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Title: Pawned

Author: Frank L. Packard

Release date: May 2, 2016 [EBook #51965]  
Most recently updated: February 25, 2021

Language: English

Credits: Produced by David Widger from page images generously  
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# **PAWNED**

**By Frank L. Packard**

**The Copp, Clark Co., Limited Toronto**

**1921**



# PAWNED



FRANK L. PACKARD



# PAWNED

BY

FRANK L. PACKARD

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OPERATOR," "THE FURTHER ADVEN-  
TURES OF JIMMIE DALE," ETC.

THE COPP, CLARK CO., LIMITED  
TORONTO



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## PAWNED

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### BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

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### HER STORY

**A** HANSOM cab, somewhat woebegone in appearance, threaded its way in a curiously dejected manner through the heart of New York's East Side. A fine drizzle fell, through which the street lamps showed as through a mist; and, with the pavements slippery, the emaciated looking horse, the shafts jerking and lifting up at intervals around its ears, appeared hard put to it to preserve its footing.

The cabman on his perch drove with his coat collar turned up and his chin on his breast. He held the reins listlessly, permitting the horse to choose its own gait. At times he lifted the little trap door in the roof of the cab and peered into the interior; occasionally his hand, tentatively, hesitantly, edged toward a bulge in his coat pocket—only to be drawn back again in a sort of panic haste.

The cab turned into a street where, in spite of the drizzle, hawkers with their push-carts under flaring, spitting gasoline banjoes were doing a thriving business. The horse went more slowly. There was very little room. With the push-carts lining the curbs on both sides, and the overflow of pedestrians from the sidewalks into the street, it was perhaps over-taxing the horse's instinct to steer a safe course for the vehicle it dragged behind it. Halfway along the block a wheel of the hansom bumped none too gently into one of the push-carts, nearly upsetting the latter. The hawker, with a frantic grab, saved his wares from disaster—by an uncomfortably narrow margin, and, this done, hurled an impassioned flood of lurid oratory at the two-wheeler.

The cabman lifted his chin from his breast, stared stonily at the hawker, slapped the reins mechanically on the roof of the cab as an intimation to the horse to proceed, and the cab wended its way along again.

At the end of the block, it turned the corner, and drew up before a small building that was nested in between two tenements. The cabman climbed down from his perch, and stood for a moment surveying the three gilded balls that hung over the dingy doorway, and the lettering—"Paul Veniza. Pawnbroker"—that showed on the dully-lighted windows which confronted him.

He drew his hand across his eyes; then, reaching suddenly inside the cab, lifted a bundle in his arms, and entered the shop. A man behind the counter stared at him, and uttered a quick ejaculation. The cabman went on into a rear room. The man from behind the counter followed. In the rear room, a woman rose from a table where she had been sewing, and took the bundle quickly from the cabman's arms, as it emitted a querulous little cry.

The cabman spoke for the first time.

"She's dead," he said heavily.

The woman, buxom, middle-aged, stared at him, white-faced, her eyes filling suddenly with tears.

"She died an hour ago," said the cabman, in the same monotonous voice. "I thought mabbe you'd look after the baby girl for a bit, Mrs. Veniza—you and Paul."

"Of course!" said the woman in a choked voice. "I wanted to before, but—but your wife wouldn't let the wee mite out of her sight."

"She's dead now," said the cabman. "An hour ago."

Paul Veniza, the pawnbroker, crossed to the cabman's side, and, placing his hands on the other's shoulders, drew the man down into a chair.

"Hawkins," he said slowly, "we're getting on in years, fifty each of us, and we've known each other for a good many of those fifty." He cleared his throat. "You've made a mess of things, Hawkins."

The woman, holding the baby, started suddenly forward, a red flush dyeing her cheeks.

"Paul!" she cried out sharply. "How can you be so cruel at such an hour as this?"

The pawnbroker shook his head. He had moved to the back of the cabman's chair. Tall, slight, grave and kindly-faced, with high forehead and the dark hair beginning to silver at the temples, there seemed something almost esthetic about the man.

"It is *the* hour," he said deliberately; "the one hour in which I must speak plainly to my old friend, the one hour that has come into his life which may mean everything to him." His right hand slipped from the cabman's shoulder and started, tentatively, hesitantly, toward a bulge in the cabman's coat pocket—but was drawn back again, and found its place once more on the cabman's shoulder. "I was afraid, Hawkins, when you married the young wife. I was afraid of your curse."

The cabman's elbows were on the table; he had sunk his chin in his hands. His blue eyes, out of a wrinkled face of wind-beaten tan, roved around the little room, and rested finally on the bundle in the woman's arms.

"That's finished now," he said dully.

"I pray God it is," said Paul Veniza earnestly; "but you said that before—when you married the young wife."

"It's finished now—so help me, God!" The cabman's lips scarcely moved. He stared straight in front of him.

There was silence in the little, plainly furnished room for a moment; then the pawnbroker spoke again:

"I was born here in New York, you know, after my parents came from Italy. There was no money, nothing—only misery. I remember. It is like that, Hawkins, isn't it, where you have just come from, and where you have left the young wife?"

"Paul!" his wife cried out again. "How can you say such things? It—it is not like you!" Her lips quivered. She burst into tears, and buried her face in the little bundle she snuggled to her breast.

The cabman seemed curiously unmoved—as though dazed, almost detached from his immediate surroundings. He said nothing.

The pawnbroker's hands still rested on the cabman's shoulders, a strange gentleness in his touch that sought somehow, it seemed, to offer sympathy for his own merciless words.

"I have been thinking of this for a long time, ever since we knew that Claire could not get better," he said. "We knew you would bring the little one here. There was no other place, except an institution. And so I have been thinking about it. What is the little one's name?"

The cabman shook his head.

"She has no name," he said.

"Shall it be Claire, then?" asked the pawnbroker gently.

The cabman's fingers, where they rested on his cheeks, gathered a fold of flesh and tightened until the blood fled, leaving little white spots. He nodded his head.

Again the pawnbroker was silent for a little while.

"My wife and I will take little Claire—on one condition," he said at last, gravely. "And that condition is that she is to grow up as our child, and that, though you may come here and see her as often as you like, she is not to know that you are her father."

The cabman turned about a haggard face.

"Not to know that I am her father—ever," he said huskily.

"I did not say that," said Paul Veniza quietly. He smiled now, leaning over the cabman. "I am a pawnbroker; this is a pawn-shop. There is a way in which you may redeem her."

The cabman pressed a heavy hand over his eyes.

"What is that way?" He swallowed hard as he spoke.

"By redeeming yourself." The pawnbroker's voice was low and earnest. "What have you to offer her to-day, save a past that has brought only ruin and misery? And for the future, my old friend? There is no home. There was no home for the young wife. You said when you married Claire, as you have said to-night, that it was all finished. But it was not finished. And your curse was the stronger. Well, little Claire is only a baby, and there would be years, anyhow, before just a man could take care of her. Do you understand, my old friend? If, at the end of those years, enough of them to make sure that you are sure of yourself, you have changed your life and overcome your weakness, then you shall have little Claire back again, and she shall know you as her father, and be proud of you. But if you do not do this, then she remains with us, and we are her parents, and you pledge me your word that it shall be so."

There was no answer for a long time. The woman was still crying—but more softly now. The cabman's chin had sunk into his hands again. The minutes dragged along. Finally the cabman lifted his head, and, pushing back his chair, stumbled to his feet.

"God—God bless you both!" he whispered. "It's all finished now for good, as I told you, but you are right, Paul. I—I ain't fit to have her yet. I'll stand by the bargain." He moved blindly toward the door.

The pawnbroker interposed.

"Wait, Hawkins, old friend," he said. "I'll go with you. You'll need some help back there in the tenement, some one to look after the things that are to be done."

The cabman shook his head.

"Not to-night," he said in a choked way. "Leave me alone to-night."

He moved again toward the door, and this time Paul Veniza stepped aside, but, following, stood bareheaded in the doorway as the other clambered to his perch on the hansom cab.

Hawkins slapped his reins on the roof of the cab. The horse started slowly forward.

The drizzle had ceased; but the horse, left to his own initiative, was still wary of the wet pavements and moved at no greater pace than a walk. Hawkins drove with his coat collar still turned up and his chin on his breast.

And horse and man went aimlessly from street to street—and the night grew late.

And the cabman's hand reached tentatively, hesitantly, a great many times, toward a bulge in his coat pocket, and for a great many times was withdrawn as empty as it had set forth. And then, once, his fingers touched a glass bottle neck... and then, not his fingers, but his lips... and for a great many times.

It had begun to rain again.

The horse, as if conscious of the futility of its own movements, had stopped, and, with head hanging, seemed to cower down as though seeking even the slender protection of the shafts, whose ends now made half circles above his ears.

Something slipped from the cabman's fingers and fell with a crash to the pavement. The cabman leaned out from his perch and stared down at the shattered glass.

"Broken," said the cabman vacantly.

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## TWENTY YEARS LATER

**I**T was silver light. Inside the reefs the water lay placid and still, mirroring in a long, shimmering line the reflection of the full tropic moon; beyond, ever and anon, it splashed against its coral barriers in little crystal showers. It was a soundless night. No breeze stirred the palms that, fringing white stretches of beach around the bay, stood out in serene beauty, their irregular tops etched with divine artistry into the skyline of the night.

Out from the shore, in that harbor which holds no sanctuary in storm, the mail boat, dark save for her riding lights, swung at her moorings; shoreward, the perspective altered in the moonlight until it seemed that Mount Vaea had lowered its sturdy head that it might hover in closer guardianship over the little town, Apia straggled in white patches along the road. And from these white patches, which were dwellings and stores, there issued no light.

From a point on the shore nearest the mail boat, a figure in cotton drawers and undershirt slipped silently into the water and disappeared. Thereafter, at intervals, a slight ripple disturbed the surface as the man, coming up to breathe, turned upon his back and lay with his face exposed; for the rest he swam under water. It was as though he were in his natural element. He swam superbly even where, there in the Islands, all the natives were born to the sea; but his face, when visible on the few occasions that it floated above the surface, was the face, not of a native, but of a white man.

And now he came up in the shadow of the steamer's hull where, near the stern, a rope dangled over the side, almost touching the water's edge. And for a moment he hung to the rope, motionless, listening. Then he began to swarm upward with fine agility, without a sound, his bare feet finding silent purchase against the iron plates of the hull.

Halfway up he paused and listened intently again. Was that a sound as of some one astir, the soft movement of feet on the deck above? No, there was nothing now. Why should there be? It was very late, and Nanu, the man who lisped, was no fool. The rope had hung from exactly that place where, of all others, one might steal aboard without attracting the attention of the watch.

He went on again, and finally raised his head above the rail. The deck, flooded with moonlight, lay white and deserted below him. He swung himself over, dropped to the deck—and the next instant reeled back against the rail as a rope-end, swung with brutal force, lashed across his face, raising a welt from cheek to cheek. Half stunned, he was still conscious that a form had sprung suddenly at him from out of the darkness of the after alleyway, that the form was one of the vessel's mates, that the form still swung a short rope-end that was a murderous weapon because it was little more flexible than iron and was an inch in thickness, and that, behind this form, other forms, big forms, Tongans of the crew, pressed forward.

A voice roared out, hoarse, profane, the mate's voice:

"Thought you'd try it again, did you, you damned beachcomber? I'll teach you! And when I find the dog that left that rope for you, I'll give him a leaf out of the same book! You bloody waster! I'll teach you! I'll—"

The rope-end hissed as it cut through the air again, aiming for the swimmer's face. But it missed its mark. Perhaps it was an illusion of the white moonlight, lending unreality to the scene, exciting the imagination to



exaggerate the details, but the swimmer seemed to move with incredible speed, with the lithe, terrible swiftness of a panther in its spring. The rope-end swished through the air, missing a suddenly lowered head by the barest fraction of an inch, and then, driven home with lightning-like rapidity, so quick that the blows seemed as one, the swimmer's fists swung, right and left, crashing with terrific impact to the point of the mate's jaw. And the mate's head jolted back, quivered grotesquely on his shoulders for an instant like a tuning fork, sagged, and the great bulk of the man collapsed and sprawled inertly on the deck.

There was a shuffle of feet from the alleyway, cries. The swimmer swung to face the expected rush, and it halted, hesitant. It gave him time to spring and stand erect upon the steamer's rail. On the upper deck faces and forms began to appear. A man in pajamas leaned far out and peered at the scene.

There was a shout from out of the dark, grouped throng in the alleyway; it was chorused. The rush came on again for the rail; and the dripping figure that stood there, with the first sound that he had made—a laugh, half bitter, half of cool contempt—turned, and with a clean dive took the water again and disappeared.

Presently he reached the shore. There were more than riding lights out there on the steamer now. He gave one glance in that direction, shrugged his shoulders, and started off along the road. At times he raised his hand to brush it across his face where the welt, raw and swollen now, was a dull red sear. He walked neither fast nor slow.

The moonlight caught the dripping figure now and then in the open spaces, and seemed to peer inquisitively at the great breadth of shoulder, and the rippling play of muscle under the thin cotton drawers and shirt, which, wet and clinging, almost transparent, scarce hid the man's nakedness; and at the face, that of a young man, whose square jaw was locked, whose gray eyes stared steadily along the road, and over whose forehead, from the drenched, untrimmed mass of fair hair, the brine trickled in little rivulets as though persistent in its effort to torture with its salt caress the raw, skin-broken flesh across the cheeks.

Then presently a point of land ran out, and, the road ignoring this, the bay behind was shut out from view. And presently again, farther on, the road came to a long white stretch of beach on the one hand, and foliage and trees on the other. And here the dripping figure halted and stood hesitant as though undecided between the moonlit stretch of sand, and the darkness of a native hut that was dimly outlined amongst the trees on the other side of the road.

After a moment he made his way to the hut and, groping around, secured some matches and a box of cigarettes. He spoke into the empty blackness.

"You lose, Nanu," he muttered whimsically. "They wouldn't stand water and I left them for you. But now, you see, I'm back again, after all."

He lighted a cigarette, and in the flame of the match stared speculatively at the small, broken pieces of coral that made the floor of the hut, and equally, by the addition of a thin piece of native matting, his bed.

"The sand is softer," he said with a grim drawl.

He went out from the hut, crossed the road, flung himself upon his back on the beach, and clasped his hands behind his head. The smoke from his cigarette curled languidly upward in wavering spirals, and he stared for a long time at the moon.

"Moon madness," he said at last. "They say if you look long enough the old boy does you in."

The cigarette finished, he flung the stub away. After a time, he raised his head and listened. A moment later he lay back again full length on the sand. The sound of some one's footsteps coming rapidly along the road from the direction of the town was now unmistakably audible.

"The jug for mine, I guess," observed the young man to the moon. "Probably a file of native constabulary in bare feet that you can't hear bringing up the rear!"

The footsteps drew nearer, until, still some distance away, the white-clad figure of a man showed upon the tree-fringed road. The sprawled figure on the beach made no effort toward flight, and less toward concealment. With a sort of studied insolence injected into his challenge, he stuck another cigarette between his lips and deliberately allowed full play to the flare of the match.

The footsteps halted abruptly. Then, in another moment, they crunched upon the sand, and a tall man, with thin, swarthy face, a man of perhaps forty or forty-five, who picked assiduously at his teeth with a quill toothpick, stood over the recumbent figure.

"Found you, have I?" he grunted complacently.

"If you like to put it that way," said the young man indifferently. He raised himself on his elbow again, and stared toward the road. "Where's the army?" he inquired.

The tall man allowed the point of the quill toothpick to flex and strike back against his teeth. The sound was distinctive. *Tck!* He ignored the question.

"When the mate came out of dreamland," he said, "he lowered a boat and came ashore to lay a complaint against you."

"I can't say I'm surprised," admitted the young man. "I suppose I am to go with you quietly and make no trouble or it will be the worse for me—I believe that's the usual formula, isn't it?"

The man with the quill toothpick sat down on the sand. He appeared to be absorbed for a moment in a contemplation of his surroundings.

"These tropic nights are wonderful, aren't they? Kind of get you." He plied the quill toothpick industriously. "I'm a passenger on the steamer, and I came ashore with the mate. He's gone back—without laying the complaint. There's always a way of fixing things—even injured feelings. One of the native boat's-crew said he knew where you were to be found. He's over there." He jerked his head in the direction of the road.

The young man sat bolt upright.

"I don't get you," he said slowly, "except that you are evidently not personifying the majesty of the law. What's the idea?"

"Well," said the other, "I had three reasons for coming. The first was that I thought I recognized you

yesterday when they threw you off the steamer, and was sure of it to-night when—I am a light sleeper—I came out on the upper deck at the sound of the row and saw you take your departure from the vessel for the second time."

"I had no idea," said the young man caustically, "that I was so well known. Are you quite sure you haven't made a mistake?"

"Quite!" asserted the other composedly. "Of course, I am not prepared to say what your present name is—you may have considered a change beneficial—so I will not presume in that respect. But you are, or were, a resident of San Francisco. You were very nice people there. I have no knowledge of your mother, except that I understand she died in your infancy. A few years ago your father died and left you, not a fortune, but quite a moderate amount of money. I believe the pulpits designate it as a 'besetting sin.' You had one—gambling. The result was that you traveled the road a great many other young men have traveled; the only difference being that, in so far as I am competent to speak, you hold the belt for speed and all-round proficiency. You went utterly, completely and whole-heartedly to hell."

The tall man became absorbed again in his surroundings. "And I take it," he said presently, "that in spite of the wonders of a tropic night, you are still there."

The young man shrugged his shoulders.

"You have put it very delicately," he said, with a grim smile. "I'm sorry, but I am obliged to confess that the recognition isn't mutual. Would you mind telling me who you are?"

"We'll get to that in due course," said the other. "My second reason was that it appeared to me to be logical to suppose that, having once been the bona fide article, you could readily disguise yourself as a gentleman again, and your interpretation of the rôle would be beyond suspicion or—"

"By God!" The welt across the young man's face grew suddenly white, as though the blood had fled from it to suffuse his temples. He half rose, staring levelly into the other's eyes.

The tall man apparently was quite undisturbed.

"And the third reason is that I have been looking for just such a—there really isn't any other word—gentleman, providing he was possessed of another and very essential characteristic. You possess that characteristic in a most marked degree. Your actions tonight are unmistakable evidence that you have nerve."

"It strikes me that you've got a little of it yourself," observed the young man evenly.

The quill toothpick under the adroit guidance of his tongue traveled from the left- to the right-hand side of the other's mouth.

"It is equally as essential to me," he said dryly. "You appear to fill the bill; but there is always the possibility of a fly in the ointment; complications—er—unpleasant complications, perhaps, you know, that might have arisen since you left San Francisco, and that might—er—complicate matters."

The young man relapsed into a recumbent position upon the sand, his hands clasped under his head again, and in his turn appeared to be absorbed in the beauty of the night.

"Moon-madness!" he murmured pityingly.

"A myth!" said the tall man promptly. "Would you mind sketching in roughly the details of your interesting career since you left the haunts of the aristocracy?"

"I don't see any reason why I should." The young man yawned.

"Do you see any reason why you shouldn't?" inquired the other composedly.

"None," said the young man, "except that the steamer sails at daybreak, and I should never forgive myself if you were left behind."

"Nor forgive yourself, perhaps, if you failed to sail on her as a first-class passenger," said the tall man quietly.

"What?" ejaculated the young man sharply.

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"It depends on the story," he said.

"I—I don't understand." The young man frowned. "There's a chance for me to get aboard the mail boat?"

"It depends on the story," said the other again.

"Moon-mad!" murmured the young man once more, after a moment's silence. "But it's cheap at the price, for it's not much of a story. Beginning where you left off in my biography, I ducked when the crash came in San Francisco, and having arrived in hell, as you so delicately put it, I started out to explore. Mr. Dante had it right—there's no use stopping in the suburbs. I lived a while in his last circle. It's too bad he never knew the 'Frisco water-front; it would have fired his imagination! I'm not sure, though, but Honolulu's got a little on 'Frisco, at that! Luck was out. I was flat on my back when I got a chance to work my way out to Honolulu. One place was as good as another by then."

The young man lit a cigarette, and stared at the glowing tip reminiscently with his gray eyes.

"You said something about gambling," he went on; "but you didn't say enough. It's a disease, a fever that sets your blood on fire, and makes your life kind of delirious, I guess—if you get it chronic. I guess I was born with it. I remember when I was a kid I—but I forgot, pardon me, the mail boat sails at daybreak."

"Go as far as you like," said the tall man, picking at his teeth with the quill toothpick.

The young man shook his head.

"Honolulu is the next stopping place," he said. "On the way out I picked up a few odd dollars from my fellow-members of the crew, and—"

"Tck!" It was the quill toothpick.

The young man's eyes narrowed, and his jaw set challengingly.

"Whatever else I've done," he stated in a significant monotone, "I've never played crooked. It was on the



level.”

“Of course,” agreed the tall man hastily.

“I sat in with the only stakes I had,” said the young man, still monotonously. “A bit of tobacco, a rather good knife that I've got yet, and a belt that some one took a fancy to as being worth half a dollar.”

“Certainly! Of course!” reiterated the tall man in haste.

The quill toothpick was silent.

“A pal of mine, one of the stokers, said he knew of a good place to play in Honolulu where there was a square deal,” continued the young man; “so, a night or so after we reached there, we got shore leave and started off. Perhaps you know that part of Honolulu. I don't. I didn't see much of it. I know there's some queer dumps, and queer doings, and the scum of every nationality under the sun to run up against. And I know it was a queer place my mate steered me into. It was faro. The box was run by an old Chinaman who looked as though he were trying to impersonate one of his ancestors, he was so old. My mate and I formed the English-speaking community. There were a Jap or two, and a couple of pleasant-looking cutthroats who cursed in Spanish, and a Chink lying on a bunk rolling his pill. Oh, yes, the place stunk! Every once in a while the door opened and some other Godforsaken piece of refuse drifted in. By midnight we had a full house of pretty bad stuff.

“It ended in a row, of course. Some fool of a tout came in chaperoning a party of three men, who were out to see the sights; they were passengers, I found out later, from one of the ships in port. I don't know what started the rumpus; some private feud, I guess. The first thing I knew one of the Spaniards had a knife out and had jumped for the tout. It was a free-for-all in a minute. I saw the tout go down, and he didn't look good, and the place suddenly struck me as a mighty unhealthy place to be found in on that account. The stoker and I started to fight our way through the jam to the door. There was a row infernal. I guess you could have heard it a mile away. Anyway, before we could break from the clinches, as it were, the police were fighting their way in just as eagerly as we were fighting our way out.

“I didn't like the sight of that tout lying on the floor, or the thought of what might happen in the police court the next morning if I were one of the crowd to adorn the dock. And things weren't going very well. The police were streaming in through the doorway. And then I caught sight of something I hadn't seen before because it had previously been hidden by a big Chinese screen—one of those iron-shuttered windows they seem so fond of down there. Things weren't very rosy just at that moment because about the worst hell-cat scramble on record was being made a little worse by some cheerful maniac starting a bit of revolver practice, but I remember that I couldn't help laughing to save my soul. In the mêlée one of the folding wings of the screen had suddenly doubled up, and, besides the window, I saw hiding behind there for dear life, his face pasty-white with terror, a very courageous gentleman—one of the rubbernecks who had come in with the tout. He was too scared, I imagine, even to have the thought of tackling such formidable things as iron shutters enter his head. I yelled to the stoker to get them open, and tried to form a sort of rear guard for him while he did it. Then I heard them creak on their hinges, and heard him shout. I made a dash for it, but I wasn't quite quick enough. One of the policemen grabbed me, but I was playing in luck then. I got in a fortunate swing and he went down for the count. I remember toppling the screen and the man behind it over on the floor as I jumped sideways for the window; and I remember a glimpse of his terrorized face, his eyes staring at me, his mouth wide open, as I took a headlong dive over the window sill. The stoker picked me up, and we started on the run.

“The police were scrambling through the window after us. I didn't need to be told that there wouldn't be a happy time ahead if I were caught. Apart from that tout who, though I had nothing to do with it, gave the affair a very serious aspect, I was good for the limit on the statute books for resisting arrest in the first place, and for knocking out an officer in the second. But the stoker knew his way about. We gave the police the slip, and a little later on we landed up in a sailors' boarding-house run by a one-eyed cousin of Satan, known as Lascar Joe. We lay there hidden while the tout got better, and the Spanish hidalgo got sent up for a long term for murderous assault. Finally Lascar Joe slipped the stoker aboard some ship; and a week or so later he slipped me, the transfer being made in the night, aboard a frowsy tramp, bound for New Zealand.”

The young man paused, evidently inviting comment.

“Go on,” prompted the man with the quill toothpick softly.

“There isn't very much more,” said the young man. He laughed shortly. “As far as I know I'm the sole survivor from that tramp. She never got to New Zealand; and that's how I got here to Samoa. She went down in a hurricane. I was washed ashore on one of this group of islands about forty or fifty miles from here. I don't know much about the details; I was past knowing anything when the bit of wreckage on which I had lashed myself days before came to port. There weren't any—I was going to say white people on the island, but I'm wrong about that. The Samoans are about the whitest people on God's green earth. I found that out. There were only natives on that island. I lived with them for about two months, and I got to be pretty friendly with them, especially the old fellow who originally picked me up half drowned and unconscious on the beach, and who took me into the bosom of his family. Then the missionary boat came along, and I came back with it to Apia here.”

The young man laughed again suddenly, a jarring note in his mirth.

“I don't suppose you've heard that original remark about the world being such a small place after all! I figured that back here in Apia a shipwrecked and destitute white man would get the glad hand and at least a chance to earn his stake. Maybe he would ordinarily; but I didn't. I hadn't said anything to the missionary about that Honolulu escapade, and I was keeping it dark when I got here and started to tell the shipwreck end of my story over again. Queer, isn't it? Lined up in about the first audience I had was the gentleman with the pasty face that I had toppled over with the screen in the old Chink's faro dump. He was one of the big guns here, and had been away on a pleasure trip, and Honolulu had been on his itinerary. That settled it. The missionary chap spoke up a bit for me, I'll give him credit for that, though I had a hunch he was going to use that play as an opening wedge in an effort to reform me later on. But I had my fingers crossed. The whites here turned their backs on me, and I turned my back on the missionary. That's about all there was to it. That

was about two weeks ago, and for those two weeks I've lived in another of Mr. Dante's delightful circles."

He sat suddenly upright, a clenched fist flung outward.

"Not a cent! Not a damned sou-marquee! Nothing but this torn shirt, and what's left of these cotton pants! Hell!"

He lay back on the sand quite as suddenly again, and fell to laughing softly.

"Tck!" It was the quill toothpick.

"But at that," said the young man, "I'm not sure you could call me a cynic, though the more I see of my own breed as compared with the so-called heathen the less I think of—my own breed! I still had a card up my sleeve. I had a letter of introduction to a real gentleman and landed proprietor here. His name was Nanu, and he gave me his house to live in, and made me free of his taro and his breadfruit and all his worldly possessions; and it was the old native who took care of me on the other island that gave me the letter. It was a queer sort of letter, too—but never mind that now.

"Splendid isolation! That's me for the last two weeks as a cross between a pariah and a mangy cur! What amazes me most is myself. The gentleman of the Chinese screen is still in the land of the living and walking blithely around. Funny, isn't it? That's one reason I was crazy to get away—before anything happened to him." The tanned fist closed fiercely over a handful of sand, then opened and allowed the grains to trickle slowly through the fingers, and its owner laughed softly again. "I've lived through hell here in those two weeks. I guess we're only built to stand so much. I was about at the end of my rope when the mail steamer put in yesterday. I hope I haven't idealized my sojourn here in a way that would cause you to minimize my necessity for getting away, no matter to where or by what means! Nanu and I went out to the ship in his outrigger. Perhaps I would have had better luck if I had run into any other than the particular mate I did. I don't know. I offered to work my passage. Perhaps my fame had already gone abroad—or aboard. He invited me to make another excursion into Dante-land. But when he turned his back on me I slipped below, and tucked myself in behind some of the copra sacks they were loading. Once the steamer was away I was away with her, and I was willing to take what was coming. But I didn't get a chance. I guess the mate was sharper than I gave him credit for. After about four hours of heat and stink down there below decks that I had to grit my teeth to stand, he hauled me out as though he knew I had been there all the time. I was thrown off the steamer.

"But I wasn't through. Steamers do not call here every day. I wonder if you'll know what I mean when I say I was beginning to be afraid of myself and what might happen if I had to stick it out much longer? That mangy cur I spoke of had me lashed to the mast from a social standpoint. I tried it again—to-night. Nanu fixed it for me with one of the crew to hang that rope over the side, and—well, I believe you said you had seen what happened. I believe you said, too, that a chance still existed of my sailing with the mail boat, depending upon my story." He laughed a little raucously. "I hope it's been interesting enough to bail me out; anyway, that's all of it."

The tall man sat for a moment in silence.

"Yes," he said at last; "I am quite satisfied. Dressed as a gentleman, with money in your pockets, and such other details as go with the rôle, you would never be associated with that affair in Honolulu. As a matter of fact your share in it was not so serious that the police would dog you all over the world on account of it. In other words, and what really interests me, is that you are not what is commonly designated as a 'wanted' man. Yes, I may say I am thoroughly satisfied."

The young man yawned and stretched himself.

"I'm delighted to hear it. I haven't any packing to do. Shall we stroll back to the ship?"

"I hope so." The quill toothpick was busy again. "The decision rests with you. I am not a philanthropist. I am about to offer you a situation—to fill which I have been searching a good many years to find some one who had the necessary qualifications. I am satisfied you are that man. You do not know me; you do not know my name, and though you have already asked what it is, I shall still withhold that information until your decision has been given. If you agree, I will here and now sign a contract with you to which we will both affix our bona fide signatures; if you refuse, we will shake hands and part as friends and strangers who have been—shall we use your expression?—moon-mad under the influence of the wonders of a tropic night."

"Something tells me," said the young man softly, "that the situation is not an ordinary one."

"And you are right," replied the other quietly. "It is not only not ordinary, but is, I think I may safely say, absolutely unique and without its counterpart. I might mention in passing that I am not in particularly good health, and the sea voyage I was ordered to take explains my presence here. I am the sole owner of one of the largest, if not the largest, business enterprises in America; certainly its turn-over, at least, is beyond question the biggest on the American continent. I have establishments in every city of any size in both the United States and Canada—and even in Mexico. The situation I offer you is that of my confidential representative. No connection whatever will be known to exist between us; your title will be that of a gentleman of leisure—but your duties will be more arduous. I regret to say that in many cases I fear my local managers are not—er—making accurate returns to me, and they are very hard to check up. I would require you to travel from place to place as a sort of, say, secret inspector of branches, and furnish me with the inside information from the lack of which my business at present, I am afraid, is suffering severely."

"And that business?" The young man had raised himself to his elbow on the sand.

"The one that is nearest to your heart," said the tall man calmly. "Gambling."

The young man leaned slowly forward, staring at the other.

"I wonder if I quite get you?" he said.

"I am sure you do." The tall man smiled. "My business is a chain of select and exclusive gambling houses where only high play is indulged in, and whose clientele is the richest in the land."

The young man rose to his feet, walked a few steps away along the beach, and came back again.

"You're devilishly complimentary!" he flung out, with a short laugh. "As I understand it, then, the price I am

to pay for getting away from here is the pawning of my soul?"

"Have you anything else to pawn?" inquired the other—and the quill toothpick punctuated the remark: "Tck!"

"No," said the young man, with a twisted smile. "And I'm not sure I've got that left! I am beginning to have a suspicion that it was in your 'branch' at San Francisco that I lost my money."

"You did," said the other coolly. "That is how I came to know you. Though not personally in evidence in the 'house' itself, San Francisco is my home, and my information as to what goes on there at least is fairly accurate."

The young man resumed his pacing up and down the sand.

"And I might add," said the tall man after a moment, "that from a point of ethics I see little difference in the moral status between one who comes to gamble and one who furnishes the other with the opportunity to do so. You are perhaps hesitating to take the hurdle on that account?"

"Moral status!" exclaimed the young man sharply. He halted abruptly before the other. "No—at least I am not a hypocrite! What right have I to quarrel with moral status?"

"Very well, then," said the other; "I will go farther. I will give you everything in life that you desire. You will live as a gentleman of wealth surrounded by every luxury that money can procure, for that is your rôle. You may gamble to your heart's content, ten, twenty, fifty thousand a night—in my houses. You will travel the length and breadth of America. I will pay every expense. There is nothing that you may not have, nothing that you may not do."

The young man was silent for a full minute then, with his hands dug in his pockets, he fell to whistling under his breath very softly—but very deliberately.

An almost sinister smile spread over the tall man's lips as he listened.

"If I am not mistaken," he observed dryly, "that is the aria from Faust."

"Yes," said the young man—and stared the other in the eye. "It is the aria from Faust."

The tall man nodded—but now his lips were straight.

"I accept the rôle of Mephistopheles, then," he said softly. "Doctor Faustus, you know, signed the bond."

The young man squatted on the sand again. His face was curiously white; only the ugly welt, dull red, across his cheeks, like the mark of some strange branding-iron, held color.

"Then, draw it!" he said shortly. "And be damned to you!"

The tall man took a notebook and a fountain pen from his pocket. He wrote rapidly, tore out the leaf, and on a second leaf made a copy of the first. This, too, he tore out.

"I will read it," he said. "You will observe that no names are mentioned; that I have still reserved the privilege of keeping my identity in abeyance until the document is signed. This is what I have written: *For good and valid consideration the second signatory to this contract hereby enters unreservedly into the employ of the first signatory for a period which shall include the lifetime of one or other of the undersigned, or until such time as this agreement may be dissolved either by mutual consent or at the will of the first signatory alone. And the first signatory to this contract agrees to maintain the second signatory in a station in life commensurate with that of a gentleman of wealth irrespective of expense, and further to pay to the second signatory as a stated salary the sum of one thousand dollars a month.*" He looked up. "Shall I sign?"

"Body and soul," murmured the young man. He appeared to be fascinated with the restless movement of the quill toothpick in the other's mouth. "Have you another toothpick you could let me have?" he inquired casually.

The tall man mechanically thrust his fingers into his vest pocket; and then, as though but suddenly struck with the irrelevancy, and perhaps facetiousness, of the request, frowned as he found himself handing over the article in question.

"Shall I sign?" His tone was sterner. "It is understood that the signatures are to be bona fide and——"

"Yes, sign it. It is quite understood." The young man spoke without looking up. He seemed to be engrossed in carefully slitting the point of the quill toothpick he had acquired with his knife.

The other signed both sheets from the notebook.

The young man accepted the two slips of paper, but refused the proffered fountain pen. In the moonlight he read the other's signature: Gilbert Larmon. His lips tightened a little. It was a big name in San Francisco, a name of power. Few dreamed perhaps where the sinews of that power came from! He drew from his pocket a small bottle, uncorked it, dipped in the quill toothpick, and with his improvised pen wrote with a rasping, spluttering noise beneath the other's signature on each of the two slips of paper. One of these slips he returned to the other—but beneath the tall man's signature there was no mark of any kind whatever.

Through narrowing eyes the tall man had been watching, and now his face darkened ominously, and there was something of deadly coolness in his voice as he spoke.

"What tomfoolery is this?" he demanded evenly.

"No; it's quite all right," said the young man placidly. "Just a whim of mine. I can't seem to get that Doctor Faustus thing out of my head. According to the story, I think, he signed in a drop of blood—and I thought I'd carry a sort of analogy along a bit. That stuff's all right. I got it from my old native friend on that island I was telling you about. It's what my letter of introduction to Nanu was written with. And—well, at least, I guess it stands for the drop of blood, all right! Take it down there to the shore and dip that part of the paper in the salt water."

The tall man made no answer. For a moment he remained staring with grim-set features at the other, then he got up, walked sharply to the water's edge, and, bending down, moistened the lower portion of the paper. He held it up to the moonlight. Heavy black letters were slowly taking form just beneath his own signature. Presently he walked back up the beach to the young man, and held out his hand.

"Let us get back to the ship—John Bruce," he said.

## CHAPTER ONE—ALADDIN'S LAMP

JOHN BRUCE, stretched at full length on a luxurious divan in the most sumptuous apartment of the Bayne-Miloy, New York's newest and most pretentious hostelry, rose suddenly to his feet and switched off the lights. The same impulse carried him in a few strides to the window. The night was still, and the moon rode high and full. It was the same moon that, three months ago, he had stared at from the flat of his back on the beach at Apia. A smile, curiously tight, and yet curiously whimsical, touched his lips. If it had been "moon-madness" that had fallen upon the gambler king and himself that night, it had been a madness that was strangely free in its development from hallucination! That diagnosis no longer held. It would be much more apposite to lay it bluntly to the door of—Mephistopheles! From the moment he had boarded the mail steamer he had lived as a man possessed of unlimited wealth, as a man with unlimited funds always in his possession or at his instant command.

He whistled softly. It was, though, if not moon-madness, perhaps the moon, serene and full up there as it had been that other night, which he had been watching from the divan a few moments before, that had sent his mind scurrying backward over those intervening months. And yet, perhaps not; for there would come often enough, as now, moments of mind groping, yes, even the sense of hallucination, when he was not quite sure but that a certain bubble, floating at one moment in dazzlingly iridescent beauty before his eyes, would dissolve the next into blank nothingness, and— Well, what would it be then? Another beach at some Apia, until another Mephistopheles, in some other guise, came to play up against his rôle of Doctor Faustus again?

He looked sharply behind him around the darkened room, whose darkness did not hide its luxury. His shoulder brushed the heavy silken portière at his side; his fingers touched a roll of banknotes in his pocket, a generous roll, whose individual units were of denominations more generous still. These were realities!

Mephistopheles at play! He had left Larmon at Suva, Fiji. Thereafter, their ways and their lives lay apart—outwardly. Actually, even here in New York with the continent between them, for Larmon had resumed his life in which he played the rôle of a benevolent and retired man of wealth in San Francisco, they were in constant and extremely intimate touch with each other.

A modern Mephistopheles! Two men only in the world knew Gilbert Larmon for what he was! One other besides himself! And that other was a man named Maldeck, Peter Maldeck. But only one man knew him, John Bruce, in his new rôle, and that was Gilbert Larmon. Maldeck was the manager of the entire ring of gambling houses, and likewise the clearing house through which the profits flowed into Larmon's coffers; but to Maldeck, he, John Bruce, was exactly what he appeared to be to the world at large, and to the local managers of the gambling houses in particular—a millionaire plunger to whom gambling was as the breath of life. The "inspector of branches" dealt with Gilbert Larmon alone, and dealt confidentially and secretly over Maldeck's head—even that invisible writing fluid supplied by the old Samoan Islander playing its part when found necessary, for it had been agreed between Larmon and himself that even the most innocent appearing document received from him, John Bruce, should be subjected to the salt water test; and he had, indeed, already used it in several of the especially confidential reports that he had sent Larmon on some of the branches.

He shrugged his shoulders. The whole scheme of his changed existence had all been artfully simple—and superbly efficient. He was under no necessity to explain the source of his wealth except in his native city, San Francisco, where he was known—and San Francisco was outside his jurisdiction. With both Larmon and Maldeck making that their headquarters, other supervision of the local "branch" was superfluous; elsewhere, his wealth was inherited—that was all. So, skipping San Francisco, he had come leisurely eastward, gambling for a week or two weeks, as the case might be, in the various cities, following as guidance apparently but the whim of his supposedly roué inclinations, and he had lost a lot of money—which would eventually find its way back to its original source in the pockets of Gilbert Larmon, via the clearing house conducted by Peter Maldeck. It was extremely simple—but, equally, extremely systematic. The habitudes of every branch were carefully catalogued. He had only—and casually—to make the acquaintance of one of these in each city, and, in turn, quite inevitably, would follow an introduction to the local "house"; and, once introduced, the entrée, then or on any subsequent visit to that city, was an established fact.

John Bruce laughed suddenly, softly, out into the night. It had been a good bargain that he had made with Mephistopheles! Wealth, luxury, everything he desired in life was his. On the trail behind him in the cities he had already visited he had nightly lost or won huge sums of money until he had become known as the millionaire plunger. It was quite true that, in as much as the money, whether lost or won, but passed from his right- to his left-hand pocket—the pockets being represented by one Gilbert Larmon—the gambler craving within him was but ill served, almost in a sense mocked; but that phase of it had sunk into insignificance. The whole idea was a gigantic gamble—a gamble with life. The whole fabric was of texture most precarious. It exhilarated him. Excitement, adventure, yes, even peril, beckoned alluringly and always from around the corner just ahead. He stood against the police; he stood a very excellent chance of being discovered some morning minus his life if the men he was set to watch, and who now fawned upon him and treated him with awe and an unholy admiration, should get an inkling of his real identity and his real purpose in their houses!

He yawned, and as though glorying in his own strength flexed his great shoulders, and stretched his arms to their full length above his head. God, it was life! It made of him a superman. He had no human ties to bind him; no restraint to know; no desire that could not be satiated. The past was wiped away. It was like some reincarnation in which he stood supreme above his fellow men, and they bowed to their god. And he was their



god. And if he but nodded approval they would lie, and cheat, and steal, and commit murder in their greed of worship, they whose souls were in pawn to their god!

