

Death
in the Air

Cornell Woolrich

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Death *in the Air*

by Cornell Woolrich

Inspector Lively Walked Slowly and Talked Slowly—but He Thought Fast, and That's What Pays Dividends on a Fiend's Murder-Trail!

Inspector Stephen Lively, off-duty and homeward-bound, stopped at the newsstand underneath the stairs leading up to the Elevated station and selected one of the following day's newspapers and one of the following month's magazines for purposes of relaxation. His nightly trip was not only lengthy, it was in two parts—from headquarters to South Ferry by "El" and from there to Staten Island by ferry—hence the two separate items of reading-matter; one for each leg of the way.

Given a combination of two such names as his and, human

nature being what it is, what else can you expect in the way of a nickname but—Step Lively? It had started at the age of seven or thereabouts when he stood up in school and pronounced his first name the wrong way; he finally quit struggling against it when it followed him onto the squad and he realized that he was stuck with it for the rest of his days, like it or not.

It wouldn't have been so bad, only it was altogether inappropriate. Step Lively had never made a quick motion in his life. To watch him was to think of an eight-times-slowed-down film or a deep-sea diver wading through seaweed on the ocean floor; he gave the impression of having been born lazy and getting more so all the time. And the nickname probably made this trait more glaring.

He was not, strangely enough, obese along with it—just the opposite, tall and spare, concave at the waist where others bulge. He carried his head habitually bent forward a little, as though it were too much trouble to hold it up straight. He not only walked slowly, he even talked slowly. What mattered chiefly was that he thought fast; as far as results went, his record on the force seemed to prove that the race isn't always to the swift. He'd been known to bring in some of the nimblest, most light-footed gentry on record.

Like a steam-roller pursuing a motorcycle; it can't keep up with it, but it can keep remorselessly after it, wear it down, slowly overtake it, and finally flatten it out. So Step's superiors didn't let it worry them too much that he was the despair of traffic-cops crossing a busy street, or that he sent people waiting on line behind him out of their minds. It takes more than that to spoil a good detective.

Step entered the lighted stairway-shed and sighed at the sight of the climb that awaited him, as it did every night. An escalator, like some of the other stations had, would have been so much easier on a man.

The subway, which would have gotten him to the ferry considerably quicker, he eschewed for two very good reasons. One was that he'd have to walk a whole additional block eastward to get to it. And secondly, even though you descended to it instead of climbing at this end, you had to climb up out of it at the other end anyway; he preferred to get the hard work over with at the start, and have a nice restful climb down waiting for him when he got off.

He slowly poised one large, paddle-like foot on the bottom step and eight minutes later he was upstairs on the platform, the ordeal of the ascent safely behind him until tomorrow night. As he stepped out from behind the turnstile, a Sixth Avenue train was standing by with its gates in the act of closing. Step could have made it; a man who had come up behind him darted across and did. Step preferred not to. It would have meant hurrying. There'd be another one along in a minute. The old adage about cars and women was good common horse-sense.

This was 59th, and the trains alternated. The next would be a Ninth Avenue. They separated at 53rd, but both wound up together again at South Ferry, so it didn't matter which he took. More seats on the Ninth anyway. And so, because he refused to bestir himself—this story.

A three-car Ninth flashed in in due course. Step got up off

the bench—it wouldn't have been like him to stand waiting—and leisurely strolled across to it. He yawned and tapped his mouth as he perambulated sluggishly down the aisle. The crabby, walrus-mustached conductor, who had had to hold the gate for him, felt a sudden unaccountable urge to stick a pin in him and see if he really could move fast or not, but wisely restrained the impulse, maybe because he had no pin. The first car had a single occupant, sitting on one of the lengthwise seats, visible only up to the waist. The rest of him was buried behind an outspread newspaper, expanded to its full length. Step sprawled out directly opposite him with a grunt of satisfaction, opened his own paper, and got busy relaxing. All the windows were open on both sides of the car, and it was a pleasant, airy way to ride home on a warm night. Two pairs of legs and two tents of newsprint on opposite sides of the aisle were all that remained visible. The conductor, maybe because Step irritated him vaguely, retired to the second car, between stations, instead of this one.

The train coasted down Ninth Avenue sixty feet in the air, with the buildings that topped it by a story or two set back at a respectable distance from its roadbed. But then at Twelfth Street, it veered off into Greenwich Street and a change in spacing took place. The old mangy tenements closed in on it on both sides, narrowing into a bottleneck and all but scraping the sides of the cars as they threaded through them. There was, at the most, a distance of three yards between the outer rail of the superstructure and their fourth-floor window-ledges, and where fire-escapes protruded only half that much.

