

Boomerang Bullets

By
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IT wasn't death itself that Drill Morgan feared. No one had a better reputation of being able to take care of himself in a jam where automatics cracked spitefully in the dark and streaks of flame leaped swiftly from unexpected places. In the open, hand-to-hand or gun-to-gun, Drill had the savage, icy-nerved scorn of danger of a fighting rat.

It was another sort of death that Drill Morgan feared. A death in a small gray room with its one furnishing a heavy wooden chair—hung with straps and wires.

And it was this fear that had gripped him and fastened and grown on him till he told the district attorney that he would testify, testify to anything, against anybody, even his own

mother, to save his life.

So they gave him a nominal sentence of five years and turned him loose on a pardon at the end of the first year. At midnight, on the very day of Morgan's release, Jim Morrison, after twelve months of fruitless appeals and delays, was to go to the chair for the murder of McCracken's butler.

Slumped down in his seat in the train, Drill let his mind run back to the scene in the courtroom when he had given his testimony against Jim.

It was he, Drill, who should have gone to the chair by rights. He had shot the butler, himself, while Jim was outside on the lookout.

But Jim would be the one to pay for the

job; there wasn't any doubt about that Drill's evidence had clinched that. He would be led into that room, and when he came out, they would put him into a cart and carry him away like a piece of meat.

Drill Morgan jumped in his chair, and his hands gripped the wooden rail till the knuckles cracked. A voice from over his shoulder had broken into his thoughts. But all it said was:

"Dinner is now served in the dining car. Dining car is in the rear."

Drill straightened himself up in his chair. He laughed and cursed himself for a fool. That was all over now, all over and past, he told himself for the hundredth time. The fear of the chair was out of his life, out of it forever. Only, he had stood sweating and trembling under its shadow for so long, it was a habit almost.

In the washroom, Drill brushed his natty gray suit of clothes that he had ordered in prison at his own expense, sleeked back his black hair, polished his neat oxfords with a brush, and came out whistling, his chin up.

He made his way back through the train to the dining car and selected a seat at a vacant table. After consulting the menu and giving his order to a waiter, he leaned back in his chair and let his gaze drift negligently and comfortably around the car.

His ease of mind lasted only a few seconds. Almost the first thing his eyes rested on was a newspaper in the hands of a man at the next table in front. In four-inch headlines slapped clear across the page, the screamer announced that all appeals in behalf of Jim Morrison had failed, and that he must die at midnight. Prominently displayed in the middle of the page was a photograph of the electric chair, bordered in black, with an imaginary drawing of Morrison strapped into it.

Drill Morgan shuddered. Furtively he mopped beads of sweat from his forehead. With the jolting of the train, it seemed to him

that the picture of the man on the hot spot looked more like him than it did like Morrison....

He muttered another oath and jerked his eyes off the tabloid. He wasn't afraid. There wasn't a thing in the world to fear now.

All at once, he realized that somebody was standing in the aisle, looking down at him.

This newcomer was an undersized, stoop-shouldered little man, with a thin, wrinkled face, pasty-white from indoor life, and brown eyes, sly and shifty as a pair of glass beads. He was dressed in a suit of sleazy prison clothes and he wore a derby hat at least two sizes too large for him.

Drill recognized the man, now that he came to look at him. Off and on, for months back in stir, he remembered he had been catching glimpses of the comical little figure in the baggy uniform shuffling around in the long, gray queues of prisoners. Moreover, the little fellow had been waiting in the warden's office only a couple of hours before when he, Drill, had passed through on his way to the outside. Waiting for his discharge at the end of his term—

SEEING that Morgan was looking at him, the little man sidled over to the table and slid into the chair opposite Drill. Seated, his head and shoulders hardly came above the table top. But his beady brown eyes gripped Morgan's like a ferret's over the white cloth and silverware.

"Hello. You're Drill Morgan, ain't you?" wheezed the little man.

Morgan stiffened. His big, cruelly handsome lips curled in disdain. He looked around for the waiter to tell him to have the shabby little intruder kicked out, and then thought better of it. He was in no position, even though legally clear of the bulls, to stir up a scene.

"Well, suppose I am. What of it?" he

replied curtly.

The little man did not answer for a second. He sat leaning forward toward Drill, mouth half open, and an expression of awed wonder on his face that reminded Drill of a dog watching its master.

"I thought so. I'm Ollie Meekers—Rabbit Meekers, you know," the little man finally wheezed back. "I've seen you around, up—up there—lots of times. I used to watch you. But I don't suppose a big shot like you would even bother to notice a runt like me."

Meekers pulled one hand up from under the tablecloth and pushed it timidly over the cloth toward Drill.

"Maybe I'm all wet to think of it, but I'd like to—do you suppose— would you shake hands, Mr. Morgan?" he blurted out.

Drill Morgan scowled with surprise. He hesitated, started to growl out a refusal, and then stuck out his hand. The people across the aisle, he saw out of the corner of his eyes, were getting interested.

