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A Man's Enemies

By Lee Thayer

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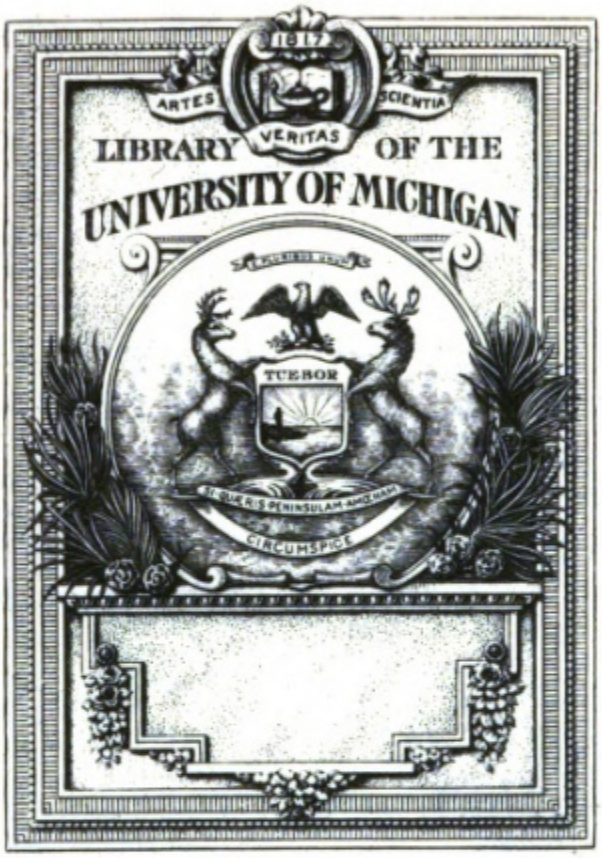

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A MAN'S ENEMIES

BY LEE THAYER

Author of "The Silent Bullet," "Dark of the Moon," etc.

If Top Hat Rafferty had remained on the straight and narrow path; if Peter Clancy, by what we call chance, had not happened to stop in on the night when the extortion note was first disclosed, the case of the Graytowers murder might never even have come to light.

For who but Peter would have asked those searching questions about the hangman's knot and the tiny wound? Why the victim's pistol was not fired? And how it came to be so far under the bed? Why Whittlesey had seemed so ready to accede to the blackmailer's demand.

So much care had been taken to leave no clues, surely the local police were justified in pouncing on those that did appear and in taking them at their face value. Only Peter's long experience made it possible to realize that the absence of a thing that should inevitably appear is sometimes more significant than the most obviously damaging piece of evidence.

And on this assumption, the astute private investigator, followed and supported by his faithful Wiggar, moves swiftly through these pages to the amazing denouement.

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A PETER CLANCY DETECTIVE STORY

A MAN'S ENEMIES

by

LEE THAYER

Author of

DARK OF THE MOON
DEAD END STREET
Etc.

DODD, MEAD & COMPANY
NEW YORK 1937

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BOOK MANUFACTURERS
RAHWAY, NEW JERSEY

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TO

BERTHA AND POMEROY LEE

THIS BOOK

IS LOVINGLY DEDICATED

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I

TOP HAT RAFFERTY, well and favorably known in the upper circles of the underworld, found himself temporarily in an embarrassing situation.

The horse in which he had placed entire faith, the horse that should have carried Rafferty's shockingly dwindled fortunes to triumphant recuperation, had betrayed his trust and left his backer in a position close approaching desperation.

No matter how resourceful one may be in a general way, there is something distinctly unnerving in the feel of pockets gone entirely limp. No response to groping fingers save the faint chink of a solitary dime against the key to Mollie's flat—and Mollie something like eight hundred miles away.

Also there is little encouragement in a long, level, four-lane cement road running swift and silent to dark and inhospitable horizons. Westward the faintness of the metallic glow in the sky showed how far distant were the accustomed lights of Broadway. Eastward, apparently into infinity, the main artery of Long Island's circulatory traffic system stretched indifferently away.

Having hitch-hiked thus far from the Jericho race-track northward across the Island, Rafferty knew he had come to a parting of the ways. A debate had been going on

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in his mind from the minute of realization that "Hold Everything" was limping home thirteenth of a possible fifteen in the race. The unnecessary effrontery of that unlucky thirteen inhibited constructive thinking for only a brief period. Then the extreme exigency of the occasion acted as a spur to his resourceful, resilient, if somewhat irresponsible, nature and the few possible alternatives began to present themselves for his consideration.

