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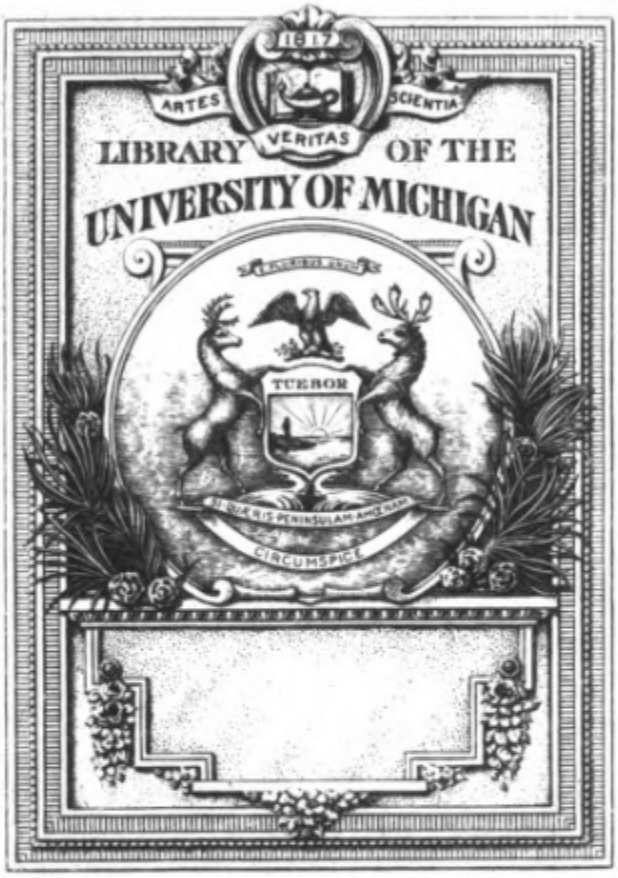

THE GIFT OF

Dr. Orma F. Butler

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THE SNARL OF THE BEAST

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THE SNARL OF THE BEAST

By

CARROLL JOHN DALY

AUTHOR OF "THE WHITE CIRCLE"

NEW YORK
EDWARD J. CLODE, INC.

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To
My Boy
JACK DALY

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	The Attack	11
II.	A Dead Police Officer	21
III.	The Police Are Curious	31
IV.	Within the Tenement Room	39
V.	The Opening Door	48
VI.	The Girl of the Night	55
VII.	The Getaway Car	65
VIII.	The Snarl of the Beast	75
IX.	A Pretty Bit of Shooting	82
X.	The Face by the Window	91
XI.	A Masked Visitor	100
XII.	Pounding Feet	109
XIII.	Inspector Coglin—From Headquarters	119
XIV.	A Hand on the Sill	130
XV.	The Man in the Blackness	140
XVI.	By the Alley Door	149
XVII.	A Rescue	159
XVIII.	The Car with the Drawn Curtains	169
XIX.	The Trap	177
XX.	I Decide to Face the Enemy	185

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CHAPTER		PAGE
XXI.	ACTION!	194
XXII.	THE SHRIEK OF A SIREN	203
XXIII.	IN THE HANDS OF THE LAW	212
XXIV.	INSIDE THE TAXI	220
XXV.	A CERTAIN LADY AGAIN	228
XXVI.	THE GUN BEHIND THE CURTAIN	236
XXVII.	JAKE MINELY TALKS	243
XXVIII.	A BULLET IN THE BACK	252
XXIX.	POLICE PROTECTION	263
XXX.	A PRISONER IN THE SHACK	271
XXXI.	THE YELLOW STREAK	280
XXXII.	THE SCREAM OF A WOMAN	289
XXXIII.	FACE TO FACE	297
XXXIV.	A LAST STAND	305
XXXV.	BON VOYAGE!	314

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The
SNARL OF THE BEAST

CHAPTER I

THE ATTACK

It's the point of view in life that counts. For an ordinary man to get a bullet through his hat as he walked home at night would be something to talk about for years. Now, with me; just the price of a new hat—nothing more. The only surprise would be for the lad who fired the gun. He and his relatives would come in for a slow ride, with a shovelful of dirt at the end of it. I can take a joke, of course, but my sense of humor isn't fully enough developed along those lines. I have brains, I suppose. We all have. But a sharp eye, a quick draw, and a steady trigger finger drove me into the game. Also you might add to that an aptitude for getting out of trouble almost as quickly as I get into it.

Under the laws I'm labeled on the books and licensed as a private detective. Not that I'm proud of that license but I need it, and I've had considerable trouble hanging onto it. My position is not exactly a healthy one. The police don't like me. The crooks don't like

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me. I'm just a halfway house between the law and crime; sort of working both ends against the middle. Right and wrong are not written on the statutes for me, nor do I find my code of morals in the essays of long-winded professors. My ethics are my own. I'm not saying they're good and I'm not admitting they're bad, and what's more I'm not interested in the opinions of others on that subject. When the time comes for some quick-drawing gunman to jump me over the hurdles I'll ride to the Pearly Gates on my own ticket. It won't be a pass written on the back of another man's thoughts. I stand on my own legs and I'll shoot it out with any gun in the city—any time, any place. Thirty-fourth street and Broadway, in the five o'clock rush hour, isn't barred either. Race Williams—Private Investigator—tells the whole story. Right! Let's go.

It's dark and the street lamps on the dirty little street of the lower East Side do no more than throw a dull shadow about a small splash of light. I'm not looking for trouble but that don't mean that I'm not expecting it. I always am. I get as many death threats as a movie star gets mash notes. The rats of the underworld are my natural enemies, and there I am in the very heart of the criminal hangout. So I play close to the curb and throw a swagger into my walk. Outward confidence always registers with the unsavory gentlemen of the night.

There are few people pounding the pavements; some loitering in ill-smelling doorways beneath the street level. Nothing suspicious about any of them;

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that is, a personal suspicion—yet I know that some one is getting my smoke. Some one is playing the lamb to my little Mary. Nothing tangible, you understand, and no way to explain it. Just instinct warns me that I am followed. It may be the police or a crook with a guilty conscience, or just one of the boys who recognizes me and stalks along in the hope of settling a private vengeance by a bit of murder. Then another figure, running along the sidewalk across the street, beating his hands against the cold, is swallowed up in the darkness.

I shrug my shoulders and plod on. I'm well known in that section of the city; a lad won't chance a shot unless he's so close he can't miss. And the man following me knows that he'll get only one shot. While he holds his distance there is no complaint. When he gets too close I'll have to lead him down a back alley and kiss him goodnight. Nothing alarming. It's an old story to me.

As I move nearer to the East River and a distant clock drones one, the lurking shadows of human forms disappear from the street. It's not the hour so much as the bitter cold. Somewhere below the level of the street the tin-pan notes of a piano drift faintly into the night. A man curses and a window slams. Far distant an ash can clatters on stone and the almost human screech of a cat pierces, shrilling through the zero night.

Then silence, but for the soft tramp of my rubber heels and the hardly audible echo of heels behind me.

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I don't have to turn to know that my shadow has quickened his pace and now takes two steps to my one; fast, short strides of a heavy body that swings from side to side. Things were getting interesting. I slipped off my thick gloves and wound my fingers about the heavy forty-four in my coat pocket. Then I shot a glance back over my shoulder and caught the dull outline of the swinging figure who was unconsciously hurrying toward a yawning grave. Big, almost massive hunched shoulders, brown cap, and hands sunk in the pockets of a great coat that was wrapped tightly about his body.

And that was all I saw of him. I turned back sharply again, for other feet sounded upon stone steps, then pounded over the pavement toward me. Just a derelict of the night he appeared, shuffling toward me—his right hand outstretched, his left hanging by his side with the palm toward me. He carried no weapon, there was no threat in his approach and his manner was cringing, his body stooped, his voice with a whine in it.

"Two bits for a flop, Mister." The voice was low and shook slightly. He didn't like the part he was playing. And I didn't blame him. The temptation to lift my gun and smack him one was strong but I didn't. It wasn't a big heart or a sensitive conscience that made me hesitate. Just common sense and the hope of a long life. So I resisted temptation, put business before pleasure and saved this bird a ride in an ambulance.

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I never had a doubt; wasn't fooled for a moment by the eager hand, the whining voice and the sunken hungry eyes. His hunger wasn't of the stomach. This was the slouching, running figure that had passed down the street at the last corner, and ducking across had waited my approach in a convenient alleyway. Well planned perhaps. It probably had worked hundreds of times before. But this time they were going to come a cropper. You couldn't pocket Race Williams between two enemies like that; leastwise, you couldn't and get away with it. The thing was too simple. The panhandler was to hold my attention while my shadow was to spring me from behind. Believe me, I threw a monkey wrench into the works. I gave these birds a surprise.

