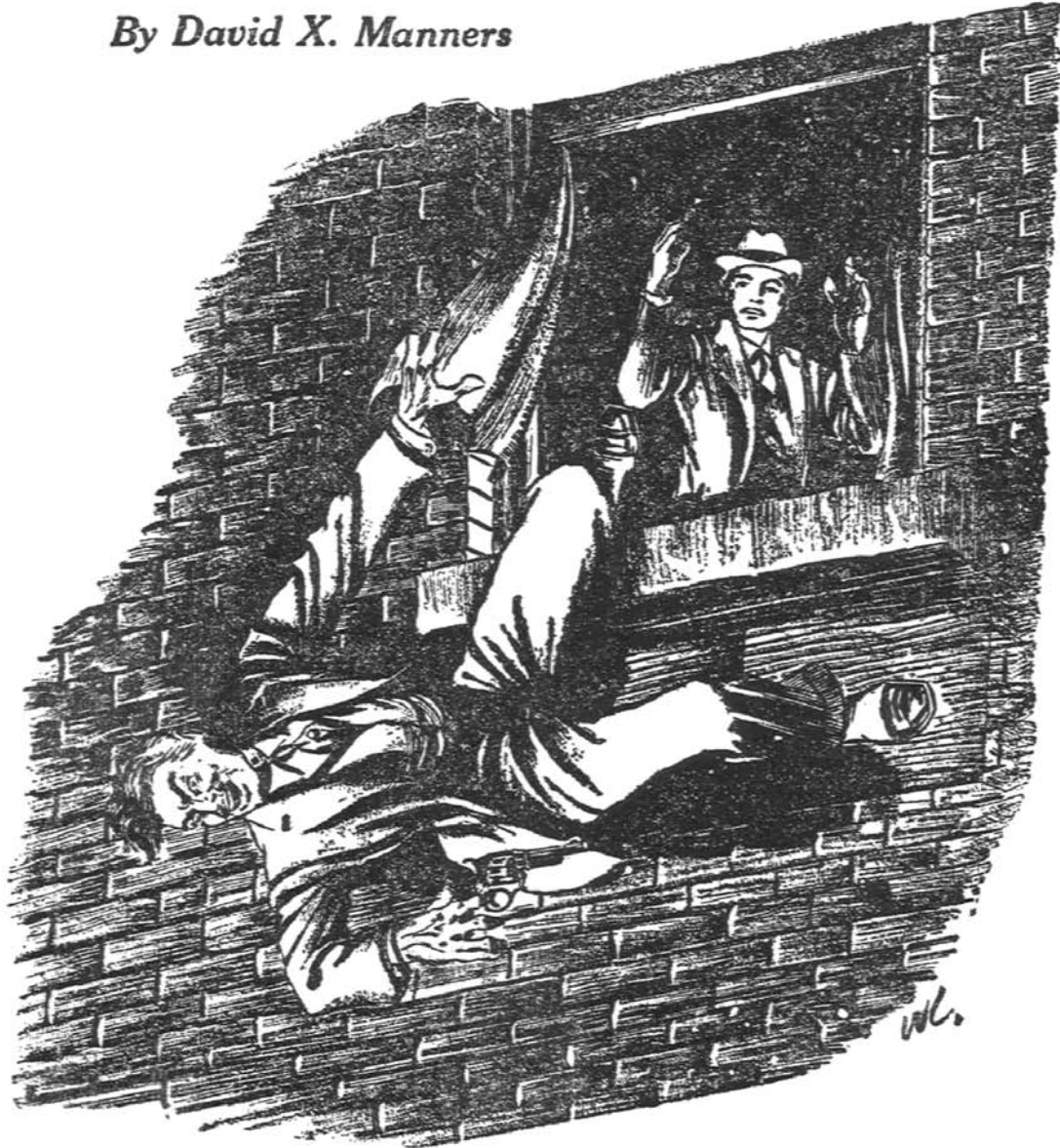


Fifty-Grand Funeral

By David X. Manners



Larry Quentin had had plenty of strange experiences in the detective business. But this was the first time he got mixed up with a clairvoyant who pulled messages out of the air—and pushed Larry toward a fatal future.