What saved them from incessant burglarizing in this way was simply that there was nothing to burglarize. They were not worth going after. Four out of five were tenantless, windows either boarded up or broken-glass cavities yawning at the night.

Occasionally a dimly-lighted one floated by, so close it gave those on the train a startling impression of being right in the same room with those whose privacy they were cutting across in this way. A man in his underwear reading a paper by a lamp, a woman bent over a washtub in a steaming kitchen. Their heads never turned at the streaming, comet-like lights or the roar of the wheels going by. They were so used to it they never gave it a thought. It was just part of their surroundings. Nor did those on the train show any interest either, as a rule. The few there were at this hour had their papers up and their backs to the passing scene. There isn't anything pretty about lower West Side of New York. The river a block over is blotted out by docks, and the connecting side-streets are roofed with produce-sheds.

In the front car, the two solitary occupants continued immersed in their reading-matter. Christopher and Houston had gone by, and they pulled into Desbrosses Street. As they cleared it again a moment later, the train slackened briefly, slowed down without coming to a full halt, then almost immediately picked up speed once more. Perhaps some slight hitch on the part of a track-signal or a momentary break in the "shoe" gripping the third rail. Step took his eyes off his paper and glanced around over his shoulder, not because of that, but to find out how near his destination he was.

There was an open window staring him in the face, flush with the car-window that framed him, and so close it was almost like a continuation of it, a connecting-tunnel into the tenement's front room. There was no light in the first room, but light shone feebly in from the room beyond through an open doorway. At the same time the train-lights swept in and washed across the walls like a sort of lantern-slide, from left to right.

In the double glare, fore and aft, two forms could be glimpsed, moving unsteadily about together. A man and woman dancing drunkenly in the dark, with exaggerated motions of their arms and heads. Lurching, reeling, pressed tightly together. "Wonder what the big idea of that is?" Step thought tolerantly. "Too warm for lights, I guess—" The noise of the cars drowned out whatever music was being supplied them for their strange activities.

Just as the two superimposed windows slipped apart out of perspective, the wheels of the train cracked loudly as though passing over a defect in the rails. At the same time, one of the shadow-dancers struck a match and it went right out again, just a stab of orange, and some water-borne insect or other winged into the car past Step's face. He slapped vaguely at it, went back to his newspaper. The train picked up speed and headed down the track for Franklin Street.

The party across the aisle had fallen asleep, Step noticed when next he glanced over across the top of his paper. He grinned broadly at the sight he presented. There was a man after his own heart. Too much trouble even to fold up his paper and put it away. The breeze coming in on Step's side of the car

had slapped it back against his face and shoulders; his hands were no longer holding it up, had dropped limply to his lap. His legs had sprawled apart, were wobbling loosely in and out like rubber with the motion of the car.

Step wondered how he could breathe with the layers of paper flattened that way across his nose and mouth, you could actually see the indentation his nose made through it. And that insect that had blown in—it looked like a large black beetle—was perched there on the paper just above it. Step thought of the innumerable comedy-gags he'd seen where someone tried to swat a fly on a sleeper's face, and of course the sleeper got the full impact of it. If he only knew the guy, he'd be tempted to try that now himself. Still, it was an awful lot of effort to reach across a car-aisle just to swat a horse-fly.

As they began drawing up for Franklin, the air-current of their own momentum rushed ahead, outdistanced them. It tugged loose the outside page of the sleeper's outspread newspaper, no longer damped down by his fingers, and sent it whirling up the aisle. Step blinked and went goggle-eyed. The black bug was still there, on the page underneath, as though it had bored its way through! A second sheet loosened, went skimming off. The damn thing was still there, as though it were leaping invisibly from one page to the other!

Step got to his feet, and though the motion was slow enough, there was a certain tenseness about him. He wasn't grinning any more. Just as he did so, the train came to a halt.

The jolt threw the sleeper over on the side of his face, and all the rest of the newspaper went fluttering off, separating as it went. The black bug had leaped the last gap, was in the exact middle of the sleeper's forehead now, this time red-rimmed and with a thread of red leading down from it alongside his nose, like a weird eyeglass-string, to lose itself in the corner of his mouth. Step had seen too many of them not to know a bullet-hole when he saw one. The sleeper was dead. He didn't have to put his hand in under his coat, nor touch the splayed hand, caught under his body and dangling down over the aisle like a chicken-claw, to make sure of that. Death had leaped out at him from the very print he was reading. Such-and-such, then—period! A big black one, right into the brain. He'd never known what had hit him, had died instantly, sitting up. It wasn't the breeze that had slapped the paper up against him; it was the bullet. It wasn't an insect that had winged past Step's shoulder that time; it was the bullet.

