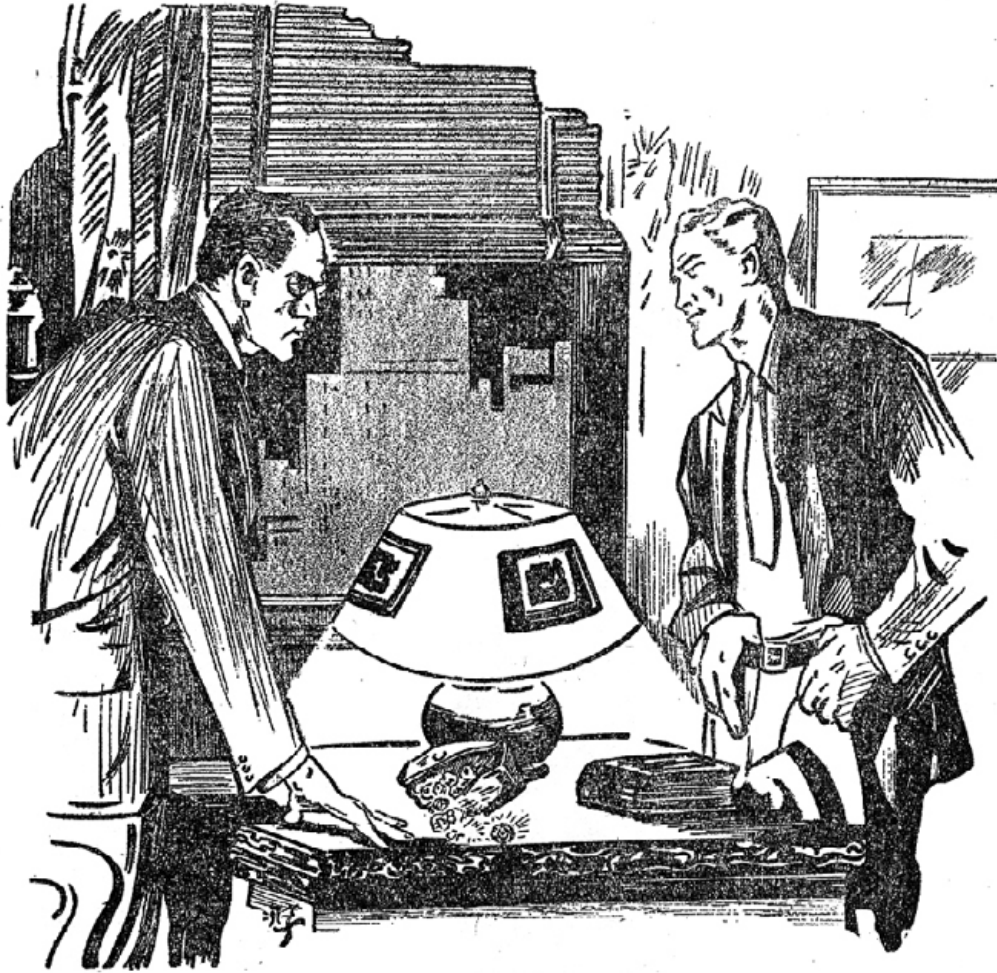


*.... Still a Rookie Detective Whose Time Was of
so Little Value, Anyone Could Command It*



DEAD END

By WILBUR S. PEACOCK

Author of "The Singing Sword," "The Guns of Shawn Tabor," etc.

"TALBOT," Chief of Police Rogers said, "this is Mr. Durand, investigator for the Mutual Bonding Company."

"Mr. Durand!" Leon Talbot acknowledged.

"How do you do," Durand said shortly, impersonally.

Chief Rogers nodded at the investigator. "Mr. Durand is here on a case

involving some quarter of a million dollars' worth of stolen diamonds. A messenger was shot to death and his delivery pouch stolen three days ago in New York; you've read the teletype reports probably. Anyway, he's here because he saw the picture of the girl who was found stabbed to death last night. He saw the news photo and thinks she was one of the gang who did the robbery and killing."

"I'm sure of it," Durand interrupted. "I've spent three days running down clues. Adele Morgan was one of the gang."

"I've read the reports," Talbot said.

"Well then, I want you to help Mr. Durand in any way you can. He's a stranger here. Take him to the morgue to see the girl's body, and do everything else necessary."

"Yes, sir," Talbot agreed.

