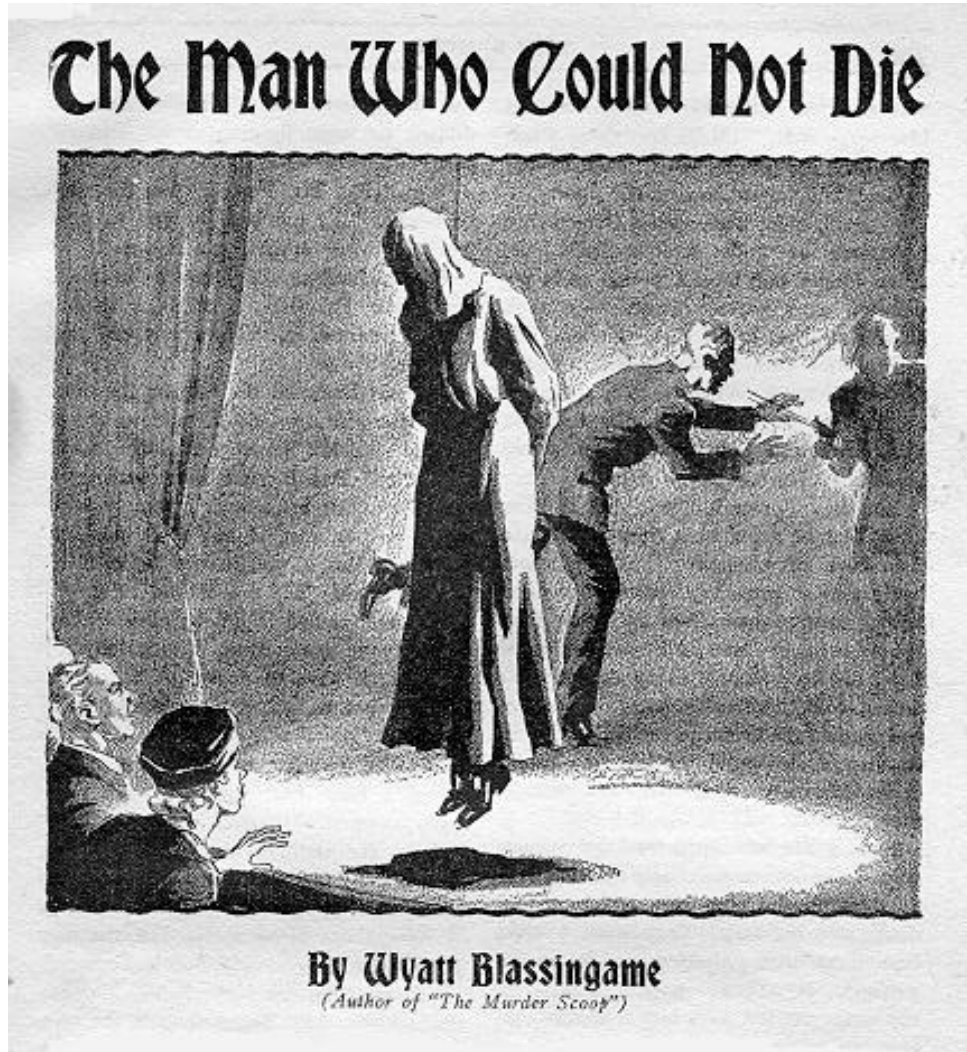


# THE MAN WHO COULD NOT DIE

By Wyatt Blassingame

*Out of death and across the face of the world came that strange and vengeful figure... Allen Foster, super-detective, tried to block it; but in trying, he himself was caught in the closing trap of doom...*

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SMALL frowning lines showed at the corners of Allen Foster's vivid blue eyes as he forked the telephone. His tongue slid back and forth between teeth and upper lip. Watching him, Tai Lo, the giant, scholarly Manchurian who was valet, cook, and assistant in the criminological laboratory, knew Foster was puzzled. He asked, "A new case, sir? What must I tell the newspapers?"

Foster stood up and smiled slightly. "I don't know what to tell them—yet." He gestured toward his coat, and as Tai Lo brought both it and his .38 automatic, in its shoulder holster, he added: "The thing sounds crazy. Lacy Masters wants me to protect him, but thinks it's already too late. He said he was being killed by magic and is nearly dead now."