Step reached up leisurely and tugged twice at the emergency-cord overhead. The gates had closed on Franklin, and the train had already made a false start ahead, checked immediately with a lurch. The handle-bar-mustached conductor came running in from the platform, the motorman looked out from his booth at the upper end of the car.

"What's the idea? What's going on in here?" The conductor's words spattered like buckshot around the heedless Step.

"Hold the train," he drawled almost casually. "Here's a man been shot dead." Then as the blue-coated one began panting down the back of his neck and elbowing him aside, he remonstrated mildly, "Now don't crowd like that. There's

nothing you can do. What y'getting so excited about? Just lemme try to find out who he is first—"

The motorman said from the other side of him, "Get him off. We can't stand here all night. We're on a schedule; we'll tie up the whole line into a knot behind us."

"Stand aside! Who do you think you are anyway?" the fiery conductor demanded.

Step said wearily, "Oh, do I have to go through that again?" and absent-mindedly palmed his badge to him, backhand, while he continued bending over the prostrate form. From then on there was nothing but a respectful silence all around while he went on going through the corpse's pockets with maddening deliberation.

His mind, however, was anything but sluggish, was crackling like a high-tension wire. The sound of the shot? There didn't necessarily have to be any in this case, but that crack of the car-wheels over a split in the rails had probably been it. And the match that one of those two tipsy dancers had struck in the darkened tenement-room back there hadn't been a match at all, hadn't glowed steadily enough nor lasted long enough, couldn't have been anything but the flash of the shot, the results of which he was now beholding.

Drinking, carousing, then entertaining themselves by taking pot-shots out the window at passing trains, were they? Well, a nice little manslaughter rap would take the high spirits out of them, for some time to come, whoever they were.

"Dudley Wall," he said, reading from an envelope. "Lives on

Staten Island like me. Shame, poor fella. All right, take him by the feet and help me get him outside to the waiting-room." And as the conductor moved backwards before him down the aisle, with the body between them, he rebuked: "Don't walk so fast. He ain't going to get away from us!" They moved at a snail's pace thereafter, to suit Step, out through the gate and across the platform with their burden. Stretched him out on one of the benches inside by the change-booth, and then Step strolled inside with the agent and sent in his report over the latter's phone.

"That guy," whispered the conductor darkly to the motorman on their way back to their posts, "has sleeping sickness, you can't tell me different!"

"Maybe it's ringworm," hazarded the motorman. They pulled out, and the two or three other trains that had ganged up behind them flashed by one after the other without stopping, to make up for lost time.

"I gotta get back to Desbrosses Street," Step remarked, coming out again. "You keep an eye on him till they get here." He felt sure he'd know the tenement window again when he saw it, whether they were still there or not.

"Well, you'll have to go down to the street, cross over, and then climb to the uptown side," the agent explained, wondering what he was waiting for.

Step looked horrified: "And then when I get there climb down again? And climb up four flights of stairs inside that building? Oh, golly, I'm just tuckered out. I couldn't make it.

I'll walk back along the track, only way I can see. That's bad enough."

He sighed deeply, took a tuck in his belt, and made his way to the far end of the platform. He descended the short ladder to the track-level and struck out from there, trudging doggedly along with one hand trailing along beside him on the guard-rail.

"Watch the trains!" the agent shouted after him warningly.

Step didn't answer out loud, that was too much trouble, but to himself he muttered: "This is one time I'm glad I'm good and thin!"

One of them caught him halfway between the two stations, and the sight of it looming up on him was fairly terrifying to one unused to track-walking. He began to wobble unsteadily on the cat-walk, which seemed only inches wide, and realizing that he would either topple dizzily in front of it or fall down to the street if he kept looking at it head-on, he wisely turned his back to it, grabbed the guard-rail with both hands, and stared intently out at the roof-tops, ignoring it till it had hurtled by. Its velocity nearly seemed to pull the coat off his back.

He stared after it disapprovingly. "Such a town. Everything always in a hurry to get somewhere else!" Then he resumed his laborious progress alongside the tracks, feeling sorry for his feet and hoping the sniper in the tenement had no firearms license, so he could also tack a stiff Sullivan-Law charge on

him.