TO BE through when you're old and gray is bad enough, but to be counted a dead pigeon when you're still young and supposedly prime beef is little short of tragic. That is the way Larry Quentin felt when he got the little manila post card from his draft board and read: *Registrant has been continued by Board of Appeals by a vote of 5 to 0 in Class 4 F.*

A dead pigeon and 4 F are one and the same.

"You," Larry's friend, the Army doc, had said in most unfriendly fashion, "have a once-fractured collarbone you sustained in a plane crash in Cuba. Then there are those two bullets Dutch the Gup put into your left lung. And how about those cracked ribs and multiple fractured vertebrae the Schmootz gang gave you when they tossed you out of a third-floor window? Why, you even use a stick to help you walk."

You are used up. Finished. No good. They told him that in not so many words. Why don't you go back to your detective business like a good boy?

That, on top of a case Larry hadn't got anywhere on in the past months, was enough to get him down.

Larry Quentin slumped in his chair in his private detective office, and was about ready to expire when a brisk rap came on his door. He turned his head.

"Hello, good-for-nothing!"

Janet Joyce, a blue-eyed goddess, walked into the room, taking a pencil and pad from her bag as she did.

He did not like that "good-for-nothing"—especially coming from a gal like Janet. And especially coming on top of everything else. He liked Janet. He hoped to marry her someday. Janet's features were beautiful, and unmarred by time and mayhem as his were not. Besides she had long blond hair that was silky to the touch. Her legs were silky too, and well-formed.

Larry Quentin said, "If it's about the scrap metal collection—I haven't got any."

She heaved a sigh. "Larry, you are never going to snap out of it! You are never going to do anything for the War Effort!"

There was a useless iron fence in front of the brownstone house where Larry lived. Larry had already made arrangements with an acetylene man to cut it down. There was only the little item of asking the landlady for her permission.

But he knew better than to stall Janet with things he intended doing.

He smiled, waved her to a chair. "The drive isn't over till next week," he said.

"Your quota is due in tomorrow," she said emphatically.

He said, "So why are you ranting? That is

still twenty-four hours off. When I act, I'll act fast and take care of it all at once. You forget, I am a busy man. There is a case I'm working on. A case involving a friend of mine who has been treated unrighteously. Who—"

Her snicker broke him off. "You haven't had a client since Cain conked Abel," she said. "You know you only use this office as a convenient place to snooze."

Larry reached under his desk for the bell-button. He had it rigged to stimulate the phone ringing, and it was a convenient device for just such an occasion as this. He would show Janet if he was busy or not.

He jumped when the telephone's bell really went off before his knee found the button. He fumbled in his hurry to get up the receiver.

"Is this the International Detective Agency?" the voice at the other end rumbled in his ear. "Can you send a man over at once to the Republican Bank and Trust Company? There's the strangest, weirdest, uncanniest—My God, he's—"

THE wire went dead. Larry juggled the hook. It did no good. Finally, he replaced the receiver, got up at once, took his hat and his walking stick.

"A client?" Janet's mouth puckered in amazement. "I don't believe it!"

Larry picked up a dog's leash that was draped over the door knob. "Sniffa!" he called. He whistled, urgently.

An uncombed Scotty had been sleeping under the desk all the while. He scampered out, claws rattling on the floor. Larry snapped the leash on the twelve-year-old dog. "A client, Sniffa," he said. He looked up at Janet and his smile was tight. "One last client, and then—the junk-heap!"

Then he hurried out the door so fast he had to call back to Janet to ask if she'd lock up for him.

The Republican Bank & Trust Company is one of New York's smaller institutions, but it is by no means small. Its home is a staid fourteen-story building in the financial district. After the way the phone call had been cut off, Larry Quentin was expecting to find the bank's foyer sprinkled with assorted corpses. Instead he was greeted by a placid-looking little brunette nifty who said, "Mr. Rolle is expecting you."

Banker Rolle was built like the head of the Truck Drivers' Union. He was a big, silver-tipped bear who got up from behind acres of desk and ambled over to greet Larry. Sniffa, the Scotty, growled, and his hackles rose.

Larry rested his stick against a chair, picked Sniffa up and held him so he would not take a chunk out of Banker Rolle's rump, and said, "What gives? Why this mysterious phone call that gets cut off in the middle like somebody is being choked or something?"

