

G-MAN HEAT



One of the gun men came into line of the car's beam

Frank Craig, Postal Inspector, Barges Head-On into a Malicious Racket where Murder is Just a Starter!

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POSTAL INSPECTOR FRANK CRAIG slanted the nose of his Boeing Special into the headwind, then let the big monoplane glide earthward in a long swoop. Field lights afforded him ample visibility despite the downpour that had turned the airport into a veritable mire.

The plane sat down without a bump, rippled the muddy ground with its tail wheel, then headed across to the government hangar at the south end of the field. Killing the ignition with a quick

twist of his wrist, Craig froze the stick into position. Two attendants, braving the swishing rain, grabbed the wings at either end and guided the plane into the lighted hangar.

No sooner had it cleared the doorway than Craig vaulted from the cockpit. A man in a topcoat rushed out to greet him. Craig accepted his hand brusquely, his eyes alive with a burning gleam. His jaws were set, his lips straight.

"Take me to the Post Office, Devens,"

he ordered.

"Car ready and waiting, Mr. Craig," replied the assistant postmaster of Bay City.

A sleek limousine was humming at the door of the administration building. Craig stepped inside, followed immediately by Stanley Devens. Hardly had the door closed before the car was rushing off into the night, headed for the lighted area two miles to the north.

"Tell me about it," Craig invited suddenly.

"Nothing much to tell, sir," Devens said seriously. "Two guards were killed and two pouches of mail, mostly registered stuff from the Bay City Mail Order House, were taken."

Devens, a young man of twenty-eight, spoke tersely, the corners of his mouth drawn. As he mentioned the death of the guards his voice choked, causing the inspector to lift his eyes.

"Know one of the guards personally?" he inquired.

Devens lowered his head, chin on his chest, as his husky voice carried one word, "Brother."

Craig patted the clenched fist of the bereaved man, but refrained from speaking. Words on such an occasion meant nothing. Instead, Craig veered the conversation into more impersonal channels.

"You're certain nothing but those two bags of registered stuff was taken?"

Devens turned to him, struggling for control. He forced the answer from between clenched teeth.

"Positive! I went over the reports myself." He blinked back the moisture invading his eyes. "If I ever get my hands on that killer!"

"Any idea what he looks like?"

"I was near the window when the first shots were fired. I saw the killer with the

smoking gun in his hand. He wore a mask, holes cut roughly for the eyes. He was stocky, about five foot ten."

"Anything peculiar about his appearance that might give me a lead?" persisted Craig.

Devens racked his brain, eyes half-shut. Finally he opened them wide, remembering something he had not given thought to before.

"Yes. The leader, the man who killed Tommy, kept his left hand in his coat pocket!"

CRAIG sat straight in the seat, leaned forward earnestly, chin jutting. He was thinking of a man he knew whose left hand had been ruined by one of the slugs from Craig's own gun. Killer Kile!

For an instant the Inspector compressed his jaws, then rasped out. "It was Kile. I'd stake my badge on it! Tell me, did this masked man keep on his toes; move about with mincing steps?"

Devens strove to recall the murder scene. He shook his head, unable to make his memory serve him accurately.

"He moved around rapidly, Inspector, but I can't remember the way he was standing." He repeated his former assertion. "But his left hand didn't budge from his pocket. I can swear to that!"

"That's more than enough," muttered Craig. "At last I've got Kile where I want him. That slug he stopped with his hand in New York wasn't wasted after all. It tells me who I'm tackling here."

Devens forced a grim smile, raised his gaze to the roadside. A blank expression at once pervaded his face. Craig caught it, instantly surmised something was out of kilter. His hand dove for the gun in his shoulder holster as Devens blurted the trouble.

"Hey, we're not headed for the post office!"

The driver heard the outcry, flung a harried glance over his shoulder. Rubber tires squealed a protest as the brakes took hold. The sudden stop threw both Devens and Craig to the floor of the car. Craig extricated himself, listened to the swish of another car as it ground to a stop behind the inspector's.

Craig braced himself on the floor, knowing full well the reason for the second car. The chauffeur poked his gun over the seat-rest, attempting to cover Devens and the inspector. Craig rapped the knuckles sharply with the barrel of his gun. A yelp of pain burst from the chauffeur, his gun falling near Devens.

