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Mystery

Dashiell Hammett

**Nightmare
Town**

and other stories



Dashiell Hammett
Nightmare town

INTRODUCTION BY COLIN DEXTER

From the English-speaking world there are a good many instances of great writers carrying only a few slimmish volumes of their works as they file past St Peter; and just behind Thomas Gray and A.E. Housman we may well spot Samuel Dashiell Hammett in the queue at the 'no-more-than-six-items' counter in the celestial supermarket.

Hammett's six? The five full-length novels written in the brief period 1929-34, including the universally acknowledged masterpieces *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Glass Key*; plus a collection (fairly considerable) of short stories, covering a much longer period. *Nightmare Town* presents the reader with twenty of these stories, most of which have been unavailable in print for some time.

In view then of his comparatively limited output, we may reasonably ask if the high praise bestowed on Hammett by Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald – his two most distinguished heirs in the 'hard-boiled' lineage – was perhaps a little over the top. And to put readers' minds at rest (there are enough questions to be sorted out in the stories) the answer is 'decidedly not'. Each of these three writers was practising his craft in a society that was corrupt – with even some of the private eyes potentially corruptible themselves – and in a world that seemed randomly ordained. The advice to fellow writers who were in some doubt about the continuation of a plot was usually 'Have a man come through the door with a gun!' and the ubiquity of guns then was a match for that of mobile phones today. Furthermore, as Chandler maintained, murder was committed not just to provide a detective-story writer with a plot. Almost all the sleuths featured in the troubled and often chaotic years between the 1920's and the 1950's would have been wholly sceptical about solving a case with the aim of putting the universe back to rights, of restoring some semblance of a moral framework to a temporarily blighted planet. No. They were doing the job they were paid to do, as was Hammett himself in his years working for the Pinkerton Detective Agency, with the resolution (if any) of their cases more the result of chance, of hunches, of experience than of some Sherlockian expertise in Eastern European cigar-wrappings.

It is the last mentioned qualification – that of experience, which gives the Hammett stories their distinctive flavour of authenticity. Yet it would be rather misleading to categorise them, in a wholly general sense, as essays in 'realistic' fiction, since Hammett is as liable as most detective-story writers to settle for the reassuringly 'romantic' approach that his gritty and usually fearless sleuths are little short of semi-heroic stature.

Who are these men?

First, we meet the unnamed Continental Op, an operative with the 'Continental Agency', who in spite of his physical appearance, short and fat, is clearly based on the tall and elegant Hammett himself, with the casework based on Hammett's personal experiences as a Pinkerton detective. In this selection, we have seven stories featuring the Op, each narrated in a matter-of-fact style in the first person, and each illustrating some aspect of his tenacity and ruthlessness, but affording virtually no biographical information.

Second (and taking Hammett's first name) is Sam Spade, who features here in *A Man Called Spade*, *Too Many Have Lived*, and *They Can Only Hang You Once* – the only three stories from the whole corpus in which the memorable hero of *The Maltese Falcon* walks and stalks the streets of San Francisco once again. The narration is in the third person, and as with the Op we are given next to no biographical details that we had not already known. Spade has no wish to solve any erudite riddles; he is a hard and shifty fellow quite capable of looking after himself, thank you; his preoccupation is to do his job and to get the better of the criminals some client has paid him to tangle with.

The third – and for me potentially the most interesting – is a man who appears here, just the once, in *The Assistant Murderer*, introduced as follows in the first sentence:

Gold on the door, edged with black, said ALEXANDER RUSH, PRIVATE DETECTIVE. Inside, an ugly man sat tilted back in a chair, his feet on a yellow desk.

He is a match for the other two – laconic, sceptical, successful; yet I think that Hammett was striking out in something of a new direction with Alec Rush, and I wish that he had been more fully developed elsewhere.

The other stories offer considerable range and variety – not only in locality, but more interestingly in diction and point of view. Take, for instance, the repetitive, virtually unpunctuated narrative of the young boxer (already punch-drunk, we suspect) at the opening of *His Brother's Keeper*:

I knew what a lot of people said about Loney but he was always swell to me. Ever since I remember he was swell to me and I guess I would have liked him just as much even if he had been just somebody else instead of my brother; but I was glad he was not somebody else.

Again, take the psychological study, in *Ruffian's Wife*, of a timid woman who suddenly comes to the shocking realisation that her husband... But readers must read for themselves.

After reading (and greatly enjoying) these stories, what surprised me most was how Hammett has kept the traditional 'puzzle' element alive. The majority of the stories end with some cleverly structured surprise, somewhat reminiscent of O'Henry at his best (see especially, perhaps, *The Second-Story Angel*). But such surprises are not in the style of a pomaded Poirot shepherding his suspects into the library before finally expounding the truth. Much more likely here is that our investigator happens to be seated amid the randomly assembled villains, with a frisson of fear crawling down his back and a loaded revolver pointed at his front.

The secrets of Hammett's huge success as a crime novelist are hardly secrets at all. They comprise his extraordinary talents for story-telling; for characterisation; and for a literary style that is strikingly innovative.

As a story-teller, he has few equals in the genre. In *Who Killed Bob Teal?*, for example, a suspicious party has flagged down a taxi and the taxi's number has been recorded. The narrative continues:

Then Dean and I set about tracing the taxi in which Bob Teal had seen the woman ride away. Half an hour in the taxi company's office gave us the information that she had been driven to a number on Greenwich Street. We went to the Greenwich Street address.

Many of us who have been advised by editors to 'Get on with the story!' would have profited greatly from studying such succinct economy of words.

The characterisation of Hammett's dramatis personae is realised, often vividly, on almost every page here – primarily through the medium of dialogue, secondarily by means of some sharply observed, physical description (especially of the eyes). Such techniques are omnipresent, and require no specific illustration. They are dependent wholly upon the author's writing skills.

Much has been said about Hammett's literary style, and critics have invariably commented on its comparative bareness, with dialogue gritty and terse, and with language pared down to its essentials. But such an assessment may tend to suggest 'barrenness' of style rather than 'bareness' – as if Hammett had been advised that any brief stretch of even palely-purplish prose was suspect, and that almost every adjective and adverb was potentially *otiose*. Yet we need read only a page or two here to recognise that Hammett knew considerably more about the business of writing than any well-intentioned editor.

Consider, for example, the second paragraph of the major story, *Nightmare Town*:

A small woman – a girl of twenty in tan flannel – stepped into the street. The wavering Ford missed her by inches, missing her at all only because her backward jump was bird-quick. She caught her lower lip between white teeth, dark eyes flashed annoyance at the passing machine, and she essayed the street again.

Immediately we spot the Hammett 'economy' trademark. But something more, too. We may be a little surprised to find such a wealth of happily chosen epithets here (what a splendid coinage is that 'bird-quick'!) as Hammett paints his small but memorably vivid picture.