The shabby lad's hand was hardly out before the man behind changed his jerky walk to a run. But if he acted quickly, I was just a bit ahead of him. My left hand shot out and clutched the extended arm before me. My right pulled a rod, and before my whining friend was sure just what had happened I was behind him, my gun playing a tattoo up and down his spine as he stood silently trembling between me and my rushing shadow.

There was a curse as the big boy who had been shadowing me hurled himself forward—skidded to a stop before he crashed his friend and stood still; a shadowy, mountainous mass in the darkness. But the hand that he still held in the air was clearly visible—

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so was the short section of iron pipe that white, knotted fist held.

"Easy does it." I tried to peer over the shabby man's shoulder and get a look at the face beneath the brown cap. It was an ugly, evil map—what I could see of it. Gleaming, shining animal-like eyes; thick lips above heavy jowls, that were lost in the collar of the great coat which was buttoned tightly about his neck. But his arm was the thing. He had a reach on him like a gorilla. The lead pipe was high enough in the air, but that arm was slightly bent. It was the other that I noted—imagination, I thought at first. Just a trick of the darkness, as I made out the whiteness of thick twitching fingers reaching to the man's knees.

But it wasn't imagination; for as I watched, those fingers closed into a fist—a fist that slowly began to rise and stretch out beside the man whose back I tickled with my gun. Uncanny, it was there in the darkness. You couldn't really distinguish the arm that led from the hand to the shoulder; that was lost in the background of the dark coat. Just a knotted fist seemed to be floating through the air; slowly, but surely and steadily, toward me. The raised hand too was sweeping down by inches.

Uncanny certainly—odd that a human being should have such a reach. But there was nothing to fear really. An embarrassing time perhaps, if I had to explain the shooting to the police. I've explained so often that it's getting monotonous to me—to the law too, for that matter. Judges were looking at me with

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suspicion. Never anything to hang on me, you understand. But one learned jurist had told me grimly that if I made it a steady practice to appear before him to explain any more little shootings in the night he'd give me a stretch on the principle of the thing. That he would was certain enough. That he could was another matter. But besides the annoyance, there was the expense of a high class lawyer. Good mouthpieces may be worth the money all right—and earn it too—but they put an awful dig in the bank account just the same. And at present my balance at the bank was about as low as the mercury in the thermometer. But back to that hand!

"Young man," I shoved my gun deeper into the generous back before me, "advise your friend that if he isn't more careful of those itching fingers of his I'll lay a row of lead buttons up and down your spine. Come—speak up!" Those hands were still doing their stuff—one of them out by the derelict's shoulder as the head of the awkward, waving creature shoved slightly forward and his feet shuffled on the sidewalk.

"Lay off that stuff." The shabby man shot the words toward his companion. Was it a command or a request? I couldn't tell at first. The hand stopped for a moment; hung so by the other's shoulder. Then the fingers opened slightly and it came on again; the huge carcass moving slightly so that it was partly protected from me by the lad between us.

"Back, you!" The panhandler jerked out the words. And there was no doubt of their meaning.

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Neither a request nor a command, but a plea in his voice—and then again. "You fool—stop it—drop those hands. Drop them—I say." And this time the whine in his voice was real. But there was more than just reality—fear, horror were all in his screech; his words echoing down the street. He had lost his head altogether. Now he appealed to me.

"Don't shoot me," he cried, his words trembling and rattling in his throat. "I can't stop him—I can't stop him. Look at his eyes."

And I did. They were shining like an animal's; like a cat's—clearly the green stood out in them. For the first time in my life I got a shudder. It was almost as if I could see things behind those eyes, as if I looked down into a reeking mass of rottenness. No way to describe it. I shuddered, yes—with revulsion, not fear. I'm not made to fear a man. It just don't come natural to me, I guess. But more than the eyes I watched the hand, the heavy shoulders, the protruding head—the sudden outward thrust of a great chin.

I swung my gun up and over the shoulder of the whiner.

"Listen, big boy," and there was no question nor pleading in my voice, "if you don't control that laudable desire to fasten your hands on my neck and won't listen to the kindly, fatherly advice of your dirty friend—and don't think anything of your life—why—" and I cut my speech, for the man was swinging slowly from side to side—crouching slightly and getting ready to hurl that huge body forward.

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"One more move and I'll plug the two of you," I said sharply—and I meant it.

"He don't understand—don't care," the other man bellowed. "Lead won't stop him—when he's like that, nothing can stop him. Run for it, Race Williams—RUN." And this time his shout was fit to wake the dead.

There may be men with charmed lives; men that lead won't stop, but I have yet to meet them. The dirty lad may have been right, but if I were a betting man I'd lay pretty good odds that at the first bark of my gun a useless mass of flesh would lie on the sidewalk. It was his party, not mine. As for running—well, the bullet-proof man who can pump lead into my dust isn't born yet.

The giant didn't stop; didn't fade back as I poked my rod forward, and what's more he didn't care much for his friend's life. He bent low, protecting his own body—shot his raised hand down, grasped his friend with it and thrust that other hand out toward my neck. I could have given ground and avoided it but I didn't. When I jump I jump forward, not backward. I raised the muzzle of my gun slightly and pressed the trigger. A bullet tore up that flapping coat sleeve. Only a scratch it would give him, but it was the warning of certain and sudden death to follow.

His body may have been bullet-proof. I didn't know about that. But his arm certainly wasn't, and his brain was susceptible to pain. For the moment I thought he wasn't a man at all. There was a grunt, an

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animal-like snarl, and an ear-splitting agonized screech of rage.

We just stood so—the three of us. The dirty lad, uncertain—his hands half raised in the air. The Terror was bent double, nursing his injured arm and giving queer groans and snarls. And I—I just swung my gun from one to the other, waiting. The show was on—would they continue with the play or ring down the curtain? As for me—I just wanted a good look at that evil face that was buried in great arms. Would I get that look? I thought not. This was New York, and gun shots were no novelty—they were expected and— We all three came erect.

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CHAPTER II

A DEAD POLICE OFFICER

A WHISTLE cut the silence—a low sharp note from far down the block. But it sounded like a great ship's blast to the three of us. Somewhere above us a window shot up and a voice called hoarsely. There was another and another—an answering whistle—running feet—the pounding of clubs, and the play broke up.

I let Dirty-Boy go first. He sort of dashed out into the middle of the street, saw a door open at the top of a few steps before him, and came back again. He called to his friend; cursed when the man just stood there, his head raised as if he sniffed the air. And I was off—down the block—close to the light near the corner when the wagon swung around. There was no clang of bells to warn me, no toot of a screeching siren—just the sudden chug of a motor, the grinding of brakes, and a cry for me to halt.

And I did. Was the game up? I had a good story to tell. I didn't like it of course—this being dragged in by the cops; but most of all my appointment in the night. I couldn't keep that now, and I always make a point of keeping my engagements.

And the game wasn't up. A door opened close beside me; a figure looked out—the frightened, white

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face of a disturbed householder. They would all be disturbed in that neighborhood, I guess. There was hardly a house you couldn't search and grab yourself off evidence of one kind or another. If there wasn't something criminal involved—why, you could find a still, or at least a few bottles of liquor.

It wasn't exactly the open door that decided me, nor it wasn't the man who looked up that made me hesitate. My friend of the snarl; the lad with the supposedly bullet-proof body had run after me, willing to finish out our little misunderstanding. Mad with pain and rage, he came pounding over the sidewalk. His breath hissed like escaping steam; the moan on his lips was like the snarl of a wounded beast.

He brought up sharply too when the police ducked around the corner, and now he skidded slightly; made the turn; lit straight for the doorway and the figure who stood paralyzed with fear in the dim light.

The man in the doorway recovered slightly, but too late. The door that he frantically tried to close was crashed in upon him. He was knocked to the floor, and the hurtling giant tramped over his body. As for me, I had a little more respect for the honest and curious citizen. I jumped his prostrate form. For I too suddenly decided to seek liberty in flight. There would be a pretty story if I were caught. I was only doing my duty in pursuing the man who had held me up and threatened my life.

The cops were on the job; fearless men followed us into the narrow hall; feet beat close to mine, and mine

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beat close on the running man ahead. He knew his way, I thought; at least, those pounding feet never hesitated.

There was a cry from the pursuing police, a warning to halt, and a shot; then an answering one from the man ahead as he turned and fired. Nice little place I had picked; the spitting streaks of orange blue flame seemed to meet right beside me. If the boys kept this up I'd be lucky if I only stopped a bullet coming one way. I ducked low as I ran now, hugging close to the wall.

