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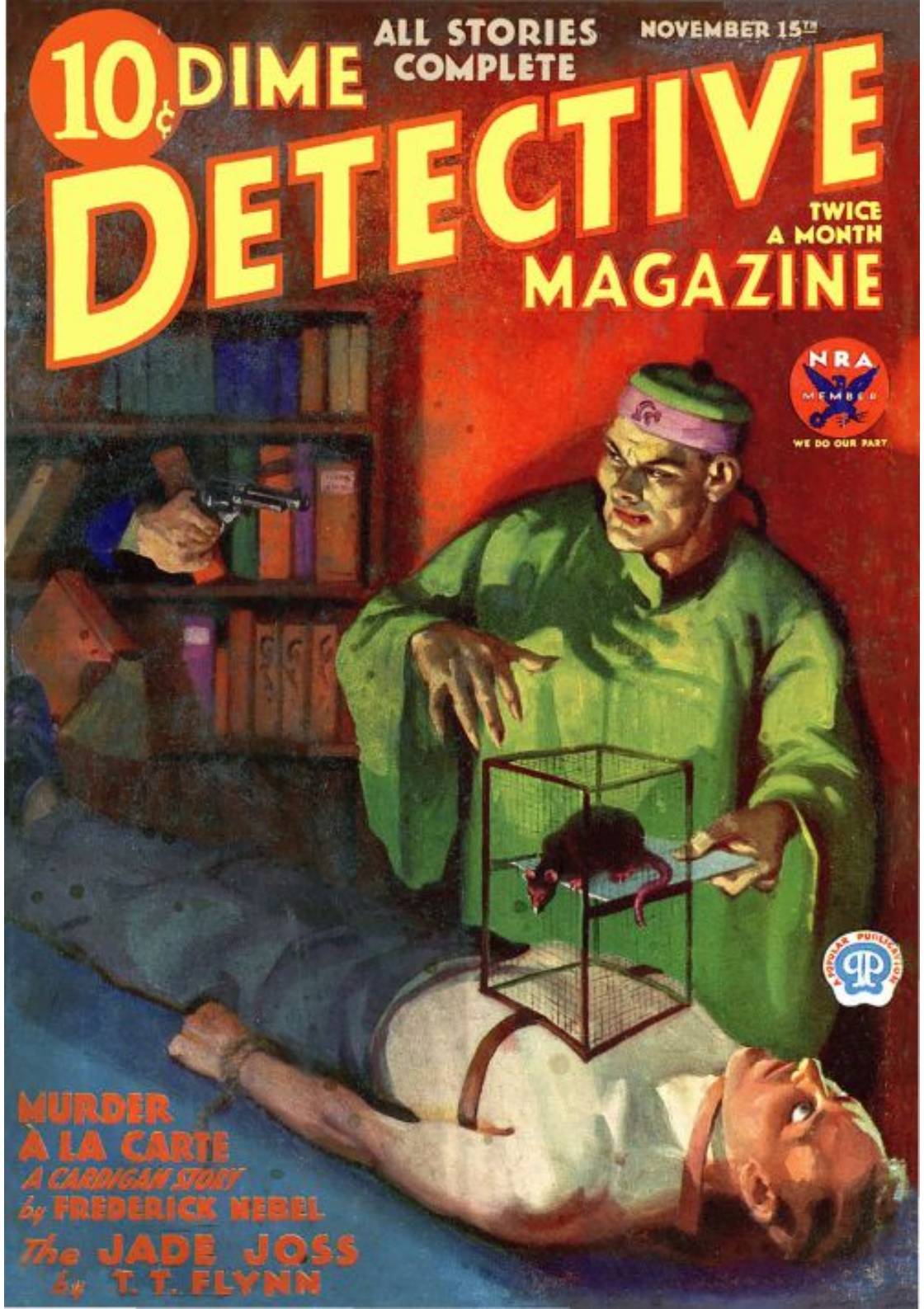
# DETECTIVE

TWICE  
A MONTH

## MAGAZINE



**MURDER  
À LA CARTE**  
*A CARDIGAN STORY*  
by **FREDERICK NEBEL**  
**The JADE JOSS**  
by **T. T. FLYNN**



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Paul Pry's blade parried the knife.

# The Cross-Stitch Killer

A Paul Pry Story

By

Erle Stanley Gardner

*Author of "The Crimson Scorpion," etc.*

First published *Dime Detective Magazine*, November 15, 1933.

*Millionaires were that hunter's only game, and when he'd bagged them he sewed their lips up tight for he knew that even dead men sometimes talk. But Paul Pry, professional opportunist, was a tailor of sorts himself, with a needle as sharp and deadly as the cross-stitch killer's—an avenging sword cane to darn living flesh!*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Murdered Millions

Paul Pry polished the razor-keen blade of his sword cane with the same attentive care a stone polisher might take in putting just the right lustre upon a fine piece of onyx.

"Mugs" Magoo sat slumped in a big overstuffed chair in the corner. He held a whiskey glass in his left hand. His right arm was off at the shoulder.

Eva Bentley sat in a small, glass-enclosed booth and listened to a radio which was tuned in on the wave length of the police broadcasting station. From time to time she took swift notes in competent shorthand, occasionally rattled out a few paragraphs on a portable typewriter which was on a desk at her elbow.

Mugs Magoo rolled his glassy eyes in the direction of Paul Pry. "Some day," he said, "some crook is going to grab the blade of that sword cane and bust it in two. Why don't you pack a big gun and forget that sword cane business? The blade ain't big enough to cut off a plug of chewing tobacco."

Paul Pry smiled. "The efficacy of this sword cane, Mugs, lies in its lightness and speed. It's like a clever boxer who flashes in, lands a telling blow, and jumps out again before a heavier adversary can even get set to deliver a punch."

Mugs Magoo nodded his head slowly and lugubriously. "Now," he said, "I know why you like that weapon—that's the way you like to play game, jumping in ahead of the police, side-stepping the crooks, ducking out before anyone knows what's happened, and leaving a hell of a mess behind."

Paul Pry's smile broadened into a grin, and the grin became a chuckle. "Well, Mugs," he said, "there's just a chance there may be something in that."

At that moment, Eva Bentley jumped to her feet, picked up her shorthand notebook and opened the door of the glass-enclosed compartment. Instantly, the sound of the police radio became audible.

"What is it, Eva?" asked Paul Pry. "Something important?"

"Yes," she said, "there's just been another corpse found, with his lips sewed together. Like the other one, he's a millionaire—Charles B. Darwin is the victim this time. His murder is almost identical with that of the murder of Harry Travers. Both men were stabbed to death; both men had been receiving threatening letters through the mail; both men were found dead, with their lips sewed together with a peculiar cross-stitch."

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Mugs Magoo poured himself a glass of whiskey. "Thank God I ain't no millionaire!" he said.

Paul Pry finished polishing the blade of the sword cane, and inserted it in the cunningly disguised scabbard. His eyes were level-lidded in concentration, and his voice was quick and sharp.

"I presume the police are making quite a commotion about it," he said.

"I'll say they are," Eva Bentley told him. "They've broadcast a general alarm telling all cars to drop everything and concentrate on finding this mysterious murderer. It seems to be a question of money. In fact, the police are certain of it. Evidently they have some information which has not been given to the press. However, it's common knowledge that both men

received letters demanding that they place a certain sum of money in an envelope and mail it to a certain person at a certain address. Both men disregarded the request and turned the letter over to the police.”

“Any information about any other men who have received similar letters?” asked Paul Pry.

“None. The police are simply giving instructions to the cars. They’re assigning cars to the district in which the body was found.”

“Where was it—in a house?”

“No, it was found in an automobile. The man had evidently been driving an automobile and had pulled in to the curb and stopped. He was killed seated at the wheel. The officers place the death as having taken place at about three o’clock this morning. They are inclined to believe there was some woman companion in the automobile with him, and they’re trying to find her. They think that she knows something of the crime, or can at least give some clue to the murderer.”

“Anything else?” asked Paul Pry.

“That’s about all of it,” she said. “You don’t want the detailed instructions which are being given the automobiles, do you?”

“No,” he told her, “not now. But make notes of everything that goes over the radio in connection with this crime.”

