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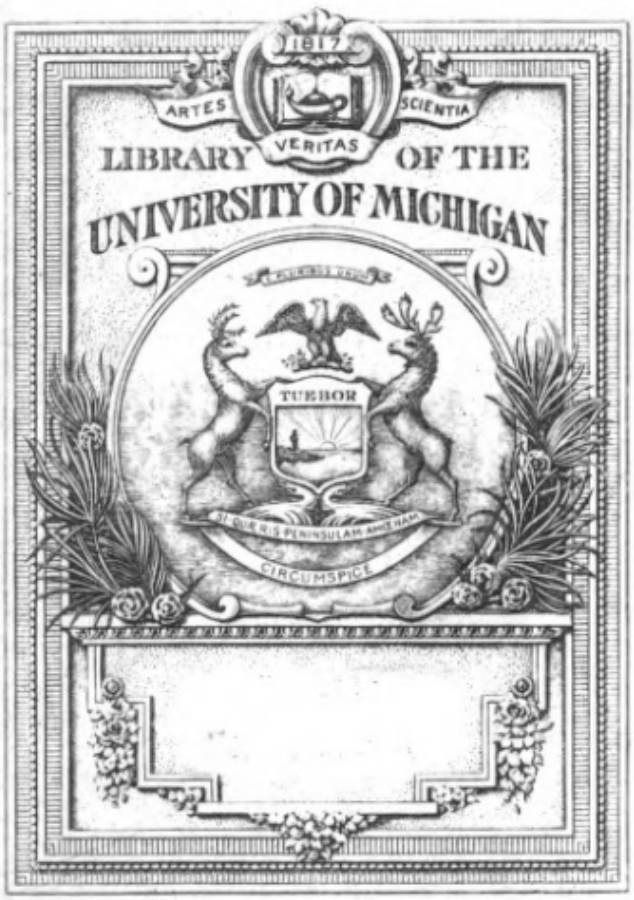

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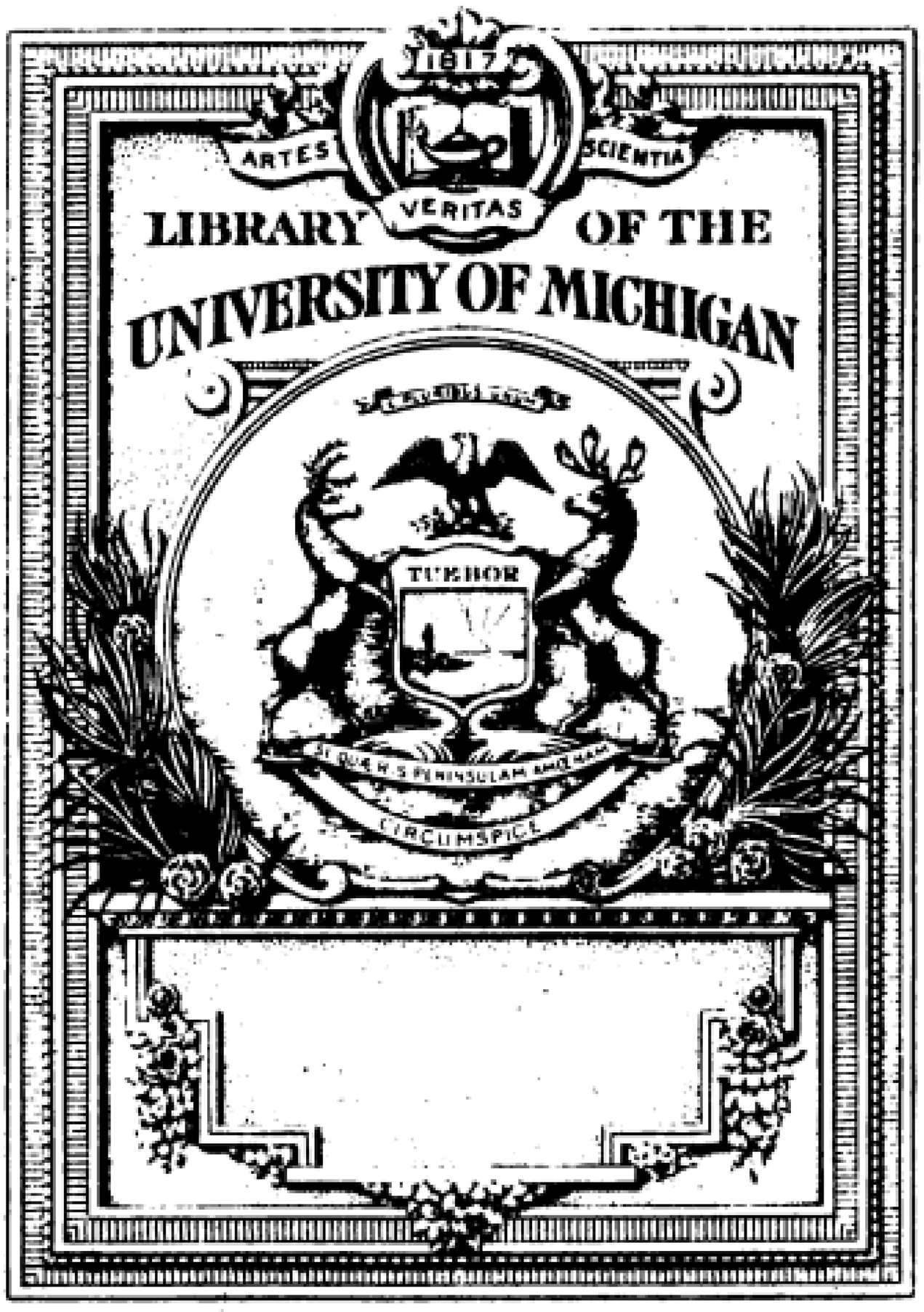

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BY

MARK LEE LUTHER

AND

LILLIAN C. FORD

INDIANAPOLIS

THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY

PUBLISHERS

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CARD 13

CHAPTER ONE

HOLLYWOOD'S MONTMARTRE

To THE casual eye there was that day no hint of tragedy in the atmosphere of Hollywood's famous Café Montmartre. Gaiety was the obvious note. One of the special luncheons, where motion-picture stars bloom as thickly as orchids at the coming-out party of an oil baron's daughter, had attracted such a throng that only the forehanded with reservations found seats. Toiling waiters made inroads on the vast platters of meat and colorful bowls of salad that heaped the central serving tables. China clattered, the orchestra blared jazz, and a confusion of tongues swelled in a discordant overtone above the din of the musicians. Herded on the far side of the long room were the tourists. The screen folk, conscious of their audience, clustered to the left of the roped entrance and along the tall windows that fronted on the boulevard. All was as carefully arranged as a studio set. The play was meant for light comedy. Yet tragedy was latent.

For Arthur Raneleigh, novelist, luncheon at the Montmartre was merely one more of many hectic affairs into which he had been drawn by Tony Gilmore. As a brilliantly successful scenario writer Gilmore had his public, just as the cinema celebrities had

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theirs, and it behooved him to show himself early and often. It was good business. That he had to-day, at least, no taste for the limelight he did not trouble himself to conceal. But the scene on which these friends of years looked with indifference was full of novelty for Gilmore's sister, and as Raneleigh watched the girl, so happily excited over it all, he realized anew how rarely beautiful she was, how ethereal, how—for younger men—altogether irresistible. He could view calmly, so he felt, the havoc she wrought on more callow males. He had reached the venerable age of thirty and was still a bachelor.

On Aileen's eager demand, Gilmore with his habitually half-bored air pointed out the notables.

"There's Tom Mix in the group near the door. Some character actors there, also, whose faces you'll recognize. One of the Beery brothers is at the far end of that wall table. Greta Garbo is near the first window. I don't know who's with her."

Aileen caught his arm.

"Tony! Isn't that Clara Bow?"

"As large as life! And here comes Charlie Chaplin. As the chairmen say, he needs no introduction. But what about food, Aileen? Is it to be à la carte or table d'hôte?"

"Oh, you order for me!" she exclaimed. "I don't want to lose a minute. I can't keep my eyes off these fascinating people. I think they're wonderful."

"Listen to our country mouse! Everybody's wonderful."

"Oh, I know I'm terribly unsophisticated," she pouted. "But if you'd let me go round more I'd do you credit. I'm not so stupid."

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"Indeed you're not, honey." Gilmore idolized her too much to hurt her. "While you're star-gazing Ran and I will wrestle with the menu."

As they made their selections from the elaborate card a bus boy brought a note folded into a triangle. Gilmore read it with a frown and, turning, nodded to a faded beauty seated at a table near the orchestra.

"Will you take care of the order, Ran? I must speak to one of the ghosts of the past that will not down."

Many eyes followed him, and Raneleigh fully understood what the scene held for the curious. It was well known that Dolly Brownrigg, former movie star, had befriended Gilmore at a time when he sadly needed help. That she had been something nearer and dearer was the common belief. On this point she was reticent, but she had spared few the tale of her first meeting with Tony when, as she put it, he nosed into Hollywood with one suit, no suitcase and no better job than writing copy on an afternoon newspaper at fifteen dollars a week. Raneleigh knew how relieved Tony had been a year ago when she went to Europe with the wealthy stock-broker whom she had cannily married as her pictures began to lose favor. He could imagine how little Tony welcomed her return. Her demands on him had been incessant. She clung to him as she clung to her faded laurels. Why was he for ever entangling himself with some woman!

Dolly Brownrigg's greeting was effusive, but there was no warmth in Gilmore's response, and cutting her short, he came back to his own table with an expression far from urbane. He had hardly seated himself when a dark young woman, trimly dressed, left her

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obscure corner on the right of the entrance and made her way to him. She spoke to him in a low tone. He gave her an ugly look and got instantly to his feet. Neither Raneleigh nor Aileen heard the curt words he addressed to her, but his voice was tense. Again followed by the gaze of the curious, he laid his hand on her arm and piloted her from the room. It was plain that he resented her intrusion, that he had hurried her away. Yet when he reappeared at the top of the steps leading down into the restaurant—that mimic stage where the more eminent patrons of the Montmartre are wont to pause for their entrances and exits—his cynical mask bore no sign of discomfiture. The man was something of an actor himself.

There was nothing of the actor, however, in Arthur Raneleigh. He felt far less at ease than his friend. He had long since accepted the fact that Gilmore's life was not beyond criticism. He knew that the dark woman had the best of reasons for accosting him: for months he had maintained her, a tarnished movie extra, in an apartment. He knew also that it was because of Gilmore's sudden interest in the exotic star, Selma Saranoff, that he had cast off his mistress. Raneleigh did not assume to sit in judgment. He liked the man, as he had liked the boy who had been his playfellow, in spite of glaring faults. Their bond was wholly masculine. Yet as he watched him now—so flushed with success, so sure of his future, so lost in certain aspects to his better self—he thought that, in the old phrase, he tempted Providence.

