

DOUBLED IN DEATH

Jack Storm

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The clock on the dashboard of the radio car indicated two ten when that scream shrilled above the drenching rain.

Patrolman Larry Ross, at the wheel, and Bill Forbes, his mate, jerked to attention. Again the yell split the air. Ross gave the wheel of the radio car a hard yank, turned around in the middle of the block and headed for the avenue. As he turned the corner, Forbes gave a cry of warning.

Half a block down the avenue, a car was slowly rolling along, near the curb. Two men were running from the lighted entrance to old Matt Lynch's antique shop, Lynch himself came into view, waving his hands. His mouth was wide open, but no sound emerged from it. The two gunmen, heedless of the onrushing radio car, stopped long enough to pump five bullets into Matt Lynch's scrawny frame. He reeled like a top and hit the pavement. The killers jumped into the moving car, and it rapidly picked up speed.

"Let's go!" Ross snapped. "By the looks of Lynch I don't think we can help him. Anyway there comes Anderson on the beat."

"Yeah!" Forbes had his gun out. "We'll follow that bus, and Larry chase 'em to Japan if you have to. They never gave Lynch a break."

The bandit car swerved around a corner on two wheels, narrowly missed climbing the curb and straightened out with a shrieking of tires. Ross took the corner just as fast but far more expertly. Forbes shoved his head out of the window, leveled his gun and fired twice. The rear window of the murder car showed streaks of cracked glass.

"Damn!" Forbes grated. "It's got bulletproof glass, and we're traveling too fast for me to spot the tires."

"Aim for the gas tank," Ross ground out.

A streak of jagged flame lanced out from the bandit car and a bullet whined by Forbes' head. He didn't duck. Instead he drew a bead on the car and let go four times. Ross cut in the siren and its wail made a bedlam of the night, punctured by the crash of guns from Forbes and the murder car.

Suddenly the bandits seemed to realize that the smaller, faster radio car would soon overtake them. The driver slammed on brakes, turned crazily and headed down a side street that was little more than an alley. There was just room enough for one car and he was traveling against the one-way sign.

"We'll bottle 'em up here." Ross gloated. "If they turn right, at the end of the alley, it'll be dead end, and we'll have 'em."

Forbes stopped shooting, ejected fresh slugs from his Sam Browne belt and began stuffing them into the hot service pistol.

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The radio car was racing down the narrow street, its siren making a devil's din because of the closeness of the buildings. Then something dark shot out from a doorway. Ross' foot came down at the brake with all the pressure he could exert. At the same time he gave the wheel a savage wrench. He knew what would happen. There wasn't a chance of missing a bad crash, but someone had stepped out in front of the car. Better to risk injury to himself and Forbes than to kill a pedestrian.

The radio coupe careened crazily. There was a thump that made Ross wince in horror. The same dark blob that had stepped in front of the car was hurled fifteen feet away. Then a solid brick wall loomed up.

"Duck!" Ross howled and threw up his arms for protection. He heard the crash as fenders crumpled and the radiator smashed to bits. The motor of the coupe came plummeting up almost into Ross' lap. Forbes, wholly unprepared for the crash, jolted forward. He gave a sickening cry and slid to the floor. His head was bloody as it rested against the seat.

Ross jerked down the door handle but got no results. The smash had jammed the door shut. He smelled gasoline and the horror of this new menace made him shiver. He tried the door beside Forbes, found that he could force it open by putting both feet against it. A tongue of flame licked at the battered radiator. Ross squirmed through the door, pulled it wider and hauled Forbes out.

By now the car was a raging inferno. The heat seared Ross' face and hands. He smelled his own hair burning. But he was safe, and Forbes was slung over one shoulder. He staggered about twenty feet from the blazing wreck and put Forbes down carefully.

"You O.K.?" he asked

"My leg . . . it's broken," Forbes groaned. "What happened?"

MEMORY returned with a rush. Ross peered around and saw a dark object a dozen yards away. He raced toward it, knelt and turned the limp form over. What he saw made him shiver. The object he had struck was a boy! At least it looked like a boy from the cut of the clothing and the general outline of the body. It was impossible to tell from the face. There just wasn't any!

The victim's clothing was drenched by the downpour. Ross slid a band under the cheap coat, ripped open the shirt and felt for a heartbeat. He didn't expect to find any; he was just going through the motions. Next he violated the regulations of the police rule book. He searched the pockets.