Banker Rolle said, "Blame Fingers." He indicated a thin, nervous-looking man who was standing near the desk. "He just touched the phone wire and, believe it or not—it went dead!"

"I don't get it," Larry said.

"I don't get it either," agreed the banker. "Neither does Fingers understand it. It's a strange power. We were just wondering if his bridgework might not be acting as a radio or something. All Fingers has to do is touch a phone wire, and he can hear what the people are saying. Or he can touch the outside of a closed book and tell you what's inside it. Sometimes he even picks up stuff right out of the air."

"That's right," said this man known as Fingers, and his voice had the music of a squeaking door hinge. He was a scarecrow of a man with neatly pressed new clothes that didn't seem a part of him. "I got magic in my fingers. I been reading fortunes and selling horoscopes in a Five and Dime store, when I got this message out of the air about Mr. Rolle's health, and I come to tell 'im."

Larry Quentin looked sharply at Fingers, and then something in his mind began to click. It was the recollection that Fingers had once been the guest of the police because his hands had been too smart about getting into safes. Surely, Rolle wasn't falling sucker to Fingers' gag, whatever its purpose,

"Let me demonstrate," Banker Rolle urged. "What can you show us, Fingers?"

FINGERS went over and touched the wall. He made his scrawny face look holy for a minute and then he said, "Your secretary has just begun writing a letter. It—le's see—it says: 'Darling Johnny... I am writing this while the boss is busy, so—'"

Larry walked quickly to the office door and pulled it open. He observed a quick sleight of hand by the little nifty who had ushered him in to Banker Rolle's presence.

Larry walked over and before she could object, he pulled out the beginning of a letter that she had quickly slid under her blotter. She blushed and tried to stammer an excuse as Larry read it, handed it back to her.

Larry returned to the bank official's office. He was beginning not to understand this thing. Larry's look was enough to show the two men that the little trick of "telepathy" had come off. Sniffa, whom Larry had leashed to a heavy chair, looked decidedly uneasy.

"Try this one," said the banker, and in Larry's sight he scribbled something on a note of paper and folded it. Fingers touched the paper which he had not seen. His voice squeaked, "You wrote, 'What have I written here?'"

Larry felt icy little prickles touch his skin. He looked at Sniffa, as if maybe the shaggy little critter could give him the answer to this uncanny puzzle. But Sniffa only stared silently back. Larry was annoyed.

To Banker Rolle, he said, "So what has this got to do with me? Why have you called me?"

"I have called you," said Rolle, "because Fingers came to me after he heard a plot against my life—heard it right out of thin air. I wouldn't have believed it—but he also said the threat against me was coupled with one against Warden Young of State Penitentiary! Warden Young is one of my true friends. If anything should happen to Warden Young—"

A sound like an explosion rent the air. A shower of broken glass sprayed the room. Sniffa yelped. Larry jumped as something heavy landed on the carpeted floor with a thud. Banker Rolle cursed.

Larry Quentin looked and saw that one of the large windows at the end of the room was smashed. Jagged spears of glass were all that was left in the frame. Then he saw the object on the floor.

He picked it up—the thing that had been hurled through the window, smashed it. It was a building brick wrapped up in newspaper. The paper was a five-year-old tabloid. Its front page had a picture of Banker Rolle and a jail picture of

a man named McCann. The headline was:

**McCANN GOES TO PEN—
BANKER FREED!**

Larry's quick eyes did not have to read the story on page two. It was as familiar to him as his own name. McCann, who had been convicted of robbing the Republican Bank and Trust Company of fifty thousand dollars, claimed that Banker Rolle was the real criminal, that Rolle had double-crossed and framed him and hidden away the loot. When Rolle was exonerated, McCann still hadn't given up. He swore never to rest until he got out of the pen and "got" Rolle.

Larry Quentin looked up, and sweat was glistening coldly on Banker Rolle's gray face.

"Some friend of McCann's threw that brick," Rolle choked. "They want to get McCann out of the pen! They won't rest until they do! Now do you see what I'm up against? Why I'm so interested in Warden Young's safety?"