Chief Rogers smiled at the investigator. "We like to help, Mr. Durand," he said. "We have a reputation here for having a clean town, and we don't want crooks to get the idea the place is a hideout."

"I'll mention your cooperation in my report," Durand said, smiling for the first time.

Leon Talbot watched the investigator without much interest. Durand was professorial, pince nez square on his thin nose, slender hands nursing a malacca cane. His eyes were cold, watchful, alive with intelligence. He was probably a crack investigator, for, with his well-cut but ordinary suit, he would not be noticed particularly in any crowd.

"I've got to testify against a drunk this morning," Talbot said, "then I'll be glad to do what I can."

"Go ahead," Chief Rogers agreed. "Mr. Durand and I'll do a bit of talking until you return."

"Thank you."

TALBOT eased back through the door, lit a cigarette. Vague anger burned at him, anger and a sense of defeat. The chief's friendly manner hadn't fooled him; he was still a rookie detective whose time was so valueless anybody could command it.

He went down the corridor, turned left, took the elevator to court. Judge Benson was presiding, bald head shining in the early sunlight from the tall windows.

Sitting on the seats to one side were the motley people pulled in the day and night before.

"Ten days and ten dollars," Benson said. "Next case."

"Dana Pearson, disorderly conduct, drunkenness, malicious destruction of private property, assaulting an officer," the clerk read.

Talbot sighed. This was his case, his first and only arrest. Dropping his cigarette into a sandjar, he approached the bench, arranged himself with the prisoner before the judge.

"What happened, officer?" Judge Benson asked.

"I arrested this man at eight o'clock last night, sir," Leon Talbot said. "He was drunk, so drunk he had staggered through a plateglass window at the Elite Cafeteria. He was pretty badly cut up, but fought me when I made the arrest."

"Guilty or not guilty?" Judge Benson asked the prisoner.

The man shrugged, winced in pain. White bandages marked his face and throat. One arm was in a sling, and his coat was ripped where glass had slashed. He was still drunk, the reek of whiskey an aura about him, bloodshot eyes glaring bleakly at the judge.

"Not guilty," he said. "I just had a couple of drinks, and then somebody pushed me through the window. I was dazed when this punk came up. That's all."

"Thirty days," Judge Benson said. "Next case."

"Why, you damned old buzzard!" Pearson snarled. "What the hell gives you the right to doubt my word? You dirty hicks think you can get away with anything. If I had a few bucks on me, I could buy every damned one of you."

"Mr. Pearson," Judge Benson said slowly and evenly, "the integrity of this court has never been questioned. You are

hereby fined one hundred dollars for contempt of court and sentenced to six months in the city jail on the same charge. Bailiff!"

Leon Talbot shrugged, watched the prisoner taken, fighting, away toward the prisoner run. He signed the papers thrust at him by the clerk, then left the courtroom. This was Monday morning, and he felt no desire to work; there was no glamour to this business, just a round of reports and sordid cases. But he was smiling when he entered Chief Rogers' office; he had discovered smiling was a good policy to follow where the chief was concerned.

"I'm free now, Mr. Durand," he said.

"Good!" Durand came smoothly to his feet held out his hand to the chief. "Thank you," he said. "I shall probably see you again."

Chief Rogers smiled. "Of course," he said genially.

Talbot held the door open, waited until Durand had stepped through, then pulled it shut. Without speaking, they moved down the hall. Fogarty at the desk waved a cheerful hand.

"Hi, sleuth," he said. "Hear you pulled in a drunk who got tough with Benson." He lifted tickets from the desk. "Better talk to the guy; he's got a couple of tickets here to *The Golden Wedding*. He won't be able to use them." He chuckled.

Talbot glanced at the tickets, ran his gaze over the billfold, keys, small change and wad of bills. Automatically, he registered the things in his mind.

"Buy 'em yourself, Fogarty," he said. "I never did care much for shows."

He went past the desk, Durand at his side. Covertly, he watched the investigator, wondering how much excitement there was in the other's business, decided it must be better than being a detective on a police force run by politics.

"We'll take a squad car," he said,

opening the door to the garage.

Durand nodded, his cane jabbing punctuation marks to the echo of his footsteps. Half a head taller than Talbot, he weighed less, shoulders bony ridges beneath his coat.