There was the usual junk a boy of about sixteen or seventeen carries around: a rusty knife, a few chunks of pool chalk, and tucked in a corner of the coat pocket, Ross found a cardboard match container. It was wet through. He opened it and his eyes grew wide. The matches were gone, but a one-hundred-dollar bill, carefully folded, was wedged into the container. The match case bore the crimson advertisement of the Superior Poolrooms.

More sirens renewed the din of a few moments before. Patrolmen were running down the alley-street. Ross, on a sudden inspiration, tucked the bill into his own pocket. Then a tornado of excitement descended on him, led by patrolmen and closely followed by a wild-eye Italian who gave Ross a violent shove out of the way.

"My boy!" he screamed. "Rocco my Rocco! He is dead! Dead!"

Ross gulped and felt a little giddy. He stepped over to the Italian and put a friendly hand on his shoulder.

"What's his full name?" he asked.

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"Rocco Rocco Marco my boy. He is dead Who did it? You are a policeman, Find out who killed my boy."

"Take it easy," Ross said, forcing his voice to a state of calmness. "Rocco stepped in front of my car. I tried to avoid him, but I couldn't. This damned alley isn't wide enough. We were chasing—"

Ross didn't get any further. The Italian suddenly leaped upon him, clawing, kicking, biting. He cursed Ross, cursed blue uniforms, cursed automobiles. Two patrolmen closed in, hauled him off and quieted him. A lieutenant climbed out of a squad car that had just pulled up. Ross raised his hand in a salute.

"It's an awful mess, sir," he said. "Forbes and I saw the murder of Matt Lynch on Sixteenth Street. We were chasing the killers. They turned into this street and we followed. Then that kid jumped out of nowhere. I tried to miss him, but you see how it was."

"I see," Lieutenant Brady nodded, "but it's going to make an awful smell, just the same. How is Forbes?"

"Broken leg," Ross said glumly. "I feel like the very devil, myself. If it was anything but a boy. He must have been deaf. The siren was screeching like mad."

"Better return to your precinct," Brady advised. "Make out a full report. Have one of the radio cars drive you."

Ross rode away to the shrieking yells of the boy's father. "I sue! I sue! My Rocco he is dead!"

"Yeah!" Ross said softly, "He'll sue all right. It's the finish of me, I guess."

"Aw, stop beefing," the driver said, "Anybody can see it wasn't your fault. All radio cars are insured, anyway. The company will make a settlement, and that's all there'll be to it."

Ross put his hand into his pocket, searching for a cigarette. His fingers encountered the one-hundred-dollar bill and the paper match container. He started! What was a sixteen-year-old boy doing with all that money and in one lump?

"Do me a favor," he said to the driver. "Roll over to Matt Lynch's place. I'd like to look it over. Got to make a full report."

The radio car slid to the curb. Ross elbowed his way through the curious crowd that had collected. Lynch's body lay as it had fallen, but a white-haired man was pressing a stethoscope against the exposed chest.

"He's dead never lived two seconds after those bullets struck him," he said.

Ross touched the doctor's arm and pointed to a heavy flannel cloth around Lynch's throat.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"I'm Dr. Loring office just up the street. Lynch was suffering from laryngitis. I gave him an ointment to smear on his throat and told him to tie a flannel cloth around it. Poor fellow a sore throat won't bother him again."

Ross frowned deeply and rubbed the back of his neck. Then he walked to the radio car and was whisked to the precinct.

COMPLICATIONS arose during the next several hours. For one thing, Ross' driving license was automatically suspended, and he was put back on a beat. The dead boy's father filed an enormous suit against the city, the police

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department and Patrolman Ross, personally.

"It's a tough break," the precinct captain told Ross.

"I know," Ross said soberly. "Captain do me a favor, will you? I know I'm back on the pavement and I'd like to be assigned to the beat in that vicinity. I'm not entirely satisfied with this mess."

The captain let loose a gasp of astonishment. "Just how, Ross? What do you mean?"

"Lynch Matt Lynch," Ross said, "was suffering from laryngitis so bad he couldn't talk above a whisper. He had been treated for it the same day he was killed. You can ask Forbes to back me up on this we heard a good load yell for help. There wasn't another soul around except Lynch and the murderers. I can't see those killers robbing Lynch's store, moving him down with lead and yelling for the cops while they did it, unless they had a reason. There simply wasn't anyone else to do the yelling. Lynch couldn't yell; it was a physical impossibility no matter how much he was scared."

