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## STOOL PIGEON

*A Brilliant, Tense Novelette  
by Frederick C. Painton*

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# The Scarlet Letter

Ray Cummings

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Holding the knife behind him, Gregg said: "I'm in trouble."

*He Had Just Killed the Man—and He Knew It Was a Perfect Crime. But He Didn't Know That Murder Always Marks a Man Unmistakably!*

George Gregg reached home at eleven P.M. that Saturday evening. The weather was raw and chilly—an overcast sky and the feel of rain or snow in the air. Gregg wore a light overcoat over his dinner clothes. He was a handsome young fellow. An artist; protégé of Kenneth Rance, the famous illustrator, with whom he lived.

The home of Kenneth Rance was a big rambling old-fashioned three-story frame house at the end of a somewhat lonely street here on the edge of town. There were no servants; just Rance, his niece, Dianne Walters—and Gregg. The house was dark now, except for lights that marked the lower front room, which was Rance's studio.

Gregg stood for a moment on the path at a corner of the fence. He had been spending the evening with friends on the other side of town, about a mile away. He

had left them at quarter of eleven. It wouldn't provide an alibi; but Gregg was not concerned with that, for the idea of murdering Rance was still only a vague conjecture in his mind. He would kill Rance—if necessary. But he would plan it carefully.

Gregg's attention was captured now by the moving blobs of silhouetted figures against the lighted studio windows. Then the blobs vanished; and a moment later the hall door to the verandah opened. The Rance grounds, and the dark empty street here were tree-shrouded. Gregg was behind a tree trunk; in the silence he heard the voices on the verandah. Rance and Dianne were saying goodnight to a young man visitor. Gregg knew him—a hardware salesman named John Martin—a fellow fascinated by Dianne's beauty—or the money she would inherit from Rance. Gregg's rival. An ironic sneer pulled at Gregg's handsome mouth. What the hell chance did a hardware salesman have? None. And the only reason Martin didn't know it was because he was too dumb.

“Goodnight, John.”

“Goodnight, Dianne. Goodnight, Mr. Rance.”

The verandah door closed. The figure of John Martin crossed the street and headed toward town. Gregg shifted behind the tree trunk so that Martin would not see him. Queer that subconsciously now, he was taking the precautions of a murderer! As though the momentous events which were upon him were making themselves felt, so that he stood, suddenly breathless and wary.

Rance and Dianne quite evidently went back into the studio. Perhaps she was posing for him. He often used her as a model; her head was familiar on the covers of many magazines.

Gregg presently went quietly up the verandah steps. The studio front window was here; its shade was down but the window was open a trifle. Abruptly Gregg stiffened; he heard Rance's voice:

“I tell you, Dianne, you can't do it. You're making a mistake. He's no good.”

“But, Uncle—please—let me—”

“Let you what?”

“Let me explain. I—I love him. We love each other—”

“He loves nobody but his handsome self. You're a fool, Dianne—”

“Uncle—please—!”

“So was I a fool, thinking I could make an artist out of him. For five years, he's been playing me for a sucker. But I'm through with him and he knows it.”

Gregg knew it, indeed. On the dark verandah he stood tense, with his heart pounding his ribs and the leering specter of murder a sudden reality beside him. The

window shade was up an inch from the bottom. By crouching, he could see a portion of the room: the wizened, sandy-gray-haired Rance striding excitedly up and down; the easel, with a big canvas on which was a partially finished pastel study of Dianne; and Dianne herself, her living beauty so much more vivid than any pastel could depict it—Dianne in a chair gazing, with almost tearful apprehension at her uncle.

“I tell you I’m through with him,” Rance repeated. “Out of my will he goes—the first chance I have to get to the lawyers’ and change it. You’re only a child. You’re in love with his handsome face. He’s got a dozen girls like you—any pool room loafer downtown could tell you. Wears a dress suit every night; plays the gentleman artist —”

“Uncle! You—you’re just ranting—!”

“He never had any idea of being an artist! A sucker out of me. An’ now he dares make love to you—”

“We’re going to be married, Uncle. I’m eighteen—”

The abrupt firmness of her tone made Rance stop before her, startled, so that he looked almost frightened.

“Dianne! You don’t know what you’re talking about. I never realized—”

“I’ve promised him, Uncle. I love him—”

Then old Rance’s temper flared again: “If you do, then I’m finished with you. Not a penny of my money do you ever get.”

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She had a temper of her own. She leaped to her feet, trembling. “I don’t want your money, Uncle Kenneth. You’ve no right to stand between me and the man I love.”