Foster patted the gun into a comfortable position under his double breasted blue serge coat. "I'll let you know when to call the papers and what to tell them," he said, and turned toward the door.

A small, quiet man with a thin, rather handsome face under straight blond hair, Allen Foster had built a nation wide reputation as a private detective—though he was still but in his early thirties. His competitors cursed him as an arrogant publicity hound. When he took a case he notified the newspapers, and gave them an approximate date when it would be settled. He had never failed.

But only Foster himself, and Tai Lo, knew that he acted on a deeper principle than love of publicity. His reputation being almost legendary, crooks had been known to give themselves up rather than be pursued by him. He had squeezed from his body almost every emotion except a cold, implacable hatred of crime, had studied the detective methods of three continents, dedicated his life to running down criminals. And what was more—they knew it.

Such a life left small time for friendship. Loneliness was the only emotion ever to show in the blue eyes which utterly dominated his face. They were a vivid bottomless blue, glittering like ice in the sunlight. A stranger passing Foster on the street carried with him a memory of blue and fathomless eyes.

LACY MASTERS was a big man with a square, brutal face set off by gray hair. Bloodshot lines spider-webbed in the whites of his eyes and his skin was drawn tight across his cheek bones, making the flesh almost as colorless as his hair. Looking at him, Foster knew the man was not far from death.

But there was no fear in the thin, cruel cut of the man's lips. He sat behind the desk in his study regarding Foster for a full minute before he spoke. His voice was crisp, but with a strained note as though he were fighting some inward pain.

"I'm dying, Mr. Foster," was the way he began. "It's too late for you to save me. No power on earth can save me!"

Foster's tongue slid between his teeth and upper lip. He leaned back in his chair, comfortably. "Then why did you call me?"

Masters slammed his feet on the desk top. "Because, by God, I want to be revenged! I'd kill him myself, but I can't. I've tried. But I don't want that devil laughing when I'm gone. I want you to get him—you can, if any man can. I'll point him out to you before I die."

Foster said, "My job should be easy."

"I'll be damned if it'll be easy. They tell me your work, damn it, is strictly legal. You'll have to prove he killed me. For my part, to hell with legality! I want you to get him!"

Masters swung around in his chair, raised a hand that wavered, then suddenly stopped. His eyes were wide, unseeing. He slapped his palm over his eyes, sat motionless for a half minute. Then, slowly, he took his hand away. "I have those blind spells. Hit me like that!—with the god-awfullest headaches."

Swinging up his right hand, Masters stabbed one thick finger toward the tall, heavily built young man standing in the background, beside the window.

"Dick will you tell him that what I say is true. Mr. Foster, Dick Rogers, the boy I adopted twenty years ago."

Foster nodded. It was easy to see why there would be a bond between this fierce old man and the younger one. There was a cold glint in Rogers' black eyes and a square, brutal cut to his chin. He nodded at Foster without speaking.

Masters twisted in his chair to face Foster again. The motion sent agony leaping through him and he gripped the desk with big-knuckled fingers. His voice was harsh, but calm. "Those blind spells—coming more frequently now. My whole body's sore as if I jumped in a fire. I'll be going out soon."

"If you would explain . . ." Foster said.

The bloodshot lines in Masters' eyes were growing thicker. He had to drag each word from aching lungs, though his thin lips flung them fiercely.

"I'll have to go back about twenty years," he began. "Ed Bruder and I were partners then. I met him working for a construction company in India, but that wasn't his business. He'd been a big time crook. A super-criminal, he liked to call himself. And he was a crook still . . . Together we robbed an old Hindu priest. God! What a bunch of emeralds the old devil had! The bloke cursed us before we killed him. But I'd forgotten all about

the old buzzard's curse until he turned up two months ago, right across the street!"

Foster's blue eyes glittered coldly. His tongue still moved back and forth across his teeth. "The man you killed turned up?"

A SHADOW that might have been fear flickered for a second in the old man's eyes, then died. His fingers tightened on the desk. His breathing was heavier.

"I'm not afraid of the old—even if he is The Man Who Cannot Die. But, by God! He won't kill me without paying! That's why I got you."

He paused, added more slowly, "He calls himself Ali Huri now, and claims to be a Spiritualist. I went to see him a month ago soon after he started torturing me. Threatened to kill him again—but I knew I couldn't. He said he'd never heard of me, never heard of any emeralds. The tortures been getting worse steadily."