They climbed into a squad car, and Talbot kicked the starter. Sunlight poured through the doorway, and he blinked a bit, driving into it. The motor sang smoothly, and slowly some of the irritation fled his mind. After all, he reasoned, it wasn't the fault of Durand that he was being shunted around.

"This is nice of you, Talbot," Durand said at last. "Working on these cases is tough enough; but a lot of police aren't cooperative."

"I can imagine," Talbot answered. "What's the lowdown on this diamond business, anyway? What about the messenger?"

DURAND shrugged, idly twisted the heavy gold ring on his right hand. "Simple case, in some respects," he said. "Diamonds were being transferred from the vaults of the Shoreham Jewelry Company to the jewelry department. The messenger got on the private elevator. The operator was a phony. The operator killed the messenger, stopped the elevator at the basement floor and got away. From what clues we could pick up, we figured a guy named Carpenter and his girl friend, Adele Morgan, pulled the job. They have no records, but worked in the store for a time. I picked up the trail, followed it here, only to see the girl's picture in the morning newspaper. She was unidentified by you. I came to see the Chief because I had to have official help."

"I suppose there's a reward," Talbot said, swung the squad car past a truck, and down an alleyway.

"Oh, like that, huh!" Durand said,

watching the detective.

"No, not like that!" Talbot said angrily. "I don't want any part of it. I was just asking."

"Sorry," Durand apologized. "I've met all kinds of cops."

Talbot parked the car. "This is the morgue," he said. "Come along."

Pop Tucker looked up from his desk, smiled at the two men. "Hi, Leon," he said. "What's on your mind?"

"This is Mr. Durand," Talbot introduced the investigator. "He wants a look at the blonde brought in last night."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Durand." Pop thrust skinny fingers through white hair. "Just a minute. Got a bum in a while back; train cut him all to hell. Messy, very messy. I'm fixing up papers."

He scratched with a pen, then pushed papers aside.

"Come along," he said.

The girl lay in waxen death on the icy slab Pop slid from a wall niche. She had been beautiful at some time, but years had marked her features, and even death could not erase the hardness. The weapon had slashed her face, driven three times into the softness of her left breast.

"It's Adele Morgan," Durand said, distaste curling his mouth.

"That her name?" Pop asked. "She a relative?"

"That's her name," Talbot answered. "She's a suspect in a robbery."

"You mean *was*," Durand said grimly.

Pop Tucker slid the slab back into the vault, closed the door, swung the latch tight. Talbot shivered; there was something final about the movement, a finality he could not put into words.

"What now, Mr. Durand?" he asked.

"Well," Durand braced his hands on the cane, stared bleakly about the room, "I know that the girl worked with Carpenter; maybe she left a clue to his whereabouts?"

Pop Tucker shook his head. "Sloan and Vraine went over her stuff," he said. "They didn't find anything of importance. You can look, though. I've got the stuff in a locker."

"Let's take a look," Talbot suggested.

They turned away, seeing the sheeted figure on the table for the first time. One mutilated hand, last two fingers gone, hung stiffly from beneath the sheet.

"Better take a look," Pop advised. "If the guy is wanted, it'd be a feather in your cap, Leon."

"Sure!" Talbot said, felt nausea crowd at his stomach as he raised the sheet.

The bum had been thoroughly battered, the train wheels almost severing his left leg, cinders ground blackly into the skin of his face and chest. His neck, obviously broken, tilted the head at a weird angle.

"Nobody I know," Talbot said.

"Stranger to me," Durand agreed.

"Figured that," Pop Tucker said. "A track-walker found him on the right of way."

"Evidently he fell from a freight, and then bums must have stripped the body later. He was naked as a jay when I brought him in."

"Let's get on," Talbot suggested, shivered at Pop's unconcerned tossing of the sheet back over the body.

Their footsteps echoed dully in the big room, and death had stilled the life of the place into something stagnant. Leon Talbot was glad when they stood in the anteroom and watched the caretaker open a locker.

"That's the lot," Pop volunteered. "One suitcase and a purse. Sloane dusted the room where she was found for prints, but the killer wiped them away."

Talbot emptied the suitcase on the table, pawed through the clothing. The clothes were ready made, bearing national labels. A few toilet articles were with them.

Durand had spilled the purse's contents

beside the clothes, fingering them. Lipstick, change purse, bobby pins, a comb and a small booklet.

"Nothing here," he said.