“You don’t love him—he’s got you hypnotized. He fooled me—I admit it.” He had his hands on her shoulders, holding her as she tried impetuously to turn away. His voice softened. “Dianne, dear, you’ve got to listen to me. Now this lad, John Martin—I guess he loves you. Does he?”

“Yes,” she murmured. “He—he proposed to me tonight. I said no.”

“He’s a good solid fellow, Dianne. Not artistic—maybe that’s an advantage, I don’t know. I like him—I think maybe you’d be happy with him. It’s not for me to say—”

“But you are saying, Uncle. And it’s George I love. You haven’t any right—”

Still he held her. “I haven’t any right to let you wreck your life. And I won’t.”

The listening George Gregg stood tense, with his heart pounding his ribs and his breath sticking in his throat. As he moved again to the doorway, one of his feet

touched something soft. He stooped, picked up a man's glove. He recognized it. John Martin's glove, which undoubtedly he had dropped here at the verandah door just a moment ago when he said goodnight.

Thoughts are instant things. Gregg stuffed the glove into his overcoat pocket—and in that moment, exactly what he was going to do was clear in his mind. Within the studio Dianne now was sobbing. Gregg once more stooped by the window. He saw Rance's arms go around the girl, but she pulled away and ran from the room, slamming the door. For a moment Rance stood staring after her; then he sighed, shrugged and sat before his easel, with his box of pastels beside him.

The scalpel, sharp-pointed as a stiletto, with which Rance cut his drawing boards, lay on his work table. Gregg could see it there now. He reached into his overcoat pocket; he put Martin's glove on his right hand. He found that it was a left-hand glove—thin, gray suède, with a fleece lining. Martin's hand evidently was larger than his own, so that though it stuck a bit on Gregg's big seal ring, nevertheless he crammed it on. It felt stiff and awkward, with the back of it at his palm. But he clenched his fist; limbered it. What the hell! It would serve to hold that knife. . . .

Very quietly Gregg opened the front door. In the dark hall he stood alertly listening. For a moment he heard Dianne's footsteps upstairs; then the slamming of her distant bedroom door. In this big rambling house no sounds would carry up to her. Twenty feet from him, along the lower hall, was the closed door of the studio. He went like a cat on the padded floor; opened the door; darted in, and closed it.

Rance, at his easel, heard the click and swung around.

"Oh, it's you—"

"Yes, it's me—" Gregg was panting; his voice was low, furtive. "Don't talk so loud, please." Above everything, their voices mustn't reach Dianne upstairs. This would only take a minute! Tumultuous minute! He must not make any errors now! He stood with his back against the door, his gloved right hand behind him. His dark overcoat was open, disclosing his spotless dinner clothes. With his left hand he reached into an inner pocket.

Rance stared. "What's the matter? You look like a ghost."

"Not so loud—please. I got a letter tonight. I'm in a jam."

Stalling for time. Just a minute now—get that knife—one stab of that knife—a hand over his mouth maybe to stifle his scream. . . .

"I'm in trouble," Gregg added softly. "I need your help."

He took a step; the work table was here; the knife lay gleaming.

Ironic contempt swept Rance's thin, wizened face. "In trouble? Well, is that surprising? More gambling, that I mustn't tell Dianne about? Or another girl after you

—”

Hot words of anger choked Gregg, but he left them unsaid. This was so easy! Rance was doing just the perfect thing: shrugging, turning his back so he faced his easel again, contemptuously resuming his work. Gregg’s mind seethed with tumultuous thoughts. Just a few seconds now—a step, and he’d have the knife. . . . One swift stab. . . . He saw that Rance was working with finishing touches on the lips of Dianne on the canvas. Lips so beautiful—in life, so warm to kiss. They would be for Gregg—Dianne and her money. . . .

His fingers within John Martin’s glove closed on the knife. . . . One blow now into old Rance’s back. . . . But suddenly Rance swung around and demanded:

“What do you mean, got a letter tonight?”

Gregg’s hand, holding the knife now, dangled behind him. He panted:

“I’m in trouble—here’s the letter.” Accursed shortness of breath. . . . His heart racing. . . . With his left hand he reached into the inner pocket of his overcoat. The letter was nothing important—a bill from the local tobacconist for a month’s cigarettes. But it held Rance’s attention. His gaze went to it as he leaned forward.

Gregg’s gloved hand came up, stabbed forward and down. Old Rance must have seen the glinting knife-blade. Surprise, then vague terror swept his face. He seemed to mumble as he lunged half to his feet.

