



TEN GLASS EYES

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CHAPTER I

IT began, if these things ever have a beginning, when a man darted across a street in broad daylight.

Dashing through the traffic like a mad moth bent on immolating itself in a flame, he made his way through the tangle of juggernauts. Broken field running, he was thinking, was never like this.

Is there any stop, he wondered, once you begin to run? Is there any escape? But there was no time for thought. Behind him, tenacious as death, came that tall, thin man whose face kept popping up so often that it had become a day nightmare.

The man who was running chanced a glance behind him. Had the traffic lost the... no, there was that aquiline face. Persistent as death.

Into a department store. The man knew he should not run, but it was hard to slow down to a walk with that menacing presence so close. Through shoppers, mostly female, past counters that offered the treasures of Araby at ten percent off, he made his way.

That elevator there... could he duck in just as the doors came to a close? He wandered around as though there was not a thought in his head. Then, just as the doors started to close, he darted within the cubicle.

He sighed. He was alone. Alone but for the twenty or thirty people in the car. The elevator operator intoned in a voice laden with the weariness of all time, "Second floor, gents furnishings, ties, shirts, suits, outdoor furniture, anyone out?"

There was no answer. The man who was running from his fate edged his way back as far as he could when the car door opened at the third floor. A bevy of women left the car. Ahead through the open door he could see girdles, slippers, and various other completely female appurtenances.

He scrunched back into the now slightly more empty car. He had no plans now. Where were those careful plans he had made? He smiled a sour grin. Where are the snows of yesteryear? The careful plans had vanished as if they had never been, when that other man had appeared in the background. What use was a new identity, a mustache, colored glasses, a stooped walk, the new name, when all the time that harsh face was somewhere in the environs?

It had all seemed so simple at first. Maybe it always looked simple. Perhaps the Greeks were right, perhaps you did carry your fate inside you.

The door opened on the fifth floor. The car was now almost empty. He walked out of it just as if he were a carefree shopper. Ahead lay what? Materially there was a floor full of phonographs and radios. Two record players were going full blast as though in competition. One was playing Beethoven's Ninth... and the other? The young man scowled as he tried to get the beat of it.

What was it? "Get out of Town"... That was too apt. It was like a corny clue in a bad play.

If only he could get out of town. If he could vanish off the face of the earth for a while it would help. If he could... his brain stopped working. Coming up the escalator, face set, eyes incurious, was the face of his fate.

The man had been trailing him for... it seemed like forever. Really it was only two days. Forty-eight hours. Two days in which he had neither slept, nor barely eaten.

The harsh-faced man seemed not even to notice his quarry. He looked around. He made a small grimace at the warring sounds that came from the rival phonographs. To the naked eye he could have been a shopper.

The young man, looking around desperately for some kind of exit, caught a distorted reflection of his own face in a highly polished piano top. Could that be his face? That gaunt, lined thing?

He was young, barely twenty-eight, but the face that leered at him looked like a middle-aged, haggard man with the worries of the world on his shoulders.

It was time for a showdown. The whole thing would not be half as nerve-wracking if he could be sure that his trailer was a detective. But would a detective have given him so much leeway? Why had he not been arrested two days back? Why was the man just following him?

His face lightened. He looked younger. He'd call the bluff of the other man! He darted forward right past the tall thin man. He jumped on to the handrail of the escalator.

All his life he had wanted to slide down a long banister. Here was his opportunity. He smiled a gay, devil-may-care grin and slid out of view of his nemesis.

It caused quite a sensation. He came rocketing down the banister from the radio phonograph floor down to the floor which was devoted to baby things. Young mothers and old looked up as the kiting figure came crashing into view. He landed on his feet and darted for a closing elevator door.

Ah, he thought, this was the way to do it. He was having some fun for his money. He ran into the elevator and smiled as the doors came together. Let his trailer top that!

But a sudden thought wiped the smile off his face. He had gambled with the fates. Gambled to see if the man would call for help, blow a police whistle, show in one way or another whether or not he was a detective.

The slide for life had not brought a whistle or a command to stop. The man was not a detective, then! That made it worse! When the elevator stopped at the ground floor, a badly frightened young man, all gaiety gone, eeled his way through the maddening crush of shoppers.

He wanted to get out into the air, out where there was some elbow room. As he walked as fast as he could without looking as if he were running, he kept looking behind him. His head turned for a glance backward so often that it looked as if he had a nervous tic.

Here on the street, the sunlight bathing everything with a hard brassy glare, he felt a bit better. After all, he thought, with all this melodrama it should either be a dark black night, or there should be a bitter storm brewing.

The sunlight washed away some of the fear. He couldn't be too frightened with all these people around. Why, not fifteen feet away a big burly traffic cop was busily unsnarling a traffic jam.

His mercurial mood shifted again when one of his backward glances showed standing out from the crowd of anonymous faces the gaunt harsh face of... This was too much. How had the other man followed him? It was uncanny. Go into no matter what crowd he would, let him dash into a swirling pool of mankind, still that face arose to haunt him.

Forty-eight hours. He shook his head. Maybe he was getting a bit punchy. Maybe some sleep would make a bit of difference. If he could sleep... he yawned. Just a nap would help. This way it seemed like black magic. Perhaps if he were rested, things would look differently.

But where could he go? Where to escape, if only for an hour? He walked on through the streets of the strange city. He'd never been here before. All his life had been spent on different levels. He was accustomed to being taken care of. Ordinarily, one of the servants bought his train tickets, the chauffeur drove him to the station, guided him to the proper track, and practically put him on the train.

Going it blind this way, he could see how much his father's money had coddled him. Maybe if his heart hadn't had that murmur, if he'd been in the army, he might have become more self-reliant. But if he'd been in the army, he probably wouldn't have been in this scrape.

He shrugged. He had come to a part of the city where wealth and poverty were sisters in arms. Most big cities have these strange areas where the poor are being usurped by the rich, where the process has not come to an end.

In New York, he thought, there was Sutton Place, where a distance of twenty feet could take you from an elevator apartment to a tenement, and the rent for the apartment for a month could pay the tenement rent for more than a year.

