

TO FIND A DEAD MAN

Emile C. Tepperman

TO FIND A DEAD MAN

Table of Contents

<u>TO FIND A DEAD MAN</u>	1
<u>Emile C. Tepperman</u>	1

TO FIND A DEAD MAN

Emile C. Tepperman

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

DICK BENSON turned into Chatham Street from Summer, and a woman in a window somewhere above him screamed, "Look out!"

Reacting instinctively to that high-pitched shriek of warning, Benson threw himself forward and to the right, landing up against the building wall, just as something struck the pavement with a ghastly, sickening plop.

Benson was on his feet instantly. A single glance was enough to tell him what it was that had come hurtling down from above. It was not a pretty thing to see the crushed body of the man lying in ghastly stillness upon the sidewalk. Benson wiped a bit of blood from his spattered cheek. His face was grim and hard as he leaped out to the curb and turned his gaze upward.

The woman who had screamed the warning to him was lying limp across the windowsill of a second-story room in a dead faint. Above her, the cheap hotel rose for five more stories. The windows in the entire line from which the man's body might have come were dark. There was no way of telling from which one he had fallen. It might even have been the roof.

A buzzing crowd of shocked spectators had already gathered around the grisly body, and a patrolman was pushing through. For the moment, Benson was forgotten. He edged away from the fringe of the crowd, and made for the entrance of the hotel.

Several people had come running out of the lobby, white-faced and trembling. One of them stopped Benson, "Who was it?"

Benson shrugged. "If he has no papers on him, it'll be hard to tell!" he disengaged himself from the man's shaky grip, and pushed through the fly-specked door into the hotel lobby. His eyes were bleak, his lips tight. If his hunch was right, he knew very well who that dead man was. But he didn't intend to impart that knowledge to anyone just yet.

Within the lobby, the desk was deserted. The clerk must have been one of those who had run out. Benson turned grimly toward the elevators. One cage was down, but there was no operator. He, too, must have hurried out into the street. Benson shrugged, and started to enter the cage.

But just then, he heard the swift patter of feet on the stairs, and a girl appeared, stumbling down, clutching at the railing with one hand and holding together a flimsy negligee with the other. There was blood on her face coming from a cut on the side of her head. Her short, dark hair was clotted with it, and there was more upon the front of the negligee. Her eyes were wild and glassy, and her lower lip was trembling.

She stumbled on the last step, and settled in a frightened heap on the floor. She let her head drop on one arm. "Murder!" she gasped. "He murdered my father! He pushed him out the window. Then he tried to kill me "

TO FIND A DEAD MAN

Dick Benson was already hurrying toward her, when a gust of air flowed through the lobby as the door was pushed open, and the patrolman entered. "Here, what's this "

Benson was stooping beside the girl, and the patrolman came running over. He looked suspiciously at Benson. "Who is she?"

"The dead man's daughter, I think," Benson told him.

The girl lifted up her head and repeated her accusation.

"Good Lord!" gasped the patrolman. He took the girl's arm. "You poor little thing! Just tell us who did it, and we'll get him. Who pushed your father out the window? Who tried to kill you?"

The girl's frightened sobs were still racking her body. She turned her head and looked at Benson. She thrust her finger out at him, accusingly. "He did! He's the one who pushed my father out the window!"

"Now just a minute, my child," said Dick Benson. "Get hold of yourself. You don't know what you're saying." He threw a side glance at the patrolman and said to him, "The girl is hysterical "

"Hysterical, is it?" growled the patrolman. "Maybe she is, and maybe she isn't. But don't you move!" He pulled out his service revolver and covered Benson. "Stand away from that girl, and keep your hands where I can see them!"

He called over his shoulder to the mob which had surged in from the street: "One of you, please call the station house. Tell the sergeant I've got a murderer here!"

"Don't be a blithering idiot!" Benson said angrily. "I just came in off the street. I couldn't have killed her father. And while you're wasting time here, the real murderer is making his escape!"

The hotel clerk was already telephoning to the precinct house, and the crowd was jabbering excitedly, casting nasty glances at Benson. Some one said, "We ought to lynch the dirty murderer!"

Benson turned to the girl, who was still huddled on the floor. "Look here! You're Elsa Hammond. I'm Richard Benson. I had an appointment with your father for eight o'clock this evening. I was just coming to keep that appointment, when it happened "

"No, no!" the girl exclaimed.