"Take it and defend yourself," ordered Craig.

Craig pondered the meaning of the set-up. Had Killer Kile guessed he had been identified as the murderer of the two postal guards? It failed to click. Kile had been masked, felt secure. Then what? The inspector groped for the door handle just then. His full weight rammed the door as the handle flew upward. He tumbled off the running board like a loose sack, hitting the ground football fashion.

A gun barked. A slug whistled menacingly close to Craig's skull. He darted up, slipped swiftly out of the blinding glare of the other car's headlights. A pair of gunmen bolted out of the tonneau of the automobile, intent on pursuit.

"That G-Man is loose!" cried the pseudo-chauffeur.

Devens fired, silencing the man with a bullet. The two gunmen from the other car reached Devens at that moment. They blazed away, Devens not returning fire. This meant one thing to Craig: Devens had been cut down!

Craig whipped his gun up as one of the gunmen came into line of the second car's beam. With refrigerator coldness Craig

fired.

THE gunman tripped in mid-stride, buckled, then fell flat. A cry of rage, sandwiched between curses, spat from the second auto. Craig darted sidewise. An orange-red blast lanced from the car. The bullets sang over his head, the hot breath of the slugs fanning his cheek. He grinned without humor as he recognized Killer Kile's voice.

He ploughed forward, gun steady, his footing certain. He advanced to the side of the mobster's car. A shout from the gunman by the first car warned Craig.

He dropped, whirled on one knee. His gun reverberated. The gunman down the road clapped a hand to his groin, sank slowly to the ground. From Kile's car came the staccato of a machine gun. But Craig had foreseen that expediency, had planned for it. He was well out of range, behind the car.

A police siren whined in the distance, growing louder. Kile's car swerved with a snort of its racing motor. Craig pivoted, aware of Kile's intention to get away.

Up snapped the inspector's arm, gun leveled. But the man at Kile's wheel was an expert on lamming. A cloud of vapor poured from the exhaust, screening the car. Craig's gun kicked twice, the shots puncturing the dense curtain of smoke.

There was the answering report of a gun, the sting of lead searing his right forearm and spinning Craig around. In the heat of the gun-fight he had neglected the wounded gunman down the road. The fellow was now swaying on his feet, a smoking weapon clutched in his right hand. That gun went up for another shot at Craig.

The inspector's own revolver spoke curtly. The gunman snapped to his toes, then jackknifed, diving headlong to the ground. Craig bounded to the spot, gun

poised should the gunman try a trick. Only a convulsive shudder passed through the man's frame. With it rippled out the gunman's life. Craig's aim had been true!

THE scream of the police siren dinned in Craig's ears, brought him back to earth. He marveled at his escape. Kile's reputation as a marksman, especially with a tommy gun, had not been borne out this trip. Craig shook his head, then chilled at a thought.

He recalled clearly the tactics of the gunmen. With a sudden realization Craig felt it had not been for Devens, but himself, that Kile had planned the attack. But that wasn't all. From the method employed, Kile had made it plain that he wanted the inspector alive!

Stunned at the idea, yet certain he was not fooling himself, Craig looked over his shoulder as the police prowler slashed through the street, skidding to a stop fifty feet away. Two bluecoats, guns drawn, leaped from the car, converging on Craig.

"Drop that rod," ordered the taller officer.

Craig obeyed, waited until they closed in on him. Revealing his identity, he briefly related what had occurred. The fake chauffeur had put Devens and Craig on the spot for Killer Kile. The taller policeman nodded.

"Headquarters notified us that they picked up the body of a government chauffeur a mile from the airport," he said, advancing. "Must have been the one that drove Devens down for you."

"Let's take a look inside the car," suggested Craig.

The policeman handed the inspector his gun. A flashlight cut a swathe in the darkness as the shorter officer skirted the car to the opposite side. Craig flinched as the beam of light fell upon the assistant

postmaster. Devens had been sieved with lead, but he was not yet dead.