This story (from which the book takes its title) shows Hammett at the top of his form, and sets the tone for a collection in which we encounter no sentimentality, with not a cliché in sight, and with none

of the crudity of language which (at least for me) disfigures a good deal of present-day American crime fiction.

Here, then, is a book to be read with delight; a book in which we pass through a gallery of bizarre characters (most of them crooks) sketched with an almost wistful cynicism by a writer whom even the great Chandler acknowledged as the master.

COLIN DEXTER

January 2001

Oxford

INTRODUCTION BY WILLIAM F. NOLAN

Although he lived into his sixties, Samuel Dashiell Hammett's prose-writing career encompassed just twelve short years, from 1922 into early 1934. But they were richly productive years, during which he wrote more than a hundred stories. Twenty of them have been assembled here in *Nightmare Town*, displaying the full range of Dashiell Hammett's remarkable talent.

In his famous 1944 essay, *The Simple Art of Murder*, Raymond Chandler openly acknowledged Hammett's genius. He properly credited him as "the ace performer," the one writer responsible for the creation and development of the hard-boiled school of literature, the genre's revolutionary realist. "He took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley," Chandler declared. "Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse."

And crime novelist Ross Macdonald also granted Hammett the number one position in crime literature: "We all came out from under Hammett's black mask."

Born in 1894 to a tobacco-farming Maryland family, young Samuel grew up in Baltimore and left school at fourteen to work for the railroad. An outspoken nonconformist, he moved restlessly from job to job: yardman, stevedore, nail-machine operator in a box factory, freight handler, cannery worker, stock brokerage clerk. He chafed under authority and was often fired, or else quit out of boredom. He was looking for "something extra" from life.

In 1915 Hammett answered a blind ad which stated that applicants must have "wide work experience and be free to travel and respond to all situations." The job itself was not specified.

Intrigued, Hammett found himself at the Baltimore offices of the Pinkerton Detective Agency. For the next seven years, except during periods of army service or illness, Sam Hammett functioned as an agency operative. Unlike most agency detectives, who worked within a single locale, the Pinkerton detectives, based in a variety of cities, ranged the states from east to west, operating across a wide terrain. Thus, Hammett found himself involved in a varied series of cross-country cases, many of them quite dangerous. Along the way, he was clubbed, shot at, and knifed; but, as he summed it up, "I was never bored."

In 1917 his life changed forever. Working for Pinkerton as a strike-breaker against the International Workers of the World in Butte, Montana, Hammett was offered five thousand dollars to kill union agitator Frank Little. After Hammett bitterly refused, Little was lynched in a crime ascribed to vigilantes. As Lillian Hellman later observed: "This must have been, for Hammett, an abiding horror. I can date [his] belief that he was living in a corrupt society from Little's murder." Hammett's political conscience was formed in Butte. From this point forward, it would permeate his life and work.

In 1918 he left the agency for the first time to enlist in the army, where he was later diagnosed with tuberculosis. ("Guess it runs in the family. My mother had T.B.") Discharged a year later, he was strong enough to rejoin Pinkerton. Unfortunately, the pernicious disease plagued him for many years and took a fearsome toll on his health.

In 1921, with "bad lungs," Hammett was sent to a hospital in Tacoma, Washington, where he was attended by Josephine Dolan, an attractive young ward nurse. This unworldly orphan girl found her new patient "handsome and mature." She admired his military neatness and laughed at all his jokes. Soon they were intimate. Jose (pronounced "Joe's") was very serious about their relationship, but to Hammett it was little more than a casual diversion. At this point in his life he was incapable of love and, in fact, mistrusted the word.

He declared in an unpublished sketch: "Our love seemed dependent on not being phrased. It seemed that if [I] said 'I love you,' the next instant it would have been a lie." Hammett maintained this attitude throughout his life. He could write "with love" in a letter, but he was incapable of verbally declaring it.

Finally, with his illness in remission, Hammett moved to San Francisco, where he received a letter from Jose telling him that she was pregnant. Would Sam marry her? He would.

They became husband and wife in the summer of 1921, with Hammett once again employed by Pinkerton. But by the time daughter Mary Jane was born that October, Hammett was experiencing health problems caused by the cold San Francisco fog, which was affecting his weakened lungs.

In February 1922, at age twenty-seven, he left the agency for the last time. A course at Munson's Business College, a secretarial school, seemed to offer the chance to learn about professional writing. As a Pinkerton agent, Hammett had often been cited for his concise, neatly fashioned case reports. Now it was time to see if he could utilise this latent ability.

By the close of that year he'd made small sales to *The Smart Set* and to a new detective pulp called *The Black Mask*. In December 1922 this magazine printed Hammett's *The Road Home*, about a detective named Hagedorn who has been hired to chase down a criminal. After leading Hagedorn halfway around the globe, the fugitive offers the detective a share of "one of the richest gem beds in Asia" if he'll throw in with him. At the story's climax, heading into the jungle in pursuit of his prey, Hagedorn is thinking about the treasure. The reader is led to believe that the detective is tempted by the offer of riches, and that he will be corrupted when he sees the jewels. Thus, Hammett's career-long theme of man's basic corruptibility is prefigured here, in his first crime tale.

In 1923 Hammett created the Continental Op for *The Black Mask* and was selling his fiction at a steady rate. In later years, a reporter asked him for his secret. Hammett shrugged. "I was a detective, so I wrote about detectives." He added: "All of my characters were based on people I've known personally, or known about."

A second daughter, Josephine Rebecca, was born in May 1926, and Hammett realised that he could not continue to support his family on *Black Mask* sales. He quit prose writing to take a job as advertising manager for a local jeweller at \$350 a month. He quickly learned to appreciate the distinctive features of watches and jewelled rings, and was soon writing the store's weekly newspaper ads. Al Samuels was greatly pleased by his new employee's ability to generate sales with expertly worded advertising copy. Hammett was "a natural."

But his tuberculosis surfaced again, and Hammett was forced to leave his job after just five months. He was now receiving 100 percent disability from the Veterans Bureau. During this flare-up he was nearly bedridden, so weak he had to lean on a line of chairs in order to walk between bed and bathroom. Because his tuberculosis was highly contagious, his wife and daughters had to live apart from him.

As Hammett's health improved, Joseph T. Shaw, the new editor of *Black Mask*, was able to lure him back to the magazine by promising higher rates (up to six cents a word) and offering him "a free creative hand" in developing novel-length material. "Hammett was the leader in what finally brought the magazine its distinctive form," Shaw declared. "He told his stories with a new kind of compulsion and authenticity. And he was one of the most careful and painstaking workmen I have ever known."

A two-part novella, *The Big Knockover*, was followed by the *Black Mask* stories that led to his first four published books: *Red Harvest*, *The Dain Curse*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *The Glass Key*. They established Hammett as the nation's premier writer of detective fiction.