Gilmore resumed his seat without comment on the incident and settled down to his belated luncheon. Whereupon, for the third time, his attention was

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drawn from food. A figure sufficiently striking stood posed on the raised threshold of the restaurant.

"And now here's Saranoff with her satellite, Gerald Hartley!" he exclaimed. "That's one of forty reasons, Ran, why I hate to come to this place. I meet every living soul I want to avoid."

"But Saranoff," reminded the writer dryly, "is like the Hebraic Satan—everywhere."

"I think she's wonderful," said Aileen. "No one on the screen can compare with her. I'm mad about her."

"Don't be so susceptible," rebuked her brother. "These sirens aren't in your class."

"I wish I were in theirs," said the girl, gazing at the newcomer. "How that costume sets off her pallor! What a magnificent leopard-skin coat! And isn't her hat a marvel? The velvet matches the leopard's spots."

Saranoff was enjoying her customary triumph. All eyes focused on her wherever she went. Even without her fame or the studied theatricality of her dress, she would have attracted attention. Tall, lithe, sinuous, she moved with a rhythm peculiarly her own. This feline grace, along with her dazzling red hair, her emaciation and her emotional intensity, inspired her publicity directors to liken her to Bernhardt whom they never failed to term the Divine Sarah. But Selma's deviltry was more apparent than her divinity. Her face was dead white. On either cheek she had painted a brilliant carmine patch. She had converted her thin, rather cruel lips into a crimson gash. It was her eyes, however, that truly revealed her nature. Long and narrow, they were usually half veiled by heavy lids,

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but when her passions were aroused they kindled with a suggestion of green flames burning in their strange depths. To Raneleigh these hypnotic eyes, fixed on Aileen as she advanced, seemed evil incarnate. He saw in them no hint of kindness, of unselfishness, of love for any being save herself. Surely an egotism as corrosive as acid fed their fires.

The two men rose automatically as she stopped at their table. Her nod to Raneleigh had more the air of a dismissal than a greeting, but she became animated as she turned to his friend.

"Hello, Tony!" she purred. "What brought you here?"

"God knows!" He gazed at her insolently. "It's the last place to come if one wants a moment's privacy."

"Who wants privacy?" she laughed. "Certainly nobody in the movies." Drawing no response from Gilmore, she added: "Don't you agree, Mr. Raneleigh?"

"That's been my impression, Miss Saranoff."

She paid no heed to his reply. Her eyes were on Aileen.

"You're Tony's sister, of course. If no one will introduce us, I'll do it myself. I'm Selma Saranoff and I want to know you."

The girl stood up and shyly offered her hand. She was bereft of words. The honor overwhelmed her.

Saranoff's gaze shifted to Gilmore.

"You needn't look so furious, Tony. I shan't kidnap little sister."

He scowled and jerked his head toward her escort hovering with heightened color in the background.

"Hartley's waiting," he said bruskly.

Aileen went pink at his rudeness. Raneleigh, the

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soul of courtesy, squirmed. But Saranoff was unperturbed.

"Gee, Tony," she drawled, "you're packing a mean grouch to-day." And with a dazzling smile and a honeyed "See you later, my dear," for Aileen, she went on.

Raneleigh did what he could to ease the constraint which blanketed their table. In general he found little to say to immature girls. Their minds were like the maps of the early geographers, strewn with disconcerting blanks. But he was at home with Aileen, whom, talkative or silent, he liked. Merely to look upon her was a joy. Her features were singularly pure in outline. The old-fashioned word chiseled best described, he thought, her profile in repose. Yet the lovely contours of cheek and chin, too full for saintliness, saved her face from asceticism. Were her lips a shade too voluptuous? Or was her make-up at fault? Heaven knew she did not need it. And, even if its curves were seductive, her mouth had the innocence of a baby cupid only half aware of its dangerous charm. It was her eyes, though, that held him. They were strangely moving. Brown, with gold glints, they mirrored her changing moods, gay, wistful, and at moments touchingly sad. He did not take her sad moods seriously. They were due, he surmised, to her failure to make her way in the movies, which was surely an insufficient reason for this beguiling creature, with the bloom and fragrance of springtime, to bemoan her fate.

That her brother worshiped her was manifest. The hard lines of his face softened as he watched her. He finished his luncheon in peace. But he had not reached

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the end of his annoyances. As they came out into the anteroom—that somewhat stuffy repository of signed photographs and theatrical souvenirs—he found Dolly Brownrigg posted like a sleek cat confident of its mouse. There was no avoiding her. Gilmore presented his sister.

"Oh, I know who you are!" cried Aileen with such a smile as careless youth rarely bestows on fat-and-forty. "Tony has told me that you are one of his oldest Hollywood friends." She clapped her hand over her mouth. "Of course I mean earliest, not oldest. I used to adore your pictures. It nearly broke my heart when you left the screen."

"You're a darling," gushed Mrs. Brownrigg, completely won. "I know we're going to be the best of friends." She turned to Gilmore. "You never let on to me that the little sister you used to talk about was grown up and a beauty."

"She was just a gangling kid when I left Iowa," he replied. "She's been getting on in years like the rest of us."

A more potent attraction than Mrs. Brownrigg now came out of the dining-room, and Aileen, with a little gesture of delight, went to the head of the staircase and watched the great Mr. Chaplin descend. Gilmore and Raneleigh exchanged indulgent smiles.

"Isn't she adorable!" cried Dolly. "Why, Tony, she has everything in Hollywood backed off the map! I'm crazy about her. Now I'll tell you what I want you to do. We're throwing a little party to-night at the old stand, and you must bring her. Don't say no. At least drop in as you're a-coming or a-going. You, too, Mr. Raneleigh."

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"Sorry, Dolly. I'm all tied up." Gilmore tried to look distressed. "You see, I promised Pat Gantley I'd be at his affair."

"That's no alibi, old dear. Pat and Jane never know who's there and who isn't. They invite the whole world and take what comes. Besides, we're going over around midnight for a plunge in that wonderful pool of theirs. So you come to our blow-out first, and we'll all go on to Pat's together."

"Oh, very well." It was apparent that he accepted because he knew not how to refuse.

"And your sister?" she persisted.

"No." His brow clouded. "Aileen has been out all she can stand this week. She's not too strong."

Having seen the last of Charlie Chaplin's hat, which in no way resembled the one with which she was familiar, Aileen rejoined the group. Mrs. Brownrigg beamed upon her.

"I've just asked Tony and Mr. Raneleigh to a little impromptu party I'm giving to-night, Miss Gilmore, and I do hope you'll come, too."

"I'd love to come." She rounded eagerly on her brother. "May I, Tony? Please!"

He shook his head.

"I've already explained that you've had a full week. You were out yesterday and are dated up to-morrow. A long night's sleep is what you need."

"Oh, let her come," coaxed Dolly. "Don't be such a martinet."

Two spots of color flamed in the girl's cheeks.

"I don't see why I can't ever decide things for myself," she protested.

"That's nonsense," said Gilmore. "I'll be on hand,

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Dolly, but don't count on my sister. How about you, Ran? Will you meet me at my house at nine? Don't bother with your car. I'll be chauffeur to-night."

"Fine," said Raneleigh, seeing that he had no choice in the matter. "I'll be over in good time. Thanks for the lunch."

Gilmore had taken his sister's arm and turned to the coat-room when Mrs. Brownrigg called him back and murmured something inaudible to the others.

"Sure," he assented. "You can depend on me."

Raneleigh started to retrieve his own hat, but paused to watch one of the little comedies that often spiced life in this droll community. Due to a face-lifting operation, Mrs. Brownrigg's expression was always strained, but at this moment it took on a hauteur which would have done credit to a stage duchess. He turned quickly. Dolly confronted Selma Saranoff. He knew, as did every one, of the long-standing feud between these women, which went back to the days of Dolly's stardom when Selma, a mere extra, had undermined her with a director. Their meeting now was, he felt, an event that no student of Hollywood amenities should miss.

Saranoff bore down on the enemy with her usual dash.

"Why, Dolly!" she exclaimed. "I had to look twice to be sure it was you. What in the world have you done to yourself? If you must bant, be careful. Some of those foreign methods are positively dangerous. You shouldn't take reckless chances with your health even if you are overweight. I'm really worried about you, darling."

"Never felt better," snapped Mrs. Brownrigg and

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put out her hand to young Hartley. "Hello, Gerald! I see you're still the answer to a maiden's prayer."

"Hello, Dolly!" he returned cordially. "I'm glad you're back. We've missed you a lot."

"Thanks. You always were a friendly kid. I'm throwing a party to-night. Drop in. You'll find 'Welcome' on the doormat."

He hesitated, visibly embarrassed.

"I'd like to come, but I'm afraid I can't make it. The fact is——"

"Of course you can," interrupted Selma. "We'll both crash in if there's no objection."

Mrs. Brownrigg swallowed hard, but recalled that she was a lady.

"Do," she urged, mustering a smile by main force.

Saranoff made an effective exit, and Dolly turned a stricken face on Raneleigh.

"Did you hear what that hellcat said to me?" she demanded. "After all the dirt she's done me, Selma Saranoff has the boiler-plate nerve to ask herself to my house."

"Perhaps," suggested Raneleigh diplomatically, "she wants to bury the hatchet."

Dolly's two chins quivered.

"B-bury the hatchet," she sputtered. "I'd like to sink it to the handle in her hateful wooden head!"

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CHAPTER TWO

TONY PACKS HIS GAT

THAT evening Raneleigh walked the few dusky blocks, lined with acacias and palms, which lay between his bachelor's apartment and Gilmore's home. As he turned in from the sidewalk he thought, as often, that Tony's house reflected his good sense in practical affairs. Unlike many to whom the movies brought sudden riches, he had not yielded to the temptation to set up a baronial establishment and live in the grand manner. Instead, he had cannily bought a so-called Swiss châlet, with ample frontage, which, if unfashionable, was comfortable and certain in time to increase in value. Whatever his friend's weaknesses where women were concerned, his business head was clear.

A Chinese servant, in a white jacket, welcomed him with a broad smile and a deferential bow. Ling knew a gentleman when he saw him. From beyond a door on the right of the hall came faintly the click of a typewriter.

"Is Mr. Gilmore busy?"

"Not for you," said Ling. "He tell me show you right in."

Tony peered through the haze of pipe smoke that clouded the study.

"Be with you in half a tick, Ran. I'm writing a letter. Beastly things, letters. I wish I never had to do another."

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"Why should you? Get a secretary."

"That's not my notion of a home. I'm so hemmed in by clerks and stenographers at the studio that I simply must have privacy here."

