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CHARLES J. DUTTON

NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY
1931

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To

FORREST SPAULDING

AND HIS DES MOINES LIBRARY STAFF,

who of course

are unlike any character in this book

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CHAPTER I

WITH his back pressed close against the door of the police station, Carty Rand stood gloomily staring across the street. Should he go up to the Press Club and play poker with the gang, or spend the next hour improving his mind in the public library? The Press Club meant walking three long blocks in the rain; as for the library, all he had to do was to walk across the street.

A few weeks before, the city editor had called Rand into the office to break the news that for the next few months the young reporter was to do police work, and had suggested that he might also cover the library. No two assignments could have pleased Rand better. Police work had always thrilled him and, like every other newspaper man, some day he was going to write a novel.

With his soft hat pulled low over his eyes, the usual cigarette in the corner of his lips, he stood looking out at the wet afternoon. It had been raining hard all day and evidently would do the same all night. The street was a glittering surface of moisture, and, whipped by a steady wind, the rain lashed in blinding sheets around the police station.

Making up his mind that the Press Club was too

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far away, he blessed the city fathers who had placed the public buildings in a civic center on the river front. For half a mile on both sides of the dirty river ran a strip of green grass; behind it stood the municipal buildings; across the water he could see the two granite court houses.

On a bright day, the green grass, the river and the stone buildings which flanked the promenade made a rather pleasing picture, but as he looked out at the blinding rain, Carty Rand decided it was not only an ugly scene but also a very depressing one. The buildings were streaked with moisture and every hideous corner and angle leaped forth to meet his eyes.

With a despairing shrug of his shoulders the tall young man pulled his coat collar up around his neck and darted down the steps of the police station. As he ran across the street the rain slapped against his face, and once he slipped and almost fell. Up the five stone steps of the library entrance he hurried, pausing for breath before the main door.

Though it was one of the best known public libraries in the country, famous for its efficient management and public service, yet the building itself was old and much out of date. Once, some forgotten architect had thought the squatty granite structure a thing of beauty, but that was in a day long past. To Rand it was the most hideous building in the city.

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Inside the door he climbed the three steps and came into the main lobby of the library. It was a large square room containing several couches, with easy-chairs flanking book-laden tables. To his right was the delivery desk, behind it the long rows of stacks, and on his left the desk where the books were checked out. Above his head ran a book-lined balcony. On the walls were several large, though not very beautiful, paintings.

Crossing the floor he paused at the delivery desk and for a few moments joked with the efficient looking girl who was in charge. Because of the storm the room was almost deserted and the assistant had plenty of time at her disposal. There were at least twenty girls on the staff and Rand knew them all, for there was hardly a day during which he did not drop into the building.

The conversation over, he paused by the open door of the librarian's office and threw a quick look into the room. Behind a rosewood desk he saw the short figure of the man who controlled the reading tastes of the city. As a rule Rand dropped into the office for a few moments' chat, but the librarian was engaged in a conversation, so Rand drifted past the door toward the reading room.

This was the largest room in the building and, as he passed through the open doors, he saw that it was filled. On every side were tall bookcases whose vol-

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umes made a pleasing contrast of colors. The tables were all occupied, and most of the magazines had been taken down from the racks. Over the room hung that uneasy stillness which one finds in a room filled with silent people.

Though books were Rand's chief hobby, yet he did not feel like reading. After all, it was the rain which had brought him into the library—the rain and the fact that the Press Club was seven long blocks away. There were at least two hours to be killed, and picking out a book of modern verse from the nearest case, he sank down into a chair.

For a while he tried to read, then, in sheer boredom, allowed the book to drop down upon the table. Reading, he decided, was the last thing he wanted to do, so he began to study the people in the room, people who, in many cases, were making no more attempt at reading than he was.

The reading room of a public library brings together many varying types of people. There are always those who have come for reference purposes, groups of high school boys and girls with a scattering of college students. These, Rand discovered when he looked over the room, were absent. But another class was well represented.

Because it is in a public building, warm and well lighted, and containing plenty of free reading matter,

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the reference room of every library brings together a large number of homeless men and women. The casual tramps, outcasts and petty criminals, the old and defeated in life spend many hours in the public reading room.

Rand was an intelligent young newspaper man, but it would have required little intelligence to place the groups sitting at the tables—men in faded, soiled and dingy suits, some with sly shifty faces, others who kept darting quick glances at the many tables. The outcasts and the homeless had been driven by the storm into the warm room.

For a time he studied the people around him. Some of the occupants of the tables he had seen in the police courts. He half smiled as he noticed one of the city's leading clergymen sitting beside a thin, shrunken figure who had come out of prison only three days before. There were several there who had been in jail, and a few who he knew would be there some day.

He gazed for a while languidly around. It was four o'clock and on a clear day the high school students would by now be thronging in through the big doors, but the rain had kept them away. The girl behind the reference desk was having nothing to do and, seated at her desk, she was carefully reading a magazine.

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It was a silent room except when someone turned the pages of a paper or scraped his feet across the floor. Once in a while there was a cough, checked as a rule almost the moment it sounded forth. From outside came the sound of the rain dashing over the windows, the howling of the wind as it shrieked its way around the building.

It was after he had listened to the rain for some time that Rand began to feel uneasy. There was not the slightest reason why he should be disturbed, but he was. The silence seemed suspicious. He caught himself waiting for someone to whisper to his neighbor. To throw aside this feeling, he began to watch a man seated at the other side of the room.

It was an oddly shaped room. Three fourths of it was a large square, the floor filled with tables, the walls lined with bookcases. The other fourth was filled with high magazine racks. Behind them was a half hidden office, its sides enclosed with frosted glass and with a little narrow door.

This built-in room was the office of the woman who had charge of the reading room. Rand knew her well and, unlike most of the people of the city, was a favorite of the thin, angular and rather ill-tempered old lady. For thirty-five years the reference room had been her kingdom, and the years of detailed work had not improved her disposition. Yet for some reason,

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perhaps because she had known his mother, Ruby Merton had taken a liking to the unconventional reporter. She had two assistants, and was not often seen outside of her enclosed office, but everyone in the city knew the old lady, and her sharp tongue had made her a public character. Few were the persons ever invited to pass behind the frosted glass partitions and sit beside her large desk.