By 1930 he had separated from his family and moved to New York, where he reviewed books for the *Evening Post*. Later that year, at the age of thirty-six, he journeyed back to the West Coast after *The Maltese Falcon* was sold to Hollywood, to develop screen material for Paramount. Hammett cut a dapper figure in the film capital. A sharp, immaculate dresser, he was dubbed "a Hollywood Dream Prince" by one local columnist. Tall, with a trim moustache and a regal bearing, he was also known as a charmer, exuding an air of mature masculinity that made him extremely attractive to women.

It was in Hollywood, late that year, that he met aspiring writer Lillian Hellman and began an intense, volatile, often mutually destructive relationship that lasted, on and off, for the rest of his life. To Hellman, then in her mid-twenties, Hammett was nothing short of spectacular. Hugely successful, he was handsome, mature, well-read, and witty – a combination she found irresistible.

Hammett eventually worked with Hellman on nearly all of her original plays (the exception being *The Searching Wind*). He painstakingly supervised structure, scenes, dialogue, and character, guiding Hellman through several productions. His contributions were enormous, and after Hammett's death, Hellman never wrote another original play.

In 1934, the period following the publication of *The Thin Man*, Hammett was at the height of his career. On the surface, his novel featuring Nick and Nora Charles was brisk and humorous, and it inspired a host of imitations. At heart, however, the book was about a disillusioned man who had rejected the detective business and no longer saw value in the pursuit of an investigative career.

The parallel between Nick Charles and Hammett was clear; he was about to reject the genre that had made him famous. He had never been comfortable as a mystery writer. Detective stories no longer held appeal for him. ("This hard-boiled stuff is a menace.")

He wanted to write an original play, followed by what he termed "socially significant novels," but he never indicated exactly what he had in mind. However, after 1934, no new Hammett fiction was printed during his lifetime. He attempted mainstream novels under several titles: *There Was a Young Man* (1938); *My Brother Felix* (1939); *The Valley Sheep Are Fatter* (1944); *The Hunting Boy* (1949); and *December 1* (1950). In each case the work was aborted after a brief start. His only sizable piece of fiction, *Tulip* (1952) – unfinished at 17,000 words – was printed after his death. It was about a man who could no longer write.

Hammett's problems were twofold. Having abandoned detective fiction, he had nothing to put in its place. Even more crippling, he had shut himself down emotionally, erecting an inner wall between himself and his public. He had lost the ability to communicate, to share his emotions. As the years slipped past him, he drank, gambled, womanized, and buried himself in Marxist doctrines. His only creative outlet was his work on Hellman's plays. There is no question that his input was of tremendous value to her, but it did not satisfy his desire to prove himself as a major novelist.

The abiding irony of Hammett's career is that he had already produced at least three major novels: *Red Harvest*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *The Glass Key* – all classic works respected around the world.

But here, in this collection, we deal with his shorter tales, many of them novella length. They span a wide range, and some are better than others, but each is pure Hammett, and the least of them is marvellously entertaining.

What makes Dashiell Hammett's work unique in the genre of mystery writing? The answer is: authenticity.

Hammett was able to bring the gritty argot of the streets into print, to realistically portray thugs, hobos, molls, stoolies, gunmen, political bosses, and crooked clients, allowing them to talk and behave on paper as they had talked and behaved during Hammett's manhunting years. His stint as a working operative with Pinkerton provided a rock-solid base for his fiction. He had pursued murderers, investigated bank swindlers, gathered evidence for criminal trials, shadowed jewel thieves, tangled with safecrackers and holdup men, tracked counterfeiters, been involved in street shoot-outs, exposed forgers and blackmailers, uncovered a missing gold shipment, located a stolen Ferris wheel, and performed as guard, hotel detective, and strikebreaker.

When Hammett sent his characters out to work the mean streets of San Francisco, readers responded to his hard-edged depiction of crime as it actually existed. No other detective-fiction writer of the period could match his kind of reality.

Nightmare Town takes us back to those early years when Hammett's talent burned flame-bright, the years when he was writing with force and vigour in a spare, stripped style that matched the intensity of his material. Working mainly in the pages of *Black Mask* (where ten of these present stories were first printed), Hammett launched a new style of detective fiction in America: bitter, tough, and unsentimental, reflecting the violence of the time. The staid English tradition of the tweedy gentleman detective was shattered, and murder bounced from the tea garden to the back alley. The polite British sleuth gave way to a hard-boiled man of action who didn't mind bending some rules to get the job done, who could hand out punishment and take it, and who often played both sides of the law.

The cynic and the idealist were combined in Hammett's protagonists: their carefully preserved toughness allowed them to survive. Nobody could bluff them or buy them off. They learned to keep themselves under tight control, moving warily through a dark landscape (Melville's "appalling ocean") in which sudden death, duplicity, and corruption were part of the scenery. Nevertheless, they idealistically hoped for a better world and worked toward it. Hammett gave these characters organic life.

Critic Graham McInnes finds that "Hammett's prose... has the polish and meat of an essay by Bacon or a poem by Donne, both of whom also lived in an age of violence and transition."

The theme of a corrupt society runs like a dark thread through much of Hammett's work. The title story of this collection, which details a "nightmare" town in which every citizen – from policeman to businessman – is crooked, foreshadows his gangster-ridden saga of Poisonville in *Red Harvest*. (The actual setting for his novel was Butte, Montana, and reflects the corruption Hammett had found there with Frank Little's death in 1917.)

Hammett saw the world around him as chaotic, without form or design. By the mid-1930's he had convinced himself that radical politics could provide a sense of order, and that perhaps an ideal "people's world" was possible. Communism seemed to promise such a world, but he eventually discovered that it was an illusion. In his last years, Hammett realised that there was no apparent solution to world chaos.

Much has been written on the typical "Hammett hero."

Critic John Paterson claims that he "is, in the final analysis, the apotheosis of every man of good will who, alienated by the values of his time, seeks desperately and mournfully to live without shame, to live without compromise to his integrity."

Philip Durham, who wrote the first biography of Raymond Chandler, traces Hammett's hero back to a tradition that began on the frontier in the early part of the nineteenth century. This American literary hero appeared constantly in the dime novels of the period, and was ready-made for such Western writers of the twentieth century as Owen Wister and Zane Grey. By the time Hammett picked him up in the pages of *Black Mask*, his heroic characteristics were clearly established: courage, physical strength, indestructibility, indifference to danger and death, a knightly attitude, celibacy, a measure of violence, and a sense of justice.

Hammett's most sustained character, the Continental Op (who is featured here in seven stories), reflects the author's dark world view, but he's not overtly political, nor is he knightly. He's a hard-working detective trying to get a job done. The Op describes himself as having a face that is "truthful witness to a life that hasn't been overwhelmed with refinement and gentility," adding that he is "short, middle-aged, and thick-waisted," and stubborn enough to be called "pig-headed."

Hammett claimed to have based the Op on the man who had trained him to be a detective, the Pinkerton Agency's Jimmy Wright of Baltimore. Wright taught young Hammett a basic code: Don't cheat your client. Stay anonymous. Avoid undue physical risks. Be objective. Don't become emotionally involved with a client. And never violate your integrity. This code stayed with Hammett; it not only served him while he was a working detective, but it also gave him a set of personal rules that shaped his actions throughout his life.