Ross' skipper was a man of quick decisions. He nodded, warned Ross to go easy and to avoid Marco and his neighbors as much as possible.

THAT night Ross began pacing the beat. There was a poolroom about four blocks from the alley where he had crashed up. Ross walked into the place.

Someone shouted, "Murderer!" A man came shoving his way through the tables, shrieking curses on Ross. It was Marco, the father of the dead boy. Ross grabbed him, pushed him up against one of the tables and held him there until he quieted down. Max Gorbin, the owner of the poolroom, helped in calming the father. Gorbin was big, thickset and powerful.

"Listen, Marco," he said. "I been telling you it wasn't this cop's fault. Rocco should have looked where he was going. This cop didn't try to kill him."

Marco pulled himself free of Ross' grasp, muttered a strained apology and walked away.

"Thanks, Max," Ross told the poolroom owner. "Say, that boy of his worked here, didn't he?"

"Sure! Nice kid, too. I had him setting up pins in the alley upstairs and taking care of the tables down here. How'd you know that?"

Ross smiled. "He was carrying a lot of pool chalk on him and a package of matches advertising your place. Say, Max, you keep ginger ale on ice. Let's have a bottle."

Gorbin walked behind the bar where he served beer to his patrons. He open a bottle of ginger ale and passed it to Ross. The patrolman fumbled in his pocket, drew out the wadded one-hundred-dollar bill he had taken from the pocket of Marco's boy and threw it on the counter. Gorbin looked.

"What's the idea?" he demanded.

Ross took a swig of the soda. "Idea? It happens that bill is all I've got. If you can't change it, I'll have to owe you the nickel."

Gorbin picked up the bill, tuned to the cash register and rang up five cents. Ross raised himself on his toes and peered into the cash drawer. It was very well filled with currency. Gorbin counted out four twenties, a ten, a five,

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four ones and the necessary silver to make the change.

"You got a nerve spending a nickel and making me bust a century note," he said. "So happens business has been good, and I had the change. I'm no cheap skate, either, only I just don't make it a habit of giving a cop anything. Gets you in trouble if things go wrong. Don't worry about Marco, copper. I'll keep him cooled off."

Ross nodded, finished his drink and returned to his beat. Once out of sight of the poolroom he stopped under a street lamp, took out the bills Gorbin had given him and examined them intently. The four twenties were new and crisp. Their serial numbers were in rotation, something that rarely happened after currency had been passed around.

There was a bank, open until midnight, about two blocks off Ross' beat. He put in his duty call and hurried over to the bank. The night cashier looked over the bills.

"It is strange that you'd have received them in rotation like this. I think they could be checked because they are so new. The Federal Reserve would have a record of the bank to which they were sent. Want me to see if I can find out? Someone will be there."

Ross did, and twenty minutes later he was mighty glad of his hunch. The bills had been shipped to the Security National Bank and drawn out to the order of one Hugh Clayton, a wealthy manufacturer. And what made Ross gasp, was the fact that Clayton had drawn twenty-five thousand dollars all at one time from his personal account.

Ross left the bank, trying to figure out what it all meant. He looked up Hugh Clayton's address in a phone book. It was at the other side of town. If he went there, he'd be late on at least me duty call and he'd be required to give a reason for it. All this might turn into a fiasco of bewildering puzzles before he was finished.

ROSS hailed a taxi. He gave Hugh Clayton's address and was driven there quickly. It was a pretentious house. A man in a smoking jacket opened the door, saw the blue uniform and uttered a gasp of horror. He tried to close the door, but Ross' foot prevented that.

"Just a moment, Mr. Clayton," he said. "Can't you see I'm an officer?"

Clayton grew crimson. "I . . . I'm sorry. I . . . I thought you were just trying to force your way in. What do you want, officer? What's wrong?"

Ross walked into the living room. Clayton's wife stood in the center of it, her face ashen, her eyes brimming with terror. Ross laid his nightstick on a table and faced both of them.

"There's nothing half so wrong with me as there is with you. What's given both of you the jitters like this? And Mr. Clayton why did you draw twenty-five thousand dollars out of the bank six days ago?"