This was such an area. He could not go toward the expensive looking section. There was no surcease for him there. Perhaps... he turned to the left. If he had gone to the right? That would have been another story. Looking back on it, an hour later, he could not help but wonder what his fate would have held for him had he gone to the right.

TO the left, past garages, past tumble-down wooden fronted houses, past garbage cans whose covers lay to one side, pushed there by gaunt alley cats, allowing the contents of the cans to fester in the hot sun.

He walked slowly now. He had lost his second wind, or whatever it was that had sustained him this long. Ahead was a group of men. Ordinarily, in that other life he had left behind, he would have avoided such a group. You can see them anywhere. Their social club is the street corner, their reason to be questionable,

their means of livelihood invisible. They were, in short, street hoodlums.

There were four of them. Here was another chance for the fates. If he had crossed the street and avoided them, then Charley Bates would not have been arrested, and...

But he did not cross the street.

As he walked up to them, one of them who wore glasses said, "Pipe the suit. Costs big bucks. Take him, Charley."

Charley said, "Well, I got this here date with Mingus, but..."

As the pursued man came abreast of them, the one with the glasses said, "Now."

The one with glasses stepped out and bumped into the man. Charley stepped forward and said out of the corner of his mouth, "Whyncha watch where ya goin'?"

That was all.

All, except that across the street, a cruising dolly car saw what had happened. A cop in the dolly car said, "Charley just dipped that character."

The other cop said, "You'd think these crumbs'd learn they can't work in daylight, wouldn't ya?" He sighed. They got out of the car. The four street loungers saw the cops too late. They started to split. But one of the cops grabbed Bates.

He grabbed him before he could ditch the leather. This is a fatal mistake for a pickpocket. The cop shook him the way you would a bad puppy. He ran his hands down Bates body. He found the stolen wallet.

Holding on to Bates with one hand, he flipped the wallet open. Only then, when he saw the name that was under the celluloid of the identification card, did he look up and see that the man whose wallet had been stolen had disappeared.

The cop said, "What a break! There's a three state alarm out for that lad!"

Bates said, "Of all the lousy breaks... I have to lift into a deal like that!"

Through a dirty window two flights up, the man whose wallet had been stolen looked down at the tableau on the street. He saw the cop look up from his wallet. He saw Bates point at the house into which he had run.

This really tied it. Now he was lost. His money gone, hidden in a house which he had never seen before, in a city in which he had never been, with the cops outside, and his trailer... he looked further out the window. There, perhaps a hundred feet away, was his implacable trailer.

All around him myriad cooking smells smashed in. Garlic and the ghost of eaten garlic was like a live thing. The peeling plaster on the walls looked like something you would see upon turning up a stone.

The stairs were rickety, and noisy as the smells that pushed at him. He took another look out the window. His trailer was easing around the little huddle where one policeman talked to Bates and the other was holding on to another of the four who had been leaning against the lamp post when he walked up.

Two of them had run away. They had made a getaway. Why couldn't he? But then they didn't have the

tall, lean man after them. There, he was coming up the stoop of the house.

The man in the hallway looked around. This was the dead end, unless... he looked up the narrow stair well. Some of those old houses, he had read somewhere, had stairs leading up to the roof. If he could get to the roof, run across a couple of buildings and come down into a completely different house, perhaps he could still...

But as he started up the stairs, he could hear only a floor below him the steady determined footsteps which were getting to be the only reality in the all encompassing nightmare that tore at his sanity.

Only a floor separated hunted from hunter. There would not be time to make the roof. His frantic eyes lighted on a door near him. There was a sliver of light stabbing out into the darkness that hung in this hall even in the day time.

The door must be slightly ajar to allow all that light to escape. He reached for the door knob. If he could throw himself on the mercy of whoever occupied these rooms...

He slid the door open quietly. He stepped into the room. That was all. Time came to a halt. It was as though he had stepped from one universe into nothingness.

CHAPTER II

HE opened his eyes. Lines. Wavy lines that shimmered off into the distance. His eyes couldn't focus on whatever it was that he was staring at. He blinked them.

Nothing happened. The same brown dirty lines wavered off out of the range of his vision. He moved his head. Something was wrong with it. The lines wavered then came together. He thought suddenly, stupidly, parallel lines extended into infinity do not meet.

He pressed his hands down. They met resistance. He moved. His hands were pressed flat on the floor. The reason he had not been able to make out the lines was that his eyes were too close to the lines.

He was lying full length on the floor. The lines were the demarcations between splintered boards that made up the floor. He lifted his head which felt mushy. There was no pain, not yet, but it felt as though his brains had been cooked over a slow fire. He sat up.

He was in a tenement kitchen. That seemed a little bizarre, but then, so did everything else. There, not far away, was a stove. It was greasy and grimy. There was a pot of something on the front burner. He twitched his nostrils. Whatever was on the stove was burning.

He tilted forward as he got to his knees. Only then did he realize that he had something in his hand. He looked at it dully. It was a knife. A bread knife with a serrated edge that looked something like the Malay kriss his father had hanging on the wall in his study.

He dropped the knife. It made the only sound in the room but that of the spluttering pot on the stove. By some freak of chance it stuck point first in the wooden floor. It quivered. The quivering put into motion a red fluid. It seemed to be the wrong color for blood.

Blood? That set off an alarm bell in the confused brain that was the only sentient thing in the room. He thought. Blood? Somebody been carving a roast?

He staggered to the stove and turned the gas off. That made the room completely still. Now all he could hear was his own rasping breath.

His staggering, wobbling progression carried him to a doorway that separated the kitchen from another room. There was no door, he noted, with an unused section of his brain. Just a doorway where there must once have been a door.

Standing in the doorway, he took some deep gulps of breath. He was trying to get some sanity into his brain. He stood there and looked back at the room.

The stove, the bare floor, the dingy ceiling, the fly specked bulb that hung from a snake-like wire from the ceiling. The smells, claustrophobic lack of height to the room. The walls that seemed to press in like a torture device. He gasped again.