It did not take very long to narrow them down to two, and at that point the argument really began. Obviously he could hitch-hike by stages back to New York and trust to luck to find some pal big-hearted enough to stake him until his plans matured. . . . Or—or—Top Hat, in his tenser moments, was wont to revert to the dramatic ideas of his early school days. A memory came upon him now as he stood, undecided, among the self-conscious azalea and rhododendron plants beside the curb, and he quoted aloud:

"'He either fears his fate too much, or his desert is small, who fears to put it to the test.' . . . After all," memory failing, he added lamely in a lower tone, "can a guy go back empty handed? Mollie's a gal among a thousand. So what? Haven't I laid the pipe well enough—as far as it goes? Perhaps it would be better . . . But, shucks! Look where I am. Right here on the road to Oyster Bay, Huntington and points east. 'Is that for nothing,' I ask you? 'Mollie wouldn't like it,' says you. 'All right, all right. But what does a dame know? And how far's a guy expected to go with nothing but a hot dog under his belt?'"

Thoughtfully he patted the trim concavity of a slightly

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flashy waistcoat. His eyes automatically swung with his head to follow the lights of cars and trucks that passed, swift and unheeding. The soft zip and whir of rubber on concrete seemed to add to the confusion of his senses, but at length quite suddenly he came to at least a provisional decision. Watching his chance he crossed to the narrow strip of ornamental shrubbery in the middle of the parkway.

"It's a fair bet," he argued, addressing the empty landscape. "If I get a hitch into town before that Huntington bus comes through, OK by me. If not—"

He shot his hand farther out of his cuff and glanced at his wrist before he recalled that his watch had gone to join his other portable property at the sign of the three balls. With a disgruntled sigh he began to figure out the probable time, half-heartedly raising an appealing thumb to the lights of west-bound traffic.

"She said the buses ran on the hour," he muttered, "but a lot of good that does me. Anyhow it's too early. Can't be much after eight. I'd have to wait somewhere. Better there than here though. . . . The bus driver'd hardly remember—or connect me. . . . It wouldn't likely be the same—and, even so, he only saw me once. . . . I'll go well past the turn and walk back. Safer and plenty of time."

A man of action was T. H. Rafferty, and impatient of delay. After all, he knew well enough how the land lay, so why not take advantage—

Two blue lights high up against the dark western horizon grew larger as they neared, coming at high speed. It looked like a juggernaut, but the big yellow bus slowed

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gently in response to Rafferty's signal and stopped with an air of docile obedience.

There were quite a good many passengers in the seats and aisle. Rafferty's neat, small figure slipped handily through the forward press and took up an inconspicuous position near the rearward exit. As is the custom in many suburban lines, the interior of the bus was darkened while the vehicle was in motion and only the headlights threw their brilliant beam along the way.

"Just what the doctor ordered," Rafferty thought with a grin, watching the dim landscape slip by. He left the brim of his hat down and his collar turned up, however, as a precaution against the momentary blaze of light when someone entered or descended from the bus. Dazed by the sudden glare, and intent on their own affairs, passengers came and went at intervals. When at length Rafferty alighted, at a well marked crossroad, he left in his wake not one person who ever afterward remembered having seen him in the bus on that eventful night.

Some hours later, on the high ridge of far-flung estates that lie between Oyster Bay and Huntington Harbor, the slight dapper figure of a young man might have been—but was not—observed moving soundlessly through a well kept garden and shrubbery at the side of a large and rather imposing mansion, two great towers of which reared themselves against the dimness of a cloudy sky. The place belonged to Nolan Whittlesey and was appropriately if somewhat obviously called Graytowers.

The house had been darkened for some time, as had been duly observed, and though, owing to absence of

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timepiece, the exact hour was impossible to determine, the prospective entrant had a pretty good idea that it was considerably short of midnight. "But shucks," he said to himself impatiently, "what's the use of waiting? The first hour's sleep is always the hardest. And never let it be said that T. H. Rafferty was ever guilty of disturbing a customer's repose."

So communing within himself, he approached by careful stages the northeast corner of the house where, as he had before noted with a practiced eye, the thick growth of English ivy flung out an almost impertinent challenge.

"You're simply asking for it," he whispered defensively as he glanced up at the balcony above his head. "Might just as well put 'Welcome' on the mat. . . . But it's my last job, Mollie, my darlin'. This here old guy's mean, and he can spare the money. What's the odds? One more crack and I'll be in the clear. Settle down like I promised, my sweet. . . . So here goes."

With the confident agility of a movie lover, the lithe figure climbed up to the balcony. Scarcely breathing, Rafferty paused here for a long tense minute. Things might be going just a little bit too easy. The French window was not only unlocked but open and held in position by a long silvered hook. For ventilation. Obviously. There was a sleeper in that still, darkened room beyond.

All right. What of it? It was not the first time. . . .

Rafferty's disappearance from the balcony was soundless as a vanishing shadow. A whippoorwill down in the autumn woods called eerily. The drying leaves whispered among themselves. The white chrysanthemums in the garden nodded ghostly heads together as they watched

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the balcony window where once a tiny pencil light flashed to be instantly obscured.

Minutes passed. The white heads in the garden trembled ominously as that small clear beam appeared once more. This time it remained visible while one could count slowly—one—two—three. Then the leaf of the window was thrust open with a violent though noiseless force. A supple shape flung itself over the balustrade and slid recklessly down through the tangled vines. Even as his toes touched the turf, Rafferty was off, running at first blindly and then with fierce imperative purpose, disappearing almost immediately into the shadows of the night.