His eyes opened just then, staring into nothing. Gore covered his neck and face. He tried to gesture with a blood-smeared hand. The effort was feeble. Craig went to his side, listening to the words that were barely audible.

"Get—them! Got—to—get them!"

He coughed, a crimson stream spilling from his lips. Then he went limp. Lines about Craig's mouth softened, only to grow hard the next instant. His eyes narrowed and in the back of his mind he was tucking away a sincere vow.

Hardened campaigner though Craig was, his eyes misted as he looked at the dead postal employee. It was the taller policeman who gave vocal tribute.

"Game guy!" he said.

"Let's take a squint at the fake chauffeur," advised Craig.

The shaft of light went to the top of the driver's seat where the man lay on his back. Devens' shot had been perfect. A ruby solitaire of blood was caked in the center of the man's forehead, an inch above the eyes.

"It's Joe!" grunted the second bluecoat. "Joe Belig!"

Craig raised his eyebrows. So local talent was being used by Killer Kile. It would narrow the field of search considerably. He turned to the big officer, asking about Belig.

"He used to be with Tony Minerti's mob until last year. He got in a squabble with Minerti and had to leave town pronto."

"A local Dillinger, eh?"

"Not exactly. He got ambitious for Minerti's job!"

"Who's this Minerti and where can I find him?"

The shorter officer replied to this.

"Minerti usually hangs out at his theater, the Palace, on Main Street. He runs the Danceland above the theater, too. Minerti used to run liquor during prohibition, but he's been going straight since repeal."

Craig wrinkled his brow, saying nothing, but his mind was hitting on all cylinders. He couldn't imagine Rile going after two bags of innocent registered mail. Then again he failed to see the link between Rile and Joe Belig. He squinted at the dead man, instinctively certain that Belig was responsible for Kile's presence in Bay City. But the why and wherefore eluded him.

Somehow, Craig told himself, Minerti was implicated in the mail robbery.

"TAKE a look at the two birds I killed off," Craig suggested. "Have you seen them before?"

The two gunmen were laid side by side. One was a small, squat fellow with Latin features. The other was blond. The police eyed them speculatively, exchanged glances, then shook their heads negatively. Craig stooped, canvassing the pockets of the short, squat man.

From one trouser pocket he drew a ring of automobile keys. These he passed to the officer, busying himself with a stuffed wallet. A batch of greenbacks jammed the leather, causing the two policemen to bulge their eyes.

"Plenty of dough, a couple mutuals from Santa Anita track, and a pair of Irish Sweepstakes." Craig enumerated, drawing out a chauffeur's license, pursing his lips in a whistle. "Frank Succio! That boy was wanted in six states."

"And if he ever won that Irish Sweepstake he couldn't have collected, anyway," snickered the big officer. "Crooks are awful dumb."

Craig shifted his attention to the other corpse. The wallet on that man was almost empty, save for a few bills. With the aid of the searchlight the inspector examined an envelope stuck in the inner fold. It was addressed to the Bay City Mail Order Company. Nothing was inside.

"Funny," muttered Craig, studying the envelope. "What would he want with an empty envelope in his billfold?"

"Here's a chauffeur's license on him," cut in the big officer, extracting the paper from the vest pocket. "Say, he's Carl Johnson! We've got a wanted on him at Headquarters."

Succio and Johnson! Craig snorted. More than ever he wondered what could bring such big-time mugs to Bay City.

"We'd better phone Headquarters," said the short man suddenly.

"Wait," cut in Craig. "I've got something in mind!" He stooped over the gunmen. "Here, you two, lift them into the car. We'll drive to Headquarters."

During the short run, Craig reviewed what had happened. The two bags of registered mail contained a great deal of correspondence for the Bay City Mail Order Company. That empty envelope in Carl Johnson's billfold was a connecting link. But why did Joe Belig induce Kile to come to Bay City? Craig smiled to himself. Somewhere in the maze of conflicting events Tony Minerti and Killer Kile were connected.

"Here we are," said the big policeman.

Craig reached back, removed the fedora from Johnson's head, drew it low over his forehead. With some difficulty he removed Johnson's topcoat. Stripping off his own, Craig put on Johnson's. The policemen watched curiously. Craig nodded to the taller one.