How could people live this way? Suddenly, and for the first time in his life, he could understand a bit, the mechanisms that drive poverty stricken people to crime.

He knuckled his eyes. He shook his head. Not even a door to separate the odorous kitchen from the next room. In the center of the tiny room, the knife sticking up at right angles from the floor, was a magnet that kept pulling his eyes back, no matter how he tried to avoid it.

What had happened since he opened the outside door expecting, hoping, praying, to find an exit? Violence, certainly. He turned away from the kitchen toward the other room. The answer seemed to be in there... the answer to be, too, that there was no exit.

He started toward the doorway without a door twice, before he finally managed to make his muscles answer the commands his brain sent to them.

He saw his fate when he got into the other room. On the only chair in the room sat a man. He was so dead that it seemed unlikely that he had ever been alive.

His clenched hands were pressed into his stomach. His fingers had not been enough to dam up that which welled between his fingers. The chair with its burden, an unmade bed with soiled bed clothes, a picture of September Morn that hung aslant on the wall, a jacket, worn and torn, hanging from a nail that had shattered the plaster around it, a worn and greasy looking felt hat... was there anything else?

A bag of tobacco and some crumpled pieces of cigarette paper lay on the floor in front of the chair. The living man went closer to the dead man. The dead man's hands suddenly dropped from his stomach. Something hard and round dropped from the red gloved hands.

The man who could still breathe stopped breathing as he bent over and looked closely at the thing that lay on the floor. It looked like a marble.

He looked from the marble up at the dead man's face and then wished that he hadn't. The man in life had worn a glass eye. Minus the eye, the gaping wound was obscene.

Not really knowing what he was doing, the live man picked up the glass eye and dropped it into his pocket. He whirled. There had been a sound behind him.

The sound was made by the door opening. Only then did the young man in any way come out of the fog that surrounded him. He felt his head. There was a small lump over his ear. He had been slugged... that was clear.

In the short time it took the door to open all the way, he saw that he was a goner. Here he was the only human in a room with a corpse. On the floor outside was the murder weapon with his fingerprints on it.

In the other room was that which would send him to his death. It was too much. He began to giggle.

The door was all the way open now. A tall man with a gaunt strong face came into the room. His profile was hatchet shaped. It was the man who had been trailing him, the giggling man saw.

His giggles got so loud now that they drowned all sounds out. He did not even hear what his trailer said. The hunter had caught the hunted.

The older man slapped the younger's face. The sound was like that of a seal applauding itself. Sharp and clear, it gradually drowned out the hysterical sound of laughter that was making the room hideous with sound.

"Did you do it," the older man repeated.

The younger man said, "No... I don't think so."

"You don't think so? Don't you know?"

"I don't know. I was trying to get away from you... I opened this door... and that's all I know. I came to with a knife in my hand and death in the other room." The younger man began to laugh again. "I ran from you to meet my fate. No matter how fast I ran, I couldn't get here any later or earlier. The fates must be screaming with laughter!"

"I'm afraid the fates have other things to do besides laughing at you. Shut up!" The man's face was as harsh as his voice. "Stop giggling or I'll leave you to your fate!"

"But you are my fate. If I hadn't been running from you, I could not have made it here! You drove me into this!"

"You drove yourself here! You forged the check, not me! You make your own fate!"

"How true. How prosaically, how horribly true. But I forged the check because my father doesn't approve of the way I live! Maybe it was my father who made my fate."

"We haven't time for idle chitchat." The tall, older man walked into the other room.

There was a banging at the door. A loud voice called, "Hey, Ally! I ain't gonna wait out here all day! Come on. Open up!"

The tall man came running out of the deathly still bedroom. "You," he said, "the closet. Quick!"

The young man quivered his nostrils as he forced his way into a filthy, smelly closet. The door closed on him. Through the thin wooden panel, he could hear the door open.

"Who the hell are you?" the strange voice asked in surly tones.

"Lamont Cranston," was the answer. "Who are you, as long as we are swapping identities?"

"Brett Dane." There was a silence. "Mean anything to you?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Here. Look at my rozzer." That meant nothing to the strained ears in the closet.

In the room with the bread-knife still stuck in the floor, with the single yellow twenty-five watt bulb trying to send some light through the fly specks that defaced it, the two men stood and took each other's measure.

Cranston was looking at the wallet that the man held out. It identified him as a private detective. Cranston looked from this to the man. He was about six feet tall, a broken nose instead of making him look tough, gave him rather agreeably pugnacious air. His broad, high cheek-boned face was impassive.

"What are you doing here?"

"Don't see that it's much of your business, but Ally sent me a frantic wire to come here."

"I see. Ally what?"

"Ally rat to his enemies, I suppose," the man said, with a crooked smile. "Albert Mingus is the name."

"Was the name," Cranston said. "He's in the other room."

"I figured that, with the knife staring me in the puss. Who carved him up?"

Cranston shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"Only about half the town would have liked to twist a knife into Ally. He was a shylock, you know. It doesn't make for popularity."

"I see. Why did he call on you?"

"Sheer modesty keeps me from giving you the proper answer." Dane grinned. "I'm the best private operator in town. I guess that's why."

Cranston said, "He's in the other room if you want to take a look. I want to look in the closet and see if there's any clue. There is nothing else of any help here."

For a long, long moment, Dane stood stock still. Cranston wondered if he could have any idea that hiding in the closet was Roger Stanton... But Dane finally said. "You look familiar. Do I know you from anywhere?"

"Not that I know of." Cranston smiled so it wouldn't sound vain, "You may have seen my picture in the papers some time or other."

"Could be," Dane said. He looked all around the kitchen. "No sign of anyone here."

"None at all," Cranston said.

Finally, still looking all around him, Dane walked toward the doorway that led into the room where Mingus sat, still in death.

Cranston stood with his back to the closet, making sure that Dane wasn't going to change his mind and turn around again. There, he was walking through the doorway.

Waiting till the private detective went into the other room, Cranston opened the closet door. His body shielded the inside of the room from any glance. He whispered, "Out the door. Hide out in the Alexis Hotel. Register under the name of John Barrel."