There was the crash of glass, the splintering of wood, the dimness of a winter sky and the towering dirty tops of blurred tenements—and I crashed out into the night. Crashed, was right. The broken, twisted door tripped me and I landed flat up against the railing of the frail back steps that led to the stone yard below. The railing groaned, cracked, then swayed slightly as I clutched for support an "upright." It held as the railing itself gave from the force of another body. The pursuing policeman had done as I had done; dashed blindly over the door, caught his foot and shot forward.

But he was not as fortunate as I. For he pitched headlong to the stones several feet below. I could hear the thud of his body and hear too the dull, unmistakable ring as his head struck the hard stone. Feet pounded against wood there across the court. I didn't see the figure of the giant, but I knew that he sought the fence behind and freedom in the block beyond.

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As for me! In a dazed way I struggled to my feet, slightly shaken up—too much so to pursue my foe. Yet I must—for in that lay safety. My head cleared, the blood rushed from it back into my body, and stepping over the débris on the little stoop I stopped dead and shot my hands into the air. Fool! I might have known. More than one policeman had followed us.

A bright light struck upon my face—there was a gruff order to throw up my hands, and behind the flash I caught the reflection of the brass buttons of a New York cop. Bad men to fool with—them. I didn't need to see the gun, for I felt it digging into my chest. My hands just shot above my head before the gruff order to throw up my hands was given. Then his voice—and this time I knew the man; and what was more, he knew me.

"Race Williams." I could feel rather than see the lips curl, and I knew too that his body stretched forward and that his flash for a second lit upon the crumpled heap of his brother officer below.

"You'll pay for this." I knew that his lips curled. Sergeant Rafferty was not one of my friends. But there was real feeling and not just vengeance in his voice as he continued. "I've always known that you ran contrary to the law. But I never could prove it. To-night—" The flash trembled as it swayed from me to the man on the stones below. "You'll have trouble explaining that, and—"

I heard the shot, perhaps even felt the purr of the bullet but of that one can never be certain. Another

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sound too that might just as well have been imagination. I thought that I heard a laugh; a gurgling, distant sort of a laugh, that seemed to have a growl in it—like an animal—like the snarl of a beast. Sergeant Rafferty broke off suddenly in his speech. His lips smacked, followed by a queer sound deep down in his chest. The light slipped from his fingers, and striking my foot rolled to the stoop. Then he slumped, crumpled up and slid slowly down upon the broken glass and the twisted wood.

I never liked the sergeant, but he went out as a man should. The gun was still clutched in lifeless, useless fingers. Even in death he didn't drop that gun. Death? Yes, he was dead all right. His head lay close to the flash and the rays shone full upon his face. But it was his eyes that told the story, more so than the trickle of red from beneath the collar of his uniform. Unseeing, glassy orbs looked unblinkingly into the glare.

I didn't lose my head, and it wasn't the stirring of the man on the pavement below that decided me, nor the hoarse calling voices in the yard next door. In the fraction of a second I weighed the possibility of flight and the wisdom of staying to face the music. Sergeant Rafferty was known as my enemy. Sergeant Rafferty was dead. What would be the caliber of the bullet found in his head? A forty-four? Maybe! There would be but one bullet missing from my gun and the man who carried that bullet had disappeared into the night. Oh, I know that there are experts who can tell from just what make and caliber of gun a

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bullet has been fired. But experts are known to favor the prosecution, and scientific statements of denial also are known to lull jurors into deep slumber. The police and I don't fit in together. I didn't wish a trial; a man's freedom often hangs on his past record, and my past was a beaut and no mistake.

Strange, you think, that I should figure all this out in the "panic" of finding a dead police officer at my feet. But there wasn't any panic. There never is with me at such a time. A man needs a clear head then. No one had seen my face—that is, no one but the dead police officer, and no one else was likely to if I played the game now. It was simply a question of finding the hole in the police lines before they discovered their dead brother and spread a net that even an alley cat couldn't get through. This was a question of minutes—perhaps seconds, if you figure closely.

People were shouting; lights were bobbing up—a few fear-crazed foreigners ventured from their rooms. There was enough running around to confuse any one. It was like a meeting of the League of Nations. Questions were shouted in one tongue to be answered in another. Half a dozen languages filled the air like a cheap radio set. Heavy feet trod on old boards. A deep Irish voice called a command. Another answered with a curse as his knees crashed a bannister.

There was only one way of escape—to follow the gigantic figure who had killed the cop. If his passage was blocked he might clear a way for me, but it was

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hardly possible that the street behind was already covered by the police.

With me the thought is the act. Crouching low, I ducked down those back steps and shot across the stone yard in the rear, toward the wooden fence. A woman screamed; a window crashed up; a voice called —and looking over my shoulder I saw the burly figure of a policeman framed in a lighted window of the second story. One hand was placed on the sill, the other clutched an automatic. His white face stretched out as he tried to pierce the darkness.

There was the crash of wood as another reached the back stoop—a cry of horror that turned almost at once to one of rage. Rafferty had been found! The message snapped quickly from him on the porch to him in the window. Distant voices echoed the cry within the building.

The white hand left the sill, a dart of light flashed through the darkness and splashed upon the wooden fence before me. There was a thud of heavy feet and I knew that the giant's head had just dropped from the fence where he had crouched, watching the play—watching me perhaps. A desperate man that. He had waited to get me if the police failed. Even after murdering the sergeant, he still sought my life. A paid murderer or one who sought private vengeance? But it didn't matter then—I had other things to think about.

The darting flash light shot frantically about the little court; swept over my face on to the fence—

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hesitated and came back again. I was smack in the light.

I heard the man in the window call; saw his gun raise too—and I fired. I didn't try to hit him. I'm not a murderer. But my shot was close enough to let him know that a man in a lighted window, bent on gun play, doesn't hold an enviable position. The glass smashed above him, fell upon his head and came tumbling down into the court. He fired once—wildly, I guess, for his head ducked back from the window and I did not hear the bullet strike; simply the crack of his gun—nothing more. Then his head disappeared from the window and the light went out.

Five seconds—perhaps ten—before that flash would go into play again. That would be enough, I thought —at least, I hoped. There was the fence just before me, dark and foreboding, with the dull outline of the top of it stretching along the blackness like the horizon across the distant ocean. A bad moment then. I'd need two hands for that fence. In the time it would take to jump, grasp the fence and swing over I would be at the mercy of the police behind and the killer ahead, if he waited in the rear yard of the house on the next block. Get the idea! When I made my leap I'd have to pocket my gun. I'm strong, husky, agile, and all that—but I'm no circus performer and I'd need both hands to hop that fence. Oh, I've heard of guns being temporarily parked between the teeth and I'm not denying that there may be men who can do it, even outside the motion pictures. But for me—I just

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pocketed that gun, reached the fence, made the leap, grasped the top and swung up on it.

Just the fraction of a second I hung there, but that fraction of a second was too much. The police had played the game well—well or cautiously, I don't know which. At least, they didn't dash blindly into the yard after me. They got to work with their flashes. The one flash was back at the window now and another shot from the rear porch where Rafferty lay dead. Luck! Yes, they had it, for both flashes seemed to light on me at the same time. They just made one mistake—overcautious that they get the right man. People were screaming and running about now; a shrieking woman dashed into the yard and the police hesitated. And that was my cue.

Then they fired; three shots came almost as one—funny how they all made up their minds together. Two of the shots hit the fence. One seemed to nick the top of it where I had been the split second before—the other tore through the thick boards and pinged against the house. But I—I was dashing across the yard beyond; into the little alleyway toward the next street.

There were running feet ahead of me, I thought—heavy feet, yet feet that struck lightly on the pavement. Hard to explain, that? Perhaps. But it struck me as if the man ahead had removed his shoes, and now the weight of his great body was softened by the even tread of stockinged feet. He panted too, I thought, and once I caught the hiss of his breath—a

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whining, snarling sort of hiss. Then silence, as I passed through the alley and reached the next block.

The street was deserted. No lumbering form ran up or down it. Not a sound on that block, but behind me came the sharp blast of a whistle and the distant shrill notes of voices. I breathed easier. There is no forest more impenetrable, no place as easy for a man to hide in, as the teeming tenements of New York's East Side. I was safe!

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CHAPTER III

THE POLICE ARE CURIOUS

It would be too much to hope for a cruising taxi in that neighborhood, even at that time of night. So I only gave a glance for one. And I didn't walk easily down the block, like an honest citizen. Not me—I know the ropes too well; the police methods too, for that matter. There would be a call sent in and a dozen men on that block in another minute or two. They'd comb that neighborhood with a fine tooth comb. About the other lad I didn't know, but that they wouldn't find me there was certain.