He turned suddenly from the window, switched on the lights, drew from his pocket a great sum of money in banknotes, and stood staring at it. There were thousands in his hand. Thousands and thousands! Money! The one universally-orthodox god! For but one of these pieces of paper in his hand he could command what he would, play upon human passions at his whim, and like puppets on a stage of his own setting move the followers of the Great Creed, that were numbered in their millions, at his will! It was only over the few outcasts, the unbelievers, that he held no sway. But he could afford to ignore the minority! Was he not indeed a god?

And it had cost him nothing. Only the pawning of his soul; and, like Faustus, the day of settlement was afar off. Only the signing of a bond that postulated a denial of what he had already beforehand held in light esteem—a code of canting morals. It was well such things were out of the way! Life stretched the fuller, the rosier, the more red-blooded before him on that account. He was well content. The future lured him. Nor was it money alone. There was the spice of adventure, the battle of wits, hardly inaugurated yet, between himself and those whose underground methods were the *raison d'être* of his own magically enhanced circumstances.

John Bruce replaced the money in his pocket abruptly, and frowned. That was something, from still another standpoint, which he could not afford to lose sight of. He had to justify his job. Gilbert Larmon had stated that he was not a philanthropist, and it was written in the bond that Larmon could terminate the agreement at will. Yes, and that was queer, too! What kind of a man was Larmon? He knew Larmon, as Larmon superficially subjected himself to inspection and speculation; but he was fully aware that he did not know Larmon the man. There seemed something almost sinister in its inconsistency that Larmon should at one and the same time reserve the right to terminate that bond at will while his very signature upon it furnished a weapon which, if he, John Bruce, chose to use it, placed the other at his mercy. What kind of a man was Larmon? No fool, no weakling—that was certain. And yet at a word he, John Bruce, could tear the other from the pseudorighteous pedestal upon which he posed, strip the other naked of the garments that clothed his criminal activities, and destroy utterly the carefully reared structure of respectability that Larmon had built up around himself. It might be very true that he, John Bruce, would never use such a weapon, even under provocation; but Larmon could not be sure of that. How then did Larmon reconcile his reservation to terminate the contract at will and yet furnish his co-signatory with the means of black-mailing him into a continuance of it? What kind of a man was Larmon? What would he be like with his back to the wall? What *other* reservation had been in Larmon's mind when he had drawn that bond?

And then a queer and bitter smile came to John Bruce's lips. The god of money! Was he so sure that he was the god and not the worshiper? Was that it? Was that what Larmon counted upon?—that only a fool would risk the sacrifice of the Aladdin's lamp that had been thrust into his hands, and that only a fool but would devote body and soul to Larmon's interests under the circumstances!

The smile grew whimsical. It was complimentary in a sense. It was based on the premise that he, John Bruce, was not a fool. He shrugged his shoulders. Well, therein Larmon was right. It would not be his, John Bruce's, fault if anything short of death terminated the bond which had originated that tropic night on the moon-lit beach in Samoa three months ago!

He looked at his watch. It was nine o'clock. It was still early for play; but it was not so early that his arrival in the New York "branch," where he had been a constant visitor for the last four nights, could possibly arouse any suspicion, and one's opportunities for inside observation were very much better when the play was desultory and but few present than in the crowded rooms of the later hours.

"If I were in England now," said John Bruce, addressing the chandelier, as he put on a light coat over his evening clothes, "I couldn't get away with this without a man to valet me—and at times, though he might be useful, he might be awkward. Damned awkward! But in America you do, or you don't, as you please—and I don't!"

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## CHAPTER TWO—THE MILLIONAIRE PLUNGER

**J**OHN BRUCE left the hotel and entered a taxi. A little later, in that once most fashionable section of New York, in the neighborhood of Gramercy Square, he was admitted to a stately mansion by a white-haired negro butler, who bowed obsequiously.

Thereafter, for a little while, John Bruce wandered leisurely from room to room in the magnificently appointed house, where in the rich carpets the sound of footsteps was lost, where bronzes and paintings, exquisite in their art, charmed the eye, where soft-toned draperies and portières were eloquent of refinement and good taste; he paused for a moment at the threshold of the supper room, whose table was a profusion of every delicacy to tempt the palate, where wines of a vintage that was almost priceless were to be had at no greater cost than the effort required to lift a beckoning finger to the smiling ebony face of old Jake, the attendant. And here John Bruce extended a five-dollar bill, but shook his head as the said Jake hastened toward him. Later, perhaps, he might revisit the room—when a few hours' play had dimmed the recollection of his recent dinner, and his appetite was again sharpened.

In the card rooms there were, as yet, scarcely any "guests." He chatted pleasantly with the "dealers"—John Bruce, the millionaire plunger, was *persona grata*, almost effusively so, everywhere in the house. Lavergne,

the manager, as Parisian as he was immaculate from the tips of his patent-leathers to the tips of his waxed mustache, joined him; and for ten minutes, until the other was called away, John Bruce proceeded to nourish the already extremely healthy germ of intimacy that, from the first meeting, he had planted between them.

With the manager's million apologies for the unpardonable act of tearing himself away still sounding in his ears, John Bruce placidly resumed his wanderings. The New York "branch," which being interpreted meant Monsieur Henri de Lavergne, the exquisite little manager, was heavily underscored on Gilbert Larmon's black-list!

The faint, musical whir of the little ivory ball from the roulette table caught John Bruce's attention, and he strolled in that direction. Here a "guest" was already at play. The croupier smiled as John Bruce approached the table. John Bruce smiled pleasantly in return, and sat down. After a moment, he began to make small five-dollar bets on the "red." His fellow-player was plunging heavily—and losing. Also, the man was slightly under the influence of liquor. The croupier's voice droned through half a dozen plays. John Bruce continued to make five-dollar bets. The little by-play interested him. He knew the signs.

His fellow-player descended to the supper room for another drink, it being against the rules of the house to serve anything in the gambling rooms. The croupier laughed as he glanced at the retreating figure and then at another five-dollar bet that John Bruce pushed upon the "red."

"He'll rob you of your reputation, Mr. Bruce, if you don't look out!" the croupier smiled quizzically. "Are you finding a thrill in playing the minimum for a change?"

"Just feeling my way." John Bruce returned the smile. "It's a bit early yet, isn't it?"

The other player returned. He continued to bet heavily. He made another excursion below stairs. Other "guests" drifted into the room, and the play became more general.

John Bruce increased his stakes slightly, quite indifferent naturally as to whether he lost or won—since he could neither lose nor win. He was sitting beside the player he had originally joined at the table, and suddenly his interest in the other became still more enlivened. The man, after a series of disastrous plays, was palpably broke, for he snatched off a large diamond ring from his finger and held it out to the croupier.

"Give me—hic!—somethin' on that," he hiccupped. "Might as well make a clean-up, eh?"

The croupier took the ring, examined it critically for an instant, and handed it back.

"I'm sorry," he said; "but you know the rules of the house. I couldn't advance anything on it if it were worth a million. But the stone's valuable, all right. You'd better take a trip to Persia."

The man replaced the ring with some difficulty upon his finger, and stared owlishly at the croupier.

"T' hell with your—hic!—trip to Persia!" he said thickly. "Don't like Persia! Been—hic!—there before! Guess I'll go home!"

The man negotiated his way to the door; the game went on. John Bruce began to increase his stakes materially. A trip to Persia! What, exactly, did that mean? It both piqued his curiosity and stirred his suspicions. He smiled as he placed a heavy stake upon the table. It would probably be a much more expensive trip to this fanciful Persia than to the Persia of reality, for it seemed that one must go broke first! Well, he would go broke—though it would require some little finesse for John Bruce, the millionaire plunger, to attain that envious situation without exciting suspicion. He was very keenly interested in this personally conducted tour, obviously inaugurated by that exquisite little man, Monsieur Paul de Lavergne!

John Bruce to his inward chagrin—won. He began to play now with a zest, eagerness and excitement which, heretofore, the juggling of Mephistopheles' money had deprived him of. Outwardly, however, the calm impassiveness that, in the few evenings he had been in the house, had already won him the reputation of being par excellence a cool and nervy plunger, remained unchanged.

He continued to win for a while; and then suddenly he began to lose. This was much better! He lost steadily now. He staked with lavish hand, playing numerous long chances for the limit at every voyage of the clicking little ivory ball. Finally, the last of his visible assets were on the table, and he leaned forward to watch the fall of the ball. He was already fingering the magnificent jeweled watch-fob that dangled from the pocket of his evening clothes.

"Zero!" announced the croupier.

The "zero" had been one of his selections. The "zero" paid 35 for 1.

A subdued ripple of excitement went up from around the table. The room was filling up. The still-early comers, mostly spectators for the time being, lured to the roulette table at the whisper that the millionaire plunger was out to-night to break the bank, were whetting their own appetites in the play of Mr. John Bruce, who had obviously just escaped being broke himself by a very narrow margin.

John Bruce smiled. He was in funds again—more so than pleased him!

"It's a 'zero' night, Mr. Croupier," observed John Bruce pleasantly. "Roll her again!"

But now luck was with John Bruce. The "zero" and his other combinations were as shy and elusive as fawns. At the expiration of another half hour the net result of John Bruce's play consisted in his having transferred from his own keeping into the keeping of the New York branch thirty thousand dollars of Mephistopheles' money. He was to all appearances flagrantly broke as far as funds in his immediate possession were concerned.

"I guess," said John Bruce, with a whimsical smile, "that I didn't bring enough with me. I don't know where I can get any more to-night, and—oh, here!" He laughed with easy grace, as he suddenly tossed his jeweled watch-fob to the croupier. "One more fling anyhow—I've still unbounded faith in 'zero'! Let me have a thousand on that. It's worth about two."

The croupier, as on the previous occasion, examined the article, but, as before, shook his head.

"I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Bruce, but it's strictly against the rules of the house," he said apologetically. "I can fix it for you easily enough though, if you care to take a trip to Persia."

"A trip to Persia?" inquired John Bruce in a puzzled way. "I think I heard you suggest that before this



evening. What's the idea?"

Some of those around the table were smiling.

"It's all right," volunteered a player opposite, with a laugh. "Only look out for the conductor!"

"Shoot!" said John Bruce nonchalantly. "That's good enough! You can book my passage, Mr. Croupier."

The croupier called an attendant, spoke to him, and the man left the room.

"It will take a few minutes, Mr. Bruce—while you are getting your hat and coat. The doorman will let you know," said the croupier, and with a bow to John Bruce resumed the interrupted game.

John Bruce strolled from the room, and descended to the lower floor. He entered the supper room, and while old Jake plied him with delicacies he saw the doorman emerge from the telephone booth out in the hall, hurry away, and presently return, talking earnestly with Monsieur Henri de Lavergne. The manager, in turn, entered the booth.

Monsieur Henri de Lavergne came into the supper room after a moment.

"In just a few minutes, Mr. Bruce—there will be a slight delay," he said effusively. "Too bad to keep you waiting."

"Not at all!" responded John Bruce. He held a wine glass up to the light. "This is very excellent, Monsieur de Lavergne."

Monsieur Henri de Lavergne accepted the compliment with a gratified bow.

"Mr. Bruce is very kind to say so," he said—and launched into an elaborate apology that Mr. Bruce should be put to any inconvenience to obtain the financial accommodation asked for. The security that Mr. Bruce offered was unquestioned. It was not that. It was the rule of the house. Mr. Bruce would understand.

Mr. Bruce understood perfectly.

"Quite so!" he said cordially.

Monsieur Henri de Lavergne excused himself, and left the room.

"A fishy, clever little crook," confided John Bruce to himself. "I wonder what's the game?"

He continued to sip his wine in apparent indifference to the passing minutes, nor was his indifference altogether assumed. His mind was quite otherwise occupied. It was rather neat, that—a trip to Persia. The expression in itself held a lure which had probably not been overlooked as an asset. It suggested Bagdad, and the Arabian Nights, and a Caliph and a Grand Vizier who stalked about in disguise. On the other hand, the inebriated gentleman had evidently had his fill of it on one occasion, and would have no more of it. And the other gentleman who had, as it were, indorsed the proceeding, had, at the same time, taken the occasion to throw out a warning to beware of the conductor.

John Bruce smiled pleasantly into his wine glass. Not very difficult to fathom, perhaps, after all! It was probably some shrewd old reprobate with usurious rates in cahoots with the sleek Monsieur Henri de Lavergne, who made a side-split on the said rates in return for the exclusive privilege accorded the other of acting as leech to the guests of the house when in extremity.

It had been perhaps twenty minutes since he had left the roulette table. He looked at his watch now as he saw the doorman coming toward the supper room with his hat and coat. The night was still early. It was a quarter to eleven.

He went out into the hall.

"Yassuh," said the gray-haired and obsequious old darky, as he assisted John Bruce into his coat, "if yo'all will just come with me, Mistuh Bruce, yo'all will be 'commodated right prompt."

John Bruce followed his guide to the doorstep.

The darky pointed to a closed motor car at the curb by the corner, a few houses away.

"Yo'all just say 'Persia' to the shuffer, Mistuh Bruce, and——"

"All right!" John Bruce smiled his interruption, and went down the steps to the sidewalk.

John Bruce approached the waiting car leisurely, scrutinizing it the while; and as he approached, it seemed to take on more and more the aspect of a venerable and decrepit ark. The body of the car was entirely without light; the glass front, if there were one, behind the man whom he discerned sitting in the chauffeur's seat, was evidently closely curtained; and so, too, he now discovered as he drew nearer, were the windows and doors of the car as well.

"The parlor looks a little ominous," said John

Bruce softly to himself. "I wonder how far it is to the spider's dining room?"

He halted as he reached the vehicle.

"I'm bound for Persia, I believe," he suggested pleasantly to the chauffeur.

The chauffeur leaned out, and John Bruce was conscious that he was undergoing a critical inspection. In turn he looked at the chauffeur, but there was very little light. The car seemed to have chosen a spot as little disturbed by the rays of the street lamps as possible, and he gained but a vague impression of a red, weather-beaten face, clean shaved, with shaggy brows under grizzled hair, the whole topped by an equally weather-beaten felt hat of nondescript shape and color.

The inspection, on the chauffeur's part at least, appeared to be satisfactory.

"Yes, sir," said the man. "Step in, sir, please."

The door swung open—just how, John Bruce could not have explained. He stepped briskly into the car—only to draw back instinctively as he found it already occupied. But the door had closed behind him. It was inky black in the interior now with the door shut. The car was jolting into motion.

"Pardon me!" said John Bruce a little grimly, and sat down on the back seat.

A woman! He had just been able to make out a woman's form as he had stepped in. It was clever—damned clever! Of both the exquisite Monsieur Henri de Lavergne and the money-lending spider at the other end of

this pleasant little jaunt into unexplored Persia! A woman in it—a luring, painted, fair and winsome damsel, no doubt—to make the usurious pill of illegal interest a little sweeter! Oh, yes, he quite understood now that warning to beware of the conductor!

“I did not anticipate such charming company,” said John Bruce facetiously. “Have we far to go?”

There was no answer.

Something like a shadow, deeper than the surrounding blackness, seemed to pass before John Bruce's eyes, and then he sat bolt upright, startled and amazed. In front of him, let down from the roof of the car, was a small table covered with black velvet, and suspended some twelve inches above the table, throwing the glow downward in a round spot of light over the velvet surface, was a shaded electric lamp. A small white hand, bare of any ornament, palm upward, lay upon the velvet table-top under the play of the light.

A voice spoke now softly from beside him:

“You have something to pawn?”

John Bruce stared. He still could not see her face. “Er—yes,” he said. He frowned in perplexity. “When we get to Persia, alias the pawn-shop.”

“This is the pawn-shop,” she answered. “Let me see what you have, please.”

“Well, I'm da——” John Bruce checked himself.

There was a delicacy about that white hand resting there under the light that rebuked him. “Er—pardon me,” said John Bruce.

He felt for his jeweled watch-fob, unfastened it, and laid it in the extended palm. He laughed a little to himself. On with the game! The lure was here, all right; the stage setting was masterly—and now the piper would be paid on a basis, probably, that would relegate Shylock himself to the kindergarten class of money lenders!

And then, suddenly, it seemed to John Bruce as though his blood whipping through his veins was afire. A face in profile, bending forward to examine the diamonds and the setting of the fob-pendant, came under the light. He gazed at it fascinated. It was the most beautiful face he had ever seen. His eyes drank in the rich masses of brown, silken hair, the perfect throat, the chin and lips that, while modelled in sweet womanliness, were still eloquent of self-reliance and strength. He had thought to see a pretty face, a little brazen perhaps, and artfully powdered and rouged; what he saw was a vision of loveliness that seemed to personify the unsullied, God-given freshness and purity of youth.

He spoke involuntarily; no power of his could have kept back the words.

“My God, you are wonderful!” he exclaimed in a low voice.

He saw the color swiftly tinge the throat a coral pink, and mount upwards; but she did not look at him. Her eyes! He wanted to see her eyes—to look into them! But she did not turn her head.

“You probably paid two thousand dollars for this,” she said quietly, “and——”

“Nineteen hundred,” corrected John Bruce mechanically.

“I will allow you seventeen hundred on it, then,” she said, still quietly. “The interest will be at seven per cent. Do you wish to accept the offer?”

Seventeen hundred! Seven per cent! It was in consonance with the vision! His mind was topsy-turvy.

He did not understand.

“It is very liberal,” said John Bruce, trying to control his voice. “Of course, I accept.”

The shapely head nodded.

He watched her spellbound. The watch-fob had vanished, and in its place now under the little conical shaft of light she was swiftly counting out a pile of crisp, new, fifty-dollar banknotes. To these she added a stamped and numbered ticket.

“You may redeem the pledge at any time by making application to the same person to whom you originally applied for a loan to-night,” she said, as she handed him the money. “Please count it.”

Her head was in shadow now. He could no longer even see her profile. She was sitting back in her corner of the car.

“I—I am quite satisfied,” said John Bruce a little helplessly.

“Please count it,” she insisted.

With a shrug of protest, John Bruce obeyed her. It was not at all the money that concerned him, nor the touch of it that was quickening his pulse.

“It is quite correct,” he said, putting money and ticket in his pocket. He turned toward her. “And now——”

His words ended in a little gasp. The light was out. In the darkness that shadow passed again before his eyes, and he was conscious that the table had vanished—also that the car had stopped.

The door opened.

“If you please, sir!” It was the chauffeur, holding the door open.

John Bruce hesitated.

“I—er—look here!” he said. “I——”

“If you please, sir!” There was something of significant finality in the man's patient and respectful tones.

John Bruce smiled wryly.

“Well, at least, I may say good-night,” he said, as he backed out of the car.

“Certainly, sir—good-night, sir,” said the chauffeur calmly—and closed the door, and touched his hat, and climbed back to his seat.

John Bruce glared at the man.

“Well, I'm damned!” said John Bruce fervently.

## CHAPTER THREE—SANCTUARY

THE car started off. It turned the corner. John Bruce looked around him. He was standing on precisely the same spot from which he had entered the car. He had been driven around the block, that was all!

He caught his breath. Was it real? That wondrous face which, almost as though at the touch of some magician's wand, had risen before him out of the blackness! His blood afire was leaping through his veins again. That face!

He ran to the corner and peered down the street. The car was perhaps a hundred yards away—and suddenly John Bruce started to run again, following the car. Madness! His lips had set grim and hard. Who was she that prowled the night in that bizarre traveling pawn-shop? Where did she live? Was it actually the Arabian Nights back again? He laughed at himself—not mirthfully. But still he ran on.

The car was outdistancing him. Fool! For a woman's face! Even though it were a divine symphony of beauty! Fool? Love-smitten idiot? Not at all! It was his job! Nice sound to that word in conjunction with that haunting memory of loveliness—job!

The traveling pawn-shop turned into Fourth Avenue, and headed downtown. John Bruce caught the sound of a street car gong, spurted and swung breathlessly to the platform of a car going in the same direction.

Of course, it was his job! The exquisite Monsieur Henri de Lavergne was mixed up in this.

"Hell!"

The street car conductor stared at him. John Bruce scowled. He swore again—but this time under his breath. It brought a sudden wild, unreasonable rage and rebellion, the thought that there should be anything, even of the remotest nature, between the glorious vision in that car and the mincing, silken-tongued manager of Larmon's gambling hell. But there was, for all that, wasn't there? How else had she come there? It was the usual thing, wasn't it? And—beware of the conductor! The warning now appeared to be very apt! And how well he had profited by it! A fool chasing a siren's beauty!

His face grew very white.

"John Bruce," he whispered to himself, "if I could get at you I'd pound your face to pulp for that!"

He leaned out from the platform. The traveling pawn-shop had increased its speed and was steadily leaving the street car behind. He looked back in the opposite direction. The street was almost entirely deserted as far as traffic went. The only vehicle in sight was a taxi bowling along a block in the rear. He laughed out again harshly. The conductor eyed him suspiciously.

John Bruce dropped off the car, and planted himself in the path of the on-coming taxi. Call it his job, then, if it pleased him! He owed it to Larmon to get to the bottom of this. How extremely logical he was! The transaction in the traveling pawn-shop had been so fair-minded as almost to exonerate Monsieur Henri de Lavergne on the face of it, and if it had not been for a certain vision therein, and a fire in his own veins, and a fury at the thought that even her acquaintance with the gambling manager was profanity, he could have heartily applauded Monsieur Henri de Lavergne for a unique and original—

The taxi bellowed at him, hoarsely indignant.

John Bruce stepped neatly to one side—and jumped on the footboard.

"Here, you! What the hell!" shouted the chauffeur. "You—"

"Push your foot on it a little," said John Bruce calmly. "And don't lose sight of that closed car ahead."

"Lose sight of nothin'!" yelled the chauffeur. "I've got a fare, an'—"

"I hear him," said John Bruce composedly. He edged in beside the chauffeur, and one of the crisp, new, fifty-dollar banknotes passed into the latter's possession. "Keep that car in sight, and don't make it hopelessly obvious that you are following it. I'll attend to your fare."

He screwed around in his seat. An elderly, gray-whiskered gentleman, a patently irate gentleman, was pounding furiously on the glass panel.

"We should be turnin' down this street we're just passin'," grinned the chauffeur.

John Bruce lowered the panel.

"What's the meaning of this?" thundered the fare.

"I'm very sorry, sir," said John Bruce respectfully.

"A little detective business." He coughed. It was really quite true. His voice became confidential. "The occupants of that car ahead got away from me. I—I want to arrest one of them. I'm very sorry to put you to any inconvenience, but it couldn't be helped. There was no other way than to commandeer your taxi. It will be only for a matter of a few minutes."

"It's preposterous!" spluttered the fare. "Outrageous! I—I'll—"

"Yes, sir," said John Bruce. "But there was nothing else I could do. You can report it to headquarters, of course."

He closed the panel.

"Fly-cop—not!" said the chauffeur, with his tongue in his cheek. "Any fly-cop that ever got his mitt on a whole fifty-dollar bill all at one time couldn't be pried lose from it with a crowbar!"

"It lets you out, doesn't it?" inquired John Bruce pleasantly. "Now let's see you earn it."

"I'll earn it!" said the chauffeur with unction. "You leave it to me, boss!"

The quarry, in the shape of the traveling pawn shop, directed its way into the heart of the East Side. Presently it turned into a hiving, narrow street, where hawkers with their push-carts in the light of flaring, spitting gasoline banjoes were doing a thriving business. The two cars went more slowly now. There was very little room. The taxi almost upset a fish vendor's wheeled emporium. The vendor was eloquent—fervently so. But the chauffeur's eyes, after an impersonal and indifferent glance at the other, returned to the car ahead. The taxi continued on its way, trailing fifty yards in the rear of the traveling pawn-shop.

At the end of the block the car ahead turned the corner. As the taxi, in turn, rounded the corner, John Bruce saw that the traveling pawn-shop was drawn up before a small building that was nested in between two tenements. The blood quickened in his pulse. The girl had alighted, and was entering the small building.

"Hit it up a little to the next corner, turn it, and let me off there," directed John Bruce.

"I get you!" said the chauffeur.

The taxi swept past the car at the curb. Another minute and it had swung the next corner, and was slowing down. John Bruce jumped to the ground before the taxi stopped.

"Good-night!" he called to the chauffeur.

He waved his hand debonairly at the scowling, whiskered visage that was watching him from the interior of the cab, and hurriedly retraced his way back around the corner.

The traveling pawn-shop had turned and was driving away. John Bruce moderated his pace, and sauntered on along the street. He smiled half grimly, half contentedly to himself. The "trip to Persia" had led him a little farther afield than Monsieur Henri de Lavergne had perhaps counted on—or than he, John Bruce, himself had, either! But he knew now where the most glorious woman he had ever seen in his life lived, or, at least, was to be found again. No, it wasn't the *moon*! To him, she was exactly that. And he had not seen her for the last time, either! That was what he was here for, though he wasn't so mad as to risk, or, rather, invite an affront to begin with by so bald an act as to go to the front door, say, and ring the bell—which would be tantamount to informing her that he had—er—played the detective from the moment he had left her in the car. To-morrow, perhaps, or the next day, or whenever fate saw fit to be in a kindly mood, a meeting that possessed all the hall-marks of being quite inadvertent offered him high hopes. Later, if fate still were kind, he would tell her that he had followed her, and what she would be thoroughly justified in misconstruing now, she might then accept as the tribute to her that he meant it to be—when she knew him better.

John Bruce was whistling softly to himself.

He was passing the house now, his scrutiny none the less exhaustive because it was apparently casual. It was a curious little two-story place tucked away between the two flanking tenements, the further one of which alone separated the house from the corner he was approaching. Not a light showed from the front of the house. Yes, it was quite a curious place! Although curtains were on the lower front windows, indicating that it was purely a dwelling, the windows themselves were of abnormal size, as though, originally perhaps, the ground floor had once been a shop of some kind.

John Bruce turned the corner, and from a comparatively deserted street found himself among the vendors' push-carts and the spluttering gasoline torches again. He skirted the side of the tenement that made the corner, discovered the fact that a lane cut in from the street and ran past the rear of the tenement, which he mentally noted must likewise run past the rear of the little house that was now so vitally interesting to him—and halted on the opposite side of the lane to survey his surroundings. Here a dirty and uninviting café attracted his attention, which, if its dingy sign were to be believed, was run by one Palasco Ratti, a gentleman of parts in the choice of wines which he offered to his patrons. John Bruce surveyed Palasco Ratti's potential clientele—the street was full of it; the shawled women, the dark-visaged, ear-ringed men. He smiled a little to himself. No—probably not the half-naked children who sprawled in the gutter and crawled amongst the push-carts' wheels! How was it that *she* should ever have come to live in a neighborhood to which the designation "foreign," as far as she was concerned, must certainly apply in particularly full measure? It was strange that she—

John Bruce's mental soliloquy came to an abrupt end. Half humorously, half grimly his eyes were riveted on the push-cart at the curb directly opposite to him, the proprietor of which dealt in that brand of confection so much in favor on the East Side—a great slab of candy from which, as occasion required, he cut slices with a large carving knife. A brown and grimy fist belonging to a tot of a girl of perhaps eight or nine years of age, who had crept in under the pushcart, was stealthily feeling its way upward behind the vendor's back, its objective being, obviously, a generous piece of candy that reposed on the edge of the push-cart. There was a certain fascination in watching developments. It was quite immoral, of course, but his sympathies were with the child. It was a gamble whether the grimy little hand would close on the coveted prize and disappear again victorious, or whether the vendor would turn in time to frustrate the raid.

The tot's hand crept nearer and nearer its goal.

No one, save himself of the many about, appeared to notice the little cameo of primal instinct that was on exhibition before them. The small and dirty fingers touched the candy, closed on it, and were withdrawn—but were withdrawn too quickly. The child, at the psychological moment under stress of excitement, eagerness and probably a wildly thumping heart, had failed in finesse. Perhaps the paper that covered the surface of the push-cart and on which the wares were displayed rattled; perhaps the sudden movement in itself attracted the vendor's attention. The man whirled and made a vicious dive for the child as she darted out from between the wheels. And then she screamed. The man had hit her a brutal clout across the head.

John Bruce straightened suddenly, a dull red creeping from his set jaw to his cheeks. Still clutching the candy in her hand the child was running blindly and in terror straight toward him. The man struck again, and the child staggered, and, reeling, sought sanctuary between John Bruce's legs. A bearded, snarling face in pursuit loomed up before him—and John Bruce struck, struck as he had once struck before on a white moon-flooded deck when a man, a brute beast, had gone down before him—and the vendor, screaming shrilly, lay kicking in pain on the sidewalk.



It had happened quickly. Not one, probably, of those on the street had caught the details of the little scene. And now the tiny thief had wriggled through his legs, and with the magnificent irresponsibility of childhood had darted away and was lost to sight. It had happened quickly—but not so quickly as the gathering together of an angry, surging crowd around John Bruce.

Some one in the crowd shrieked out above the clamor of voices:

“He kill-a Pietro! Kill-a da dude!”

It was a fire-brand.

John Bruce backed away a little—up against the door of Signor Pascalo Ratti's wine shop. A glance showed him that, with the blow he had struck, his light overcoat had become loosened, and that he was flaunting an immaculate and gleaming shirt-front in the faces of the crowd. And between their Pietro with a broken jaw and an intruder far too well dressed to please their fancy, the psychology of the crowd became the psychology of a mob.

The fire-brand took.

“Kill-a da dude!” It was echoed in chorus—and then a rush.

It flung John Bruce heavily against the wine shop door, and the door crashed inward—and for a moment he was down, and the crowd, like a snarling wolf pack, was upon him. And then the massive shoulders heaved, and he shook them off and was on his feet; and all that was primal, elemental in the man was dominant, the mad glorying in strife upon him, and he struck right and left with blows before which, again and again, a man went down.

But the rush still bore him backward, and the doorway was black and jammed with reenforcements constantly pouring in. Tables crashed to the floor, chairs were overturned. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a white-mustached Italian leap upon the counter and alternately wave his arms and wring his hands together frantically.

“For the mercy of God!” the man screamed—and then his voice added to the din in a flood of impassioned Italian.

It was Signor Pascalo Ratti, probably.

John Bruce was panting now, his breath coming in short, hard gasps. It was not easy to keep them in front of him, to keep his back free. He caught the glint of knife blades now.

He was borne back foot by foot, the space widening as he retreated from the door, giving room for more to come upon him at the same time. A knife blade lunged at him. He evaded it—but another glittering in the ceiling light at the same instant, flashing a murderous arc in its downward plunge, caught him, and, before he could turn, sank home.

A yell of triumph went up. He felt no pain. Only a sudden sickening of his brain, a sudden weakness that robbed his limbs of strength, and he reeled and staggered, fighting blindly now.

And then his brain cleared. He flung a quick glance over his shoulder. Yes, there was one chance. Only one! And in another minute, with another knife thrust, it would be too late. He whirled suddenly and raced down the length of the café. In the moment's grace earned through surprise at his sudden action, he gained a door he had seen there, and threw himself upon it. It was not fastened, though there was a key in the lock. He whipped out the key, plunged through, locked the door on the outside with the fraction of a second to spare before they came battering upon it—and stumbled and fell headlong out into the open.

It was as though he were lashing his brain into action and virility. It kept wobbling and fogging. Didn't the damned thing understand that his life, was at stake! He lurched to his feet. He was in a lane.

In front of him, like great looming shadows, shadows that wobbled too, he saw the shapes of two tenements, and like an inset between them, a small house with a light gleaming in the lower window.

That was where the vision lived. Only there was a fence between. Sanctuary! He lunged toward the fence. He had not meant to—to make a call to-night—she—she might have misunderstood. But in a second now *they* would come sweeping around into the lane after him from the street.

He clawed his way to the top of the fence, and because his strength was almost gone fell from the top of the fence to the ground on the other side.

And now he crawled, crawled with what frantic haste he could, because he heard the uproar from the street. And he laughed. The kid was probably munching her hunk of candy now. Queer things—kids! Got her candy—happy—

He reached up to the sill of an open window, clawed his way upward, as he had clawed his way up the fence, straddled the sill unsteadily, clutched at nothingness to save himself, and toppled inward to the floor of the room.

A yell from the head of the lane, a cry from the other end of the room, spurred him into final effort. He gained his feet, and swept his hand, wet with blood, across his eyes. That was the vision there running toward him, wasn't it?—the wonderful, glorious vision!

“Pardon me!” said John Bruce in a sing-song voice, and with a desperate effort reached up and pulled down the window shade. He tried to smile “Queer—queer things—kids—aren't they? She—she just ducked out from under.”

The girl was staring at him wildly, her hands tightly clasped to her bosom.

“Pardon me!” whispered John Bruce thickly. He couldn't see her any more, just a multitude of objects whirling like a kaleidoscope before his eyes. “She—she got the candy,” said John Bruce, attempting to smile again—and pitched unconscious to the floor.

## CHAPTER FOUR—A DOCTOR OF MANY DEGREES

**D**EAD! The girl was on her knees beside John Bruce. Dead—he did not move! It was the man who had pawned his watch-fob hardly half an hour before! What did it mean? What did those angry shouts, that scurrying of many feet out there in the lane mean? Hurriedly, her face as deadly white as the face upturned to her from the floor, she tore open the once immaculate shirt-front, that was now limp and wet and ugly with a great crimson stain, and laid bare the wound.

The sounds from without were receding, the scurrying footsteps were keeping on along the lane. A quiver ran through the form on the floor. Dead! No, he was not dead—not—not yet.

A little cry escaped from her tightly closed lips, and for an instant she covered her eyes with her hands. The wound was terrible—it frightened her. It frightened her the more because, intuitively, she knew that it was beyond any inexperienced aid that she could give. But she must act, and act quickly.

She turned and ran into the adjoining room to the telephone, but even as she reached out to lift the receiver from the hook she hesitated. Doctor Crang! A little shudder of aversion swept over her—and then resolutely, even pleading with central to hurry, she asked for the connection. It was not a matter of choice, or aversion, or any other consideration in the world save a question of minutes. The life of that man in there on the floor hung by a thread. Doctor Crang was nearby enough to respond almost instantly, and there was no one else she knew of who she could hope would reach the man in time. And—she stared frantically at the instrument now—was even he unavailable? Why didn't he answer? Why didn't—

A voice reached her. She recognized it.

"Doctor Crang, this is Claire Veniza," she said, and it did not seem as though she could speak fast enough. "Come at once—oh, at once—please! There's a man here frightfully wounded. There isn't a second to lose, so —"

"My dear Claire," interrupted the voice suavely, "instead of losing one you can save several by telling me what kind of a wound it is, and where the man is wounded."

"It's a knife wound, a stab, I think," she answered; "and it's in his side. He is unconscious, and——"

The receiver at the other end had been replaced on its hook.

She turned from the telephone, and swiftly, hurrying, but in cool self-control now, she obtained some cloths and a basin of warm water, and returned to John Bruce's side. She could not do much, she realized that—only make what effort she could to staunch the appalling flow of blood from the wound; that, and place a cushion under the man's head, for she could not lift him to the couch.

The minutes passed; and then, thinking she heard a footstep at the front door, she glanced in that direction, half in relief, and yet, too, in curious apprehension. She listened. No, there was no one there yet. She had been mistaken.

Suddenly she caught her breath in a little gasp, as though startled. Doctor Crang was clever; but faith in Doctor Crang professionally was one thing, and faith in him in other respects was quite another. Why hadn't she thought of it before? It wasn't too late yet, was it?

She began to search hastily through John Bruce's pockets. Doctor Crang would almost certainly suggest removing the man from the sitting room down here and getting him upstairs to a bedroom, and then he would undress his patient, and—and it was perhaps as well to anticipate Doctor Crang! This man here should have quite a sum of money on his person. She had given it to him herself, and—yes, here it was!

The crisp new fifty-dollar bills, the stamped and numbered ticket that identified the watch-fob he had pawned, were in her hand. She ran across the room, opened a little safe in the corner, placed the money and ticket inside, locked the safe again, and returned to John Bruce's side once more.

And suddenly her eyes filled. There was no tremor, no movement in the man's form now; she could not even feel his heartbeat. Yes, she wanted Doctor Crang now, passionately, wildly. John Bruce—that was the man's name. She knew that much. But she had left him miles away—and he was here now—and she did not understand. How had he got here, why had he come here, climbing in through that window to fall at her feet like one dead?

The front door opened without premonitory ring of bell, and closed again. A footstep came quickly forward through the outer room—and paused on the threshold.

Claire Veniza rose to her feet, and her eyes went swiftly, sharply, to the figure standing there—a man of perhaps thirty years of age, of powerful build, and yet whose frame seemed now woefully loose, disjointed and without virility. Her eyes traveled to the man's clothing that was dirty, spotted, and in dire need of sponging, to the necktie that hung awry, to the face that, but for its unhealthy, pasty-yellow complexion, would have been almost strikingly handsome, to the jet-black eyes that somehow at the moment seemed to lack fire and life. And with a little despairing shrug of her shoulders, Claire Veniza turned away her head, and pointed to the form of John Bruce on the floor.

"I—I am afraid it is very serious, Doctor Crang," she faltered.

"That's all right, Claire," he said complacently. "That's all right, my dear. You can leave it with confidence to Sydney Angus Crang, M.D."

She drew a little away as he stepped forward, her face hardening into tight little lines. Hidden, her hands clasped anxiously together. It—it was what she had feared. Doctor Sydney Angus Crang, gold medalist from one of the greatest American universities, brilliant far beyond his fellows, with additional degrees from London, from Vienna, from Heaven alone knew where else, was just about entering upon, or emerging from, a groveling debauch with that Thing to which he had pawned his manhood, his intellect and his soul, that Thing



of gray places, of horror, of forgetfulness, of bliss, of torture—cocaine.

Halfway from the threshold to where John Bruce lay, Doctor Crang halted abruptly.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, and glanced with suddenly darkening face from Claire Veniza to the form of John Bruce, and back to Claire Veniza again.

"Oh, *will* you hurry!" she implored. "Can't you see that the wound——"

"I am more interested in the man than in the wound," said Doctor Crang, and there was a hint of menace in his voice. "Quite a gentleman of parts! I had expected—let me see what I had expected—well, say, one of the common knife-sticking breed that curses this neighborhood."

Claire Veniza stamped her foot.

"Oh, hurry!" she burst out wildly. "Don't stand there talking while the man is dying! Do something!"

Doctor Crang advanced to John Bruce's side, set down the little handbag he was carrying, and began to examine the wound.

"Yes, quite a gentleman of parts!" he repeated. His lips had thinned. "How did he get here?"

"I do not know," she answered. "He came in through that window there and fell on the floor."

"How peculiar!" observed Doctor Crang. "A *gentleman* down here in this locality, who is, yes, I will state it as a professional fact, in a very critical state, climbs in through Miss Claire Veniza's window, and——"

The telephone in the other room rang. Claire Veniza ran to it. Doctor Crang's fingers nestled on John Bruce's pulse; he made no other movement save to cock his head in a listening attitude in the girl's direction; he made no effort either to examine further or to dress the wound.

Claire Veniza's voice came distinctly:

"Yes... No, I do not think he will return to-night"—she was hesitating—"he—he met with an—an accident ——"

Doctor Crang had sprung from the other room and had snatched the receiver from the girl's hand. A wave of insensate fury swept his face now. He pushed her roughly from the instrument, and clapped his hand over the transmitter.

"That's one lie you've told me!" he said hoarsely. "I'll attend to the rest of this now." He withdrew his hand from the transmitter. "Yes, hello!" His voice was cool, even suave. "What is it?... Monsieur Henri de Lavergne speaking—yes... Mister—who?... Mister John Bruce—yes." He listened for a moment, his lips twitching, his eyes narrowed on Claire Veniza, who had retreated a few steps away. "No, not to-night," he said, speaking again into the transmitter. "Yes, a slight accident.... Yes..., Good-by."

Doctor Sydney Angus Crang hung up the receiver, and with a placid smile at variance with the glitter that suddenly brought life into his dulled eyes, advanced toward the girl. She stepped backward quickly into the other room, retreating as far as the motionless form that lay upon the floor. Doctor Crang followed her.

And then Claire Veniza, her face grown stony, her small hands clenched, found her voice again.

"Aren't you going to help him? Aren't you going to do something? Is he to die there before your eyes?" she cried.

Doctor Crang shrugged his shoulders.

"What can I do?" he inquired with velvet softness. "I am helpless. How can I bring the dead back to life?"

"Dead!" All color had fled her face; she bent and looked searchingly at John Bruce.

"Oh, no; not yet," said Doctor Crang easily. "But very nearly so."

"And you will do nothing!" She was facing him again. "Then—then I will try and get some one else."

She stepped forward abruptly.

Doctor Crang barred her way.

"I don't think you will, Claire, my dear!" His voice was monotonous; the placid smile was vanishing. "You see, having spoken to that dear little doll of a man, Monsieur Henri de Lavergne, I'm very much interested in hearing your side of the story."

"Story!" the girl echoed wildly. "Story—while that man's life is lost! Are you mad—or a murderer—or——"

"Another lover," said Doctor Crang, and threw back his head and laughed.

