PLUNDER

FREDERIC F. VAN DE WATER

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PLUNDER

FOR EXCITEMENT!

A rattle of gun-fire, a speeding motor, and the prisoner whom Sergeant John Tarleton, of the New York State Police, had brought from up-state for the Arnold Committee in New York, lay dead at his feet. Tarleton himself would have been killed, if a Mr. Tucket had not been close by—the little man to whom a policeman later on remarked, “You’re the slickest, crookedest little mug in this town!” “I claim so,” Tucket replied. “Mr. Tucket is a very good man.” And Mr. Tucket was, as Tarleton found when, broken out of the troopers for losing his prisoner, he became a manhunter in the jungle he knew nothing of—the slums and towers of Manhattan—searching for the killers who had cost him his career. From sinister conferences at the huge Hotel Assyrian to gay—and peculiar—affairs at Ira Draw’s Park Avenue flat, the chase swept on—until one day John Tarleton heard Maxie Wain’s weird laugh—at a party where Maxie Wain had never been—and the strange and terrible conclusion began to run its bloody course.

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The cold-blooded murder of the man at his side turned John Tarleton from state trooper to ruthless manhunter . . . his clue an eery laugh, his hunting grounds the canyons of New York, his quarry the most dangerous killer in America. Fast-moving, hard-boiled . . . this is the kind of story Wallace might have written had he been an American.

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PLUNDER

CHAPTER I

WHEELS unlocked with a jar. The black locomotives and jetting steam of Harmon slid past the Pullman window. Sergeant John Tarleton of the New York State Troopers thrust the telegram into his civilian tweeds, told the lingering porter, "We'll get off at 125th Street," and once more met the stare of his prisoner in the chair ahead. This time, Steve Horowitz did not flinch and look away.

"Off where?" he asked hoarsely. Fear harried his eyes, plucked at his flabby face. In the day and night since he had ransomed his swarthy hide from the doom of the Baumes Law by squealing, Horowitz, the sergeant thought, had shrunk visibly.

Tarleton replied, moved by perverse sympathy: "Take it easy," and, pulling out the message, read aloud:

" '*Avoid possible unpleasantness by getting off One Hundred Twenty-fifth where my car will meet you.* FOLLANSBEE ARNOLD.'

"That's all," he concluded, refolding the yellow sheet. Horowitz wiped his clammy face with a soiled silk handkerchief and demanded: "What's this 'possible unpleasantness' stuff, hey?"

A large, mild woman, progressing uncertainly down the aisle, lurched and caught the back of the prisoner's chair. His gasp, his stricken face, stifled her apology, and she fled. Tarleton's unwilling pity turned sour.

"Buck up," he advised coldly. "I don't know what it means." But his hostility failed to quell the other's mounting panic. Horowitz's recently mopped face was glossy with sweat; his voice was shrill.

"Somebody's belched," he accused. "Arnold's double-crossed me."

"Now, wait a moment," Tarleton interrupted. "Whatever Arnold told you, rides. You wouldn't understand, but he's that sort."

"Is he?" returned Horowitz, wavering between incredulity and a hunger for reassurance. "You say so. Promises to spring me if I'll play ball, doesn't he? He and his sidekick take a statement a mile long from me, but no one is going to peep until I'm safe with his damned committee. And now 'possible unpleasantness.' "

His voice jumped upward. Fear bleached his sweating face.

“Somebody’s spilled,” he cried. “And if somebody has, the finger’s on me.”

Across the aisle an elderly gentleman turned with annoyance to survey them above his glasses. Tarleton leaned forward and gripped the prisoner’s twitching shoulder.

“Pipe down,” he said. “You talk too much.”

Horowitz’s handkerchief was a gray ball between grinding palms. He drew a long, shaky breath.

“Listen, sergeant,” he returned more quietly, “I wish—I wish this was over.”

“Both of us,” Tarleton agreed.

The sinking sun had hung a blue awning of shadow before the Palisades and had tarnished the bright river. Maples spun past, stippled with crimson, and the conductor, entering from the platform, brought a chill, quickly perishing gust of autumn into the dead warmth of the car.

The sergeant sniffed wistfully and frowned at the stiff, bristled neck of the man before him. He discounted the importance attached to this wilted little craven by Follansbee Arnold, lawyer, philanthropist, millionaire, and head of the latest of committees to investigate New York City’s civic iniquity. In Tarleton’s own district, where crime was a matter of individual insurgence instead of commercial organization, there were a dozen scapegraces who could tear Horowitz in half.

They roared through Tarrytown. To Tarleton, the solid ranks of buildings, streets packed with traffic, were an abhorrent foretaste of the greater city beyond. The rim of the Palisades ran like a slow, uneven saw along the nether arc of the sun. Horowitz sat silent but never motionless, turning and wrenching slowly as though in the pressure of some invisible vise. A shabby, small-time crook, Tarleton grumbled to himself, reviewing his record. This had shown a six months’ term for assault, a year for robbery, and then, eight years ago, eighteen months for burglary. Thereafter his record was marked by fourteen arrests and no conviction. Arnold, the gaunt, white-mustached incorruptible who had rushed from New York to Euclid Center at behest of his nephew the local district attorney, had professed to see significance in this.

The sergeant yawned and cursed beneath his breath the circumstances that had hauled him away from his substation in the hills to escort a tawdry gangster who, confronted by the Baumes Law that deals grimly with fourth offenders, had turned yellow. Arnold, with the voice and gestures of an oracle, had warned Tarleton of the man’s importance; of the need of getting

him to town as safely and as secretly as possible. Major Speede, superintendent of state police, had reiterated Arnold's admonitions.

"Maybe!" the sergeant now commented so loudly that Horowitz swung about in his chair.

"Hey?" he inquired. Tarleton grinned.

"Nothing," he replied. "I was just wishing you'd stayed where you belonged and let the New York cops pinch you."

"God," Horowitz retorted earnestly, "don't I just!" He scrabbled in the débris of his terror for a few vain remnants of defiance.

"When I'm through telling what I know," he boasted feebly, "a lot of cops'll be takin' it on the lam, huntin' for some country that don't have extradition."

"Oh, yes?" Tarleton jeered, affronted by the other's mean glee.

"You said it," Horowitz retorted. "I'll put the heat on the big burg. Watch me. I'll show them how far they get pushing Steve Horowitz around."

"Our outfit pushed you around a bit," Tarleton reminded him as encroaching walls magnified the tumult of the train. "And we've got, up to now, as far as Yonkers."

A note of martyrdom flattened the prisoner's voice.

"Yeh, I know," he conceded. "You boys play at being cops. Just because there's a little shooting over that alky shipment and you nail me when the Tommy machine gun jams, anybody'd think I was Scarface himself."

He winced and went on hurriedly, almost placatingly:

"What was there to do but squeal? I should rot in the can just for the pleasure of keeping my yap closed. A guy's gotta take care of himself, hasn't he?"

"If he can," Tarleton agreed wearily. Horowitz found something sinister in the admission.

"What's that mean?" he snapped.

Tarleton glanced at his watch.

"Nothing," he returned. "Now listen to me: We'll be in pretty soon. I'm not going to lose you after bringing you this far."

Steel clinked dully as he fumbled in his hip pocket. Horowitz jerked his head like a frightened horse.

"The cuffs are here," the sergeant said, patting his trousers, and added, thrusting his hand into his jacket's side pocket, "There's a gun here. You get the first anyway, and the second if there's any monkey business."

“Listen,” Horowitz begged earnestly, “with that statement Arnold got out of me, think I’d try to double-cross you?”

“Sure,” Tarleton returned cheerfully. “I think you’re in a jam where you’d double-cross your own father—if you ever had one. In a few minutes now we’ll go stand on the front platform, and one of those cuffs goes on my left wrist and the other on your right. If we get off together and walk side by side, maybe no one will see them. I’ll duck all the notice I can, but I’m not going to let you get away.”

Wheels complained as they rounded a curve, and a few scattered lights were inlaid on the leaden sheet of Spuyten Duyvil. Tarleton rose and looked down at his prisoner with eyes incongruously blue beneath thick black brows.

“Come on,” he ordered, and his tanned face was suddenly grim.

“Say, listen,” Horowitz objected, and gulped as the other laid a quiet hand upon his shoulder.

“I’m tired of listening,” said the sergeant. “Tell it to Arnold.”

Side by side, a quarter hour later, linked by barely perceptible steel, they worked their way along the elevated platform toward a stairway. Out of the confusion about the parked luggage a man stepped toward them. The sergeant approved his smart salute and, conscious of the flutter of loose cloth about his own ankles, observed enviously the trim whipcord uniform and the glitter of puttees.

“Gentlemen for Mr. Arnold?” the chauffeur asked, and at Tarleton’s nod, relieved him of his bag. “Any further luggage, sir? Very good, sir. If you’ll follow me . . .”

The tumult of the city spouted up the steep chute of the stairway. The brawling of motors, the jolt and roar of street cars, yelpings of newsboys, automobile horns, and the lacerating shrillness of a traffic whistle assailed them and were beaten back by the harsh thunder of a train overhead. Tarleton winced and cursed softly. The raw brilliance of street lights, the nervous leaping of electric signs drove back the dusk and splintered from the slow, vociferous currents of the traffic. The sergeant breathed the reek of burned gasoline, mingled with coal smoke, a taint of escaping gas and the far-borne flavor of bilge from the waterfront, and jerked his prisoner through the swirling humanity about the street doors as though he were obscurely responsible for the odorous tumult.

They followed the erect figure in whipcord across the avenue to where a limousine was parked. A youngster, catching the glitter of handcuffs, yelped excitedly and followed. The chauffeur slammed the door behind them. The

soft comfort of the upholstery soothed Tarleton's irritation. His prisoner, relaxed beside him on the wide seat, mopped sweat away and gave a tremulous grin of relief as the car slid from the curb.

"Whew!" he chattered with the glibness of unstrung nerves. "I could stand a drink. This is the first whole breath I've drawed since we stepped off that rattler. Say, you yanked me through that jam like nobody's business. This cuff's near pulled my wrist off."

"Too bad," Tarleton returned, fumbling with his free hand for a cigarette. "It won't be long now."

The car swung out of the confusion and glare of 125th Street onto a wider, less crowded thoroughfare. The sergeant listened approvingly to the soft mutter of its quickened engine and offered Horowitz a cigarette with a tolerance born of dread abolished. The little gangster's terror had been faintly contagious. In a half hour now his job would be finished. He recalled Arnold's portentous warnings, Major Speede's anxious instructions, and smiled condescendingly at the river of motor lights that washed along the cliffs of enormous buildings. This town was so big and noisy, it bluffed people. That was all.

A traffic light popped red, and they swung onto a darker side street. Horowitz exhaled a blast of smoke with a satisfied sigh.

"Where," he asked, "is this Arnold gonna park me while I do my stuff?" and Tarleton once again felt a spasm of distaste for his prisoner's smug satisfaction in his treachery.

"That," he told Horowitz, "isn't my grief. If I can hop the first train north, I don't care what happens to you."

"Oh, yeah?" the other asked with an oily smile. "Says you! Before I'm through spilling, everybody in this state'll care. Believe it."

"The major's with Arnold tonight," Tarleton replied. "Maybe they'll give you a trooper bodyguard, but I won't be on it."

"That'll be just too bad," Horowitz sneered. "Is this Arnold's dump?"

Their car had swung in to the curb. Now it crept forward toward a long trench in the pavement, rimmed with rubble and shards of asphalt on which red lanterns gleamed. Beyond the excavation a street lamp spread a wide circle of radiance. On either side the thoroughfare dark ranks of private houses stood, shades drawn, reticent. The chauffeur clambered out and opened the door beside Tarleton.

"They're tearing up the street before the house, sir," he reported. "I can't get closer. It's 311, the next but one along. I'll bring your bag in immediately, sir, if you'll go ahead."

“Right,” Tarleton acknowledged, disembarking awkwardly and followed by his tethered prisoner.

“Very good, sir,” the chauffeur parroted. “That house there.”

Across the far perspective of the gloomy street an elevated train crawled. Against its distant rumble the quick footsteps of someone approaching sounded sharply. As Tarleton skirted the excavation, Horowitz dragged so hard upon his wrist that he turned impatiently.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute,” his prisoner begged with mounting anxiety. “This ain’t Arnold’s address. What the hell street is this, anyhow? Ain’t there any numbers on these houses?”

“Come on,” Tarleton commanded, jerking the handcuffs. Horowitz barely missed collision with a little man who halted.

“Hey,” the stranger snapped. “What’s all this?”

The prisoner uttered a choking sound.

“Well!” the little man exclaimed. “It’s Steve!”

“Dip,” Horowitz cried. “Dip. Listen. What street’s this?”

Tarleton, turning angrily, stared in bewilderment. The car that had brought them shot away to the panicky sound of rapidly shifted gears. Its tail light leered, vanished.

Horowitz squealed and began a frantic tugging at his tether. Tarleton, resisting his prisoner’s lunges, staggered against the mound beside the excavation. As he reeled, the stranger with a shrill yelp dived for the trench, caromed from the sergeant, and plunged into the hole. Thrown off balance, the state policeman toppled, found no footing on the sliding rubble, and fell beside him.

For an instant, the pain in the wrist that was twisted by the handcuff dazed him. Dust filled his eyes. From somewhere above came a peremptory reiterant sound, as though a boy drew a stake across iron palings. A spurt of pebbles stung Tarleton’s neck. The strain on his wrist slackened. The stranger spat curses like an angry cat.

Awkwardly, favoring his twisted arm, he rose to his knees. A woman was screeching. He rubbed grit from his eyes and saw her plainly, a fat, agitated figure against the glow of an open window across the street.

Above the breastwork of débris Steve Horowitz’s shackled hand stretched toward him, crooked talon-like, still, with his. On the sidewalk slope of the rubble lay his prisoner, face down, and across his jacket, from shoulder blade to shoulder blade, ran a long tear, ragged and sodden. The

woman had hushed her screaming, but window after window rasped open in the near-by houses, and voices called back and forth shrilly.

Coherent thought returned slowly. Ignoring the crowd that grew about him, Tarleton automatically bent and sought for a pulse in Horowitz's handcuffed wrist. At length, he unshackled himself and rose, focus for the regard of twenty faces, fifty, a hundred. They ringed him about, weirdly shadowed by the street light. He could hear the slap of shoes on the pavement as others came running. There was something terrifying in this pallid, shadow-splotched, ever thickening ring; in the swelling buzz of voices like a swarming of scavenger insects; in the sharp hysterical laughter that rose above speech. Before him, a fat collarless man waved shirt-sleeved arms and shouted indistinguishable questions. Children wriggled through the press to stand wide eyed and calm above the body.

Tarleton found his voice.

"This man's been murdered," he said hoarsely. "Phone for the police."

No one seemed to hear him. He looked about helplessly and saw the little man scrambling from the far side of the trench, his sharp face livid; his dapper raiment dust smeared and disheveled. The stranger met Tarleton's regard with a blandness more suspicious than cunning.

"I'll get a cop," he offered loudly and rubbed his derby against his jacket sleeve. The sergeant's bewildered mind laid hold gladly upon an immediate problem.

"You'll stay," he announced, and stepped across the excavation to his side.

CHAPTER II

THE man accorded him a brief, disconcertingly penetrating stare and grew elaborately absorbed in renovating his hat.

"Oh, yeah?" he asked at length. "What for?"

"You knew Horowitz," Tarleton told him.

The little man's eyebrows were the color of a fox pelt and inappropriately thick, as though all the fertility in that hard, dry visage had been spent on them and his sleek red hair. His eyes were brisk and clever as a terrier's.

"Didn't you?" he queried. Tarleton retorted:

"I'm Sergeant Tarleton of the New York State Troopers. You'll stay here till a policeman shows up."

"Pleased t'meetcha," the little man returned with faintly derisive composure. "I'm Tucket, Ignatius Loyola Tucket, and the sooner a cop shows, the better I'll be pleased. I don't like this street."

"No?" asked Tarleton grimly. "But you were here right on time, weren't you?"

Tucket put on his derby at a faintly rakish angle.

"So were you," he said dryly. "And if I hadn't been, where'd you be now? With your face in the pebbles like Steve, eh? When I bumped you into the ditch I saved your life, mister. And get that straight."

Beyond the circle of faces a bellowing rose. The mass parted with reluctance, and a blue-coated figure shouldered its way through. Before Tarleton could speak, Tucket yapped jauntily:

"Hi, Eddie?"

The patrolman's professional glower broke into a grin.

"You, Dip?" he asked. "What's all this?"

"Steve Horowitz," Tucket returned, "and nearly a couple of other fellas."

"Steve, eh?" the patrolman repeated, and gave a long whistle. He squatted and lifted the dead man's head, released it, rose, and turned on the spectators with blustering fury.

"Gawan wit' ye," he bawled. "Git back now, I'm tellin' ye. Beat it. Gawan home."

His abolishing gestures included Tarleton, who did not stir.

“Friend of yours?” the patrolman asked Tucket with a jerk of his head.

“Up-state cop,” the little man shrugged. “With Steve. I saved him, but he don’t seem grateful. Wants me pinched.”

“Ain’t by himself,” the policeman grinned, and turned to Tarleton. “How about it, buddy?”

“I’m a sergeant in the State Troopers. If you’ve finished your Brother Elk act with this crook,” Tarleton snapped, back rigid, keen face dark with anger, “I’ll turn this case over to you.”

Geniality vanished from the patrolman’s bearing. His features were suddenly wooden.

“Oh-ho,” he said, “so that’s the way it sets? Shoot the works, sergeant.”

Midway in Tarleton’s brief recital the other interrupted him suspiciously.

“Takin’ him to Arnold’s house?” he snorted. “Then how did you get here?”

“If you’ll wait a minute,” Tarleton said stiffly, and produced the telegram. The patrolman scanned it and shook his head.

“Better tell it to the loot,” he decided. “It’s way past me, the whole racket.”

With a brazen flurry of its gong, an ambulance scattered one segment of the crowd. A white-clad interne dropped off and inspected indifferently the body of Horowitz.

“Why send for me?” he complained to the patrolman. “Get the morgue wagon. This guy’s dead as your brain. Lead poisoning and .45 caliber is my bet.”

“Tommy machine gun,” Tucket offered, and lit a cigarette.

“Where from?” the patrolman snapped. The little man included the entire row of houses in his gesture.

“Window,” he replied.

“Which?”

Tucket shook his head.

“I’d give five grand to know,” he answered.

The green bus that brought a half-dozen police in brass and blue and two bored plainclothes men bore Tarleton, Tucket, and his patrolman acquaintance toward the police station.

Chin on hands and elbows on knees, the sergeant sat and suffered. Realization of the disaster broke over him in chill, faintly nauseating waves. Knowledge of his helplessness numbed him. Nothing in his conversation

with the plainclothes men had brought the least encouragement. Their questions had been laconic; their scorn of him, obvious. This was a city and a people strange to him—reptilian, tacitly hostile. And beyond the distress of the present dwelt the prospect of confessing to Arnold his tragic failure. He considered this with the sick apprehension of a patient bound for the operating room.

Tucket, in low-voiced conversation with the patrolman, chuckled. The sound was a draught upon the spark of anger that smoldered beneath the state policeman's sudden wretchedness. He looked up sharply, and the little man, meeting his eyes, slid along the seat to his side.

"Mister," he asked as one might humor a child, "you don't think, on the square, that you can pin anything on me?"

"Worried?" asked Tarleton with faint truculence. The other shook his head, and beneath his bushy brows the canny eyes seemed secretly amused.

"Out in the sticks, maybe," he replied. "Not here in the Big Town, where Mr. Tucket, who's a very good man, is known by most and respected by some. Mister, if I hadn't knocked you into that hole, you know where you'd be now."

"I wish to God you hadn't," the sergeant blurted. The little man tilted his derby a trifle.

"Well," he surrendered. "That's gratitude. I've seen lots of it in my time. Only I'm telling you, you're wasting time trying to put the heat on me. I don't know much more than you do, so far. And what a confession that is! You can't hold me, mister."

"You say so," Tarleton replied grimly.

"Better'n that," Tucket returned, "I know so."

The bus screeched to a stop before a gaunt building flanked by green lights. They passed through a magically assembled pack of children up the steps and into the police station.

Glaring electric lamps only emphasized the dinginess of a chamber haunted by the ghosts of bad tobacco and worse plumbing. Through the half-open door to the room beyond came the growl of male voices and a disconcerting burst of laughter. Behind the desk a uniformed man with the bars of a lieutenant on the collar beneath his blunt, stubborn face, continued to write in the book before him, nor did he look up when the patrolman advanced and talked confidentially.

A spittoon stood on a splashed rubber mat near the patrolman's feet. Tarleton, trained to the orderliness of a semi-military organization, watched a roach run across the floor and felt his heart sink.

Tucket, a cigarette stub dangling from his lip, was preening himself like a bird, brushing dust from his shepherd's plaid suit, pulling the tight vest and flaring jacket into place. He grinned at Tarleton's scowl, and the creases wrought by the grimace emphasized his foxy, furtive sophistication.

Laughter bursting again from the back room seemed to wash out through its half-opened door a long thin civilian who quickened merriment by something he called back over his shoulder and then paused to stare hard at Tarleton through horn-rimmed glasses.

He was a strangely professorial figure against the settled squalor of the police station, and yet the smile with which he approached the sergeant was boyishly eager.

"Hello, Buck," he said quietly.

"Jimmy," Tarleton gulped incredulously. "Jimmy Carrigan."

"None other," Carrigan returned, gripping the outstretched hand. "It's been a long time, Buck."

They considered each other an instant in eloquent silence.

"Old devil," Carrigan said at last.

"Dirty Mick," Tarleton returned, and surveying the other's gangling length offered:

"I heard you were lousy rich."

"More than enough," Carrigan replied. "My tastes were ever simple."

"Oh, yeah?" the sergeant jeered. "What are you doing here?"

"Police reporter," the other responded. "Still on the *Standard*. More fun than anything else I know. Keeps one close to the city's great big yellow heart. Sleep all day and sniff about all night and wonder when the brimstone of the Lord will consume us all. They've just burned another bozo over west."

"Yes," Tarleton said briefly. "I know."

The happiness faded out of Carrigan's eyes as he surveyed his friend.

"Tell me," he said at length.

"For publication?" Tarleton demurred.

"In a minute," Carrigan returned, "I'll kick your kneecap off. I don't butcher my friends. Wait."

He gripped the sergeant by the arm and hurried him up to the desk, where the lieutenant still wrote, and the patrolman continued to mumble.

"Hello, Jerry," he said quickly. "Hello, Schmidt. Can I horn in here?"

“Haven’t you?” the lieutenant queried, and looked from the reporter to Tarleton with fierce little eyes, deep set in a solid, ruddy face.

“Oh, stop that,” Carrigan said impatiently. “You don’t impress me. Jerry, be human now. This is Sergeant John Tarleton of the galloping state police. We just barely went through Dartmouth together, and he rose in the world, and I sank to associating with guys like you. Lieutenant Gannon, Buck, and Patrolman Schmidt and Schmitty, you’ve got a leave of absence while we talk to the lieutenant.”

“Sure,” the patrolman acquiesced, backing away. “Say, that was a nice piece you had in the paper about me yesterday, Mr. Carrigan. I’m obliged.”

“You ought to be,” Carrigan retorted. “I should be jailed for lying like that.”

He turned to Gannon, who still held the pen in his big fist.

“Put it down,” the reporter begged, “and listen, Jerry. Anything you do for this mug, it’s twice for me. Go ahead, Buck.”

“A minute now,” the lieutenant interposed in a voice that seemed to snarl over some obscure grievance. “ ’Twill save time if I ask you a few questions. Schmidt’s been filling my ear full for ten minutes already. Will you tell me what in hell you were parading through that part of town for with Steve Horowitz tied to you?”

Tarleton hesitated under his stare, and at last shrugged:

“The man’s dead,” he surrendered. “Secrecy can’t help anything now. I was bringing him from Euclid Center, my substation up-state, where he was arrested, to testify before the Arnold Committee.”

Beneath raised brows, Carrigan’s eyes snapped with interest.

“Oh-ho,” he said softly. Gannon, with an impatient shake of his head, pursued:

“Where were you taking him? To Follansbee Arnold’s home? That’s two miles in the opposite direction from where they burned him.”

Briefly, for the bull-like lunging of Gannon’s speech irked him, Tarleton told of the telegram, the chauffeur, and the waiting car. Gannon listened dourly, thick fingers interlaced and thumbnails clicking loudly upon each other.

“It was dark,” the sergeant concluded. “I don’t know this town. Neither Horowitz nor I watched where we were going.”

“They must have wanted him,” Carrigan muttered, his long face studiously thoughtful.

“They did,” Gannon replied out of a corner of his mouth.

He turned upon Tarleton again and asked:

"You saw no one, nothing?"

The sergeant jerked his head toward where Schmidt and Tucket stood.

"Your patrolman's sidekick, yonder, the little friend of all the world. That's all. He came by and knew Horowitz. He dived into that excavation and knocked me in too. This isn't my game, nor my turn to speak, but I'd hold him. His name is Tucket."

"Yeh," Gannon granted with a frown. "I know." But Carrigan turned about and stared at the dapper figure with interest.

"So," he marveled, "that's the Dip, himself, in person? I've heard of him plenty. I've never caught up with him before."

"There's worse," Gannon retorted. "This guy came by, you say? What can you hold him on?"

"Material witness," Tarleton replied in surprise. The lieutenant shrugged. "Not a chance," he growled. His disparagement quickened Tarleton's dislike.

"All right," he returned, "how about accessory before the fact? I'll make that charge, if you can get it to stick."

"This," said Gannon, and the dull grievance in his voice sounded louder, "isn't Amenia nor yet Euclid Center. You might as well try to tie a horse with a postage stamp."

Tarleton's tanned face darkened.

"Now, wait a minute," he said, "I'm charging this bird with complicity in the murder of Steve Horowitz, and I'd like to see you turn him loose after that."

Gannon raised heavy shoulders and called:

"Hey, you. Dip. Come here."

The figure in the flamboyantly tailored checked suit exhaled a blast of cigarette smoke, flipped the butt toward the cuspidor, and advanced to lean negligently against the desk.

"I was just gonna leave," he said, and grinned from Tarleton to Gannon.

"That's just too bad," Gannon retorted. "Sergeant Tarleton, here, wants us to lock you up for murder."

"Don't make me laugh," Tucket begged.

"Got an alibi, of course," Gannon sneered. The little man's grin faded into earnestness.

“Oh, I was there right enough,” he conceded. “And the big guy here will tell you him and me both just missed being there yet. Gannon, I don’t know no more about it than he does.”

The lieutenant turned to Tarleton.

“Want to press the charge?” he asked.

“Good God!” the state trooper exclaimed. “Don’t you?”

Gannon hesitated an instant.

“Son,” he said at last, “if you knew this town better you wouldn’t ask so many fool questions. All right. We’ll go through the motions. You’re going to be booked again, Dip.”

The little man rolled a reproachful eye at Tarleton and said with resignation, “Oke. Gimme the phone.”

“Listen,” Gannon snarled, affronted by his wide grin, “you’re a wise guy, aren’t you?”

Tucket’s smile spread mockingly, wrinkling and sharpening his foxlike nose.

“Yeah,” he jeered, “if I wasn’t, you’d have me downstairs trying to whale a squeal out of me with a length of hose. And if you’re a wise guy, too, you’ll hand over that phone or see how you’ll look next week transferred again, and maybe to Bathhurst. I know my onions, Gannon. Never forget it.”

He mumbled a number into the mouthpiece and calmly lit a cigarette while he waited. Gannon bent glowering over the open book before him. Carrigan muttered to Tarleton:

“The old fix, Buck. They’ll spring him in court.”

“The what?” Tarleton asked.

“The fix,” the other repeated. “You bounce these right laddies in and the fix bounces them out again. He’ll have some politician over to tell the magistrate what to do, and maybe a lawyer and bondsman, too, just in case. You can’t hold him, old-timer, and it wouldn’t help matters if you could.”

“Why not?” Tarleton queried angrily. Carrigan’s reply was briskly positive.

“If he’d helped spot Horowitz, he’d have an alibi built that you couldn’t break through with a tank. The fact that he hasn’t a good watertight lie ready proves he’s telling the truth. This baby’s smooth. He’ll be this town’s Big Shot one of these days.”

“What have you got cops for?” Tarleton demanded.

“Oh,” said Carrigan blandly, “just to kid the taxpayers that mobs aren’t running New York.”

Tucket replaced the telephone, and the angle of his derby expressed jaunty confidence.

“Whenever,” he told the room at large, “you gents want to visit Night Court for a glimpse of the seamy side of city life, I’ll be glad to show you around.”

His mocking geniality killed Tarleton’s last hope but one. He stepped toward Gannon and nodded at the telephone.

“Mind if I use it?” he queried. The lieutenant scowled.

“What for?” he grumbled.

“I might as well let Mr. Arnold know,” Tarleton replied grimly, “why I haven’t brought in his star witness. And maybe he’ll have something to say about Mr. Tucket’s plans.”

Gannon thrust the instrument toward him with a snort, rose, and joined Carrigan on the far side of the room. Tucket readjusted his tie and gave his sleek derby further, unnecessary polishing. Watching him, Tarleton wondered inanely if the present were not a bad dream from which he would wake presently in the Euclid Center substation. On his wrist he marked the red weal bruised by the handcuffs he had unlocked from Horowitz’s body. He heard the dry pulsing sound that told him Arnold’s telephone was ringing and drew a long preparatory breath.

“What is it?” a woman’s voice asked. Surprise made him flounder.

“This is—I mean, I want to speak to Mr. Arnold.”

“He’s not in.” He found himself trying to picture anyone with a voice as soothingly calm as this. “Who is this, please?”

“Sergeant Tarleton of the State Troopers,” he replied. “It’s important I reach Mr. Arnold as soon as possible.”

“Oh.” Her cool tone was suddenly warmer, friendly. “Major Speede and my uncle were talking about you at dinner, Mr.—I mean, Sergeant Tarleton. I’m Patricia Arnold. They went a long time ago to meet you at Grand Central.”

“Oh,” he said stupidly. “Grand Central. Will you tell Mr. Arnold, when he comes back, that I will get to his house as soon as possible?”

“Indeed I will,” she assured him, and he heard the connection break. It was, he thought staring blankly into the mouthpiece, a singularly lovely voice, and then, as its message sank in, felt the trapped feeling overwhelm

him once more. Gannon and Carrigan both were looking at him. He crossed the room wearily, with sagging shoulders.

"They went," he told the reporter, "to the Grand Central Station to meet me. They aren't back yet. That telegram——"

Gannon's ill-tempered voice broke in.

"We were talking about that just now," he said. "Where did you get that telegram? Harmon, eh? Got it with you still?"

"I have," Tarleton retorted, thrusting a hand inside his jacket.

"Let's see it," Gannon commanded. "It might tell us something."

Tarleton halted his search an instant, stared blankly at his companions, and pallor spread beneath his tan. He plunged his hands into the side pockets of his jacket and rummaged his trousers.

"It's gone," he said at last in a stifled voice. "I had it, but—it's gone."

Gannon at length broke the silence.

"For a cop, you've got a bad habit of losing things."

CHAPTER III

"THIS plaintiff," said the chubby pink magistrate, glaring down at Tarleton, "through his own admitted negligence brings about the death of his prisoner and then turns on this gentleman here who actually saved his life and accuses him of being *particeps criminis*. He brings no single jot or tittle of evidence to substantiate this charge."

The magistrate glanced at a well fed gentleman in the front row who balanced a hard hat on his knee. The magistrate beamed with brotherly love on Ignatius Loyola Tucket, who stood reverently before him and, turning upon Tarleton, depressed his chin so that it trebled, and continued in an outrage-shaken basso:

"I can only suggest to the defendant here that the law provides adequate reprisal for the humiliation and mental agony of false arrest. I can only advise this young man who claims to be a sergeant of state police that he go back from whence he came and learn some of the primary principles of that higher sister of the law—justice—before having the temerity to appear in a court of this city again. Case is dismissed."

He banged his gavel and looked expectantly at the well fed gentleman, who nodded gravely.

"Thank you, y'honor. Thank you," cried Tucket, ducking thrice, and, as he turned to depart, favoring Tarleton with an outrageous wink.

Once outside, Carrigan turned to his friend and shrugged.

"The fix," said he. "What did I tell you?"

Tarleton said slowly, "That cheap little twerp!"

"You mustn't," the reporter reproved, "judge our fair city by its magistrates. Cheap people buy cheap jobs."

He considered Tarleton's dark face with ecclesiastical gravity.

"His honor, inside," he continued, "pulls rawer ones than that. I've seen 'em. When that pink-gilled sachem in the front row pops the whip, his honor jumps. And I'd give a leg," he added with soft vehemence, "to know who makes Pink Gills jump. However . . ." He spread his hands with a relinquishing gesture and asked:

"Now what?"

"I've got to see Arnold," Tarleton answered with a wry grin, "and be hanged, drawn, and quartered."

“And then?” his friend persisted. The sergeant’s laugh was like a cough.

“What’s the difference?” he asked. Carrigan’s hand gripped his arm.

“Now, listen,” he ordered. “You’re coming home with me. There’s plenty room, Buck, and a few drops of Scotch and a few crumbs of Jap valet to comfort you. That’s settled. You know the address. Or better yet. Listen some more:

“I’ve got to phone my suffering paper and give them as much of this yarn as I think is good for them. You go break the news to Arnold. After he’s booted you down the steps, pick yourself up and cross Madison Avenue. Two doors from the corner there’s a house with an appropriate brass rail around the area. Tell the mug that snarls at you through the wicket you want to see me. I’ll be there.”

Tarleton said gruffly: “There’s no reason you should saddle yourself with my grief, Jimmy.”

Carrigan snorted: “There are no less than seventy-odd that I’ll recite to you over a Greek’s idea of a whisky sour. Right? The Lord bless and keep you, Buck.”

He departed with the long, lurching gait Tarleton remembered from their freshman year. The sergeant gave Arnold’s address to a taxi driver, gruffly, for his throat was choked, and his eyes smarted.

He thought, with sardonic amusement, as the cab banged and jolted over atrocious paving, of the tumbrel-borne dedicatees to the guillotine. The sick dread had left him, now that he was on his way to the ordeal. He desired to get it over with as quickly as possible. Coupled with this eagerness that seizes men committed to battle was a perverse swelling anger. The spark that had smoldered beneath humiliation broke into flame. He had been trained in an organization that did not parley or equivocate with crime, and tonight he had been caught and abased and had had his nose rubbed in the dust by a something still unseen that made a burlesque of law.

He no longer scorned the vast sprawling city whose endless battalions of buildings marched past his cab window, but he hated it the more and found himself bitterly avid for reprisal.

“Watch yourself from now on,” he muttered to the glowing gilt filigree of the Grand Central Building’s fat spire, and smiled sourly at the childish sound of his threat as the cab swept up the ramp to the Forty-second Street traffic bridge.

Follansbee Arnold’s dwelling was an undistinguished integer in a Quaker-like rank of brownstone houses on the slope of Murray Hill.

Unimpressed by the region's tradition of aristocracy, the sergeant, as he paid off his cab, wondered whether he had been misconducted again.

The venerable side-whiskered butler who responded to his ring reassured him. Tarleton's throat was dry as he gave his name. The butler received his hat like a sacrament.

"If you'll follow me, sir," he offered. "Mr. Arnold is expecting you." He turned toward the wide dark stairway, but stood aside at a flurry of footsteps from above. Silver slippers, descending, darted in and out beneath the edge of a blue evening gown. Tarleton stared. The delicately plump figure stressed by the bright frock was strange. So was the gay oval face beneath the duskily golden hair, and yet something half remembered made it tantalizingly familiar.

The girl checked her descent at sight of the waiting man, and then continued it with a questioning half smile. The sergeant met her blue eyes for an instant as she passed and bowed briefly. Beside the door on the hall's far side, she turned with sudden resolution and surveyed him again. At the foot of the stair the butler waited with pious patience.

"It's Johnny Tarleton," the girl announced at last, "and he doesn't remember me no more'n a rabbit."

It was not, Tarleton appreciated with a queer relief, the voice that had spoken over the telephone, and yet it quickened memory.

"Who doesn't?" he retorted. "Winter carnival. Hanover, 1923. You were Harry Dunn's weedy little kid cousin, and your name is Betty Spillane. Or was."

"Is," she laughed, and held out her hand. "You're marvelous. I heard Daddy mention 'Tarleton' upstairs just now, and I wondered. All the banked embers of a child's hopeless passion sprang into flame at once. To think that you're the same person. There is—there is a Santa Claus."

"You're—you're Mr. Spillane's daughter," he accused. She made no effort to withdraw her hand.

"And Mrs. Spillane's," she amended, "or so I'm told. But you're not a state trooper, Johnny?"

"I am—up to now," he replied dryly, and released her hand, but she clung to his.

"But," she begged, "where's your horse? Where's the grand and glorious uniform? Oh, listen. Do they let you wear dress clothes, and have you any handy, because we're shy a man for the Maxfield ball. Ira Draw is missing again, curse him. Come in and meet the boy and girl friend, Johnny, and if you've evening clothes it'll be a swell party. Come in, anyway."

The butler coughed behind a tactful hand. Tarleton shook his head.

"Thanks," he replied, "but I'm overdue upstairs."

She grimaced prettily in exaggerated despair.

"Oh, I know," she said. "Duty calls, and you always get your man, and all that. I wish there was one handy. Haven't you a prisoner you could loan me? Where's the cowering victim?"

"Going upstairs," Tarleton answered, and turned to follow the butler. She called after him:

"I'll be waiting to trap you on the way down. After all these yahs and yahs."

He barely heard her. His heart thumped disproportionately for the easy upward climb. His mouth was sticky and bitter.

"Mr. Tarleton," the butler proclaimed at a wide doorway.

Cigar smoke wove faint haloes about the electric sconces between ceiling-high bookshelves and hung in a thin blue cloud over a refectory table, paper laden, where three men sat.

"Major," Tarleton snapped, and stopped in the doorway, facing the deep-chested brown-visaged man in an armchair.

Superintendent Speede nodded, but the scowl did not vanish from above his steady eyes. Arnold, white-mustached and ruddy, with that air of austere aristocracy which thrice had defeated him for political office, rose with instinctive courtesy and said:

"We're glad to see you, sergeant. We have been worried."

His shock of silver hair was tumbled, his eyes narrow. He had the look, as he motioned toward a chair, of a rumpled, eager hawk. Tarleton ignored his gesture, for Spillane, rotund of figure but with a voice as sharp as his clever face, asked:

"Where is Steve Horowitz?"

"Dead," said Tarleton.

The lighter he held to his cigar jerked in Arnold's hand, but he lit it before stirring further.

"Now, by God, Sergeant——" Spillane stormed, springing to his feet, but Speede's steely voice cut across his speech.

"Dead, sergeant?" he echoed.

"Yes, sir."

"Then what," the superintendent asked quietly, "are you doing here?"

"If the major will permit," Tarleton replied, "I came here to tell what happened."

Speede cocked an eye at Arnold. The older man removed the amber cigar holder from his lips and nodded.

"By all means," he said politely. His hand shook so that his cigar smoke went up in a wavy ribbon. His face had grown pale, but his voice remained level.

Tarleton drew a long breath and began. There was a savage satisfaction in at last meeting, face to face, this passage he had dreaded. His untinctured recital of his failure brought him a certain relief.

"That's all, sir," he told Major Speede at length, and waited. Arnold considered the lean cavalryman's figure, and compunction softened his aquiline visage. In the silence a knuckle cracked audibly in the big hands the superintendent had knotted over his knee. Spillane, clearing his throat, commented:

"I said at the time we should bring the man back with us, but the major ____"

Speede's glowering face grew a shade darker, but his voice held a bitter humility.

"You wanted secrecy, and it seemed to me hurry would defeat it. I believed it was better to take the necessary legal steps naturally, and evade publicity by bringing him here today under escort of a man I thought entirely reliable. I was—mistaken."

He swallowed dryly. Arnold said, as though thinking aloud:

"We still have the affidavit Horowitz made."

"We have," Spillane agreed acidly. "In other words, we have a self-starter, but the car is wrecked, commissioner."

"Then," Arnold said with a weary courage, "the committee must find another car," but his assistant made no effort to emulate his self-control.

"When Horowitz was killed," he snarled, staring with animus at Tarleton, "the committee lost its reason for being. This was a witness who was willing to save his hide by exposing the coöperation in New York between racketeering and politics. He was our ferret. Rats don't fear the three thousand word affidavit of a dead man." He gnawed the end off a cigar, still glaring at the sergeant, and spat it away.