And then the knife went in. Gruesome thrust. . . . Now! Twist it! Hold him. . . . !

## II

The scene blurred into a chaos of horror for Gregg. He was aware that he had dropped the letter with his left hand fumbling for Rance's mouth. . . . He mustn't scream! Don't let him scream! . . . There was no scream. Rance staggering—his arms flailing—one of his hands groping as though for Gregg's neck. Futile! He couldn't do anything. He was dying, just an old man dying. . . .

Horrible, ghastly seconds while Gregg's gloved fingers wildly thrust the knife to its hilt. . . . Rance must have tried to scream, but it was only a choked gurgle of blood. . . . God! Why didn't he fall!

Gregg suddenly heard his own low, wild voice: "Let me go—you damned old buzzard—!"

Gruesome, as though a dead man was sagging here, clinging, trying to fight. . . . Then, in another second, the sagging body of Rance slumped forward so that Gregg shook himself free and nimbly leaped backward and stood panting. The body hit the floor, face downward with a little thud; twitched and lay still.

Done! The thing was over! Just those few seconds. . . . Gregg for a moment stood panting, wild-eyed, with the frenzy of murder so hot within him that his blood seemed liquid fire in his veins. Then the frenzy passed and he stood triumphant. How easy it had been! Damned old buzzard—dead now. He couldn't change his will and throw Gregg out in the cold. He couldn't persuade Dianne now, that she would wreck her life marrying the handsome George Gregg. He couldn't do a damn thing, now, but lie there weltering. . . .

Then Gregg suddenly realized that he must hurry. . . . Things to do now. He must think swiftly—calmly—make no errors. . . . The knife lay buried to its hilt in Rance's heart. No fingerprints would be on its handle. . . .

Gregg darted to the door; with his gloved fingers he slid its bolt, locking it here on the inside. Hardly a minute had passed. The house was silent; Dianne, far upstairs, had heard nothing. Gregg turned back into the room. His soft black hat was still on his head; his clothes were hardly disheveled. Blood on him? He knew there was none. Blood must have welled around the wound, but he saw now that there was none even on the glove. No mirror was in the room; but for a moment Gregg stood carefully examining himself, adjusting his clothes. Nothing wrong. Where would be the best place to drop the glove? Evidence against John Martin. Maybe it wouldn't convict him. What the hell difference? The police could think what they

liked, they'd never prove anything against Gregg. . . .

He decided that the best place for the glove would be wrapped around the handle of the knife. As though Martin had held the loose glove around the knife handle, and in the excitement had forgotten and left it there. . . .

Gruesome, this goggling, slumped, dead thing. . . . The chest with the knife was downward, pressed against the floor. Very carefully, with his gloved hand, Gregg turned the body partly over. Then he ripped off the glove, dropped it on the knife handle where blood now had welled with a crimson stain on Rance's shirt. . . .

That did it. The glove and the knife looked perfectly rational—a panic-stricken murderer overlooking this vital clue. . . . Gregg was about to turn away when abruptly he went cold with horror. Panicky murderer? Overlooking a vital clue? Here on the floor was Gregg's letter—the tobacconist's bill! The body had fallen on it. A scarlet letter now, with the blood of the dead man staining it! Vital clue indeed! Suppose he hadn't happened to turn the body over? The police would have found this scarlet letter; the tobacconist would have testified that just this evening he had handed the bill to Gregg! Damning evidence!

And as Gregg stood horrified, a new frightening thought transfixed him. Suppose Martin had come back for his lost glove? The window shade was raised only an inch, but suppose Martin was crouching out there now?

Trapped! But it was only Gregg's wild rush of panic. He mastered it. There was no one outside the window. Martin hadn't come back. Nothing was wrong at all. . . . But he must get out of here at once. Too dangerous. . . .

He seized the blood-stained letter. Burn it? That would be best. There were glowing embers in the fireplace here where Rance, earlier in the evening, had had a fire. Gregg dropped the oblong of paper; touched a match to it. It burned into a little shriveled wisp of ashes. With the poker, he stirred them until they were unrecognizable. . . .

Nothing else to do here. . . . Certainly only two or three minutes had passed since Gregg had entered the room. Only five minutes since Dianne was here. . . . Gregg took a last hasty look. This time he had forgotten nothing. . . . The damnable staring eyes of the dead man seemed following him as he went to the front window; climbed carefully, noiselessly through it to the verandah.