For the past ten minutes Rand had noticed that Joe White was much interested in the door of the librarian's office. Every reporter knew Joe—just as the police knew him well. He was a petty sneak thief who found it a hard task to keep on the water wagon. Not only was he a thief but also a bit of a coward, sneaking and sniveling his way through life and always in trouble.

Seated at a table, the thin little figure was holding a newspaper before his face. But at the angle in which he was sitting, Rand was able to see the sharp, sallow features. Again and again he saw the man throw a quick eager questioning look at the office door, a look which would be repeated in a few moments. For some reason Joe was interested in the glass-enclosed office.

Having nothing else to do, Rand picked up a magazine and made a bluff at reading. It was only a gesture, for he was watching the police character. Why White

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was in the library he knew. The wind and the storm had driven him to warmth and shelter. But why he should appear so interested in the glass-enclosed room he could not understand.

That he was interested there was no doubt. Again and again the narrow shifting eyes would dart a quick look at the door. It was a curious look, filled with both wonder and anticipation, as though he was watching for someone to come into the larger room. After each glance at the door, Rand noticed that White would throw a searching look around the tables, as if trying to see if he had been observed.

That White was up to any serious mischief the reporter doubted. There were at least fifty people in the reading room, and one could not move without being observed, but something had aroused the curiosity of the sneak thief, and he seemed to be a little bit excited.

At last Rand rose slowly to his feet. Walking across the floor, he paused for a moment before the magazine rack and threw a long look at White. The little figure had given Rand a suspicious glance, but when Rand looked at him the thin face was quickly buried in the paper. With a slight smile the reporter passed behind the long magazine rack and a second later stood before the door of the office.

The door was closed and he paused for a moment

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wondering if should open it. He was standing in an open space behind the tall magazine racks. In front of him were the frosted glass partitions, to his right the wall with the two large windows. On every side were bookcases.

As his hand shot out for the knob, he hesitated for a moment. Again there swept over him the queer uneasy feeling he had experienced a few moments ago. It was an odd feeling, one he was unable to analyze. It made him wonder what could be the matter with his nerves. Above his head the rain was smearing across the windows. He cast a sudden glance toward the little table, and his look caused the watching eyes of White to drop quickly to the paper he held in his hand.

With a shrug of his shoulders Rand opened the door and looked into the glass-enclosed room. Across from him was another door which he thought led out into a hallway. On two sides of the room were tall bookcases filled with bulky reference works and piles of magazines. Three steps would have brought him to the desk, littered with papers and book catalogues, but the eyes of the young man narrowed as he saw the woman slumped down in the chair behind the desk.

No one had ever called the reference librarian good-looking; there were many who said she was just the opposite. Eccentric in everything she did, like

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many of her type, her clothes ran to vivid, extreme colors. The purple dress did give the room a touch of color, but Rand did not notice the dress. There was something which puzzled him.

The woman was seated behind her desk, but the angular figure had slumped down far into her chair. She was sitting in an odd and uncomfortable position and something about her appearance caused him to catch his breath suddenly. He could not see her face, for her head had fallen forward, and only the close-cropped hair could be observed. He noticed that she was very still.

For a moment he stood silent in the doorway. Then all at once the sound of rain upon the windows seemed to die away. Nor did he hear the rustling of papers in the reading room. A curious silence seemed to brood over the little room—a silence which he could feel pressing around him in a sinister manner. Then suddenly giving a gasp he stepped quickly into the room, carefully shutting the door behind him.

By the chair he stood looking down at the still, pathetic figure. Though he had made some slight noise in crossing the floor, she had not raised her head. As he looked down at the purple dress, and saw the thin white hair upon her head, he suddenly realized that she would never raise her eyes to look

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at him. It was at this second that he saw the cord around her neck.

It was not a pleasant sight. Drawn tightly around the swollen throat, it was pulled so taut that it was hard to distinguish it. His eyes fell upon a knife lying upon the desk, but as he picked it up and reached down to cut the cord he knew that the effort was useless. The woman was dead and had been dead for some time.

He managed at length to cut the encircling cord and silently placed it upon the desk. Accustomed as he was to scenes of violence, yet he shuddered as he carefully raised the woman's head with his hand. One look at the wild, staring eyes, the pain-twisted face, and he trembled.

His first instinctive impulse was to rush from the room and shout for aid, but he did not move. He was a reporter and had stumbled upon what might prove to be the most sensational crime story of the year. And it was his own personal story—a real beat.

He had known the librarian for some years. To others she might have been sarcastic, even rude; to him she had been kindly and helpful. That any person in the city would take her life seemed beyond belief, yet before him, slumped in that odd attitude in the chair, was her silent figure.

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That it was murder there was no doubt. The cord had been drawn so tightly around her neck that it had cut the flesh. What was more, the slip knot was at the back. A finger shot out for a moment to touch the swollen face. It was still warm. Death had come within the past hour. As he thought this, he gave a start.

Out in the reading room were at least fifty people. All afternoon the room had been filled, the tables and chairs occupied. It was a motley group that had been driven to shelter by the rain, the outcasts and failures and the petty criminals of the city streets. Yet it seemed incredible that she could have been killed with help only a few feet away, murdered only a few minutes before without any of the fifty persons in the next room aware of what was being done.

He cast a slow somber look beyond the desk. Against the wall stood a large green safe, its doors partly open. In the dark interior he saw a row of shelves, the backs of books. But the safe held his gaze for only a second. The telephone upon the desk was within reach of his hand. Sinking down in a chair he took the receiver from the hook and called a number.

As he waited for his connection, he felt grateful for one thing. Across the street was the police station,

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and the head of the homicide squad was in his office. Rand was glad of that, for Kent was a shrewd, efficient police official. As he was thinking this, the connection was made; a second later he heard the rough voice of the inspector.

"Listen, chief," came Rand's low voice, "it's Rand, over in the library. Yes, the library. Now listen carefully. Someone has just done in Ruby Merton. Yes, that's what I said. It's a killing. I stumbled on her body. No one knows a thing about it yet, I just found her. Rush over here and bring some dicks with you. There's a big bunch in the reading room. You will want to line them up. Yes—"

He paused a moment to listen to the sharp barking questions, picturing the surprised official at the other end of the wire. Just as Kent was about to slam down the receiver Rand spoke again.