Arnold reflected aloud: "The four of us and District Attorney Martin were all who knew that Horowitz was being brought to New York."

“You mean,” said Speede with a brusque nod, and driving in his words with savage lunges of his head, “that there was a leak. There must have been.”

Spillane said suddenly to Tarleton: “You have that telegram you received en route? I should like to see it.”

“I lost it,” the sergeant replied, and felt his face grow red. Speede released his knee and thrust himself forward in his chair as if to spring.

“What did they offer you, Tarleton?” he demanded brutally.

His subordinate flinched, and color drained from his face. Arnold, watching him carefully, said at last:

“That is rather jumping at conclusions, isn’t it, major?”

For an instant the burly superintendent hesitated and then nodded acknowledgment.

“Tarleton,” he said deliberately, “I ask your pardon for a charge I can’t prove.”

He drew a long breath and continued, in a quiet voice:

“You have failed the department when I trusted you most. You have come here unhurt to report that your prisoner was murdered. I’m breaking you here and now. You’re not even going to get the chance to resign. You’re fired. You can return to your substation and get your personal effects. Unless these gentlemen have anything further to ask you, you can go.”

Spillane pursed his lips and shrugged. Arnold shook his head almost sadly. At length Tarleton said distinctly:

“Very well, sir.” Speede’s voice checked him as he turned toward the door.

“I’m driving to K Troop’s barracks tomorrow morning. I’ll be at H some time the next afternoon. If you get there ahead of me, tell Captain Dover ____”

“I’m not going, major,” Tarleton returned. “I’m staying on here. In New York.”

“Why?” Speede snapped suspiciously. The other met his stare.

“I’m staying on here,” he repeated, “until I find who killed Steve Horowitz. And when I do, you’re going to eat everything you’ve said to me, Major Speede, or I’ll break your stiff neck making you.”

His voice was unhurried. The eyes beneath the black bar of his brow were steady and hot.

“Is that quite clear?” he asked politely, nodded, and left the room.

Anger had ebbed by the time he reached the stairway, muting the lilt of his defiance, transforming it into the shabbiest of bluffs. Miserably, he knew, as he descended, that the relief he had expected when his ordeal ended still remained aloof. He had the panicky impulse to return and rescind his vainglorious boast. Freed from the anodyne of wrath, the wounds cut by Speede's words stung and throbbed. He heard, outside, the low, steady roar of the city's traffic and felt the terrifying loneliness of utter insignificance.

The door before which Betty Spillane had stood was open. From the brightly lighted chamber she called to him urgently as he passed.

"Johnny," she reproached. "You great big welcher!"

Framed in the doorway, she begged:

"Oh, murder, don't scowl so. Please come in just a minute. Ah, please. Be a good egg."

"I can't, Betty," he muttered. "I——" But she caught his arm, and, though yearning to tear her pretty hand away, he suffered himself to be led into the high-ceiled living room where a girl and a man sat on the couch before a fireplace in which logs burned tamely.

They rose at Betty's triumphant clamor. Strangely, he recognized her. It was she, he knew, who had answered his telephone call an hour ago. Her hair was dark and thick and was coiled severely above a face lovely as a carving in ivory. Her gray eyes were merrily friendly, and the black gown that clung to her taut young body revealed slim, rounded arms and shoulders creamy beneath black lace. Watching her, he thought, with no amazement at his irrelevance, of a hill-locked little lake he knew, and the scent of firs at twilight, and white water lilies folding their hands for the night.

In Betty Spillane's babbling he caught her name—Patricia Arnold—and bowed. She laughed and, kneeling on the couch, held out her hand across its back with a gesture of rescue.

"Come and sit down," she invited. "We're waiting for Mr. Spillane. Aren't they almost through? This is Mr. Rowan."

He nodded to a portly youth with a thirsty eye and said:

"I'd like to. Really I would. But—I have to go."

"Johnny Tarleton," Betty insisted, thrusting herself before him, "stop being official and nobly devoted to duty and tell me if you have evening clothes in this town, because, if you have, you can take me to a most amazing party and help me show Ira Sorry-but-I-can't-possibly-break-away Draw where he gets off at."

"I haven't even a uniform," he managed to grin.

“Can’t state policemen sit down in civilian clothes?” she inquired. “Draw up around the camp fire and tell us of the wide open spaces of Westchester and Dutchess.”

“I’ve got to go,” he insisted. “Some other time. If you’ll let me.” Patricia Arnold’s lashes, he thought, were the darkest and thickest he had ever seen.

“Let you!” Betty scoffed, twisting about on the couch. “After another seven years?”

He shook his head.

“I’m staying in town for a while,” he told her. “With Jimmy Carrigan, a reporter.”

“Jimmy Carrigan, a reporter,” Betty repeated. “James Talbot Carrigan, the human bat? Sleeps all day and flits hither and yon all night? That Jimmy Carrigan? Oh, Johnny, oh, joy, oh, bliss! This isn’t the end, then. We’ll see you some more.”

She accompanied him to the door and returning, demanded of Rowan and Patricia:

“I ask you: Do I exaggerate? Isn’t he just too gosh-darned swell for anything?”

Patricia, her face toward the flames, said slowly:

“He’s in trouble of some sort.”

“He?” Betty derided. “A big black handsome devil like him?”

Her friend said slowly:

“His eyes were unhappy.”

CHAPTER IV

THE wicket in the basement door through which hostile black slit-eyes had stared at Tarleton slid wide again, revealing a square segment of Jimmy Carrigan's face.

Bolts grated, and the portal opened just sufficiently to admit the visitor into a drab passage-way that smelled like a distillery cellar. Carrigan hiccupped gravely and said to the dwarfish door-tender:

"Mr. Tarleton is right, Harry. Don't forget him."

The reporter led the way through another door and paused at the foot of a stairway. His face was owlishly solemn.

"Apologies for the formality, Buck, but we're jumpy tonight. The demise of the Hon. Horowitz has made us nervous. That's the trouble with organization. Bump someone in Harlem and every speakie in town twitches."

He hiccupped again and looked reprovingly at his friend.

"You took so long," he accused, "I'm pretty well fried waiting for you, and besides, I've had company."

He nodded toward a doorway at the end of the passage that revealed one corner of a bar.

"Distinguished company," he reiterated. "Maybe you'd rather go upstairs?"

"I don't care," Tarleton replied indifferently, but Carrigan grinned.

"Maybe you do," he pursued. "I've been making wassail with none other than Mr. Dip Tucket, in person. No," he continued as Tarleton started to speak, "he didn't horn in. I did. I met him on the Night Court steps and made peace signs. Mr. Tucket is a man no racketeer fancier can afford not to know. So I brought him here. I think he wants to meet you again. He bears no malice for saving your life, but," his voice and face grew earnest, "if you've got compunctions over your job and prefer to go upstairs——"

"I haven't," Tarleton returned, "either compunctions—or job."

Carrigan stiffened and blinked.

"Oh," he said at last, "that's a tough break, Johnny."

"Forget it," Tarleton bade. "I could do with a drink."

They stood aside at the entrance to the barroom for an unsteady quartet that was leaving: an older woman, followed by two men in dinner clothes,

who guided a girl not more than eighteen. Her feet dragged, and her pretty head lurched with each step. They reeled down the hallway and passed through the outer door, leaving the sour smell of liquor and the echo of shrill laughter.

"Sweet, isn't it?" Carrigan asked. "I've been watching that child get herself stewed. Well, thank God, the saloon and its accompanying evils have been wiped from America. Anyway, we'll have the barroom to ourselves."

The big bright chamber was deserted, save for a waiter who conversed with the bartender and a dapper figure in shepherd's plaid who sat at the end of a row of tables with his tipped-back derby revealing a peak of rufous hair.

"I think," Carrigan said, approaching, "that you two gentlemen have met before."

The tight craftiness of Tucket's face had relaxed a trifle. His eyes, the hue of the reddish brown liquor he sipped, were moist but still canny.

"Nope," he conceded, holding out a slender hand, "we just fell in with each other, as you might say. Set down, mister. What are you drinkin'?"

"I'm buying," Tarleton protested.

"Not in my town," Carrigan said firmly.

"Not in my speak, either of you," Tucket proclaimed with an expansive gesture.

"Your speak," the reporter echoed truculently. "Who brought you here?"

Tucket considered him with acid amusement.

"Son," he retorted, "any time you can bring me to a dump like this I don't know a'ready, I'll let you buy. Hey, Giovanni, ever seen me before?"

The bartender raised a peaked face from the glasses.

"Not since Thursday, Dip," he conceded. Tucket beamed and pushed his derby back further.

"I collect here," he explained. "This is one of our string. And it's good home-made liquor too. None of this cut, imported stuff."

"Mr. Tucket," Carrigan explained, drinking half his glass and regarding with mild disapproval the caution with which Tarleton sipped, "is by way of being a Big Shot."

The little man shook his head.

"Nix," he said pregnantly. "Not yet."

"But soon," Carrigan prodded. "Mr. Tucket began his life of crime in humble circumstances as a cannon, a pickpocket, and by industry and application——"

Tucket interrupted, his sharp nose twitching scornfully.

"Crime," he scoffed. "That's a word for saps and newspapers. There's only one crime in this burg, and that's killing a cop."

"And well it should be," Carrigan acclaimed with a loud hiccup. "You should never bite the hand that milks you. That's what made cows what they are today."

Tucket regarded him suspiciously.

"Most cops," he defended, "are regular."

"They are," Carrigan agreed. "They are indeed."

"Including Gannon?" Tarleton asked Tucket scornfully. The little man shook his head.

"Gannon's a sap," he complained. "He ain't friendly, and he ought to of learned by now. He played your game tonight."

"I hadn't noticed it," Tarleton retorted with bitterness. Tucket grunted, set down his drink, and considered the sullen face before him with covert interest.

"What were you bringing back Steve for?" he asked suddenly.

"What did you bump him for?" Tarleton countered.

"You," Tucket proclaimed with irritation, "must be another honest cop. You're that dumb. Think I'd walk 'cross town for the pleasure of standing on the spot with Steve? I never liked him that much."

"Funny, isn't it," Tarleton asked Carrigan, "how things happen by accident?" He grinned. The liquor had soothed the sullen resentment within him. He picked up the fresh glass the waiter set before him and drank toward Tucket with smiling derision.

"Listen," said the little man, "I didn't know a thing until I heard someone raise a window. I was headin' for a new speak that had opened up there, to collect for seven cases Scotch and twelve of gin. Right now, I don't know who did it—for certain. If I guess right they're certainly kicking themselves around for not gettin' me, too. And that's on the up and up, mister."

"What's your theory?" Tarleton asked bluntly. The other stamped rings of wet on the table with his glass.

"None," he replied. Carrigan pushed back his chair and rose unsteadily.

"I've got," he said, "to get back uptown, Buck. Here's the key to my flat. Turn in whenever you want. Mr. Tucket, I'll be seeing you again."

Tucket's canny eyes followed his slightly weaving passage across the room and through the doorway. They returned to Tarleton, and again the lids

puckered with secret calculation.

"How long," he asked at length, "have you been a cop?"

"You mean," the other corrected, "how long was I one?"

"Oh, yeah?" the little man queried slowly. "Quit a'ready?"

"Kicked out," Tarleton replied. "A half hour back."

"Well, well," Tucket reflected, and plucked invisible lint from his coat sleeve. "Your mob works fast." He set down his glass and stared into space. To Tarleton, watching, it seemed as though the film of geniality were slowly evaporating from his companion's face, leaving it hard, immensely wary. The intent reddish eyes shifted. Tarleton turned.

A slender youth stood at his elbow. The visor of his cap was pulled down toward his crooked nose, hooding the gaze he bent on Tucket.

"Hya, Hop?" asked the little man, not stirring. The clinking sounds of the bartender's glass polishing ceased suddenly, and he stood, palms on the counter, staring.

"Who's your friend?" the intruder queried, nodding toward Tarleton with a mechanical smile.

"He's right," Tucket returned, still motionless. "What's on your mind, Hop?"

The stranger replied with a widening of his pale smirk, and beneath his forced cordiality Tarleton sensed something coiled and deadly:

"The boss sent me after ya. There's a conference at the Assyrian. Maybe you don't know it, but——"

"Yeh," Tucket replied. "I know all about it. I'll be there, Hop."

Hop elaborately consulted a platinum watch on his shaggy wrist.

"There's a bus outside," he urged. "It's gettin' late, and I'll take you."

"Nope," Tucket answered, shaking his head slowly.

"Aw," the other urged, and his hand went negligently into the side pocket of his jacket. "Come along. Cass tells me to bring ya."

"Thanks," Tucket acknowledged. "I'll be over."

The fraudulent smile altered, grew candid, almost gleeful. Pretense fled from the purring voice. It ordered:

"Get on your feet and come along, Dip."

For an instant neither stirred. Tarleton saw the intruder's eyelids pucker and marked the disproportionate bulge of the pocket-hidden hand. He glanced at Tucket. Fear flickered momentarily in the little man's eyes. Tarleton said deliberately:

"Your friend doesn't understand English, Dip."

The intruder shifted suddenly and snarled. Meeting the glare of his heroin-brightened eyes, Tarleton suggested:

"Don't swing that gun onto me, rat."

He grinned at the other's hissing snarl and calmly raised his glass to his lips. Out of an eye corner he could see one of Tucket's hands slipping ever so slowly inside his jacket.

"Oh, no?" Hop wheezed, and the fabric of his pocket stretched taut over a blunt point. "Up. You, I mean. Up fast and make your hands behave."

He fell back a half pace, to stand with dire gaze shuttling from one man to the other. His knees were bent, his body crouched forward. Tarleton set down his glass and rose. He saw murder flare in Hop's eyes and blew his last sip of liquor into them.

The explosion of the gun boxed their ears, and the relinquished glass blew into fragments over a long white weal on the table. Hop reeled toward Tucket, both hands pawing at his eyes. The bartender had vanished. The waiter squealed and dodged about the far corner of the room.

And then, as Tarleton gathered himself to spring, his assailant lay on the floor, face down, a slender screw of smoke rising from his smoldering pocket, and Tucket, stepping back, thrust a little leather-covered bludgeon from sight.

"Mister," he said to his companion with a bleak smile, "we're square. Only I'm gratefuller to you than you was to me."

The bartender gradually reëmerged from behind his barrier. Harry, rushing in, collided with the fleeing waiter, and both remained by the door, staring. Tucket adjusted his hat and pulled his jacket straight.

"Can you imagine that?" he demanded to the room at large over the body of his victim. "This small-time mug thinking he could take me, Ignatius Loyola Tucket, who's a very good man?"

He addressed Harry crisply: "Is there a car outside? With a guy in the back seat? Yeh. I thought so."

He tapped his sharp chin and turned to Tarleton with a grin like a zestful terrier.

"Mister?" he demanded. "You game?"

"I am," Tarleton replied, resolutely swallowing innumerable provisions and queries.

"Oke," Tucket said with decision. "We'll go, you and me. Harry, when that rat wakes up with a headache, tell him I'm putting the finger on him.

Got that? C'm'on, mister."

"Where to?" Tarleton asked, following him down the hall.

"Gotta rod?" the other returned obliquely. "Good. We're goin' over to the Assyrian, you and me. And in the car Hop brought, and if that ain't a laugh, you tell one."

They closed the door softly behind them, crossed the sunken area, and went up the brief flight of steps to street level. Before them, a sedan waited with its single occupant lounging on the back seat. Tucket advanced briskly and opened the door.

"Get out," he ordered in a blistering voice. "You mother-gypping, double-crossing, son of a sow. Move fast and no monkey business, or I'll spill you on the sidewalk. Step on it."

A sallow youth, counterpart of the speakeasy's invader, obeyed and stood between Tucket and Tarleton, clucking and gasping. Dip searched him with expert hands, jerked an automatic pistol from its shoulder holster and tossed it onto the rear seat, and, after further pawing, exhumed a smaller weapon from beneath his vest.

"My, my!" he commented scathingly. "Bad boy, ain't you! Belly gun and everything. Now, talk fast, or you'll stop for good. Who sent you to get me?"

"Cass," the other gulped. "Dip, I didn't——"

"Cass Horvak sent a two-timin' yella pair like you to take me for a ride," Tucket snarled. "Tell another. He ain't that dumb. You mugs are in with Maxie."

"No, I mean not—well, Hop thought——"

"Yeah," his captor replied with infinite scorn. "Hop thought he'd do Maxie a favor, eh? Max thinks I know too much about Steve's burnin', maybe. Get in there, rat."

He flung open the door and kicked the cringing youth into the front seat, thrust Tarleton into the rear, and followed him.

"Now," he rasped, "drive us to the Assyrian, and if you and Hop want to keep livin', you lam outa this burg before I get through talking to Maxie."

Responsive to the nervousness of its driver, the car crept jerkily crosstown into the rapids of Broadway's traffic and headed north. Glaring tapestries of electric bulbs were hung against the night, and by their flare Tarleton watched the grim nutcracker face of his companion, whose eyes never left the neck of the man before them. They swung crosstown again, and Tucket spoke out of a mouth corner.

“Mister, stick with me, willya? Just in the lobby of the hotel for five minutes, till I get the lay. Can you do that and keep your yap shut after?”

“Yep,” Tarleton responded. The other permitted himself a split-second glance of approval.

“For a busted cop,” he said, “you ain’t so bad. Whoa there, Monk. Now, remember what I told you. Two hours from now there’ll be an open season on you and Hop.”

The skyward-reaching cliff of a hotel loomed above them as they disembarked. Tucket, on the threshold of the magnificent lobby, peered about like a questing dog and then led Tarleton to a settee against the far wall.

“I’m damned near sure,” he muttered, and his companion saw that his face was glossy with sweat, “that it’s on the up and up. But I’m safer with a stranger with me until Frankie shows. You might be a cop, and nobody burns them if he’s got sense.”

They sat silent and apart from the movement of the lobby. While people came and went, a languid hallboy intoned a list of names he was paging, and the revolving door uttered a continual flapping sigh.

A man entered through its deliberate sheaves, followed by two more who hurried with him across the tiled floor. Tarleton, feeling Tucket stiffen beside him, looked toward them too late to see anything but the backs of the trio and hear a shrill bubbling laughter, grotesquely childlike.

“Ain’t that,” Tucket asked with strange violence, “hell’s own laugh?”

“I’ve heard worse,” said Tarleton. “Who is it?”

The little man ignored the query.

“You ain’t heard it as much as I have,” he retorted, and rose suddenly with a grunt of satisfaction.

“Here’s Frankie, my nephew,” he exclaimed in obvious relief. “Shake hands, Frankie, with Mr. Tarleton.”

Suavely tailored, slender, with a feminine delicacy of feature and magnificent eyes, the newcomer presented Tarleton with a limp palm and turned straightway to Tucket.

“It’s oke,” he announced in a soft voice.

“Sure?” Tucket queried.

“Cass is in, and Little Maxie’s just gone up.”

“Yeh?” his uncle replied. “I just saw Maxie. Mister, like I said, I’m obliged. See you some more.”

He nodded, and with his nephew talking earnestly at his elbow, went along the lobby's marble colonnade, an alert, suddenly purposeful little figure.

CHAPTER V

TARLETON, emerging from the Hotel Assyrian, lingered an instant while the panoplied doorman reiterated offers of a cab, and then, because his head swam and the bill roll in his pocket had become precious, elected to walk to Carrigan's apartment.

He worked his way south through the sluggish human current that flooded Broadway sidewalks and at last lengthened his stride. The vast flare of electric signs, the hysterical yelpings of the traffic, were behind him, and ahead were dark ranges of buildings against which sparse lights glowed dully, like embers of the daylight's activity.

Overhead, between high cornices, he caught the wan glitter of a star. The disdainful power of the city, coarse, strident, oblivious of individuals, overwhelmed him once more. Sense of his own inconsequence oppressed him. The glib callousness with which New Yorkers accepted atrocity, condoned outrage, filled him with bitter loneliness.

With almost fugitive haste he turned into a side street and fled from the mute derision of monstrous sleeping buildings into the hallway of the faintly shabby apartment house where Carrigan dwelt. A bored West Indian elevator runner pointed out a door on the second floor. Tarleton unlocked it and entered.

He called, but the only answer was the yawping of a radio in the flat overhead, and the clatter of faintly ribald laughter from across the court. The glow of twin floor lamps revealed in a further room a bed turned down with fresh pajamas spread across it. He saw that the broad couch he stood beside had been likewise prepared and that the nightgear it bore was Carrigan's own. A lump grew in his throat, and his loneliness lessened. It was like a friend to give a guest the better bed. It was like Jimmy Carrigan to remember that Tarleton's bag had vanished with the car that took Horowitz to his death.

He prowled about the room, surveying the worn rug, the shabby, comfortable chairs, Carrigan's littered desk. One picture, in a heavy silver frame, stood thereon. He turned it to the light, and Betty Spillane's face smiled at him. There was a big cellarette against the wall. He passed it, to peer at the laden bookshelves, and nodded as though they answered an unvoiced question.

Here stood Gibbon and Mommsen in dull, much-used bindings, Lombroso and Havelock Ellis, and other volumes of various authorships whose titles were variations of one theme—*The Criminal and the Community*, *Die Psychopathischen Verbrecher*, *The Clinic and the Court*, and one word, reiterant and savage as the beat of a gong, *The Gang Age*, *The Gang*, *The Gangs of New York*.

He turned at the click of the latch.

"Damn!" said Carrigan, entering. "I perjure myself to get here ahead of you, and you beat me. Señor, my house is yours."

Tarleton said gruffly: "I'll park here tonight, and on the couch, not in your bed, Jimmy. Tomorrow I'll——"

"Tomorrow," the reporter snarled at him, "you'll settle down as a permanent fixture for as long as you can stand this town. Shut up till I get us a drink. No ginger ale, of course. That Jap must bathe in it. Wait till I phone the accommodating corner drugstore and bootleggery."

He set down the instrument at length and soberly considered Tarleton's nervous wandering about the room.

"Sit down, Buck," he said at length. "You crave an audience, and I'm it. Start at the beginning and get it all off your chest. It's good to have you here. Cigarette? Now, tell all."

Reluctantly at first, but then with quickening gusto as speech brought relief, Tarleton, in short, bitter sentences, set forth the Horowitz tragedy and its consequences to him, while Carrigan, nursing a long leg in his desk chair, smoked a blackened briar and listened with narrow, thoughtful eyes. Once, at the shrill of a bell, he rose, vanished with a mutter of "Ginger ale," and returning with filled glasses, bade tensely: "Go on."

With a grimace of distaste, Tarleton compelled himself to detail the interview at Follansbee Arnold's.

"Betty, eh?" Carrigan interjected. "A triflin' wench if there ever was one. Some day I'm going to spank her. See Pat Arnold too?"

"Yes."

"Oh, yeah?" the reporter jeered, regarding him with suspicion.

"What's that mean?" asked Tarleton, reddening.

"Just 'Oh yeah,' " Carrigan grinned. "Go on."

Presently, as his friend paused, he said softly:

"So that's the way you took your canning. Well, old son, you pulled a good exit line. Hooey, but good."

"Why hooey?" Tarleton snapped, sitting straighter. Recital of the scene with Speede had reawakened humiliation and wrath. "You mean I've no comeback, no chance to get the man who killed my prisoner?"

Carrigan shrugged and drew on his pipe.

"I mean," he said slowly, "that needles have been found in haystacks, but it's harder to dig out a particular blade of hay, especially if you don't know what it looks like. They don't worry much in this town about getting a gang murderer. They know that sooner or later one of his playmates will save the cops trouble and the state expense."

"My God!" Tarleton said in utter scorn.

"Did you ever think," Carrigan queried, eyes squinting at the tobacco cloud above his head, "what happened to Rome? They've pinned her downfall on everything from malaria to Christianity, and nobody's ever thought that there may have been racketeers at the bottom of it all? Crooks aren't a new invention, and neither is political corruption. The Prætorian Guard was as easy to bribe as a present-day cop. What do you bet Scarface Flaccus and Lefty Quintilian with their Falernian speakeasies and their laundry and milk and greengrocery rackets didn't get so prevalent they ran the town and rotted all the grandeur out of Rome?"

"That's silly," Tarleton protested, uneasy under his earnest, prompting stare. Carrigan grinned.

"All right," he surrendered. "Laugh it off. I tell you, Buck, big cities putrefy. Too many people in one place fester, and some day I'm going to write a book and prove it. I'm getting plenty material in this town. You think the kept magistrates and the crooked cops and the ten-twent-thirt graft stories that get into the papers are just the frailties of greatness. They're really smells that leak out of the buried garbage heap. Don't get an Edmond Dantes complex. You can't get anything back from this town. You don't even know where to start."

He blinked, obviously abashed at his own vehemence. The angry prophet vanished, and Jimmy Carrigan peered studiously through horn-rimmed glasses at his balky pipe.

"Can't I?" Tarleton drawled. "I'm not so sure. I've one starting point."

He told what had happened after Carrigan's departure from the speakeasy. His friend's pipe dropped unheeded to the floor. His eyes, excitement sharpened, held Tarleton's.

"Conference at the Assyrian," he mused aloud, when the other had ended. "Horvak and Tucket and Little Maxie Wain together, and the

lightning of the Lord still off the job! Can you imagine that? And you saw Frankie Tucket too? Big boy, you've been travelling."

"A rather daffodil-looking kid," Tarleton disparaged.

"Oh, yes," Carrigan agreed sardonically. "Just about as vernal and lyrical as a cobra. Two guns and ambidextrous. Dip points 'em out, and Nephew puts 'em away. A sweet team. I'll say you've got a start. What are you going to do with it?"

Tarleton said slowly: "I've just decided. I'm going to see Arnold in the morning, tell him what I'm doing, and see if he won't deputize me or back me up."

"And you'll end in a vacant lot with no head on your shoulders," Carrigan completed caustically. "Horvak and Little Maxie in a conference! Tie that, if you can."

"Stop gargling like an oracle," Tarleton suggested. "Who are these guys?"

"Casimir Horvak and Maxie Wain?" his friend repeated with scornful surprise. "I keep forgetting the cloistered life you've been leading. Horowitz, my son, was one of Horvak's satraps. That's point one. Point two is that Horvak and Little Maxie have bought with hootch what the Indians sold for gin, several centuries ago. They're the Big Shots of this village."

In the living room of Cass Horvak's suite on the tenth floor of the Hotel Assyrian, Little Maxie Wain selected a chair and settled himself therein with the grace of a plump cat. The lights above the bottle- and glass-adorned table lent additional gloss to his thick black hair that ventured down his cheek-bone into brief sideburns, hirsute parentheses framing a swarthy face, as reticent as the back of a playing card. His neutral-hued eyes behind round spectacles conducted a silent roll call of his companions.

Across the table Tucket and his girlish nephew sat side by side. At Frankie's elbow the bulk of Horvak dwarfed his chair. He was a mighty man with a white slab of a face and shoulders that sagged beneath their own weight. Flanking Wain sat his bodyguards, two well groomed youths who, in the anonymity of expensive tailoring, might have been college seniors or bond salesmen.

Stillness had fallen upon the chamber, lately so clamorous with specious heartiness, the tautly vigilant instant of silence that presages struggle. Through the half-open door that revealed the darkness of a bedroom, came the sound of a window shade astir in the draught. Horvak drank deeply,

licked his wide mouth, and bumped his glass down upon the table. Tucket, waiting an instant, voiced the question his chief seemed reluctant to utter.

"Is anyone gonna come clean on this Horowitz thing?"

His ruddy little eyes stabbed at Wain's olive visage; at Nick Dominick, Maxie's accustomed shadow, who sat on his left; at the stranger, called Lupo, on his other hand. Wain said at last in his quick, shrill voice:

"Well, Cass, is anybody?"

His eyes dwelt impudently upon Horvak, who rumbled with a scowl:

"I'm finding out, Maxie. And when I do——"

"What?" the other asked, filling in the menacing pause with smooth insolence. His face was blandly inquiring. At his elbow, the man Lupo stirred and grinned.

"Did you spot Steve?" Horvak inquired hoarsely. Wain shook his head at once.

"I did not," he returned, "but it seems to me a good idea. He'd squealed, hadn't he? Towed back here by a fat-headed cop to belch, wasn't he? Well, then?"

His eyes challenged the men across the table and dwelt a long instant on Frankie Tucket, who was staring intently at Lupo. Horvak growled: "I can handle my mob without outside help, Maxie."

"No doubt," the other replied with a galling smile. Horvak's broad palm smacked down on the table. He roared:

"I didn't ast you here to talk about Steve. I wanta know, Maxie, what the push around is for."

"Push around?" the other echoed.

"You heard me," Horvak retorted, leaning forward. Tucket translated his baleful glare into speech.

"There's musclin' goin' on in the Bronx an' Harlem. Ain't all Long Island enough for you, Maxie?"

"Plenty," Wain returned calmly. His self-possession goaded Horvak, who spoke in a voice like breaking rock:

"What's the idea of startin' a milk route uptown, then? Think you're big enough to take me? Trying to give me the run-around?"

"Not at all," Little Maxie returned. "When I'm taking you, Cass, you won't know it till you're taken. I'm not muscling in on your territory. Who's been ribbing me? Tucket here?"

He raked the hard-bitten little man with cold eyes. While Horvak gulped against his mounting wrath, Dip queried:

"Monk Lazarus an' Hop Morelli are on your payroll, ain't they, Maxie?"

"Off and on," Wain admitted. "Not now. Why?"

Tucket grinned bleakly.

"Oh, nothin'," he replied with heavy irony. "They were set to take me for a ride tonight. Their own idea, eh?"

Wain replied with entire self-possession: "I said ribbing was going on. I don't know anything about it. I'll find out." Horvak cleared his throat with a grating noise. Tucket pursued:

"Don't bother. Monk's on his way out of town, now. When you see Hop, tell him I've got the finger on him. That's all."

At his elbow Frankie spoke in a silky voice, his thick-lashed, romantic eyes on the bitter face of Lupo.

"I'm taking Morelli. Tell him that, too, if you wanta."

His steady, provocative stare had pushed its object beyond silent endurance. Wain's bodyguard's eyes pinched into slits. He offered, with body suddenly tense:

"Says you."

Frankie replied softly, not stirring: "Says me. You're from Chi, eh?"

"Can it," Tucket muttered over his shoulder, but his nephew paid no heed. The shadow of a smile played about his girlish mouth. His voice had a softly eager lilt:

"Yeah," he confirmed. "Lupo, from Chi. I've heard of you. Too hot for you there, eh? An' now you're Maxie's heavy man."

"Frankie, shut up," Tucket snapped nervously, but his nephew met Lupo's glower with perverse, avid glee.

"A two-timin' yella Chi rat," he said distinctly.

Breath whistled sharply through Lupo's nose. Maxie, lunging about, caught the hand that moved toward an armpit. Tucket's desperate clutch was swifter but needless. Frankie, beaming, spread ten slender fingers on the table in front of him. His eyebrows curved satanically; his eyes were eerily brilliant.

"Let him go, Maxie," he invited. "Turn him loose. I'll let him touch his rod before I move, and then I'll show you what you've bought. A heavy man, eh? Don't make me laugh."

Tucket yelped frantically in his nephew's ear: "Lay off, you crazy yap." Dominick, at Wain's other side, sat stiff and still, eyes on Frankie's delicate hands.

"Quit," Wain ordered in an unhurried, deadly voice, still holding his mercenary's wrist. "Hear me?"

Lupo hesitated. Little Maxie's free palm smote him hard across the mouth. The mob leader's clenched teeth were revealed in a brutal grin. His voice strained through them as though he spoke to a balky horse:

"When I say a thing it goes. Get me?" He struck his henchman again. Lupo gulped and surrendered. Wain leered through his spectacles at the bruised, twitching mouth and uttered a bright, bubbling laugh.

Slowly, as though the ghastly merriment had defeated him too, Frankie Tucket relaxed. Lupo, with a dazed movement, pressed a bright silk handkerchief to his bleeding lips.

"Sometime," Wain told the elder Tucket with a trivial air, "the kid's going to play Tom Mix once too often."

"Any time," Frankie invited quickly.

The diamond on Little Maxie's plump hand glowed steadily as he lit a cigar, paying no more heed to either disputant than if their quarrel had been the snarling of strange dogs.

"Is that," Horvak asked suddenly, canting his head toward Lupo, "the mug that burned Steve?"

Slowly and secretly his anger had gathered as though it were too ponderous to acquire swift momentum. Now it blared in the query.

"I've told you already," Wain returned with suavity, "that I don't know anything about that. Just what," he pursued, "is this conference for, Cass?"

"What do you want, Maxie?" Horvak queried. The inquisitive arch of Wain's eyebrows, his expression of polite bewilderment, quickened the savagery in his voice. "I want to know what you're after. Trouble?"

"Nonsense," Wain replied. Horvak's long, white face had turned to marble. His usually dull eyes blazed, and there was sawlike vindictiveness in his voice.

"Nonsense? There's musclin' goin' on in Harlem. Don't you watch your own rackets? Steve is burned——"

"I've told you already," Wain pointed out, "that I don't know anything ____"

"Listen," Horvak bade with husky ferocity. "Don't think because I been easy you can push me around. You've told me plenty, first and last. I don't

believe any of it. I've played ball with you. If you think you're good enough, go to it. Man for man and rod for rod, I can take you, now or any time."

He surged forward in his chair, a menacing figure, hungry for combat.

"Keep out of Harlem," he bellowed. "Keep off this island."

"Show me where I haven't," Maxie invited. His polite voice stung Horvak, whose slash of a mouth spread away from yellow teeth. His big fist pounded on the table with apelike frenzy.

"Listen," he roared. "The next fast one you pull on my mob, Maxie, is gonna be your last. Hear me?"

"Could I help it?" Wain inquired, and pushed back his chair. His bodyguards rose with him. Horvak's slitted, hungry eyes probed at each of them, vainly challenging the impassive men to resentment.

"We're goin'," Little Maxie said calmly. "You're just trying to make trouble for yourself, Cass."

"Hah!" the other snorted fiercely. The rage that had disrupted seemed now to congeal and solidify him. His great pale face was still; his voice deadly quiet.

"Maxie," he droned wickedly. "You took Steve. You got the idea you can push into Harlem. You're a smooth liar, but I'm not as thick as you think. One more slip by you and the agreement's off. If you want trouble——"

"I don't," Wain returned. "That's why I'm leaving."

CHAPTER VI

THE door closed behind him. Horvak's angry breathing rasped loudly. Frankie Tucket said at length, "He don't want no trouble," and laughed musically. His uncle considered the volcanic bulk of his chief and commented in a brittle voice:

"We know where we stand, Cass."

Horvak slowly recovered from the drug of his fury.

"He started it," he commented in a thick voice. Tucket shook his head.

"Not here, he didn't," he corrected. "You're lucky I got brains. Maxie thinks he's strong enough to take you. Hollerin' at him ain't gonna get you nowheres."

"The double-crossin' little rat," the other muttered.

"Wrong," Tucket's biting voice pursued. "A smart guy. Too smart, maybe, but he wants to own this town. Now, get this. He burned Steve."

"Don't I know it," Horvak growled.

"Sure," Tucket agreed corrosively. "I've toldya. You're soft, Cass. That's your trouble. You oughta started in on Maxie before this."

"If he don't——" the other began, but his henchman cut him short.

"If, if, if," Tucket snarled. "You play the big time. You deal it out to cops and politicians and think a mob'll run itself. You're fat and lazy. If I hear things, why don't you?"

"Maybe," Horvak returned, "I do. You say Wain burned Steve. I know why he did."

"Hey?" the little man asked in astonishment. The mob leader nodded his big head a little wearily.

"Yeah," he rumbled. "I'm soft. I tipped Steve to squeal. On Little Maxie's mob. Steve used to work with 'em. That was my setup."

Tucket surveyed his chief's bulk with admiration rekindling reluctantly in his eyes.

"Double-crossin' Maxie," he muttered. "Lettin' Steve squawk to the Arnold Committee about Maxie. Puttin' the heat on him that way!"

"Yeah," Cass acknowledged heavily. "But there was a leak somewhere. And Maxie's faster'n I thought. That," he added with more vigor, "is under your hat."

"Sure," Tucket agreed, "the Commandment about not double-crossin' is the only one I've never busted so far. Frankie, son, we'll blow. Comin', Cass?"

"I'm sleepin' here," the other replied, and yawned.

"You oughta," Tucket approved. "When we come in to find you alone with them three hyenas, though, I wondered what kinda fool play you'd make next."

"I ain't," replied Horvak, shaking his head and turning his dull face toward the half-open bedroom door, "as near through as you think, Dip. I figured you guys would be with me and anyway—Gus!"

A bandy-legged figure, blue of jowl, beady eyed, lurched into the light, leered at his chief, and detached the drum from the submachine gun he bore.

"I wasn't takin' chances," Horvak droned. "G'-night."

He closed the door behind them and lingered beside it a moment, weary eyed, before he told the gunman, who packed his weapon into a violin case: "Beat it."

He did not go to bed at once after Gus's departure, but walked about the room with the ponderous, noiseless gait of an elephant. Tucket's caustic speech still rankled. He thought of Little Maxie's vitriol smoothness and scowled. Alone of all the men whom he had dodged or placated or stilled in his devious jungle route to power, this suave racketeer baffled him. Bit by bit, Wain had risen in the feudal system of the half-world, and now he felt competent to challenge Horvak's power.

The big man padded back and forth. What was Wain's game? Outside and far below, the city muttered. Here in the subdued elegance of the hotel's most expensive suite that was at once office and occasional dormitory, the loneliness of eminence oppressed Horvak. Something was wrong. He knew that. There was trouble ahead.

He was tired. Lily, his sister, who shared his home, insisted that he needed rest. For a moment he felt impelled to telephone her. He consulted his watch and forebore. She would be in bed. He ought to be. He needed rest. As he fumbled with the buttons of his vest, someone rapped on the door.

He stood with far more vigor in his stillness than there had been in his aimless pacing. He heard the subdued mutter of traffic, the sigh of an elevator, and again the furtive, quick tapping. He crept forward and laid an ear against the door. There was no sound. He said at last: "Well?"

A voice replied, urgent and soft with terror:

"Lupo. Lemme in. Quick."

Horvak for an instant hesitated. Then, with incredible rapidity, it was accomplished. The lights went out. The door swung open, revealing to the gunman in the hall only darkness from which a voice ordered: "Up. Way up."

Lupo complied. Out of the gloom, Horvak slowly emerged, a gun in his fist, his white face twitching.

"You're near dead," he told his visitor, "right now. Talk fast."

Hands still raised, the gunman stared, not at his captor, but down the long bright hallway.

"There's a rod," he breathed, "under my left arm. Another in my right jacket pocket. Take 'em both, only don't keep me standing here."

Warily, Horvak disarmed him, thrust the weapons into his own coat, and stepped back, still covering his visitor. The lights popped on, and the panic in the man's voice was emphasized by his stricken face.

"Come in," the mob leader said at length, and kicked the door shut after him. Lupo scarcely heeded the muzzle of the pistol against his stomach.

"Horvak," he muttered so rapidly that his words stumbled and collided, "they're set to burn you. Tomorrow. In the lobby when you pull out."

"Yeah?" Horvak grunted, fighting against credulity. "Whatcha been sniffin'?"

"I'm tellin' you," the other almost whimpered. "It's set. Joe Moreno and Gyp Cohen. Little Maxie's got it fixed."

"Maxie," Horvak rumbled. "You rattin' on him? A hot one!"

"Squealin'," the gunman snarled, "is what I'm here for. No man beats my face in free of charge. I'm tellin' you not to go through the lobby tomorrow. If there ain't no back way out, stay here. Now lemme out. If Maxie knew where I was I'd be cold in an hour."

Convinced against his will, with eyes still on his visitor, Horvak circled about him and opened the door.

"Drop the rod, Cass," Little Maxie Wain's voice counseled. He stood, plump and calm, on the threshold, and the pistol in his fist emphasized his order. Numbly Horvak obeyed, and backed into the chamber at his visitor's command. Wain followed. The door closed, and Lupo, having retrieved the fallen weapon, brought it, butt down, upon Horvak's skull.

Wain, leaping in, eased him to the floor with a ghastly solicitude that muffled all sound.

“No,” Little Maxie whispered as Lupo bent to strike again. “Switch off those lights. Open the window. Easy.”

In the darkness sounded the grunt and shuffle of burdened men.