The night was dark; blustery now with wind. Good enough, for that had made the house noisy upstairs so that by no chance could Dianne have heard anything. It wasn't raining; hadn't rained all evening. That was correct, because Gregg was supposed to be only arriving home now—and if it was raining, his clothes would be wet. . . . He was thinking of everything now. He walked noisily on the verandah;

then, nonchalantly whistling, he unlatched the front door with his key and went noisily in. . . .

From the bottom of the staircase he called: "Oh, Dianne—you home?"

She answered him in a moment.

"Where's Uncle Kenneth?" he called.

"In the studio, George. He was—a few minutes ago." She appeared at the head of the staircase, in a negligée, with her long black hair flowing over her shoulders.

"Funny," Gregg said, "the door's locked. I just tried it."

Then presently, from the verandah window they stooped and gazed through the slit under the shade; gazed with horror at the mute, tragic scene. Then they ran wildly into the house; and Gregg wildly telephoned the doctor and the police, stammering his shocking news that Kenneth Rance had been murdered.

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I guess, Sergeant, it was about ten after eleven when I got here," Gregg said frankly. "I'd been playing cards with Tolly Green and some friends. I took a bit of a walk—it wasn't raining—I needed the exercise."

He was absolutely calm now. It was easy to talk frankly, with just the right touch of excitement which anyone naturally would have at such a time. Gregg had a slight acquaintance with this police sergeant. A friendly fellow, not overly clever, Gregg figured.

They were in the living room, across the hall from the studio. It was quarter of twelve now. What a difference three-quarters of an hour had made! The dim, silent house now was blazing with lights, resounding with the tramp of footsteps. The quiet, lonely neighborhood was milling now with people, miraculously gathered when the police cars arrived.

The neighborhood doctor had come and gone. Kenneth Rance was dead, with the knife in his heart; beyond the reach of medical science. There was nothing needed here now but the science of the policemen to figure out who had done it. Gregg smiled to himself. Much good it would do them. . . .

The County Medical Examiner was in the studio now, with two or three police detectives, a fingerprint man, and a photographer. Soon they would be finished. The body would go for autopsy, perhaps. . . .

Somebody had said a while ago that Melvin Cone was in town, and that he was coming. It gave George Gregg a sudden thrill of fear. He had heard of Melvin Cone. A Federal man. A hard fellow to beat, once he got after you. Then Gregg thrust away the fear. What the hell? He wasn't afraid of Cone or anybody else. He'd been too clever with this thing.

Nothing had been said in Gregg's presence, so far, about the glove. He wondered when they'd mention it. When they did, Dianne undoubtedly would recognize it. . . . Dianne was here now, sitting beside Gregg, clinging to him. Still in her negligée, her glorious black hair falling free. . . . Appealing figure, with shocked grief on her beautiful face, and her eyes red from her first burst of weeping. Trustfully she clung to Gregg. That was good—the two of them, so obviously innocent, shocked, grief-stricken.

Dianne and Gregg together had answered most of the questions. No, they hadn't entered the murder room. . . . The police had had to break down the door. . . . No, they knew of no enemy of Rance's. . . . Yes, they agreed the murderer must have locked the door, and escaped by one of the windows, all of which were unlocked.

From the studio now came one of the policemen.

"No fingerprints, Sergeant. He used the glove—"

The glove! At last! The sergeant dangled it now before Gregg and Dianne. Gray suède, left-hand glove, fleece-lined. Gregg so wanted to speak, but he was too clever. He looked dubious, with excited curiosity. And Dianne exclaimed: "John's glove!"

"John?" the sergeant snapped. "John, who?"

So simple. It all came out. John Martin had left here, just a few minutes before the murder. Then the sergeant hurried outside to order a car, or a motorcyclist to go for Martin. . . . So simple. If only Martin wouldn't have an alibi! Probably he wouldn't; he lived alone in a boarding house less than a mile from here—probably went in and went to bed. They'd have him here in a few minutes. . . .

Dianne was shivering in the cold living room. Gregg had discarded his hat; he still wore his overcoat buttoned because he felt shivery himself.

He put his arm around Dianne. "You're cold, sweetheart. Put on my overcoat."

"No, I'm all right. Oh, George—do you think he could have done it? That glove—!"

Gregg shrugged. "I never knew him very well. Maybe I'm jealous—"

"But you needn't be. He—he proposed to me tonight, George. I told him no."