I loped easily across the street, entered the alley-way opposite, and keeping in the shadows passed to the back of another tenement, through the yard behind and so on to the next block. This process I repeated for three more blocks. Unnecessary so much caution, you think. Perhaps. But then, I'm a cautious man. Since I had fled the scene of Sergeant Rafferty's murder I'd have a lot of explaining to do, and I much preferred that another than I explained that little bit of killing. Gigantic figures that waylay people on the street and kill policemen in mistake for you, are not the sort of bed time stories that are swallowed by the

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police. Lord knows they're gullible enough, without trying to feed them that sort of stuff.

Through the last alley, dodging the last ash can, I came out upon the open street and walked leisurely down it toward the East River. I wasn't over four blocks from my destination—a disreputable neighborhood down by the docks. The letter in my pocket was explicit enough—there was the street and number, and also a description of the house—though that description might fit half a dozen of the shabby holes along the water front.

As I walked along I gave considerable thought to that letter. Was it a trap? Had the attack on me followed quickly upon the letter? Had they been laying for me on the deserted block? But hardly that. The panhandler or the giant could not have guessed I'd come that way, a good half dozen blocks above my destination. No—I had been followed. The boy that tried to shake me down for a "flop" had crossed the street and ducking back waited for me.

Many wanted my life but most of them have taken it out in feeble, half-hearted attempts at ambush. This time things were different. I shrugged my shoulders, broke open my gun, ejected the two empty shells and slipped in fresh bullets. I'd clean her up when I got home. It looked like it was going to be open season for Race Williams. All the yeggs who made threats against my life must have passed New Year's resolutions to finish the job at once.

I dismissed the idea that the letter writer had at-

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tempted to trap me—that I was now booked to enter a darkened hallway and be shot down. The letter wasn't clever enough for that—and besides, there wasn't a penny sent in it. My enemies have single-track brains. Race Williams was hard boiled, out for the almighty dollar—it would never enter their heads that I'd hunt up a case in that neighborhood without first getting the feel of a few century notes. I didn't think I would myself, for that matter. But business was dull. We do strange things—and there I was.

When a thing is done it's done. So I dismissed the incident from my mind. It wasn't the first time my life had been attempted and I'm not stupid enough to think it will be the last. It was simply in the course of business. I was a bit more cautious about being followed, that was all. And I took my time too—sauntered along. If I should happen to be questioned I wouldn't gasp out my answers. After a chase like that, a breathless man would be a suspected man.

My business is like the weather. It clears up if you wait long enough. It's surprising what a lot of trouble there is in the world, and it's generally people with money who have the time to find the pitfalls of life and drop into them. It's up to me to get the rope and haul them out. And to-night I carried a letter—a queer, terse sort of note; but to me there was an air of reality—sincerity—in it. I slipped the letter from my pocket again and peered at it under the street lamp. I knew the address all right—but a harness bull had

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suddenly popped around the corner and confronted me, less than fifty feet away.

I could have ducked him I suppose, but I'd done enough of that for one night and Race Williams is often asked to explain his presence in such a neighborhood. The cops get used to spotting me, and now—well, he might have recognized me even at that distance and I didn't want to be raked in later and questioned on the murder of Sergeant Rafferty. Besides, as I looked behind me a motor-cycle cop with a boy friend in a side car was slowly slipping up the street. Also the boy in the side car was sporting a machine gun. I just caught the flash of it, but I knew those things and know that they are only trusted in the hands of men who know how to use them. I leaned against the pole and waited.

The motor cycle reached me first, stopped across the street and waited, the man in the side car leaning far out and staring at me with bull dog ferocity. He did it good too. I leaned against the pole beneath the light, pocketed my letter and lit a cigarette.

There's a false impression among the police that an innocent citizen won't notice such an attitude of belligerency, while a crook or a man with a guilty conscience will quake beneath such scrutiny. Of course it works backwards nine times out of ten. The innocent citizen gets nervous and blows us, while the well-trained crook expects it and is prepared for it. And that's often the reason the innocent bystander gets hauled in so much.

In law every man is considered innocent until he is

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proven guilty, but in fact every man is looked on as guilty until he is proven innocent. And you take that as gospel from one who knows. I'm not quoting from books; I get all my knowledge from life, and when you get a lesson out of life it sticks.

The harness bull on the sidewalk didn't quicken his pace. I was being given time to think. Orders must have gone out quickly to question every one even ten blocks away—perhaps the whole lower city. I puffed my butt and waited. It was old stuff for me. Would this cop know me, and if he did would it hurt or help me? If I proved a stranger to him would he drag me in for the desk sergeant to have a look at? The commissioner was getting mighty particular lately with gun fights a nightly affair in most any section of the city, and the killing of a policeman no longer a national event.

I was deeply interested in my cigarette when the heavy hand fell upon my shoulder and a gruff voice snapped in my ear.

"I'll have a look at that letter you were reading—now!"

"Do you know any more jokes?" I shot the words at him without looking up, but before he could figure out an answer I swung and faced him beneath the light.

"Race Williams," he gasped. Then as the surprised upward curve of his mouth cut quickly down to hard straight lines, "But that'll do you no good. There's been mur—" He cut the word short, bit his lip a second, decided he'd better not say too much, and con-

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tinued: "Shots and you go together like ham and eggs. I think you'd better have a talk with the sergeant."

"Had a lot of talks lately." I shook his hand from my shoulder. It was funny how he didn't ask to look at the letter again. He knew I knew my rights. "Of course it's up to you to do your duty. You know my business. I'm privately working with the law at present. You know I have good friends at headquarters. Perhaps, after all, you might have to do the explaining." I sort of nodded over at the motor cycle cops. "Now, Delaney, I have business to-night. Young blood —a bad woman and worse whiskey. I won't add that he's a relative of any one in political circles; but his father's got the money to hire me for a job like that and his father must have good friends. Better think it over. Haven't you heard anything lately?"

And he had. So had I, for that matter. The whispered talk of the infatuation of a certain young man for an uncertain young lady. Besides, that man's father was rather well connected—too well connected for Delaney's piece of mind. That I hadn't been approached in the case and wouldn't be apt to touch it with a ten-foot pole if I had been approached didn't matter to me—and wasn't known to Delaney.

It was just a lie of course, but it might very easily have been the truth as far as Delaney was concerned. All the police read my character wrong. Not one of them would believe that I'd turn down a case there was money in, and that I didn't make a business of rescuing the perverted sons of wealth, whose scanda-

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lous and sometimes criminal escapades are looked upon as just the acts of big good natured boys having their fling at life.

Delaney was falling—slipping anyway. I saw the nod he gave to the motor cycle lad, who moved slowly away. So I pushed my advantage and added a touch of color to the story.

"It's a thing that won't stand for delay, or the newspapers will grab it. If that's the case I'll know where to lay the blame. Perhaps you can slip that blame along to the desk sergeant. He'll be willing to shoulder it, and no doubt thank you for it." I finished sarcastically.

"You have a tongue on you." Delaney shook his head and smiled. "I'm not one to have anything against your methods of business, Race Williams. I envy you your conscience at times and wish we of the force were allowed a little more loose shooting. There'd be more money in the pension fund then and less widows and fewer orphans." His lips were rather grim and I knew that he was thinking of Rafferty and the wife and children left behind. Delaney had no doubt picked up his information over a police box.

"They can't always hang it on you," he went on, "and they ain't never convicted you when they did get the evidence, but I dare say you've done for many a man who needed a killing. But—" wide blue eyes rested on me as a pudgy finger dug into my chest, "if you're lying to me and have had a hand in what went on to-night we'll know where to find you. I can't keep

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an eye on you to-night, even if I was so minded, but I'll get word of our meeting to Inspector Coglin, uptown."

With that final shot Delaney was gone. Inspector Coglin was down on me. Jealousy that I had so often succeeded where he had failed, or perhaps a real honest belief that I was more of a criminal than a detective—it didn't make any difference. He had sworn to get me—was laying for my scalp. But every time he had dragged me in for questioning I got my story over to the newspapers, which gave me considerable free advertising and gave Inspector Coglin a bit of the old raspberry. He'd let me alone lately. Vented his spleen on me by making faces and uttering threats. But I still followed my regular routine of business. When I wanted a man I stuck a gun in each pocket and went after him.

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CHAPTER IV

WITHIN THE TENEMENT ROOM

DELANEY passed from view. The motor cycle cop, with his side kick, had long since disappeared; the street was deserted, but I backed into a near-by doorway and waited a few minutes. My letter writer was particular that I be not followed. He even saw his death if his whereabouts were known. The letter I ran over again in my mind. The wording was simple enough.

"If you will visit me to-night—one-thirty—at (and here was the address) you can render me a great service, which will pay you a great price. The knowledge of certain others of your visit or my whereabouts means my death. I have heard of you. I need you. I can't come to you. My God! Take a chance and come. Third floor, back hall, last door—right.

"D. D."

