

THE MAGAZINE OF WEIRD MYSTERY!

 **DIME  
MYSTERY  
MAGAZINE**  
COMBINED WITH 10 STORY MYSTERY

NEXT ISSUE OUT NOVEMBER 3rd!

Volume 31

November, 1944

Number 1

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Published bi-monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois. Editorial and executive Offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York 17, N. Y. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary; Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter March 4, 1941, at the postoffice at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1944, by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 15c. Six-issue subscription in U. S. A. 90 cents. Foreign postage 28 cents additional. Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send to 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them.

# THEY KILL BY NIGHT!

*In the chill, dark hours when shadows haunted the city streets, they came stealthily crawling, a sharp-eyed, vicious invading legion that threatened the whole sleeping city. . . . Only veteran Johnny Quane knew part of the puzzle—but he knew, also, that he was marked for death before he could learn the grim, ghastly answer. . . .*

## Bizarre Novelette of Ghastly Menace



### CHAPTER ONE

#### Death Draws Blood

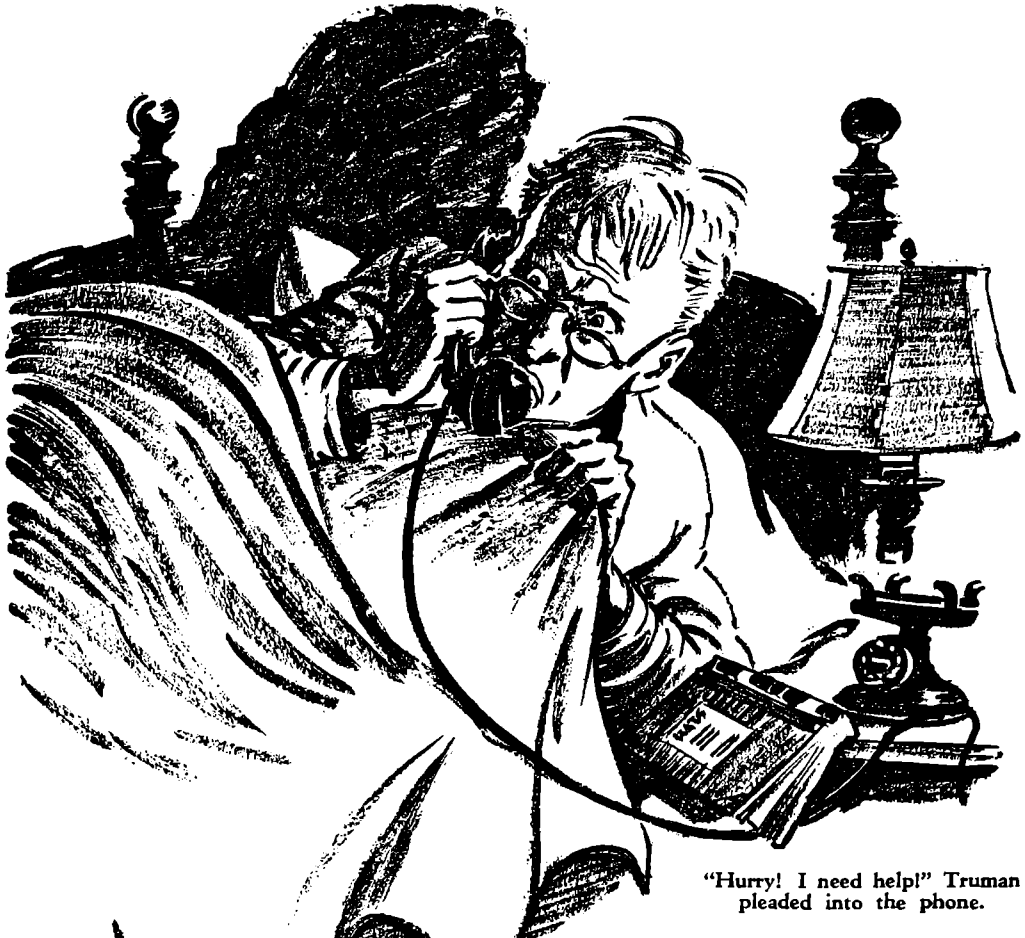
NOW, even as Johnny Quane and Sally talked and planned their evening, Joe Wold lay in a ditch, dead. Thus destiny had already shaped events. Death was on the loose, with new blood on its breath; although, had the Quanes known, they would not have been particularly concerned yet. Who was Joe Wold, anyway? What did he matter? They had never heard of him.

This night, one in the war's most vital month of 1944, the Quanes were turning new and exciting pages. After nearly two years overseas, Johnny had come home, and tonight he and Sally were going out to dine and dance



and celebrate with Lou Vincent and his new exotic girl friend.

Frankly, Johnny Quane thought, glancing in the mirror, he looked a little pale; probably



"Hurry! I need help!" Truman pleaded into the phone.



because of old scars made by Jap slugs. But it was natural that he no longer had his old dash and swagger—but then one could hardly compare a tuxedo with the dress blues of a marine sergeant. Now with civilian status once again as a result of his medical discharge, he had the old job on the morning *Bugle*.

He grinned as he turned to Sally, "How's about it, hon; do you miss the medals and the uniform?"

She kissed him, and she was blonde and very slim and tall. She said, "I'll get my wrap, darling, and be with you in a minute—" The phone rang.

It was Lou Vincent. "Johnny, look," he said. "I'm hopelessly detained, hellishly involved—"

Lou Vincent was a pale, thin, intense young man, the kind usually tied up with emotional

problems. He was a lawyer, and two years earlier he'd been desperately in love with Sally. Before Sally married Johnny Quane, that was. . . .

The scene flashed through Johnny Quane's mind quickly. He'd known he was going overseas. He'd had a last short furlough—and he'd married Sally on the last day. So, as Sally said, the best man won, but—as she'd also said—Lou Vincent had carried a terrific torch afterward. According to Sally's letters he hadn't looked twice at a girl, until—

Lou had called a few nights ago, serious as always but friendly again. He'd met a new love, he'd said, a dancer named Vivi. And tonight the Quanes were to have met Vivi, at the Paradise Restaurant where she danced.

"But I'm afraid I can't get away," Lou said now, regretfully, on the phone. "Why don't you and Sally go on anyway? Then if I get a break I'll join you later, and we'll carry out the evening as we planned."

Johnny Quane put down the phone. He looked at Sally, and he saw something queer in her eyes. "Darling," she said, "is it *me*? Do you suppose he's going to be—funny again?"

Once more the phone rang, and this time it was the paper, for Johnny. The cops had found Joe Wold. And who was this Joe Wold?

"How the hell do I know?" the Big Boss at the *Bugle* bellowed over the wire. "This guy's dead, see? Under peculiar circumstances, see? And I got to print it, see? So Benson's got acute appendicitis—they just hauled *him* to the hospital. So Thorpe is out somewhere—damn it, Quane, I've got to get that story!"

"But look," Johnny began, "my wife and I have been planning on this night. . . ."

The Big Boss yelled, "You know damn' well that a good reporter never has a night off! Get that story, Quane!"

So Johnny Quane, in tuxedo, and Sally in her white evening gown decided half a celebration was better than none; they knocked an hour off their plans and drove around to start the night by reviewing a body that had belonged to a nonentity known as Joe Wold. . . .

It lay way out, in the ditch on a narrow, unpaved side street. There were trees and underbrush and a ravine—and, of course, a few houses. The cops said Joe Wold had a cottage at the very end of this dark road. The cops said it seemed that Wold was walking home—at least, he always had walked home from the distant carline. It seemed he'd had a dizzy spell; according to his wife, he'd had these dizzy spells of late. Apparently he'd staggered off the sidewalk, fainted, and fallen in the ditch or gully that was half-filled with broken slabs of concrete. He'd hit his head

in falling, and no doubt suffered a concussion. But death had occurred when a rat had bitten him in the neck and severed his jugular.

Beyond that, it was all rather vague, even to the cops. The cops could guess, though. The rat, bloody, tailless, dead of a broken neck, lay off to one side. Apparently Joe Wold had regained consciousness, and his last act but one had been to grab and fling the rat away from him. Then, with his own blood, he had managed to write *pla-* on a stone slab, but death had come before he could finish the word.

Well, what would *pla* mean? Lacey, Homicide Inspector, finally talked with Quane, but Lacey was brusque. He shrugged.