Thereafter, avoiding the elevators, they went like twin shadows down the interminable flights of the fireproof stairway and across the lobby that had wakened suddenly from its early morning somnolence. No one heeded them as they passed into the street and entered the waiting car without the doorman’s aid. He had become part of a dark clot of men that dilated and contracted uncertainly about a hidden nucleus and broke apart at the clangor of an ambulance bell.

The city slumbered. Summoned by brief whisperings of private wireless stations, a rum ship from St. Pierre crept in beneath the night, over the darker void of the sea, through the cordon of destroyers, cutters, and power craft that blockaded the coast. Unmolested by these, the liquor runner made its “drop” off a deserted beach. Shore craft waited there. Five thousand cases came in by sea that night.

A police patrol boat chugged past a lighter discharging the sacking-wrapped, six-bottle “hams” of whisky at a wharf. A voice hailed. Another replied. The police boat went on.

Out of the sea the liquor seeped inland. A stranded Long Island motorist, hailing a truck, stared into a pistol muzzle, yelped, and fled. Elsewhere on this same highway guns hammered briefly. In Manhattan a crew waited at a warehouse until daylight for a cargo that did not appear.

The city lay asprawl and dreaming. Through its northern suburbs, the nightly caravan rumbled. Vans, at decorous intervals, rolled into the Bronx and continued their southward course over appointed thoroughfares. Patrolmen, halting on lonely beats, watched them go by.

Dust of a half-dozen counties lay thick on the vans. Alert men sat in their cabs. Guns lay ready beside them, and at their backs were tarpaulin-covered cases, each bottle packed in a watertight tin container to guard against breakage. Five thousand cases came down from the north that night.

When the last of the caravan had passed, a policeman, who had briefly halted each vehicle, climbed into his car and went home to his $5,000-a-year apartment. Two men, he knew, were waiting for him there, to bear most of the cash with which his pockets were packed to its proper destinations. On the morrow he would deposit the remainder in one of the seven bank accounts he held under as many different names.

The city twitched and muttered in its sleep. In tenement kitchens and in buildings used for no other purpose, liquor was made. Alcohol was stewed more or less efficiently to rid it of denaturants. Malt and caramel and flavoring were combined with spirits to approximate rye, Scotch, and bourbon.

Trucks called, were loaded and moved away. Gang leaders rapped an appointed number of times on doors, were admitted and departed. Other men, businesslike as renting agents, dropped in, collected, and continued their profitable rounds. Twenty thousand cases were fashioned in the city itself that night.

Prohibition enforcement agents raided one still with much sound and publicity and ignored its three neighbors. A visiting dry Senator paid a caller at his hotel suite $120 for a case of dubiously genuine rye. Three juniors from New Haven, seeking adventure, worked their way into four speakeasies in one block. Two detectives, acting on complaints to headquarters, traversed the same street a half hour later and found no trace of liquor law violation in its entire length.

Three night clubs were closed by the police. One, whose owner had boasted unwisely, was smashed into kindling. In compensation, fifteen new resorts throughout the city were permitted to open.

A buyer from Nebraska, discovering in an East Side speakeasy that his wallet had vanished, looked at the blonde hostess who attended him with suspicion that he was too unsober to repress. He was picked up an hour later a block away, beaten insensible.

A Greenwich Village night-club was shot up by three efficient gunmen as a reproof to its proprietor who had changed his liquor dealer. A laundry that had not paid tribute to the racketeers of its district was bombarded with a dozen pint bottles of ink, that smashed its window, broke against its walls, and ruined two hundred dollars' worth of clothing. A truck farmer from New Jersey had his horse poisoned on the Forty-second Street ferry as an instance of the dangers he would avoid by joining an "association" at the cost of $100. Racketeers in the Bronx set fire to the scaffolding of an almost completed building whose contractor had been stubbornly parsimonious.

In an East Side dance hall, where the Three Wellknown Friends were holding a profitable tango contest, someone raised a chair. A gun spoke. The lights went out. When the police arrived, Fingers Riley alone remained. Shot through the chest, he grinned at their questioning and, grinning, died.

Gregory Levy's body lay riddled in a Queens gutter as lesson to those who sought to carry on their liquor trade independently. Mitts Martini,

bootlegger, went for a ride with three intimate friends and was fished out of the Harlem two days later with no back to his head. Three men died in Bellevue from the effects of Bowery “smoke.”

The city slept on, soddenly, its sprawling giant body flaccid, indifferent, complacent.

CHAPTER VII

JIMMY CARRIGAN, wilted rather than stirred by his sojourn beneath the shower, peered into his living room, where his Japanese hovered, grinning admiration of Tarleton's appetite.

"Food," the reporter shuddered, "is a loathsome thing. Coffee, Miyako. I'll be with you presently, Buck."

When he reappeared, bathrobe swathed, he grinned wanly at his guest.

"You," he accused, "are a disgusting example of the fruits of right living. How do I feel? Terrible. And all because I welcome you with wassail and do most of the drinking myself. Seen the papers? The *Standard* gives you the biggest play."

The black headlines slapped Tarleton across the eyes.

GANGMAN IS MURDERED
SHACKLED TO TROOPER

Color darkened his face as he read the banks of the head and ran through the story itself. There was irony latent in its brisk sentences. They stung him. Carrigan drank coffee and watched him gravely. Tarleton read aloud:

> "*The Sergeant leaped or fell into the excavation, leaving his prisoner to die in a stream of bullets!*"

The bitterness in his voice was his only comment, and he forced himself through the rest of the account, wherein the magistrate's dismissal of the charge against Tucket was set forth in full, and the fact that Follansbee Arnold and Major Speede declined to comment was surrounded by a scaffolding of surmise.

"If you think," Carrigan defended, "that we didn't give you a break, you ought to read the others, Buck. I asked them to save your feelings all they could."

"You needn't have," Tarleton said slowly. Each line of type was a fresh thorn of humiliation. The reporter grinned provocatively at his set, angry face.

"You made the first page your first day in town," he jeered gently. "And if the President hadn't seen prosperity lurking just around another corner,

you'd have made the fold. Right at this moment, Buck, there probably are a dozen earnest brethren of mine trying to find you. I'm guilty of every newspaper crime in the book by keeping you hidden."

Tarleton said in a dull voice: "You're white, Jimmy. I'll take my shadow from your door this morning."

Carrigan's mocking expression altered swiftly, but his voice remained calm:

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To see Arnold," his friend asserted stubbornly. "And when he heaves me down the steps—oh, well, what difference?"

"I see," the other calculated aloud. "Just throwing your weight about last night, eh?"

"I don't get you," Tarleton said in a surly tone. Carrigan polished his horn-rimmed glasses. His voice was as abstracted as his gaze.

"Jack Tarleton, the Giant Killer, was going to clean up this town. Oh, well, wine is a mocker and a magnifier."

The depression burned away from his friend's face.

"That sounded like hooey," he granted with a twang of anger in his voice, "but I mean it. I'm going to get the man who killed Horowitz—or else be got, but I'm not going to clutter up your place with me and my troubles."

"And that," Carrigan commented blightingly, "is a dazzling show of intelligence, as a starter. By all means, go out on your own, you Galloping Goof, and get yourself spread by some apprentice gunman. That's sense, isn't it?"

"Nothing in this nightmare town makes sense," the other muttered.

"Can I call your attention," Carrigan queried dreamily, "to the headline on page one, column three, about halfway down the page?"

Tarleton stared at him, unrumpled the paper in his fist, and read aloud:

"HORVAK, MOB CHIEFTAIN,
DIES IN 10 STORY FALL."

Excitement washed away his misery. He said incredulously: "Horvak? He was one of the guys that Tucket went——"

"To see at the Assyrian," Carrigan completed. "He was indeed, and if you follow through the yarn, you'll find that the Hon. Horvak went out of a window in his apartment there. Get it?"

"Just what," the other asked, "are you driving at, Jimmy?"

"Of course, you don't understand," Carrigan proclaimed. "Yet just by dumb luck, you and I know more about it than any cop in New York."

He leaned forward, hands clasped before him on the table, his lean face so earnest that Tarleton thought of a minister about to invoke the Deity.

"Buck," Carrigan said solemnly, "I know this town. Racketeering and mobs have been my hobby. Stick around, you big ape. With me to help you, your chances are only a thousand to one you'll flop and ten to one you'll be rubbed out."

His grin was mocking, but there was appeal in his eyes. Tarleton answered in a gruff voice:

"I'm willing to take those odds, Jimmy. I don't see myself dragging you in on a bet like that."

"Me?" the other exclaimed. "Nonsense. They never shoot reporters, or hardly ever. There's a permanent closed season on us. I'm safe enough. I like amusement. It's lonely here. Money is no object. And besides, I'm the only living chance you have, Buck. Be a good guy. Do me a favor."

"I'll probably never be able to pay you back," Tarleton replied gruffly, and looked hard at the paper spread on his knees.

"How," Carrigan inquired with a lilt of relief in his voice, "would you like a sock in the nose? Go see Arnold, Buck. Tell him what you're after. If you get his O. K., all right. If not—hell with him."

He beamed. Tarleton, looking up from his paper, asked with a pucker of thought between his black brows:

"Do you think Tucket——"

"That story," Carrigan broke in with suppressed excitement, "is probably the most important in the paper this morning, and it barely made first page. You got a bigger play, and everyone will have forgotten you, next week."

"I don't know what it means," his friend persisted with the heaviness of bewilderment.

"Sure you don't," the other acknowledged. "Be thankful. If you did, besides all the earnest young newspapermen who are sitting in some early-opening speakeasy this morning trying to find you, you'd have a lot of other folk hunting you with rods and pray-as-you-enter cars and ukuleles—machine guns."

"Do you know?" Tarleton asked bluntly. Carrigan shook his head.

"Nope," he conceded. "That is, I don't know what happened. Horvak's had this town by the tail and was having trouble holding on. He was its first big-time racketeer. I've heard Little Maxie had begun to push him around.

He may have fallen out of that window. He may have mistaken himself for a cigar butt. He may have been pushed. Neither Tucket nor Maxie could have done it. Cass was big as an ox. Right now your guess is as good as mine."

"Who's Maxie?" the other queried. The reporter shrugged.

"Little Maxie Wain," he pronounced. "A high-spading, hippodroming gambler. That's his front, anyway. There are a dozen stories about his past, all gratifyingly different. Whatever he was, he's come up from it fast. Horvak was a brute. Little Maxie has brains, and the scruples of a weasel. He can invent rackets faster than the boys can work them. About one person in every ten on Long Island pays him protection money, which is a polysyllabic term for blackmail, directly or indirectly. I hear he's even branching into the suburbs, where the commuter and the millionaire alike are finding it simpler to come through, than to have their gardens drenched with crude oil some dark night."

"My God," Tarleton commented in slow scorn. Carrigan smiled.

"Meaning," he interpreted, "that the people he afflicts are sheep? Sure they are. That's what civilization does for us, isn't it? It takes away our right to defend ourselves and our weapons. Of course we're sheep. What else is the ideal good citizen?"

"The man who insists that law be enforced," Tarleton retorted. Carrigan shook his head.

"Try and do it," he invited. "Execute Little Maxie for murder. Any one of a dozen. And see what you get."

"He's got to be convicted first," the other blundered.

"How?" Carrigan asked. "Fifty out of every fifty men who know him will tell you he's a cold-blooded killer. That's thirty-eight more than a jury verdict."

"There's the law," Tarleton insisted blindly.

"Isn't there just?" his friend retorted. "Read the criminal record of any racketeer. Maybe a reformatory sentence as a cub, but when he grows into a real wolf, it becomes monotonous. 'Dismissed for lack of evidence'; 'dismissed for lack of evidence'; 'dismissed for lack of'—— Hell! It's sheep-enforced law, and we try to catch wolves with it."

"There are the police," Tarleton pointed out.

"Sure," his friend retorted. "They're the shepherd dogs. They herd the sheep for their owners. And who owns them? The politician and the racketeer. I can't tell which is which, and if Fuddy-duddy Arnold and his

committee can, God bless them every one. Look at Gannon. They bat him around from precinct to precinct like a tennis ball, the stubborn Mick."

"Well," Tarleton disparaged, "if he's your prize exhibit, Jimmy——"

"I know," the other conceded. "You didn't meet under the best circumstances. Gannon, Buck, is an honest cop, and he spends all his off time on the job, preparing for the day when the department is to be made clean, as confidently as an Adventist expects the Second Coming—and with about as much encouragement."

Tarleton glanced at his watch and rose. Carrigan stretched with a prodigious yawn.

"And that," he announced, blinking watery eyes, "is the racket we aim to buck. We both must have been dropped on our heads while we were infants. I'm going to see if I can trace that telegram."

Before the steps to Follansbee Arnold's door, Tarleton paused, started to draw a long, determined breath, and, glancing upward, lost it. Some remote, conscientious corner of his mind bewailed the disastrous scattering of all the arguments he had rehearsed on his tramp uptown. He paid scant heed thereto. The fact that Patricia Arnold was as lovely in riding habit as in evening gown dwarfed at the moment all other considerations.

Her knees, he appreciated with a happy awe, were slim and straight as a boy's. The flaring breeches, the close coat, reiterated the lithe roundness of her body. For an instant, he saw bewilderment cloud the clearcut face beneath the soft little tricorn hat. Then she smiled and ran down, holding out her hand with the candid delight of a child. He stammered out his mission.

"Oh," she replied, and at the barely perceptible disappointment in her voice, he cursed his clumsiness, "my uncle won't be back until tonight."

"I see," he said stupidly. "You—you're going riding?"

She nodded.

"In the Park. It's better than no riding at all. Do you ride, Mr. Tarleton?"

"A little," he admitted. Her face flushed.

"I am ridiculous," she admitted. "Of course, you're a sergeant in——"

She made a half gesture to hail a passing taxi, and then shook her head.

"I think," she decided aloud, "I'll walk up to the Park. Are you—going that way? It's such a lovely day."

He fell into step beside her.

"I haven't," he confessed, "the least idea where the Park is, but it's exactly the way I am going."

She laughed, and he knew for the first time the great beauty through which they walked. A wind from Jersey had burnished October's sky. Out of the welter of human confusion, dwarfing man and his aimless hastes, buildings sprang aloft, lifting cornices and pinnacles higher, ever higher, against the valiant blue. The sunlight quickened opalescence in the heart of fluttering steam. The sunlight sparkled and spun from the glittering lines of traffic and turned the prodigious shaft of the Chrysler Building into a torch capped with steady white fire.

He liked the easy way in which she matched her stride to his, her frank comradeship of manner and speech. From little spurred heels to the crown of her jaunty hat there was nothing about her, a dozen glances assured him, that he did not like.

"Isn't it," she asked, nodding to the long vista of great apartment houses before them, "a rather splendid town?"

"It is indeed," he agreed. He had forgotten his animosity toward the city. He had thrust aside the recollection of his own failure and disgrace. Her eyes smiled back into his like an unself-conscious boy's. No feminine subterfuge or pretense obscured her warm, honest spirit.

They turned at length into Sixtieth Street, and he saw that drab foliage blocked its end.

"I wish," she said suddenly, "you would ride with me."

"In these clothes?" he laughed.

"No, but—I mean," she went on with sudden determination, "I ride every morning, unless the weather is bad. Would you care to join me—sometime?"

"Any time," he returned.

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," he agreed with a recklessness that amused her. Neither quite knew why they laughed.

A wizened man in gaiters touched his hat as she approached and gathered in the rein of a lovely chestnut mare.

"This is Lucy," Patricia told Tarleton. "Do you like her?"

"Very much," he replied. "May I?" and ran over her quickly with eye and hand.

"That girth," he asked the groom, "could be a bit tighter, couldn't it?"

"No, sir," the wizened man returned promptly. "It's quite right as it is, sir."

The girl's calm voice forestalled argument.

“Tighten it, Peter,” she bade, and as the other complied with protestant mumblings added, “Mr. Tarleton knows what he’s talking about, Peter. He’s a member of the state police.”

Something that had soared within Tarleton turned to lead at the pride in her voice. She held out her little gloved hand and smiled.

“Tomorrow,” she repeated. “Here, at twelve—or will you stop for me?”

“I can’t,” he mumbled. “I can’t come at all, Miss Arnold—unless——”

Her unafraid regard heartened and steadied him.

“You see,” he explained. “Much as I want to—see you again, I’ve got to tell you. I’m not a trooper. They kicked me out last night, at your uncle’s home.”

Peter, the groom, muttered balefully into Lucy’s velvet ear. The mare stamped and fidgeted. On a bench beneath a yellowing elm her mistress sat and listened to the stranger with the gentle, firm hands, who crushed his felt hat between them as he talked.

When he had finished he looked from the sweetness of her eyes to the ruin of his headgear and thrust it back into approximate shape with a hard little laugh. He rose and grew pale as the girl stood up and held out her hand.

“Thank you for telling me,” she said. “At twelve o’clock tomorrow, then?”

“At twelve o’clock,” he repeated mechanically, and resolutely fought back all other words but an inadequate “Thank you.”

Beside the mounting block, she turned toward him impulsively again.

“You know,” she said with a rush, “I think it is a rather—crazily splendid thing you are trying to do, Don Quixote.”

“Until an hour ago,” he told her slowly, “I had no idea what a splendid place the world could be.”

CHAPTER VIII

CARRIGAN and a guest, seated at luncheon, looked up as Tarleton entered.

"Hi, Buck," the reporter hailed. "We didn't wait for you. Jerry was in a hurry. What luck?"

"Good," Tarleton blurted, and amended in haste, "that is—he won't be back until late tonight."

"Oh," Carrigan commented, dryly observing his confusion. "I see. You remember the lieutenant?"

Gannon's cubical body was sheathed in civilian raiment, apparently cut from cloth-covered metal. In the face he lifted toward Tarleton taut lines of self-discipline curbed a smoldering chronic anger.

"H'areya, son?" he said with patronage. "Draw up."

"Thanks," the intruder returned a trifle stiffly. "I ate only a couple of hours ago."

Gannon dismissed him with a nod and broke a roll with blunt, powerful fingers, industriously avoiding Carrigan's eyes.

"We were just talking about you," the reporter told Tarleton a trifle uncertainly. "I asked Jerry to come down. He——"

Gannon confirmed: "Jimmy's been telling me what a swell guy you are. What can you do?"

"What do you mean?" Tarleton retorted, matching his truculence.

"I mean," the policeman replied, between spasms of chewing, "Jimmy's been spilling a scenario about the Rover Boys in the Underworld and the good kind cop that helped them—and got transferred to Tremont or out of the department for his trouble. I mean, what good are you?"

"I've been a sergeant of state police," Tarleton answered in an edged voice. "I'm not asking you or anyone to——"

"Sure," Gannon pursued unscrupulously. "I know. You're the Lone Wolf, or something. You look like a lad with more sense. How much police work did they teach you up-state?"

"More than your outfit seems able to learn," the other replied. He recognized in the lieutenant's attitude the traditional hostility of city departments toward rural police, together with something more vitally urgent. Gannon ducked his close-cropped head.

"Riding," he enumerated, "and shooting, and the rules of evidence and traffic regulations and a list of all the crimes and misdemeanors in the book. 'Sergeant of state police.' It's ex-sergeant now, Jimmy was tellin' me."

"It is."

"And," Gannon rumbled on, "it might as well be admiral of the navy, or president of the Rotary Club, for all the good it'll do you in this racket. You'd be no more use than a one-armed riveter."

He drank coffee noisily and thrust back his chair, surveying from head to foot Tarleton's rigidly angry figure.

"You're sore," he accused, "from the rimmin' you got yesterday, and now at me for tellin' you the truth. Carrigan's crazier than most reporters. Blame him for givin' you such ideas."

"Now, wait a minute," his host urged, sputtering with indignation. "Have I ever given you a wrong steer, Jerry? I know Jack Tarleton——"

"So do I," the lieutenant broke in. "Better, maybe, because not so long. He got framed like a sucker yesterday, didn't he? Of course, he wants to get his own back. Any good lad would. But I've enough sins on my conscience as it is, Jimmy, without helpin' a friend of yours find a spot to stand on. And that goes."

He rose. Something in Tarleton's quiet immobility appeared to puzzle him, for he scowled and asked with paternal gruffness:

"You know what the book says about blackmail, but do ye know how the greengrocers' racket is run in this town, or who the Cabbage King is who gets two cents on every head sold? Do you know who's behind the window-cleanin' racket that's dumped a dozen lads to smash on the pavement already? You can distinguish between murder and manslaughter. Can you name a half-dozen of Horvak's mob?—may he roast in hell! Do you know Little Maxie Wain, or Frankie Tucket, or——"

"I've been here," Tarleton responded with deadly quiet, and his lips were all that stirred in his set, tanned face, "less than twenty hours."

"You could make that twenty weeks—if you lived that long," Gannon snorted, "and still you couldn't answer."

"Little Maxie Wain," the other pursued, ignoring the interruption, "is five feet six; weight about 170 pounds, swarthy complexion, black hair, dark gray suit, Scotch grain oxfords. I didn't see his face, but I'll know his laugh when I hear it again. Five feet ten inches; 140 pounds; clear, pale complexion; girlish features; gray eyes; dark brown wavy hair; diamond ring on third finger of left hand; faint triangular scar on forehead over left

eyebrow; soft voice; almost feminine manner. That's Frankie Tucket. I can describe Hop Morelli and another gunman called Monk for you, too."

Through the silence came the sound of Carrigan's soft chuckle. Gannon cannily subjugated his surprise and wet his hard lips with a cautious tongue.

"Oh, yeah?" he scoffed at length. "Where did you run into Little Maxie, fella?"

"That," Tarleton told him, "is my own personal, exclusive business."

The lieutenant looked thoughtfully from him to Carrigan, who smiled dreamily into space.

"Well," Gannon offered finally. "When it happens, remember I warned you—if you've time to remember anything. The pavements in this burg are slippery. I'll hate to see you spread on 'em. I could wish you had more sense and less crust."

"The same to you," Tarleton said politely. The door closed behind the policeman. Carrigan considered Tarleton's chill face and offered at length:

"Not so good, eh?"

"Just how much," Tarleton queried, nodding viciously toward the door, "did you tell that mug?"

"Oh, stop," the other begged irritably, "looking like Washington two-timing the Delaware. Sit down and relax your spleen with some nice, fairly hot coffee. I didn't tell him anything except the general setup. You got here too soon."

"Good," the other approved, compelling himself to smile. "I'm running this without his help. I don't care for any, thanks."

Carrigan poured coffee and corrected:

"Wrong twice, Buck. We're running it. 'Suicides, Ltd., Carrigan, Tarleton & Co., Props.' And I'm seeing Gannon again."

"What for?" his friend rapped. The other surveyed him sorrowfully:

" 'What for,' you big yap?" he echoed. "To tell him all you know. You surprised him plenty. He'll listen to reason now."

"I'll be damned if you do," Tarleton snarled.

"You," Carrigan pursued calmly, "will be burned if you don't. You won't stay lucky forever. Who do you think you are, anyway? I'll tell you who both of us are. Gas for Gannon's engine, if we can get him to use us: that's all."

He cunningly checked his friend's imminent wrath by adding:

"Oh, by the way, your girl friend wants you to call her up."

“Miss Arnold?” Tarleton queried quickly. “I——”

He checked himself, and Carrigan grinned.

“Miss Elizabeth Spillane,” he corrected. “Who asks you to accompany her to some sort of a party at Ira Draw’s Park Avenue flat this afternoon, and what a cocktail cistern that dump is! Better phone your acceptance.”

“You don’t,” Tarleton asked irrelevantly, “happen to have any riding clothes, Jimmy?”

Carrigan gave a frenzied gesture.

“Oh, Lord,” he moaned. “Yes, I have. Didn’t she take up horses in a serious way last fall and didn’t I nobly dislocate my vertebrae thrice weekly for the pure love of her and fall off at the end of each ride into the waiting arms of an osteopath? They’re in the closet. Take ’em, my son, with an old man’s blessing. It would be her strategy to start riding again because you’ve been a bold, bad, mounted cop.”

“Who?” Tarleton demanded.

“Who?” his friend shrilled indignantly. “Betty Spillane, that trifling wench.”

“Listen,” the other ordered with a grin, “I’m riding tomorrow with Miss Arnold, if you’ll tell me where I can hire a horse.”

“No kidding?” Carrigan asked, reviving perceptibly. “Hire a horse. I’ll buy you two. Not Betty, then? I’m getting to the point where I fall apart at thought of further competition. I’ll have to charge you rent for the riding clothes, though. You can pay it in a lump by taking her to Draw’s party today.”

“The name,” the other man pointed out, “is John Tarleton, not Alden. Why me?”

“Two reasons,” his friend said with awkward seriousness. “In the first place, it will take a load off my mind to know that while she’s with you, she can’t be with anyone else. In the second, I’m not asked. Draw thinks I don’t like him, and if he knew how thoroughly I don’t, he’d write me and tell me I’m not.”

“Why are you off him?” Tarleton inquired.

“For no reason at all,” Carrigan returned. “Which is the best reason in the world for not liking anyone.”

Late that afternoon, an august personage in maroon and burnt-orange livery opened the door of the Spillane limousine, permitted Betty and

Tarleton to alight, and then abolished the car with a majestic wave of his gold-encrusted arm.

Draw's guests crossed the sidewalk beneath an awning, passed through a hall of moving picture magnificence and were ushered by a shorter but equally resplendent official into an elevator, masquerading as the boudoir of a marquise. Betty pinched her escort's arm.

"Isn't it awful?" she murmured. "I don't know how Ira stands it. It's one of the places where you'd rather be tight than resident. I think you'll like his party, though. They're generally amusing."

Tarleton had the impression, on entering the vast crowded living room, that everyone was amused. The glare of lights dazzled him, and the warring clatter of voices deafened. He followed Betty, who slid with practised skill through the confusion toward where a lamp turned a bald pate a bright celluloid pink. He skirted the cloud of fragrance that hung about a gay, overblown matron, and avoided a tray of cocktails that materialized out of chaos in his pathway.

A dark girl in red caught his arm and released it with the comment: "Oh, he isn't you," more rueful than apologetic. A lank man with an orotund voice and an actor's haircut shook his hand and proclaimed: "My dear chap, I thought you were on the Coast. How pleasant to see you," and the crowd that rimmed a great table, laden with barbaric-hued hors d'œuvres, jostled and repulsed him.

He arrived at length at the fringe of the central group into which Betty had dived, and stared at their backs until she caught his eye and shouted imperiously: "Johnny, come here." Someone stepped on his foot; several persons collided with him, and drops from a cocktail spattered his sleeve, but he won his way at last to her side.

"Ira," Betty proclaimed, "this is my protector, so watch your step, old dear."

"He's big enough," Draw commented, in a slow drawl, his mild, pale eyes surveying Tarleton. He held out a pink palm and beamed like a beardless Santa Claus, blond, rubicund, with only a narrow thatch of yellow hair lodged on either side of his bald shining skull.

"And mean enough," Betty supplemented. "He's a state policeman—or he used to be."

Tarleton hoped that his involuntary wincing was imperceptible. He had not told the girl of his dismissal. Draw held out a cocktail.

"The traditional gesture for all policemen," he grinned. It was pungent and easy to swallow. Tarleton, fearing the jostlers about him, drained the

glass.

"Another," Draw proposed. "It's only fair to warn you that they pack a kick. Mild, but they petrify. June, this is Mr. Tarleton. See he gets fed."

June, whose peaked, faintly sallow face seemed perpetually disconsolate, muttered in his ear that the food was filthy but that the cocktails weren't bad. Thereafter their moods drifted rapidly apart. For Tarleton, a gayety crept into the racket and movement about him. For his partner it was clear the spectacle became increasingly deplorable, yet she continued to halt cocktail-laden waiters and to drink with Socratic determination, as though alcohol eventually would purge her mind of each jesting remark her partner offered.

Reiterated handclapping partially subdued the feverish talk and squeals of laughter. Ira Draw, a shade more highly polished and radiant, proclaimed that Ivan Somebody—Tarleton missed the name—had consented to play the piano. "On whose time?" a raw voice queried, and the remainder of the host's introduction was abolished by merriment.

Ivan, gaunt, jaundiced, and impassive, was not disconcerted, but slid briskly onto the piano bench and added to the general dissonance. No one seemed to heed him. June suddenly thrust her half-emptied glass at Tarleton.

"Take it," she ordered. "I'm going."

"Where?" he asked, astonished.

"To be sick," she returned. "In private, if possible."

She vanished. A fragile blonde bumped into Tarleton, spilled the contents of the glass he held upon his vest and giggled ribaldly. Thereafter, with dreamlike regularity, personalities emerged from chaos, endured and were extinguished again, born of noise and dissolving thereinto. Tarleton found himself embroiled in a heated argument on glanders with a brown, lathy man who departed crying, "Is there a veterinary in the house?" and was seen no more. The brunette in the red dress wrote her telephone number on a card for him and then tore it up in a burst of sobbing because, she insisted, he was not sincere. From a series of only vaguely identifiable men and women, Tarleton received in succession an invitation to proceed to another and better party elsewhere, bids to a lunch and two dinners, the proffered services of the best bootlegger in New York, an offer to sell him a horse, and a request for the loan of a hundred dollars. He declined them all, without perceptible offense to anyone. He moved in an aura of effervescent cordiality and beamed upon Betty when she suddenly appeared before him.

"Is it a good party?" she smiled.

"It is," he replied carefully, for his tongue was faintly treacherous. "Only I haven't done right by you, Betty. You've been evading me, and I promised James Talbot Carrigan, the boy reporter, to watch over you, Betty. To be a ben—ben'ficent spiritual chaperon, and where have you been? Ducking ____"

"Johnny," she cried, twisting under his sudden fierce grip on her wrist. "Stop. You hurt."

"Sorry," he muttered, releasing her. "Betty, who was it that laughed just then?"

"What a sensible question that is," she returned, regarding him suspiciously, for his recently relaxed and merry face was taut. "With everybody here either laughing or crying, or both."

He did not seem to hear her. He searched, narrow-eyed, the sluggish human whirlpool about him, looking for a repetition of that laugh—that bubbling, shrill, unforgettable merriment. She spoke again, and when he did not reply, turned away with a despairing smile.

"Lost someone?" Draw asked a few moments later as his restless guest weaved his way through the crowd.

"Know a man named Wain?" Tarleton asked abruptly.

"Never," Draw replied, "ask a New Yorker the names of his guests. If you saw him, he's here."

"He was here," his guest replied stubbornly. "I'd know that laugh of his anywhere."

"What's he look like? Maybe I can help."

"Plump and dark," Tarleton returned, "with the laugh of an infant sadist."

"There's lots of laughter around," Draw gestured toward his guests. "Take your pick. I'm afraid you don't drink." He nodded to the cocktail bearer waiting at his guest's elbow and beamed when Tarleton picked up a glass.

"If there's anyone you want to know," he bade as he turned away, "go slap him or her on the back. The party's that far along."

Over the head of a woman sculptor who sought to enlist him as her model with an embarrassing candor concerning his proportions, Tarleton caught a glimpse of Betty and Draw side by side in a far corner of the room. Thereafter, she vanished. A half hour later he disengaged himself from an emotional matron's unreticent recital of her husband's infidelities to hail his host as he passed.

"What," he grinned, "have you done with Miss Spillane?"

"Done?" Draw retorted. "My dear man, she left a half hour ago."

"Oh, Lord," Tarleton groaned. "What a fine escort I turned out to be! I'll blow, too, Mr. Draw. Thanks a——"

"Oh, I say," his host protested. "It's quite all right. She said she couldn't bear to drag you away. This is her opera night. Stick around with the Old Guard, Mr. Tarleton. Cocktails can't be kept till some other time."

"I better go," Tarleton persisted, still self-reproachful. "I'm most amazingly obliged, Mr. Draw."

"Nonsense. Come again. Come often," said the other.

After the door had closed on his guest, Draw lingered a moment, his chubby face thoughtful, his pudgy hands softly chafing each other. At length he turned away from the flagging revelry and entered another chamber where a three-quarter-length oil painting of his mother presided over an opulent bed and a stand with light and telephone.

Draw waited, receiver to ear, and surveyed the portrait with blank eyes. His voice, when he spoke, was softly peremptory.

"Spillane, I want to see you this evening. . . . I'm sorry, but I want to see you this evening. . . . Not later than ten o'clock. . . . My dear chap, naturally it's important. . . . Thanks so much."

He restored the telephone to its place, glanced once more at his mother's picture, and returned demurely to his guests.

In the outside hall Tarleton found two other men awaiting the elevator. One of these, catching his glance, gave a faint, despairing grin. His companion, whose arm he held, swayed and tried unsuccessfully to lift a sagging head.

He sat upon the settee in the elevator and then slowly folded over. Tarleton retrieved his hat while the other man pushed his friend upright.

"Thanks," he muttered. "I'm praying I can get him into my car without carrying him."

The ground-floor door slid open, and the elevator runner waited with impassive disdain while the Samaritan attempted to pull his charge to his feet, and succeeded with Tarleton's aid. Together, they half supported, half carried him through the lobby and into the street, where golden lights were swarming through the smoky dusk. A closed car slid up to the awning's end. They tacked across the sidewalk and managed to thrust their burden in upon the rear seat. The other stranger laughed pleasantly.

"I'm obliged," he said. "Can't I give you a lift somewhere?"

Tarleton glanced at his watch and found it later than he had thought.

"Oh, no," he hesitated. "I'll take a taxi downtown, thanks."

"Might just as well ride with us," the other offered. "I've got to go to Washington Place and deliver my friend. Get in, if you don't mind the front seat. I'll spread him out here in back."

He held open the door and, while Tarleton settled himself, seemed to have some trouble in relatching it. The car slid into the stream of northbound traffic, turned east for a block, and then bore northward on Lexington.

Tarleton turned about impulsively but uttered no word, for he stared into the blunt muzzle of an automatic pistol.

"Sit still."

It was the voice of his acquaintance, but the man who held the gun in a steady, competent hand was the helpless drunk of a moment ago. He added quietly:

"Turn around, you. And don't move again. Step on it, Abe."

CHAPTER IX

WITH a numb deliberation Tarleton looked away from the gun barrel pointing up steadily from his captor's lap and faced about. The avenue was a dazzle of lights rushing toward him, blurred and irrational as his own thoughts. The speeding car swung around a truck, and he braced himself. Dread of the pistol's muzzle, that ring of steel about a black spot like a period yet unuttered, had wakened dull apprehensive aching in his neck.

Out of his eye corners he considered the driver's peaked intent face, thrust forward from shoulders that stooped above the wheel. He debated the possibility of grappling with him. Thought of the blunt steel finger behind blighted that hope. He caught the sibilant mutter of speech on the back seat and a brief cold laugh.

They shot by a red traffic light, and one of his captors squalled viciously at the driver. The car's pace grew more sedate. With immense caution Tarleton shifted his arm and held, at last, the latch handle. It would not turn. The door had been locked.

Thereafter, instinct argued against employment of the last forlorn expedient. Rather than be borne, unresisting, to some vacant lot on the fringe of the city there to be slaughtered and thrown out, he would attack and die, fighting back. A sudden movement, he knew, would bring a bullet. In a city so bombarded by muffler explosions, the report would pass unnoticed. If the first shot missed, he might be able to dive into the tonneau and grapple before the second could be fired. At all events, in such a struggle his chances were better than if he continued to sit meekly obedient. He told himself this, angrily, for the dire ache in the back of his neck seemed to paralyze his limbs, and urged him to defer the moment of resistance. Battalions of buildings wheeled past; people as remote from his plight as fishes in an aquarium went by the glass pane at his shoulder.

Traffic lights burned red again as they entered a block. The street at its far end was crisscrossed with east- and west-bound cars, and between their currents Tarleton saw a stalwart blue-clad figure. Here, he recognized as the car rolled forward at reduced speed, was the place where attack should be launched, and felt his body quail. He moved his feet cautiously.

The driver turned his head and then swung curbward to evade a big orange taxicab that ran abreast of them. The end of the block was just ahead. The red light still burned. Tarleton heard the brakes catch and hold. The

driver cursed as the cab crowded him in toward the gutter. A parked car ahead blocked their path. They were pocketed, and a thick-set figure had bounced from the taxi and swung upon the running board of the gunman's car.

"Bull," a voice on the rear seat croaked. A latch clicked. Cool air blew on Tarleton's neck. Swiftly, he flung himself about, teeth bared. His captors leaned back upon the cushions, arms folded, impassive, and a voice he had known and disliked brought deliverance.

"Goin' anywhere special?" asked Lieutenant Gannon.

"Uptown," the erstwhile drunk replied.

"Oh, yeah?" the policeman returned. "Tarleton, outside."

"The door's locked," the recent captive answered, and shrank from the quaver in his voice.

"Lew," Gannon rasped. "One of these days you'll fry, and I'll dump you in the pan myself. Open that door, and make it fast. Abie, you coke-sniffin' rat, who's this other mug?"

"Smith," said the driver. "John Smith."

The door beside Tarleton swung open. "Must of stuck," his recent captor offered blandly.

"Get uptown," Gannon told the driver. "And you'll save me trouble if you roll on to Sing Sing."

A door slammed, gears locked and whined. A spurt of gasoline vapor, as the car moved off, deepened the scowl on Tarleton's face.

"You're letting them go," he objected as Gannon joined him.

"News!" the lieutenant acclaimed. "Why not?"

He listened grimly while the rescued man babbled his story.

"Now, wait," the policeman commanded as rancor crept into Tarleton's voice. "Sure I could have pinched 'em. Maybe I could have worked over them till they spilled, but only cops who are sitting pretty dare get rough. I'd have been out on my neck for unnecessary brutality before I could have swung the rubber hose a dozen times."

"You'd have had my testimony," the other protested, still resentful. "And at least one of them had a gun."

"Your testimony," Gannon retorted, "would have been one against three. And if you want to look, you'll find the gun in the gutter somewheres. They dumped it when they saw me. They found you drunk and were takin' you home. That'd have been their story, and you smell like it. Son, I know my game. Never think I don't."

Under his choleric stare Tarleton smiled wanly and held out an abashed hand.

"It's just occurred to me I owe you a bill," he offered. Gannon grinned.

"Both of us," he growled, "have been off the target. Carrigan, this afternoon, showed me I'd underrated you. I went to Draw's to find you and was parked in the lobby, waitin', when you come out with those gorillas. So I hopped a cab and followed."

"I'm glad you did," Tarleton replied inadequately with a shudder.

"Yeh," the policeman continued. "Your luck was in. Let's taxi back to Carrigan's."

"As long as I don't sit in front," the other jested feebly.

"That's safer," Gannon granted, hailing a cab, "but even that ain't too safe always."

Tarleton, relaxing on the taxi's seat, exhaled a long sigh. His companion, bending forward, slid shut the glass panel between them and the driver. Thereafter, twisting about, he prodded with blunt questions the man he had saved.

With a glibness born of recently overstrained nerves, Tarleton told of his encounter with Tucket the previous night, and the outcome thereof. When he had ended, Gannon said solemnly:

"I'd give my pension to know what went on in Horvak's suite. Cass and Dip and Little Maxie all together. What a spot for a bomb."

"You think," Tarleton asked, "they ganged this Horvak person and threw him out of the window?"

"I'll find out—some day," the other replied sourly.

In the lurching gloom of the cab, Tarleton's voice sounded faintly ironic.

"There must be ways," he commented. "I've always understood there were."

Gannon's jaws clicked together sharply.

"Son," he returned, "lemme tell you something. If you were me, I know what you'd do. You'd find out where Maxie and Dip hang out. I know that already. You'd pinch 'em both. Each of 'em would have an alibi. An hour after you nailed 'em, their lawyers would have them out again. And a week later, you'd be reporting to the skipper of whatever police station in town was furthest away from where you lived. And some of them are real far. I know."

The grim resignation in his voice smote Tarleton.

“Why don’t you quit?” he asked. “Or why don’t you go to Arnold’s committee and tell what you know?”

Gannon said at last in a flat, tired voice:

“I’ve worked at this game too long to admit I’m licked. I haven’t gone to Arnold because I’ve been unable to nail anything down. Maybe,” he added darkly, “after tonight, I’ll have enough.”

“I’ve told you all I know,” Tarleton answered. Gannon grunted:

“Not you. I’ve dug up a squeal. Hop Morelli’s coming to Carrigan’s tonight to see me.”

The traffic light that had halted them revealed his face, still in the ruddy twilight as a bitter mask.

“You think,” Tarleton ventured as they moved forward again, “that Tucket tried to take me for a ride?”

Gannon tore himself away from gloomy brooding.

“I can’t,” he confessed, “make it fit. Unless you’re holding out on me, I don’t see it. That’s more like Maxie than Dip. Now what?”