"You had already come. You came into the room, and I saw you. I was right there. I saw your face, and I remember your clothes. Even that green necktie. You were supposed to help my father. You're Richard Benson the detective. Dad called you for help and you murdered him!"

The patrolman began to look puzzled. "A detective?" he said. "Are you a detective?"

Benson nodded. "Matthew Hammond this girl's father phoned me this afternoon. He had gotten hold of some information which might mean his death. He didn't dare to leave the hotel. He asked me to come here this evening, after dark. But some one else must have got to him first "

"Not someone else," Elsa Hammond said stubbornly. "You! You came in and talked to dad for five minutes, while I sat in the corner reading. Then you suddenly jumped up and took out a gun and hit dad on the head, and pushed him out the window. Then you jumped for me, and you hit me with the gun, but it only grazed my head. I

TO FIND A DEAD MAN

screamed, and ran into the next room and locked the door, and you went out. When I heard the door slam, I came out in the hall and ran downstairs. When I got down here, you were right where you're standing now. You must have come down just ahead of me!"

Frowning, Benson studied the girl. She was about eighteen. There was a strange air of unsophisticated innocence about her which did not jibe with the deadly lie she was telling. It was hard to guess whether she really believed the lie, or whether she had been coached by one of Benson's many enemies.

It was a ghastly thing to think that she could act so with her father's crushed body lying on the pavement outside!

But in the meantime, the real murderer of Matthew Hammond must have made good his escape through the back entrance. The killer would surely not have remained in the hotel. There would be no use in searching the place now. Benson shrugged, and resigned himself to await the arrival of the homicide men.

They had not long to wait. Within a very few minutes, a small, tight knot of men pushed in through the crowded lobby. At their head was Captain Dolson.

Dolson knew Dick Benson very well. He frowned when he saw that the patrolman was covering Benson with the revolver. "What's this, McClure?" he demanded. "Don't tell me that Mr. Benson is your murderer."

"Yes, sir," Patrolman McClure said. "This girl here accuses him!"

It took just a few moments after the lobby had been cleared for Captain Dolson to get the girl's story. When she finished, he looked at Benson. "Can you clear yourself easily enough?"

"Why, yes. I think so. All I need to do is prove that I was in the street when the body landed. It would have hit me if a woman upstairs hadn't screamed a warning. She was leaning out of the second-floor window. We can go up there, and she can tell you that she saw me in the street."

"Let's go up," said the captain.

He motioned to one of the plain-clothesmen and the three of them entered the elevator. As they ascended, Dolson said, "What was this information that Hammond wanted to give you?"

There was a faraway look in Dick Benson's eyes. "It was about a dead man," he said.

"A dead man!" Dolson exclaimed. "You mean, about some one else who was murdered?"

"No. It was about a man named Egon Black."

"Egon Black! That was the chap you ran down, about a year ago the fellow who operated the Death Syndicate!"

"That's right."

"It was you who caught him. You turned him over to the police, and he escaped. He had a powerful organization, and he was able to obtain a plane for his escape. But the plane crashed, and he was burned to death in the wreck."

"Exactly," said Benson.

"But what could Hammond have had to tell you? What kind of information could Hammond have had which might mean his death?"

TO FIND A DEAD MAN

"He told me that Egon Black was still alive!"

"Impossible!"

Benson shrugged. "That's what I thought, too. But Hammond gave me certain details details which were known to nobody but Egon Black and to my agency."

"And you came here believing that Egon Black was still alive?"

"I didn't know. I came to find out. Now, after seeing Hammond's body, I'm inclined to believe it."

They had reached the second floor, and they made their way down the corridor to the door of the front room from which the woman had screamed her warning. The hotel clerk, who had accompanied them, said, "The lady who lives here is a Mrs. Linton. She's been here a couple of weeks."

Dolson nodded, rapping at the door. "All we'll need, Mr. Benson, is her statement that she saw you in the street when the body fell. That should clear you "

He frowned, rapping a second time. "Funny she doesn't answer. She must know we'll want to question her "

"She fainted when the body hit," Benson said. "Maybe she hasn't come out of it yet." He glanced at the clerk. "Better open the door."