The man in the closet said. "Money."

Cranston gave him ten dollars. There was no sound from the other room. The open door of the closet cut off a view of the kitchen. Perhaps with some luck...

"Now..." Cranston said. "Beat it, Roger."

The younger man tiptoed out of the kitchen. It didn't seem possible that he could make it. Dane's voice roared out of the other room, "Hey, Cranston! Where's Ally's glass eye?"

Cranston walked into the bedroom as Roger Stanton left the kitchen. Cranston's body cut off any view that Dane might have had of Roger.

"Glass eye?" Cranston sounded surprised.

"Guess you wouldn't dig that. Say, why were the boys in blue huddled around this joint when I made my entrance?" Dane asked, coming back into the kitchen.

"Pickpocket caught. Wallet he stole was that belonging to a youngster named Roger Stanton."

"Stanton... where've I heard that name? Wanted poster, that's it. He's on the loose and wanted in New York, isn't he?"

"That's right. He forged a check."

Cranston and Dane looked at each other. Dane said, "Guess we better let the cops know about this."

Nodding, Cranston said, "I'm rather surprised they haven't been in to see us already. They were looking over all the houses in the neighborhood. Stanton ran into this house."

"Probably took it on the lam over the roof..." Dane's face scowled. "Unless..." He turned and looked back at the bedroom in which a money lender lay dead. "Say," he burst out, "you don't think Stanton ran in here do you?"

Cranston shrugged noncommittally.

"If he did, and Ally recognized him as somebody that the cops wanted, he woulda tried to hold him. That boy didn't love money any more than a cat loves catnip. Is there a reward out for Stanton?"

Cranston nodded. "A thousand dollars."

"That does it. Seven to five the kid bounced in here and was spotted by Ally who tried to put the arm on him." The private detective looked thoughtfully at the knife which was still stuck in the floor. He crouched down on his heels in a deep knee bend. "Hmmm... you see the prints on the handle here?"

"Uh huh," Cranston said.

"Lucky for the cops this is an open and shut case. There's a bill up before the state legislature about a rise in pay for the Gestapo. Anything that smears up the works is not going to go good with the politicians. The cops will want to clear this up but fast."

"I see," Cranston said.

Dane looked out a dirty window. He saw some policemen on the street. He raised the creaking window. "Hey, Butler! Up here! It's me, Dane. I got a kill for you!"

The policeman looked up at Dane and said, "When don't you have a kill? You ought to travel around with a meat wagon!"

"Cut the comedy," Dane said, "and come on up. This is bad!"

"They're always bad," the cop said, off-handedly.

"Not like this! Ally Mingus got his!"

"They ought to make it a holiday," the cop said. "If anyone ever asked to get boffed, that character did!"

"Well, come on up and feast your eyes on the cadaver, then!" Dane said.

"Yeah, just a minute." The policeman turned to two quiet men in plain clothes. He spoke to them. The two men looked up at Dane's head which stuck out the window like a Punch and Judy show.

One of the plainly dressed men waved at Dane. "Be right up."

The men on the street talked together for a moment. Dane said to Cranston, "If they ever finish with their knitting, they'll be up. We're in luck. Some homicide men are down there talking to the boys."

"Good," Cranston said.

"I been giving myself a good case of ear strain, but I can't make out what the boys in blue are brooding about down there," Dane said.

"Probably talking about the weather," Cranston said.

"No doubt." Dane shrugged. "Funny, how callous you can get to anything, including death."

"It's their business. I suppose they have to be callous."

"Sure." Dane still looked down at the street.

"Know anything more about Mingus?" Cranston asked Dane.

He eased the window back down. "You know, I don't get what happened to Ally's glass eye. He was vain about that. It was his only vanity. He was never seen without it."

"Curious," Cranston agreed.

Dane shrugged. "Doesn't matter, of course. If the prints on the knife belong to Stanton, that'll be the end of the whole thing, eye or no eye."

The door burst open. Two uniformed policemen came in. One said, "I called the homicide boys. Whatcha got, Dane?"

"Ally got shivved." Dane said.

The cops exchanged secret glances. One said, "Oh oh... that does it!"

"Why?" Dane asked.

"Didn't you know? He was backing John, good old Honest John Dorran, the ward heeler. He put up the green stuff to put John in the state legislature. Wonder if this is gonna be a political mess?"

Before anything more could be said, the door opened again. A man's voice said. "If it ain't the demon detective! Ready to go to work on the force again, Dane?"

Dane grinned, "Hi, Hogan. No, not yet. Make a buck or two more my way."

Hogan was a squat, strong looking man in his fifties. A wiry red brush on the back of his head was all that was left of his hair. He had an unlighted cigarette in his mouth. He gestured with his thumb to the man who was with him, a small, thin, compact looking man with a set jaw and thin mouth. "You know Dockerty? Or is he since your time?"

"Don't think I've had the pleasure," Dane said as he stuck out his hand.

"It's not much of a pleasure," Dockerty said, and his mouth barely moved.

Hogan had taken a look in the bedroom. "I always knew Ally Mingus was born to be killed. I thought it would be in a dark alley some rainy night. Not this way."

"The whole thing is all wrapped up in a neat package," Dane said, "Your boys were chasing a lammister and he entered this house. There are prints on the murder knife."

"Neat but not gaudy," Hogan said, looking at the knife. "What's his name?"

"Roger Stanton. You've got his pic up on the Wanted board at headquarters."

"I remember. We'll pick him up. Thanks a lot, Dane." Hogan grinned a sour grin. "This'll be a quickie. He should burn in a month..."

CHAPTER III

THE Alexis Hotel: Strange name for a refuge. In room nine twenty three, the man who was registered under the name of John Barrel lay on a narrow bed. He looked at the ceiling. A guttering cigarette sent a narrow plume up through the gray blue haze that hung heavy in the small untidy room.

Three bucks for the room, in advance please, as long as you have no baggage... twenty cents for cigarettes, a quarter to the bellhop. That left six fifty five. You couldn't get very far on that.