"Tell him, Hugh," Mrs. Clayton spoke in an agonized voice. "Tell him! Anything is better than this uncertainty."

Clayton mopped his face. "I . . . I don't know how to begin, officer. I well, my son was kidnaped eight days ago. I was ordered to pay a fifty-thousand-dollar ransom in two installments of twenty-five thousand each. I was told to spread these payments over a period of thirty days and my son would be held until the kidnapers proved to their own satisfaction that I had neither notified the police nor marked the currency with which I paid them. When the second installment was paid, my son would be freed. I know he's alive. I had a letter from him only this morning. I should have told the police. But he's my son I couldn't risk it. Now you seem to have found out yourself."

"Have you the note?" Ross asked. "The letter your son wrote? And any others he sent you?"

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Clayton nodded, walked over to a living-room table and took four letters from the drawer. He handed them to Ross. They were all written in the same hand.

"My son wrote them. I'm positive of that," Clayton said.

Ross put them into his pocket. "Forget that I ever came here," he said. "If the kidnapers contact you again, do as they order. Don't tell a soul about it."

"But, officer" Clayton grasped his arm "I . . . I don't see why they sent a patrolman. I thought detectives handled this sort of thing."

"I'm in disguise," Ross said with a grin. "Anyway, trust me."

He left the house, hailed another cab and had himself driven to headquarters. He slipped in through a side door, went to the police laboratories and had a twenty-minute talk with the scientist in charge. When Ross left, his face was grim.

He had missed one duty call, but that didn't worry him now. He could call in, report he'd been busy.

As he swung around a corner at the end of his beat, he saw Patrolman Hennessey walking up to the call box. Hennessey inserted his key into the door, pulled it open and a bedlam of fury broke forth. The call box ejected fire and death! Hennessey was blown back a dozen feet, and then crumpled into the gutter.

ROSS began running like mad toward him, saw a shadowy form emerge from a doorway and dart into an alley. Ross changed his tactics. He went in swift pursuit, drawing his gun as he raced. There was little doubt in his mind but that the explosive placed in that call box had been meant for him. By missing his duty call, he'd avoided a horrible death; but it had killed Hennessey. Ross' lips were tight, his face grim, as he rushed into the intense darkness of the alley.

As he reached the end of the alley, he saw his quarry, silhouetted by yellow light streaking down from a tenement above. Ross cut loose with two quick shots. The man stumbled, almost lost his balance and then plunged on. Ross came out of the mouth of the alley like a tornado. That fact probably saved his life once more, for the bomber was crouched in the gloom, waiting. His gun spat! A bullet whizzed by Ross' head and he made a flying leap for the protection of an ash box. Again the killer fired, and a chunk of wood chipped off the corner of the box.

Ross risked a quick look, drew down and sent two slugs hurtling at the man. He knew that he missed, but the killer was forced to duck back for safety, Ross came around the ash box in a furious charge. The killer heard him rushing in his direction. He stood up and Ross fired. The killer decided things were too hot for him. He wheeled and began running again, keeping close to the shadows of the big buildings so he'd be more of a difficult target.

Ross lost him for a moment and took advantage of the lull to reload his service pistol. The killer gave himself away a moment later by kicking a tin can and raising a metallic din. Ross was after him in a flash and got a glimpse of the man. He seemed to have a definite destination in mind for he ran straight, not the crooked winding path of a desperate man who sought only to get away.

The killer reached the back of a huge, ramshackle old warehouse. A small door at the back was wide open and he headed for it. Ross' jaws clamped shut. If he was fool enough to dive into that maw of darkness, he'd have him cold.

The fleeing man did just that. But as he crossed the cleared space in front of the door, Ross sent a bullet smashing toward him. The killer gave a yell of pain and fear. His foot caught on the single step of the doorway and he slid

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forward on his face. Ross felt the joy of triumph surge through him. He catapulted through that door and launched himself in a dive calculated to end as he fell on top of the killer. That happened as planned, but Ross didn't have a chance to close manacles around his prisoner's wrists. For he heard footsteps behind him and before he could turn and fight, the cold muzzle of a gun was thrust against his head.

"Just stay where you are," someone hissed softly. "Let that roscoe drop out of your hand. One phony stunt and you get it."