Johnny Quane walked back to the car. Sally was in the car waiting for him. He got in, kicked the starter, drove on up the dark street, to the last house. Mrs. Wold had returned from the job of identifying her husband's body. She lay on a sofa now, sobbing. A neighbor woman was with her, trying vainly to console.

"He was such a good little man," the neighbor whispered. "Why, last March my boy was sick, and Mr. Wold stayed up with him all night, just so I could get some sleep. And him with an important job in an advertising agency!"

The neighbor said, "And one time his chickens got loose. He didn't have a garden, but they got into mine. He came right around and paid me for the damage. Right was right, he always said, and you could see he meant it. Yes, sir, he was a deacon in his church—"

Quane interrupted. "Would you tell me Mrs. Wold's first name?"

The woman blinked. "Why, it's Martha!"

"Know anyone whose name begins with *Pla*? Or anything beginning with those letters? The cops asked that, of course, but—did *she* know?"

The woman shook her head, and Quane walked back to his car, and this time he drove away, and for a while Sally sat close to him, in silence and shivering. She said at last, "It was such a big rat. I saw it, Johnny. It was horrible."

He found her hand, pressed it. "Can't let a thing like this get us down, hon. I'll stop at the first phone and call the paper. Then what's it going to be? The Paradise?"

**T**HE PARADISE was strictly a slice of big-time glamour. It had a suave maitre d'hotel and the finest crew of waiters. Its bands were internationally famous—and the legs of its chorus line the most beautiful in the city. . . . In the city, hell! In America. In the world! Dave Hood handled Paradise publicity, and according to Hood's business cards, "If it's Hood, it's good!" But the Para-

dise had, above all, Nate Rooney—and Vivi.

Nate Rooney was the owner, but despite his Irish name he *ouï-ouïed* French. "John-ee!" he cried as the Quanes came in. He pumped Quane's hands and exclaimed how *trés* marvelous it was to see him, and he kissed Quane on both cheeks soundly. "You come to see my Vivi, no?"

"And who," Quane said, grinning, "is Vivi?"

Who's Lamour, Chili Williams, Lana Turner?

"Ze light of ze morning!" Nate Rooney kissed his finger tips. "Ze flower blooming in ze heaven! But *non*, that ees not right. Ze passion flower! Come, myself, I geeve you a fine table."

The Quanes sat down, and Johnny consulted the wine list, ordered, looked around. He wondered idly what it was that had delayed Vincent. There was a happy crowd at the next table, three men, two of whom were elderly, and three gorgeous blondes. The third and youngest man looked up, stiffened, and cried out, "Johnny Quane—back from the wars!" It was the press agent, Dave Hood, a dark and handsome man in the late thirties. He rose and came at once to Quane's table. . . .

Not many years past, Dave Hood had covered ships news for the *Bugle*. He had strange ideas, which isolated him from the other reporters at the barge office. The trouble was the *Queen Mary* and the *Normandie* didn't come in every day, and Hood was at a loss if he couldn't use superlatives. He'd bragged he could glorify a tub. He did, and the Big Boss fired him because it turned out the tub was a garbage scow. So Dave began by renting desk space in a room—he called it "The Hood building"—and his talents were to be bought for flesh or product. It was rumored he was immensely successful, although gossip also had it he'd invested not too wisely in factory sites and buildings which hadn't paid off in the war boom.

"How's the little girl who always gets her man?" Dave asked.

"Fine, Dave," Sally said. In the old days, and when Hood was still a reporter, she'd written the *Bugle's* advice to the lovelorn.

"Looking for a story, Johnny?"

"I've got a story," Quane said grimly.

Hood grinned. "Man bites dog?"

Quane said "Rat bites man, and kills him. Fellow in the advertising game. Ever hear of a guy name Joe Wold?"

"My God," Hood said, "he worked for me!"

For a moment Quane just stared. The waiters came and served them smoothly, and Hood sat down, to hear about Joe Wold, and Dave Hood looked sick, Quane thought. "Poor beggar," Hood said at last. "He wasn't worth

a dime to me. No flair, no imagination, but I felt sorry for the guy. I kept him." Hood said, "Johnny, look; what kind of a set-up did he have? Will his wife need help?"

The band blared at that moment, and the lights were dimmed. Only then did Dave Hood rise. "Johnny, it's Vivi, the big event!" He added grimly, "I was going to marry her, until—" Hood's hands were clenched. He opened them, slapped Quane on the back. "Well, old man, let me know if there's anything I can do for Mrs. Wold, won't you?"

"The guy's dead, isn't he?"

Hood took a deep breath. Again he slapped Quane on the back. "Well—bye now kids! And get a load of Vivi!"

The band moaned. But that girl was a passion flower, all right. Yes, Nat Rooney was right. No heavenly flower bloomed to *that* music. It was a wicked, jarring rhythm, and suddenly a black velvet curtain; and then she came upon them like that, Vivi, her body flowing from the blackness.

Quane abruptly stiffened. One searching finger of light found something gray-brown and furry on the dance floor. The lights swept on, paused as though surprised, swung back for a quick second look. The crouched thing was a tailless rat, near Vivi, directly in her path. And someone screamed, a woman in the audience, and Vivi's undulating body drew up instantly, taut with dismay.

The rat's teeth were bared. Then it leaped, savage and snarling, snapping and clawing the air; and now the piercing shriek was Vivi's, and waiters, musicians, patrons from tables nearest her were lunging across the floor. The lights brightened. Someone was swinging a cane. . . .

The band began to play a gay and lilted tune. A waiter scurried off with something heavy in a napkin. Vivi, her maid standing by, was clothed in a long black garment, as by some feat of magic. Vivi smiled, bowed, disappeared. Everything was quite all right again—Nate Rooney gave his solemn word for it. Vivi would return, he said, if ze patrons would be kind and patient. This, Nate said, was verree, verree strange. Wolves, yes, they were always after Vivi, but—someone laughed. The tension was relieved, but there was sweat on Nate Rooney's forehead. And the rhythm of the band sounded still a little jerky.

On the floor, where Vivi had been standing, there was only a little smear of blood.

"Johnny," Sally whispered. "The rat bit her!"

Johnny said nothing.

"Johnny, she—she was bleeding!"

"Yes."

She shuddered. "The night's spoiled for us. Oh, Johnny, I don't want to wait for Lou.

I don't want to stay in this awful place!"

THEY left the Paradise and drove a dozen blocks. And Quane said, "Hon, it won't take ten minutes."

"But Johnny," Sally wailed, "who is this Charlie Lord you've been talking about?"

Quane cut into a side street. She looked at him. "I know you, Johnny," she said. "There's something on your mind." And when he didn't answer, she lit a cigarette and put the lighter back in its dashboard slot before continuing. "Have you noticed the little pieces lately, tucked away here and there in the *Bugle*? About the babies who have been bitten by rats?"

Quane drew up at the curb. They climbed a stairs then, to the third floor, to stop before the first door. When Quane rapped, Sally whispered, "Darling, it's after midnight! He's in bed!"

But Quane only grinned, and rapped again, and suddenly they heard someone coming up the stairs behind them, and they turned. It was Charlie Lord.

He was middle-aged, and his ruddy face was wreathed in smiles now as he saw them. He invited them in, apologizing, "The place is likely to be dusty." He was carrying a black bag.

"So you're back from the war?" he said to Johnny, and then, inside, he set the black bag by the window, and something scampered inside and he chuckled. "Got me a beauty tonight, Johnny. I bet he's eighteen inches long."

"Oh, no!" Sally murmured faintly. "Not another rat!"

"Sure it is, Mrs. Quane. He'll weigh a pound and a half, I'll bet. Want to see him?"

Sally, very white, sat down very quickly.

"But I thought your job was to *kill* rats?" Quane said.

Lord grinned. "I'm not with the Health Department any more. I'm a research expert now, Johnny. Ever hear of *Ratkill*?"

"The poison?"

"That's it. H. V. Moyer—he's *Ratkill*, Johnny; he owns a little plant on River Street. Well, H. V. Moyer hired me a year ago. He's got a pretty fancy outfit, and if things work out, some pretty fancy plans. I'll have me a real laboratory one of these days. Yes, sir, I catch rats, raise rats, and see that H. V. has got plenty of 'em for our experiments. Got me a beauty tonight, all right, down by the Paradise restaurant."

