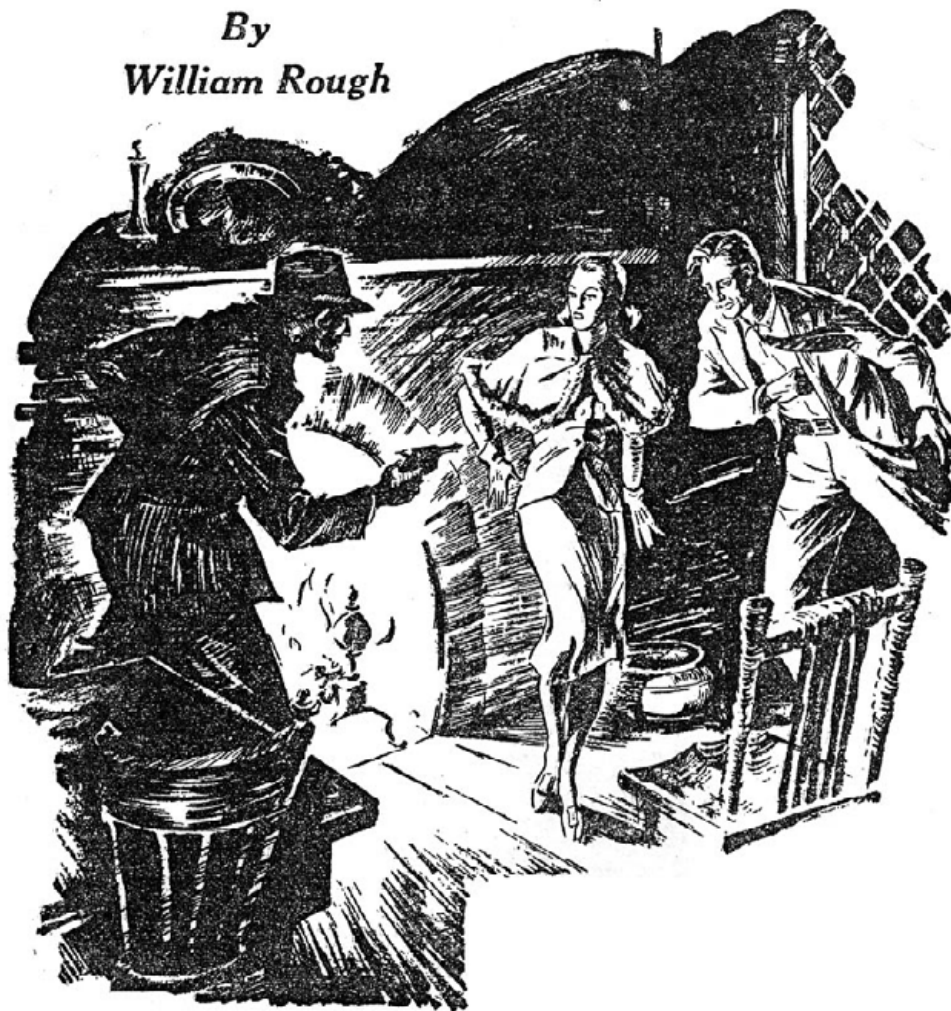


# Trooper Tape

By  
William Rough



*Trooper Dix had his own theory about murder. But when he tried to solve the case of the poisoned antique collector, his theory thrust him headfirst into a tangle of blood-red tape.*

MURDER doesn't always out, but murder always smells. That isn't just a theory with me; it's a fact, proved over a period of years. Of course I don't mean it literally—I don't mean there's a tangible, physical odor. I mean there's a subtle change in the atmosphere of a scene where murder's been committed.

Everyone doesn't agree with me. Nine out of ten hard-boiled troopers will scoff.

Even the tenth won't agree openly. He'll look sheepish and say: "We-ell . . ."

But the murder of Mrs. Amelia Todburn did smell. There was an actual, palpable odor that anyone with a normal sense of smell could have detected. I didn't suspect it, of course, until I examined her body; but as soon as I entered her sprawling mansion that morning I sensed that other, the incorporeal, elusive change in the air.

I felt it as soon as Dr. Loftus led me inside the huge reception room and introduced me to roly-poly Amos Cliesh, Mrs. Todburn's lawyer, and to Judith Barnes, Mrs. Todburn's niece—a dark-haired, brown-eyed girl, trim as a light cruiser.