She returned to the booth, where she closed the door and once more started her pencil flying over the pages of the shorthand notebook.

Paul Pry turned to Mugs Magoo. His face was fixed in an expression of keen concentration. “All right, Mugs,” he said, “snap out of it and tell me what you know about the millionaires.”

Mugs Magoo groaned. “Ain’t it enough for me to know about the crooks?” he asked, “without having to spill all the dope on the millionaires?”

Paul Pry laughed. “I know what you’re trying to do, Mugs,” he said. “You’re trying to keep me from taking an interest in this case because you’re afraid of it. But I’m going to take an interest in it just the same.”

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Mugs Magoo tilted the bottle of whiskey over the tumbler, drained the last drop from the tumbler, smacked his lips, then turned his glassy eyes toward Paul Pry.

Those were remarkable eyes. They protruded slightly and seemed dead and expressionless, as though covered with some thin, white film. But they were eyes that saw much and forgot nothing.

Mugs Magoo could give the name, antecedents, connection and criminal record of almost every known crook in the United States. Moreover, he had but to look at a face once in order to remember that man indefinitely. All gossip, all information which ever reached his ears; all occurrences which took place within the range of his vision, remained indelibly impressed upon his memory.

At one time he had been camera-eye man for the metropolitan police. A political shake-up had thrown him out of work, and an unfortunate accident had taken off his right arm at the shoulder. Feeling that he could never return to the police force he had indulged his desire for liquor, until, when Paul Pry found the man, he had been but a sodden wreck, begging a mere pittance as a cripple, by selling pencils on a street corner. Paul Pry had cultivated the man, gradually learned something of his history and the remarkable gift which had made him so valuable to the police. He had given him food, clothes, money, and an allowance of whiskey,

which served to satisfy the keen craving of the man's insatiable appetite. From time to time, he used such information as Mugs Magoo could impart by drawing upon his encyclopedic knowledge of the underworld.

"Mugs," said Paul Pry, "what do you know about Charles Darwin?"

Mugs Magoo shook his head. "Keep out of it, chief," he said. "Please keep out of it. You're mixing with dynamite. This isn't the sort of a case where you're up against some cheap crook; you're dealing with a homicidal maniac here."

Paul Pry waited for a moment, then said again with slow emphasis: "Mugs, what do you know about Charles Darwin?"

Mugs Magoo sighed. "To begin with, he's a millionaire who made his money out of the stock market when the stock market was going up, and didn't lose his money when the stock market went down. That means that he's got brains or is lucky.

"He married one of those cold-blooded, society-type women, and the marriage didn't take. He got to playing around. Mrs. Darwin never played in her life; she didn't know what play was. Life was a serious proposition with her, a question of just who she should invite to the next tea, and what sort of a bid she should make when she picked up her bridge hand.

"Darwin wanted a divorce. She wouldn't give him one. She hired detectives to trail him around, so that she could get enough on him so that he couldn't get one. He could never get anything on her, because there was never anything to get."

"How do you know all this, Mugs?" asked Paul Pry curiously.

Mugs Magoo regarded the empty whiskey glass with a speculative eye. "Those glasses," he said, "don't hold as much as the others; they—"

"Never mind the glasses, Mugs. How did you find out all this about a millionaire's matrimonial mix-up?"

"Oh," said Mugs wearily, "the detective that Mrs. Darwin got hold of was an ex-con. I spotted him, and he was afraid I was going to turn him in, so he spilled the beans to me about what he was doing."

"Well," said Paul Pry, "you're still not telling me what happened."

"Well," Mugs Magoo said, "he was a clever bird. He wasn't like the ordinary private detective. Naturally he wasn't, because he'd been a high-class crook in his time, and he knew a lot of angles that only a crook would know. As a result, he got quite a bit of stuff on Darwin. He found out where Darwin was keeping a love nest."

"A love nest?" asked Paul Pry.

"Well, that's what the tabloids call it," Mugs Magoo said. "It was just an apartment he kept without letting his wife know about it."

"But his wife found out about it?" asked Pry.

"Not this one," Mugs said. "The detective found out about it, but he was too wise to report the information to the agency. He realized that all he'd draw from the agency would be eight dollars a day, perhaps a bonus of a suit of clothes, or something. So he went to Darwin, put the cards on the table, told Darwin what he had, and offered to sell out for five thousand dollars. Naturally, he got the five grand."

"And what did he tell the agency?" asked Paul Pry.

"Oh, he told the agency enough to let them make a pretty good report to Mrs. Darwin. As a matter of fact, I think he fixed it up with Charles Darwin so that the report was sufficiently complete to give Mrs. Darwin most of the evidence she wanted."

Paul Pry squinted his forehead thoughtfully. "Where was this love nest, Mugs?" he asked.

Mugs was pouring whiskey into the glass. Abruptly, he stopped and straightened. His eyes blinked thoughtfully. “Hell!” he said. “I’ve got the address of the place somewhere in my mind, but—by gosh!—it was out in the west end somewhere. Ain’t that a break?”

Paul Pry reached for his hat and coat. “All right, Mugs,” he said, “pull the address out of the back of your mind, because I want it.”



## CHAPTER TWO

### Paul Pry Turns Peeping Tom

The apartment house had that subtle air of quiet exclusiveness which is associated with high prices, but not necessarily with respectability.

Paul Pry moved down the deeply carpeted corridor like some silent shadow. He paused in front of the door and inspected the lock. Then he selected a key from a well-filled key ring, inserted the key and exerted a slow, steady pressure. A moment later there was a click as the lock slipped back.

Paul Pry moved on through the door, into the apartment, and closed the door behind him.

He had, he observed with satisfaction, reached the place ahead of the police. Doubtless, the police would, sooner or later, find out about this expensive apartment which was maintained by the millionaire play-boy who had figured so grimly in such a blood-curdling murder. Right at present, however, Paul Pry was on the job, and in the position of one who is one jump ahead.

Paul Pry did not switch on the lights, but used an electric flashlight. He sent the beam darting about the apartment. He saw that the windows were covered by expensive drapes; that, in addition to the drapes, there were shades which were drawn down, making it virtually impossible for the faintest flicker of light to be seen from the street. There were expensive carpets, deep over-stuffed chairs, a well filled bookcase which seemed, however, more to furnish background than a source of reading material. There was a bedroom with a beautiful walnut bed, a tiled bathroom with the spaciousness which indicated high rental. There was a second bedroom which opened on the other side of the bath. There was a kitchen and dining room which opened off the room which Paul Pry entered.

Paul Pry moved through the dining room and into the kitchen.

Then he walked back to the bedroom, turned the flashlight into the closet.

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The closet was well filled with clothes of expensive texture. They were feminine garments, and it needed no price tag to show either their quality or their high initial cost.

Paul Pry looked in the bureau drawers and found filmy silk underthings, expensive hose, silk lounging pajamas. He left the bureau and entered the other room. Here he found a closet well crammed with masculine garments. There was a writing desk in this room, and a checkbook in a pigeon-hole of the writing desk. Paul Pry took out the checkbook and looked at the stubs.

The stubs were virtually all in a feminine handwriting. They ran to an alarming total.

He was putting the checkbook back in its compartment, when his eye caught a letter with a special-delivery stamp on it. The letter was addressed to Gertrude Fenwick and the address was that of the apartment house. It had been very neatly typewritten and there was no return address on the envelope.

Paul shamelessly inserted his fingers under the flap of the envelope, took out a sheet of typewritten paper and proceeded to read:

My Dear Miss Fenwick:

I dislike very much to involve you in this matter, but I am addressing this communication to you in order that it may reach the eyes of Mr. Charles B. Darwin.

I feel that when Mr. Darwin realizes that even the carefully guarded secret of this apartment is known to the undersigned, he may, perhaps, be more inclined to give heed to my requests.

My last request was turned over to the police, despite the fact that I warned him that such a course would be disastrous. I am now giving him one last chance.

If he will make a check, payable to bearer, to an amount of twenty-five thousand dollars, address it to Fremont Burke, at General Delivery, and make certain that no attempt is made to follow the person who is to receive that letter and cash the check, and in no way to seek to trace such a person by marked money or otherwise, and if he will further use his influence to notify his friend, Mr. Perry C. Hammond, that he is making such a remittance, and that he feels it would be well for Mr. Hammond to make such a remittance, then he will be unmolested. The secret of this apartment will remain a secret and he need fear no physical violence from the undersigned.