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II

"So now, Pete, my lad, with the whole of this illicit sweepstake racket in the bag, I suppose you'll be taking the vacation Wiggar's been howling about for so long." Captain of Detectives Kerrigan leaned back in his swivel chair and put his feet on his desk, regarding his clever red-headed friend with something deeper than mere admiration.

"Imagine Wiggar howling about anything," laughed Peter Clancy, lighting a last cigarette before leaving. "You may break, you may shatter the vase as you will, but the silent old Wiggar remains silent still—except on rare occasions."

"And then he speaks to some purpose," Kerrigan chuckled. "Will you ever forget—" He broke off as a sharp knock sounded on his office door. "What is it?" he called impatiently.

"Excuse me, Captain Kerrigan, but I thought I'd better put it up to you, although if you're busy—" A young policeman bulked large and blue in the half-open door.

"He's not. I'm just going, Everett," said Peter, rising. "It must be getting late. What time is it anyway?"

"It's only a little after ten," said Kerrigan. "Don't go yet, Pete. What's it all about, Everett? Anything important?"

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"I don't know, sir." The patrolman stepped nearer. "But he looks the berries. Some class. And worried. You can take it from me."

"Well, well, who is he?" Kerrigan inquired testily. "And what's biting him? Did you find out?"

"I didn't just get the rights of it," Everett dropped his voice, "but it's something about a threatening letter. The name's Babbit or— Here's his card."

"Babcock. Joseph Babcock," Kerrigan read. "Know anything, Pete?"

"Humph. Lives at the Boots and Saddles Club. As Everett says, that means 'class' in any man's language." Clancy glanced up from the elegantly engraved bit of pasteboard. "What's he doing here? Why don't you see him, Jake? It might be interesting."

"Oh, you!" growled Kerrigan. "Never satisfied. If I had your curiosity— All right, Everett, show him in."

The policeman responded with due alacrity and after a slight delay returned accompanied by a well-dressed man, tall, heavy, but of rather distinguished bearing. He appeared to be in the indeterminate forties. His dark hair was already well threaded with gray but his expression was alert and purposeful, though at the minute clouded by some indecision.

"I'm very sorry indeed to trouble you at this time of the evening—er—Captain Kerrigan—but I'm really— You see, I don't know just where to turn. It may all be a mare's nest, but I'm not satisfied in my own mind." Joseph Babcock advanced toward the desk where Kerrigan was standing. "I thought I'd like advice from someone in authority, though of course it's not exactly my

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responsibility, one might say, and in a way I'm going against my partner's expressed wishes."

He hesitated and came to a full stop. Though his manner was self-contained and dignified, it was obvious that he was genuinely anxious.

"Suppose you sit down here and tell us all about it, Mr. Babcock." So far as anyone could see, Kerrigan had entirely overcome his momentary impatience. The professional calm of his voice was well calculated to put any man at ease. "As to the hour," he went on cheerfully, "don't let that worry you. A copper like me, in this gay old burg of ours, is lucky if he can hit the hay before midnight three days out of seven. So let's get right down to cases. What is it that's bothering you, and how do you think I can be of service?"

"You're very kind, Captain Kerrigan. Very kind indeed." Babcock took the chair that Peter had recently vacated, but he sat on the very edge of it, regarding the police detective with troubled eyes. "As a matter of fact, since you mention it," he said hesitatingly, "I'm afraid no one here could be of assistance except in a very general way. The thing that I'm disturbed about really concerns my partner, and he lives out on Long Island."

"Well," said Kerrigan with a slight laugh, "that's hardly in my district."

"I know, of course," Babcock agreed thoughtfully. "All I could hope for, Captain Kerrigan—all I expected to get when I stopped in here on my way home—was a word of advice—assurance, maybe. From someone of experience. Whether this was a matter of more or less common occurrence. What precautions might be taken, sup-

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posing I could persuade my partner to listen to reason."

The worried voice stopped. In contrast to its nervous uncertainty, Kerrigan sounded soothing and assured.

"You mentioned something in the outside office about a threatening letter. Addressed, Mr. Babcock, to your business partner? Yes. Well, just what was in the letter, may I ask? A demand for money?"

"That," Babcock admitted, "and a threat." His face was full of concern.

"They usually go together," Kerrigan remarked easily. "What was the amount er—suggested?"

"Five thousand dollars—"

"Hum-m-m. And the threat?"

"Death."

The word fell abruptly into a pool of silence. After a minute Kerrigan said: "That sounds serious, I'm free to admit, Mr. Babcock, but your partner—I think you didn't mention his name." He paused tentatively.

"He'd hate this, you know," Babcock responded uneasily, "but since I've gone so far—"

"Perhaps I'd better toddle along now, Jake," said Peter, coming forward and speaking in a courteous aside. Though his manner was quite perfect, Kerrigan did not fail to catch the inquisitive light in the steel-blue eye that met his own.