The hand that Rabbit Meekers slid into Drill's big white digits was just what Morgan had expected it would be. Long and slender and thin-fingered, wonderfully flexible and soft. The kind of a hand that can move in and out of a pocket, or back and forth over a deck of cards, faster than the eye can follow it.

The waiter came with the soup, and Morgan started to eat it.

"Now suppose you spill me something," he growled to Meekers after a moment. "What's the big idea? Why all the stuff about who I am and shaking hands. Rabbit? Ain't runnin' for Congress or something, are you, cull?"

Meekers hugged himself with both his skinny, pipestem little arms. He sucked in his flabby blue lips in a chuckling grin.

"You're the man that pulled the McCracken job and got away with it," he breathed. "We knew all about that, up at college. Even the ones that was up there

before it happened. I just finished two this time—"

"What's your line, Rabbit?" Morgan interrupted.

Meekers flushed sheepishly and dropped his eyes.

"Me? Oh, I ain't nothing compared to you. Drill," he muttered. "I'm just a pocket-dipper—a gold watch here, a piece of coin somewhere else. I tried to do a couple of box jobs, but I fell down. Someway, I can't seem to get the hang of it. The last time they nabbed me on the way in—that's how good I am." He laughed cacklingly.

"Guess I'm too dumb to be anything but honest. And I don't even know how to be that."

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the rhythmical click of the car wheels

"That was why I wanted to speak to you. Drill," the little man went on wistfully, at last. "Me, I ain't never done nothin' all my life but bum around and get pinched. I always wanted to meet up with one reg'lar guy. If I couldn't never pull off a decent job myself, anyhow I wanted to shake hands with a high-toned worker, and see how it felt. Gee, yuh couldn't never guess what a kick I'm gettin' outa this!"

Drill Morgan sat staring at the comically earnest, wrinkled little face in front of him for a moment, then burst out laughing.

"Say, you're handin' me the first good laugh I've had in a year, no kidding," he guffawed. "I didn't know they let 'em loose with as few brains as what you've got. Have something to eat on me, dumb-bell."

RELAXING from the tension of the last weeks, Morgan amused himself during the next half hour by relating to the little man some of the less serious exploits of his career, and listening with a certain contemptuous amusement to the pickpocket's awed exclamations of wonder.

Finishing their meal, the pair left the dining car together and went into the smoker, which happened to be empty except for themselves. There, Morgan went on with his anecdotes.

"Gee, you're wonderful!" Meekers sighed admiringly at last. "What you goin' to do when you get back to the big town, Drill? Got anything lined up to turn over?"

Drill's cigar halted halfway to his lips. He froze motionless as a statue, his blue-ice eyes drilling the Rabbit like a butterfly under a pin.

"You're askin' me?" he said slowly. "I been away more than a year, don't forget. And exactly what difference does it make to you, anyway, punk?"

Rabbit glanced up, flushed and fidgeted in his chair.

"Not a thing in the world, Drill," he stammered hastily. "Only, I was just thinkin'. I suppose you're figgerin' to go up to Rosy the fence's some night pretty soon and pick up the twenty grand that mug owes you on the McCracken emeralds, ain't you? You could live on that dough quite a while without doin' any work. If you could get it—"

Drill Morgan did nothing to attract the attention of the two men who had just paused in the doorway of the smoking car. His big white hand fell on Rabbit's skinny forearm as it rested between them and vised over it with a clutch that brought tears to the little man's eyes.

"What do you know about Rosy and the junk—supposing there ever was any?" he snarled. "What do you mean, 'if I can get it'? What are you trying to do, muscle in on me, you shrimp? Come clean and come fast."

"Cripes, Drill, don't go gettin' me wrong," Rabbit whined. "Leggo my arm. You're killin' me. Me muscle in on you? Say, do I look that goofy—honest, do I, now?"

"I'll find out how goofy you are after you talk," Morgan grunted, a little mollified in

spite of himself. "Go ahead, cull. Shoot the works."

"There ain't no use you tryin' to stall me that you didn't knock off old man McCracken's emeralds that night that y-o-u—I mean Jim Morrison—smoked the butler," Meekers said. "And you went and soaked the junk with Rosy—didn't you, Drill?"

Drill Morgan laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh to hear, so smooth, yet withal so rasping. Like the unsheathing of a jagged-edged knife from a satin scabbard.

"Who says so? If you know something, let's hear it. But don't go shoving no cross-examination at me, Rabbit," he purred.

"Who says so?" Meekers leaned closer to Drill, laughing knowingly under his breath. "Spike Haggerty said so. And Spike's in the know, what I mean. He got up here—up there at the house, I mean—about six months after you did. I guess maybe you never happened to pipe off who he was. Somebody must have spilled the works to him—I don't know who. Spike said that you left the stuff with Rosy for safe keeping. He swore to keep dark that he had it. If you got a long stretch up river, he promised to keep it in his safe till you came and got it, if it was ten years. Didn't he?"

Drill Morgan's breath had started to come thickly and fast. His face grew white, hard and cruel as chiseled stone.