If, on the other hand, he continues in his course of obstinate refusal to comply with my wishes, if he continues to unite with Mr. Hammond in employing private investigators to seek to learn my identity, his fate and that of Mr. Hammond will be the fate of Mr. Harry Travers.

Very truly yours,

*XXXX*

The letter was unsigned, except for the diagram of several interlocking "x's" which formed a rude diagram of a cross-stitch, similar to the stitch which had been placed across the lips of the dead body of Harry Travers, and, later, across those of Charles B. Darwin.

Paul Pry whistled softly when he had read the letter, folded it and thrust it in his pocket. He had directed the beam of the flashlight once more upon the desk, when his ears caught the metallic click of a key being inserted in the lock of the door which led to the corridor.

Paul Pry switched out the flashlight and stood motionless.

He heard the sound of the door opening, then closing, and the noise made by the spring lock as it snapped into place. Then he heard the rustle of garments, and the click of a light switch.

Paul Pry slipped the sword cane down from the place where he had held it clamped under his arm and moved on furtive feet, stepping noiselessly upon the tiled floor of the bathroom, to where he could look into the bedroom.

There was no one in the bedroom, but a mirror showed him the reflection of the person who had entered the apartment.

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She was perhaps twenty-six years of age, slender, well-formed, gray-eyed, blond, and exceedingly nervous. She had carried two suitcases into the apartment, and the suitcases now reposed on the carpet near her feet, one on either side.

For a moment, Paul Pry saw her reflection in the mirror clearly. Then she moved out of his range of vision, and he suddenly realized she was coming directly toward the bathroom.

He flattened himself in the shadows just back of the door and waited.

The light switch clicked in the bedroom. There was the sound of swift surreptitious movement.

Paul Pry waited for more than a minute. Then, curiosity getting the better of discretion, he peered round the edge of the door.

The young woman had divested herself of her outer garments, and stood attired in filmy underthings, looking at herself in the mirror. As Paul Pry watched, she picked up a dress from the bed, slipped it on, and surveyed the effect.

She nodded to herself with evident approval at what she saw in the mirror, then pulled the dress off over her head.

The dress which she had worn when she entered the apartment, a gray affair which displayed to advantage the curves of her willowy figure, lay upon the bed. Paul Pry waited for her to put it on. Instead, however, she took lingerie from the drawer of the bureau, held it against the satin smoothness of her skin and once more surveyed the reflection with critical inspection.

At length, she picked up the gray dress, slipped it over her head, adjusted it in front of the mirror, then walked rapidly to the living room, where she picked up the suitcases and carried them into the bedroom. She laid the suitcases on the bed, opened them and started folding the garments into them.

Paul Pry, watching from his place of concealment, saw that the suitcases had been empty when she took them into the room; that she carefully folded the gowns, packing the cases as tightly as possible; that she also put in the elaborately embroidered silk lingerie which she had taken from the bureau drawer.

When both cases had been packed to the point of bursting with the most modish of gowns, the most expensive selection of underthings and accessories, the young woman struggled with the straps, trying to get the suitcases closed.

It was at that moment that Paul Pry, his sword cane held under his arm, his hat in his hand, stepped into the bedroom.

“I beg your pardon,” he said.

She gave a sudden scream, jumped back from the bed and stared at him with wide, startled eyes.

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Paul Pry bowed courteously. “I happened,” he explained, “to be in the bathroom. I couldn’t help watching you. Perhaps it is a ‘Peeping Tom’ complex that I have. I didn’t know I possessed it until just this moment, but you were beautiful, and I was curious. Need more be said?”

She was white to the lips. She stared at him wordlessly.

“But,” Paul Pry went on, “having been permitted to invade the privacy of milady’s boudoir, I recognized the obligations which are incident to the benefits. Apparently you need someone to assist you in closing the suitcases. May I offer my services?”

Words came chokingly from her lips.

“Who . . . who . . . who are you, and what do you want?”

“The name,” he said, “really doesn’t matter, I assure you. It doesn’t matter in the slightest. When people get acquainted under such charmingly informal circumstances, I think names have but little to do with it. Suppose, therefore, that I shall call you Gertrude, and you call me Paul?”

“But,” she said with swift alarm, “my name is not Gertrude.”

“No?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “My name is—”

“Yes, yes,” he told her, “go on. Only the first name, if you please. I am not interested in last names.”

“The name,” she said, “is Thelma.”

“A remarkably pretty name,” he told her. “And may I ask, Thelma, what are you doing in this apartment?”

“I was getting some clothes,” she said.

“Your clothes?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“Then,” he said, “you must be aware of the untimely death of the person who is maintaining this establishment.”

“No! No!” she said. “I don’t know anything about that. In fact, I don’t know anything about the place at all.”

“You just left your clothes here?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I’d just moved in. You see, I subleased the apartment.”

“From whom?” he inquired.

“From an agent,” she said.

He laughed. “Come, come,” he said “you’ll have to do better than that. Let’s be frank with each other. This apartment was maintained by Charles B. Darwin. Darwin recently met a very violent end. You have doubtless heard of the death of Harry Travers. The circumstances surrounding the death of Darwin were almost identical. The lips, if I may be pardoned for speaking of such a gruesome matter, were sewed tightly shut with a peculiar cross-stitch. Now, it is quite apparent that a person who sews lips of a man, does so with some motive. Were the man living, that motive might well be to insure temporary silence. But there are much better and less painful methods of insuring silence. To sew the lips of a dead man has nothing whatever to do with the powers of speech. One would judge, therefore, that the sewing of the lips was either by way of warning to others, or as a gesture, to make the murder seem the more gruesome. It might also well be a warning to others who had been approached along certain lines not to communicate the facts to the police.”

She swayed slightly.

“You’re faint?” he asked. “Do sit down in one of these chairs.”

She shook her head in tense silence. “No,” she said, “I’m all right. I’m going to tell you the truth.”

“I wish you would, Thelma,” he said.

“I’m a model,” she said, “in a dressmaking establishment. I know the lady by sight who accompanied Mr. Darwin when these dresses were purchased. I happened to meet her on the street just an hour or so ago. She told me that owing to circumstances over which she had no control, she was leaving the city at once; that she had left a very fine wardrobe here, and that she knew the dresses would fit me, because we were almost identical in size. She gave me a key to the apartment, and told me to come up and take whatever I wanted.”

“Why didn’t you bring a trunk?” asked Paul Pry.

“Because,” she said, “I didn’t want too many clothes; I just wanted some of the pretty things that would give me a break.”

“And she gave you her key to the apartment?”

“Yes.”

“Is it at all possible,” Paul Pry inquired, “that you are, perhaps, drawing upon your imagination?”

She shook her head.

“And you’re not the young woman who occupied this apartment?”

“You should be able to figure that one out for yourself,” she said. “You stood there and watched me trying on the things.” She lowered her eyes.

“Are you, perhaps,” asked Paul Pry, “trying to blush?”

Her eyes flashed with swift emotion. “You should be ashamed of yourself,” she said, “standing there and watching a woman dress that way!”

Paul Pry bowed his head humbly. “Please accept my most profound apologies,” he said. “And would you, perhaps, let me see the key with which you entered the apartment?”

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She inserted her fingers into a small pocket in her dress, took out a key, started to hand it to him, then stopped suddenly.

Paul Pry’s eyes were hard and insistent. “The key,” he said.

“I don’t know who you are,” she said, “and I don’t know what right you’ve got to ask for the key.”

Paul Pry moved toward her. His eyes were cold and hypnotic. “The key,” he repeated.

She stared into his eyes for several seconds, then slowly opened her hand.

The key dropped to the carpet.

Paul Pry stooped to pick it up.

At the moment she moved with swift speed. Paul Pry swung himself to one side and dodged as a small, pearl-handled automatic glittered in her hand.

“Stick them up!” she said savagely.

Paul Pry lunged forward, caught her about the knees. She gave a half-scream and fell forward, the gun dropping from her hand. They came together on the floor, a tangled mass of arms and legs, from which Paul Pry emerged presently, smiling and debonair.

