

A woman's cry for "Help!"—an eerie wail over the telephone, "like some monster screaming in agony"—and young Dellert rushes into the night on a wild and dangerous chase.

# *A Shriek in the* **Night**

By SEWELL PEASLEE WRIGHT

MONTY DELLERT leaned back more comfortably in a chair that was built for comfort and nothing else. He ground out the coal of his cigarette in a hammered-copper tray and looked around his bachelor apartment with mingled content and dissatisfaction.

Not bad. Not as bachelor diggings go. Comfortable, substantial, masculine furniture. Leather upholstery—good leather, applied by master craftsmen. A few severely-framed prints on the wall. An odd cup or so, trophies of almost forgotten feats of athletic prowess; open shelves of odd-looking old volumes, worn and scuffed. A conventional bookcase crammed with ponderous legal tomes bound in calfskin. The hospitable, sophisticated scent of good tobacco in the air. Still....

Monty's idle gaze drifted across a battered brief-case thrown down carelessly on the table in the far corner of the room, and his rather heavy black brows crowded together in a sudden frown.

The brief-case was the one he carried to and from the office; it was associated, in his mind, with the office and its affairs. It served to remind him of something he was trying to put out of his mind.

It was ridiculous that he should be in love with his secretary. Utterly ridiculous! As a lawyer, used to dealing with facts, he recognized the absurdity of the thing.

He had known her only a week—or was it two weeks? Two weeks, yes Miss Frazee had quit on a Saturday, and then Betty—that is, Miss Storey—had come to work on a Monday. Two weeks ago. You don't fall in love with your

secretary—not in two weeks, anyway. Not even as charming a young woman as Bet—Miss Storey.

Monty selected another cigarette, rolled it carefully between his fingers to loosen up the tightly packed tobacco, and was just about to apply a light, when his telephone rang sharply.

"Hello!"

"Mr Dellert?" gasped a voice high with fear and excitement. "This is Miss Storey. Listen! I must see you at once—at *once*, you understand! And bring a gun. You'll need—Oh, here they come! The address is twelve thirty-one—*ah!*"

There was a stifled gasp, the sound of a brief struggle, and then a noise like some monster screaming in agony; a sound that rose to a clamorous crescendo of frenzy, a mingled roar and shriek, a metallic outpouring of sound that was both thrilling and horrible. It mounted almost instantly to a thunder of cataclysmic sound that clattered the diaphragm in the receiver, and started to die away just as quickly.

Then, suddenly, there was a sharp *click* as the receiver was banged into place on the other end of the wire, and then—silence.

Monty, his grey eyes narrowed with excitement, rattled the hook.

"Hello! *Hello!*—"

"Number, please?" said a calm, impersonal feminine voice.

"Listen, Central," snapped Monty, "what was the number of the party who just called me? It's a matter of life and death. I must—"

"I'll give you the supervisor," interrupted the girl, and there was a clicking of circuits being

completed. After a few seconds another voice, a more austere voice this time, snapped "Supervisor."

"I must have the number of a party that just called me," Monty explained hurriedly. "It's a matter of life and death. The party that called is in trouble. She was interrupted before she had a chance to give me the address. Hurry!"

There was a momentary, maddening silence.

"It will be impossible, sir," said Supervisor coldly. "We can not—"

*Bang!* Monty slammed the receiver onto the hook angrily and jumped to his feet.

What did you do in a case like this? Call the police? If she'd wanted the police, why hadn't she called them? Why had she called him, anyway?

Why should he bring a gun? What was the danger she mentioned? And what had made the terrible sound that had poured from the receiver? Nothing human, Monty was sure.

A formless thought was struggling frantically in the back of his brain; a thought that concerned the wailing shriek he had heard. That din, that clamor.

"Ah!" He snatched up the 'phone again and juggled the hook.

"Number, please?"

"*Mam O!*" he snapped. "*Quick!*"

MONTY'S fast little roadster swept down the silent and nearly deserted street.

Two arterial highways, at which he should have stopped, he crossed without slowing down. Half a dozen times he had narrow escapes at intersections, and left angry, cursing drivers behind him in his mad flight. He turned a corner and slowed down just enough to enable him to catch a glimpse of the street signs.

He was in a seedy, run-down residential district, a part of town that had once been favored by the finest families, but now deserted and left to its fate. It was unfamiliar territory to Monty, but at last he found the street for which he was searching—a street even shabbier and more run-down than the one he had been following.