Tarleton’s stifled exclamation left him speechless an instant. At last he said slowly:

“Wain was at Draw’s party,” and told of the gurgling laugh and his inability to trace it.

Gannon asked with the heaviness of intense thought, “Didja ask anyone about him?”

“Draw,” Tarleton reported. “He’d never heard of him.”

“Hadn’t he, though?” the lieutenant asked with specious indifference. “He can’t get around much, Ira Draw. Son, maybe you’re more important than either of us thinks. Maybe we’ll both go see Arnold tomorrow.”

“You know the jam I’m in,” Tarleton replied through clenched teeth. “And the fool way I tried to commit suicide a while ago.”

“You’re raw,” Gannon replied. “And you’ve had delusions of grandeur. But mostly Jimmy Carrigan knows what he’s talking about. Maybe we can help each other. Just maybe. Whoa! Here’s Jimmy’s dump.”

From the bedroom, as they entered the flat, the reporter yelped a greeting and struggled with a stiff-bosomed shirt, flapping its white arms like a scarecrow.

“Do you think you’re the mayor?” Gannon, growled.

“Shut up.” Carrigan invited, “Come in. Where have you been?”

While Tarleton perched on the bed's edge, Gannon, planted squarely under the archway to the living room, talked rapidly. Carrigan's fury of dressing gradually ebbed. He stood for a long instant with one leg thrust into his trousers, drew them on abstractedly, and, as the lieutenant concluded, sat down beside Tarleton and began to pull them off.

"Have I prostrated you? Are you going to bed?" Gannon asked ironically.

"Do you think," the reporter demanded, "I'd pass up the chance to hear the gifted Mr. Morelli squeal, right here in my own apartment, even for the joy of accompanying Betty Spillane to the opera? Be yourself, Jerry."

"Oh," Gannon reflected aloud. "The lady that went to the tea with Tarleton? Is that right?"

"Precisely," Carrigan assured him and fumbled with a shirt stud. "I'm that way about her. Otherwise, why would I sacrifice my one night off to hear music written by a Russian, sung in French to an audience that doesn't understand either? Her father, I hear, is suddenly indisposed. I'll tell her it's contagious, and I am too."

"Put your pants on," Gannon ordered. "What do you know about Ira Draw?"

"If the sight of me, pantless, shocks you," Carrigan returned, "my opinion of Ira Draw will drive you screaming into the street."

"I didn't," Gannon corrected, "ask your opinion."

His earnestness wiped derision from Carrigan's face. He scowled thoughtfully and ticked off his sentences on the spread fingers of one hand.

"Comes from somewhere in the West and is wealthy. Plays the market, I believe, and please God some day it catches him plenty. Well known man about town; popular with the Spillanes and unpopular with me. Has a face like a pink sofa cushion with eyes like two oysters that have been left on it."

"I've seen him," Gannon interrupted. "Is that all?"

"Unless you want to quote me. I can give you enough for a whole page, all libelous."

"Because he makes passes at this Miss Spillane?" the lieutenant asked with a flicker of amusement in his grim eyes. "Then she knows him better than you do?"

"And she makes passes back at him," Carrigan complained. "Sure she knows him better. Poor deluded girl."

"Into the soup and fish," the policeman commanded, "and take your jane to the opera. Get her to give you the low-down on Draw, if she'll talk about

him."

Tarleton offered dryly: "Someone talks too much," and told of Betty's knowledge of his discharge. Carrigan, hopping about on one leg, nodded and said, as he slipped suspenders over his shoulders:

"I'll find out what I can. If she knows, she'll tell me, darn her for the seven most beautiful women in New York. By the way, Buck, you never got any telegram."

"What do you mean?" his friend bristled.

"What I say," the other returned. "There's no record of any being sent. Think that over."

Presently, glowering in the splendor of evening dress, Carrigan appeared in the living room where the automaton-like Japanese set the table, and Gannon observed, through a cloud of cigar smoke, Tarleton's nervous wandering about the room.

"I hope," Carrigan invited, "you two mugs get food poisoning. Jerry, you won't be here when I get back, I suppose?"

Gannon hesitated until Miyako went to the kitchen.

"I've the late tour on the desk," he said in a low voice. "If our friend comes through, Jimmy, you'll have company for the night. If it's a real squeal, he won't want to leave, and I won't dare let him. You'll have to keep him on ice while I'm locking up the innocent and watching the real shots bounce in and bounce out again. Right?"

"You bet," Carrigan acclaimed.

Gannon's voice delayed him as he turned toward the door.

"Your Jap, he still sleeps out?"

"Since I won't be here," the reporter assured, "he'll blow before you've finished eating, leaving all the dirty dishes in the sink. Gents, I'll be seein' you."

He departed. Presently, with a grin and cordial hissings, Miyako announced dinner. The two ate almost in silence: Gannon with a heavy relish; Tarleton unenthusiastically. Above them a radio blared, and voices, welling from open windows, clattered in the courtyard. While they lingered, smoking, at the meal's conclusion Miyako deftly whisked the empty coffee cups away, and almost immediately they heard the front door close behind him. Gannon rose, assured himself it was locked, and, returning, consulted his watch.

"Thirty minutes' leeway," he grinned. "He's due at nine. And I think he'll be on time."

Tarleton's nerves were suffering the after effect of shock. Neither Gannon's composure nor the continual noise overhead and in the street outside soothed them. He startled at an explosion and spilled ashes in his lap.

"Muffler," the policeman said impassively. "You get so you can tell 'em apart."

"I wish," the other said with a shaky, shamed smile, "that I was clear of this town."

"Morelli," Gannon told him, settling his square bulk more comfortably in his chair, "wishes it more than you, fella. And he can't get out."

"Meaning?" Tarleton queried.

"He's made a bad play of some sort," the policeman returned calmly. "The finger's on him. Maxie's after him. So is Tucket. His only chance is a squeal, and he sends one of my stool pigeons to say he's ready. This is the only place I dared tell him to come."

Tarleton considered his hard, patient face and blurted at last:

"You know the game. Only—for God's sake, Gannon, you're not the only square-shooter in town."

His companion jerked his head toward the radio blaring above them.

"Every house," he returned, "is thick with square-shooters. There's millions of them in this burg, and they're all asleep, night and day. Some day they'll wake up and clean out this town unless they wake up too late."

"Too late?" Tarleton repeated, disturbed by the tragedy in his voice.

"I said it," the lieutenant returned. "A big city's a stomach. You can feed it just so much bad food. Tweed and Croker and others made this town plenty sick in their time. Now—I wonder."

"When the next spasm is due?" his companion queried. Gannon shook his head.

"If it's due—ever," he corrected. "What's racketeering and the bootlegging game and the killings? I'll tell you. It's a brand-new government taking over. And making the square-shooters like it."

"Oh, sure," he invited, at Tarleton's skeptical chuckle, "laugh it off. Everybody does. But don't forget bootleg rum has made organization necessary. And organization has made racketeering easy. And rum and racketeering mean big money, and big money and organization mean power. Next time the square-shooting sleepers wake up and try to clean house, they may find they can't. They won't even own the house any more. Go ahead and laugh."

“I don’t believe it,” Tarleton answered.

“Look,” the other drove on, “at Chicago. Who owns that house, now, eh? And suppose Chicago and New York and a half-dozen other big towns in the same mess form a racketeering union? Who’s going to own this country? That’s no pipe dream, either.”

“I’m about five years older than I was this time yesterday,” Tarleton confessed.

“Yeh,” the other acclaimed. “You’re growing up fast, son. If we can get a clean squeal from Morelli, we’ll have something. The time to break mobs is when they get fighting among themselves.”

“Since when,” Tarleton asked with faint scorn, “have they been? I thought there was organization and——”

“There was,” Gannon admitted with a brusque nod. “There will be. Right now, Horvak’s dead. Tucket was his right-hand man. Little Maxie wants Cass’s rackets and Cass’s mob. Dip probably has ideas of his own. Watch for trouble.”

Giovanni, who had sheltered him, had refused with obstinacy, that broke at last in screaming passion, to drive Hop Morelli to his appointment. The revolt of his fat little jackal astonished, angered, and at last subjugated the gunman. It was unreal, terrifying as though a pet rabbit had bared fangs.

With great satisfaction Hop would have fulfilled the threat he had uttered often in jest. He would have killed Giovanni here in the back room of his host’s “non-alcoholic cordial” shop. Rage flared in Morelli’s sloe eyes, and the torrent of the other’s invective faltered, but recurring dread quenched the gunman’s ire. The finger was on him—Maxie’s finger, Tucket’s finger.

Finally, for what he said was the supremely reasonable price of twenty dollars, Giovanni consented to go and find a taxicab. His profit from his foray was nineteen dollars and ninety-five cents, for he paused en route and spent a nickel on a brief telephone call.

Morelli’s face had grown thinner and more apprehensive during his host’s absence. The gunman voiced no conventional farewell. He merely wiped sweating palms on his trousers, tugged his shoulder holster into place, and with one hand thrust beneath his coat lapel and body bent forward as though breasting a gale, squattered across the pavement and into the waiting taxi. It was some seconds before he could recover sufficient voice to give the address.

Hop jolted westward, a motor-borne pariah, fleeing to the only refuge remaining, and accompanied by terror. Fear of death hung over him. Fear of what he was about to do was almost as oppressive. Murder, through long familiarity, had lost its power to stir his conscience. He could not consider so calmly the fact that he was about to commit the unforgivable iniquity; the crime that in New York, Chicago, anywhere that gangs flourished, would make his extinction a duty and his memory a sore. Squeezed into a corner of the taxicab, as hidden as possible from outward eyes, Morelli rode to squeal to a cop.

The taxi went down Third Avenue. Each iron roar of a train overhead crushed the gunman. His grip on his pistol did not comfort him now. Something whispered, truly, that now, if faced with extinction, he would lack guts to pull his rod.

Yet, thereafter, as the cab turned west; as the street grew cleaner and buildings threw off their squalor, Morelli was obscurely heartened. He compelled himself to peer from the cab's rear window. No one followed. His journey was almost completed.

Dread of death and sting of conscience eased together. The taxi stopped. A glance at the doorway number of the house reassured Morelli. There was no car creeping up behind the cab; none parked in front, yet he did not descend until he had paid the driver and emerged at last with the sharp gasp of one who enters a cold tub.

The cab slid away. Morelli again hurried across the sidewalk through an imperceptible gale, and reached the steps leading upward to the vestibule. He thrust open the door. From a car parked in shadow across the way a jet of fire darted. The car moved off. The body of Hop Morelli fell, deliberately, across the threshold.

"Muffler?" Tarleton asked.

"Trouble," Gannon snapped and rose. His ruddy face was suddenly white and stiff. He went with stumbling haste toward the outer door.

CHAPTER X

"WE," said Diamond Ike Pincus, "don't want no trouble."

He considered Ignatius Loyola Tucket with sulky uncertainty and cleared his throat. His gaze passed nervously from one to the other of the company, inviting endorsement.

No one responded immediately to his voiceless roll call. Tucket asked at length: "Who does?"

His chair was tipped against the wall of his hotel bedroom. Over the knee he nursed, he blinked secretly vigilant eyes at the half-dozen men before him, the erstwhile vassals of Cass Horvak, the barons of bootleggery, lords of a score of profitable rackets, satraps of commercially profitable lawbreaking who now were leaderless.

They sat in a half circle before him—Pincus and Putty Logardo, Larry Horrigan and Toots Morosco, Ears Maltesta and Tincan Levine—an arc of sullenly thoughtful faces that scowled through tobacco smoke. About them all, despite the accomplishments of barbers and tailors, despite form-fitting raiment and sleek jowls and glossy hair, hung a furtive shabbiness, the tiptoe, sinister air of the wolf.

Pincus, with a stir of animus on his hatchet face, broke the silence, addressing Tucket directly.

"You want Horvak's job, eh?" he queried, and again his eyes plucked at his companions.

"You can have it," Tucket shrugged. "Give it to Little Maxie. See if I care."

"Why not?" Pincus began incautiously. "Lemme tellya somep'n. Little Maxie Wain——"

The growl of dissent and threat that ran from mouth to mouth daunted him.

"That rat?" Horrigan asked scornfully out of a corner of his scarlike mouth. Levine's negroid face twisted as he cursed. Pincus shifted ground adeptly.

"Wait a minute," he begged. "Wait a minute. All I mean is he'll get it, if we don't—make up our minds."

Maltesta, whose curdled ears and beaten face attested the ring experience that had preceded more open crookedness, spoke directly to Tucket.

“Dip,” he asked in a grating voice, “what’s this trouble with Maxie? Why don’t he act nice? Does he think he can muscle in on our lay? Spill it?”

Tucket released his knee and thumped the fore legs of his chair down upon the floor. His eyes were careful, his tone deceptively light:

“Cass,” he returned, “let him go too far. Maxie’s all hopped up. He wants to own this town. Cass and him had a showdown last night. If Cass hadn’t been bumped——”

Logardo revealed gold teeth in a startled snarl.

“Hey!” he exclaimed.

“You heard me,” Tucket replied, his eyelids narrowing. “Bumped, and I’ll tell you who did it when I find out how. You mugs wouldn’t be squattin’ and moanin’ about trouble if Horvak’d stayed inside his window. You’d be in it to your necks. This town wasn’t big enough for him and Maxie. He’d found that out.”

“Says you,” the dapper little Morosco offered, and spat toward a cuspidor.

“You saps,” Tucket continued, ignoring him, “are fat and soft. That’s your trouble. You don’t want no fuss with Little Maxie? All right, hand him the town. That’s what he wants.”

“Hand him the works,” Levine suggested, thick lips pulled back in an avid grin. “Spot the rat.”

“Try and do it,” Pincus sneered. “He ain’t no goof.”

“No,” Tucket admitted, and his hard face was expressionless. “He ain’t. Give him that. Only listen. He’s bringing in muscle men. He’s startin’ to push us around in Harlem. He thinks he’s strong enough to take us.”

“He ain’t no heel, either,” Pincus added tentatively and once more scanned his companions’ faces.

“Horse feathers,” Logardo commented, with a jerk of his bullet head. “He ain’t crazy.”

“Like a fox,” Tucket told the burly overlord of Little Italy. “Yesterday, only, he tried to give me a one-way ride.”

“Yeah?” Logardo asked, his blue jowls turning purple. “Put the heat on him then. Why not?”

“Look ’em over,” Tucket invited, with a wave of his slender hand toward the uncertain faces before him. “That’s why.”

Horrigan’s green eyes clashed with his.

“Listen,” he told the silent room. “Dip’s right. Let him have Horvak’s shoes. Hey, Dip?”

"Yeah?" Tucket asked and surveyed the company with a bleak grin. Levine nodded and said, "Right with me." Logardo grinned and softly acclaimed, "Aces." The others assented with varying degrees of reluctance.

"You're elected," Horrigan announced, and gave a wide, fearsome smile.

"Now what?" Pincus asked with a furtive sneer.

"Nothin'." Tucket's voice was calm, but satisfaction glittered in his eyes. "Only I ain't Horvak. He was slack. Times had been too good for him. Maybe we got war on our hands."

"Let's go," Logardo crooned lustfully, but Tucket shook his head sharply.

"I said 'Maybe,' " he retorted. "You mugs sit tight. Hear me? I'm makin' the plays for this mob. That goes."

He challenged the men before him. The harsh faces gave assent.

"Pincus don't want trouble," Tucket resumed. "I don't neither. There's another damned investigation comin' on with that old guy on roller skates Arnold headin' it. War's bad for business any time. It would be worse just now. I'm gonna see Maxie again. Meanwhile, not a break by anybody. Sit tight, and pass that down the line, too. No musclin', no gunplay till I've seen Maxie. Let the cops run the town for a while."

The last of his new subordinates had left. Ignatius Loyola Tucket had opened the window to let the night breeze clear the chamber of stale smoke and was standing before it, surveying the light-splashed bulk of the city with a proprietary intentness when the door behind him opened. He spun about with a hiss of indrawn breath and then permitted himself a brief dry grin.

"Scared me," he told his nephew. "I was thinkin' of Cass."

Frankie tossed his hat in a chair and smoothed his hair unnecessarily with a long, pale hand.

"I'm the works," Tucket told him, "if I can swing it."

"Yeah?" his nephew asked. "I figured it would be like that."

"Diamond Ike," the other frowned, "is set to give us the run-around."

"Lemme see him," Frankie offered. "Here."

He fumbled in his vest pocket, and tossed something toward his uncle. It rang against a metal footpost of the bed and bounced back onto the counterpane, an empty brass cartridge, powder-blackened.

"Morelli," Frankie explained simply, a soft smile upon his red mouth.

The elder man stared at the spent, soiled shell as though it had stung him.

"You're kidding," he said without conviction.

"In the head," his nephew continued calmly, stripping off his jacket and hanging it up carefully. "I can call my shots."

"Frankie," Dip said slowly. "What was that for? Here I try to duck trouble, and you——"

Incomprehension, tinged with scorn, troubled the other's clear features.

"You," he reminded his uncle, "told that wop to blow or get bumped, didn'tcha?"

Tucket replied, with a strident distress in his voice:

"It's safer to scare 'em than burn 'em, you shootin' fool."

"But nowhere near as permanent," Frankie replied, fumbling with the platinum link in his silk cuff. "You're runnin' this mob, ain'tcha?"

"You'll find out if you make another break," his uncle snapped.

"Well, run it, then," the other advised blandly, "and back your bets."

With his face wrinkled into a snarl by worry, Tucket stepped to the telephone and called the East Side dwelling behind whose shabby brownstone front Little Maxie Wain, his bodyguards and intimates planned devious enterprises.

"Out," said the voice that finally responded, and hung up without further elaboration.

Tucket lit a cigarette. A mile away Marshall Spillane, seated opposite Ira Draw, tried to and could not. He flicked out the match and took the paper tube from his lips with the sluggish movement of an automaton. Vitality had drained from his clever face, and his eyes were sick.

"I don't understand," he said. "You can't mean——"

Across the plate-glass expanse of his flat-topped desk Draw regarded his visitor with sympathy.

"Unfortunately," he replied, "I mean just that, and I don't suppose the fact I regret it makes matters much easier for you, Marshall. I hold your notes for—" he made a pretense of elaborately consulting the open book before him—"one hundred and twenty-seven thousand dollars."

Spillane cleared his throat with a tearing sound.

"You told me, only last week," he half whispered, "that you would renew my paper."

Draw shook his bright bald head deploringly:

"That," he pointed out, "was before some suddenly righteous crook in the Coast Guard chased the *Annie M.* onto a reef. It was also before the

Income Tax Bureau decided I owed them three times what I paid. I can't argue with either. Bootleggers can't be choosers."

Desperation stiffened Spillane's spine and brought a flicker of light into his stupefied eyes.

"Ira," he began with hollow bluster, "what good will it do you to chase me into bankruptcy? How far will a bootlegger get in a court?"

Draw, rotund and impassive, finally permitted himself a smile of deprecation.

"Marshall," he purred, "surely you're not threatening me?"

"I mean," the other pressed forward more vigorously, "that I can't pay you one fifth of that amount, with the market as it is. You know it. I mean, too, that I know a good deal about your business, Ira, and——"

"Now, wait," the other bade, holding up a plump manicured hand. "What you know about my business is a confidence between client and attorney. I believe the Bar Association is harsh on members who break such confidences. The money you borrowed pulled you out of a hole. Am I right? Do you think it is clubby, Marshall, to talk of throwing me over because I want it back?"

Spillane made no reply but wiped his clammy face.

"And furthermore," the drawling voice pursued, "if we are going to stoop to such unpleasant things as threats, may I point out what will happen to you, a member of the Arnold Committee, if you and I start swapping accusations? Do I have to be coarse and remind you that I'm a good business man? I've entirely legal proof that you invested in the cargo of the *Annie M.*, bound from Miquelon to Jones's Inlet, Long Island, with 8,000 cases of Golden Wedding rye. Wouldn't a revelation like that rather—well, damage your usefulness as a protector of civic virtue?"

He considered his companion who had slumped back in his chair and pursued with relishful cruelty.

"Wouldn't it?" he persisted.

Spillane swallowed dryly.

"Yes," he half whispered.

"That," Draw went on, nails glistening as he rubbed fingertips together reflectively, "rather destroys your menace as a—double-crosser. I want my money, Marshall."

"I can't pay you." Spillane's voice was abject.

"You have," the other reminded him suavely, "twelve hours before I—take action."

“Do you think,” the other turned on him with feeble irritability, “that if I hadn’t exhausted all other possible credit I would have come to you?”

“Candid, if not complimentary,” Draw commented, but his pink face turned a trifle darker, and his speech was velvet-sheathed steel. “I’m grateful for that. It removes any compunction I might have felt. I shall expect you before noon tomorrow, Marshall.”

He rose. They stood face to face.

“There’s no use,” Draw said, “for us to prolong a painful interview. If you face facts, I believe you’ll see you will have to get the money you owe me.”

He accompanied his mute guest to the door and assisted him into his coat.

“Good-night,” he said, ushering him out. “After all, as I think someone has said before, business is business, you know. Even in my profession.”

Draw shut the portal softly and returned to his desk humming gently.

Spillane was not aware he had entered his car until the chauffeur, twisting about, inquired, “Home, sir?”

“Why, yes, of course,” he stammered. Movement aroused him. The motor’s and his brain’s gears enmeshed together. For an instant, on the surface of his mind, injured vanity burned. Draw had humiliated him, tricked him. Behind that suddenly hated, pink, genial face, some purpose lurked unrevealed. He groped for defense, for reprisal, and found none.

Self-pity followed. He saw himself the victim of ruthless bad fortune. First, the market collapse. In this he had evaded ruin by an unscrupulous use of every cent he could reach, his own funds, his daughter’s inheritance from her dead mother, money he held in trust for two minor nephews, cash he had raised by loans from the bank in which he was a director. Thereafter, when it had seemed his desperation was to be justified, the market had fallen again, and the bank, collapsing, had driven him in fright from friend to friend. Draw alone had aided him, had taken his paper willingly, had even pointed out a new way to fortune by revealing his own trade and its opportunity for great profit. Spillane had not shrunk from the proposal that he invest in a bootlegging enterprise. His career as lawyer and politician had inured him to far more tawdry associations.

He reflected with a sour smile how grateful he had been to Draw at the time; how he had wondered whether his plump, softly merry rescuer was pursuing his generous course as an indirect wooing of Betty. Thought of his daughter reëmphasized his plight, started cold sweat on his forehead, set his mind to running blindly about like a hunted rat.

He left his car as mechanically as he had entered and found himself at length in his own silent apartment. The liquor he drank seared his throat and routed physical chill, but did not seep from his body into his mind. He sat at his desk and held between his hands a face from which the confidence and sophistication bred by years of success had been wiped away. There, returning from the opera and a maddeningly inquisitive Carrigan, his daughter found him.

She entered, a bright vision from another world than that in which Spillane now dwelt, and forgot waspish plans for reprisals upon her overcurious escort as she stared at her father.

"Marshall," she told him at last, "you look like the spirit of acute indigestion."

"I'm smashed," he said in a low voice. Her blue eyes widened, and she caught her breath. She sat down in a chair before him.

"Tell Betty," she ordered. He complied. There was a certain relief in self-abasement. It was his habit to confide in her. He withheld nothing, and said in conclusion:

"So there you are, my dear. If I thought I were worth more to you dead than alive, I'd——"

"Yes," she interrupted, "but that curtain line is rather ham, Marshall. Let me think."

Her gay face grew serious. Pallor emphasized her rouge.

"Do you flatter yourself," he cried with weak violence, "that I haven't been thinking?"

"Oh, hush," she said irritably. "Ira has some reason for doing this, Marshall."

"One hundred and twenty-seven thousand reasons, among others," he returned, and twisted his head in a spasm of self-revulsion. He did not see surmise brighten her eyes, or her secret, flattered half smile.

"I'll talk to him myself," she said at length.

"I can't let you. I forbid it," he returned with no conviction.

"All right," she told him briskly. "That clears your conscience. Sitting here like a Currier & Ives print of the gambler's doom isn't going to get you up bright and clear eyed in the morning."

He scoffed. "Do you think I could sleep?"

"When you've taken the dose I'm going to give you," she said, rising, "you won't do anything else but."

An hour later she lifted the silk puppet that hid the telephone in her own room.

"Ira," she said, when Draw's voice answered, "I want to see you."

"I've just gone to bed, Betty," he replied quietly.

"You've fifteen minutes to dress," she told him. "I'm coming up."

"Oh," he said, and after a pause, "very well."

He opened the door at her ring and helped her out of her coat with steady hands. She turned with a little laugh and withstood his inquiring gaze. Her cheeks were brilliant, her voice lilting with a secret excitement.

"Well," she prompted, "aren't you going to ask me in?"

He smiled.

"First of all," he returned, "I was going to say that you were not very—discreet."

Her laugh was brittle. A glance at her loveliness, reflected by a mirror, was stimulation.

"And now that that's settled," she told him over her shoulder, leading the way unbidden into his living room, "why are you after Marshall's scalp, Ira?"

She sank upon the couch and felt the heavy silk of her gown cling intimately about her body. He did not reply at once, but settled himself in a chair before her. She thrilled at the approval in his eyes as they crept from her silken slippers to her face and rested there.

"I think," he drawled at length, "that you dramatize things, Betty. Your father has told you how I make my money?"

"Yes," she replied. "I always wondered."

"You see," he pursued, his pale eyes holding hers, "it's a demanding business, and a debt is a debt, my dear, even among bootleggers. And furthermore, from your father's viewpoint, there's the inconvenient matter of notes—and other things."

"Are you a blackmailer, too?" she queried sharply.

"No," he replied with deliberation, as though considering the problem. "I don't really think so. I just happen to want money very badly. And your father's notes are overdue, both of them."

"I see," she mused aloud, and seemed to be gathering inward resolution. "That's that, then."

"That," he agreed, "is exactly that."

She hesitated and automatically thrust a strand of bright hair back into place. Draw's quiet voice went on:

"I'm sorry you felt you had to come, Betty. I'd rather it had been any one of a million other men than—your father."

The pretty hands clasped her knees, tightened the fabric of her gown against her body's gracious curves.

"Ira," she asked in a voice she could not raise above a half whisper. "Do you want poor Marshall's money more than anything else in the world?"

In the stillness she heard him draw a long breath. His steady regard wavered a trifle. He said:

"I don't understand you, Betty."

"You do," she retorted. "You must know why I came here tonight. Ira, do you want to marry me?"

"You mentioned blackmail a little while ago," he returned carefully. "Unfortunately, my dear, I have a wife."

"You want me, though," she pursued in a tight voice. "You do, don't you, Ira?"

Again she felt his deliberate regard travel from her little high arched feet to her flaming face.

"Yes," he admitted. She thrilled to the drama of her sacrifice.

"Then take me," she offered in a half whisper, and watched, breathless, for the flame to quicken in his eyes. He shook his head slowly.

"I'd rather have one hundred and twenty-seven thousand dollars, my dear," he replied. His deliberate voice broke her pose, sent her into incredulous confusion.

"Why?—What——" she faltered.

"You compel me," Draw returned, "to be most unchivalrous, Betty. I'm sorry to say you aren't worth that amount to me."

"Oh!" she cried. "Oh!"

"I appreciate," he continued, with a smile, "the offer. Only, your estimate of your market value is exorbitant. I'd rather have your father meet his notes."

She stared at him until he added:

"Thank you, just as much."

Humiliation blazed in her face. She rose, pressing her palms against scarlet cheeks.

"Let me get you your cloak," Draw offered smoothly.

Neither spoke again until he had opened the door and had stepped back for her to pass.

"You might tell Marshall," he remarked, "that I think he still has one asset he has overlooked. Ask him to come at one-thirty tomorrow. Good-night, my dear, and thank you again."

CHAPTER XI

NOON sun gilded the mangy lawns of Central Park, spread a pool of blue shadow about the roots of each anemic tree, and warmed the bridle path where Patricia Arnold's mare and Tarleton's big hired sorrel paced side by side.

In the lull of midday the Park's neglected reaches were half deserted. A fat policeman on duty at a sidewalk crossing, a loafer sunning himself on a bench, apathetically envied the lean, dark young man his grace in the saddle and his companion. Beyond the wire fence enclosing the reservoir, a gull that had circled, glittering, slanted over toward the East River, mewing dolefully.

Girl and man rode soberly side by side. Tarleton, talking steadily, marveled in a remote corner of his brain at the ease of their companionship; the smoothness in which their moods joined as though they had known each other for years instead of hours.

His horse stumbled and sidled. He spoke sharply, and with pressure of knee and rein drew him alongside her mount again, to conclude the story of Morelli's unfulfilled tryst.

"He lay in the vestibule, and he was dead when Gannon reached him. They took his body away at last. Carrigan's paper gave it a half column in combination with two other shootings. The others, less. And that's all."

Patricia Arnold looked up at him quickly, and Tarleton once more revised his estimate. Her full face, he decided now, was lovelier than her profile.

"Human beings," she said with vicarious suffering darkening her eyes, "are the most horrible of all animals, aren't they?"

"I don't think so," Tarleton answered, watching her.

Bolivar's statue looked down on them, a dark cameo upon the blue. The bridle path curved. Trees fell away, and beyond rose the glory of towers, the man-made mountain range of mid-Manhattan, incredibly august and stirring. The girl caught her breath.

"They kill each other from behind in dirty streets," she said softly. "They pollute and destroy, and then they build things like those, and God withholds His thunderbolt. Isn't that what you mean?"

“No,” Tarleton answered. His face felt stiff beneath her rapt gaze. “That wasn’t what I meant.”

She looked away, and her hand played in her mare’s mane.

“My uncle,” she said at last, “will be home this afternoon at five. Will you come to see him?”

“You haven’t,” Tarleton blundered, “told him——”

“I promised I wouldn’t,” she replied, as though he must have forgotten. “Only you said you wanted to see him.”

“Yes,” he admitted, and looked stonily at his horse’s ears. She considered the sudden darkness of his lean face and said, a trifle stiffly:

“You needn’t, if you think best.”

He turned quickly in his saddle, checked himself, and began carefully:

“Thank you for telling me. It isn’t that. It’s just that—you make me forget the city, and then I remember, and it hits me on the jaw. I don’t belong here. It isn’t my game.”

“Homesick,” she said, with a little whimsical smile, “I know. Din in your ears, stones underfoot, stones before your eyes, while in the country maples are on fire, and there is steel in the air, and the smell of burning leaves in all the little towns.”

“How did you know?” he muttered. She quenched the reckless blaze in his eyes by a gay, sweet burst of laughter.

“I read you,” she cried. “Cross my palm with silver, kind sir. It’s the Romany strain.”

She frowned as she stripped forward her soft glove cuff and looked at her wrist watch and then gathered up her rein.

“I’m late,” she called, as her mare sprang forward. “Let’s gallop in.”

Side by side they rushed forward to the dull thunder of hoofs on soft earth, and the whistle of wind in their ears, until the unwinding pathway revealed the white-walled Plaza at its far end. They pulled in eager horses under the disapproving eyes of a mounted policeman and the more eager scrutiny of a hard-bitten little man who was passing in a taxicab. He turned his head at length and squalled to his driver.

As they dismounted, the little man disembarked. As Tarleton, having closed the door of Patricia’s car, squared his shoulders to tramp down the avenue, Ignatius Loyola Tucket approached from behind with quick, wary strides.

Tucket had risen early for one whose profession was largely nocturnal. In the other bed his nephew still slumbered, Endymion in violet silk pajamas. His uncle considered the darkly beautiful face with more of prideful exasperation than anger and, as the first step toward his own toilet, lit a cigarette. Thereafter, he drew the morning papers from the compartment in the outer door and bent over these, turning from page to page of each with eagerness akin to dread.

He dwelt for a minute on a statement from the governor outlining the scope of the proposed investigation, and longer on a far briefer mention of Morelli's slaying.

"Police," read the final trite phrase of the stenciled account, "believe it to have been a gang slaying."

Tucket surveyed his nephew again and permitted himself a grin. This faded as he turned to the telephone, a private wire, and called Wain's home.

"Out," said the ungracious voice again, in response to his query.

"Wait a minute," Tucket snarled. "I'm sick of that. You tell Maxie Dip wants to talk to him."

"Oh, yeah?" the voice returned more cordially. "This is Dominick, Dip. He's out."

"Look," the other said earnestly, "I wanta see him. 'S important. Tell him, like a good guy."

"Count on me, kid," Dominick promised, and Tucket restored the receiver with a bleak grin.

" 'Count on me,' " he quoted aloud, and met the dark-lashed eyes of his nephew, who sat up in bed and thrust sleek hair back by running clasped hands along his skull.

"Still after Little Maxie?" Frankie asked in soft mockery. "I'll get him."

"Now, listen—" his elder's sharp lips clipped the words—"and get this right: I'm not just your uncle, now. I'm the boss. One more break, you crazy hyena, and I'll spot you myself."

"One more break," Frankie jeered. "What do you mean 'one more'? Morelli? How many cops been around for me?"

"Frankie," Dip warned gravely, "I mean it."

"Sure," the other acknowledged, smoothing the sleeves of his pajama jacket. "I ain't deef. What's the idea of comin' to life this early?"

"Guy I got to see," Tucket returned. "And you're coming too. Step on it."

Five minutes thereafter he emerged, dripping, from the bathroom at the shrill of the telephone.

"Him?" he asked Frankie, who shook his head scornfully and surrendered the receiver.

"Whataya doin' with a private dick, for Gawd's sake?" he inquired as Tucket hung up, but his uncle ignored him.

An hour later, wearing a freshly pressed checked suit with a sparrow-like perkiness, Ignatius Loyola Tucket with his bodyguard set out for the Harlem marches of his new kingdom. He acknowledged his increased importance by leaving his hotel via the employees' entrance and followed an alley leading to another street, where he and his nephew boarded a taxicab and were driven north.

Dip reviewed the most immediate problem of his régime as he rode. Harlem had been Horvak territory, undisputed and serene, until recently. For almost a year the "milk route" through that district had operated with the efficiency Tucket admired. Liquor trucks had delivered cut whiskies and fabricated gin to a growing string of speakeasies and night clubs in peace only faintly marred by occasional quasi-amateur hijackings and shootings. Rackets had been carried on with a minimum of protest from their victims. Profit had flowed in smoothly, and the police cut had been large enough to keep even the most avaricious cop contented.

Then, gradually, trouble had developed. Someone had begun to muscle in. The invader's identity had been obscure, but from the first Tucket had suspected Wain. Horvak had grown fat and mentally slack with easy living. He had had no desire that cash could not assuage. He had not possessed the fire of the genuine Big Shot to whom money was only a means to the higher, sterner goal of power. Cash, among the true aristocracy of gangdom, is only incidental. Cash always is plentiful. In the last analysis it is power, absolutism, they desire. Little Maxie, supreme on Long Island by the terms of the year-old peace, had felt the hunger for new conquests and, ignoring the treaties of the half-world that are worth no more than the agreements of diplomacy, was planning invasion.

This was Tucket's conviction. Absolute proof was lacking, but minor defects, jarrings, and knockings had developed in the heretofore smoothly running machine. Despite the tribute they paid the Horvak mob, merchants had had show windows smashed; delivery boys beaten up, produce surreptitiously drenched with kerosene. The chorus of their complaints was growing. These, and the increase of speakeasy hold-ups, of hijackings,

mayhems, and murders, were symptoms a veteran mobsman could diagnose. Horvak's organization was being pushed around.

The cab crossed 125th Street, ran north a few blocks, and swung into a dingy thoroughfare to halt before an outwardly desolate dwelling.

"This right?" the driver asked, dubiously surveying the litter on the neglected steps, the boarded windows.

"Absolutely," Tucket affirmed, paying him. "Stick, if you want to. We won't be long."

He rang the tarnished bell beside the area door and grinned at the mulatto who peered at him and Frankie through the grille.

"Hi!" he exclaimed, but the other only scowled hesitantly and vanished for an interval, during which Tucket muttered to his nephew and caressed his sharp jaw.

"Listen," Frankie demanded with truculence when the mulatto's face again popped into view. "What's all this, Claude? A lodge or something?"

"Henry says fo' you to come on up," Claude replied sulkily.

"He damn well better," Frankie announced, and followed his uncle upstairs to the office of Congo Henry Lagrange, by the grace of the Horvak mob proprietor of a half-dozen black and white night clubs, who rose from behind his roll-top desk as his visitors entered. Lagrange's fat copper-hued face was nervous. His sly bloodshot eyes flickered from Tucket and Frankie to the room's other occupant.

"Polly," Dip spoke at last in a level voice to the dapper, pigeon-breasted figure who sat defiantly beside Lagrange. "You ain't lost, are you?"

Polly Berko, henchman to Little Maxie Wain, squinted with yellow eyes set close to the bridge of his parrot-like nose and glanced at Frankie's dreamy face.

"I hadn't heard about it," he smirked. "Congo and me, we're visitin'."

"Oh," Tucket said bleakly. Before he could speak further Lagrange slapped down the desk top with a diamond-ringed paw and spoke in a resentful, bull-like roar:

"Visitin' nawthin'. Tappin' me plenty. Can't stand up under it, no, sir."

Under Tucket's careful scrutiny Berko's nose twitched. His eyes slid away to stare dreamily at the wall.

"No, sir," Lagrange reiterated, and slapped the desk again. "There's gotta be a showdown."

"Yeah," Tucket conceded after a pause. "What's he tappin' you for, Congo? Little idea of his own?"

“Don’t make me laugh,” Congo rumbled bitterly.

Berko said mildly, regarding the ceiling: “Congo’s takin’ from Maxie from now on, Dip.”

“Yeah?” Tucket responded. “Says you.”

“Says Little Maxie,” the other lisped.

Lagrange’s heavy voice lunged:

“Now, listen, I’m telling you both. Before I’ll be reamed coming and going I’ll quit.”

He blinked reddened lids and muttered huskily. Berko fidgeted under Frankie’s steady regard, and finding it unendurable, rose.

“I’ll be goin’,” he announced, and tried to thrust himself past Dip toward the door. “Think it over, Congo.”

Frankie, at a nod from his uncle, clutched Berko’s coat lapels and released one momentarily to strike down the hand that moved uncertainly upward.

“Just a minute,” Tucket bade. “Maxie’s givin’ us the run-around? Talk fast, Polly.”

Frankie shook his captive to dislodge speech. Berko babbled:

“I got my orders. Ask Maxie.”

“I will,” Tucket responded with a barren smile. “And listen. Tell him to measure you for a box before he sends you into Harlem again. Now, blow, and head south.”

He gripped the pudgy racketeer with startling dexterity, rushed him to the head of the stairs, and kicked him soundly. Berko avalanched down and fled. The color ebbed from Tucket’s face, leaving it warily thoughtful as he went back to the night-club proprietor’s office.

“What,” Lagrange lowed sullenly, “is the low-down on all this, Dip? Goddlemighty, I can’t buy from two mobs. I’ll close.”

Tucket ran fingers along his jaw line. Inner calculation whetted nose and chin to sharper points.

“Yeh,” he conceded at length. “You better close, Congo.”

Lagrange snorted furiously.

“What,” he bawled, “do I pay you mugs protection for?”

“For protection,” Tucket responded. “Sit tight and keep shut.”

“Thanks,” Lagrange rasped. “That’s swell, after I cough up a grand to Polly to stay open.”

“Yeah?” the other asked. Congo jerked his pomade-plastered head wrathfully.

“You heard him,” he retorted. “Wain’s the Big Shot from now on, he says. And I come through with a grand.”

“Wain ain’t takin’ over,” Tucket returned, and stripping a yellow bill from a roll, tossed it on the desk. “I’m tellin’ you to close till we straighten this out.”

Congo’s sanguine eyes moved slowly from the money to his visitor.

“You,” he rumbled incredulously, “ain’t payin’ back what Maxie gets?”

The dry little man permitted himself a brief grin.

“What Maxie don’t get,” he corrected. “I rolled Polly plenty just now. Close down for a couple days, anyway, Congo.”

CHAPTER XII

TARLETON, tramping down Fifth Avenue, was dimly aware of a dapper figure that marched at his elbow. Only when the sliding door of crosstown traffic barred their way did Tucket speak.

"Mister," he offered, "you walk fast."

The other's stare broke into a grin of recognition.

"Hello," Tarleton exclaimed. "They haven't got you yet, eh? Or are you looking for a place to spot me."

"Not yet," Tucket replied. "Listen. I got somep'n to show you."

"You certainly have," Tarleton agreed. "Every time I see you."