The novelist, whose method was different, watched with amusement. Like most men trained in newspaper offices, Gilmore wrote with the first finger only. Yet, when the thoughts flowed, he had almost the speed of a professional typist. To-night, however, his nimble brain seemed sluggish, and after staring absently at the keys, he got to his feet with a sigh.

"I'll tackle this later," he said. "Why do anything to-day that can be put off till to-morrow? Reverse those tiresome old maxims and you enjoy life."

"I shouldn't," said his friend laconically.

"No; you're like the virtuous châtelaine of this household—hamstrung by puritan inhibitions."

Raneleigh laughed.

"I had never thought I resembled your Aunt Harriet. But I know this: if I followed your advice I'd starve."

"For God's sake," flared Gilmore irritably, "don't call her my aunt! Sometimes I can't believe that we share the same blood." Then, as suddenly contrite: "Sorry, old man. The truth is, Mrs. Barnett has been getting my goat again, and my nerves are raw."

Raneleigh, discreetly silent, watched him take a restless turn about the room. Dinner clothes became him, their sober black and white giving slenderness to his slightly heavy build. With his strong face, his bold eye, his air of mastery, he was a distinguished figure and looked his success. What a pity that success could not have brought him contentment!

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"And of course," he added, "I rasp her nerves, too. To her—after Iowa—Hollywood is Sodom and Gomorrah rolled in one. Back there among the Hawkeyes she was president of the temperance union, treasurer of the foreign missions fund and active in heaven knows what other societies for meddling with other peoples' business. To her strong drink is an invention of a Devil who is as real—perhaps more real—than her God. She looks on dancing as a cardinal sin. She thinks that motion-pictures are destroying the moral fiber of the nation and the sanctity of the home. You can't shake her convictions. She's too set in her way, too stubborn, too old."

He took a small bronze Buddha from the mantelpiece, gazed at it fixedly and replaced it with a shrug.

"Godlike omniscience! She has it. And complacence. The eternal verities are hers. She's always been like that. But you know it, Ran. And you know there's no reasoning with the smug. These good women!" He again circled the room. "I want to be fair to her. I've tried. I realize that she's a fish out of water here, that it was a wrench for her to come. But I had to ask her. She stood on her rights as my sister's legal guardian. She wouldn't hear to a separation. I had to ask her, you see. I wanted Aileen."

"I understand. So should I in your place."

"But even Aileen—I haven't made her happy. She's movie mad. Ever since I got my foothold she's dreamed of startling the world. And she can, I believe. She has the beauty, the talent. It's merely a question, I feel, of the right part in the right play. And the right director, of course. With my connec-

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tions, I could put her over like a shot. Her health, though—that's the handicap. I don't mean that she's sickly. She just isn't strong. Never has been, in fact. Yet she's wild to see everything, go everywhere. She thinks I'm a tyrant because I won't let her. To-day, after we left the Montmartre, we had a spat. It was over Dolly Brownrigg's party, as you'll guess. You saw how her heart was set on it. She begged me to take her along to-night. She asked if I thought she came to Hollywood to learn how to throw a trance."

"Do what?"

"She's been reading Oriental philosophy. Holkar—you've met my Hindu friend next door—lends her books. Anyhow, it struck me as funny and I laughed. That made her angry. She told me that she was sick of being mewed up at home. She said if I fancied our aunt was lively company I ought to try sitting alone with her night after night. There was no answer to that. Poor kid! I felt sorry for her. But I couldn't give in about Dolly's party. I won't have her drawn into that rowdy set."

A knock came. Gilmore opened the door on Aileen, a radiant Aileen, in a billowing chiffon evening dress of blended shades of orchid. In her dark hair was a bandeau of pearls. Other pearls clasped her exquisite throat. She was arrayed for conquest.

Her brother frowned.

"Why the play-acting, Aileen?"

"Aren't I rather nice to look at, Tony? Don't you like me in this frock? It's one you bought me in Paris. Remember? I've had it made over." Getting no response, she faced Raneleigh. "How about it, Ran? I know you have good taste. Isn't it lovely?"

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"It seems the last word. But turn round before I give my expert opinion. The back is most important these days."

His tone was bantering, but she was too self-absorbed to heed it, and happy to display herself, pirouetted for his inspection.

"Flawless. But don't you think you ought to save it for the Wampus ball?"

"That's what I say," put in Gilmore with cold decision.

She sidled up to him like a wheedling child.

"You will let me go to-night, Tony?"

"No, Aileen."

"But I'm all dressed for it."

"That makes no difference. You should be above such tricks."

"Do take me," she pleaded. "I like Dolly. I'm sure she likes me. And I do so want to be liked. Please!"

"I said no. And I meant exactly what I said."

"But that was before you knew how I'd look," she argued naively. "Don't you truly and honestly want to take me now? Say you will, Tony. Don't be so hard."

"Hard! I'm not. No one knows it better than you. How many times must I explain that I won't have you cheapen yourself by running everywhere? Dolly Brownrigg lets any one in who pushes the bell."

"Then I can't go, though I'm all ready! You don't want me?"

Gilmore threw up his hands.

"Have women no sense!" Then, controlling himself: "I am thinking solely of your good. You under-

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stand that clearly enough. It's unfair of you to tease like this."

Tears blurred her brown eyes.

"I'm through teasing," she retorted bitterly. "Some day you'll find that I have a mind of my own."

"Aileen!" he protested. "Do be reasonable."

The girl was not for the moment a reasoning being. She flung up her head and turned in injured dignity to leave the room. But at the door her stately progress met a check. Mrs. Barnett blocked the threshold. Sharp-nosed, firm-chinned, her iron gray hair waved, parted and screwed in a knot at the back of her head, her matronly figure clad in gray woolen that fell to the tops of her high-buttoned shoes, she personified austere respectability. And she was also, thought Raneleigh, not untypical of the women who once signed testimonials for patent medicines. She fixed her eyes on her nephew.

"Anthony," she said, in a tone of a school-teacher accustomed to laying down the law, "I shall not allow Aileen to go to this party. From what I've heard of that Mrs. Brownrigg she is not a fit person to entertain a niece of mine."

Gilmore's face mottled with rage.

"Mrs. Brownrigg is all right. She helped me when no one else would lift a finger. That's the breed of friend she is. Half the people who criticize her aren't worthy to breathe the same air. As for her party tonight, I've already told Aileen that she can't go."

"In that case," returned his aunt, "I have no more to say."

"But I have," he countered, yielding to his fury. "It's time for a show-down. I've stood all a man can

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stand. Henceforth, I'll thank you not to interfere between Aileen and me."

"I'll be guided by my conscience," she said quietly. "As always."

"Your conscience!" he flung back. "Your precious conscience! That's merely a name you give your will to dominate. You've always tried to dictate. It's your passion."

"But my poor boy——"

"There you go! I'm still a boy in your eyes. You can't realize that either of us is grown up. You want to keep us still under your thumb. I had enough of that in Iowa. I've been a fool to tolerate such an attitude here. I shan't from now on. I'm through."

"Is that all?"

"No. It's not all. While we're on the subject of interference, get this straight: you're to quit tampering with Ling. I've told him not to give the key of these rooms—my personal quarters—to any one. Yet last week you tried your best to get it from him."

"The rooms need cleaning."

"That's part of his job. When I want it done I'll tell him. This is my house. I'm entitled to some privacy in it, and I'm going to have it."

Mrs. Barnett's poise was unshaken.

"If I am to live here," she said evenly, "I must direct the servants. If I am not to live here I shall take Aileen with me and make a Christian home for her, which yours is not."

Raneleigh, who above everything abhorred a scene, had gone to the hearth where the embers of a dying fire threw off a cheerful glow. He wished with all his heart that he could become invisible. But he respected

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the courage of that iron woman, standing there with folded arms, and because he knew that she had a temper of her own, he admired her restraint. He even felt for her a certain sympathy. To him the issue between these twain was clear. Two warring conceptions of life drove them to act as they acted and be what they were. Puritan against Pagan—the ancient strife. The only point of novelty was that the battle-field should be Hollywood.

Mrs. Barnett was self-possessed to the last.

"We'll talk this over at your leisure," she said, turning to go. "And there are other matters, Anthony, which must be frankly discussed."

"You'll find me frank enough," he retorted defiantly. "But you'll not get Aileen away from me."

The girl, who had hovered wide-eyed near the door, now vanished in a bright swirl of chiffon. Her aunt, quaint but dauntless champion of the old order, followed her with backbone rigid and head erect. Gilmore met his friend's eyes. He obviously smarted with shame.

"A sweet mess, Ran!"

"Sorry, old fellow. It's a difficult situation. But Aileen will soon be of age and things will change."

"You're damned right they will." His hand shook as he lighted a cigarette. "It was hard—even without that fracas—to refuse the kid. It got me when she burst in with all her pretty war-paint. But I had to keep a frozen face. I couldn't take her, Ran."

"Of course not."

"There are so many places I can't take her." He stared a moment at vacancy. "The Montmartre—that was a mistake. Yet she was crazy to go. I thought,

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with you along—but it didn't work. I never dreamed that Ida would brace up to me. She must be off her head. I couldn't see how Aileen took it. I want her to think well of me—as well as she can. Not much gets by you, Ran. Did she suspect anything?"

"I can't answer that, Tony."

"No. It was a fool question. For God's sake, let's get out of here! Ling? Where are you? Bring my hat and gloves."

The valet, who had effaced himself, reappeared from the bedroom with hat, gloves and an overcoat.

"I shan't need the coat. The night is too warm. You'll find yours a nuisance, Ran."

"Perhaps. But it's winter by the calendar and I run no risks with colds. It will be late before we return. You'd better play safe."

Gilmore was in no humor to follow any one's advice.

"I don't want it. That coat's a sight for evening wear. I've meant to be measured for another. No time. Get the car out, Ling." He strode to his desk and from a drawer took a pistol and a silver hip-flask. "Have a tot of brandy, Ran. It's Three Stars."

"No, thanks."

"You may find something you like better in the cellarette."

"I won't drink now. We have a wet evening ahead."

"No doubt of that. I must have the lock of that cellarette fixed when I get time. It's loose. Time again! I'm so driven I don't know whether I'm going or coming." He pocketed the flask, but balanced the weapon, a small pearl-handled revolver, in his palm. "Why should I burden myself with this gat? Did you bring yours?"

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"Not to-night."

Gilmore laughed harshly.

"Consistency is not your middle name. You shy at a cold and ignore bandits!"

"Hold-ups aren't as frequent as they were. Besides, I hate to carry a gun. It doesn't seem civilized."

This was enough to goad the distraught man to a contrary course.

"Since you, who are so civilized, gave me this toy I'll tote it along. In any case, I dare say it wouldn't kill a flea."

"It wasn't meant for insecticide, Tony. But it's nine-thirty, and Dolly will be in a fine stew if you are late. You're probably the main event."