Of course, despite his age and physical appearance, the Op is Hammett himself in fictional guise. Told in the first person, many of the Op's adventures are fictionalised versions of actual cases that Hammett worked on during his sporadic years as a detective. When young Hammett first joined the Baltimore branch of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, the headquarters were in the Continental Building – clearly the source for the Op's fictitious agency.

Hammett deliberately kept his character's biographical background to a minimum. As critic Peter Wolfe notes, "he tells us nothing of [the Op's] family, education, or religious beliefs." Of course the Op has no religion in any traditional sense of the term; his religion is the always dangerous game of manhunting, a trade he pursues with near-sacred zeal.

If one sifts carefully through the canon (some three dozen stories), it is revealed that the Op joined Continental as "a young sprout of twenty" (Hammett's age when he became a Pinkerton operative), that he held a captain's commission in wartime military intelligence, that he speaks some French and German, eats all his meals out, smokes Fatima cigarettes, enjoys poker and prizefights, and avoids romantic entanglements ("They don't go with the job"). Pragmatic, hard-souled, and tenacious, he resorts to physical violence when necessary and uses a gun when he has to, but prefers using his wits. He is as close to an actual working detective as Hammett could make him.

Hammett featured the Op in his earlier long works, *Blood Money* (also known as *The Big Knockover*), *Red Harvest*, and *The Dain Curse*, all of which were revised from *Black Mask* novellas.

His next major fictional creation was San Francisco private eye Samuel Spade, to whom Hammett gave his first name. (As a Pinkerton, he had always been called Sam. When he turned to writing, he became simply Dashiell Hammett.) Spade made his debut in *The Maltese Falcon*, a five-part *Black Mask* serial that Hammett carefully reworked for book publication by Alfred A. Knopf. Most critics rate this "saga of a private detective" as the finest crime novel written in this century. Describing his character for a Modern Library edition of *Falcon*, Hammett stated:

Spade had no original. He is a dream man in the sense that he is what most of the private detectives I worked with would like to have been and what quite a few

of them, in their cockier moments, thought they approached. For your private detective does not... want to be an erudite solver of riddles in the Sherlock Holmes manner; he wants to be a hard and shifty fellow, able to take care of himself in any situation, able to get the best of anybody he comes in contact with, whether criminal, innocent bystander, or client.

Indeed, this was precisely the way Hammett wrote Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* – able to match wits with the crafty fat man, Casper Gutman, in tracking down the fabled bird of the title; able to handle the intrusive police; and able to fend off the advances of seductive Brigid O’Shaughnessy in solving the murder of his partner, Miles Archer.

Hammett never intended to make Spade a continuing character; in completing *The Maltese Falcon* he was “done with him.” Yet he had not foreseen the book’s wide and lasting popularity, nor that it would become a supremely successful radio series, nor that no less than three motion pictures would be produced based on the published novel.

The public demanded more Spade stories, and Hammett’s literary agent pleaded with the author to come up with new adventures. Hammett was reluctant, but he was also short of money. He made vast sums in Hollywood as a scriptwriter, but he squandered every dollar as quickly as he earned it. Money was for spending and Hammett always felt that more of it would magically appear as needed. Finally, he sat down to rap out three new Spade stories, placing two of them with *The American Magazine* and the final one with *Collier’s*.

All three are in the present collection: *A Man Called Spade*, *Too Many I have Lived*, and *They Can Only Hang You Once*. The tales are crisp, efficient, and swift-moving.

The other stories assembled here demonstrate Hammett’s bold experimentation with language and viewpoint. Compare the fussy, ornate narration in *A Man Named Thin* (featuring a poet-detective) with the crude, uneducated narration of the young boxer in *His Brother’s Keeper*. Both are told first-person, but they are leagues apart. Hammett tackles a female point of view in the superbly written *Ruffian’s Wife*, and brings off a neat twist ending in *The Second-Story Angel* (note the understated humour in this one).

Both *Afraid of a Gun* and *The Man Who Killed Dan Odams* are set far from his usual San Francisco locale and demonstrate the wide range of Hammett’s fiction. *Gun* takes place in the high mountain country, and *Dan Odams* is a semi-modern Western set in Montana. They represent Hammett in top form.

While the majority of pulp writers in the twenties and thirties were grinding out stories for money, Hammett worked as a dedicated artist. He gave each story the best of himself, labouring over each sentence, each turn of phrase. And he was constantly seeking new ideas and new characters. His protagonist in *The Assistant Murderer* is a prime example. With Alec Rush, the author created a detective described as incredibly ugly, a radical departure from the usual magazine hero. Hammett was striking out in a fresh direction with this story, which involves a complex case solved not by Rush but by the killer’s confession.

The Assistant Murderer was written just before Hammett temporarily left Black Mask for his unsuccessful attempt at a career in advertising. One feels that had he remained with the magazine, Hammett might well have written more stories featuring this offbeat detective.

During the pulp era, editors constantly called for “Action! More action!” Hammett decided to see just how much action he could pack into a single novella. Originally printed in *Argosy All-Story Weekly*, the title story of this collection, *Nightmare Town*, is a *tour de force* in sustained violence. The hero wields an ebony walking stick with devastating effectiveness, cracking skulls and breaking bones in the finest pulp tradition.

An important contribution in *Nightmare Town* is *The First Thin Man*, which here achieves its first book printing. This early version of 1930 stands in sharp contrast to the novel Hammett eventually finished for Alfred A. Knopf three years later, with vast differences in basic approach, mood, plot, and tone. A call from Hollywood and the promise of substantial film money had caused Hammett to abandon the original manuscript at sixty-five typed pages. When he returned to it three years later, John Guild, the Op-like working detective – dedicated, stoic, close-mouthed – was replaced by Nick Charles, a hard-drinking, party-loving cynic, an ex-crime solver with no desire to solve more crimes; he just wanted

another martini. It was Nick's wife, Nora (modelled directly on Lillian Hellman), who badgered him into becoming a detective again to solve the case of the missing thin man.

Dashiell Hammett had undergone a major life change between 1930 and 1933, and Nick Charles marked the end of Hammett's career as a novelist. He had written himself into a blind corner and no longer believed that the criminal ills of society could be dealt with on a one-to-one basis. In Hammett's view, a lone detective (such as Sam Spade or John Guild) could do nothing to stem the mounting tide of societal corruption. The detective's code of personal honour could have no effect on a dishonourable world. Hammett's core bitterness and cynicism, reflected in a less obvious form in his earlier work, had now taken centre stage. He was no longer able to believe in heroes. Even plainspoken, down-to-earth, working heroes.