"You put on my topcoat and hat. Then take me in as though I were a prisoner."

Puzzled, the officer nevertheless obliged. Craig said nothing. He didn't want the police to know that Kile was after him. The police would try to prevent it—something Craig didn't want. A plan had formulated in his mind.

Captain Lew Mackail was in charge at Headquarters. He glanced up, amazement spread over his irregular features. The inspector hurriedly identified himself, related the events of the night. He concluded with:

"Kile doesn't take chances. He knows I bumped off Succio, but he thinks I only wounded Johnson, because he lammed before Johnson and I had our final set-to."

An understanding light shone in the captain's eyes. He nodded slowly, saying, "I see." He half-shut one eye as he added, "You think Kile will come for Johnson, try to get him away from us."

"That's it," grimly from Craig. "But we'll get him instead."

"What's this about Minerti, though?" Mackail inquired, his florid face wreathed in a frown.

"That's what I want you to tell me. What about Minerti?" Craig explained about the Bay City Mail Order Company. "Is he interested in that outfit?"

Mackail jumped to his feet, one fat fist pounding the desk. "Good God! So that's why I've been getting reports that Minerti has been hanging around the mail order company."

Craig's eyes widened. He had scored again. "Tell me, Captain," he asked, "who owns that company?"

Mackail went to his private files, extracted a voluminous book, brought it to the desk. Opening it, he thumbed through the pages to the one headed by the Bay City Mail Order Company.

"Owner, Phillip Miles." Mackail frowned at the entry. "But Miles has been dead for two years."

Craig stared at Mackail, finding it difficult to digest the information. The whole affair had begun to dove-tail startlingly. He almost shouted at the police captain.

"Well, who's boss at the mail order company?"

Mackail shrugged his heavy shoulders, chagrined at the faulty state of his department records. He reached for the telephone on his desk.

"I'll get the general manager, Stokes, to tell me."

"Hold up," Craig said, eyes flashing. In their depths of blue was a glint not to be ignored. Mackail stopped, stared silently at the inspector.

Craig had suddenly remembered a chance remark made by the tall policeman. The full value of it had escaped him until that very moment. He pivoted to the waiting officer.

"Let's see that Succio billfold again!"

UNDER the powerful rays of the desk lamp Craig scrutinized the contents, dumped everything on the blotter for the captain to view. Straightening, a peculiar gleam in his eyes, Craig spoke. Clearly he explained his plan of action to Mackail, inviting cooperation.

The captain listened attentively, head nodding in complete accord. He grasped the phone, demanding to be connected with the radio branch of the service.

"Captain Mackail speaking," he said succinctly. "General alarm—repeat at one-minute intervals—watch for a black sedan with two men, one of them Killer Kile, responsible for mail robbery and gunfight today. Assistant postmaster and two guards killed. Inspector Craig of Postal Department has in custody Carl Johnson, a member of the gang. He is taking the prisoner to the post office building for identification. Killer Kile may try to

prevent that!’ ”

“That ought to do it,” Craig beamed. He turned to the tall policeman who was still wearing his felt hat and topcoat. “Ready?”

The policeman looked at his chief who nodded, saying earnestly, “Follow the Inspector’s orders to the letter, Banning. And luck to you both!”

CRAIG and Banning readied themselves for their respective roles, Craig as Johnson, Banning acting as the postal inspector. Collars of their topcoats turned up, hats tugged down, they started out of the office. Banning seized Craig by the arm, conducting him toward the street.

Outside, the rain pelted down in a continuous drive. Banning guided his man toward the police cruiser instead of the blood-soaked sedan. Craig couldn’t refrain from a glance at the death car, not forgetting his silent pledge to the valiant young postmaster.

Playing their game to the hilt, Craig behaved sulkily while Banning drew his gun menacingly. The policeman led Craig to the left side of the police prowler, forced him to crawl under the steering wheel to the seat alongside. Then, using extreme caution, Banning slipped into the driver’s place.

“How’m I doin’?” he asked jocularly, foot on the starter.

“Great!” smiled Craig. “To the post office—slow!”