Talbot lifted the pamphlet. "*Driv-Ur-Self*" was the title, and it had been issued by a car-renting agency. The detective thumbed through it, eyes thoughtful.

"Let's take a look at this place," he suggested. "If Carpenter and the girl rented a car, we might get some lead."

"Sure!" Durand nodded, twisted the ring back into place on his finger. "Any clue is a good clue right now."

"Thanks, Pop," Talbot said.

"Any time, Leon," the old man answered, began gathering up the murdered girl's effects.

OUTSIDE, in the car, Talbot glanced at the booklet again. "The agency is just a few blocks away; we'll find out pretty quick if the girl rented a car."

"Okay, let's go."

Talbot kicked the starter, slid the squad car into gear. Traffic swirled by the alley end, and he eased the sedan into it, turning right, then circling the block. A red light caught him, and he braked to a stop.

"A hell of a way to die," he said, thinking of the girl. "She must have been stabbed half a dozen times."

"Stilettoes are nasty," Durand agreed. "I saw an Italian carve up another guy at a dance once." He shivered. "I hope I never see anything like that again."

"I've seen razors used," Talbot agreed, "and a cutting fight isn't any fun to watch."

The light changed, and he sent the car ahead again. A traffic patrolman waved a friendly hand, and Talbot nodded, looking now for a place to park. A green coupe edged from the curb, and he tooled the sedan into the vacated place.

"That's it," he said, gestured toward a garage front which bore a twenty foot sign,

"*Driv-Ur-Self System. Cars Rented.*"

Springs squeaked as they stepped from the sedan. Durand led the way now, predatory nose poked forward, his thin legs moving at a speed Talbot found hard to match. A driver cursed them from behind the wheel of a speeding truck, but they gave no heed.

The interior of the agency was gloomy, cars parked in neat rows along the walls. A mechanic worked in the soft yellow glow of a drop light at the rear, and a typewriter clicked from a small office to the right of the entrance.

"Yes, sir?" the typist said, glancing up from the machine.

Talbot stepped through the doorway of the office, approached the railing. Durand hesitated, fumbling in his billfold, cane tucked under his arm.

"I'm Talbot, from headquarters. I'd like to talk to the manager."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Talbot," the girl said, motioned to a side door. "Go right in."

Talbot held the railing gate open, followed Durand. The investigator opened the side door and entered. Talbot followed, closing the panel.

"Good morning, gentlemen, can I help you?" the manager said. He was bald and big, and very affable.

"I'm Talbot, from headquarters," Talbot said. "We're checking to see if you've rented a car to a blonde girl in the last day or so. Probably she was with a man."

"This girl," Durand said quietly, peered through his pince nez sharply, as he handed a newspaper clipping to the manager.

The man studied the picture, wincing at the rigidity the camera had caught in her dead face. Sweat beaded his forehead, but he nodded.

"I rented her a car, Saturday, that was. She made a deposit. But there was no man with her." He handed back the clipping. "Funny thing! The car was parked outside

the agency last night, but wasn't checked in or the deposit claimed."

"Outside?" Talbot asked.

"Yeah, just half a block down the street. Tony, my mech, found it there when he reported for work." Interest flashed in his eyes. "You think the girl was killed in the car?"

"No," Talbot said, "not in the car." He hesitated, feeling Durand's gaze on him, feeling futile as hell at the moment. "Mind showing us the car?"

"Not at all, glad to cooperate," the manager said, came from his chair. "I think Tony parked it at the rear of the garage."

HE LED the way, going through the outer office where the girl typed form letters, leading Talbot and Durand down the lane of cars toward the rear.

The mechanic turned, then bent over his work. The acridly-sweet odor of whiskey drifted from him.

"Tony, you've been drinking!" the manager said. "I warned you about that."

The mechanic turned a sweat and grease stained face upward in the light, licking his lips nervously. "I just had a couple, Mac," he said defensively. "I killed the rest of the bottle in the Buick."

"What bottle?" the manager asked, pointed at a coupe. "You mean this car?"

"Sure! I found the bottle under the seat when I cleaned the car. It was good whiskey, not much, but good. I didn't see any sense in letting it go to waste."

"That the car the girl hired?" Talbot asked.

"That's it," the manager agreed.

Durand opened the door, peered in. Talbot touched the investigator's arm.

"There might be prints," he cautioned.

"The car's clean," Tony said. "I polished and gassed it just an hour or so ago."