Quane looked at Sally, and Sally bit her lip and then Quane said, "Look, I'm in a hurry, Charlie. I want information."

Something changed in Charlie Lord's face. Quane caught it; was it wariness? "About rats?" Lord said.

"That's right. I want everything that you know. And put it in a nutshell."

Charlie pondered, shook his head. "Nope. Can't do that for you, Johnny, not in a nutshell. Suppose you ask some questions?"

"Could you positively identify a rat-bite, Charlie?"

"Well now, Johnny," Charlie Lord began pulling off his coat, "take the brown rat. That's the one you'll run up against, most likely—and that's the one that's fiercest. It's got strong jaws and long curved incisors, with cutting edges sharp as a razor. It can gnaw through mortar, or brick or limestone. It can gnaw into the plumbing pipes. But rat-bite?" He'd bared his arm, and now he raised a loose gauze bandage.

The wound, fairly new, looked angry. It was a small slash; there was no imprint of teeth. "It might have been made by a knife," Quane said softly. "Then a rat will attack a man?"

"Attack anybody," Charlie Lord said, "if they're hemmed in, or if you come on 'em too suddenly. So don't go sticking out your hand where you expect one of 'em to be. And you be careful how you use a stick, too. A rat will run right up the stick and nab you."

"Smart?"

Lord snorted. "Smart?" The wisest beast on earth!" Lord was rolling down his sleeve again. "Why they kick a trap around until it snaps, and then they grab the bait. An old one, will out-think a man who hasn't made a study of rat habits. Out-fight him if he has the ghost of a chance."

"How about mental capacity? Tests you've run, things like that?"

Charlie shook his head. "I only know what rats will do. If it's their insides and what makes 'em tick and their diseases that's on your mind, you go to the Health Department. The man you want to see is Doctor Ira Truman."

Sally had risen. She walked to the door, and Quane said aside to her, "One more minute, dear." He turned back to Charlie Lord. "Would a rat kill a man?"

There was a fierce scratching sound from the window, paws clawing at the mesh or steel that lined the inside of the bag. Lord looked at it. "Johnny," he said, after taking a deep breath, "if he gets a chance, there ain't *anything* a rat won't do!"

## CHAPTER TWO

### Rodent Invasion!

THE Quanes returned to the street. Johnny nosed the car into an alley, to make the turn by Charlie Lord's building in the middle of the block. Then he jammed on the brakes.

In the gutter ahead, close to the building line, were four brown rats. They quivered in the bright lights. It was as though they measured the strength and size of this mechanical monster. Then they whirled and went slinking away, their claws rasping against the pavement. . . . and these rats all had tails.

Quane backed the car. A queer thought entered his mind: Like gangsters lurking, bent upon the rescue of the rat in Charlie Lord's bag. He drove on slowly, and while the streets were no longer bright taxis still raced violently by. A sign, way up, blocks distant, caught and momentarily held his gaze. It spelled *Ratkill*.

Sally broke into his thoughts. "Remember what I said a while ago? The babies, Johnny?"

When he didn't answer, she said, "Coincidence? And those four rats we just saw—coincidence, Johnny?" She moved a little nearer to him and he felt her body quiver. "Johnny,

night that beast attacked Vivi. Johnny, wouldn't this be the time they *would* strike, while all our energies are occupied, while we're actually straining at war and fighting for our lives and freedom elsewhere? Johnny, fantastic as it sounds, do you think all this is part of a *plan*?"

His mind examined the word, although he'd faced it before tonight, from the moment he'd seen that Joe Wold had written three letters in blood. *Pla*— Was *plan* the word Joe Wold had tried to leave behind, the warning?

But how could an unobtrusive little man, on record for possessing no great amount of intelligence, no large powers of imagination, have discovered evidence or such a plan as Sally had now raised? Quane's mind began to spin. "Sometimes I believe they can even read," Charlie Lord had said. The car swerved beneath Quane's tight grip on the wheel. He could see Joe Wold, the little man, hurrying

do rats have brains? I mean we know, Charlie Lord told us, how cunning they are, but—Johnny, can they *think*?"

"How about it, hon," he said, "would it be too late tonight to contact Doctor Truman?"

"You don't want me to help you, is that it?"

"Help me with what?" he hedged.

"The Joe Wold case."

"It's closed. He's dead."

"Is it closed?" she said. "You aren't satisfied. Oh, darling, I know you! Why don't you phone Doctor Truman, even if it is late?"

The car gained speed. Sally said, "Rats are so deadly. They love so to destroy. I mean, like getting into warehouses and ripping holes in sacks of grain or flour. Hundreds of them. Or like attacking poultry, and not killing just what they can eat, but going berserk. Could all that be result of a deep hatred? For us, Johnny—for—for *humans*?"

"Easy, hon," he said. He heard her quickened breathing. "No deep-end stuff."

"But Johnny, suppose *some* rats, like some humans, are geniuses? Suppose these—these Hitlers and Tojos finally realized the futility of guerilla tactics and organized the herds. *Wouldn't* they start cautiously, maybe by first biting babies? Then tonight, there was Joe Wold. He was murdered—but did you ever before hear of a *rat* killing a *man*? And to-

home, excited with the knowledge possessed, unsure, disbelieving—intending to discuss it with his wife, perhaps. His mind could see ugly gray shapes trailing Joe Wold, crawling silently in the gutters. Fantastic, he thought. Impossible. But how else could a man's lips be sealed, except by death?

He left the car at the curb, and though it was after one o'clock now, paged through the phone directory. He found Truman, Ira, Doctor. But the line was busy. Okay, that meant Truman was awake, so he'd run around.

Doctor Truman was very much awake. As a matter of fact he stood on the weird brink of death. . . .

**T**HE WAR had made Doctor Ira Truman a busy man, indeed. As Medical Director of the Quarantine Station of the Public Health Service, it was his job to supervise examination of every ship in foreign service that came into the harbor. Doctor Truman's staff was short-handed, and shipping had doubled, trebled—and rat infestation, too, had increased. The danger from rats was Doctor Truman's immediate problem. Casablanca, Suez, a dozen foreign ports were now upon the plague list—and a plague ship lay now in the harbor.

She'd put in with a cargo from the Middle East, with wine, tobacco, seeds. The crew

was fit; the captain had his certificate of de-ratization, but the U. S. Sanitary Inspector had *smelled* rats. And he'd found gnawings, tracks, droppings, nests. Truman ordered fumigation, and in course of time the dead rats were collected. They were, as usual, combed for fleas. The fleas were pounded in a mortar, put into a solution and injected into guinea pigs. The dead rats, too, were autopsied, and bits of their spleen and livers snipped out and prepared in solution for guinea pig inoculation.

The guinea pigs died. Cultures from their blood showed an oval organism, *Pasteurella pestis*. Bubonic. The rats carried the Black Death!

An immediate question rose: Had any rat from the ship escaped fumigation, to swim ashore? Truman's men set break-back traps on nearby piers, and waited. . . . waited. . . . And now each trapped rat was carefully examined, and Truman himself, in his own laboratory at home, worked tirelessly with cultures and strange serums.

All his life Ira Truman's passion and hobby had been directed toward one end: Discovery of a specific, a cure or preventative, for the Black Death. The goal had never been reached, but he was a patient, a methodical man. His children had married, his wife was dead; his chauffeur had enlisted; the chauffeur's wife, Truman's cook and maid, was now working in a war plant. So Doctor Truman lived alone. Thus his spare time was his own, to spend with the cages in the basement of the old house far across town, with the rats he kept for research and with his test tubes.

Now, this night, worried lest a break-out of the dread disease occur in the city, he'd worked late. Shortly before twelve o'clock he'd driven home, far up-town, through the Bronx. It was a dark night. His house set well removed from others, in a grove.

He drank a little wine, for he was tired, and at first he thought he would at once retire. But he felt restless, nervous. He felt a strange foreboding. At last he wandered through the lonely house and down the stairs.

Here, in the basement, the caged rats glared at him with feverish eyes. In a purely reflex way he noted that the door of each cage was tightly closed and latched; if, he thought, he could only lock disease out of the city so easily. Doctor Truman sighed. Was *this* his fear, he wondered then? This pressure and—and dread? Was his a psychic warning that death, in fact, stood poised to leap upon a people despite all that he had done and might do?