There was ample time for the radio broadcast to be made. Craig realized that no radio was needed for Kile to be advised of his movements. But he wanted to put himself in a position to be snatched! And the set-up was ideal for it. It was the only way Craig could learn what was behind Kile’s actions.

Smoothly the police car turned the corner, proceeded slowly down the side

street. Doubts assailed Craig, but he brushed them aside. His thoughts were knocked flat at the intersection, a scant hundred feet from the rear of Police Headquarters.

A truck shuttled from the right, tearing down at a terrific clip. Banning twisted the steering wheel frantically, accelerated the motor. The rich flow of gas choked the carburetor, almost stalling the engine. The car bounded forward, swerved crazily in an attempt to avoid being hit.

But the man at the truck’s helm had no intention of permitting escape. The truck catapulted forward like a huge projectile, straight at the smaller vehicle.

The steel bumper crashed into the broadside of the police car. It was rammed against a lamp post, Craig bracing himself for the impact. His head banged hard against the windshield, cut a gash from which blood gushed down the side of his face.

A grunt of pain came from Banning as he collapsed behind the wheel, pinned helplessly to the rear of the seat. He couldn’t be extricated, though Craig strove to tug him free.

Blood-smeared, senses jarred, the inspector struggled to regain control of his faculties. The warm, sticky flow trickled down his forehead. Lightness attacked him and he seemed to float. With a mighty effort he exerted his will to stave off the blanket of unconsciousness swooping down to engulf him.

He was aware of the door being wrenched open at his right. He tumbled out, landing on the wet pavement. The stinging rain revived him somewhat, warned him of a figure looming at his side.

Craig leaped to his feet as though released by a spring. His right fist battered the face of the stocky man, sending him reeling. A curse spat between thick lips. The man lunged forward, gun glimmering

in the haze of the distant street lamp.

Backing off, Craig attempted to grasp the gun hand. He failed to see the approach of a gaunt figure from behind. Something crashed down on the inspector's skull, sprawling him.

"Think I'd fall for the radio stuff?" laughed an icy voice. "You know too much, Craig."

The inspector chilled at the words, recognized the metallic quality of the voice. There was no mistaking the identity of the man. Killer Kile! Kile grabbed Craig by one arm while the stocky man grasped the other. Together they hoisted Craig to his feet, dragged him to the truck.

"Over with him, George," Kile ordered harshly. "Let's scam!"

CRAIG felt himself sailing through space, then landed on the flooring of the truck. George leaped in after him, jabbing a gun into Craig's midsection. It was more than a mere gesture. He meant business—plus!

Craig lay motionless while the truck gathered momentum. It rumbled along faster than forty miles an hour. The captive tried to see the face of his guard, but the man was sitting in the shadows of the truck's wall. Only the shiny metal of his gun was visible. Craig stirred suddenly, his right leg snapping up.

The gunman anticipated the move, for he fell away from it with a curse. He bounded forward, smacked the inspector on the head with the gun butt. It generated a pain in his skull, nearly driving Craig to distraction. He had to clench his teeth to curb the outcry that came to his lips.

Craig upbraided himself for having fallen into Kile's trap. It was plain that the truck was a stolen one. It had been picked up while the inspector was in Headquarters. Kile, cunning as ever, must have watched the entrance of the police

station, saw Banning and Craig leave. Circling the block with the truck, he had headed off the police car. But why hadn't he killed Craig on the spot?

Was it possible that Kile was planning to put his death on the doorstep of some one else? It sounded unreasonable. Then what?

The sudden application of brakes jolted the truck to a halt. Alert despite the incessant din inside his head, Craig bided his time. He was going to be taken from the truck, of that he was positive.

George rose, gun slanted at the inspector. He kicked Craig, ordered him to get up. Slowly the government man obeyed, starting from a half crouch. He pivoted sharply, right hand snaking out and up. It buried itself in the solar plexus of the gunman. The man staggered, went back on his heels. The gun in his hand cracked, the slug tearing through the inspector's sleeve.

Then Craig followed up his advantage with a stiff right to the point of the chin. George toppled over the side of the truck with a yelp of fear. The gun fell inside the truck. Craig dove for it.