Ross groaned and let the gun fall. As he stood up, the man whom he had been chasing rose to his feet and laughed harshly.

"Boy, am I smart," he gloated. "I led him right here. Wasn't that slide I took the real goods though? This poor fool of a copper thought he'd plugged me."

"You're a nitwit," the unseen leader snarled. "You should have blasted his head off with that bomb I gave you. What happened?"

The slender killer shrugged. "This copper was late on his ring and another comes along. see? When he goes to put in his call, I knew he'd be blasted to pieces; so I was just goin' to yell for help and get him away from the call box when Ross comes runnin' around the corner. So I just let it go at that. Man, you should have seen that bomb go off. It was a honey!"

"One cop less is some satisfaction," the leader snapped. "This time I'll handle Ross myself. You guys get your guns ready. We're going to plank him up against that farther wall and shoot him down. They'll think he chased the guy who put that bomb in the call box and got himself plugged for his trouble."

Ross felt sweat roll down his face. He'd never been so close to death.

"Keep your hands shoulder high," the leader warned in a soft voice. "Now walk over to that wall. Walk slow and easy. Just even start to turn your head and I'll blow it off!"

Ross began moving very slowly, "You're afraid to let me see your ugly mug, eh? Afraid I might know you?"

"Shut up!" came the savage retort, "or I'll work over you with a gun butt. Line up against the wall and put the palms of your hands against it. Greg, turn use. A small door at the back was wide open and he headed for it. Ross' jaws clamped shut. If he was fool enough to dive into that maw of darkness, he'd have him cold.

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Lights were turned on. One of the three killers closed the door of the warehouse. Then he ran across the huge bare floor to line himself up beside his companions in crime. All three men sighted their guns! The leader spoke:

"When I give the word, shoot—and keep on shooting so we're sure this copper is stone dead. He must not live even ten seconds after help comes, because he might talk. Ready?"

ROSS, facing the wall, saw exposed electric-light wiring run two inches from his upraised hands. The wires were thin, held to the wall by cheap porcelain clamps. Ross' right hand moved a trifle. His fingers touched the wires, and he gave them a jerk, using every ounce of strength he possessed.

There was a bluish flame near the ceiling as the wires parted. Then the warehouse was plunged in intense darkness. Ross let himself drop to the floor. The three guns blazed! Bullets slapped into the wall and the roar of the guns was increased tenfold by the echoes that rang through the empty building.

Ross scurried to one side and tried to penetrate the darkness for a glimpse of the killers. That proved to be impossible. The warehouse was not provided with windows and the gloom was as intense as that of a coal mine.

Ross crouched and listened. He could hear rasping breathing to his left. One of the thugs lurked in that direction. Quietly Ross bent down, untied his shoes and stepped out of them. On stockinged feet he made no more noise than a ghost.

"Greg," he hissed. "You there?"

The killer who lurked nearby was the man called Greg. Believing that Ross would never dare give himself away by speaking, he answered in sibilant hiss. Ross went into a dive before Greg finished speaking. His outstretched hand touched warm flesh. A gun went off and the bullet fanned his neck. He gripped the gun hand, turned it savagely and the weapon dropped to the floor. Ross buried his fist into Greg's stomach, felt around in the darkness for his head and his fingers closed around a thick shock of hair. Now he had a real target. He drew back his right fist and smashed home a terrific hook that crashed Greg full in the face and put him out of the picture completely.

There was a lancing jet of flame to Ross' left and the roar of a gun. Whoever fired was aiming in the general direction of the scuffle and he missed by a dozen feet.

Ross fumbled around, found Greg's gun and pulled back the hammer. He wondered where the third member of the grisly trio had gone. Unless he was crouched in some corner, waiting for a chance to get in a deadly bullet, he must have fled.

Ross slithered toward the wall. His foot struck a loose board and it creaked under his weight. Instantly a gun cracked, but Ross was ready this time. He fired directly into that jet of flame and drew a scream of agony, the sound of someone flailing around and then a groan.

Silence settled over the big warehouse, aggravated by dust that seeped down from the dirty walls and ceilings. Dust loosened by the concussion of gunfire.

Gently, Ross began negotiating his way toward the small rear exit. If the leader of the trio lurked in that vicinity, he was bound to draw his fire, but anything was better than this awful uncertainty. There was little chance of any help coming. The warehouse lay close to the pier and it was early morning. There were no tenements nearby, and no pedestrians would be walking this dismal section at such an hour.