Larry thought: *This Rolle is not interested in anything but his own hide. But something is happening. And I still do not understand about Fingers.*

He said, "I'll be glad to take the case. It happens that I know McCann's record. I've followed his case and I am interested in it. You claim he practically stabbed you in the back after you had taken him in and given him a position of trust. I know he is a desperate menace to your life and safety."

LARRY again picked up his walking stick and Sniffa's leash. A few more details, and he was heading with Fingers for the railroad station and River City.

State Penitentiary loomed like a medieval fortress out of the murky river fog that came closing over it with the dark. A few explanations and Larry Quentin was admitted to Warden Young's office. Larry introduced Fingers, and conveyed his message of warning concerning the Warden's safety.

"I think it may have something to do with a convict here named Zero McCann," Fingers said. "I think maybe the threat comes from that direction."

The Warden's lips twisted grimly. He was a neat, precise man with a receding hairline and

shining spectacles. Suddenly he was out of his chair. He grabbed Fingers by the throat. He apparently wasn't convinced Fingers could pick such startling things out of the air.

He shouted to Larry. "This fraud knows damn well it comes from that direction! He knows damn well *that ZERO McCann is not in his cell right now!*"

Larry had to grab Sniffa before the dog, roused by the sudden action, took a sample out of the warden's leg. "You mean McCann escaped?" Larry gasped.

The warden relaxed his hold on Fingers' throat, shoved him aside like a useless doll. "I'm sorry I lost my temper. McCann has been missing from his cell since lockup tonight! We're damn sure he's not out of the grounds. He couldn't be! He's hid himself somewhere, hoping he wouldn't be missed, waiting his chance." He looked sharply at Larry. "I guess you know this is curtains for Banker Rolle if McCann ever makes it away from here. That thug McCann has sworn to make hashbrown potatoes out of him!"

The bulb of inspiration illumined suddenly in Larry's brain. "Fingers!" he said.

"Huh-h-h?" said the warden.

"Fingers," repeated Larry. "Maybe he can do it! Personally, I'm doubtful, but maybe he can tell you where McCann is. He gets things out of thin air."

"Yeah," said Fingers, suddenly coming to life. "I can do it. I can do it with the tips of my fingers!"

Warden Young looked at the two of them as if they both were about to sprout wings and fly away.

"I told you," urged Larry. "That's how he knew to warn you about danger to your life. He apparently has some kind of sixth sense or something. Maybe it's his bridgework that acts like a radio detector. Anyway, he seems to tell things. Can you demonstrate, Fingers?"

Warden Young grabbed Fingers by his scrawny arm. His eyes looked such dagger points, it seemed a miracle to Larry they didn't break his glasses. "To hell with demonstrations! If you can just tell me where that sneaking rat has made his nest I'll—"

A sudden, hollow groan rattled in Fingers' throat. His face beamed with a neon look. "The

power house,” he said. “That’s it—the power house. McCann is in the power house!”

WARDEN Young’s lower jaw dropped. He stared at Fingers. Then, suddenly, he galvanized into action. “You may be a damn liar, but—I been thinking all along he was there, myself!” He threw a toggleswitch on an intercommunicator on his desk. “Call the guards!” he bellowed. “Surround the power house. McCann is hiding in the power house—just like I been telling you!”

Fingers said, “It’s something about a pipe. A water pipe. Does that make sense? Does—”

A half dozen guards armed with rifles and sub-machine guns burst into the room.

“The power house, boys!” the Warden bellowed. “McCann is trying to make it out through the old water-system pipes. We’ll drown him like the rat he is!”

The power house was a huge, square brick building with four towering chimneys. It was in the extreme corner of the prison grounds, just inside the wall. Inside of five minutes, Warden Young had almost every guard at his disposal ringing it. Every searchlight he had available was trained on it, illuminating it bright as Christmas.

There were several deep, abandoned cistern pits, covered by iron grills, inside the power house. It was an hour’s work to open them all. The last pit was just being opened when a cry jolted razor-edge nerves. Into the power house rushed a guard, bearing a dripping-wet object in his hands.

“McCann—he’s escaped! A barge tender seen him swim ashore on the other side of the river!” He held up the crudely made outfit that obviously had been put together from scraps collected in the prison tailor shop. It was an all black, hooded garment, splashed with splashes of gray paint. On a foggy night, black as this one, it would make its wearer invisible! “He was using this camouflage suit.”