"I wish you'd wait a few minutes, Clancy, if you can spare the time," objected the police detective. "There was a little matter I wanted to ask you about. And by the way, Mr. Babcock, I'd like you to meet my friend, Peter Clancy. He left the force some time ago, worse luck, but we still keep in touch and he throws me a

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bone now and then—usually after he's gorged himself on most of the meat."

"It's quite the other way round I do assure you, sir," said Peter, returning Babcock's grave bow. "I'm a mere private investigator and dependent on the police for tips and ha'pence."

"Says you," grunted Kerrigan. "But never mind. Will you wait a bit, Pete?"

"If Mr. Babcock doesn't object."

"Why, no. No. If Captain Kerrigan—"

"Clancy won't spill any beans. You can depend on that, sir. It's better you spread your troubles out before the both of us. Maybe he could help where I, being more or less tied to the spot, could not. And anyhow he's a prize package when it comes to ways and means. So if you don't mind, let's get on with your little matter. Or rather that of your partner. You were about to say—"

"His name is Nolan Whittlesey." Babcock, who had hesitated for only a little longer, now spoke decisively. "He lives at a little place called Graylock."

"Out Huntington way. I know that part of Long Island well," said Peter. "Please go on, sir."

"Then perhaps you know how lonely that high ridge is along there." Babcock glanced at Peter and turned back to Kerrigan. "There are big estates all along that part of the Island. Houses sometimes half a mile or more apart. Of course the roads are patrolled—"

"And, with telephone and radio, anybody can get police protection in a few minutes," Kerrigan put in soothingly.

"If he'd only do it." Babcock frowned. "I argued and argued, but he—he won't listen to me any more. You

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see he's been ill a long time. Now, physically, he certainly is better. The doctor thinks he may be up and around in a week or so. He seemed to be getting along finely—and now this thing had to turn up."

"The threatening letter?" Kerrigan asked with obvious patience.

"Yes. I didn't know a thing about it until today. He called me up on the phone—"

"At your office?"

"This morning. Yes. He asked me if I could bring him out five thousand dollars in hundreds this afternoon. Wouldn't give me any reason. Just said it was very important."

"You recognized his voice?" asked Peter.

"Naturally. Oh, there wasn't any mistake. And he meant what he said. He always does. When I demurred a little—the thing was so damned unusual, you understand, Captain Kerrigan—he just asked could I do it or should he send Terrell in for the cash."

"Terrell?"

"Faulkner Terrell, a sort of private secretary Nolan's had out at Graytowers for some little time."

"I see." Kerrigan nodded.

"You didn't think it wise to trust Terrell with so much cash?" Peter suggested quickly.

Babcock glanced up and then down again. "I wouldn't say that. No, Mr. Clancy. So far as I know, Terrell is all right. If you thought my manner implied anything, you must forget it. There wouldn't have been the slightest reason—I mean, no one but a fool would have failed to deliver the money that his employer knew he was sup-

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posed to bring. Oh, no," he repeated emphatically, "it wasn't that. I confess my curiosity was already aroused. I only hesitated because I simply couldn't imagine why Nolan wanted just that much money in that particular form. Also why he needed it so pressingly. Why he didn't draw a check for it. The whole thing was entirely unprecedented, you understand."

The two detectives nodded sympathetically. Peter said: "So you took the money out there yourself this afternoon. I infer he must have explained further when you saw him."

"I couldn't get away from the office until quite late," Babcock corrected hastily. "As a matter of fact I left him only a couple of hours ago. Caught the eight-fifty in. Takes nearly an hour and a half you know. Came directly here from the Pennsylvania Station. After thinking it all over on the train I decided that I must ask some questions on my own. What he told me had me that much upset, Captain Kerrigan. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep. I can't take things lightly as some people can. I'm not that temperament. At least not until I'm sure I've done everything in my power to avert a catastrophe. That's why I've come bothering the police. And yet I must ask you to be very careful. Nolan—Mr. Whittlesey—will never forgive me if I go counter to his wishes—and he finds it out."

"Just exactly what was it he told you?" prompted Peter quietly. "Captain Kerrigan can hardly give you intelligent advice on the present data."

"I see that. Of course. Well, then, Mr. Whittlesey said he'd had a request for the sum I'd brought him and that

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on the whole he thought it reasonable enough. Then he showed me the note."

"He showed it to you? You actually saw it? Can you remember exactly what it said?" Kerrigan sat forward in his chair.

"Yes. I think I can. He handed it to me and I read it over a couple of times. There wasn't any preamble. It just said—" Babcock's frown deepened and he half closed his eyes. "It started simply with the amount of the demand. Five thousand dollars in hundreds. Then it went on: 'Have it ready night of October twenty-eighth.' "

"That's tonight," Kerrigan interrupted hastily. "Excuse me. Go on. What else? Where was it to be delivered?"