Now and then Monty caught a glimpse of a house number: eighteen thirty-seven, sixteen nineteen, fifteen naught one, thirteen fifty-five, twelve sixty-one, twelve thirty-three—Monty drew his car up to the curb quietly and cut his ignition.

The house next to twelve thirty-three would

be, of course, twelve thirty-one. The house he was looking for!

Twelve thirty-one was a house much like the others; a big old house, set well back from the street, with a large, weed-grown yard, a generous *piazza*, several turreted, bulging bay windows at the corners of the second story, and a look of general desolation.

There were no lights showing anywhere, and as Monty strode up the walk he could see that the windows were blank and curtainless.

Monty looked up and down the street. There was not a soul in sight. He tightened his grip on the automatic in his coat pocket; his forefinger crooked around the trigger, his thumb resting on the safety catch. With jaws clamped together, he walked up on the porch and tried the front door.

To his surprise it swung open at his touch. For an instant Monty was undecided, fearing a trap. He realized, however, that the next move was up to him. He made it. Quickly and quietly, he dodged inside, and closed the door.

He decided, even before his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, that the house had been occupied recently. There was no trace in the air of the staleness common to long-closed houses.

Monty's eyes had accustomed themselves to the darkness by now, and he could see, by the aid of the dim light that came in through the front window, that he stood in a large reception hall. On the left an arch, barred at the top with elaborate carved wood filigree work, gave into what had been, some decades ago, a drawing-room. Straight ahead a door, standing partly ajar, gave entrance to a narrow hallway that presumably led to the rear of the house.

Monty considered. The 'phone would probably be on the ground floor. The upstairs, then, could wait. He had a feeling that there was no one in the house, anyway. It sounded empty; it felt empty.

The 'phone was in the next room; the one that had been the drawing-room. It lay on the floor in a tangle of dusty, twisted brown cord. The dust brought an idea to Monty's mind. He glanced out of the big bay windows and saw that nobody was passing. Then, stooping low, he carefully lit a match and inspected the dusty floor. Footprints were visible all over the room.

With difficulty he followed these footprints,

and in a little dark room, which from its appearance had been a library or study at one time, he found where the girl had been tied to a chair. The ropes that had bound her lay on the floor nearby.

A scrap of paper, fresh-looking, caught his attention. The little crumpled ball was lying partially concealed in a corner formed by a projecting bookcase and the wall. He snatched it up and read it through by the light of a match.

The note was addressed to him, gave his full name and business address and was written in a hand that he recognized as Betty's:

Whoever finds this rush it to the above address. Reward will be given. They are after the Vanetti confession. Guard that and your life. Danger! Will phone if I can.

E. S.

For the first time Monty began to see through the amazing riddle that confronted him.

"So that's it!" he muttered, shoving the paper into his pocket.

Vanetti was a lad of spirit. He refused to be a goat. He refused, to the horror of gangland, to keep his trap closed. He talked. Plenty. Monty was his attorney. The confession which Monty was to spring at the trial reposed in his safe—or did it? Enough to hang four of five men in that confession; enough to put the skids forever under Cold Deck Harrison and his machinations.

Monty ran through the empty house, darted through the door and slammed it behind him, and raced down the steps and out to his car. The starter growled under his impatient foot, the engine caught with a roar, and the car shot forward down the empty street.

The boulevard lights flashed by like the pulsing of a heart. At the intersections Monty sounded his horn, gritted his teeth and hoped nobody was in as big a hurry as he was.

Monty whirled into one of the principal business streets and cut his motor to a reasonable speed. There would be police here, and he had no time for explanations.

There were few cars parked along the curb by the building in which Monty's office was located, for it was late, and the theatre district was blocks away. Monty drew up in front of the building, and leaped from the car. It was a hot night, and old Dad Sands, who ran the elevator after business hours,

was standing outside, looking down the street.

"Hustle up, Dad!" cried Monty, grabbing the old man by the arm and hustling him into the lobby. "Shoot me up to my floor. Quick!"

"All right, all right!" muttered Dad testily. "Everybody in a hurry t'night. Good Gosh! Hot weather warn't meant to rush 'round in so." He jerked the lever over and they shot up to the seventh floor.

"Wait!" Monty called back over his shoulder as he ran down the echoing marble hall, and Dad leaned in the open doorway of the cage and watched with wondering old eyes as Monty disappeared around the corner into the passage that led to his office.