"Corporal Dix, Judy, from the state police barracks," said Dr. Loftus. "It's a formality when some one dies unattended. This is Miss Barnes and Mr. Cliesh, corporal."

Cliesh bobbed his moon face, peered at me from behind gleaming pince-nez. He was a rotund little man with a big bald spot, fringed with gray. "Checking the art collection," he said peevishly. "Indecent haste, of course, but I knew Judy'd be here, and it has to be done. Has to be done." He waddled off, pencil and notebook in hand.

"Good morning, Miss Barnes," I said. "I thought Mrs. Todburn lived alone."

"Oh, she did, Mr.—Corporal Dix." She turned black, thickly-lashed eyes on me. "I came down to visit her last night. I have a little curio shop in New York to keep me out of mischief."

I grunted. Anyone with eyes and a figure like hers needed to be kept out of mischief. "Then you were here when she died?"

"No, she wasn't, Dix," cut in Dr. Loftus. "Judy didn't get in till late last night, and, knowing Mrs. Todburn was alone here and wouldn't want to be disturbed, Judy stayed at a hotel. She and I got here this morning together, almost. She arrived a minute after me."

I said absently, my eyes on a small sign or placard on the wall across the room: "Regular call, doc?"

LOFTUS shook his head. He was a black-haired, thinnish man in his late thirties. In another ten years he'd look

dignified. He had a black toothbrush mustache, already shot with gray. He'd patched me up once when I got in the way of a machine-gun slug. I didn't have anything against him—then.

"Mrs. Tooky called me," he said. "She's Mrs. Todburn's housekeeper. Came in every morning at six but didn't sleep here. Mrs. Todburn was eccentric, very eccentric. Wouldn't let a servant sleep in the house. This morning Mrs. Tooky discovered that Mrs. Todburn had passed away during the night. She tried to reach me, but I spent the night at my club and wasn't available till I opened my offices at nine o'clock. I got here about a half hour ago and called Cliesh and the barracks at once."

"Why didn't Mrs. Tooky call us?" I asked, still trying to make out the writing on the sign across the room.

Dr. Loftus grinned. "Well, she's something of a character herself, Dix. She has—a—morbid dread of the police."

I took a step closer to the sign. Anyone who has a morbid dread of coppers usually has good reasons. "Does anyone survive Mrs. Todburn besides you, Miss Barnes?" I asked.

The girl's brown eyes were liquid. "I'm the only heir."

"I'll look—" I broke off. Damn it, that sign was screwy or my eyes were bad. I dived across the room. Well, my eyes were okay—the sign said what I thought it did—but suddenly I was on edge, tense. I smelled it.

The sign read in a feeble, feminine scrawl: *Please Be Kind To My Dead Husband's Ashes.*

There was a little arrow on the card, pointing across the room to another sign that said the same thing: *Please Be Kind To My Dead Husband's Ashes.*

There was a second arrow. I followed it to the mantle—and sure enough, there

were her dead husband's ashes. They were in a little silver urn under another sign that said: *These Are My Dead Husband's Ashes. Please Be Kind To Them.*

Dr. Loftus came up behind me. "I told you Mrs. Todburn was eccentric, Dix. She went in for spiritualism. She was a regular customer of a medium who calls himself Reverend Marino."

"Marino!" I yelped. Then I caught myself. Now something was definitely smelly. This Marino punk hadn't been a minister the last time we picked him up. He'd been held on a narcotic charge.

"Upstairs," I snapped. "I want a look at that body!"

Dr. Loftus started, opened his mouth. But he decided not to argue. He led me upstairs to Amelia Todburn's bedroom. Judy Barnes trailed us. Cliesh was puffing from picture to statue to antique, cataloguing them in his notebook.

Amelia Todburn's thin, bony hands were folded peacefully over a fresh pink counterpane. Her face was slightly strained, but her white hair seemed undisturbed and peaceful. Some one could have combed it, I decided.

A little table by the bed was decked out like a chemist's laboratory. There was also a silver tray with a cup of cold tea, full, and two slices of dried toast. I bent over the old lady, studied her face. Then I bent closer, sniffed. There was an odor of mouth wash on her lips.