The warden groaned. “While we’re busy on this end—he goes out the opposite end!”

He whirled in sudden fury on Fingers. “You were a decoy!” he swore. “A damn decoy! You know you never heard anything about him escaping down here.”

Larry was sure of the same thing himself, but

Fingers whined, blubbered. “I swear I heard. But I guess I took it wrong! The voice I heard out of the air was saying, ‘I’ll give ‘em the ol’ powerhouse play. Over the water. It’ll be a pipe!’” Fingers’ blubbering grew thicker. “How’d I know he meant it would be a pipe to swim the river? I thought he was talking about a water pipe.”

Larry said, “Where’s a telephone? I got to call Banker Rolle, see what he says.”

Over the phone, Rolle sobbed, “This is my funeral. Look, I want to be buried back home in West Virginia next to my kinfolks. Quentin, will you see to it that—”

Larry said, “Sit tight and do like I say and maybe you won’t have to worry. Maybe they’ll catch Zero first. I’ll be with you as fast as the N. Y. Central will rattle.”

IT WAS nearly midnight when Larry Quentin, Sniffa at heel, entered the Republican Bank and Trust Company building. He’d parted company with Fingers immediately after the debacle in River City. Larry found no elevator running.

Larry was puffing from the climb when he rapped on the ground-glass door of the banker’s office. Banker Rolle was in a blacked-out office on the bank building’s fourteenth floor. There was no answer from inside. But Larry heard footsteps, stealthily moving! On guard, he stepped quickly to the wall alongside the door, jerking his eleven-clip automatic from the holster under his right armpit. With a low growl, Sniffa haunched back for any eventuality.

“It’s me, Mr. Rolle. Quentin,” Larry said, not knowing if it was the banker moving inside the room.

The door opened, and Banker Rolle stood there. Rolle put away the gun he held, immediately. Larry followed suit, crowded inside the office in the shadow of the banker’s great bulk, closed the door on Sniffa’s heels. He rested his walking stick against a chair.

Rolle’s jowled face looked haggard, worn. Ledgers and large-size file cards were scattered over a desk. Rolle nodded toward them. “I’m going over the accounts, the books—getting them into shape in case—in case I won’t be around.” His voice broke, steadied. “Will you guard me, Quentin? I—I guess I’ll be safe enough if you’ll stand watch outside that door until I get this

important work done. The door is the only access to this office.” He mentioned behind him. “It’s a fourteen-story drop, straight down, from either of my windows”

Larry was worried by that last. He wondered if in a pinch Rolle might not take a dry dive, under stress of mental torture. He prayed not.

Larry’s roving eyes took in the setup. “You get your work done, Mr. Rolle. I’ll stand watch outside the door, like you say. C’m on, Sniffa.”

Larry dragged a chair out with him in the hall. Something told him he’d rather be in the room where he could see things, but he knew, too, that guard duty was always done best outside the room you were protecting.

After the first half hour, Sniffa was restless. He wanted to be walked. Larry had rushed down so fast from River City, he hadn’t had a chance to walk Sniffa that evening. It was plain he couldn’t walk the grizzled old warrior now.

He took him to the stairs. “Fourteen floors down, Sniffa, and fourteen back up. If you want to take it.”

Sniffa took it. Larry could hear the Scotty’s toenails clattering down the hard stairs. Larry went back to his post. He doubted if Sniffa would go all the way down. If he did, he’d probably not be able to get out into the street. Unless he found a night man to push open the hard-swinging brass door for him. Maybe Sniffa would just find an inconspicuous corner . . .

LARRY waited, but Sniffa didn’t come back. And things were singularly quiet inside the office now. Before, he’d heard the occasional noises of the banker’s movements as he worked on his books.

Larry knocked on the door. He rapped again, even harder. The hall echoed the thuds.

Mr. Rolle . . . Rolle—”

Larry jerked and shoved the doorknob loud enough for a dead man to hear “Mr. Rolle—” The door was snap-locked. Larry called one last time. Then he stepped back from the door.

He considered using his automatic. Then his quickly roving eye caught the fire-extinguisher on the wall. Seconds later, heave went the fire-extinguisher, and *cra-ashhh* went a ten-buck pane of glass. Larry stepped through the shattered door.