Durand slammed the door, tapped his cane thoughtfully on the floor. Bony shoulders shrugged, and his professorial face lightened slightly in the detective's direction.

"Dead end," he said. "What do we do now?"

"I don't know," Talbot said shortly. "Thanks," he finished to the manager.

"Glad to help," the manager said.

He was bawling hell out of the mechanic as Talbot and Durand left the garage.

"How about a cup of coffee?" Talbot asked. "Maybe we'll get an idea."

"I can use it," Durand agreed.

They paced down the street two doors, entered the small cafe. "Coffee and doughnuts," Talbot ordered, and Durand nodded his agreement.

The girl poured coffee from a Silex pot, laid flaky doughnuts on two dishes. Talbot spooned sugar into his cup, thoughtfully broke a doughnut in half.

"I'm stumped," he admitted. "No prints, no description, no nothing."

Durand swallowed a bit of cruller and a swallow of coffee. "I gave Chief Rogers a description of the man Carpenter. I guess I forgot to give it to you."

"You did," Talbot said, watched the smooth lines of the girl behind the counter.

"About five ten, weighing about one sixty. Partially bald. Brown eyes."

"The Chief probably put out a police call on him," Talbot said. "I'll check in as soon as we're through here and see if anything has turned up."

"Fair enough." Durand tore a doughnut in half.

"Nice looking ring," Talbot said. "Better have it sized before you lose it."

Durand nodded, slipped the ring from his finger, extended it in a hand smooth and unmarked, slightly tanned.

"Company gave me that fifteen years ago," he said. "I'd hate to lose it."

Talbot handed the ring back, showed his own hand. "Mine's a class ring," he admitted. "But I've got my eyes on a diamond down at Baker's." He finished his coffee. "They'd fix that ring in just a couple of minutes."

"Thanks." Durand slipped the ring back onto his finger. "You can drop me there, if you will. I've got to send a report to the company, anyway. Maybe they'll have some news to send back."

Talbot tossed a quarter on the counter. "The telegraph office is near headquarters; I'll send the telegram for you."

"Fine." The investigator fumbled for paper and his fountain pen. "Send it collect."

"*Mutual Bonding Company*," he wrote, added the address. "*Have definite lead to case. Police most cooperative. Mailing full report tonight. Durand.*"

Talbot folded the sheet of paper, thrust it into his pocket. "I'll give you a lift to the jeweler's," he said. "You can call headquarters after you're through there. There may be a lead."

"Okay! If there isn't, I'll go back to the hotel. You can contact me there."

THEY left the cafe, went toward the squad car. Five minutes later, Durand waved a goodbye from the door of the jewelry store, and Talbot sent the car whirling ahead again.

Thoughts whirled like quicksilver on a mirror in his mind, and he drove automatically. At the City Morgue, he parked, went in.

"Another look, Leon?" Pop Tucker asked.

Talbot nodded. "Might as well," he admitted. "We struck a dead end further along."

Five minutes later, he sent the car down the alley, driving into the traffic, cutting

south toward headquarters. Parking in the section reserved for squad cars, he crossed to the telegraph office, sent Durand's telegram and a couple of his own. Lighting a cigarette, he went slowly back to headquarters, reported to Chief of Police Rogers.

"We didn't find anything, sir," he said. "Durand's gone to his hotel, waiting to hear from his company."

"All right, Talbot," Chief Rogers said. "You'll work with him while he's here. That bonding company is big; we can't afford any ill will."

"Yes, sir," Talbot agreed, eased back through the door.

He went directly to Sloan. The detective looked up from where he pored over papers, and shook his head.

"Not a thing, Talbot," he said. "Vraine's sucking around the neighborhood, trying to find a lead. Men are searching the sewer openings for the knife. The thing is dead, momentarily."

"Thanks," Talbot said, and went into the squad room. He sat there for minutes, revolving jaggedly-shaped thoughts in his mind, trying to fit them into a pattern. At last, he arose, went toward the desk.

"Nuts!" Fogarty said. "It's against regulations for me to let somebody else take the desk while I'm on duty."

Talbot grinned. "Since when are regulations so tough?" he asked. "I don't want to walk off with the place; I just want to check up on some stuff."

"What stuff?" Fogarty said suspiciously. "Nobody's supposed to go through anything locked up."

"Yeah!" Talbot spread his hands. "Look, we put a drunk away this morning; I just want to refresh my memory with what he was carrying."