"And this partner of yours, this Ed Bruder?" Foster asked. "Is he being tortured also?"

Masters jerked erect in his chair and a laugh broke from his gray lips. "Tortured in hell! He kept telling me what a super-criminal he was, and that I was just an amateur. So I killed him four days after we took the jewels. Shot him square through the chest and left him in a swamp. Super-criminal, hell!"

Foster got slowly to his feet. His eyes were bright blue and bottomless beneath blond brows. Near the wall Masters' adopted son stood tensely, watching.

Foster's voice was quiet but rock-hard. "Mr. Masters, I entered my profession to help curb crime, not assist it. Within fifteen minutes I shall have told the police what you've told me. If the British Government wishes to extradite you, I hope they are able to. And I hope they hang you."

With a lunge, Masters came to his feet. "Why, by God! You . . ." He swayed drunkenly, clapped his hands over his eyes. His gray lips kept twitching, but there was no more sound. He leaned forward and, hands still clasped over his eyes, plunged headlong across his desk, where he lay motionless.

Dick Rodgers leaped across the room, gripped Masters' shoulders. "Dad!" he cried. His fingers went stiff and straight, his wide shoulders

jerked stiffly erect. He took two steps backward, staring at the body.

Foster moved swiftly, caught Masters' right wrist between his fingers. There was no pulse. He dropped the wrist, stood staring down at the body, and the blue of his eyes seemed to freeze. The man he had been hired to protect had been killed within three feet of him!

Never before had one of Foster's clients been injured—this one had been killed before his eyes! It didn't matter now that he had sworn to turn the old buccaneer over to the police. This was another murder.

Silence spread heavy wings over the sunlit room as both he and Rogers stared at the corpse stretched across the desk. It struck Foster as incongruous that the seat of Masters' trousers was worn thin and shiny, that his coat was pushed up around his neck, and wrinkled. Rogers was standing flatfooted, his square face pushed forward, hands clenched at his side.

"Call a servant," Foster ordered, "and carry the body to a bedroom." He stepped past Rogers and looked out the window to where August sunlight made the heat waves shimmer upward from the asphalt street.

Behind him sounded Rogers' steps on the rug, the door swinging open, and the young man's call. "Wilson! Come here. Quick!" Rogers' voice had gone strangely calm.

DIRECTLY across the street Foster saw a large, white stone house, On the front was a gold lettered sign:

*ALI HURI  
SPIRITUALIST  
THE MAN WHO CANNOT DIE  
SEANCES BY APPOINTMENT*

Abruptly the muscles of Foster's body went stiff and tense. From an upstairs window a man over there stared down into the street. His face was not close to the pane and Foster could just about make out the white turban above a dark, lean face which, even from here, was a mask of treachery and evil.

The man's eyes moved slowly until they were looking squarely at the detective. Then a curtain fell abruptly across the window.

Foster's eyes seemed an intense blue. His tongue slid rapidly back and forth and across his teeth. He turned from the window just as a thin, pale old man entered the room.

The fellow saw Master's body stretched across the desk, and jerked to a halt.

"What—what's happened?"

"Mr. Masters has been murdered. You and Rogers take him to a bedroom, then get the other servants and come back here."

Rogers spoke harshly. "Wilson is the only servant." He turned, and Foster could see his lips pulled hard across his teeth, his jaw set as he caught up the feet of the dead man. The seat of Rogers' trousers also was shiny. Foster nodded. Perhaps Masters hadn't given the young man much money to spend on clothes.

Wilson slipped his arms under Masters' shoulders. As he and Rogers slid the body from the table, the old man coughed violently. He stopped, one hand pressed against his chest. Color flamed in his pale cheeks as he said: "I—I've a little touch of T.B., sir."

"Very well," Foster said. He took Masters' shoulders, and he and Rogers carried the body to a bedroom. Afterward they returned to the study. For a full minute Foster stood looking about the room, then he stepped to the window, and stared out.

A large automobile had stopped across the street and two men and two women were alighting. He watched them go up the steps of the spiritualist's house, and knock.

Without turning from the window, he asked: "Who will get the money Masters left? It's quite a bit, isn't it?"

"I—I think it comes to me," Rogers answered.

"You think?" Foster's voice was toneless.

"I—I—Yes, sir. Dad told me that."

"All right," Foster said.