The clerk nodded nervously, and produced his passkey. In a moment they were pushing into the room.

Sure enough, the woman's body was lying against the window, with her head on the sill.

"That's a long time to be in a faint!" said Dolson. He stepped over to her, saying to the clerk, "Get some water, please "

Then he stopped short, looking down at her. "Never mind the water," he said in a queer voice.

Dick Benson felt a sudden, cold chill in his veins. He moved over alongside the captain. And he saw what Dolson was looking at.

The woman was dead. There was a small, clean bullet wound in her right temple. She hadn't fainted at all. She had been shot from across the street, probably with a silenced rifle!

"Well," said Captain Dolson, "that sort of puts a hole in your alibi!" He was just a mite less cordial than before. There was a growing glimmer of suspicion in his eyes.

Benson frowned, looking down at the body of the woman. "Poor thing," he said. "She was an innocent victim. It was her misfortune to be looking out of the window when Hammond's body fell. She must have been shot when she screamed the warning to me."

"Shot?" Dolson repeated. "By whom?"

"By one of Egon Black's men."

"Why? Why should they want to kill her?"

TO FIND A DEAD MAN

"Don't you see? They wanted to remove any alibi I might have."

"Do you mean to say that this Egon Black granting that he's still alive planned to frame you for Hammond's murder?"

"Maybe he didn't plan it in advance," Benson said thoughtfully. "Maybe that marksman was stationed across the street to pick me off when I got here. But then, when Hammond's body came hurtling down just at that minute, the sniper must have thought fast. He must have figured that I'd hurry into the hotel, and that Elsa would accuse me of the murder "

"Now wait," the homicide captain said. "How would that sniper know that Elsa was going to accuse you of the murder?" He was openly suspicious now. "The only way Elsa Hammond could accuse you of the murder, was if she saw you do it."

"Of course," said Benson. "She saw me do it."

"What who ?" Dolson began to splutter. "First, you say you were in the street; then, you say Elsa saw you murder her father "

Benson smiled grimly. "She thinks she saw me do it. The man who murdered her father must have been made up to look like me!"

"You're crazy "

"Egon Black must have learned of my appointment with Hammond, He may have listened in on the telephone conversation. So he got one of his men to make up like me, and came five minutes earlier. Don't forget that Hammond had never met me in person, so the deception would be fairly easy. The object, of course, was to get Hammond to reveal his information to the impostor, and then to kill him. That's just what they did. They were going to kill me, too, in the street; but when the body fell out of the window just at that moment, they decided to try framing me for the murder."

Captain Dolson was far from being convinced. "That's a lot of theory, Mr. Benson; but I'm sorry to say that it's not evidence. The only evidence we have so far is Elsa Hammond's statement that *you* murdered her father."

"Let's go downstairs," Benson said. "There were several people from the lobby who met me in the street right after Hammond's body struck. Perhaps they can identify me."

But downstairs in the lobby, the breaks were once more against Richard Benson. The only one who could remember having stopped someone to ask what had happened, was the hotel clerk, and he only looked hazily at Benson. He said:

"I'm sorry, but I can't say if this was the man or not. With the dim-out and all, it's pretty dark out there in the street, and my eyes were blinded by coming out of the lighted lobby. Besides, I was too excited to notice the man's face. In fact, I don't think it was this man at all!"

Elsa Hammond was seated in one of the easy chairs, under the care of a police matron. She pointed a shaking finger at Benson and exclaimed, "Don't let him talk his way out of this. He's the murderer, He killed my dad!" Then she buried her face in her arms and began to sob all over again.

Captain Dolson's face was hard and grim. "Richard Henry Benson," he said, "I arrest you on the charge of wilful murder. I warn you that anything you say may be used against you!"

TO FIND A DEAD MAN

Dick Benson smiled bitterly. Against the damning identification by Elsa Hammond he could advance only a guess. To clear himself, he must produce the real murderer Egon Black.

But he had only the whispered hint from a murdered man that Egon Black was still alive. Legally, Egon Black was dead. So, in order to prove his own innocence he had to find a dead man!

But before he could do that, he must free himself. As a prisoner, held for the grand jury on a charge of murder, he would have no chance at all to find Egon Black.