"Time of death, doc?" I asked Loftus.

"Hard to say, Dix," he frowned. "I didn't examine her thoroughly. Knew she had a bad heart, of course. She was dead when Mrs. Tooky brought in the tea this morning at seven. I should say she had died almost anytime before that. I'd want another examination before I commit myself."

"Did you wash her or comb her hair?"

"I had Mrs. Tooky bathe her face and comb her hair, yes," admitted Loftus, mystified.

"C'm'ere, doc," I said. "Use your nose," I told him, pushing his head down close to Amelia Todburn's lips. I pried open her mouth with one hand and pressed firmly on her chest with the other.

There's usually a bit of air left in the lungs of a corpse. Sometimes in the morgue they sigh when you least expect it. Mrs. Todburn sighed a trifle when I pressed her chest.

"Smell?" I said to Dr. Loftus.

He licked his lips. His face was pale, contrasting sharply with his black, toothbrush mustache. "Remember, Dix," he said quickly. "I only made a cursory examination. I—"

I cut him off acridly. "Smell?" I repeated.

He nodded.

"Bitter almonds?" I said.

"Y-yes."

I was satisfied. If it had been an odorless poison instead of hydrocyanic acid my experiment would've flopped. But I figured it would have some odor or the mouth wash wouldn't've been used.

"It's murder," I said softly. Loftus grimaced. Judy Barnes shivered.

THERE was a clearly audible gasp from the doorway, and the sound of someone's thudding through the corridor told me even before I saw her that Mrs. Tooky had a clubbed foot. She also had a glass eye on the left side, a huge mole on her long nose and an incipient mustache. I had to drag her back to the room. She ran bony fingers through her dirtyish gray hair, looked at my uniform as if it were covered with snakes.

"I don't know anything," she whined. "He came for her. She's happy now."

I took a deep breath. "Who came for her, did you say?"

"He did, sir. Mr. Jacob. Now she's happy." Mrs. Tooky's glass eye rolled in its socket. It was supposed to be blue.

Dr. Loftus said woodenly. "She's referring to the late Jacob Todburn, Dix."

"Aye," mumbled Mrs. Tooky. "She used to sit for hours in front of Mr. Jacob's ashes. Last night Reverend Marino's control said Mr. Jacob's spirit was calling stronger and stronger."

I groaned. "Why didn't you call the police this morning. Don't you know when somebody dies like this—"

Mrs. Tooky said wearily: "They couldn't bring her back."

I gave her up for the moment and went downstairs to the telephone. Lawyer Cliesh was still taxiing his plump form from one picture to another. I had an idea.

"Is everything according to Hoyle, Mr. Cliesh?" I asked.

"I suppose so, I suppose so," he said. "I haven't checked half of the stuff yet. There's upwards of a million dollars worth of choice objects of art in this house."

I whistled. That was one for the book. I called the barracks, didn't lower my voice when I got through to the captain. "I want an autopsy, sir," I said and explained what I had learned. "I want Salvadore Marino picked up, too. And I want Corporal Small out to appraise this Todburn art collection. . . Just a hunch, sir. Mr. Cliesh hasn't found anything missing yet. Yes, sir. . . Yes, sir. Right."

I turned from the phone and looked 'em up and down. Judith Barnes was pale and looked lovelier than ever. Dr. Loftus was nervous as sin. He kept trying to pull his toothbrush mustache off his upper lip. Cliesh wasn't much better since he had heard my phone conversation. His voice was irritable, rasping.

"This is most disconcerting, corporal," he hacked, polishing his bald spot with a silk handkerchief.

"Not as disconcerting as it'll be in court," I tossed.

"What?" Cliesh's words crackled. "What do you mean, Corporal Dix?"

"Take it for what it's worth," I shrugged. I turned to Judith Barnes. "You own a curio shoppe. Probably you deal in antiques and stuff like that." She nodded, and I said: "Maybe you can tell if these pictures and stuff are genuine then?"

The girl's big brown eyes grew wide, flashed to Dr. Loftus, then to Cliesh. "Perhaps I can," she whispered and started to examine an antique secretary in the corner. A moment later she looked up, scared.

"I-if this were genuine I'd know it. As it is I—oh, I think it's a c-copy."