He saw the door of the spiritualist's house open, and the two couples enter. As he turned slowly, his blond brows were knitted.

He had never had a client killed before. Masters had said he was being murdered by black magic; then he had fallen dead across his desk. The man Foster had seen in the window across the street was young, yet Masters claimed he had killed that man twenty years ago.

Rogers and Wilson were standing near the desk, watching him. Roger's square jaw was set, his eyes beady. Foster said quietly: "Wilson, call my home, Westchester 6—3366. Tell the man who answers that Mr. Masters has been murdered and for him to notify the newspapers that I will have the murderer within a few hours."

He stepped to the desk, looked down at the place where the body had lain, at the empty chair. He raised blue, emotionless eyes to the old servant "And tell Tai Lo that at the same time I will clear up a couple of murders which happened twenty years ago in India."

WITH one long stride Rogers reached the detective, clapped his hands on Foster's shoulders. He towered over the smaller man.

"By God! You can't do that!" he cried. "You can't go spreading a story through the filthy newspapers about a dead man. That man was a father to me. I'll . . ."

Foster answered thinly. "I have no use for murderers, dead or alive. If the papers want the story, they'll get it. And—" he paused, added softly, "the police will get another murderer."

Rogers' big fingers clasped the detective's blue coat. His eyes blazed. "I'll be damned if—"

Foster moved very slightly, his shoulders rippling like the fur along a cat's back. Then he was free of Roger's hands.

"You might go down and try to keep the newspapers quiet," he remarked. Turning to Wilson he added: "Go and make that phone call. I'm going to see Ali Huri." His small black shoes made a bare whisper on the rug as he went out.

The knocker on Ali Huri's door was covered with signs of the zodiac. Foster lifted it and rapped, smiling grimly. Almost instantly the door swung half open to show a squat, heavily built Hindu barring the entrance. He glared at Foster.

"The Master is busy," he snapped. His voice had a pronounced accent.

"Very well," Foster said. He knew that spiritualists were in constant fear of the police. "I'm—"

"You make the appointment by the telephone. Now the Master is busy!" The door banged shut.

For ten seconds Foster stood there, frowning slightly—looking with blue, bottomless eyes at the door which had been slammed in his face. Deep

in thought, his tongue again slid unconsciously back and forth across his teeth.

Turning he went down the steps, circled the house. The windows were all too high to be reached from the ground. He tried the back door, and found it locked. Returning to the front, he went up the steps and knocked again.

The squat Hindu jerked the door open, holding the knob with his left hand. He saw Foster and snarled. "The Master—"

"Sure," Foster said. He clamped his right hand on the Hindu's left wrist, twisted, and stepped forward and inside as the Hindu was jerked out of his way. Then he heeled the door shut behind him.

The Hindu made a guttural, animal sound in his throat and plunged headlong at Foster's belly. Foster sidestepped six inches. His left fist landed against the Hindu's mouth, driving his head erect, halting his dive. Foster's right hand flickered inside his coat and out. His gun made a black streak in the air, and a low thudding sound when it hit. The Hindu pitched forward on his face.

Foster looked down at the man calmly. His lips said—soundlessly: "That's for slamming the door in my face!" He stuck the gun back in his holster, leaned over, and catching the unconscious servant by the shoulders dragged him into a small waiting room where he dropped him on the floor.

Returning to the front door, Foster took a fountain pen from his pocket and let three drops of ink fall on the knob. Then, returning the pen to his pocket, he started down a dark hallway toward the rear of the house.

HIS black shoes were rubber soled, and moving on the balls of his feet he made no sound at all. In that fashion he came to a closed door on his right, crouched beside it, put his ear against the panel and listened intently. He heard nothing.

Straightening, he twisted the knob, swung the door open, and stepped through. The latch barely clicked when he closed the door behind him.

A dim twilight seeped through the one heavily curtained window. He could see two long laboratory tables, littered with bottles. A Bunsen-burner held up a tiny flame on the right hand table. The left side of the room was concealed by a heavy black curtain.

Foster tensed, head pushed forward, ears pricked. From somewhere beyond the curtain came the dull mutter of voices. The detective's blue eyes glowed in the dull light. The Man Who Could Not Die would not be afraid of giving death.

Right hand close to his gun, Foster tiptoed to where the curtain joined the far wall. The sound of voices was louder here. He went down on his hands and knees, and pulled the curtain carefully to one side.