"What are you driving at, you boob?" he gritted between his teeth. "Are you trying to tell me that Rosy—"

Rabbit Meekers shrank back from the killing fury in Morgan's face.

"He sold you out, Drill," he muttered. "Old McCracken put up twenty grand reward for the return of the stuff and no questions asked. Rosy packed it up and some wise mouthpiece of his took it back to McCracken and collected the dough. So—"

His face white and twitching. Drill plunged out of his seat and started to pace the

floor.

"The double-crossing skunk!" he raged, hoarsely. "I'll cut his heart out for this—"

He whirled and stood glaring down at the Rabbit.

"Curse you, if you're lying to me—if this yarn of yours is some plant—"

He stooped and gripped the little man by the shoulder. His fingers burned through the thin cloth of the coat like steel hooks.

"What's your racket, anyhow, you rat?" he hissed. "What's the idea, musclin' into the know with me, and then unloadin' all this? What business is it of yours, anyhow?"

"For the lovamike, Drill, what d'yuh keep gettin' me wrong for?" Meekers whimpered. "Listen, will yuh? Yuh had the rocks once, and when yuh gave 'em to Rosy, yuh was goin' to have the dough instead of 'em. Wasn't yuh? Now you're sore because yuh think you've lost 'em—rocks and kale, both." Meekers dropped his voice. "Well, how'd yuh like it if yuh could get 'em back again? Not just the dough. The dough and the rocks, both?"

Inch by inch it seemed, so slowly did he move, Drill sank back into his chair again.

"What d'yuh mean, cull? What are yuh drivin' at?" he growled.

For reply, the Rabbit reached into his pocket and drew out a newspaper. He folded it to the headlines of an article in the society section and passed it wordlessly to Morgan.

PROMINENT SOCIETY PEOPLE TO ATTEND HOUSEWARMING

Members of several of New York's most prominent families have accepted invitations to assist at the housewarming festivities to be held tonight by Mr. and Mrs. John Henry McCracken on the occasion of the opening of their new hunting lodge in the Adirondacks. Mr. and Mrs. McCracken left the city yesterday forenoon with a staff of domestics from their New York residence, arriving at Cedarcrest in the late afternoon for the purpose of completing last minute preparations for the reception of several autoloads of friends who followed them early this morning. Mr. and Mrs.

McCracken will remain at their palatial "camp" only two days on this occasion, returning to the city tomorrow for the purpose of attending the international polo matches, in which their son, Mr. Jerrold McCracken, will participate as a member of the American team.

DRILL MORGAN let the paper drop into his lap and sat staring at Meekers.

"The servants have gone with 'em. There won't be a soul in the place," he muttered. "For a show like that, up in the woods, the missis won't lug her big junk. It would be a wide-open lay, only for one thing. It's a cinch McCracken has switched the combination of that wall safe since the job I done on it last year. I knew the combination that time. It took the old lady's French maid six months to pipe it off for me. But now—" Drill Morgan shoved a cigar viciously into his mouth and jabbed a match across the sole of his boot. "Cripes, what a lay! And I got to pass it up!"

"There's another way to g-get into a safe, Drill, without knowing the c-combination." Rabbit's voice was stuttering with excitement. "D-did you ever hear of an acetylene blow pipe? C-cuts through a foot of steel in half an hour—"

"Did I ever hear of my left leg?" Drill grunted disgustedly. "You poor fish, where am I going to grab off a gas gun outfit in three-four hours after I hit town, after bein' away from the mob more than a year. Huh?"

"I can get you a gas outfit in t-two hours, or less, Drill," Meekers chattered. "That is, unless the p-party I'm thinking of has got pinched while I been away. We'll be in and out again at McCracken's by one o'clock, and then we'll go down to Rosy's. You needn't say anything to Rosy that you've got the rocks in your pocket. You can just stick your gun in his stomach and tell him you know how he double-crossed you, and to come across with the twenty grand, or you'll b-blow him to hell.

He'll shell out, all right. He's y-yellower than what I am." Rabbit chuckled. "And then we—"

Drill Morgan's steel fingers gripped again over the Rabbit's arm. His flat, cruel eyes glowed green as a cat's.

"Hold on a minute. Where do you get that 'we' stuff?" he growled. "'We'll' do this—'we'll' do that. When did I ever tell you you was mobbin' in with me on anything, cull?"

Rabbit's little red eyes blinked rapidly. His bony Adam's apple fluttered up and down in his skinny throat.

"I guess I forgot myself, D-Drill," he stuttered. "I was just thinkin'—like as if me and you was together on the job. I kep' thinkin' and thinkin' about it so much back at stir—you know, imaginin' that we was pals—wantin' to work with you so bad—it sorta seemed like it had come true."

He leaned suddenly toward Morgan, his seamed, monkeylike little face fairly twitching with eagerness.