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Then Ross heard stealthy footsteps. They were high above him and sounded as though the leader was sneaking down a stairway. Then Greg, the man he had slugged, suddenly came back to life. He groaned dismally and sat up. A flashlight broke through the darkness, swept across the floor and across Greg's form. He lay face down. His suit was dark and the collar pulled up as a result of his battle with Ross. The killer on the stairway made a natural mistake He thought this was Patrolman Ross.

"Take it, copper," he yelled.

Something hit the floor with a loud bang. A sheet of flame reached out suddenly and an explosion all but deafened Ross who was crouched in a corner fully forty feet away. The whole section of the warehouse caved in. Debris clattered down, huge beams smashed to the floor. Ross hastily covered his head with his arms and prayed silently. One beam landed within easy reach and threw up a cloud of dust. Ross held his breath, jumped over the debris and streaked for the small rear exit. He dived headlong out of it.

No shots came from the warehouse. Apparently the leader of the mob kept some kind of crude laboratory upstairs where he manufactured bombs. He had hurled his deadly missile and knowing his way around this warehouse, had made good an escape.

Ross sagged limply against a fence and drew his forearm across his face to wipe away sweat and dirt. Fire sirens were whining. A radio car turned down the alley beside the warehouse. Ross hurried up to it.

"There are two men inside," he panted. "One must be dead. The bomb landed two feet away from him. The other mug has a bullet in his carcass, but you'd better get inside and see if he's beyond help."

"What's it all about, Ross?" one of the patrolmen asked.

"Plenty," Ross snapped. "Contact headquarters and have 'em send the riot squad to the Superior Poolrooms over on Allen Street. Block off every exit and tell them to be careful. The guy we're after is an expert on bombs."

ROSS swung into the radio car, turned it neatly and shot back out of the alley. He stopped the car a block from his destination, ran out into the middle of the road and stared at the tall building that housed the Superior Poolrooms. There was another tall building adjoining it, with an alley no more than three feet wide.

Ross darted into the hallway of this next-door building, climbed up what seemed to him a million steps, and reached the roof. Without stopping, he sprinted across the flat, gravel roof, gave a leap and cleared the space between the two buildings.

He looked around for the skylight, found it and went down the ladder to the top floor. The poolroom was five or six stories below, and the rest of the building was unoccupied. But despite that fact, Ross moved silently, grateful that he still wore no shoes.

He went down the steps, sliding against the banister to avoid putting his whole weight on the stairway. Then Ross stopped and listened. He could hear voices coming from far down a corridor. Two of them were familiar. The third, protesting volubly, was obviously that of a boy.

"No—no!" one of the men shouted. "You cannot do this. You will kill him!"

"Listen, you half-wit!" The man who answered was nervous and desperate. "I bombed out that lousy copper. I know he's dead because the bomb landed right beside him. What if it killed Greg and Tony, too? If they'd been smart, all this wouldn't have happened. And this damned kid—with his itchy fingers. Swiping dough that was bound to be hot. Old man Clayton will pay for this."

"But what you gonna do if the cops come here?" the other man asked.

"Listen—they'll think Clayton's kid is up here, won't they? That damned copper maybe forced Clayton to talk. Maybe he phoned the dope to headquarters. Maybe he even mentioned names. We're getting out—quick. If we're stopped—"

He ceased talking, for outside in the street sirens were wailing and hoarse voices were giving the orders that hemmed in the building.

"He did it! Ross did it!" the voice of the leader rasped. "O. K.—he's dead and they got nothing against us so far. We'll proposition 'em. We'll hold the kid up to a window and threaten to blow his head off unless we're given a break. That'll get 'em! It always does."

"But if they say no—" the other man countered nervously. "Then what you do—shoot the boy? No—no!"

"You yellow double-crosser," the leader snarled. "Sure, I'll bump him! You, too—unless you do what I say. Bring that kid near the window."

There was the sound of smashing glass; then the killer's raucous voice made his proposition.

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"I got Hugh Clayton's kid up here. See? I'm not kidding. Well, I walk outta here with the kid right in front of me. My roscoe will be pressed against his head. If anybody tries to stop me, I'll blow it off."