“Mr. Rolle—”

He clipped off at sight of the open window, its drapes wafted by the night wind. He lurched to it. Rolle hadn’t been accurate. He wasn’t accurate about a lot of things. The other of the two windows in the room gave way to a sheer drop. But a six-inch ledge lined the outside of this window, bounded by a wrought-iron railing. It didn’t permit anyone to use the ledge as a terrace; the ledge wasn’t wide enough for that. But it did permit access to the window from the window of the adjoining office. The rail protected the connecting ledge between the two windows.

Larry went out on the ledge, on through a second window into the next office. Then he froze with the sudden realization: *Anyone escaping off the floor would still have to use the hall and the stairs! They couldn’t have escaped while he was still in the hall!*

Cr-a-a-sh!

The numbing impact of a gun striking out of the dark at his skull, spun Larry half around. He grabbed for his assailant. He smashed a fist at an unseen face. Then light bulbs exploded in Larry’s brain box.

Aeons later, Larry came to. He staggered up from the floor, feeling the matted, wet tangle of his hair, and a rising bump on his head big enough to hang a hat on. Then he remembered the immediate past, and he lurched toward the hall.

In front of the bank building, the street was clear. There was no sign of Banker Rolle. There was no sign of Zero McCann. There wasn’t even a sign of Sniffa.

“Sniffa! Here, Sniffa—” Larry began weakly. Then he had a dizzy spell, and he was aware that he was dropping to a sitting position on the curb.

Next morning, Larry Quentin woke up in St. Vincent’s Hospital with six things called sutures in his scalp. He promptly took his leave. The life of an innocent man—his friend—was in dire peril, he knew. It might already be too late! He had to get to Banker Rolle before it was

But where was Rolle. And where was Zero McCann?

Larry ran down a dozen false clues, and his knees were beginning to buckle from nervous strain. A dozen times he had called back at the building where he lived to find out if there was any report on Sniffa. For he had an idea Sniffa would lead him to Rolle. There was an

identification tag on the grizzled old Scotty's collar that might help out.

Larry saw blond Janet Joyce, and he ducked into a phone booth to avoid her. He couldn't talk to her now with so much else on his mind.

THEN, at the morgue, Larry found and identified the body of the man known as Fingers. Struck by a hit-run driver was the report.

Larry left the morgue, called his landlady again. This time she told him a call had come from a man up near Croton. Sniffa had been found up there.

Larry added it up. The only way Sniffa could have gotten out of the bank building was if someone opened the door. And the only way Sniffa could have gotten thirty miles from New York in so short a time was by hitching a ride. Now, with whom would Sniffa probably have hitched a ride except with—whoever went out the bank building when Sniffa did.

Larry had a little job to do with the loads in his gun. Then he went up to Croton via N. Y. Central to get Sniffa. The man who had him said, "He come on my porch couple hours ago, commenced barkin' like he was crazy."

First thing, Sniffa jumped in Larry's arms and began licking his face. Then he jumped down and began barking, his nose close to the ground, and sniffing in great snorts. His coat was burred.

Two minutes later, Larry was hoofing it behind Sniffa, and Sniffa was sniffing ahead. The little legs on the grizzled old Scotty were pumping away. Larry watched him sharply, understandingly.

They went out of the village and across a low-lying field and then over a hill. Dark was coming down fast. Suddenly, Sniffa slowed his pace, looked at a solitary house off in the gloom ahead, then looked back at Larry. No light showed from the house. "That the house, Sniffa?"

Larry felt for the reassuring hardness of the Colt at his armpit. "Stay here, Sniffa!"

Larry started to move off toward the house alone, but Sniffa would not remain behind. He started to come too. Larry had to repeat his warning before the dog would remain behind.

Larry glanced into a car parked just off the shoulder of the deserted road in front of the house.

He spent another glance on the car's front bumper. Then Larry did not waste time with the formality of knocking at the door. He put his shoulder against it, and there was one door that needed a new lock.

Inside, he stopped short, bracing himself against the momentum of his lunge. A man lay bound and gagged on the floor. The familiar bulk of Banker Rolle was crouched over that figure. Rolle straightened. His eyes widened in startled surprise at seeing Larry.