"Steady, mug," came Kile's frigid voice. "One more move, and I'll drill you through the back!"

Craig stopped, half-turned. Looking over the enclosure was Kile's grim visage, hard-bitten and leering. His contorted lips were parted, showing a missing tooth in front. A gun protruded over the truck wall. The driver of the truck vaulted inside, recovering George's lost weapon, aimed it at Craig, then gesturing with his free hand for the inspector to get down.

Climbing down, Craig came upon George nursing the bruise on his shoulder which he sustained in the fall. He rushed the inspector angrily, flung a stinging right cross to Craig's unprotected chin. It drove him back to the truck, smacking the back

of his head against the steel runway.

"Cut the comedy," rasped from Kile.

The killer was as tall as the inspector, but bulkier. He moved silently, his heels off the ground, like a boxer weaving in for a punch. He wagged his head for Craig to follow him. The two gunmen brought up from behind.

Darting glances about, Craig realized the truck had been driven into a courtyard behind a four-story building. A high wooden fence, topped with barbed wire, assured privacy. From the east came the sullen roar of waves thundering against bulwarks and piers. To the north he could hear the hoots from freight locomotives. He took his bearings, knowing he was on the fringe of Benigut Bay.

Kile reached the door leading to the basement of the building. He knocked with his right hand, his left encased in the pocket of his coat. The door was opened at once by a fat-bellied, elderly man whose beady eyes showed unmistakable signs of relief.

"**W**ELL, Minerti," Kile said with a smirk, "I told ya I'd bring this mug here." He nodded at Craig.

The inspector stared. He had felt sure that Minerti and Kile were both involved in the case, but he had not dreamed they were in cahoots. It was something that failed to strike a true note. Craig looked about, certain now that he was in the basement of the Bay City Mail Order Company.

"Me and Stokes heard the short-wave," Minerti said, waving a fat hand to the sandy-haired man behind him. "The cops—they got Johnson!"

"Just a gag," laughed Kile. "This here guy Craig thinks 'em up pretty fast. But I think 'em up faster, eh, Inspector?"

Craig smiled disdainfully, trying to fathom the situation. Stokes was in the

racket, too. Craig narrowed his eyes, let them rove over the array of kitchen equipment. Electric ranges, oil stoves, hot-water heaters of all description were on display. Shelves lining the walls were packed with paints and cans of merchandise. In the rear of the basement was a small structure fashioned into a model kitchen.

"Planning to take up domestic science?" Craig asked Kile.

"Still funny, eh?" Kile snarled. He confronted Minerti. "Am I in this for a fifty-fifty cut?"

Minerti rubbed his hands together. "You sure everyt'ing is okay? Them G-Mens is tough babies!"

Kile stepped up to Craig, slapped him across the mouth with the back of his hand. He laughed at Minerti ominously.

"Not so tough, Minerti," he said. "Everything is jake now. I'm in, then?"

Minerti half-turned to Stokes, shrugging his shoulders as though resigned to the situation. He dug his fat hands into the pockets of his coat. Then he faced Kile again.

"You get what you want—of course!"

Kile wasn't fooled. His gun spat from his coat pocket the instant Minerti jerked the trigger on his own weapon. The muffled roar reverberated through the basement, its echo dull and ominous. A cloud of bluish smoke eddied from the hole in Kile's coat.

Minerti faltered, cried out in agony, then collapsed on the cement floor. Stokes reached for his gun. Kile saw the move, blasted for the second time. Stokes reeled, sank in a heap.

"Shorty," Kile commented, "looks like we take over the whole works. You're the new manager. Me—I'm boss!"

Kile's confidence afforded Craig the opening he sought. He sprang sideways, his right fist smacking hard into the face of

the nearest gunman. He wrenched the man's gun away, whirled to confront Kile.

BUT Kile had moved the moment Craig had. He shifted to fire, and Craig ducked behind a refrigerator. The slug ricocheted, missing the inspector by inches. The odds were three to one against him. Swiftly Craig started down the aisle, the killers after him. Bullets showered the area about him, striking cans on the shelves.

The stocky gunman who had driven the truck tried to head Craig off. He shot diagonally across the floor, dodging behind the kitchen equipment for safety.