Another chance for which Gregg had been warily waiting! The sergeant was back in the room now, so that Gregg said with raised voice:

"You really ought to tell the sergeant that, Dianne."

"Tell me—what?" the sergeant demanded; and Dianne stammered it out.

"Oh," said the sergeant. "That's interesting."

Simple. Everything was going just right. Then abruptly from the studio, Melvin Cone came quietly across the hall. Gregg felt his heart jump as through some

invisible hand had gripped it. Cone had been here some time, been poking around for clues in the studio. Queer that nobody had mentioned that he was here! Was Gregg under suspicion, that these policemen kept things from him? What had Cone found out? Something which Gregg had overlooked?

Nonsense! . . . Gregg flung away his wild rush of thoughts. Nothing was wrong. This damned Cone was probably a big bluff anyway. . . .

### III

Gregg stared with interest at the famous sleuth. A tall, smooth-shaven, rather handsome man. Forty perhaps, with hair graying at the temples. He looked like a successful business executive. He shook hands quietly with Dianne and Gregg as the sergeant introduced him.

“Distressing time for both of you,” he said gently. He seemed addressing them both impartially.

“Yes,” Gregg said. “If there’s anything we can do to help you, Mr. Cone—?”

“Thanks. I wish there were.”

He had a very cordial, grave sort of smile. And then Gregg noticed his eyes—mild, blue eyes, but damnably restless. They seemed never still. Darting. Questing. As though the man’s calm, poised voice, his smile, were things unconnected with those questing eyes.

Gregg felt suddenly as though he were on a stage, with floodlights and that the eyes were searching every detail of him. . . . Then there was a commotion on the verandah. It brought to Gregg a vast relief; it took Melvin Cone’s gaze away.

“They’ve got him,” Cone said. “That’s good.”

Then John Martin was here. Martin—pallid, frightened, stricken wordless. Cone and the sergeant went out into the hall to question him. Dianne and Gregg sat staring. The voices were a blur, but some of it was audible. He had no alibi! The best he could say was that he’d gone home and gone to bed. The glove was his, of course. He had the mate to it in his overcoat pocket. He had lost it somewhere here.

What a lame story! Gregg sat chuckling as he felt Dianne shuddering beside him. Poor girl—maybe she did have some sneaking love for this fellow Martin. It didn’t matter now. Martin was going to jail; maybe to the electric chair. . . .

Then they brought Martin into the sitting room and shoved him into a chair where he sat wordless, so frightened that he looked absolutely guilty as he flung an imploring glance at Dianne. And she murmured impulsively: “Oh, John—I—I don’t believe you did it!”

What the hell difference what she believed? Gregg’s hand on her arm pressed it with just the right touch of sympathy. But for all his outward masterful calmness, again Gregg felt a shiver. Cone was leaning nonchalantly against the door casement. He did not speak; he just stood there with those darting, questing eyes—first at Martin, then Dianne, then Gregg. Searching. As though, not bothering to talk, he

depended on his eyes to show him some hidden motive in the relationship of these three young people. Some hidden motive that by chance word, or look, they might disclose. . . .

Intolerable silence. Gregg suddenly heard himself saying: "If you've any clue to the murderer, Mr. Cone? Surely you don't think it's John here?"

Clever. Natural. John Martin was a friend.

Cone's eyes for just a moment clung to Gregg's face. And he smiled.

"I don't know what to think. Puzzling, isn't it?"

Then abruptly he drew up a chair before Gregg and Dianne, and sat down. Queer. He didn't seem particularly to think that Martin was guilty! It stabbed Gregg with a sudden fright, but he fought against it. Nonsense. This detective wasn't the type to tell all his thoughts. Of course he believed Martin guilty, but he just wanted to be sure.

But Cone's damnable gaze was now frankly searching Gregg. His face, his clothes, his hands. . . . A hand can be so expressive! Gregg abruptly was aware that his fists were clenching! He loosened them. He said:

"No clues at all, Mr. Cone? Just that—that glove?"

"That seems to be all," Cone said. "And the trouble is, maybe Martin did just drop it when he said goodnight."

"I did!" Martin exclaimed.

"I—I think so, too," Gregg agreed. He suddenly seemed on the defensive. What nonsense! It was Martin, not himself, who was mainly under suspicion. . . . Or had Cone found some other clue, which offset the glove so that now he was puzzled?

"That's an odd ring you've got, Gregg."

Cone's quiet conversational voice snapped Gregg out of his reverie. The detective's gaze was on Gregg's hands—his right hand—his big seal ring, with its ornate filigree setting fashioned in a circlet of tiny elephants. Gregg felt his heart leap wildly. Was something wrong with his ring?