"Wait a minute," someone called up from the street. "You know it's the chair, if you do. Let the boy go unharmed, come out with your hands in the air and you'll get a fair deal."

"Yeah! Fair deal! You got two minutes by the clock to promise, or I give it to the kid."

THERE was half a minute of silence. Ross crept forward. He had to save that boy's life. Outside the open door, he thought the pounding of his heart would give him away. Then Ross drew a long breath, took a firm grip on his gun and stepped into the room.

Max Gorbin, who owned the poolroom below, spun. Consternation made him a little slow. He made a grab for a swarthy-faced boy who stood nearby and opened fire at the same time. Ross felt a bullet nick his side. He snapped two quick shots from the hip. Gorbin gave a screech, backed against the wall and his gun sagged from a hand gone limp. Ross moved in, gun ready to blast this killer out of existence if he moved. But Gorbin was past that stage. There was a slug through his shoulder, another through his lung. Blood flecked his lips. He began to sag toward the floor.

Ten feet away, Marco, the father of the boy whom Ross was accused of killing, made a frantic start for the door. Ross headed him off, fought the man back into the room and knocked him cold with a jaw-breaking right. The boy was backing toward the door, too, eyes wide in terror.

"Hold it," Ross snapped. "You're not in this mess too deep. but you will be if you try a getaway."

The boy stopped and raised his hands. Feet pounded up the stairs. The room filled with blue-uniformed men. Ross sank into a chair and shook his head violently to dispel the cobwebs that threatened to form.

"Nice work, Ross." Lieutenant Brady elbowed his way toward him. "You got the kidnapers and the boy as well."

"You're wrong, sir," Ross said quietly. "That kid isn't Hugh Clayton's son. Look at him and look at Marco. That's Marco's kid."

"But I thought you ran him down—killed him—"

"The boy I hit was Hugh Clayton's son. Gorbin snatched him. He forced the boy to write a series of letters. Then he demanded ransom in two installments, stating he'd spend the first twenty-five grand before he released the boy. Clayton couldn't notify us or refuse to turn over the money. It wasn't marked and the numbers weren't registered, but young Marco here swiped a one-hundred-dollar bill for his cut. Then, that same night young Clayton tried a getaway and Gorbin or one of his hoodlums killed him. They had a corpse on their hands and a good chance of missing out on the second ransom installment, So they decided to get rid of the body in an easy manner, and make some more money at the same time."

Lieutenant Brady grasped the set-up. "They dressed young Clayton's body in this boy's clothes and hurled him in front of your car. They even staged that holdup at Matt Lynch's to get a radio car on their trail—and traveling at a fast clip. How did you get wise, Ross?"

"The clothing of the boy I hit was soaked. It was raining hard that night. But when I felt for a heartbeat, I found his underclothing was dry and, curiously enough, of an expensive weave. You couldn't identify him because his face had been crushed, purposely, before I struck him. Marco kept his son hidden up here. He was ready to collect from the insurance company for the death of his boy. But I found a one-hundred-dollar bill in one of the pockets of the boy I was supposed to have killed. Also a package of matches from Gorbin's poolroom, I went there and made him break the hundred. He recognized it, guessed I was wise and set out to eliminate me. But in the change he gave me were several twenty-dollar bills, with serial numbers in rotation. They were new, traceable, and I found Hugh Clayton had drawn them out of the bank. He broke down and told me the whole story."

"But how were you so sure it was Clayton's boy that was thrown in front of your car?" Brady wanted to know.

"Those notes Gorbin sent to Hugh Clayton had all been written at the same time. I had the police labs check on 'em. It's possible, by comparing the fading qualities of the same ink, to tell how long ago they had been written. I guessed the set-up then. That's why I wasn't afraid to tackle Gorbin. He didn't have Clayton's son for a hostage—only young Marco. You know, I think he'd have played it out to the end —made you believe it was young Clayton he held. I think he would have murdered this boy, too."

The older Italian was conscious and struggling in the grasp of two patrolmen. "He made me do this! He knew

DOUBLED IN DEATH

I am an alien. He threatened to have me sent back unless I obeyed. But now I tell everything."

Gorbin, bleary-eyed and pale, gave a groan of despair.

"Go ahead, Marco," Ross said. "Talk him straight into the chair. We don't need your evidence, but it will save the State dough by making the trial shorter. Go ahead and talk!"