She shrank away; her hands tight against her bosom. She glanced around her. If she could only reach the telephone and lock the connecting door! No! She did not dare leave him *alone* with the wounded man.

"What—what are you going to do?" she whispered.

"Nothing—till I hear the story," he answered.

"If—if he dies"—her voice rang steadily again—"I'll have you charged with murder."

"What nonsense!" said Doctor Crang imperturbably. "Did I stab the gentleman?" He took from his pocket a little case, produced a hypodermic syringe, and pushed back his sleeve. "A doctor is not a magician. If he finds a patient beyond reach of aid what can he be expected to do? My dear Claire, where are your brains tonight—you who are usually so amazingly clever?"

"You are mad—insane with drug!" she cried out piteously.

He shook his head, and coolly inserted the needle of the hypodermic in his arm.

"Not yet," he said. "I am only implacable. Shall we get on with the story? Monsieur de Lavergne says he sent a gentleman by the name of John Bruce out in your father's car a little while ago for the purpose of obtaining a loan in order that the said John Bruce might return to the gambling joint and continue to play. But Mr. Bruce did not return, and the doll, for some reason being anxious, telephones here to make inquiries. Of course"—there was a savage laugh in his voice—"it is only a suspicion, but could this gentleman on the floor here by any chance be Mr. John Bruce?"

"Yes," she said faintly. "He is John Bruce."

"Thanks!" said Doctor Crang sarcastically. He very carefully replaced his hypodermic in his pocket. "Now

another little matter. I happen to know that your father is spending the evening uptown, so I wonder who was in the car with Mr. John Bruce."

She stared at him with flashing eyes.

"I was!" she answered passionately. "I don't know what you are driving at! I never did it before, but father was away, and Monsieur de Lavergne was terribly insistent. He said it was for a very special guest. I—I didn't, of course, tell Monsieur de Lavergne that father couldn't go. I only said that I was afraid it would not be convenient to make any loan to-night. But he wouldn't listen to a refusal, and so I went—but Monsieur de Lavergne had no idea that it was any one but father in the car."

Doctor Crang's lips parted wickedly.

"Naturally!" he snarled. "I quite understand that you took good care of that! Who drove you?"

"Hawkins."

"Drunk as usual, I suppose! Brain too fuddled to ask questions!"

"That's not true!" she cried out sharply. "Hawkins hasn't touched a drop for a year."

"All right!" snapped Doctor Crang. "Have it that way, then! Being in his dotage, he makes a good blind, even sober. And so you went for a little ride with Mr. John Bruce to-night?"

Claire Veniza was wringing her hands as she glanced in an agony of apprehension at the wounded man on the floor.

"Yes," she said; "but—but won't you—"

"And where did you first meet Mr. John Bruce, and how long ago?" he jerked out.

Claire Veniza's great brown eyes widened.

"Why, I never saw him in my life until to-night!" she exclaimed. "And he wasn't in the car ten minutes. Hawkins drove back to the corner just as he always does with father, and Mr. Bruce got out. Then Hawkins drove me home and went uptown to get father. I—I wish they were here now!"

Doctor Crang was gritting his teeth together. A slight unnatural color was tinging his cheeks. He moved a little closer to the girl.

"I'm glad to hear you never saw Mr. Bruce before," he said cunningly. "You must have traveled *fast* then—metaphorically speaking. Love at first sight, eh? A cooing exchange of confidences—or was it all on one side? You told him who you were, and where you lived, and—"

"I did nothing of the kind!" Claire Veniza interrupted angrily. "I did not tell him anything!"

"Just strictly business then, of course!" Doctor Crang moved a step still nearer to the girl. "In that case he must have pawned something, and as Lavergne sends nothing but high-priced articles to your father, we shall probably find quite a sum of money in Mr. Bruce's pockets. Eh—Claire?"

She bit her lips. She still did not quite understand—only that she bitterly regretted now, somehow, that she had removed the money from John Bruce's person; only that the drug-crazed brain of the man in front of her was digging, had dug, a trap into which she was falling. What answer was she to make? What was she to—

With a sudden cry she shrank back—but too late to save herself. A face alight with passion was close to hers now; hands that clamped like a steel vise, and that hurt, were upon her shoulder and throat.

"You lie!" Doctor Crang shouted hoarsely. "You've lied from the minute I came into this room. John Bruce—hell! I know now why you have always refused to have anything to do with me. That's why!" He loosened one hand and pointed to the figure on the floor. "How long has this been going on? How long have you been meeting him? To-night is nothing, though you worked it well. Hawkins to take you for a little joy ride with your lover while father's away. Damned clever! You left him on that corner—and he's here wounded! How did he get wounded? You never saw him before! You never heard of him! You told him nothing about yourself! He didn't know where you lived—he could only find the private entrance! Just knows enough about you to climb in through your back window like a skewered dog! But, of course, your story is true, because in his pockets will be the money you gave him for what he pawned! Shall we look and see how much it was?"

She tore herself free and caught at her throat, gasping for breath.

"You—you beast!" she choked. "No; you needn't look! I took it from him, and put it in the safe over there before *you* came—to keep it away from you."

Doctor Crang swept a hand across his eyes and through his hair with a savage, jerky movement, and then he laughed immoderately.

"What a little liar you are! Well, then, two can play at the same game. I lied to you about your lover there. I said there was nothing could save him. Yes, yes, Claire, my dear, I lied." He knelt suddenly, and suddenly intent and professional studied John Bruce's face, and felt again for the pulse beat at John Bruce's wrist. "Pretty near the limit," he stated coolly. "Internal bleeding." He threw back his shoulders in a strangely egotistical way. "Not many men could do anything; but I, Sydney Angus Crang, could! Ha, ha! In ten minutes he could be on the road to recovery—but ten minutes, otherwise, is exactly the length of time he has to live."

An instant Claire Veniza stared at him. Her mind reeled with chaos, with terror and dismay.

"Then do something!" she implored wildly. "If you can save him, do it! You must! You shall!"

"Why should I?" he demanded. His teeth were clamped hard together. "Why should I save your lover? No—damn him!"

She drew away from him, and, suddenly, on her knees, buried her face in her hands and burst into sobs.

"This—this is terrible—terrible!" she cried out. "Has that frightful stuff transformed you into an absolute fiend? Are you no longer even human?" Flushed, a curious look of hunger in his eyes, he gazed at her.

"I'm devilishly human in some respects!" His voice rose, out of control. "I want you! I have wanted you from the day I saw you."

She shivered. Her hands felt suddenly icy as she pressed them against her face.

"Thank God then," she breathed, "for this, at least—that you will never get me!"

"Won't I?" His voice rose higher, trembling with passion. "Won't I? By God, I will! The one thing in life I will have some way or another! You understand? I will! And do you think I would let *him* stand in the way? You drive me mad, Claire, with those wonderful eyes of yours, with that hair, those lips, that throat—"

"Stop!" She was on her feet, and in an instant had reached him, and with her hands upon his shoulders was shaking him fiercely with all her strength. "I hated you, despised you, loathed you before, but with that man dying here, you murderer, I—"

Her voice trailed off, strangled, choked. He had caught her in his arms, his lips were upon hers. She struggled like a tigress. And as they lurched about the room he laughed in mad abandon. She wrenched herself free at last, and slipped and fell upon the floor.

"Do you believe me now!" he panted. "I will have you! Neither this man nor any other will live to get you. His life is a snap of my fingers—so is any other life. It's you I want, and you I will have. And I'll tame you! Then I'll show you what love is."

She was moaning now a little to herself. She crept to John Bruce and stared into his face. Dying! They were letting this man die. She tried to readjust the cloths upon the wound. She heard Doctor Crang laugh at her again. It seemed as though her soul were sinking into some great bottomless abyss that was black with horror. She did not know this John Bruce. She had told Doctor Crang so. It was useless to repeat it, useless to argue with a drug-steeped brain. There was only one thing that was absolute and final, and that was that a man's life was ebbing away, and a fiend, an inhuman fiend who could save him, but whom pleading would not touch, stood callously by, not wholly indifferent, rather gloating over what took the form of triumph in his diseased mind. And then suddenly she seemed so tired and weary. And she tried to pray to God. And tears came, and on her knees she turned and flung out her arms imploringly to the unkempt figure that stood over her, and who smiled as no other man she had ever seen had smiled before.

"For the pity of God, for anything you have ever known in your life that was pure and sacred," she said brokenly, "save this man."

He looked at her for a moment, still with that sardonic smile upon his lips, and then, swift in its transition, his expression changed and cunning was in his eyes.

"What would you give?" he purred.

"Give?" She did not look up. She felt a sudden surge of relief. It debased the man the more, for it was evidently money now; but her father would supply that. She had only to ask for it. "What do you want?" she asked eagerly.

"Yourself," said Doctor Crang.

She looked up now, quickly, startled; read the lurking triumph in his eyes, and with a sudden cry of fear turned away her head.

"My—myself!" Her lips scarcely moved.

"Yes, my dear! Yourself—Claire!" Doctor

Crang shrugged his shoulders. "Edinburgh, London, Vienna, Paris, degrees from everywhere—ha, ha!—am I a high-priced man? Well, then, why don't you dismiss me? You called me in! That is my price—or shall we call it fee? Promise to marry me, Claire, and I'll save that man."

Her face had lost all vestige of color. She stood and looked at him, but it did not seem as though she any longer had control over her limbs. She did not seem able to move them. They were numbed; her brain was mercifully numbed—there was only a sense of impending horror, without that horror taking concrete form. A voice came to her as though from some great distance:

"Don't take too long to make up your mind. There isn't much time. It's about touch and go with him now."

The words, the tone, the voice roused her. Realization, understanding swept upon her. A faintness came. She closed her eyes, swayed unsteadily, but recovered herself. Something made her look at the upturned face on the floor. She did not know this man. He was nothing to her. Why was he pleading with her to pawn herself for him? What right had he to ask for worse than death from her that he might live? Her soul turned sick within her. If she refused, this man would die. Death! It was a very little thing compared with days and months and years linked, fettered, bound to a drug fiend, a coward, a foul thing, a potential murderer, a man only in the sense of physical form, who had abused every other God-given attribute until it had rotted away! Her hands pressed to her temples fiercely, in torment. Was this man to live or die? In her hands was balanced a human life. It seemed as though she must scream out in her anguish of soul; and then it seemed as though she must fling herself upon the drug-crazed being who had forced this torture upon her, fling herself upon him to batter and pommel with her fists at his face that smiled in hideous contentment at her. What was she to do? The choice was hers. To let this man here die, or to accept a living death for herself—no, worse than that—something that was abominable, revolting, that profaned.... She drew her breath in sharply. She was staring at the man on the floor. His eyelids fluttered and opened. Gray eyes were fixed upon her, eyes that did not seem to see for there was a vacant stare in them—and then suddenly recognition crept into them and they lighted up, full of a strange, glad wonder. He made an effort to speak, an effort, more feeble still, to reach out his hand to her—and then the eyes had closed and he was unconscious again.

She turned slowly and faced Doctor Crang.

"You do not know what you are doing." She formed the words with a great effort.

"Oh, yes, I do!" he answered with mocking deliberation. "I know that if I can't get you one way, I can another—and the way doesn't matter."

"God forgive you, then," she said in a dead voice, "for I never can or will! I—I agree."

He took a step toward her.

"You'll marry me?" His face was fired with passion.

She retreated a step.

"Yes," she said.

He reached out for her with savage eagerness.

"Claire!" he cried. "Claire!"

She pushed him back with both hands.

"Not yet!" she said, and tried to steady her voice. "There is another side to the bargain. The price is this man's life. If he lives I will marry you, and in that case, as you well know, I can say nothing of what you have done to-night; but if he dies, I am not only free, but I will do my utmost to make you criminally responsible for his death."

"Ah!" Doctor Crang stared at her. His hands, still reaching out to touch her, trembled; his face was hectic; his eyes were alight again with feverish hunger—and then suddenly the man seemed transformed into another being. He was on his knees beside John Bruce, and had opened his handbag in an instant, and in another he had forced something from a vial between John Bruce's lips; then an instrument was in his hands. The man of a moment before was gone; one Sydney Angus Crang, of many degrees, professional, deft, immersed in his work, had taken the other's place. "More water! An extra basin!" he ordered curtly.

Claire Veniza obeyed him in a mechanical way. Her brain was numbed, exhausted, possessed of a great weariness. She watched him for a little while. He flung another order at her.

"Make that couch up into a bed," he directed. "He can't be moved even upstairs to-night."

Again she obeyed him; finally she helped him to lift John Bruce to the couch.

She sat down in a chair and waited—she did not know what for. Doctor Crang had drawn another chair to the couch and sat there watching his patient. John Bruce, as far as she could tell, showed no sign of life.

Then Doctor Crang's voice seemed to float out of nothingness:

"He will live, Claire, my dear! By God, I'd like to have done that piece of work in a clinic! Some of 'em would sit up! D'ye hear, Claire, he'll live!"

She was conscious that he was studying her; she did not look at him, nor did she answer.

An eternity seemed to pass. She heard a motor stop outside in front of the house. That would be her father and Hawkins.

The front door opened and closed, footsteps entered the room—and suddenly seemed to quicken and hurry forward. She rose from her chair.

"What's this? What's the matter? What's happened?" a tall, white-haired man cried out.

It was Doctor Crang who answered.

"Oh—this, Mr. Veniza?" He waved his hand indifferently toward the couch. "Nothing of any importance." He shrugged his shoulders in cool imperturbability, and smiled into the grave, serious face of Paul Veniza. "The really important thing is that Claire has promised to be my wife."

For an instant no one moved or spoke—only Doctor Crang still smiled. And then the silence was broken by a curious half laugh, half curse that was full of menace.

"You lie!" Hawkins, the round, red-faced chauffeur, had stepped from behind Paul Veniza, and now faced Doctor Crang. "You lie! You damned coke-eater! I'd kill you first!"

"Drunk—again!" drawled Doctor Crang contemptuously. "And what have you to do with it?"

"Steady, Hawkins!" counselled Paul Veniza quietly. He turned to Claire Veniza. "Claire," he asked, "is—is this true?"

She nodded—and suddenly, blindly, started toward the door.

"It is true," she said.

"Claire!" Paul Veniza stepped after her. "Claire,

"Not to-night, father," she said in a low voice. "Please let me go."

He stood aside, allowing her to pass, his face grave and anxious—and then he turned again to Doctor Crang.

"She is naturally very upset over what has happened here," said Doctor Crang easily—and suddenly reaching out grasped Hawkins' arm, and pulled the old man forward to the couch. "Here, you!" he jerked out. "You've got so much to say for yourself—take a look at this fellow!"

The old chauffeur bent over the couch.

"My God!" he cried out in a startled way. "It's the man we—I—drove to-night!"

"Quite so!" observed Doctor Crang. He smiled at Paul Veniza again. "Apart from the fact that the fellow came in through that window with a knife stab in his side that's pretty nearly done for him, Hawkins knows as much about it as either Claire or I do. He's in bad shape. Extremely serious. I will stay with him to-night. He cannot be moved." He nodded suggestively toward the door. "Hawkins can tell you as much as I can. It's got to be quiet in here. As for Claire"—he seemed suddenly to be greatly disturbed and occupied with the condition of the wounded man on the couch—"that will have to wait until morning. This man's condition is critical. I can't put you out of your own room, but——" Again he nodded toward the door.

For a moment Paul Veniza hesitated—but Doctor Crang's back was already turned, and he was bending over the wounded man, apparently oblivious to every other consideration. He motioned to Hawkins, and the two left the room.

Doctor Crang looked around over his shoulder as the door closed. A malicious grin spread over his face. He rubbed his hands together. Then he sat down in his chair again, and began to prepare a solution for his hypodermic syringe.

"Yes, yes," said Doctor Crang softly, addressing the unconscious form of John Bruce, "you'll live, all right, my friend, I'll see to that, though the odds are still against you. You're too—ha, ha!—valuable to die! You played in luck when you drew Sydney Angus Crang, M.D., as your attending physician!"

And then Doctor Sydney Angus Crang made a little grimace as he punctured the flesh of his arm with the needle of the hypodermic syringe and injected into himself another dose of cocaine.



"Yes," said Doctor Sydney Angus Crang very softly, his eyes lighting, "too valuable, much too valuable—to die!"

## CHAPTER FIVE—HAWKINS

**I**N the outer room, the door closed behind them, Paul Veniza and Hawkins stared into each other's eyes. Hawkins' face had lost its ruddy, weatherbeaten color, and there was a strained, perplexed anxiety in his expression.

"D'ye hear what she said?" he mumbled. "D'ye hear what he said? Going to be married! My little girl, my innocent little girl, and—and that dope-feeding devil! I—I don't understand, Paul. What's it mean?"

Paul Veniza laid his hand on the other's shoulder, as much to seek, it seemed, as to offer sympathy. He shook his head.

"I don't know," he said blankly.

Hawkins' watery blue eyes under their shaggy brows traveled miserably in the direction of the staircase.

"I—I ain't got the right," he choked. "You go up and talk to her, Paul."

Paul Veniza ran his fingers in a troubled way through his white hair; then, nodding his head, he turned abruptly and began to mount the stairs.

Hawkins watched until the other had disappeared from sight, watched until he heard a door open and close softly above; then he swung sharply around, and with his old, drooping shoulders suddenly squared, strode toward the door that shut him off from Doctor Crang and the man he had recognized as his passenger in the traveling pawn-shop earlier that night. But at the door itself he hesitated, and after a moment drew back, and the shoulders drooped again, and he fell to twisting his hands together in nervous indecision as he retreated to the center of the room.

And he stood there again, where Paul Veniza had left him, and stared with the hurt of a dumb animal in his eyes at the top of the staircase.

"It's all my fault," the old man whispered, and fell to twisting his hands together once more. "But—but I thought she'd be safe with me."

For a long time he seemed to ponder his own words, and gradually they seemed to bring an added burden upon him, and heavily now he drew his hand across his eyes.

"Why ain't I dead?" he whispered. "I ain't never been no good to her. Twenty years, it is—twenty years. Just old Hawkins—shabby old Hawkins—that she loves 'cause she's sorry for him."

Hawkins' eyes roved about the room.

"I remember the night I brought her here." He was still whispering to himself. "In there, it was, I took her." He jerked his hand toward the inner room. "This here room was the pawn-shop then. God, all those years ago—and—and I ain't never bought her back again, and she ain't known no father but Paul, and—"

His voice trailed off and died away.

He sank his chin in his hands.

Occasionally he heard the murmur of voices from above, occasionally the sound of movement through the closed door that separated him from Doctor Crang; but he did not move or speak again until Paul Veniza came down the stairs and stood before him.

Hawkins searched the other's face.

"It—it ain't true, is it, what she said?" he questioned almost fiercely. "She didn't really mean it, did she, Paul?"

Paul Veniza turned his head away.

"Yes, she meant it," he answered in a low voice. "I don't understand. She wouldn't give me any explanation."

Hawkins clenched his fists suddenly.

"But didn't you tell her what kind of a man Crang is? Good God, Paul, didn't you tell her what he is?"

"She knows it without my telling her," Paul Veniza said in a dull tone. "But I told her again; I told her it was impossible, incredible. Her only answer was that it was inevitable."

"But she doesn't love him! She can't love him!" Hawkins burst out. "There's never been anything between them before."

"No, she doesn't love him. Of course, she doesn't!" Paul Veniza said, as though speaking to himself. He looked at Hawkins suddenly under knitted brows. "And she says she never saw that other man in her life before until he stepped into the car. She says she only went out to-night because they were so urgent about it up at the house, and that she felt everything would be perfectly safe with you driving the car. I can't make anything out of it!"

Hawkins drew the sleeve of his coat across his brow. It was cool in the room, but little beads of moisture were standing out on his forehead.

"I ain't brought her nothing but harm all my life," he said brokenly. "I—"

"Don't take it that way, old friend!" Paul Veniza's hands sought the other's shoulders. "I don't see how you are to blame for this. Claire said that other man treated her with all courtesy, and left the car after you had

gone around the block; and she doesn't know how he afterwards came here wounded any more than we do—and anyway, it can't have anything to do with her marrying Doctor Crang.”

“What's she doing now?” demanded Hawkins abruptly. “She's up there crying her heart out, ain't she?”

Paul Veniza did not answer.

Hawkins straightened up. A sudden dignity came to the shabby old figure.

“What hold has that devil got on my little girl?” he cried out sharply. “I'll make him pay for it, so help me God! My little girl, my little——”

“S-sh!” Paul Veniza caught hurriedly at Hawkins' arm. “Be careful, old friend!” he warned. “Not so loud! She might hear you.”

Hawkins cast a timorous, startled glance in the direction of the stairs. He seemed to shrink again, into a stature as shabby as his clothing. His lips twitched; he twisted his hands together.

“Yes,” he mumbled; “yes, she—she might hear me.” He stared around the room; and then, as though blindly, his hands groping out in front of him, he started for the street door. “I'm going home,” said Hawkins. “I'm going home to think this out.”

Paul Veniza's voice choked a little.

“Your hat, old friend,” he said, picking up the old man's hat from the table and following the other to the door.

“Yes, my hat,” said Hawkins—and pulling it far down over his eyes, crossed the sidewalk, and climbed into the driver's seat of the old, closed car that stood at the curb.

He started the car mechanically. He did not look back. He stared straight ahead of him except when, at the corner, his eyes lifted and held for a moment on the lighted windows and the swinging doors of a saloon—and the car went perceptibly slower. Then his hands tightened fiercely in their hold upon the wheel until the white of the knuckles showed, and the car passed the saloon and turned the next corner and went on.

Halfway down the next block it almost came to a halt again when opposite a dark and dingy driveway that led in between, and to the rear of, two poverty-stricken frame houses. Hawkins stared at this uninviting prospect, and made as though to turn the car into the driveway; then, shaking his head heavily, he continued on along the street.

“I can't go in there and sit by myself all alone,” said Hawkins hoarsely. “I—I'd go mad. It's—it's like as though they'd told me to-night that she'd died—same as they told me about her mother the night I went to Paul's.”

The car moved slowly onward. It turned the next corner—and the next. It almost completed the circuit of the block. Hawkins now was wetting his lips with the tip of his tongue. His hands on the wheel were trembling. The car had stopped. Hawkins was staring again at the lighted windows and the swinging doors of the saloon.

He sat for a long time motionless; then he climbed down from his seat.

“Just one,” Hawkins whispered to himself. “Just one. I—I'd go mad if I didn't.”

Hawkins pushed the swinging doors open, and sidled up to the bar.

“Hello, Hawkins!” grinned the barkeeper. “Been out of town? I ain't seen you the whole afternoon!”

“You mind your own business!” said Hawkins surlily.

“Sure!” nodded the barkeeper cheerily. “Same as usual?” He slid a square-faced bottle and a glass toward the old man.

Hawkins helped himself and drank moodily. He set his empty glass back on the bar, jerked down his shabby vest and straightened up, his eyes resolutely fixed on the door. Then he felt in his pocket for his pipe and tobacco. His eyes shifted from the door to his pipe. He filled it slowly.

“Give me another,” said Hawkins presently—without looking at the barkeeper.

Again the old man drank, and jerked down his vest, and squared his thin shoulders. He lighted his pipe, tamping the bowl carefully with his forefinger. His eyes sought the swinging doors once more.

“I'm going home,” said Hawkins defiantly to himself. “I've got to think this out.” He dug into his vest pocket for money, and produced a few small bills. He stared at these for a moment, hesitated, started to replace them in his pocket, hesitated again, and the tip of his tongue circled his lips; then he pushed the money across the bar. “Take the drinks out of that, and—and give me a bottle,” he said. “I—I don't like to be without anything in the house, and I got to go home.”

“You said something!” said the barkeeper. “Have one on the house before you go?”

“No; I won't.”

“No,” said Hawkins with stern determination.

Hawkins crowded the bottle into the side pocket of his coat, passed out through the swinging doors, and resumed his seat on the car. And again the car started forward. But it went faster now. Hawkins' face was flushed; he seemed nervously and excitedly in haste. At the driveway he turned in, garaged his car in an old shed at the rear of one of the houses, locked the shed with a padlock, and, by way of the back door, entered the house that was in front of the shed.

It was quite dark inside, but Hawkins had been an inmate of the somewhat seedy rooming-house too many years either to expect that a light should be burning at that hour, or, for that matter, to require any light. He groped his way up a flight of creaking stairs, opened the door of a room, and stepped inside. He shut the door behind him, locked it, and struck a match. A gas-jet wheezed asthmatically, and finally flung a thin and sullen yellow glow about the place. It disclosed a cot bed, a small strip of carpet long since worn bare of nap, a washstand, an old trunk, a battered table, and two chairs.

Hawkins, with some difficulty, extricated the bottle from his pocket, and lifted the lid of his trunk. He thrust the bottle inside, and in the act of closing the lid upon it—hesitated.



"I—I ain't myself to-night, I ain't," said Hawkins tremulously. "It's shook me, it has—bad. Just one—so help me God!—just one."

Hawkins sat down at the table with the bottle in front of him.

And while Hawkins sat there it grew very late.

At intervals Hawkins talked to himself. At times he stared owlily from a half-emptied bottle to the black square of window pane above the trunk—and once he shook his fist in that direction.

"Crang—eh—damn you!" he gritted out. "You think you got her, do you? Some dirty, cunning trick you've played her! But you don't know old Hawkins. Ha, ha! You think he's only a drunken bum!"

Hawkins, as it grew later still, became unsteady in his seat. Gradually his head sank down upon the table.

"I—hie!—gotta think this—out," said Hawkins earnestly—and fell asleep.

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## CHAPTER SIX—THE ALIBI

JOHN BRUCE opened his eyes dreamily, unseeingly; and then his eyelids fluttered and closed again. There was an exquisite sense of languor upon him, of cool, comfortable repose; a curious absence of all material things. It seemed as though he were in some suspended state of animation.

It was very strange. It wasn't life—not life as he had ever known it. Perhaps it was death. He did not understand.

He tried to think. He was conscious that his mind for some long indeterminate period had been occupied with the repetition of queer, vague, broken snatches of things, fantastic things born of illusions, brain fancies, cobwebby, intangible, which had no meaning, and were without beginning or end. There was a white beach, very white, and a full round moon, and the moon winked knowingly while he whittled with a huge jack-knife at a quill toothpick. And then there was a great chasm of blackness which separated the beach from some other place that seemed to have nothing to identify it except this black chasm which was the passageway to it; and here a man's face, a face that was sinister in its expression, and both repulsive and unhealthy in its color, was constantly bending over him, and the man's head was always in the same posture—cocked a little to one side, as though listening intently and straining to hear something. And then, in the same place, but less frequently, there was another face—and this seemed to bring with it always a shaft of warm, bright sunlight that dispelled the abominable gloom, and before which the first face vanished—a beautiful, the wondrously beautiful, face of a girl, one that he had seen somewhere before, that was haunting in its familiarity and for which it seemed he had always known a great yearning, but which plagued him miserably because there seemed to be some unseen barrier between them, and because he could not recognize her, and she could not speak and tell him who she was.

John Bruce opened his eyes again. Dimly, faintly, his mind seemed to be grasping coherent realities. He began to remember fragments of the past, but it was very hard to piece those fragments together into a concrete whole. That white beach—yes, he remembered that. And the quill toothpick. Only the huge jack-knife was absurd! It was at Apia with Larmon. But he was in a room somewhere now, and lying on a cot of some sort. And it was night. How had he come here?

He moved a little, and suddenly felt a twinge of pain in his side. His hand groped under the covering, and his fingers came into contact with bandages that were wrapped tightly around his body.

And then in a flash memory returned. He remembered the fight in Ratti's wine shop, the knife stab, and how he had dragged himself along the lane and climbed in through *her* window. His eyes now in a startled way were searching his surroundings. Perhaps this was the room! He could not be quite sure, but there seemed to be something familiar about it. The light was very low, like a gas-jet turned down, and he could not make out where it came from, nor could he see any window through which he might have climbed in.

He frowned in a troubled way. It was true that, as he had climbed in that night, he had not been in a condition to take much note of the room, but yet it did seem to be the same place. The frown vanished. What did it matter? He knew now beyond any question whose face it was that had come to him so often in that shaft of sunlight. Yes, it *did* matter! He must have been unconscious, perhaps for only a few hours, perhaps for days, but if this was the same place, then she was *here*, not as a figment of the brain, not as one created out of his own longing, but here in her actual person, a living, breathing reality. It was the girl of the traveling pawn-shop, and—

John Bruce found himself listening with sudden intentness. Was he drifting back into unconsciousness again, into that realm of unreal things, where the mind, fevered and broken, wove out of its sick imagination queer, meaningless fancies? It was strange that unreal things should seem so real! Wasn't that an animal of some sort scratching at the wall of the house outside?

He lifted his head slightly from the pillow—and held it there. A voice from within the room reached him in an angry, rasping whisper:

"Damn you, Birdie, why don't you pull the house down and have done with it? You clumsy hog! Do you want the police on us? Can't you climb three feet without waking up the whole of New York?"

John Bruce's lips drew together until they formed a tight, straight line. This was strange! Very strange! It wasn't a vagary of his brain this time. His brain was as clear now as it had ever been in his life. The voice came from beyond the head of his cot. He had seen no one in the room, but that was natural enough since from the position in which he was lying his line of vision was decidedly restricted; what seemed

incomprehensible though, taken in conjunction with the words he had just heard, was that his own presence there appeared to be completely ignored.

He twisted his head around cautiously, and found that the head of the cot was surrounded by a screen. He nodded to himself a little grimly. That accounted for it! There was a scraping sound now, and heavy, labored breathing.

John Bruce silently and stealthily stretched out his arm. He could just reach the screen. It was made of some soft, silken material, and his fingers found no difficulty in drawing this back a little from the edge of that portion of the upright framework which was directly in front of him.

He scarcely breathed now. Perhaps he was in so weak a state that his mind faltered if crowded, for there was so much to see that he could not seem to grasp it all as a single picture. He gazed fascinated. The details came slowly—one by one. It was the room where he had crawled in through the window and had fallen senseless to the floor—whenever that had been! That was the window there. And, curiously enough, another man was crawling in through it now! And there was whispering. And two other men were already standing in the room, but he could not see their faces because their backs were turned to him. Then one of the two swung around in the direction of the window, bringing his face into view. John Bruce closed his eyes for a moment. Yes, it must be that! His mind was off wandering once more, painting and picturing for itself its fanciful unrealities, bringing back again the character it had created, the man with the sinister face whose pallor was unhealthy and repulsive.

And then he opened his eyes and looked again, and the face was still there—and it was real. And now the man spoke:

“Come on, get busy, Birdie! If you take as long to crack the box as you have taken to climb in through a low window, maybe we’ll be invited to breakfast with the family! You act just like a swell cracksman—not! But here’s the combination—so try and play up to the part!”

The man addressed was heavy of build, with a pockmarked and forbidding countenance. He was panting from his exertions, as, inside the room now, he leaned against the sill.

“That’s all right, Doc!” he grunted. “That’s all right! But how about his nibs over there behind the screen? Ain’t he ever comin’ out of his nap?”

The man addressed as “Doc” rolled up the sleeve of his left arm, and produced a hypodermic syringe from his pocket.

“There’s the safe over there, Birdie,” he drawled, as he pricked his arm with the needle and pushed home the plunger. “Get busy!”

The big man shuffled his feet.

“I know you know your business, Doc,” he said uneasily; “but I guess me an’ Pete here ‘d feel more comfortable if you’d have put that shot of coke into the guy I’m speakin’ about instead of into yourself. Ain’t I right, Pete?”

The third man was lounging against the wall, his back still turned to John Bruce.

“Sure,” he said; “but I guess you can leave it to Doc. A guy that’s been pawin’ the air for two days ain’t likely to butt in much all of a sudden.”

The man with the hypodermic, in the act of replacing the syringe in his pocket, drew it out again.

“Coming from you, Birdie,” he murmured caustically, “that’s a surprisingly bright idea. I’ve been here for the last three hours listening to his interesting addresses from the rostrum of delirium, and I should say he was quite safe. Still, to oblige you, Birdie, and make you feel more comfortable, we’ll act on your suggestion.”

John Bruce’s teeth gritted together. How weak he was! His arm ached from even the slight strain of extending it beyond his head to the screen.

And then he smiled grimly. But it wasn’t a case of strength now, was it? He was obviously quite helpless in that respect. This man they called Doc believed him to be still unconscious, and—he drew his arm silently back, tucked it again under the sheet and blanket that covered him, and closed his eyes—and even if he could resist, which he couldn’t, a hypodermic injection of morphine, or cocaine, or whatever it was that the supreme crook of the trio indulged in, could not *instantly* take effect. There ought to be time enough to watch at least—

John Bruce lay perfectly still. He heard a footstep come quickly around the screen; he sensed the presence of some one bending over him; then the coverings were pulled down and his arm was bared. He steeled himself against the instinctive impulse to wince at the sharp prick of the needle which he knew was coming—and felt instead a cold and curiously merciless rage sweep over him as the act was performed. Then the footstep retreated—and John Bruce quietly twisted his head around on the pillow, reached out his arm, and his fingers drew the silk panel of the screen slightly away from the edge of the framework again.

He could see the safe they had referred to now. It was over at the far side of the room against the wall, and the three men were standing in front of it. Presently it was opened. The man called Doc knelt down in front of it and began to examine its contents. He swung around to his companions after a moment with a large pile of banknotes in his hands. From this pile he counted out and handed a small portion to each of the other two men—and coolly stuffed the bulk of the money into his own pockets.

The scene went blurry then for a moment before John Bruce’s eyes, and he lifted his free hand and brushed it across his forehead. He was so beastly weak, anyhow, and the infernal dope was getting in its work too fast! He fought with all his mental strength against the impulse to relax and close his eyes. What was it they were doing now? It looked like some foolish masquerade. The two companions of the man with the sinister, pasty face were tying handkerchiefs over their faces and drawing revolvers from their pockets; and then the big man began to close the door of the safe.

The Doc’s voice came sharply:

“Look out you don’t lock it, you fool!”

Once more John Bruce brushed his hand across his eyes. His brain must be playing him tricks again. A din

infernal rose suddenly in the room. While the big man lounged nonchalantly against the safe, the other two were scuffling all over the floor and throwing chairs about. And then from somewhere upstairs, on the floor there too, John Bruce thought he caught the sound of hurried movements.

Then for an instant the scuffling in the room ceased, and the pasty-faced man's voice came in a peremptory whisper:

"The minute any one shows at the door you swing that safe open as though you'd been working at it all the time, Birdie, and pretend to shove everything in sight into your pockets. And you, Joe, you've got me cornered and covered here—see? And you hold the doorway with your gun too; and then both of you back away and make your getaway through the window." The scuffling began again. John Bruce watched the scene, a sense of drowsiness and apathy creeping upon him. He tried to rouse himself. He ought to do something. That vicious-faced little crook who had haunted him with unwelcome visitations, and who at this precise moment had the bulk of the money from the safe in his own pockets, was in the act of planting a somewhat crude, but probably none the less effective, alibi, and—

John Bruce heard a door flung open, and then a sudden, startled cry, first in a woman's and then in a man's voice. But he could not see any door from the position in which he lay. He turned over with a great effort, facing the other way, and reached out with his fingers for the panel of the screen that overlapped the head of the cot. And then John Bruce lay motionless, the blood pounding fiercely at his temples.

He was conscious that a tall, white-haired man in scanty attire was there, because the doorway framed two figures; but he *saw* only a beautiful face, pitifully white, only the slim form of a girl whose great brown eyes were very wide with fear, and who held her dressing gown tightly clutched around her throat. It was the girl of the traveling pawn-shop, it was the girl of his dreams in the shaft of sunlight, it was the girl he had followed here—only—only the picture seemed to be fading away. It was very strange! It was most curious! She always seemed to leave that way. This was Larmon now instead, wasn't it? Larmon... and a jack-knife... and a quill toothpick... and....

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## CHAPTER SEVEN—THE GIRL OF THE TRAVELING PAWN-SHOP

JOHN BRUCE abstractedly twirled the tassel of the old and faded dressing gown which he wore, the temporary possession of which he owed to Paul Veniza, his host. From the chair in which he sat his eyes ventured stolen glances at the nape of a dainty neck, and at a great coiled mass of silken brown hair that shone like burnished copper in the afternoon sunlight, as Claire Veniza, her back turned toward him, busied herself about the room. He could walk now across the floor—and a great deal further, he was sure, if they would only let him. He had not pressed that point; it might be taking an unfair advantage of an already over-generous hospitality, but he was not at all anxious to speed his departure from—well, from where he was at that precise moment.

And now as he looked at Claire Veniza, his thoughts went back to the night he had stepped, at old Hawkins' invitation, into the traveling pawn-shop. That was not so very long ago—two weeks of grave illness, and then the past week of convalescence—but it seemed to span a great and almost limitless stretch of time, and to mark a new and entirely different era in his life; an era that perplexed and troubled and intrigued him with conditions and surroundings and disturbing elements that he did not comprehend—but at the same time made the blood in his veins to course with wild abandon, and the future to hold out glad and beckoning hands.

He loved, with a great, overwhelming, masterful love, the girl who stood there just across the room all unconscious of the worship that he knew was in his eyes, and which he neither tried nor wished to curb. Of his own love he was sure. He had loved her from the moment he had first seen her, and in his heart he knew he held fate kind to have given him the wound that in its turn had brought the week of convalescence just past. And yet—and yet— Here dismay came, and his brain seemed to stumble. Sometimes he dared to hope; sometimes he was plunged into the depths of misery and despair. Little things, a touch of the hand as she had nursed him that had seemed like some God-given tender caress, a glance when she had thought he had not seen and which he had allowed his heart to interpret to its advantage with perhaps no other justification than its own yearning and desire, had buoyed him up; and then, at times, a strange, almost bitter aloofness, it seemed, in her attitude toward him—and this had checked, had always checked, the words that were ever on his lips.

A faint flush dyed his cheeks. But even so, and for all his boasted love, did he not in his own soul wrong her sometimes? The questions *would* come. What was the meaning of the strange environment in which she lived? Why should she have driven to a gambling hell late at night, and quite as though it were the usual thing, to transact business alone in that car with—

God! His hands clenched fiercely. He remembered that night, and how the same thought had come then, mocking him, jeering him, making sport of him. He was a cad, a pitiful, vile-minded cad! Thank God that he was at least still man enough to be ashamed of his own thoughts, even if they came in spite of him!

Perhaps it was the strange, unusual characters that surrounded her, that came and went in this curious place here, that fostered such thoughts; perhaps he was not strong enough yet to grapple with all these confusing things. He smiled a little grimly. The robbery of the safe, for instance—and that reptile whom he now knew to be his own attending physician, Doctor Crang! He had said nothing about his knowledge of the

robbery—yet. As nearly as he could judge it had occurred two or three days prior to the time when his actual convalescence had set in, and as a material witness to the crime he was not at all sure that in law his testimony would be of much value. They must certainly have found him in an unconscious state immediately afterward—and Doctor Crang would as indubitably attack his testimony as being nothing more than the hallucination of a sick brain.

The luck of the devil had been with Crang! Why had he, John Bruce, gone drifting off into unconsciousness just at the psychological moment when, if the plan had been carried out as arranged and the other two had made their fake escape, Crang would have been left in the room with Claire and Paul Veniza—with the money in his pockets! He would have had Doctor Crang cold then! It was quite different now. He was not quite sure what he meant to do, except that he fully proposed to have a reckoning with Doctor Crang. But that reckoning, something, he could not quite define what, had prompted him to postpone until he had become physically a little stronger!

And then there was another curious thing about it all, which too had influenced him in keeping silent. Hawkins, Paul Veniza, Claire and Doctor Crang had each, severally and collectively, been here in this room many times since the robbery, and not once in his presence had the affair ever been mentioned! And—oh, what did it matter! He shrugged his shoulders as though to rid himself of some depressing physical weight. What did anything matter on this wonderful sunlit afternoon—save Claire there in her white, cool dress, that seemed somehow to typify her own glorious youth and freshness.

How dainty and sweet and alluring she looked! His eyes were no longer contented with stolen glances; they held now masterfully, defiant of any self-restraint, upon the slim figure that was all grace from the trim little ankles to the poise of the shapely head. He felt the blood quicken his pulse. Stronger than he had ever known it before, straining to burst all barriers, demanding expression as a right that would not be denied, his love rose dominant within him, and—

The tassel he had been twirling dropped from his hand. She had turned suddenly; and across the room her eyes met his, calm, deep and unperturbed at first, but wide the next instant with a startled shyness, and the color sweeping upward from her throat crimsoned her face, and in confusion she turned away her head.

John Bruce was on his feet. He stumbled a little as he took a step forward. His heart was pounding, flinging a red tide into the pallor of his cheeks that illness had claimed as one of its tolls.

"I—I did not mean to tell you like that," he said huskily. "But I have wanted to tell you for so long. It seems as though I have always wanted to tell you. Claire—I love you."

She did not answer.

He was beside her now—only her head was lowered and averted and he could not look into her face. Her fingers were plucking tremulously at a fold of her dress. He caught her hand between both his own.

"Claire—Claire, I love you!" he whispered.

She disengaged her hand gently; and, still refusing to let him see her face, shook her head slowly.