Babcock shook his head. "I don't know. There was no provision for that. Right after the date came the threat: 'Failure means death.' "

"Any sort of signature?" Peter's tone chimed with the solemnity of the other's utterance.

"Not exactly. It ended: 'You know me,' and there was a queer sort of circle with some lines across."

"Could you show us?" Peter, still standing, pushed paper and pencil across the desk.

"I think," Babcock hesitated as he picked up the pencil, "it was something like this." He drew an irregular circle. "And then four lines, two up and two across."

"Crooked like that?"

"Maybe not quite, but sort of like a plaid, you know."

"Suggest anything to you, Pete?" Kerrigan looked up at the serious face of his friend.

"Might be the old game of tit-tat-toe, three in a row,"

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Clancy replied but his expression did not lighten. "It's the signature of no known society, black-hand or otherwise, I think. You agree, Jake?"

"Never saw one like it," Kerrigan answered promptly. There followed a pause of several minutes. The police detective, studying his friend's thoughtful face, waited for him to speak. At length Peter roused himself. "The set-up hardly looks like a gang or racket to me, Mr. Babcock," he said in a tone of conviction. "In the first place the amount, though a tidy sum to a poor man, is unusually small. With the G-men doing their stuff to such effect, a kidnapper would want a half million at least. That is if your partner appears to be good for it."

Babcock answered the rising inflection of the last sentence with a nod. "I daresay he could raise even that amount if sufficiently urged."

"So you see that point," said Peter with a shrug. "And then there's another angle, of course. In the circumstances you'll pardon the implication, I'm sure. It seems hardly possible to ignore it. If your partner was willing to acceed so promptly to the demand, isn't it a fair conclusion that he probably knows pretty well who's making it—and why? A man submitting tamely to—to blackmail—or maybe I should say extortion—usually has some good reason. And one might question, perhaps, the advisability of interference, even by a friend and no matter how well meant. The police would hardly be in a position to proceed except on formal complaint. If a man wants to pay through the nose, after all, the nose is his own, and if he doesn't object—"

"That's the crazy part of the whole thing," Babcock

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broke in hotly. "It's not in Nolan's character. That's what I can't understand. He's irritable. Hot tempered as the deuce. That's what frightens me, gentlemen. He isn't one to sit down under a threat. He'd show fight—somehow. His illness has changed him—but not to that extent. Look—look how he stood up to me this evening. Wouldn't tell me a thing more. Tucked the damned note under his pillow. Told me to put the money in that foolish little safe in his bedroom and to mind my own business. I'm sure he had some plan—something up his sleeve. If only I could guess what!"

Babcock paused and wiped his forehead. His dread was obvious. This was no hysterical weakling and, though his fears might be groundless, his bearing claimed consideration.

"I don't think you really need worry so much over this affair." Kerrigan spoke with comforting confidence. "As Clancy says, these private—er—arrangements are plenty common and the police get no thanks for butting in. On your own showing it looks like Mr. Whittlesey was confident he had everything under control. He had the money all ready to pay over in case of necessity."

"That's right," Babcock agreed and after a little thought added more hopefully: "He always keeps a loaded pistol in the drawer of his bed-head table, too. Maybe—maybe he is prepared for every emergency. He certainly thought so, and I hope he hasn't overestimated—or underestimated—if you see what I mean." He rose and took up his hat from the desk. "I want to thank you for your courtesy and consideration, Captain Kerrigan. And you, too, Mr. Clancy. You've been most kind and

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reassuring. I'm very glad I came in. My inexperience in such matters must excuse my anxiety. And I'm afraid I've trespassed unpardonably on your time. My word, it's nearly eleven! I'd no idea I'd been here so long. I'll take myself off at once—if you have no further suggestions to make?"

He looked from one to the other. They were all standing now. Kerrigan had been observing his keen-eyed, red-headed friend. With his hand on Clancy's shoulder he said: "If you or your partner find things getting out of hand, Mr. Babcock, I freely give you a tip that this is the man I'd bet on to straighten them out without noise or unnecessary outlay. If you could get him interested in the case—"

"I am now," said Peter cordially, "and, while Captain Kerrigan is too complimentary by half, I do believe I might be of service. It's a lovely run out on the north shore this time of year. Suppose I drift out and browse about Graylock a bit in the morning. Would you like me to?"

"Well, frankly, Mr. Clancy, I'm afraid Whittlesey wouldn't hear of such a thing, and he'd be simply furious with me."

"Oh, he'd never know," Kerrigan put in eagerly. "You could trust Clancy for that. He'd make up a water-tight excuse of some kind and probably bring home the bacon on a silver platter."

"And in the matter of fees," said Peter quietly, with a slight smile, "I never ask for an advance royalty on the bacon, or put up the price of pork if I'm lucky enough to bring it in. I mention it beforehand just in case there

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are unfavorable developments of any kind. I don't believe there's any particular danger—unless success goes to the head of the person who—possibly—is planning to get that five thousand dollars tonight. A blackmailer rarely stops at one *coup*, unfortunately. By the way, Jake, it's just occurred to me that Mr. Babcock might feel easier if you phoned the police at Graylock to keep an eye on any suspicious person seen out around the Whittlesey place tonight. You wouldn't have to give any special reason. Would you think that a good idea, sir?"