The two lighted halves of the Desbrosses Street platform loomed toward him, lighted under the apron like the footlights of a stage. It ought to be about here. They'd already pulled out, he remembered, when he'd turned around to look. Dark-red brick it had been, but then the whole row was that. No fire-escape, either. Wait a minute, there'd been a sign up on the cornice of the building next-door, but on which side of it, he couldn't recall. Nor what it had said, until suddenly it was staring him in the face once more, with that vague familiarity that only twice-seen things can have. Then he knew that was it. PICKLED AND SALTED FISH in tarnished metal capitals with rain-streaks under them, each letter separately clamped to the brickwork, in the style of the nineteenth-century advertiser. He stopped in front of the building next to it, on the Desbrosses side. This had almost certainly been it. There was the same wide-open window through which he'd seen them dancing. But no light was coming in from the other room now. It was dark and deserted, just a gap in the façade.

It looked near enough to touch, but actually was far more inaccessible from where he now was, than it had seemed from the train-window. The gap was just wide enough to fall to your death in without half-trying, and the ledge was just over his head, now that he was down at track-level.

Step Lively had the courage of his convictions. He was going to get in this way, without going all the way down to the street and climbing up inside that dump, if he died in the attempt. He looked around him vaguely but determinedly. They had been repairing the track-bed near here somewhere,

and there was a neat, handy little stack of short planks piled up, almost directly across the way from him—but with two third-rails in-between.

He didn't hesitate for a minute. What was a third rail compared to climbing four flights of stairs and getting all out of breath? Besides, they had guards on top of them, like covered troughs. There wasn't anything coming on this side, so he started across on one of the ties, and arched respectfully over the deadly metal when he came to it. So much for the downtown track. An uptown train was pulling out of Franklin, but it wouldn't get here for awhile yet. Plenty of time to get back and across.

He reached the opposite catwalk safely, picked up the top plank, and tucked it broadside under his arm. The on-coming train was still at a respectable distance, although its lights were getting brighter by the moment. He started back over, the plank swaying up and down in his grasp like a see-saw. It wasn't the actual weight of it that hampered him, it was that its length threw him off-balance. He was like a tightrope-walker with too long a pole. He didn't have it right in the middle, and it kept tipping him forward. The train was big as a barn by now, he hadn't calculated on how quickly it would cover the short distance between the two stations. You could already look right down the lighted aisle of the first car, through the open vestibule-door. But this was no time for surveying. He lifted one foot clear of the contact-rail, set it down on the other side, then tried to bring the second one over after it. It wouldn't come. He must have given it just the wrong kind of a little half-turn. It was stuck between the two ties.

He didn't do anything at all for just a split second, which is sometimes the wisest possible course—and came easiest to him, anyway. However, there weren't many of them left, split or otherwise. The roar of the train was rising to a crescendo. The first thing almost anyone else would have done in his fix would have been to yank and tug at the recalcitrant foot—and wedge it in irretrievably. Step Lively was a slow mover but a quick thinker. He used his split-second to turn his head and stare down one hip at the treacherous hoof. The heel had dipped down into the space between the two ties and jammed. It ought to come out again easy enough, if he did the right thing. And there wasn't time to do the wrong thing. So he started turning back again on it, as if he were going to step right in front of the train. That reversed whatever twist had originally trapped it; it came up free, smooth as pie, and he stepped backwards with it out of death's path, face turned toward the train as it rushed abreast of him, brakes that wouldn't have been in time to save him screeching. He had presence of mind enough to point the plank skyward, like a soldier presenting arms, so the train wouldn't sideswipe it and throw him. The cars seemed to take the skin off his nose.

The damn thing stopped a car-length away, but whether on his account or the station's he didn't know and didn't bother finding out. He got back the rest of the way to the other side of the tracks on knees that made him ashamed of them, they jogged so.

"Now just for that," he growled unreasonably at the blank

window, "I'm gonna slap you up plenty for, attempting to escape while under arrest, or something!"

The plank, when he paid it out, bridged the gap neatly, but at rather a steep incline, the window-ledge being higher than the guard-rail of the "E1" structure. The distance, however, was so short that this didn't worry him. He took the precaution of taking out his gun, to forestall any attempt to shake him off his perch before he could grab the window-sash, but so far there had been no sign of life from within the room. They were probably sleeping it off.