Better stay right here until Lamont Cranston showed up. That was strange, everything you read about Cranston put him on the side of the law. Why had he aided and abetted a criminal in his flight?

The young man rolled over on the bed and put out his cigarette. Instantly he lighted another one. He'd have to stop that. His mouth felt like a bar room floor after a big night. His head was pounding. He was too exhausted to sleep.

A rat race. That's what it was. What had happened in that room? Had he killed that man? Had his hand driven that knife deep into the little man's belly?

He knuckled his eyes. If Cranston had helped him to get out of that impossible situation, did that mean that if at any time in the last two days he had turned himself over to Cranston, that Cranston would have helped him get out of the forgery rap? No... unless his father had gotten to Cranston. It wouldn't be the first time that the old man's money had brought in help...

He thought back to the night when he'd been out on the town... it had been a big night, all right. His lips curled in a sneer at his own idiocy as he realized that he couldn't even remember the name of the hat check girl for whom he had forged the check. That made it perfect. Perfectly futile. What had been her name? Bunny... no, Bobby? No, that wasn't it. He was sure it began with a B, but that was all... whooo... he had been tight, all right.

Why had he forged the check? It came back slowly through gray mists... he'd picked her up in a cellar night club. She'd suggested... or had he?... that they gamble. No, she suggested it. That was it. She was a

steerer. He'd gone for a bundle on the crap table. He hadn't wanted to look small in her eyes, so he'd forged the check to get more money to throw away on the dice... and now he couldn't even remember her name, let alone her face. She was blonde. He was sure of that. He never went out with brunettes. So she was blonde... so what?

He looked back at the wasted and futile pattern of his life. As long as he was in his own milieu, the asininity of what he did had never struck him. But now, away from the pattern of athletic clubs, of golf and getting drunk at the nineteenth hole, of wasted nights in unamusing night clubs where the only entertainment was provided by the guests, and that very unentertaining... he could see that in the last analysis, it wouldn't matter very much to anyone whether he lived or died.

There might be a few head-waiters here and there who would wonder where the sucker who usually tipped so lavishly was, there might be a girl here and there, worried about her rent, who might think of him... his father?

In his mind's eye, his father had no features. Instead of a head, there was a check book. Instead of features, there was a dollar sign.

Did his father have any real affection for him? Stanton could not figure it out. As far as he could see, the only thing he represented to his father was someone who could be dominated, made to obey commands.

He wondered what kind of person he might have been if he had been brought up differently. If his mother had lived. For while she had lived, she had acted as a buffer between his father and him. He thought of her despairingly. The only person who had ever wanted him, who ever seemed to have any love for him and she died when he was what? Six? No seven. That left twenty-one years in which he had gone through a period of dry rot.

But that was a pretty easy out, he thought honestly. There were plenty of people who had lived under the same conditions as he had and not grown up into that which he had become.

No, the dry rot was within himself... of that he was sure. He wondered if he could do anything about it. But this was hardly the time.

He leaped from the bed with a start. The door had opened. Surely he had locked it! What was worse, he hadn't even heard a key inserted in the lock!

"Hello," Cranston said.

"Oh, it's you." Stanton's heart had missed a beat. "Uh... c'mon in."

Cranston sat on the only chair in the room. Stanton went back on the bed. "You're in a jam."

"You don't say!" Stanton's mouth was grim. "I had figured that out. Even with my feeble brain."

"It must be pretty feeble for you to have wound up in the mess you're in," Cranston agreed.

"How right you are. Sorry. My nerves are gone. I'm completely fouled up."

Cranston said, "We'd better start at the beginning."

"Okay. I forged my dad's name to a check. I've done it before. This time he said it was the last straw. I didn't really believe him. Not even when he called the cops. I thought he was bluffing right up to the time a cop came to the house for me. It was then I went out the window. I had some money left from the check. I figured I'd get away and let dad cool off."

"That's where I came in," Cranston said. "Your father called me in. He was afraid he had gone too far. He asked me to keep an eye on your peregrinations. He wanted me to follow you till you were ready to call it quits and come home and face the music. I figured you would get tired of being an outlaw."

"Does he really mean to prosecute me?"

"He did. I think, however, that this latest development will change the picture. I can't see him facing you going to the chair with any degree of equanimity."

"But I didn't... how can I convince you... I didn't kill that little man!"

"I didn't think you did" Cranston said. "That's the only reason I helped you get away. With the political scene what it is in this town, plus the fact that the police are hoping for a pay rise to go through the legislature, you may be sure that they're going to wind up this case fast!"

"Oh brother!" Stanton sighed. "Everything makes it worse! How can I prove that I arrived after that man was stabbed?"

"I don't know," Cranston said.

Stanton looked desperate. "I'd be willing, now, to go back to New York and throw myself on dad's mercy... but if I do that, the police here will... Hey! Wait!" Stanton's voice was so excited that Cranston had to shush him. "Wait... the police don't know I was there, do they? They saw me enter the building, but how can they prove that I was in the room?"

"Very simply. Your fingerprints are on the knife... unless... have you ever had your fingerprints on record?"

Stanton started to shake his head no, then he said, "This gets more and more fantastic. Yes, they are on record. The police had a drive one time to have every law abiding citizen file their prints. Dad insisted that everyone in the family go down and have it done! Yes, they are on file."

There was a silence. Stanton broke it. "Would it serve any purpose for me to give myself up to the police?"

"Ordinarily, I would demand you do that before I try to help you. But this time..." Cranston said, "This time, with the political situation, with the evidence what it is, I can only recommend that you stay hidden till I can get my hands on some evidence in your favor!"

There was nothing else to say. The two men sat in silence. Cranston said, "I have one angle. I almost can't put a name on it, but there's something nagging at the back of the Cranston cranium."

"How's that?"

"The pickpocket whom the police picked up after he had lifted your wallet."

"Umm... what about him? I saw the cops grab him."

"I think he said something about having an appointment..." Cranston said.

"I don't get it," Stanton said. "But this is your business, not mine."