"Look," his companion urged as the lights changed and cars roared along the avenue again. "There's a dump down the street where the food's better than the liquor, even. Let's eat."

"Mr. Tucket," the other said gravely, "the last party I went to, a couple of big-hearted boys named John Smith and Joe Armado tried to take me for a ride in Abie Salt's car."

"Yeah?" Tucket asked, his face a grotesquely carved mask of wood in which only his eyes stirred.

"Yeah," Tarleton mimicked. "Your friend Maxie Wain was there, too. And last night some other kind gentleman cluttered up Jimmy Carrigan's vestibule with the corpse of Hop Morelli."

"The hell!" exclaimed the little man.

"Quite," the other agreed. "You'll understand, then, that there's nothing particularly personal intended when I say I'm not hungry. I just happen to feel pretty important to myself."

Tucket, lingering at the curb, stolid as a fire hydrant, said at last:

"What's your racket, mister?"

"Staying alive," Tarleton retorted, his spirits still tingling from his ride. "And one or two other things."

The paw that gripped his forearm was hard and urgent. There was unwonted candor in the little man's foxy eyes.

"Mister," Tucket said slowly, "pick your own place. You and me gotta talk."

Tarleton hesitated. The grip on his sleeve relaxed. A folded yellow slip was thrust into his hand. He opened it, and the blue-inked words blotted out the tumult about him.

"Avoid possible unpleasantness . . ." the message began. He stared stupidly at the composed dapper figure beside him.

"Where——" he began. Tucket tilted his derby and completed with a shameless grin: "—did I get it? It ain't so easy to talk here on the street corner, mister."

Tarleton took his elbow.

"Show me the speakeasy," he ordered.

At a table in a far corner of a beautifully appointed room, remote from the men and women who lunched decorously and well, Tucket gave his order to a smirking head waiter and grinned at Tarleton's choked exclamation.

"Lost something?" he asked. The other rummaged frantically through his jacket pockets while a tragically sick expression came into his face.

"My God," he moaned, "I put——"

Tucket tossed a folded yellow slip across the table to him.

"You don't hang onto things very good, mister," he reproached. "That's the way you lost it the first time."

Under Tarleton's stupefied stare he considered his own long-fingered hands with complacence. A waiter set cocktails before them. Tarleton drank as though he needed it. His companion leered across the brim of his.

"Mr. Tucket," he toasted himself, "who's a very good man."

Tarleton asked with difficulty, for his confused thoughts evaded words:

"You stole that telegram?"

"In the quick wagon, on the way to the station," his companion confirmed with a shameless grin.

"What for?"

"I hadda know where it was sent from," Tucket replied, calmly impudent.

"Well?" Tarleton prodded.

"It wasn't," the other reported out of a corner of his tight mouth, as the waiter bore their order to a serving table, "sent from nowheres at all. It's a phony."

While the waiter hovered over them, Tucket watched his companion's astounded face. When they were alone again, he forestalled Tarleton's

stumbling questions with a sharp query:

"Mister, what's your racket? On the up and up now? Cops that's been canned don't go gallopin' around the Park with a smooth-lookin' frail. What are you, anyways?"

"A canned cop," Tarleton returned with a crooked smile. "I want to find who killed Steve Horowitz."

Tucket appeared to chew this statement with his food, and at length to swallow both. He leaned over the table, and again the other marked the discrepancy between stiff, dead face and alert eyes. His words slipped cautiously out of a mouth corner.

"I know what the guy looked like who spotted Steve."

He shook his head impatiently as Tarleton started to speak, and pursued in short, sharp bursts:

"I lift that telegram. I need it worse than you. It's a phony. I find that out. I give it to an agency man. He checks up. You get the phony at Hudson. A guy hands it to the porter. What's he look like? Short, fat, pink. That's all the porter remembers. Bald, Harmon station agent says. That's all I got. Check up if you wanta."

He tossed the message over to Tarleton, who stowed it in an inside vest pocket with a rueful smile.

"Better pin it fast," Tucket counseled dryly. "Whoever wanted Steve was plenty careful. How come Maxie wanted to take you for a ride, mister?"

"Maxie?" Tarleton retorted suspiciously. The other's voice was impatient.

"Who else? Smith I don't know. Armado an' Salt are Maxie men. How come?"

Tarleton told him briefly. Gradually, as he listened, all expression ebbed from the little man's lignum-vitæ face.

"Gannon," he commented briefly, when the other had ended, "is a pest. Then you didn't see Maxie?"

"I heard him," Tarleton returned. "No one else laughs like that."

"Nope," Tucket agreed, wincing slightly. "This egg Draw, what's he like?"

"Santa Claus with a shave," said the other. "Pudgy and high colored and pretty nearly hairless."

His companion's suddenly abstracted eyes appeared to look through Tarleton and beyond him. Tucket's delicate fingers beat a silent tattoo on the tablecloth. Tarleton's chair scraped with the violence of his movement.

"Hey," his companion inquired. "Something?"

The other said in an awed voice: "Short, fat, pink, bald. Draw!"

"You think of everything, don't you?" Tucket marveled. "About five minutes after I do."

"Draw," Tarleton asked bluntly, "is in with Wain?"

"Never heard of him," the little man replied. He searched his companion's dark, brooding face and offered at length:

"You might check, mister."

Tarleton did not seem to hear. His black brows were joined by a scowl over puckered eyes.

"Why," he muttered at length to himself, "should Draw kill Steve Horowitz?"

"Hell," Tucket scoffed. "Little Maxie Wain bumped Steve."

"Can you prove that?" Tarleton asked quickly. The little man's grin was mocking.

"No," he jeered softly, "I can't."

Tarleton searched the other's face.

"Just what," he asked at length, "is your rake-off, Mr. Tucket? Where do you fit in?"

His companion looked innocently pained.

"Mister," he complained, "I'd know you were a cop, anywheres. You got that sort of a mean mind."

He extracted from a little memorandum book a slip of paper which he handed to Tarleton.

"Listen," he bade, "I don't come into this at all. We never even seen each other. It was a couple other fellas. Only, I told you I owed you somep'n. Here's the last installment on it."

"That," he added, as Tarleton scowled, "is this smoke porter's name and address. Maybe you can use him. Now what, mister?"

Tarleton had risen abruptly.

"I want a telephone," he snapped.

"Yeh," Tucket conceded. "I kinda thought you would. It's yonder in the corner."

His secretly amused eyes followed Tarleton's tall form into the booth. Then, rising, he nodded briskly to the eagerly hovering head waiter and departed. In the taxi that bore him toward his hotel, Ignatius Loyola Tucket permitted his sternly disciplined face to crease into a satisfied grin.

Ira Draw thrust a chair toward Spillane, sat down composedly before him, and frowned at the shrill of the telephone. He made no motion toward the instrument, but waited until his valet thrust a sleek, swarthy head into the chamber.

"Answer it," Draw bade. "I'm out."

With palm pressed down upon the transmitter the servant said at last:

"Mr. Tarleton wants to know when you'll be back."

Draw's genial face showed faint irritation.

"Tell him you don't——" he began, and checked himself. "Tell him," he revised slowly, "at five."

He waited with covert interest until the valet relinquished the instrument.

"What did he want?" he queried abruptly. The other shrugged and spread his hands. There was a moment's silence.

"All right," Draw said. "If it rings again, let it."

He settled himself, folded chubby hands upon his plump middle, and mildly considered his visitor. Spillane's face was drawn. Beneath the confidence he affected, his body stirred in suppressed revolt. His hands clutched each other, relaxed and clutched again. His lips, when he released their pressure, twitched and jerked. Draw said genially:

"Well, Marshall?"

"Well?" Spillane retorted with fraudulent composure. Draw waited until his steady regard had beaten down the lawyer's stare.

"I hope I was right," he said at last, and elaborated politely in response to Spillane's inarticulate sound of inquiry. "I mean, I hope you can meet those notes, Marshall."

"No." The other looked about the room with hunted eyes.

"That," Draw responded without stirring, "is too bad."

"You know," the lawyer retorted with a spurt of animus, "I can't raise that money. Drive me into bankruptcy and see how much you get."

"I told you last night," Draw reminded him, "that there is more than money involved. You're forgetful, Marshall."

The patronizingly reproachful air broke Spillane's self-control. His hands wrenched at each other. His voice was unsteady.

"Ira," he faltered, "what do you want? You've got me. I've tried every possible way to raise cash. Drop the superior air and talk."

Draw unlocked his fingers and softly rubbed their tips together in a devotional gesture.

"There's one piece of paper," he offered slowly, "on which a friend—a business acquaintance of mine—might be willing to advance you one hundred and twenty-seven thousand dollars."

There was fright in Spillane's eyes. "What?" he asked hoarsely.

"Where," the other drawled, "is the Horowitz statement?"

Spillane sprang up in the haste of terror.

"Sit down," Draw snapped. "No one's going to hurt you, Marshall. Sit down, I say."

Spillane obeyed. There was eagerness in the other's eyes, and a businesslike dryness in his voice.

"Bootlegging," he said deliberately, "makes as many strange bedfellows as politics. I'm offering you a proposition. If you want to turn it down without hearing it, that's your business, Marshall."

Spillane swallowed loudly, pulled body and spirit into a pretense at indifference, and croaked:

"You're a crook, Ira."

"So are you," his host replied blandly, "and I can prove it. Now, listen, and stop exhibiting moral outrage. Have photostats been made of that statement? No? Where is it?"

"Go to hell," Spillane retorted, with a defiance so feeble that Draw smiled.

"I'm not," he said patiently, "going to ask you to steal it, Marshall. I'm not going to ask you to do anything that can implicate you with anyone."

He leaned forward in his chair and, for the first time, spoke candidly.

"Horowitz squealed, not on the mob he belonged to, but on another he had been allied with until recently. It all was framed up by a gang leader in this town. If you hadn't been smart enough to have him make an affidavit, you wouldn't have a Chinaman's chance now. Little Maxie Wain wants that statement. He'd rather not have it in circulation."

Spillane jerked as though the name had stung him. Draw seemed to discern obscure endorsement in the movement, nodded and pursued:

"Wain bumped that rat and the man behind him, but the evil men do lives after them, Marshall. Here's the proposition: I wish you'd pay attention."

He paused until the other's twitching face grew still.

“Wain wants that paper. If it’s where he can reach it, he’ll pay me the face value of your notes. If it isn’t, we might as well stop annoying each other now. You don’t have to enter the thing at all. You may save your reputation and cash merely by telling where that affidavit is. It’s worth little enough to anyone but Wain, anyhow.”

He considered Spillane’s suddenly attentive figure an instant and smiled in a friendly fashion.

“You’re too good a lawyer,” he wheedled, “to think you can trouble anyone much with the unsupported affidavit of a dead man. It’s important to Wain because he has a battle ahead of him. There’s another mob blow-up coming, and I’m going to get out of town before it happens. Wain wants that statement of Horowitz’s out of the way before he goes into action. That’s all. Where is it?”

Spillane answered with a shrug:

“You can’t get it. It’s in Arnold’s safe.”

“I don’t want it,” Draw disclaimed smoothly. “In Arnold’s house? A wall safe?”

The lawyer nodded mutely.

“Now,” his host acclaimed, “you’re being more sensible. Suppose someone opens that safe——”

“No,” Spillane exclaimed in anguish. “My God, I can’t——”

“Ass,” Draw said impatiently. “Of course you can’t. Here’s all you have to do: Where’s Arnold now?”

“On his way back from Albany,” Spillane replied.

“Draw a diagram of the floor that safe is on,” Draw proposed, “and keep that old man away from his home till six tonight, and you’ll get those notes from me in tomorrow morning’s mail.”

His companion said after a long silence:

“You can’t rob a house that’s filled with servants, by daylight.”

“Maxie’s expert can,” Draw assured him. “And today happens to be most of the servants’ afternoon off.”

CHAPTER XIII

THE chambermaid who answered Tarleton's ring that afternoon reported that neither Mr. Arnold nor his niece was at home, but when, downcast and baffled, he mentioned his name, she dimpled and admitted him.

"Miss Arnold left you a note," she said, producing it. "Will you wait upstairs, sir?"

She led him into the somberly mellow library. Patricia's message was brief.

> "*If I'm not back before my uncle comes, talk to him the way you ride.* PATRICIA ARNOLD."

The telegram he had received from Tucket crackled as he thrust the folded paper in beside it. He stared absently out at the street. Already shadows were gathering there, but the spires of distant buildings still were glamorous with late sunlight.

He considered them with a sudden flagging of spirits. Once again, at sight of this small segment of the city, the abject sense of personal insignificance that clutches the star gazer oppressed him. He turned away, and the austere dignity of the room itself troubled him further.

Face to face with her, he had ignored many things to which the old carved marble mantel, the great refectory table, the sober richness of hangings and rug, bore testimony. Her ancestors peered down with calm superciliousness from a half-dozen frames. The Arnold who had been governor looked at him scornfully over his high stock. His grandfather in buff and blue ignored a lively battle in the background to glare at the intruder. A thin-faced, high-busted woman with a spaniel on her lap considered him in patrician disdain. No softer were the keen old eyes of Follansbee Arnold himself, glaring from a Chase canvas.

He felt the bitter consciousness of his own inconsequence immerse him once more. Outside was the enormous city that, an hour ago, following a brief talk with Gannon, he had been inclined to despise. Here, her forebears and the furnishings of the silent, suddenly gloomy room reminded him of the lineage and luxury that were hers. And he—the thought brought a dull impulse to surrender—was a former policeman, discharged, discredited.

Ambition that had seemed plausible an hour ago became inane, vain. Hope that had appeared not entirely impossible as they had galloped together mocked him now. He turned away with a qualm of self-disgust and saw the painting of Patricia Arnold on the far wall.

It seemed, as he approached it slowly, that the firm, slender figure stirred. She had posed in a dark riding habit. One hand held gloves and crop. His memory following beyond the frame of the three-quarter-length portrait supplied little booted feet that had tiny silver spurs at their heels. Her face smiled at him, and her wide gray eyes were friendly. He stood in the gathering dusk before the portrait and, marking that it hung slightly askew, straightened it reverently.

When, obscurely fortified, he turned away, he confronted the painting's original, standing in the doorway.

"Oh, I am so sorry," she exclaimed, advancing. "Jane should have turned on the lights." She pressed a switch, and in the responsive glow held out her hand with a frank smile. He released it mutely, for the portrait's materialization had robbed him of speech. Her face was flushed; her voice slightly breathless.

"I'm so sorry," she repeated, "but Betty Spillane wanted to see me. I came back as fast as I could. And I've bad news for you. My uncle has telephoned that he won't be back until six-thirty at the earliest. Can you wait, or would you rather try again tomorrow?"

"I'd rather wait," he blundered. "But I'll have to go, I'm afraid. You see, I've had a bit of luck."

Because her eyes were kind and her face so responsive and eager, he outlined his interview with Tucket. She listened with kindling excitement.

"So," he ended, "Gannon is rounding up the darkey. We're taking him to Draw's apartment. It's probably," he added carefully, "just another goose chase. Yet Carrigan is sure Betty knew about Steve Horowitz's confession. And she may have told Draw."

"I wonder," she replied, suddenly thoughtful, "if she did? I never liked Ira Draw. The Spillanes——" She checked herself, thrusting away some unuttered surmise.

"You still," she hesitated, "don't want me to say anything to Uncle?"

He shook his head decidedly.

"You do enough," he told her, "by letting me see you and talk to you. It isn't your mess, you know."

"You'll see him tomorrow?"

"May I see you first?" he asked. "Do we ride?"

"We do," she said, after a second's hesitation. "If we can go early. Couldn't you telephone me if anything happens at Ira Draw's?"

"If anything does," Tarleton replied, "I'll be calling on your uncle with a delegation, anyway."

They stood an instant beside the library doorway, in dangerous silence. He could see her breathing quicken and expectancy replace calm inquiry in her eyes. He said, rather hoarsely at length:

"I better—go," and thrilled at the faint disappointment that clouded her face. Her smile drove it away. She held out her hand.

"Good luck—Don Quixote," she said slowly.

Tarleton, accompanying Gannon and a doleful Negro through the lobby of Draw's apartment house, a half hour later, saw the policeman stop and peer over his shoulder at a man who had passed. Not until the squat dark figure had vanished into the street did the policeman move.

"Know that baby?" he growled in his associate's ear.

Tarleton, who had obtained only a brief impression of black hair, swarthy skin and horn-rimmed spectacles, shook his head impatiently.

"Oh, no?" Gannon asked grimly. "Little Maxie Wain. Himself. What's he doin' this far off his beat?"

He left the disconsolate Negro in Tarleton's charge and sought the hallman. After five minutes' conversation, he returned, red-faced and scowling.

"Mr. Draw," he announced, "don't live here no more. Mr. Draw's lease expires November first, and he's pulled out ahead of it."

"Oh," Tarleton said flatly. Gannon regarded him with choleric eyes.

"You," he said bitterly, "have poor powers of expression, son."

The Negro looked mutely from the policeman's scowling face to Tarleton, who asked at length:

"Why was Wain here?"

Gannon shrugged: "Ask me another," he replied in a metallic voice. "Came in and sat down. And walked out again when he saw us. Wait a minute."

He approached the lingering hallman again and plunged at once into low-voiced argument that eventually prevailed. His antagonist gave a gesture of reluctant surrender. Gannon jerked a summoning gesture toward Tarleton and the porter.

“Draw,” he said, when they joined him, “left the keys with this egg. It was a furnished apartment. We’ll go up.”

Over the chamber they entered brooded an air of desertion that carefully ordered furniture emphasized. The drawers of the desk in an alcove off the living room rasped and slammed as Gannon, snarling down the half-hearted protest of the building’s employee, searched it.

“Cleaned out,” the policeman told Tarleton. They straggled after him to the bedroom. Gannon glanced in, turned on his heel, and tramped toward the kitchen. The others stared at walls stamped with dusty oblongs where pictures had hung.

“Mr. Draw,” the hallman mumbled, “took all his luggage with him.”

Curiosity overcame his air of offended dignity.

“What,” he muttered, “are you after him for, anyway?”

Gannon, storming back from the kitchen, saved Tarleton response.

“Let’s go,” he growled. While they waited for the elevator he fixed their guide with coldly menacing eyes.

“Listen,” he ordered. “You moaned about this costin’ you your job. You peep about it to anyone and it damn well will.”

The man gulped and nodded. When they had reached the street Gannon thrust a bill at the Negro.

“Wilbert,” he told him, “you blow yourself to a taxi home. Keep your yap closed, and phone me at ten tomorrow morning. If you don’t, I’ll come after you.”

“Yessa, yessa,” the porter gulped, and fled. The lieutenant walked a block beside Tarleton in glowering silence.

“Has Jimmy a photo of this mug?” he queried suddenly.

“Hardly,” the other replied. “They weren’t buddies. Perhaps Betty Spillane has.”

“I’d like real well to know,” Gannon rumbled, signaling a cab, “what tie-up Maxie has with Draw. And why Draw blew so fast.”

“He may have planned to move,” Tarleton demurred. “My phone call couldn’t have scared him that much.”

Gannon answered out of a corner of his mouth as the taxi drew up beside them:

“He blew in a hurry. The icebox was full of food.”

He pushed Tarleton into the cab, barked Carrigan’s address at the driver, and followed.

The big bright car in which Little Maxie rode slid to a reluctant stop before one of the humblest in a block of shabby houses. Dominick, who shared the deep rear seat with Wain, peered out into the gathering dusk through bullet-proof glass. The chauffeur twisted beneath the wheel to stare likewise.

"Oke," the gunman pronounced at last. Little Maxie nodded, and Dominick, disembarking, unlocked the dwelling's door that opened directly off the sidewalk. The chauffeur got out to stand beside the car and scrutinize the buildings on either side of Wain's residence. Dominick watched those across the street. Behind Little Maxie, the portal closed sharply. At its sound his employees relaxed. The chauffeur reëntered the car. Dominick grinned briefly at him and vanished in a narrow alley flanking the house.

In the lower hall of Wain's home, lights snapped on, illuminating creamy walls and the upward sweep of deep carpeted stairs; gleaming on the sleek black hair of the sallow man who hurried forward to relieve his chief of hat and coat.

"Anything?" Little Maxie purred.

"Otto," the other responded, "ees upstairs."

"So?" the swarthy little mob leader asked, pale eyes puckering with faint displeasure behind thick glasses. "Now, listen. Lights out. Everybody out."

"Right," the other acclaimed impassively. Wain went upstairs to his office like a well fed cat.

He entered the glaringly lighted chamber so softly that its occupant, who stowed ledgers away in the maw of an open safe, did not hear him until he spoke.

"Downstairs, Otto," Wain said mildly. The other's breath hissed. He sprang erect, his dry white face with a red bullet scar across one cheek-bone stiffly attentive. His sunken china-blue eyes met his superior's with a parade-ground blankness.

"Anything?" Little Maxie asked. Otto Gerlach, whom the German police sought under several other names, rasped:

"Tucket, he has called five times today?"

"Yes," Wain countered, and seemed mildly amused. His employee, who kept those account books that the mob leader permitted anyone to see, continued with military precision:

"Berko wass here. Tucket chased him out of Harlem dis morning. I sent him away."

“Hmm,” Maxie crooned, caressing the thin black whisker before his left ear. “And you?”

“She will see you dis evening,” Gerlach reported.

“Good,” Wain approved. “Get out.”

He watched the other’s rigid figure go down the stair, and turned toward the room again with a face alive and deadly. He pressed a button. Shadow filled all the room save the space about the desk where a green-shaded lamp burned. Thereafter, Wain moved with the noiseless, spasmodic activity of a spider.

He closed the door, thrust shut the safe and spun its knob, pulled a chair into exact position, moved the lamp a trifle. No sound, when he paused to listen, came from below. He snapped off the desk light. The window he approached was a paler oblong in the gloom, starred sparsely by lights from the rear of the houses on the other street.

The frame slurred as he raised the lower pane, slipped out upon the fire escape, and closed it again. Above the steady humming growl of the city sounded the tinkling discord of breaking glass. Fragments spattered dully upon the carpet. The frame sighed again as he reëntered. He did not close it behind him, but slipped across to his desk chair. The lamp, rekindled, revealed Wain’s round dark visage as he settled himself. It gleamed on his horn-rimmed spectacles and struck dull responsive glintings from the rug beneath the window from which that portion of the upper pane nearest the catch had been broken inward.

Wain picked up his desk telephone and spoke a number. Presently he asked quietly, in response to his lawyer’s voice:

“Enoch, you’ll be there for the next hour? No, I’ll call again. I may need you.”

Thereafter, while minutes dragged slowly through the dim chamber, he waited, a plump, motionlessly expectant figure with glasses fixed on the open window. The slanting rays of the desk lamp cast on his face strange, distorting shadows.

He heard the intermittent purring of cars that went by his home, the occasional throaty roar of the elevated, the nasal whine of a distant radio, the far-borne single whoop of a tug groping its way through the East River, trivial sounds that emphasized the absolute stillness of the house itself.

Once he stirred, looked at his watch, and then resumed his attitude of patient expectance, still face turned toward the open window.

Above the dull sounds of the city he heard at length the soft grating of metal. He did not stir. Again the fire escape creaked. Presently came the

sound of cautiously climbing feet that rubbed against iron. Scrape, pause; scrape, pause. Clothing rasped upon some obstruction, and he heard a stifled sound, half grunt, half sigh. Against the blackness a paler something moved, and developed at last into a face, dimly revealed by the desk lamp's feeble light. Wain said in a gentle voice:

"Pincus?"

There was a brief pause. Then from the fire escape came a sibilant "Yes."

"Come in," Little Maxie directed levelly. "It's all set."

A leg was thrust over the sill. Another followed. Gradually, from the feet up, the figure of Diamond Ike Pincus emerged from the darkness. He trod upon the scattered glass with a brief snapping noise he did not seem to hear. His narrow visage was white, his breath sounded quickly. The mirthless grin he cast upon Wain was akin to a snarl.

"Jeeze," he muttered with the languor of relief. "I need a shot of somep'n."

"Did you get," Maxie asked, not stirring, "what you went after?"

Pincus's lips drew away from uneven teeth. He tapped the breast pocket of his coat, with momentary pride that was immersed almost at once in grievance.

"It was where you said," he whined. "I didn't have no trouble there. But I don't like this up-the-fire-escape stuff, Maxie."

His voice grew firmer at recollection of his recent ordeal.

"Somebody," he grumbled, "mighta burned me plenty."

"If Tucket," Wain returned, "knew you were here, how long would you live? You dumb egg, don't you know he's watching this place? Over the back fence and up that ladder was the only safe way for you."

"Yeh, I know you said so," Pincus granted, and wiped a clammy forehead on his coat sleeve. He smirked apologetically at the squat brooding figure before him and fawned:

"Dip's through, Maxie. You're the comer. That's why I'm givin' him the run-around."

"Yes, I know," Wain replied. "You've told me all that. Let me see that Horowitz belch."

Pincus advanced a step, and then, with sudden resolution, delayed.

"Ain't I proved it?" he demanded, midway between appeal and bluster. "Ain't I showed I was on the up and up by pullin' this job for you? And don't forget I can do more."

“Have you got that statement?” Little Maxie interrupted.

Pincus attempted a weak swagger.

“I’ll say,” he retorted. “Fresh from the can, too. Have you got ten grand, Maxie?”

“Right here in the desk,” Wain assured him, stirring a trifle in his chair. “Let me see it.”

The other leered at him and drew a folded document from his inner pocket.

“It’s genuwine,” he insisted. “Real uncut stuff, hey, Maxie? Listen.”

He turned so that light caught the paper, and read aloud:

> “State of New York; County of Tuscarora; Town of Euclid Center: Stephen Horowitz, being duly sworn, deposes and says: That he has been told by Marshall W. Spillane, the person taking this statement, that he need not make any statement unless he desires to do so; that everything he may say must be of his own free will and that anything he may say can be used against him in a criminal action. He does say as follows:
>
> “That he is twenty-six years of age, single and has at present no permanent address. That he was employed for three years prior to last May as bodyguard by Maximilian Wain——”

Pincus lifted his head and turned toward the attentive Little Maxie a triumphantly complacent face.

“Ain’t that,” he queried with a sly grin, “what you sent me after?”

“Yes,” Wain replied, and shot him through the body.

Over the edge of his desk, Little Maxie peered down attentively at a fist that tightened, stirred, and then relaxed from a crumpled paper. Presently, he stepped delicately around the desk corner and drew the document from the limp palm. For an instant more he waited, looking down, and then returned to his desk and picked up the telephone.

“I want a policeman,” he said distinctly. “I have just shot a burglar.”

CHAPTER XIV

In Carrigan's flat, Gannon, his bulk crammed into an armchair, the thumbnails of his big clasped hands clicking on each other, watched Tarleton pace the floor. Their host held low-voiced conversation over the telephone. As he slowly restored the receiver to the hook the policeman snapped:

"Well, what's the matter? Hasn't she got a picture of him?"

Carrigan spread his hands in a gesture of bewilderment.

"I don't know," he reported slowly. "When I asked her she made hysterical noises and then hung up on me."

"What for?" Gannon lunged. "Because you wanted Draw's mug?"

"Jerry," the reporter said with solemnity, " 'What for?' is something I've never been able to answer as far as that trick is concerned. I think I crowded her too hard with questions last night."

He looked from Gannon's angry visage to Tarleton, still nervously pacing, and his near-sighted eyes narrowed.

"I'll go and see her," Carrigan decided aloud. "And if there's a picture of the Hon. Ira Draw in that household, I'll get it. I'm as good a photo thief as any tabloid man in town."

"Hey," Gannon fired at Tarleton. "You I mean. You're not training for a bunion derby. Sit down. You told me there was only three knew about this Horowitz squeal, didn't you?"

The other returned with the brevity of strained nerves:

"I've told you all that before. Horowitz was pinched by one of my patrols for running an alcohol cookery. He squealed to Martin. Martin sent for Arnold and Spillane."

"Yeh-yeh. I know all that," Gannon interposed impatiently. "And they were all that knew what Horowitz spilled?"

"Nope," Tarleton returned with a sickly grin. "All the mugs in New York knew about it, too."

Gannon shifted his attention to Carrigan, who was blowing smoke rings toward the ceiling and scowling at them.

"Spillane and Draw?" he asked. "Good friends, eh?"

The reporter considered him with professorial earnestness and shook his head.

"I see what you're shooting at," he announced, "but you're off the target, Jerry. You know Spillane. He's been looking for a chance to edge into the limelight again, and the Arnold Committee is his best bet. He wouldn't be tipping his hand to outsiders."

"His daughter," Gannon pressed stubbornly on. "How does Draw stand with her?"

Carrigan pulled a wry face and said with lightness that could not quite conceal resentment:

"After the act she just put on when I asked her about his picture, I can't answer that."

"Is she likely to tell what she knows?" Gannon persisted. The reporter made a gesture of relinquishment.

"She's a sieve," he admitted. "Sieve? She's a spray. If Spillane told her, she'd probably babble to the first guy who asked her."

"Then he wouldn't," Tarleton commented, but Carrigan shook his head.

"All women and most men are alike," he told his friend, "and they will talk to each other when they shouldn't."

"Well," the other retorted in scornful surrender. "Of course Spillane is as loose mouthed as that——"

"Have you," Carrigan interrupted suddenly with a fiendish insight, "told your troubles to any woman?"

Color darkened Tarleton's face.

"That's not the point," he retorted. "She's different."

His friend surveyed him with a wide, derisive grin.

"Every man," he pronounced, "says that about some woman. That's what makes them all alike."

Gannon grunted scornfully. "I'd like to get hold of this Draw egg."

Tarleton sought to cover confusion with speech.

"Your boy friend, Little Maxie, can give you his address," he ventured, and challenged by Gannon's stare, pursued:

"There's a tie-up. There must be. Look at it. Spillane talked to Betty about Horowitz's squeal, and Betty let Draw pump her. Draw gives the porter that fake telegram for me. Out goes Horowitz. Maxie may have seen me in the lobby of the Assyrian with that little weasel, Tucket. Maxie was at Draw's cocktail upheaval. I'll bet my right leg on it. Draw knows I'm looking for the owner of that ghastly laugh. I'm taken for a ride that doesn't quite come off. I call up Draw this noon. I don't see what makes him blow, but you can't go back of the record. He does, and who's waiting downstairs

to see whom I bring with me at the time Draw's man set? The Hon. Wain. Explain that away if you can."

The policeman nodded. Carrigan studiously observed his friend and said to no one in particular:

"The boy has a head, if he can keep it."

"Something," Tarleton retorted, "is happening that we don't know anything about."

The reporter nodded solemnly.

"We never do," he replied. "The gunmen drop 'em, and the cops pick 'em up. The police in this town, Buck, are just the undertaker's first assistants. Don't go away, Jerry."

Gannon had risen abruptly. The creases that reined in his red, chronically wrathful face were deeper; his voice a trifle unsteady.

"Do you not suppose," he asked in a quietude more impressive than a roar, "that I know what should be done? There should be men combin' this town for Draw right now. That smoke porter ought to be in the can as a material witness. We should be wirin' for the dirt on Draw from whatever town in the West he came from. Hah."

His exclamation and the helpless gesture that accompanied it were blighting. His face struggled against its curbing wrinkles and was subdued.

"That telegram," he told Tarleton, "is a tip-off. Sure it is. Let me try to follow it officially, and they'll build another station house, further out than any of 'em, just so they can send me to it."

His hard breathing filled the momentary silence. Carrigan offered at length:

"Always supposing Draw shoved that phony wire across. We don't know that yet."

"Can you get his picture?" Gannon demanded abruptly. Carrigan consulted his watch and stood up.

"Technically," he remarked, "I've been uptown seeking out news for my paper for the last hour. I'll spend another calling on Betty. The greatest good for the smallest number is my motto."

"I'll give you the coon's address," Gannon offered. "If you get Draw's photo, take it around there. If he identifies it, drop in at the station and tip me off."

"And then?" Carrigan asked cynically. Gannon's big fists clenched.

"If he says Draw's the guy," the policeman replied, "Tarleton and I'll call on Arnold together in the morning. If he doesn't want my help, I'll send

myself further away than the New York Police Department can send me. I mean it," he glared. "If the mobs are bossin' Arnold too, I've a brother in Iowa that raises pigs. It'll be a pleasant change."

"Sure," the reporter commented, arming himself with hat and stick. "I've heard that more times, man and boy, than I can count, Jerry. Buck, you stay here. And that means: Stay here."

"I was thinking," Tarleton demurred, "that I might——"

"Forget it," Carrigan interrupted. "In the couple days you've been here you've managed to meet all the worst people. Keep the door locked and the shades down. That door is a mean place to carry a coffin through, and Little Maxie probably is designing a brand-new decoration for the guy who gets you, right now."

At this particular moment, however, Wain was occupied with more immediate matters. He was sitting, composed and inscrutable, at the head of the table in his baroque dining room. On one hand lounged the precinct captain, fat and reticent, in civilian clothes. On the other a raw, youthfully nervous assistant district attorney perched on his chair edge. Opposite his host sat one whose raw-boned frame was faintly cushioned with the flesh of good living, whose presence obviously awed the prosecutor's aid and stirred the policeman to eager reverence. His name was found on no roster of city officials, yet he had created many and broken more. Even the plainclothes man, lingering in the doorway, ceased his hat-agitating chewing of gum when this man spoke.

"Well," he offered smoothly, raising his glass to Wain and draining half of it, "you were lucky, Max."

His eyes, twin careful dots in a pink face, strayed to the captain, who rumbled eager assent, and to the assistant district attorney, who nodded.

"I was," Wain acknowledged, considering with a gambler's impassiveness the happy chance that had brought this visitor to his house at this particular hour. "I'm sorry I killed him."

"You should be glad," the captain corrected. "He had his hand on his gun butt. In another second——"

"I can't imagine," Little Maxie addressed the awkward young man, "why a burglar should try to rob me."

"I can't imagine," the captain retorted before the assistant could reply, "why Diamond Ike Pincus, who used to be a Grade A yegg, should go in for

second-story work. However——" he shrugged and concluded: "He won't be missed much."

The youthful prosecutor asked: "You've a pistol license, Mr. Wain?" and reddened at the policeman's chuckle and the other guest's grin.

"Certainly," Maxie returned, and brought out his wallet. "Want to see it?"

"Oh, not at all, never mind," the youth replied in confusion, and choked over his drink.

Feet scuffed heavily on the stair, and the plainclothes man, peering into the hall, reported:

"They're carting the body out now."

The captain drained his glass and rose. The big man opposite Wain looked studiously into his, and then addressed the youngster from the prosecutor's office.

"Anything more on your mind, Mr. Silver?"

"No," the other stumbled. "I think not. Of course, Mr. Wain——"

"Son," Maxie's guest replied. "I'll guarantee Mr. Wain. Whatever formalities there are, he'll be there. Tell your chief that from me, if he doesn't think you've handled things right."

"I will," the youth promised eagerly. "I'm—glad to have met you."

He ducked hastily and followed the captain and the plainclothes man from the room. In the silence that succeeded his departure they heard a door close. Wain sipped at the drink before him and replaced it gently. His companion looked up from contemplation of his own.

"Maxie," he asked, "what's all this about?"

"You mean about Pincus, Lew?" his host purred. The other regarded him calmly.

"I mean," he returned, "this pushing around. Why can't you boys act nice? Isn't there enough trouble on hand with that damned Arnold Committee getting ready to stir a stink, without starting a mob war?"

"See Tucket," Wain suggested, blinking. Lew's wide mouth grew hard. He replied with the hint of a threat in his voice:

"I've told Tucket what I'm telling you now, Maxie. This has got to stop. And I mean stop. You boys have been sitting pretty. We've played ball with you. And what a time you pick to start trouble."

"Tucket picks," Wain corrected briefly. "Not me."

"Now, wait a minute," the other commanded. "This isn't advice I'm giving you, Maxie. It's orders. And let me tell you something else. You're putting the heat on Tucket, not him on you."

Little Maxie washed the remains of his drink about the bottom of his glass and considered it attentively for an instant.

"Lew," he said at length, "if you want to believe a crooked little ex-pickpocket instead of me, that's just too bad."

He raised a hand, forestalling the other's reply.

"If the bulls in this town," he pursued with corrosive smoothness, "were good for anything except being there at the pay-off, Tucket would be in the can right now for the murder of Cass Horvak. Wait a minute. If I hadn't had my rod in my hand when I went upstairs an hour ago, Tucket's man Pincus would have laid me alongside Horvak. That's the way I'm pushing him and his mob around."

Lew's pink face deepened in hue.

"I've known Dip Tucket a long time," he vociferated. "What he says is on the level."

"All right," the other retorted. "Play it that way if you want to. Whose mob did Diamond Ike Pincus belong to?"

He surveyed his companion with the faintest trace of a sneer.

"And another thing," he went on, "and get a load of this: They broke the trooper who brought Horowitz back to town and heaved him out of the state cops because he didn't get burned too, didn't they? That's just so much horse feathers. His name is Tarleton, and he's a buddy of Tucket. And Tucket and he and Gannon are like that."

He smirked scornfully across the three close fingers he held up at his companion.

"Outside," he concluded, "of bumping Horvak and trying to burn me and two-timing everybody by playing ball with the state cops, Tucket is on the up and up. Sure he is."

"And you," Lew commented with heavy scorn, "aren't starting a thing?"

"I am not," the mob leader responded readily. "But neither am I going to lie still while Tucket and his gorillas kick all my ribs in."

The doubt in the other's rotund face was succeeded by anger.

"Either you or Dip," he said at last, "is going out of your class. You can't give us the run-around. Tucket wants peace. He says he's been trying to reach you."

"He almost did," Maxie agreed, "an hour ago."

Perplexity that troubled the other was routed by sudden decision.

"One of you," he said with a calm more threatening than bluster, "is lying. I'm telling you, Maxie, what I've told Dip already. Lay off. That comes from the Big Fella. It's final."

Wain's dark visage was candidly distressed.

"Lew," he replied, "you're wasting your breath. I'm not starting anything. If Tucket puts the heat on me, can I sit still?"

The big man rose and came round the table to Maxie's side. His faintly softened bulk dwarfed the swarthy little man, who peered up at him serenely. Lew asked:

"If I set the time and the place, will you meet Tucket and me and talk it over?"

Wain hesitated an instant and quenched the suspicion that began to kindle in the other's eyes by surrender.

"If you say so. Any time, anywhere you pick."

"That's the talk," Lew acclaimed cordially. "I'll be on my way."

Dominick, who appeared from nowhere to usher out the guest, returned thereafter to the dining room where Little Maxie sat with head bent forward, regarding the gleaming mahogany before him. He looked up and shook himself like a plump awakened bird.

"Car's outside," Dominick reported.

The flat that had been Horvak's home occupied the second floor of what once had been a private house. The electric lock of the front door chattered, and Dominick waited at the stair's foot. Maxie ascended, composed, sleek, his swarthy face already set in an expression of regret.

Past the big figure of the woman who waited beside the open door, the scent of many flowers drifted into the hall, a thick, depressing odor.

"Thank you for letting me come, Lily," Wain said gently. She did not answer, but stood aside for him to enter.

The warm chamber was languid with fragrance, aglare with blossoms. They shrouded Horvak's coffin. They blanketed the hurdles on which it rested. Wreaths were propped against the bier. Wilting sheaves were piled upon the floor. Wain approached the floral mound with firm, gentle steps.

"It ain't open," the dead man's sister said. "They wouldn't let it be."

"I'm sorry," Little Maxie said. "I just came to tell him good-bye. Cass was my pal."

He faced her now, with the still flames of the flowery pyre behind him, a grave, grieved figure.

On Lily Horvak's cheek bones twin spots of rouge burned. Over the strong framework of her face, tears had turned the flesh sodden, blunting her Valkyrie comeliness. Bereavement spoke too in the unwonted slovenliness of her dress, the skirt askew on her wide hips, the wrinkled silk blouse with the diamond bar pinned awry. Between lids swollen by much weeping, her gray eyes regarded Wain with despair-clouded anger.

"You pick a funny time," she said.

"I had to come by night, Lily," he told her. "I didn't dare try before."

Her sullen stare was an unvoiced question. He pursued:

"I've got to be careful. I may be—the next."

Her hands were clasped. The rouged nails dug into her knuckles. She said in her husky voice, blurred by much weeping:

"Cass never jumped from that window."

There was ferocity in the statement. He nodded with calm composure.

"I know he didn't," he replied. "I know too much. That's why I had to sneak in here now to tell my pal good-bye, Lily. The heat's been put on me, too."