"Come along," Captain Dolson said, taking his arm and motioning for the detectives to close in around them. "We'll go down to the district attorney's office "

It was at that precise moment that Nellie Gray entered the lobby.

Nellie Gray was small and blond and pretty and demure. She looked no older than a high-school senior. But in her case, looks were deceiving. Behind that wide-eyed innocence of hers, there was a mind as trigger-keen as that of any hard-bitten fighting man; and the training which Benson had given her as his assistant had equipped her to hold her own and more in any kind of battle.

In the lobby, everyone was so engrossed with the drama of the arrest, that no one noticed her appearance; no one, that is, except Benson himself.

Benson's eyes flickered. He shook his head almost imperceptibly, and Nellie took the hint. She ducked around behind one of the easy chairs, where she was completely hidden from view.

Benson allowed Captain Dolson to lead him by the arm toward the door. Dolson called back to the matron, "Bring Elsa Hammond along, Mrs. Merkle. We'll take her downtown with us. The D. A. will want to get a written statement from her, to hold Benson on."

Benson went out into the street with him, and Dolson led the way to a police sedan at the curb. The two detectives with them kept close on either side of Benson, each with a hand on his arm; and the matron followed, with Elsa Hammond. Dolson opened the door of the car, and motioned for his prisoner to step in. As soon as Benson was inside, he nodded to Elsa Hammond, who also stepped into the car. Benson sat tautly on the edge of the seat, his muscles tight, as if waiting for something to happen. Dolson started to enter the car. He put his foot on the running board.

And as if that had been a signal of some sort, four sharp pistol shots sounded, coming from inside the hotel lobby, in quick, spiteful succession. They were immediately followed by a girl's high-pitched scream, filled with what sounded convincingly like agony and terror. Immediately after the scream, there came terrified words: "Help! Murder! Police "

The last word was drowned by two more sharp pistol reports.

Benson sat quite still beside the frightened Elsa Hammond, suppressing a smile. He recognized the voice, of course, as that of Nellie Gray. She was doing an excellent bit of histrionics, with the assistance of her automatic as a sort of or chestration.

Captain Dolson and the detectives were galvanized into frantic action. Snatching out their revolvers, they swung about and rushed back into the hotel, momentarily forgetting about their prisoner.

TO FIND A DEAD MAN

Benson sat still, watching them for the two seconds it took them to barge through the door into the lobby. Then he chuckled, reached across Elsa Hammond and pulled the door shut,

Elsa looked at him with large, frightened eyes. "What what are you going to do?"

Benson did not answer. He swung his legs over the top of the front seat, and slid in behind the driver's wheel. He turned the ignition key, yanked the starter button and shifted into first. He thrust down on the accelerator and let up on the clutch, and the car leaped away from the curb like a hunted antelope.

Elsa Hammond had opened her mouth to scream, but she was jarred back into the seat, and the breath jolted out of her body.

Benson turned the corner on two wheels, sent the car whistling down the side street and turned the next corner to the right, coming into the street at the rear of the hotel.

He braked down to ten miles, peering into the darkness of the dimmed-out street, and spotted the slender figure of Nellie Gray coming out through the back entrance on the run. He blinked his lights twice, sad she headed for the car, wrenched the door open and sprang inside.

"Nice timing, Dick!" she gasped, as she sprawled over against the frightened Elsa Hammond.

Benson smiled tightly, and stepped on the gas and the car shot away, just as Dolson and his two detectives came racing out of the hotel. But by that time, Benson was already turning the next corner, and the shots they sent after him went wild.

Benson raced two blocks more, then turned another corner, and slowed up a bit. He glanced over his shoulder and said, "Nice timing to you, too, Nellie. You worked it perfectly!"

Nellie gave him a demure smile. "It worked beautifully. As soon as I did my screaming and shooting act, I scrambled past the clerk and out the back way. For a minute I was afraid you wouldn't think of the back door."

Elsa Hammond had stopped her sobbing. She started to get up, shouting, "Let me out of here "

Nellie Gray wrapped strong, competent fingers around the girl's arm. "Take it easy, sister," she said. "You're coming with us. And no place else!"

Elsa tried to struggle, but Nellie got her in a deft arm-lock. "Stay put, sister. You little fool, you're among friends!"