There's the music, write your own words. The last line told the whole story. Sincerity there? Maybe. Perhaps just a fear—even a hopeless sort of horror. Nearly every week some false case was offered to me. Mostly cheap-tricks, where the enclosed check turned out to be no good when I tried to get it certified at the

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bank, before paying a visit to some lonely country spot. It was funny how these city killers went in for lonely spots in the country. And always the message was to come alone and secretly in the night. Still, most people who have business for me do not have the kind of business that can be shouted from the house tops. Blackmail, a great deal of it. Follies of youth demanding retribution in respectable and wealthy middle age. The skeletons in the closets of "the best people" rattle loudest. Now, I was searching for a client in the worst and cheapest section of the city. This smacked of one who feared the law.

I beat my hands across my chest a few times and started on my way. Another block up and a turn to the left, and I spotted my building. A searching glance up and down the street and I stepped inside, pushed open the door, breathed in a few of the smells, then shut out the winter night. But I didn't shut out the chill—a damp chill that was worse than the bitterness of the cold without.

A dull flickering gas light burned in the rear of the dirty hallway. I leaned against a rocky bannister and waited. Nothing special on my mind, but if the thing was a frame-up, a lad from across the street might drop over, plant himself in the hall and blow me out, coming down. No, I didn't suspect a trap but I was prepared for one just the same. It's not the expected in life that means death, but the unexpected.

Ten minutes were enough. I pulled out my flash, shot a splash of light down the hallway, then up the

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stairs. Lots of dirt but not enough for a man to hide under. The smells I couldn't see—but I didn't need to. I mounted the first flight of stairs. They creaked. I played the side of them. They creaked louder. I hugged the walls and the old boards still gave up their dead. Not so bad, you understand, but the slightest sound, if you fear a lurking enemy, is magnified to the pounding of a hammer.

The first flight—again my light. More dirt, but still emptiness. The second floor was safely reached and still without trouble, but I didn't get careless. Some guns like to play the ground, others feel safer at jumping roofs. The third floor took me longer to reach—real slow going there, and my gun was shoved into my hand. I'd listen most every step for sounds above or below. And the creaks were hard to place—you'd step on a board that would moan like a child—then another that would squeak like a mouse, and a third perhaps that would creak like a rusty hinge. Seven or eight such flights would get on a man's nerves. I was glad when I reached the top landing—I did my final stuff with the flash held well out to my side. Killers have a way of aiming at lights. I do it myself when dealing with the ordinary crook; and the novice always holds the flash straight before him. The wise man swings it far and wide and high or low. For my part, I always hold the light in my right hand and far to that side. The thinking gunman figures you'll play the gun in the right hand and the light in the left. Therefore he directs his fire to the wrong side of the

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light. That isn't just mathematical figuring or psychology. It's fact. I'm still alive, to prove it.

Just emptiness on that third floor but for the dirty smells, rounded in with the damp cold. If you wanted atmosphere, it was all there. Thick enough to cut. You could feel, smell and taste the odors that crept all over you like a live slimy thing. I shivered slightly, drew my heavy coat the tighter and pussy-footed it to the back of the hall and the door at the right. Light doused, head pressed close to the door, I listened. A dead silence, then a cough—low, hardly audible, but with a sort of rattle to it.

A minute's wait and I tried the knob; the door was locked. The catch clicked. A sudden squeak from the room within, as if some one had climbed from bed. Feet crossed the floor; bare feet that dragged along like the tread of a small animal. A lock snapped, the knob turned beneath my grasp, and relinquishing my hold on it I stepped back a pace. I was ready for most anything—expected most anything. There isn't much new that can happen to me.

The door swung open a trifle, and clutching my gun I waited for the man's head that would peer out of the darkness. But no head came, and the door hung open a few inches only. There was just room enough for a man to stick his head out—or in, for that matter. If the party within expected me to oblige him by diving through that opening and getting crowned for my pains, he had a lot to learn yet.

So we waited. I wasn't in a hurry; the lad within

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was impressed, for his breath came in short, uneven gasps. Twice he cleared his throat—after the last, he spoke. There was a squeak to his voice like the boards of the stairs.

"Mr. Williams?" There was an unmistakable question in his voice. "I—" He started in again and stopped. If he wanted to make the conversation short and snappy I'd give him results.

"Yes," was all I answered.

"You have my letter—with you?" Then in a faint whisper, "D. D."

"Certainly." And before he got out his request for a slant at the paper I shoved it through the opening and dropped it to the floor. That was the first time I spotted the chain that held the door, for he pulled the door back to the full play of the chain and the flickering gas light pierced the darkness. An old rocker, a table that relied more upon the wall for support than it did on its three legs, torn wall paper that had been slapped back on the wall with a thick coating of home-made paste flashed into view.

He'd have to stoop to grasp that letter where I had dropped it. My flash was ready to shove on his face when he leaned over. But he didn't bother to pick up the letter. He let it lie there and pushed the door closed. I heard part of what he said.

"It is you, of course. Such a man would not have the letter taken from him." A slight bit of coughing, more words, and the door closed. Then the chain clanged as it was placed carefully down along the wall

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and the door opened again. Very slowly it swung back. Feet crossed the floor, the bed creaked again, and helping the door along with my foot so that it snapped back against the wall, I entered. It's a good many years since some one behind a door crashed me.

A bare-footed figure in a heavy bathrobe was climbing into bed—and the linen on the bed was clean. The blankets old, but clean also. Even the bed itself, which had long since lost its air of respectability, was free from dust or dirt; the black scars on the white enamel standing as grim reminders of hard years.

But the man with the thing. Those legs that disappeared under the clothes were thin, trembling lengths of bone. An arm that stretched out over the coverlet and a hand that waved me in were skeletonlike; the flesh drawn tightly, not soft and flabby. There were marks on the arms, too—tiny punctures too numerous to count, yet they seemed old ones. Then, as the emaciated little body turned and the hand waved toward me, I got a look at his face. White, drawn, sunken cheeks—colorless lips—and far distant, somber, searching, roving eyes.

Of course the thing wasn't new to me. There are thousands and thousands of them right in the city. One meets them every day—on the Bowery and along Fifth Avenue—from an East Side dive to a West Side apartment. I knew that I was looking at the ravages of dope. From the manner in which the back of his hand shot over his mouth before he spoke and the furtive glance over my shoulder as I closed the door

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behind me, I'd of spotted him without the telltale marks upon his arm.

"I'm glad you came," he squeaked. "I must talk—talk—now—some one must listen or I—"

"Just a minute." I raised my hand. I was in the thing now. I'd have to listen to him—a wild, fanciful story, no doubt. And perhaps it wouldn't do any harm. The warmth of the room felt good, the cleanliness of it was surprising, and the closeness of the two oil heaters that burned in opposite corners was not so stifling as at first. But I'm not the kind of story book detective who sits down, lights his pipe, folds his arms, and closing his eyes gets ready to digest a chestful. I wanted to have a slant about that room. There was ample space under the bed for a man to hide; also there were cheap calico curtains that hung to the left of the bed and close to the musty window that was closed tight and plugged up around the edges with bits of paper and cardboard.

Haunted eyes followed me as I looked under the bed, and guessing my purpose his other hand came out empty and rested on the coverlet—but I kept my eye on him too as I looked behind the curtains. Just a glance—some clothes there and nothing more. I spotted books too, the titles of which made me kill a whistle of surprise. And there was no closet in the room—not another place to hide a cat in. This lad was there alone—unless he had some one tucked into bed with him, which, as I have two eyes, wasn't likely.

His smile was a weird, fantastic affair as I turned

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back to the bed and stood looking down at him. He sure was a mess, and yet his face had been a good one —a delicately formed hand twitched at the blankets. I'd let him begin, though already I was sorry I had come. "Got to have a million dollars by Thursday— Wednesday I don't need it and Friday will be too late," was already forming on those lips, I thought. Here was a sample of the very dregs of humanity. Still, out of the jumble I might get something that would serve me later. He had lived with the gang; deserted by them now, no doubt. Snowbirds have a way of hearing things—being treated by the big guns as so much stuffed furniture. But our snowbird was talking; gulping it, coughing it and squeaking it out.

"I thought you'd come. That was the first part of my trouble—to get the letter to you without any one knowing." A longer gulp. "A friend did that for me— a friend whom I can trust, for he'll forget so soon— though with me, I'll never forget. It's so like a dream." He stopped there and eyed me. What he read in my face couldn't help him any. But I was there to listen, not to talk. Once, by listening to the prattle of a child of four I caught a murderer. The thin man in the bed went on hurriedly.

"You have heard of Daniel Davidson. That is I." And I sat the straighter. "Is I" had slipped out so naturally, so unconsciously, it staggered me. I wasn't expecting that sort of English, even after spotting some of the books. But now my head half turned, and the gilt letters of Thackeray and Dickens and even the dry

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Macaulay glared dimly out at me. But the name Daniel Davidson didn't make me lie down and roll over. I'd never heard it before. Why he didn't pretend to be John D. or the President or the Prince of Wales I couldn't tell. In a hazy way his voice got over to me.