"If Cass," she gulped over the name and then went on with an animus blotting out all other emotion, "was your pal, why don'tcha get the guy ____"

Maxie spread his hands and gave his head a sorrowful shake.

"Lily," he deplored, "I would if I could. They're too strong for me. I don't dare make a move."

He watched her body stiffen; saw her deep bosom thrust against the rumpled blouse. Slowly, under his attentive eyes, the swollen face seemed to solidify, to harmonize with her fierce, vengeance-hungry eyes.

"Who did it, Maxie?" she asked, and cold venom had supplanted the despair in her husky voice. He shrugged and asked:

"Has Tucket been to see you, Lily?"

She answered after a brief pause:

"No. He sent a lotta flowers."

"I hear," Maxie returned, "he's got Cass's job now."

Her puffed eyelids widened. He did not flinch but added mildly: "He wanted it bad enough."

"Who," she asked at last with a fearful eagerness in her voice, "did it, Maxie?"

He shook his head with determination and gave a wry smile.

“You’re a woman,” he disparaged. “They all talk. If I told you, they’d get me. Tucket’s pushing me around now.”

“Was it,” she whispered avidly, color stirring beneath the splotches of rouge, “Dip Tucket?”

Again he shook his head.

“What good would it do?” he countered. “You can’t do anything, and I don’t dare go after him. I’m taking big chances just coming here to see you, Lily.”

She glanced toward the flower-buried coffin and dropped her voice as though she feared its occupant might hear.

“If you don’t dare, I do,” she muttered, and neither doubt nor boasting marred her cold voice. “I’ve promised Cass, Maxie. I’m going to kill whoever killed him. Was it Dip Tucket?”

He contemplated her heroic figure; the deadly purpose in her face, and said at last with reluctance:

“Of course it was, Lily.”

Wain, a half hour later, sat down once more at his desk. He looked for a long instant at the black gap in the windowpane, at the sparkle of fragments on the floor. He pressed a bell button and uttered a brief gurgling laugh.

Dominick faced his smiling chief, who asked gently:

“Tarleton, the big dark guy? Know him?”

Dominick nodded. Little Maxie handed him a slip of paper.

“That’s his address. Get him out of town.”

“Yeh,” the other assented.

“And leave him there.”

“Yeh.”

“There’ll be,” Wain directed, “no slip-up this time. Take plenty. And send Lupo up.”

The mercenary from Chicago entered with a swagger of heavy shoulders and the trace of a sneer.

“Well?” Maxie prompted, and frowned at the other’s insolent grin.

“Set,” Lupo reported. “Ain’t you got a man-sized job?”

“Tony,” Wain told him slowly. “No guy as good as you think you are lasts long.”

“Yeah?” the other asked, but his eyes slanted away from Maxie’s dire gaze.

“Yeah,” Wain emphasized. “Did you follow that coon I pointed out to you?”

Lupo leaned over his shoulder and scribbled an address on the pad before his employer.

“Check up,” he invited, stepping back, “in the morning papers.”

He grinned jauntily into Maxie’s unwillingly approving face.

“I didn’t stop to get his name,” he reported, “but that’ll be in the papers, too.”

Before the address Lupo had set down an ambulance waited, ringed about by black avid faces. They filled the air with a mumbling clamor in which the drawl of the South clashed against the clipped accents of the Indies. The crowd swarmed toward the feeble light that streamed from the flat-house vestibule and recoiled unwillingly before the ferocious gestures of the patrolman who guarded the steps.

The gabble rose higher as the white-jacketed surgeon came out. He thrust his way through the press, deaf to questions, and swung up into the ambulance. The gong sounded, and it plowed a quickly closed furrow through the crowd. Carrigan, caught in its resurgence, was jostled and pushed toward the steps. He called to the patrolman:

“What’s all this, Dan?”

The policeman shooed back the more venturesome and replied:

“Just a cheap shooting. Somebody got a smoke named Curtis.”

“Wilbert Curtis?” the reporter queried, involuntarily tightening his hold on the flat package he bore. “A Pullman porter?”

“So I hear,” the patrolman yawned.

CHAPTER XV

MIYAKO'S hushed arrival the following morning woke Tarleton, who rose noiselessly and peered into Carrigan's darkened bedroom. He saw only a tuft of hair motionless above the mounded bedclothes and heard a mild, steady snore. With the grin of an erring small boy, the guest stole riding breeches and boots from the closet, gathered up his own clothing, and crept into the bathroom.

Bathed, shaved, and clothed, save for the boots which he carried, he tiptoed to the kitchen and in a whisper demanded coffee from the Japanese.

"Mr. Carrigan," he explained, "was up late last night. I've an engagement, but I don't want to disturb him."

Fortified, he slunk back down the hall. For an instant, at the living-room door, he hesitated, weighing Carrigan's admonition against his own tryst with Patricia.

"You," the reporter had told him vehemently in response to his protests, "are going to keep your ugly mug inside this flat, and I'm going to bring Arnold here. I'm scared, Buck. This is earthquake weather. I can feel it."

Tarleton stepped softly to the window and pulled the shade aside. Sunlight glorified the shabby street, brightened a tailor's sign aswing in the morning breeze, stippled the freshly sprinkled pavement with gilt. A milk wagon clattered by. Two men in their shirt sleeves wiped down a car parked opposite. The calm normality of the prospect heartened Carrigan's guest, made the reporter's earnest warning faintly ridiculous.

Tarleton accorded it one token of respect. He drew from beneath his pillow an automatic pistol, thrust the flat weapon into his hip pocket, and went carefully to the hall door. There he drew on his boots and slipped out.

The cool wind shouted in his ears as he went down the steps. The brave hue of the early sky was undimmed by smoke. He breathed deeply, and a nostalgic longing, stirred by the sun and the breeze, for the October countryside, possessed him an instant and was forgotten in a truant chuckle. Three loungers on the steps opposite superintended the car polishers. Tarleton glanced at his watch, hurried to the corner, and hailed a cab. It was later than he had thought.

Fear that he might be tardy made him forget all other concerns. He was not aware that, as soon as he had passed, the men who scrubbed the black limousine had abandoned their work; that the watchers on the steps had

entered the machine with them and that now it followed his cab, a decorous half block in the rear.

Sunlight, flooding the Plaza, set the gilded statue of Sherman ablaze and turned the palm his guardian Victory bore into a sheaf of fire. Tarleton dismissed his cab and hurried toward the bridle path. The taxi moved off. The following car drew in to the curb and paused.

Beside the mounting block, blanketed horses whickered and stamped. He found his among them, but searched vainly and with a suddenly sinking of spirits for her bright mare. He spun about at the sound of her voice.

She had risen from a bench and came hurrying toward him. Disappointment stifled relief, for he saw that she wore, not a riding habit, but tweeds, and that a heavy coat hung from her shoulders. Her smile was forced, but her handclasp firm and tight.

"I was afraid," she said, "that I had missed you."

Her eyes searched his so intently that he laughed in embarrassment.

"I was late," he told her, "and very afraid." His glance traveled down over the taut, tweed-clad body, and he added:

"It was premonition. We're not going to have our ride."

She said with some unuttered question plain in her scrutiny:

"I've a car over yonder. You see—" she caught herself and went on with forced lightness—"I thought, perhaps, we'd drive out into the country, instead."

"You," he said as they went toward the big glittering roadster, "frighten me. You read minds. I've been hungry for the country ever since I woke this morning."

"I can read yours, sometimes—I think," she replied with a smile that did not completely rout the strained look about her eyes. "Will you drive?"

"I'd rather watch you," he answered, settling himself beside her. The roadster drifted into the uptown stream of traffic with the smoothness of enormous power. He watched her little gloved hand adeptly shift gears and grinned.

"Black care," he announced blissfully, "falls out of the rumble seat. Where are we bound for?"

"Wherever you choose," she answered.

"Baffinland," he directed.

A black limousine with five well dressed young men inside followed them up Fifth Avenue and across 110th Street to Riverside Drive, never more or less than a half block in the rear.

Grant's Tomb loomed, a great marble inkpot, above frost-blanched foliage, and the Claremont's flag was a pink, agitated spot against the sky's valiant blue. The Palisades were steeped in sunlight, and wind, leaping from them, stirred whitecaps on the river and bellowed about Tarleton's ears.

"From now on," he said solemnly as they crossed the viaduct, "everything dates from this morning. How long," he asked with a trace of anxiety, "can you be gone?"

She glanced up from the road ahead for an instant with a queer expression, half humorous, half worried.

"No particular time," she replied; and her hands gripped the steering wheel more tightly. "I've run away."

He laughed, so happily that she looked at him again and seemed comforted by his glee.

"So have I," he chuckled. "I sneaked away from my keeper while he still was asleep."

The traffic light at the viaduct's far end burned red. They glided to a halt. Behind them the black limousine came on deliberately. Nor did it pick up speed again until they once more were a half block ahead.

"I've a lot to tell you," Tarleton said soberly.

She hesitated, and at last replied: "I've a lot to tell you, too. You first, though. It's easier to listen than talk in traffic."

While they ran to the Drive's north end, and thereafter scurried beneath the subway trestle to Van Cortlandt Park, he took her, step by step, through all that had happened since he had left her the foregoing afternoon. Twice she seemed about to speak, but checked herself and kept her eyes on the roadway. He was able, unchallenged, to watch the clear sweetness of her profile while he talked.

"So that," he concluded, as they swung off Broadway and skirted the Park's lower border, "is why I had to slip out this morning without telling Jimmy. I left a message with his Jap so that his bright reportorial mind wouldn't jump to the conviction I had been kidnaped."

Ahead of them rose the domed main building of the Botanical Gardens. Beyond it they turned into the Bronx River Parkway and drove north. One-half block distance behind them the black limousine picked its way through the welter of traffic.

Great elms bowed to each other above the pavement. The road curved through copses, skirted bits of meadow, or leaped across rustic bridges over the mild little river. Behind the wheel the girl relaxed a trifle, and for a

second's fraction met Tarleton's eyes with an expression so puzzling that he accused instinctively:

"You're in trouble of some sort."

A sign marked "City Limit" flashed past. She said with an odd air of relief: "I had to get you out of town."

"Why?" the man asked sharply. She delayed response for a moment and offered with an uncertain smile:

"We're both in trouble."

"Have you," he asked when she had turned her face once more to the road and seemed uninclined to elaborate, "by any chance Delphic as well as gypsy inheritance?"

She shook her head, unresponsive to his raillery.

"I have," she told him, "a five-pound lead weight in my middle. At least five pounds. My uncle was robbed yesterday."

She looked fleetingly at Tarleton's sudden alertness.

"Go on," he prompted.

"I'll have to," the girl surrendered. "I hoped we could reach some quiet spot and stop before we really began to talk. But I've got to tell you. Someone opened my uncle's wall safe yesterday and stole a paper."

"The Horowitz statement?" Tarleton queried, and pitied her for the frightened glance she cast him.

"How did you know?" she faltered. He smiled grimly.

"I guessed. Perhaps I've gypsy blood myself. Where was this safe?"

Her voice broke free from her difficultly maintained control. She confessed with a rush, like a frightened child.

"In the library. Behind my portrait. There were fingerprints on its frame, and Uncle Arnold has called in the police."

"When was the robbery?" Tarleton queried, quite calmly. Beneath the pulled-down brim of his soft hat his narrow eyes watched the road uncoiling before them.

"Sometime," she said, "between yesterday morning at ten and eight o'clock last night, when Mr. Spillane and my uncle opened the safe."

"Do they," he pursued carefully, "suspect anyone but——"

She caught up his query and completed it with a rush, as though further suspense were unendurable.

"But you? You were the only stranger in the house yesterday. Who else is there for them to suspect?"

“I see,” Tarleton answered deliberately. She found difficulty in enduring his calm and moved so suddenly in her seat that her foot, pressing the accelerator, sent the car leaping ahead with a sudden snort. She controlled the motor and herself.

“Uncle Arnold asked me this morning if there had been any stranger in the library. I said you had, before I thought. It wouldn’t have done any good to lie, anyway, because Jane saw you there.”

“You saw me there, too,” Tarleton reminded her. “You saw me there with my hands on the frame of that portrait.”

“Yes,” she admitted, and the misery in her voice tore the question from him.

“Do you think I stole that statement?”

His voice had an angry sound. While she let the car coast, she stared at him a long second with astonishment that puzzled him.

“Why, I know you didn’t,” she replied, as though he had just voiced utter inanity. He suppressed words that rushed to be spoken and twisted them into sorry jest.

“The gypsy blood again?” he queried, and then, more gravely: “Thank you!”

“When I heard them telephone police headquarters,” she went on, with a shy smile, “I knew your fingerprints were on that frame. That’s why I ran away. I wanted to see you and warn you and give you time to collect yourself, because I think they are going to arrest you.”

He did not reply at once. With the purring of muted power the car sped northward over the lovely winding road, and a half block’s space behind, constant as though an invisible tow rope linked the two machines, the black limousine followed.

In his hotel bedroom Ignatius Loyola Tucket sat at bay. The wall against which his chair back pressed was no more adamantly impassive than his face. Trim, bleak, and calm, he faced the mounting tumult of complaint, reproach, the veiled accusations, the still more obscure hints at mutiny launched by his early morning callers.

They had arrived unannounced and together, a sign in itself of impending rebellion. Now, Logardo’s squat body perched on the unmade bed beside the green-eyed, lithe Horrigan. Maltesta straddled a chair, his heavy blue chin resting on arms folded across its back, his attitude malevolent as a crouching wolf’s. Levine, with his negroid face additionally

darkened by resentment, sat gloomily beside him. In the bathroom doorway, Frankie Tucket wiped his freshly shaven face and smiled angelically at his uncle across the snarling babble.

The clash and crackle of confused speech stormed about the little man. There was anger in the sound and a strident note of fear. The unanimity that had marked the arrival of the four had vanished now. Their voices warred and beat each other down. For an instant Logardo's bovine lowing, Horrigan's shrillness, or Levine's drawl would dominate, only to be dragged under and overwhelmed in a passion of jumbled talk. Tucket sat and listened, slim fingers of one hand prowling back and forth along his jaw line, while out of the chaos of voices the outline of disaster gradually emerged.

Trouble, to which the leaders of Horvak's mob had grown unaccustomed during a year of peace, was upon them now. These sleek, vindictive messengers related disaster to an impassive little Job in duet, trio, quartet, and an occasional brief solo.

The heat was on them. They were being pushed around. Tucket, garnering articulate sentences, phrases, and words, gradually acquired the sum of their grievances. Theirs was the tale of sudden assaults, unprovoked and systematic, upon the provinces they governed; of stills raided by heretofore contentedly subsidized agents; of police, with sudden contrariness, enforcing closing laws; of subscribers to various forms of protection complaining that further pay for immunity was being demanded by strangers; of more than this.

Logardo bawled how the alcohol cookers in his domain were being threatened with death unless they deserted him. Horrigan spat viciously a story of incipient mutiny among night-club proprietors, and the shooting of one who had remained loyal. Maltesta's milk route had been assailed, two truckloads hijacked, and three men beaten, one to death. Levine told with sullen rage of a Coast Guard, suddenly vigilant, that had captured by gunfire a runner bringing 8,000 cases of rye from St. Pierre.

Gradually all this emerged from the turmoil of speech as a photograph develops in the hypo bath, and through the strident racket one name rang persistent, reiterant, "Maxie," "Wain," "Little Maxie Wain." They embellished it with curses; they smeared it with obscenity; they accorded it the respect of rage and lurking fear.

At length, as the storm of speech flagged, Frankie Tucket emerged perfectly groomed and redolent of toilet water from the bathroom, and

leaning against the wall beside his uncle favored the glowering, twisted faces before them with a white-toothed yawn.

Momentarily silence fell. For the first time in ten minutes the little mob leader spoke:

"You janes," he inquired, "all through your heebie-jeebies?"

No one responded. Maltesta sulkily avoided his eyes. Logardo rumbled beneath his breath to Horrigan beside him. Levine said at last, with forced truculence:

"Ain't you runnin' this mob?"

"Yep," Tucket responded promptly. "I am. And I'm tellin' you jitterin' eggs to wait."

Logardo, his jowls purple, snorted:

"Wait? What for? Till Maxie spits in your face and makes you like it? He's musclin' in on us, ain't he? He burns down Ike—an' you say wait. The hell!"

"Pincus," Levine offered with a lunging nod of his kinky head, "had guts, anyway. He——"

"Stop it!" Tucket commanded sharply. "Stop it and listen. Who says he had guts? Brains, maybe, but a heel, and you know it."

"Easy," Maltesta said suddenly, raising his battered face from his crossed arms, "to rib him now——"

"Now he's rubbed out?" Dip queried. "I've told him worse to his face, and you've heard me. That's how I know he was a heel. Now, get a load of this: You mugs are supposed to be able to think. Would any of you do what Pincus done? Pick Maxie's house as a nice soft second-story setup? Hey?"

His taunting eyes pried at the sullen faces before him.

"You're right, you wouldn't," he acclaimed. "And neither did he. You knew Ike. Think it over."

"Maybe," Horrigan suggested ironically, "he ain't dead at all. Maybe it's a couple of other——"

"He's dead," Tucket assured him. "And how! By a double-cross. Bet on it. He wabbled yesterday, didn't he? He threw in with Maxie, and that's what he got."

"Says you," Ears Maltesta jeered.

"Think up a better one," the mob leader invited. "And while you're thinkin', Ears, chew over what happens to the yellow son of a sow that ditches this mob for Maxie's."

"Who's gonna ditch the mob?" Maltesta snarled with unnecessary violence. Logardo asked, in bovine anger:

"What's the play, Dip? Sit an' talk till he chases us into the river?"

"The play," Levine thrust in before Tucket could reply, "is gunplay. Plenty gunplay. Burn 'em up." His clouded eyes leered. His chief shook his head.

"Listen," he bade. "I'm seein' Maxie this afternoon."

Levine swore foully. Tucket waited until the thick voice died.

"Lew's fixin' it," he continued. "It's his idea."

"Tell him," Horrigan suggested, "to hang out a window along with Maxie. This ain't a debatin' society, for Gossakes."

"No," Tucket agreed calmly. "It ain't. Neither is it the army. It's business. You know that well as me. I turn Lew down. He tells the Big Fella. What happens? You guys that are hollerin' for war, can you lick Maxie and politics and the cops? If so, go to it, and count me out."

He looked alertly from face to face. None of them withstood his terrier-like scrutiny.

"Sit tight," he begged, "until I've seen Maxie. If he'll listen to reason, we've saved ourselves trouble. If he won't——"

He grinned bleakly. "Gimme time," he concluded, "and act nice. That's your lay right now."

"Suppose," Levine's thick voice demurred, "Maxie won't act nice? Thought of that?"

"Sure," his chief agreed. "Long before you did. If Maxie won't lay off, if there's more pushin' around, do you want Lew and the Big Fella pushin' for you or against you? That's the answer."

He rose and swept the half circle of faces before him as though challenging further protest. None came.

"Tonight. Here," he instructed. "And now, if you mugs will lam, I got plenty to do between now and then."

They departed, one by one, at least momentarily convinced. As the door closed on the last of them, Tucket sighed and then resumed his flagrant hard-bitten perkiness. He grinned at his sneering nephew.

"Was it you," Frankie derided, "said Cass was gettin' soft?"

"Yeh," Tucket admitted after a pause, and rubbed his derby on his sleeve. "He was. I ain't. I'm smart. There's a difference. If I can duck trouble till I get the Chi merger set, that's all I ask. Where'll Maxie be then,

eh? That's why he's got the heat on us. He knows if we join that Chicago syndicate, he's through. Come on, you shootin' fool. Let's go."

Frankie accorded his uncle a faintly poisonous smile, jerked his shoulder holster into place, and led the way down the hall, into the elevator, and out along the service alley to the street below that the hotel faced. Dip hailed a taxi rolling by, and grumbled as he saw a passenger's profile against the glass. His nephew stiffened, and his right hand jerked upward as the cab's brakes screeched and it stopped. The door flew open. Both men stared into Lily Horvak's pale face.

"I was just coming to see you," she told Dip in a forced voice.

CHAPTER XVI

FOR an instant thereafter, no one spoke. Framed in the cab doorway, the woman continued to peer out with queer irresolution. Her mink coat could not quite conceal the splendid contours of her body. Rouge splashed on her jutting cheek bones emphasized the pallor of her vigorous face. There was a tenseness in her attitude, and an eagerness only half concealed in her steady green eyes.

Tucket, tilting his derby, grinned at her in a friendly fashion.

"Tough," he said. "I was just goin' out."

"I've got to see you," she repeated. "It's important."

"Well——" Dip demurred. Frankie nudged him and muttered:

"Ain't healthy for you to be standin' here." But the nephew's eyes, instead of raking the opposite buildings and the traffic stream, were fixed on Lily in kindling admiration. She evaded the mob leader's steady regard and for an instant considered his escort's dark, feline beauty. Color quickened beneath the rouge as she looked away. The elder Tucket asked, as though emerging from some secret debate with himself:

"Where were you going, after? Home? We'll ride back with you."

Again her glance shifted from him to his nephew.

"I gotta see you alone," she replied dubiously.

"Sure," Tucket agreed. "You know Frankie, don'tcha? Well, whataya know about that? Frankie, meet Miss Horvak. He's my nephew."

The younger Tucket's smile was dazzling. He thrust his uncle into the cab and followed him.

"Baby," he exclaimed, "the time I been losin'!"

"Who," she returned automatically, "you callin' 'Baby'?"

His eyes were brilliant with admiration. He thrust himself into the vacant space beside her and grinned across at his uncle.

"Dip," he told her, "has been holding out on me. 'Baby' is only the beginning. Don't you bother with him. Whatever you want, I'll get you."

His beaming promise killed her smile abruptly. As the cab moved away, she turned to the elder Tucket.

"Dip," she said, "I gotta see you alone."

Her voice roused him from self-communion.

"Oke, Lily," he nodded. "Frankie can wait outside."

She drew a long breath.

"All right," she answered. They jolted southward beneath the recurrent thunder of the elevated. Twice she met Frankie's flagrantly ardent eyes. Each time a responsive smile froze to death on her white face.

She unlocked the front door with a steady hand. As it clicked shut behind them, Tucket turned at the stair's foot to Frankie:

"Park yourself here," he ordered quietly. "I won't be long."

"Alla way for me next time. An' I'll be alone," Frankie called after them.

Tucket watched her open her apartment door. In the wan radiance of the hall light her face was bleak as marble. Without a word, she entered. He followed and sniffed the sickly perfume of vanished flowers in which the chamber was steeped. She spoke as though answering his unvoiced question.

"I sent 'em all over to the undertaker's. They'll keep better there for the funeral."

"Tomorrow at ten," he nodded. "I'll be there."

"No," she said. "You won't."

She faced him with her back toward the window, a majestic figure in the loosened fur coat. Her hands were deep in its pockets. Tucket's face, mercilessly revealed by the cold light streaming through the pane, did not stir. His ruddy little eyes watched her thoughtfully.

"I'm gonna kill you, Dip," Lily Horvak said simply. He nodded as though her dull voice had confirmed suspicion.

"Yeh," he admitted. "I guessed that was why you asked me here."

His calm was the more complete. It shattered hers. The hand hidden in the mink coat brought forth a bright, short-barreled revolver. He considered the muzzle that shook and steadied; the cylinder that stirred a trifle under her finger's pressure on the trigger and commented mildly: "That's the sorta play a jane would make."

Fury had supplanted the deadly calm upon her face. Her lips trembled. The muzzle of the gun scrawled little circles in the air.

"You killed Cass," she accused in a stifled voice.

"Says Little Maxie," Tucket commented dryly. "Cheese, Lily! Where's your brains? Go ahead. Shoot and do him a favor."

Into his self-possession crept scorn that baffled her still more completely. The wrath on her face softened into bewilderment, turning it womanly once

more. She fought to retain her purpose under the faintly leering regard of Tucket's nutcracker visage.

"Well," he prompted. "Are you gonna shoot or listen to me?"

She hesitated, and her wide, pale mouth twitched. Then the leveled revolver slowly dropped to her side.

"I'll listen—first," she said unwillingly.

"You aren't," Tucket commented, "quite as dumb as you look. Cass's sister actin' as torpedo for Maxie. Gawd!"

His air of caustic indifference dropped away. He jabbed at her with questions. Under their sting, she answered at first in hostile monosyllables, and then more fluently, with a growing disquiet. When his savage verbal digging had unearthed the entire story of her interview with Wain, Tucket asked with a brief, foxlike grin:

"Weren'tcha gonna phone him when the job was done?"

"He told me to," she confessed. "But I wasn't gonna. I don't care what happens now Cass's gone."

"Applesauce," Tucket rebuked her heartily. "A great big smooth-lookin' jane like you. Be yourself, Lily. Why, even Frankie's nuts aboutcha."

She softened still further at mention of his nephew's name, and sat down, aimlessly turning the bright little pistol over and over on her lap. Tucket said gravely:

"Listen, Lily. Cass and me, we were like that. You know. It's his mob Maxie wants you to fight, sendin' a jane on a job he ain't got guts to do himself. I'm meetin' him this afternoon. Will you come if I send Frankie for you?"

She looked bewildered and faintly frightened. His hard, fearless confidence dominated her.

"Bring your gun, if you wanta," Tucket pursued, nodding toward the glittering weapon. "Tell Lew—he's gonna be there too—just what Wain told you. Then, if you still think I rubbed out Cass, spot me right where I sit. Willya?"

Tears welled in the wide green eyes that watched his earnest face. She nodded mutely.

"Atta baby," Tucket approved, and patted her shoulder.

In the hall below, Frankie Tucket wheeled about as his uncle came complacently downstairs.

"I got a cab waitin'," he reported. "Make it snappy. There's a mug on the corner actin' too innocent."

As the taxi moved off he turned upon Dip. “You took plenty time,” he accused in no more than semi-jest.

“I mighta been there yet,” Dip retorted, and told dryly of his interview. Frankie’s long-lashed eyes narrowed, but he made no comment until the recital’s end.

“Little Maxie,” he offered, “could stand some burnin’.”

The brooding expression on his face alarmed the elder man.

“Frankie,” he snapped, “have I got to send you for a ride before I get any peace? Lay off. Your job is to see Lily gets to our dump at four-forty this afternoon. I got an ace in the hole at last.”

He chuckled venomously. His nephew said, frowning:

“If she’s so free with that gun, I better take it off her before she burns herself.”

“She won’t,” the elder man returned, and cackled as he counted five loaded cartridges from one hand to the other. “I frisked her comin’ down in the cab,” he explained complacently. “Here’s the bullets that was in that gun, and every one of ’em addressed to Ignatius Loyola Tucket, who, maybe I’ve toldja, is a very good man.”

The man who had loitered indolently on the corner for a full half hour dived with sudden purpose into a cigar store. Maxie Wain raised his eyes from the ledger before him, as the telephone bell whirred, and watched Otto Gerlach rise with military snap and take the receiver.

“ ’S Morrie,” the voice twanged in his ear. “The conference is over, an’ Steel is still up.”

Gerlach’s guttural voice translated to Wain:

“She hass had him in her room and hass let him go.”

Maxie’s black brows flickered and then were as steady as his eyes.

“Lupo?” he asked, and Gerlach queried into the transmitter:

“Copper, eh. How iss dot now?”

“Still trailin’,” the voice responded. Wain nodded when his employee had relayed the report and had restored the receiver.

“No word on Tarleton?” Little Maxie queried blandly. The other shook his head.

“No news is good news,” the plump little man returned with the faintest smile.

Past Tarleton at that minute swept trees that burned with October's cold fire. Westchester's little hills were soft with smoky haze. He believed, soberly looking upward, that no sky had ever been so flawless a blue; no color so valiant as the branches flashing by overhead; no wind as tingling as the breeze that streamed past the great roadster's windshield to clamor in his ear. He glanced at his companion and was inarticulately grateful.

It was her presence, he knew, that had sharpened his perceptions and had lent additional glamour to the sunlight and the sky and the tapestries the changing foliage wove upon the countryside. Surreptitiously, he considered the pliant roundness of her body, the strong little hands gripping the wheel, the gallant poise of her head, and was at once awed and sublimely content.

With each tree that swung past, the dangerous, brawling city dropped further behind. The keen air, the myriad roadside lyrics of October—wastrel elms that flung away handfuls of gold; birches baring white bodies to the sun; the crimson spilling of a vine across a stone wall—absolved and sustained him. Traffic had thinned. They had been able to talk as they drove: she, earnestly; he, with growing lightness. Each minute his plight seemed more like a nightmare reviewed in the sane light of morning. Behind them, unnoticed, inconspicuous, undeviating, the black limousine followed.

The girl's clear face was grave with thought. She had drawn from him by questions deftly placed, his last sparse shred of information. Now, after a long pause, she asked suddenly:

"What hold had Ira Draw on Mr. Spillane?"

"Hold?" he echoed, brought back sharply from his happy relaxation. "Who said he had any?"

She said carefully: "Something went wrong. He ran away."

"It may have," he conceded, and grinned as he pointed out, "So did we."

"But," she returned, meeting his eyes for a breathless instant, "you are going back?"

"I am," Tarleton acknowledged. His vague gesture included the landscape and themselves. "Whatever happens," he plunged on, "it's been worth it. Jail is a cheap price for—this."

Again their glances crossed. He looked away from the provocation on her face. He thought with a flagellant resolution of his plight. He was a trooper kicked out of the service. She was Follansbee Arnold's niece. He forced himself to say:

"Men usually don't vanish unless they are crooks. Draw can come back now. Whoever killed that darkey porter made the world safe for Ira."

“Draw,” she pressed obstinately ahead, “has been friendly with both Betty and her father. And Mr. Spillane and my uncle were the only people who knew where that statement was kept.”

“They aren’t friendly any more,” he replied with a quickening of interest. “That’s what Carrigan gathered when he saw Betty last night. She wouldn’t elaborate on her hate, but it was there, Jimmy said. And when Betty won’t elaborate, it’s a mystery all by itself. Usually she tells what she knows.”

She was silent a moment and then queried with the briskness of resolution:

“Did she ask Jimmy Carrigan to lend her money?”

He returned in amazement: “Lend her money? Certainly not. Why should she?”

“That,” Patricia replied calmly, “is what I couldn’t quite understand. She sent for me yesterday afternoon and begged me to lend her a hundred and twenty-seven thousand dollars.”

“What for?” he snapped.

She raised her shoulders and smiled mockingly at his astonishment.

“Another of life’s little mysteries,” she replied, and grew grave at once. “She was in trouble of some sort, or her father was. She didn’t offer explanation. I didn’t ask. But she called me up early last evening and told me not to bother. That was just after my uncle came home, and it must have been just after she’d seen her father, for he had been with Uncle Foll all yesterday afternoon.”

“Spillane may have been squeezed and have borrowed from Mr. Arnold,” he hazarded, but she shook her head decidedly.

“He didn’t. I asked my uncle. If he needed money, he got it from someone else—Mr. Draw, perhaps.”

Tarleton stiffened, but hesitated over the surmise that rose in his mind. The girl was less scrupulous.

“Is it possible,” she asked, “that Horowitz’s statement might have been worth a hundred and twenty-seven thousand dollars to Ira Draw? He vanished on the day it was stolen.”

The eyes that looked into his were clear, remorseless. He stammered and said at length:

“Spillane couldn’t be that kind.”

“In New York,” she retorted, “all things are possible.”

“Yes,” he acknowledged with a crooked grin. “I’m a first-class witness to that.”

They rounded a curve and a drive, branching off from the highway, ran up to a broad winged building, flanked by a vast stable and garage. Before it, saddled horses were ranked, and about them men in gray uniforms moved, tightening girths, straightening blankets. Something swelled in Tarleton’s throat. He felt Patricia’s eyes on him yet did not dare confront them. She asked at last:

“Your troop?”

He shook his head and strove to conceal homesickness and humiliation by quick speech.

“No, my outfit is—was—further up-state. That is K’s barracks. Those lads in front must be the mounted detail going to police the fair at Whitham. Remember the little town with an air of impending celebration a few miles back? It’s fun, sometimes, policing a fair.”

He hated the wistfulness that crept involuntarily into his voice. He shut his mouth with a snap. The girl slackened the car’s speed for a long instant and then increased it again with an abruptness that jerked Tarleton’s head back. They roared along for a brief space and dropped to their normal loitering pace. She said, quite quietly:

“Don’t look around, but I think we are being followed.”

In response to Tarleton’s sharp exclamation and suppressed movement, she pursued:

“There’s a big black car that has been hanging on behind for miles and miles. I’ve been watching it in the mirror.”

She pressed her lips tight and swung the wheel sharply. The roadster left the pavement and lurched into a dirt track leading uphill from the highway.

“This,” Tarleton half protested, “goes back to Whitham. It’s a short cut and rough.”

“I wanted to see,” she replied and, an instant later, added: “They are following us. They’re going back to Whitham too.”

CHAPTER XVII

TARLETON looked around. He saw the black limousine's nose dip and heave as it left the main road for the uneven byway. He felt his head jerk again to their own quickened speed. Dust boiled behind the roadster, which shot up the unkempt road to the full-throated clamor of its motor and the grunt and hiss of abused springs. Patricia, her face tense with a queer angry glee, had jammed the accelerator down to the floorboards. Pebbles popped and flew. The wind in Tarleton's ears grew into a strident yell. He looked back again. The black car came on, half hidden in dust, obscuring all behind by its own addition to the cloud.

The roadster soared to the stiff hill's crest. Before them, the short cut to Whitham wriggled across a rolling plateau, with woods to the left and ill fenced pasture on the other hand. The motor's clamor rose triumphant. The girl's rapt body was braced against the mutiny of the steering wheel. Tires slewed and retched as they swung round a curve, and the mounting gale of their passage was a tangible fabric slapping the man's face. Out of the settling dust cloud at the summit, he saw the pursuing car emerge.

"They're dropping back," he shouted to his companion. Her smile was fierce and zestful.

"They'll drop further," she said through set teeth.

The road squirmed away under the lurching hood. Trees went past in a blur. Tarleton saw, far behind, a dim sparkle in the dust cloud. This waned and vanished. They were outfooting their pursuers. He clung to the roadster's side to keep from being flung against the girl's exalted figure. The intoxication that had possessed his companion, enveloped him less completely. Who was it that followed? The question nagged and troubled him. Police? If so, they could have overtaken him long before.

He was aware of the hard bulk in his hip pocket. It comforted him. Another backward glance at the straight stretch of road they had flung behind revealed only a slowly settling haze.

"We've lost them," he exulted. The girl gave a sharp exclamation and wrenched at the wheel. Their headlong flight slackened. Into the smooth tumult of their passage crept a jarring discord, reiterant, mounting until the car throbbed to its beat. Patricia's gray eyes met his in forced composure.

"There's a tire down," she said.

He peered out into the dwindling gale and was sickened by the flat spread of the fabric beneath the right front wheel.

Beyond a crumbling stone wall, splashed with reddened vine, trees stood in a clump, and beneath them squatted a shabby white house and a swaybacked barn. Patricia swung the limping roadster into the weed-grown lane that led to them. Tarleton, as the car hobbled along the track, searched the buildings for sign of life and found none. In the bright, cool glare of noon, they were bleak and deserted. The windows of the dwelling were boarded; its door shut tight.

He leaped out before the car had halted and, running to the porch, turned the knob. The portal did not stir. The girl stood up in the car and looked toward the uneven line of trees that marched beside the road they had left. Between their trunks, Tarleton could see the swirl of an approaching dust cloud.

Patricia was at his side before he was halfway to the car. Her face was pale and her breath quick, but her voice and eyes were steady.

"The barn," she directed. "The barn."

They fled across the back yard to it. The sagging door swung open raspingly at Tarleton's tug, revealing empty stalls and a ladder reaching up into the dusk of a loft. As he tried to push the door shut behind them, he heard, above the complaint of hinges, the shrill kindred sound of suddenly applied brakes. The sagging portal resisted. From the barn's depths, Patricia called him sharply.

Peering into the gloom, he heard a harsh stirring aloft and the girl's reiterated summons. When he had swarmed up the ladder to the mow, she was creeping across its mouldy hay to a dust-crusted window set in the barn's gable. She rubbed clear a portion of the pane. He flung himself beside her and saw the black limousine roll abreast of the roadster and halt.

Men climbed out. Four took cover about the dwelling. The fifth, lingering, yelled something indistinguishable. At length the others emerged and joined him. Together they advanced toward the front door and vanished behind a corner of the house. Faintly, a second later, Tarleton heard the crash and tear of splintering wood.

He turned from the window and burrowed violently in the musty hay.

"Patricia," he panted at last, rising to his knees. The girl turned from the window. The wan light revealed her face, a dark cameo against the dull glow of the dusty pane, and crystallized his resolution. He spoke briskly and held the automatic pistol toward her.

“Take it,” he commanded and, as she instinctively obeyed, continued, “get in that hole I’ve dug and lie still. I’ll cover you. They’ll search the barn next. I’m going to stand by the door. When they start this way, I’ll run for it. They’ll follow me.”

“No,” she said, her fingers closing upon the stubby little weapon. He scowled.

“Do you think,” he asked savagely, “I’m going to drag you deeper into this? Do as I say. Lie still, and there are three chances in four they won’t find you. I’ll lead them away. But if anyone comes up here, use that gun. Do you know how?”

“Perfectly,” she replied, and settled the butt more firmly in her palm.

“Good,” he exclaimed, and motioned toward the hollow he had made. “Hurry.”

She did not stir. She only watched his face, desperate and palely glimmering in the twilight, and said quietly:

“I won’t. They’ll kill you.”

From the direction of the house a voice called shrilly. He flinched and glared at her.

“There’s no time to argue,” he hissed. “Lie down.”

“No,” she said again. He returned angrily:

“Suit yourself. I’m going.” He crept toward the ladder.

“Stop,” she commanded. The weapon he had given was pointed at him. Her face was calmly determined. “You won’t go down,” she told him, “to be killed. Don’t you move an inch further toward that ladder, John Tarleton, or I’ll shoot you. In the leg. I mean it.”

The steady pistol, her stiff composure convinced him.

“I won’t have you save me by being killed yourself,” she insisted. “We’ll go through this together. Please,” she begged with passion softening the clear resolution of her speech. “Please.”

“Patricia,” he urged, “for God’s sake, listen: If I charge out as they come this way, I can put the barn between me and them. They’ll be too startled to shoot—or, anyway, to hit—and behind the barn it’s downhill to a swamp. If I can make that, they’ll never catch me. Listen. If all five of them chase me I’ll yell. If you hear me whoop three times, fast, don’t hide here any longer. Slip out and get their car and drive away like——”

The bang of the pistol, fired almost in his face, stunned him for an instant. He flung himself to one side and caught the weapon. She made no effort to resist. She pressed both hands against her eyes.

Through the clap of the explosion it had seemed he had heard his own body fall with a thud and a clatter, and now, like an echo of that delusion, muffled sound rose from below. He peered over the mow's shaggy edge. In the pale fan of light streaming through the half-open door, a dark sprawled form stirred, hiccupped, and was still.

The girl's face was shuttered by her hands.

"He was—creeping up the ladder," she said in a muffled voice. "Did I ____"

"No," Tarleton soothed. "It's all right."

The smack of a bullet through the shingles above and the crash of the explosion from the half-open door came together. He fired at the man, who whipped out of view, and knew he had missed. Someone invisible shouted in the distance, and a nearer voice replied. The form at the ladder's foot lay motionless now. Tarleton, meeting the girl's eyes, gave a tight little smile.

"Come away from that window," he ordered. The childish docility with which she crept to the hollow he had dug in the hay softened his fierce grin. The windowpane vanished as a bubble bursts. Bullets tore bright holes in the shingles. She flinched. He laid a quieting hand on her shoulder.

A gust of fresh air invaded the rank smelling mow. He heard the dry rustle of trees in the wind and, beneath their sound, a low mumble of voices. The girl, curled up in the depression, looked up with serenely trustful eyes. She raised a cold hand and laid it on his. He said:

"I've only five cartridges left. You should have let me go. It would have been sweeter than dying with you, to die for you. I love you. I guess I've loved you ever since I was born. I can tell you that now, because—— Are you frightened?"

Her arms were about his neck. She whispered unfalteringly:

"It was written, my dear."

"You've known it, too?" he asked, when their kiss was ended. She nodded.

"Long before ever I saw you, John."

Outside a voice squalled: "Hey, Tarleton."

He stiffened, thrust the girl gently aside and shouted:

"Well?"