The walls of the room beyond were all formed by heavy black drapes. From somewhere beneath the one on the far side a green light sprayed a ghastly stream across the face of a man standing on a slightly raised platform. It was a lean, dark face, in which the eyes showed dark green and malignant. The mouth was a red, evil slit between sunken cheeks. Without a doubt, the man was Ali Huri.

Seated in chairs, watching him, were the two couples who had entered the house shortly before. And directly above the spiritualist's head hung a rope tied in a hangman's noose.

Ali Huri was talking. His voice was deep, guttural, yet somehow weirdly inhuman.

"To prove to you there is no trick, I shall allow you two men, instead of my assistant, to hang me. You shall tie my hands and my feet with the rope which you brought yourself, place the hangman's noose about my neck, and suspend me. After three minutes you shall cut me down. I shall be dead, completely dead—yet my spirit shall hear the questions you ask and shall answer them. After twenty minutes my spirit returns to me. If you will come forward now, we shall begin."

The two men got slowly to the feet. A woman laughed hysterically. One of the men said: "We've brought two pair of handcuffs. Is that all right?"

"Only the body is tied," Ali said. "It matters not how." He pointed toward an electric button on the floor. "When the noose is placed, and I am tied, press that. It will jerk me into the air."

"Okay," a man said. His voice was nervous. He slipped the noose about Ali's head, adjusted it with the knot back of the left ear. The other brought the black hood, handed it to Ali, who fitted it over his own head. Then the two men clamped the handcuffs about the spiritualist's wrists and ankles, fastening his wrists behind him.

Their faces were a sickly green in the light which spewed from under the curtain. Crouched

within fifteen feet, Allen Foster could hear their rapid breathing.

"You ready?" One man asked.

Ali's foot tapped the floor.

"Okay," the man said. He leaned over and pushed the electric button.

The rope jerked taut, snapping the body high into the air. One of the women screamed shrilly. Foster saw the other sway and clutch at her chair.

SWINGING in the air, Ali's body writhed and twisted spasmodically, then gradually went limp. One of the men, his voice strained and harsh, said: "If that didn't break his neck, he'll choke to death in three minutes. No human being can hang that long." A woman was sobbing frantically. The body swung three feet above the floor, swaying slightly at last, bathed in the eerie light.

Foster's fingers were digging into the curtain. His eyes strained in their sockets, staring at the swaying body. He pushed the curtain slightly aside so that he might see better.

And at that second it happened.

The weird green light snuffed out and blackness whipped into the room. In the same instant a pistol blasted twice. Foster saw the orange flame stab the darkness, but he was already flinging himself sideways, rolling under the curtain into the small auditorium.

The shots had come from the point where Ali had hung—or directly beyond it. He couldn't be certain. His automatic in his hand, Foster snapped to his feet, drove forward.

A gun blasted again. A bullet whistled past his ear. A woman screamed, and Foster heard the thud of her body as she pitched unconscious from her chair. Then his head banged into something hard. The darkness whirled about him as he lost his balance and crashed down.

He rolled to his knees, just as white light blazed into the room. Still on his knees, gun in hand, he found himself facing the body of Ali, which rocked backward and forward as if something had struck it. Foster knew then that he had run headlong into Ali's feet. Beyond the spiritualist, their faces white with fear, were the two men.

"Dog! Drop that gun or I kill . . ." the words were a snarl.

Foster's body jerked, froze motionless. He let the gun slip from his fingers, as footsteps padded behind him. Then, his eyes an icy blue, his mouth thin and straight, Allen Foster got to his feet, and turned to face the Hindu he had knocked out a few minutes before.

The man was five feet away, his squat, burly shoulders hunched over a blunt-nosed revolver. Beyond him were the women, one of whom had fainted in a huddle beside her chair. Foster stood straight, slim shoulders pushed forward, muscles hard, ready.

"So! You would kill the Master," the man growled. "But instead . . ." His knuckle whitened around the trigger.

"Drop that gun!" a voice said. It seemed to emanate from thin air, yet beside Foster!

The Hindu's narrow eyes popped open, jerked wildly from side to side. And as he jerked, Allen Foster leaned backward on his left heel, lashed his right foot upward. His toe struck the Hindu's wrist. The gun leaped from the Hindu's hand, spun up, then down, to clatter on the floor.