Fogarty sighed. "Okay!" he agreed, and grinned. "I've got to go to the john, anyway."

His eyes were guileless. "Take over for a moment, will you, Talbot?"

"Sure," Talbot said. "Take your time."

THIRTY minutes later, he strolled into the Western Union office, glanced at the yellow sheets of paper which awaited him. He nodded to himself, smiling a bit, then folded the telegrams and tucked them into his wallet.

He had the pattern now; all he needed was the evidence.

He tooled the squad car along Marshal Boulevard and stopped at a large building. "*Frostee Food Lockers*," the sign read over the doorway.

Inside, he handed a key to the attendant, followed him into a cold back room, through towering lanes of frozen food compartments, and waited while the man unlocked and emptied number 648.

He almost laughed when he saw the three naked ducks wrapped in waxed paper, felt their coldness oozing into his hands. Back in the front office, he laid them aside, waited until the attendant had checked his files.

"Mr. and Mrs. Morgan," the attendant read from a card. "Last Saturday. Rent paid for one year."

"Remember what they looked like?"

"Sure! I remember thinking it was a lousy shame a good looking blonde should be married to a bald-headed—say!" The attendant snatched at the morning newspaper, held it so the picture could be seen. "Did you know—"

"I know," Talbot said, picked up the ducks, left the building.

Placing the frozen ducks in the front seat of the squad car, he drove toward the center of town. He had the evidence now; there was no need even to confirm it as yet.

AT THE Shetland Hotel, he parked on a side street, caught up the ducks. The

doorman pushed the revolving door, and he went into the lobby, approached the desk.

"416," the room clerk said.

The elevator whined a bit in ascending, stopped without a jar at the fourth floor. Talbot stood for a moment, orienting himself, then strode toward 416. Outside he stood for a moment, then knocked.

"Hello," Durand said, opened the door. "Find out anything?"

"A little," Talbot admitted; crossed the room to a table, laid the ducks on its polished surface. He still wore his hat, and a smile brushed his mouth.

"What are those?" Durand asked, came close to the table.

"Ducks—frozen," Talbot answered.

"So?" The investigator's bony shoulders shrugged in puzzlement.

Talbot found his knife, ripped open the belly of the first duck. In the second, he found the chamois bag. Cutting the lace, he emptied a handful of glittering stones into a large ashtray.

"My God!" Durand said, dipped slender fingers into the fortune. "Where did you find these?"

"Where Adele Morgan and Carpenter left them, in a frozen food locker."

"Then you found Carpenter?" Durand asked, dropped the last of the diamonds back into the tray. His eyes were bleak and cold, and his hands trembled slightly as he lit a cigarette.

"He's in jail," Talbot said.

"Where'd you find him?"

Talbot grinned. "He found me. "I arrested him last night for drunkenness. Judge Benson gave him six months this morning for contempt of court."

"But—" Durand began.

"I got to figuring," Talbot said, "and came up with a few answers. Adele Morgan and Carpenter came here. They rented a car to drive around in, maybe just for sightseeing. They had to ditch the

diamonds for a time, but didn't want to rent a safety deposit box which could be entered only at banking hours. So they bought these ducks, shoved the diamonds into one, and rented a frozen food locker. They had access at any time, and nobody would suspect a locker of holding a fortune."

"Adele was murdered, and Carpenter knew the cops would look for him. He beat them to the draw; he looked for the cops. By pretending to be drunk, then cursing the judge, he got put away for six months. He was absolutely safe; for it's pretty obvious he had no criminal record. I happened to see the locker key when we first left headquarters, but it made no impression then. Later, I got to figuring. I saw the car Adele had rented, heard that liquor was found in it. I connected that with Carpenter, and eventually connected him with the drunk I had arrested. The drunk act had to be planned. On Sunday, he couldn't buy liquor, yet he was plenty spiffed. Too, there was no justification for his contempt of court. Everything added up to his wanting a jail sentence."

"Damned clever," Durand said, smiling. "You've got a keen brain." He flipped ashes to the floor. "Maybe I can fix it, at that, for you to cut in on the reward."

"No, thanks," Talbot said, took off his hat, sat back in a deep chair. He smiled diffidently over the table at the investigator. "I'm a cop, remember!"

"Well, even so—" Durand spread slender hands.

"Got your ring fixed, I see," Talbot said.