"Let her stew! Nobody can dictate my schedule. I come when I please and go when I please. Anyhow, it's only a five-minute run."

Nevertheless, he was impatient to be off. Raneleigh glanced into the living-room as Gilmore closed his study door. It was shrouded in gloom. From the high-powered limousine, parked in the driveway, he looked for Aileen's light, but her bedroom, too, was dark. He pictured her drooping disconsolate in her finery. Poor Cinderella! No pumpkin coach for her.

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CHAPTER THREE

DOLLY'S PARTY GETS ROUGH

For Dolly Brownrigg a party was not a party without a flood of alcoholic drinks. She was bolstered in this faith by the fate of certain Hollywood hosts and hostesses, who, braving custom and serving no liquor, had seen their guests walk out on them to assuage their thirst in establishments more lax in their interpretation of the Eighteenth Amendment. No such humiliation for her.

On his arrival Raneleigh was seized by Dolly's florid and obese husband and propelled firmly to the dining-room. The long refectory table looked like a delicatessen counter. Salads, meats, cheeses, sandwiches, covered every available inch of the lace-edged cloth. Two grave footmen stood ready to serve this gargantuan feast to all and sundry, but few troubled them. The popular resort was the buffet, and the crowning glory of the buffet was a silver punch-bowl of heroic size. It was before the punch-bowl that Brownrigg, still clutching him by the arm, brought up.

"Have a depth-bomb," he urged.

"A what?"

"A depth-bomb."

"My error, Charlie. I thought you said a death-bomb. If you don't mind I'll take a mild high-ball instead."

"You're a wise bimbo, Ran. Here's Scotch that's

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Scotch. I can't recommend that stuff in the bowl, anyhow. My wife's been waiting for Tony to give it the master touch. She says he promised to mix a punch that will knock 'em out. Don't care for gin myself. Nigger poison."

They drank, and the broker's drink was obviously not his first. He eyed Raneleigh with an owlish stare.

"Write books, don't you?"

"Yes. That's my job."

"Never read 'em," he chuckled. "No offense intended. Don't read any books. Market reports keep me too busy."

"I understand perfectly."

"That," said Brownrigg, with ponderous gravity, "is a reckless statement. Nobody understands any dam' thing perfectly."

"Perhaps you're right."

"You bet I'm right. Take me, for instance. You don't understand my sish—my sit-u-a-tion at all. Look here! I want to give you—— Say, Ran, are you married?"

"No. You know that, Charlie."

"Do I? I'm not sure what I know to-night. What was I talking about?"

"Marriage, I believe."

"Sure I was. You threw me off the track. Here's what I want to tell you: don't marry an actress. It's good advice I'm handing you. Don't marry an actress."

"I'll try to remember it."

"See that you do. Mind you, I'm not casting any aspirins—that's not the word I want."

"Aspersions?"

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"That's it. I'm not casting any—any—whatever you said—on Dolly. She's the finest woman in the world, bar none. Do you follow me?"

"Oh, yes."

Brownrigg guffawed.

"Then you're smarter than I am. I don't know where in hell I'm at."

He spied fresh arrivals in need of depth-bombs, and Raneleigh sought other company. He saw many acquaintances, but few with whom he cared to linger. The ukase, recently promulgated in Hollywood's upper circles, that one should carry one's liquor like a gentleman—and by inference, like a lady—found no favor here. Some guests, who had come from dinner parties, were in the mellow state of well-being that their host enjoyed. Others were pugnacious and on their shoulders bore the proverbial chip. One man had attained complete oblivion and slumbered on a polar-bear rug beneath the gilded grand piano. The instrument had no other use, Raneleigh judged, than to serve as a receptacle for empty cocktail glasses. A couple would snap on the radio, dance briefly and snap it off. A demon of restlessness seemed to possess all these pleasure-seekers. They wandered through the vast drawing-room, the billiard-room, and yet other rooms below- and above-stairs. No one questioned their goings or comings. It was Liberty Hall.

The novelist in time discovered that he was wrong about the grand piano. To its accompaniment, an apelike pair of dwarfs, male and female, exhibited their version of the Black Bottom with variations that added to its obscenity. They drew a storm of applause, gave the encore their contract specified, and swallowing

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all the punch and caviar sandwiches they could hold, left for their next engagement. It behooved them to make hay while their sun shone. In another month they would be shelved for some new sensation. Raneleigh watched them with disgust. That kind of thing was as little to his taste as the wholesale guzzling. What swine some humans were! No wonder Tony refused to bring Aileen.

He tried the library. The Brownriggs had a library because the architect had included it in his plan. The same arbiter of elegance had obligingly selected books whose bindings harmonized with the color scheme. Their function was purely decorative. But, even here amid the unread volumes, there was no peace. A noisy poker game was in progress. So he returned to the maudlin hilarity of the drawing-room and looked about for Tony in the hope of inducing him to start the movement to Gantley's. Pat's place was no haven of tranquillity, but his swimming-pool had its attractions. He came upon Gilmore listening with a sardonic smile to the wisdom of his host. The broker was charging him never to marry an actress. In a chair, just around the jamb of the doorway leading to the dining-room and impromptu bar, Raneleigh spied Saranoff. She was speaking to young Hartley, but her eyes were on Tony. She patently meant him to overhear.

"Now why," she argued, "can't I have another cocktail?"

"Because you're soused, my pet. You've had enough."

"But who are you, Gerald, old dear," she drawled, "to say when I've had enough?"

"I'm the man who's going to marry you, Selma.

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Lay off the booze. You know it's bad for you. Be sensible."

She veered in a flash from docility to anger.

"Who wants to be sensible at a party, you big stiff!" she retorted. "Oh, Tony! Tell Charlie Brown-rigg to shut his trap. I want you to get me a cock-tail. Gerald, here, who's always saying he'd do anything for me, is holding out on me."

Gilmore swept her a mocking bow.

"Ask me something hard, Selma." He made no move to serve her, but stared at Hartley. "So you'd do anything for her, Gerald?"

Raneleigh saw a brawl in the making.

"Let's be off, Tony," he interposed. "We'll never reach Pat's if some one doesn't lead the way."

Gilmore brushed him aside.

"I asked you a question, Hartley," he persisted. "Selma says you'd do anything for her. Is that straight?"

Hartley shrugged. He was the more sober of the two.

"Stow it, Tony. You heard what she said."

"That's not the point." He waved a long fore-finger under the youth's nose. "I want to hear it from you. Haven't you sand enough in your craw to speak up? Would you do anything for her? Would you? Say yes or no."

"Yes," blurted Hartley, losing his temper. "What's it to you?"

"That's my business. Mine and Selma's. So you'd do anything for her, my brave cock-of-the-walk!" He struck an attitude and began to spout Shakespeare. "'Swounds, show me what thou'lt do: woul't weep?

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woul't fight? woul't fast? woul't tear thyself? woul't drink up eisel? eat a crocodile?' "

Brownrigg, with no notion what it was all about, gave a raucous cheer. A group gathered.

"Don't be an ass," said Hartley, crimson with embarrassment.

"Do you mean me, you cub?" bridled his host.

"Keep out of this, Charlie," ordered Gilmore. "An ass, eh?" He thrust his face insolently close. "Well, then, there's a pair of us. But here's the difference. I don't jump when she cracks the whip. On the other hand, when she asks a favor nicely, I don't turn her down." He beckoned a servant, passing with a tray. "Selma, here's your drink."

The woman's strange eyes had smoldered throughout the foolish dispute. Did she enjoy it? Or was she incensed? Raneleigh was uncertain. But she took the glass, held it high in a shaking hand for an instant, and then put it to her painted lips. At the first swallow she choked, and the amber liquid spilled to her frock and spread darkly over its vivid green. Hartley pulled her to her feet and thumped her nude back so briskly that the red came. As soon as she got her breath she lurched away and, still clutching the glass, braced herself against the chair and faced them. The younger man shrank from her blazing eyes. He was no match for such a temperament as hers. But Gilmore, unmoved by her fury, gave her stare for stare.

"Take that leer off your face, Tony Gilmore!" she screamed. "You damned superior hypocrite! Take it off, I say!"

His eyes changed. Their pupils contracted. His taunting look turned to contempt.

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"You won't, eh? Well, I'll do it for you!" She flung her glass.

It struck him between the eyes and shattered at his feet. The curious, as if marshaled by some invisible movie director, crowded round. Gilmore himself behaved as if mindful of a camera and the myriad patrons of the films. With a mauve-bordered silk handkerchief he staunched the blood from a cut on his nose and ignored the rising welt above.

"Come!" he said debonairly. "Let's close this pretty little scene and go on with the party."

Brownrigg could not repress his admiration.

"Good scout!" he exclaimed thickly. "You're all right, Tony. And Selma's all right. You gotta overlook lil' things like that. Women"—he gesticulated vaguely—"women will be women. Not that I'll have guests inshulted in my house. I'll not stand for it. Dammit, this is my house. Mine and Dolly's. I told her when I deeded it over—sweetheart, I says——"

"Shut up, Charlie!" His wife appeared suddenly at his elbow. "There's no need for you to act like a fool because that she-devil went on a rampage."

The broker was aggrieved.

"D'you hear that?" he appealed to the company. "It's jus' a sample of what she hands me right along."

"You bet I do," said Dolly. "Every time he deserves it. And I always tell him if he doesn't like it he can give me a settlement and I'll quit. Cut out the sob stuff, Charlie. Nobody cares a hoot about it."

Saranoff had collapsed in her chair. She looked deathly sick. No one else offering to lend a hand, Raneleigh helped Hartley take her to the women's dressing-room. Here, to his disgust, he found two

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male guests on their hands and knees, engaged in a boisterous game of craps. A colored maid guided Selma's tottering steps to the bathroom. The men on the floor paid no heed to them. The game went on. Descending to the drawing-room, Raneleigh was greeted by more hubbub. Dolly thought it time to set out for Gantley's. Discussion raged. Some had other engagements for the small hours. Some preferred to stay where they were. And some, incapable of voicing their desires, merely goggled with glazed eyes.

"This is worse than a Democratic convention, Ran," Dolly complained. "They won't agree on anything. I gave my word to Pat I'd bring my crowd. How am I going to do it?"

"You might first of all," he suggested, "weed out those who can't navigate under their own steam."

"Good idea, Ran. Here's where we lose Saranoff. She's passed out. I'd like to ditch her permanently. Just look at poor Tony's forehead!" She turned to Tony. "Come up-stairs with me and I'll dress it."

"No, thanks," he said, avoiding her tender gaze. "Well, I'll be damned!" he ejaculated, staring beyond her. "The little devil has staged a come-back!"

Saranoff, with faithful Hartley at heel, stood in the hall doorway. She had restored her make-up. She looked her usual self. After a quick glance round she walked directly to Gilmore.