He got up on the bottom rail, put his knee on the plank, and a minute later was groveling across it in mid-air, above the short but very deep chasm. It slipped diagonally downward toward the "E1" a little under his weight, but not enough to come off the ledge. The next minute he had his free hand hooked securely around the wooden window-frame and was over and in.

He took a deep breath of relief, but still wouldn't have been willing to admit that this was a lot of trouble to go to just to get out of climbing a flock of stairs. He was that way. Without looking down just now, he'd been dimly aware of people milling about on the street below him, shouting up. They'd taken him for crazy, he supposed.

A downtown train careened past just behind his back right then, and lighted up the interior of the room for him nicely, better than a pocket-flash. It also did something else—as though all these trains tonight bore him a personal grudge. It struck the lower edge of the plank he had just used, which

extended too far in past the rail, with a crack and sent it hurtling down to the street below. As long as he hadn't been on it at the time, being cut off like this didn't worry him particularly—he'd intended walking down anyway. He only hoped those on the sidewalk would see it coming in time to dodge. They ought to, looking up the way they had been.

But before he could give it another thought, the flickering train-lights washing across the walls showed him that he wasn't alone in the room after all.

One-half of his quarry was lying there face-down across the bed. It was the lady-souse, and judging by the way her arms hung down on one side and her feet on the other she was more soused than ladylike. Step took his eye off her and followed the phantom yellow-square the last car-window made as it traveled around three of the walls after its mates and then flickered out in the opposite direction from the train. It had shown him a switch by the door. So the place was wired for electricity, decrepit as it was. There was a moment of complete darkness, and then he had the room-light on.

He turned back to her. "Hey, you!" he growled. "Where's that guy that was in here with you a couple minutes ago? Get up offa there and answer me before I—!"

But she wasn't answering anybody any more. The bullet-hole under her left eye answered for her, when he tilted her face. It said: *Finished!* The cheek was all pitted with powder-burns. There was a playing-card symbol, the crimson ace of diamonds, on the white counterpane where the wound had rested. His eye traveled around the room. No radio, nothing to

make music. They hadn't been dancing. That had been her death-struggle in his arms. The first shot had missed her, had killed the man named Wall in the first car of the "El" instead; the second one must have come a split-second after Step's car-window passed beyond range. The same bullet hadn't killed both; hers was still in her head. There was no wound of egress.

Step didn't bother playing detective, snooping around, even examining the remaining rooms of the tawdry little flat. His technique would have astounded a layman, horrified a rookie, probably only have made his superior sigh resignedly and shrug. "Well, that's Step for you." What he did about getting after the culprit, in a murder that had been committed so recently it was still smoking, was to pull over a warped rocking-chair, sit down, and begin rolling a cigarette. His attitude implied that it had tired him plenty to walk the tracks all the way back here, and everything could wait until he'd rested up a little. An occasional flickering of the eyelids, however, betokened that all was not as quiet on the inside of his head as on the outside.

The woman's hands seemed to fascinate him. The tips of her fingers were touching the floor, as though she were trying to balance herself upside-down. He took them up in his own and looked more closely. The nails were polished and well cared for. He turned them palm-up. The skin was not coarse and reddened, by dishwashing and housework. "You didn't belong here on Greenwich Street," he remarked. "Wonder who you were hiding from?"

A long spike of ash had formed on the end of his cigarette, and crummy as the place was, he looked around for something to park it in. No ashtrays in sight; evidently the dead lady hadn't been a smoker. He flicked the ash off into space, and as he did so, his eyes traveled down the seam between two of the unpainted floor-boards. Wedged into it was a butt. He got it out with the aid of a pin from his lapel. The mouth-end was still damp. Her lips, he had noticed, had been reddened fairly recently. But there wasn't a fleck of color on this. Not hers, therefore.

He dropped the cigarette he had been smoking and crushed it out, then passed the other one back and forth under his nose a couple of times. An acrid odor immediately took the place of the aroma of his familiar Virginia tobacco. He went a step further, put a lighted match to the end of it and tried to draw on it without actually touching it to his lips, still holding it on the pin. He had to suck mightily to start it glowing. Instantly there were results. His lungs smarted. And yet it wasn't the smoke of the burning paper he was getting, as in the case of an ordinary cigarette. That was escaping at both ends. It was the vapor of the weed that filled it.

Marihuana—crazy-weed. And unwittingly he'd gone about just the right way of smoking it, not letting it come into contact with his lips. A vacuous, boisterous laugh wrenched from him abruptly, over the slain woman's head. Nothing to laugh at, and here he was roaring. He dropped the damned thing precipitately, trod on it as though it were a snake, opened his mouth and fanned pure air into it. The booming laugh subsided to a chortle, ebbed away. He mopped his forehead, got up, and went unsteadily toward the outer door of the flat.