I said to myself: "And a curio shop would be a good clearing house for stolen antiques and valuable paintings." Aloud I said: "Corporal Small, our art expert, will be out to give this stuff the once over."

I spun on my heel and clumped out to the kitchen. Mrs. Tooky wasn't there. I whirled, dived for the stairs, raced up to Mrs. Todburn's room. Mrs. Tooky wasn't there either. I ran out into the hall, stood still, listening. Then I heard the clumping sound of the old crone's clubbed foot. It was going down the very stairs I had come up.

I drifted down the stairs behind her. She had a pillow-case full of soiled linen and clothes. I grinned at her and she wobbled, cringed away from me. If ever I saw anyone who looked, acted and felt guilty it was Mrs. Tooky. I was actually sorry for her. But she was still the logical suspect. More logical than ever, in fact, after what I found among the soiled clothes.

"Did you change the counterpane on Mrs. Todburn's bed after she died?" I asked. And when she nodded, rolling her blue glass eye, I said:

"Where is it?"

Her glass eye rolled again while the good one looked away from me. Her lips trembled. She brushed nervously at her straggly gray hair.

"I—it's in the wash tub, mister policeman."

"Is it soaking?" I barked.

"Aye," she said, biting her lip.

"Open that bundle," I ordered, pointing to the pillow-case.

SHE started to blubber then. She was caught. I grimaced; I don't like picking on old women. But it had to be done. I emptied the pillow-case, found a counterpane that was stained with a large, brownish spot. I didn't look at Mrs. Tooky; her sniveling was bad enough without the sight of it.

I took the counterpane out to my car, waited until the boys from the barracks arrived. "Don't let Mrs. Tooky get away," I told the man who was to stand guard at the house. Then I went in to the Acme Laboratory and ordered them to analyze the stain on the counterpane.

I found Mrs. Tooky's name in the phone book and drove over to her dilapidated cottage. I climbed rickety stairs, knocked on the front door. No one answered. I went around to the back and used a skeleton key on the back door, found myself in a grimy kitchen. I began a careful search. I started with the cellar—and stopped with the cellar. Or rather, I was forced to stop. I was trapped.

There was a stout door in the kitchen, locked with a hasp and padlock. The funny thing was that the padlock wasn't closed. It hung open. It was a perfect come-on.

And I came. I opened the door, started down the steps.

"Boy, did you bite," chuckled a voice.

I whirled, clutching at my holster. But the door was already closing. I caught just a glimpse of a short, swarthy man with a tiny waxed mustache. But that glimpse was enough. It was Salvadore Marino.

"Tough, Dix," he said hollowly. "But you horned in the wrong place. Killing isn't my style, but this time I gotta cover up. And with this setup it should be a cinch. It'll look like you got trapped."

I felt my tongue run over my lips and my mouth went dry. I didn't quite know what he meant. It was easy enough to see he meant to kill me, but I didn't know how just yet. I found out quick.

I heard a trickle of liquid splattering on the kitchen floor, right in front of the cellar door. Then there was the scrape of a match.

I flung myself against the door, hut it was a sturdy, old-fashioned type, built to protect, not just to conceal. I wouldn't be able to batter it down in a million years. There was no break on the lock either. Even though I had my police positive there was nothing to shoot at. The hasp was on the other side.

I dived down the steps to the cellar. It was about the size of a cigar box, divided into two parts: one part for the furnace and washtubs, the other for the coal bin. The only window in the place was the square where the coal chute came through. It wasn't wide enough for my shoulders, even if I sweated off twenty pounds trying to squeeze through.

I looked up. The ceiling of the cellar was wood, thin wood. It wouldn't burn through in spots; it'd burn through all at once and fill the cellar full of smoke and fiery embers. I heard the sizzle of the flames as I stood there licking my lips.

I ran back up the steps to the door to the kitchen. I ran down again. Then I ran back up again before I caught myself. Panic wouldn't buy a thing. I leaned against the furnace, gripping the door to steady my hands.

I was a rat in a trap. No question about that. I was trying to think and act like a man, but I didn't have as much nerve as a flea. I didn't want to die—not like that. I would have barged into a machine-gun nest laughing rather than just sit there and wait for that damn ceiling to cave in.