The girl suddenly wilted, and gave way to sobs. "Y—you'll k—kill me the way you k—killed my f—fa—ther "

"Tut, tut," said Nellie. She thrust the girl back into a corner of the seat, and calmly proceeded to insert fresh cartridges in the clip of her automatic.

"Where are we heading for, Dick?" she asked. "This car will be awful hot in five minutes, when they get it on the short wave."

"The first thing we've got to do," Benson said, "is to get to some quiet place where we can talk to our guest, here, and convince her that I didn't murder her father."

"Never!" exclaimed Elsa Hammond. "You'll never convince me. I saw you! I saw you with my own eyes!"

TO FIND A DEAD MAN

"And the next thing," Benson went on imperturbably, as he drove north, "is to find Egon Black."

"Egon Black!" Nellie Gray repeated. "How are we going to find a dead man?"

Benson chuckled. "Maybe it'll be easier than you think. Take a look out the rear window at that taxi cab. It's been tailing us ever since we left the hotel. I think that perhaps Mr. Egon Black is going to assist us to find him!"

Nellie Gray glanced behind at the shrouded headlights of the taxi which was tailing them. It remained about two hundred feet behind them, slowing when they did, and speeding up when Benson stepped harder on the gas.

"Well," said Nellie, "we can't go anywhere till we lose them."

"We don't want to lose them," Benson told her. "In fact, I'm more anxious to keep contact than they are. That taxicab is our only hope of ever finding Egon Black. Elsa's father told me very little over the phone. He was a disbarred lawyer. At one time, he used to handle legal matters for Egon Black, and he was disbarred after we broke up Black's death syndicate. If you recall, Egon Black used to insure men for large sums of money payable to some phony charity, and then they would die shortly afterward. When Black was finally caught "

"You mean, when *you* caught him!" Nellie interrupted. "If it hadn't been for you, Egon Black would have gone on forever with his death syndicate!"

Benson waved that aside. "It was known that Black had made several millions out of his murder scheme, but the money was never found. It was thought that the secret of its whereabouts had perished with Egon Black in the crash of that plane. But Hammond phoned me tonight out of a clear sky that Egon Black was still alive. He said that Black had contacted him, because he needed Hammond's help in getting to the hidden money."

"But did he explain how it was that a dead man was still alive?" Nellie asked, peering out through the back window, with her pistol ready, in case the cab should speed up to overtake them.

Benson nodded. "Yes. Hammond said that Black had a fellow named Dimitroff in his gang, who had once been an actor. Dimitroff made up some stooge to look like Black, and it was the stooge who went aboard the plane in Black's place. It was the stooge who died when the plane crashed. The body was so badly burned that it was unidentifiable, but several people at the airport identified pictures of Egon Black as the man who had boarded the plane so the police marked Black down as dead."

"I see," said Nellie. "And it must have been this Dimitroff who made up the impostor who came to Hammond's room tonight, posing as you!"

"Exactly! It seems from what Hammond told me on the phone, that Black had hidden the money under the planking of a cabin cruiser he had owned, but which had been registered in Hammond's name. At the time, Hammond didn't know that the money was there. Black lay low for two years after the plane crash, and he had just now contacted Hammond. He wanted to know where the cabin cruiser was tied up. Hammond was cagey, and refused to tell him until Black divulged the reason why he wanted to know. Hammond stalled him off, and phoned me."

Benson glanced into the rear-view mirror, then went on:

"He had been earning an honest living for the last two years, trying to live down his disgrace for the sake of Elsa, here. He didn't want to become involved with Black again, but at the same time he was afraid to go to the police. That's why he called me, and made the appointment for tonight. He must have told that impostor where the cabin cruiser is located, and it was then that the murderer killed him. They didn't want him to reveal that Egon Black is

TO FIND A DEAD MAN

still alive!"

Elsa Hammond had been listening carefully to everything Benson said. She, too, was glancing nervously behind, at the pursuing taxicab. Now she asked shakily, "W—why are they following us? If you really aren't the one who murdered my dad and if you're telling the truth about someone else posing as you then why are they still after us? Dad told that man where the boat was tied up "

"Ah!" said Benson. His hands tightened on the wheel as he drove. "And it was right after your father told him, that he pulled his gun and struck him?"