In 1951, after he was sentenced for contempt because he refused to name names before a federal judge in New York, Hammett spent five months in jail in defence of his political beliefs. But he never believed in political violence and had been shocked when Senator Joseph McCarthy asked him if he had ever engaged in an act of sabotage against the United States. Having served his country in two world wars as an enlisted soldier, he loved America, even as he despised its capitalist politics.

Hammett's final years, following his release from prison, were sad ones. His name was removed from a film based on one of his characters; his radio shows were cancelled; and a scheduled collection of his fiction was dropped by the publisher. He spent most of his last decade isolated in a small gatekeeper's cottage in Katonah, New York. On two occasions shots were fired through his front windows, but Hammett bore his exile with stoic acceptance.

Sick and frail, blacklisted as a political pariah, unable to write, and hounded by the IRS for taxes on money he no longer earned, Samuel Dashiell Hammett died of lung cancer in 1961, at the age of sixty-six.

He considered himself a literary failure, but, as this book helps prove, he was anything but that. No other writer since Edgar Allan Poe has exerted a greater influence on mystery fiction. His art was timeless and his work has not dated. In the genre of detective fiction, he was a master.

That mastery is evident in *Nightmare Town*, the largest collection of his shorter works and by far the most comprehensive.

WILLIAM F. NOLAN
West Hills, California 1999

TOM, DICK, OR HARRY

I don't know whether Frank Toplin was tall or short. All of him I ever got a look at was his round head – naked scalp and wrinkled face, both of them the colour and texture of Manila paper – propped up on white pillows in a big four-poster bed. The rest of him was buried under a thick pile of bedding.

Also in the room that first time were his wife, a roly-poly woman with lines in a plump white face like scratches in ivory; his daughter Phyllis, a smart popular-member-of-the-younger-set type; and the maid who had opened the door for me, a big-boned blond girl in apron and cap.

I had introduced myself as a representative of the North American Casualty Company's San Francisco office, which I was in a way. There was no immediate profit in admitting I was a Continental Detective Agency sleuth, just now in the casualty company's hire, so I held back that part.

"I want a list of the stuff you lost," I told Toplin, "but first –"

"Stuff?" Toplin's yellow sphere of a skull bobbed off the pillows, and he wailed to the ceiling, "A hundred thousand dollars if a nickel, and he calls it stuff!"

Mrs. Toplin pushed her husband's head down on the pillows again with a short-fingered fat hand.

"Now, Frank, don't get excited," she soothed him.

Phyllis Toplin's dark eyes twinkled, and she winked at me.

The man in bed turned his face to me again, smiled a bit shame-facedly, and chuckled.

"Well, if you people want to call your seventy-five-thousand-dollar loss stuff, I guess I can stand it for twenty-five thousand."

"So it adds up to a hundred thousand?" I asked.

"Yes. None of them were insured to their full value, and some weren't insured at all."

That was very usual. I don't remember ever having anybody admit that anything stolen from them was insured to the hilt – always it was half, or at most, three-quarters covered by the policy.

"Suppose you tell me exactly what happened," I suggested, and added, to head off another speech that usually comes, "I know you've already told the police the whole thing, but I'll have to have it from you."

"Well, we were getting dressed to go to the Bauers' last night. I brought my wife's and daughter's jewellery – the valuable pieces – home with me from the safe-deposit box. I had just got my coat on and had called to them to hurry up when the doorbell rang."

"What time was this?"

"Just about half-past eight. I went out of this room into the sitting-room across the passageway and was putting some cigars in my case when Hilda" – nodding at the blond maid – "came walking into the room, backward. I started to ask her if she had gone crazy, walking around backward, when I saw the robber. He –"

"Just a moment." I turned to the maid. "What happened when you answered the bell?"

"Why, I opened the door, of course, and this man was standing there, and he had a revolver in his hand, and he stuck it against my – my stomach, and pushed me back into the room where Mr. Toplin was, and he shot Mr. Toplin, and –"

"When I saw him and the revolver in his hand" – Toplin took the story away from his servant – "it gave me a fright, sort of, and I let my cigar case slip out of my hand. Trying to catch it again – no sense in ruining good cigars even if you are being robbed – he must have thought I was trying to get a gun or something. Anyway, he shot me in the leg. My wife and Phyllis came running in when they heard the shot and he pointed the revolver at them, took all their jewels, and had them empty my pockets. Then he made them drag me back into Phyllis's room, into the closet, and he locked us all in there. And mind you, he didn't say a word all the time, not a word – just made motions with his gun and his left hand."

"How bad did he bang your leg?"

"Depends on whether you want to believe me or the doctor. He says it's nothing much. Just a scratch, he says, but it's my leg that's shot, not his!"

"Did he say anything when you opened the door?" I asked the maid.

"No, sir."

"Did any of you hear him say anything while he was here?"

None of them had.

"What happened after he locked you in the closet?"

"Nothing that we knew about," Toplin said, "until McBirney and a policeman came and let us out."

"Who's McBirney?"

"The janitor."

"How'd he happen along with a policeman?"

"He heard the shot and came upstairs just as the robber was starting down after leaving here. The robber turned around and ran upstairs, then into an apartment on the seventh floor, and stayed there – keeping the woman who lives there, a Miss Eveleth, quiet with his revolver – until he got a chance to sneak out and get away. He knocked her unconscious before he left, and – and that's all. McBirney called the police right after he saw the robber, but they got here too late to be any good."

"How long were you in the closet?"

"Ten minutes – maybe fifteen."

"What sort of looking man was the robber?"

"Short and thin and –"

"How short?"

"About your height, or maybe shorter."

"About five feet five or six, say? What would he weigh?"

"Oh, I don't know – maybe a hundred and fifteen or twenty. He was kind of puny."

"How old?"

"Not more than twenty-two or -three."

"Oh, Papa," Phyllis objected, "he was thirty, or near it!"

"What do you think?" I asked Mrs. Toplin.

"Twenty-five, I'd say."

"And you?" to the maid.

"I don't know exactly, sir, but he wasn't very old."

"Light or dark?"

"He was light," Toplin said. "He needed a shave and his beard was yellowish."

"More of a light brown," Phyllis amended.

"Maybe, but it was light."

"What colour eyes?"

"I don't know. He had a cap pulled down over them. They looked dark, but that might have been because they were in the shadow."

"How would you describe the part of his face you could see?"

"Pale, and kind of weak-looking – small chin. But you couldn't see much of his face; he had his coat collar up and his cap pulled down."

"How was he dressed?"

"A blue cap pulled down over his eyes, a blue suit, black shoes, and black gloves – silk ones."

"Shabby or neat?"

"Kind of cheap-looking clothes, awfully wrinkled."

"What sort of gun?"

Phyllis Toplin put in her word ahead of her father.

"Papa and Hilda keep calling it a revolver, but it was an automatic a thirty-eight."

"Would you folks know him if you saw him again?"

"Yes," they agreed.

I cleared a space on the bedside table and got out a pencil and paper.

"I want a list of what he got, with as thorough a description of each piece as possible, and the price you paid for it, where you bought it, and when." I got the list half an hour later.