“Naughty, naughty,” he said. “I really should spank you for that.”

He took the automatic and slipped it into his hip pocket. Then, as the young woman sat on the floor arranging her clothes so as to cover her legs, Paul Pry searched until he found the key, held it up and smiled knowingly.

“I thought so,” he said. “A skeleton key.”

She stared at him wordlessly.

“You are,” said Paul Pry, “in the eyes of the law, a burglar, a person guilty of making a felonious entrance and taking property which does not belong to you.”

She said nothing.

“Under the circumstances,” said Paul Pry, striding easily across the room, “I think I will have to telephone to the police.”

She remained as he had left her—motionless, silent, and with a face which was drained of expression.

Paul Pry approached the door which led into the corridor, turned and smiled. “Upon second thought, however,” he said, “in view of the most charming display of feminine pulchritude which you unwittingly gave me, I am going to let mercy temper justice.”

With a swift motion of his arms and hands, he flipped back the spring catch on the door, pulled the door open, stepped into the corridor and slammed the door behind him.

There was no sound of pursuit, no commotion. The apartment remained completely silent.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Wooden Fish

Paul Pry was faultlessly attired in evening clothes when he pressed the doorbell of the magnificent residence of Perry C. Hammond.

A dour-visaged butler opened the door. Pry met his sour look with a disarming smile.

"A gentleman," he said, "who refuses to divulge his name, wishes to see Mr. Hammond at once upon a matter of the most urgent nature."

"Mr. Hammond, sir," said the butler, "is not at home."

"You will explain to Mr. Hammond," said Paul Pry, still smiling, "that I am a specialist in my line."

"Mr. Hammond, sir, is not at home."

"Quite right, my man, quite right. And, will you please add to the explanation you make to Mr. Hammond that my particular specialty is in disorders of the lips—disorders which have to do with a permanent silence, brought about through mechanical means."

Paul Pry's smiling eyes locked with those of the butler, and suddenly the smile left Paul Pry's eyes. His face became cold and stern.

"You will," he said, "convey that message to Mr. Hammond immediately. Otherwise, I will communicate with Mr. Hammond in some other way, and explain to him the reason my message was not delivered personally. I don't mind assuring you that Mr. Hammond will consider you have committed a major indiscretion."

The butler hesitated for a long moment. "Will you step this way, sir?" he asked.

He ushered Paul Pry through a reception hallway, into a small entrance parlor. "Please be seated, sir," he said. "I will see if, perhaps, Mr. Hammond has returned."

The butler glided from the room, and the door had no sooner closed upon him, than Paul Pry, moving with noiseless stealth, jerked open the door and stepped once more into the reception corridor.

His quick eyes had detected a small enameled box for out-going mail, and Paul Pry's deft fingers raised the lid of the box and explored the interior.

There were three letters addressed in a cramped, angular handwriting. Paul Pry flipped the letters, one over the other, in rapid succession, scanning the addresses. The third envelope was addressed to Fremont Burke, General Delivery.

Paul Pry stuck it in his pocket, returned the others to the mail box, and then moved on furtive feet back into the reception parlor.

He had barely resumed his seat when the butler entered through another door. "Mr. Hammond," he said, "will see you."

Paul Pry walked across the room, followed the butler down a passageway and went through a door the servant indicated.

A man with great puffs under his eyes, a look of infinite weariness upon his face, stared at him with expressionless interrogation. "Well," he said, "what was it you wanted?"

"I have reason," said Paul Pry, "to believe that your life is in danger."

"I think you are mistaken," said Hammond.

"I have reason," said Paul Pry, "to believe that the same fate which overtook Charles B. Darwin may, perhaps, be in store for you."

Perry Hammond shook his head. "Whoever gave you your information," he said, "misinformed you."

"In other words," said Paul Pry slowly, "you deny that you have received any demands from a person who has threatened you with death or disaster in the event you fail to comply? You deny that you have been threatened with death, under circumstances similar to the threats which were made to Mr. Charles Darwin?"

"I," said Perry Hammond, slowly and deliberately, "don't know what you're talking about. I saw you because I thought you might be interested in getting some information about Mr. Darwin. As far as I am concerned, you can get out and stay out."

Paul Pry bowed. "Thank you very much," he said, "for your interview, Mr. Hammond." He turned on his heel.

"Wait a minute," said the millionaire in a cold, husky voice.

"Are you a newspaper reporter?"

"No," said Paul Pry without turning.

"Then who the devil are you?" asked Hammond with sudden irritation.

Paul Pry turned to face the millionaire. "I am a man," he said, smiling affably, "who is going to make you extremely sorry you lied to him."

With that, he turned once more and strode steadily and purposefully down the carpeted corridor.

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Mugs Magoo looked up from his whiskey glass as Paul Pry latch-keyed the apartment door. "Well," he said mournfully, "I see you're still with us."

"Temporarily, at least, Mugs," Paul Pry retorted, smiling.

He hung up his hat and coat, crossed to a closet and opened the door. The closet contained a collection of drums, drums of various sorts and descriptions.

Mugs Magoo shuddered. "For God's sake," he said, "don't start that!"

Paul Pry laughed lightly and fingered the drums with the attentive care that a hunter might give to the selection of a gun from a gun cabinet.

Mugs Magoo hastily poured liquor into the glass. "At least," he said, "give me fifteen minutes to get liquored before you start. Those damn drums do things to me. They get into my blood and make the pulses pound."

Paul Pry's voice was almost dreamy as he picked out a round piece of wood which seemed to be entirely solid, save for a cut along one end, with two holes bored at the end of the cut.

"That, Mugs," he said, "is the function of drums. We don't know exactly what it is they do, but they seem to get into a person's blood. You don't like the sound of drums, Mugs, because you are afraid of the primitive. You are continually trying to run away from yourself. Doubtless a psycho-analyst could look into your past and find that your taste for whiskey had its inception in an attempt to drown some real or fancied sorrow."

Mugs Magoo let his face show extreme consternation. "You're not going to take me to one of those psycho-analysts?" he asked.

Paul Pry shook his head. "Certainly not, Mugs," he said. "I think it is too late to effect a cure now, and, in the event a cure was effected, Mugs, you would lose your taste for whiskey."

"Drums, Mugs, do to me exactly what whiskey does to you. If you could cultivate a taste for drums, I think I would endeavor to cure you of the whiskey habit. But, since you cannot, the only thing I can do is to let you enjoy your pleasures in your own way, and insist that you allow me an equal latitude."

Paul Pry sat down in the chair which faced the big fireplace, took a long, slender stick, to the end of which had been affixed a rose-bud-shaped bit of hard wood.

“Now, Mugs,” he said, “here we have a *Mok Yeitt*, otherwise known as a ‘wooden fish.’ The wooden fish is a prayer drum used by the Buddhists in China to pave the way for a friendly reception to their prayers. If you will listen, Mugs, you will get the remarkable delicacy of tone which the better specimens of these drums give. They are cunningly carved by hand. A hole is made in either end of the slit, and the wood is hollowed out with painstaking care. . . .”

“For God’s sake!” said Mugs Magoo, “don’t! You’re going to drive me crazy with that thing!”

Paul Pry shook his head, started tapping the wooden stick against the bulge of the drum. A throbbing sound filled the apartment, a sound which had a peculiar wooden resonance which trailed off into vibrating overtones.

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Mugs Magoo frantically downed the whiskey, poured himself another drink, gulped it, then shivered and sat motionless. After a moment, he placed his one hand against his ear.

“I can shut out half of the sound, anyhow,” he said, at length.

Paul Pry paid no attention to him, but continued tapping upon the drum at regular intervals.

“What’s the idea of all the drumming now?” asked Mugs Magoo.

“I’m trying to concentrate,” said Paul Pry. “I think I almost have the solution I want.”

Abruptly, he ceased drumming and smiled benignly at Mugs. “Yes, Mugs,” he said, “I have the solution.”

Mugs Magoo shivered. “It’ll be another five minutes,” he said, “before that whiskey takes effect. I was spared five minutes of torture anyway. What is the solution?”

Paul Pry set down the *Mok Yeitt*. He reached into the inside pocket of his coat, pulled out an envelope, the flap of which had been steamed open, and took out a letter and a tinted oblong of paper.