He looked sadly at his vials, his test tubes; all were nicely labeled, for he was a methodical man, a careful man; but his failure had never before seemed quite so keen; and the future,

oddly, never before so black and uncertain. When, finally, he pattered back upstairs, to his first floor bedroom, something had been changed.

He paused, frowned at the room. Yes, something was different, but though he looked around he couldn't tabulate the change. The window was open a wide crack—it had been; the radio, the phone stood beside his bed, and the bed light was on—but it had been; the dresser drawer was open—but *had it been?* Try as he would he couldn't remember; and then he looked into the drawer and he knew vaguely that something was missing.

But what?

*I'm a silly old man*, he thought grumpily, and muttering to himself he undressed and turned out the light and went to bed. For a while he played the radio, dialing for a news report, but still sleep evaded him. His mind, however he would try to direct it, returned morbidly, anxiously, to rats. At last, he knew this alone was his worry. And almost with that moment he heard a familiar sound in the darkness. Claws on wood. Scratching.

But the cages are all latched, he thought. Tense now, he listened. The scratching seemed at first in the wall, somewhere near the window. A mad thought passed through his mind. Through the many, many years thousands, yes, millions of rats had been killed by his order. Did these rats have spirits? Could these ghosts return, for revenge?

He tossed restlessly in bed, amused, angry, vaguely fearful, until—it was a *live* rat loose in the house, and he knew it. He knew, too, it wasn't in the wall. His thin nostrils twitched. No man of his experience could mistake the rat odor.

The rat was here, in this room.

**D**OCTOR TRUMAN lay another moment stiffly. How could this have happened? How could a rat have escaped from its cage and got so *quickly* upstairs—and why were his muscles tightening like this? Why did cold sweat ooze from his body? True, he had never looked upon a full grown rat with scorn—he knew their cunning, their viciousness. Cautiously, Truman rose to one elbow. He snapped on the bedlight. His heart sank and his stomach began to flutter. A giant gray-brown body sat upon the window sill, a tailless rat.

It looked at him, its teeth showing slightly, as though in a crooked grin. Seconds passed. Then it scampered down the drapery.

Claws rasped on the floor. Claws rasped at the open window, and now Doctor Truman was scarcely breathing.

Then a second rat appeared on the sill, tailless also.

Truman turned to get out of bed. He could-



n't find his slippers in his haste. He shuddered at the thought of stepping barefoot on the floor, but he took a deep breath, leaped for the door.

His fingers turned the knob and pulled—but nothing happened.

Now he understood, in part, why this room had seemed vaguely different. The key was always in the lock on the inside of the door. Tonight someone had transferred the key to the other side, and while he'd lain in the darkness listening to the radio the intruder had locked him in. A scene viewed by his own eyes, long back, exploded in Truman's consciousness.

Once in the basement of an Italian grocery near the water-front, he'd seen a horde of rats, hundreds, try and temporarily fail to reach some cheeses that hung off the floor. They'd jumped and they'd squealed as though in angry frustration, but presently, cleverly—they'd built a pyramid of their own bodies. . . .

So rats in great number could have *reached* the key. But the plot, the *plan* behind such action? What rat could conceive and carry out the locking of a door? Truman looked at the window. A rat sat on the sill, watching him. Truman stumbled back to the bed, to the bedside phone, and his voice was high and a little frantic now as he dialed and cried, "Police—police!"

There was a sudden scurrying sound; he didn't look down, but the floor seemed angry, alive. "Police—!" Truman said hoarsely. "The rats are here—" A furry brown body leaped on the bed, snarling, revengeful and savage. "Hurry, I need help—!" Truman pleaded on the phone. . . .

**T**HE police were at the Truman home when Johnny Quane arrived. Quane's heart missed a beat. He recognized Inspector Lacey, Homicide.

"Truman?" Quane said.

Lacey looked at him. "He's dead," he said.

"But his phone was busy. He was alive not fifty minutes ago!"

"Come along," Inspector Lacey said.

Three tailless dead rats lay in the bedroom. The detectives had killed them. "The house is alive with rats," Lacey said grimly. "Every cage in the basement is open. Truman called the precinct station. He sounded terrified. He said he was being attacked by rats. Then the phone went dead. It's on the floor. The desk sergeant hung on another minute. He heard shots—"

Quane looked at the body, lying crosswise on the bed. He shivered. The rats had been at work, and however soon the police had arrived, the body wasn't pretty. There was a bullet hole near Truman's right temple—and a revolver near Truman's right fist.

"What's the answer, Inspector?" Quane

said softly. "Don't tell me this time the rats used a *gun*?"

"Rats?" Again Lacey looked at Quane. Queerly. "Truman shot himself. It's his *gun*."

"How about his hand? The nitrate test?"

Lacey fingered his chin. "I've a hunch it will be positive—there's powder tatoo on his cheek all right. Yes, I've a hunch Truman's finger pulled the trigger."

"Twice? You said the sergeant heard *shots*?"

Lacey growled, "And that's the cute one. *Two* shots—and we've got *one* empty shell. Well, come along, Quane, I want to talk to you."

They crossed the hall, into Doctor Truman's study. Lacey sat down, put his feet on Truman's desk. Then he lit a cigarette. He was a big man, dark, and his voice was rough now as he began, "The other boys were here and gone. The *Times*, the *News*, the *Bulletin*. And Thorpe covered for the *Bugle*. They're going to string along—but how about you?"

"Well?" Quane countered.

Lacey made circling motions with his cigarette, frowned at the curling smoke. "Earlier tonight we found Joe Wold. Now according to the book he was killed by a rat. Okay, it's one of those believe-it-or-not cases, although a rat will bite an adult, if he's sleeping or unconscious. Okay, I've been a cop too long not to take life—and death—the way it comes. Here's the way the Joe Wold case stacks up: "There's no hint of a motive for foul play. The guy's life was lily-white; he fell in the ditch and a rat took a nip at his neck, and what the hell else are you going to do about it?"

"Don't forget the word he tried to write before he died," Quane broke in. "And the rats without tails."

"I'm not forgetting anything," Lacey said heavily, "because *two* such rat cases in one night is two too many. But who knows what a guy thinks is important a few seconds before death. A lot of words begin with *pla*. Let's take 'plant'. Say he was thinking about his garden—"

"He didn't have a garden. He kept chickens."

Lacey's glance was malignant.

"And besides," Quane grinned, "it's too late to plant a garden, anyway."

Lacey flipped ash on the floor. "All right, wise guy, let's take 'plasma'. Suppose *that* was the last word in his mind—if somebody found him unconscious, that is, a plea for plasma quick, to save him. Hell, a lot of words begin with *pla* besides plan."

Quane blinked.

"So what are *you* going to do about it, Quane? Spill inflammatory ink all over the

*Bugle's* pages? I know what's in your mind—and don't think you're the only reporter in this town with imagination. Suppose, huh, the rats have declared war on us? Makes good reading, I admit, too damn' good! A lot of people will start believing it. Remember the men from Mars, that time on the radio? What do you want, a few million people losing their heads now, with a real war on?"

Quane studied the Inspector a moment. "How about that second shot?" he said then.

"We'll take care of it. Don't think for a minute we won't run that angle down."

"Uh-huh. Anything stolen from the house?"

"Not so far as we know. Matter of fact, Truman's wallet lay on his bedside table."

Quane said, "Uh-huh. What's your theory for the empty cages? And the rats without tails?"

The muscles tightened in Lacey's square jaw. "We'll take care of all that too. I want no talk of a rat rescue, understand? You can say Truman left his rat cages open."

"Suicide, eh?"

"That's where it stands, for the moment. Well, what's it going to be, Quane—a fight, or co-operation?"

Quane said wearily, "Don't worry, Lacey, I'll play ball with you."

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Before It's Too Late!

HE WROTE the piece under wraps. "A serious threat to the welfare of the community, the nation," he wrote. . . . Vivi, the dancer. . . . Four rats in an alley, rats who not only bit babies, but who attacked and killed Joe Wold; they were all in Quane's story, but. . . . "We could lose this war at home," he wrote, which was always a good line, which would make people *think*. "What's the Health Department doing?" he wrote, and that was a good line too. Pan a bureau.

But that night an added entry blazed upon the city's streets. It struck the eye first via a picture, a close-up of a rat, in a quarter page ad. The text ran:

A rat will gnaw insulation off electric wiring. Rats will build nests with matches and other inflammable material. Fire, disease, death are all rat allies. Statistics show there are nearly two rats to every human being in this city. Why kill only Japs?