"Yes "

"Then don't you see why they're following us? They've got to kill both you and me and Nellie, too, for that matter. They're going after the money hidden in the cabin cruiser but they also have to make sure that no one remains alive who knows that Egon Black isn't dead!"

"Then then those men in the taxicab intend to kill us?"

"Of course they do. And they're taking their own sweet time about it, because they know I'm wanted for murder, and that I don't dare seek help from the police!"

Elsa Hammond's eyes were wide, and her lower lip was trembling. She appeared to be still unconvinced that Benson wasn't the one who had killed her father.

But Nellie Gray put a hand on her arm. "You must trust us, my dear," she said softly. "Your life the lives of all of us may depend on your trusting us."

Elsa uttered a choked sob. "I I don't know what to think anymore!"

Benson continued to tool the car north, peering constantly in the rear-vision mirror.

Nellie Gray patted Elsa's shoulder. "You see, my dear, Mr. Benson didn't kill your father. You must believe that. You "

Suddenly, Nellie broke off, uttering a cry of warning. "The cab is closing up on us, Dick!"

Benson had seen it, too. The cab had spurted ahead, cutting the intervening distance in half. They had reached a secluded portion of the East River Drive, and there were few other cars in sight. The road just ahead was clear of traffic for the moment, and the killers in the cab were going to take advantage of the opportunity.

The taxi gained on them with a rush now, and Nellie Gray exclaimed, "They're going to pass us, Dick! And there's a machine gun poking out of the window!"

Benson's hands remained steady on the wheel, and he did not accelerate, nor did he try to swerve in either direction. The cab came hurtling abreast of them, and the face of the man behind the machine gun was clearly visible. Elsa, in spite of her fright, uttered a gasp. "That face! It it's the same as Mr. Benson's!"

Indeed, the face of the man who peered at them over the ugly muzzle of the machine gun was almost a replica of Benson's. This then, was the murderer who had impersonated Benson.

TO FIND A DEAD MAN

It was evident that the fellow was holding his fire until the very last moment, when the cab would be pulling ahead of the police sedan, so that he could rake the occupants with his first burst.

"Hold on!" Benson shouted over his shoulder to Nellie and Elsa. He kept the pace steady, his hands hard on the wheel, his eyes glued on the cab. He gauged his timing with uncanny accuracy. He waited until the cab was just barely about to pull ahead. That was the moment when the gunner chose to pull the trip of his machine gun. But it was also the moment when Dick Benson stepped down hard on the brake!

The sedan rocked to a grinding stand-still, as if it had come up against an invisible and impassable barrier. The cab slid ahead, just as the first burst of lead spat from the muzzle of the machine gun.

But the gunner had been calculating without the sedan's stopping short. His burst was directed at the spot where the sedan should have been in the next split second. But it wasn't there, and the zinging bullets smashed through empty air only inches ahead of the sedan's radiator.

The cab, which had been traveling much faster than Benson's sedan; rolled on for perhaps thirty feet before the driver braked frantically to a stop, while the gunner leaned far out of the window and swung the muzzle of his machine gun around to bear on the sedan.

But by that time, Dick Benson had ripped open the door and was out in the road with an automatic in his hand. He ran forward shooting, straight toward the cab, his slugs smashing into the face of the machine-gunner. The man's countenance disintegrated under the impact of those bullets, and the machine gun fell back off the window ledge, into the cab.

Someone inside the cab uttered a shout, and the driver set the taxi in motion once more. It pulled away swiftly from Benson.

He held his fire, sending no more shots after it. There was not a second to waste now, not even for a single shot. For he knew that the shooting would bring radio cars converging upon the spot radio cars which must already have received orders to capture him. He swung around and called to Nellie and Elsa:

"Follow me!"

Nellie sprang out of the sedan, dragging Elsa after her by the hand. The frightened girl made no further objection now, as they followed Benson across the road and into the obscure shadows of a side street. The sight of that impostor's face in the cab must have convinced as nothing else could have done, that someone other than Dick Benson had murdered her father.

Just as they reached the shelter of a doorway, a squad car came screaming down the street, and swung into the Drive. The policemen piled out with guns in their hands, and advanced upon the sedan.