Before it struck, Allen Foster had scooped up his own.

"You're a hell of a spiritualist," he said quietly. You don't even know how to talk without moving your lips."

He stepped to his right, picked up the other gun, flipped open the cylinder. Not a shell had been fired; the barrel was clean. He dropped the gun in his pocket, and stood motionless for one moment, his vivid blue eyes shadowy with thought.

Then he turned, looked at the body swaying with the rope about its neck. "You better cut down The Man Who Cannot Die," he said. "He's been up there long enough." He stepped quickly to the curtain under which he had rolled, flung it aside and dashed toward the hall.

At the front door he paused, looked at the ink-stained knob, and smiled. Then he swung the door open and went out, across the street to the home of Lacy Masters.

HE found the thin, pale faced old servant in the room where Masters had had died. "Hello, Wilson," he said. "Where's Rogers?"

"He's gone to interview the newspapermen, sir. He doesn't want them to run the story about—about Mr. Masters."

"Okay," Foster said. "I'll wait. And while I'm waiting you call my home again and tell Tai Lo I've caught the murderer."

The old man's pale face jerked tense, his eyes wide. "You—you've caught him, sir? Who? It—it's not . . ."

"Not only caught him," Foster said, "but seen a good spiritualist show. I've seen The Man Who Cannot Die hanged by the neck."

"Hanged?" Wilson was gulping with excitement. "I heard he did something like that. Was he . . .?"

"It's a good trick," Foster said. "But it's a trick. When he put the hood over his face he put a rubber clamp in his mouth, and fastened it to the rope. He hung by his teeth like any circus acrobat."

Steps thudded on the porch. The door swung open and a moment later Dick Rogers came in the room. He saw Foster and his eyes blazed. His voice was husky. "They're going to run that story. I can't stop them. But, by God! I'll . . ."

Foster interrupted. "I've caught the man who killed Masters."

"What? Who?" Rogers leaned forward, his muscles showing taut.

"Bruder. Ed Bruder. The man Masters thought he killed twenty years ago."

"Then that Hindu . . ." Roger's mouth was thin.

"No," Foster said. "The Hindu's just a spiritualist who happened to take the house across the street. Bruder goes now under the name of Wilson."

The servant flung backward, lips snarling. "You—liar!"

Foster said: "No, I'm not lying. If you'll look in the palm of your right hand, and on your fingers, you'll find ink stains. It's indelible and won't come off. You got it when you opened the spiritualist's door after trying to kill me. You shouldn't have tried to kill me, but I would have known anyway."

"How—how?" Rogers stammered. "It couldn't. . . ."

"It is," Foster repeated. "He killed him by putting radium in his chair. I thought it was something like that when Masters described the symptoms. If Masters had gone to a doctor he would have learned what was wrong. But he

didn't go. He made up his hard head he was dying by magic and he stuck to it. When I saw the seat of his trousers, how shiny they were, I was pretty sure. A rich man doesn't use a suit long enough to wear it out. Not Masters anyway. And I knew it couldn't be you when I saw the way your own trousers were shiny. You wouldn't have been sitting in the chair if you had known."

The servant was half crouched, backing slowly toward the far wall. Foster moved a step closer, but there was no expression in his blue eyes.

"So you were something of a super-criminal after all. But you weren't good enough. If you had T.B., Bruder, your cheeks would be flushed, not as pale as they are. And you wouldn't cough only when you strain yourself. You cough as if a bullet, not germs, had gnawed on your lungs. You must have gone through hell after he left you for dead, if it changed your face so he couldn't recognize you. But the scar where the bullet struck will still be there."

For an old man, Bruder's movements were remarkably fast. His hand whipped under his coat and out. There was the blue of an automatic. "I'll get . . ."

Allen Foster drove forward. His left hand slapped on Bruder's wrist even as the gun cleared the coat, pushing the hand back toward the other's chest. Foster's right hand came up like a whip lash. It made a crackling sound when it landed.

The roar of the gun shook the window panes.

Ed Bruder shivered backward. While three slow seconds ticked past, he stood stiffly erect. There was a small hole in his coat over the right lung. Blood began to ooze from the hole. Then, still holding the gun, his knees buckled slowly, gave way. His body made a dull thump on the rug.

Allen Foster turned to look at the young man by the desk. "There are no men who can't die," he said quietly. "Not even Ed Bruder."

**THE END**



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