"I—I——" Her voice was very low. "Oh, don't you know?"

"I know I love you," he answered passionately. "I know that nothing else but that matters."

Again she shook her head.

"I thought perhaps he would have told you. I—I am going to marry Doctor Crang."

John Bruce stepped back involuntarily; and for a moment incredulity and helpless amazement held sway in his expression—then his lips tightened in a hurt, half angry way.

"Is that fair to me, Claire—to give me an answer like that?" he said in a low tone. "I know it isn't true, of course; it couldn't be—but—but it isn't much of a joke either, is it?"

"It is true," she said monotonously.

He leaned suddenly forward, and taking her face between his hands, made her lift her head and look at him. The brown eyes were swimming with tears. The red swept her face in a great wave, and, receding, left it deathly pale—and in a frenzy of confusion she wrenched herself free from him and retreated a step.

"My God!" said John Bruce hoarsely. "You—and Doctor Crang! I don't understand! It is monstrous! You can't love that——" He checked himself, biting at his lips. "You can't love Doctor Crang. It is impossible! You dare not stand there and tell me that you do. Answer me, Claire—answer me!"

She seemed to have regained her self-control—or perhaps it was the one defense she knew. The little figure was drawn up, her head held back.

"You have no right to ask me that," she said steadily.

"Right!" John Bruce echoed almost fiercely. His soul itself seemed suddenly to be in passionate turmoil; it seemed to juggle two figures before his consciousness, contrasting one with the other in most hideous fashion—this woman here whom he loved, who struggled to hold herself bravely, who stood for all that was pure, for all that he revered in a woman; and that sallow, evil-faced degenerate, a drug fiend so lost to the shame of his vice that he pricked himself with his miserable needle quite as unconcernedly in public as one would smoke a cigarette—and worse—a crook—a thief! Was it a coward's act to tell this girl *what* the man was whom she proposed to marry? Was it contemptible to pull a rival such as that down from the pedestal which in some fiendish way he must have erected for himself? Surely she did not know the man for what he actually was! She could not know! "Right!" he cried out. "Yes, I have the right—both for your sake and for my own. I have the right my love gives me. Do you know how I came here that first night?"

"Yes," she said with an effort. "You told me. You were in a fight in Ratti's place, and were wounded."

He laughed out harshly.

"And I told you the truth—as far as it went," he said. "But do you know how I came to be in this locality after leaving you in that motor car? I followed you. I loved you from the moment I saw you that night. It seems as though I have always loved you—as I always shall love you. That is what gives me the right to speak. And I mean to speak. If it were an honorable man to whom you were to be married it would be quite another



matter; but you cannot know what you are doing, you do not know this man as he really is, or what he——”

“Please! Please stop!” she cried out brokenly. “Nothing you could say would tell me anything I do not already know.”

“I am not so sure!” said John Bruce grimly. “Suppose I told you he was a criminal?”

“He is a criminal.” Her voice was without inflection.

“Suppose then he were sent to jail—to serve a sentence?”

“I would marry him when he came out,” she said. “Oh, please do not say any more! I know far more about him than you do; but—but that has nothing to do with it.”

For an instant, motionless, John Bruce stared at Claire; then his hands swept out and caught her wrists in a tight grip and held her prisoner.

“Claire!” His voice choked. “What does this mean? You do not love him; you say you know he is even a criminal—and yet you are going to marry him! What hold has he got on you? What is it? What damnable trap has he got you in? I am going to know, Claire! I will know! And whatever it is, whatever the cause of it, I’ll crush it, strangle it, sweep it out of your dear life at any cost! Tell me, Claire!”

Her face had gone white; she struggled a little to release herself.

“You—you do not know what you are saying. You——” Her voice broke in a half sob.

“Claire, look at me!” He was pleading now with his soul in his eyes and voice. “Claire, I——”

“Oh, please let me go!” she cried out frantically. “You cannot say anything that will make any difference. I—it only makes it harder.” The tears were brimming in her eyes again. “Oh, please let me go—there’s—there’s some one coming.”

John Bruce’s hands dropped to his sides. The door, already half open, was pushed wide, and Hawkins, the old chauffeur, stood on the threshold. And as John Bruce looked in that direction, he was suddenly and strangely conscious that somehow for the moment the old man dominated his attention even to the exclusion of Claire. There was something of curious self-effacement, of humbleness in the bent, stoop-shouldered figure there, who twisted a shapeless hat awkwardly in his hands; but also something of trouble and deep anxiety in the faded blue eyes as they fixed on the girl, and yet without meeting her eyes in return, held upon her as she walked slowly now toward the door.

“Dear old Hawkins,” she said softly, and laid her hand for an instant on the other’s arm as she passed by him, “you and Mr. Bruce will be able to entertain each other, won’t you? I—I’m going upstairs for a little while.”

And the old man made no answer; but, turning on the threshold, he watched her, his attitude, it seemed to John Bruce, one of almost pathetic wistfulness, as Claire disappeared from view.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT—ALLIES

CLAIRE’S footsteps, ascending the stairs, died away. John Bruce returned to his chair. His eyes were still on the old chauffeur.

Hawkins was no longer twisting his shapeless hat nervously in his fingers; instead, he held it now in one clenched hand, while with the other he closed the door behind him as he stepped forward across the threshold, and with squared shoulders advanced toward John Bruce. And then, quite as suddenly again, as though alarmed at his own temerity, the old man paused, and the question on his lips, aggressively enough framed, became irresolute in tone.

“What—what’s the matter with Claire?” he stammered. “What’s this mean?”

It was a moment before John Bruce answered, while he eyed the other from head to foot. Hawkins was not the least interesting by any means of the queer characters that came and went and centered around this one-time pawn-shop of Paul Veniza; but Hawkins, of them all, was the one he was least able, from what he had seen of the man, to fathom. And yet, somehow, he liked Hawkins.

“That’s exactly what I want to know,” he said a little brusquely. “And”—he eyed Hawkins once more with cool appraisal—“I think you are the man best able to supply the information.”

Hawkins began to fumble with his hat again.

“I—I—why do you say that?” he faltered, a sudden note of what seemed almost trepidation in his voice.

John Bruce shrugged his shoulders.

“Possibly it is just a hunch,” he said calmly. “But you were the one who was driving that old bus on a certain night—you remember? And you seem to hang around here about as you please. Therefore you must stand in on a fairly intimate basis with the family circle. I’d like to know what hold a rotten crook like Doctor Crang has got on Claire Veniza that she should be willing to marry him, when she doesn’t love him. I’d like to know why a girl like Claire Veniza drives alone at night to a gambling hell to——”

“That’s enough!” Hawkins’ voice rose abruptly, peremptorily. He advanced again threateningly oft John Bruce. “Don’t you dare to say one word against my—against—against her. I’ll choke the life out of you, if you do! Who are you, anyway? You are asking a lot of questions. How did you get here in the first place? You answer that! I’ve always meant to ask you. You answer that—and leave Claire out of it!”

John Bruce whistled softly.

"I can't very well do that," he said quietly, "because it was Claire who brought me here."

"Claire brought you!" The old blue eyes grew very hard and very steady. "That's a lie! She never saw you after you got out at the corner that night until you came in through the window here. She didn't tell you where she lived. She didn't invite you here. She's not that kind, and, sick though you may be, I'll not keep my hands off you, if—"

"Steady, Hawkins—steady!" said John Bruce, his voice as quiet as before. "We seem to possess a common bond. You seem to be pretty fond of Claire. Well, so am I. That ought to make us allies." He held out his hand suddenly to the old man. "I had just asked Claire to marry me when you came to the door."

Hawkins stared from the outstretched hand into John Bruce's eyes, and back again at the outstretched hand. Bewilderment, hesitation, a curious excitement was in his face.

"You asked Claire to marry you?" He swallowed hard. "You—you want to marry Claire? I—why?"

"Why?" John Bruce echoed helplessly. "Good Lord, Hawkins, you *are* a queer one! Barring beasts like Crang, why does a man ordinarily ask a woman to marry him? Because he loves her. Well, I love Claire. I loved her from the moment I saw her. I followed her, or, rather, that old bus of yours, here that night. And that is how, after that fight at Ratti's when I got out the back door and into the lane, I crawled over here for sanctuary. I said Claire brought me here. You understand now, don't you? That's how she brought me here—because I loved her that night. But it is because of Crang"—his voice grew hard—"that I am telling you this. I love her now—and a great deal too much, whether she could ever care for me or not, to see her in the clutches of a crook, and her life wrecked by a degenerate cur. And somehow"—his hand was still extended—"I thought you seemed to think enough of her to feel the same way about this marriage—for I imagine you must know about it. Well, Hawkins, where do you stand? There's something rotten here. Are you for Claire, or the dope-eater?"

"Oh, my God!" Hawkins whispered huskily. And then almost blindly he snatched at John Bruce's hand and wrung it hard. "I—I believe you're straight," he choked. "I know you are. I can see it in your eyes. I wouldn't ask anything more in the world for her than a man's honest love. And she ain't going to marry that devil! You understand?" His voice was rising in a curious cracked shrillness. "She ain't! Not while old Hawkins is alive!"

John Bruce drew his brows together in a puzzled way.

"I pass you up, Hawkins," he said slowly. "I can't make you out. But if you mean what you say, and if you trust me—"

"I'm going to trust you!" There was eagerness, excitement, a tremble in the old man's voice. "I've got to trust you after what you've said. I ain't slept for nights on account of this. It looks like God sent you. You wait! Wait just a second, and I'll show you how much I trust you."

John Bruce straightened up in his chair. Was the old man simply erratic, or perhaps a little irresponsible—or what? Hawkins had pattered across the floor, had cautiously opened the door, and was now peering with equal caution into the outer room. Apparently satisfied at last, he closed the door noiselessly, and started back across the room. And then John Bruce knew suddenly an indefinable remorse at having somehow misjudged the shabby old chauffeur, whose figure seemed to totter now a little as it advanced toward him. Hawkins' face was full of misery, and the old blue eyes were brimming with tears.

"It—it ain't easy"—Hawkins' voice quavered—"to say—what I got to say. There ain't no one on earth but Paul Veniza knows it; but you've got a right to know after what you've said. And I've got to tell you for Claire's sake too, because it seems to me there ain't nobody going to help me save her the way you are. She—she's my little girl. I—I'm Claire's father." John Bruce stared numbly at the other. He could find no words; he could only stare.

"Yes, look at me!" burst out the old man finally, and into his voice there came an infinite bitterness. "Look at my clothes! I'm just what I look like! I ain't no good—and that's what has kept my little girl and me apart from the day she was born. Yes, look at me! I don't blame you!"

John Bruce was on his feet. His hand reached out and rested on the old man's shoulder.

"That isn't the way to trust me, Hawkins," he said gently. "What do your clothes matter? What do your looks matter? What does anything in the world matter alongside of so wonderful a thing as that which you have just told me? Straighten those shoulders, Hawkins; throw back that head of yours. Her father! Why, you're the richest man in New York, and you've reason to be the proudest!"

John Bruce was smiling with both lips and eyes into the other's face. He felt a tremor pass through the old man's frame; he saw a momentary flash of joy and pride light up the wrinkled, weather-beaten face—and then Hawkins turned his head away.

"God bless you," said Hawkins brokenly; "but you don't know. She's all I've got; she's the only kith and kin I've got in all the world, and oh, my God, how these old arms have ached just to take her and hold her tight, and—and—" He lifted his head suddenly, met John Bruce's eyes, and a flush dyed his cheeks. "She's my little girl; but I lie when I say I love her. It's drink I love. That's my shame, John Bruce—you've got it all now. I pawned my soul, and I pawned my little girl for drink."

"Hawkins," said John Bruce huskily, "I think you're a bigger man than you've any idea you are."

"D'y'e mean that?" Hawkins spoke eagerly—only to shake his head miserably the next instant. "You don't understand," he said. "I as good as killed her mother with drink. She died when Claire was born. I brought Claire here, and Paul Veniza and his wife took her in. And Paul Veniza was right about it. He made me promise she wasn't to know I was her father until—until she would have a man and not a drunken sot to look after her. That's twenty years ago. I've tried.. God knows I've tried, but it's beaten me ever since. Paul's wife died when Claire was sixteen, and Claire's run the house for Paul—and—and I'm Hawkins—just Hawkins—the old cab driver that's dropping in the harness. Just Hawkins that shuffers the traveling pawn-shop now that Paul's quit the regular shop. That's what I am—just old Hawkins, who's always swearing to God he's going to leave the booze alone."

John Bruce did not speak for a moment. He returned to his chair and sat down. Somehow he wanted to think; somehow he felt that he had not quite grasped the full significance of what he had just heard. He

looked at Hawkins. Hawkins had sunk into a chair by the table, and his face was buried in his hands.

And then John Bruce smiled.

"Look here, Hawkins," he said briskly, "let's talk about something else for a minute. Tell me about Paul Veniza and this traveling pawn-shop. It's a bit out of the ordinary, to say the least."

Hawkins raised his head, and his thoughts for the moment diverted into other channels, his face brightened, and he scratched at the scanty fringe of hair behind his ear.

"It ain't bad, is it?" he said with interest. "I'm kind of proud of it too, 'cause I guess mabbe, when all's said and done, it was my idea. You see, when Paul's wife died, Paul went all to pieces. He ain't well now, for that matter—nowhere near as well as he looks. I'm kind of scared about Paul. He keeps getting sick turns once every so often. But when the wife died he was just clean broken up. She'd been his right hand from the start in his business here, and—I dunno—it just seemed to affect him that way. He didn't want to go on any more without her. And as far as money was concerned he didn't have to. Paul ain't rich, but he's mighty comfortably off. Anyway, he took the three balls down from over the door, and he took the signs off the windows, and in comes the carpenters to change things around here, and there ain't any more pawn-shop."

Hawkins for the first time smiled broadly.

"But it didn't work out," said Hawkins. "Paul's got a bigger business and a more profitable one to-day than he ever had before in his life. You see, he had been at it a good many years, and he had what you might call a private connection—swells up on the Avenue, mostly ladies, but gents too, who needed money sometimes without having it printed in the papers, and they wouldn't let Paul alone. Paul ain't got a hair in his head that ain't honest and fair and square and above-board—and they were the ones that knew it better than anybody else. See?"

"Yes," said John Bruce. "Go on, Hawkins," he prompted.

"Well," said Hawkins, "I used to drive an old hansom cab in those days, and I used to drive Paul out on those private calls to the swell houses. And then when Mrs. Paul died and Paul closed up the shop here he kind of drew himself into his shell all round, and mostly he wouldn't go out any more, though the swells kept telephoning and telephoning him. He'd only go to just a few people that he'd done business with since almost the beginning. He said he didn't want to go around ringing people's doorbells, and being ushered into boudoirs or anywhere else, and he was settling down to shun everybody and everything. It wasn't good for Paul. And then a sort of crazy notion struck me, and I chewed it over and over in my mind, and finally I put it up to Paul. In the mood he was in, it just caught his fancy; and so I bought a second-hand closed car, and fitted it up like you saw, and learned to drive it—and that's how there came to be the traveling pawn-shop."

"After that, there wasn't anything to it. It caught everybody else's fancy as well as Paul's, and it began to get him out of himself. The old bus, as you called it, was running all the time. Lots of the swells who really didn't want to pawn anything took a ride and did a bit of business just for the sake of the experience, and the regular customers just went nutty over it, they were that pleased."

"And then some one who stood in with that swell gambling joint where we picked you up must have tipped the manager off about it, and he saw where he could do a good stroke of business—make it a kind of advertisement, you know, besides doing away with any lending by the house itself, and he put up a proposition to Paul where Paul was to get all the business at regular rates, and a bit of a salary besides on account of the all-night hours he'd have to keep sometimes. Paul said he'd do it, and turned the salary over to me; and they doped out that pass word about a trip to Persia to make it sound mysterious and help out the advertising end, and—well, I guess that's all."

John Bruce was twirling the tassel of his dressing gown again abstractedly; but now he stopped as Hawkins rose abruptly and came toward him.

"No—it ain't all," said Hawkins, a curious note almost of challenge in his voice. "You said something about Claire going to that gambling joint. It was the first time she had ever been there. That night Paul was out when they telephoned. You must be one of their big customers, 'cause they wouldn't listen to anything but a trip to Persia right on the spot. They were so set on it that Claire said it would be all right. She sent for me. At first I wasn't for it at all, but she said it seemed to be of such importance, and that there wasn't anything else to do. Claire knows a bit of jewelry or a stone as well as Paul does, and I knew Claire could take care of herself; and besides, although she didn't know it, it—it was her own old father driving the car there with her."

"Thank you, Hawkins," said John Bruce simply; and after a moment: "It doesn't make the love I said I had for her show up very creditably to me, does it—that I should have had any questions?"

Hawkins shook his head.

"I didn't mean it that way," he said earnestly. "It would have been a wonder if you hadn't. Anyway, you had a right to know, and it was only fair to Claire."

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## CHAPTER NINE—THE CONSPIRATORS

**J**OHN BRUCE fumbled in the pocket of his dressing gown and produced a cigarette; but he was a long time in lighting it.

"Hawkins," he demanded abruptly, "is Paul Veniza in the house now?"

"He's upstairs, I think," Hawkins answered. "Do you want him?"

"Yes—in a moment," said John Bruce slowly. "I've been thinking a good deal while you were talking. I can

only see things one way; and that is that the time has come when you should take your place as Claire's father."

The old man drew back, startled.

"Tell Claire?" he whispered. Then he shook his head miserably. "No, no! I—I haven't earned the right. I—I can't break my word to Paul."

"I do not ask you to break your word to Paul. I want you to earn the right—now."

Hawkins was still shaking his head.

"Earn it now—after all these years! How can I?"

"By promising that you won't drink any more," said John Bruce quietly.

Hawkins' eyes went to the floor.

"Promise!" he said in a shamed way. "I've been promising that for twenty years. Paul wouldn't believe me. I wouldn't believe myself. I went and got drunker than I've been in all my life the night that dog said he was going to marry Claire, and Claire said it was true, and wouldn't listen to anything Paul could say to her against it."

"I would believe you," said John Bruce gravely.

For an instant Hawkins' face glowed, while tears came into the old blue eyes—and then he turned hurriedly and walked to the window, his back to John Bruce.

"It's no use," he said, with a catch in his voice. "You don't know me. Nobody that knows me would take my word for that—least of all Paul."

"I know this," said John Bruce steadily, "that you have never been really put to the test. The test is here now. You'd stop, and stop forever, wouldn't you, if it meant Claire's happiness, her future, her salvation from the horror and degradation and misery and utter hopelessness that a life with a man who is lost to every sense of decency must bring her? I would believe you if you promised under those conditions. It seems to me to be the only chance there is left to save her. It is true she believes Paul is her father and accepts him as such, and neither his influence nor his arguments will move her from her determination to marry Crang; but I think there is a chance if she is told your story, if she is brought to her own father through this very thing. I think if you are in each other's arms at last after all these years from just that cause it might succeed where everything else failed. But this much is sure. It has a chance of success, and you owe Claire that chance. Will you take it, Hawkins? Will you promise?"

There was no answer from the window, only the shaking of the old man's shoulders.

"Hawkins," said John Bruce softly, "wouldn't it be very wonderful if you saved her, and saved yourself; and wonderful, too, to know the joy of your own daughter's love?"

The old man turned suddenly from the window, his arms stretched out before him as though in intense yearning; and there was something almost of nobility in the gray head held high on the bent shoulders, something of greatness in the old wrinkled face that seemed to exalt the worn and shabby clothes hanging so formlessly about him.

"My little girl," he said brokenly.

"Your promise, Hawkins," said John Bruce in a low voice. "Will you promise?"

"Yes," breathed the old man fiercely. "Yes—so help me, God! But"—he faltered suddenly—"but Paul—"

"Ask Paul to come down here," said John Bruce. "I have something to say to both of you—more than I have already said to you. I will answer for Paul."

The old cab driver obeyed mechanically. He crossed the room and went out. John Bruce heard him mounting the stairs. Presently he returned, followed by the tall, straight, white-haired figure of Paul Veniza.

Hawkins closed the door behind them.

Paul Veniza turned sharply at the sound, and glanced gravely from one to the other. His eyebrows went up as he looked at John Bruce. John Bruce's face was set.

"What is the matter?" inquired Paul Veniza anxiously.

"I want you to listen first to a little story," said John Bruce seriously—and in a few words he told Paul Veniza, as he had told Hawkins, of his love for Claire and the events of the night that had brought him there a wounded man. "And this afternoon," John Bruce ended, "I asked Claire to marry me, and she told me she was going to marry Doctor Crang."

Paul Veniza had listened with growing anxiety, casting troubled and uncertain glances the while at Hawkins.

"Yes," he said in a low voice.

John Bruce spoke abruptly:

"Hawkins has promised he will never drink again."

Paul Veniza, with a sudden start, stared at Hawkins, and then a sort of kindly tolerance dawned in his face.

"My poor friend!" said Paul Veniza as though he were comforting a wayward child, and went over and laid his hand affectionately on Hawkins' arm.

"I have told Hawkins," went on John Bruce, "that I love Claire, that I asked her to marry me; and Hawkins in turn has told me he is Claire's father, and how he brought her to you and Mrs. Veniza when she was a baby, and of the pledge he made you then. It is because I love Claire too that I feel I can speak now. You once told Hawkins how he could redeem his daughter. He wants to redeem her now. He has promised never to drink again."

Paul Veniza's face had whitened a little. Half in a startled, half in a troubled way, he looked once more at John Bruce and then at Hawkins.

"My poor friend!" he said again.



John Bruce's hand on the arm of his chair clenched suddenly.

"You may perhaps feel that he should not have told me of his relationship to Claire; but it was this damnable situation with Crang that forced the issue."

Paul Veniza left Hawkins' side and began to pace the room in an agitated way.

"No!" he said heavily. "I do not blame Hawkins. We—we neither of us know what to do. It is a terrible, an awful thing. Crang is like some loathsome creature to her, and yet in some way that I cannot discover he has got her into his power. I have tried everything, used every argument I can with her, pleaded with her—and it has been useless." He raised his arms suddenly above his head, partly it seemed in supplication, partly in menace. "Oh, God!" he cried out. "I, too, love her, for she has really been my daughter through all these years. But I do not quite understand." He turned to Hawkins. "Even if you kept your promise now, my friend, what connection has that with Doctor Crang? Could that in any way prevent this marriage?"

It was John Bruce who answered.

"It is the last ditch," he said evenly; "the one way you have not tried—to tell her her own and her father's story. I do not say it will succeed. But it is the great crisis in her life. It is the one thing in the world that ought to sway her, win her. Her father! After twenty years—her father!"

Paul Veniza's hands, trembling, ruffled through his white hair. Hawkins' fingers fumbled, now with the buttons on his vest, now with the brim of his hat which He had picked up aimlessly from the table; and his eyes, lifting from the floor, glanced timorously, almost furtively, at Paul Veniza, and sought the floor again.

John Bruce got up from his chair and stepped toward them.

"I want to tell you something," he said sharply, "that ought to put an end to any hesitation on your parts at *any* plan, no matter what, that offers even the slightest chance of stopping this marriage. Listen! Devil though you both believe this Crang to be, you do not either of you even know the man for what he is. While I was lying there"—he flung out his hand impulsively toward the couch—"the safe here in this room was opened and robbed one night. You know that. But you do not know that it was done by Doctor Crang and his confederates. You know what happened. But you do not know that while the 'burglars' pretended to hold Crang at bay with a revolver and then made their 'escape,' Crang, with most of the proceeds of that robbery in his own pockets, was laughing up his sleeve at you."

Hawkins' jaw had dropped as he stared at John Bruce.

"Crang did it! You—you say Crang committed that robbery?" stammered Paul Veniza. "But you were unconscious! Still you—you seem to know that the safe was robbed!"

"Apparently I do!" John Bruce laughed shortly. "Crang too thought I was unconscious, but to make sure he jabbed me with his needle. It took effect just at the right time—for Crang—just as you and Claire appeared in the doorway. And"—his brows knitted together—"it seems a little strange that none of you have ever mentioned it in my presence; that not a word has ever been said to me about it."

Paul Veniza coughed nervously.

"You were sick," he said; "too sick, we thought, for any excitement."

Hawkins suddenly leaned forward; his wrinkled face was earnest.

"That is not true!" he said bluntly. "It might have been at first, but it wasn't after you got better. It was mostly your money that was stolen. Claire put it there the night you came here, and—"

"Hawkins!" Paul Veniza called out sharply in reproof.

"But he knows now it's gone," said the old cabman a little helplessly. He blundered on: "Paul felt he was responsible for your money, and he was afraid you might not want to take it if you knew he had to make it up out of his own pocket, and—"

John Bruce took a step forward, and laid his hand on Paul Veniza's shoulder. He stood silently, looking at the other.

"It is nothing!" said Paul Veniza, abashed.

"Perhaps not!" said John Bruce. "But"—he turned abruptly away, his lips tight—"it just made me think for a minute. In the life I've led men like you are rare."

"We were speaking of Doctor Crang," said Paul Veniza a little awkwardly. "If you know that Doctor Crang is the thief, then that is the way out of our trouble. Instead of marrying Claire, he will be sent to prison."

John Bruce shook his head.

"You said yourself I was unconscious at the time. You certainly must have found me that way, and Crang would make you testify that for days I had been raving in delirium. I do not think you could convict him on my testimony."

"But even so," said Paul Veniza, "there is Claire. If she knew that Crang was a criminal, she—"

"She does know," said John Bruce tersely.

"Claire knows!" ejaculated Paul Veniza in surprise. "You—you told her, then?"

"No," John Bruce answered. "I said to her: 'Suppose I were to tell you that the man is a criminal?' She answered: 'He is a criminal.' I said then: 'Suppose he were sent to jail—to serve a sentence?' She answered: 'I would marry him when he came out.'"

"My God!" mumbled the old cabman miserably.

"I tell you this," said John Bruce through set teeth, and speaking directly to Paul Veniza, "because it seems to me to be the final proof that mere argument with Claire is useless, and that something more is necessary. I do not ask you to release Hawkins from his pledge; I ask you to believe his promise this time because back of it he knows it may save Claire from what would mean worse than death to her. I believe him; I will vouch for him. Do you agree, Paul Veniza?"

For an instant the white-haired pawnbroker seemed lost in thought; then he nodded his head gravely.

"In the last few days," he said slowly, "I have felt that it was no longer my province to masquerade as her

father. I know that my influence is powerless. As you have said, it is the crisis, a very terrible crisis, in her life." He turned toward Hawkins, and held out his hand. "My old friend"—his voice broke—"I pray Heaven to aid you—to aid us all."

Hawkins' blue eyes filled suddenly with tears.

"You believe me, too, Paul, this time!" he said in a choking voice. "Listen, Paul! I promise! So help me, God—I promise!"

A lump had somehow risen in John Bruce's throat. He turned away, and for a moment there was silence in the room. And then he heard Paul Veniza speak:

"She is dear to us all. Let us call her—unless, my old friend, you would rather be alone."

"No, no!" Hawkins cried hurriedly. "I—I want you both; but—but not now, don't call her now." He swept his hands over his shabby, ill-fitting clothes. "I—not like this. I——"

"Yes," said Paul Veniza gently, "I understand—and you are right. This evening then—at eight o'clock. You will come back here, my old friend, at eight o'clock. And do you remember, it was in this very room, twenty years ago, that——" He did not complete his sentence; the hot tears were streaming unashamed down his cheeks.

John Bruce was staring out of the window, the panes of which seemed curiously blurred.

"Come," he heard Paul Veniza say.

And then, as the two men reached the door, John Bruce looked around. Hawkins had turned on the threshold. Something seemed to have transfigured the old cab driver's face. It was illumined. There seemed something of infinite pathos in the head held high, in the drooped shoulders resolutely squared.

"My little girl!" said Hawkins tenderly. "To-night at eight o'clock—my little girl!"

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## CHAPTER TEN—AT FIVE MINUTES TO EIGHT

**B**EFORE the rickety washstand and in front of the cracked glass that served as a mirror and was suspended from a nail driven into the wall, Hawkins was shaving himself. Perhaps the light from the wheezing gas-jet was over-bad that evening, or perhaps it was only in playful and facetious mood with the mirror acting the rôle of co-conspirator; Hawkins' chin smarted and was raw; little specks of red showed here and there through the repeated coats of lather which he kept scraping off with his razor. But Hawkins appeared willing to sacrifice even the skin itself to obtain the standard of smoothness which he had evidently set before himself as his goal. And so over and over again he applied the lather, and hoed it off, and tested the result by rubbing thumb and forefinger critically over his face. He made no grimace, nor did he show any irritation at the none-too-keen blade that played havoc with more than the lather, nor did he wince at what must at times have been anything but a painless operation. Hawkins' round, weatherbeaten face and old watery blue eyes smiled into the mirror.

On the washstand beside him lay a large, ungainly silver watch, its case worn smooth with years of service. It had a hunting-case, and it was open. Hawkins glanced at it. It was twenty minutes to eight.

"I got to hurry," said Hawkins happily. "Just twenty minutes—after twenty years."

Hawkins laid aside the razor, and washed and scrubbed at his face until it shone; then he went to his trunk and opened it. From underneath the tray he lifted out an old black suit. Perhaps again it was the gas-jet in either baleful or facetious mood, for, as he put on the suit, the cloth in spots seemed to possess, here a rusty, and there a greenish, tinge, and elsewhere to be woefully shiny. Also, but of this the gas-jet could not have been held guilty, the coat and trousers, and indeed the waistcoat, were undeniably most sadly wrinkled.

And now there seemed to be something peculiarly congruous as between the feeble gas-jet, the cracked mirror, the wobbly washstand, the threadbare strip of carpet that lay beside the iron bed, and the old bent-shouldered figure with wrinkled face in wrinkled finery that stood there knotting with anxious, awkward fingers a large, frayed, black cravat about his neck; there seemed to be something strikingly in keeping between the man and his surroundings, a sort of common intimacy, as it were, with the twilight of an existence that, indeed, had never known the full sunlight of high noon.

It was ten minutes to eight.

Hawkins put the silver watch in his pocket, extinguished the spluttering gas-jet, that hissed at him as though in protest at the scant ceremony with which it was treated, and went down the stairs. He stepped briskly out on the street.

"Claire!" said Hawkins radiantly. "My little Claire! I'm her daddy, and she's going to know it. I'm going to get her to call me that—daddy!"

Hawkins walked on halfway along the block, erect, with a quick, firm step, his head high, smiling into every face he met—and turning to smile again, conscious that people as they passed had turned to look back at him. And then very gradually Hawkins' pace slackened, and into his face and eyes there came a dawning anxiety, and the smile was gone.

"I'm kind of forgetting," said Hawkins presently to himself, "that it ain't just that I'm getting my little girl. I—I'm kind of forgetting her 'rouble. There—there's Crang."

The old man's face was furrowed now deep with storm and care; he walked still more slowly. He began to mutter to himself. At the corner of the street he raised an old gnarled fist and shook it, clenched, above his

head, unconscious and oblivious now that people still turned and looked at him.

And then a little way ahead of him along the street that he must go to reach the one-time pawn-shop of Paul Veniza, his eyes caught the patch of light that filtered out to the sidewalk from under the swinging doors of the familiar saloon, and from the windows in a more brilliant flood.

Hawkins drew in a long breath.

"No, no!" he whispered fiercely. "I will never go in there again—so help me, God! If I did—and—and she knew it was her daddy, it would just break her heart like—like Crang 'll break it."

He went on, but his footsteps seemed to drag the more now as he approached the saloon. His hand as he raised it trembled; and as he brushed it across his brow it came away wet with sweat.

The saloon was just a yard away from him now.

There was a strange, feverish glitter in the blue eyes. His face was chalky white.

"So help me, God!" Hawkins mumbled hoarsely.

It was five minutes of eight.

Hawkins had halted in front of the swinging doors.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN—THE RENDEZVOUS

**P**AUL VENIZA, pacing restlessly about the room, glanced surreptitiously at his watch, and then glanced anxiously at John Bruce.

John Bruce in turn stole a look at Claire. His lips tightened a little. Since she had been told nothing, she was quite unconscious, of course, that it mattered at all because it was already long after eight o'clock; that Hawkins in particular, or any one else in general, was expected to join the little evening circle here in what he, John Bruce, had by now almost come to call his room. His forehead gathered in a frown. What was it that was keeping Hawkins?

Claire's face was full in the light, and as she sat there at the table, busy with some sewing, it seemed to John Bruce that, due perhaps to the perspective of what he now knew, he detected a weariness in her eyes and in sharp lines around her mouth, that he had not noticed before. It was Crang, of course; but perhaps he too—what he had said to her that afternoon—his love—had not made it any easier for her.

Paul Veniza continued his restless pacing about the room.

"Father, do sit down!" said Claire suddenly. "What makes you so nervous to-night? Is anything the matter?"

"The matter? No! No, no; of course not!" said Paul Veniza hurriedly.

"But I'm sure there is," said Claire, with a positive little nod of her head. "With both of you, for that matter. Mr. Bruce has done nothing but fidget with the tassel of that dressing gown for the last half hour."

John Bruce let the tassel fall as though it had suddenly burned his fingers.

"I? Not at all!" he denied stoutly.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Claire, with mock plaintiveness. "What bores you two men are, then! I wish I could send out—what do you call it?—a thought wave, and inspire some one, and most of all Hawkins, to come over here this evening. He, at least, is never deadly dull."

Neither of the two men spoke.

"You don't know Hawkins, do you, Mr. Bruce?" Claire went on. She was smiling now as she looked at John Bruce. "I mean really know him, of course. He's a dear, quaint, lovable soul, and I'm so fond of him."

"I'm sure he is," said John Bruce heartily. "Even from the little I've seen of him I'd trust him with—well, you know"—John Bruce coughed as his words stumbled—"I mean, I'd take his word for anything."

"Of course, you would!" asserted Claire. "You couldn't think of doing anything else—nobody could. He's just as honest as—as—well, as father there, and I don't know any one more honest." She smiled at Paul Veniza, and then her face grew very earnest. "I'm going to tell you something about Hawkins, and something that even you never knew, father. Ever since I was old enough to remember any one, I remember Hawkins. And when I got old enough to understand at all, though I could never get him to talk about it, I knew his life wasn't a very happy one, and perhaps I loved him all the more for that reason. Hawkins used to drink a great deal. Everybody knew it. I—I never felt I had the right to speak to him about it, though it made me feel terribly, until—until mother died."

Claire had dropped her sewing in her lap, and now she picked it up again and fumbled with it nervously.

"I spoke to him then," she said in a low voice. "I told him how much you needed him, father; and how glad and happy it would make me. And—and I remember so well his words: 'I promise, Claire. I promise, so help me, God, that I will never drink another drop.'" Claire looked up, her face aglow "And I know, no matter what anybody says, that from that day to this, he never has."

Paul Veniza, motionless now in the center of the room, was staring at her in a sort of numbed fascination.

John Bruce was staring at the door. He had heard, he thought, a step in the outer room.

The door opened. Hawkins stood there. He plucked at his frayed, black cravat, which was awry. He lurched against the jamb, and in groping unsteadily for support his hat fell from his other hand and rolled across the floor.

Hawkins reeled into the room.

"Good—hic!—good-evenin'," said Hawkins thickly.

Claire alone moved. She rose to her feet, but as though her weight were too heavy for her limbs. Her lips quivered.

"Oh, Hawkins!" she cried out pitifully—and burst into tears, and ran from the room.

It seemed to John Bruce that for a moment the room swirled around before his eyes; and then over him swept an uncontrollable desire to get his hands upon this maudlin, lurching creature. Rage, disgust, a bitter resentment, a mad hunger for reprisal possessed him; Claire's future, her faith which she had but a moment gone so proudly vaunted, were all shattered, swept to the winds, by this seedy, dissolute wreck. Her father! No, her shame! Thank God she did not know!

"You drunken beast!" he gritted in merciless fury, and stepped suddenly forward.

But halfway across the room he halted as though turned to stone. Hawkins wasn't lurching any more. Hawkins had turned and closed the door; and Hawkins now, with his face white and drawn, a look in his old blue eyes that mingled agony and an utter hopelessness, sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

It was Paul Veniza who moved now. He went and stood behind the old cabman.

Hawkins looked up.

"You are sober. What does this mean?" Paul Veniza asked heavily.

Hawkins shook his head.

"I couldn't do it," he said in a broken voice. "And—and I've settled it once for all now. I got to thinking as I came along to-night, and I found out that it wasn't any good for me to swear I wasn't going to touch anything any more. I'm afraid of myself. I—I came near going into the saloon. It—it taught me something, that did; because the only way I could get by was to promise myself I'd go back there after I'd been here."

Hawkins paused. A flush dyed his cheeks. He turned around and looked at Paul Veniza again, and then at John Bruce.

"You don't understand—neither of you understand. Once I promised Claire that I'd stop, and—and until just now she believed me. And I've hurt her. But I ain't broken her heart. It was only old Hawkins, just Hawkins, who promised her then; it would have been her *father* who promised her to-night, and—and it ain't any good, I'd have broken that promise, I know it now—and she ain't ever going to share that shame."

Hawkins brushed his hands across his eyes.

"And then," he went on, a sudden fierceness in his voice, "suppose she'd had that on top of Crang, 'cause it ain't sure that knowing who I am would have saved her from him! Oh, my God, she'd better be dead! I'd rather see her dead. You're wrong, John Bruce! It wasn't the way. You meant right, and God bless you; but it wasn't the way. I saw it all so clearly after—after I'd got past that saloon; and—and then it was all right for me to promise myself that I'd go back. It wouldn't hurt her none then."

John Bruce cleared his throat.

"I don't quite understand what you mean by that, Hawkins," he said a little huskily.

Hawkins rose slowly to his feet.

"I dressed all up for this," said Hawkins, with a wan smile; "but something's snapped here—inside here." His hand felt a little aimlessly over his heart. "I know now that I ain't ever going to be worthy; and I know now that she ain't ever to know that I—that I—I'm her old daddy. And so I—I've fixed it just now like you saw so there ain't no going back on it. But I ain't throwing my little girl down. It ain't Claire that's got to be made change her mind—*it's Crang*." He raised a clenched fist. "And Crang's going to change it! I can swear to *that* and know I'll keep it, so—so help me, God! And when she's rid of him, she ain't going to have no shame and sorrow from me. That's what I meant."

"Yes," said John Bruce mechanically.

"I'm going now," said Hawkins in a low voice. "Around by the other way," said Paul Veniza softly. "And I'll go with you, old friend."

For a moment Hawkins hesitated, and then he nodded his head.

No one spoke. Paul Veniza's arm was around Hawkins' shoulders as they left the room. The door closed behind them. John Bruce sat down on the edge of his bed.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE—THE FIGHT

FOR a long time John Bruce stared at the closed door; first a little helplessly because the bottom seemed quite to have dropped out of things, and then with set face as the old cabman's words came back to him: "Crang—not Claire." And at this, a sort of merciless joy crept into his eyes, and he nodded his head in savage satisfaction. Yes, Hawkins had been right in that respect, and—well, it would be easier to deal with Crang!

And then suddenly John Bruce's face softened. Hawkins! He remembered the fury with which the old man had inspired him as the other had reeled into the room, and Claire, hurt and miserable, had risen from her chair. But he remembered Hawkins in a different way now. It was Hawkins, not Claire, who had been hurt. The shabby old figure standing there had paid a price, and as he believed for Claire's sake, that had put beyond his reach forever what must have meant, what did mean, all that he cherished most in life.



John Bruce smiled a little wistfully. Somehow he envied Hawkins, so pitifully unstable and so weak—his strength!

He shook his head in a puzzled way. His thoughts led him on. What a strange, almost incomprehensible, little world it was into which fate, if one wished to call it fate, had flung him! It was an alien world to him. His own life of the past rose up in contrast with it—> not of his own volition, but because the comparison seemed to insist on thrusting itself upon him.

He had never before met men like Hawkins and Paul Veniza. He had met drunkards and pawnbrokers. Very many of them! He had lived his life, or, rather, impoverished it with a spendthrift hand, among just such classes—but he was conscious that it would never have been the poorer for an intimacy with either Hawkins or Paul Veniza.

John Bruce raised his head abruptly. The front door had opened. A moment later a footstep sounded in the outer room, and then upon the stairs. That would be Paul Veniza returning of course, though he hadn't been gone very long; or was it that he, John Bruce, had been sitting here staring at that closed door for a far longer period than he had imagined?

He shrugged his shoulders, dismissing the interruption from his mind, and again the wistful smile flickered on his lips.

So that was why nothing had been said in his hearing about the robbery! Queer people—with their traveling pawn-shop, which was bizarre; and their standards of honesty, and their unaffected hospitality which verged on the bizarre too, because their genuineness and simplicity were so unostentatious—and so rare. And somehow, suddenly, as he sat there with his chin cupped now in his hands, he was not proud of this contrast—himself on the one hand, a drunkard and a pawnbroker on the other!

And then John Bruce raised his head again, sharply this time, almost in a startled way. Was that a cry—in a woman's voice? It was muffled by the closed door, and it was perhaps therefore his imagination; but it—

He was on his feet. It had come again. No door could have shut it out from his ears. It was from Claire upstairs, and the cry seemed most curiously to mingle terror and a passionate anger. He ran across the room and threw the door open. It was strange! It would be Paul Veniza in a new rôle, if the gentle, white-haired old pawnbroker could inspire terror in any one!