"Do you know the number of Miss Eveleth's apartment?" I asked.

"702, two floors above."

I went up there and rang the bell. The door was opened by a girl of twenty-something, whose nose was hidden under adhesive tape. She had nice clear hazel eyes, dark hair, and athletics written all over her.

"Miss Eveleth?"

"Yes."

"I'm from the insurance company that insured the Toplin jewellery, and I'm looking for information about the robbery."

She touched her bandaged nose and smiled ruefully.

"This is some of my information."

"How did it happen?"

"A penalty of femininity. I forgot to mind my own business. But what you want, I suppose, is what I know about the scoundrel. The doorbell rang a few minutes before nine last night and when I opened the door he was there. As soon as I got the door opened he jabbed a pistol at me and said, 'Inside, kid!'

"I let him in with no hesitancy at all; I was quite instantaneous about it and he kicked the door to behind him.

"Where's the fire escape?' he asked.

"The fire escape doesn't come to any of my windows, and I told him so, but he wouldn't take my word for it. He drove me ahead of him to each of the windows; but of course he didn't find his fire escape, and he got peevish about it, as if it were my fault. I didn't like some of the things he called me, and he was such a little half-portion of a man so I tried to take him in hand. But – well, man is still the dominant animal so far as I'm concerned. In plain American, he busted me in the nose and left me where I fell. I was dazed, though not quite all the way out, and when I got up he had gone. I ran out into the corridor then, and found some policemen on the stairs. I sobbed out my pathetic little tale to them and they told me of the Toplin robbery. Two of them came back here with me and searched the apartment. I hadn't seen him actually leave, and they thought he might be foxy enough or desperate enough to jump into a closet and stay there until the coast was clear. But they didn't find him here."

"How long do you think it was after he knocked you down that you ran out into the corridor?"

"Oh, it couldn't have been five minutes. Perhaps only half that time."

"What did Mr. Robber look like?"

"Small, not quite so large as I; with a couple of days' growth of light hair on his face; dressed in shabby blue clothes, with black cloth gloves."

"How old?"

"Not very. His beard was thin, patchy, and he had a boyish face."

"Notice his eyes?"

"Blue; his hair, where it showed under the edge of his cap, was very light yellow, almost white."

"What sort of voice?"

"Very deep bass, though he may have been putting that on."

"Know him if you'd see him again?"

"Yes, indeed!" She put a gentle finger on her bandaged nose. "My nose would know, as the ads say, anyway!"

From Miss Eveleth's apartment I went down to the office on the first floor, where I found McBirney, the janitor, and his wife, who managed the apartment building. She was a scrawny little woman with the angular mouth and nose of a nagger; he was big, broad-shouldered, with sandy hair and moustache, good-humoured, shiftless red face, and genial eyes of a pale and watery blue.

He drawled out what he knew of the looting.

"I was fixin' a spigot on the fourth floor when I heard the shot. I went up to see what was the matter, an' just as I got far enough up the front stairs to see the Toplins' door, the fella came out. We seen each other at the same time, an' he aims his gun at me. There's a lot o' things I might of done, but what I did do was to duck down an' get my head out o' range. I heard him run upstairs, an' I got up just in time to see him make the turn between the fifth and sixth floors.

"I didn't go after him. I didn't have a gun or nothin', an' I figured we had him cooped. A man could get out o' this buildin' to the roof of the next from the fourth floor, an' maybe from the fifth, but not from any above that; an' the Toplins' apartment is on the fifth. I figured we had this fella. I could stand in front of the elevator an' watch both the front an' back stairs; an' I rang for the elevator, an' told

Ambrose, the elevator boy, to give the alarm an' run outside an' keep his eye on the fire escape until the police came.

"The missus came up with my gun in a minute or two, an' told me that Martinez – Ambrose's brother, who takes care of the switchboard an' the front door – was callin' the police. I could see both stairs plain, an' the fella didn't come down them; an' it wasn't more'n a few minutes before the police – a whole pack of 'em – came from the Richmond Station. Then we let the Toplins out of the closet where they were, an' started to search the buildin'. An' then Miss Eveleth came runnin' down the stairs, her face an' dress all bloody, an' told about him bein' in her apartment; so we were pretty sure we'd land him. But we didn't. We searched every apartment in the buildin', but didn't find hide nor hair of him."

"Of course you didn't!" Mrs. McBirney said unpleasantly. "But if you had –"

"I know," the janitor said with the indulgent air of one who has learned to take his pannings as an ordinary part of married life, "if I'd been a hero an' grabbed him, an' got myself all mussed up. Well, I ain't foolish like old man Toplin, gettin' himself plugged in the foot, or Blanche Eveleth, gettin' her nose busted. I'm a sensible man that knows when he's licked – an' I ain't jumpin' at no guns!"

"No! You're not doing anything that –"

This Mr. and Mrs. stuff wasn't getting me anywhere, so I cut in with a question to the woman. "Who is the newest tenant you have?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Jerald – they came the day before yesterday."

"What apartment?"

"704 – next door to Miss Eveleth."

"Who are these Jeralds?"

"They come from Boston. He told me he came out here to open a branch of a manufacturing company. He's a man of at least fifty, thin and dyspeptic – looking."

"Just him and his wife?"

"Yes. She's poorly too – been in a sanatorium for a year or two."

"Who's the next newest tenant?"

"Mr. Heaton, in 535. He's been here a couple of weeks, but he's down in Los Angeles right now. He went away three days ago and said he would be gone for ten or twelve days."

"What does he look like and what does he do?"

"He's with a theatrical agency and he's kind of fat and red-faced."

"Who's the next newest?"

"Miss Eveleth. She's been here about a month."

"And the next?"

"The Wageners in 923. They've been here going on two months."

"What are they?"

"He's a retired real-estate agent. The others are his wife and son Jack – a boy of maybe nineteen. I see him with Phyllis Toplin a lot."

"How long have the Toplins been here?"

"It'll be two years next month."

I turned from Mrs. McBirney to her husband.

"Did the police search all these people's apartments?"

"Yeah," he said. "We went into every room, every alcove, an' every closet from cellar to roof."

"Did you get a good look at the robber?"

"Yeah. There's a light in the hall outside of the Toplins' door, an' it was shinin' full on his face when I saw him."

"Could he have been one of your tenants?"

"No, he couldn't."

"Know him if you saw him again?"

"You bet."

"What did he look like?"

"A little runt, a light-complected youngster of twenty-three or -four in an old blue suit."

"Can I get hold of Ambrose and Martinez – the elevator and door boys who were on duty last night – now?"

The janitor looked at his watch.

"Yeah. They ought to be on the job now. They come on at two."

I went out into the lobby and found them together, matching nickels.

They were brothers, slim, bright-eyed Filipino boys. They didn't add much to my dope.