"Now listen to this, chief. If you see Joe White sliding out of the building, pick him up. I'll give you the low down later. Yes, it's the office in the reading room. And hurry over. It's a bit lonesome in here just now."

Rand held the receiver in his hand for several moments after he heard the inspector slam down his instrument. Soberly his eyes went traveling around the little room. As they passed over the silent figure in the chair he shook his head. People talked about

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the dignity of death. There was none here. An old lady who had given her life to the service of the public had died, died by violence, with more than fifty people within sound of her voice.

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CHAPTER II

THE telephone receiver remained upon the hook only a second. As Rand's glance fell upon the wall clock he remembered that he was a reporter, and that the last evening edition would be going to print in a few moments. Calling the city room, he asked for the managing editor, knowing that for the first time in his career he was giving his chief a real beat.

The connection completed, there followed a short, snappy conversation. There was much to tell; he had stumbled upon a crime; that crime was murder. Before the busy editor got off the line he told Rand to stick to the story until the case was solved.

Replacing the receiver, Rand rose to his feet, studying the room. So far as he could see there was nothing out of the way. The doors of the big green safe were wide open, and he tried to remember if they had been open on the other occasions when he had been in the office.

Out in the reading room there was a sound of hurrying footsteps; the door was flung open and the tall, raw-boned figure of the police inspector stood on the threshold. Behind him was the police doctor.

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The gray eyes of the official rested for a second upon the face of the reporter, then passed over to the silent figure at the desk, and Rand saw the square jaw shut tight as the dead woman came into the inspector's vision. After a moment's silence he stepped into the room, followed by the doctor. As the inspector raised the woman's head he asked Rand to close the door.

With his back against the door Rand watched the two police officials make a quick but careful examination of the body. No one spoke, and within the little room was silence; but from behind the door came the murmur of excited voices, loud whisperings and shuffling feet. The reporter could picture the amazed room watching the police walk across the floor. Perhaps someone in that room had reason to fear them.

Straightening up, Kent made a quick inspection of the little office with his keen gray eyes. The glance ended at the surface of the desk, and the cord which Rand had thrown upon a magazine met his eyes. Picking it up, the inspector gave it one glance. For a moment there was silence; then Kent turned to the reporter.

"Tell me how you happened to find her," he commanded.

There was not much to tell and the story was soon ended. Kent made no effort to break in, and while Rand was talking the inspector's eyes were carefully

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studying the office. Not until Rand paused was there a question.

"You say Joe White made you suspicious?"

"Got me guessing why he was so interested in the office. That's why I got up and came in. I knew the old lady pretty well."

Kent started to speak, then turned and looked at his doctor. Rand knew the young physician and was glad the police had someone of intelligence for their medical man, instead of the usual inefficient political appointee. As the doctor carefully allowed the woman's head to fall back upon her breast, the inspector spoke:

"What about it, Trent?"

"Strangled. The murderer placed the cord around her neck and just pulled it tight. Been dead more than thirty minutes."

Rand saw the brows of the inspector knit as the man looked in the direction of the reading room. A puzzled look swept over his face as he slowly shook his head.

"There were fifty or sixty people in that room when we walked through. She must have been killed here, yet I have a hunch we will find no one heard a sound. That's what I can't see."

"But Kent," came the doctor's low tones. "It's my idea she had a hand pressed down over her lips, so

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that she wasn't able to scream. You see she could not have been very strong."

Whatever Kent thought of this statement his next remark had nothing to do with what had just been said. He asked the doctor to find the librarian, to tell him what had taken place, and arrange to have the library closed. No one was to be allowed to enter the building nor was anyone to leave the place until his name had been taken and he had been examined. As the doctor started for the door the inspector called him back.

"Trent, tell Mike to take all the people in the reading room up in one of the rooms on the second floor. Have them all examined. I want to find out if anyone saw any person come in here or heard any sort of a sound. Tell him to go the limit to get their stories. If they won't talk, pinch them. Somebody must have seen something during the afternoon."

When they were alone he turned to Rand.

"We are going to look this room over," he said. "Then I will have White brought in. We got him as we came up the steps. He was in a hurry; felt pretty bad at seeing us. But this is not the sort of thing he would pull off. Took nerve to kill her, with all those people within sound of her voice—and nerve is not Joe's long suit."

The examination of the office revealed nothing of

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any value. It was true that under a heap of papers they found a hundred and fifty dollars. The sum surprised Rand a little, but the fact that it was on the desk seemed to show that robbery could not have been the motive of the crime. Though it had been placed under a heap of papers, the money could be plainly seen by anyone who had looked at the desk.

As he watched the police inspector he began to grow more puzzled. That the woman should have been killed in her office was a startling thing. It was very far from being a private office. Though the librarian did not leave it often, all day long her assistants were running in and out. The office seemed to Rand to be the last place in the city for a premeditated crime.

This aspect of the affair puzzled him, but to think of a motive bothered him even more. For thirty-five years the woman had been in the public library. Her disposition had grown a bit sour during the years, and people often grumbled because she was not as courteous as she should have been. But that anyone would plan her death seemed absurd. She might not have been very well liked, but he doubted that she had any real enemies.

Kent had dropped to his knees before the safe, and for a moment peered into its interior. When he rose to his feet he stood looking at the woman's body;

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then his glance went across the desk and his eyes narrowed. So far as Rand could see, there was nothing to cause the look; only a chair and behind the chair a bookcase.

"Rand, you knew this woman. Did she let many people come into her office?"

Rand replied that the librarian was a stickler for formality. Perhaps her long years of service at a small salary had soured her, for there was no doubt her disposition was not of the best. Few were the people that would have come into her office uninvited.

"That's what I thought," said Kent. "But look at that chair. It's right across from her body, just where it would be if someone had been sitting there talking with her. It looks as though someone she knew was in here, someone she was not suspicious of."

Rand gave the chair a studied look. It was pushed a little way out from the desk, in the position it would be in if the person who had been sitting in it had risen to leave the room. Kent was right. Whoever had been occupying that chair was someone the librarian had known. Strangers and people she did not like were not invited to her office.