Rats, too, have declared war on us!

#### BUY RATKILL

(The Sure Exterminator)

There were column ads, with tricky headings:

#### PLAGUE IN THE UNITED STATES?

In twenty-five years, nearly eleven million deaths by plague were recorded in India alone.

While so far, fortunately, this country has been relatively free, there have been sporadic cases and epidemics, in San Francisco, Seattle, New Orleans, Los Angeles. . . .

Every live rat is a potential threat to your life.

Be safe.

Kill rats.

#### Buy Ratkill!

And there were barbed little fillers:

Are rats threatening *your* home, *your* security? Want *your* baby bitten by a rat? Rats are *your* enemies, so stop them *now*, before it is too late!

#### Buy Ratkill!

The columnists were witty and cynical:

Who hasn't longed for the luscious Vivi? At the Paradise last night, a rat took the first bite—and died. What lawyer might well take the hint? . . .

Rat enters Paradise—but then we've wondered this long time why Nate Rooney let the bars down. . . .

Quane, scowling as he read, reached for the inter-office phone. "Who's handling *Ratkill*?" he asked the advertising department.

"Dave Hood."

He called the Dave Hood agency. "Johnny," Dave Hood said. "I've just been reading your piece, and it's fine—"

"Look," Quane interrupted, "about this dynamite *you're* throwing around."

"Don't like it?"

"Well, dynamite's dangerous, isn't it?"

Hood began to laugh. "Ever hear me say I wore a halo? I'm a callous son of a so-and-so, Quane. I'm cold, scheming, strictly an opportunist. I take advantage of every situation—and everybody. So figure it out: Rats declare war on human race—that's my cue. False? True? Either way, I don't know and don't care. It's terrific publicity. So keep *your* nose clean, Johnny boy. . . . And what's the real dope on the Truman suicide?"

Quane said shortly, "Talk to Lacey."

"I did, and nuts he sez." Hood was laughing again. "Get this, Johnny: Nuts *I* sez—to any compromise. No one has ever yet called me a sucker."

Then Quane called the Paradise.

"Such theings as appear in ze papers!" Nate Rooney wailed. "Thee tables, thee reservations I have had to cancel—!"

"How's Vivi?"

"I do not know! I do not see her! It ees a treek. Someone has done thees to me, Quane. I am to be ruined!"

Then Quane called Lou Vincent. Vincent was reticent. "No, I didn't get around last night," he said. "Yes, I know about Vivi, of course, and I detest this ugly publicity, so she's not seeing anyone, Johnny. I have advised against it. I've hidden her."

"But the wound?"

"I hardly think there will be complications."

"Then perhaps some other night we'll get together?"

Lou Vincent broke in quickly, "Yes, some other night, Johnny. Soon."

Quane hung up. His lips were tight.

**A** SNOWBALL gathers speed—and more snow—as it rolls downhill. Following the Joe Wold and Truman cases—and aided by Moyer's advertising—rats were seen and reported in ferry sheds, railroads, subway stations. Rats were seen—and reported—in churches, theaters, homes. An influential woman discovered rat burrows in a city playground. The burrows were opened, and photographed, to expose many-chambered colonies. And someone else saw a herd—rats by the thousands, according to the story—march across an after-midnight thoroughfare.

The rats were an "army" now. Commentators on radio stations in cities nearby, broke the word Inspector Lacey had feared. A *plan*. And immediately mothers rushed to doctors with their children's scratches, crying, "Rat-bite!" Women working in war plants began remaining at home. Whispers were heard. Day nurseries were said to be infested—yes, it was dangerous to leave the children there. H. V. Moyer made a terrifying statement on the *Ratkill* program on the air: "I wouldn't be surprised," Moyer said, "if we awoke some morning to find the rats our masters!"

Incidents, these; small parts and little pieces, but Quane—as did Lacey, no doubt, and others now vitally interested—saw *all* of the pieces and the menace of the picture completed.

Quane called H. V. Moyer on the phone. And Moyer said smoothly, "I had no idea anything of this sort was taking place. I don't know, however, what I can do about it."

"Why not stop this panic advertising?"

Pompously, H. V. Moyer refused. "The city is overrun by rats," he said. "There is almost a diabolical, dastardly and dangerous plan afoot, it seems, and the people must be awakened to it. Sir, I don't understand your attitude! We're not living in the Middle Ages. The people have the right to the scientific certainty of my product. Why—why, suppose the *plague* should break out!"

Quane tried to get a word in. He couldn't.

"This is a crusade!" Moyer continued. "I'll spend my last dollar in a drive for proper health and sanitation. I—I'll dedicate my life to humanity. Why, I—I'll flood the city with handbills!"

"Mr. Moyer, look. I appreciate your—uh—sincerity. Could I see you personally, for a brief and quiet conversation?"

There was at last a short pause. Then Moyer's answer came cautiously, "I'll have to talk to Hood and my lawyer first. I'll let you know." Moyer cut the connection.

That night, Sally looked worried. She looked away as she said, "I had a dream. I dreamed the rats had gone back to their burrows and their colonies, for a conference. Joe Wold knew of their plan to rule, so they liquidated him. Oh, Johnny, it was so—so real! They caused Truman's death, and rats he'd held captive were there, at this meeting. Now was the time for battle, they said, and the rats cheered, and—and they jeered us. And the leaders, Johnny—they didn't have tails!"

Quane said, very softly, "Hon, you're going right down the line. You're reacting just as someone wants us to do."

She pounced upon the word he'd used. "Someone?" she said.

He nodded. "I'm afraid so."

"—human?"

He took a deep breath. "Isn't that the intelligent answer?"

"But why?"

He didn't reply, and she cried, "What can we do?"

"Sit tight," he said. "Rely on the authorities, on men like Lacey. Don't worry, Lacey's no fool. Before the week is out—"

But before the week was out, the city rocked from a new blow.

**U**NTIL nightfall, this new and terrible day—Black Friday, as H. V. Moyer later called it on the radio—had augered well for Quane. Dave Hood phoned. "Moyer will see you at eight this evening," Hood said, "at my office."

Nate Rooney phoned. "Johnny, I am desolate," he said. "My Vivi, she weel not dance! You know thees man called Vincent, Johnee, no?"

Quane said, "Yes, I know him." And as Nate Rooney muttered something, "What about him?"

"I could keel heem weeth a knife, by Joe! It ees he who keeps Vivi from ze Paradise. It ees thees man, Johnee, who weel ruin me! Tonight I talk to Vivi, and we see though!"

Then Lacey phoned. Lacey said, "We've produced an echo in Truman's bedroom. Matter of acoustics, you know. A shot definitely resounds over the phone."

"After how long an interval?"

"Well—" Lacey said.

"Oh, so there is a discrepancy in the time between the two reports?"

"Well," Lacey said, quickly cautious, "a few seconds, perhaps."

"Can I print that?"

Lacey said, "Quane, you're too damn' smart. The answer is *no!*"

Quane sat staring from the window, but there was nothing much to see, a view of rooftops and the river. Presently he rose, to make a search of deed transfers, as reported

by the *Bugle*. Then, as darkness fell, he started for the Hood agency, but now he walked with lagging steps, for there was something wrong. It was vaguely as though a race was to be run, as though he'd bet on the wrong horse; yes, as though now yet he should turn back, and. . . but what was going to happen? And turn back where?

Twice, in the few blocks from the *Bugle* building, Quane did turn sharply around—with the new and uneasy feeling that someone watched, followed him. At last he passed a dark alley, and then swung abruptly into a store front beyond and waited.

A car stopped to park some distance away, but there was no shadowy figure and no sound of footsteps behind him. There was nothing except—Quane tensed, then as he heard a small rasping sound. A moment later a crouched gray shape emerged from the alley.

It wriggled forward a furtive foot, to stop and look about. Quane took a small flashlight from his pocket, shot the ray downward, and for seconds the rat stood its ground boldly. Curiously fascinated, Quane just watched until the foul thing whirled, to slink back into the alley. Then Quane took a deep breath and walked on, and the crossing light was red as he started across the street. There was no warning horn, no blaze of headlights. Seemingly from nowhere a heavy car roared into the intersection and bore straight for him.