Ambrose had come down to the lobby and told his brother to call the police as soon as McBirney had given him his orders, and then he had to beat it out the back door to take a plant on the fire escapes. The fire escapes ran down the back and one side wall. By standing a little off from the corner of those walls, the Filipino had been able to keep his eyes on both of them, as well as on the back door.

There was plenty of illumination, he said, and he could see both fire escapes all the way to the roof, and he had seen nobody on them.

Martinez had given the police a rap on the phone and had then watched the front door and the foot of the front stairs. He had seen nothing.

I had just finished questioning the Filipinos when the street door opened and two men came in. I knew one of them: Bill Garren, a police detective on the Pawnshop Detail. The other was a small blond youth all flossy in pleated pants, short, square-shouldered coat, and patent-leather shoes with fawn spats to match his hat and gloves. His face wore a sullen pout. He didn't seem to like being with Garren.

"What are you up to around here?" the detective hailed me.

"The Toplin doings for the insurance company," I explained.

"Getting anywhere?" he wanted to know.

"About ready to make a pinch," I said, not altogether in earnest and not altogether joking.

"The more the merrier," he grinned. "I've already made mine," nodding at the dressy youth. "Come on upstairs with us."

The three of us got into the elevator and Ambrose carried us to the fifth floor. Before pressing the Toplin bell, Garren gave me what he had.

"This lad tried to soak a ring in a Third Street shop a little while ago – an emerald and diamond ring that looks like one of the Toplin lot. He's doing the clam now; he hasn't said a word – yet. I'm going to show him to these people; then I'm going to take him down to the Hall of Justice and get words out of him – words that fit together in nice sentences and everything!"

The prisoner looked sullenly at the floor and paid no attention to this threat. Garren rang the bell and the maid Hilda opened the door. Her eyes widened when she saw the dressy boy, but she didn't say anything as she led us into the sitting-room, where Mrs. Toplin and her daughter were. They looked up at us.

"Hello, Jack!" Phyllis greeted the prisoner.

"Lo, Phyl," he mumbled, not looking at her.

"Among friends, huh? Well, what's the answer?" Garren demanded of the girl.

She put her chin in the air and although her face turned red, she looked haughtily at the police detective.

"Would you mind removing your hat?" she asked.

Bill isn't a bad bimbo, but he hasn't any meekness. He answered her by tilting his hat over one eye and turning to her mother.

"Ever see this lad before?"

"Why, certainly!" Mrs. Toplin exclaimed. "That's Mr. Wagener who lives upstairs."

"Well," said Bill, "Mr. Wagener was picked up in a hock shop trying to get rid of this ring." He fished a gaudy green and white ring from his pocket. "Know it?"

"Certainly!" Mrs. Toplin said, looking at the ring. "It belongs to Phyllis, and the robber –" Her mouth dropped open as she began to understand. "How could Mr. Wagener –?"

"Yes, how?" Bill repeated.

The girl stepped between Garren and me, turning her back on him to face me. "I can explain everything," she announced.

That sounded too much like a movie subtitle to be very promising, but –

"Go ahead," I encouraged her.

"I found that ring in the passageway near the front door after the excitement was over. The robber must have dropped it. I didn't say anything to Papa and Mamma about it, because I thought nobody would ever know the difference, and it was insured, so I thought I might as well sell it and be in that much money. I asked Jack last night if he could sell it for me and he said he knew just how to go about it.

He didn't have anything to do with it outside of that, but I did think he'd have sense enough not to try to pawn it right away!"

She looked scornfully at her accomplice.

"See what you've done!" she accused him.

He fidgeted and pouted at his feet.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" Bill Garren said sourly. "That's a nifty! Did you ever hear the one about the two Irishmen that got in the Y.W.C.A. by mistake?"

She didn't say whether she had heard it or not.

"Mrs. Toplin," I asked, "making allowances for the different clothes and the unshaven face, could this lad have been the robber?"

She shook her head with emphasis. "No! He could not!"

"Set your prize down, Bill," I suggested, "and let's go over in a corner and whisper things at each other."

"Right."

He dragged a heavy chair to the centre of the floor, sat Wagener on it, anchored him there with handcuffs – not exactly necessary, but Bill was grouchy at not getting his prisoner identified as the robber – and then he and I stepped out into the passageway. We could keep an eye on the sitting-room from there without having our low-voiced conversation overheard.

"This is simple," I whispered into his big red ear. "There are only five ways to figure the lay. First: Wagener stole the stuff for the Toplins. Second: the Toplins framed the robbery themselves and got Wagener to peddle it. Third: Wagener and the girl engineered the deal without the old folks being in on it. Fourth: Wagener pulled it on his own hook and the girl is covering him up. Fifth: she told us the truth. None of them explains why your little playmate should have been dumb enough to flash the ring downtown this morning, but that can't be explained by any system. Which of the five do you favour?"

"I like 'em all," he grumbled. "But what I like most is that I've got this baby right – got him trying to pass a hot ring. That suits me fine. You do the guessing. I don't ask for any more than I've got."

"It doesn't irritate me any either," I agreed. "The way it stands the insurance company can welsh on the policies – but I'd like to smoke it out a little further, far enough to put away anybody who has been trying to run a hooligan on the North American. We'll clean up all we can on this kid, stow him in the can, and then see what further damage we can do."

"All right," Garren said. "Suppose you get hold of the janitor and that Eveleth woman while I'm showing the boy to old man Toplin and getting the maid's opinion."

I nodded and went out into the corridor, leaving the door unlocked behind me. I took the elevator to the seventh floor and told Ambrose to get hold of McBirney and send him to the Toplins' apartment. Then I rang Blanche Eveleth's bell.

"Can you come downstairs for a minute or two?" I asked her. "We've a prize who might be your friend of last night."

"Will I?" She started toward the stairs with me. "And if he's the right one, can I pay him back for my bartered beauty?"

"You can," I promised. "Go as far as you like, so you don't maul him too badly to stand trial."

I took her into the Toplins' apartment without ringing the bell, and found everybody in Frank Toplin's bedroom. A look at Garren's glum face told me that neither the old man nor the maid had given him a nod on the prisoner.

I put the finger on Jack Wagener. Disappointment came into Blanche Eveleth's eyes. "You're wrong," she said. "That's not he."

Garren scowled at her. It was a pipe that if the Toplins were tied up with young Wagener, they wouldn't identify him as the robber. Bill had been counting on that identification coming from the two outsiders – Blanche Eveleth and the janitor – and now one of them had flopped.

The other one rang the bell just then and the maid brought him in.

I pointed at Jack Wagener, who stood beside Garren staring sullenly at the floor.

"Know him, McBirney?"

"Yeah, Mr. Wagener's son, Jack."

"Is he the man who shooed you away with a gun last night?"

McBirney's watery eyes popped in surprise.

"No," he said with decision, and began to look doubtful.

"In an old suit, cap pulled down, needing a shave – could it have been him?"

"No-o-o-o," the janitor drawled, "I don't think so, though it – You know, now that I come to think about it, there was something familiar about that fella, an' maybe – By cracky, I think maybe you're right – though I couldn't exactly say for sure."