"Sorry I went wild, Tony. I can't help my temper. You know that. Not sore, are you?"

"No, Tigress," he said indifferently, and turned to Dolly Brownrigg. "I think I'll be off."

"But you aren't leaving me flat!" she cried. "You told me you'd go on with us to Pat's."

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The caress in her baby-blue eyes again irked him.

"I'm not welching," he said shortly. "Round up your crowd."

She managed it at last, and as they trooped forth Raneleigh, from the steps, saw Selma link arms with Tony. When he next glimpsed her she was beside him in his car. Hartley, an irresolute and pathetic figure, loitered at the curb. Then, as the engine started, Gerald, with sudden decision, opened the rear door and scrambled in. The trio sped off into the night. Raneleigh glanced at his watch. It was nearly twelve. He felt tired and bored. Since Tony had left him to his own devices, he thought he might as well steal away and go home to bed.

But Mrs. Brownrigg outflanked his retreat.

"Did you see what I saw?" she demanded. "The poor fish! But some people will put up with murder. Well, let's get action. Ran, you come along with me."

"How are you going?" he asked.

"With any one but Charlie. He's hogged my new French limousine, of course. We'll pile in somewhere. Isn't that Myrtle Murillo's car? Coo-hoo! Hey, Myrtle! You're about to jitney a famous author to Santa Monica. And me! I guess I'm somebody. Time was, I had my name in electric lights from coast to coast."

Raneleigh found himself sandwiched between heavyweights. It was a snug fit. Much of the way Dolly regaled him with tales of her palmy days of stardom. He listened so courteously that by and by she nestled her blonde head on his shoulder. Her nature was affectionate. He thought longingly of the Gantley pool. Beverly Hills left behind, they faced a salty breeze and

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a few miles beyond reached a Spanish-Colonial structure overlooking cañon and sea. Other survivors of the Brownrigg festivities were noisily alighting in the walled forecourt. The Gantley establishment absorbed them like a hotel.

And Pat Gantley himself suggested a hotel manager. Whatever his night-time guests wore—and they came as whim seized them—he was always clad in formal dress. A born mixer, he could blend the most ill-assorted social ingredients. Financially, his status was vague. He was one of those men who prosper without visible means of support. Raneleigh had caught hints of chartered ships and bootlegging, but he suspected that gambling was nearer the mark. There was always bridge for high stakes in the brilliantly lighted sun-room. Poker and other games went on in quiet corners. Nor, to the initiate, was a roulette-wheel hard to find. It was less a home than a casino.

For Dolly's guests, however, the main attraction was the huge enclosed swimming-pool. This, too, with its warmed sea water of varying temperature, its dressing-rooms and attendants, had the air of a public resort. But no drab uniformity of costume prevailed. The opulent Pat furnished one-piece bathing-suits of every hue. This freedom of choice added much to the gaiety of the scene. Dolly Brownrigg unhappily chose scarlet in which she looked like a bloated firecracker. Unable to find Gilmore, she still clung to Raneleigh and his plunge proved less bracing than he had hoped. She had the overwhelming playfulness of a porpoise. At last he passed the buxom nymph to an unwary stranger and fled.

Dressed once more and ready to go, he hunted

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vainly for Gilmore. His friend's heedlessness incensed him. It was unpardonable in Tony to leave him in the lurch after insisting that he come to-night in his car. But it was Saranoff's doing, of course. She had forced herself upon him. He got his coat and hat and paused at the door, uncertain whether to call a taxicab or wait for a lift from some acquaintance. A taxi seemed safer. Then he heard himself paged.

"Mr. Ran-e-leigh—Mr. Ran-e-leigh!" intoned a Japanese voice.

"Yes," he said. "What's wanted?"

"Telephone, sir. This way, please."

He was shown to a closet off the central hall and took up the receiver. "Raneleigh speaking. . . . Who? . . . Oh, it's you, Gerald! Where in thunder have you people been all this while? . . . What did you say? Repeat that. . . . Good God! Yes, I'll come." The servant had not left the hall. "Get a taxi," he called. "Don't lose a minute. I must have it at once."

Dolly Brownrigg, still in her bathing-suit and dripping from every surplus ounce, waylaid him at the door.

"You're not ditching me at this hour," she protested. "Have a heart! I don't want to poke home with Charlie. You don't know what he's like after a bat." Then, noting his pallor, the haggard lines into which his usually tranquil face had set, she forgot her grievance. "Ran! You look sick. What's happened to you?"

"It's Tony." He spoke in a flat voice from which all emotion was erased. "He's been shot. He's dead."

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE SHOT FROM THE HEDGE

"DEAD!" parroted Dolly. "Tony Gilmore shot dead!" Her befuddled wits, keyed for hours to frivolity, could not at once grasp this grim reality. "How can that be when only a little while ago——" She clutched his sleeve. "Why, Ran, that devil Selma left my house with him! She must have killed him!"

"I don't know. Hartley phoned me. He was at Tony's. The police are there. But Tony's dead."

She missed the tragic note in his voice. It was her own loss, the sudden rending of an old bond, the drama of the moment, her part in the play, that absorbed her. Raneleigh jerked away. She roused herself and ran wildly after him.

"Are you holding something back?" she panted. "I want to hear it all. I want to tell the others."

"That's all I know," he said, and sprang into his cab.

Jolting toward the city, her grotesque image recurred to him. So she'd wanted to tell the others! Facing this horror, she was still the actress. She saw herself spreading the news. Yet, if rumor were true, she and Tony had been more than friends. Love! What did these moths of the limelight know of love? None of them had cared for Tony as he had cared. Incidents of their early years together floated to the troubled surface of his mind. That handsome boy, best of

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playfellows—he was the real Tony Gilmore. This final phase, his life in Hollywood, was but a specious gloss. None of that shallow crew had known him. But they had sealed his fate. The luncheon at the Montmartre to-day—no, yesterday it was; it had become a mere date, a segment of the irrevocable past—at that luncheon the dragon's teeth were sown. The sinister forces which had done him to death were gathering then. A look here, a word there, a lightly given promise, trifles all, yet their sum was oblivion.

They swung into the familiar street at last. There was the house. Its lights picked it out from the darkness. Bystanders, late as was the hour, were clustered on the sidewalk. A policeman in uniform guarded the entrance.

"I am a friend of the family," said Raneleigh. "May I go in?"

The officer opened the door behind him and called to a plain-clothes man.

"Sergeant, this guy says he's a friend of the family."

The detective, burly, dark and, by now, much in need of a shave, looked him over sharply.

"Were you with Gilmore to-night?"

"Yes, early in the evening."

"What's your name?"

"Arthur Raneleigh. I want to help."

"All right. Come in. We may want to talk to you by and by."

He stepped into the hall.

"Did he die at once—without a word?"

"Plugged through the heart," said the plain-clothes man tersely. "He's in there if you want to see him."

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Raneleigh entered the living-room. Tony lay on the davenport. His still face wore a look of startled incredulity as if, to the very last, he was unconvinced that such a fate could be his. The welt on his forehead raised by the impact of the glass Saranoff had thrown, showed purple against ash-gray. A clot of blood had oozed from the cut at the base of his nose. Selma's mark! Had her rage outlasted that moment of pique? Had her hand sped the bullet that found Tony's heart? As Raneleigh bent over the lifeless clay that was once his friend, he believed her guilty. Then he became aware of some one behind him. Mrs. Barnett, in a gray lounging-robe, her stockinged feet in felt slippers, stood in the doorway. Her drawn face wore a mottled flush, and for once, her hair did not ripple in smooth waves from its parting, but clung to her head in tight rings. Back of one ear he noticed the ends of a kid curler which she had neglected to remove.

"I don't see why they insist on all this light," she said. "It isn't seemly."

Neither, he thought, was murder. Even were she confronting her own death, Mrs. Barnett would no doubt keep an eye on the proprieties. Yet her self-possession helped to steady him.

"I want to do all I can," he told her. "Please call upon me for any service."

"Thank you, Arthur," she replied. "For the present, apparently, we can only stir at the beck and call of the police."

"Is Aileen all right?"

"Yes. She was hysterical at first, but I reasoned with her and she became quiet."

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"May I see her?"

"I'd rather you wouldn't disturb her. She's lying down in the library."

There seemed to be nothing he could do. Even the Law marked time. The detective, braced against the newel, was cleaning his finger-nails.

"What is he waiting for?" asked Raneleigh in an undertone.

"More police, I infer," said Mrs. Barnett.

He turned at a shuffling step. Gerald Hartley had risen from a bench beyond the staircase. He was ghastly white and so near collapse that when Raneleigh reached his side his knees gave way and he clung to him for support.

"My God," he whimpered, "this is awful! It came like a bolt of lightning, Ran. I didn't realize what was happening till I went to help Tony and found him dead."

Raneleigh gripped his arm.

"Better say nothing now," he cautioned. "You can tell me all about it later."

"He can't incriminate himself any more than he has," barked the plain-clothes man with sudden ferocity. "He's spilled his story three or four times already. If he wants to tell it again let him do it."

"In that case, perhaps you won't mind if I talk with him in private?"

"Go ahead. But make it snappy. Take him into the dining-room." And unseen by Hartley, he signed to Raneleigh to leave the door ajar.

The unhappy youth slumped into a chair.

"This is awful," he repeated. "Simply awful!"

"I know, old man. A tough break. But try to

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pull yourself together. I want to hear exactly what happened."

"I don't know, Ran. Honest, I don't."

"Where is Selma?"

"In the rear hall telephoning. There's a cop watching her. They're all over the place."

"Give it to me straight, Gerald. Did she shoot Tony?"

"No, no. I swear it. That detective would like to pin it on her. Or on me. He thinks I'm lying. But I'm not, Ran."

"Haven't you any idea who did the shooting?"

"Wouldn't I tell if I had! We drove back here because Tony wanted his overcoat."

"You drove straight here from the Brownriggs'?"

"Yes. That is, we'd gone only a block or two toward Santa Monica when he said his throat was sore and that he was afraid he might catch cold after a swim unless he had his coat. Selma sat in front with him."

"Were they quarreling?"

Hartley's mouth twitched.

"No," he replied. "Petting. At least Selma was. She was trying to get him in good humor again. She was sorry for her flare-up at the Brownriggs'. That's her way, Ran. After she's done something mean she's so sweet you'd hardly believe she was the same girl. You don't like her. I've seen it. But you don't know her as I do. I'd do anything for her."

Raneleigh's breath shortened at his repetition of the phrase which Gilmore had so cruelly ridiculed. Was Hartley, with some boyish notion of chivalry, making good his word? Was he shielding his idol?

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"Go on," he said. "What happened after you arrived here?"