"I'll try to get word to your father somehow," Cranston said at the door. "In the meantime, lie low; don't answer the door unless I knock three taps, a pause and then another knock."

Stanton nodded. "Make it as fast as you can... I'm going to blow my top if I have to hole up here much longer."

"I'll do my best." Cranston was gone, and a frightened young man was alone with his thoughts.

Outside the hotel room Cranston looked up and down the hallway. This hotel was precisely what he had wanted. It was not good enough to attract any publicity, and not bad enough to have the police pay it any special attention.

He walked down the rather threadbare rug that carpeted the floor. The elevator was slow in arriving at the floor. Cranston mused as he waited for it, better pick up the newspapers and see what's been going on.

Strange set-up in this town. But as he thought more about it, there was nothing too strange. Almost any town had its own political setup, its little battles between its civil servants, its own kind of venality, of sudden death and corruption.

The elevator car dropped to the ground level. On his way through the quiet, dark lobby, Cranston bought the papers from a candy stand. The man behind the counter was nodding in sleep. Cranston left the proper change on top of the counter and walked away. The counter man didn't even stir.

There was no one else in the lobby but the incurious desk clerk who seemed almost ready to join the counter man in a nap. Yes, it was exactly the right kind of hotel for a badly wanted man to hide out in.

A doorman in a rather battered uniform signaled for a cab as he saw Cranston exit. "Cab?"

"Yes, please." Cranston got in and leaned back. Too bad this whole thing had developed in such a way that he had been unable to have Shrevvie along.

He looked over the papers he had bought. The world situation was relegated to the comparatively unimportant left-hand side of the front page.

The reporters were busy making political capital out of the murder of Ally Mingus. The two papers represented two different political camps. Each was blaming the other political party. The democrats pointed out that only under a republican administration could murder walk unchecked. The republican viewpoint was that the murder was a hangover from the previous regime which had been democratic. They both had very little about the actual murder, but a great deal about the political aspects of the death of a ward heeler.

Mingus had obviously been one of those only too common figures who operate in the shadowy area between legality and the underworld. Making their money in the demimonde, they use it to control the local politicians... to put in a fix, to keep the reins of power in their own hands.

The district attorney, a man with an eye to the future by the name of Lancer, was clearly making hay while the sun shone. There was a long interview with him in one of the papers in which he attacked the police.

This was a standard gambit. Cranston sighed. So often internecine warfare between the police and the D.A.'s office interfered with the tracking down of criminals. Petty politics so often could turn a criminal free...

Lancer, the papers said, was determined to get to the root of the death of Mingus, no matter who was involved. The inference was clear that Lancer was blaming the police...

"Some mess, huh?" The cabbie interjected.

It was a mess as long as the papers were not told of the existence of Stanton's fingerprints. The police were clearly keeping that quiet till they had their hands on him. No sense in tipping their hands.

Cranston answered, "I'm new in town. What are the papers so fussed up about?"

"Ah, the D.A. wants to be gov-nor. You know. Besides," the cabbie pontificated, "they always wanna make a stink the minute anybody who's even close to politics gets knocked off."

"I see," Cranston said. It always helped to get the opinion of the man on the street. "What kind of reputation did Mingus have?"

"Lousy," the cabbie said. "He was mixed up in every racket in town."

"You'd never know it from the way the papers are carrying on."

"That's because the guy who's in from Mingus' section, in the state legislature, is a no party man. Both political parties are after his scalp. They'll try to get him over this murder!"

"I can't see where it's his fault that someone from his neighborhood was killed..."

"Course not. But they're gonna fix it so it looks like he ordered it. You wait and see!" The cabbie nodded sagely.

They were in front of police headquarters. A mob of men were running down the steps. If Cranston's guess was correct, they were reporters. They looked a bit excited. The cabbie, alert for gossip, leaned out and called to one of them. "Hey, Red! What makes?"

The auburn haired reporter turned, grinned, and said, "Hi, Mike, read all about it in the papers. A witness to the Mingus kill just did the Dutch!"

"No kiddin... Who?"

"Some jerky pickpocket! They found him in his cell with his necktie on, but tight!"

Cranston leaned back on his seat. That ended that... now how was he to find out what appointment the little pickpocket had been unable to keep? The killer, whoever he was, certainly did not believe in letting grass grow under his feet...

This made the frame even more gilt edged... if ever a man was being delivered to the police hog tied with the evidence wrapped around him, Stanton was!

CHAPTER IV

IN the police station there was anger heavy in the air. Behind the desk sergeant there was a door. Through the heavy door Cranston could hear an even heavier voice raised in anger. It was saying, "Who paid you off to let that creep keep his tie? You know blasted well you're supposed to take the tie and belt and suspenders off every crook you throw in the tank!"

A rather hesitant voice answered, "But chief, you know he wasn't in for anything stiff. He coulda done whatever his sentence was gonna be standin' on his head. I didn't think he was gonna take it the hard way... he's been in the can more than he's ever been out!"

The heavy angry voice said, "You know what the papers are going to say about this, don't you? Do you

want that raise in pay from the state or are you makin' so much on the side you don't care about the raise?"

"I never took a cent of easy dough in my life, chief! You know that..." The voice petered out.

The desk sergeant, who had been listening avidly, looked up finally and saw Cranston. "What do you want?"

"I'd like to see the chief if it's at all possible."

"If you wanna, all right, but he's in no mood for light chatter. He'll chew your head off." The sergeant paused, and then said, "Who are you?"

"I don't know if the chief will remember me, but I met him at a convention a few years ago. My name is Lamont Cranston."

"Oh yeah... I heard of you. Wait a minute," The sergeant went through the door as the officer who had just been being called down came out. His face was red. He evidently felt that he had been treated unfairly. Cranston wondered if it might not be a good idea to interview him while he was in this mood. But there was no time. The sergeant came back and said, "C'mon. The chief would like to see you."

The small room had a masculine smell, almost like a locker room. The ugly desk that bisected the room was scarred by feet and cigar burns till it looked like a relief map of a bombed country.