"My father was D. Perry Davidson. I am his only son. You see, in youth I lived with my mother in London. My father married again—but in his will he left me everything—everything. He had made that will before my sister was born." A pause—I lowered my eyes and looked at him. His listless gray eyes were glaring up at me. "You don't believe me. You don't—you couldn't—but you'll believe this when I tell you. Look at me—and here, look at this." His hand shot beneath the pillow—a bit of newspaper flashed into his fingers, then was crushed in mine. While the man breathed heavily I spread out the paper and looked down at the picture. There was a resemblance between it and the man upon the bed—nothing more. But the caption beneath it was interesting.

Thomas Henderson—escaped convict. Five feet, four inches—dark hair, dark eyes, weight a hundred and twenty-four pounds. Escaped prison, March 7th, 1926. $500 reward.

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CHAPTER V

THE OPENING DOOR

I LIFTED my eyes from the paper. Everything but the weight might fit the lad upon the bed, but then it would fit a dozen other men. Here was the old story of the wronged convict claiming his own.

"This you?" I asked, tapping the paper.

"Yes," he nodded. "See how I trust you—one word and I'd go back to those walls for twenty-five years."

"And the crime?" I fingered the soiled paper.

"Murder."

"Of course you were not guilty." I thought that I said the expected thing. This lad might be snowed up enough to start parading the street in his night shirt, crying for justice.

"On the contrary, I was guilty." And his voice was very calm and very grim now. I saw his fingers close too and the slender, sharp, polished nails bite into thick flesh. There was a red flicker of blood on his lower lip—then his lips parted.

"I think," he went on, "that this will be your strangest story—your greatest hope of reward—and the righting of a great wrong. Not for me, perhaps, for my real

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identity means prison, and prison means my death. I am not big enough to die, even for a great cause—I am afraid of death. And yet the complexity of what I tell you is built on its very simplicity." With that he broke straight into the story, and I listened. Not that I believed it. But he told it well, and beyond doubt the man had an education.

"I was ten, my sister five, when my mother separated from my father. I would have chosen my father, but the choice was not mine. She took me to England with her. It was her hold on father's money that she thought of, for she left my sister. I recall my father's hand upon my shoulder—the look in his eyes when I left—the final words when he kissed me. 'Some day you will understand and come back to me.' And I did understand—but I never came back. My mother needed me. She was a weak, thoughtless woman—God forgive her—and the man that she left my father for was little short of a beast. He dominated her life and mine. She died—I would have sought my father—then came the war—the months in the hospital from gas—and finally the word of my father's death."

A long pause there; the flicker of blood again on the lower lip, and again polished nails straining against tightly drawn palms. He would just clutch frantically at his hands, the nails tearing the skin—but no blood came. There was not much blood, I guess. I'm not one for sympathy, but I stretched out a hand and tightened it on his wrist. I understand such life, and after all this thing was real enough to him. So I let

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him ramble on; there were several hundred thousand involved. I laughed to myself and denied it as rot. But underneath it all was the semblance of truth. It was a story so fantastic and strange that even a snow-bird couldn't have created it all. And the strangeness of it was what made it ring true. Get it as he gave it.

"My father's brother came to London for me, for I was sole heir—and, after many years, I was to see my sister who would be twenty-three then—that was 1925. I never fully understood that trip. For some reason or other it was necessary to put up at a cheap hotel along the water front when we reached New York. I registered under another name. The name on that paper—Frank Henderson. The explanation, I can't remember—there was champagne, a celebration; a girl and a fight—a gun in my hand, another gun in the hand of a stranger—and I killed him. I think he was to kill me."

"You imagine that. You didn't really kill him. It was a frame-up and they got—"

"No, no—I killed him. I remember that too well. The crime is mine. I was arrested. A lawyer was there—they said they would arrange it all. My father's memory, my sister's life—and I was convicted under another name and drew thirty years in prison. Even then I didn't suspect. Even when my life was twice attempted within the prison wall. They were working for me outside, I was told, and I would be free. Money would do it. Money would fix everything. Money — money — MONEY. Cursed

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MONEY!" And his head went into his hands and his hands went down on his knees.

"At last I could stand those grim walls no longer. I threatened to speak out—disclose who I really was—spend my own money in obtaining the best legal talent. They sent a little lawyer to see me who told me that a convicted murderer's money went to the state; that if I spoke out my sister could not inherit the money I would leave. It was a lie, of course—but I didn't know then. I was told that I would be free.

"They planned my escape by having me brought from prison to testify in a case, but they planned my death with it. A girl saved me. It's all too long to tell. For me to tell the truth now will mean prison again." He jerked his head suddenly erect—his eyes flaming, his cheeks flushed, his lips pale whitish lines. "To go to my uncle will mean my death. To lie idly by will mean the robbing of my sister. I don't want to die. I don't want to go back to prison. I can't. I can't stand it." He fairly shrieked the words. "Yet—I must face my God and my father, having protected my sister."

"Does she know all this—and your mother—your stepfather? What of them?"

"My mother is dead," he said again. "A broken, sickened, maddened woman. Like Macbeth's wife, she died. My stepfather—a drunken brute who disappeared in London when the money my father gave my mother was spent—a beast who beat me as a child until I lay a helpless heap upon the floor. I see him

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yet—his flaming eyes, great hairy hands and—" Again the head into his hands and again his cry. "Great God in Heaven, I am little better than the beast I feared. My nights are torture when I think of my sister. I can no longer hide the truth—yet—yet I fear to tell the truth. Here—" He turned sharply in the bed, and like a dog pawing for a hidden bone, dug into the mattress. A moment of hesitation, a sudden gulp of fear—then a hasty snatch, followed by a sigh of relief—and he faced me again.

"I got it— I thought for a moment—but no matter—name your price—name your fee and see the trust I put in you. Take it; keep it." He thrust a crumpled envelope into my hand. "Use it when I'm dead—for I have not the heart of a man now nor the blood of a son and brother. It is the truth—my will too —time it took—secret it was—one witness—a hopeless, dragging, dope-crazed creature—but he could write and he is a citizen—born here in the city, you understand." And he began to laugh as I shoved the envelope into my pocket. "Your word not to open it while I live. Her address—my sister's—on the envelope. I threatened them with that—first, a letter begging for help or I would seek you—then, threatening them—or him —my brother's father—my uncle—the lawyer—all. And if my sister is dead, that will avail them nothing; they can't touch my money when I'm dead." He cut off suddenly, coming bolt upright in bed and staring over my shoulder.

"I see him now—Raphael Dezzeia—my stepfather

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—the snarling lips—the great teeth—those hands—those hands—see—see—Raphael—my mother's husband." He clung suddenly to me like a frightened child, but his bony fingers still pointed and his weird, wild, searching eyes glared past me at the door.

Involuntarily I turned, and the hand that patted his back as I might have patted a dog swung to my pocket. For the face and eyes and great teeth and hands may have been an illusion. I didn't see them. But certainly the knob of the door had clicked, was turning there as I lifted my eyes from the jabbering, frightened, broken thing that was called a man and watched the door. Slowly—very slowly—yet very surely that door was opening. I jerked loose now and came to my feet; my hand clutched the gun in my pocket as I backed behind the other side of the bed, where I could watch that slowly opening door and also the man upon the bed. Nothing to fear from him, you think. Maybe not. Probably not. Almost certainly not. But I'm not of a trustful nature. All the great actors are not on the stage—besides, when I'm shot down I expect the coroner to find the bullet in my chest, not in my back.

Expectant, we both waited. He was looking for his stepfather, and I—well, one thing was certain—if this stepfather, this Raphael Dezzeia, did pay a visit after all the years he'd be less messy than usual. He wasn't related to me, you see, and I had little to fear. If the dear, long lost relative tried any of his beating-up tricks on me—why, the undertaker could pour him back in

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the bottle. So we watched the door—his eyes frightened, wandering, and pleading up to me. Mine, steady and ready for anything. But I didn't intend to cow our visitor with a look—I leave that to detectives to frighten women and children with. My finger caressed the cold, hair-tuned trigger of a forty-four, and I have yet to see the man that can frown a gun down.

Whoever was at the door was an expert at soft entry. There wasn't a sound as the door slipped open, far enough to admit a body—then it stopped, and I changed my position. I got the idea that some one might be playing Little Bo Peep through the crack. But I said nothing. It wasn't my game. Whoever opened that door intended to come in. If some one wanted my life or the lad's upon the bed, surely they didn't expect to get it by giving us pneumonia with the draft.