But there was nothing else I could do. My jaw was stiff from keeping it clenched so tightly. My forehead and hands were wet with sweat. The noise of the flames above had settled down from their first crackling to a steady swooshing, sucking sound, as if they were gulping everything in their path.

The first story must have been beyond hope by that time, with the flames mounting the walls to the roof. Someone had to notice the fire. Someone had to turn in an alarm. Someone had to . . . !

But what good would that do me? No one knew I was in the cellar. No fireman would enter even if he did know it. The place would be an inferno by the time the sirens screeched around the corner. If I'd've been upstairs, I could have leaped. Maybe broken a leg or my back, but at least I could've *tried* something.

But that cellar was hopeless. It was almost as small as a tomb in a cemetery. There were five walls: the four that formed the foundation of the cottage and the fifth that split the cellar into two parts. It cut the coal bin off from the furnace room, leaving only an ordinary door-sized space as the communicating passage.

A thin, whitewashed door swung in the space. It wasn't strong but it didn't have any cracks in it. I toyed wildly with the idea of huddling in the coal bin with the

door closed, trying to keep the smoke out until the last minute. Funny what a guy'll think of, isn't it?

**M**Y EYES were focused on the door. I saw it, but it didn't seem to be registering. It was, though; for an idea caught in my brain. I started, then found myself staring at two pipes that ran up alongside the furnace. One was a gas pipe, the other the water pipe.

I licked my lips. It was one chance in a million. If the cellar had been any larger I wouldn't even have tried. But the cellar was small, and with the door to the coal bin closed it would be even smaller.

There was a pile of dirty clothing soaking in a wash tub. I grabbed my hands full and wrung the water from them as I ran. I dived up the stairs to the kitchen door.

I wedged the wet clothing all around the edges, the top and bottom. I worked feverishly, but I was careful to make the door as nearly airtight as possible. I hurried back to the cellar, closed the furnace doors tightly and shut the draft damper so no gas could escape through the chimney.

Then I grabbed the poker and wedged it between the wall and the gas pipe. I heaved. I felt my shoulder muscles strain, my arms crack. I heaved again, with the desperation of a dying man.

The gas pipe broke. I got a whiff of the spurting gas and it smelled like the sweetest thing in the world.

It would take ten minutes, I judged, to fill the cellar with enough gas. I shut the coal bin door temporarily while I wedged my police positive between the remainder of the gas pipe and the wall. I tied the gun firmly, holding my breath as much as I could.

Then I ripped strips from the wet clothing and made a ragged string. I tied

one end to the trigger, led the other end inside the coal bin, under the door. I closed myself in the coal bin and blocked up the cracks under and at the sides of the door. Then I think I prayed.

I tried counting slowly to sixty time and time again, so I wouldn't get impatient and underestimate the gas. I counted sixty, seven times. Figuring seven minutes since I'd been in the coal bin and eleven or twelve since I'd broken the gas pipe, a small cellar like that would be pretty well filled with gas.

If it worked—well at least I might be able to get off with a couple roasted fingers. If it didn't . . . I wouldn't let myself think of that.

I whipped away the wet clothing at the bottom of the door, grabbed the string that was attached to the trigger of my police positive. I tugged gently to see that it was free—then I pulled hard and threw myself back into the coal bin.

There were two explosions. I know there must have been. But the sound of the gun's discharge was lost and drowned out in the reverberating roar that followed. My scheme had worked. I'd caused one hell of an explosion in that cellar.

It remained to be seen what good had been done. If only the kitchen door went the way the coal bin door had. I had both hands covering my eyes, but the solid sheet of flame that flung the coal bin door back against the cement seared my eyeballs.

I huddled cautiously for a second, then I eased around the wall. The coal bin door was splintered in a thousand pieces. I jumped across the cellar, raced up the steps. I cried aloud. For even before I came to the door I saw the licking devils of fire in the kitchen and knew the blast had worked.

The kitchen door was blown off. Not only that; it had fallen backward and lay

like a plank over the burning floor. A window beyond it had broken. It was just as well it had. I would have broken it anyway. I took two steps across the door and hurled myself, head first through the window, sprawled on the grass outside. My lips were moving as I tried to yell, but no sound came.

"Cripes! Look!"

There was a babble of voices in my ears as I passed out. The strain had got me.