"Oh, why I never thought of that," said Babcock. "Why—why, yes. That would be splendid—especially if it won't be necessary for Mr. Whittlesey to know I sponsored the thing. Suppose, Captain Kerrigan, you say to watch for suspicious persons along Graytowers Road. That would do the trick. It only runs from the Huntington Boulevard in a short loop to the Amityville road, not more than a mile in all, and it's the only approach to Whittlesey's place—except by woods and fields, of course. But even a watch on the road would be a protection—supposing—"

"Supposing what, Mr. Babcock?" prompted Kerrigan as the other came to a thoughtful pause.

The visitor shook his iron gray head. "I was only wondering. . . . But, yes. I believe it would be a satisfaction to know that the police were on the watch for any unexplained strangers who might be loitering—or getting away too quickly perhaps—Captain Kerrigan, on the Graytowers Road."

"All right; I'll attend to it, Mr. Babcock. I happen to know a man stationed out in that section now. It'll do

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no harm to call him, at any rate, and I'm glad to do whatever I can."

Kerrigan was as good as his word. It was only ten minutes after eleven when he was able to contact the State Troopers' Headquarters near Huntington. His friend was in, as luck would have it, and it was not more than twenty minutes past eleven when Lieutenant Ogilvy's motor cycle was moving swiftly, uphill and down, through the mile of hard-surfaced road that ran past Graytowers. It was exactly eleven-twenty-five when he came out on the Amityville turnpike. He had seen nothing in any way to arouse his suspicions—for the simple reason that Top Hat Rafferty had already turned that corner and taken his swift way southward nearly half an hour earlier.

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III

"YOUR bath is ready, sir."

"Wha—u—r?" said Peter Clancy, stifling a comprehensive yawn. "Can't be time to get up, Wiggar. I was just having the jolliest dream. I thought Hitler and Mussolini were fighting a duel because Marie of Roumania said that— Hey! What's your hurry? I haven't anything special on for this morning."

"Excuse me, Mr. Peter. I rather think you have, sir. Ahem. Pardon. It came in on the radio just now. Short wave. Police news."

"Oh?" said Peter, sitting up suddenly. "What, Wiggar? What is it, man? Robbery? Kidnap—"

"Murder, Mr. Peter." The valet spoke solemnly, holding out his master's dressing robe. "The gentleman we took last night to the Boots and Saddles Club—"

"Babcock? You don't mean that he's been bumped off!" Peter threw back the covers and leaped from the bed.

"Oh, no. No, sir. But you explained on the way home—The other gentleman—his partner, you know—that's the one. Mr. Nolan Whittlesey, at his place on Long Island. Near Huntington. It had just been discovered."

"How did they know it was—murder?" Peter asked sharply.

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Wiggar shook his head. "Robbed and murdered, the broadcast said. That was all."

"Good God!" Peter muttered. "I wonder if we could have done anything—anything to prevent it. Babcock was right to be anxious, it seems. But what can the police do in such a case? Kerrigan had no reason to think, really, that it would be— What time is it, Wiggar? Eight o'clock. Try Captain Kerrigan at his apartment. Locate him for me while I get my tub. In five minutes. And then hustle up breakfast. I have a feeling we'll be called upon to go places."

In scarcely more than the time mentioned, Peter thrust out a tousled head. "Well?" he asked.

"Captain Kerrigan's wire has been busy," Wiggar reported, proceeding swiftly with his accustomed duties. "If you'll allow me, sir. Thank you. I'll try again in a moment. Unless—"

"That may be him now." Peter's sharp exclamation coincided with the ring of the telephone bell. "Don't bother. Let me. . . . Yes, Jake." He spoke eagerly into the transmitter. "What? . . . Wiggar just got it over the radio. . . . Well, I don't see that you have any cause to blame yourself. No. We did what we could. Anyone would have thought— Yes. It just looked like an ordinary case of putting on the screws, and with the money there in hand . . . What's that? You felt you had to break it to Babcock? Well, I suppose the local police would hardly have had time yet to—"

A short pause.

"Well, of course he feels badly, but he can't blame you! Oh, he's decent about it. Well, why wouldn't he be?

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Any reasonable man— What did you say, Jake? I didn't get that last. Thought I'd like to go out? Of course I would, but I don't really see how I could go butting in. . . . Oh. Babcock wants me. Well, certainly. That puts another face on it. No, I'm not anxious about a fee. I can always manage to wangle enough out of the year's crime crop to support Wiggar more or less in the style to which he's accustomed."

Peter glanced up at the valet's wooden face and almost caught the tail end of what might have been a slight disarrangement of its architectural features. The receiver being held a little way from the listener's ear, Kerrigan's voice came over plainly.