It took seconds before the banker's lips could form words. He indicated the body on the floor. "I—I got him," he whispered huskily. "I got him before he could get me!"

It was Zero McCann—the escaped con. Larry knew the young face as well as his own. It was bloodless and pale. He caught the rise and fall of McCann's chest. He was still alive.

Larry's face cracked into a slow, appreciative smile. "Good!" he said. "You gonna carry him out to the car? I'll help you."

He moved toward the body. He crouched over, apparently studying how he was going to pick it up. But every muscle in his body was spring-tense. Abruptly, he whirled, grabbing the banker's gun-laden fist that was smashing down at his skull from behind.

Rolle cursed, tried to knee Larry as Larry smashed out at his jowled face. Rolle's gun went flying, Larry jerked out his own Colt, covered the burly banker.

"Cat-gut on the body, huh?" Larry panted. "You'd weight him down with concrete blocks. I saw them ready out in the car. When the gut rotted, he'd float back up to the surface and nobody would ever be the wiser that he'd been tied up when he was thrown in. They'd think maybe he committed suicide, or fell in by accident!"

BANKER ROLLE'S face went paler. Then: "What you stickin' your nose in this for?" he ripped. "I can make it worth your while—"

"Zero McCann is my pal," Larry said tightly. "I been workin' to free him ever since you framed him to the pen on a robbery you did yourself. You heard things were cookin' up, and you were always terrified that McCann might soon be free and pinning the rap on you. You wouldn't feel

really safe until he was dead. So you spread the word around that McCann had sworn to crack out of jail and ‘get’ you. But secretly you were in touch with McCann, acting like his pal. You made all the arrangements to crack him out—for your accounts were short at the bank, and you needed a fall guy again. Who better than McCann? Who had better reason than McCann to crack out of jail and take you for another fifty grand to pay for his five years in stir?”

Larry paused for breath. “You used Fingers. Faked it with your secretary—who probably didn’t know what it was all about—to fool me about his weird talent. She probably threw in that brick, too. Then you literally bumped him off when you were through with him. You may have wiped all his blood off your car’s front bumper, but your mistake, Rolle, was that you shoulda been more careful when you called in a dick to alibi and front for you. It was a mistake to call in the dick who was cookin’ up things to free and clear McCann!”

Rolle had backed to the wall, crouching, trembling. But suddenly the jell came back into his bones. He straightened. “Your goose is cooked, Quentin! Look behind you!”

Larry heard the soft pad of approaching footsteps behind him. He knew it was a trick on Rolle’s part. But he wanted to fall for that trick. If he ever wanted to trap Rolle he had to let Rolle get away from here.

Larry whirled. Rolle hurled forward as he did. His bulk bowled Larry over. Then he was on top of Larry and Larry’s gun was his. But Sniffa, whose soft padding footsteps it was that Larry heard, leaped for the banker’s throat.

The banker clipped down sharply with Larry’s gun and Sniffa collapsed into a broken heap, jerking convulsively.

“That pays that damn yap-dog for sneaking a ride out here!” Rolle pointed the gun menacingly at Larry’s head. “This means your finish too!”

Sharp-nosed Sniffa must have smelled the cat-gut Rolle had in the rear of his car, and he’d climbed in the car. “You polish me off and it’ll be just too bad,” Larry bluffed. “Don’t think you can do that and then go back to your bank and say McCann and Quentin kidnaped you, robbed you of fifty grand or whatever, and then made off. It won’t wash. Before I came out here I dropped a

letter off to Police Headquarters, telling all.” Larry gulped over that lie. “Your only chance would be to kill us both and then skip. But you won’t do that, Rolle. You won’t want any more murders on your head. With draft numbers and ration books and things like that, you know you couldn’t be on the loose for long before—”

ROLLE’S jowled face went lax, then grim. His eyes were dark slits. “Yeah? Well, I don’t think they’re gonna catch me. You marked me for this trail, so I’ll take it. I’ll take me and a quarter million out into the Jackson Hole country, out Wyoming way. I know a hideout there where I can sit tight till everybody forgets. Nobody will ever hear of yours truly again.”

Larry saw Rolle’s fingers tighten on the Colt’s trigger. He had figured Rolle would take this way out. He shut his eyes tight, tensed as if against the impact of bullets. Instead . . .