"That'll do!" Garren grunted in disgust.

An identification of the sort the janitor was giving isn't worth a damn one way or the other. Even positive and immediate identifications aren't always the goods. A lot of people who don't know any better – and some who do, or should – have given circumstantial evidence a bad name. It is misleading sometimes. But for genuine, undiluted, pre-war untrustworthiness, it can't come within gunshot of human testimony. Take any man you like – unless he is the one in a hundred thousand with a mind trained to keep things straight, and not always even then – get him excited, show him something, give him a few hours to think it over and talk it over, and then ask him about it. It's dollars to doughnuts that you'll have a hard time finding any connection between what he saw and what he says he saw. Like this McBirney – another hour and he'd be ready to gamble his life on Jack Wagener's being the robber.

Garren wrapped his fingers around the boy's arm and started for the door.

"Where to, Bill?" I asked.

"Up to talk to his people. Coming along?"

"Stick around a while," I invited. "I'm going to put on a party. But first, tell me, did the coppers who came here when the alarm was turned in do a good job?"

"I didn't see it," the police detective said. "I didn't get here until the fireworks were pretty well over, but I understand the boys did all that could be expected of them."

I turned to Frank Toplin. I did my talking to him chiefly because we – his wife and daughter, the maid, the janitor, Blanche Eveleth, Garren and his prisoner, and I – were grouped around the old man's bed and by looking at him I could get a one-eyed view of everybody else.

"Somebody has been kidding me somewhere," I began my speech. "If all the things I've been told about this job are right, then so is Prohibition. Your stories don't fit together, not even almost. Take the bird who stuck you up. He seems to have been pretty well acquainted with your affairs. It might be luck that he hit your apartment at a time when all of your jewellery was on hand, instead of another apartment, or your apartment at another time. But I don't like luck. I'd rather figure that he knew what he was doing. He nicked you for your pretties, and then he galloped up to Miss Eveleth's apartment. He may have been about to go downstairs when he ran into McBirney, or he may not. Anyway, he went upstairs, into Miss Eveleth's apartment, looking for a fire escape. Funny, huh? He knew enough about the place to make a push-over out of the stick-up, but he didn't know there were no fire escapes on Miss Eveleth's side of the building.

"He didn't speak to you or to McBirney, but he talked to Miss Eveleth, in a bass voice. A very, very deep voice. Funny, huh? From Miss Eveleth's apartment he vanished with every exit watched. The police must have been here before he left her apartment and they would have blocked the outlets first thing, whether McBirney and Ambrose had already done that or not. But he got away. Funny, huh? He wore a wrinkled suit, which might have been taken from a bundle just before he went to work, and he was a small man. Miss Eveleth isn't a small woman, but she would be a small man. A guy with a suspicious disposition would almost think Blanche Eveleth was the robber."

Frank Toplin, his wife, young Wagener, the janitor, and the maid were gaping at me. Garren was sizing up the Eveleth girl with narrowed eyes, while she glared white-hot at me. Phyllis Toplin was looking at me with a contemptuous sort of pity for my feeble-mindedness.

Bill Garren finished his inspection of the girl and nodded slowly.

"She could get away with it," he gave his opinion, "indoors and if she kept her mouth shut."

"Exactly," I said.

"Exactly, my eye!" Phyllis Toplin exploded. "Do you two correspondence-school detectives think we wouldn't know the difference between a man and a woman dressed in man's clothes? He had a day or two's growth of hair on his face – real hair, if you know what I mean. Do you think he could have fooled us with false whiskers? This happened, you know, it's not in a play!"

The others stopped gaping, and heads bobbed up and down.

"Phyllis is right." Frank Toplin backed up his offspring. "He was a man – no woman dressed like one."

His wife, the maid, and the janitor nodded vigorous endorsements.

But I'm a bull-headed sort of bird when it comes to going where the evidence leads. I spun to face Blanche Eveleth.

"Can you add anything to the occasion?" I asked her.

She smiled very sweetly at me and shook her head.

"All right, bum," I said. "You're pinched. Let's go."

Then it seemed she could add something to the occasion. She had something to say, quite a few things to say, and they were all about me. They weren't nice things. In anger her voice was shrill, and just now she was madder than you'd think anybody could get on short notice. I was sorry for that. This job had run along peacefully and gently so far, hadn't been marred by any rough stuff, had been almost ladylike in every particular; and I had hoped it would go that way to the end. But the more she screamed at me the nastier she got. She didn't have any words I hadn't heard before, but she fitted them together in combinations that were new to me. I stood as much of it as I could.

Then I knocked her over with a punch in the mouth.

"Here! Here!" Bill Garren yelled, grabbing my arm.

"Save your strength, Bill," I advised him, shaking his hand off and going over to yank the Eveleth person up from the floor. "Your gallantry does you credit, but I think you'll find Blanche's real name is Tom, Dick, or Harry."

I hauled her (or him, whichever you like) to his or her feet and asked it: "Feel like telling us about it?"

For answer I got a snarl.

"All right," I said to the others, "in the absence of authoritative information I'll give you my dope. If Blanche Eveleth could have been the robber except for the beard and the difficulty of a woman passing for a man, why couldn't the robber have been Blanche Eveleth before and after the robbery by using a – what do you call it? – strong depilatory on his face, and a wig? It's hard for a woman to masquerade as a man, but there are lots of men who can get away with the feminine role. Couldn't this bird, after renting his apartment as Blanche Eveleth and getting everything lined up, have stayed in his apartment for a couple of days letting his beard grow? Come down and knock the job over? Beat it upstairs, get the hair off his face, and get into his female rig in, say, fifteen minutes? My guess is that he could. And he had fifteen minutes. I don't know about the smashed nose. Maybe he stumbled going up the stairs and had to twist his plans to account for it – or maybe he smacked himself intentionally."

My guesses weren't far off, though his name was Fred – Frederick Agnew Rudd. He was known in Toronto, having done a stretch in the Ontario Reformatory as a boy of nineteen, caught shoplifting in his she-make-up. He wouldn't come through, and we never turned up his gun or the blue suit, cap, and black gloves, although we found a cavity in his mattress where he had stuffed them out of the police's sight until later that night, when he could get rid of them. But the Toplin sparklers came to light piece by piece when we had plumbers take apart the drains and radiators in apartment 702.

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| THE SECOND-STORY ANGEL | |
| AFRAID OF A GUN | |
| TOM, DICK, OR HARRY | |
| ONE HOUR | |
| Two | |
| Three | |
| WHO KILLED BOB TEAL? | |
| A MAN CALLED SPADE | |
| TOO MANY HAVE LIVED | |
| THEY CAN ONLY HANG YOU ONCE | |
| A MAN NAMED THIN | |
| THE FIRST THIN MAN | |
| Two | |
| Three | |
| Four | |
| Six | |
| Seven | |
| Eight | |
| Nine | |