A rasping, jeering oath—in a man's voice this time—reached him. John Bruce, a sudden fury whipping his blood into lire, found himself stumbling up the stairs. It wasn't Veniza! His mind seemed to convert that phrase into a sing-song refrain: "It wasn't Veniza! It wasn't Veniza!"

Claire's voice came to him distinctly now, and there was the same terror in it, the same passionate anger that he had distinguished in her cry:

"Keep away from me! I loathe you! It is men like you that prompt a woman to murder! But—but instead, I have prayed God with all my soul to let me die before——" Her voice ended in a sharp cry, a scuffle of feet.

It was Crang in there! John Bruce, now almost at the top of the stairs, was unconscious that he was panting heavily from his exertions, unconscious of everything save a new refrain that had taken possession of his mind: "It was Crang in there! It was Crang in there!"

It was the door just at the right of the landing.

Crang's voice came from there; and the voice was high, like the squeal of an enraged animal:

"You're mine! I've got a right to those red lips, you vixen, and I'm going to have them! A man's got the right to take the girl he's going to marry in his arms! Do you think I'm going to be held off forever? You're mine, and——"

The words were lost again in a cry from Claire, and in the sound of a struggle—a falling chair, the scuffle once more of feet.

John Bruce flung himself across the hall and against the door, it yielded without resistance, and the impetus of his own rush carried him, staggering, far into the room. Two forms were circling there under the gas light as though in the throes of some mad dance—only the face of the woman was deathly white, and her small clenched fists beat frantically at the face of the man whose arms were around her. John Bruce sprang forward. He laughed aloud, unnaturally. His brain, his mind, was whirling; but something soft was grasped in his two encircling hands, and that was why he laughed—because his soul laughed. His fingers pressed tighter. It was Crang's throat that was soft under his fingers.

Suddenly the room swirled around him. A giddiness seemed to seize upon him—and that soft thing in his grip slipped from his fingers and escaped him. He brushed his hand across his eyes. It would pass, of course. It was strange that he should go giddy like that, and that his limbs should be trembling as though with the ague! Again he brushed his hand across his eyes. It would pass off. He could see better now. Claire had somehow fallen to the floor; but she was rising to her knees now, using the side of the bed for support, and

Her voice rang wildly through the room.

"Look out! Oh, look out!" she cried.

To John Bruce it seemed as though something leaped at him out of space—and struck. The blow, aimed at his side, which was still bandaged, went home. It brought an agony that racked and tore and twisted at every nerve in his body. It wrung a moan from his lips, it brought the sweat beads bursting out upon his forehead—but it cleared his brain.

Yes, it was Doctor Crang—but disreputable in appearance as he had never before seen the man. Crang's clothes were filthy and unkempt, as though the man had fallen somewhere in the mire and was either unconscious or callous of the fact; his hair draggled in a matted way over his forehead, and though his face worked with passion, and the passion brought a curious hectic rose-color to supplant the customary lifeless gray of his cheeks, the eyes were most strangely glazed and fixed.

And again John Bruce laughed—and with a vicious guard swept aside a second blow aimed at his side, and his left fist, from a full arm swing, crashed to the point of Doctor Crang's jaw. But the next instant they had

closed, their arms locked around each other's waists, their chins dug hard into each other's shoulders. And they rocked there, and swayed, and lurched, a curious impotence in their ferocity—and toppled to the floor.

John Bruce's grip tightened as Doctor Crang fought madly now to tear himself free—and they rolled over and over in the direction of the door. Hot and cold waves swept over John Bruce. He was weak, pitifully weak, barely a convalescent. But he was content to call it an equal fight. He asked for no other odds than Crang himself had offered. The man for once had over-steeped himself with dope, and was near the point of collapse. He had read that in the other's eyes, as surely as though he had been told. And so John Bruce, between his gasping breaths, still laughed, and rolled over and over—always toward the door.

From somewhere Claire's voice reached John Bruce, imploringly, in terror. Of course! That was why he was trying to get to the door, to get out of her room—through respect for her—to get somewhere where he could finish this fight between one man who could scarcely stand upon his feet through weakness, and another whose drug-shattered body was approaching that state of coma which he, John Bruce, had been made to suffer on the night the robbery had been committed. And by the same needle! He remembered that! Weak in body, his mind was very clear. And so he rolled over and over, always toward the door, because Crang was heedless of the direction they were taking, and he, John Bruce, was probably not strong enough in any other way to force the other out of the room where they could finish this.

They rolled to the threshold—and out into the hall. John Bruce loosened his hold suddenly, staggered to his feet, and leaned heavily for an instant against the jamb of the door. But it was only for an instant. Crang was the quicker upon his feet. Like a beast there was slaver on the other's lips, his hands clawed the air, his face was contorted hideously like the face of one demented, one from whom reason had flown, and with whom maniacal passion alone remained—and from the banister railing opposite the door Crang launched himself forward upon John Bruce again.

"She's mine!" he screamed. "I've been watching you two! I'll teach you! She's mine—mine! I'll finish you for this!"

John Bruce side-stepped the rush, and Crang pitched with his head against the door jamb, but recovering, whirled again, and rushed again. The man began to curse steadily now in a low, abominable monotone. It seemed to John Bruce that he ought to use his fist as a cork and thrust it into the other's mouth to bottle up the vile flow of epithets that included Claire, and coupled his name with Claire's. Claire might hear! The man was raving, insane with jealousy. John Bruce struck. His fist found its mark on Crang's lips, and found it again; but somehow his arm seemed to possess but little strength, and to sag back at the elbow from each impact. He writhed suddenly as Crang reached him with another blow on his side.

And then they had grappled and locked together again, and were swaying like drunken men, now to this side, and now to that, of the narrow hall.

It could not last. John Bruce felt his knees giving way beneath him. He had under-estimated Crang's resistance to the over-dose of drug. Crang was the stronger—and seemed to be growing stronger every instant. Or was it his own increasing weakness?

Crang's fist with a short-arm jab smashed at John Bruce's wounded side once more. The man struck nowhere else—always, with the cunning born of hell, at the wounded side. John Bruce dug his teeth into his lips. A wave of nausea swept over him. He felt his senses leaving him, and he clung now to the other, close, tight-pressed, as the only means of protecting his side.

He forced himself then desperately to a last effort. There was one chance left, just one. In the livid face, in the hot, panting breath with which the other mouthed his hideous profanity, there was murder. Over his shoulder, barely a foot away, John Bruce glimpsed the staircase. He let his weight sag with seeming helplessness upon Crang. It brought Crang around in a half circle. Crang's back was to the stairs now. John Bruce let his hands slip slowly from their hold upon the other, as though the last of his strength was ebbing away. He accepted a vicious blow on his wounded side as the price that he must pay, a blow that brought his chin crumpling down upon his breast—and then with every ounce of remaining strength he hurled himself at Crang, and Crang's foot stumbled out into space over the topmost stair, and with a scream of infuriated surprise the man pitched backward.

John Bruce grasped with both hands at the banister for support. Something went rolling, rolling, rolling down the stairs with queer, dull thumps like a sack of meal. His hands slipped from the banister, and he sat limply down on the topmost step and laughed. He laughed because that curious looking bundle at the bottom there began a series of fruitless efforts to roll back up the stairs again.

And then the front door opened. He could see it from where he sat, and Paul Veniza—that was Paul Veniza, wasn't it?—stepped into the room below, and cried out, and ran toward the bundle at the foot of the stairs.

John Bruce felt some one suddenly hold him back from pitching down the stairs himself, but nevertheless he kept on falling and falling into some great pit that grew darker and darker the farther he went down, and this in spite of some one who tried to hold him back, and—and who had a face that looked like Claire's, only it was as—as white as driven snow. And as he descended into the blackness some one screamed at him: "I'll finish you for this!" And screamed it again—only the voice kept growing fainter. And—and then he could neither see nor hear any more.

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When John Bruce opened his eyes again he was lying on his cot. A little way from him, their backs turned, Claire and Paul Veniza were whispering earnestly together. He watched them for a moment, and gradually as his senses became normally acute again he caught Claire's words:

"He is not safe here for a moment. Father, we must get him away. I am afraid. There is not a threat Doctor Crang made to-night but that he is quite capable of carrying out."

"But he is safe for to-night," Paul Veniza answered soothingly. "I got Crang home to bed, and as I told you, he is too badly bruised and knocked about to move around any before morning at least."

"And yet I am afraid," Claire insisted anxiously. "Fortunately Mr. Bruce's wound hasn't opened, and he could be moved. Oh, if Hawkins only hadn't—"

She stopped, and twisted her hands together nervously.

Paul Veniza coughed, averted his head suddenly and in turning met John Bruce's eyes—and stared in a startled way.

"Claire!" John Bruce called softly.

"Oh!" she cried, and ran toward him. "You—"

"Yes," smiled John Bruce. "And I have been listening. Why isn't it safe for me to stay here any longer? On account of Crang's wild threats?"

"Yes," she said in a low voice.

John Bruce laughed.

"But you don't believe them, do you?" he asked. "At least, I mean, you don't take them literally." Claire's lips were trembling.

"There is no other way to take them." She was making an effort to steady her voice. "It is not a question of believing them. I know only too well that he will carry them out if he can. You are not safe here, or even in New York now—but less safe here in this house than anywhere else."

John Bruce came up on his elbow.

"Then, Claire, isn't this the end?" he demanded passionately. "You know him for what he is. You do not love him, for I distinctly heard you tell him that you loathed him, as I went up the stairs. Claire, I am not asking for myself now—only for you. Tell me, tell Paul Veniza here, to whom it will mean so much, that you have now no further thought of marriage with that"—John Bruce's voice choked—"with Crang." She shook her head.

"I cannot tell you that," she said dully, "for I am going to marry Doctor Crang."

John Bruce's face hardened. He looked at Paul Veniza. The old pawnbroker had his eyes on the floor, and was ruffling his white hair helplessly with his fingers.

"Why?" John Bruce asked.

"Because I promised," Claire said slowly.

"But a promise like that!" John Bruce burst out. "A promise that you will regret all your life is—"

"No!" Her face was half averted; her head was lowered to hide the tears that suddenly welled into her eyes. "No; it is a promise that I—that I am glad now I made."

"*Glad!*" John Bruce sat upright. She had turned her head away from the cot. He could not see her face. "Glad!" he repeated incredulously.

"Yes." Her voice was scarcely audible.

For a moment John Bruce stared at her; then a bitter smile tightened his lips, and he lay back on the cot, and turned on his side away from both Claire and Paul Veniza.

When John Bruce looked around again, only Paul Veniza was in the room.

"I don't understand," said Paul Veniza—he was still ruffling his hair, still with his eyes on the floor.

"I do," said John Bruce grimly. "Claire is right. It isn't safe for me to stay here, and I'll go to-night. If only Hawkins hadn't—" He laughed a little harshly. "But I'll go to-night, just the same. A taxi will do quite as well."

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN—TRAPPINGS OF TINSEL

**U**NDER the shaded light on his table, in his private sitting room in the Bayne-Miloy Hotel, John Bruce had been writing steadily for half an hour—but the sheets of paper over which his pen had traveled freely and swiftly were virgin white. He paused now, remained a moment in thought, and then added a line to the last sheet. No mark was left, but from the movement of the pen this appeared to be a signature.

He gathered the sheets together, folded them neatly, and slipped them into an envelope. He replaced the cap on the fountain pen he had been using, placed the pen in his vest pocket, and from another pocket took out another pen that was apparently identical with the first. With this second pen, in black ink, he addressed the envelope to one Gilbert Larmon in San Francisco. He sealed the envelope, stamped it, put it in his pocket, returned the second fountain pen to his vest pocket, lighted a cigarette leaned back in his chair, and frowned at the ascending spirals of smoke from the cigarette's tip.

The report which he had just written to Larmon, explaining his inaction during the past weeks, had been an effort—not physical, but mental. He had somehow, curiously, felt no personal regret for the enforced absence from his "work," and he now felt no enthusiasm at the prospect of resuming it. He had had no right to tinge or color his letter to Larmon with these views; nor had he intended to do so. Perhaps he had not; perhaps he had. He did not know. The ink originated by the old Samoan Islander had its disadvantages as well as its advantages. He could not now read the letter over once it was written!

He flicked the ash irritably from his cigarette. He had been back here in the hotel now for two days and that feeling had been constantly growing upon him. Why? He did not know except that the cause seemed to insist on associating itself with his recent illness, his life in the one-time pawn-shop of Paul Veniza. But, logically, that did not hold water. Why should it? He had met a pawnbroker who roamed the streets at night in a fantastic motor car, driven by a drunkard; and he had fallen in love with a girl who was glad she was going to marry a dope-eating criminal. Good God, it was a spectacle to make—

John Bruce's fist crashed suddenly down on the desk beside him, and he rose from his chair and stood there staring unseeingly before him. That was not fair! What was uppermost now was the recrudescence of the bitterness that had possessed him two nights ago when he had returned from Paul Veniza's to the hotel here. Nor was it any more true than it was fair! What of the days and nights of nursing, of care, of the ungrudging and kindly hospitality they had given to an utter stranger? Yes, he knew! Only—only she had said she was *glad!*

He began to pace the room. He had left Veniza's in bitterness. He had not seen Claire. It was a strange sort of love he boasted, little of unselfishness in it, much of impatience, and still more of intolerance! That it was a hopeless love in so far as he was concerned did not place him before himself in any better light. If he cared for her, if there was any depth of feeling in this love he claimed to have, then at least her happiness, her welfare and her future could not be extraneous and indifferent considerations to him. And on the spur of the moment, piqued, in spite of Paul Veniza's protestations, he had left that night without seeing Claire again!

He had been ashamed of himself. Yesterday, he had telephoned Claire. He had begged her forgiveness. He had not meant to say more—but he had! Something in her voice had—no, not invited; he could not say that—but had brought the passion, pleading almost, back into his own. It had seemed to him that she was in tears at the other end of the wire; at least, bravely as she had evidently tried to do so, she had been unable to keep her voice under control. But she had evaded an answer. There had been nothing to forgive, she had said. He had told her that he must see her, that he would see her again. And then almost hysterically, over and over again, she had begged him to attempt nothing of the sort, but instead to leave New York because she insisted that it was not safe for him to stay even in the city.

John Bruce hurled the butt of his cigarette in the direction of the cuspidor, and clenched his fist. Crang! Safe from Crang! He laughed aloud harshly. He asked nothing better than to meet Crang again. He would not be so weak the next time! And the sooner the better!

He gnawed at his under lip, as he continued to pace the room. To-day, he had telephoned Claire again—but he had not spoken to her this time. He had not been surprised at the news he had received, for he remembered that Hawkins had once told him that the old pawnbroker was in reality far from well. Some one, he did not know who, some neighbor probably, had answered the phone. Paul Veniza had been taken ill. Claire had been up with him all the previous night, and was then resting.

John Bruce paused abruptly before the desk at which he had been writing, and looked at his watch. It was a little after ten o'clock. He was going back to "work" again to-night. He smiled suddenly, and a little quizzically, as he caught sight of himself in a mirror. What would they say—the white-haired negro butler, and the exquisite Monsieur Henri de Lavergne, for instance—when the millionaire plunger, usually so immaculate in evening clothes, presented himself at their door in a suit of business tweeds?

He shrugged his shoulders. Down at Ratti's that night his apparel—it was a matter of viewpoint—had been a source of eminent displeasure, and as such had been very effectively disposed of. He had had no opportunity to be measured for new clothes.

The smile faded, and he stood staring at the desk. The millionaire plunger! It seemed to jar somehow on his sensibilities. Work! That was a queer way, too, to designate it. He was going to take up his work again to-night, pick up the threads of his life again where he had dropped them. A bit ragged those threads, weren't they? Frayed, as it were!

What the devil was the matter with him, anyway?

There was money in it, a princely existence. What more could any one ask? What did Claire, his love for a girl who was glad to marry some one else infinitely worse than he was, have to do with it? Ah, she *did* have something to do with it, then! Nonsense! It was absurd!

He took a key abruptly from his pocket, and unlocked one of the drawers of the desk. From the drawer he took out a large roll of bills. The hotel management had sent to the bank and cashed a check for him that afternoon. He had not forgotten that he would need money, and plenty of it, at the tables this evening. Well, he was quite ready to go now, and it was time; it would be halfpast ten before he got there, and—

"The devil!" said John Bruce savagely—and suddenly tossed the money back into the drawer, and locked the drawer. "If I don't feel like it to-night, why should I? I guess I'll just drop around for a little convalescent visit, and let it go at that."

John Bruce put on a light overcoat, and left the room. In the lobby downstairs he posted his letter to Gilbert Larmon. He stepped out on the street, and from the rank in front of the hotel secured a taxi. Twenty minutes later he entered Gilbert Larmon's New York gambling hell.

Here he received a sort of rhapsodical welcome from the exquisite Monsieur Henri de Lavergne, which embraced poignant regret at the accident that had befallen him, and unspeakable joy at his so-splendid recovery. It was a delight so great to shake the hand of Mr. Bruce again that Monsieur Henri de Lavergne complained bitterly at the poverty of language which prevented an adequate expression of his true and sincere feelings. Also, Monsieur Henri de Lavergne, if he were not trespassing, would be flattered indeed with Mr. Bruce's confidence, if Mr. Bruce should see fit to honor him with an account of how the accident had happened. He would be desolated if in any way it could be attributable to any suggestion that he, Monsieur de Lavergne, on behalf of the house which he had the honor to represent as manager, had made to Mr. Bruce which might have induced—

"Not at all!" John Bruce assured him heartily. He smiled at Monsieur de Lavergne. The other knew nothing of Claire's presence in the car that night, and for Claire's sake it was necessary to set the man's mind so



completely at rest that the subject would lack further interest. The only way to accomplish that was to appear whole-heartedly frank. John Bruce became egregiously frank. "It was just my own damned curiosity," he said with a wry smile. "I got out of that ingenious contraption at the corner after going around the block, and, well, my curiosity, as I said, got the better of me. I followed the thing, and found out where Mr. Veniza lived. I started on my way back, but I didn't get very far. I got into trouble with a rather tough crowd just around the corner, who didn't like my shirt front, I believe they said. The fight ended by my being backed into a wine shop where I was stabbed, but from which I managed to escape into the lane. I was about all in, and the only chance I could see was a lighted window on the other side of a low fence. I crawled in the window, and flopped on the floor. It proved to be Mr. Veniza's house."

"*Pour l'amour du dieu!*" exclaimed Monsieur Henri de Lavergne breathlessly.

"And which also accounts," said John Bruce pleasantly, "for the apology I must offer you for my appearance this evening in these clothes. The mob in that respect was quite successful."

"But that you are back!" Monsieur de Lavergne's hands were raised in protest. "That is alone what matters. Monsieur Bruce knows that in any attire it is the same here for monsieur as though he were at home."

"Thank you!" said John Bruce cordially. "I have only dropped in through the urge of old habits, I guess. I'm hardly on my feet yet, and I thought I'd just watch the play for a little while to-night."

"And that, too," said Monsieur Henri de Lavergne with a bow, as John Bruce moved toward the staircase, "is entirely as monsieur desires."

John Bruce mounted the stairs, and began a stroll through the roulette and card rooms. The croupiers and dealers nodded to him genially; those of the "guests" whom he knew did likewise. He was treated with marked courtesy and consideration by every attendant in the establishment. Everything was exactly as it had been on his previous visits. There were the soft mellow lights; the siren purr of the roulette wheel, the musical *click* of the ball as it spun around on its little fateful orbit; the low, quiet voices of the croupiers and dealers; the well-dressed players grouped around the tables, the hilarious and the grim, the devil-may-care laugh from one, the thin smile from another. It was exactly the same, all exactly the same, even to the table in the supper room, free to all though laden with every wine and delicacy that money could procure; but somehow, even at the end of half an hour, where he was wont to be engrossed till daylight, John Bruce became excessively bored.

Perhaps it was because he was simply an on-looker, and not playing himself. He had drawn close to a group around a faro bank. The play was grim earnest and for high stakes. No, it wasn't that! He did not want to play. Somehow, rather, he knew a slight sense both of contempt and disgust at the eager clutch and grasp of hands, the hoarse, short laugh of victory, the snarl of defeat, the trembling fingers of the more timorous who staked with Chance and demanded that the god be charitable in its omnipotence and toss them crumbs!

Well, what was he caviling about? It was the life he had chosen. It was his life work. Wasn't he pleased with it? He had certainly liked it well enough in the old days to squander upon it the fair-sized fortune his father had left him. He decidedly had not gone into that infernal compact with Larmon blindfolded. Perhaps it was because in those days he played when he wanted to; and in these, and hereafter, he would play because he had to. Perhaps it was only that, to-night, there was upon him the feeling, which was natural enough, and which was immeasurably human too, that it was irksome to be a slave, to be fettered and shackled and bound to anything, even to what one, with one's freedom his own, was ordinarily out of choice most prone to do and delight in. Well, maybe! But that was not entirely a satisfactory or conclusive solution either.

He looked around him. There seemed to be something hollow to-night in these trappings of tinsel; and something not only hollow, but sardonic in his connection with them—that he should act as a monitor over the honesty of those who in turn acted as the agents of Larmon in an already illicit traffic.

"Oh, hell!" said John Bruce suddenly.

The dealer looked up from the table, surprise mingling with polite disapproval. Several of the players screwed around their heads.

"That's what I say!" snarled one of the latter with an added oath, as a large stack of chips was swept away from him.

Some one touched John Bruce on the elbow. He turned around. It was one of the attendants.

"You are being asked for downstairs, Mr. Bruce," the man informed him.

John Bruce followed the attendant. In the hall below the white-haired negro doorkeeper came toward him.

"I done let him in, Mistuh Bruce, suh," the old darky explained a little anxiously, "'cause he done say, Mistuh Bruce, that it was a case of most particular illness, suh, and——"

John Bruce did not wait for more. It was Veniza probably—a turn for the worse. He nodded, and passed hurriedly along the hall to where, near the door, a poorly dressed man, hat in hand and apparently somewhat ill at ease in his luxurious surroundings, stood waiting.

"I am Mr. Bruce," he said quickly. "Some one is critically ill, you say? Is it Mr. Veniza?"

"No, sir," the man answered. "I don't know anything about Mr. Veniza. It's Hawkins."

"Hawkins!" ejaculated John Bruce.

"Yes, sir," said the man. He shuffled his feet. "I—I guess you know, sir."

John Bruce for a moment made no comment. Hawkins! Yes, he knew! Hawkins had even renounced his pledge, hadn't he? Not, perhaps, that that would have made any difference!

"Bad?" he asked tersely.

"I'm afraid so, sir," the man replied. "I've seen a good bit of Hawkins off and on in the last two years, sir, because I room in the same house; but I've never seen him like this. He's been out of his head and clawing the air, sir, if you know what I mean. He's over that now, but that weak he had me scared once, sir, that he'd gone."

"What does the doctor say?" John Bruce bit off his words.

The man shook his head.

"He wouldn't have one, sir. It's you he wants. You'll understand, sir, that he's been alone. I don't know how long ago he started on this spree. It was only by luck that I walked into his room to-night. I was for getting a doctor at once, of course, but he wouldn't have it; he wanted you. At times, sir, he was crying like a baby, only he hadn't the strength of one left. Knowing I could run her, me being a motortruck driver, he told me to take that car he drives and go to the hotel for you, and if you weren't there to try here—which I've done, sir, as you see, and I hope you'll come back with me. I don't know what to do, though I'm for picking up a doctor on the way back whether he wants one or not."

John Bruce turned abruptly, secured his coat and hat, motioned the man to lead the way, and followed the other out of the house and down the steps to the sidewalk.

The traveling pawn-shop was at the curb. The man opened the door, and John Bruce stepped inside—and was instantly flung violently down upon a seat. The door closed. The car started forward. And in a sudden glare of light John Bruce stared into the muzzle of a revolver, and, behind the revolver, into a bruised and battered face, which was the face of Doctor Crang.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN—THE TWO PENS

JOHN BRUCE stared for a moment longer at the revolver that held a steady bead between his eyes, and at the evil face of Crang that leered at him from the opposite seat; then he deliberately turned his head and stared at the face of still another occupant of the car—a man who sat on the seat beside him. He was trapped—and well trapped! He recognized the other to be the man known as Birdie, who had participated on a certain night in the robbery of Paul Veniza's safe. It was quite plain. The third man in that robbery, whose face he had not seen at the time, was undoubtedly the man who had brought the "message" a few minutes ago, and who was now, with almost equal certainty, engaged in driving the car. Thieving, at least, was in the trio's line! They must somehow or other have stolen the traveling pawn-shop from Hawkins!

He smiled grimly. If it had been Birdie now who had brought the message he would never have fallen into the trap! Crang had played in luck and won by a very narrow margin, for Crang was naturally in ignorance that he, John Bruce, had ever seen either of the men before. And then John Bruce thought of the bulky roll of bills which by an equally narrow margin was *not* in his pocket at that moment, and his smile deepened.

Crang spoke for the first time.

"Take his gun away from him, if he's got one!" he gnarled tersely.

"It's in the breast pocket of my coat," said John Bruce imperturbably.

Birdie, beside John Bruce, reached over and secured the weapon.

John Bruce leaned back in his seat. The car was speeding rapidly along now.

The minutes passed. None of the three men spoke. Crang sat like some repulsive gargoyle, leering maliciously.

John Bruce half closed his eyes against the uncanny fascination of that round black muzzle which never wavered in its direction, and which was causing him to strain too intently upon it. What was the game? How far did Crang intend to go with his insane jealousy? How far would Crang dare to go? The man wasn't doped to-night. Perhaps he was even the more dangerous on that account. Instead of mouthing threats, there was something ominous now, it seemed, in the man's silence. John Bruce's lips drew together. He remembered Claire's insistence that Crang had meant what he said literally—and Claire had repeated that warning over the telephone. Well, if she were right, it meant—*murder*.

From under his half closed lids, John Bruce looked around the car. The curtains, as they always were, were closely drawn. The interior was lighted by that same soft central light, only the light was high up now near the roof of the car. Well, if it was to be murder, why not *now*? The little velvet-topped table was not in place, and there was nothing between himself and that sneering, sallow face. Yes, why not now—and settle it!

He straightened almost imperceptibly in his seat, as impulse suddenly bade him fling himself forward upon Crang. Why not? The sound of a revolver shot would be heard in the street, and Crang might not even dare to fire at all. And then John Bruce's glance rested on the man beside him—and impulse gave way to common sense. He had no intention of submitting tamely and without a struggle to any fate, no matter what it might be, that Crang proposed for him, but that struggle would better come when there was at least a chance. There was no chance here. Birdie, on the seat beside him, held a deadlier and even more effective weapon than was Crang's revolver, a silent thing—a black-jack.

"Wait! Don't play the fool! You'll get a better chance than this!" the voice of what he took to be common sense whispered to him.

The car began to go slower. It swerved twice as though making sharp turns; and then, running still more slowly, began to bump over rough ground.

Crang spoke again.

"You can make all the noise you want to, if you think it will do you any good," he said viciously; "but if you make a move you are not told to make you'll be *carried* the rest of the way! Understand?"

John Bruce did not answer.

The car stopped. Birdie opened the door on his side, and stepped to the ground. He was joined by the man

who had driven the car, and who, as John Bruce now found he had correctly assumed, had acted as the decoy at the gambling house.

"Get out!" ordered Doctor Crang curtly.

John Bruce followed Birdie from the car. It was dark out here, exceedingly dark, but he could make out that the car had been driven into a narrow lane, and that they were close to the wall of a building of some sort. The two men gripped him by his arms. He felt the muzzle of Crang's revolver pressed into the small of his back.

"Mind your step!" cautioned Birdie gruffly.

It was evidently the entrance to a cellar. John Bruce found himself descending a few short steps; and then, on the level again, he was guided forward through what was now pitch blackness. A moment more and they had halted, but not before John Bruce's foot had come into contact with a wall or partition of some kind in front of him. One of the men who gripped his arms knocked twice with three short raps in quick succession.

A door opened in front of them, and for an instant John Bruce was blinded by a sudden glare of light; but the next instant, his eyes grown accustomed to the transition, he saw before him a large basement room, disreputable and filthy in appearance, where half a dozen men sat at tables drinking and playing cards.

A shove from the muzzle of Crang's revolver urged John Bruce forward into an atmosphere that was foul, hot and fetid, and thick with tobacco smoke that floated in heavy, sinuous layers in mid-air. He was led down the length of the room toward another door at the opposite end. The men at the tables, as he passed them, paid him little attention other than to leer curiously at him. They greeted Birdie and his companion with blasphemous familiarity; but their attitude toward Crang, it seemed to John Bruce, was one of cowed and abject respect.

John Bruce's teeth closed hard together. This was a nice place, an ominously nice place—a hidden den of the rats of the underworld, where Crang was obviously the leader. He was not so sure now that the promptings of so-called common sense had been common sense at all! His chances of escaping, practically hopeless as they had been in the car, would certainly have been worth trying in view of this! He began to regret his "common sense" bitterly now.

He was in front of the door toward which they had been heading now. It was opened by Birdie, and John Bruce was pushed into a small, dimly-lighted, cave-like place. Crang said something in a low voice to the two men, and, leaving them outside, entered himself, closing the door only partially behind him.

For a moment they faced each other, and then Crang laughed—tauntingly, in menace.

John Bruce's eyes, from Crang's sallow face, and from Crang's revolver, swept coolly over his surroundings. A mattress, a foul thing, lay on the ground in one corner. There was no flooring here in the cellar. A small incandescent bulb hung from the roof. There was one chair and a battered table—nothing else; not even a window.

"It was like stealing from a child!" sneered Crang suddenly. "You poor mark!"

"Quite so!" said John Bruce calmly. "And the more so since I was warned that you were quite capable of—murder. I suppose that is what I am here for."

"Oh, you were warned, were you?" Crang took an abrupt step forward, his lips working. An angry purple clouded the pallor of his face. "More of that love stuff, eh? Well, by God, here's the end of it! I'll teach you with your damned sanctimonious airs to fool around the girl I'm going to marry! You snivelling hypocrite, you didn't tell her who *you* were, did you?"

John Bruce stared blankly.

"Who I am?" he repeated. "What do you mean?"

Crang for the moment was silent. He seemed to be waging a battle with himself to control his passion.

"I'm too clever a man to lose my temper, now I've got you!" he rasped finally. "That's about the size of your mentality! The sweet, naïve, innocent rôle! Yes, I said a snivelling hypocrite! You don't eat dope, but perhaps you've heard of a man named Larmon—Mr. Gilbert Larmon, of San Francisco!"

To John Bruce it seemed as though Crang's words in their effect were something like one of those blows the same man had dealt him on his wounded side in that fight of the other night. They seemed to jar him, and rob his mind of quick thinking and virility—and yet he was quite sure that not a muscle of his face had moved.

"You needn't answer," Crang grinned mockingly. "If you haven't met him, you'll have the opportunity of doing so in a few hours. Mr. Larmon will arrive in New York to-night in response to the telegram you sent him."

"I know you said you were clever," said John Bruce shortly, "and I have no doubt this is the proof of it! But what is the idea? I did not send a telegram to any one."

"Oh, yes, you did!" Crang was chuckling evilly.

"It was something to the effect that Mr. Larmon's immediate presence in New York was imperative; that you were in serious difficulties. And in order that Mr. Larmon might have no suspicions or anxiety aroused as to his own personal safety, he was to go on his arrival to the Bayne-Miloy Hotel; but was, at the same time, to register under the name of R. L. Peters, and to make no effort to communicate with you until you gave him the cue. The answer to the telegram was to be sent to a—er—quite different address. And here's the answer."

His revolver levelled, Crang laid a telegram on the table, and then backed away a few steps.

John Bruce picked up the message. It was dated from San Francisco several days before, and was authentic beyond question. It was addressed to John Bruce in the care of one William Anderson, at an address which he took to be somewhere over on the East Side. He read it quickly:

Leaving at once and will follow instructions. Arrive Wednesday night. Am exceedingly anxious.

Gilbert Larmon.

"This is Wednesday night," sneered Crang.

John Bruce laid down the telegram. That Crang in some way had discovered his, John Bruce's connection

with Larmon, was obvious. But how—and what did it mean? He smiled coldly. There was no use in playing the fool by denying any knowledge of Larmon. It was simply a question of exactly how *much* Crang knew.

“Well?” he inquired indifferently.

The door was pushed open, and Birdie came in. He carried pen and ink, a large sheet of paper, and an envelope.

Crang motioned toward the table.

“Put them down there—and get out!” he ordered curtly; and then as the man obeyed, he stared for an instant in malicious silence at John Bruce. “I guess we’re wasting time!” he snapped. “I sent the telegram to Larmon a few days ago, and I know all about you and Larmon, and his ring of gambling houses. You talked your fool head off when you were delirious—understand? And—”

John Bruce, his face suddenly white, took a step forward—and stopped, and shrugged his shoulders. Crang’s outflung revolver was on a level with his eyes. And then John Bruce turned his back deliberately, and walked to the far end of the little room.

Crang laughed wickedly.

“I am afraid I committed a breach of medical *étiquette*,” he said. “I sent to San Francisco and got the dope on the quiet about this Mr. Larmon. I found out that he is an enormously wealthy man; and I also found out that he poses as an immaculate pillar of society. It looks pretty good, doesn’t it, Bruce—for me? Two birds with one stone; you for trying to get between me and Claire; and Larmon coughing up the dough to save your hide and save himself from being exposed for what he is!”

John Bruce made no answer. They were not so fanciful now, not so unreal and wandering, those dreams when he had been ill, those dreams in which there had been a man with a quill toothpick, and another with a sinister, loathsome face, whose head was always cocked in a listening attitude.

“Well, I guess you’ve got it now, all of it, haven’t you?” Crang snarled. “It’s lucky for you Larmon’s got the coin, or I’d pass you out for what you did the other night. As it is you’re getting out of it light. There’s paper on the table. You write him a letter that will get him down here with a blank check in his pocket. I’ll help you to word it.” Crang smiled unpleasantly. “He will be quite comfortable here while the check is going through the bank; for it would be most unfortunate, you know, if he had a chance to stop payment on it. And I might say that I am not worrying at all about any reprisals through the tracing of the check afterward, for if Mr. Larmon is paying me to keep my mouth shut there is no fear of his opening his own.”

John Bruce turned slowly around.

“And if I don’t?” he asked quietly.

Crang studied the revolver in his hand for a moment. He looked up finally with a smile that was hideous in its malignancy.

“I’m not sure that I particularly care,” he said. “You are going to get out of my path in any case, though my personal inclination is to snuff you out, and”—his voice rose suddenly—“damn you, I’d like to see you dead; but on the other hand, my business sense tells me that I’d be better off with, say, a hundred thousand dollars in my pocket. Do you get the idea, my dear Mr. Bruce? I am sure you do. And as your medical advisor, for your health is still very much involved, I would strongly urge you to write the letter. But at the same time I want to be perfectly frank with you. There is a tail to it as far as you are concerned. I have a passage in my pocket—a first-class passage, in fact a stateroom where you can be secured so that I may make certain you do not leave the ship prematurely at the dock—for South America, on a steamer sailing to-morrow afternoon. The passage is made out in the name of John Bruce.”

“You seem to have taken it for granted that I would agree to your proposal,” said John Bruce pleasantly.

“I have,” Crang answered shortly. “I give you credit in some respects for not being altogether a fool.”

“In other words,” said John Bruce, still pleasantly, “if I will trap Mr. Larmon into coming here so that you will have him in your power, and can hold him until you have squeezed out of him what you consider the fair amount he should pay as blackmail, or do away with him perhaps, if he is obstinate, I am to go free and sail for South America to-morrow afternoon; failing this, I am to snuff out—I think you called it—at the hands of either yourself or this gentlemanly looking band of apaches you have gathered around you.”

“You haven’t made any mistake so far!” said Crang evenly. He jerked his hand toward the table. “It’s that piece of paper there, or your hide.”

“Yes,” said John Bruce slowly. He stared for an instant, set-faced, into Crang’s eyes. “Well, then, go ahead!”

Crang’s eyes narrowed.

“You mean,” his voice was hoarse with menace, “you mean—”

“Yes!” said John Bruce tersely. “My hide!”

Crang did not answer for a moment. The revolver in his hand seemed to edge a little nearer to John Bruce as though to make more certain of its aim. Crang’s eyes were alight with passion.

John Bruce did not move. It was over—this second—or the next. Crang’s threats were *literal*. Claire had said so. He knew it. It was in Crang’s eyes—a sort of unholy joy, a madman’s frenzy. Well, why didn’t the man fire and have done with it?

And then suddenly Crang’s shoulders lifted in a mocking shrug.

“Maybe you haven’t got this—*straight*,” he said between closed teeth. “I guess I’ve paid you the compliment of crediting you with a quicker intelligence than you possess! I’ll give you thirty minutes alone to think it over and figure out where you stand.”

Crang backed to the door.

The door closed. John Bruce heard the key turn in the lock. He stared about him at the miserable surroundings. Thirty minutes! He did not need thirty minutes, or thirty seconds, to realize his position. He was not even sure that he was thankful for the reprieve. It meant half an hour more of life, but—

Cornered like a rat! To go out at the hands of a degenerate dope fiend... the man had been cunning



enough... Hawkins!

John Bruce paced his little section of the cellar. His footsteps made no sound on the soft earth. This was his condemned cell; his warders a batch of gunmen whose trade was murder.

Larmon! They had not been able to trick Larmon into their power so easily, because there wasn't any Hawkins. No, there was—John Bruce. John Bruce was the bait. Queer! Queer that he had ever met Larmon, and queer that the end should come like this.

Faustus hadn't had his fling yet. That quill toothpick with which he had signed—

John Bruce stood stock still—his eyes suddenly fastened on the piece of paper on the table.

"My God!" John Bruce whispered hoarsely.

He ran silently to the door and listened. He could hear nothing. He ran back to the table, threw himself into the chair, and snatching the sheet of paper toward him, took out a fountain pen from his pocket. Near the lower edge of the paper, and in a minutely small hand, he began to write rapidly.

At the end of a few minutes John Bruce stood up. There was neither sign nor mark upon the paper, save an almost invisible impression made by his thumb nail, which he had set as a sign post, as it were, to indicate where he had begun to write. It was a large sheet of unruled paper, foolscap in size, and there was but little likelihood of reaching so far down with the letter that Crang was so insistent upon having, but he did not propose in any event to superimpose anything over what he had just written. He could always turn the sheet and begin at the top on the other side! Again he began to pace up and down across the soft floor, but now there was a grim smile on his face. Behind Larmon and his enormous wealth lay Larmon's secret organization, that, once set in motion, would have little difficulty in laying a dozen Crangs, by the heels. And Crang was yellow. Let Crang but for an instant realize that his own skin was at stake, and he would squeal without hesitation—and what had narrowly escaped being tragedy would dissolve into opera bouffe. Also, it was very nice indeed of Crang to see that the message reached Larmon's hands!

And it was the way out for Claire, too! It was Crang who had mentioned something about two birds with one stone, wasn't it? Claire! John Bruce frowned. Was he so sure after all? There seemed to be something unfathomable between Claire and Crang; the bond between them one that no ordinary means would break.

His brain seemed to go around in cycles now—Claire, Larmon, Crang; Claire, Larmon, Crang.... He lost track of time—until suddenly he heard a key rattle in the lock. And then, quick and silent as a cat in his movements, he slipped across the earthen floor, and flung himself face down upon the mattress.

A moment more, and some one prodded him roughly. His hair was ruffled, his face anxious and dejected, as he raised himself on his elbow. Crang and two of his apaches were standing over him. One of the latter held an ugly looking stiletto.

"Stand him up!" ordered Crang.

John Bruce made no resistance as the two men jerked him unceremoniously to his feet.

Crang came and stared into his face.

"I guess from the look of you," Crang leered, "you've put in those thirty minutes to good advantage. You're about ready to write that letter, aren't you?"

John Bruce looked around him miserably. He shook his head.

"No—no; I—I can't," he said weakly. "For God's sake, Crang, you—you know I can't."

"Sure—I know!" said Crang imperturbably. He nodded to the man with the stiletto. "He's more used to steel than bullets, and he likes it better. Don't keep him waiting."

John Bruce felt the sudden prick of the weapon on his flesh—it went a little deeper.

"Wait! Stop!" he screamed out in a well-simulated paroxysm of terror. "I—I'll write it."

"I thought so!" said Crang coolly. "Well, go over there to the table then, and sit down." He turned to the two men. "Beat it!" he snapped—and the room empty again, save for himself and John Bruce, he tapped the sheet of paper with the muzzle of his revolver. "I'll dictate. Pick up that pen!"

John Bruce obeyed. He circled his lips with his tongue.

"You—you won't do Larmon any harm, will you?" he questioned abjectly. "I—my life's worth more than a little money, if it's only that, and—and, if that's all, I—I'm sure he'd rather pay."

"Don't apologize!" sneered Crang. "Go on now, and write. Address him as you always do."