He stammered: "Yes—odd ring. I've had it for years." He felt an impulse to hide his hands behind him.

Some error? Then what it might be swept Gregg with a tumultuous rush of horror. That fleece-lined glove, awkwardly put on backwards! Gregg recalled now how it had caught in the setting of his ring! Was some of the fleece clinging to this filigree of tiny elephants, so that Cone's keen gaze was seeing it now?

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**D**amnable error! Too late to fix it! Gregg did not dare raise his hand to peer at the ring more closely. . . . Then Cone's gaze darted away; still questing; puzzled, as

though the detective felt that there might be some clue still hidden. . . .

And Cone was saying thoughtfully: "If what Martin says should happen to be true. . . . The opportunity—the motive—but where is the proof?"

The sergeant and another policeman were here, standing beside Cone; peering, expectant, as though they sensed that something vital must happen now.

But relief swept Gregg. This damned detective still was puzzled. He seemed to have lost interest in the ring. Nothing wrong with the ring!

Beside him, Gregg felt Dianne stirring uneasily—everyone here was tense. Everyone but Cone, who just sat pondering, puzzled. . . . Then Gregg heard himself murmuring:

"I do wish we could help you, Mr. Cone." He desperately tried to appear nonchalant. He smiled; unbuttoned his overcoat, reached into his inner pocket for his cigarettes.

But what was this? Cone suddenly stiffened; staring. The sergeant was staring; the other, policeman—staring. From across the room, John Martin was staring.

And the blue eyes on Cone no longer were mild. No longer questing, for there was a menacing triumph flashing from them as abruptly they had come to the end of the trail.

And Cone's voice rasped: "Delivered into my hands, by Jove! I've got you, Gregg!"

Accusation! The room whirled before Gregg. Got him? What rot! This was a bluff! This damned detective, puzzled, trying to run a bluff. Hold firm! . . . He felt Dianne's frightened hand on his arm; heard her voice:

"Why—why, George! What does he mean? How does he dare—?"

Hold firm! Say nothing! Just a damn bluff! He saw Cone's gaze go to Dianne; and Cone said gently: "A shock for you, Miss Walters. I'm sorry—but it's best in the end. He would have wrecked your life—"

Hold firm! Gregg stared numbed, as the trembling Dianne leaped up.

"George, guilty! Why—why—"

"He is," Cone said, still gently. And now Martin had come and was holding Dianne, and the girl suddenly was weeping!

"Obviously," Cone added, "you're very young, Miss Walters. I think maybe you got confused. Maybe it's this young man Martin you love. I hope so. He seems a very nice young fellow. He tells me Mr. Rance approved of him. He tells me that Mr. Rance promised to stop you, if he could, from marrying this fellow Gregg. That seems like Gregg's motive. And here's the obvious proof of his guilt."

What the hell was all this? Despite his efforts to keep silent, Gregg heard himself

saying: “What the devil do you mean? Obvious? What’s obvious?”

Cone snapped around. “Like Hester Prynne,” he said ironically. “She also, had a scarlet letter.”

Hester Prynne? What the devil did that mean? Scarlet letter? But he burned the scarlet letter in the fireplace?

“Hester Prynne,” Cone was saying, “the heroine of Hawthorne’s story. Don’t you remember? They branded her with a scarlet letter ‘A’ because she was an adulteress.”

In the chaos of the whirling room Gregg heard himself murmuring: “What do you mean? I don’t see—”

“Kenneth Rance was working with pastels when you stabbed him,” Cone said. “We found a little piece of crimson chalk in his hand—he probably was working on the lips of the girl in the picture. And as he died—by accident or design—or maybe just that bad luck which works against every murderer—he branded you, Gregg! We’ll show you—”

Suddenly Cone was pulling Gregg to his feet, shoving him to a big mirror here on the living room wall. And Gregg numbly stared. . . . Damnable mischance! No mirror had been in the murder room. He had examined himself so carefully, but without a mirror he couldn’t see the top of his full dress, starched shirt bosom. And his buttoned overcoat had hid it from Cone until just now.

Against all his efforts he heard himself stammering: “Why—why I didn’t know that was there! You’ve got me!”

A scarlet chalk mark was high on his starched shirt bosom, just below his necktie. A little wavy line, which seemed to make a letter.

Scarlet letter! Branded! “M” for murderer!

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Scarlet Letter* by Ray Cummings]