The car flashed past as Quane leaped. Its fender grazed his coat, and the car was gone as suddenly as it came, around the corner, and Quane saw only that it was a black coupé; and that its license, blurred with mud and darkness, ended with the figures six and three.

The act had been deliberate. He knew that. The driver of that coupé had tried to kill him. Quane walked on, into the Hood building.

It was grand to see Johnny Quane again, said Josephine. Yes, Mr. Hood was here this long time, in his private office, but he'd left strict orders not to be disturbed until Mr. Moyer arrived. And what was Josephine doing at her desk at this late hour? Josephine flushed. Mr. Hood wished a stenographic record of this meeting.

Quane cooled his heels with Josephine. The minutes passed. Finally heavy footsteps sounded in the corridor, and Quane heard a loud knocking. Then a door up the hall opened, closed, and Josephine whispered, "That was Mr. Moyer!"

Dave Hood opened the inter-office door a moment later and said, "Come in, Quane." Thus Quane, at last, met H. V. Moyer—one of the two elderly men who had sat at Dave Hood's Paradise table the night a rat had bitten Vivi.

## THEY KILL BY NIGHT!

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He had very little time, Moyer said importantly. At ten tonight he was to speak on the radio, on the Ratkill hour. He was perhaps fifty-five, his hair white and full; and his eyes were a pale, bleak blue, and he was proud, Quane saw, and pompous, and such people can be not only stubborn but ruthless. Then Moyer touched at once upon the weak spot in Quane's armor.

"No newspaper committee after all? You came alone? Quane, what nonsense is this? I thought the papers were against me?"

Quane spoke then, what was for him a long speech. "I'm afraid the newspapers do not yet view your panic advertising too seriously, Mr. Moyer. And the civil authorities are slow to act against you, no doubt because human rights, the rights of free speech, are bellowed from the housetops these days. Well, Mr. Moyer, you're standing on such rights now, as a citizen—and using them shamefully.

"Yes, I'm alone," Quane continued quickly, evenly. "But I've many friends overseas, the men I fought with, the men who risk and give their lives for these rights and for people like you. These men, like me, expect the nation at home to pull together. The war is the main event, and until the war is over they want no sideshow, nothing to jeopardize their lives needlessly—and the victory. If supplies from just one port were to be delayed now in reaching them—"

"Are you implying I'm sabotaging the war effort?" H. V. Moyer thundered.

"No." Quane looked down at his clenched fist. "You aren't; not seriously, not yet. But there *has* been a local slowdown. And don't forget, the output of a nation flows *through* this port. Mr. Moyer, I too, want to liquidate rats. It's a fine and public spirited idea. My objection is to your methods, the fright you inspire and that's like a leak in a hose that's being used to fight a fire. The fire, the war, comes first. I want to patch this leak before the hose blows out."

Moyer lit a fat cigar. "How else can you awaken the people without scaring them?"

"The people," said Quane, "are smart."

"Dave," Moyer swung around, "where in blazes is my lawyer?"

The lawyer came in at that moment, and Johnny Quane's brows rose. The lawyer was Lou Vincent.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Teeth of the Rat

VINCENT wore a dark suit. He was slim and pale. His hand was cold and sweaty as Quane gripped it. Vincent muttered some-

thing, that he'd had a problem on his mind, that he'd been delayed.

"And how's Vivi, Lou?" Quane said.

"Better, thank you." The moment seemed embarrassing to him, and Lou Vincent cleared his throat nervously as he sat down.

"Well, Vincent," H. V. Moyer growled, "where do we stand?"

Vincent looked aside, away from Quane as he spoke. "The rights to advertise are legally limited only as to price and product. My client certainly complies with the Food and Drug laws. Now, however, if Mr. Moyer sees fit, as a public spirited citizen, to combine advertising with a message, and if this message be accurate, honest, and designed to awaken the public to conditions sinister and of definite danger to them, then no court in the land but can uphold him."

Dave Hood was grinning lazily. "Quane," he broke in now, "crawl into your hole."

"As I understand it," Vincent continued, "you are concerned about the war effort. This campaign, Johnny, is part of our war effort. We must fight also for security at home—"

Quane rose. There was at that moment an urgent buzzing of the phone. Josephine answered it. "For you, Mr. Moyer," she said.

"Hello," Moyer said at the phone—and gasped. "What? Charlie Lord is dying? Wait—you're sure? *Sure?*" Moyer's pale blue eyes began to glitter. He swung around from the phone, faced Dave Hood. "Dave!" he cried, and now he couldn't seem to get the words out for excitement. "Dave, get busy on a new script for tonight's program! Dave, this is—tremendous! Charlie Lord. . . . *Dave, it's the plague!*"

No one seemed to know—or care—what Quane was doing. He stood very still momentarily; then he slipped quietly out of the office. In the hall, he ran, and now the emptiness within him was not alone caused by the swiftly falling elevator. There were little voices in his mind, all crying *plague*. Suddenly, mentally, he could see again the rat leaping at Vivi; and he could hear again Vivi's sharp scream; and here, at last, he knew why earlier tonight he should have made himself turn back.

There were phone booths in the building's foyer. He called the desk.

"Plague?" the voice at the *Bugle* repeated. There was a pregnant pause. "Quane, we'll have to check that. Which hospital?"

"I don't know."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm going to *be*," Quane said, "at the Quarantine Station. I'll verify from there. Can you get me the Vivi's address?"

## THEY KILL BY NIGHT!

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"Call the Paradise."

"No," Quane said, tight-lipped, "I can't do that."

Again the pause, and Quane saw H. V. Moyer leave the elevator and walk hastily to the street. Quane stuck a cigarette in his lips—

"Quane? Gossip department says Hotel Knowlton—but the dame walked out the morning after she was bitten and has been in hiding ever since."

"Get Lacey. Start him looking."

"Quane, what's the angle?"

"Well," Quane said, and his own voice sounded queer to him, "it runs like this: Wold, Truman, Lord. . . . And now *watch Vivi*."

He lit the cigarette, but didn't leave the phone booth. Lou Vincent was emerging from the elevator. Quane looked after Vincent's slender figure. *He* knew Vivi's address. Nate Rooney apparently knew also—Rooney had said on the phone that he was going to see her tonight. Now, Vincent stopped just outside, to look quickly up and down the street. He crossed the sidewalk then, and got in a black coupé parked at the curb.

Quane reached the door as the coupé was sliding away. Mud and darkness fogged the license plate, but the last two figures were clear—a six and a three.

Quane caught a cab and said grimly, "The Quarantine Station."

The doctor succeeding Truman in charge freely admitted Lord's case, and the seriousness of the situation. A rat from the plague ship in the harbor had got into the city; that, the doctor said, seemed obvious. The infected rat had mingled with and infected others. Charlie Lord certainly had been bitten by the rodent flea. Crews of trappers were already at work, however, throughout the city.

"How long a period is required for germ incubation?" Quane asked.

"As little as two days."

"Could rat-bite cause the disease?"

The doctor shook his head. "Rodent *fleas* introduce plague. No, you're confusing plague with rat-bite fever. The rat is host and carrier of a good many diseases, Quane. Typhus, spirochetal jaundice, trichinosis, tularemia—"

"What about the shipping situation?" Quane interrupted. "Will this single case of plague restrict port activities?"

The doctor looked at him. "Frankly," he said, "a good many ships have been allowed to dock, discharge cargo, load and pull out again because of the tremendous pressure of the war. A convoy could often be delayed, or component ships miss it entirely, if we held to rigid fumigation. In future? Well, I'm afraid—" The doctor's lips shut tightly.

## CYRIL PLUNKETT

A small radio on his desk was playing softly. The music stopped, and a voice broke in. Quane caught his breath. The voice was Moyer's. And Moyer was saying: "*I care not whose product you buy, but rats must be swept from this city! This, my friends, is R-day. Rat day! On this Black Friday we have seen our first case of plague in this city. Yes, the rats can conquer, for the plague—is here!*"

The doctor snapped the set off angrily. Then the phone rang. It was the *Bugle*, calling Quane.

"Lacey found the girl's hideout. Sorenson Drive, Number 14532."

"Good!" Quane said.

"No, not so good, Quane. Vivi's dead."

**W**ORLD, Truman, Lord—and now Vivi! It was weirdly like reliving an old scene.

"Shot in the temple, Quane," Lacey said.