John Bruce dipped the pen in the ink, and wrote in a small hand:

"Dear Mr. Larmon:—"

He looked up in a cowed way.

"All right!" grunted Crang. "I guess we'll kill another bird, too, while we're at it." He smiled cryptically. "Go on again, and write!"

And John Bruce wrote as Crang dictated:

"I'm here in my rooms in the same hotel with you, but am closely watched. Our compact is known. I asked a girl to marry me, and in doing so felt she had the right to my full confidence. She did me in. She—"

John Bruce's pen had halted.

"Go on!" prompted Crang sharply. "It's got to sound right for Larmon—so that he will believe it. He's not a fool, is he?"

"No," said John Bruce.

"Well, go on then!"

And John Bruce wrote:

"She was all the time engaged to the head of a gang of crooks." Crang's malicious chuckle interrupted his dictation.

"I'm not sparing myself, you see. Go on!"

John Bruce continued his writing:

"They are after blackmail now, and threaten to expose you. I telegraphed you to come under an alias because we are up against it and you should be on the spot; but if they knew you were here they would only attach the more importance to it, and the price would go up. They believe you are still in San Francisco, and that I am communicating with you by mail. They are growing impatient. You can trust the bearer of this letter absolutely. Go with him. He will take you where we can meet without arousing any suspicion. I am leaving the hotel now. If possible we should not risk more than one conference together, so bring a blank check with you. There is no other way out. It is simply a question of the amount. I am bitterly sorry that this has happened through me. John Bruce."

Crang, with his revolver pressed into the back of John Bruce's neck, leaned over John Bruce's shoulder and read the letter carefully.

"Fold it, and put it in that envelope without sealing it, and address the envelope to Mr. R. L. Peters at the Bayne-Miloy Hotel!" he instructed.

John Bruce folded the letter. As he did so, he noted that his signature was a good two or three inches above the thumb nail mark. He placed the letter in the envelope, and addressed the latter as Crang had directed.

Crang moved around to the other side of the table, tucked the envelope into his pocket, and grinned mockingly.

And then without a word John Bruce got up from his chair, and flung himself face down on the mattress again.

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN—THE CLEW

**P**AUL VENIZA, propped up in bed on his pillows, followed Claire with his eyes as she moved about the room. It was perhaps because he had been too ill of late to notice anything, that he experienced now a sudden shock at Claire's appearance. She looked pale and drawn, and even her movements seemed listless.

"What's to-night?" he asked abruptly.

"Wednesday, father," she answered.

Paul Veniza plucked at the counterpane. It was all too much for Claire. Besides—besides Crang, she had been up all night for the last two nights, and since Monday she had not been out of the house.

"Put on your hat, dear, and run over and tell Hawkins I want to see him," he smiled.

Claire stared at the old pawnbroker.

"Why, father," she protested, "it's rather late, isn't it? And, besides, you would be all alone in the house."

"Nonsense!" said Paul Veniza. "I'm all right. Much better. I'll be up to-morrow. But I particularly want to see Hawkins to-night." He did not particularly want to see Hawkins or any one else, but if he did not have some valid excuse she would most certainly refuse to go out and leave him alone. A little walk and a breath of fresh air would do Claire a world of good. And as for the lateness of the hour, Claire in that section of the city was as safe as in her own home. "Please do as I ask you, Claire," he insisted.

"Very well, father," she agreed after a moment's hesitation, and went and put on her hat.

From downstairs, as she opened the front door, she called up to him a little anxiously:

"You are sure you are all right?"

"Quite sure, dear," Paul Veniza called back. "Don't hurry."

Claire stepped out on the street. It was not far to go—just around the first corner and halfway down the next block—and at first she walked briskly, impelled by an anxiety to get back to the house again as soon as possible, but insensibly, little by little, her footsteps dragged.

What was it? Something in the night, the darkness, that promised a kindly cloak against the breaking of her self-restraint, that bade her let go of herself and welcome the tears that welled so spontaneously to her eyes? Would it bring relief? To-day, all evening, more than ever before, she had felt her endurance almost at an end. She turned her face upward to the night. It was black; not a star showed anywhere. It seemed as though something dense and forbidding had been drawn like a somber mantle over the world. God, even, seemed far away to-night.

She shivered a little. Could that really be true—that God was turning His face away from her? She had tried so hard to cling to her faith. It was all she had; it was all that of late had stood between her and a despair and misery, a horror so overwhelming that death by contrast seemed a boon.

Her lips quivered as she walked along. It almost seemed as though she did not want to fight any more. And yet there had been a great and very wonderful reward given to her before she had even made the final sacrifice that she had pledged herself to make. If her soul revolted from the association that must come with Doctor Crang, if every instinct within her rose up in stark horror before the contamination of the man's wanton moral filth, one strange and wondrous thing sustained her. And she had no right to mistrust God, for God must have brought her this. She had bought an unknown life—that had become dearer to her than her own, or anything that might happen to her. She knew love. It was no longer a *stranger* who would live on through the years because she was soon to pay the price that had been set upon his life—it was John Bruce.

Claire caught her hands suddenly to her breast. John Bruce! She was still afraid—for John Bruce. And to-

night, all evening, that fear had been growing stronger, chilling her with a sense of evil premonition and foreboding. Was it only premonition? Crang had threatened. She had heard the threats. And she knew out of her own terrible experience that Crang, as between human life and his own desires, held human life as naught. And yet, surely John Bruce was safe from him now—at least his life was safe. That was how Crang had wrung the promise from her. No, she was not so sure! There was personal enmity between them now. Besides, if anything happened she would not be able to bring it to Crang's door—Crang would take care of that—and her promise would still hold. And so she was afraid.

She had not seen Crang since the night that John Bruce had thrown him down the stairs. She had thanked God for the relief his absence had brought her—but now, here again, she was not so sure! What had kept him away? Where was John Bruce? She began to regret that she had told John Bruce he must not attempt to see her or communicate with her any more, though she had only done so because she had been afraid for his sake—that it would but arouse the very worst in Doctor Crang. Perhaps John Bruce had yielded to her pleading and had left the city. She shook her head. If she knew the man she loved at all, John Bruce would run from no one, and—

Claire halted abruptly. She had reached the dingy rooming house where Hawkins lived. She brushed her hand resolutely across her eyes as she mounted the steps. The tears had come after all, for her lashes were wet.

It was not necessary either to ring or knock; the door was always unfastened; and, besides, she had been here so many, many times that she knew the house almost as well as her own home. She opened the door, stepped into a black hallway, and began to feel her way up the creaking staircase. There was the possibility, of course, that Hawkins was either out or already in bed; but if he were out she would leave a note in his room for him so that he would come over to the old pawn-shop when he returned, and if he were already in bed her message delivered through the door would soon bring Hawkins out of it again—Hawkins, since he had been driving that old car which he had created, was well accustomed to calls at all hours of the night.

A thin, irregular streak of light, the only sign of light she had seen anywhere in the house, showed now at the threshold under Hawkins' ill-fitting door, as she reached the landing. She stepped quickly to the door and knocked. There was no answer. She knocked again. There was still no answer. Claire smiled a little whimsically. Hawkins was growing extravagant—he had gone out and left the light burning. She tried the door, and, finding it unlocked, opened it, stepped forward into the room—and with a sudden, low, half-hurt, half-frightened cry, stood still. Hawkins was neither out, nor was he in bed. Hawkins was sprawled partly on the floor and partly across a chair in which he had obviously been unable to preserve his balance. Several bottles, all empty but one, stood upon the table. There were two dirty glasses beside the bottles, and another one, broken, on the floor. Hawkins was snoring stertorously.

It seemed somehow to Claire standing there that this was the last straw—and yet, too, there was only a world of pity in her heart for the old man. All the years rolled before her. She remembered as a child climbing upon his knee and pleading for the *tick-tick*—that great cumbersome silver watch, which, fallen out of his pocket now, dangled by its chain and swung in jerky rhythm to his breathing. She remembered the days when, a little older, she had dressed herself in her best clothes, and to Hawkins' huge delight had played at princess, while he drove her about in his old ramshackle hansom cab; and, later still, his gentle faithfulness to Paul Veniza in his trouble, and to her—and the love, and a strange, always welcome, tenderness that he had ever shown her. Poor frail soul! Hawkins had been good to every one—but Hawkins!

She could not leave him like this, but she was not strong enough alone to carry him to his bed. She turned and ran hurriedly downstairs. There was the widow Hedges, of course, the old landlady.

Back at the end of the lower hall, Claire pounded upon a door. Presently a woman's voice answered her. A moment later a light appeared as the door was opened, and with it an apparition in an old gingham wrapper and curl papers.

"Oh, it's you, Miss Claire!" the woman exclaimed in surprise. "What's brought you over here to-night, dear? Is your father worse?"

"No," Claire answered. "He wanted Hawkins, and—"

Mrs. Hedges shook her head.

"Hawkins ain't in," she said; "but I'll see that he gets the message when he comes back. He went out with the car quite a little while ago with some men he had with him."

"With the car?" Claire found herself suddenly a little frightened, she did not quite know why. "Well, he's back now, Mrs. Hedges."

"Oh, no," asserted Mrs. Hedges positively. "I might not have heard him going upstairs, but I would have heard the car coming in. It ain't come back yet."

"But Hawkins *is* upstairs," said Claire a little heavily. "I—I've been up."

"You say Hawkins is upstairs?" Mrs. Hedges stared incredulously. "That's very strange!" She turned and ran back into her room and to a rear window. "Look, Miss Claire! Come here! You can see!" And as Claire joined her: "The door of the shed, or the gradge as he calls it, is open, and you can see for yourself it's empty. If he's upstairs what could he have done with the car? It ain't out in front of the house, is it, and—oh!" She caught Claire's arm anxiously. "There's been an accident, you mean, and he's—"

"I am sure he never left the house," said Claire, and her voice in its composed finality sounded strange even in her own ears. She was thoroughly frightened now, and her fears were beginning to take concrete form. There were not many who would have any use for that queer old car that was so intimately associated with Hawkins! She could think of only one—and of only one reason. She pulled at Mrs. Hedges' arm. "Come upstairs," she said.

Mrs. Hedges reached the door of Hawkins' room first.

"Oh, my God!" Mrs. Hedges cried out wildly. "He ain't dead, is he?"

"No," said Claire in a strained voice. "He's—he's only had too much to drink. Help me lift him on the bed."

It taxed the strength of the two women.

"And the car's stole!" gasped Mrs. Hedges, fighting for her breath.

"Yes," said Claire; "I am afraid so."

"Then we'll get the police at once!" announced Mrs. Hedges.

Claire looked at her for a moment.

"No," she said slowly, shaking her head. "You mustn't do that. It—it will come back."

"Come back?" Mrs. Hedges stared helplessly. "It ain't a cat! You—you ain't quite yourself, are you, Miss Claire? Poor dear, this has upset you. It ain't a fit thing for young eyes like yours to see. Me—I'm used to it."

"I am quite myself." Claire forced a calmness she was far from feeling into her voice. "You mustn't notify the police, or do a thing, except just look after Hawkins. It—it's father's car, you know; and he'll know best what to do."

"Well, maybe that's so," admitted Mrs. Hedges.

"Do you know who the men were who were here with Hawkins?" Claire asked.

"No, I don't," Mrs. Hedges answered excitedly. "The thieving devils, coming here and getting Hawkins off like this! I just knew there were some men up in his room with him because I heard them talking during the evening, and then when I heard them go out and get the car I thought, of course, that Hawkins had gone with them."

"I—I see," said Claire, striving to speak naturally. "I—I'll go back to father now. I can't leave him alone very long, anyhow. I'll tell him what has happened, and—and he'll decide what to do. You'll look after Hawkins, won't you, Mrs. Hedges?"

"You run along, dear," said Mrs. Hedges reassuringly. "Who else but me has looked after him these ten years?"

Claire ran from the room and down the stairs, and out to the street. The one thing left for her to do was to reach home and get to the telephone—get the Bayne-Miloy Hotel—and John Bruce. Perhaps she was already too late. She ran almost blindly along the street. Her intuition, the foreboding that had obsessed her so heavily all evening, was only too likely now to prove itself far from groundless. What object, save one, could anybody have in obtaining possession of the traveling pawn-shop, and at the same time of keeping Hawkins temporarily out of the road? Perhaps her deduction would show flaws if it were subjected to the test of pure logic, perhaps there were a thousand other reasons that would account equally well, and even more logically, for what had happened, but she *knew* it was Crang—and Crang could have but one object in view. The man was clever, diabolically clever. In some way he was using that car and Hawkins' helplessness to trap the man he had threatened. She must warn John Bruce. There was not an instant to lose! To lose! How long ago had that car been taken? Was there even a chance left that it was not already far too late? She had not thought to ask how long ago it was when Mrs. Hedges had heard the car leave the garage.

It had never seemed so far—just that little half block and halfway along another. It seemed as though she had been an hour in coming that little way when she finally reached her home. Her breath coming in hard, short gasps, she opened the door, closed it, and, with no thought but one in her mind, ran across the room to the telephone. She remembered the number of the Bayne-Miloy. She snatched the telephone receiver from the hook—and then, as though her arm had suddenly become incapable of further movement, the receiver remained poised halfway to her ear.

Doctor Crang was leaning over the banister, and looking down at her.

With a stifled little cry, Claire replaced the receiver.

Paul Veniza's voice reached her from above.

"Is that you, Claire?" he called.

"Yes, father," she answered.

Doctor Crang came down the stairs.

"I just dropped in a minute ago—not professionally"—a snarl crept into his voice—"for I have never been informed that your father was ill."

Claire did not look up.

"It—it wasn't serious," she said.

"So!" Crang smiled a little wickedly. "I wonder where you get the *gambling* spirit from? One of these days you'll find out how serious these attacks are!" He took a step forward. "Your father tells me you have been over to Hawkins' room."

There was a curious hint of both challenge and perverted humor in his voice. It set at rest any lingering doubt Claire might have had.

"Yes," she said, and faced him now, her eyes, hard and steady, fixed on his.

"Poor Hawkins!" sighed Doctor Crang ironically. "Even the best of us have our vices! It should teach us to be tolerant with others!"

Claire's little form was rigidly erect.

"I wonder if you know how much I hate you?" she said in a tense, low voice.

"You've told me often enough!" A savage, hungry look came into Crang's eyes. "But you're mine, for all that! Mine, Claire! Mine! You understand that, eh?"

He advanced toward her. The door of the inner room, that for weeks, until a few days ago, had been occupied by John Bruce, was just behind her, and she retreated through it. He followed her. She did not want to cry out—the sound would reach the sick room above; and, besides, she dared not show the man that she had any fear.

"Don't follow me like that!" she breathed fiercely.

"Why not?" he retorted, as he switched on the light and closed the door. "I've got the right to, even if I



hadn't something that I came over here particularly to-night to tell you about—quite privately.”

She had put the table between them. That he made no effort to come nearer for the moment afforded her a certain relief, but there was something in the smile with which he surveyed her now, a cynical, gloating triumph, that chilled her.

“Well, what is it?” she demanded.

“I trapped that damned lover of yours to-night!” he announced coolly.

Claire felt her face go white. It *was* true, then! She fought madly with herself for self-possession.

“If you mean Mr. Bruce,” she said deliberately, “I was just going to try to warn him over the phone; though, even then, I was afraid I was too late.”

“Ah!” he exclaimed sharply. “You knew, then?”

Claire shrugged her shoulders.

“Oh, yes!” she said contemptuously. “My faith in you where evil is concerned is limitless. I heard your threats. I saw Hawkins a few minutes ago. He was quite—quite helpless. You, or some of your confederates, traded on his weakness, took the key of the car away from him, and then stole the car. Ordinary thieves would not have acted like that.” An icy smile came to her lips. “His landlady thought the police should be notified that the car had been stolen.”

“You always were clever, Claire,” Crang grinned admiringly. “You've got some brains—all there are around here, as far as I can make out. You've got it straight, all right. Mr. John Bruce, Esquire, came out of Lavergne's on being informed that Hawkins was in bad shape—no lie about that!—and walked into the car without a murmur. Too bad to bother the police, though—the car will have been left in front of Hawkins' door again by now.”

It was hard to keep her courage; hard to keep her lips from trembling; hard to keep the tears back; hard to pretend that she was not afraid.

“What are you going to do with him?” Her voice was very low. “The promise that I gave you was on the condition that he *lived*—not only then, but now.” Crang laughed outright.

“Oh, don't worry about that! He'd never let it get that far. He thinks too much of Mr. Bruce! He has already taken care of himself—at another man's expense.”

Claire stared numbly. She did not understand.

“I'll tell you,” said Crang, with brutal viciousness. “He's a professional gambler, this supposedly wealthy gentleman of leisure. He works for a man in San Francisco named Larmon, who really is wealthy, but who poses as a pillar of the church, or words to that effect. Never mind how, but Larmon will be here to-night in New York—just at the right moment. And Mr. Bruce has very kindly consented to assist in convincing Mr. Larmon that exposure isn't worth the few dollars that would buy him immunity.”

Claire did not speak. Still she did not understand. She sat down wearily in the chair beside the table.

Crang took a letter from his pocket abruptly, and, opening it, laid it in front of Claire.

“I thought perhaps you would like to read it,” he said carelessly.

Claire rested her elbows on the table and cupped her chin in her hands. She stared at the letter. At first the words ran together, and she could not make them out. Then a sentence took form, and then another—and she read them piteously. “... I asked a girl to marry me, and in doing so felt she had the right to my full confidence. She did me in... She read on to the end.

“But it's not true!” she cried out sharply. “I don't believe it!”

“Of course, it isn't true!” said Crang complacently. “And, of course, you don't believe it! But Larmon will. I've only shown you the letter to let you see what kind of a yellow cur this would-be lover of yours is. Anything to save himself! But so long as he wrote the letter, I had no quarrel with him if he wanted to fake excuses for himself that gave him a chance of holding his job with Larmon afterwards.”

It couldn't be true—true that John Bruce had even written the letter, a miserable Judas thing that baited a trap, for one who trusted him, with the good name of a woman for whom he had professed to care. It couldn't be true—but the signature was there, and—and it was genuine: “John Bruce.... John Bruce.... John Bruce.” It seemed to strike at her with the cruel, stinging blows of a whip-lash: “John Bruce.... John Bruce.... John—”

The words became blurred. It was the infinite hopelessness of everything that crushed her fortitude, and mocked it, and made of it at last a beaten thing. A tear fell and splashed upon the page—and still another. She kept looking at the letter, though she could only see it through a blinding mist. And there was something ominous, and something that added to her fear, that she should imagine that her tears made *black* splashes on the blurred letter as they fell, and—

She heard a sudden startled snarl from Crang, and the letter was snatched up from the table. And then he seemed to laugh wildly, without reason, as a maniac would laugh—and with the letter clutched in his hand rushed from the room. Claire crushed her hands against her temples. Perhaps it was herself who had gone mad.

The front door banged.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN—A WOLF LICKS HIS CHOPS

OUTSIDE the house Crang continued to run. He was unconscious that he had forgotten his hat. His face worked in livid fury. Alternately he burst out into short, ugly gusts of laughter that made of laughter an evil thing; alternately, racked with unbridled passion, he mouthed a flood of oaths.

He ran on for some three blocks, and finally dashed up the steps of a small, drab-looking, cheap frame house. A brass sign, greenish with mold from neglect, flanked one side of the door. Under the street light it could just barely be deciphered: SYDNEY ANGUS CRANG, M.D.

He tried the door. It was locked. He searched impatiently and hastily in his pockets for his pass-key, and failing to find it instantly he rang the bell; and then, without waiting for an answer to the summons, he immediately began to bang furiously upon the panels.

An old woman, his housekeeper, whose bare feet had obviously been thrust hurriedly into slippers, and who clutched at the neck of a woolen dressing gown that also obviously, and with equal haste, had been flung around her shoulders over her nightdress, finally opened the door.

"Get out of the road!" Crang snarled—and brushed his way roughly past her.

He stepped forward along an unlighted hall, opened a door, and slammed it behind him. He switched on the light. He was in his consulting room. The next instant he was standing beside his desk, and had wrenched John Bruce's letter from his pocket. He spread this out on the desk and glared at it. Beyond any doubt whatever, where Claire's tears had fallen on the paper, traces of writing were faintly discernible. Here, out of an abortive word, was a well-formed "e"; and there, unmistakably, was a capital "L."

Crang burst into a torrent of abuse and oaths; his fists clenched, and he shook one of them in the air.

"Double-crossed—eh?—damn him!" he choked. "He tried to double-cross me—did he?"

Carrying the letter, he ran now into a little room behind his office, where he compounded his medicines, and that was fitted up as a sort of small laboratory.

"I'm a clever man," Crang mumbled to himself. "We'll see about this!"

With sudden complacency he began to study the sheet of paper. He nodded curtly to himself as he noted that the traces of the secret writing were all on the lower edge of the paper.

"We'll be very careful, *very* careful"—Doctor Crang was still mumbling—"it may be useful in more ways than one."

He turned on the water faucet, wet a camel's-hair brush, and applied the brush to the lower edge of the letter. The experiment was productive of no result. He stared at the paper for a while with wrinkled brow, and then suddenly he began to laugh ironically.

"No, of course, not!" He was jeering at himself now. "Clever? You are not clever, you are a fool! She *cried* on the paper. Tears! Tears possess a slight trace of"—he reached quickly for a glass container, and began to prepare a solution of some sort—"a very slight trace... that's why the characters that already show are so faint. Now we'll see, Mr. John Bruce, what you've got to say.... Salt!... A little salt, eh?"

He dipped the camel's-hair brush in the solution and drew it across the bottom edge of the paper again.

"Ha, ha!" exclaimed Doctor Crang in eager excitement. Letters, words and sentences began to take form under the brush. "Ha, ha! He'd play that game with me, would he? Damn him!"

Very carefully Sydney Angus Crang, M.D., worked his brush upward on the paper line by line, until, still well below the signature that John Bruce had affixed in his, Crang's, presence, there failed to appear any further trace of the secret writing. He read as fast as a word appeared—like a starving beast snatching in ferocious greed at morsels of food. It made whole and complete sense. His eyes feasted on it now in its entirety:

Keep away. This is a trap. Stall till you can turn tables. Information obtained while I was delirious. Am a prisoner in hands of a gang whose leader is a doctor named Crang. Veniza will tell you where Crang lives. Get Veniza's address from Lavergne at the house. The only way to save either of Us is to trick Crang. Look out for yourself. Bruce.

He tossed the camel's-hair brush away, returned to his desk, spread the letter out on a blotter to allow the lower edge to dry, and slumping down in his desk chair, glued his eyes on the secret message, reading it over and over again.

"Trick Crang—eh?—ha, ha!" He began to chuckle low; then suddenly his fingers, crooked and curved until they looked like claws, reached out as though to fasten upon some prey at hand. And then he chuckled once more—and then grew somber, and slumped deeper in his chair, and his eyes, brooding, were half closed. "Not to-night," he muttered. "One job of it to-morrow... squeal like a pair of rats that—"

He sat suddenly bolt upright in his chair. It came again—a low tapping on the window; two raps, three times repeated. He rose quickly, crossed the room, opened the door, and stood motionless for a moment peering out into the hall. It was a purely precautionary measure—he had little doubt but that his old housekeeper had long since mounted the stairs and returned to her bed. He stepped rapidly then along the hall, and opened the front door.

"That you, Birdie?" he called in a low voice.

A man's form appeared from the shadow of the stoop.

"Sure!" the man answered.

"Come in!" Doctor Crang said tersely.

He led the way back into the consulting room, and slumped down again in his chair.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Peters arrived all right," Birdie reported. "He registered at the Bayne-Miloy Hotel, and he's there now."

"Good!" grunted Crang.

For a full five minutes he remained silent and without movement in his chair, apparently utterly oblivious of the other, who stood, shifting a little awkwardly from foot to foot, on the opposite side of the desk.

Then Crang spoke—more to himself than to Birdie.

"He'll be anxious, of course, and growing more so," he said. "He might make a break of some kind. I'll have to fix that. I'm not ready yet. What?"

Birdie, from staring inanely at the wall, came to himself with a sudden start at what he evidently interpreted as a direct question.

"Yes—sure!" he said hurriedly. "No—I mean, no, you're not ready."

Crang glared at the man contemptuously.

"What the hell do you know about it?" he inquired caustically.

He picked up the telephone directory, studied it for a moment, then, reaching for the desk telephone, asked for his connection. Presently the Bayne-Miloy Hotel answered him, and he asked for Mr. R. L. Peters' room. A moment more and a voice reached him over the phone.

"Is that Mr. Peters?" Crang inquired quietly. "Mr. R. L. Peters, of San Francisco?... Yes? Then I have a message for you, Mr. Peters, from the person who sent you a telegram a few days ago... I beg your pardon?... Yes, I am sure you do... Myself? I'd rather not mention any names over the phone. You understand, don't you? He told me to tell you that it is absolutely necessary that no connection is known to exist between you, and for that reason he does not dare take the chance of getting into touch with you to-night, but he will manage it somehow by early afternoon to-morrow... What say?... Yes, it is very serious, otherwise he would hardly have telegraphed you to come on from San Francisco... No, personally, I don't know. That was his message; but I was also to warn you on no account to leave your rooms, or have communication with anybody until you hear direct from him.... No, I do not know the particulars. I only know that he is apparently in a hole, and a bad one, and that he is now afraid that you will get into it too.... Yes. You are sure you fully understand?... No, not at all! I am only too glad.... Good-night."

Crang, with a curious smile on his lips, hung up the receiver. He turned abruptly to Birdie.

"You get a taxi to-morrow," he said brusquely. "We'll want it for two or three hours. Slip the chauffeur whatever is necessary, and change places with him. See? You'll know where to find one that will fall for that. Then you come here for me at—let's see—the boat sails at four—you come here at half past one sharp. Get me?"

"Sure!" said Birdie, with a grin. "That's a cinch!"

"All right, then!" Crang waved his hand. "Beat it!"

Birdie left the room. A moment later the front door closed behind him.

Crang picked up the letter and examined it critically. The lower three or four inches of the paper was slightly crinkled, but quite dry now; the body of the original letter showed no sign whatever of his work upon the lower portion.

Doctor Crang nodded contentedly.

He rose abruptly, secured his surgical bag, and from it selected a lance. With the aid of a ruler and the keen-bladed little instrument, he very carefully cut away the lower section of the paper. The slip containing the erstwhile secret message he tucked away in his inside pocket; then he examined the letter itself again even more critically than before. For all evidence that it presented to the contrary, it might have been the original size of the sheet. There was even a generous margin of paper still left beneath John Bruce's signature. He folded the letter, replaced it in its envelope—and now sealed the envelope.

"To-morrow!" said Doctor Sydney Angus Crang with a sinister smile, as he produced a hypodermic syringe from his pocket and rolled up the sleeve of his left arm. He laughed as the needle pricked his flesh. "To-morrow—John Bruce!"

He slumped far down in his chair once more. For half an hour he sat motionless, his eyes closed. Then he spoke again.

"Damn you!" he said.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN—ALIAS MR. ANDERSON

**D**OCTOR Sydney Angus Crang looked at his watch, as he stepped from a taxi the next afternoon, and entered the Bayne-Miloy Hotel. It was fifteen minutes of two. He approached the desk and obtained a blank card. "From J. B.," he wrote upon it. He handed it to the clerk.

"Please send this up to Mr. R. L. Peters," he requested.

He leaned nonchalantly against the desk as a bellboy departed with the card. From where he stood the front windows gave him a view of the street, and he could see Birdie parking the taxi a little way up past the entrance. He smiled pleasantly as he waited.

Presently the bell-boy returned with the information that Mr. Peters would see him; and, following the boy upstairs, he was ushered into the sitting room of one of the Bayne-Miloy's luxurious suites. A tall man with a thin, swarthy face confronted him. Between his fingers the tall man held the card that he, Crang, had sent up; and between his lips the tall man sucked assiduously at a quill toothpick.

"Mr. Peters, of course?" Crang inquired easily, as the door closed behind the bell-boy.

Mr. Peters, alias Gilbert Larmon, nodded quietly. "I was rather expecting Mr. Bruce in person," he said.

Crang looked cautiously around him.

"It still isn't safe," he said in a lowered voice. "At least, not here; so I am going to take you to him. But perhaps you would prefer that I should explain my own connection with this affair first?"

Again Larmon nodded.

"Perhaps it would be just as well," he said.

Once more Crang looked cautiously around him.

"We—we are quite alone, I take it?"

"Quite," said Larmon.

"My name is Anderson, William Anderson," Crang stated smoothly. "I was the one who telephoned you last night. I am a friend of John Bruce—the only one he's got, I guess, except yourself. Bruce and I used to be boys together in San Francisco. I hadn't seen him for years until we ran into each other here in New York a few weeks ago and chummed up again. As I told you over the phone, I don't know the ins and outs of this, but I know he is in some trouble with a gang that he got mixed up with in the underworld somehow."

"*Tck!*" The quill toothpick flexed sharply against one of the tall man's front teeth. "William Anderson"—he repeated the name musingly—"yes, I remember. I sent a telegram in your care to Mr. Bruce a few days ago."

"Yes," said Crang.

The quill toothpick appeared to occupy the tall man's full attention for a period of many seconds.

"Are you conversant with the contents of that telegram, Mr. Anderson?" he asked casually at last.

Crang suppressed a crafty smile. Mr Gilbert Larmon was no fool! Mr. Gilbert Larmon stood here as Mr. R. L. Peters—the telegram had been signed: "Gilbert Larmon." The question that Larmon was actually asking was: How much do you really know?

"Why, yes," said Crang readily. "I did not actually see the telegram, but Bruce told me it was from a friend of his, a Mr. Peters, who would arrive in New York Wednesday night, and whom he seemed to think he needed pretty badly in his present scrape." Larmon took a turn or two up and down the room. He halted again before Crang.

"I am obliged to admit that I am both anxious and considerably at sea," he said deliberately. "There seems to be an air of mystery surrounding all this that I neither like nor understand. You did not allay my fears last night when you telephoned me. Have you no more to tell me?"

Crang shook his head slowly.

"No," he said. "You've got everything I know. Bruce has been like a clam as far as the nature of what is between himself and this gang is concerned. He will have to tell you himself—if he will. He won't tell me. Meanwhile, he sent you this."

Crang reached into his pocket and took out the envelope addressed to Mr. R. L. Peters, that he had taken pains to seal the night before.

Larmon took the envelope, stepped over to the window, presumably for better light, and opening the letter, began to read it.

Crang watched the other furtively. The quill toothpick, from a series of violent gyrations, became motionless between Larmon's lips. The thin face seemed to mold itself into sharp, dogged lines. Again and again Larmon appeared to read the letter over; and then the hand that held the sheet of paper dropped to his side, and he stood for a long time staring out of the window. Finally he turned slowly and came back across the room.

"This is bad, Mr. Anderson—far worse than I had imagined," he said in a hard voice. "I believe you said you would take me to Bruce. This letter asks me to accompany you, and I see we are to go at once." He motioned toward a box of cigars on the table. "Help yourself to a cigar, Mr. Anderson, and take a chair while I change and get ready. I will only be a few minutes, if you will excuse me for that length of time?"

Crang's face expressed concern.

"Why, certainly, Mr. Peters," he agreed readily. He helped himself to a cigar, and sat down in a chair. "I'm sorry if it's as bad as that."

Larmon made no answer, save to nod his head gravely as he stepped quickly toward the door of the apartment's adjoining room.

Crang struck a match and lighted his cigar. The door of the connecting room closed behind Larmon. A cloud of blue smoke veiled Crang's face—and a leer that lighted his suddenly narrowed eyes.

"So that's it, is it?" grinned Crang to himself. "I wondered how he was going to work it! Well, I guess he would have got away with it, too—if I hadn't got away with it first!"

He sat motionless in his chair—and listened. And suddenly he smiled maliciously. The sound of running water from a tap turned on somewhere on the other side of the connecting door reached him faintly.

"And now a little salt!" murmured Doctor Sydney

Angus Crang. He blew a smoke ring into the air and watched it dissolve. "And, presto!—like the smoke ring—nothing!"

The minutes passed, perhaps five of them, and then the door opened again and Larmon reappeared.

"I'm ready now," he announced quietly. "Shall we go?"

Crang rose from his chair.

"Yes," he said. He glanced at Larmon, as he tapped the ash from the end of his cigar. Larmon had *not* forgotten to change his clothes. "I've got a taxi waiting."

"All right," agreed Larmon briskly—and led the way to the elevator.

Out on the street, Crang led the way in turn—to the taxi. Birdie reached out from his seat, and flung the



door open. Crang motioned Larmon to enter, and then leaned toward Birdie as though to give the man the necessary address. He spoke in a low, quiet tone:

"Keep to the decent streets as long as you can, so that he won't have a chance to get leery until it won't matter whether he does or not. Understand?"

Birdie touched his cap.

"Yes, sir," he said.

The taxi jerked forward.

"It's not very far," said Crang. He smiled engagingly as he settled back in his seat—and his hand in his coat pocket sought and fondled his revolver.

Larmon, apparently immersed in his own thoughts, made no immediate reply. The taxi traversed a dozen blocks, during which time Crang, quite contented to let well enough alone, made no effort at conversation. Larmon chewed at his quill toothpick until, following a savage little click, he removed it in two pieces from his mouth. He had bitten it in half. He tossed the pieces on the floor, and produced a fresh one from his pocket.

"My word!" observed Crang dryly. "You've got good teeth."

Larmon turned and looked at him.

"Yes, Mr. Anderson, I have!" His voice was level. "And I am going to show them—when I get hold of Bruce."

Crang's expression was instantly one of innocent bewilderment.

"Why," he said, "I thought you—"

"Have you ever met the lady?" Larmon asked abruptly.

"The—lady?" Crang glanced out of the window. Birdie was making good time, very good time indeed. Another five minutes at the outside and the trick was done.

"The woman in the case," said Larmon.

"Oh!" Crang whistled low. "I see! No, I've never met her. I didn't know there was one. I told you he had said nothing to me."

Larmon was frowning heavily; his face was strained and worried. He laughed out suddenly, jerkily.

"I suppose I should give him credit for keeping you at least in the dark," he said shortly; "though it strikes me as more or less of a case of locking the stable door after the horse has gone."

Crang's eyebrows were raised in well-simulated perplexity.

"I don't quite get you, Mr. Peters," he said politely.

"It's of no consequence." Larmon's eyes were suddenly fastened on the window. From an already shabby street where cheap tenements hived a polyglot nationality, the taxi had swerved into an intersection that seemed more a lane than anything else, and that was still more shabby and uninviting. "This is a rather sordid neighborhood, isn't it?" he observed curiously.

"It's safe," said Crang significantly.

The taxi stopped.

"We get out here, Mr. Peters," Crang announced pleasantly, as Birdie opened the door. "It's a bit rough, I'll admit; but"—he shrugged his shoulders and smiled—"you'll have to blame Bruce, not me. Just follow me, Mr. Peters—it's down these steps."

He began to descend the steps of a cellar entrance, which was unprepossessingly black, and which opened from the rear of a seedy looking building that abutted on the lane. He did not look behind him. Larmon had made *sure* that the letter was to be relied upon, hadn't he?—and it was John Bruce, not anybody else, that Larmon was trusting now. Certainly, it was much easier to *lead* Larmon as long as Larmon could be led; if Larmon hesitated about following, Birdie stood ready to pitch the other headlong down the steps—the same end would be attained in either case!

But Larmon still showed no suspicion of the good faith of one William Anderson. He was following without question. The daylight streaking down through the entrance afforded enough light to enable Crang, over his shoulder, to note that Larmon was always close behind him. At a door across the cellar Crang gave two raps, three times repeated, and as the door was opened, entered with Larmon beside him.

The man who had let them in—one of three, who had evidently been rolling dice at a table close to the entrance—closed the door behind them, and resumed his game.

"If you'll just wait here a minute, Mr. Peters," Crang said breezily, "I'll find Bruce for you."

He did not wait for a reply. It mattered very little as to what Larmon said or did now, anyhow—Larmon's exit was barred by three men! He walked up the length of the low-ceiled, evil-smelling place, and with a key which he took from his pocket unlocked a door at the farther end. As he stepped through the door his revolver was in his hand.

He laughed in an ugly way, as John Bruce rose from the mattress and faced him.

"Salt is a great thing, isn't it?" he jeered. He drew from his pocket the slip of paper he had cut from the bottom of the letter, and held it so that John Bruce could see it. Then he put it back in his pocket again. "Understand? He got the *rest* of the letter, all right; and so he has come down to pay you a little visit. He's outside there now."

John Bruce made no answer.

Crang laughed again.

"You thought you'd double-cross me, did you? You poor fool! Well, it's a showdown now. I'm going to bring him in here—and let you tell him what he's up against. I guess you can convince him. He's got less than an hour in which to come across—if you are going to sail on that steamer. If you don't make yourself useful to that extent, you go out—for keeps; and Larmon stays here until he antes up—or rots! Is that quite clear?"

John Bruce's lips scarcely moved.

"Yes; it is quite clear," he said.

"I thought it would be!" snarled Crang—and backed out through the door.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN—THE HOSTAGE

AS Crang disappeared through the doorway, John Bruce stepped noiselessly forward across the earthen floor. With the door half open and swung inward, it left a generous aperture at the hinges through which he could see down the length of the cave-like den outside.

He was strangely calm. Yes, there was Larmon down there—and Crang was walking toward him. And Crang had left the door open here. Well, why not?—with those three apaches at that table yonder! Yes, why not?—except that Crang had also left open the way to one last move, left him, John Bruce, one last card to play!

Strange, the cold, unnatural calmness that possessed him! His mind seemed instantaneously to have conceived and created a project that almost subconsciously he was now in the act of putting into effect. He reached out, and extracting the key from the outside of the door, inserted it on the inside of the lock. He smiled grimly. So far, it was quite safe! The door was swung so far inward that the inner edge of it, and therefore his act, certainly could not be seen by any one out there.

A last card! His lips tightened. Well, perhaps! But it was more than that. His unnatural composure had something deeper than that behind it—a passionate fury smoldering on the verge of flame. Larmon was out there—trapped! He could not put Larmon in greater jeopardy now, no matter what he, John Bruce, did personally, because Larmon dead would not be worth anything to them. But for himself—to stand and take it all like a sheep at the hands of a damned, cringing—

He shook his head in quick, curious self-rebuke. Not yet! He needed that cold composure a little longer since it was to be a showdown now. That was what Crang had said—a showdown. And Crang was right! It meant the end—one way or the other. But with luck, if Crang was as yellow as he believed the man to be, the idea of the bluff that had leaped into his mind would work successfully; and if it didn't work—well, then, there was the end—and at least it would not be a scatheless one for Crang!

The mind works swiftly. Had Crang had time only to walk down *half* the length of that room out there toward Larmon? Yes, he saw Crang halt now, and heard Crang call out sharply to the three men at the table:

"See if he's got a gun!"

John Bruce, through the crack, saw Larmon whirl around suddenly, as though aware for the first time that he was in danger; saw two of the men grasp Larmon roughly, while the third searched through his clothes.

And then Crang laughed out raucously:

"This way, *Mr. Peters*—please! You three can stay where you are—I'll call you if I need you!"

For still another instant John Bruce watched through the crack. Larmon, though his face was set and stern, advanced calmly to where Crang stood. Crang, with a prod of his revolver, pushed him onward. They were coming now—Larmon first, and Crang immediately behind the other. Without a sound, John Bruce slipped around to the other side of the door; and, back just far enough so that he would not be seen the instant the threshold was reached, crouched down close against the wall.

A second passed.

"Go on in there!" he heard Crang order.

Larmon's form crossed the threshold; and then Crang's—and John Bruce hurled himself forward, striking, even while his hands flew upward to lock like a vise around Crang's throat, a lightning blow at Crang's wrist that sent the revolver to the soft earthen floor without a sound—and a low, strangling, gurgling noise was alone the result of Crang's effort at a shout of alarm.

"Shut the door—*quietly!* And lock it, Larmon!" John Bruce flung out.

It was an impotent thing. It struck at the air blindly, its fists going like disjointed flails. Strong! He had not just risen from a sick bed this time! John Bruce and the soul within him seemed to chuckle in unison together at this wriggling thing that he held up by the neck with its feet off the ground. But he saw Larmon, though for the fraction of a second held spellbound in amazement, spring and lock the door.

"If you make a sound that reaches out there"—John Bruce was whispering now with panting, labored breath, as he swung Crang over to the corner and forced him down upon the mattress—"it will take too long to break that door in to be of any use to you! Understand?"

"Bruce!"

It was Larmon standing over them. John Bruce scarcely turned his head. His hands were still on Crang's throat, though the man lay cowed and passive now.

"His inside coat pocket!" John Bruce jerked out. "It will save a lot of explanation."

Larmon leaned over and thrust his hand into Crang's pocket. He produced several envelopes and the slip of paper cut from John Bruce's letter.

"Read the slip!" said John Bruce grimly. "He showed it to me a minute ago when he came in to tell me you were here. It was written in our invisible ink at the bottom of the letter he brought you." He laughed shortly. "When you've read it, I'll introduce you."

Larmon read the slip hurriedly.

"Good God!" he cried out.