“Mugs,” he said, “I have here a letter bearing the angular signature of Perry C. Hammond, a multi-millionaire. Let me read it to you.

“Mr. Fremont Burke,  
General Delivery,  
City.

Dear Mr. Burke:

I herewith comply with your request. You will find enclosed my check for twenty-five thousand dollars, payable to bearer. I wish to assure you that no attempt whatever will be made to interfere with the cashing of that check. On the other hand, I have notified my bankers by telephone that the check represents the transfer of consideration in a bona fide business deal, and that they are to promptly honor the check when it is presented.

Trusting that this complies in full with your demands and that I may now be at liberty to consider the matter closed, I am,

Very truly yours,  
Perry C. Hammond.”



Mugs Magoo stared at Paul Pry. "A check," he said, "for twenty-five thousand dollars?"

Paul Pry nodded. "And don't forget, Mugs," he said, "that it's payable to bearer."

"But," said Mugs Magoo, "who is the bearer?"

Paul Pry got to his feet, replaced the wooden fish in the drum closet, closed the door, turned to Mugs and smiled once more. "Mugs," he said, "I am the bearer."

Mugs Magoo stared at him with eyes that seemed to pop from his head. "My God!" he said. "You've been mixing into things again! You're going to have the police after you for theft, Perry Hammond after you for fraud, and probably the man who pulls the cross-stitch murders after you, hammer and tongs, trying to kill you and sew your lips up!"

Paul Pry pursed his lips thoughtfully, then nodded his head.

"Yes, Mugs," he said, "I should say that that is a very fair statement of the probable consequences. In fact, I would say that it is a somewhat conservative estimate."

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Smiling, he crossed to the writing desk and pulled down the slab of heavy wood which served as a writing table. He explored the pigeon holes which were disclosed in the back of the desk.

"You will remember, Mugs," he said, "that at one time I secured a long, purple envelope, with a red border. You asked me what the devil I wanted with such an envelope, and I told you that I was keeping it because it was distinctive."

Mugs Magoo nodded. "Yes," he said, "I remember that."

Paul Pry took a fountain pen from his pocket and addressed the purple envelope with the red border.

"Mr. Fremont Burke, General Delivery, City," he said when he had finished writing. "The red ink shows up rather to advantage on that purple background. It makes it quite harmonious."

"What's in the envelope?" asked Mugs Magoo.

"Nothing," said Paul Pry.

"What's going to be in it?"

"Nothing."

"What's the idea?" asked Mugs Magoo.

Paul Pry smiled. He took from another compartment of the desk a stamped envelope. He addressed that envelope also to Fremont Burke, General Delivery, City.

"What's going in that envelope?" asked Mugs Magoo.

"In this envelope," said Paul Pry, smiling, "is going the best forgery of this check which I can make, and I'm satisfied, Mugs, that it will be quite a clever forgery."

Mugs Magoo stared at Paul Pry in wordless contemplation. Then, "You're going to cash the original check?" he asked.

Paul Pry nodded.

"How about the forged check?" asked Mugs Magoo.

Paul Pry shrugged his shoulders. "That, Mugs," he said, "is a matter which lies between the bank and the man who presents the check."

"But," said Mugs Magoo, "suppose the forged check should be presented first?"

Paul Pry smiled patronizingly. "Come, come, Mugs," he said, "you must give me credit for a little intelligence. The original check will be cashed before the forged check ever reaches the post office."

“And what,” asked Mugs Magoo, “is the idea of the two letters—one in the colored envelope and one in the plain envelope?”

“That, Mugs,” said Paul Pry, “comes under the classification of a trade secret. Really, it’s something that I can’t tell you unless you permit me to do a little more drumming.”

Mugs Magoo shook his head violently from side to side in extreme agitation.

“What’s the idea of the shake?” asked Paul Pry.

“I wanted to see if the whiskey had taken effect,” said Mugs Magoo. “If it had, I’d let you drum some more, but I see that I either didn’t get enough whiskey, or else I misjudged the time it would take to make me dizzy. I can’t stand the drumming, so you can keep your damned trade secret to yourself.”

Paul Pry chuckled and thrust the envelopes into his inside pocket. “Tomorrow at this time, Mugs, I’ll be twenty-five thousand dollars richer. Moreover, I’ll be embarked upon an interesting adventure.”

“Tomorrow at this time,” said Mugs Magoo, with solemn melancholy, “you’ll be stretched out on a marble slab, and a coroner and an autopsy surgeon will be staring at the cross-stitches that are placed across your lips.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Second Check

Paul Pry, wearing an overcoat which was turned up around the neck, a felt hat which was pulled down low over his forehead, and with heavily smoked glasses shielding his eyes, shoved the check through the cashier's window.

The cashier stared at Paul Pry's smoked glasses, looked at the check, said, "Just a moment," and stepped from his grilled cage. He consulted a memorandum, looked at the check once more, sighed, and, with obvious reluctance, picked up a sheaf of currency.

"How," he asked, "would you like to have this?"

"In hundreds," said Paul Pry, "if that's convenient."

The cashier counted out hundred dollar bills in lots of ten, stacked them all together and snapped a large elastic band about them.

"You'll take them that way?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You wish to count them?"

"No," said Paul Pry, and turned away.

His long overcoat flapped about his ankles as he walked. He could feel the gaze of the cashier striking between his shoulder blades with almost physical impact.

Paul Pry went at once to the post office, where he dropped the two letters through the slot marked for city mail. Then he went out to lunch, and, after lunch, he strolled back to the post office.

He managed to stand where, without seeming to be too conspicuous, he could watch the window marked "General Delivery—A to G."

Shortly after two thirty, a young woman, stylishly gowned, presented herself at the window.

Paul Pry, standing some thirty feet away, at the end of a corridor, saw the clerk at the general-delivery window hand out a long envelope of purple tint, with a red border. The young woman took it, looked at it curiously. A moment later, the man behind the grill slid another envelope through the window. The girl took it, stared curiously at both envelopes. A moment later she moved away from the window, paused to open the envelopes, staring with puzzled countenance at the empty interior of the purple envelope.

Evidently she expected the check which was in the second envelope, for, as she removed the slip of paper, a look of relief came over her features. Paul Pry, standing where he could observe her every move, saw that she was laboring under great tension. Her lips seemed inclined to quiver, and her hands shook as she crumpled the purple envelope, held it over the huge iron waste basket as though to drop it. Then, apparently she thought better of it, for she uncrumpled the envelope, folded it and thrust it in her purse.

She walked from the post-office building, down the granite steps to the sidewalk, where a second young woman was waiting in an automobile.

Paul Pry, following behind, yet careful lest he should seem too eager, was unable to get a clear view of the woman who drove the automobile. But he saw the young woman who had taken the letters from the post office jump into the car. The car immediately drove off at high speed.

Paul Pry ran down the post-office steps to the lot where he had left his own automobile parked. He started the motor, then divested himself of the overcoat, the dark glasses, and shifted the slouch hat for one with a stiffer brim, letting the engine of his car warm up as he was making the changes. Then he stepped into the machine, drove at once to the bank where he had cashed the twenty-five thousand dollar check earlier in the day.

He made no effort to find a legitimate parking place for his car, but left it in front of a fire plug, certain that he would receive a tag, certain, also, that the car would be located in an advantageous position when he wished to use it once more.

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He walked through the revolving door, stood in the ornate marble foyer looking at the long corridors with their grilled windows, the desks of executives, the customers crowding about the stand on which counter checks and deposit slips were kept.

Paul Pry went at once to the end of the longest line he could see, stood there fumbling a deposit slip in his fingers.

He had been there less than five seconds when he saw the young woman who had taken the letter from the post office walk with quick, nervous steps to the window of the paying teller. She presented a check and was promptly referred to the cashier. Paul Pry watched her as she thrust the check through the window to the cashier, saw the hand of the cashier as it took the check and turned it over and over while he studied it intently.

A moment later, there was the faint sound of an electric buzzer. A uniformed officer who had been loitering about, watching the patrons idly, suddenly stiffened to attention, looked about him, caught a signal from the cashier. He moved unostentatiously forward.