Vivi wore a white gown, silky of course, and belted, and her waist looked tiny as she lay there. Now she looked not the sullen temptress who had danced sensuously to brass and reeds and the savage beat of tom-toms, but like a child as she lay there. Her skin was very white and satin-smooth, except for the bullet hole. It was blue, powder-pitted.

There was an open window, a fire escape. The gun, this time, had fallen to the floor. It was a pearl handled .32 snug and lovely on the black carpet. The name on its silver stock plate was engraved—*Vivi*.

"How long ago, Inspector?"

"Half hour. Maybe forty five minutes. But *after* you sent along the tip." Lacey's voice rumbled. "Something funny about that tip—"

Quane broke in, "Motive?"

Lacey chewed his lip a moment. Then he pointed to a desk, a typewriter—and a sheet of paper still in the machine:

I cannot stand it. The wound remains angry. I am confused. I have no strength. Tonight I—I found a painful swelling. It is plague! And I cannot face it, so I kill myself. . . ."

Quane looked at Lacey. "*Two* shots?"

"That," Lacey said heavily, "is the cute one. *One* empty shell. But come along."

He led the way across a small burnished hall. Here, with detectives, a little man sat in a little room. He bounded to his feet as Quane came in, cried, "Johnee!"

Nate Rooney.

And he was coming to see Vivi tonight; he'd said that on the phone! Vivi *was* the Paradise; without her he was ruined—he'd said that. "But I do not do thees, Johnee!"

Lacey said now, "Cut it, Nate. Talk English. Hell, you were born in Brooklyn."

Nate Rooney sighed, deflated, shrugged.



## THEY KILL BY NIGHT!

"Okay. It's the truth, though. I came up the stairs. I was about to rap. It was then I heard the shots—"

Quane swung around to face Lacey and asked again, quickly, "Two shots? How about residents of the building? Did they hear?"

Lacey's quiet voice answered, "Johnny, on the face of it, I'd say suicide. Of course the note is typed, unsigned, but fear *might* do that, to a woman of Vivi's temperament. Only—yes, you're right. A woman living downstairs did hear and swears there were two reports. So the way it looks to me, one was used to kill. And that gun, Vivi's, firing the bullet, was left with the victim. Then a second gun, containing a blank cartridge, was held in the victim's hand, held close to the wound, and fired to provide the powder tattoo. This second gun was carried away.

"Okay, Rooney here had a motive of sorts. According to him, the girl was dodging him, hiding from him, playing fast and loose with her contract. She was costing him big money. But we find Rooney here in the hall, on the *outside* of the door, and the door was locked on the *inside*. I mean the first record we get on Rooney, he busts into the foyer, from upstairs, to yell to the switchboard operator that he heard *shots*, a sucker play, if he was really guilty."

Suddenly, Lacey wore a grim grin. "Want to play it straight this time?"

"Murder? We break the Truman case open again too?"

"That's it."

Quane said, "Is the phone clean?"

He called the *Bugle*. Again a heady warning bored into his brain. Tonight death had ridden in a black coupé, to get *him*. He called Sally. He let the phone ring a dozen times, and Sally should have been at home, but she didn't answer. Lacey, from the doorway, said now softly. "Better give, Johnny. Tips don't come from a crystal ball, and I didn't spend all this time with you for nothing."

The muscles in Quane's cheeks had tightened. "Lacey," he said harshly, "God help the man if he has killed my wife!"

"Well!" Lacey said. "I thought you had a lead, so let's go on it!"

**T**HE officer-chauffeured black police car ran with siren wailing. Lacey sat in the rear seat, with Quane, leaning back, his eyes closed. He was looking at Quane. He reached out, gripped Quane's arm as a police call came on the air:

*Car 18 . . . Car 18 . . . Report to Inspector  
Lacey . . . Quane apartment empty . . .  
Wife seen to leave with man, in black  
coupé. . . .*

## CYRIL PLUNKETT

"Hell, did you think she'd leave a note?" said Lacey. "Want to go down for a look-see anyway?"

Still Quane, sitting tensely, made no reply. And again the radio broke silence.

*Car 18 . . . Car 18 . . . Report to Inspector Lacey . . . Wrecked black coupé abandoned in Exeter Park area . . . No sign of occupants . . . Car license number 14-32-763. . . .*

Quane's voice exploded. "Exeter Park—that's across the river from the Moyer plant! Cut for the river, Lacey!"

The siren didn't wail now. The police car swung finally into River Street, and here were sprawling dark buildings: here were thin worried tendrils of fog that stole in from the restless blackness. A sign bloomed ahead suddenly, small, red, sinister in the inky heavens. The sign, on top a building, spelled *Ratkill*.

There was a car, a big black job aglitter with chrome, parked in the cement court. And there was a watchman at the gate, an old man dozing until rubber squealed beneath the squad car. There was, too, a light in the office; and the office door opened before the watchman could get to his feet.

"Is that you, Lou?" H. V. Moyer called.

Lacey, with his detectives, marched to the door. Quane remained in his seat.

"I am expecting," Moyer was explaining in his smooth and pompous voice, "my attorney, Mr. Vincent."

"And he didn't show?" said Lacey.

"No, he—" Moyer's break sounded worried. And his voice sounded worried as he tried again, "He should be here. . . ." Apparently he recognized the inspector.

"Let's go inside," Lacey said ominously. He turned around. "Where the hell is Quane?"

Johnny Quane was already walking off, swiftly in the darkness, up the street.

Moyer's high barbed fence stopped short of the corner. There was a vacant weeded area, then a lane, scarcely a street, that dropped sharply toward the river. As Quane turned this corner he could see a dark blot ahead, the brick of another big building, and this building right-angled from Moyer's plant, but it was *outside* Moyer's barbed fence. Quane stopped momentarily, looked back. Lacey's officer-chauffeur had got out of the squad car.

No car parked here? But there was something better. A match flared near a window in the second story. A face was briefly, vaguely revealed. Quane knew the face. It was Lou Vincent's.

Quane's little flashray, carefully screened, found a door. It wasn't locked, and again Quane paused, frowning now. A thready pulse was pounding, and his throat began to ache. Then Quane thought of Sally.

## THEY KILL BY NIGHT!

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The door squealed on rusty hinges, to swing shut again. Now Quane stood tensely alone in the ebony darkness, and though he listened there was nothing to be heard, until—

Something scampered.

It seemed to come from above. . . . No, Quane reconsidered, from below. *It came from all around him.* He snapped the flashlight. The unused waterfront building was alive with rats! Beady eyes looked at him from rafters and from a littered floor. They were great gray-brown beasts, all sniffing, quivering, as though on the edge of hysteria.

A restless wave began again around the room, and now Quane gulped a deep breath and went swiftly up the steep stairway. The door at the top was ajar.

He pushed it in. His light found a brick wall ahead, and a brick wall to the right of him.

The door slammed shut behind him, driven as though by a strong steel spring! There was a click of the lock. A ceiling light blazed, and Quane saw two people, the strained white faces of Lou Vincent and Sally.

From the third floor stairway, half way up, a laughing voice drawled, "Well, Quane, I knew you'd come!"

Dave Hood sat on these steps, holding a gun.

### CHAPTER FIVE

#### Rat-Race with Death

QUANE looked at Lou Vincent. He wore a gag, and his hands and feet were tied. Quane looked at Sally. She was bound and gagged too, and her eyes were wide pools of horror. Hands clenched, Quane swung back to face the stairway. Dave Hood was grinning crookedly.

"Funny," he said. "I mean your mouth is hanging open, Johnny boy. Surprised?"

"No," Quane said.

"Tell the cops of your suspicions?"

"Yes," Quane said.

Hood laughed. "Johnny, that's off-key. A reporter likes to break a case and *then* hand it to the cops. Besides, if he's wise, why is our friend Lacey still grilling Moyer?"

Now Quane's jaw did drop. "So you know that?" he said. "And the certainty the police will be here any moment looking for me doesn't matter to you? Why, Hood, you fool, you're hooked!"

Dave Hood moved the gun a little, let the muzzle stare at Quane's broad chest. Then he rose lazily from the steps. It's plenty safe—brick walls, no windows . . . and there's plenty of time, his stocky body seemed to say. He even stretched himself.

"I like rats," he said. "They're cunning.