"Listen," the nasal whine pursued, "heave out your rod and come along after it, and we'll let the jane get by."

"Go to hell," Tarleton bawled after a momentary pause.

"Aw right," the voice surrendered. "You've asked for it."

The man said to the girl beside him:

"If there was even a remote chance, I'd take it. But you know too much for them to let you go."

She nodded. A rasping thump against the barn's wall drew them apart. He sat, gun tight in his fist, with a wrinkled alert face, sniffing, sniffing.

"I was afraid so," he said at length. "They're going to burn us out, Pat darling. Smell it?"

The scent of smoke floated like an invisible cobweb through the loft. They heard the pop and sputter of kindling flame. The panic Tarleton conquered was succeeded by the unscrupulous ferocity of the trapped.

"By God!" he swore, tight lipped, and rose to hands and knees. "We don't go that way, Pat."

He crept to the window and suddenly peered over the sill. His hat jumped from his head at the bang of the shot. His own followed like an echo. The man who stood at the barn's corner spun and plunged out of view behind its protection. The girl saw Tarleton duck back, grow rigid, and then, screaming madly, empty his gun skyward.

The hammering of the explosions, his shrill yelping froze her. His nerve had snapped. He had gone insane. She shuddered, and the face he turned toward her, tear-wet and twitching, confirmed belief.

"Patricia," he gulped. "Patricia!" and wheeling to the window yelled again. She crept toward him. Neither heeded the last wild bullet that tore through the roof above them. The hand he fastened on her shoulder dug into her flesh. The arm he pointed shook.

"Look," he babbled. "Look at 'em."

She saw frost-rusted grass over which three of their late attackers blundered, hauling a fourth figure toward the car. She saw the prim, harsh angles of the deserted house, the dusky splendor of hills beyond, remote and unmoved as the benignity of God. Her eyes followed the lane toward the byway they had traveled. She caught her breath and all at once felt her nerves tune themselves to Tarleton's crazy shouting.

Two by two they rode, eight mounted men in gray. Sunlight glistened on horses and struck particles of fire from equipment. She marked the pink dots of faces beneath gray slouch hats, all turned in their direction. She heard the clatter of hoofs change and quicken.

The sergeant commanding the detail that pursued the short cut to the fair at Whitham turned in his saddle, bawled to his men. They swung into the lane. Horses' heads tossed. Spurs drove home. With the sound of distant

surf, the little column launched itself, gray bodies swaying in rhythm with the galloping horses.

A shot popped loudly from the group that hoisted the wounded man into the black limousine. Someone yelled. The oncoming tempest of horses was too much for them to withstand. They scattered and fled blindly, while the wounded man squalled curses.

The charging column broke and spread. The orderly gallop dissolved into a pell-mell hunt. Two of their late assailants sprinted past the barn, mouths agape, faces blank with terror, and plunged from view down the slope toward the brush-covered marsh, pursued by four bellowing troopers. Tarleton and the girl heard a final shouted order to halt, and then the bang-bang-bang of revolver shots. The third man, mad with terror, dodged about the house like a harried rat, turned at last to fire, point blank, at the red-faced trooper who pursued, and went down yelping beneath the horse, to lie, still and dusty, when the hoofs had passed.

Tarleton turned to the sobbing girl beside him.

"Just because," he said unsteadily, "I've had hysterics is no excuse for you."

They were aware that smoke gushed past their heads. The crackling below had swelled to a roar. Tarleton stared back into the lurid glow that pulsed and spread.

"They weren't," he said gruffly, "any too soon. Give me your hands. I'll let you down."

The girl dangled from the window and dropped easily to the ground. The man followed and stared at the sergeant who cantered across the barnyard, reining with difficulty his fretting chestnut.

"What's all this?" he demanded.

"Felonious assault, attempted murder," Tarleton replied, evading the dancing hoofs. He coughed in a sudden swirl of smoke and added, "Put in arson, too."

"I know you," the sergeant said suddenly.

"You ought to," the other replied in a level voice. "You're Harry England and I used to be Sergeant Tarleton of H. This is Miss Arnold, Follansbee Arnold's niece."

England saluted sharply and swung his snorting mount.

"Pleased," he said. "I'll be back," and cantered downhill toward the confusion of crackling brush and voices.

Tarleton led Patricia to her car. Pale flame had swallowed one end of the barn and spread a great horsetail of smoke across the sky. Before the house, one trooper held three sweating horses. His two dismounted brethren bore from the dwelling's rear the man who had been ridden down. The riders who had been beating the swamp followed the sergeant uphill on panting, mud-splashed mounts.

"Two got away," England grumbled, dismounting beside Tarleton. "How many were there?"

"Five," the other responded over his shoulder as he lifted Patricia, whose knees had suddenly mutinied, into her car.

"Two," England counted aloud and nodded to the wounded man, who lay on the limousine seat, "and one is three and that bird is four." He jerked his head toward the troopers who bent over the trampled man. One of them said mildly:

"This guy's just as dead as he can be, sergeant."

"Where's the fifth?" England rasped. Tarleton, hurrying toward the well, stopped abruptly. His face went white.

"Dead," he replied, and nodded toward the blaze that had been a barn. "In there."

CHAPTER XVIII

JAMES CARRIGAN paused midway in a snore to swear at his Japanese, who tapped his employer's shoulder again, even more peremptorily.

The reporter pried open one eye to observe his wrist watch, and resultant indignation banished drowsiness.

"You ginger-ale guzzling moron," he began with mounting venom, "didn't I leave you a note not to wake me until——"

Miyako drew in his breath and bobbed his head.

"Excuse," he begged. "Porice are here. For Mr. Tarreton."

"Police?" Carrigan groaned and sat up. "For Tarleton? Well, don't stand there sucking wind. Where is he?"

"Out," the Japanese replied.

"Why," the reporter snarled, and stopped rubbing his touseled head. "The ivory-headed goof! I told him——"

He paused to stare with surprise that curdled into dislike at the plainclothes man who, uninvited, tramped into the bedroom.

"Where," the intruder demanded huskily, "is this John Tarleton? Hey?"

"The chances are," Carrigan returned, squinting near-sightedly and pawing on the bedside table for his glasses, "that even if I knew I'd tell you to go to hell. I don't, as a matter of fact. So go to hell, anyway."

His horn-rimmed spectacles improved his vision and made worse his temper.

"Flatty," he demanded, "what do you think this is? The Grand Central Station? Who told you to come busting in here?"

"Listen, smart guy," his visitor rasped, and tapped his breast. "I gotta warrant here for the arrest of John Tarleton, sworn out by Follansbee Arnold; charge of burglary. What do you think of that?"

He thrust forward a truculent jaw and glared. The tidings subdued Carrigan's wrath. His face relaxed into professorial melancholy; his eyes grew abstracted. The plainclothes man sneered. The reporter asked politely:

"Would you care to look under the bed?"

"You," the intruder countered, "get up and come around to the station. Hear me?"

"Just barely," the other replied. "What station? Oh, yes? Tell Captain Finn, Jimmy Carrigan of the *Standard* asks him to boot you one, as a favor. He's probably wanted to plenty, and besides, he'll have his shoes on."

He beamed acidly at the policeman, whose face lost much of its truculence, who fidgeted and offered:

"Look, there's no need in being tough."

"That's what I thought in the first place," Carrigan agreed with a trace of a grin. "Let me see that warrant."

The plainclothes man hesitated and then complied. The reporter scanned it closely and handed it back.

"Looks all right," he commented. "Don't know what papers Tarleton's supposed to have stolen, do you? No? Neither do I."

He pushed himself out of bed and stood, rumpled and ungainly, before the policeman.

"I don't know where Tarleton is," he said with candor. "When he comes back, I'll bring him around to the station myself. Tell the skipper that. If he wants you to wait for him, wait outside."

Ten minutes later, dressed and hurriedly breakfasting, Carrigan vainly cross-examined his servant. Thereafter, he telephoned Arnold's home, to be informed that its owner could not be disturbed, and seemed remotely cheered when told additionally that Miss Arnold was not at home.

"Miyako," he asked gravely, gathering up hat and stick, "you never heard of the noble Bayard or stout Sir Launcelot, did you?"

"No, sir," the other beamed.

"The Japs," Carrigan told him, "are certainly one great little people," and hurried away to Arnold's residence. There the butler, a heretofore cherished acquaintance, informed him with fond firmness that Mr. Arnold could not be seen. Expostulation and persuasion were equally futile. Miss Arnold had gone out without saying when she would return. Mr. Arnold and Mr. Spillane were together in the library. Mr. Arnold had left explicit orders that they were not to be disturbed. Mr. Arnold had said that on no account, now or later, would he see newspapermen.

"And," the butler concluded, condoning a friend's frailty, "you are a newspaperman, after all, Mr. Carrigan."

The reporter descended the steps, outwardly downcast, inwardly alert, and crossed the street. There he paused with a half-formed determination to wait, catlike, for the appearance of Spillane, and presently forgot his

resolution in contemplation of the Arnold residence and the houses adjoining.

The dwelling from which he had been barred and those to its right and left were contemporaries, born in a period when wealth was content with brownstone ugliness. Arnold's house and its westward triplet retained the dignity of ripe old age, but the most easterly of the three had given up the ghost. Its boarded windows, a real-estate sign upon its door, proclaimed its extinction. Carrigan's melancholy eyes dwelt upon its lifeless bulk, while he attempted to imagine, step by step, the tactics of a daylight burglar.

Presently he shrugged, as though discouragement had vanquished him, and walked deliberately toward Lexington Avenue. Not until he was well out of range of the Arnold windows did he cross the street and hurry westward again, pushed on by some irresistible surmise.

Before the vacant dwelling he paused. His studious face was doleful. His eyes alone betrayed excitement. They raked the somnolent street, considered the basement grille and the large, uncompromising padlock that adorned it. Carrigan crept up the littered steps toward the sign-emblazoned front door. Holding his breath, tense as a gambler who has wagered all on the wheel's one spin, he grasped the knob and thrust against the portal. It resisted, then swung inward. He entered and closed it quickly behind him, grinned shakily, and relaxed against the door.

The house was dark and silent. The air was stale. His eyes at last began to find outlines in the gloom, the lighter oblong of a doorway off the hall, the upward slant of a balustrade. He struck a match. The wooden treads of the stair before him were deep in dust, and on this were stamped the recent prints of feet, ascending and descending.

"James," Carrigan told himself aloud, "you have been wasting your talents," and, dropping the match, stole upward through the darkness. By the time he reached the top flight and emerged into light filtering down palely through the overhead skylight, he was sweating, less from exercise than apprehension, for his upward passage and the cheepings, creaks, and strange flutterings to which it woke the house had done his nerves no good.

On the floor beneath the skylight was a puzzle of footprints and tracks that led to and from a ladder lying along one wall. He picked this up and, a moment later, stepped out upon the roof. Tar-embedded gravel crunched beneath his feet, and on the tile-capped boundary wall between the houses he found a space rubbed clean of dust and cinders, as though a body had slipped across it, and one clearly outlined print of a hand, gloved.

He let himself down cautiously upon the Arnold roof and crept to the scuttle. It rose with a creak that ran agonizingly down his spine. For an instant, he hesitated; then stole down the ladder and pulled the scuttle shut above him. In the bare top-floor hallway he waited, breathing warily through open mouth. Noises floating up the stair well urged him to flee. He gulped and gripped the balustrade with a sweating palm. Someone walked across the hall below, setting his heart to quicker beating with each step. A door closed and he heard the muffled whine of a vacuum cleaner at work. Taut and breathless, he forced himself downward.

Carpet muffled his tread on the flight below. He attained the second-floor hall and pulled himself together with a wan grin. A half-open door afforded a glimpse of a bedroom and the maid who moved about it. The opposite portal was shut but, laying his ear against it he could hear, within, the rumble of male voices.

Carrigan hooked his cane over an arm, tugged at his coat lapels, removed his hat, and, drawing a deep breath, turned the knob.

"Good-morning," he said politely as he entered.

From their seats before the paper-stacked table, Arnold and Spillane looked up sharply, the former with amazement slowly turning to indignation; his assistant with a frightened widening of his eyes, immediately suppressed. Both recognized him, but there was no acknowledgment in Spillane's regard nor in Arnold's cold voice.

"I told Maitland I could see no one."

His stern old eyes considered the intruder's faintly disheveled tweeds, battered hat, and dwelt with mounting disapproval upon the solemn spectacled face. It was pale. There was a dust smudge upon its forehead, but the eyes below were brightly defiant.

"It's not," said Carrigan, and found courage and competence in the sound of his voice, "Maitland's fault. He told me. I came in—anyway."

Again, for a brief instant, he thought he saw a pallid flicker of fear in Spillane's eyes. Arnold said with austere scorn:

"I had believed till now that the *Standard* was one paper that did not employ house breakers. I'll ask you to go, Mr. Carrigan."

The reporter deliberately hung his stick on the back of a chair and laid his hat on its seat.

"Suppose," he suggested, "we waive the fact I'm a newspaperman. I'm not here professionally. Nothing we say will get into print through me. I'm John Tarleton's friend, Mr. Arnold. You've a warrant out against him for burglary."

Spillane asked:

"Just what's your interest in this, Jimmy?"

"You couldn't have heard me," the reporter answered. "I said I was his friend."

The lawyer smiled, and his clever face was derisive.

"Sent out," he asked, "to scout by Tarleton, eh?"

"Tarleton," Carrigan replied, "doesn't even know he's accused. He went out this morning before your fat-headed dick reached my apartment."

"Where is he now?" Arnold queried sharply.

Carrigan confessed. "I know with whom, but not where. But I do know this, Mr. Arnold: He had no more to do with the theft of that Horowitz statement than I did."

"Who told you it was the Horowitz statement?" Spillane asked with a grin of triumph.

"You did," the reporter returned. "Just now. I'd only guessed." He turned from his questioner's reddening face to Arnold. His voice was immensely earnest.

"I've told you why I've intruded here, quite unforgivably, sir. I ask you to recall that warrant in return for my assurance that I'll bring John here as soon as he gets back."

His tone, the candor of his distress, relaxed the wrinkles about Arnold's eyes, leaving them weary but more kindly. His voice had lost a measure of its austerity.

"Mr. Carrigan," he said, "I've two regrets: one that we have to arrest your friend, and the other that we didn't do it sooner." He raised a hand, checking the other's retort, and continued sympathetically: "I can understand your feeling. I know what distress it is when a friend proves unworthy. Facts can be very painful things, but I call your attention to them, Mr. Carrigan:

"Your friend manages to lead the man he was chosen to escort here, who was immensely important to our committee, into the hands of assassins. He manages to escape himself. Since then he has been seen in the company of the very men we intend to hunt down. He calls here yesterday on the pretext of seeing me. Through some mistake, or his own persuasion, he is left alone in this room. I return to find that he has gone, and I discover that the statement of the very man he managed to have killed is gone too. I send a policeman to arrest him. He has vanished, and even you, his friend, don't know where he is."

He spread his big thin hands and looked across them at Carrigan. Sympathy faded from his face, leaving it stubborn.

"I appreciate your offer to bring Tarleton here. I wish you might."

Carrigan trapped Spillane's expression of satisfaction. Anger stirred in the reporter and was controlled by an indefinable suspicion. Something, a queer sixth sense insisted, was not right about Spillane. There was discord in the man, a furtive cunning he had never marked before. Resolutely he thrust aside conjecture and turned to Arnold.

"May I answer you rather at length, sir?" he asked, and at the old man's murmured assent, spoke quickly, incisively, in the defense of his friend. He told briefly of the years he had known Tarleton. Of the plight in which his friend had been plunged by the Horowitz murder; of the man's fantastic attempt, when discharged from the service, to find the murderer. He spoke of his own and Gannon's aid toward that end.

"It has been," he pursued, "one man, with some help from Gannon and me, against an organized mob in this town. The odds against his success are ridiculous. The chance he would stay long alive was remote. He wanted to get enough material together to come to you and clear himself."

"You are eloquent, Mr. Carrigan," Arnold returned with dry courtesy, "but I really don't see how——"

The ghost of a smile haunted Spillane's mouth. The reporter saw it and, prompted again by a stir of intuition, revised his defense, omitting much.

"I'm coming to that," he said. "You say he led Horowitz into a trap. He can prove to you that the trap was set for both of them by someone in New York who knew when Steve was to arrive. You say someone has told you he has been seen with crooks. Mr. Arnold, you can't find what Tarleton's hunting by sitting in the reading room of a Y. M. C. A. You say he called here yesterday. So he did. But he had no hand in the theft of that statement."

Spillane's cynical voice intruded.

"Jimmy," it patronized, "you ought to run for alderman. Yesterday, the only nonresidents who entered this house were Tarleton and I. He didn't take that paper, you say. We've reason to know he did. But if he didn't, did I? Or was it an inside job? Or did someone fly through a window?"

"I should," the other retorted, "be a detective, which is not quite as bad as being an alderman, thanks just the same, Mr. Spillane. Did you ever think that there's a vacant house next door; that someone could cross the roofs above and slip down here and out again without anyone seeing him?"

"Oh, come now, Mr. Carrigan," Arnold complained, losing patience. "Why take up our time with fantastic——"

Carrigan grinned, not at him but into Spillane's face.

"Not so darned fantastic," he replied, "because I came in that way twenty minutes ago. The front door of Number 137 is unlocked, and someone recently went up the stairs there and across the roof and back down the stairs again."

"Impossible," Spillane jerked, and coughed violently.

"I keep telling you," Carrigan said mildly, "that I just did it."

Arnold, waiting until his assistant's agitation had subsided, said slowly:

"Possible, perhaps, Mr. Carrigan, but most improbable. Particularly when my niece has admitted she found Tarleton standing before the picture that conceals my safe and, now that the police are searching for him, he cannot be found anywhere."

"Which picture?" Carrigan asked quickly and Arnold, after a second's hesitation, nodded toward Patricia's portrait. A smile of unwilling amusement spread over the reporter's face.

"Maybe," he ventured, "it would be pertinent to point out that my fool friend has risked getting himself thoroughly murdered for the sake of riding in the Park this morning with that portrait's original."

Twenty minutes later Carrigan ran downstairs, waved jauntily to a stunned and pop-eyed butler, and let himself out of Arnold's home before the servant could move or find his voice. Self-satisfaction accompanied him as he hurried toward the corner and a telephone. Over the opposition of Spillane, he had won Arnold to withdrawing the charge against Tarleton. He had guaranteed that his friend would present himself at Arnold's home that evening. He, in spite of Spillane's disparagement, had interested the grim old man in Gannon and had promised to try to induce the policeman to accompany Tarleton.

Yet a frown had replaced his grin when he emerged from the booth. Gannon was not at home. Tarleton had not returned. He cursed them both as ungainly strides carried him down the avenue. Thereafter, his thoughts were so all-enveloping that he walked on, despite his aversion to exercise.

It was Spillane who bothered him. All at once a sinister aura had spread itself about Spillane. Carrigan acknowledged its presence, while admitting inability to identify it. Trivial divergencies of the man from normal—strange stresses in his voice, inconsiderable movements, a flavor of pretense in this or that gesture—had made him suddenly worthy of suspicion. Of being—what? Carrigan shrugged and shook his head, irritably, but the question still hovered, nagging and evasive as a deer fly.

While he had disclosed the tale of the fraudulent telegram, he had watched Spillane with covert intentness, but the man's demeanor had remained calm, unflawed. And yet, when the reporter had mentioned Draw's disappearance, he had felt, rather than seen, uneasiness stir in Draw's erstwhile friend.

Varicolored traffic, somber private cars, and the harlequinade of taxis flowed past. Against the afternoon sky rose the pinnacled skyline, remote, contemptuous. He scowled at the segment of the immense city, and strove to visualize the sinister forces that warred bitterly upon each other beneath surface bustle and pomp. For an instant he thought of searching out Tucket. No friendly or charitable impulse, he knew, had impelled the grim little man to aid Tarleton. It was a segment of some campaign dark and deep as any medieval Florence saw. If Tucket would talk!

He plodded aimlessly onward. Lacking a lever to pry forth information, he knew Tucket would remain as dangerously impassive and reticent as a coiled spring.

Betty! Thought of her seemed an actual obstacle over which he stumbled, to halt narrow-eyed and thoughtful. He recalled her pent vehemence of the evening before, when she had surrendered Draw's photograph. Once he had achieved his mission he had not lingered to question her further. Now he cursed himself for delaying so long, glanced at the street sign on the corner where he lingered and turned purposefully westward. She might be the link between Draw and the fake telegram. And Draw might be Wain's tool.

The sound of avenue traffic dwindled behind him. He hurried on, oblivious of the rank of outmoded private houses he passed. His mind was now as purposeful as his long, lurching stride.

Before his feet the pavement cracked loudly and the deflected bullet soared wailing past his ear. A man ran toward him. Fifty yards behind, a charging policeman flourished his revolver and yelled.

In the instant he hesitated, Carrigan recognized the fugitive. The white face was twisted into a grinning mask of effort. The brim of the hat was blown upward by the speed of flight. As he approached, Frankie Tucket jerked one hand toward his shoulder holster, but already the reporter had rejected his first impulse and had followed its successor. He dived into the adjoining basement. The dark figure flashed by to the panic beat of shoes on concrete, and a householder darting from his doorway to peer after him collided with the pursuing policeman, who reeled, almost fell, and brought up against a lamp post, too breathless, for the instant, even to swear.

Carrigan, peering out, saw the fugitive swing onto the running board of a moving cab and vanish. The reporter emerged from his retreat, and the red-faced, panting patrolman shifted his wrath from his first cringing target.

"You," he bawled, "whyn't you—stop him?"

"I hadn't lost," Carrigan returned, "anybody with a rod. Who was it?"

"Wish I knew," the policeman replied, and pumped profanity from his overstrained lungs.

"Done something, eh?" the man with whom he had collided asked ingratiatingly.

"Just murder," replied the patrolman, and glared at him. "That's all."

CHAPTER XIX

IGNATIUS LOYOLA TUCKET restored the receiver of his private telephone to its hook and found release for overstrained nerves in yapping at his nephew.

"For Gossakes, you ain't goin' to bed, are ya?"

Slender, almost girlish in silken underwear, Frankie smiled dreamily over his shoulder and drew from his bureau a shirt even more lustrous than that he had discarded.

"Just changin'," he informed his uncle, and returned from the closet with another suit, fresh from the hands of a tailor, who had cut the fabric to allow for the bulge of the holster beneath the left armpit, and had fashioned in the trousers, to be concealed by the vest flap, a narrow, slanting pocket for its owner's additional "belly gun."

Derision faded from the elder man's face as he watched his nephew dress. A look of simian mournfulness and worry dragged downward the usually taut lines about his sharp nose and flat cheeks.

"Frankie," he said at last, a trifle wearily, "I was just talkin' to the Chi syndicate. If Wain acts nasty, we'll never get that merger over."

"Yeah?" the other queried, carefully knotting his tie before the mirror.

"Yeah," his uncle snapped, affronted at his indifference. "And you should break down, eh, Beau Nash?"

Once more his expression sagged into gloom. The momentary briskness ebbed from his voice, and it acquired an unwonted note of appeal.

"Frankie, I been working on it a year. A big organization with wholesale business methods is what this racket needs. And now it's 'postponed,' they say. Postponed nothin'. They ain't throwin' in with a mob that's bein' pushed around. They've heard about Maxie."

His nephew pulled his vest into place over narrow hips, and with eyes still on his reflection, offered:

"There's one way of fixin' that, Dip."

The deadliness in his voice irked his uncle afresh.

"Oh, sure," he agreed with bitter irony. "Burn him. That's the only idea you've got. And then you're rubbed out, and hell pops, and someone's gotta start at the bottom and build up again. That's your idea of how to run a racket, ain't it? My idea is amalgamation and cutting down of overhead."

"Yours ain't been so successful," Frankie reminded him. The taunt banished Tucket's depression.

"Listen," he squalled, "I ain't in the undertaker's parlors yet. Don't think I ain't got an ace up my sleeve—Lily Horvak. Lessee how Maxie talks his way past her."

His nephew wheeled and faced him, an elegant, baleful figure.

"Look," he asked, as though smitten by sudden thought, "you're putting that smooth big number on a tough spot, bringin' her to spill on Maxie."

"Applesauce," the elder man returned. "Act your age. Maxie don't bump off janes."

"Don't he?" Frankie inquired. "You say. Me, I bet he would even."

He stared at his uncle a moment with such venom that the other, after an instant's blank surprise, grinned.

"Well," he exclaimed. "Cooked at last! Frankie, the frail hater, hangin' on the ropes. Can ya tie that?"

Anger blackened his nephew's lovely face.

"That's the idea of all the front, eh?" Dip pursued mercilessly. "Gotta show her what the well dressed men are wearin'."

"Lay off," Frankie suggested. The other glanced at him and complied.

"Listen," he begged placatingly. "Once she's been here an' told Lew about Maxie's frame-up, it ain't gonna do him no good to bother her, is it?"

"If," his nephew promised softly, "he lays a finger on her, I'll shoot him six times before I kill him, and you and Lew and the Big Fella himself can all go hang outa window. Get me?"

His uncle considered the ferocity in the dark eyes an instant before he replied:

"There ought to be music with this, Frankie, but listen: You're all the folks I got. If you're that way about Lily, it's oke by me. If it was gonna help, I'd ditch the racket and blow. It ain't, though. Maxie rigged her to bump me. She didn't. He'll know that. He'll know she's squealed or, anyway, gone yella. If he burns women he's got plenty reason right now, ain't he?"

"Yeh," Frankie agreed after a pause. "I'll be blowin'."

"She ain't due here for near two hours," Tucket objected.

"I'm goin' back there," his nephew returned, "an' if she won't lemme in, I'll sit on the steps till it's time, Dip."

At the door he paused and said with a recurring flare of protest:

“This ain’t the sort of a lay to drag a jane in on, Dip.”

“Did I?” his uncle demanded vehemently. “She walked into it right up to her neck, didn’t she?”

The other nodded and left without further speech. Ignatius Loyola Tucket passed a hand through his stiff hair with a harried gesture.

“About one more day of this,” he told his bedroom wall with bitterness, “an’ I’ll be anti-prohibition myself.”

Pale eyes, peering over the edge of an open newspaper, pursued the exquisite Frankie through the lobby. As he stepped into the revolving door, Lupo cast aside the concealing journal and followed.

The younger Tucket hesitated at the doorman’s offer of a cab and then shook his head. He walked briskly away, and entering a garage a block further on, suffered fawning attendants to bring out his own glittering coupé. His baby wasn’t going to ride in a hack. There were other slowly crystallizing resolutions that underlay his decision.

He drove with so catlike a judgment of space and opportunity; he snaked his glittering car so deftly through the welter of traffic, that the cab in which Lupo followed was completely outdistanced. With each block, it seemed to the infatuated Frankie that his errand grew more urgent. He spun off the avenue into her street, so sharply that a crossing policeman glared, and stopped before her house with a mad squeal of brakes. Oblivious of the fact that he had parked his car against a fire hydrant, he rushed up the steps.

The electric door latch chattered in answer to his ring no more rapidly than his own heart. He was breathless when he rapped on her door. It did not open, but from its other side, a negroid voice demanded suspiciously: “Who dar?”

He spoke his name and his errand with strange awkwardness. At length the door opened a crack and then swung wide. Stalwart, deep-bosomed Lily Horvak observed him with shyness softening her bold comeliness.

“It ain’t,” she said with an embarrassment that sounded hostile, “time to go yet.”

“Nope,” he acknowledged, “but I kinda thought——” He paused and added with a rush, “I wanted to see you.”

“Oh,” she said awkwardly, and was alarmed at the reluctance in her voice. “Come in.”

In the room, still redolent with vanished funeral flowers, they considered each other. Her eyes met his an instant and looked away nervously. The

encounter turned him breathless again. He broke the unendurable silence with triteness.

"Where," he demanded, "you been all my life?"

"Aw," she returned, and her large white hands twisted each other, "stop it."

Her uneasy voice fortified him. There was pleading in his eyes and voice.

"I'm nuts aboutcha, baby," he confessed. "And don't think I ain't."

All her Amazonian self-confidence deserted her. She considered him like a child who fears that a glorious promise is, after all, jest.

"You say," she returned weakly.

Greatly daring, he caught her uneasy hands. They did not resist, but rested cold and abject against his hot palms.

"If I didn't mean it so much," he gulped, "I could tellya easier. I wantcha, Lily. I'm nuts aboutcha."

They stood thus, through a long silence, awkward and exalted. He asked at length:

"Sore?"

She shook her head stiffly.

"Nope," she responded, and with humbleness laid her gift before him.

"There's never been nobody," she offered unsteadily, "till now."

For an instant they held each other close. Her kiss was hungry as his. Then, because the room grew unstable and breath came hard, they drew apart. She wiped her eyes and gave a quavering little laugh. He sought desperately for adequate speech.

"Listen," he bade. "An' don't think I don't mean it. You coulda bumped Dip today, and know what I'da done? Made a getaway for ya. That's how you stand with me."

"I'm like that too," she confessed, and held out her arms for him.

A clock tritely struck the hour. She felt his body relax suddenly and stepped back to thrust at her bright disheveled hair with trembling fingers.

"We better go," he muttered.

"It ain't time yet," she began, but he checked her.

"Listen, you great big beautiful kid," he bade. "We ain't goin' where you think. We're blowin', you an' me. I'm takin' you out of this—wherever you say."

He laughed softly at the sudden blaze of joy in her eyes, but it flickered and died. He strove to rekindle it.

"Think I'd let my sweetie mix in this racket?" he demanded. "I ain't like that. This town ain't safe for you, with Maxie an' Dip ribbin' each other. We're goin' away, you an' me. The car's downstairs. Pack a bag, an' we blow."

"Frankie," she returned miserably, "I can't. There's Cass's funeral, tomorrow. How'd it look if——"

"I'm rattin' on Dip, ain't I?" he interrupted. "I'm walkin' out on him, and we been like that—closer even—always. Is that right? Sure it is. It's you and me, ain't it, Lily?"

Under his imploring eyes her eagerness sprang into flame once more.

"Yeah," she acknowledged. "It's you an' me, Frankie. I'll go."

Presently, while he walked the floor, the Negro woman brought in a suitcase and set it beside the door. When Lily returned, pulling her fur coat about her, worry clouded her lover's face.

"Listen," he said tensely. "You don't think I'm duckin' outa town because there's a heat on? You don't think I'm beatin' it because I'm scared?"

"Aw," she returned, "Frankie, don't I know?"

Her smile absolved him, yet did not quite erase his scowl.

"I ain't scared of nobody," he insisted, poulticing qualms with boasting. "I'd take Little Maxie himself, if Dip didn't make me lay off. I'll go get him now, if you think I'm yella. There's just one thing I'm scared of—losin' you."

"Try an' do it," she told him shamelessly. "Ain'tcha gonna kiss me before we go?"

At length, unsteadily, he picked up the suitcase. She pulled the door shut behind them with a throaty, gleeful laugh. It provoked and stirred him. For a long minute they lingered in the dimly lighted hall, pressed close to each other, wordless, yearning.

He lifted his head sharply and sniffed. They stood apart, and she saw his face grow wicked and his nostrils dilate.

"Cigarette smoke," he whispered. "Someone downstairs."

Below, in slow, furtive succession, three steps creaked loudly. In the angle of the hallway they waited, invisible, unseeing. Cautiously, Frankie thrust her aside.

He went like a cat. Suddenly there was a gun in his hand, pointing downward. She saw his face, terrible in the radiance of the overhead light. She heard his voice rasp:

"Come on, Lupo, if you got the guts."

Below, on the stairway, Wain's gunman did not stir. Lily, standing at Frankie's shoulder, looked down into the bleak visage. Eyes that had been fixed on Tucket shifted to the girl and narrowed into a leer.

"So that," Lupo commented a little hoarsely, "is how it is, eh?"

His hand stirred on the balustrade. He looked at Frankie and moved it no further.

"Maxie," he said to the girl, "sent me."

"I'll be seein' Maxie," Tucket promised, with a satanic smile, "if he sends anyone to bother my jane. Tell him that, you Chicago heel."

Lupo's deadly eyes shuttled from the girl to his enemy. His voice was contemptuous.

"Maxie," he told Lily Horvak, "don't want you to go out no more today. That's his orders."

"Oh, yeah?" Frankie asked. Hatred gleamed between Lupo's narrowed eyelids.

"This broad," he said, "goes back upstairs. Maxie'll tend to the two-timing——"

"One more crack outa you," Frankie promised, "and——"

Lupo interrupted sneeringly:

"Easy to be tough, ain't it, with a rod in your fist and a broad to admire ya? Well, go on and use it, then. There's a cop waitin' by your car outside. Use your rod, yella boy. You don't dare. You ain't got guts to pull the trigger."

With a wide white smile Tucket pulled it.

At the crash of the explosion Lupo pitched forward. Face down, his body slid solemnly back over the steps it had ascended. At their foot, it slumped limply, but one hand moved of its own volition. Flame squirted from beneath the crumpled figure. Through the double thunder of the shot and Frankie's reply Lily cried out.

Above, a door slammed and a voice squalled. Below, on the street, the policeman who had waited vindictively beside Frankie's hydrant-obstructing car stared wildly about and then floundered into the vestibule. After one glance through its window he set his whistle screaming and rang all the apartment bells in rapid succession.

Frankie's dilated nostrils breathed the powder reek while he watched Lupo's knees draw up and cease to move. He turned, as one emerges from coma, to the girl beside him. She sat on the top step, resting wearily against the balustrade. Her eyes were open, but they did not stir. There was puzzled inquiry on her dead face.

Tucket screamed, but the anguish and fury of his cry came from his stiff throat only in a shrill gurgle. Horror that might have numbed another stirred him into red frenzy, shot through by a flaming thirst for reprisal.

He went down the stair in a blundering rush and wrenched at the doorknob the patrolman rattled. The door swung open. He saw the blue-clad figure only dimly, felt the shock of collision not at all. The policeman, reeling from the impact, clutched and missed. There was pavement beneath Frankie's feet. His flight was not fugitive. He ran as one who tried to flee from agony unendurable. He did not hear the whistle shrilling. He did not see Carrigan before him. The misplaced shoulder holster jabbed cruelly against his ribs. Instinctively he adjusted it. As instinctively he swung himself aboard the taxicab and cried to the driver Maxie Wain's address.

The chauffeur stared and asked some question, indistinguishable above the roaring in Frankie's ears. The gunman snarled and reached toward his shoulder. It was enough. The other shrugged and thrust his car into the traffic torrent.

The patrolman, soothed by sight of Carrigan's police card, hurried the reporter toward the Horvak apartment house, retailing, as they went, his own heroism. Behind them trailed a growing queue of the curious. They thrust their way through more who were packed about the door, and were readmitted at last by a hysterical woman. Tenants peered down from above. A man in his shirt sleeves bent over Lupo's cramped body. A girl at the stair's head touched the matted fur on the front of Lily Horvak's mink coat, looked at her fingers, and screamed.

"He ain't dead," the shirt-sleeved one reported to the policeman, nodding toward Lupo.

The gunman stirred. A voice, close to his ear, reiterated a question.

"Who done it?" the kneeling policeman roared. "Who done it?"

Lupo's curved thumb gouged feebly and ineffectually at the eyes of the dimly seen form in blue and brass.

"Go to——" he whispered, coughed, and died.

"You," the patrolman said a few minutes later to Carrigan, "got a better look at the guy than I did."

The reporter shook his head.

“I was too busy getting out of his way,” he lied deliberately.

CHAPTER XX

THREE men sat, voiceless and impassive, in Tucket's room until the hotel telephone's clamor died away. Thereafter, Wain smiled politely into the face of the big man, whose furious voice had been stilled by the bell.

"You were saying, Lew?" he prompted. The other grunted and looked from Maxie who leaned back in his chair, plump hands folded primly across his stomach, to Tucket, who slouched in his with veiled expectancy in his eyes.

Lew shook his head. There was a bovine threat in the gesture.

"I've said it. To both of you. Till my face is sore. This ribbing and muscling's gotta stop."

"Sure," Maxie agreed smoothly. "I'm with you."

The big man ignored his interruption. He drove on angrily, yellow teeth biting off each sentence.

"I've heard that before, too. From both of you. Do you want this town closed tight? You eggs bleat about a push around. Do you want the cops to start one? Any more heat and they will. That's not hot air. That's straight from headquarters. Arnold, the walking corpse, is cranking up his committee. There's a city election next autumn. If there's more trouble we'll shut this town up so tight that the Anti-Saloon League and the Vice Society will go out of business. And don't think we can't."

He glanced at Tucket's carefully composed face and glared at Wain. Dip offered dryly:

"There's always some trouble, Lew. You can't duck it."

"I mean," his admonisher interpreted, "the sort of shooting that gets into the papers. First Horvak, then Pincus. That's two strikes. The next, you're both out."

Wain asked in mild protest: "Why give me the eye, Lew? I don't want ____"

The other cut him off mercilessly.

"Because, the more I hear of that Pincus thing, the sourer it smells, Maxie."

"Just what do you mean by that?" Wain queried, his face still as an oil pool. The other shrugged.

"Nothing but just that," he conceded. "I'm not accusing you. I'm telling you."

Little Maxie replied astoundingly: "Dip says there's bound to be a rough spot here and there. He's right. As for my mob, I want peace. I'm not looking for trouble."

He met Tucket's wary eyes, Lew's amazed stare, without a tremor. His swarthy face simulated candor perfectly. He was more than a gambler confronting misfortune without a tremor. He was a polished actor hiding disaster beneath masterly composure.

An hour ago he had frightened even the veteran Otto Gerlach by his scarlet, screaming fury. Now, he bore the scrutiny of two suspicious men without a tremor and half convinced them.

Four of his henchmen were gone. The telephone message that had wrecked his plans had told of disaster. He had torn the instrument from Gerlach's hand. He had insisted that Dominick, sole member of the quintet to escape, repeat the tale to him. It had been veiled, for safety's sake, in metaphor, but the thin shaken voice of its narrator had lent actuality. Abie and Hump and Joe were in the hands of the state police, living or dead. Armado who had fled with Dominick to the swamp, had died therein with a bullet through his back. What about Tarleton? Dominick did not know.

Wain had dashed the telephone to the floor. He had raged about the room, spurting incredible blasphemy, beating himself about the head with clenched fists, his pudgy body flung about as though it were buffeted by invisible waves of disaster. He had screeched frightful predictions of the fate he had in store for Tarleton, for Dominick the bungler, until Gerlach grew even paler. At length he had dropped in his chair, to writhe with foam gathering in his lip corners.

The loss of four men who were not the gunmen of gangdom but trusted members of his staff, confidential emissaries on darkly devious missions was, for the time, a paralyzing blow. They could not be replaced at once. Plans that he had employed must be abolished. Territory for which he had reached must be relinquished.

He had revived from his spasm, white and shaken, as one emerges from long debauch. He had appeared at Tucket's chamber, plump, dapper, inscrutably sleek, to propose a truce that, an hour earlier, he had been prepared to reject; to play with gambler's skill for terms which, once the news of his defeat reached his rival's ears, would never be offered.

"I'm not looking for trouble. I never have been," he reiterated, and met Tucket's foxy eyes with amiability.

"Yeah," Dip replied skeptically, "I hear you."

Lew looked from one man to the other, and his threatening voice grew heavier with scorn.

"I hear you both. Neither of you wants trouble from the other one. You want to deal it, not take it. Come down to cases. Dip, what's your idea?"

Tucket answered, nodding toward Wain. "Him and Cass had an agreement. I stick by that. He don't."

His eyes flickered to the door, and he looked at his watch with a faint grimace of annoyance. His nephew and Lily Horvak should have appeared fifteen minutes before.

Wain responded, hiding defense beneath the simulation of attack: "Why should I? I made no agreement with Tucket. When Cass fell from his window——"

"Fell," Tucket repeated grimly.

Little Maxie considered him in silence for a moment.

"If I'm wrong," he said at length, with vitriolic calm, "maybe you can correct me."

Lew rumbled impatiently in his throat.

"Let it ride," Dip granted at last.

"Good," Wain approved politely. "We will. To duck any more trouble, I'm willing to let a lot ride. Pincus, for instance."

"Now, wait a minute," Tucket snapped. "I'm clean on that. Cleaner, maybe, than——"

Wain looked at their gloweringly attentive mediator with protest on his round, swarthy face.

"I'm supposed," he asked smoothly, "to have hired the Hon. Diamond Ike to break into my house and kill me, just to put Tucket in bad. Is that the idea?"

"Ever hear," his rival asked with sudden viciousness, "of Lily Horvak?"