"Someone she knew," came Kent's dry voice. "Someone who could rise and go around the desk and get behind her without her thinking anything was wrong. Then a hand was slammed over her mouth, the cord whipped around her neck and—"

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The words died upon his lips as the door was flung violently open. They turned to see the thickset figure of the librarian rushing into the room. The round red face was flushed, the large eyes frightened. For a second he glanced at them, then looked over to the desk. As he glimpsed the body, the librarian's face went white, and he leaned against the wall for support.

The silence seemed endless. Neither Rand nor the inspector cared to say anything and the librarian was too shaken to speak.

"How—how did it—happen?" he gasped at length.

Kent briefly described how Rand had gone into the office and what he had discovered. When he had ended the librarian gave a long questioning look over the room as he slowly shook his head.

"And to think that it is perhaps my fault that she is dead."

"Your fault?" snapped out Kent.

Spicer nodded. A troubled look swept over his round face. With a quick look at the desk he turned to face the inspector.

"In a sense. She's been trying all afternoon to get into the office to see me. I have been away for a week, and got back only this noon. I found a note on my desk saying she wished to see me at once, had something very important to tell me."

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As he paused for a second Rand saw a keen look sweep over the police official's face, but he did not speak.

"You know," came the anxious voice, "she was a queer woman and always did get on my nerves. I thought she simply had some complaint to make, so I put her off. There was a number of traveling men from the book houses to interview, and I sent back word that she could see me at five. But if I had only seen her at once, perhaps—"

"You don't know what she wanted?"

"No. But she sent in a page three times during the afternoon to see if I were free."

"And that was unusual?"

"Very. I have an idea that when I was chosen for this position she thought it ought to have been given to her. We did not have very much to do with each other, but all afternoon she was trying to get into my office. There was something on her mind."

Kent nodded. Slowly his eyes went over the bookcases, coming to rest on the surface of the desk. The sight of the money partly concealed by papers, caused him to take two steps and pick it up. Then he turned to Spicer.

"There was not much in here of any value," he started, but the action of the librarian was so surprising that the words died upon the inspector's lips.

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There had come a sudden gasp from Spicer's lips as he darted over to the safe. Dropping down on his knees, he looked into the dark interior. It was a long look and when he rose to his feet his face expressed relief.

"Now what might that all mean?" began Kent.

"I just remembered that we have three or four very valuable books in the safe, but I see they are on the shelf, so that's all right."

There came a muffled expression from the inspector's lips. To Rand it sounded as if the police official doubted the value of any books which might be in the safe. After a look at the money in his palm Kent asked a question.

"We found this on the desk, Spicer. One hundred and fifty dollars. Now would you have any idea what it might be doing here?"

The librarian looked at the outstretched hand. In it lay a small heap of bills. Rand judged they were all tens. Spicer straightened up; a curious look swept over his face: he slowly shook his head.

"Of course it might be her own money. What it means I don't know, but Miss White, who was at the outside desk might."

He made a half motion to open the door. The inspector stopped him. Kent wanted to see the woman who had been at the other desk. He warned

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the librarian not to talk, then telling him to find the assistant, and to wait outside, he dismissed him. When the door closed he hastened over to the telephone and rang a number.

It was the police station he wanted, and he had the connection in a second. He ordered the finger-print expert to be sent over to the library at once. Also, he wanted three more policemen and a stenographer. When he banged the receiver down on the hook he turned to Rand.

"It doesn't stand to reason she could be bumped off without somebody who was in the room outside knowing something. If they do we are going to find it out."

Rand was thinking of the librarian's statement. All afternoon the reference librarian had wished to have an interview with her superior. Something must have bothered her. There was some secret she wished to disclose. Could the secret have had anything to do with her death?

He would have liked to think this over, but Kent had gone out of the room and beckoned for him to follow. As he passed through the door, he noticed that it was almost impossible to see the office door from the reference room. In only one place could anyone sitting at a table have a direct view of the office.

The reading room was deserted. Only a few mo-

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ments before, it had been filled, all the chairs taken, every table occupied. Now there could be seen only a blue-uniformed policeman by the door. The people had vanished; the police had driven them out. The sight of the wide expanse of floor, the unoccupied tables and the deep silence which hung over the room depressed him. Only a few moments before it had been filled with people, now it was deserted. Kent shuddered as he thought what they had left behind them in the office.

A sound caused him to lift his eyes. The librarian was reëntering the room and by his side was a young woman, a woman who would have been very good to look at if her eyes had not been red from weeping and if she had been able to control the trembling of her body. But this she could not do, for the assistant had lost all control of her nerves.

As he saw her, Kent started across the floor, and they met beside one of the tables. Pulling out a chair, he motioned for the girl to be seated, and waited a moment for her to pull herself together. As this seemed something she could not do, the police official was forced to speak.

"Young lady," came his gruff voice, "I know you feel bad and all that, but my time is valuable. Your boss has been murdered and—"

There came a muffled cry from the girl's lips, and she rose in a frightened manner from her chair. With

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one hand gripping the table for support, she stared at the office door as if expecting it would open. Her lips were trembling, the blue eyes opened wide with fright. As she looked, little trembling cries escaped from her lips.

Rand saw an expression of disgust sweep over the inspector's face. He knew what the man was thinking. Time was valuable and before them was a hysterical young woman, one who had lost all control of her nerves and would be unable to answer any questions until she had calmed down. With a gesture the inspector turned to the librarian.

"Take her somewhere and tell her I will see her in a few moments."

The girl was led from the room with the librarian's arm around her shoulders. It was not a dignified retreat, for she was letting herself go. They could hear her voice, broken with sobs, dying away in the distance. As he listened, Kent swore; swore just once, but that once was enough.

He might have spoken if two men had not come through the door. One was a young patrolman, the other, who carried a tin box under his arm, was the fingerprint expert. Reaching the inspector's side they paused. Receiving his instructions, the fingerprint expert hastened toward the office door, leaving the policeman behind.

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There came another interruption. A policeman was pushing a shrinking figure into the room, a little protesting man, who swore rather loudly and did not wish to look at the inspector, a man dressed in a faded brown suit, whose feet slid over the floor far more than they walked.