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They're cynical. A trap means nothing to the old ones. As Charlie Lord told me, once get an old-timer in your house, there are just two things to do: wait for the rat to die or burn the shanty down. See what I mean, Quane? *They never get caught. And I'll never be caught either.*"

Hood's eyes began to shimmer as he took the first step down. "Johnny boy, I've been skating on thin ice the past few days, and I knew it, and I guess tonight is the payoff. If you had come *with* the cops, Vincent and your wife would have been found dead up here, and that's all there would have been to it. Vincent carried the torch for her, as everyone knew, and whatever you might have *suspected*, the evidence would have proved he killed your wife and then himself, just seconds before you and the cops broke in. Don't worry, Vincent would have taken the rap for any loose ends I might have left in the Vivi-Truman-Lord and Joe Wold cases. Hell, I've already got his confession written out; already have it signed! I've got *him* hooked with everything from conspiring with enemy agents to infecting a city with bubonic plague!"

Hood took a second step down. "But you came in *alone*, and that's the way I wanted it, Quane. Now my plan double-checks—it's perfect! According to the record, *you* are going to kill Vincent and your wife. Motive? Evidence will be found to prove Sally was unfaithful to you while you were overseas. Vincent *still* takes the rap for the Wold-Truman-Lord-Vivi murders. And *you*, Quane my lad, will never voice a suspicion against me. Because you'll have a bullet in *your* head, and a gun in *your* hand—"

Quane broke in flatly, doggedly, "You can't get away, Hood."

"Oh, can't I!" Hood said. His feet left the steps and touched the floor. Grinning, his gun level, he backed quickly off to one side, toward a chimney that jutted into the room.

"We're over water, Quane, right at the edge of the river. There's a boat below, the one I used to bring Vincent and your wife across, after ditching Lou's car. I'm going free via the boat, and if the cops are too close, I can swim it. Because they won't see me leave. There's a ladder built into this chimney—I pull a hidden lever and the chimney opens for me. I drop right off the ladder, into the boat."

His left hand, behind him, found a hole in the brick. He stuck his hand in the hole, to find and grasp the lever, and then the front of the chimney shivered.

He twisted half around, his hand jerking from the hole, but a snarling gray-brown body came with it. A rat, clawing and with teeth fixed in Hood's fingers.

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Dave Hood threw the vicious squirming creature, tried desperately to bring his gun into play now, as Johnny Quane leaped. There was a flat report, surprisingly soft in the fastness of this room, but Quane had gripped Dave Hood's wrist, and Quane's smashing drive had already thrown Hood off balance.

The bullet splattered against brick, harmlessly, and Dave Hood discovered then what it was to be on the wrong end of an ex-Marine's commando tactics. Dave Hood, numbed, shaking his head in bewilderment, was suddenly unarmed and looking up from the floor.

Quane calmly took the gun and cracked Hood on the head with it. Then he went to Sally.

**S**HE insisted that she, too, was calm. But that was after Quane had released her. Grinning, he took the cigarette she was trying to light, lit it, and gave it back to her.

Lou Vincent, released at once also, returned now from Moyer's plant with Lacey, the dicks, and H. V. Moyer.

"You see," Lou Vincent was saying to Lacey, "I was worried about this *Ratkill* advertising program from the beginning. Mr. Moyer's affairs were my legal responsibility, and it was fairly obvious to me that Hood was grinding his own ax.

"He owned this factory building, failed to get war contracts for it, and knew he stood to lose upwards to a couple hundred thousand if he didn't get rid of it now. So he sold Moyer on an advertising campaign, Hood's plan a quick boom for *Ratkill*. Then Moyer would have to expand—and couldn't without buying this property.

"Furthermore," Vincent continued, "I knew Hood hated *me*. This was because Vivi had turned from him, to fall in love with me. Tonight Quane got away from our meeting before I could quietly let him know I wanted a confidential talk with him about Hood. I tried to locate Quane at the *Bugle*; he wasn't in. I called at his home—and I'd just arrived when Sally and I heard of Vivi's death. We heard it on the radio."

Vincent paused. His eyes were deeply shadowed. He swallowed hard then, and resumed, "We left at once, intending to go to Vivi's place, but when we got outside, Hood was sitting in my car. We hadn't reached the corner before he pulled a gun on us.

"The rest you know—except that I owned a small share in this property with Hood. He practically gave it to me recently, and his reason obviously was that I too might logically have come here with Sally tonight."

Moyer said, "Lou, I'll take you home."

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The detectives removed the handcuffed Hood. Then Lacey, Sally, Quane walked slowly up the hill.

"Let's start," Quane said abruptly, "with Ratkill. The alarming increase of rats in the city, the epidemic of baby bitings, gave the prolific Hood an idea.

"Hood hated the government for the brush-off he got on war contracts. Very likely he voiced this hatred—and was quickly propositioned by an enemy agent. So Joe Wold did actually overhear a pair of two-legged rats discuss a plan to play the Ratkill program to the limit, thus to paralyze the port in this vital month of the war, and simultaneously jam the war industries of this city. There was, however, something of the missionary in Joe Wold. He confronted Hood with his knowledge and attempted to change and save him. Very likely Hood played up, then laid for Wold, knocked him, produced a gash in his throat that rat teeth *might* have made—and left a dead, bloody rat to show the police how Wold had died.

"That Wold rallied before death, to leave a message of sorts, the first three letters, to spell *plan* or *plague*, only enlarged the rat menace for Hood. He'd already arranged to loose a rat in the Paradise, knowing the incident would be taken up by the newspapers.

"Now psychology was Hood's weapon—and his method was utilization of every situation. A plague scare, a frenzied people, drastic port control—these were but one objective; he had another goal also. Personal gain, as Vincent said, through the forced sale of property to Moyer—and personal revenge. *He'd* wanted Vivi; he'd lost her to Vincent. His murder plan therefore, while subtle, was never *too* clever. It amused him, for example, to leave a sly clue—the tailless rats, symbol of the man behind the plan. He was well aware that Truman's death and Vivi's, so similar in technique, would eventually be proved murder."

Quane paused to light a cigarette. "Truman, because of his experimental work, was the one

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simple source to plague germs. This Hood knew, through being a ships reporter. Somehow he discovered that Truman owned a gun. And here again he played all the stops, every string, every angle of the situation.

"There was a glaring and dangerous flaw in it, however. Charlie Lord. Charlie was innocently providing the rats—and Charlie could certainly suspect something, as well as the next one. So Charlie Lord had to be eliminated—and again Hood played the situation. *Lord had recently suffered a rat-bite.* Hood used that wound to infect Charlie Lord with Doctor Truman's germ culture.

"Now the threat of plague, so cleverly put into Moyer's mouth, became real. But it wasn't yet *dramatized*—and Hood's revenge was not yet achieved, either. Tonight he borrowed Lou Vincent's car; then he left his office, and returned unseen, by way of a private door. He used Vincent's car in a deliberately bungled attempt to kill me, for I was the last link in his chain. I had to *suspect* Lou Vincent. Because Hood needed Sally to complete his payoff plan, I had to be conditioned to accept Vincent as Sally's killer and, as Hood hoped, also plant Vincent's guilt for *all* the crimes in the minds of the police. Thus to motivate the forged confession and Vincent's death, still to come.

Quane took a deep breath and said, "Earlier tonight I discovered the purchase record of Hood's River Street property. When the chase turned toward the river, I knew where to go."

"Never mind," Lacey interrupted, grumbling. "I got a head on me too, Quane. The Paradise was pretty damn' handy for that rat publicity. And certainly it wasn't Vincent who told Nate Rooney where Vivi was hiding—not when it was Vincent's purpose to keep her *from* Rooney.

"Don't worry, Quane, I got it figured. Nate Rooney was 'trecked' all right—he didn't want his Vivi killed. So he was going to 'treck' Dave Hood tonight. Only he practically walked in on the murder—and then tried desperately to save his own skin. But don't rats always leave a sinking ship, Quane?"

Inspector Lacey, still grumbling, started for the squad car. "I'm going to the Paradise to pick up Rooney. Want a lift uptown, you kids?"

Quane shook his head. "I'll phone the *Bugle*, and then we'll take a taxi."

He stood with Sally a moment, his arm around her slender waist. He looked back then, and up, at the *Ratkill* sign.

"It's like a dream," Sally whispered. "But now we'll wake and sing—"

"—a requiem for rats," he told her.

THE END