It didn't get me for long though. I'm young and healthy, and in a couple minutes I came around. I watched the firemen fight the fire. They fought a losing battle. The kerosene or gasoline or whatever it was Salvadore Marino had poured in the kitchen had been the start, the start that proved the dilapidated cottage was nothing but tinder. There was only one interesting thing about it: one of the firemen pulled a couple sticks of furniture out of the upstairs before the walls caved.

One of those pieces of furniture was obviously an antique, an old secretary. I opened it up and inside I found a rolled up piece of canvas that proved to be a painting of some sort. That was all the answer I needed to understand why Marino had been so anxious to kill me.

I went over to the barracks then, talked with the captain and found out that Corporal Small's examination of the Todburn art collection had shown over fifty thousand dollars worth of imitations. Some one had been systematically robbing the old girl for months. I called the Acme Lab and learned that the stain on the counterpane showed unmistakable signs of tea and prussic acid. I told the lab technician to tabulate his results in a way that a jury could understand.

Then I went back to the Todburn mansion to arrest Mrs. Tooky for the murder of old Amelia. I never did though.

The old crone was dead as a doornail when I got there. Some one had shot her squarely between the eyes during the time it took me to drive out from the barracks.

Private Baker, the trooper who'd been left on guard, was pale and flustered.

"Just one shot, Dix," he swore. "Just one. Only a minute ago. Miss Barnes and I were—er—"

"Were what?" I growled.

**B**AKER gulped and looked sheepish. "We were p-popping corn in the drawing room. Dix—for cripes sake keep that under your hat. Hell, I wasn't supposed to tie myself to Mrs. Tooky's apron strings, was I? She was in the kitchen and—"

"Get the barracks," I snapped and went out to look at Mrs. Tooky. She was in pretty bad shape. Her good eye was open. The glass eye had sunk to the bottom of the socket. It lolled sickeningly.

I opened the old girl's purse that had fallen to the floor, noticed she had on an old shawl. She'd been ready to leave. The purse gave me more confirmation for the theory that she had killed Mrs. Todburn. There was a small phial, strong with the stench of prussic acid. Now I was sure she had poisoned Mrs. Todburn's *first* cup of tea that morning. But who had killed her?

"Dix," bellowed Private Baker. "They picked up Marino at the railroad station."

"Get him out here," I ordered. "Get Cliesh and Dr. Loftus, too." I looked hard at Judith Barnes' white cheeks. Her big eyes were frightened. "Was she with you when you heard the shot, Baker?" I demanded menacingly.

"Hell, yes, Dix," said Baker. "She—she. . . Aw, she's okay, Dix. I'm telling you."

Judith looked at him gratefully. I grimaced. Baker's a big, blonde guy who looks like a poster picture cop in his

monkey suit. He's a good kid though, only a little soft on women. If Judith Barnes had been making him just to get him on her side, she'd done a good job. But Baker wouldn't lie. I knew that, so Judith Barnes was out as far as Mrs. Tooky's death was concerned. Whether or not she was in on robbing Mrs. Todburn of her art collection remained to be seen.

I dived for the mantelpiece, grabbed the little silver urn containing her dead husband's ashes and examined it all over for springs or partitions or a fake bottom. There was none. I took the top off, peered inside. It seemed like an ordinary heap of ashes. I shook it a little, stirred it with my finger. Then I saw them!

They were little paper balls. Dozens of them. They had been crumbled up and tossed into the ashes. I fished one of them out, unrolled it. The paper was covered with fine, spidery writing. I unrolled a couple more. The same thing.

I whistled and got to a table as the boys from the barracks stomped in. Cliesh and Doc Loftus were just behind them. Marino had the cuffs on. His black eyes looked amazed when they saw me. Then they filmed and his waxed mustache almost met his lower lip, he shut his mouth so tight.

"Give 'em all a look in the kitchen," I ordered. "Then bring 'em back here. I've got all the dope I need." I tapped the urn suggestively.

Three uniforms herded Cliesh, Loftus and Marino out and back again. They all looked sick when they returned. Cliesh wiped his bald spot with the silk handkerchief, breathed rapidly. His gray eyes behind his pince-nez were bright, feverish.