Measuring the man's movements, Craig jerked his trigger. The gunman slapped a hand to his chest, stood erect, a foolish expression on his face. He crumpled, blood spurting from the wound, and hit the floor with a thud of finality.

In the exchange of shots, Kile darted across the basement. He pumped away at Craig, but the metal cabinet at Craig's side and back made a perfect shield.

From the opposite direction converging upon the postal inspector came the short, wiry thug. Being smaller, he was a tougher target to hit. Craig backed away, knowing he had one chance—the model kitchen. Once inside, he could command the entrance and hold off the killers.

Kile, guessing Craig's plan, shouted to the short gunman to get a bead on the entrance. Craig stopped short, ducked around. He had to take attention from that doorway. His gun spat twice at the wiry gunman.

It brought the result Craig wanted. The hood disobeyed Kile's order, altered his position to return fire. Craig dove for the kitchen door. A staccato crack warned the inspector. He crept forward instead of dashing there. Kile, clever killer that he was, had subbed for Shorty, guarding the

entrance.

Searing metal pierced Craig's left shoulder. He winced, then plunged through the kitchen door. Another bullet sang past his temple, imbedding itself in the door jamb. Craig kicked the door shut behind him. A lone light in the ceiling illuminated the place.

Craig looked around for movable pieces of furniture to place against the door. None was there. The electric range was much too heavy to budge.

Opening a closet door Craig saw two mail pouches, empty. Near them were piles of correspondence. Craig smiled to himself as he shuffled his hands through them. Small booklets filled with names and addresses attracted him mostly. He stuffed a few of them into his coat pocket as Kile's voice came from outside the curtained window to the left.

"You got in there okay, Craig, but how do you figure on getting out?" He laughed as though it were a huge joke. "Get wise to yourself and play ball. Maybe you'll be able to make yourself a fortune. Minerti figured out a swell racket for me. Now that he ain't any good as a front, what do you say to the job?"

Craig smiled grimly. He thought of Devens. His lips curled. He was in a tough spot, with death lingering outside for him. He settled back against the wall, keeping his eyes peeled on the window and the door.

Suddenly he leaped backward. The window sash was shattered by a gallon tin hurtled at it. The flimsy curtain was ripped off the frame, exposing Craig. He rifled out a shot, changed his position. He glanced at the door as it was pushed in a little. His next shot shut the door again.

He kicked the gallon can, then stopped, stared. The can contained benzine. Should it be struck by a flying bullet it might turn the model kitchen into

a veritable furnace. Kile had not overlooked that bet.

Craig snatched the tin from the floor. A slug buried itself into the linoleum at that spot the next second. Craig sweated, panted. An idea, rash but worth the chance, popped into his mind. Working swiftly, he set the stage. Suddenly he spun about.

KILE was standing in the doorway, gun leveled. "Ready to talk turkey, mug?" the killer demanded sardonically.

Craig knew he was caught. "About what?" he stalled.

"Toss out your gat. An' remember I'm coverin' you like a tent."

Shorty moved in through the open doorway. He advanced and frisked the G-Man. Kile then stepped up to the inspector, asking: "Are you gonna play ball? Tell me how much you birds know about this racket?"

Craig did not answer. Kile menaced him with the gun, poking him in the back. Finally Craig spoke in measured tones.

"You've got me, Kile, but there are other men ready to take up where I leave off. They know Minerti's been using the mails to defraud. They know you came here with Joe Belig to muscle in on the racket. You robbed the mails to show Minerti you weren't stopping at anything to get what you wanted. You bragged to Minerti you could bag me—"

"Smart, ain't you?" sneered Kile. "Figured it all out by your lonesome, eh?"

"Yes," Craig snapped back. "Minerti wanted me out of the way. He used you to get me—and I let you!"

Kile's face was purplish. "You let me! Why, you punk I coulda drilled you the minute you got into the car with Devens. As for Minerti, I played him, letting him think a fifty-fifty split would be okay."

He snorted and laughed. "But when the

dough was ready to be split I had other plans. I needed a front, but I guess I can work the business myself."