The man who sat behind the desk looked almost as battered as did the desk. He was puffing a beat-up pipe. His round head was almost too large for his big shoulders. He smiled, a rather tired smile, "Hello, long time no see."

"Farrell, good to see you." Cranston smiled.

"Get a load off your feet. What brings you to our thriving community?"

"An accident. I happened to be passing through when this murder occurred," Cranston lied.

"Oh no, not you too! If I get heckled any more about that..." The chief's nouns were more descriptive than polite. They wound up, "The best thing that little rat ever did was getting murdered. But why it had to happen now while I'm having a feud with the D.A.'s office is more than I know."

"Why was Mingus so universally hated?"

"He was a brass bound no-goodnick. In the first place, he was a shylock. In the second place, with the money he made out of money lending, he factored into half the business in town. In the third place, he was a miser. Either he made you pay or you went to the cleaners, and no fooling about that. In the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh places, he was mixed up in all the gambling, girl and dope rackets that we can never seem to completely wipe out. Oh, he was a cute one, all right. We could never get him with the goods. Plenty of stool pigeons have barbered to us, but when the chips were down... he eeled out.

"We've had him down here, boxed around, wasted time, and then had to turn him loose."

"Who gets his estate now that he's dead?" Cranston asked curiously. "If you can release that information."

"The reporters wanted to know that, too. It's a funny angle. No one gets it. He died intestate as far as we can find out. The dough goes to the state, for I don't think he had a single living relative!"

"Then seemingly it was not a money kill?"

"Well, it's no secret... you were there, I hear. You know whose prints are on the knife. It looks like Mingus was killed out of desperation by a guy on the lam. That is certainly the most improbable thing that could have happened. I woulda sworn there were a hundred different ways he was more likely to get his."

Before Cranston could ask the next question on his mind, the chief said, "By the way, did you see anything of Mingus' false eye? Brett Dane is tearing the whole building apart looking for it."

"No, I haven't seen it. Why does Dane attach so much significance to the eye?"

"Dane's no dope," the chief said thoughtfully. "He makes the point that Mingus had no personal vanity at all except about that damn eye. He was literally never seen without it. Why would he have had it out? There was no sign that he was asleep when he was killed. He might have taken it out while he slept, but even so, why would anyone have stolen it?"

"That is a puzzle."

"I've wracked my brain... look, if he was killed by this forger, why the forger didn't even know him. I've considered the fact that he might have had something concealed in it. That's happened in the past. But if he was killed by someone who didn't even know him, why would they have taken the eye, no matter what was in it?"

"Do you think that might mean that he was not killed by the forger, who could have run into his room looking for an escape?"

"So that's the way the wind blows!" The chief was no fool. "Why are you interested in the forger, Stanton?"

Cranston shrugged. Had he overplayed his hand? He had tried to make his query as innocent sounding as possible. "No reason. Just wondered. After all, it seems too much like a laughing fate to have had this so hated man killed almost by an accident. I just wondered if it mightn't be a frame-up."

"Could be," said the police chief. "But I doubt it like hell. If this is a frame, it's the most perfect I've ever seen. Besides... how could it be a frame? The killer, if it was a frame up, could not have known that a forger wanted by the police was going to walk into the apartment just in time for a frame to fit him. No, that sounds ridiculous."

"But suppose someone else was slated for the frame and didn't get there in time?" Cranston asked.

The chief shrugged. "Sounds too pat to me. You been readin' too many detective books. The guy who's supposed to be framed doesn't get there in time, so the killer takes whoever walks in."

"Have you wondered," Cranston asked, "why a pickpocket should commit suicide?" He got up to leave.

"You mean the guy who did the Dutch was the one who was supposed to be framed?"

"Could be." Cranston mimicked the chief.

"But, then, why would he kill himself?"

"Who said he killed himself?" Cranston asked as he eased the door closed behind him.

Having dropped that disturbing comment behind him, Cranston walked out past the desk sergeant. He

looked around wondering how all police stations managed to look alike. He thought, Hollywood must save a lot of money because of that. They certainly could use the same set over and over again, and no one would be able to point a finger at them and say it was wrong.

Some petty malefactors were being escorted in the door. Cranston stood to one side as the cops pushed the men in front of them. One of the men snarled, "Watch watcha doin'! Me, I'm a taxpayer, see!" He didn't look like one, that was sure.

The cop said, "Benny, one more word out of you..."

Cranston walked out before Benny decided what to do about the situation. Leaving the station house behind him, Cranston saw a drug store across the street. As he headed for it he thought, wonder if the chief is brooding about that crack of mine?

THE chief of police sat at his desk for quite a while after Cranston left. He filled his pipe twice while he sat and thought. Finally he shrugged and dismissed the whole thing from his mind. It was too far-fetched... and besides where was the proof? To say nothing of the fact that they had a pigeon all set with his fingerprints on the murder knife. No, it was too far fetched.

In the drug store not far from the police station, Cranston was thumbing through a phone book. D... D... Da... Dane. Here it was. Dane, Brett, 43 Fale Street. Private inquiries. Completely confidential, the Red Book said.

43 Fale Street... Cranston looked around. That was somewhere nearby. He got directions from a ruddy-faced traffic cop.

Two blocks away. Cranston walked slowly, trying to get his thoughts into a pattern. Rarely, if ever before, had he had so little to go on. Really, all he had on his side was his opinion of Stanton's character... weak... yes, but not vicious. He couldn't see the boy as a cold-blooded killer! The motivation wasn't strong enough. Admittedly the boy had been trying to get away. But the result of not getting away was not fateful enough for him to have murdered to escape capture.

As he walked through a section of very old buildings which must have been originally quite impressive, he wondered whether or not he had been wrong in giving Stanton as much leeway as he had. The idea had been to show him how futile was any thought of escape. It was to have been a softening up process. Cranston had intended to give him about three days, and then suggest return. A return that would have meant facing the music.

41 Fale Street. The next building was the one he wanted. Its old brownstone face was badly in need of some plastic surgery. Cranston wondered idly why the buildings near any municipal center were always so run down. He looked at the building directory. It was full of lawyers, city marshals, and the like. Brett Dane was in 612.