"Gee, Drill, if you only would!" he breathed. Think of it! Me, dumb-bell Rabbit Meekers, in with Drill Morgan on a job! Gosh, I'd never forget it. I'd learn more in that one night than I ever knew in all my life before. And, at that, Drill, haven't I got a little something coming to me?" Rabbit went on after a pause. "I'm gettin' the gas gun outfit for yuh, don't forget. And I showed you the lay in the paper, didn't I?"

Drill Morgan did not say anything for a moment. A crafty look narrowed his flat green eyes.

It had been on the tip of his tongue to tell Meekers where he got off. But suddenly he realized that the very fact that the little pickpocket was a blundering nitwit dazzled out of what few senses he had by his awe of a big-time crook really made him all the more valuable. Priceless, in fact.

Swiftly the details of the plan clicked into place in Drill's brain. The second robbery of

the McCracken emeralds, coming the very day of his release from stir, would send the dicks hotfoot on his trail. The first needful thing was a water-tight alibi. Drill knew a dozen places in the city where a ten-minute call before he went to work would line up a dozen witnesses who would swear he had been in the place all night.

The Rabbit would cinch the rest of it. The Rabbit's fingerprints on the gas gun left at McCracken's, and on the safe. Of his own, not a sign to be found.... Then with the Rabbit to Rosy, the fence's squalid hole. Not only the twenty grand he had collected from McCracken, but every last dollar he had in the place, Drill would wring out of the shivering little Jew at the point of his gun. When he had cleaned him, a bullet through the heart. And then another bullet for Meekers' brain.

But it would be the gun in Rosy's hand whose barrel-scratches would match the bullet that had killed Rabbit, when the cops found him. And the steel messenger in the fence's heart would-be out of the rod they would find clamped in Meekers' slender white fingers. In his pocket, the Rabbit would still have some of Rosy's cash—enough to look plausible.

A picture that needed no title, the silent pair would tell. At the worst, he, Drill, with time to park his junk in a safe place, would get off with a pinch on suspicion and a sweating at headquarters. But they couldn't hold him. They wouldn't have a thing on him—not a thing.

Drill turned to the Rabbit with a grin. He held out his hand.

"I was all wet, what I said about your being empty above the ears, Rabbit," he said. "You've got it, kid. We go and pull those two jobs tonight, just like you said. And you don't go just to learn how, either. We split fifty-fifty on the clean-up."

Tears of joy stood in the Rabbit's eyes as he gripped Drill Morgan's hand.

"Gee, Drill, that's sure swell of you!" he cried. "Me on a job with Drill Morgan! And a fifty-fifty split, too! Gosh. I can't believe it!"

Could the little pickpocket have read behind the stony mask of the big man's enigmatic smile, he would have shuddered with chill terror.

DUSK was thickening around the shoulders of the skyscrapers as Drill and Rabbit Meekers stepped out onto Forty-Second Street. At the corner of Fifth Avenue, Rabbit flagged a taxi. The two men got in. Meekers gave an address several miles down town.

Leaving the car a quarter of an hour later, the Rabbit plunged into the maze of curving, crisscrossing streets to the south and west of Washington Square. After some ten minutes of dodging and twisting back and forth, he turned into a narrow, half-lighted alley. He felt his way down this for some hundred yards or so, and then stopped in front of a wooden door leading into a fenced-in back yard.

"Here's where Tim used to be," he muttered to Drill. "If some double-crossing stool pigeon hasn't turned him up, he's here now. Tim will do anything for me."

Drill fell back a couple of steps behind Rabbit as they scuffed across the yard to the rear door of the frowsy-looking tenement house. Meekers knocked.

After a few seconds, the door opened a crack and a section of face appeared. There was a moment of silence as the person inside scrutinized the Rabbit through the slit.

Then the door flew open and a big, slatternly woman with eagle-keen eyes under a mop of gray-streaked hair seized Meekers' hand.

"Well, if it ain't the little old Rabbit, himself, back home again!" she exclaimed, pumping the little man's hand up and down. "Say, it's been years. How are yuh, kid? When

d'yuh hit town?"

"Hello, Annie—just came down from my country estate this afternoon," the Rabbit grinned. "Meet my friend—Mr. Drill Morgan, Annie Hope. Annie is Tim's wife." he explained to Drill, as Morgan stepped forward out of the shadow. "She'll do anything for me."

"You bet I will," the red-haired woman exclaimed as she held out her hand to Drill. "And that goes for you too, Mr. Morgan. Any friend of Eddie's is a friend of mine. Haven't I heard of you somewheres before, big boy? A big job up on the Avenoo?"

"Drill pulled the McCracken job a year ago," Meekers said importantly. "You know—his pal, Morrison, is the one they're putting away tonight. Drill just got out. I and him are going to turn over a little one tonight. We want a room for a few hours, an' something to eat. And I wanta see Tim about a couple of gats and—something else—before we start."

"Sure—come right upstairs," Annie Hope exclaimed. "Tim's away till tomorrow, but I'll fix yuh up for everything."