There was no light inside, but Monty realized now that he had been thrown up against a tough proposition; that he was interfering with the plans of as cold-blooded a gang as ever took a man for a ride, with a sub-machine gun to write *finis* to the trip. He turned his key in the lock, swung open the door and jumped aside.

There was no sound from within save the busy ticking of the clock on his desk.

One of three things had happened, Monty reasoned as he stood there; he had figured wrong in believing that they would make a direct try for the confession, they had already come and gone, or he had beaten them to the office. Or—they might still be there, waiting. He drew his gun from his pocket, and with his left hand clicked on the lights.

There was no doubt then as to what had happened. The office, ordinarily neat and orderly almost to the point of primness, was in utter confusion. There were muddy footprints on the thick rug, there were papers scattered everywhere by a careless, impatient hand, and the ponderous door of Monty's big safe was ajar.

One glance inside told him that they had got what they wanted. Monty cursed in a manner most unbecoming to a legal light, rammed his gun back into his pocket and turned out the lights. He banged the door behind and raced down the hall back to the elevator. Dad was still waiting for him, chewing placidly and spitting at intervals into the white sand of a convenient receptacle.

"Listen, Dad," rasped Monty, "my office has been broken into. I've been robbed. Now, don't get excited! But—have you taken anybody to this floor tonight? Anybody that doesn't belong here?"

"That's them, b'gad!" said Dad, dropping the elevator at amazing speed. "I thought 'twas funny they was in such a hurry. Maybe you can git 'em yet, Mr. Dellert! I was watchin' 'em when you come up. They started away in such a tarnation hurry I thought it served 'em good and right. A big car whammed into them at the next corner and took a hunk outa their rear tire. You should of heard it! They was changin' it when you come up."

Monty groaned.

"Come along and point them out to me," he exclaimed as the car stopped at the first floor. He sent the door flying open and half dragged Dad, as excited now as Monty himself, to the doorway.

"There they be!" cried Dad, pointing. "See that there big black closed car? That's them! Look, the man's just jumping in—Hurry, Mr. Dellert, hurry!"

The black car shot away, but not alone. Monty was already in his car, and after them, leaving Dad shouting excited encouragement to him from the curb.

MONTY'S first impulse was to race alongside the other car and settle things then and there. His better judgment told him, however, that there were probably several of them, and they would have every advantage. Besides, Betty was undoubtedly prisoner in the car, and there would be the risk of hitting her. Monty was sure the driver of the other car was not alarmed, from the way he drove, and Monty trailed him at a safe distance.

Rather to his surprise, the car he was following went but a few blocks and drew up in front of a ramshackle old building, with which Monty was quite familiar. It was a disreputable rooming-house, directly across the street from the county jail, and Monty had often gone there to consult with his clients.

As soon as he saw the other car stop, Monty turned into a side street and drew his own car to the curb. Quickly he slipped off his coat, transferring the gun from the coat pocket to the hip pocket of his trousers. He rolled up his sleeves, loosened his belt a notch, and threw his straw hat on the seat. Leaping out of the car, and making sure that no one was watching, he ran his hands over the dusty tires and rubbed the dirt on to his shirt and his bared arms. At the last moment he tore off his tie and opened the top button of his shirt. Then, shaking

his shock of stubborn black hair low over his eyes, he hurried around the corner and up to the building before which the big black car had stopped.

In front of the shiny powerful sedan he paused idly and lit a cigarette, letting the thin white tube droop dispiritedly from the corner of his mouth. The car was empty. Casually, he turned and strolled up to the door that led upstairs.

There was a dim light burning inside, and through the grimy, torn shred of lace curtain that was hung across the glass panel of the door, Monty could see a flight of worn, uncarpeted steps leading upward. He flung open the door carelessly and entered.

Just as he set foot on the first step, somebody started coming down. Monty's heart skipped a beat, but he steeled himself to look up casually, insolently.

It was a woman that met Monty's gaze; a large, round woman, with no visible waist nor neck. She peered down at Monty curiously and then came ponderously down the steps, while Monty waited at the bottom. Huge as she was, it would have been hard for them to pass on the narrow stairs.

"You lookin' fer a room?" she wheezed as she reached the landing. "'Cause if you are I only got one and you got to take it sight unseen. I ain't climbin' up there agin' to show nobody any rooms. I live right next door and run both places. It's the first room to your right as you go up and it's four-fifty the week. Want it?"

Monty stared at the woman coolly, through slitted eyes, and exhaled a cloud of smoke through his nostrils.