The last remark had one significance. Craig knew it meant that Kile was ready to put a slug through him. The gun in Kile's hand leveled itself at Craig's heart. An insane flicker of hate glazed the murderer's eyes. His lips were drawn back, showing the man's teeth.

Craig knew death was staring at him from the eye of the Killer's gun barrel. With a desperate lunge he grabbed Shorty, hurled him at Kile. The gun in Kile's hand belched, but the aim had been marred. Kile steadied himself for another shot.

Craig realized he could hope for no reprieve from the finger tightening on the gun's trigger. Petrified, he waited the feel of death. At that instant there was a roaring blast from the electric range.

An explosion tore the range to bits, blasting metal in all directions. The building vibrated to its foundation. Liquid fire shot out to cover the wiry gunman. Kile was floored by the flying metal.

Craig was flung across the window sill, away from the spreading blaze. He forced himself to his feet, looked back.

Kile still clutched his automatic and was creeping toward the shattered door. Then Kile spied Craig. He raised himself on his elbow, preparing to shoot.

"It's your work, you rat!" he screamed.

Flames licked Kile's sleeves, causing his arm to shake. That gave Craig the chance to plough in. The gun barked, the slug stabbing Craig in the thigh. But it didn't deter him.

Wrenching the gun from Kile, he yanked the killer to his feet. A knife gleamed in the man's hand the next instant. He whipped it at Craig. The inspector barely escaped the blade as he jumped in to meet Kile's rush. They locked arms. Craig pushed Kile back,

holding onto the fellow's knife wrist. He measured the man.

"This is with regards from the Devens boys," Craig said, and his fist collided with Kile's chin, felling him like a log.

Tottering, near the point of exhaustion, Craig dragged the unconscious pair of crooks from the burning kitchen. With his bare hands Craig beat out the flaming clothes of the little man to prevent his burning alive.

WEARLY, perspiring, blackened by the fire, Craig leaned against a display counter as axes slashed at the basement door.

The door fell before the onslaught. Bay City firemen rushed in, stopped short at the sight of the wreckage. Captain Mackail breezed in behind the firemen.

"I thought you were done for," he said to Craig. "We picked up Banning. He's in the hospital. But what's been going on here?"

Craig told him. Mackail listened with mouth agape.

"But what was the mail order racket?" demanded the police captain.

"Counterfeit Irish Sweepstake tickets," Craig answered. "I tumbled to the racket from a remark made by Banning. He said that even if Succio won the Sweepstake he couldn't collect. At Headquarters I looked at the tickets in Succio's wallet for the second time. They were counterfeit. Then I found the mail stolen by Kile this afternoon. In it I found these."

He exhibited booklets containing names and addresses of people who were being robbed of money they thought was being put in the Irish lottery. Mackail whistled, but Craig resumed.

"Minerti evidently bought the mail order company from the Phillip Miles estate. He kept in the background, using the legitimate business for his front."

"And Stokes, his manager, was in it, too?" the captain muttered. "But still, how does this tie up with the mail robbery today?"

"Very neatly," the inspector said. "Minerti refused to have anything to do with Kile at first. Belig tipped Kile off about the registered mail containing money for the fraudulent sweepstake tickets. Needing cash and wanting to scare the daylights out of Minerti, Kile went after the mail."

Mackail understood. "Then when Minerti heard you were coming into the picture he promised to split with Kile if Kile brought you in—"

"And let Minerti finish me," supplied Craig grimly. "But Minerti was greedy. So he and Stokes got it from Kile when they tried to doublecross him. Then Kile tried to use me as a cover-up for the racket. When I refused, it looked like curtains for me."

"But that explosion—" Mackail began, perplexed.

"Kile intended to smoke me out of the place," Craig explained. "But I took his cue, grabbed the gallon tin of gasoline, punched a hole in the top with my gun barrel. Then I put it into the electric oven, turned on the current and let the heat do the rest. When enough vapor had been generated, the heat of the oven set it off."

Kile moaned and sat up, befuddled. Craig yanked him to his feet.

"Compared to the jolt you'll get at the end of the hangman's rope, Kile, that range explosion will seem awfully mild to you."