So we waited. No sound from without—no sound from within but the deep breathing of the man upon the bed. He was doing his stuff like an old lady with the asthma—and the worn door hung half open, and the cold wet damp and the musty smells of the hall and the winter night combined, drifted into the heated room.

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CHAPTER VI

THE GIRL OF THE NIGHT

GENERALLY I let the other fellow play the cards and just follow suit myself or trump when I can. But now I couldn't wait. I was afraid. Afraid for the lad upon the bed. His sunken cheeks had taken on a deathlike gray and his eyes, still blazing, had sunk far back into his head. His chest rose and fell and his heart beat like the town clock. He was the sort of a bird whose heart would just give a final jump up, forget to come down in time to catch the next beat and stop altogether. I had been standing alongside of one dead body already that night and I didn't want another. So I spoke out.

"You, behind the door," I snapped the word, "come in or I'll put a —"

And I didn't get any further. A voice came from behind that door—and believe me, it was no step-father.

"You have company, Danny—I suspected as much —and I know, for Old Tim told me—Old Tim talks." And she came into the room. A slip of a thing, with a little hat that hid most of her hair, the strings of black just peeping out below the tips of her ears. Beautiful?

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No. Pretty? Certainly, in a sinister sort of way. I'd of spotted her any time. I knew the type. A girl of the night. She shot those snappy black eyes up at me —frankly hostile she was, and was willing for me to know it. And when she closed the door behind her she locked it, hurried across the room to the bed, staring angrily at the man in it a moment, shook her hand at him, started in to rag him for something—then broke off with a pitiful little cry in her voice, and the next moment had crushed that emaciated body in her arms. She was crying too—sobs she tried to gulp down, but they came just the same. Here was real emotion, from one who was used to crushing the feeling of her inner being.

"You"—she cocked her head up at me like a bull pup—"why did you come and put him like this? Why, he could—he could— I know you, Race Williams—now go—go—he's mine and I'll take care of him—and protect him too. Why don't you go?" She jumped from the bed and stood before me, her little hands clenched.

"Easy does it." I looked steadily down at her, and then to the man. "Who is this girl? What is she to you?"

The girl jumped me again, but the man reached out a hand and gripped at her coat. His voice trembled.

"You mustn't mind, Mr. Williams. She don't understand. She fears—fears for me. Look at her, poor child. She's the girl I told you of—who helped me

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from—from them." He half glanced up at her. "It won't be long now." He turned to the girl. "Mr. Williams will help me—we'll go off somewhere for a long time—then when it is forgotten and things are cleared up—why, I'll take my own place in the world and you'll no longer have to work so hard, but live like a lady—a real lady. See, Mr. Williams, the haunted look in her eyes—poor child—poor child." And his weak, trembling arms sought to draw her down to him.

Poor haunted little child, eh? Some imagination that. A hunted look in her eyes maybe; a shrewd, appraising look, as one who is used to meet with and tackle the abuses of life—but nothing haunted in her eyes. A determined, hard, cold, calculating face—yet in it all the doubtful, frightened look of a mother chicken who watched her young. She patted the boy who clung to her as she steadily regarded me. Hardly more than out of her teens in actual years, but her soul had lived a century.

Davidson whispered to her. Motors, yachts and great houses drifted to me occasionally as I stood looking down at them. I was willing to leave. Here was the talk of a millionaire, or the ramblings of a snow-bird all hopped up. You could take a look at this lad and you wouldn't need more than one guess to draw your conclusions.

"Of course, of course." The girl finally untwisted herself from his arms. "Mr. Williams believes and will help you—and now he will go, for you need your rest, Danny."

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"Yes—yes." Danny stretched out a hand toward me. "You'll remember—you won't forget—won't think I'm a poor distracted soul who through the ravages of the drug contracted in prison—but now forever—See, she smiles at you—Milly likes you—that is good—for Milly doesn't like every one—hardly any one." And he patted her hand and held it to his lips. Did Milly smile? Perhaps. Her lips did, at least I think they did. Thin lips parted and showed even, white, well kept teeth—but her eyes didn't smile. Not by a jugful, they didn't. They watched me, hard and cold—and bitter too, I thought. Not with fear—here was the type who know little of fear—either physical or moral—just an uncertain, animal doubt and watchfulness of danger.

I took the bony hand of the man, dropped it and stepped to the door, turned the key and opened it. The air in the room was bad now. The oil mixed in with the other odors; the damp smell from without struck me full in the face. I shut the door behind me and stepped into the darkened hall.

Light feet crossed the room within, a hand gripped the door knob. I could feel it twist in my fingers. Just locking the door, I thought, as I moved down the hall. Then I stopped; the door had opened, the light illuminated the filth of that hallway. The girl stepped through, partly closing the door behind her. Once she stuck her head back in, and I heard her say:

"I'll tell him it's all the truth—but never worry—I'll have you out of this hole in a—" The door closed,

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until just a dim thin sliver of yellow ran its length, and a hand gripped my sleeve.

"May I speak to you a minute, Mr. Williams—it's about him." Faintly I felt more than saw a little white hand shoot into the air and a thumb jerk through the sliver of light.

I nodded, then remembering the darkness, answered, "Yes."

"Down here then." She gripped my arm, and half dragging, half leading me, we stumbled along the darkened hall to the dirty window in the rear. Through the glass crusted with years of dust dimly came the outline of a distant sky and the bleak worn buildings of the block behind.

"I don't want him to hear," she explained. "What did he tell you?"

"Not much." If she wanted to talk to me, I was willing to listen—but if she wanted me to talk to her, that was a different story altogether. I remembered the hard, unfriendly eyes she had put on me. So she started in.

"He spoke of money—his inheritance—a sister—great wealth?"

"Considerable wealth—yes."

"You didn't believe it—believe him?"

"Isn't it true?" I evaded the question.

"What else did he tell you?"

"Not much."

"Anything?"

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"About what?"

"Prison—for instance."

"Yes—prison, for instance," I repeated. "Isn't it true?"

"Of course it isn't. How could it be? Look at him—don't you understand? He's suffered—his mind wanders at times—but he'll come around all right. Forget to-night. Forget him."

"Do you think he should be sent away?" I tried that vaguely—just the hope of seeing how she'd take it, I guess.

"Sent away—him!" Little fingers bit into my arm. "No—never—never—he'll be all right now."

"And you—you question me. What are you doing here? What are you to him?"

"Why—I am his life." I jarred back as she shot the words. There was a sincerity in them all right. But why did she follow me into the hall? Did she think for a moment that I believed such a wild yarn? Was she simply a poor distracted girl? No, she wasn't one to go into a panic—there was some truth in the story. But if there was, why didn't she want my help? Why wasn't she glad to get it? Did she think that I'd betray him or—? But she was talking.

"You understand his—his condition?"

"Snowbird." I nodded.

"Yes." And her voice was so low that I hardly caught the word.

"All hopped up to-night?" Somehow I wanted to

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stir her up. It hurt her to hear that word. "That's why he talks money—too bad." Then more slowly as I heard her quick intake of breath. "Snowed up! Bad!"

"No." It just broke from her. "Don't say that. I can't say that—because it's not true. He has been—but he's cured—it's that which ravages his body—plays queer tricks on his mind. But he don't touch the stuff—not now. He promised me—swore to me—and he wouldn't lie—not to me. He couldn't. I'd know—and—you don't think he touches it!" A change there. A pleading in her voice—a desperate sort of pleading, and the hands had slipped from my arms to my shoulders—her face palely dim in the dismal light from the distant sky on the blurred glass.

"I don't know. I only listened to you—you said it." I shrugged my shoulders. I'd be glad to get away from the whole drab business. The dregs of life are passed lightly over in a book or in a police court, for that matter—but here—when I faced it I didn't like the taste of it so well. I'm hard boiled all right—none more so, I guess, and I've seen so much that my heart is petrified to a granitelike hardness. The weakness must be in my stomach then, if you can call it a weakness. But she was speaking again.

"You'll forget it all then—your visit here—and he didn't give you anything, did he?"

Here was a direct attack and I didn't like that. She suspected that envelope then—maybe wanted it back.

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Of course I could have lectured her on the ethics of my profession; gone into a long discourse on the confidence between my client and myself. But I didn't. I just lied to her. It came easier and saved time.

"He gave me nothing," I said.

"No—" There was enough of a catch in her voice to let me more than suspect that she knew that I lied, but she didn't seem to mind and I certainly didn't.

"I'll be going then." I lifted the little hands from my shoulder. Maybe she worked hard, for the hands were rough and coarse, with a smoothness at the heel of the palm—leaving the impression that hard work was new to her. "Of course," I added, "none of the story is true?"