Drill Morgan followed the other two into the house. He had never seen nor heard of Annie Hope before, but he knew her type. Those shifty, yet gimlet-keen, knowing eyes, the hall marks of hard-boiled astuteness stamped on her heavy, deeply lined face were enough to prove what she was—a woman of the underworld and the keeper of a crook's lodging house.

In the small, comfortable room where she took the two men, they had supper. After the meal. Rabbit excused himself for a few minutes.

"I got to see Annie 'bout our—supplies—for tonight," he grinned to Drill. "She's got the rods right here, but it may take her a couple of hours to get hold of the gas gun. I'll be right back."

Drill glanced up from the hand of solitaire

he was playing and nodded without speaking.

Rabbit returned in about ten minutes.

"Everything's jake," he said as he shut the door behind him. "She'll have the stuff here at ten-thirty."

Drill tossed his hand of cards on the bed and got up. He reached for his hat.

"Okay, cull," he grunted. "We pull outa here about eleven. You be down there at that back door at a quarter of, sharp, and let me back in again, see?"

"Why, w-where you goin', Drill?" Rabbit exclaimed.

"Just to call on a couple of old friends," Drill said, offhandedly. "Nothing to do with our job. Don't go to sleep and forget to let me back in again, that's all"

Rabbit did not say anything. He stood looking worriedly out of his funny wrinkled face and roving red eyes while Drill slammed his hat on his head and went out.

Drill's business took him on a round of certain restaurants and speak-easies, ending with the last hour spent at a night club whose festivities were just beginning to get under way as he arrived.

There, Drill circulated among the waiters, shaking hands and chatting jovially. He finished off his call with a ten-minute interview in private with the owner of the place. Upon leaving, Drill knew that wherever he might actually be during the next three hours, he could prove by overwhelming testimony in any court in the land that he had spent them talking and dancing with the alluring hostesses at the Lotus Club.

Rabbit was at the back door to let him in on the dot of ten forty-five. He led the way back to the room without asking any questions as to where Drill had been.

He stepped over to the bed and tossed back a blanket covering a humped shape. He picked up one of the two automatics lying on the spread and handed it to Drill.

Without a word. Drill pushed back the catch of his gun, shelled the six grease-nosed, ugly-looking cartridges out into his palm, grunted, reloaded the gun, and dropped it into his pocket.

"How's yours?" he asked.

Rabbit nodded. "The same as yours. Loaded, all O.K."

A black suitcase lay on the bed. Rabbit stooped and opened it. Inside were a pair of polished metal cylinders, with a blowpipe nozzle at the end of connecting rubber tubes.

"The works," Rabbit grinned. "That baby there is so hot she'll cut a hole through chrome steel with her little finger. Light, too. And neat-looking. We can shove that under a bull's nose and he'll only think we're rushing out an armful of dirty shirts."

JOHN HENRY McCracken's mansion stood back some fifty yards from the Drive, on the summit of a knoll overlooking the Hudson.

Keeping in the shadow of the clumps of high shrubbery, Drill and the Rabbit made a complete circuit of the house, pausing to listen and peer in through the windows.

Not a light showed from top to bottom of the great brick and cement edifice. Not a window in any of the sleeping rooms above the ground floor was unlocked.

"All clear. Nobody there," Drill muttered. "Let's go on in."

"Here's an iron I got off of Annie," Rabbit whispered. "Let's see how you do it, Drill."

Drill took the ten-inch chisel-like jimmy that Meekers handed him, tucked the thin edge into the crack of the back door and threw his weight sidewise. There was a sharp snapping sound, and the door swung inward.

Drill stepped over the threshold and halted, holding his breath to listen. Rabbit crowded close to his elbow.

It was utterly still. So still that Rabbit

could hear the blood pounding in his ears.

"S-suppose we're in wrong, Drill? Suppose there's somebody here, after all?" he chattered. "I'm—I'm afraid—"

"Shut up!" Drill Morgan's voice growled exasperation. "What the hell is there to be afraid of, you sap? There's nobody here."

"All right, Drill. I'll keep still," whispered Meekers. "Was this the way you come in the—the other time, Drill?"

Drill Morgan muttered an oath.

"I thought you was goin' to can the chatter?" he snarled. "No, it wasn't this way. We made it through a side window that time. Anything else you wanta know, punk?"

"All right, Drill. Don't get sore," twittered the Rabbit. "Where do we go next? Where's the room with the safe?"

Drill Morgan took a step ahead in the dark.

"Down this way—through the kitchen, I guess," he muttered.

Drill in the lead, the two men cat-footed down a short passage, through a door into the kitchen, and out of that into another passage.

"Over there is the dining room," Drill pointed out. "That door there goes into the conservatory."

A few feet farther along, Drill came to still another door. He turned the knob noiselessly, pushed open the door and stood peering and listening without making a sound for a long half-minute. Then, inch by inch, he glided in over the threshold, with the Rabbit hugging his elbow.

They were at one end of a big, high-ceilinged room. Massive pieces of oak furniture stood about, dimly visible in the greenish light of the moon that shone in through a tall, narrow window. Shelf after shelf of books alternated with gold-framed paintings hung against panelings of dark, hand-carved wood that covered the walls. Priceless rugs of Persia and China covered the floor.