"Now, who the hell said anything about rentin' rooms?" he growled. "I got friends here, see? Just come in. I hadda fix the bus for a getaway."

The woman looked at him with something like respect in her rheumy eyes; respect not unmixed with fear.

"Gord!" she muttered. "Pick and his mob? They'll be in the front room raisin' hell. Tell 'em not to let that soused jane that they dragged in go to yellin'—I got two warnin's already I got to be more quiet." And with another sharp glance at Monty, she moved heavily out of the door.

Monty heard low voices coming from the front room as he gained the head of the stairs, but they were silenced at the sound of his feet in the hall. For on instant he had a desire to march up to

the green door of that room, kick it open, and start emptying his automatic. A more logical plan won out, however, and he entered, without hesitation, the "first room to your right as you go up," and slammed the door behind him.

Without bothering to turn on the light, he slipped off his shoes, and then, very cautiously and very silently, opened the door into the hall again.

There was no one in sight, and from several rooms he could hear the sound of sonorous breathing that told of deep sleep. Of course, someone might come in. The occupants of the front room might decide to leave. Almost anything might happen. But Monty did not hesitate.

Quickly he made his way down the hall to the green door of the front room. There was a quiet murmur of men's voices coming from within, but not until he laid his ear to the thin panel could Monty understand a word.

"—come to the winder agin any time, now," said a surly voice. "When he does, he gits it. I got a dead rest, and this .30-'06'll tear a hole in him big enough to stick a cabbage in. God, ain't I seen 'em fair bust a Heinie in two, though!"

"Let him have it—but be sure you don't miss," replied a cold, hard voice. "If you do—"

"I won't, Pick!" The surly voice was whining, fawning now. "Just you wait!"

"I'm waiting," came the cold voice of the man called Pick—the man the landlady had mentioned with such fear and respect.

"What I wanta know," broke in a third voice, "is what we do with the frail. Leave her here, bump her off, or take her with us? She ain't so bad lookin', now; if she was wise, this here skirt, I wouldn't mind—"

"That's all out," cut in the icy voice of the man called Pick. "You know damned well, Ramsey, that Harrison never lets any skirts trail with this mob. We leave her here when we go."

"She'll talk," objected Ramsey sullenly. "She knows too much. Here we got all this stuff Vanetti blabbed, and we bump him off—and leave her here to spill her guts to the first dick—"

"I said we'd leave her here," interrupted Pick coldly. "I—didn't say *how* we'd leave her. She won't talk," he added significantly.

"More like it," growled Ramsey. "I don't want to be turned up on account of no damned frail. Ike, why the hell don't you bump off that bird and

be done with it. God! I don't like this waitin' around."

"Loosin' your nerve, Ramsey?" asked Pick in a sneering voice. "Ike, you take your time, and do a clean job of it."

"Damn right I will," said the man who had spoken first. "He's standing there, talking with somebody. I can see him fine through these here glasses. But he'll come over to the window again, to git a breath of fresh air, and when he does, with the light right to his back; it'll be duck soup. Then we beat it in the bus. That right?"

"That's right," agreed Pick. "We—*Look!*" his voice was low and sibilant, but it crackled with sudden excitement; the first real emotion he had allowed to show in his voice. "*Vanetti! He's coming to the window. Watch him! See? Just a second, Ike—then get him!*"

Monty drew back from the door, crouching low, and jerked the heavy black automatic from his pocket. Quietly he pressed down with his right thumb, and the safety catch clicked down with a little snick of well-oiled, polished steel.

Then, gathering his body under him, he suddenly catapulted himself against the green door.

THE flimsy door splintered, cracked, and flew open. A rifle roared like a clap of sudden thunder in the confines of the little room. There was a chorus of shouts, roared cursing, stamping feet, the crash of overturned furniture.

A gun in the hands of a tall, thin man started barking. Monty's gun answered, and the tall man, the man known as Pick, stumbled back against the wall and slid slowly to the floor. Ike, a little man with a heavy rifle, threw the weapon at Monty and tried to dodge out through the wreckage of the door. Monty's gun spat fire and Ike stumbled and shrieked, locking his grimy, clawlike fingers around his leg. Thick blood oozed out between the fingers as he rocked back and forth, screaming and cursing.

It was all very strange to Monty. There was another man in the room; an ugly man with feverish eyes and a white, deeply-lined face. A "snow bird." That must be Ramsey. He was muttering and whining, his face twitching, his fingers tearing at the slide of a wicked-looking automatic in his hands.