"This is Crang," said John Bruce evenly.

"But"—Larmon's face was tense and strained—"how——"

"How did he discover there was anything there to begin with, and then hit on the salt solution?" John Bruce interrupted. "I don't know. We'll find out." He relaxed his hold a little on Crang's throat, and taking the slip of paper from Larmon, thrust it into his own pocket. "Go on, Crang! Tell us!"

Crang's eyes roved from John Bruce to Larmon and back to John Bruce again. His face was ashen. He shook his head.

"You'll *talk!*" said John Bruce with ominous quiet.

"And the less urging"—his grip began to tighten again—"the better for you."

"Wait!" Crang choked. "Yes—I—I'll tell you. I showed the letter to Claire. She—she cried on it. A tear splash—black letter began to appear. I took the letter home, and—trace of salt in tears—and——"

Crang's voice died away in a strangling cry. Claire! John Bruce had barely caught any other word but that. Claire! The face beneath him began to grow livid. Claire! So the devil had brought Claire into this, too. *Too!* Yes, there was something else. Something else! He remembered now. There was a reckoning to come that was beyond all other reckonings, wasn't there? He would know now what hold this thing, that was beast, not man, had upon her. He would know now—or it would end now!

"Claire! D'y'e hear?" John Bruce whispered hoarsely. "You know what I mean! What trick of hell did you play to make her promise to marry you? Answer me!"

The thing on the mattress moaned.

"Bruce! For God's sake, Bruce, what are you doing?" Larmon cried out sharply.

John Bruce raised his head and snarled at Larmon. Neither Larmon, nor any other man, would rob him of this now!

"You stand aside, Larmon!" he rasped out. "This is between me and Crang. Keep out of the way!"

He shook at Crang again. He laughed. The man's head bobbed limply.

"Answer me!" He loosened his grip suddenly. Queer, he had forgotten that—Crang couldn't speak, of course, if he wouldn't let him!

The man gasped, and gasped again, for his breath.

"I give you one second." John Bruce's lips did not move as he spoke.

Twice Crang tried to speak.

"Quick!" John Bruce planted his knees on the other's chest.

"Yes—yes, yes, yes!" Crang gurgled out. "It's you—the night you—you were stabbed. You were—were nearly gone. I—I gave her the—the choice—to marry me, or—or I'd let you—go out."

John Bruce felt his shoulders surge forward, felt his muscles grow taut as steel, and he shook at something flabby that made no resistance, and his knees rocked upon something soft where they were bedded. *him!*—Claire had faced that inhuman choice, born in this monster's brain—to save *his* life! Madness seized upon him. The room, everything before him whirled around in great, red, pulsing circles. A fury that shook at the roots of his soul took possession of him. He knew nothing, saw nothing, was moved by nothing save an overwhelming lust for vengeance that seemed to give him superhuman strength, that enabled him to crush between his two bare hands this nauseous thing that——

He heard a voice. It seemed to come from some infinite distance:

"You are killing the man! In the name of God, John Bruce, come away!"

It was Larmon's voice. He looked up. He was vaguely conscious that it was Larmon who was pulling at his shoulders, wrenching madly at his hands, but he could not see Larmon—only a blurred red figure that danced insanely up and down. Killing the man! Of course! What an inane thing to say! Then he felt his hands suddenly torn away from a hold they had had upon something, and he felt himself pulled to his feet. And then for a little he stood swaying unsteadily, and he shuddered, then he groped his way over to the chair by the table and dropped into it.

He stared in front of him. Something on the floor near the door glittered and reflected the light from the single, dim incandescent. He lurched up from the chair, and going toward the object, snatched it up. It was Crang's revolver—but Larmon was upon him *in* an instant.

"Not that way, either!" said Larmon hoarsely.

John Bruce brushed his hand across his eyes.

"No, not that way, either," he repeated like a child.

He went back to the chair and sat down. He was aware that Larmon was kneeling beside the mattress, but he paid no attention to the other.

"The man's unconscious," Larmon said.

John Bruce did not turn his head.

The minutes passed.

John Bruce's brain began to clear; but the unbalanced fury that had possessed him was giving place now only to one more implacable in its considered phase. He looked around him. Crang, evidently recovered, was sitting up on the mattress. The letters Larmon had taken from Crang's pocket lay on the table. John Bruce picked them up idly. From one of them a steamer ticket fell out. He stared at this for a moment. A passage for John Bruce to South America! Then low, an ugly sound, his laugh echoed around the place.

South America! It recalled him to his actual surroundings—that on the other side of the door were Crang's apaches. There was still time to catch the steamer, wasn't there—for South America? "If the bluff worked"—he remembered his thoughts, the plan that had actuated him when he had crouched there at the door,

waiting for Crang to enter. Strange! It wouldn't be a *bluff* any more! All that was gone. What he would do now, and carry it through to its end, was what he had intended to bluff Crang into believing he would do. And Crang, too, would understand now how little of bluff there was—or, misunderstanding, pay for it with his life.

He thrust the ticket suddenly into his pocket, stepped from his chair, the revolver in his hand, and confronted Crang. The man shrank back, trembling, his face gray with fear.

"Stand up!" John Bruce commanded.

Crang, groveling against the wall, got upon his feet.

It was a full minute before John Bruce spoke again, and then the words came choking hot from his lips.

"You damned cur!" he cried. "That's what you did, was it? The price Claire paid was for my life. Well, it's hers, then; it's no longer mine. Can you understand that, and understand that I am going to pay it back, if necessary, to rid her of you? We are going to walk out of here. You will lead the way. We are going down to that steamer, and you are going on John Bruce's ticket where you proposed to send me—to South America. Either that—or you are going on a longer journey. I shall carry this revolver in the pocket of my coat, and walk beside you. It is your affair how we pass those men out there. If you make any attempt at trickery in getting out of here, or later in the street attempt to escape, I will fire instantly. It does not matter in the slightest degree what happens to me at the hands of your men, or at the hands of a thousand people in the most crowded street. You will have gone out *first*. The only consideration that exists is that Claire shall be free of you."

"Tck!" It was the quill toothpick flexing against one of Larmon's teeth.

John Bruce turned.

"I did not understand," said Larmon in a low, grim way. "If I had, I am not sure I should have stopped you from throttling him when I did."

John Bruce nodded curtly. He spoke again to Crang.

"I am not asking you whether you agree to this or not," he said with level emphasis. "You have your choice at any moment to do as you like—you know the consequences." He slipped his hand with his revolver into the right-hand side pocket of his coat, and took his place at Crang's left side. "Now, go ahead and open that door, and lead the way out! Mr. Larmon, you follow close behind me."

"Yes," Crang stammered, "yes—for God's sake—I—I'll do it—I—"

"Open that door!" said John Bruce monotonously. "I didn't ask you to talk about it!"

Crang opened the door. The little procession stepped out into the long, low cellar, and started down toward the lower end. The three men, from playing dice at the table near the door, rose uncertainly to their feet. John Bruce's revolver in his pocket pressed suggestively against Crang's side.

"It's all right, boys," Crang called out. "Open the door. I've got Birdie outside."

They passed the table, passed through the doorway, and the door closed behind them. In the semi-darkness here, as they headed for the exit to the lane, Larmon touched John Bruce's elbow.

"He brought me down here in a taxi," Larmon whispered. "I suppose now it was one of his men who drove it."

"Birdie, he just told those rats," said John Bruce tersely. "Do you hear, Crang? If he's still out there, send him away!"

They emerged into the lane. A taxi-cab stood opposite the exit; Birdie lounged in the driver's seat.

John Bruce's revolver bored into Crang's side.

"Beat it!" said Crang surlily to the man. "I won't want you any more."

"You won't—what?" Birdie leaned out from his seat. He stared for a moment in bewilderment, and then started to climb out of the taxi.

The pressure of John Bruce's revolver increased steadily.

"Damn it, you fool!" Crang screamed out wildly. "Beat it! Do you hear? Beat it!"

Birdie's face darkened.

"Oh—sure!" he muttered, with a disgruntled oath. He shot the gears into place with a vicious snap. "Sure—anything *you* say!" The taxi roared down the lane, and disappeared around the corner in a volley of exhausts.

"Go on!" John Bruce ordered.

At the corner of the lane John Bruce turned to Larmon.

"You are safe, and out of it now," he said. "I am going to ask you to step into the first store we pass and get me some good light rope, but after that I think you had better leave us. If anything happened between here and the steamer, or on the steamer, you would be implicated."

"Tck!" It was the quill toothpick again. "I'll get the rope with pleasure," Larmon said calmly; "but I never lay down a good hand. I am going to the steamer."

John Bruce shrugged his shoulders. Larmon somehow seemed an abstract consideration at the moment—but Larmon had had his chance.

"What time does the steamer sail, Crang?" John Bruce bit off his words, as he looked at his watch.

"Four o'clock," Crang mumbled.

"Walk faster!"

They stopped for a moment in front of a store. Larmon entered, and came out again almost immediately with a package under his arm.

A block farther on John Bruce hailed a passing taxi.

Fifteen minutes later, pushing through the throng on the dock, John Bruce produced the ticket, they mounted the gangway, and a steward led them to a stateroom on one of the lower decks.

John Bruce closed the door and locked it. His revolver was in his hand now.



"There isn't much time left," he said coldly. "About ten minutes."

At the end of five, Crang, bound hand and foot, and gagged, lay lashed into his bunk.

A bugle sounded the "All Ashore!"

John Bruce tossed the ticket on the couch.

"There's your ticket!" he said sternly. "I wouldn't advise you to come back—nor worry any further about exposing Mr. Larmon, unless you want to force a showdown that will place some very interesting details connected with the life of Doctor Crang in the hands of the police!"

The bugle rang out again.

John Bruce, without a further glance in Crang's direction, opened the cabin window slightly, then unlocking the door, he motioned Larmon to pass out. He locked the door on the outside, stepped to the deck, tossed the key through the window to the floor of Crang's cabin, and drew the window shut again. A minute more, and with Larmon beside him, he was standing on the dock.

Neither John Bruce nor Larmon spoke.

And presently the tugs caught hold of the big liner and warped her out of her berth.

"John Bruce" had sailed for South America.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN—CABIN H-14

**F**OR a time, Crang lay passive. Fear was dominant. He could move his head a little, and he kept screwing it around to cast furtive glances at the cabin door. He was sure that Bruce was still outside there, or somewhere near—Bruce wouldn't leave the ship until the last moment, and....

The craven soul of the man shrivelled within him. Bruce's eyes! Damn Bruce's eyes, and that hideous touch of Bruce's pocketed revolver! The fool would even have killed him back there in the cellar if it hadn't been for Larmon! He could still feel those strangling fingers at his throat.

Mechanically he made to lift his hand to touch the bruised and swollen flesh—but he could not move his hands because they were bound behind his back and beneath him. The fool! The fool had *wanted* to shoot. Perhaps with Larmon out of the road, and just at the last minute, that was what he still meant to do—to open the door there, and—and *kill*. Terror swept upon him. He tried to scream—but a gag was in his mouth.

What was that? He felt a slight jar, another, and another. He listened intently. He heard a steady throbbing sound. The ship was moving—moving! That meant that Bruce was ashore—that he need not fear that door there. He snarled to himself, suddenly arrogant with courage. To the devil's pit with John Bruce!

He began to work at his bonds now—at first with a measure of contained persistence; and then, as he made no progress, angry impatience came, and he began to struggle. He tossed now, and twisted himself about on the bunk, and strained with all his might. The gag choked him. The bonds but grew the tighter and cut into his wrists. He became a madman in his frenzy. Passion and fury lashed him on and on. He flogged himself into effort beyond physical endurance—and finally collapsed through utter exhaustion, a limp thing bathed in sweat.

Then he began the struggle again, and after that again. The periods came in cycles... the insensate fury... exhaustion... recuperation...

After a time he no longer heard the throbbing of the engines or the movement of the ship during those moments when he lay passive in weakness, nor did the desire for freedom, for merely freedom's sake, any longer actuate him; instead, beneath him, in his pocket, he had felt the little case that held his hypodermic syringe, and it had brought the craving for the drug. And the craving grew. It grew until it became torture, and to satisfy it became the one incentive that possessed him. It tormented, it mocked him. He could feel it there in his pocket, always there in his pocket. Hell could not keep him from it. He blasphemed at the ropes that kept it from his fingers' reach, and he wrenched and tore at them, and sobbed and snarled—and after long minutes of maniacal struggle would again lie trembling, drained of the power either to move or think.

It grew dark in the cabin.

And now, in one of his series of struggles, something snapped beneath him—a cord! One of the cords around his wrists had given away. He tore one hand free. Yes, yes—he could reach his pocket! Ha, ha—his pocket! And now his other hand was free. He snatched at the hypodermic syringe with feverish greed—and the plunger went home as the needle pricked its way beneath the skin of his forearm.

He reached up then, unloosened the knots at the back of his head, and spat the gag from his mouth. His penknife freed his legs. He stood up—tottered—and sat down on the edge of his bunk. He remained motionless for a few minutes. The drug steadied him.

He looked around him. It was dark. The ship was very still; there was no sense of movement, none of vibration from the engines. It seemed to him that in a hazy, vague way he had noticed that fact a long time ago. But, nevertheless, it was very curious!

He stood up again. This was better! He felt secure enough now on his feet. It was only as though a great fatigue were upon him, and that he seemed to be weighted down with lead—nothing more than that. He crossed to the window, drew the shade, and opened the window itself.

And then, for a long time, puzzled, his brows drawn together, he stood there staring out. Close at hand, though but faintly outlined in the darkness, he could see the shore. And it was not imagination, for beyond the

shore line, he could see innumerable little lights twinkling.

It was strange! He rubbed his eyes. Here was something else! The window opened on a narrow, dimly lighted and deserted deck—one of the lower decks, he remembered. Below this deck, and evidently alongside of the steamer's hull, he could make out the upper-structure of some small vessel.

A figure came along the deck now from the forward end—one of the crew, Crang could see from the other's dress, as the man drew nearer. Crang thrust his head out of the window.

"I say, look here!" he called, as the other came opposite to him. "What's all this about? Where are we?"

"Down the bay a bit, that's all, sir," the man answered. "We've had some engine trouble."

Crang pointed to the small vessel alongside. A sudden, wild elation surged upon him.

"That's a tug down there, isn't it?" he said. "They're going to tow us back, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, sir," the man replied. "It's the company's tug, all right, that they sent down to us, but she'll be going back as soon as we're off again. It's nothin' serious, and we won't be more'n another hour, sir."

Crang snarled under his breath.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" inquired the man.

"Nothing!" said Crang. "I'm much obliged to you."

"Thank you, sir," said the man, and went on along the deck.

Crang returned to his bunk and sat down again on its edge. He could still see the reflection of the shore lights. This seemed to obsess him. He kept staring out through the window. Suddenly he chuckled hoarsely—and then, as suddenly, his fist clenched and he shook it in the air.

"Another hour, eh?" he muttered. "Then, I'll get you yet, Bruce—ha, ha, I'll get you yet! But I'll make sure of Claire *first* this time! That's where I made the mistake—but Doctor Sydney Angus Crang doesn't make two mistakes alike!"

He relapsed into silent meditation. At the end of five minutes he spoke again.

"I'm a clever man," said Doctor Crang between his teeth. "First Claire—then you, Bruce. And I'll take good care that you know nothing, Mr. John Bruce—not this time—not until it is too late—both ways! I'll show you! I'll teach you to pit your clumsy wits against me!"

He got up from the bunk and turned on a single incandescent light. Bruce had thrown the key in through the window, he remembered. Yes, there it was on the floor! He picked it up; and quickly and methodically he began to work now. He gathered together the pieces of rope with which he had been bound, tucked them under his coat, and running to the window, thrust his head outside again. The deck was clear, there was not a soul in sight. He unlocked the door now, stepped noiselessly out on the deck, dropped the pieces of rope overboard, and then, returning to the cabin, smiled ironically as he made a mental note of the number on the cabin door.

"H-14," observed Doctor Crang grimly. "Quite so—H-14!"

He halted before the mirror and removed the more flagrant traces of his dishevelled appearance; then he took off his coat, flung it on a chair, pushed the electric button, and returned to his bunk.

He was sitting up on the edge of the bunk, and yawning, as the steward answered his summons.

"Hello, steward!" said Crang somewhat thickly. "I guess I've overslept myself. Overdid the send-off a little, I'm afraid. What are we stopping for?"

"A little engine trouble, sir," the steward answered. "It was right after we started. We're only a little way down the bay. But it's all right, sir. Nothing serious. We'll be off again shortly."

"Humph!" Crang dismissed the subject with a grunt. "I suppose I've missed my dinner, eh?"

"Oh, no, sir," replied the steward. "It's only just a little after seven now, sir."

"That's better!" smiled Crang. "Well, get my traps right up here, like a good fellow, and I'll clean up a bit. And hurry, will you?"

The steward looked a little blank.

"Your traps, sir?"

"Luggage—traps—baggage," defined Crang with facetious terseness.

"Oh, I knew what you meant, sir," said the steward. "It's where your traps are, sir? I—I thought it a bit strange you didn't have anything with you when you came aboard this afternoon."

"Did you, now?" inquired Crang sweetly. "Well, then, the sooner you get them here the less strange it will seem. Beat it!"

"But where are they, sir?" persisted the man. "Where are they? Good God, how do I know!" ejaculated Crang sarcastically. "I sent them down to the ship early this morning to be put aboard—in your baggage room. You've got a baggage room aboard, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir; but—"

"I would suggest the baggage room, then!" interrupted Crang crisply. "And if they are not there, ask the captain to let you have any of the crew who aren't too busy on this engine trouble, and get them to help you search the ship!"

The steward grinned.

"Very good, sir. Would you mind describing the pieces?"

"There are four," said Crang with exaggerated patience, as he created the non-existent baggage out of his imagination. "And they have all got your 'wanted on the voyage' labels, with my name and cabin written on them—Mr. John Bruce; Cabin H-14. There is a steamer trunk, and two brown alligator-leather—which I do not guarantee to be genuine in spite of the price—suit-cases, and a hat box."

"Very good, sir," said the steward again—and hurried from the cabin.

Crang got up and went to the window. The tug alongside seemed to furnish him with engrossing reflections,

for he stood there, smiling queerly, until he swung around in answer to a knock upon his door.

A man in ship's uniform entered ahead of the steward.

"The steward here, sir," said the man, "was speaking about your baggage."

"*Speaking* about it!" murmured Crang helplessly. "I told him to get it."

"Yes, sir," said the man; "but I am sorry to say that no such baggage as you describe has come aboard the ship. There has been no baggage at all for Mr. Bruce, sir."

"Not aboard!" gasped Crang. "Then—then where is it?"

"I can't say, sir, of course," said the other sympathetically. "I am only stating a fact to you."

"But—but I sent it down to the dock early this morning." Crang's voice was rising in well-affected excitement. "It must be here! I tell you, it must be here!"

The man shook his head.

"It's my job, sir. I'm sorry, Mr. Bruce, but I know positively your baggage is not aboard this ship."

"Then what's to be done?" Crang's voice rose louder. "You've left it on the dock, that's what—fools, thundering idiots!"

The man with the baggage job looked uncomfortable.

Crang danced up and down on the floor of the cabin.

"On the way to South America to stay six months," he yelled insanely, "and my baggage left behind! I can't go on without my baggage, do you hear?"

There was a whispered conference between the two men. The steward vanished through the doorway.

"I've sent for the purser, sir," volunteered the other.

Crang stormed up and down the floor.

Presently the purser appeared. Crang swung on him on the instant.

"You've left my baggage behind!" he shouted. "My papers, plans, everything! I can't go on without them!" He shook his fist. "You'll either get that baggage here, or get me ashore!"

The purser eyed Crang's fist, and stiffened perceptibly.

"I'm not a magician, Mr. Bruce," he said quietly. "I am very sorry indeed that this should have happened; but it is quite impossible, of course, to get your baggage here."

"Then get me ashore!" Crang snatched up his coat and put it on. "There's a tug, or something, out there, isn't there?"

"Yes," said the purser, "that's the company's tug, and I suppose you could go back on her, if you think you —"

"Think!" howled Crang. "I don't *think* anything about it! I know that—!" His eye suddenly caught the envelope on the couch containing the ticket. "And what about this?" He picked it up, jerked out the ticket, and waved it in the purser's face.

The purser refused the document.

"You'll have to see the New York office, sir, about that," he said.

"I will, will I?" snapped Crang. "Well, that isn't all I'll see them about!"

"I am sure they will do what they can, sir, to make things right—if they are to blame," said the purser a little sharply. "But it might have been your teamer, you know, who made the mistake." He turned to the door. "I will arrange about your going ashore, Mr. Bruce."

"Yes!" growled Crang savagely—and five minutes later, swearing volubly for the benefit of those within hearing, he wriggled his way down a rope ladder to the tug's deck.

A deck hand led him to the pilot house.

"The captain 'll be along as soon as we start," the man informed him.

Crang made himself comfortable in a cushioned chair. He sat chuckling maliciously, as he stared up at the towering hull that twinkled with lights above him—and then the chuckle died away, and little red spots came and burned in his sallow cheeks, and his lips worked, and his hands curled until the nails bit into the palms.

He lost track of time.

A man came into the pilot house, and gave the wheel a spin.

"We're off!" said the man heartily. "You've had tough luck, I hear."

Crang's fingers caressed his bruised and swollen throat.

"Yes," said Crang with a thin smile; "but I think somebody is going to pay the bill—in full."

The tug was heading toward New York.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY—OUTSIDE THE DOOR

**H**AWKINS very cautiously got out of bed, and consulted his watch. It was five minutes after nine. He stole to the door and listened. There was no sound from below. Mrs. Hedges, who had been his jailor all day, had now, he was fairly certain, finally retired for the night.

The old blue eyes blinked in perplexity and he scratched at the fringe of hair behind his ear in a perturbed way, as he began, still cautiously, to dress. It had been a very dreary day, during which he had suffered not a little physical discomfort. Mrs. Hedges had been assiduous in her attentions; more than that, even—motherly.

“God bless her!” said Hawkins to one of his boots, as he laced it up. “Only she wouldn't let me out.”

He stopped lacing the boot suddenly, and sat staring in front of him. Mrs. Hedges had been more than even motherly; she had been—been—yes, that was it—been puzzling. If she had said Paul Veniza wanted to see him, why had she insisted that Paul Veniza didn't want to see him? Hawkins' gaze at the blank wall in front of him became a little more bewildered. He tried to reconstruct certain fragments of conversation that had taken place between Mrs. Hedges and himself.

“Now, you just lie still,” Mrs. Hedges had insisted during the afternoon, when he had wanted to get up. “Claire told me——”

He remembered the sinking of his heart as he had interrupted her.

“Claire,” he had said anxiously, “Claire ain't—she don't know about this, does she?”

“Certainly *not!*” Mrs. Hedges had assured him.

“But you said she told you something”—Hawkins continued to reconstruct the conversation—“so she must have been here.”

“Law!” Mrs. Hedges had returned. “I nearly put my foot in it, didn't I—I—I mean starting you in to worry. Certainly she don't know anything about it. She just came over to say her father wanted to see you, and I says to her you ain't feeling very well, and she says it's all right.”

Hawkins resumed his dressing. His mind continued to mull over the afternoon. Later on he had made another attempt to get up. He was feeling quite well enough to go over and find out what Paul Veniza wanted. And then Mrs. Hedges, as though she had quite forgotten what she had said before, said that Paul Veniza didn't want to see him, or else he'd send word.

Hawkins scratched behind his ear again. His head wasn't quite clear. Maybe he had not got it all quite straight. Suddenly he smiled. Of course! There wasn't anything to be bewildered about. Mrs. Hedges was just simply determined that he would not go out—and he was equally determined that he would. Paul Veniza or not, he had been long enough in bed!

“Yes,” said Hawkins; “God bless her, that's it!”

Hawkins completed his toilet, and picking up his old felt hat, reconnoitered the hallway. Thereafter he descended the stairs with amazing stealth.

“God bless her!” said Hawkins softly again, as he gained the front door without raising any alarm and stepped outside—and then Hawkins halted as though his feet had been suddenly rooted to the spot.

At the curb in front of the house was an old closed motor car. Hawkins stared at it. Then he rubbed his eyes. Then he stared at it again. He stared for a long time. No; there was no doubt about it—it was the traveling pawn-shop.

Hawkins' mind harked back to the preceding evening. He had met two men in the saloon around the corner, whom he had seen there once or twice before. He had had several drinks with them, and then at some one's suggestion, he could not recollect whose, there had followed the purchase of a few bottles, and an adjournment to his room for a convivial evening. After that his mind was quite blank. He could not even remember having taken out the car.

“I—I must have been bad,” said Hawkins to himself, with a rueful countenance.

He descended the steps, and approached the car with the intention of running it into the shed that served as garage behind the house. But again he halted.

“No,” said Hawkins, with a furtive glance over his shoulder at the front door; “if I started it up, Mrs. Hedges would hear me. I guess I'll wait till I come back.”

Hawkins went on down the street and turned the corner. He had grown a little dejected.

“I'm just an old bum,” said Hawkins, “who ain't ever going to swear off any more 'cause it don't do any good.”

He spoke aloud to himself again, as he approached the door of Paul Veniza's house.

“But I *am* her daddy,” whispered the old man fiercely; “and she is my little girl. It don't change nothing her not knowing, except—except she ain't hiding her face in shame, and”—Hawkins' voice broke a little—“and that I ain't never had her in these arms like I'd ought to have.” A gleam of anger came suddenly into the watery blue eyes under the shaggy brows. “But he ain't going to have her in *his!* That devil from the pit of hell ain't going to kill the soul of my little girl—somehow he ain't—that's all I got to live for—old Hawkins—ha, ha!—somehow old Haw-kins 'll——”

Hawkins' soliloquy ended abruptly. He was startled to find himself in the act of opening the front door of the one-time pawn-shop. He even hesitated, holding the door ajar—and then suddenly he pushed the door wider open and stepped softly inside, as the sound of a voice, angry and threatening in its tones, though strangely low and muffled, reached him. He knew that voice. It was Doctor Crang's.

It was dark here in the room that had once been the office of the pawn-shop, and upon which the front door opened directly; but from under the door leading into the rear room there showed a thread of light, and it was from there that Hawkins now placed the voice.

He stood irresolute. He stared around him. Upstairs it was dark. Paul Veniza, because he had not been well, had probably gone to bed early—unless it was Paul in there with Crang. No! He caught the sound of Claire's voice now, and it seemed to come to him brokenly, in a strangely tired, dreary way. And then Crang's voice again, and an ugly laugh.

The wrinkled skin of Hawkins' old weather-beaten hands grew taut and white across the knuckles as his fists clenched. He tiptoed toward the door. He could hear distinctly now. It was Crang speaking:

“... I'm not a fool! I did not speak about it to make you lie again. I don't care where you met him, or how



long you had been lovers before he crawled in here. That's nothing to do with it. It's enough that I know you were lovers before that night. But you belong to me now. Understand? I spoke of it because the sooner you realize that *you* are the one who is the cause of the trouble between Bruce and me, the better—for *him!* I wasn't crowding you before, but I'm through fooling with it now for keeps. I let you go too long as it is. Today, for just a little while, he won out—yes, by God, if you want the truth, he nearly killed me. He got me tied in a cabin of a ship that sailed this afternoon for South America; but the engines broke down in the harbor, and, damn him, I'm back! You know what for. I've told you. There's one way to save him. I've told you what that is, too. I'm waiting for your answer."

"Why should it be me?" Claire's voice was dull and colorless. "Why cannot you leave me alone—I, who hate and loathe you? Do you look for happiness with me? There will be none."

"Why should it be you?" Crang's voice was suddenly hoarse with passion. "Because you have set my brain on fire, because you have filled me with a madness that would mock God Himself if He stood between us. Do you understand—Claire? Claire! Do you understand? Because I want you, because I'm going to have you, because I'm going to own you—yes, *own* you, one way or another—by marriage, or—"

A low cry came from Claire. It tore at Hawkins' heart in its bitter shame and anguish. His face blanched.

"Well, you asked for it, and you got it!" Crang snarled. "Now, I'm waiting for your answer."

There was a long pause, then Claire spoke with an obvious effort to steady her voice:

"Have I got to buy him *twice?*"

"You haven't bought him *once* yet," Crang answered swiftly. "I performed my part of the bargain. I haven't been paid."

And Hawkins, standing there, listening, heard nothing for a long time; and then he distinguished Claire's voice, but it was so low that he could not catch the words. But he heard Crang's reply because it was loud with what seemed like passionate savagery and triumph:

"You're wise, my dear! At eight o'clock to-morrow morning, then. And since Mr. John Bruce's skin is involved in this, you quite understand that he is not to be communicated with in any way?"

"I understand." Hawkins this time caught the almost inaudible reply.

"All right!" Crang said. "There's a padre I know, who's down on Staten Island now. We'll go down there and be married without any fuss. I'll be here at eight o'clock. Your father isn't fit to ride in that rattle-trap old bus of yours. I'll have a comfortable limousine for him, and you can go with him. Hawkins can drive me, and"—he was laughing softly—"and be my best man. I'll see that he knows about it in time to—"

Like a blind man, Hawkins was groping his way toward the front door. Married! They were to be married to-morrow morning!

He found himself on the street. He hurried. Impulse drove him along. He did not reason. His mind was a tortured thing. And yet he laughed as he scurried around the corner, laughed in an unhinged way, and raised both hands above his head and pounded at the air with his doubled fists. They were to be married to-morrow morning, and he—he was to be *best man*. And as he laughed, his once ruddy, weather-beaten face was white as a winding-sheet, and in the whiteness there was stamped a look that it was good on no man's face to see.

And then suddenly two great tears rolled down his cheeks, opening the flood gates of his soul.

"My little girl!" he sobbed. "Daddy's little girl!"

And reason and a strange calmness came.

"John Bruce," he said. "He loves her too."

And in front of Mrs. Hedges' rooming-house he climbed into the driver's seat of the old traveling pawnshop.

It didn't matter now how much noise he made.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE—THE LAST CHANCE

**J**OHN BRUCE closed the door of Larmon's suite, and, taking the elevator, went up to his own room in the Bayne-Miloy Hotel, two floors above. Here, he flung himself almost wearily into a chair. Larmon had gone to bed; but bed offered no appeal to him, John Bruce, in spite of the fact that he was conscious of great mental fatigue. Bed without sleep was a horror, and his spirits were too depressed to make sleep even a possibility.

From a purely selfish standpoint, and he admitted to utter selfishness now, it had been a hollow victory. Crang was gone, disposed of, and as far as Larmon was concerned the man no longer existed, for if Crang had held certain intimate knowledge of Larmon's life over Larmon's head, Larmon was now in exactly the same position in respect to Crang. And Crang, too, for the time being at least, was no longer a factor in Claire's life.

He smiled grimly to himself. Hollow! The victory had been sweeping, complete, conclusive—for every one but himself! He had not even waited to leave the dock before he had telephoned Claire. And Claire had—He rose suddenly and began to walk feverishly up and down the room. Hollow! He laughed out shortly. She had curtly refused to talk to him.

He had only meant to telephone to say that he was on the way up to her house, and he had managed to say that much—and she had coldly, contemptuously informed him that she would not be at home, and had hung

up the receiver. She had given him no opportunity to say any more.

It was not like Claire. It had been so unexpected that he had left the dock mentally dazed. The sight of the liner out in the stream had seemed to mock him ironically. After that, until now, he had followed the line of least resistance. He had come back here to the hotel, and dined with Larmon.

He stood still in the middle of the room. Larmon! It had been a singular evening that he had just spent with Larmon. He had got a new viewpoint on Larmon—a strange, grave, sympathetic Larmon. He had given Larmon the details of everything that had happened; and Larmon had led him on to talk—of everything, and anything, it seemed now, as he looked back upon it. And somehow, he could not tell why, even while he felt that Larmon was drawing him out, urging him even to speak of Claire and the most intimate things of the last few weeks, he had been glad to respond. It was only when Larmon for a little while had discussed his great chain of gambling houses that he, John Bruce, had felt curiously detached from it all and estranged from the other, as though he were masquerading as some one else, as some one whom Larmon believed to be John Bruce, and as though he in his true self had no interest in these matters any longer in a personal sense, as though his connection with them had automatically ceased with the climax of Crang's removal. It was queer! But then his mind had been obsessed, elsewhere. And yet here, too, he had been frank with Larmon—frank enough to admit the feelings that had prompted him to refrain from actual play only two nights before. He remembered the quick little tattoo of Larmon's quill toothpick at this admission, and Larmon's tight little smile.

Yes, it had been a singular evening! In those few hours he seemed to have grown to know Larmon as though he had known the man all his life, to be drawn to Larmon in a personal way, to admire Larmon as a man. There was something of debonair sang-froid about Larmon. He had made no fuss over his escape that day, and much less been effusive in any thanks. Larmon's philosophy of life was apparently definitely fixed and settled; and, in so far as Larmon was concerned, satisfactorily so. The whole world to Larmon was a gamble—and, consistently enough, his own activities in that respect were on as vast a scale as possible.

Larmon with his unemotional face and his quill toothpick! No; not unemotional! When Larmon had finally pleaded fatigue and a desire to go to bed, there had been something in Larmon's face and Larmon's "good-night," that still lingered with him, John Bruce, and which even now he could not define.

John Bruce's brows gathered into tight furrows. His mind had flown off at a tangent. There was Claire! It had not been like Claire. Nor had he meant, nor did he intend now to accept her dismissal as final. But what was it that had happened? What was it? He could think of only one thing—the letter he had written to Larmon, and which, on that account, he had asked for and received back from the other.

It was a certainty that Crang's hand was in this somewhere, and Crang had said that he had shown the letter to Claire, but—

The telephone rang.

John Bruce stepped to the desk, and picked up the instrument.

"Yes? Hello!" he said.

The clerk's voice from the office answered him:

"There's a man down here, Mr. Bruce, who insists on seeing you. He's pretty seedy, and looks as though he had been on a bat for a week. I'm sorry to bother you, but we can't get rid of him. He says his name is Hawkins."

"Send him up at once!" said John Bruce sharply.

"Yes, sir." The clerk coughed deprecatingly. "Very well, Mr. Bruce. Thank you."

Hawkins! John Bruce walked to the door of his suite, and opened it. He looked at his watch. It was getting on now to eleven o'clock. What on earth had brought Hawkins up here to the Bayne-Miloy at this hour? He smiled a little grimly as he stood waiting on the threshold, and the recollection of the night before last came back to him. Well, at least, he was safe to-night from any kidnaping through the medium of Hawkins!

The elevator door clanged a little way down the corridor, and Hawkins, followed by a bell boy, stepped out.

"This way, Hawkins!" John Bruce called—and dismissed the bell boy with a wave of his hand.

And then, as Hawkins reached the door, John Bruce stared in amazement, and for a moment absolved the clerk for his diagnosis. Hawkins' face was like parchment, devoid of color; his hands, twisting at the old felt hat, trembled as with the ague; and the blue eyes, fever-burned they seemed, stared out in a fixed way from under the shaggy brows.

John Bruce pulled the old man inside the apartment, and closed the door.

"Good Lord, Hawkins!" he exclaimed anxiously. "What's the matter with you?"

Hawkins caught at John Bruce's arm.

"It's to-morrow morning," he said hoarsely. "Tomorrow morning at eight o'clock."

"What is?" inquired John Bruce. He forced the old cabman gently into a chair. "You're upset, Hawkins. Here—wait! I'll get you something."

But Hawkins held him back.

"I don't want a drink." There was misery, bitterness, in Hawkins' voice. "I don't want a drink—for once. It's come! It—it's come to the end now. Crang and—and my little girl are going to be married to-morrow morning."

And then John Bruce laughed quietly, and laid his hand reassuringly on the old cabman's shoulder.

"No, Hawkins," he said. "I don't know where you got that idea; but it won't be to-morrow morning, nor for a good many to-morrow mornings either. Crang at the present moment is on board a ship on his way to South America."

"I know," said Hawkins dully. "But half an hour ago I left him with Claire in Paul Veniza's house."

John Bruce's hand tightened on Hawkins' shoulder until the old man winced.

"You what?" John Bruce cried out.

"Yes," said Hawkins. "I heard him talking about it in the back room. They didn't know I was there. He said there was something the matter with the engines."

Crang back! John Bruce's face was set as chiselled marble.

"Do you know what you are saying, Hawkins?" he demanded fiercely, as though to trample down and sweep aside by the brute force of his own incredulity the other's assertion. "Do you know what you are saying—*do you?*"

"Yes, I know," said Hawkins helplessly. "He said you nearly killed him to-day, and——"

John Bruce's laugh, with a savagery that had him now at its mercy and in its grip, rang suddenly through the room.

"Then, for once, he told the truth!" he cried. "He tricked me cold with that old bus last night, and trapped me in the rats' hole where his gang holds out, but——"

Hawkins stumbled to his feet. His face seemed to have grown grayer still, more haggard and full of abject misery.

"That's it, then!" he whispered. "I—I understand now. I was drunk last night. Oh, my God, I'm to blame for this, too!"

John Bruce pushed Hawkins almost roughly back into his chair. Last night was gone. It was of no significance any more.

"Never mind about that!" he said between his teeth. "It doesn't matter now. Nothing matters now except Claire. Go on, tell me! What does it mean? To-morrow morning, you said. Why this sudden decision about to-morrow morning?"

Hawkins' lips seemed dry. He circled them again and again with his tongue.

"He said you nearly killed him to-day, as I—I told you," said Hawkins, fumbling for his words. "And he said that you had been lovers before that night when you were stabbed, and that he wasn't going to stand for it any longer, and—and"—Hawkins' voice broke—"and that she belonged to him. And he said she was the only one who could stop this trouble between you and him before it was too late, and that was by marrying him at once. And—and Claire said she would."

Hawkins stopped. His old felt hat was on his knees, and he twisted at it aimlessly with shaking fingers.

John Bruce stood motionless.

"Go on!" he bit off his words.

"That's all," said Hawkins, "except he made her promise not to let you know anything about it. They're going to leave the house to-morrow morning, and are going down to Staten Island to get married because there's some minister down there he knows, Crang said. And I'm to take Crang, and—and"—the old man turned away his face—"I—I'm to be best man. That—that's what he said—best man."

John Bruce walked abruptly to the window, and stared blindly out into the night. His brain seemed afire.

For a time neither man spoke.

"You said you loved her," said Hawkins at last. "I came to you. There wasn't any other place to go. Paul Veniza can't do anything."

John Bruce turned from the window, and walking to

Hawkins, laid his two hands on the other's shoulders. He was calmer now.

"Yes, I love her," he said huskily. "And I think—I am not sure—but I think now there is a chance that she can be made to change her mind even here at the last minute. But that means I must see her; or, rather, that she must see me."

Hawkins paused in the twisting of his felt hat to raise bewildered eyes.

"I've got the car here," he said. "I'll take you down."

"The car!" exclaimed John Bruce quickly. "Yes, I never thought of that! Listen, Hawkins! Claire refused to see me this afternoon, or even to talk to me over the telephone. I am not quite sure why. But no matter what her reason was, I must see her now at once. I have something to tell her that I hope will persuade her not to go on with this to-morrow morning—or ever." His voice was growing grave and hard. "I hope you understand, Hawkins. I believe it may succeed. If it fails, then neither you nor I, nor any soul on earth can alter her decision. That's all that I can tell you now."

Hawkins nodded his head. A little color, eagerness, hope, had come into his face.

"That's enough," he said tremulously, "as long as you—you think there is a chance even yet. And—and you do, don't you?"

"Yes," said John Bruce, "I think there is more than a chance—if I can see her alone and make her listen to me. The car will be just the thing. But she would refuse to come out, if she knew I were in it. I depend on you for that. We'll drive down there, and you will have to make some excuse to get her to come with you. After that you can keep on driving us around the block until I either win or lose."

Hawkins rose hurriedly to his feet.

"Let us go, John Bruce! For God's sake, let us go!" he cried eagerly. "I'll—I'll tell her Mrs. Hedges—that's my landlady—has got to see her at once. She'll come quick enough."

John Bruce put on his hat and coat, and without a word led the way to the door—but at the door he paused for an instant. There was Larmon—and Crang was back. And then he shook his head in quick decision. There was time enough later. It would serve no purpose to tell Larmon now, other than the thankless one of giving Larmon a restless night.

John Bruce went on. He did not speak again until, outside the hotel, he stepped into the traveling pawnshop as Hawkins opened the car door for him.

"You will have to make sure that Crang has gone," he said quietly. "Don't stop in front of the house,

Hawkins."

"I'll make sure," whispered Hawkins, as he climbed to his seat. "Oh, my God, my little girl!"

The old car jolted forward. John Bruce's face was set again in hard, chiselled lines. He tried to think—but now his brain seemed curiously impotent, as though it groped through chaos and through turmoil only to stagger back bewildered, defeated, a wounded thing. And for a time it was like that, as he sat there swaying with the lurch of the speeding car, one thought impinging fast upon another only to be swallowed up so quickly in turn by still another that he could correlate no one of them.