As he stood before them, Joe White was not a pleasing sight. He had not shaved for several days and the rough beard gave his thin cheeks an unpleasant color. The narrow, shifting eyes shot one fleeting look at the inspector; then their gaze dropped to the floor. There was no doubt the man was ill at ease and, Rand thought, a bit frightened.

The inspector's hand fell on White's shoulders and he pulled the little figure close to him. As the captive did not look up, Kent's other hand threw White's head back. For a moment the eyes of the two men met. Then came the low, slow voice of the official:

"Well, Joe, what's it been this time?"

"Nothing," came the whining reply. "I ain't done a thing, chief. You have no right to pull me around like this."

"No?" barked out Kent. "What were you trying to sneak out of the building for?"

For a second White raised his head and Rand saw a nervous, anxious look leap into the man's eyes.

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Then came the whining voice, and there was a trace of fear in the tones:

"Had a right to leave the place if I wanted. It's a public building."

Kent scowled, his eyes studying the figure before him for a moment, then he took his hand from the man's shoulder. His voice was like the barking of a machine gun.

"Joe, in that office is Ruby Merton, dead. Just been bumped off. What do you know about it?"

They saw the little figure sway for a moment; then White dropped into the nearest chair. He did not speak, neither did he raise his eyes. The thin hands were clasping each other, and his face grew pale. When he did lift his head, the look they received was a mixture of fear and doubt. The shrill voice trembled when he spoke.

"Dead?" he gasped.

Kent nodded, waiting for a reply. There was no reply. Not until he had been asked again and again the question: "What do you know about her death?" did he speak. Then it was only to shake his head and say that he knew nothing.

But he did know something. Rand was sure of that. He remembered how he had watched White studying the office door. There had been curiosity on his face, then also anticipation. He had known

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something. But that Joe White had the courage to kill anyone Rand doubted.

Yet the man was afraid. It could be seen in his trembling hands; it flashed forth in his eyes. What Kent might be thinking Rand could not tell, but he was pretty sure of one thing—White had been startled when the inspector had told him the librarian was dead, not only startled but actually surprised.

Try his best, Kent could not get the man to speak. To every question he would shake his head, remain silent and motionless. This stubborn spell surprised both the inspector and Rand. There had been other occasions when the law had reached out for White. He had always been willing to talk then.

In the end, disgusted and angry, Kent's hand went slamming down on White's shoulder and he pulled the shrinking figure to its feet. For a moment the police official scowled at the man before him; then he turned to the policeman.

"Take him over to the station and throw him in a cell," he ordered.

The two started over the floor, and Kent watched the tall policeman as he half pulled, half shoved his prisoner along. White knew something, but what? Then, as they had almost reached the door, Kent remembered the look in White's eyes when he ordered him to be taken to jail. It had been a look of relief.

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"Jake," he called out, "bring him back."

The policeman stopped and brought his prisoner back to the inspector's side. For a second Kent looked down at the sullen figure, then reaching forth he pulled him close to his side and, with the other hand, began to search his pockets. There were several pocket knives, pencils, bits of string, a paper of tobacco and two cheap pipes. These did not interest the official, but they were all he found in the pockets.

Rand had noticed that the search was far from pleasing to White, but, when Kent finished and stepped back to throw a gloomy look at the objects on the table, he saw a flash of relief sweep over White's face. It passed away when the inspector ordered the man to take off his shoes. He started to protest but Kent shoved him down into a chair and motioned to a policeman.

They were not very good shoes, or very clean. As they were pulled from his feet, White started to protest. His frightened eyes watched the long fingers of the inspector go searching into the shoes. From the look on the man's face, Rand knew that something would be found.

The first shoe revealed nothing, but when his fingers went into the toes of the second, Kent gave a little nod of satisfaction. They saw his hand come forth, noticed the quick glance he gave the object he was holding, watched the look that swept over his face.

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"Well, Joe," came the cold voice, "suppose you tell us what you were doing with five ten dollar bills hidden in the toe of your shoe? They look like companions of the fifteen which were on Miss Merton's desk."

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CHAPTER III

A DEEP silence fell over the room. The inspector stood glaring down at the shrinking figure in the chair. For the moment he did not care to speak. As for White, he would have been unable to say a word if he had wished to talk. With his face twisted into a frightened grin, the blinking eyes gazed at Kent's outstretched hand, gazed as though ten dollar bills were some strange oddity he had never seen before.

"Well, Joe?" came Kent's voice again, and, though the tone was low and even, the icy edge behind the inflection caused White to jump. Unable to meet Kent's gaze he looked at the floor as he stammered out an excuse.

"I got that jack, working."

Kent gave a scornful laugh. That Joe White would ever receive fifty dollars for any sort of work was something that could not happen unless there had been a miracle. For Joe White to work would have been a miracle.

Kent's lips went suddenly tight. His hand shot out to yank White upright from the chair. With a half twist he sent the frightened man spinning into the arms of the nearest policeman.

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"Joe," came the snarling word, "you talk, and you talk damn quick. Tell me where you got that money or over to the jail you go with a charge of murder against you. What's more, I'll make it stick."

White's face had grown pale and his lips twitched. Throwing out his hands in a gesture, he tried to slip from the clutching grasp which held him. Then suddenly words came tumbling from his lips.

"I never croaked her, not me, never. Don't hang that on me, chief. I did swipe the jack, but I never croaked her."

The thin face was working nervously as he pleaded with the inspector. He was deadly frightened. Rand could see that, but he doubted very much if White knew anything about the woman's death. If he had gone into the office to steal the money, it could only have been when no one was there. If he had found her dead, he never would have remained in the reading room.

What White told them seemed to prove that Rand's idea had been right. In a voice which broke as he looked into the stern face of the inspector, the captive told his story. Though the little man seemed to have become even smaller, yet there was a frightened sincerity behind his words.

He had seen Miss Merton come out of her office and go over to the desk where her assistant was sitting. Rand could see this desk; it was on the other

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side of the room from the private office. In a few moments the librarian had returned. White had observed that she was carrying money in her hand. Entering her office, she had remained there for a while; then she came out again. This time she went out of the reading room.