The din down below in the street seemed to have increased a hundred-fold, meanwhile; he couldn't be sure whether it actually had or it was just the after-effects of the drugged cigarette making it seem so. Sirens screeching, bells clanging, voices yelling—as though there were a whole crowd milling around out there.

He opened the flat door, and you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. No lights out in the hall. Then he saw a peculiar hazy blur just a few feet away, up overhead, and realized that there *were* lights—but the building was on fire. It wasn't darkness he'd stepped out into, but a solid wall of smoke.

He could possibly have gotten out, still made the street from where he was, by a quick dash down the stairs then and there. Step Lively plus several whiffs of a drugged cigarette, however, was no combination calculated to equal a quick dash in any direction, up or down. He turned around coughing and shuffled back into the flat he had just emerged from, closing the door on the inferno outside.

To do him justice, it wasn't simply inertia or laziness this time that kept him up there where he was. Hundreds of men in hundreds of fires have hung back to drag somebody living out with them. But very few have lingered to haul out somebody already dead. That, however, was precisely what Step had gone back for. The lady was his *corpus delicti* and he wasn't leaving her there to be cremated.

That a fire should start up here and now, in the very building where a murder had been committed, was too much of a

coincidence. It was almost certainly a case of incendiarism on the murderer's part, perpetrated in hopes of obliterating all traces of his crime. "And if he was smoking that devilish butt I picked up," he said to himself, "he wouldn't stop to worry about whether anybody else was living in the building or not!"

He retrieved it a second time, what there was left of it, and dropped it in his pocket, pin and all. Then he wrapped the counterpane with the ace-of-diamonds symbol on it around the woman, turning her into a bundle of laundry, and moved toward the door with her. The current failed just as he was fumbling at it with one hand, under her, and the room went black.

A dull red glow shone up the stairwell, though, when he got it open. It would have been all right to see by, but there wasn't anything to breathe out there any more, just blistering heat and strangling smoke. Spearheads of yellow started to shoot up through it from below, like an army with bayonets marching up the stairs. He got back inside again, hacking and with water pouring out of his eyes, but hanging onto her like grim death, as though she were some dear one instead of just a murdered stranger he had happened to find.

The room was all obliterated with haze now, like the hallway had been the first time, but he groped his way through it to the window. He didn't lose his head; didn't even get frightened. That was all right for women or slobs in suspenders, trapped on the top floor of a blazing tenement. "I didn't come in through the door, anyway," he growled. He was good and sore, though, about all this hectic activity he was having to go through. "I should 'a' been home long ago, and

had my shoes off—" he was thinking as he leaned out across the sill and tried to signal to the mob that he could hear, but no longer see, down on the street.

He was hidden from them, and they from him, by the smoke billowing out from the windows below him. It formed a regular blanket between—but not the kind that it paid to jump into. Still, the apparatus must be ganged up down there by this time. You'd think they'd do something about helping a fellow get down, whether they could see him or not. Somebody must have almost certainly spotted him climbing in....

Even if he still had the plank, he couldn't have made it across on that any more. He not only had *her* now, but his lungs and eyes were going all wacky with this damn black stuff, he'd have toppled off it in a minute. The crack he'd just made to himself about having his shoes off at home registered. He parked her across the sill, bunched one leg, and started unlacing. It took him about forty-five seconds to undo the knot and slip the oxford off—which for him was excellent time. He poised it and flung it down through the smoke. If it would only bean somebody, now, they'd stop and think maybe that shoes don't come flying down out of a fire unless there's somebody up there in it alive.

It did. A section of ladder shot up out of the swirling murk just as it left his hand. The helmeted figure scampering up monkey-like met the shoe halfway, with the bridge of his nose, and nearly went off into space. He flailed wildly with one

propeller-like arm, caught the ladder once more in the nick of time, and resumed his ascent—a brief nosebleed to add to his troubles. Such language Step had rarely heard before. "Oops," he murmured regretfully. "Shows it never pays to be too hasty. What I've always said."

The fireman wiped his mouth, growled: "C'mon, step out and over, the roof's gonna go any minute." He was on a level with Step's eyes now, outside the window. The room was about ready to burst with heat; you could hear the floor-boards cracking as they expanded.