Cra-a-shh!

Down came the gun on Larry’s skull!

It seemed hours later to Larry Quentin when he felt something hot and wet slapping against his face. “Sniffa!” Larry breathed, and the old terrier desisted for a moment from licking his master’s face. Sniffa had apparently come around okay from the blow that had put him out.

Quickly, Larry freed Zero. Zero was unharmed. Rolle wouldn’t have wanted any marks of violence on him when he was fished from Croton Lake—where Rolle had obviously planned to throw him before Larry had caused a quick switch in his plans.

“We got to hurry!” Larry said to Zero. “Rolle is cleaning out what he can from his bank. I figured it. I wanted to force him into a spot like that where he’d have to show his hand. But I figured when he’d get a chance he would shoot me instead of conk me. I would have played dead and it would have saved us time. I had my gun rigged with blanks. This way, God knows if we aren’t too late already!”

Back in New York, Larry glimpsed the sign that said: *Practice Blackout tonight!* just as he and Zero and Sniffa were entering the Republican Bank & Trust Company building. Just then he saw Banker Rolle coming out of the building, a bulging gladstone bag sagging from his right hand.

Larry had the banker's own gun, which he had recovered, in his own hand—and he knew there was nothing phony about its bullets. Rolle's eyes apparently quickly took in the fact that his escape through the building's front door was blocked. He hesitated, glancing at his watch, then turned, ran for the stairs. He knew he had to lead them on a chase until the blackout came on, and then escape would be relatively easy.

Larry and Zero were after him. They were right behind him when he entered the dark fourteenth floor office, and forced their way inside before he could stop them. Rolle was a fool, Larry thought. He couldn't escape. Least of all through the window, in the dark office, he would be silhouetted against it—an easy target.

Then, just at that moment, whistles shrilled in the street. The rising whoop of the sirens signalled *blackout!*

THE glow behind the windows vanished. Everything was pitch black. Larry could not see the hand or gun in front of his face. Rolle had stalled for just this.

Larry shouted: "Don't try to go out that window, Rolle. You'll kill yourself. I had an acetylene man cut away that rail out there this morning for scrap!"

Larry knew the futility of that warning even as he shouted it. He hoped it might slow Rolle up enough so that he could get at him. But as he groped blindly toward where he heard the banker moving, he knew the banker had already reached the window. In the dark, he could make good his escape across the ledge and then through the manifold connecting suites of the bank's maze of adjoining offices.

A scream sheered up. Banker Rolle's shriek of horror. Its last echo trailed up, as if from a bottomless well. After a moment there was a faint, distant plop. Then there was silence.

Larry couldn't say anything. Zero went to the window. His groping hand was apparently feeling

the vacancy outside it. "It's—it's not your fault," he said hoarsely after a moment. "You warned him. You told him you'd had the rail on this ledge cut away for scrap."

"That's just it!" Larry said. "That's what I can't get over. I was bluffing. I didn't have any rail cut away. This room has two windows. In the dark—*he must have gone out the window that didn't have a ledge!*"

Summoned by Air Raid wardens, police were already thick on the scene when Larry and Zero reached the street. Rolle's gladstone had come open on his fall down, and a soft layer of 50, of 100, and 1000 dollar bills covered the street. Mercifully, they even hid the crumpled form of the banker.

It was a little difficult for Larry getting the police to understand. But after a while they began to get the idea. Suddenly, the sirens whooped again in steady signal and the lights came on. Larry found himself looking into a familiar, pretty, blond face.

Janet Joyce said, "I was so worried about you. I didn't know what had happened to you. I was at Air Raid headquarters when the flash came over the police radio that you were here. I came down in a squad car. I—I heard all you've said about—your friend."

Larry felt a nice warm glow inside, like he hadn't felt in years. Like he hadn't felt since Zero McCann, who had been his roommate at college, and the boy he had picked most likely to succeed, had been sent to the pen for something he hadn't done.

Larry said, "Then will you come along with us, Janet? Zero and I have to go down to Headquarters to iron out a few details about jail-breaking and stuff. After that I think we'll all go out for a champagne celebration, at which I'll tell you my latest plans about scrap collection."

Janet took both Larry and Zero's arms. "It's a date!" she said.

Sniffa trotted merrily along behind.