Maxie's self-control was perfect. It baffled even Tucket's probing eyes.

"Did she jump out of a window, too," the little man asked suavely, "or did I shoot her?"

"She'll be here," Tucket evaded, scowling at his watch.

"If she says I've seen her in the last six months, she lies," Wain remarked.

"Says you," commented Dip acidly, and flinched at the slap of Lew's hand on his chair arm.

“Lay off,” the big man commanded in a muted bellow. “Come through, Maxie. How much don’t you want trouble?”

Wain pulled a paper from his inside jacket pocket and handed it to his questioner.

“My terms,” he said calmly. “Typewritten.”

Lew’s lips moved as he read. He handed the sheet to Tucket.

“What,” asked the latter, at last raising his head from the few brief lines of script, “is the idea? This is the Horvak split. Nothing else.”

Suspicion and astonishment troubled his canny face.

“I told you,” Maxie reminded him with a shrug, “that I didn’t want trouble. All I want is a guaranteed peace. And guaranteed now, so it’ll stick.”

“Says you,” Tucket began. “Says Cass. Says Ike. You been musclin’ into Harlem. You frame me with Lily——”

“Shut up,” Lew roared. Tucket gulped and complied, but worry lurked in his eyes, and he looked toward the door with something like desperation.

“Dip,” Lew half shouted, speaking his name for the third time. “Come outa it. That lay right with you?”

“It would be,” the other responded slowly, “but——”

“But what?” the mediator pursued impatiently.

“I don’t believe it,” Tucket said at last. “If he’s on the up and up, what’s all the heat been for?”

He regarded the paper again with suddenly quickened interest. Maxie smiled at Lew in patient resignation.

“When a big shot like Cass goes out,” he philosophized, “mobs are likely to run wild a while. There’ll be no more trouble by me, unless——” He nodded eloquently toward Tucket, who was absorbed once more in the paper he held.

“What do you say, Dip?” Lew queried. Tucket looked up, and abstraction faded from his face.

“Oke,” he muttered, but added with reviving suspicion: “unless——”

“Unless,” Lew repeated. “There ain’t gonna be any ‘unlesses.’ There’s gonna be peace and decency, practically, in this town, or neither of you is gonna be here. You eggs agree to them terms?”

“Yeah,” Tucket conceded at last with concealed suspicion.

“Yes,” Wain said smoothly, his revulsion and hatred far better hidden.

“See you keep ’em, then,” Lew growled.

When at length his visitors had departed, Tucket turned angrily to the telephone. Thrice in rapid succession he called the Horvak apartment. Each time the metallic pulsing in his ear proclaimed the line was busy. While he waited for a space before calling again, he drew from his pocket the typewritten paper Maxie had presented and scanned it once more. He was thus occupied when someone rapped on his door. His head jerked up sharply, but he made no response. Twice more the rapping sounded, and then a voice came, muffled but identifiable, through the portal.

"It's Carrigan, Dip. I know you're there."

He stole across the room and suddenly pulled the door open. The reporter's mournful face reproached him.

"You can take your hand off your rod, but thanks for the compliment. Want to frisk me before I come in?"

"Beat it," Tucket snarled. "I'm busy."

The reporter blocked the closing portal with his foot, squeezed into the room, and slammed the door himself. With his back against it, he said to the ruffled, glowering little man:

"What do you know about Lily Horvak?"

"Never heard of her," the other retorted.

"Oh," Carrigan mused aloud. "That's all right, then. It won't be a shock to know she's dead."

Tucket stood quite still, his face a grotesque wood carving whose immobility the reporter vainly tried to shatter. He told with brutal terseness of the discovery of the bodies and paused. Dip stirred and searched his pockets for a cigarette. He lit it with a hand that shook.

"No one," the reporter pursued, "seems to know how it happened or who did it."

"Yeah?" Tucket asked.

"Except me," Carrigan amended calmly.

The cigarette barely trembled as the little man asked between tight lips: "How much?"

"The guy that burned Steve Horowitz," the reporter replied simply.

"I don't know," Tucket replied, and the lengthening ash of his cigarette broke and spilled unheeded on his shoes, "who he is."

"Will you show up," Carrigan asked, "at my flat at, say, nine tonight and tell Tarleton and me what you do know?"

"Sure," the little man agreed, with a readiness so suspicious that Carrigan grinned.

“Meanwhile,” he assured his unwilling host, “I bear a charmed life. I’ve written what I saw and sent it, registered mail, in a sealed inner envelope, to a friend. If I’m alive and healthy tomorrow morning, he’ll return it unopened. Otherwise——” He shrugged and grinned more widely.

“The squeeze, eh?” Tucket commented. Carrigan shook his head.

“Just a swap,” he corrected. “Steve’s killer for your nephew Frankie. At nine promptly, Dip? It’s a bet.”

He departed. With rheumatic slowness Tucket groped for a chair and sat down.

Two blocks from Wain’s residence, Frankie Tucket halted the cab and, disembarking, thrust a twenty-dollar bill into the driver’s hand.

“That,” he said softly, “is for keeping your face shut. Open it, and they’ll be shoveling dirt onto it. Now, blow.”

Dapper and outwardly calm, he stood on the corner and watched the cab out of sight. Frenzy had vanished, anguish had ebbed to leave his purpose additionally sharp. His course was plain, his code simple. Maxie’s hireling had killed Lily. There was one adequate retort. He felt, as he strolled toward Wain’s house, neither compunction nor grief. Thought of Lily was a barely perceptible ache underlying his craving. He was far more conscious of the weight of guns at shoulder and groin. He loitered down the thoroughfare, slender, exquisite, following his instinct with the exclusive purposefulness of the bird-stalking cat.

He recognized in a flare of satisfaction, the glittering car that whirled past, but he slackened rather than quickened his pace. Half hidden by a store awning, he observed the brief ceremony of Wain’s alighting. The limousine moved off. For five minutes Frankie did not stir. Far to the west, towering buildings framed a segment of sunset. A girl passed and paused a long minute on the corner in ostensible preoccupation. Twice she glanced over her shoulder provocatively. He did not even see her.

At length he left the awning’s shelter and went with feline deliberation along the line of shabby houses toward Maxie’s residence. He had formulated no plan. His was the alert opportunism of the hunting animal. The dark alley beside the house was an invitation. He turned quickly into it. An uneven pyramid of ash cans half blocked his way. He huddled beside them.

From the strip of sky overhead, dusk came down, filling the alley with blackness. Lights popped on in the street behind him. A window further down the narrow way was a glowing rectangle. Pans clattered, and he caught the smell of cooking. He did not stir.

Faint, and at first only intermittently triumphing over the steady growl of traffic, he heard the windy voices of men who cried an extra. They came nearer, sounding calamity through the darkening street in hollow, hoarse fury.

One vendor, pausing before the house, chanted indistinguishable disaster until the alley echoed. Against the glowing window a man's head was outlined. It vanished, and a second later Frankie heard the squeak of an opening door followed by the click of the latch as it closed again. Footsteps came rapidly toward him. He could see the glimmer of shirt sleeves and the white apron the man wore. He passed and pausing at the alley mouth, shouted.

Presently he returned, a newspaper in his hand. A shadow drifted away from the ash-can pile and followed him. Frankie heard the jingle of keys. Peering around the corner of the dwelling, he saw the door swing open. He leaped forward and brought the barrel of his pistol down upon the bent head. The thud of the falling body shook the kitchen.

Pots bubbled on the gas range, and fish, already rolled in flour, lay upon the table. The intruder's dazzled eyes did not see the man who had entered from the hall until he cried out. Frankie shot him and sprang across his body through the door it held ajar.

At the hall's far end, stairs went upward. Frankie's feet drummed loudly across the polished floor. He caught the newel post and looked upward. For an instant he saw Maxie's startled face goggling at him from the doorway above, and felt the fierce joy of consummation. He had no thought of strategy, of concealment. A gun in either hand, he went up the stairs as though to an appointed tryst.

Something beat terribly upon his body, checking its rush, pitching it backward. He saw the flicker of fire from the mouth of the submachine gun; Maxie's dire face above it. As he fell, the pistol in either fist spoke once. He went down a deeper, darker incline than the stairway behind him.

In the adjoining boarding house, the dreary ritual of dinner halted an instant.

"Riveting at this time of day?" someone asked incredulously.

"Beating carpets," the landlady corrected with resignation. "That club next door picks out the strangest times for everything."

CHAPTER XXI

PATRICIA ARNOLD'S roadster, its brilliance dulled by dust, slid down the south slope of the Grand Central causeway and was checked by a red crosstown traffic light. Tarleton, who drove, said to the girl beside him:

"You take the wheel and drop me at your corner. I'll go to Carrigan's by taxi."

They changed places before the green lights returned, but the car flashed by her street and continued south. She said, smiling at his protest:

"I'm driving you home. You're too valuable to leave lying around."

"Your uncle," he objected, avoiding her eyes, "will be frantic."

"I phoned him," Patricia replied, "while you were being arraigned. I told him I'd had an accident and would be late."

Before them Park Avenue glowed and flickered, adorned with yellow, red, and green lights, like a great prostrate Christmas tree. The pomp of motors, the steady roar of the traffic tide, setting strongly uptown, blurred and made incredible his recollection of the day.

"It's been a nightmare we've just waked from," he exclaimed. Her eyes looked out of shadows of weariness, but her slender neck still held her head, undrooping. She asked:

"Nightmare? All of it?"

He told her stubbornly: "Some nightmares you wake to are worse than those you wake from."

The city minimized and mocked him. Its strident racket derided dreams and plucked them apart. The welter of lights, the hurrying thousands of cars, the buildings, thrusting back the night with lofty shoulders, all the crass manifestations of wealth and might enthralled him once more, broke hope by their savage impact, hammered and solidified an already half-formed resolution.

Her voice was grave and steady.

"You mean, it would be easier to die with than live with me?"

"Much," he replied hoarsely. Her eyes met his an instant.

"I love you," she said.

He drove himself onward:

"That's out. My dear, you are twenty and rich——"

"Twenty-three," she corrected indignantly.

"Twenty-three," he acknowledged, "and rich and influential and patrician. I'm none of these. And I'm about to be arrested on your uncle's complaint."

His voice, his body, were weary. His eyes smarted in the dazzle of lights. His mind considered the future with sodden grimness. She said carefully:

"I love you. Have you any answer to that?"

"Only," he returned, "that I'll remember it always."

"You don't—flatter, do you, John?" she asked, watching the pavement before them. She swung the roadster off the avenue, into Carrington's street. He said deliberately:

"You forget that I couldn't even buy four tires for this car."

"What has that to do with—anything?" she asked. "It has four tires and a spare. You don't put me, or you—or us, on a very high plane. Are you trying to be rude?"

"Honest," he offered. She said quietly:

"You're succeeding, either way."

He could not tell whether it was the wavering lights of their passage or emotion that troubled her face. Presently, as the car nosed toward the curb, she asked:

"You mean that—it's over, before it's really begun?"

He fumbled with the door latch and replied:

"I mean I'm a bluff and a boaster and—a failure. I've told you what I was going to do, and I've accomplished none of it. Can't you see why it must be over?"

He stepped from the roadster. She tugged at the gear lever and calmly met his miserable eyes.

"*Vaya con Dios*, Don Quixote," she said in a low voice, and her car moved off.

Tarleton let himself into Carrigan's apartment and collided with his friend.

"Well," the reporter commented, masking relief with acidity. "You pick a nice time to take a vacation. Where have you been? Whom have you been with? What have you been doing? You bull-headed cluck, you might have been killed."

He attempted to scowl and only achieved an amazing face that spread into a grin.

"Miyako," he shouted down the hall, "bring ginger ale. What, no ginger ale again? Bring ice, and as soon as Lieutenant Gannon arrives, bring food. The prodigal has returned."

Behind his horn-rimmed glasses his eyes were moist. He pushed his friend into the living room and thrust him into a chair.

"I'm right glad to see you, Buck," he offered, charging his cocktail shaker.

"And there you are," Tarleton concluded a half hour later. "Two corpses and another immolated in the barn. A man with a bullet through his lung, who is as communicative as the dead men, and I'm held on a technical charge of homicide in the custody of Captain Hare, who was my substation sergeant when I was a rookie and is indiscreet enough to trust me."

He looked from Gannon, who chewed his food as though it were the cud of discontent, to Carrigan. The reporter offered, as the table was cleared:

"God takes care of children and idiots, Buck. You qualify both ways."

"There's been a warrant out for you," the police lieutenant informed Tarleton grimly.

"Carrigan told me," the other admitted. "I'm seeing Arnold this evening. Not that I've anything helpful to tell him."

Gannon said in an angry voice: "I'd almost go with you, son. I'm transferred again. To Staten Island."

"Well," Carrigan proposed after a moment's silence, "why don't you, you big yap?"

The lieutenant's little eyes returned from angry contemplation of infinity.

"With what?" he asked. "You know a lot, yourself. Why don't you tell Arnold? Because you can't prove a bit of it. Neither can I. They say the pigs of Iowa are a pleasant and personable crowd. I'm minded to go see."

"Tough, Jerry," Carrigan sympathized.

"Have you just found that out?" Gannon inquired.

He stared at the reporter, who regarded the mantel clock. From the kitchen came the splash and clatter of hasty dishwashing. Tarleton managed a stiff grin.

"Well," he offered, "at this point the three Rover boys in Manhattan picked up their marbles and went home with uniform expressions of disgust."

Gannon pushed back his chair with a snort.

"Wait," Carrigan retorted cryptically. "I'm expecting a caller. Jerry, don't you know enough about the Horowitz bumping to hold it under Fuddy-

duddy Arnold's noble beak and affront him with its stink?"

"Plenty," Gannon growled. "Here's the dope. Cass Horvak finds Maxie is poison. Horowitz, who used to work for Wain, is Cass's man. He gets pinched, and Horvak tips him to squeal to Arnold on Wain in exchange for immunity. There's a leak, somewhere."

"The leak," Carrigan said grimly, "was from Spillane to Betty to Draw. I've found out that much. She admitted that this afternoon. Just a light-hearted talker. Didn't mean any harm."

"Draw," the policeman pursued, "whoever or whatever he is, hands Tarleton the phony telegram. Tarleton takes Steve to the spot—and blooey!"

His smile was bitter with self-derision. His heavy voice blanketed Carrigan's excited comment.

"There it is. How much of it can I prove? Not a word. Horowitz is dead. Horvak is dead. The porter is dead. Draw has evaporated. Make up your own story. It may sound better, and it will get you just as far."

"There is nothing," the reporter commented, "like a nice, well murdered corpse as an investigation stopper."

Tarleton's disheartened eyes had wandered to the lamp-crowned side table on which, face up, lay the photograph of Ira Draw that Carrigan had purloined. He considered it in silence for an instant, and then turned to his host.

"Didn't Spillane——" he began, and checked himself. The reporter looked at him sharply. "I mean," Tarleton revised, "you saw Betty today?"

"I did," the reporter acknowledged. "This afternoon. After admitting she knew about Horowitz and might have talked, she froze tight. She just barely recalled Ira Draw. Someone has told her not to talk, and she's trying hard. I wish I'd stopped to pump her last night. No, I don't, either. You can't ask the wife you've picked out to squeal on your future father-in-law or on herself."

"She tried to borrow a hundred thousand dollars yesterday," Tarleton announced.

"From whom?" his host snapped.

"None of your business," the other replied.

Carrigan grinned. "And that," he taunted, "leaves me completely in the dark!"

He subsided into mournful gravity and reflected aloud:

"But she didn't get it."

"She found she didn't need it," Tarleton said briefly.

"My future father-in-law discovered other assets," Carrigan mused. "He and Draw were friends. That Horowitz statement possibly was worth one hundred thousand dollars to Little Maxie Wain. And there you are!" He gave a despairing gesture.

"Derry," Gannon contributed, "is lieutenant in Wain's precinct and as much of a friend of mine as he dares be. He's seen a guy that looked like Draw come outa Maxie's house a coupla times."

"That's interesting," Tarleton ventured.

"That's all it is," the policeman corrected caustically. He thrust himself from his chair with sudden determination.

"I've got to pack," he announced. "For Staten Island or Iowa, I'm not sure which. We can tell bedtime stories all night and get nowhere."

"Oh, sit down," Carrigan ordered irritably. "Don't walk out on me now, Jerry. I need you to impress the Honorable Dip Tucket, who's going to do a bit of ratting for Buck and me and maybe you."

"What are you talking about?" the police lieutenant demanded. Carrigan glanced again at the clock.

"I'm allowing him twenty minutes' grace," he returned with thin-lipped determination. "If he hasn't showed by then, you'll understand what I'm talking about. It will be a plenty."

Wain's telephone was ringing with shrill insistence, but Little Maxie made only one brief effort to answer it, and beneath the hand he had clapped to his side, felt warm wetness spread about the bullet wound.

The telephone ceased its clamor for an instant and then resumed it. He listened with the apathy that had laid hold on him when the blind shot of the dying Frankie had gone home. Maxie had the fearlessness of the infidel, and his fatalism. Lacking a god, he clung to luck, and now luck had turned against him.

It had taken time and reiterated disaster to compel this surrender. He had wriggled from beneath the menacing raised hand of Fate earlier that afternoon. He had returned from his peace conference with Lew and Tucket, confident, already planning future triumph.

When, over the sight of the submachine gun, he had seen the charging figure of Frankie Tucket, he had exulted at this evidence of his rival's perfidy. Thereafter, he had tried to rise and could not. His left groin and leg were numb. He had felt little pain. Sweat of fear, not anguish, had glossed his swarthy face. His luck was out. He had known blind panic as Otto helped him to the sofa and brought the bandage he himself had adjusted. Fortune that had lifted him high had turned on him at last.

Now, with the clamor of the telephone in his ears and the spreading warmth beneath his hand, he endured the clammy nausea of defeat. Almost impersonally, he listened to Otto's returning footsteps.

Otto lifted his gaunt, white visage from the instrument and reported gutturally:

"Tarleton iss back home. Gannon is dere also. Tucket hass come to see dem."

The last name was a draught blowing upon Maxie's ebbing vitality.

"Tell Morrie to watch," he directed. "And call again."

When his henchman had obeyed, Wain demanded another gauze pad, and rejecting the other's aid, pushed it into place, and pulled the bandage tighter. Animation stirred in his pale eyes.

"You took your time," he told Otto. The German shrugged.

"It iss a mess down dere," he commented, and once more Wain felt, as his henchman went on, the great hand, remorseless and chill, closing about him.

Frankie's body lay at the stair foot where it had fallen, for there had been none to move it. Julius, the cook, was still dizzy from the blow on his head. Martin had a bullet wound in his shoulder. Gyp was bandaging it.

"Where's Lupo?" Maxie demanded in a half whisper. "Hasn't he——"

With a smirk that was faintly gloating, Otto thrust toward him the newspaper he had found in the kitchen.

"It wass of him dey were calling 'Extra,' " he commented.

The paper dropped at last from Wain's hands. He looked at Gerlach's face, fixed in a skull-like grin, and laughed, so clearly, so brightly that his henchman winced. The sound rang through the still house.

It ceased abruptly. The eyes that looked up through horn-rimmed spectacles at Gerlach's deathly face were less dull. Wain's recently lax mouth was tight. The hand with which Fate bore him down pressed too hard. He turned to strike at it. Four of his men lost in Westchester; Lupo and Lily Horvak dead; Martin and he wounded, and Tucket, Tarleton, and Gannon unharmed!

His luck was out. He could dog it and quit. There were discreet physicians. There were complaisant private hospitals. There were other matters requiring more immediate attention than a bullet wound—pride crushed and humiliated; a satanic love of power rubbed in the dust. Defeat he had learned to accept with a gambler's philosophy. Overthrow, while Tucket looked on with a jeer on his nutcracker face, was unendurable.

Wain turned upon Gerlach a wide, mad smile. It wrinkled his nose like a snarling dog's. It squinted his pallid eyes into crescents. Otto's smirk vanished.

"Send Gyp up here," the wounded man ordered with a tinkling chuckle. Gerlach tried desperately to retain his newly found, wolfish defiance. He moved instinctively to obey, and then lingered.

"Martin," he demurred, "wants to see a doctor. So should you."

"Send," Wain repeated, filling the long space between each word with menace, "Gyp up here. And you and Julius roll Tucket up in the dining-room rug."

Gerlach stared.

"You heard me?" asked Little Maxie.

"*Zu befehl*," the other said automatically, and obeyed.

Gyp, a baboon-like little man, with obedience as reverent and automatic as a well broken dog's, received his whispered orders unblinkingly, and at Wain's command went to the head of the stair and summoned Otto.

"Open the safe," Maxie gasped, "and give Gyp four grand."

The little gunman stared from the yellow bills on his palm to the weary yet obscurely stimulated face of his chief.

"Two for you. Two for Morrie," Wain whispered. "You'll find him watching the place. Is the car outside?"

He turned to Otto who nodded.

"Drive away and stay away," Wain told Gyp with a terrific smile.

Otto followed the apelike figure downstairs. Little Maxie heard the grunting of burdened men, the slam of a door. His smile turned into a grimace of pain. Presently, the front door opened and closed again. Otto came deliberately upstairs.

"Dey are all gone," he announced, and licked his lips with a pale tongue as though the words were sweet. "Julius hass taken Martin to der doctor."

Wain's pudgy body was cramped with agony. He wheezed:

"I better—see one myself. Call Dr. Bontemps, Otto."

Gerlach seemed to find sudden savory jest in the sight of his employer transfixed like some miserable beetle on an invisible shaft of pain. Almost reluctantly he turned his death's-head visage toward the open safe.

"Did you hear me?" Wain asked more strongly as the spasm abated.

Before replying, Gerlach moved out of the stricken man's reach the chair across which the submachine gun rested. He turned then to the safe and as

he crammed sheafs of currency into his satchel, jeered over his shoulder.

"It iss unfortunate, but I go too. You haff run out your string, I dink, Maxie. De rats, dey leaf der sinking ship, and der smartest rat last of all."

He clicked shut the satchel and waited, disappointed by his employer's indifference. He discovered with growing uneasiness that the wounded man's eyes still had power to awe him. It was not shame that stirred Gerlach. He had long outlived shame. It was fear. He clapped on his hat and ran downstairs.

Maxie flinched and pressed the compress tighter against his side. Then he laughed. The mad sound bubbled through the stillness. He relaxed beneath the grip of the great cold hand. It was vain to struggle when your luck was out.

CHAPTER XXII

MIYAKO'S regular nightly dash for freedom was delayed this evening in midcareer by Carrigan, who called as the Japanese reached the door:

"Stop at the corner and tell them to send in a case of ginger ale, right away. With you out of the house we'll have a chance to use some. Don't forget."

"Nossa," Miyako acknowledged, opened the door and remained an instant, staring. At length, he turned and informed his employer dubiously: "Gerraman to see you."

Tucket's grim face challenged Carrigan, who peered out. At his elbow, a spare, alert youth considered the reporter with open disfavor. Dip's host said slowly:

"I don't remember inviting the—boy friend."

The little man nodded abruptly.

"He waits," he said, "out here in the hall. I'm takin' no chances."

"If you think I'm spotting you——" Carrigan began stiffly, but Tucket shook his head.

"Not you," he said. "That ain't it." He caught the reporter's forearm so tightly that it ached. "Heard anything—about him?"

"Not a word," his host replied. For an instant the hard, shifty face before him was tired and sick.

"Me neither," Tucket confessed, then squared his shoulders and dropped the jeering wooden mask over his emotions. "Let's go," he said hardily, and followed Carrigan with jaunty steps.

He grinned at Tarleton. He grinned at Gannon, betraying by no flicker of expression, surprise at his presence.

"Gents!" he exclaimed, and seated himself beside the lamp table, one arm resting negligently upon Draw's photograph, one sharply creased trouser leg dangling across the knee of the other. Brisk but entirely composed, he looked at Carrigan inquiringly.

"There'll be ginger ale in a minute," his host said. "Will you have a straight one first?"

"I'll wait," Tucket decided.

There was an awkward silence while the flashy little figure danced perkily from Carrigan, who bit his lip in thought, to the glum visages of

Tarleton and the police lieutenant. Dip was the most self-possessed of the four. Carrigan said at length:

"Heard what happened to Tarleton today?"

"Yeah," Tucket admitted readily. "Just a little while ago. Wish I'd 'a' known sooner. It explains quite a lot of things."

"Such as?" Tarleton queried. The little man cocked a derisive eye.

"Business," he said with finality.

Carrigan said with grave candor: "Answer one question, Dip. Did your mob rub out Horowitz?"

"With me on the spot with him?" Tucket queried in derision. "What a chance! No, sir."

"Then it was Maxie?" Tarleton inquired.

"I don't," Tucket responded carefully, "know who it was."

Gannon grunted, and Dip beamed at him. Carrigan said:

"I'm coming clean. Tarleton is my friend. He's busted because Steve is shot. He's accused now of stealing the statement Horowitz made to Arnold. He's been taken for a ride. He was pretty nearly killed today. Why? Because he wants the man that killed Steve. Who's putting the heat on him?"

Tucket touched his cigarette with the flame of a platinum lighter and exhaled smoke and counter question together.

"What am I, a mind reader?"

Gannon replied vindictively:

"You're the slickest, crookedest little mug in this town."

It was plain the policeman's angry tribute pleased the little man.

"I claim so," he acknowledged composedly. "Mr. Tucket is a very good man."

"Will your conscience, or what have you," Tarleton asked, "let you tell us who Ira Draw is?"

"It might or it mightn't," Tucket responded readily. "I don't know. Never even saw him."

"If you move your elbow you can look him over. You're leaning on his face," Gannon suggested.

The little man complied and picked up the photograph. His face was as still as the portrait.

"Funny, ain't it?" he commented at last. "He looks like——"

"Whom?" Carrigan prodded.

“Never seen him,” Tucket answered firmly, but he continued to stare. Presently he looked up at Tarleton.

“Still got that phony telegram?” he demanded.

“I had,” Tarleton grinned, “when you came in.”

He pulled it forth and held it out, but Tucket’s eyes had dropped to the picture once more.

“Why don’tcha,” he asked almost absently, “find the typewriter it was written on?”

“Now, that,” Gannon retorted with scoring irony, “is one swell tip. Why didn’t we ever think of it? We’ll just call on the three guys in this town that own typewriters.”

“Listen, Dip,” Carrigan pursued. “Was Draw in with Maxie?”

The sharpness of his query jerked Tucket’s head up. A flicker of excitement faded from his eyes, leaving them bright and shallow.

“I don’t know Draw,” he replied resolutely, “or anything about him.”

Carrigan broke the silence with flat, faintly menacing comment.

“You aren’t being much help, Dip.”

Gannon gave a brief, bitter laugh.

“Got any idea,” the reporter pursued smoothly, “who killed Lily Horvak?”

Tucket twisted in his chair, and his wooden face cracked into a snarl.

“What am I?” he rasped. “A rat?”

“That,” Gannon commented, “is only the beginning of it.” But the little man did not heed him.

“Ain’t it enough,” he demanded bitingly, “for the cops to be crooks without expectin’ the crooks to be cops?”

He jumped up and gestured with the photograph toward Tarleton.

“That goof,” he pursued, “does me a favor. I pay him back. You got the phony telegram Draw sent. You got Draw’s picture. What do you want me to do? Find him and get a statement and a diagram from him?”

A bell sounded in the kitchen, and they heard the creak of the laden dumbwaiter ascending. Carrigan rose.

“Sit down, Dip,” he bade. The little man hesitated and then complied. “We’ll get,” his host continued, “a drink out of this caucus anyway.”

He chose a bottle from his cellarette and stalked down the hall. Gannon glowered at Tarleton. Tucket, taut and self-possessed once more, scrutinized

Draw's picture, obscuring with one hand first the upper then the lower half of the face.

The dumbwaiter door squeaked open. The bottle Carrigan bore dropped with a bump so loud in the stillness that Gannon half rose.

Feet rushed in panic haste along the hall. Tarleton, leaping up, saw his friend tear open the front door. Carrigan, at his call, turned for a split second a face, stiff, white, and voiceless, and plunged from the flat. The door slammed behind him. Tarleton, with Gannon at his heels, followed, and swung it wide again upon a tableau.

Against the outside wall, Carrigan's lank figure stood gasping incoherence, pinned by the pocket-sheathed gun Tucket's bodyguard pressed against his midriff.

"Easy," the stranger said from one corner of a grim mouth, and Tarleton came no nearer. His friend's agitation deserted him suddenly. He relaxed and looked from his captor to Tucket, who peered over Gannon's shoulder.

"What's all this?" Dip rasped suspiciously. Carrigan's face was silvery white; his smile, a sick grimace.

"It's too late," he managed to whisper huskily. "I—forgot your gunman, Dip."

At Tucket's command, his henchman stepped back. Voicelessly Carrigan motioned his companions back into the flat and, following, closed the door. Before the cellarette a bottle neck chattered on the rim of a glass as he poured himself a mighty drink and swallowed it in a gulp.

Thereafter he drew a long breath and stared at the faces before him.

"In the kitchen," he said slowly and, squaring his shoulders, led the way.

The bottle lay before the open door that revealed the dumbwaiter, laden.

"Your friends, Dip," Carrigan began in a hoarse voice, "are—" his chattering teeth quelled speech an instant—"efficient," he concluded.

Gannon stepped forward.

"Frankie," he said at last.

"Yes," Carrigan acknowledged, looking away.

He found himself facing Tucket. The little man's eyes wrung speech from him:

"I tried to catch them, Dip. Downstairs. But your man—I heard them drive away."

The rasp of cloth on wood, and Tarleton's and Gannon's hard breathing sounded behind him.

"Dead?" asked Tucket.

"Very," the policeman answered from where he crouched. "Machine gun."

"Yeah," Frankie's uncle acknowledged. Tarleton, turning, forgot nausea at sight of the little man who held with one tight hand to the kitchen door.

"Tough," he offered clumsily. Dip's eyes blinked once.

"Ain't it?" he commented, and went back to the front room.

He had vanished when they returned. While Gannon barked into the telephone, and Carrigan paced the floor, rumpling his hair with desperate gestures, Tarleton stared at the cigarette butt still smouldering in the tray and the white oblong of Draw's picture, face down on the chair where Tucket had sat.

"Wynn," Gannon said clashing the receiver back into place, "will be up. He's the ace of the homicide squad. Not that he'll get anywhere. Frankie's been dead an hour, anyway, and headquarters has had no report of a machine gunning."

"Tucket," Tarleton offered stupidly, "is gone."

"Yeh," Gannon acknowledged with rasping sarcasm, "I see you noticed that. We'll drag him in and sweat him and get nothing. He'll fix this up his own way. They always do. And he liked Frankie. A lot. Jimmy, are you a polar bear? Sit down."

"I'm in this thing," Carrigan groaned, complying, and told of the compulsion he had used upon Tucket. His own voice soothed him. He concluded with an uncertain smile:

"I thought he could give us a line on Draw. And all we got——"

"Is another murder," Tarleton completed, rising and crossing the room to take a cigarette from the box beside the tray in which Tucket's had burned to ash. "We move from slaughter to slaughter."

"That's all you'll get," Gannon replied grimly. "If Tucket won't squeal when his own nephew's corpse is sent C. O. D., he'll never belch. Now what?"

He glared at Tarleton, who had retrieved Draw's photograph from the chair and had uttered a strange sound. He bent, now, holding the portrait to the light, and did not seem to hear the irascible query. At length, with the mechanical movement of the dazed, he held the photograph out as the lieutenant approached.

"Maxie Wain," the policeman exclaimed instinctively, and added in a muffled roar: "where'd you get that?"

Carrigan sprang up to peer over their shoulders at the transformation. Quick pencil strokes had covered the bald skull with hair, had darkened and thickened eyebrows; had laid thin sideburns on either chubby cheek. The eyes were shielded by hastily drawn spectacles.

Tarleton laughed unsteadily: “You got your squeal, Jimmy. Little Maxie Wain is Ira Draw.”

The rending crash as the front door gave way roused Wain from the coma the clamoring bell had not penetrated. He rolled his head wistfully toward the machine gun that rested on the chair, six feet, an infinity, away. Remembered agony restrained him from further movement toward it. He had fainted after he had managed to pull over himself the rug at the couch’s foot.

He had no wish, as voices rumbled below and many feet mounted the stair, to faint again. Lacking the Thompson gun, with which to blast the intruders, power still remained. He thrust one hand beneath the coverlid and waited.

His head was clear but his senses queerly dim. He saw the men who lingered an instant in the doorway only as a blurred confusion. Their voices were inarticulate. He barely felt the pressure of fingers upon his pulse.

“Get a doctor,” Gannon ordered over his shoulder to one of the uniformed patrolmen, and then said to Wynn, who held the limp wrist, “Roll back the sleeve, Bob. I thought so.”

From fingertip to mid forearm the flesh was dyed the swarthy hue of Wain’s face. Beyond, the skin was white, unstained.

“Wain,” the homicide bureau man called, his mouth close to Little Maxie’s ear, “did Frankie getcha?”

His question was routine, for the splashed stair rug and bullet-bitten wall were ample confirmation. The wounded man’s concealed hand moved slightly beneath the coverlid. The other brushed the disguising spectacles from his clouded eyes.

He could see a little more clearly now—Wynn’s lean intent face, and beyond that the vague outlines of Gannon’s. The former’s voice sounded distinct, urgent.

“You’re hurt bad, Maxie. Come clean, fella. Did Frankie getcha?”

There was tacit disparagement in the query that stung Little Maxie. He felt the bandage slip beneath his hand, and the warm resultant flow soften

the stiffness of the wound. They had caught him, but they could not hold him. Flat on his back, trapped and hurt, he still had power beyond them.

"It was Frankie, eh?" Wynn cajoled. "He gotcha, didn't he?"

Wain spoke with the mighty voice of offended pride. It dribbled through his white lips in a whisper.

"Got me? I got Frankie, and Horvak and Horowitz. I got Pincus and George Leonard and Izzy Gordon and——"

Gannon interrupted, striving to transform the thin babble into legal confession.

"Maxie, do you think you're gonna die?"

Wain's flaccid face puckered into a derisive leer.

"Try and stop me," he invited, and uttered for the last time a faint echo of his gayly terrible laugh.

The city slumbered. The wireless whistled rum runners in from the sea. The elephantine procession of liquor trucks plodded down from the north. Stills in flats, in cellars, in loft buildings, in warehouses, bubbled and dripped. Fifty thousand cases of liquor were made or smuggled that night. Four men were murdered for the good of the trade.

From his hotel room, a dry, hard-bitten little man spoke over the long-distance telephone and thereafter forgot a portion of his bereavement in thought of power and profit; of the syndicate, backed by enormous wealth and greater influence that, in time, would link and coördinate and render invulnerable the liquor enterprises of many cities; of wholesale buying and efficient distribution and reduced overhead.

Elsewhere, a canny attorney diagnosed his trouble as a mental breakdown and made plans to go West with his pretty, too talkative daughter until the storm blew past.

A man sat in his library when his three late visitors had departed and rested his weary, silvery head on thin old hands, while across the hall his niece dreamed unhappily of one of his recent guests.

A lank district man suddenly bobbed up in the *Standard's* city room, derailed the managing editor's fury, and set him bawling through the press- and composing-room telephones for a make-over edition.

Vans and trucks snorted. Laden lighters crept shoreward from the "drop." Cash registers chimed behind twenty thousand bars.

The city slept on, its lax mouth open; its omnipotent body indifferent and flaccid.

Gaunt from lack of sleep, but wearing an air of professorial complacency, James Talbot Carrigan climbed into a taxicab the following morning and grinned at Tarleton, who had preceded him.

"A nervous breakdown," he continued, settling himself, "is a most convenient ailment. It can be stretched to cover even my future father-in-law's sins. He's leaving with Betty this morning, and I'm probably the only person who will see them off. Meanwhile old Fuddy-duddy Arnold will be looking for an assistant to help him run around in circles."

"Is that," his friend asked suspiciously, "what he wants to see me for at this hour?"

"This," Carrigan returned with scant patience, "is the fourth time I've told you I don't know. The message said you were to be there at nine. Why don't you wake up and answer your own phone calls?"

They swung into Fifth Avenue, bright in the early light, swept clear by the morning wind of its miasma of gasoline fumes.

"I'll miss this town," the reporter said a trifle wistfully. "Yep, I'm leaving next week. Going to run Betty down and marry her out of hand before she gets some other fool idea."

"Maybe," Tarleton suggested, "you can teach her not to talk out of turn!"

A shadow darkened his friend's face.

"Yes," he agreed. "When she told Draw, or Wain, about Horowitz's squeal, she certainly started up the mills of the gods. I'm going to train her to tell everything she knows to no one but me. That, and my book, will be my life work."

"You won't be idle," Tarleton commented.

"Buck," the reporter offered, "after I've left, use the flat as long as you wish. The lease still runs six months. I don't want it. Every time the dumbwaiter rings, I swallow my tongue."

"Thanks," Tarleton responded ungraciously. "I hate this town worse every hour."

"You've got a right to talk back to it," his friend acknowledged. "You've tied a knot in its tail. Well, what do you call it, then? You've got the typewriter that Wain wrote that telegram on. You've got the stolen statement, dug out of Maxie's safe. You've got the man who killed Horowitz. You've even got the gun that did it. The department firearms

expert says the same chopper burned Frankie and Steve. Tell Arnold that. We didn't have that dope last night."

Tarleton muttered indistinguishably, scowling at colossal buildings that dwarfed the avenue they bordered and made nothing of men.

"If the old bird offers you a job," Carrigan pursued carefully, "what are you going to do?"

"Tell him to eat it," the other replied savagely. "And get out of this nightmare city."

"You're wise," his friend approved. "You're a born hick, Buck, and who is a New Yorker to sneer at one? And Arnold, with his fine old incorruptibility, isn't going to get anywhere. The town's too big for him. Or anyone. That's the trouble with it. Men's hands are beginning to build things too big for their brains to manage. Great cities are only part of it. Our name is Frankenstein, and civilization is our monster. Gannon still insists he's quitting to raise pigs. He's probably chosen the better part. Get out. That's my advice, and let Mr. Tucket run his city. He'll do it well, too. He'll own America, one of these days, but you small-town people never will know it. Here's your corner, Buck."

Tarleton tramped down the slope of Murray Hill, resentful and apprehensive. With Gannon and Carrigan as endorsers, he had faced Arnold, late the previous evening, and had cleared himself. He had wondered, while he had wrung acknowledgment and retraction from the grim old man, at the empty flavor of his triumph, and had accompanied his friends down the lighted stairway of the otherwise darkened house more unhappily than the first time he had ascended them.

With brutal self-discipline he had fortified resolution before he had gone to sleep. In the empty apartment, when Carrigan had departed to atone for his long silence by presenting the *Standard* with an authentic beat, he had weighed, all over again, Patricia's twenty-three years against his ten more; her wealth against his poverty; her lineage against his doubtful distinction of a college degree, and had fallen at length into slumber.

Now, tramping moodily toward her home once more, he reviewed these with a penitential fortitude and renewed his bitter hope that he might not see her again. Thus, when he did, it was too late to withdraw. She sat before her home in the big roadster like one who has waited long.

Under her smile, he felt imponderable facts stir and slip beyond his grasp. She was so lovely, so bravely gay, that his voice failed. He stood, awkward, bareheaded, beside her.

"It was a plot," she confessed. "My uncle isn't even home, John."

“You mean——” he gulped. She nodded shamelessly, yet there was anxiety in her eyes.

“He’s gone to find Lieutenant Gannon. I wanted to see you. I didn’t know till this morning you had been here last night.”

She looked hopefully at his rigid face, and he thought of fir trees dark against a clear sunset, and water lilies closing on a quiet pool.

“It will be pretty in the country today,” she ventured.

“Pat,” he groaned, “I—want you more than anything else in the world.”

It was not in the least what he had intended to say, and now he added desperately: “But it isn’t right.”

“Don’t you,” she demanded suddenly, “think I’m the fairest and noblest lady in all Christendom, Jack?”

“I do indeed,” he acknowledged, wondering.

She laughed and held out her hand.

“That’s what you used to tell me hundreds of years ago, when I was Dulcinea and you were Don Quixote. Please let’s go for a ride!”

She unlatched the door. Still he hesitated.

“I only wanted to tell you,” he blundered, “that——”

“Do you think,” she asked raptly, her voice grave, her eyes large in her clear face, “that you can stop it by talk—or anything? It’ll be lovely in the country today. Please let’s go.”

He held her hand. It drew him in beside her.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Plunder* by Frederic F. Van de Water]