But Benson did not wait to see their disappointment at finding it abandoned. He broke out of cover and led the way down the street at a lope, away from the Drive, with the two girls following him. At Second Avenue he slowed to a walk, and said to Nellie, "You and Elsa cross the street and walk parallel with me. They'll be looking for the three of us together. We'll stand a better chance of getting through if we separate."

Nellie nodded and took Elsa's arm. "Let's go "

"Wait!" said Elsa Hammond. She came up close to Benson. There was no longer any fear in her eyes. "I was a fool," she said. "I know, now, that you never killed my father. Lets go to the police. I'll tell them it wasn't you "

TO FIND A DEAD MAN

Benson shook his head. "It's no good, Elsa. You can only tell them what you saw. And no matter what you *believe* at this moment, the fact remains that you saw a man who looked like me murder your father."

"But but isn't there any way we can prove "

"Prove that someone else killed him? Yes. By finding the body of that machine-gunner I just shot. By exhibiting his body, with the face what's left of it made up like mine. The only trouble is, that there won't be much left of that face. I put four bullet into it!"

"Then there isn't any way?"

"I'm afraid the only way is to produce Egon Black. I don't think he was in that cab. I think he must have left others to do this work, while he, himself, went to the cabin cruiser to retrieve the hidden money. If we only knew where the boat is tied up "

"But I know!" Elsa Hammond said quickly. "I was there when dad told that impostor "

Nellie seized hold of Elsa's shoulder. "Talk, kid and quick!"

"It==it's at Follan's Pier, at City Island. Dad never used it after Black's crash in the plane. He tried to sell it, but the market for pleasure boats was dead, and it was too small for war use "

"Never mind the rest!" Dick Benson said hurriedly. "We've got to get up there before Egon Black leaves. If we miss him, we'll never find him again!"

He swung into Second Avenue, and Nellie said, "Hadn't we better separate "

But he shook his head. "No time for caution. Every minute counts now. We've got to take chances!"

He found a cab parked at a hack stand at the next corner, and he hurried the girls into it. "City Island!" he said to the cab driver.

Just as they got started, a second police car came racing up Second Avenue, made a right turn directly in front of them, and disappeared down the side street heading for the Drive. The two policemen in it didn't even glance toward the occupants of the taxi.

"Gee," said the taxi driver. "There must have been a shooting over on the Drive. That's the second police car that's hightailed over there."

"A shooting?" Dick Benson said in a horrified voice. "How terrible! Isn't there enough shooting going on all over the world?"

He leaned forward and passed a twenty-dollar bill to the driver. "It's very important that we reach City Island quickly. I know there are rules against driving fast in the dimout, but if you'll break them tonight, I'll pay any fine, and give you a hundred dollars more if we reach City Island in thirty-five minutes."

"Brother," said the driver, "consider yourself there! "

The long stretch of water front at City Island was as black as the nethermost pit. If the dimout was bad in the city proper, it was much more drastic here, close to the shore. They left the cab about five hundred feet from Follan's Pier, and Benson gave the driver the promised hundred dollars, telling him to wait for a possible return ride.

TO FIND A DEAD MAN

Fortunately, both Benson and Nellie Gray were familiar with City Island, for Benson had once kept a boat here which they had used for emergency runs up the Sound. They walked swiftly but soundlessly along the shore, past darkened piers cluttered with gear, and with the saltwater spray whipping their faces. As they walked, Benson reloaded his gun.

"Keep about ten feet behind us," he whispered to Elsa Hammond. "If that cab full of gunmen has come here, there may be a lively few minutes!"

As they came close to Follan's Pier, Nellie pointed excitedly to a tiny pin point of light from a boat which was tied up close to the dock. It emanated from a crack in a cabin window.

Benson tapped Nellie on the shoulder, for they dared not speak now, even in a whisper. He motioned for her to cover him, and she nodded in swift understanding, and dropped back a couple of paces. It was so dark here that they could not even see Elsa Hammond, who had remained behind, in obedience to Benson's order.

Benson moved forward as silently as a cat, and stepped out onto the pier. But he had hardly taken a step before a figure rose suddenly out of the darkness, thrusting a gun into his face.

"This is it, Benson "

Benson acted even before the man finished. His pistol came up hard, cracking against the underside of the man's wrist, driving his gun muzzle up. The weapon exploded in the air, shattering the stillness of the water front. Benson swiped sideways with the barrel of his gun, catching the man in the temple. The gun struck with a thud, and the fellow crumpled and went down.