"Stop kiddin', Pete, for the love of Mike, and promise me you'll get out to Huntington as fast as you can. I can't do anything personally, of course, and I suppose I haven't any real call to feel involved, but Babcock's coming to us last night and me giving him what turned out to be a bum steer—"

"I was in wrong just as much as you," Peter interrupted. "I know exactly how you feel, and I'll do what I can, it goes without saying."

"Oh," said Kerrigan crisply. "Then that's that. You get in touch with Lieutenant Ogilvy of the State Police as soon as you can. I will have told him all about you before you get there. Naturally, I have no authority, but I know Ogilvy well and he's a good scout. They're going to need all the help they can get if the local outfit is what usually stays in the sticks. By the way, Pete—"

"Yes?"

"You're driving out I suppose?"

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"Yes. Why?"

"I told Babcock you'd pick him up and take him along in your car. He hasn't one and couldn't make as good time by train. It'll give you a chance to find out a lot of maybe helpful details before you get there. See what I mean, Sweetheart?"

"Sweetheart yourself," laughed Peter. "You think of everything, don't you? Specially how to spoil a beautiful early morning drive. Well, have it your own way. I daresay it will save time. Did you happen to tell your friend Babcock what time I'd call?"

"Yes," Kerrigan answered brazenly. "I said you'd be there in half or three quarters of an hour."

"All right, you slave driver. I'll try to choke down your beautiful tribute to my celerity along with a cup of Wiggar's coffee and be at the Boots and Saddles Club before nine o'clock. Will he be ready?"

"Said he'd be waiting at the door by a quarter to nine, so there'll be no delay."

"Swell," said Peter. "If this isn't an ordinary cut and dried affair, it's the early bird that'll catch the worm when it turns."

"You've said it, Pete, my lad. Let me know how you come on. So long—and good luck."

Peter responded heartily, dropped the telephone on its cradle and dashed into his clothes. By the time he had swallowed the small but perfectly prepared breakfast that Wiggar brought him on a tray, the butler-valet had already metamorphosed himself into a complete chauffeur and was waiting in the car. The run through the Park occupied but a few minutes and it was not yet nine when

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they rolled up before the reserved and exclusive looking entrance to the Boots and Saddles. Even as they drew up to the curb a page flung open the door and Babcock came quickly out. He looked pale and deeply concerned and took his place beside Peter with only a murmured word of greeting.

"Terrible! This is a terrible thing, Mr. Clancy," he said as the car rolled swiftly eastward. "I confess I'm at my wit's end. I hardly know what I ought to do. I called up Graytowers but could get few details, and I didn't like to press matters over the wire. After what I told Captain Kerrigan last night you must realize that I'm in a very delicate position. The captain was very decent this morning in breaking the dreadful—the shocking news—very considerate indeed. But he couldn't see his way clear to advising me further—except to consult you."

Peter bent his head. "I'll try to deserve Captain Kerrigan's good opinion," he said gravely, "though I don't think there's much to be decided upon until we see exactly how the land lies when we get to the scene of the crime. Robbery and murder was all that we heard on the radio. Have you any more details?"

"Only very few. The secretary, Terrell, you know, was talking to the police and I could get only the butler on the wire. He said they discovered the—the tragedy—early—a little after seven o'clock. The nurse went in to take his—Nolan's—morning medicine and found him dead. Strangled." Babcock's tone was eloquent of a sternly restrained horror.

"Strangled!" exclaimed Peter. "Hum-m-m. Well, that

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fact necessitates certain elements in the set-up and excludes certain others."

"I don't follow you." Babcock's eye flashed a question.

"The type of person who could kill—that way—is distinctly different from one who shoots—or stabs," Peter replied with thoughtful slowness. "But we'd better not go into that further at the minute. What about the robbery?"

"The little safe in his bedroom was open. So was a window that leads onto a balcony. Samuel—that's the butler—Samuel Kilroy—he said it looked as if the thief got in that way."

"Was there any mention of the threatening note that Mr. Whittlesey showed you?"

"Samuel didn't speak of it and I didn't like to ask that sort of question. I'm quite certain from Nolan's manner that he had kept the thing, as far as possible, a complete secret. Apparently the only reason I knew anything at all about it was that he wasn't in a position to go out and get the cash himself. That's what makes my position so delicate, Clancy. If, as you and Captain Kerrigan seem to think, my partner had some—old secret—or something—that he wanted to keep dark, it hardly seems loyal to go against his wishes now if it could possibly be avoided. Mr. Whittlesey was a great stickler for family tradition—honor—and all that sort of thing, and, while unfortunately he and his daughter disagreed about a good many things, he would have wished to spare her the knowledge of anything that could reflect on their name. Of that I'm certain."

"Ah, a daughter?" Peter put in on a note of interrogation. "Any other relatives?"

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"A sister. Miss Amanda Whittlesey. So far as I know he had no other close connections."

"You—I suppose you know the family and the household well, Mr. Babcock? You visited out there? And can, perhaps, tell me something about the servants?"