Doc Loftus was folded a little in the middle. His thin shoulders slumped and he tried his damndest to chew on his toothbrush mustache.



Marino said nothing. He was the only habitual criminal there. He knew the routine and was steeling himself to it. I tried to crack him fast.

"How long were you and Mrs. Tooky robbing Mrs. Todburn?" I grated. "Shut up!" I roared as he opened his mouth. "Listen to this!"

I picked one of the balls of paper from the urn of ashes, explained briefly: "Mrs. Todburn was a spiritualist. You know that, Marino. Okay, she wrote down her troubles on these little slips of paper and put them in this urn with her husband's ashes. She wrote everything—her hopes and fears and suspicions. Get it? . . . Now listen to this."

I read coldly: "Dear Jacob, Mrs. Tooky is acting strangely. I'm beginning to be afraid of her. She's doing something and trying to conceal it. I shan't let her sleep in the house any longer."

I looked over at Marino. "Okay, wise guy. You want to ease the rap by talking? You can't beat it anyway, because the firemen found some of the stuff in Mrs. Tooky's house that was stolen from here. You were at Mrs. Tooky's today; you tried to kill me to cover up the theft angle—"

"Dix!" Marino wet his lips. "That—that business of trying to push you. You holding that against me, too?"

I shrugged. "Take your chances, rat. I'm still alive. I can afford to be generous. If you give me enough, maybe—"

"It's a deal, Dix," said Marino quickly. "I don't want no part of these kills. I didn't have nothing to do with them. All I did was talk that old Tooky dame into stripping a couple paintings and stuff out of here. S'help me, Dix."

"How'd you get rid of the stolen stuff?" I asked, looking at Judith Barnes. She didn't bat an eyelash.

"I fenced it in Philly," confessed Marino.

THAT let Marino out. He wouldn't have killed Mrs. Todburn as long as he was getting away with a nice racket. He couldn't have killed Mrs. Tooky because he'd been picked up at a railroad station miles away just about the time the shot was fired. It was down to Cliesh, Doc Loftus or Judith Barnes.

I went to work. "Mrs. Todburn was killed this morning when she drank a cup of tea containing prussic acid," I said flatly. "It's obvious that Mrs. Tooky gave her that tea. Mrs. Todburn drank from the cup and died while she still held it in her hand. The tea spilled on the counterpane. The stain's been analyzed and proves it conclusively. There was a phial of prussic acid in Mrs. Tooky's purse."

"Mrs. Tooky washed Mrs. Todburn's mouth with mouth wash to conceal the odor of prussic acid. She removed the stained counterpane and the poisoned tea and put a fresh cupful on the table by the bed to make it look as if Mrs. Todburn had been dead when she, Mrs. Tooky, arrived this morning. But the stain proves Mrs. Todburn wasn't dead. Marino," I snapped, "was Mrs. Todburn suspicious of you and Mrs. Tooky?"

"Hell no, Dix," swore Marino. "She was half blind. She didn't know one picture from another. We could've carted away the whole art gallery."

"Good," I said. "That proves that Mrs. Tooky didn't kill Mrs. Todburn because Mrs. Todburn had caught up with her. And there's only one other reason why Mrs. Tooky would have killed her—because she had to," I said. "Because some one forced her to."

"Someone else had detected the substitutions of fakes for the genuine pictures and antiques. That someone had a powerful hold over Mrs. Tooky. A hold powerful enough to cause her to murder Amelia Todburn. That someone's name is

here." I tapped the silver urn gently. "The name is in one of these notes. I'm positive of it. It's only a question of time till I find the right one."

That got them. They grew so tense the air was full of sparks. But that was what I wanted. I wanted them at the breaking point. I opened note after note, slowly, methodically, reading carefully and then letting my eyes cruise from face to face.

"Damn it, Dix!" Cliesh burst. "I'm a lawyer. I know my rights. I don't have to put up with this puerile exhibition. I demand that you either make a charge or release us."

"Right," snapped Doc Loftus, gathering courage from the plump little lawyer. "These histrionics—"

"Shut up," I snapped. "Sit down and listen. You'll take this and like it. There's evidence in these notes that'll send one of you to the electric chair."

Then I prayed that there was. I had stuck my neck out a foot beyond my collar. Cliesh and Loftus were sore and they had plenty of influence.