Rabbit Meekers muttered an oath and caught his breath. It was like a chamber in some great cathedral—the utter silence, the solemn dignity of furniture and pictures, the haughty, disdainful faces of the ladies and gentlemen that gazed down at them out of the rows of gilded frames.

Meekers glanced up at Drill Morgan. He was standing motionless, his eyes sweeping the room from end to end. A queer expression was on his face.

If anyone had told Drill that shivers of dread would run down his spine when he went back into that room to open McCracken's safe for the second time, he would have told the man he was crazy.

And yet it was true. He was afraid. What of, he did not know. Not of Meekers, not of being caught again, not of the chair.

Maybe it was the picture of McCracken's father, the old wolf of Wall Street, glowering down at him with his blazing blue eyes out of the massive gold frame over the fireplace. Maybe it was the memory of the old butler. Right under the picture was where he had dropped and lain motionless on his back, blood gushing out of the hole between his eyes and flooding down over his white, hair—

Drill Morgan gasped out an oath and jumped backward. Tingles of icy terror congealed his skin in goose pimples.

A loud, jangling uproar had crashed in on his tense nerves—the booming of the grandfather clock out in the hall. Stroke after stroke, till it had counted a dozen, the heavy, measured beats thundered on Morgan's ears and rolled away in throbbing echoes through the house.

AS the last of the peals faded out into silence. Drill growled a curse and wiped the sweat from his forehead. Midnight. Twelve o'clock and the chair for Morrison. Right now, they would be leading Jim out of

his cell in the death house. What was he afraid of? It was all over. They couldn't burn him now.

He swung around to the Rabbit

"Let's get to work. The keister is over behind that picture of McCracken. Go unhook it and swing it out"

Rabbit Meekers stared up at Morgan. His birdlike little brown eyes glittered with excitement.

"Oh, gee—you're goin' to let me do something, Drill?" he exclaimed.

"I'm goin' to let you do everything," Drill grunted back curtly. "This is your lay—you can spring it. Go ahead and get busy."

Rabbit Meekers tiptoed awesomely across the room to the painting of the father of the master of the house. He reached up, felt for the hook that held it in place, pushed it up, and slowly pulled the big painting around on the hinges, like a door. Behind it, the door of a large wall safe gleamed dully in the moonlight.

Rabbit turned back to Drill.

"I can't hardly believe it!" he chattered. "Here I am, workin' with Drill Morgan on a job! How many times I've dreamed of doin' that—an' now it's comin' true. Gee, I'm so nervous I'm all shaky. Do you ever get the nerves, Drill? Were you nervous that—that other night when you smoked the butler?"

Drill Morgan jarred out a gritting laugh.

"Cripes, how you talk! You're worse than a woman to chew the rag!" he flung back at the little man. "Me, nerves? No—I ain't got any nerves. Shut up and get ready to open that box."

"I will. Drill, I will," Meekers gulped. "In just a minute." Awed eagerness gripped the little man's face as he swept his eyes around the room. "We've got lots of time. Tell me about that first time, Drill. Gee, I can't believe it—it was right here. You was cold as ice all through, I bet. If it had been me, I'd have

flopped cold. Where was the butler when you popped him—here or out in the hall?"

Drill Morgan muttered another oath. With hands that trembled, he fumbled out a cigarette and lighted it. A minute back, he had boasted to the Rabbit that he had no nerves. But it was a lie. There was no use fighting against it.

Here, in this high-ceilinged, tomb-like old chamber, with the pale green light of the moon making everything look drab and spectral, the terror was gripping his soul again. Terror of nothing definite. Nothing he could name. Terror of ghosts....

Down under the edge of the desk, Drill could see the white-haired old butler with the blood trickling out between his eyes. The great oak armchair over under McCracken's picture was the other *chair*—from which they were now dragging Morrison's body and carrying it away—

A sudden, irresistible longing surged over Drill Morgan. If he could only talk—if he could just tell it all once, the way it happened, and get it off of his conscience—out of his brain and thoughts—he could forget it. Forget the *chair*. Forget Morrison. The fear that gripped his heart would be gone.

Drill burst out laughing. Harsh, gritting laughter that brought frowns of troubled bewilderment to Rabbit's face. If he had to talk, the Rabbit was the best one in the world to spill it to. A man may talk in his sleep. But a dead man is always safe....

Drill dropped the gun back into his pocket and took a step toward Meekers.

"So you got a yen to find out what happened here that night, have you, cull?" he said. "Okay, then. I'm goin' to spill you the works. But not till after we burn out the keister. Then we won't have anything to do but get out. Now open up that bag and get out the stuff."

Rabbit stooped, slipped the catch on the black box and lifted out the contrivance of

metal cylinders and rubber tubes. He stood dangling them from his fingers and looking at Morgan.

"My fingerprints, Drill—all over this. I oughta wore gloves," he exclaimed.