Rand could picture the sneak thief as he watched the woman leave the room. In her office was money, and for the moment the place was deserted. It was too strong a temptation and, if he told the truth, all he had done was to make a bluff of going to a magazine rack and then suddenly to dart into the little room. The money was half hidden under a blotter, and he had taken five of the bills.

Kent had listened without a word. When White paused for breath the inspector spoke.

"You say you saw her come over from the desk over there, and that she was carrying the money in her hand, then when she went out of her office you sneaked in there?" he queried.

The eagerness with which White nodded was impressive. For a second the inspector looked at him, then, with a weary note in his voice motioned to the policeman.

"Take him over to the police station and lock him up. On your way out tell them to have the librarian bring back that girl."

Protesting loudly, White was pushed out of the

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reading room. As he vanished through the door, the fingerprint expert came out of the office. While he crossed over to their side, Rand saw there was a pleased look on the man's face. He started to talk while some feet away.

"I picked a half dozen or more prints. What else do you want done?"

Kent shook his head in a dubious fashion.

"There are at least a hundred people in the building," he said, "counting those who were in this room and the girls who work here. I guess you better make sure you stay in the station. There may be other prints I shall want you to take."

With a nod the man left them. Kent turned to gaze reflectively over the room. Now that it was empty it appeared to be a large place. He sighed as he thought of what was ahead of him. Every single person in the building would have to be examined, and there must be over a hundred. There would be little sleep tonight. Rand's voice broke in on his gloomy thoughts.

"You believe White?" he queried.

"Yes," came the slow reply. "Joe would not have nerve enough to kill her. He's no killer anyway, and if he had sneaked in to that office and found her dead in her chair, you can be sure he would not have stayed around. Not he. Here comes that damned girl."

Mr. Spicer was coming across the floor. Behind him was the reluctant figure of the girl. Though her

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lips were trembling, yet she appeared to have gained control of her feelings to some extent. They saw her give one look at the private office, and for a second Rand thought she would make another scene, but her lips shut tight as she hurriedly glanced away. Pulling a chair from the table, Kent motioned for her to be seated. For a moment he studied her face, then spoke softly:

"You can help us a great deal if you will only answer my questions. There is nothing to be excited about. No harm can come to you."

The girl's face grew very serious as she nodded. Though her hands were nervously clasping and unclasping, she leaned back in her chair to wait for the first question.

"You were on duty in the reading room this afternoon?"

The girl nodded.

"Did you see Miss Merton during the afternoon?"

"Three of four times."

"When was the last time?"

"I should say a little before four o'clock. She came to my desk to get the money from the Women's Club."

The look she received caused her to add quickly:

"It was money given by the Women's Club for a memorial picture to be hung in one of the branch libraries."

She had gained control of her nerves and her voice

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had become stronger. In reply to the inspector's questions, she informed him that the amount was two hundred dollars. Twenty ten dollar bills had been given to her superior, who had taken them to her private office. A few moments later she had seen Miss Merton going out of the reference room.

The inspector gave a glance at his wrist watch as a scowl swept over his face. Time was passing and they were getting nowhere. All that had been discovered, Rand could have written in one sentence, and it would have been a short one at that. The next question was very direct:

"Do you know if Miss Merton had any visitors in her office this afternoon?"

"Three. A book salesman was in around two, and stayed until two-thirty. At three Professor Henry Harlen went in the office. He stayed until—oh, perhaps thirty minutes. And one of the girls was in there after the professor."

Rand knew what was passing through Kent's mind. Three people had been in the private office and, though what they would have to say would be of little value, it would prove one thing. Up until about four the woman was still alive. Could anyone have gone into the office and not been observed by the assistant in the reading room? After all, her desk was in such a position that she would have been unable to see the office door.

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To Rand's surprise, Kent did not pursue this line of information. Instead, after one look at the girl, he wanted to know if she had observed anything out of the way in the dead woman's manner during the day.

A shrewd expression swept over the girl's face. She cast a doubtful look at the floor, then raised her eyes. The look was a keen one, filled with a little trace of excitement. Now that her hysteria had passed, the reporter could see that she was not only a very pretty girl but also a rather intelligent one. When she replied there was a half apologetic tone in her voice:

"It may mean nothing, sir, but she was very much excited all day. Again and again during the morning she tried to get some number on the telephone. I think she must have gotten her party about one o'clock, for she did not use the phone after that. I thought that she was not only excited but also, perhaps, a little shocked."

"You have no idea whom she wanted, whom she was trying to get on the telephone?"

The girl shook her head. The reference librarian had a direct line outside the building and, as the telephone system was automatic, the calls could not be traced through the exchange. But the woman had tried again and again to get a number, the girl was sure of this, for during the morning she had been working at a table just outside the office door. She had heard the telephone being used.

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The inspector was silent a moment, then with a wave of his hand motioned the girl to go. She had taken but one step toward the door, however, when he called her back.

"I noticed that there is another door in her office. I presume that it leads out to a hallway. Did she keep that door locked?"

"Always. You see—" the girl hesitated a moment giving Spicer a half glance, but the look upon Kent's face caused her to say what was on her mind. "You see, she hated to have people running in to see her. So she locked that door, always kept it locked. I know it was locked around two-thirty, for one of the girls told me she was bringing a book to Miss Merton and tried the hallway door. It was locked."

Whatever Kent thought of her reply could not be told from his face. With a grunt he told the girl he would not want her any longer and at the same time asked Spicer to see that all his assistants were gathered in one room. The man hurried away, and Kent stood for a moment in a brown study. Then, with a sudden shrug of his shoulders, he turned to Rand.

"Rand," he said, "I have to go upstairs and see if my men have picked up anything from that gang they have herded together. We are not getting anywhere. While I am upstairs suppose you go and see if that office door is locked. You might hang around here

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till the body is moved. I will give you what dope I get later."

Rand walked over the floor, hesitating a second before the closed office door. Straightening up his shoulders he pushed it open and entered the room. He tried not to give a glance at the still figure at the desk, but was unable to turn his eyes away. The glance was only for a second, however; the next instant he was standing before the door which was opposite the one he had just pushed open.

