black, both alive. A mother cat with her kitten. Some farmer's cat, no doubt, carrying a weakling of her brood to a new hideaway. The silent car and the light swinging around the bend had startled her, made her as blind as the kitten she carried. She had whirled, back-humped, facing straight in the path of the slow-rolling Hisso.

Steve Cameron acted instinctively. He was a gambler's son. He had been reared in a mountain home where signs and portents were almost like a religion. "Black cat across our path," his mind flashed, and he lunged to spin the wheel from the lax hand of the Greek and twist it the other way.

The unlatched door flew open and things began to happen.

Steve Cameron's shoulder hit the Greek hard and the Greek's head slammed against the window. The car veered, and the Greek's foot, sprawling for balance, came down full on the throttle. A lesser car would have choked and stalled, but not the Hisso. She took the gas in a gulp and leaped ahead straight for the brush-filled gully opposite. The Greek's fist came up with a gun in it and that gun cracked twice wildly. The Greek shouted. Maybe, he thought, this was the double-cross. He lashed out in frenzy, striking, kicking. He got one foot in Cameron's chest and hurled him back. And then he saw Stanislaw.

Johnny Stanislaw who never wore a gun, with a long-nosed rod in his hand—

Johnny Stanislaw shooting!

Stanislaw was crouched there, his face gaunt and ghostly, his eyes like black buttons, his hair wild and awry. His mouth was screwed around as if he shouted in agony, but no sound came. With one hand clawed into the upholstery of the front seat he held himself against the dizzy sway and the awful lurch. His other hand—fingers glued to the butt of his gun—flashed up automatically.

The nervous reflex of blind fear and rage jerked against the trigger. The muz-

zle spat—bullets jumped . . . All his life Stanislaw had been a cool man, a man who kept his head. He could riffle the deck for a ten grand jackpot with nerveless fingers. He could sit on the Jockey Club veranda, calm and aloof, expressionless, while a colt he had backed to the hilt came fifth and pocketed into the home-stretch. The poise was part of him. He had trained himself so.

But now—

Now it was different. This wasn't a game of yellow bills and scheming brain against scheming brain. This was the raw stuff of life and death, black and abrupt, demanding an instant answer. And for the second time that night Stanislaw's taut nerves betrayed him.

He didn't know what it was all about. He saw Cameron lunge for the wheel; he was whirled headlong as the Hisso bucked and leaped ahead; he scrambled erect again as the Greek's foot catapulted Steve Cameron out the door. Treachery?—the double-cross? How could he know? He had one flash of the brush-choked gully that yawned straight ahead, one vivid glimpse of the Greek's welted face leering at him—that was all.

His mind flashed that this was the end. He'd never see the Lido, never play at baccarat or *chemin-de-fer* in *Cannes* or Biarritz. No soft and lazy beaches under the sun. No silken, subtle ladies under a Mediterranean moon. Here was the end of Mr. S, even as it had been planned, in the ugly, yellow muck of a country road.

He did the only thing he could do—the instinctive, defensive thing. Under his senseless finger the trigger jerked. Again and again.

Instinctively the Greek fired back. He did not know that Stanislaw, tossed in a heap by the car's first swerve, was jerking that trigger for no human reason. He could not know that Stanislaw's nerve had broken, and that the iron Mr. S. was babbling in fear of the unexpected. Stanislaw was shooting—The Greek shot back. He saw something happen to Stanislaw's face, and then the car lurched and staggered sickeningly.

The Hisso was rolling over and the black skies were falling down on them.

RONGETTI was wet and tired. He was hungry and wanted a hot drink more than anything in Christendom. He was disgusted with himself, with the lousy detective racket, with the world at large.

Here he was, chasing the wind out in the sticks, running blind on the wildest goose-chase of a wild career.

"And if they ask me why," he thought, "I can't tell 'em."

What difference did it make about Stanislaw's dogs? Marlock was dead back there in the Park Manor, and there's where Nick Rongetti ought to be. Not out here chasing some crazy hunch in the cow pastures. He was close to Stanislaw's country place now, and the nearer he got the more he thought:

"I'm dizzy—punch-drunk on this dog stuff. They ought to have me tied up in Bellevue."

But he kept on driving. He was perhaps half-a-mile from Croton Dam when he heard the sound and saw the lick of flame glow up. It was over to the left and Rongetti twisted the wheel quickly. His hunch burned hot again when he came to the side-road and saw the size of the tire marks in the muck.

He bore down with his speed foot and burst upon the scene abruptly. The Hisso was on her back in the little gully and flame was roaring up from her. The crest of the hill round about was lit up bright as day. He saw a black figure sprawled at the edge of the road. He was limp when Rongetti turned him over, but his heart was beating. "Stanislaw!" the detective thought at first. But even though there was mud on the face, he saw it was the punk Kid, all dressed up like a lighthouse. His arm was twisted in an ugly way beneath him, and he was only semi-conscious.

Rongetti lifted him and felt that twisted arm. The Kid groaned with pain and his eyes fluttered open. He looked at Rongetti blankly.

"Where's Stanislaw?" Rongetti snapped.

Steve Cameron stared wildly at the spouting pillar of flame. He choked and covered his eyes with his uninjured arm.

That was what Rongetti had figured.

"If they're down there," Rongetti said, "the war is over."

In a little while the farmers would start flocking to see what the flame was about. Cars would be piling up. Rongetti wanted to get this business straight before he was bothered. He helped the Kid to his own car and started asking questions fast. The Kid was weak but game. In six minutes Rongetti had his whole story.

Rongetti nodded. He knew when he was hearing the truth. He could see the lights of cars below twisting around to climb up to them. And the whole affair was still as dark as the inside of a derby.

"I see," he muttered. "Stanislaw smashed the Greek with his cane after they bumped Marlock, and the Greek picked this spot to get even. The car got away and smashed both of them. Yeah."

"But—" Steve Cameron protested.

"I know," Rongetti said. "But you leave this to me." The whole thing was as wide open as Swiss cheese, but what else was there? "Keep your trap shut about that money, Kid. I'll do the talking. If we can get a coroner to act fast we may be able to get you started West by Monday."

And maybe they could, at that. The wise thing to do was to get the kid out of town before some wise newspaper began to kick things full of holes. A check of Cameron's story would absolve him of implications in Marlock's murder. Pin that on Stanislaw and the Greek, down there in the Hisso's funeral pyre. If they dug too deep they'd have one of those mysteries with no answer—and mysteries are bad news for any police administration.

Steve Cameron was rolling his head on his shoulders, moaning, mumbling in a broken voice. "Oh, Lord—Oh Lord—to die like that . . . Why couldn't it been me? . . . He was the finest man in the world—Mr. Stanislaw . . . I'm goin' to get well—some day I'll be like him . . ."

Rongetti said absently, "Yeah, Yeah, a great guy. A sweetheart of a fellow."

He got out of the car as other machines began to drive up. People came toward

him, hollering already and asking dumb questions. He was dog-tired and his nerves were raw. He wanted a drink. But he'd have to stick it out until he could turn it over to someone in authority.

"Two murderers fall out," he muttered. "Go into a fight and skull each other. . . . Yeah. That ought to satisfy 'em. If they

don't like that they can draw their own picture."

He fumbled for a cigaret, yawned.

The flame was dying down.

"But I wonder what it really was?" he mumbled wearily. "And why did they put the croak on Stanislaw's bloodhounds?"

He shrugged, moving away.