An affirmative nod had answered the first two questions. To the last the response was as immediate. "Samuel has been there many years and seems entirely trustworthy. Maria, the cook, has been with them even longer —a relic of the past, really, before Nolan's father made a fortune in leather during the great war. She's old, but still an excellent cook," Babcock remarked appreciatively. "The housemaid I don't know so much about. She's pretty, and her name, I believe, is Lottie something or other. Local talent, but she's well trained and I never heard any complaints of her."

"And that's the lot?" asked Peter.

"I believe there's a gardener, a local man who doesn't live on the place. I think his name is Davis but I'm not sure."

"It's likely to be, in that section of Long Island," said Peter. "Davis and Robinson are kind of generic names out there even yet. Well, that lineup doesn't seem to yield anything very suspicious."

"Of course not. Why should it? Samuel thought it obvious that the criminal came in through the balcony window."

"Yes . . ." said Peter slowly. "The five thousand dollars you put in the safe is missing of course. . . ."

"I suppose so. But Samuel wouldn't know anything about that."

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"Then why was he so sure there had been a robbery?"

"Oh," said Babcock blankly. "I hadn't thought of that."

On the far side of the Fifty-ninth Street bridge the ugly rows and rows of little houses flashed past the windows, but none of the occupants of the car noticed them. Wiggar, with one ear carefully trained on the rear seat, urged the motor to still higher speed, for he was sensible of the great advantage an early arrival would give his master. Peter was automatically conscious of the satisfactory swiftness of their passage, but his mind was engrossed with even more serious matters. Presently he said: "We mustn't jump at conclusions. Of course there may have been other things missing from the safe. It's being open, naturally, would attract a good servant's attention immediately."

"That's right." Babcock's frown relaxed. "For my part, Clancy, I haven't suspected anyone except the unknown person who sent that outrageous letter to Whittlesey. It seems obvious to me that he came to collect the money, met with resistance—and—" A shrug that was half shudder finished the sentence.

"Your point is well taken," said Peter. "But we can't lose sight of the fact that a man's enemies may be those of his own house. Oh, I'm not going to make any foolish guesses. We'll know more, perhaps, when we get there. . . . But I suggest now that we face the possibility that this was—actually—an inside job—and see where that leads us. As a matter of fact, in a case of blackmail, long service might be considered to tell nearly as much against a servant as for him—or her."

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Babcock's head came up sharply. "In what way do you mean, Clancy?"

"Well, if the secret is an old one, wouldn't it naturally be an old acquaintance who would know it?"

"Not necessarily," Babcock countered after a minute's consideration. "Someone might have just recently discovered something that happened a long time ago."

"You think the demand for money couldn't be based on an occurrence in Whittlesey's immediate past?" Peter inquired with a shrewd glance. "Come, Mr. Babcock, you must be open with me if I'm to be of the least service. Tell me, how long have you and your late partner been connected?"

"In business you mean?"

"In any way."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I've known him nearly all my life. We were both born and brought up in a little town in northern Pennsylvania. His people practically owned the town. I worked for his father when I was a mere lad. Nolan went to college and I lost sight of him during that period. Also at the time of the war. He was on his yacht in South American waters and I was over seas. When I came back I went into the New York branch of the business, which had developed largely during that period. Nolan inherited it soon after and we've been partners nearly ever since. So you see, Clancy, there can be only the period while he was in college and the succeeding years of the war when I would not have been familiar with his movements."

"In a general way," Peter said slowly, "that, of course, is true. But how much do we really know of what goes

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on around us? Even with our nearest and dearest. And a business partner, even though he be a close friend, could hardly be sure that he knew the other's intimate life. Things happen under our very noses that we don't see. . . . And what occurs during the night may leave no record—in the morning."

Peter lifted his head with a queer sense of having said something important. But there was nothing of any special interest in the flat landscape. The road from the Jericho racetrack came into the boulevard at that point. The fact that T. H. Rafferty had stood there making an important decision the night before unfortunately could leave no recognizable trace upon the morning air.

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IV

For several minutes thereafter silence reigned in the swiftly moving car. Presently, Peter, intent on making the most of the opportunity that Kerrigan had so thoughtfully provided for securing inside information, returned to his line of inquiry. Shaking off a curious sense that he was missing some vital matter, he said: "For the present it looks as if we'd better shelve the question of who might or might not have sent that demand for five thousand dollars, and see if we can determine who could—or could not—have committed the murder—just supposing—as we must, Mr. Babcock—that it turns out not to have been outside talent. At this point we have no real evidence either way. The open window might be merely a blind. So, if we can clear up any ground, we'll be that much ahead when we get to Graytowers. It's fortunate all around that you were so closely in touch with the situation, and I'm hoping you can tell me who of the household were actually in the house last night. Also if there were any guests."

Babcock shook his head. "No guests," he said. "That much I'm sure of. Miss Amanda was home, for I said good night to her when I left some little time after eight o'clock."

"She and her brother were on good terms, do you

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