It was a wooden door, and there was a key in the lock, but when he turned the knob the door swung open. The girl had said that Miss Merton always kept the door locked; what was more, one of her assistants had tried the door earlier in the afternoon. It was locked then. It was now unlocked.

Pushing the door open, he stepped out into a small hallway. To his left was another door, its top glass. He could see part of the large lounge, though the view was broken by high pillars. To his right the hall ran only about six feet, and there was a door which he thought opened into the basement.

He stood there for a while thinking. If the door was always locked, if it had been locked at three, then the murderer had simply turned the key and escaped through the hallway. It would be an easy thing to do. Though he might be observed as he stepped into the lounge, yet again he might not be. Anyone who was

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careful and picked the moment well, could dart to one of the pillars and be unseen.

When he stepped back into the office, for some unknown reason, he turned the key in the lock. He gave it a moody glance, then stepped over to the desk and sank down into the chair. One hand reached out for the telephone. While he had the time, he had better phone into the rewrite man what he had found. But just as he was about to dial the number he gave a start.

For some reason the desk did not look natural. Why he thought this he did not know, but there was something that should have been on the table, which was not there. It was not the money that had been under the blotter, for the inspector had taken that. So far as he could see, nothing had been disturbed, and yet—

Slowly his eyes searched every section of the desk. He noticed the pile of magazines, the copies of the Publishers' Weekly, the orderly row of book catalogues. For a second he even allowed his eyes to rest upon that white head, a head sunk down upon a still chest. Everything seemed to be as it was when he first came into the office. But he knew that something was missing.

Again his eyes started to travel over the desk; then suddenly he gave a start. There was one thing missing. The inspector had not taken it, and the finger-

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print expert would touch nothing. But one thing was gone. He had watched the inspector examine the cord which had been around the woman's neck. After one look Kent had tossed it upon the desk. It had been upon the desk when they left the office to go into the reading room, but it was not there now. Nowhere in the room could he see that bit of cord.

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CHAPTER IV

LEANING back in the chair, Rand stared at the desk as though he had never seen it before. When he rose to his feet, he lifted each book, picked up every piece of paper. After examining the desk, he searched the rest of the room, and in the end he was forced to admit that the bit of cord had vanished.

Kent had not placed it in his pocket; he was positive of that. The inspector had thrown the cord on the desk and had not picked it up again. Spicer had seen the cord but had not touched it. The fingerprint expert had not touched it Rand was sure; he certainly would not have taken it from the room. However, it was gone.

Rand's eyes rested upon the door which opened into the hallway. He gave a start. The bit of cord was missing, and none of the police had taken it, but someone might have come into the office from the hallway. If this had happened, the cord had been taken while Kent and Rand were out in the reading room. He thought of this for a moment, as a shrewd look swept over his face. That bit of cord had been the weapon by which the librarian had been killed. It was of no interest to anyone save the murderer. Then he gave a little whistle.

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Whoever had taken the cord must still be in the building. The inspector had stated that he had policemen at all the doors, and that no one was allowed to enter or leave the building until he had been examined. There had been no time as yet to examine anyone. Whoever had taken the string must still be in the building.

His first idea was to rush from the room and tell the inspector, but by this time Kent would be on the second floor trying to discover what the people who had been in the reading room had observed. Then he had another idea.

Going into the hallway he turned to his left. He paused by the door that led to the lobby and glanced through the glass. Leaning against the post was a uniformed policeman. Rand gave the thickset figure one glance then pushed open the door and called out.

With a slight start of surprise, the man turned around and gazed at the reporter. At the sight of Rand's beckoning finger he came slowly across the floor. Every policeman in the city knew the reporter, and a half grin passed over the officer's face as he reached Rand's side.

"Have you seen anyone come through this door?" Rand questioned quickly.

The policeman slowly shook his head.

"No." was the very positive reply. Seeing that one word was not enough, he went into details. "I have

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been back of that post for the last thirty minutes. There is a man outside. My job is to see that no one sneaks out. There ain't been no one past me, and if they tried to come past that door I would see them. What you want to know for?"

There was an interested look upon the policeman's face; he was willing to listen. With a little shake of his head Rand murmured some excuse and stepped back into the hallway. As the door closed he stood silent a moment. One thing seemed sure; no one had gone out into the lobby. It would have been impossible to do so without being seen by the watching policeman.

But there was another door in the hallway, and he judged that it went down into the basement. Whoever had taken the cord had to come through the hallway door. Then the basement must be the place where the murderer had vanished.

Walking to the end of the passage, he threw the door open and found himself looking down into a pit of blackness. It was after six o'clock and, because of the storm, darkness had already fallen over the city. The cellar into which he was looking no doubt passed under the entire building. Just how large it was he did not know.

Passing through the doorway, he went down two steps and then stood listening. Not a sound came to his ears, but after a moment he could make out the

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windows across the floor. High up in the wall were two dim squares not quite so black as the rest of the cellar.

To go down in the dark cellar, not knowing its size or what it might contain, did not seem a very sensible thing to do. There must be a switch somewhere, and he turned to see if it was on the wall behind him. Not finding it, he decided that it must be at the bottom of the steps.

There were just seven steps but when he stood on the concrete cellar floor he found that the cellar was even darker than he had thought. True, across the floor he could make out the two small windows, but they were only a trifle lighter than the cellar itself.

A hand went searching in his pocket for his lighter and finding it he flipped the spring, but though there came a tiny spark the wick did not ignite. As he thrust the trinket back into his pocket he remembered that he had been intending to fill it all day. He would have to depend upon matches if he wished a light.

Matches were one thing Carty Rand was never able to keep in his pockets. When he had made a careful search, he held just five in his hand. They ought to be enough, for all he wished was to discover the switch for the electric lights. It must be on the wall by his side.

He struck a match, and as the flicker of flame leaped into being quickly looked about him. High on

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the wall was the switch; just as the match went spluttering out, his fingers touched the button. But though he turned it over, the cellar did not leap forth into light.

Again and again his nervous fingers tugged and snapped the switch, but to no avail. Either the lights were turned off in the cellar or there was something wrong. He had found the switch but he could get no illumination. The thing would not work.