Step reared the mummy-like figure, thrust it across the sill into the smoke-eater's arms. "Take this stiff and be careful of her," he coughed. "She's valuable. I'll be right down on top of you."

The fireman, hooked onto the ladder by his legs, slung the burden over his shoulder, clamped it fast with one arm, and started down. Step started to climb over the sill backwards. The smoke was worse out here than in the room, he couldn't see the ladder any more. A silvery lining to the smoke, like a halo all around him, showed they were training a searchlight up from below, but it couldn't get through the dense, boiling masses. He found a rung with his one stockinged foot, made passes at the air until he'd finally connected with one of the invisible shafts—and the rest was just a switch over. Try it sometime yourself.

Then he stayed where he was until he'd shrugged his coat half-off his shoulders and hooded it completely over his head. Then he went down slowly, blind, deaf, seared, and breathing

into worsted a little at a time. He went down ten stories, twenty, fifty—and still the ground wouldn't come up and meet him. He decided the place must have been the Empire State in disguise. One time he passed through a spattering of cool, grateful spray blown off one of the hose-lines and almost felt like sticking around in it, it felt so good! Just about the time he decided that the ladder must be slowly moving upward under him, like a belt-line or treadmill, and that was why he wasn't getting anywhere, hands grabbed him at the ankles and shoulders and he was hoisted to terra firma a yard below.

"Bud," said the Fire Chief patiently, "as long as you were in shape to climb down on your own, couldn't you have made it a *little* faster? I'm a very nervous man."

Step disengaged his head from his coat, kissed himself on the knuckles, bent down and rapped them against the Greenwich Street sidewalk. Then he straightened up and remonstrated: "I never was rushed so in my life as I been for the past half-hour!" He glanced upward at the haze-blurred building, whose outline was beginning to emerge here and there from the haze of smoke.

"The fire," the Chief enlightened him, turning away, "was brought under control during the half-hour you were passing the third floor. We finally put it out during the, er, forty-five minutes it took you getting from there down. The assistant marshal's in there now conducting an investigation—" Which may have leaned more toward sarcasm than accuracy, but was a good example of the impression Step made upon people the very first time they encountered him.

"Tell him for me," Step said, "it was arson—nothing else but. He mayn't be able to find any evidence, but that doesn't alter the fact any."

"A firebug, you think?"

"Something just a step worse. A murderer. A pyromaniac is irresponsible, afflicted, can't help himself. This dog knew just what he was doing, killed his conscience for both acts ahead of time with marihuana." He pointed to the muffled figure on the stretcher. "That woman was shot dead a good quarter of an hour before the fire was discovered. I was a witness to it. I'm Lively, of the —th Precinct, uptown."

The fire chief muttered something that sounded like: "You may be attached to that precinct, but you're not lively." But he was diplomatic enough to keep it blurred. "But if you were a witness," he said aloud, "how is it the guy—?"

"Powdered? I wasn't in the room with them, I glimpsed it from an 'El' train that stalled for a minute opposite the window! You go in there and tell your marshal not to bother looking for gasoline cans or oil-soaked rags. He didn't have time for a set-up like that, must have just put a match to a newspaper running down the stairs. Where's the caretaker or janitor, or didn't the dump have one?"

"Over behind the ropes there, in the crowd across the street. Take him over and point out the guy to him, Marty."

Step trailed the fireman whom he had clouted with his shoe—which incidentally had vanished—limping on his one unshod foot, and ducked under the rope beside a grizzled, perspiring little man. Palmed his badge at him to add to his terror, and asked, while his eyes roved the crowd that hemmed them in: "Who was the woman top-floor front?"

"Insoorance?" whined the terrified one.

"No, police department. Well, come on—"

"Smiff. Miss Smiff."

Step groaned. But he'd figured she'd been hiding out anyway, so it didn't really matter much. "How long she been living up there in your house?"

"Ten day."

"Who visited her, see anybody?"

"Nome-body. She done even go out; my wife bring food."

Good and scared, reflected Step. Scared stiff, but it hadn't saved her. "Did you hear anything tonight just before the fire? Were you in the building? Hear a couple shots? Hear any screams?"

"No hear no-thing, train make too much noise. Only hear fella laff coming downstairs, like somebody tell-im good joke. Laff, laff, laff, all the way out to street—"

The marihuana, of course. Just two drags had affected his

own risibilities. The effects of a whole reefer ought to last hours, at that rate. Step shoved away from the futile janitor, flagged one of the patrolmen holding the crowd in check behind the rope-barrier, introduced himself. The excitement was tapering off, now that everyone was out of the house and the fire had been subdued, it was only a matter of minutes before they'd start melting away. Overhead the "El" trains, which had been held back at Desbrosses Street while the smoke had been at its thickest, were again being allowed through, although surface traffic was still being detoured.