I forced a yawn, scrutinized another note. I was picking them at random. There were dozens of them, as I said, and they'd been written over a period of years. Some of them didn't mean a damn thing, but the one I had picked up seemed fairly recent. It sounded recent, too.

"Miss Barnes," I said. "Did your aunt send for you?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"Well, you're not lying anyway," I said. "Listen to this: 'Dear Jacob, everything is confused, I'm going to send for our niece, Judith. She is young and strong and will help me.'"

I looked up at Judith again. "What confused her, Miss Barnes?"

"I-I'm not sure," gulped the girl. "But she said she wanted me to liquidate her assets and buy her an annuity. She was

afraid she'd lose all her money."

I leaned forward, said softly: "She told you that?"

"Yes, s-sir. . . In a letter. Here it is."

I groaned inwardly, read the letter. It was the McCoy. I'd thought I had Judith Barnes that time she had said Mrs. Todburn was dead when she arrived that morning, and I was going to tackle her about how she knew what her aunt wanted if she hadn't got a chance to talk to her. The letter scotched that.

I said half-heartedly to Cliesh: "Did you know Miss Barnes was going to liquidate?"

"No," snapped the lawyer testily. "I've handled the Todburn fortune for years. I didn't know anything about it. I didn't even know Judy was coming here."

My heart skipped. I reached for another of those rolled up paper balls, shook the ashes from it. "Funny," I drawled. "Listen to this one: 'Dear Jacob, I've told Amos Cliesh that Judith is to take charge of my money.'"

I leveled my eyes at Cliesh. "Explain!" I crackled.

He half opened his mouth. There was quick perspiration on his bald spot. I figured it was time to apply the pressure. "And explain this one," I rasped. "'Dear Jacob, Amos Cliesh has said my investments are turning out badly. I don't trust him, Jacob. I think he's stealing—'"

"All right, Dix!"

CLIESH was on his feet. There was a revolver in his chubby hand. His rotund little body trembled, but the gun was steady as rock. "Keep both hands on the table," he warned. Then he said to the men behind him without taking the gun off me: "If anyone gets in my way I'll kill Dix."

"Take him, boys," I snapped.

No one moved. They must've liked me

in spite of the way I order them around. Cliesh started to back away, gun centered inflexibly on my chest.

"So it was you who forced Mrs. Tooky to kill Mrs. Todburn," I drawled, trying to hold him. "You knew Mrs. Todburn would become suspicious when Miss Barnes liquidated and found most of the fortune gone."

Cliesh said thickly. "The old fool couldn't use her money. I could."

"And did," I nodded. "You let Mrs. Tooky steal the art fixtures because it gave you a hold over her. You could have sent her to jail. You saw that she'd be the perfect tool to kill Mrs. Todburn. But then you were afraid she'd crack, so you shot her, too. It wasn't bad, but you're an amateur at murder, Cliesh."

"What do you mean?" he clipped. "If it hadn't been for those notes—"

"Sucker," I chuckled. "It wasn't the notes that told me. It was you yourself. This morning when I met you, you were checking the art collection. You said, 'Indecent haste, but I knew Judy'd be here and it has to be done.'"

"Get it, Cliesh? This morning you admitted you knew Judy was coming. Just now you denied it. That's what hooked you. The rest was bluff. These notes don't

incriminate you. They don't say a word about you. I was bluffing. I made that last note up word for word. Look, sucker, if you don't believe me!"

I spread the note out on the table, turned it around so the writing faced Cliesh's round face. "See what it says yourself," I jibed.

It was too much for him. He couldn't resist. He stepped forward, bent over slightly. Then I blew! I blew like I never blew before—blew for my life—right smack into the pile of her dead husband's ashes!

Up they swirled into the lawyer's eyes. They powdered his bald spot, filled his ears, tickled his nostrils. He staggered back, gasping and choking—and shooting!

He poured shot after shot into the spot where I had been. I wasn't there any longer. I moved fast. The boys in back moved too this time. Cliesh didn't have a chance. He was blinded. I whistled as I snapped the cuffs. My eyes sought the sign on the mantle: *These Are My Dead Husband's Ashes. Please Be Kind to Them.*

I said under my breath: "I was, old gal. I was kind to them—and they were kind to me! . . ."