With his back pressed against the wall he peered out into the darkness. Like a huge tunnel of gloom, the cellar stretched away before him. In the blackness it had neither shape nor size, seemingly stretching away into chaos—a sinister darkness, he thought, which threatened to engulf him if he moved.

Just what to do he did not know. Two floors above, Kent would be examining the library patrons, trying to find some fact which might throw light on the crime. He knew what Kent would say when told of the disappearance of the cord, could see his face flush with eagerness. Perhaps the best thing to do was to go back up the steps.

Yet he hesitated. The cord had vanished. Whoever had taken it must have come down into the cellar. He knew there must be another entrance to the basement; no doubt it was at the other end of the building. If he went to the center of the floor, and picked his way carefully, he ought to be able to find it.

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Suddenly there came over him the feeling that he was not alone. Though he could see nothing, and no sound drifted to his ears, yet a little shiver swept over him. It was an indescribable feeling, as though a sudden cold wind passed through the basement. As he felt it he realized that he was not alone.

Pressed close against the wall he bent forward and listened. For a moment he heard nothing. Then he thought he could hear the rain hitting against the windows, but the sound was so faint he could barely hear it.

He tried to throw his nervousness aside, telling himself that it was caused by the darkness and silence, but he knew that he was simply deceiving himself. Someone was in the cellar; though he could neither see nor hear the person, yet he knew someone was there. The very air he breathed seemed filled with a threatening presence. Again the shiver passed over him and he gave one look at the steps. They were overhead, but so dense was the gloom that it was rather difficult to make out the shadowy outline. It was then that he was sure he heard a sound.

It was not much of a sound, yet it could not be mistaken. A little to his right had come a curious scraping on the cement floor, the dragging sound of creeping coming in his direction, feet which were trying to pick their way without a noise.

He had courage enough, but his heart took a sud-

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den pounding leap. Whoever was in the cellar knew he was there, must have seen him come down the steps, caught the flare of his match. Now this unknown was stalking him in the darkness.

The sound had come from the direction of the stairway. Rand tried to pierce the darkness with his glance, but could see nothing. As he pressed against the wall, he thought he heard someone breathe. Then he gave one leap in the direction of the stairway.

As he leaped away from the wall he slammed into the unseen body of a man. His hand brushed against a shoulder; his face felt the rough cloth as it scraped against his cheek. Then a hand came clutching down upon his shoulder.

With a burst of strength he threw it off, only to feel it clutching at his coat. A fist crashed against his arm. Though it was only a slanting blow, yet the force sent him backward. As he half stumbled, his unseen assailant came rushing after him.

As they clinched, Rand knew that it would take all his skill and strength to keep on his feet, but keep his feet he must, for his opponent was larger and heavier than himself. Once down on the concrete he would be at a disadvantage. He must keep his feet as long as he could.

A hand was creeping over his shoulder, searching for his throat. Rand felt long sinuous fingers clutching at his flesh. Desperately he threw them off and

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sent his fist against the man's chest. The blow drove him back, but only for a second. The next he had rushed in again.

As they struggled back and forth in the darkness, for some unknown reason Rand did not call out. He could hear the heavy breathing of his opponent, feel the hands which clutched and tore at his clothing, but neither of them spoke.

Once the man's arms encircled Rand's waist, and he was almost thrown to the floor. Shaking himself loose, he reached out his hand, only to have his fingers entangled in the pocket of a coat. As they slipped in they clutched something, which, as he drew away, he kept securely in his hand.

Leaping back he thrust the object into his pocket as the man rushed him against the side of the stairway. Struggling to break away, he felt the pressure of the strong hands upon his arms, sensed the cutting edge of the stairway. Here he was at a disadvantage, and he realized to his horror that the man had a grip which he could not break.

The side of the stair was cutting into his back; the pressure was getting stronger, and he felt a sudden twinge of pain. A hand crept up his arm, slid over his shoulder, then the long fingers fixed around his throat.

He shook one arm away, and struck out wildly with his clenched fist. He felt it go smashing upon the

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man's throat and realized that the grip around his neck had been broken. He gave a leap for the steps, leaped again as the man jumped forward to catch him, and managed to escape the grasp.

His feet reached the first step then the second. Half creeping, half climbing, he dragged himself toward the open door, and knew that the danger was over. The man had given up the idea of following him. He heard footsteps running over the cellar floor, heard them die away as, with a gasp, he staggered through the door into the hallway.

The first instinctive action was to lean wearily against the wall. Next he closed the door and turned the key which was in it. His wind was gone and he was panting. By the light which came from the lobby he saw that his clothes were in a sorry state.

For several moments he leaned against the wall. Just what the episode in the cellar might mean he did not at the moment try to fathom. His entire body ached, and where the man's fingers had encircled his throat there was a fiery pain.

As his strength came flooding back, he realized that he must get to Kent at once. The man must still be in the cellar, unless he had managed to escape through the windows. Rand knew he must hurry to Kent and have the cellar searched at once.

Suddenly he remembered the object his fingers had clutched when they slipped into the man's pocket. He

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found the object and for a moment his fingers rested on it. When his hand came out into the light he gave a long look at the thing clutched in his fingers. It was a sober look and at the same time a wondering one. There in his hand was a piece of cord, a harmless looking bit of cord, to look at, but Rand knew that it was not as harmless as it appeared, for in his hand he was holding the cord which had been around the librarian's throat.

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CHAPTER V

ONLY for a second did he look at the cord. Thrusting it back into his pocket he turned and started for the lobby. The policeman, still standing beside the first pillar, gave him a friendly glance as he hurried by, but Rand did not even nod.

Rushing up a wide stairway he came out on the balcony which ran around the large court. To his right were the art gallery and the special library, and across the court was a lecture room. Both art gallery and lecture room contained people, and after a quick glance he saw that Kent was in the special library.

He paused by the door and looked into the room. In front of a book-lined wall, the tall inspector was seated at a desk. Beside him sat a stenographer and behind her was a policeman. A worried looking man was answering the questions which were being hurled at him.

It was several moments before the inspector looked in the direction of the door. A scowl swept over his face as Rand beckoned and for a moment Rand thought he would not leave the desk, but at last he rose and hastened out into the hallway.

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