And then, after a little time again, out of this strange mental strife images began to take form, as sharply defined and distinct one from the other as before they had been mingled in hopeless confusion—and he cried out aloud in sudden agony of soul. It was to save his life that this had happened. He had wrung that knowledge from Crang. That was the lever he meant to use with Claire now, and it *must* succeed. He must make it succeed! It seemed to drive him mad now, that thought—that to-morrow morning she should die for him. Not physical death—worse than that! God! It was unthinkable, horrible, abominable. It seemed to flaunt and mock with ruthless, hell-born sacrilege what was holiest in his heart. It stirred him to a fury that brought him to his feet, his fists clenched. Claire in her purity—at the mercy of a degenerate beast!

He dropped back on the seat. He battled for calmness. In a little while Claire would be here beside him—*for a little while*. He shook his head. This was not real, nothing of his life had been real since that moon-mad night on the sands of Apia. No; that was not true! Soul, mind and body rose up in fierce denial. His love was real, a living, breathing, actual reality, Claire—

John Bruce sank his face in his hands. Hours seemed to pass. And then he was conscious that the car had stopped. He roused himself, and drawing the window curtain slightly, looked out. Hawkins had stopped a few houses down past the one-time pawnshop.

John Bruce rose suddenly and changed his seat to the one in the far opposite corner, his back to the front of the car. The time seemed interminable. Then he heard a light footstep ring on the pavement, and he heard Hawkins' voice. The car door was opened, a dark form entered, sat down, the door closed, and the car started forward.

It was strange! It was like that, here in this car, that he had stepped in one night and found Claire—as she would now find him. That was so long ago! And it seemed so long too since even he had last seen her—since that night when, piqued so unwarrantably, he had left Paul Veniza's house. He felt his hands tremble. He steadied himself. He did not want to frighten or startle her now.

"Claire!" he said softly.

He heard a slight, quick rustle of garments—and then the light in the car was flashed on.

She was leaning tensely forward, a little figure with loose cloak flung over her shoulders, without hat, a wondrous sheen from the light on the dark, silken hair, her eyes wide, her finger still on the electric-light button.

"You!" she cried sharply. "And Hawkins, too, in this!"

She reached for the door handle; but John Bruce caught her hand.

"Claire!" he pleaded hoarsely. "Wait! If it is a trick, at least you know that with Hawkins and me you will come to no harm. What else could I do? You would not speak to me this afternoon, you would not let me see you, and I must talk to you to-night."

She looked at him steadily.

"*Must?*" she repeated coldly. "And to-night? Why to-night?"

"Because," John Bruce answered quickly, "to-morrow would be too late. I know about to-morrow morning. Hawkins told me. He was outside the door of that room when Crang was talking to you to-night." She sank back in her seat with a little cry. Her face had gone white—but again she steadied herself.

"And—and do you think that is any reason why you should have inveigled me into this car?" she asked dully. "Do you think that anything you can say will alter—to-morrow morning?"

"Yes; I do!" said John Bruce earnestly. "But"—he smiled a little bitterly—"I am afraid, too, that it will be hopeless enough if first you will not tell me what has so suddenly come between us. Claire, what is it?"

The dark eyes lighted with a glint, half angry, half ironical.

"Is *that* what you brought me here for?"

"No," he said quietly.

"Then," she said coolly, "if you do not know, I will tell you. I read a letter that you wrote to a certain Mr. Larmon."

It was a long minute before he spoke.

"I—I thought it might be that," he said slowly. "I knew you had seen it. Crang told me so. And—and I was afraid you might believe it—Claire."

"Believe it!" she returned monotonously. "Had I any choice? Have I any now? I knew you were in danger. I knew it was written to save your life. I knew it was your handwriting. I knew you wrote it." She turned away her head. "It was so miserable a lie, so cowardly a betrayal—to save your life."

"But so hard to believe, and so bitter a thing to believe"—there was a sudden eager thrill in John Bruce's voice—"that you wept upon it. Look, Claire!" he cried. "I have that letter here—and this, that I took from Crang to-day when I turned the tables on him. See! Read them both!" He took from his pocket the letter and the slip cut from the bottom of the sheet, and laid them in her lap. "The bottom was written in invisible ink—the way always communicated privately with Larmon. Salt brings it out. I knew Larmon would subject it to the test, so I was willing to write anything that Crang dictated. I wrote that secret message on the bottom of the paper while Crang was out of the room where he had me a prisoner. Oh, don't you see now, Claire? When your tears fell on the paper faint traces of the secret writing began to appear. That gave Crang the clew, and he worked at it until he had brought out the message, and then he cut off the bottom before delivering the



letter to Larmon, and——”

John Bruce stopped. Claire's face was buried in the cushions, and, huddled in the corner of the car, she was sobbing bitterly.

“Don't! Don't cry, Claire!” John Bruce whispered, and laid his hand over hers where it crushed the letter in her lap.

“I believed it,” she said. “I did you that wrong. There is no forgiveness for such meanness of soul as that.”

“No,” John Bruce answered gently, “there is no forgiveness—because there is nothing to forgive. It was only another piece of that miserable hound's cunning that tricked us both. I did not appreciate what he was after in that reference to you; I thought he was only trying to make the letter bullet-proof in its plausibility for Larmon's benefit—I never thought that he would show it to you.”

She had not drawn her hand away, but her face was still hidden; and for a moment there was silence between them.

“Claire,” John Bruce said in a low voice, “the night I left your house you said that, rather than regretting your promise to marry Crang, you had come to be glad you had made it. Can you still say that?”

She lifted her face now, tear-stained, the brown eyes strangely radiant through the wet lashes.

“Yes,” she said. “I am glad. So glad—because I know now that it was worth it all so many, many times over.”

“Claire”—his voice was lower still—“I left your house that night, angry, jealous, misjudging you because you had said that. You asked for forgiveness a minute ago when there was nothing to forgive; I asked for forgiveness from you after that night, but even then I did not know how far beyond the right to forgiveness I had gone.”

She stared at him in a startled way.

“What—what do you mean?” she breathed.

And now John Bruce's face was alight.

“You have confessed your love, Claire!” he cried passionately. “It was not fair, perhaps, but I am past all that now—and you would not have confessed it in any other way. Glad! I was a stranger that night when you bought my life—and to-night you are glad, not because my life is now or ever could be worth such a sacrifice as yours, but because love has come to make you think so, sweetheart, and you care—you care for me.”

“You know!” Her face was deathly white. “You know about—about that night?” she faltered.

John Bruce had both her hands imprisoned now.

“Yes; I know!” He laughed with a strange buoyancy; passion, triumph, were vibrant in his voice. “Did Crang not tell you how near to death he came to-day? I choked the truth out of him. Yes; I know! I know that it was to save my life you made that promise, that you sold everything you held dear in life for me—but it is over now!”

He was beside her. He raised her two hands to draw her arms around his neck.

She struggled back.

“No, no!” she cried wildly. “Oh, you must not—you must not!”

“Must not!” His voice rang his challenge to the world. The blood was pounding in mad abandon through his veins. His soul itself seemed aflame. Closer, closer he drew her to him. “Must not! There is only you and me—and our love—on all the earth!”

But still she struggled—and then suddenly the tears came.

“Oh, you are so strong—so strong,” she sobbed—and like some weary child finding rest her head dropped upon his shoulder and lay hidden there.

“Claire! Claire!” It was his soul that spoke.

He kissed the silken hair, and fondled it; and kissed the tear-wet eyes; and his cheek lay against hers; and she was in his arms, and he held her there tight-clasped so that she might never go again.

And after a time she sobbed no more; and her hand, lifting, found his face and touched it gently, and creeping upward, brushed the hair back from his forehead—and then suddenly she clung to him with all her strength and drew his head down until her lips met his.

And there was no world about them, and time was non-existent, and only they two lived.

It was Claire at last who put his arms from her in a wistful, lingering way.

“We have been mad for a little while,” she whispered. “Take me back home now, John—and—and you must never try to see me again.”

And something seemed to grow chill and cold within John Bruce's heart.

“Not that, Claire!” he cried out. “You do not mean that—that, after this, you will go on with—with tomorrow morning!”

A brave little effort at a smile quivered on her lips.

“We have had our hour, John,” she said; “yours and mine. It can never be taken from us, and I shall live in it all my life; but it is over now. Yes; I shall go through with it to-morrow morning. There is no other way. I must keep my promise.”

“No!” he cried out again. “It shall never be! Claire, you cannot mean what you are saying! A promise like that! It was forced upon you inhumanly, horribly. He would have murdered me.”

“But to-night you are alive,” she answered quietly.

“Alive! Yes!” he said fiercely. “I am alive, and——”

“It is because you are alive that I promised,” she broke in gently. “He kept his word. I cannot break mine.”

“Alive!” John Bruce laughed now in sudden, bitter agony. “Alive—yes! And do you think that I can walk about the streets, and talk, and smile, and suck the honey out of life, while you have paid for it with a tortured

soul? Claire, you shall not! That man is— No, wait! There is myself. He called me a snivelling hypocrite. You shall know the worst of me before you know the worst of him. There is not much to tell—because he has told you. I am a gambler. All my life I've gambled. As far back as I can remember I've been a rolling stone. My life has been useless, utterly worthless. But I was never ashamed of it; I never saw any reason to be ashamed until you came into my life. It hasn't been the same since then '—and it will never be the same again. You have given me something to live for now, Claire."

She shook her head. "You do not argue well," she said softly. "If I have brought this to you, John, I am so glad—so glad for this, too. Oh, I cannot tell you how glad I am, for, because I loved you, the knowledge of what your life was hurt me. But I had faith in you, John, as I always shall have. So don't you see"—the brave little smile came again—"that this is a reward, something tangible and great, to make still more worth while the promise that I made?"

He stared at her. He swept his hand across his eyes. She seemed—she seemed to be slipping away from him—beyond—beyond his reach.

"That man!" he said desperately. "You said you knew him—but you do not know him. He is the head and front and brains of a gang of crooks. I know! He held me a prisoner in their dirty lair, a hidden place, a cellar over in the slums—like rats they were. He is a criminal, and a dangerous one—while he masquerades with his medicine. God alone knows the crimes, if there are any, that he has not committed. He is a foul, unclean and filthy thing, debauched and dissolute, a moral leper. Claire, do you understand all this—that his life is pollution and defilement, that love to him is lust, that your innocence—"

With a broken, piteous cry, Claire stopped him.

And again he stared at her. She did not speak, but in her eyes he read the torment of a far greater and fuller appreciation of the price than he, he knew, though it turned his soul sick within him, could ever have.

And suddenly he covered his face with his hands.

"Bought!" he said brokenly in his agony. "Oh, my God, this has bought me!"

He felt his hands drawn away, and her two palms laid upon his cheeks. He looked at her. How white she was!

"Help me, John," she said steadily. "Don't—don't make it harder."

She reached out and touched the bell button beside the seat. In a subconscious way he remembered that was the signal for Hawkins to bring the traveling pawn-shop to the end of its circuit around the block in its old-time trips to Persia. He made no effort to stop her. There was something of ultimate finality in her face and eyes that answered, before it was uttered, the question that stumbled on his lips.

"Claire! Claire!" he pleaded wildly. "Will nothing change you?"

"There is no other way," she said.

He stretched out his arms to draw her to him again, to lay her head once more upon his shoulder—but now she held him back.

"No!" she whispered. "Be merciful now, John—my strength is almost gone."

And there was something in her voice that held him from the act.

The car stopped.

And then, as the door was opened and she stood up, suddenly she leaned swiftly forward and pressed her lips to his—and springing from the car, was gone.

John Bruce groped his way out of the car. Across the sidewalk the door of Paul Veniza's house closed. Hawkins, standing by the car door, clutched at his arm. And Hawkins' hand was trembling violently. Slowly his eyes met Hawkins'.

He shook his head.

The old lined face seemed to gray even in the murky light of a distant street lamp.

"I'd rather see her dead," said the old cab driver brokenly.

John Bruce made no answer.

Then Hawkins, gulping his words, spoke again:

"I—where'll I drive you?"

John Bruce started blindly on past Hawkins down the street.

"Nowhere," he said.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO—THROUGH THE NIGHT

**A** GAUNT and haggard figure stalked through the night; around him only shuttered windows, darkened houses, and deserted streets. The pavements rang hollow to the impact of his boot-heels. Where the way lay open he went. But always he walked, walked incessantly, without pause, hurrying—nowhere.

There was a raw, biting chill in the air, and his hands, ungloved, as they swung at his sides, were blue with cold. But sweat in great beads stood out upon his forehead. At times his lips moved and he spoke aloud. It was a hoarse sound.

"Or him!" he said. "Or him!"

On! Always on! There was no rest. It was ceaseless. The gray came into the East.

And then at last the figure halted.

There was a large window with wire grating, and a light burned within. In the window was a plate mirror, and a time-piece. It was a jeweler's window.

The man looked at the time-piece. It was five o'clock. He looked at the mirror. It reflected the face of a young man grown old. The eyes burned deep in their sockets; the lines were hard, without softness; the skin was tightly drawn across the cheek bones, and was colorless. And he stared at the face, stared for a time without recognition. And then as he smiled and the face in the mirror smiled with him in a distorted movement of the lips, he swept his hand across his eyes.

"John Bruce," he said.

It seemed to arouse him from some mental absorption in which his physical entity had been lost. It was five o'clock, and he was John Bruce. At eleven o'clock—or was it twelve?—last night he had left Hawkins standing by the door of the traveling pawn-shop, and since then—

He stared around him. He was somewhere downtown. He did not know where. He began to walk in an uptown direction.

Something had been born in those hours. Something cataclysmic. What was it?

"Or him!" The words came again—aloud—without apparent volition.

What did that mean? It had something to do with Hawkins; with what Hawkins had said, standing there by the traveling pawn-shop. What was it Hawkins had said? Yes; he remembered: "I'd rather see her dead."

"Or him!"

With cold judicial precision now the hours unrolled themselves before him.

"Or him!"

He was going to kill Crang.

The hours of mental strife, of torment through which he had just passed, were as the memory of some rack upon which his soul had been put to torture. They came back vividly now, those hours—every minute of them a living eternity. His soul had shrunk back aghast at first, and called it murder; but it was not murder, or, if it was, it was imperative. It was the life of a foul viper—or Claire's. It was the life of an unclean thing that mocked and desecrated all decency, that flung its sordid challenge at every law, both human and divine—or the life of a pure, clean soul made the plaything of this beast, and dragged into a mire of unutterable abomination to suffocate and strangle in its noxious surroundings and die.

And that soul was in jeopardy because at this moment he, John Bruce, had the power of movement in his limbs, the sense of sight, the ability to stretch out his hand and feel it touch that lamp-post there, and, if he would, to speak aloud and designate that object for what it was—a lamp-post. She had bought him these things with her life. Should she die—and he live?

And he remembered back through those hours since midnight, when his soul had still faltered before the taking of human life, how it had sought some other way, some alternative, *any* alternative. A jail sentence for Crang. There was enough, more than enough now with the evidence of Crang's double life, to convict the man for the robbery of that safe. But Claire had answered that in the long ago: "I will marry him when he comes out." Or, then, to get Crang away again like this afternoon—no, *yesterday* afternoon. It was *this* morning, in a few hours, that they were to be married. There was no time left in which to attempt anything like that; but, even if there were, he knew now, that it but postponed the day of reckoning. Claire would wait. Crang would come back.

He was going to kill Crang.

If he didn't, Crang would kill him. He knew that, too. But his decision was not actuated, or even swayed, by any consideration of self-preservation. He had no thought of his future or his safety. That was already settled. With his decision was irrevocably coupled the forfeiting of his own life. Not his own life! It belonged to Claire. Claire had bought it. He was only giving it back that the abysmal price she had agreed to pay should not be extorted from her. Once he had accomplished his purpose, he would give himself up to the police.

He was going to kill Crang.

That was what had been born out of the travail of those hours of the night. But there were other things to do first. He walked briskly now. The decision in itself no longer occupied his thoughts. The decision was absolute; it was final. It was those "other things" that he must consider now. There was Larmon. He could not tell Larmon what he, John Bruce, was going to do, but he must warn Larmon to be on his guard against any past or present connection with John Bruce coming to light. Fortunately Larmon had come to New York and registered as Peters. He must make Larmon understand that Larmon and John Bruce had never met, even if he could not give Larmon any specific reason or explanation. Larmon would probably refuse at first, and attribute it as an attempt to break, for some ulterior reason, the bond they had signed together that night on the beach at Apia.

John Bruce smiled gravely. The bond would be broken in any case. Faustus was at the end of the play. A few months in prison, the electric chair—how apt had been his whistling of that aria *in his youth!*

Youth! Yes, he was old now; he had been young that night on the beach at Apia.

He took off his hat and let the sharp air sweep his head. He was not thinking clearly. All this did not express what he meant. There was Larmon's safety. He must take care of that; see to it, first of all, that Larmon could not be implicated, held by law as an accomplice through foreknowledge of what was to happen; then, almost of as great importance for Larmon's sake and future, the intimacy between them, their business relations of the past, must never be subjected to the probe of the trial that was to come.

John Bruce nodded his head sharply. Yes, that was better! But there was still something else—that bond. He knew to-night, even if prison walls and a death penalty were not about to nullify that bond far more

effectively than either he or Larmon ever could, that the one thing he wanted now, while yet he was a free agent, while yet it was not arbitrarily his choice, was to cancel that agreement which was so typical of what his life up to the present time had always stood for; and in its cancellation, for what little time was left, to have it typify, instead, a finer manhood. The future, premonitive, grim in its promise, seemed to hold up before him as in a mirror where no lines were softened, where only the blunt, brutal truth was reflected, the waste and worthlessness of the past. He had no wish to evade it, or temporize with it, or seek to palliate it. He knew only a vain and bitter regret; knew only the desire now at the end, in so far as he could, to face death a changed man.

He walked on and on. He was getting into the uptown section now. How many miles he must have covered since he had left Hawkins, and since the door of the one-time pawn-shop had closed on that little bare-headed figure with the loose cloak clutched about her throat—the last sight he had had of Claire! How many miles? He did not know. It must have been many, very many. But he felt no weariness. It was strange! It was as though his vitality and energy flowed into him from some wholly extraneous source; and as though physically he were non-existent.

He wondered what Larmon would say. Larmon alone had the right to cancel the bond. That was the way it had been written. Would Larmon refuse? He hoped not, because he wanted to part with Larmon as a friend. He hoped not, though in the final analysis, in a practical way, Larmon's refusal must be so futile a thing. Would Larmon laugh at him, and, not knowing, call him a fool? He shook his head. He did not know. At least Larmon would not be surprised. The conversation of last evening—

John Bruce looked up. He was at the entrance to the Bayne-Miloy Hotel. He entered, nodded mechanically to the night clerk, stepped into the elevator, and went up to his room. There was his revolver to be got. Afterward he would go down to Larmon's room. Somehow, even in the face of that other thing which he was to do, this interview which was to come with Larmon obsessed him. It seemed to signify some vital line of demarcation between the old life and the new.

The new! He smiled grimly, without mirth, as, entering his room, he switched on the light, stepped quickly to his desk, pulled open a drawer, and took out his revolver. The new! There would be very little of the new! He laughed now in a low, raucous way, as he slipped the weapon into his pocket. The new! A few weeks, a few months of a prison cell, and then— His laugh died away, and a half startled, half perplexed look settled on his face. For the first time he noticed that a letter, most obviously placed to attract his attention, lay on the center of the desk pad. Strange, he had not seen it instantly!

He stared at it now. It was a plain envelope, unstamped, and addressed to him. The writing was familiar too! Larmon's! He picked it up, opened it—and from the folds of the letter, as he drew it from the envelope, four torn pieces of paper fluttered to the desk. And for a long time, in a dazed way, he gazed at them. The letter dropped from his hand. Then mechanically he pieced the four scraps together. It was one of the leaves torn from Larmon's notebook that night in Apia—and here was the heavy scrawl where he, John Bruce, had signed with the quill toothpick. It was Larmon's copy of the bond.

And again for a long time he stared at it, then he picked up the letter again. He read it slowly, for somehow his brain seemed only able to absorb the words in a stunned way. Then he read it again:

Dear Bruce:—11 P. M.

Something has come into your life that was not there on a night you will remember in the Southern Seas, and I know of no other way to repay you for what you did for me to-day than to hand you this. I knew from what you said to-night, or, rather perhaps, from what you did not say, that this was in your heart. And if I were young again, and the love of a good woman had come to me, I too should try—and fail, I fear, where you will succeed—to play a man's part in life.

And so I bid you good-by, for when you read this I shall be on my way back West. What I lose another will gain. Amongst even my friends are men of honorable callings and wide interests who need a John Bruce. You will hear from one of them. Godspeed to you, for you are too good and clean a man to end your days as I shall end mine—a gambler.

Yours,

Gilbert Larmon.

The love of a good woman—and young again! John Bruce's face was white. A thousand conflicting emotions seemed to surge upon him. There was something fine and big in what Larmon had done, like the Larmon whose real self he had come to glimpse for the first time last night; and something that was almost ghastly in the unconscious irony that lay behind it all. And for a little while he stood there motionless, holding the letter in his hand; then with a quick, abrupt return to action, he began to tear the letter into little shreds, and from his pocket he took his own copy of the bond and tore that up, and the four pieces of Larmon's copy he tore into still smaller fragments, and gathering all these up in his hands, he walked to the window and let them flutter out into the night.

The way was clear. There was nothing to connect Gilbert Larmon with the man who to-morrow—no, *to-day*—would be in the hands of the police charged with murder. Nothing to bring to light Larmon's private affairs, for nothing bearing Larmon's signature had ever been kept; it was always destroyed. Larmon was safe—for, at least, they could never make John Bruce *talk*.

There was a strange relief upon him, a strange uplift; not only for Larmon's sake, but for his own. The link that had bound him to the past was gone, broken, dissolved. He stood free—for the little time that was left; he stood free—to make a fresh start in the narrow confines of a prison cell. He smiled grimly. There was no irony here where it seemed all of irony. It meant everything—all. It was the only atonement he could make.

He switched off the light, left his room, and went down to the desk. Here he consulted the directory. He requested the clerk to procure a taxi for him.

It was five minutes after six by the clock over the desk.

He entered the taxi and gave the chauffeur the address. He was unconscious of emotion now. He knew only a cold, fixed, merciless purpose.



He was going to kill Crang.

The taxi stopped in front of a frame house that bore a dirty brass name-plate. He dismissed the taxi, and mounted the steps. His right hand was in the pocket of his coat. He rang the bell, and obtaining no response, rang again—and after that insistently.

The door was finally opened by an old woman, evidently aroused from bed, for she clutched tightly at a dressing gown that was flung around her shoulders.

"I want to see Doctor Crang," said John Bruce.

She shook her head.

"The doctor isn't in," she answered.

"I will wait for him," said John Bruce.

Again she shook her head.

"I don't know when he will be back. He hasn't been here since yesterday morning."

"I will wait for him," said John Bruce monotonously.

"But——"

John Bruce brushed his way past her into the hall.

"I will wait for him," he repeated.

A door was open off the hallway. John Bruce looked in. It was obviously Crang's office. He went in and sat down by the window.

The woman stood for a long time in the doorway watching him. Finally she went away.

John Bruce's mind was coldly logical. Crang was not aware that his escape was known to any one except Claire, and he had been cunning enough to keep under cover. That was why he had not been home. But he would be home before he went out to be married. Even a man like Crang would have a few preparations to make.

John Bruce sat by the window. Occasionally the old woman came and stood in the doorway—and went away again.

There was no sign of Crang.

At fifteen minutes of eight John Bruce rose from his chair and left the house.

"He was to be at Paul Veniza's at eight," said John Bruce to himself with cool precision.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE—THE BEST MAN

**H**AWKINS sat at the table in his room, and twined and twined one old storm-beaten hand over the other. For hours he had sat like that. It was light in the room now, for it was long after seven o'clock. His bed had not been slept in. He was dressed in his shiny best suit; he wore his frayed black cravat. He had been dressed like that since midnight; since he had returned home after Claire had fled into her house, and John Bruce had strode by him on the sidewalk with set, stony face and unseeing eyes; since, on reaching his room here, he had found a note whose signature was false because it read "Paul Veniza," when he knew that it came from Crang. Crang was taking precautions that his return should not leak out! The note only corroborated what he had heard through the door. He was to be at Paul Veniza's at eight o'clock with the traveling pawn-shop.

The note had said nothing about any marriage; but, then, he knew! He was to be the best man. And so he had dressed himself. After that he had waited. He was waiting now.

"The first," said Hawkins, with grave confidence to the cracked mirror. "Yes, that's it—the first in line, because I *am* her old father, and there ain't nothing can change that."

His own voice seemed to arouse him. He stared around the shabby room that was his home, his eyes lingering with strange wistfulness on each old battered, and long familiar object—and then suddenly, with a choking cry, his head went down, buried in his arms outflung across the table.

"Pawned!" the old man cried brokenly. "It's twenty years ago, I pawned her—twenty years ago. And it's come to this because—because I ain't never redeemed her—but, oh God, I love her—I love my little girl—and—and she ain't never going to know how much."

His voice died away. In its place the asthmatic gas-jet spat venomous defiance at the daylight that was so contumaciously deriding its puny flame.

And after a little while, Hawkins raised his head. He looked at his watch.

"It's time to go," said Hawkins—and cleared his throat.

Hawkins picked up his hat and brushed it carefully with his coat sleeve; his shoulders, and such of his attire as he could reach, he brushed with his hands; he readjusted his frayed black cravat before the cracked mirror.

"I'm the best man," said Hawkins.

Oblivious to the chattering gas-jet, he descended the stairs, and went out to the shed in the rear that housed the traveling pawn-shop.

"The first in line," said the old cab driver, as he climbed into the seat.

Five minutes later, he drew up in front of the onetime pawn-shop. He consulted his watch as he got down from his seat and entered the house. It was twenty-five minutes of eight.

He twisted his hat awkwardly in his hands, as he entered the rear room. He felt a sudden, wild rush of hope spring up within him because there was no sign of Crang. And then the hope died. He was early; and, besides, Claire had her hat on and was dressed to go out. Paul Veniza, also dressed, lay on the cot.

No one spoke.

Then Paul Veniza's frame was racked with a fit of coughing, and out of a face ashen in pallor his eyes met Hawkins' in silent agony—and then he turned his head away.

Hawkins twisted at his hat.

"I came a little early;" he said wistfully, "because I thought mabbe you might—that mabbe there might be some change—that mabbe you might not——"

He stopped. He was looking at Claire. Her face was very white too. Her smile seemed to cut at his heart like a knife.

"No, Hawkins," she said in a low voice; "there is no change. We are going to Staten Island. You will drive Doctor Crang. There is a limousine coming for father and me, that will be more comfortable for father."

Hawkins' eyes went to the floor.

"I—I didn't mean that kind of a change," he said.

"I know you didn't, Hawkins. But—but I am trying to be practical." Her voice broke a little in spite of herself. "Doctor Crang doesn't know that you overheard anything last night, or that you know anything about the arrangements, so—so I am explaining them to you now."

Hawkins' eyes were still on the floor.

"Ain't there nothing"—his voice was thick and husky—"ain't there nothing in all the world that any of us can do to make you change your mind? Claire, ain't there nothing, nothing at all? John Bruce said there wasn't, and you love John Bruce, but——"

"Don't, Hawkins!" she cried out pitifully.

The old shoulders came slowly up, and the old head; and the old blue eyes were of a sudden strangely flints like.

"I've got to know," said Hawkins, in a dead, stubborn way.

"There is nothing," she answered.

Hawkins' eyes reverted to the floor. He spoke now without lifting them.

"Then—then it's—it's like saying good-by," he said, and the broken note was back again in his voice. "It's—it's so many years that mabbe you've forgotten, but when you were a little girl, and before you grew up, and—and were too big for that, I—I used to hold you in my arms, and you used to put your little arms around my neck, and kiss me, and—and you used to say that—Hawkins would never let the bugaboos get you, and—and I wonder if—if——"

"Oh, Hawkins!" Claire's eyes were full of tears. "I remember. Dear, dear Hawkins! And I used to call you Daddy Hawkins. Do *you* remember?"

A tear found a furrow and trickled down the old weather-beaten face unchecked, as Hawkins raised his head.

"Claire! Claire!" His voice trembled in its yearning. "Will—will you say that again, Claire?"

"Dear Daddy Hawkins," she whispered.

His arms stretched out to her, and she came to them smiling through her tears.

"You've been so good to me," she whispered again. "You *are* so good to me—dear, dear Daddy Hawkins."

A wondrous light was in the old cabman's face. He held the slight form to him, trying to be so tenderly careful that he should not hurt her in his strength. He kissed her, and patted her head, and his fingers lingered as they smoothed the hair back from where it made a tiny curl about her ear.

And then he felt her drawing him toward the couch—and he became conscious that Paul Veniza was holding out his hands to them both.

And Claire knelt at the side of the couch and took one of Paul Veniza's hands, and Hawkins took the other. And no one of them looked into the other's face.

The outer door opened, and Doctor Crang came in. He stood for an instant surveying the scene, a half angry, half sarcastic smile spreading over his sallow face, and then he shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah, you're here, like me, ahead of time, Hawkins, I see!" he said shortly. "You're going to drive me to Staten Island where——"

Claire rose to her feet.

"I have told Hawkins," she said quietly.

Hawkins' hand tightened over Paul Veniza's for a moment, and then he turned away.

"I—I'll wait outside," said Hawkins—and brushed his hand across his eyes as he went through the doorway.

Paul Veniza was racked with a sudden fit of coughing again. Doctor Crang walked quickly to the couch and looked at the other sharply. After a moment he turned to Claire.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked crisply.

"Yes; I am ready," she answered steadily.

"Very well, then," said Crang, "you had better go out and get into the old bus. You can go with Hawkins and me."

"But"—Claire looked in a bewildered way at Paul Veniza—"but you said——"

"I know I did," Crang interrupted brusquely, "but we're all here a little early and there's lots of time to

countermand the other car." He indicated Paul Veniza with a jerk of his head. "He's far from as well as he was last night. At least you'll admit that I'm a *good* doctor, and when I tell you he is not fit to go this morning that ought to be enough for both of you. I'll phone and tell them not to send the limousine."

Still Claire hesitated. Paul Veniza had closed his eyes.

Crang shrugged his shoulders.

"You can do as you like, but I don't imagine"—a snarl crept into his voice—"that it will give him any joy to witness the ceremony, or you to have him. Suit yourselves; but I won't answer for the consequences."

"I'll go," said Claire simply—and as Paul Veniza lifted himself up suddenly in protest, she forced him gently back upon the couch again. "It's better that way," she said, and for a moment talked to him in low, earnest tones, then kissed him, and rose, and walked out from the room.

Crang, with a grunt of approval, started toward the telephone.

"Wait!" Paul Veniza had raised himself on his elbow.

Crang turned and faced the other with darkened face.

"It is not too late even now at the last moment!" Paul Veniza's face was drawn with agony. "I know you for what you are, and in the name of God I charge you not to do this thing. It is foul and loathsome, the basest passion—and whatever crimes lay at your door, even if murder be among them, no one of them is comparable with this, for you do more than take a human life, you desecrate a soul pure as the day God gave it life, and —"

The red surged into Crang's face, and changed to mottled purple.

"Damn you!" he flung out hoarsely. "Hold your cackling tongue! This is my wedding morning—understand?" He laughed out raucously. "My wedding morning—and I'm in a hurry!"

Paul Veniza raised himself a little higher. White his face was—white as death.

"Then God have mercy on your soul!" he cried.

And Crang stared for a moment, then turned on his heel—and laughed.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR—THE RIDE

JOHN BRUCE turned the corner, and, on the opposite side of the street, drew back under the shelter of a door porch where he could command a view of the entrance to Paul Veniza's house. And now he stood motionless, waiting with cold patience, his eyes fixed on the doorway across the street. He was there because Crang was either at the present moment within the house, or presently would come to the house. It was nearly eight o'clock. The old traveling pawn-shop was drawn up before the door.

He had no definite plan now. No plan was needed. He was simply waiting for Crang.

His eyes had not left the doorway. Suddenly, tense, he leaned a little forward. The door opened. No; it was only Hawkins! He relaxed again.

Only Hawkins! John Bruce's face grew a little sterner, his lips a little more tightly compressed. Only Hawkins—only an old man who swayed there outside the door, and whose face was covered with his hands.

He watched Hawkins. The old cabman moved blindly along the sidewalk for the few steps that took him to the corner, and turning the corner, out of sight of the house, sat down on the edge of the curb, and with his shoulders sunk forward, buried his face in his hands again.

And John Bruce understood; and his fingers, in his pocket, snuggled curiously around the revolver that was hidden there. He wanted to go to that old bent figure there in its misery and despair, who was fighting now so obviously to get a grip upon himself. But he did not move. He could not tell Hawkins what he meant to do.

Were they minutes or were they hours that passed? Again the front door of Paul Veniza's house opened, and again John Bruce leaned tensely forward. But this time he did not relax. Claire! His eyes drank in the slim, little, dark-garbed figure, greedy that no smallest gesture, no movement, no single line of face or form should escape him. It was perhaps the last time that he would see her. He would not see her in his prison cell—he would not let her go there.

A queer sound issued from his throat, a strange and broken little cry. She was gone now. She had crossed the sidewalk and entered the traveling pawn-shop. The curtains were down, and she was hidden from sight. And for a moment there seemed a blur and mist before John Bruce's eyes—then Hawkins, still around the corner, still with crouched shoulders, still with his face hidden in his hands, took form and grew distinct again. And then after a little while, Hawkins rose slowly, and came back along the street, and climbed into the driver's seat of the traveling pawnshop, and sat fumbling at the wheel with his hands.

The door of Paul Veniza's house opened for the third time—and now John Bruce laughed in a low, grim way, and his hand, hugging the revolver in his pocket, tightened and grew vise-like in its grip upon the weapon. It was Crang at last!

And then John Bruce's hand came out from his pocket—empty.

*Not in front of Claire!*

He swept his hand across his forehead. It was as though a sudden shock had aroused him to some stark reality to which he had been strangely oblivious. Not in front of Claire! Claire was in the car there. He felt himself bewildered for a moment. Hawkins had said nothing about driving Claire too.

Crang's voice reached him from across the street:

"All right, Hawkins! Go ahead!"

Where was Paul Veniza? Crang had got into the car, and the car was moving forward. Wasn't Paul Veniza going too?

Well, it did not matter, did it? Crang was there. And it was a long way to Staten Island, and before then a chance would come, *must* come; he would make one somehow, and——

John Bruce ran swiftly out into the street, and, as the car turned the corner, swung himself lightly and silently in beside Hawkins. Crang would not know. The curtained panel at the back of the driver's seat hid the interior of the car from view.

Hawkins turned his head, stared into John Bruce's face for an instant, half in a startled, half in a curiously perplexed way, made as though to speak—and then, without a word, gave his attention to the wheel again.

The car rattled on down the block.

John Bruce, as silent as Hawkins, stared ahead. On the ferry! Yes, that was it! It was a long way to Staten Island. Claire would not stay cooped up in a closed car below; she would go up on deck to get the air. And even if Crang accompanied her, it would not prove very difficult to separate them.

He looked around suddenly and intercepted a furtive, puzzled glance cast at him by Hawkins.

And then Hawkins spoke for the first time.

"You'd better get off, John Bruce," he said in a choked voice. "You've done all you could, and God bless you over and over again for it, but you can't do anything more now, and it won't do you any good to come any further."

"No," said John Bruce, "I'm going all the way, Hawkins."

Hawkins relapsed into silence. They were near the Battery when he spoke again.

"All the way," Hawkins repeated then, as though it were but a moment gone since John Bruce had spoken. "All the way. Yes, that's it—after twenty years. That's when I pawned her—twenty years ago. And I couldn't never redeem her the way Paul Veniza said. And she ain't never known, and thank God she ain't never going to know, that I—that I——" A tear trickled down the old face, and splashed upon the wrinkled skin of the hand upon the wheel. And then old Hawkins smiled suddenly, and nodded toward the clock on the cowl-board—and the speed of the car increased. "I looked up the ferry time," said Hawkins.

They swung out in front of the ferry house, and the car stopped. A ferry, just berthing, was beginning to disgorge its stream of motors and pedestrians.

"We're first in line," said Hawkins, nodding his head. "We'll have to wait a minute or two."

John Bruce nodded back indifferently. His eyes were fixed on the ferry that he could just see through the ferry house. Certainly, Claire would not stay down in the confined space of the ferry's run-way all the trip; or if she did, Crang wouldn't. His face set. Quite unconsciously his hand had gone to his pocket, and he found his fingers now snuggling again around the weapon that lay there.

And then he looked at Hawkins—and stared again at the other, startled. Strange, he had not noticed it before! The smile on Hawkins' face did not hide it. The man seemed to have aged a thousand years; the old face was pinched and worn, and deep in the faded, watery blue eyes were hurt and agony. And a great sympathy for the man surged upon John Bruce. He could not tell Hawkins, but—— He reached out, and laid his hand on the other's arm.

"Don't take it too hard, Hawkins," he said gently. "I—perhaps—perhaps, well, there's always a last chance that something may happen."

"Me?" said Hawkins, and bent down over his gears as he got the signal to move forward. "Do I look like that? I—I thought it all out last night, and I don't feel that way. I'll tell you what I was thinking about. I was just thinking that I did something to-day when I left my room that I haven't done before—in twenty years. I've left the light burning."

John Bruce stared a little helplessly.

"Yes," said Hawkins. He smiled at John Bruce. "Don't you worry about me. Maybe you don't understand, but that's all I've been thinking about since we've been waiting here. I've left the light burning."

Sick at heart, John Bruce turned his head away. He made no response.

Hawkins paid the fare, ran the car through the ferry house, and aboard the ferry itself. He was fumbling with a catch of some kind behind his seat, as he proceeded slowly up the run-way.

"He'll want a little air in there," said Hawkins, "because it's close down here. It opens back, you know—the whole panel. I had it made that way when the car was turned into a traveling pawn-shop—didn't know what tough kind of a customer Paul might run into sometime, and I'd want to get in beside him quick to help, and I——" The old cabman straightened up.

The car was at the extreme forward end of the ferry—and suddenly it leaped forward. "Jump, John Bruce! Jump clear!" old Hawkins cried. "There's only two of us going all the way—and that's Crang and me! Claire and Paul 'll be along in another car—tell them it was an accident, and——"

John Bruce was on his feet—too late. There was a crash, and the collapsible steel gates went down before the plunging car, and the guard chain beyond was swept from its sockets. He reeled and lost his balance as something, a piece of wreckage from the gates or chain posts, struck him. He felt the hot blood spurt from shoulder and arm. And then, as the car shot out in mid-air, diving madly for the water below, and he was thrown from his feet, he found himself clinging to the footboard, fighting wildly to reach the door handle. Claire was in there! Claire was in there!

There was a terrific splash. A mighty rush of water closed over him. Horror, fear, madness possessed his soul. Claire was in there! Claire was in there—and somehow Hawkins had not known! Yes, he had the door handle now! He wrenched and tore at the door. The pressure of the water seemed to pit itself against his strength. He worked like a maniac. It opened. He had it now! It opened. He could scarcely see in the murky



water—only the indistinct outlines of two forms undulating grotesquely, the hands of one gripped around the throat of the other—only that, and floating within his reach a woman's dress. He snatched at the dress. His lungs were bursting. Claire! It was Claire! She was in his arms—then blackness—then sunlight again—and then, faintly, he heard a cheer.

He held her head above the water. She was motionless, inert.

“Claire! Claire!” he cried. Fear, cold, horrible, seized upon him. He swam in mad haste for the iron ladder rungs at the side of the slip.

Faces, a multitude of them, seemed to peer at him from above, from the brink of this abyss in which he was struggling. He heard a cheer again. Why were they cheering? Were they cheering because two men were locked in a death grip deep down there in the water below?

“Claire!” he cried out again.

And then, as his hand grasped the lower rung, she opened her eyes slowly, and a tremor ran through her frame.

She lived! Was he weak with the sudden revulsion that swept upon him now? Was that it? He tried to carry her up—and found that it was beyond his strength. And he could only cling there and wait for assistance from above, thankful even for the support the water gave his weight. It was strange! What were those red stains that spread out and tinged the water around him? His arm! Yes, he remembered now! His shoulder and arm! It was the loss of blood that must have sapped his strength, that must be sapping it now so that—

“John!” Claire whispered. “You—John!”

He buried his face in the great wet masses of hair that fell around her. Weak? No, he was not weak! He could hold her here always—always.

He felt her clutch spasmodically at his arm.

“And—and Hawkins, John?” she faltered.

He lifted his head and stared at the water. Little waves rippled across its surface, gamboling inconsequentially—at play. There wasn't anything else there. There never would be. He made no answer.

A sob shook her shoulders.

“How—how did it happen?” she whispered again.

“I think a—a gear jammed, or something,” he said huskily.

He heard her speak again, but her voice was very low. He bent his head until it rested upon hers to catch the words.

She was crying softly.

“Dear, dear Hawkins—dear Daddy Hawkins,” she said.

A great mist seemed to gather before John Bruce's eyes. A voice seemed to come again, Hawkins' voice; and words that he understood now, Hawkins' words:

“I've left the light burning.”

## THE END.

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