The door of the cabin was thrust violently open, and at the same time the light inside was doused. A gun barked six times in quick succession, and bullets swept the pier where Benson had been standing. But Benson had already leaped to the deck of the boat. The thud of his landing was drowned by the blasting of the gun.

The man who had fired grunted, and said to someone behind him, "Give me the flashlight, Egon. I think I got him."

Benson smiled tightly. He stepped around the deck on his soft-sole shoes, and swung into the doorway, smashing down with his gun barrel. He struck bone, and there was a horrible crunching sound, and the man gasped and fell forward. Benson caught his collar and pulled him out on the deck, and let his limp figure sag to the planking.

Inside the cabin, Egon Black cursed softly. "Are you out there, Benson?" he called.

"Yes," said Benson. "I'm here."

"Are you alone?"

"I'm alone on the deck of this boat."

"I have three million dollars in here, Benson. I'll split it with you."

Benson laughed harshly. "I'm coming in after you, Egon Black!"

"All right!" screamed Black. "I've tried to get you killed a dozen times. But this time, I won't fail. I'll kill you this time. Nothing will stop me now with three million dollars!"

TO FIND A DEAD MAN

A machine gun began to clatter inside the cabin, and a hail of slugs swept out through the cabin door. Benson crouched, waiting until the first burst was over. Then his legs straightened. Powerful muscles sent him hurtling in through that door, his pistol spitting lead as he fanned it around the interior of the cabin.

He expected another hail of lead from the machine gun, and dropped flat on the floor, with his gun empty. He lay still in the pitch-blackness, waiting for some sound to tell him whether he had missed, or whether he had got his man.

At last, there came a faint scraping sound; a foot dragging against the floor. Then, the wheezing breath of a wounded man. Benson knew he had hit Egon Black, but hadn't killed him. His own gun was empty now. He lay quiet, waiting.

A moment later, a flashlight winked on, the beam traveling upward. Benson saw Egon Black. He was on the floor, with his legs stretched out in front of him, and blood oozed from a wound in his side. Black had the flashlight in one hand, and the machine gun cradled under the other arm, with his finger on the trigger. He swung the beam of the light around to center upon Benson.

Benson pushed up, and got to his feet, the flashlight sticking to him like glue.

Egon Black's face was a mask of hatred. "I'm not done yet, you cheap snooper. I'm going to give it to you now!" He raised the snout of the machine gun so that it centered upon Benson's stomach. "A belly full of hot lead, Benson! How do you like the idea? Here goes "

There was a single, spiteful crack from somewhere outside. Something whined past Benson's ear, and a small round hole miraculously appeared in Egon Black's forehead. His body twitched, and the machine gun jerked upward. A single short burst spattered into the ceiling as his dead finger contracted upon the trip, and then the gun dropped to the floor as his body slumped over.

Nellie Gray hurried into the cabin, breathless. Benson turned and nodded to her. "That was nice shooting, Nellie," he said. "But I was afraid you were going to wait too long."

"I had to make sure," she gasped. Benson stooped and picked up the flashlight from the cabin floor. He directed it first at a trunk near the wall, which stood with the lid up, and the keys in the lock. It was filled almost to the brim with money of all denominations, jammed into it helter-skelter.

"That's what Egon Black did murder for," he said.

"And look what it got him!" Nellie whispered.

Benson swung the flashlight around to cover the body of a man which had been dumped onto one of the bunks. It was a ghastly thing to see, for there was little left of the face. Nellie turned away, sick.

"That's the fellow I shot," Benson said. "The one who impersonated me. I think there'll be enough of the makeup left to convince Captain Dolson, don't you?"

He swung toward the door as a light step sounded on the deck. Elsa Hammond appeared in the doorway, her eyes two great pools of horror in a white and ghastly face. She saw Benson and Nellie Gray alive and unharmed, and her whole body seemed to relax. "Oh! I I thought you'd both been killed!" Her gaze went to the body of Egon Black, with the hole in his forehead showing up like a black badge of dishonor.

"I I see you found the dead man!"

TO FIND A DEAD MAN

Benson smiled bitterly. "Yes. And this time he'll stay dead!"

THE END.