"Jammed! My damned luck! Jammed just

when—Hell!” Ramsey flung the useless weapon crashing into a corner and stood staring at Monty, his hands raised shoulder high, his eyes beady as a rat’s, his gray face twitching nervously.

Excited shouts came from the rooms to the rear. There was a sudden rush of feet, and a crowd of sullen, curious faces at the battered door. Several of the half-dressed men had guns, and from the looks in their eyes they were ready to use them. If the dicks—

Monty forestalled them.

“Lissen,” he snarled thrusting out his chin truculently. “Any you birds figurin’ on hornin’ in? These monkeys kipped the wrong jane, see? The bulls’ll be here in a minute; beat it before we all get caught in a jam, you damn fools!”

That was different. This bird was one of them. Just so the cops weren’t putting over a fast one—The little crowd melted away like magic.

“Fer God’s sake!” exclaimed Ramsey. “There’s the bulls now! Let’s get clear!”

“Stay where you are!” snapped Monty. “You and your boy friend, here—” he nodded towards the writhing, groaning little rifleman they had called Ike—“are going to the Big House for a stretch. A nice, long, juicy stretch. Get used to the idea.”

“But—”

“Keep quiet!” Monty poked his gun against the snow bird’s ribs suggestively. “I’ll ask the questions; all you do is the answering. Where’s the girl?”

“Go to hell!” growled Ramsey.

“She’s in the next room!” piped up Ike suddenly. “Right through that door. And remember who told you. God, I’m glad I missed Vanetti! That’d be the chair, Lissen, you, I’ll give you the real low-down—”

There was a heavy rumble of feet on the rickety stairs. Monty thrust his head through the splintered door and hailed the squad of policemen who, with drawn revolvers, were coming into view at the head of the stairs.

“Right in here!” he called to them, and then, to his unwounded prisoner, “Hold everything, Ramsey; it’ll all be over in a minute or two!”

Ramsey glared at the threatening muzzle of the big .45 automatic, and said nothing.

There was nothing, really, for him to say.

BETTY—unbound but still excited and disheveled—seated herself in Monty’s car.

“I’m afraid I’ve made you a lot of trouble,” she remarked demurely as Monty sent the car rolling down the quiet street.

“Don’t be absurd,” said Monty. “Tell me: how did they manage to get hold of you?”

“The big car; they drove up to the curb in a big car as I was walking home. One of the men got out, lifted his hat and asked me if I could direct them to the Mercy Hospital. I came out to the curb to point out the turn, and quick as a flash he bundled me into the car and we were gone. His hand was over my mouth, so I couldn’t make any sound; the street is a quiet one, and nobody seemed to notice what had happened.

“Of course, I couldn’t for the life of me figure out what was happening, nor why, until they started asking about the Vanetti confession. I told them it was in the safe, where they couldn’t get it, but they had found out, somehow, that I knew the combination. While they were trying to get it out of me, there in the back room, I was wriggling free of the ropes around my hands. Somebody drove up in another car, and they all went out to talk with this newcomer. I scribbled that note and ran to the ‘phone.

“They were angry, of course, because I tried to get away, and said they were through fooling. Either I would open the safe for them, or they would get you here by a trick and make you open it to save me. They thought....

“Well, anyway, I gave in to them. Somehow, I knew you’d get the best of them. But I can’t for the life of me—even yet—understand how you found the house and the paper I left there, as you did. They jerked me away before I had time to name the street—and there must be a hundred or so houses in the city numbered twelve thirty-one.”

“I imagine so,” nodded Monty, “but you see, Betty—”

The girl looked up at him as he paused, and smiled. “You may call me Betty, if you wish,” she said softly.

“I *do* wish,” said Monty emphatically. “But locating the street wasn’t so hard. You see, just as you were speaking, I heard a fire engine siren go shrieking by. Couldn’t figure out what it was that made that unearthly sound for a minute or two; then it popped into my head. A moment later, I saw

a chance of finding the house from which you had 'phoned. An accurate record of all fire calls is kept. I found out what company had rolled at that particular moment, and then where it had gone. Only one street it had passed down had a number twelve thirty-one. So—"

"It's been a terrible night," said the girl

soberly, as Monty paused.

Monty glanced down at the tender, upturned face, and for the first time in several hours his tense features relaxed.

"Terrible—this evening? Betty—*I think it's been wonderful!*"