"Tony stopped in the drive. Right where his car stands now. It hasn't been moved. He didn't get out at once—Selma still had her hands on him. I—I guess he rather wanted to show me the power he had over her." Hartley gulped, and tears welled to his eyes. "Selma's hard to understand. She does lots of things I don't like. Yet, in other ways——" He broke off with a baffled gesture, as if mere words could not convey her fascination.

"Then Tony got out?"

"Yes."

"Did Selma stay in the machine?"

"Yes. She knew she'd made me a little huffy with her petting and so she turned—I was on the far side of the back seat—and began kidding me. And at that moment—as God's my witness, Ran, I'm telling you the truth—a shot was fired and I jerked my head just in time to see Tony fall. I don't think he gave a cry."

"From what direction did the shot come?"

"From the shrubbery at the left side of the house."

"Didn't you see any one? It was bright moonlight."

"No. And neither did Selma. I jumped out of the car and found Tony unconscious. Selma threw herself on the ground and pressed her ear to his breast. She screamed that he was dead. I couldn't believe it and tried to pour some whisky down his throat from my flask. But she was right. He was dead."

"What about the people in the house? Had they heard nothing?"

"I don't know. I rang the bell and pounded on

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the door, and pretty soon Mrs. Barnett came down. Then Tony's sister ran out. She went into hysterics—worse than Selma. Then the Hindu next door and other neighbors came, and a doctor and the police, and I phoned you. I guess the police will hold me. But I didn't do it, Ran. Don't you believe me?"

"I don't think you did it, Gerald."

"But you think it was Selma—that I'm lying to protect her. She didn't. She's innocent."

The plain-clothes man poked his head into the room.

"That'll be enough, bo. The Chief's here and wants to see you."

"The Chief?" Hartley blenched and started to his feet. His eyes had the look of a hunted animal.

"Captain Logan of the homicide squad. No big case gets by John B."

Raneleigh went quickly to the door.

"I'd like to be present," he said, fingering a bank-note. "Can you see any reason why I shouldn't?"

The plain-clothes man could not.

"Stick round," he said from the corner of his mouth, and then, Logan looming behind him: "Chief, meet Mr. Raneleigh, friend of the family. He's been assisting me. And over there is the fellow who happened to be on the spot when the shooting occurred."

"Happened, eh?"

The thin, long-faced, sharp-eyed Logan examined Hartley from head to foot. Like the terrier he resembled, he had his tricks. This cool silent appraisal of a suspect was number one. Raneleigh, who had heard something of the man and his methods, expected to see a canine twitch of nostrils. He was not disap-

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pointed. Trick number two followed with melodramatic suddenness. Hurling himself at Hartley he gripped either shoulder in a bony claw.

"So it was you who fired that shot?" he snarled.

"No, no!" Hartley cringed, terrified, before him. "I didn't shoot Tony."

"Look me in the eyes!"

The investigator had advanced to his third trick, the glassy stare. The school in which he was trained put great faith in this stare, and Logan had perfected it to a point where it seemed to probe the darkest secrets of the soul. Culprits had been known to break under it. Even the innocent found it terrible to endure. Hartley, innocent or guilty, could not support it. He turned his eyes to Raneleigh in mute appeal. His chin quivered. His body swayed as if, released from that steel clutch, he would pitch to the floor.

"Can't stand the gaff, eh? What's the matter with you? If you're not guilty, why don't you face me like a man? Look at me, I say!"

The youth raised his harassed eyes and strove to hold them steady. But he could not meet that malevolent glare. His lips trembled. He tried to speak. Words would not come. Then, as Logan abruptly loosed his grip, he crumpled into a chair, dumb with fright. Raneleigh winced at the spectacle. He had long thought Hartley a weakling, but such cowardice passed his comprehension. Or was it a form of heroism? His humane impulse was to go to him now, bid him to refuse to talk, to demand a lawyer to safeguard his rights. But he remembered Tony lying beyond the closed doors to the next room—Tony, with that incredulous look in his dead eyes—and his heart hard-

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ened. If this jealous fool had killed him he should be made to pay. If he was shielding a worthless woman he must be brought to see the folly of such misplaced devotion.

Logan bent and, thrusting a hand under his victim's chin, lifted his pitiful face.

"You talked to Black here. Why aren't you gabby now? Can't you remember your story? Why don't you tell it to me? Have you lost your nerve? Can't you speak up like a man?"

Hartley again shrank from his tormentor, but he found his voice.

"I—I want to speak. But you—you treat me as if—— Oh, I didn't shoot him! I didn't, I tell you! I didn't!"

"Go on," prodded Logan. "Spit it out."

He babbled his story once more. It was without sequence, less coherent than before. He repeated himself, wandered distractedly to the Brownrigg party, harked back to the tragedy, defended Selma, and over and over protested his innocence and hers.

Logan's satisfaction increased.

"So you and Gilmore went to the mat at the party?"

"No, no."

"You've admitted that there was a fight."

"Not a real fight. We didn't come to blows."

"Naw! Just a word-slinging bout, eh?"

"Yes. That's all."

"You're a liar. Wasn't socking him in the head with a glass a blow?"

"But I've explained——"

"Oh, yes!" Logan bore him down. "You've ex-

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plained and it's as clear as a blue-print. You picked a quarrel with him and the dame mixed in. Gilmore was trying to get your skirt away from you."

"No. You've twisted things. Won't you listen? I meant——"

"I got you the first time. You went loco when he walked off with your girl. You followed them outside. You jumped into the car with them. And, when you saw your chance, you shot him."

"No, no!"

"You shot him," persisted Logan. "You shot him, you white-livered skunk! You shot him!"

Hartley's jaw sagged. Terror again overcame him. With a groan of despair, he covered his face and broke into wild sobs.

Logan, who seemed about to pounce, wheeled at a step in the hall. A well-dressed, keen-faced man, with a confident bearing, entered the room.

"Hello, Chief! Made any progress?"

"I'll say I have, Kent. He'll come through when we give him the works." Then, his glance falling on Raneleigh, he jerked his head toward the door. "Out!" he ordered tersely. "And we shan't need you, Sergeant."

Raneleigh followed the plain-clothes man into the hall. As the door closed behind them, the newcomer's voice—deep, slow, relentless—took up the inquisition.

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CHAPTER FIVE

ENTER INVESTIGATOR KENT

RANELEIGH paused before the library. He was anxious for Aileen. Could she overhear that merciless grilling in the room beyond? The door was ajar. He looked in and, in the obscurity, relieved only by the light from the hall, made out her form prone on a couch and Mrs. Barnett, sitting bolt upright, in a chair beside her. The girl staggered to her feet.

"Don't get up," he protested. "I did not mean to startle you. Lie down, my dear. It's best for you."

She swayed as he reached her. He took her arm.

"Don't touch me!" she cried shrilly. "I don't want any one to touch me!"

"Of course you don't," he humored her. "I understand."

She peered at him.

"Oh, it's Ran!" And she, who would not be touched, clung to him excitedly. "Did you know that Tony's dead? He's dead, Ran! And aunt and I are all alone. He was going to make me a star. Yes, he promised. He said he could. And now he's dead."

He had thought himself prepared for any vagary of the human mind under stress, but that this distraught child should think of herself and her thwarted ambition now shocked him profoundly.

"It's a crushing blow for us all," he said gently. "Won't you lie down again, my dear?"

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She continued to peer at him.

"Did you see him lying there in the moonlight—the moonlight that he loved? I saw him. My Tony! And I saw her!" Her voice rose strident and vindictive. "I saw that Saranoff woman? She was bending over him!" Her head dropped to his shoulder and her frail body shook with violent sobs.

"It's the first time she's wept," said her aunt. "I'm thankful."

The girl sank back on the couch. Her sobs grew less frequent. Raneleigh saw her relax. As he tiptoed out he noted that nothing said in the dining-room could be distinguished here. The old house was soundly built. The plain-clothes man had vanished, but the uniformed officer who had stood outside the front door was now on guard in the hall.

"If Sergeant Black wants me, tell him I'm on the veranda. I need a whiff of fresh air."

"You can report to him yourself," said the officer. "He just went out."

Whereupon Raneleigh beheld one more illustration of Saranoff's ruling passion. Although the veranda light illuminated much of the lawn, she had turned on the ceiling light in Gilmore's limousine and sat there haughtily indifferent to the policeman posted by the running-board. But she could not ignore Dolly Brownrigg who now pushed through the bystanders on the sidewalk and ran to the car.

"You brazen hussy! How can you face us?"

Selma coolly eyed her dethroned rival.

"If I looked like you at this moment," she drawled, "I couldn't face anybody."

"You never saw the day you looked like me."

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"Thank heaven for that! If I ever do I hope they chloroform me."

"Chloroform's too good for you. It's the rope you'll get. You're a murderess!"

"You're a fool. Toddle along, Fatty. Bed's the place for old folks."

Mrs. Brownrigg was stung to fury.

"You shot Tony. I know you did. You wanted to kill him when you threw that glass at him in my house. Now you have killed him. You're going to jail. You're going to be tried for murder. You're going to be hanged."

"And you, old hippo," countered Selma, "are going to have apoplexy."

Sergeant Black halted Dolly's seething rejoinder.

"Who are you?" he asked, producing a note-book.

"Mrs. Brownrigg. I was known on the screen as Dorothy Vere."

"Her real name was Higgins," contributed Selma. "Put that down, Sherlock. If she hadn't married a rich broker she'd be hoofing it. You'd better get her finger-prints, too."

The detective led Mrs. Brownrigg to a spot less exposed. Raneleigh, turning away, saw Tony's neighbor, Holkar. Always cloudily aloof, the Hindu now seemed in spirit yet more remote from this Occidental world in which he chose to dwell. Then, as their eyes met, he recalled himself from far spaces and gravely bowed.

"One feels so helpless at such a time," said Raneleigh. "So stunned and bewildered."

"Bear life's pain gloriously," replied the Hindu in his soft voice. "Let it be a symbol."

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"Ah, yes!" The novelist strove to look intelligent. "I'm sure you're right. By the way, did you hear the shot?"

"The shot?" He stroked his silky beard. "No, I did not."

"What attracted your attention?"

"A woman's screams. I came over and found my friend dead."

"The woman was Miss Saranoff?"

"Yes. It was she who screamed first."

The front door opened. Logan came briskly out, but halted as his sharp glance fell on the dark-skinned Oriental.

"This is Mr. Holkar who lives next door," said Raneleigh. "He tells me that he did not hear the shot."

Logan scowled.

"Anything wrong with your hearing, Holkar? Not deaf, are you?"

"No."

"Were you asleep?"

"I had not gone to bed."

"Wide awake and yet you didn't hear a gun fired just outside your windows?"

"No. It was the commotion here that drew me out of my house."

"What time was it?"

"A little after twelve, I believe."

Logan leveled his intimidating stare.

"And you were still up, eh! Waiting, maybe for this to happen?"

Holkar met his gaze with untroubled eyes. His full lips curled slightly, but he deigned no reply.