"Never mind that now. We'll wipe 'em off afterwards," Drill replied carelessly. "Turn on the gas. The one with A on it first."

Rabbit turned a button. Drill struck a match and held it to the snout of the blowpipe. A threadlike yellow flame flickered into the dark. Rabbit twisted the other lever. The orange pencil spat into a hard blue, almost colorless drill of hissing, sizzling heat.

Drill pulled a chair up under the safe and motioned to Rabbit.

"There you are. Go ahead and open her up," he said. "Cut a circle around the lock. After we get that out, the rest won't be nothing."

HOLDING the blowpipe nozzle in both hands, Rabbit climbed up into the chair.

He turned the flame on the safe door and started drawing it in a slow circle around the combination lock.

Time dragged away. For twenty, thirty minutes, neither man spoke. The snarling buzz of the vicious little flame sang in the silence. The flickering yellow glow of the blobs of molten metal spattering out from under the tip threw the two faces into grotesque gargoylike masks of light and shadow—the Rabbit's tense, flushed with excitement; Drill Morgan's cold, cynical, gripped in a leer of gloating mockery.

"All right. That's good enough for now." Drill's voice broke the silence at last. "Now get out of the way while I open her up."

Rabbit stepped down from the chair and Drill took his place. Drill had a glittering steel tool in his hand, Rabbit saw. Also he wore black cotton gloves.

For a minute or so, Drill worked with the

chisel at the face of the safe. He pulled away the melted-out lock and tossed it down into a cushioned chair. He stuck his hand into the opening and pulled it out again. As he did so, the remains of the safe door swung ajar on its hinges.

Drill jumped down onto the floor.

"There you are. Go get 'em," he said briefly.

His eyes glittering, Rabbit scrambled back into the chair. With a cry of awed excitement, he pushed his hand into the safe and pulled out box after box. His arms full, he jumped down and ran to a table. He dumped down the boxes and a flood of glittering radiance poured out.

Rabbit looked up at Morgan. His breath came fast, his little brown eyes were ablaze.

"Well, there it is. Drill—and I did it!" he exclaimed. "Gee, it's easy when you know how. Now do we divvy up? What's my split for tipping you the lay?"

Drill waved his hand magnanimously.

"Well take it back to the room and split it there," he said. "You carry it all till then."

Meekers hesitated, looked surprised, then swept the heap of blazing stones off the table into his hand, and dropped them into his pocket.

"All right, if you say so," he murmured. "Now tell me about that night—the other time. Drill—"

Drill Morgan laughed. The laugh was jerky, forced. The hand with which he scratched the match to light his cigarette made the little flame dance like a will-o'-the-wisp.

"I'm over there at the box, see?" he began. "I've just got it open, and I'm hauling out the junk. Morrison's out in the hall, listening to see if anyone comes down the stairs."

"The butler sneaks in through another door and hops me before I'm wise that he's within a dozen miles. I let him have it between the eyes. He drops like a log."

"Everybody in the house wakes up and

starts yelling. Jim and me, we take it on the lam and slide clear by the skin of our teeth. We hop it back to my room and finish the night there. We lay doggo there for a couple of days. I'm wise that the bulls have got a line on us. We're on the list. Sooner or later, one of us is going to get rapped.

"The afternoon of the second day, while Morrison's taking a nap, I shift guns on him. That night we make a run for it.

"Outside my place, we split. Morrison gets away clean. I'm pinched half an hour after I've soaked the junk with Rosy, the fence.

"I've got a .32 calibre gun on me, the same size as the bullet that's in the butler. I've got a record. They're all set to shove me the works.

"I tell them to go pick up Jim Morrison, look at his gat, notice it's a .32, also—and *then compare the scratch markings on the bullets out of it with the one that killed the butler.*

"They do. When they fire test cartridges out of Jim's gun and mine, the marks on the bullets prove that the slug that smoked the butler was shot out of the gat he's carrying, and not out of the one I've got on me.

"So that's all there is to it Morrison burns, I get five years and then a pardon."

A light of admiring awe glowed in Meekers' button-brown eyes.

"Gee!" he murmured. "As easy as that—and you got away with it!"

"Sure, I got away with it," Morgan laughed. It had been the way he expected. Now that he had talked, confessed, he felt better. His nerve was back again. "When you've got brains and nerve, you can get away with anything, cull," he said meaningly.

Rabbit did not say anything. He shrank back from the diabolical expression on Morgan's lips. His eyes bulged. His weak, purposeless face began to twitch and tremble with sudden terror.

Morgan got up out of the chair he had been

sitting in as he talked, and pitched his cigarette into the fireplace.

"Well, now that you know all about it, sap, let's travel," he said. "You go ahead first—and don't try to lose me, see?"

Rabbit started to walk around Morgan, back toward the fireplace.

"That gas gun—my fingerprints are all over it. I wanta wipe 'em off," he explained.

Morgan grinned. His right hand slipped down into his coat pocket. The other hand flicked into Meekers' pocket and came out with the little man's gun.