"No." Then a sudden grab at me and a voice pitifully low. "About the money, I mean. The prison part—well, that's true. I've got to tell you so you'll not—" and a flood of words, so fast it was hard to follow them—pleadings and threats all mixed in together. "You won't betray him—what good can it do you? Poor, mishandled, ill-treated boy! They'd take him back—you won't—" A pause. "If you did—if you did—I'd kill you." And she didn't hiss the words; didn't shoot them out in uncontrolled anger or with the threat of an hysterical woman. Very slowly she let out the three words. Empty talk? Maybe. But I got the idea that she meant it. Yep—I believed her.

Then she grew frightened.

"There's a price on his head—I'll pay that—all of

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it—perhaps later in a big lump—at the worst in small weekly amounts—say, five dollars—maybe ten. Trust me—believe me—you'll get the money just as if you gave him up to the police—more even, for I'll—"

"Lay off, kid." I gave her the talk she'd understand. "If I can't help a client I don't blackmail him. That's the difference between a Private Investigator and a Private Detective." I stopped—a voice was calling from within the room—plaintive, whining, cracked. Parts of it only drifted down the hall.

"Raphael—the beast—him—hairy hands." A moment of silence while we listened. "Milly—Milly—Milly!"

"There, you see." She spoke as if she blamed me for it. "I'll have to go to him. Be kind and generous and—" Then suddenly, "He didn't give you an envelope?"

I didn't lie to her this time. I didn't need to. The cracked voice within the room was calling loudly now—a disturbed roomer cursed and pounded on the wall. The girl left me—fled down the hall and into the room. The light for a moment—the frightened, childlike voice of the man and the answering, soothing notes of the girl—darkness and the click of the key—and silence. I stretched out a hand, found the bannister, ran my fingers along through the dust and followed the unseen trail to the head of the stairs. Dimly from below came the dull flickering glare of the single gas jet. The tenement house laws requiring a light on every other

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floor didn't disturb this landlord. A wealthy, drunken man at his club, perhaps, who couldn't tell offhand the number, or even the street the disreputable building he owned was on. And I didn't blame him overmuch. I'd try to forget that dump myself.

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CHAPTER VII

THE GETAWAY CAR

THIS time I didn't bother with the flash as I went down the stairs and I didn't bother so much with the creaking boards either. The next time a lad sent for me in that tenement I'd make him ship me a gas mask. The air was good as I busted right onto the street; a single blast and a deep swallow of it was like a course dinner with champagne.

And what had I received for my trouble, I thought, as I buttoned my coat tightly about me. Nothing but bad smells and the wandering talk of a drug addict who wanted to take his girl friend bye-bye on powerful steam yachts made from drifting dreams. Funny—I wasn't mad and I didn't laugh. There was something appealing about the boy on the bed—the education in his voice, the few books of a past that was no doubt filled with promise—and now; dope and prison and the dregs of life, with fruitless hopes and imaginary fears of the future.

The girl—yes, I sized up her anxiety. She loved the boy or thought she did, which for the time being would amount to the same thing. Something to mother and

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protect—the instinct of womanhood that is found among the rich and the poor, and even the woman of the night. The rich take it out on a dog, the poor on the children, and those of the underworld on some worthless man. Worthless; I didn't know about that —the boy appealed. If I were a philanthropist, perhaps I'd dig down in my pocket and send him away to a hospital which was supposed to cure the unfortunates. Then I'd puff with pride and strut about and get my clergyman to preach a sermon about me, and never stop to think that the money I gave the boy was being used to bribe the attendants to furnish him with dope. No—there's only one cure and that's manhood; a will power which is so seldom built into the racked brain of the weakling who becomes a sleigh rider.

And the girl? She was simply possessed with the fear that I'd send him back to jail. No—there was nothing in the thing for me. I'm not a charitable institution—so I stuck my hands deep into my coat pockets and turned down the street. What of the dead policeman? What of my alibi if I was questioned on that bit of shooting? I cursed the dreams of the boy and the hard-headed suspicion of the girl that put me in such a position. I remembered the cop who had questioned me a half hour before. Yes—I'd have to seek a telephone and fix that alibi. I belong to a high class club and I have a waiter who'd swear to anything for me. As to my chauffeur—well, before I got hold of him and straightened him out he'd done a term for

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perjury, so that wouldn't bother him any. Also there are a few good high class friends who I've helped out of trouble—they understand the mess an honest man can get into and haven't forgotten. Oh, I play the lone hand in everything but the alibi, and you've got to meet lies with lies. Not good ethics maybe, but common sense—and besides, I've said that my ethics are my own. No apologies, you understand—I don't try to tell any one how to run his business and I don't expect any one to try and tell— But back to the winter night and that alibi.

There'd be a dump open along the water front and I could slip into it and do my stuff on the phone. So I turned back; pulled up sharp and ducked down in an alleyway. A figure had slipped from the dirty tenement I had just left—a figure that stood irresolute; a tiny shadow only against the bleak background of the door. But a white face turned sharply now and looked up and down the street. I didn't recognize her of course there in the darkness. But I didn't need to. I knew that slim build, the quick turn of that little head and the flash of the steady black eyes that tried to pierce the darkness. It was my girl of the night—Milly, of the smiling lips and the hard, cold, appraising eyes. Did she seek me? Should I show myself? And I decided to wait.

The girl had a coat pulled tightly around her and a little hat that was jerked down over her head like a basket. Even in the darkness I could tell that the coat

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was thin and cheap and that the winter night bit through.

The street was deserted; one more hasty glance up and down and a quick jerk of her head back over her shoulder and she was down the street toward me and the avenue beyond. She didn't exactly run—it was sort of a walking, jumping motion as she stuck close to the buildings. A suspicious gait that time of night, which of course had its disadvantage for one who did not wish to attract attention. But it was also a hard gait to follow; to pursue a speeding figure is easy enough, to shadow one is not so simple—almost impossible in the city streets. Was it that the girl didn't fear the law? Was it that she thought some one might shadow her, or was it that she was just in a hurry and didn't bother about either one of the reasons?

Well, I'd chance it—follow her at a distance. That bobbing head that jerked so often back over her shoulder would spot me all right. But she couldn't recognize me at that distance and there was the chance I might keep far enough behind her not to be seen at all. But what did I want with her? What was the use of following her? She was a dead issue as far as I was concerned, and there was my alibi and the—

My head shot back into the alley. Just in time, too—another was taking an interest in the girl. A man who leaned far out of a doorway down the street and on the opposite side from the girl. I needed good eyes to see him—just the whiteness of his face framed on the motionless outline of two shoulders. Like a statue he

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was, so steady, so intent upon watching the girl. Yet, he too hesitated to follow her.

She reached the corner and disappeared, and I still crouched in the alley. The man stepped out upon the sidewalk; a hand dove into his pocket; a match flashed for a moment and a white face bobbed up between cupped hands. Then darkness again as the man sauntered up the street, paused opposite the tenement and crossed the street. He stood looking up at the building and puffing on his cigarette. Twice he moved toward the entrance and hesitated. Once he turned down the street in the direction the girl had taken and again he hesitated. Elbows akimbo, hands on hips, he waited.

There was the whir of a motor down the street. The man before the tenement and I turned our heads together. We both saw the approaching car. I looked back at the man in time to see his figure disappear into the hallway. A couple of seconds later a touring car with top down jerked up at the curb. There was no grinding of brakes, no squeak of old worn mechanism. Yet, the car was a relic. From the outside of the body alone you'd of thrown it away ten years ago. Still, the machinery was kept in good condition—brakes well taken care of, even if the engine did miss a beat as it panted by the curb.

It was the girl, of course. She hopped from the front seat, dashed into the tenement—and I ducked from the alley in time to hear her feet pounding on the stairs. Now, where did I fit into the picture? Certainly there

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was the smell of sick fish in the whole business. Should I protect the girl? Was she in danger from the man who lurked some place in that hallway? I thought not. He had seen her come from the house and hurry down the street. The street was deserted as far as he was concerned. If he burned with the laudable desire to knock her on the head he had his chance.

I'd wait. After all he might simply be a friend of the girl's. She feared the police would find Danny; here was the lookout maybe. A little too well dressed? Perhaps. But the boys on the Avenue were getting a bit flashy to-day. One couldn't tell. Anyway, I'm no Sir Launcelot; this game wasn't for me. I'm not out to defeat the ends of justice—rather, the other way about. Still, I waited and listened for the girl to cry out, telling myself it wasn't my business, but knowing all the time that I'd duck into the tenement, crash the boy who was bothering her and see the kids safely away. Away? Certainly. The car was there at two o'clock in the morning for a single purpose. I know life well enough to know that the battered touring that stood so innocently against the curb was the get-away car.

It was a cinch that the girl felt their hiding place, or at least the boy's hiding place, had been discovered. Was it the man who had lurked across the street she feared—or did she fear me? And had the man across the street seen me duck into the alley? It was very dark there and I doubted that. Still, he may have

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