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"We'll talk to you later," rapped out Logan. "Don't leave your house. Black? Where are you?"

Black answered from the driveway.

"Look here, Chief!" he called. "We've found the gat."

Logan strode down the steps. Raneleigh followed. The officer held the weapon by the very tip of the barrel.

"Where was it?"

"On the lawn next door, just beyond the hedge. I marked the spot. One bullet's missing."

Then, as Logan turned a pocket flash-light on the pistol, Raneleigh was startled out of his poise.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "That's Tony's revolver!"

Saranoff leaned from the car.

"It's not Tony's," she declared. "His gun was no more like that plaything than a dagger's like a pen-knife. He owned an automatic."

Logan swung round.

"How do you know?"

"Haven't I seen it many a time? I've even used it in a picture."

"What picture?"

"Oh, a silly flop of Benzinger's called *Sunday's Duds*. The title queered it, I guess. Not refined enough, if you get me. Anyhow, I could round up a dozen witnesses who'd tell you this gun wasn't Tony's."

Raneleigh was staggered by her bravado. She could not possibly prove such a statement. But he now thought he saw how the tragedy occurred. The pair, despite Hartley's story, had resumed their quarrel in the car. She had slipped her hand into

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Tony's pocket, secured the revolver, threatened him with it in her melodramatic way and, probably at some taunt from him, fired the deadly shot, and then, like the fool she was, had thrown the pistol, not into the hedge, but over it. And at this very minute, the infatuated Gerald was going through hell to shield her!

Logan rounded on Raneleigh.

"What about it? Do you still say this gun was Gilmore's?"

"Yes. Miss Saranoff is mistaken."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Because I gave it to him a year ago. There were many hold-ups then, as you may recall."

Logan plainly did not care to be reminded of a period when the entire police force had seemed powerless to stem a wave of highway robbery.

"Stick to the present," he snapped. "When did you last see this revolver you claim you gave Gilmore?"

"As he was leaving for the Brownrigg party to-night."

"Did he take it with him?"

"Yes."

"Have you any proof that this is the same gun?"

"If it was the pistol I gave him, you'll find his initials engraved on the handle."

"Hold it to the light, Joe. Careful! Don't smudge the finger-prints." Logan again examined the revolver. "They're there! Well, Miss Saranoff, your dozen witnesses don't seem to be worth a hurrah in hell. We'll have to jog your memory. Come into the house. You, too, Randal."

Raneleigh would have responded to any name, but Selma voiced a bored protest.

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"I've already told all I know. Can't you let a woman alone? I'm tired."

"Yeh? All the same, you'll have to answer a few more questions before you get your beauty sleep."

They came upon Kent in the hall.

"Dining-room free?" asked Logan.

"Yes," said Kent blandly. "I thought you'd be needing it." His eyes were on Selma. "You, of course, are the famous Miss Saranoff?"

Logan himself fell into the drawing-room manner.

"Meet Mr. Kent, investigator from the District Attorney's office. And this," he added, "is a friend of the deceased, Mr. Ransom."

"I dare say it doesn't really matter, but my name is Raneleigh—Arthur Raneleigh."

Kent looked interested.

"The distinguished author?"

"I'm an author."

They shook hands, and as they followed Logan and his charge through the hall, Kent surprisingly revealed that he had at least heard of Raneleigh's books. Once inside the dining-room, however, the investigator from the District Attorney's office put aside bookish things and, without raising his voice or borrowing any part of Logan's drastic technique, led Selma through a stiff cross-examination. That the man was in his way an artist Raneleigh, himself an artist, was quick to perceive. He was also conscious, standing in the background with Black, that the scene had a pictorial quality as arresting as its drama. The light fell from a low chandelier to the table where the actress, vivid in dress, macaber in make-up, had taken her seat. Kent had moved a chair to face her. Logan, with his canine

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alertness, prowled restlessly behind. The rest of the oak-paneled room, with its mulberry hangings, was Rembrandtesque in its obscurity.

But Selma's story added nothing to the known facts, if facts they were. It coincided with Hartley's testimony to the last detail, while, to Raneleigh's amazement, she still stoutly maintained that the revolver found on the neighboring lawn was not Tony's.

"But Gilmore's friend here," broke in Logan, "has identified it. You can't get around the evidence of those initials."

"Couldn't Tony have had more than one?" she parried. "I tell you the gun he lent me for the picture was an automatic. I've never laid eyes on that pearl-handled thing before."

"Not before we showed it to you to-night?"

"No. How many times must I say it? Do you think I'm lying?"

"Yes," he retorted harshly. "And I think you sneaked the gun out of his pocket and shot him."

Selma did not quail.

"The doctor said the shot must have been fired from a distance of twelve or fifteen feet. That lets me out."

"You fired after he left the car."

"He wasn't shot in the back."

"No. He turned and you got him in the heart. You took as good an aim as you did to-night when you threw the glass in his face."

"So you know about that! Well, what of it? Gerald Hartley will tell you that Tony and I made up. He had nothing against me. Nor I against him, even if we did scrap now and then. You're in big business trying to bulldoze me! But I'm not afraid of you."

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Kent quietly resumed control of the investigation.

"It's as well to clear up such little discrepancies, Miss Saranoff. Often, till they're explained, they seem more important than they are. Now, there is one point about which I confess that I am curious. I should like to know just why you changed from the front seat to the back?"

"I didn't change." For the first time she was caught off her guard. "I didn't." Her green eyes blazed. "Whoever said I did is a dirty liar!"

Kent glanced over his shoulder.

"You'll find Mr. Hartley in the kitchen, Sergeant Black. Fetch him here."

The wretched youth shambled, manacled, into the room. At sight of the handcuffs Selma leaped to her feet, but instantly regained command of herself and sauntered coolly away from the light.

"Will you be good enough to come back to the table?" requested Kent.

She warily complied.

"And now, Mr. Hartley, will you assure Miss Saranoff that you told us she changed from the front seat of the car to the rear?"

"Yes, sir. I did." He cast an agonized look at Selma. "I had to tell them, dear. They'd found your finger-prints on the door."

"You idiot!" she cried. "They've never taken my finger-prints. How could you let them trick you with such bunk?"

"You can't keep up this bluff, Miss Saranoff," interposed Kent. "You're stupid to try."

"I was stupid to have anything to do with such a coward!" Her eyes again darted her contempt. "I don't know why I ever noticed him."

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"Hold Hartley here," said Kent. "Come, Miss Saranoff. We'll go out to Gilmore's machine. I want you to demonstrate, on the spot, exactly what occurred."

"My God, man," she exploded, "how much time do you intend to waste on this tomfoolery! While you're stalling along Tony's murderer will make his get-away. Is that what you detectives want? Is this to be another Desmond Taylor case? More mysterious influence?"

Logan scowled. No honest policeman was proud of the department's record in Hollywood's most famous unsolved crime.

But Kent merely smiled.

"That was before my time. I can assure you, however, that no mysterious influence will prevail with me. Not even yours, Miss Saranoff. Don't keep me waiting."

She went quietly out, and at his bidding seated herself in the rear of Gilmore's car and once more, with no essential variance, rehearsed her story. Kent listened with one foot on the running-board.

"And when did you change from the front to the rear seat?"

"Still harping on that!"

"Still harping. What about it?"

"I didn't change."

"Don't be childish. We have the proof."

"Finger-prints! All bunko. You've never taken mine. You can bluff Gerald with that, but it doesn't go with me. Besides, they'd prove nothing, for I did get in here after they carried Tony into the house. Some one helped me. I was faint."

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"Are you sure it was after the shooting that you changed?"

"Yes."

"Very sure? You'll be taking your oath to this by and by. Better get it all straight now."

She threw back her furs as if they stifled her.

"Can't you damned fools realize that I was fond of Tony? Can't you see I'm all broken up over his death? You don't seem to think us stars human."

"Too human. But if you were so fond of Tony Gilmore, you ought to be eager to help us find his murderer."

"You're cruel!" she cried. "I won't be hounded so. I'm worn out. I'm all in, I tell you!" Her voice rose to a shriek. "I can't stand any more! I won't—I won't—I won't!" And, forthwith, she took refuge in hysterics.

"Faked, I guess," barked Logan. "But faked or real, the treatment is the same." He beckoned to an officer. "Chuck water in her face. Plenty of it. And cold—the colder the better."

Kent did not linger to watch the effect of this restorative, but walked over to Raneleigh.

"I've a notion," he said, "that you're the man I want."

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CHAPTER SIX

RANELEIGH TAKES A HAND

RANELEIGH could not repress a start.

"The man you want!"

Kent smiled at his tone.

"I should have said 'need.' I'm not so careful in my use of words as you writers." He drew him aside. "I want to talk to you. I gather that you were a close friend of Gilmore."

"Yes. I've known him since we were boys in a small town in Iowa."

"Tell me something of his life. Just hit the high spots now. When did he come to Los Angeles?"

"Five years ago. He'd been a reporter on a Chicago daily. Before that he went for a while to the State University, but he hadn't money enough to finish the course. He was ambitious to write something besides newspaper copy, and when he came out here he tried his hand at short stories. They were rather good, but they didn't sell. It's slow work, as a rule, for a writer to get a start. Yet he had to make a decent income somehow. His sister was almost wholly dependent on him, you see. He was nearly at the end of his resources when he found a job with an afternoon paper."

"In Los Angeles?"

"Yes. They didn't pay him enough to live on. I could have helped him, but I was in Europe at the

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time and he didn't let me know how bad things were with him. At all events, he finally landed a job with a Hollywood producing company. At first he was in the publicity department. Then he began to write titles and made a hit. When I came back from abroad he was a full-fledged scenario writer with half a dozen successful photoplays to his credit. They all proved big money-makers. He was, as you are doubtless aware, very well known."

"What was his income?"

"He never told me." Raneleigh was reluctant to disclose details that bore no relation to the crime.

"You must have some idea. What's your guess?"

"Possibly thirty thousand a year."

"A tidy sum," said Kent. "Was he a free spender?"

"Yes. But rather a shrewd business man, too."

"Now, about women? He wasn't married?"

"No."

"Had Saranoff been his mistress?"

Raneleigh hesitated.

"People said so."

Kent shrugged at his reticence.

"I can easily find out. What other sweeties had he?"

"He rented an apartment for another woman. Not recently, however."

"Do you know her name?"

"I don't see why she should be dragged in, Mr. Kent. She's merely a movie extra."

"We'll have to check up on her. She may be more important than you think. Give me her name, please. It will save time."

"Mrs. Ida Hunter."

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"Address?"

"You can hardly expect me to know that."

"Asking questions is my job. Were there other frails on his telephone list?"

"Perhaps. He wasn't the sort to boast of his conquests and I didn't inquire."

"Well, no matter. It will all come out in the wash."