During all of this time the young woman had stood at the window, apparently entirely oblivious of what was taking place about her.

Paul Pry walked to the telephone booths, dropped a nickel and called the number of Perry C. Hammond.

A moment later, a feminine voice announced that Mr. Hammond's secretary was speaking, and Paul Pry stated that he desired to speak with Mr. Hammond concerning the matter of a twenty-five-thousand-dollar check which had been issued to Fremont Burke.

Almost at once he heard the sound of whispers, and then Hammond's voice came over the wire, a voice which was dry with nervousness, despite the millionaire's attempt to make it sound casual.

"How are you this afternoon, Mr. Hammond?" said Paul Pry cordially.

"What was it you wanted to talk to me about?" asked the millionaire.

"Oh," said Paul Pry casually, "I just wanted to advise you that I had stolen twenty-five thousand dollars from you and that I trusted the loss wouldn't inconvenience you in any way."

"That you had what?" screamed the millionaire.

"Stolen twenty-five thousand dollars from you," Paul Pry remarked. "I don't think that there's any occasion to get excited over it. From all I hear, you can well afford to spare it. But I didn't want you to be embarrassed on account of the theft."

"What are you talking about?" Hammond demanded.

"Merely," said Paul Pry, "that my name happens to be Fremont Burke. I was flat broke and had tried to get five dollars from my brother in Denver. I called at the post office to see if there was any mail for me, and a letter was delivered to me. I opened it and saw there was a check enclosed for twenty-five thousand dollars, payable to bearer."

“Naturally, I thought the thing was some sort of a joke, but thought perhaps I might be able to get the price of a meal out of it, so I took it to the bank. To my surprise, they cashed it at once and without question. I realized then, of course, that I had, fortunately, stumbled on a remittance which was intended for someone else. Not wishing to disappoint the someone else, I forged your name to a check, put it in an envelope and mailed it to Fremont Burke, in care of General Delivery.”

The millionaire’s voice was almost a scream of terror.

“You did what?” he shrieked.

“Come, come,” said Paul Pry. “There’s no need of so much excitement. I forged your check for twenty-five thousand dollars and put it in the mail. It occurred to me that the person who received that check might have been expecting a legitimate business remittance from you, and would probably put the check through his bank for collection, or might possibly present the check at the cashier’s window.

“Under the circumstances, the check would probably be branded as a forgery. I did my best to make the forgery a good one, but, you understand, even a large bank will look carefully at a second check for twenty-five thousand dollars, payable to bearer, which is presented in the course of one business day.

“It occurs to me, therefore, that if the bank should advise you someone has forged a check and is presenting it for collection, it might be advisable for you to refuse to prosecute that person on the ground of forgery. You see, he might be acting in perfect good faith, and . . .”

There was an inarticulate exclamation at the other end of the line, followed by the slamming of a receiver on the hook. Paul Pry figured that Perry Hammond had cut off the connection in order to rush through a call to the bank.

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He strolled from the telephone booth, walked across to a desk, filled out a deposit slip and strolled to the window which was nearest to the cashier’s window.

The uniformed officer had moved up and taken the young woman by the arm. She was white-faced and trembling.

“I tell you,” Paul Pry heard her say, “I know nothing whatever about it, except that I was hired to get this check out of the mail and cash it. After I had the money I was supposed to call a certain telephone number, and I would then be given instructions as to how I should proceed. That’s all I know about it.”

The telephone at the cashier’s elbow rang sharply and insistently. The cashier picked up the telephone, said, “hello,” and then let surprise register on his countenance. After a moment he said: “Yes, Mr. Hammond, late this morning. I remembered particularly that you had left instructions about the matter, and . . .”

The receiver made squawking, metallic noises which were inaudible to Paul Pry’s ears, but the face of the cashier flushed with color.

“Just a minute,” he said. “I think you’re nervous and excited, Mr. Hammond. If you’ll just . . .”

He was interrupted by more squawking noises from the receiver.

The line at which Paul Pry had been standing moved up, so that Paul Pry found himself at the window.

“I wish to make a deposit,” he said, thrusting the deposit slip through the window, together with ten of the one-hundred-dollar bills he had received from the bank earlier in the day.

The man at the window was smiling and affable. "You should go down to the fourth window," he said, "the one marked 'Deposits—M to R'."

Paul Pry looked apologetic and embarrassed.

"Just right down there where you see the lettering over the window," said the man, smiling unctuously.

Paul Pry walked slowly past the cashier's window. He was in time to hear the cashier say to the officer: "It's quite all right, Madson. We can't cash this check because the signature is irregular; but Mr. Hammond promises that he will rectify the matter, so far as Mr. Burke is concerned. It seems there's been a very serious mistake, for which the bank is in no way responsible. It's due to the carelessness of a customer in mailing checks payable to bearer . . ."

There was more, which Paul Pry could not hear because it was delivered in a lower voice, a voice which was almost surreptitiously confidential, and because appearances required that Paul Pry should move over toward the window which had been pointed out to him.

He did, however, see the young lady move away from the window, in the direction of the telephone booths. She dropped a coin and called a number. She talked rapidly and excitedly, then paused to listen for several seconds, at the end of which time she nodded her head and hung up the telephone.

Paul Pry followed her from the bank, down to the curb, where he saw the same car which he had seen parked in front of the post office. The young woman got into the car, which at once drove off.

This time, Paul Pry's car was parked where he had no difficulty in getting into an advantageous position directly behind the coupe which he was trailing. He ripped the red police tag from the steering wheel, thrust it in his pocket, and concentrated his attention upon following the car ahead.

It was not a particularly easy task. The young woman in the car ahead was a good driver, and she was evidently going some place in very much of a hurry.

The car stopped, at length, in front of a building which apparently housed a speakeasy. The young woman left the car, walked across the curb with rapid, nervous steps, rang a bell and stood perfectly still while a panel slid back in the door and a face regarded her.

A moment later, the door opened, and the young woman vanished.

The coupe left the curb, and, as it sped away, the driver turned for one last look at the door where the young woman had been admitted.

Paul Pry started nervously as he saw the face pressed against the glass in the rear window of the coupe. It was the face of the young woman he had met previously in the apartment which Charles B. Darwin had maintained so secretly, the young woman who had been trying on clothes in front of the mirror. However, it was too late then to do anything about it. The coupe continued on its way, and Paul Pry began to put into operation a certain very definite plan he had in mind.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Cross-Stitch Killer

There was a drug store across the street, and Paul Pry stepped across to it, purchased a woman's purse, a lip stick, compact, handkerchief, a package of chewing gum. He paid for the purchases with one of the hundred-dollar bills he had received, and thrust the change into the purse. He also folded two more of the hundred-dollar bills and pushed them into the purse. The drug clerk watched him curiously, but said nothing.

Paul Pry walked back across the street to the speakeasy. He rang the bell and a panel slid back.

"About four or five minutes ago," said Paul Pry, "there was a young woman, a brunette, wearing a blue skirt and a small, tight-fitting, blue hat. She got out of a coupe and came in here."

"What about it?" said the frosty voice of the man who regarded Paul Pry with hostile eyes through the wicket in the doorway.

"I've got to see her," said Paul Pry.

"You got a card?"

"No. But I've got to see that young woman."

"You can't see her."

Paul Pry fidgeted. "You see," he said, "she dropped her purse. I picked it up and intended to return it to her. Then I looked inside of it and saw what was in it, and the temptation was too much for me. I started to run away with it. You see, I've got a wife and a couple of kiddies who haven't had anything much to eat for two or three days now. I've been out of work and my savings are completely used up. I had to do anything I could to get by. When I saw the money in this purse, I decided I wouldn't return the purse. Then, after I'd walked half a block, I realized I couldn't steal, so I had to bring it to her."

"All right," said the man, "give me the purse and I'll take it to her."

Paul Pry opened the purse. "Look," he said, "there's almost three hundred dollars in it."

"I'll take it to her," said the man in the doorway.

"Like hell you will," said Paul Pry. "She'll probably give me a five spot, or perhaps a ten, or she might even get generous and give a twenty. That would mean a lot to me. I couldn't take the purse, but I sure as hell could take a reward."

"If she wants to give you a reward, I'll bring it to you," said the man.

Paul Pry's laugh was mocking and scornful.