Durand nodded. "Took just a couple of minutes." He glanced at the table. "But getting back to the diamonds. I'll write out a receipt for them, and take them along. The company will be damned glad to have them back."

Talbot shook his head, eyes grave and speculative. "Sorry," he said, "but that's

impossible. The jewels are impounded as evidence against Carpenter."

Durand scowled. "Wait now," he said. "I was sent to get those stones back. I represent the company."

"What company?" Talbot's smile was lazy, his tone mild.

"Mutual Bonding, of course." Perspiration was on Durand's face.

"Nonsense!" Talbot said softly. "You represent yourself; you're the last of the robbers. Durand is dead, lying at the morgue. We saw his body this morning."

Durand was backing now, going toward the bed. He sat, forgetting the cigarette, unconsciously pushing aside his coat and cane.

"You're crazy, Talbot," he said.

"Not entirely," the detective said. "Here's the setup, as I get it. You, Carpenter and the girl planned the robbery with the help of Durand who knew the time deliveries were made from the jeweler's vaults. Durand tipped you off, and you robbed and killed the messenger. Which one of you did the killing, I don't know. Anyway, plans went wrong, or again, maybe they didn't."

"Anyway, you traveled with Durand here, intending to meet the girl and Carpenter. Or again, they skipped out, and you traced them here. But to go on, you killed Durand, dropped him from the train, naked. You even cut off his finger to obtain his company ring. That was why the ring was too large, and also why you have no indentation in your finger, although you claimed to have worn the ring for years."

DURAND was staring at the solid gold band on his hand. Then he looked up, and smokey hell began swirling in his eyes.

"I checked the body," Talbot continued, "saw the fingers had been cut off with a sharp blade. Well, I also checked other things. I sent telegrams to the company,

asking for a description of Durand, and they tallied with the corpse. And about that time, or really a bit before, a couple of things finally made sense to me.

“First, it was too damned coincidental you should pop up so soon after Adele Morgan was found. Secondly, you had the names so pat it didn’t seem right. Thirdly, and this is a nice clincher, you knew the girl had died from a stiletto wound—while the cops just knew some sort of knife had been used.

The fake Durand stood, cane in hand, began a slow pacing forward. Talbot sat, staring quietly, not moving.

“You’re rather smart, Talbot,” the killer said gently.

“Not so smart,” Talbot shook his head. “It took me a long time to figure out things. For example, I didn’t figure out why Carpenter went through the window, until I realized you had killed Adele Morgan and tried to kill him. He escaped you, then put on the drunk act with the window, knowing the glass cuts would cover his other wounds, the ones you had inflicted.”

“I say you’re smart,” the false Durand said flatly. “You can take some of those diamonds and keep your mouth shut. Or you can have it shut another way—permanently.”

Metal whispered on metal, and steel glistened in the tall man’s hand.

“So that’s the stiletto!” Talbot said. “A knife cane!”

The killer nodded, smiling a bit now, cane scabbard in one hand, a two-foot stiletto-sword in the other.

“You see,” Talbot said triumphantly “I wasn’t so smart; I never did figure that.”

“Well?” the killer said quietly, and the blade came up.

“Well!” Talbot said, sat motionless, watching the other.

“Do we split, or is there trouble?”

Then you did kill the girl?”

“Sure! It was like you figured. Durand worked with us. None of us had records. Carpenter killed the messenger, gave the diamonds to Adele. They double-crossed us and scrambled. I figured they’d hole up here, so followed with Durand. He turned yellow, so I killed him. I found the girl and Carpenter, had a fight. Adele got killed and Carpenter escaped. I played it smart, took Durand’s identity, got the cops to help me. That’s the size of it.”

“Good!” Talbot nodded. “Now you’re under arrest for murder. Carpenter will sing; and you’ll both fry. That’s good.”

The fake Durand debated for a brief silent second, then came lunging in with the naked murderous blade. He began twisting midway in the stroke, turning toward the side, the bullet catching him low in the chest. He hit the floor hard, stared with incredulous eyes at Talbot who hadn’t moved.

The detective lifted his hat, disclosed the .38 nestled in his hidden hand. Inquiringly, his finger poked through the hole the slug had cut in the felt of the hat.

“You damned fool!” he said tonelessly to the man on the floor. “Don’t you go to the movies? Crime doesn’t pay!”

He sighed a bit, then reached for the phone.