"Who's on this job with you?" Step asked the cop in a low voice.

"One other guy, down at the other end."

"Think the two of you can keep 'em in like they are, another couple minutes?"

The cop looked insulted. "That's what we been doing. You don't see anybody edging out into the middle of the street, do ya?"

"No, you don't understand what I mean. Can you put up another rope at each side, hem them in where they are, keep them from strolling off just a little while longer till I get a chance to take a careful look through them all?"

"I'm not authorized to keep people from going about their business, as long as they don't hamper the fire apparatus—"

"I'll take the responsibility. There's someone I'm out to get, and I've got a very good hunch he's right here looking on.

Firebugs are known to do that, murderers too when they think they're safe from discovery. When you've got a combination of both, the urge to stay and gloat ought to be twice as strong!

"Bawl me out," he added abruptly, "so it don't look too phony, my standing talking to you like this."

The cop swung his club at him, barked: "Get back there! Whaddya think that rope's for? Get back there before I—"

Step cringed away from him, began to elbow his way deeper into the tightly-packed crowd jamming the narrow sidewalk. He did this as slow as he did everything else, didn't seem like anyone who had a definite place to go, just a rubber-necker working his way toward a better vantage-point. From time to time he glanced over at the gutted building, or what could be seen, of it under the shadowy "E1" structure that bisected the street vertically. Torches blinked deep within the front hallway of it, as firemen passed in and out, still veiled by the haze that clung to it.

There wasn't, however, enough smoke left in the air, certainly not this close to the ground, to send anyone into paroxysms of strangled coughing. Such as that individual just ahead was experiencing, handkerchief pressed to mouth. Step himself had inhaled as much smoke as anyone, and his lungs were back on the job again as good as ever. He kept facing the burned building from this point on, edging over sidewise to the afflicted one. The spasms would stop and he'd lower the handkerchief; then another one would come on and he'd raise it again and nearly spill himself into it. Step was unobtrusively at his elbow by now.

When a person is suffering from a coughing-fit, two ways of assisting them will, occur to almost anybody. Offer them a drink of water or slap them helpfully on the back. Step didn't have any water to offer, so he chose the second means of alleviation. Slapped the tormented one between the shoulder-blades: but just once, not several times, and not nearly forcefully enough to do any good. "You're under arrest," he said desultorily, "come on."

The concealing handkerchief dropped—this time all the way to the ground. "What for? What're you talking about?"

"For two murders and an arson," drawled the wearied Step. "I'm talking about you. And don't be afraid to laugh right out. No need to muffle it with your handkerchief and try to change it into a cough any more. That was what gave you away to me. When you've been smoking marihuana, you've just gotta laugh or else—. But watching fires isn't the right place to do your laughing. And if it had been real coughing, you wouldn't have stayed around where the smoke irritated you that much. Now show me where you dropped the gun before you came back here to watch, and then we'll get in a taxi. I wouldn't ask my feet to carry me another step tonight."

His prisoner bayed uncontrollably with mirth, then panted: "I never was in that building in my life—" Writhed convulsively.

"I saw you," said Step, pushing him slowly before him

through the crowd, "through the window from an 'El' train as I was going by." He knew the soporific effect the drug was likely to have, its blunting of the judgment. "She came to us and told us she was afraid of this happening to her, asked for protection, and we been giving it to her. Did you think you could get away with it?"

"Then what'd she rat on Plucky at his trial for? She knew what to expect. He sent out word—"

"Oh, that vice trial. And she was one of the witnesses? I see." Step slammed the door of the cab on the two of them. "Thanks for telling me; now I know who she was, who you are, and why it was done. There is something to be said for marihuana after all. Not much, but maybe just a little."

When he stepped out of the cab with his handcuffed quarry at the foot of the Franklin Street station four blocks away, he directed the driver: "Now sound your horn till they come down off of up there." And when they did, his mates found Inspector Stephen Lively seated upon the bottom step of the station-stairs, his prisoner at his side.

"Fellas," he said apologetically, "this is the guy. And if I gotta go up there again to the top, I wonder could you two make a saddle with your hands and hoist me between you. I'm just plumb tuckered out!"

[The end of *Death in the Air* by Cornell Woolrich (as
Cornell George Hopley-Woolrich)]