The man on the other side of the door seemed undecided.

"You either let me in and I take it to her personally," said Paul Pry, "or she doesn't get it. If you want to keep a customer from getting her purse back, it's all right by me; I've done my duty in trying to return it. If you won't let her have it, I'll put an ad in the paper telling the whole circumstances."

"Look here," said the man who glowered through the opening in the doorway, "this is a high-class restaurant. We put on a floor show, and the young woman who just came in is one of the girls who works in the floor show. Now you've got that purse and it belongs to her. If you try to take it away, I'll call a cop and have you arrested."

Paul Pry sneered. "A fat chance you've got of calling a cop," he said. "I'd raise a commotion and tell the whole cockeyed world that this place was a speakeasy; that I was trying to get in to return the purse and you wouldn't let me in, but started calling a cop. If you're a respectable restaurant why the hell don't you open your door so the public can patronize you?"

The bolts slipped back in the door.

"Oh hell," said the man, "come on in and get it over with. You're just one of those damn pests that show up every so often."

"Where do I find her?" asked Paul Pry.

"The name is Ellen Tracy. She's in one of the dressing rooms up on the second floor. I'll have one of the waiters take you up."

"And want to chisel in on the reward," said Paul Pry. "Not much you don't. I'm on my way right now."

He pushed past the man and ran up the stairs.

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There was a telephone at the man's elbow. As Paul Pry was halfway up the stairs he heard the telephone ring, heard the man answer it and then lower his voice to a mere confidential mumble.

Paul Pry would have given much to have heard that conversation, but he had no time to wait. With his sword cane grasped firmly in his hand, he took the stairs two at a time. He walked rapidly across a dance floor, pushed his way through a curtained doorway, walked up a flight of steps. He saw a row of doors, one with the name "Ellen Tracy" painted on it. He tapped with his knuckles.

"Who is it?" called a woman's voice.

"A package for you," said Paul Pry.

The door opened a few inches. A woman's hand and bare arm protruded. "Give it to me," she said.

Paul Pry pushed the door open.

She fell back with a little scream.

She had slipped out of her dress and was attired in underwear, shoes and stockings. There was a costume on a stool beside a dressing table and a kimona draped carelessly over a chair. The young woman made no attempt to pick up the kimona, but stood staring at Paul Pry, apparently entirely unconscious of her apparel.

"Well," she said, "what's the big idea?"

"Listen," said Paul Pry, "I came from him—the man who got you to get that check from the post office. You know what I mean."

Her face was suddenly drained of color, her eyes dark with alarm. "Yes," she said in a low, half-choked voice.

"What did they tell you at the bank?" said Paul Pry. "It's important as hell."

"Mr. Hammond," she said, "said that he would make the check right. He wanted the bank to cash it, but they wouldn't cash a forged check. He said that he'd make the check good. I telephoned a few minutes ago and explained the whole thing. You should have known."

"There's some question about that," Paul Pry said. "You telephoned to the wrong number. Somebody else seems to have got the information. Are you sure you telephoned to the right number?"

There was a puzzled frown on her forehead. She nodded slowly.



“What was the number?” asked Paul Pry.

She fell back from him suddenly, as though he had struck her. Her face was deathly white. She seemed to shrink within herself. “Who . . . who . . . who are you?” she asked in a voice which was shrill with panic.

“I told you who I am,” Paul Pry said.

She shook her head slowly. Her eyes were wide and dark. “Get out of here!” she said in a half-whisper. “For God’s sake get out of here while there’s still time!”

Paul Pry took a step toward her. “Listen,” he said, “you either know what you’re mixed up in or you don’t. In any event. . . .”

A woman’s scream, shrill and high-pitched, interrupted his sentence. The scream seemed to come from one of the adjoining dressing rooms.

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Paul Pry stood still, listening, his eyes slitted, his mouth a thin, straight line. The scream rang out again, louder and more insistent.

Paul Pry stared at the woman. “Who’s that screaming?” he asked.

She could hardly answer, so great was her terror. Her tongue clung to the roof of her mouth. Her throat seemed paralyzed. At length, she stammered: “It’s Thelma . . . that’s her room next to mine.”

“Thelma?” asked Paul Pry.

She nodded.

“Tell me,” said Paul Pry, “was that the girl who drove the coupe that took you to the post office and the bank?”

She nodded once more.

Paul Pry jabbed his finger at her as though he had been stabbing her with a weapon. “You,” he said, “stay right there. Don’t you make a move. Don’t try to go out. Don’t let anyone else in. When I come back you let me in. Do you understand?”

She nodded.

Paul jerked the door open.

The scream from the adjoining dressing room sounded once more as Paul Pry jumped through the doorway into the corridor, and flung himself at the door of the next dressing room.

The door was unlocked.

Paul Pry pushed his way into the dressing room, then, at what he saw, kicked the door shut behind him.

The young woman who had given him the name of Thelma, when he had caught her trying on clothes in the millionaire’s apartment, was standing in the far corner of the room. Her waist was torn open at the throat, ripped for its entire length. The brassiere was pulled down from her shoulders. Her hair was in disarray. Her skirt was lying on a chair. Her step-ins were torn in two or three places. She held a gun in her right hand. As Paul Pry kicked the door shut, she screamed again.

Paul Pry stared at her and at the gun.

“O. K., Thelma,” he said. “What’s the trouble? Quick!”

She swayed toward him. “C-c-c-can’t you see?” she said.

“I can see plenty,” he told her, looking at the white of the girl’s skin, a white which showed angry red places where, apparently, blows had been rained.

“Did you see the man who went out of here?” she asked.

Paul Pry shook his head. He was staring at her with eyes narrowed.

"I c-c-c-can't tell you," she said. "Come over here and let me w-w-w-whisper to you. It was awful!"

Paul Pry moved toward her.

She shivered. "I'm c-c-c-cold," she said. "I'm going to faint. Take off your coat and put it around me. I'm so c-c-c-cold. Put your coat around my shoulders." She swayed toward him.

Paul Pry jumped forward and caught her by the shoulders. He spun her abruptly, brutally, jerking the gun from her hand as he did so.

She staggered halfway across the small dressing room, dropped to a chair and sat staring at Paul Pry with startled eyes.

"All right," said Paul Pry, "now give me the low-down and do it quick!"

"How did you know?" she asked.

"It was too raw," he told her. "Give me the low-down."

"I don't think I could have gone through with it anyway," she said. "But my life depended on it."

"All right," he said, "I think I know the answer, but tell me what it was."

"I saw that you were following us," she said. "I recognized you. I telephoned the information to the party to whom I make my reports. He told me to rush up to my dressing room, pull my clothes off, make it look as though I had been attacked, and scream. When you came in, I was to shoot. He gave me the gun, but he didn't trust me. He only gave me one shell in the gun. I was to fire that one shell when you were so close I couldn't miss. When he heard the shot, he was to come in. I was to swear that you had tried to attack me."

"Then what?" asked Paul Pry.

"That's all," she said, "if the sound of the shot attracted any attention. If it didn't, I wasn't going to figure in it. I wasn't going to have to say anything. He was going to dispose of your body some way; I don't know how. All I had to do was to pack up my things and take a long trip around the world. He was going to give me the tickets and everything."

"And if you didn't do it?" asked Paul Pry.

"Then," she said, "neither one of us was to come out of here alive."

"You know of the murderous activities of this man you're working for?" asked Paul Pry.

She hesitated a moment, then nodded her head. "Yes," she said slowly, "I know now. I didn't until a few minutes ago."

"And," said Paul Pry, "he's here in this restaurant?"

"He owns the place," she said.

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Paul Pry flipped open the cylinder of the gun. It was as the young woman had said—there was but one shell in it.

Paul Pry pushed the cylinder back into position. "Let's get out," he said.

She shook her head. "You can't do it," she said. "He's waiting outside, and he's got another man with him. They're going to kill us both unless I go through with what he told me to do."

"Suppose no one from the outside hears the shot?" said Paul Pry. "Then what?"

"Then," she said, "I think . . ."

"Go on," he told her, as her voice trailed away into silence, "tell me what you think."

Her voice came in a whisper. "I think," she said, "he's going to sew up your lips and dump your body somewhere."