Raneleigh sighed.

"With a spouting geyser of scandal, I presume!"

"I reckon," said Kent. "Fond of Gilmore, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Then you must want to see justice done. You must want to help?"

"If I did not I shouldn't have come back here to-night."

"That's evident. And my hat's off to you, Mr. Raneleigh. A good many men would have ducked. Was that affair at the Brownriggs' what you'd call a wild party?"

"I've known wilder parties."

"Did you see Saranoff throw the cocktail glass at Gilmore?"

"Yes. I stood near him."

"And that's how he came by the cut on his nose and the bruise on his forehead?"

"Yes. Selma had been drinking. But, apparently, they patched up their quarrel, just as she stated."

"You saw them leave the house together?"

"Yes. Arm in arm. I supposed they were going on to Gantley's as agreed."

"Did you see Hartley climb into Gilmore's car?"

"Yes."

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"Do you think Hartley shot him?"

"I can't believe it. They were friends."

"Friendship is no alibi," said Kent dryly. "Friends kill friends, brothers kill brothers, and wives kill husbands in season and out. There is no doubt in your mind that Gilmore had his revolver with him?"

"How can there be when I saw him slip it in his pocket? He took it from a drawer in his desk—with a flask—and hesitated whether or not to carry it. He ended by taking both flask and pistol. I know he had it when he left the house. I did not lose sight of him. I was with him till we reached the Brownriggs'."

"And he did not leave the Brownrigg house until he drove away with Saranoff and Hartley?"

"No."

"That clinches it," said Kent. "One of that pair turned the trick. Give me a line on young Hartley. He looks like a cake-eater."

"That label fits him as well as any. He came here less than a year ago. He's also an Iowan."

"Still another? What would Los Angeles do without the Hawkeyes! Did Gilmore know him back in the corn belt?"

"Yes. But Gerald was five or six years the younger. His parents are dead, and he came into money. Too much money! He's reputed to be worth half a million."

"A juicy melon for the lawyers to cut," commented Kent. "Is he dippy over Saranoff?"

"They're said to be engaged."

"How did Gilmore like that?"

"I don't think he cared. In fact, I never believed that he had any real fondess for her."

"Just fancied having a celebrity on his string, eh?"

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"Perhaps. Anyhow, I saw no sign of deep feeling on his part or that he objected to Gerald's attentions."

"He might have felt too sure of his own hold on her," suggested Kent.

"It's possible."

"Was he, should you judge, about through with her?"

"I thought so. But, as I've told you, we did not discuss such matters."

"Have you any idea who edged her out?"

"No one, to my knowledge."

"Well, that, too, will come out in the wash. I know how you feel, Mr. Raneleigh. But there's no use in your trying to protect Gilmore's reputation. He should have looked after that when he was alive. Murder is news and there are reporters outside already. All the skeletons will rattle from their closets before we're through."

"I hope not. It would blight his sister's life."

"A tough break," said Kent. "But perhaps you can ease the strain for the family. If you want to sit in on this investigation it's all right with me. I'll be glad of your help when I go through the house. I take it you're familiar with the premises?"

"There's seldom been a day I haven't dropped in."

"Very well, then. We'll do it now." He summoned Black from the side of the drenched and subdued Selma. "Where's the key to Gilmore's private quarters?"

"Here are two of them," said the plain-clothes man. "One was in the door. The other I took away from the servant. Mrs. Barnett told me he carried a duplicate. I had to strong-arm the Chink to get it. Gil-

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more had ordered him not to give it to any one. Some wrestler, that boy! His name ought to be Cling instead of Ling."

"What's his story?"

"He was sound asleep in his own room, which opens from a passage back of the kitchen, when Mrs. Barnett woke him up. She told him Gilmore had been shot and sent him hot-footing for a doctor two blocks up the street."

"Valet, I suppose?"

"Yes. And general handy-man, according to Mrs. Barnett. He brought Gilmore his breakfast and waited on table at night when he was at home. If the ladies were alone the cook, a woman who sleeps out, looked after them. Ling also kept the car and yard in order."

"Did you ask him about his employer's habits?"

"You bet. He said he stayed out late nights and usually slept till ten in the morning."

"When you arrived did you give the house the once-over?"

"All but Gilmore's rooms. I was waiting for the Chief."

"Then you'd better make the rounds with me. Speak up if you notice anything's been changed."

Raneleigh followed them into Tony's study at the right of the hall. Though he knew it as well as his own workroom, the tragedy invested it with a new significance, and he examined it as attentively as if he now saw it for the first time. It was furnished unimaginatively in the brown walnut of the current mode. Two bookcases, a large writing-desk and a smaller one for the typewriter, left scant space for the heavy, leather-covered easy chairs. A man's room, it was

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neither library nor office, yet suggested both. Kent threw a cursory glance round and remarked the location of the windows. They were three in number, two on the front and the third opening from the side wall broken by the fireplace. On the other side of the hearth, instead of a balancing window, was a door which the investigator at once tried. The key was in the lock and the lock was turned.

"What's beyond this?" he asked.

"A narrow porch," said Raneleigh. "And of course, the driveway."

"Was there a window here originally?"

"Yes. Tony had the door cut through."

"Why?"

"He said that all sorts of people tried to see him—sometimes watched the front door to waylay him. Any one conspicuous in the movies is apt to be besieged. This door gave him a chance to slip in and out unobserved."

"So! And did it give certain favored callers a chance to slip in and out unobserved?"

"Perhaps."

They passed into the more spacious bedroom, and Kent raised and lowered the shade of each of the two windows.

"Heavy shrubbery on this side, I see. Who lives in the next house?"

"Mr. Holkar."

"The Hindu bird I was telling you about," put in Black. "He was the first to beat it over here."

Kent surveyed the fantastic room. The walls were gold, the rug was black, the Chinese hangings red. The ornate furniture was finished in Chinese red lacquer,

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and facing the door to the study, a panel painting, also Chinese, extended from the floor to the picture-molding.

"Some boudoir!" exclaimed Kent. "It looks as if the valet had done the decorating." He brought up before the painting. "Who's this slant-eyed dame—a lady god?"

"Possibly," said Raneleigh, with a shrug. "I'm not up on Chinese art."

Kent smiled.

"This isn't your idea of a bedroom, I infer?"

"No. I've never liked it."

Kent briefly inspected the bath, walled in polychromatic tiles, and then, turning to the bedroom closet, ordered Black to search the pockets of the dead man's wardrobe. Exploring a cabinet, he found that its doors concealed a chest of drawers.

"These drawers aren't locked, Sergeant. See that Hines gets them fitted with keys."

Black jotted a note in his memorandum book and went methodically on with his task. Kent himself, Raneleigh observed, refrained from rummaging. He wondered if he held himself above this hateful detail of his profession. Was there such a thing as caste among detectives? Once Kent softly whistled a bar or two from a popular air and awoke an echo in the writer's memory. What did that incongruous whistle recall? *The Moonstone*, of course, and Sergeant Cuff with his eternal *Last Rose of Summer!* Well, this was like a novel, too, and he was one of its puppets bewildered by an appalling crime! He could hardly credit its reality. Were these his best friend's effects which were being ransacked? Was Tony actually dead?

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Black reported that he had found nothing but a few handkerchiefs and began to search the drawers of a chiffonier. Here he presently made a less prosaic find.

"Look!" He gingerly held aloft a suit of orchid-tinted silk pajamas edged with lace.

Kent viewed the exhibit without surprise.

"Any monogram, Sergeant?"

"No. And no laundry mark, either. I wonder if they belong to Saranoff?"

"What is your expert opinion, Mr. Raneleigh?" asked Kent, with mock gravity. "Do you think she'd be apt to wear that shade?"

"I can't say."

"And you're making no guesses, eh! Lay the pretties back where you found them, Sergeant."

They returned to the study, and under Kent's direction, Black searched the large writing-desk. The lowest drawer on the right contained a file of typed correspondence, but from other drawers came to light neat bundles of letters in their envelopes, each bundle secured by an elastic band.

"Those look more promising," said Kent. "We'll have them all examined. When you get a free moment, Sergeant, phone and ask to have Emery assigned to the job. He may not be able to do it at once, but meanwhile we'll seal the rooms."

Black looked embarrassed.

"Shan't I speak to the Chief first?"

"Of course," replied Kent shortly. "Put it as my request. Logan and I understand each other. I intend asking him to assign you to the case to work with my office. Is that all right with you?"

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"It sure is, Mr. Kent."

Raneleigh sensed departmental jealousy. So even these ferrets had their human traits! A deep depression settled over him as he watched them at the desk where but a few hours since Tony himself had stood. How little had he dreamed that he, who was so secretive, would soon have no secrets! What use to plan and struggle for success! What use was life itself that could be so suddenly snuffed out! Mortals were chaff, blown hither and yon by capricious winds and as irrationally dropped to earth and extinction.

Gloomily he walked over to the typewriter desk. Beside the machine lay Tony's unfinished letter. It was addressed to a magazine editor, who had asked for an article on the real Hollywood, and seemed of no importance now. Beside the machine, also, lay a flashlight. Had it been there earlier in the evening? He could not recall. Black, at the larger desk, with a self-important air was checking each package of letters with an official blue pencil. Then, as he shifted the bundles, Raneleigh caught sight of a gleaming object. It was the silver flask! Kent saw it at the same moment.

"Look here, Mr. Raneleigh," said he. "Is this the flask you mentioned?"

"Yes."

"The one you thought Gilmore had with him to-night?"

"I know he had it with him, Mr. Kent. I'm as sure of it as I am that I see it now. Do you question my word?"

"Oh, no! Only your memory. It's easy to be mistaken in such matters. Listen for an hour to any trial

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and you'd have ample proof of that. Saranoff claims that Gilmore must have owned more than one gun. Isn't it just as probable that he had more than one flask?"

"But this is the flask he always carried. I know its design. Turn it over. You'll find a camel in black enamel on the other side."

Kent carefully reversed the flask by its neck. The little emblem of thirst was there.

"Odd," he said. "Sergeant, who searched the body?"

"I did. There was no flask."

Raneleigh perceived that Black, too, doubted his memory.

"Tony had the flask," he repeated. "It was filled with brandy."

"Empty now," said the sergeant.

"It was full when he left. He offered me a drink."

"Did you take it?" asked Kent.

"No."

"Did Gilmore take a drink?"

"No. And it isn't likely that he had any of it at the Brownrigg house."

"No need, I reckon. From all I hear that was as wet a party as Hollywood could reasonably expect."

Raneleigh was impatient with this detour.

"But since the flask is here now," he said, "Tony must have come into the house before he was shot."

"The point is worth considering." It was obvious that Kent attached no weight to it and still thought his memory at fault.

"What stumps me," said Black, sniffing ecstatically at the stopper, "is where the good liquor went."

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