"You're wipin' off nothing. Get it punk?" he growled.

"Why—why, Drill, what d'yuh mean?" Rabbit quavered. His face was white and horrified. "Yuh—yuh don't mean you're goin' to frame me. Drill? Yuh ain't goin' to put me on the spot to take the rap for this—"

"I mean you're goin' to jam your yap and get lammin' outa here—or you won't never go," Morgan growled. He twitched the gat out of his pocket and jabbed the cold snout into Rabbit's ribs. "I smoked one guy here and another man just took the hot rap for it. If you don't wanta be another one, you savvy what's good for you. Get movin', dumb-wit."

Rabbit did not move. A stubborn look—the crazy daring of utter terror—froze his ashy-white lips.

"I ain't goin'! I won't!" he screamed. "You're framin' me! You're goin' to leave my prints here for me to get caught. I know the rest of it, too. At Rosy's you're goin' to kill us both and then switch the guns, the same as you did on Morrison, so it'll look like we killed each other."

The little pickpocket's shrill voice rasped up into a shriek. "You lousy double-crossing rat, you! Give me my gun—"

Screeching at the top of his lungs in a frenzy of hysterical rage, Rabbit threw himself onto Morgan. He hammered one puny fist into

his face while with the other he clutched for his automatic.

Morgan snarled out a curse. His face was livid green in the moonlight. With one smashing blow of his fist, he sent Meekers reeling backward.

"Take it, then, you screechin' idiot," he snarled. "How d'yuh like this—"

Six times in half as many seconds, Drill jerked the trigger as he drew bead on Rabbit's heart.

EVEN while he was still firing, a dazed, uncomprehending expression muddled Drill Morgan's face, his jaw dropped. His eyes bulged in bewilderment.

Six times, faint empty clickings instead of the roar of exploding powder popped grim mockery into his ears.

"Those were all fake cartridges in your gun, Morgan."

A cool, far-away voice that Drill dimly recognized as Meekers' cut through the whirling daze that made his head spin. The Rabbit's face, grinning mockingly, swam round and round in front of him.

"We had the bullets drawn, the powder dumped out, and the shells reloaded with salt behind the bullets. It seemed safer under the circumstances."

Drill rubbed his eyes. Lights were blazing up in the room. From hiding places behind the long draperies that fell to the floor on either side of the windows, men in uniform, with guns in their hands, came pouring out.

"Come on, Morgan. The game's up. Throw up your hands and don't make any trouble," the foremost one shouted. "We've got you with the goods."

Directly opposite Drill, a young girl appeared and stood looking at him with scornful triumph gripping her face. Drill snarled a curse. She was the sister of Jim Morrison. Day after day, during the trial, she

had sat in court gazing at him, the speechless hatred in her blue eyes lashing him like fiery whips.

The big man in uniform stepped up and snapped the handcuffs around Morgan's wrists.

"Let me introduce you to Eddie Carmichael, the cleverest detective in America," the officer grinned, nodding at the Rabbit. "He spent a dozen years on the stage before he went on the cops. He never does anything by halves. Maybe you realize that now, Morgan. He put in a clean seven months up at the big house just so you would get used to seeing him around and not suspect him for a dick when he finally conned you. Annie Hope is another one of our cops that got her experience in the real game before she went to work for the Secret Service of the United States. The Government just lent her to us. That house down there we dressed up just for tonight. It's all up with you, Drill. We had six witnesses behind those curtains listening to your confession how you killed the butler—"

Drill Morgan burst into wild, mocking laughter.

"You're tellin' me something? What good will it do you, you saps? They burned Morrison half an hour ago. You can't rap two men for the same job—"

"Oh, no, they didn't burn Morrison. Not even a little bit," Carmichael grinned. With the laying aside of his part of the Rabbit, he seemed taller, straighter. His face had lost its sly, simian linings. His brown eyes were keen as knife blades as they bored into Drill Morgan's apoplectic countenance.

"The Governor granted him a week's reprieve, to give us a chance to try this out on you. But all the papers got the word that he was going to die tonight. McCracken's family are all upstairs, keeping out of the way. That society notice in the papers was another come-on plant—just for you. Cedarcrest Lodge was

opened a month ago.”

The Rabbit—Eddie Carmichael—lit a cigarette, and puffed the smoke in Morgan’s face.

“You were a hundred per cent sucker, Drill, all the way through,” he grinned. “You bit for everything like a big hay-and-hen man from the sticks. And it was a woman’s brain that doped out the plant. Edna Morrison here. She’s been to college and studied psychology—if you know what that is.

“She was determined her brother shouldn’t die for a job he never did. She knew that when

a crook goes back to the scene of his crime, he always has a wild craving to talk about it. It was her idea to get you here at the very hour when Jim was due to go to the chair, and kid this confession out of you.”

Drill Morgan did not hear what Carmichael was saying. He was fighting like a wild animal with the burly figures that pinioned him on either side. Fighting and screaming through his foaming lips as they dragged him away toward the shadow of the *chair*.