She shuddered and trembled as though with a chill.

Paul Pry stood in front of her, staring at her with level, appraising eyes. “Look here, Thelma,” he said, “if you’re lying to me it’s going to mean your life. Tell me the truth. If no one hears the shot, he’s going to dispose of my body that way?”

She nodded, then said, after a minute, in a dull, hopeless tone: “But it’s no use now. We’re both going to die. You don’t know him. You don’t know how absolutely, unutterably ruthless, how unspeakably cruel. . . .”

Paul Pry moved swiftly. He took the dressing table, tilted it to a sharp angle, pulled open one of the drawers, inserted the revolver and pulled the trigger.

The gun gave forth a muffled *boom*.

Paul Pry toppled the dressing table to the floor. It fell with a bang which shook the walls.

Paul Pry, stepping back, tossed the useless gun to the floor, took the razor-keen blade of his sword cane from its scabbard, held himself flat against the wall, just to one side of the door, so that the opening door would serve to conceal him from those who entered the room.

There was a period of silence.

Thelma put her head in her hands and started to cry.

Slowly, the knob on the door rattled into motion. The latch clicked; the door opened slowly. Two men entered the room. Paul Pry could hear the sounds of their shuffling feet, but could not see them.

A masculine voice said: “Where is he, Thelma?”

The sobbing girl said nothing, but kept her face in her hands, sobbing hopelessly.

The men moved further into the room. One of them walked toward her.

Paul Pry took a deep breath and kicked the door shut.

Two pairs of startled eyes stared at him. One of the men was the man who had been on guard at the door of the speakeasy. The other was a man Paul Pry had never seen before—a well-dressed man with curly, black hair, eyes that glinted with dark fire. He had a saturnine cast to his countenance, and his face seemed to radiate a sort of hypnotic power.

Both men had guns which dangled from their hands.

The man who had guarded the door of the speakeasy was nearest to Paul Pry. He raised his gun.

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Paul Pry lunged forward. The slender blade of his sword cane, appearing hardly stronger than a long darning needle, flicked out like the tongue of a snake. The glittering steel embedded itself in the left side of the man’s chest.

The man wilted into lifelessness. Blood spurted along the stained steel of the cane as Paul Pry whipped it out and whirled.

The man with the dark, curly hair fired.

The bullet clipped past Paul Pry’s body so close that it caught the folds of his coat, tugging and ripping at the garment as though some invisible hand had suddenly snatched at the cloth.

Paul Pry’s slender steel flicked out and down. The razor-keen edge cut the tendons on the back of the man’s right hand. The nerveless fingers dropped the gun to the floor.

With an oath, he jumped back, flung his left hand under the folds of his coat, whipped out a long-bladed knife.

Paul Pry lunged once more. The man parried the lunge with his knife. Steel grated on steel.

Paul Pry’s light blade was turned aside by the heavy knife. The momentum of Pry’s lunge carried him forward. The dark-haired man laughed sardonically as he turned the point of the

knife toward Paul Pry's throat.

But Paul Pry managed, by a super-human effort, to catch himself just as he seemed on the point of impaling his throat on the knife. His adversary recognized too late that he had lost the advantage. He thrust outward with the knife, but his left hand made the thrust awkward and ill-timed. Paul Pry jumped back from the thrust. Once more the point of his sword cane was flickering in front of him, a glittering menace of steel which moved swiftly.

"So," he said, "you know how to fence?"

The dark-haired man held the heavy knife in readiness to parry the next thrust. "Yes," he said, "I know how to fence far better than you, my friend."

"And I suppose," said Paul Pry, "that is the knife which accounted for the men whose lips were sewed together."

"Just a little trade mark of mine," admitted the man with the knife. "When I leave here, your lips and Thelma's lips will be sewed in the same manner. I'll drop your bodies. . . ."

Paul Pry moved with bewildering swiftness. The point of his narrow steel blade darted forward.

The man flung the knife into a position to parry the thrust. "Clumsy," he said.

But Paul Pry's wrist deflected the point at just the proper moment to slide the slender steel just inside the blade of the heavy knife.

The dark-haired man had time to register an expression of bewildered consternation. Then Pry's flicking bodkin buried itself in his heart, and his face ceased to show any expression whatever.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Fifty Grand

Mugs Magoo stared with wide eyes at Paul Pry as he entered the apartment. "Say something," he pleaded.

Paul Pry smiled, took off his hat and coat.

"What shall I say?"

"Anything," Mugs Magoo said, "just so I can tell that your lips aren't stuck together with cross-stitches."

Paul Pry took a cigarette case from his pocket, took out a cigarette and inspected the end critically. "Well, Mugs," he said, "suppose I smoke? How would that be?"

"That'd be all right," said Mugs. "Where were you last night?"

"Oh, just around doing things," said Paul Pry. "I had a couple of young women I had to see off on a plane."

"Good looking?" asked Mugs Magoo.

"Well," said Paul Pry, "they had mighty fine figures, and if they hadn't been so badly frightened they'd have been pretty good lookers."

"And then what did you do with the early part of the morning?"

"I had to cash a check," said Paul Pry.

"I thought you cashed that one yesterday."

"I did, Mugs, but you see, there was a misunderstanding about the check that I left in its place, so Mr. Hammond sent another check for twenty-five thousand to the same party at General Delivery."

"And why didn't the party get that one?" asked Mugs Magoo.

Paul Pry sighed. "That," he said, "is rather a long story."

Eva Bentley pushed open the door of the glass compartment where she had been taking down the radio calls. "There's a lot of hot stuff coming in over the radio," she said, "about this cross-stitch murder."

Paul Pry puffed complacently on his cigarette. "What is it?" he said. "Can you tell me what's happening?"

"Yes," she said. "There's a broadcast out for the apprehension of two women. One of them is Ellen Tracy and the other is Thelma Peters. They were employed as entertainers and floor girls in a downtown speakeasy."

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Paul Pry's face showed no expression other than a mild curiosity. "Indeed?" he said. "And just what have these two young ladies been doing?"

"The police think," she said, "that they can give valuable information about the cross-stitch murderer. In fact, they think the girls might have been implicated in the murders—perhaps unwillingly."

"And what," asked Paul Pry, with that same expression of polite curiosity in his face, "gives the police that impression?"

"Because," said Eva Bentley, "the police raided the speakeasy on a tip this morning about ten o'clock. They found two bodies in the dressing room which had been occupied by Thelma

Peters. The men had evidently fought with a knife and pistol, and there may have been another man present in the room. In fact, the police think there was.

“On one of the bodies the police found a surgeon’s needle and some thread of exactly the same kind which was used in making the cross-stitches on the lips of the murder victims. The police started an investigation and are pretty well satisfied the man is the cross-stitch murderer. They found evidence which tied him up with a wholesale murder plot. It seems that he’d been collecting money from half a dozen different millionaires, threatening to murder them if they gave the police any information whatever. The two people who were killed were those who had given the police information, but the cross-stitch murderer figured that he’d kill a couple of millionaires anyway, in order to get the newspaper notoriety which would strike terror into the hearts of his proposed victims.”

“Rather a neat scheme,” said Paul Pry. “And, by the way, have the police any trace of the two young ladies?”

“Not yet; they’ve just broadcast a general description.”

Paul Pry looked at his wristwatch. “Doubtless,” he said, “by this time, the young ladies are far, far away, which, probably, is just as well. Possibly they were intimidated, by the man for whom they worked, into taking certain isolated steps in connection with a murder campaign, but didn’t know just how those steps were connected up at the time.”

“Perhaps,” said Eva Bentley, staring at Paul Pry curiously. “The police have a description, however, of a young man who entered the speakeasy just about the time when the autopsy surgeon estimates the two men were killed. Would you like to hear that description?”

Paul Pry yawned and shook his head. “No,” he said, “I don’t think so. Really, Miss Bentley, I’m not particularly interested in the cross-stitch murders any more.”

Mugs Magoo stared at him with stupefied wonder for a moment, then suddenly reaching out, he grasped the neck of the whiskey bottle in his left hand, and, disdainingly the use of a glass, tilted the bottle to his lips, letting the contents gurgle down his throat.

[The end of *The Cross-Stitch Killer* by Erle Stanley Gardner]