The elevator, a rickety wrought iron cage, complained and groaned all the way up. The operator, almost as old and rickety as the elevator, croaked, "Six."

The unwashed square of frosted glass boasted, "Brett Dane, International Detective Agency. We never sleep."

It was a lie. Cranston eased the door open. A rather pretty girl leaning on her elbows on her desk, was sound asleep. She blinked her eyes open as Cranston cleared his throat.

"Did I have a night last night." She shook her blonde hair. "Got to sleep with the birds." She took a deep

breath, and said, "What can I do for you?"

Cranston grinned, "Umm... I don't really need your help. I wanted to see Mr. Dane."

"The boss? Sure." No buzzers or inter-communicating phones here. She leaned back in her swivel chair and yelled at a closed door. "Brett! Business!" She modestly pulled the skirt back down and again leaned forward on the desk.

The door opened, and the bulky frame of Dane filled the doorway. "Hi! C'mon in."

The inner office was, if anything, more dilapidated than the outer. Dane swept some papers off the only other chair in the room besides the one behind the desk and said, "Squat."

He sat down, and with one smooth, almost automatic gesture, pulled open a drawer in his desk, pulled out a bottle, set it on the desk and said. "What makes?" and then, "Have one?"

Cranston shook his head no. Dane didn't wait for another word, but instead, upended the bottle, took a swallow, put the bottle back in the drawer, said, "That clears the cobwebs away."

"Had any luck," Cranston asked idly, "in your quest for the vanished glass eye?"

Dane scowled, "Nah, I don't get it. Where could it be? Why would anyone steal a thing like that?"

"I can think of a few reasons."

Dane leaned forward on his desk, knocking over an ash-tray. He paid no attention to the mess he had made, but said, "Like what?"

"Ummm... I don't think they are the real reasons, but if a one-eyed man saw a chance to steal an eye, he might."

"Jokes," Dane said. He made a face.

"We could postulate a case in which a dishonest man, mixed up in a larcenous business, desirous of keeping a record which would not be found easily, might keep a micro record of his transactions inside his eye."

Dane looked at Cranston. "Do you take it in the arm, kid?"

"I can even see a contingency in which a false eye might be a clue to a killer."

"No wonder you didn't take a drink. You're so high you're walkin' on air," Dane said admiringly.

"To say nothing of the fact," said Cranston, without paying attention to Dane's comments, "that there are at least six other hypothetical reasons I could give for the theft of a false eye."

"Give. This is one for the books," said Dane with a grin.

Before Cranston could say anything more, there was a high-pitched scream from the other room. The secretary? The scream had a word in it... or words.

"Don't... don't shoot!"

There was a splat. Something slammed into the wall with a sound like a giant fist. If Dane had been sitting upright instead of leaning forward on his elbows, the bullet would have gone through his forehead.

Cranston threw his chair backward and slammed the door open. The frosted glass, splintered by the bullet, fell in shreds to the floor. In the other room the secretary had fallen across her typewriter.

It dug into her chest. They left her there. Cranston in the lead, Dane behind him, they slammed open the door to the hall. There was no one in sight.

Running out into the hall, Cranston looked all around. The place was like a rabbit warren. There was no place to start looking.

Dane pounded off down the hall. But it was futile. He returned in a minute, shaking his head.

"Whoever took the pot shot at me could be anywhere by now."

They stood and looked at each other, two big men, standing in the old hallway. "That was close," Dane said.

"Much too close," Cranston agreed. "Where could the marksman have gone?"

Dane waved a heavy arm about him. "Anywhere. Look at these old doors! Look at these old offices! Even with a housing and office shortage, there's still plenty of unrented offices in this building. He could have ducked into any one of ten doors on this floor and not have been seen.

"This is the kind of office building where two or three guys chip in rent for a single deck amongst 'em. They get phone calls if anyone is in to take the calls."

"Wildcatters?"

"Cheap hustlers. No real con men. Just the boys who carry their records around in their heads because they don't pay any tax on what they graft. You know the type."

"Only too well," Cranston agreed.

"Not much point in calling the cops."

"No, I don't see what they could do. Whoever did the shooting could be halfway across town by now," Cranston said. "By the way, your girl!"

"That's right, Tootsie pulled a pass-out, didn't she!" Dane opened the door and they went back into the anteroom of his office.

They looked at the girl who was coming to. She shook her head groggily. She smiled. "Ain't I the one! I fainted!"

Dane growled, "If there's anything that annoys me, it's being shot at before dinner! What happened, kid?"

"I was sittin' here mopin' and I thought I heard a squeak... I looked up and saw the door opening slowly..."

"Remind me not to have that door oiled. Go ahead."

"That's all. The door opened, a gun poked in, I could just see the hand that held it. I thought it was pointing at me. I screamed... and that's all. I fainted." She looked rather proud of having been able to faint.

Dane walked to the door. "Cranston, would you go inside and sit at my desk... slouch over the way I was."

He paused. "No, wait a minute. I'll do it. I wanna get the position right." He grabbed a length of window blind off the window and fastened it to what little glass remained in the door. "There, that'll give the same effect as the frosted glass."

He went into the other room. Cranston could see what it was Dane wanted to know. When he was sitting at the desk, slumped forward, a shadow was thrown on the curtain. To an expectant eye, it would look as if he were sitting upright. The gun had fired at the head of shadow which looked upright.

Dane came back. "What'd it look like?"

"Anyone shooting, from here would have thought they were firing at your head."

"I thought so. That'll teach the scut it's hard to hit anybody in the head. Why these gunsels never shoot at the body I can't figure."

Dane turned to the girl. "I'm not working on anything that would warrant anybody making a clay pigeon outa me, am I?"

She shook her head. "You know how quiet things have been."

"Too quiet," Dane agreed. "Funny..." He and Cranston went back into the little office.

"That leaves only one guy who'd be gunning for me."

Cranston asked, "Who?" although he knew what was in Dane's mind.

"That kill-crazy forger! Stanton! Although why he'd be after my scalp, I don't know. This settles it. I'll get him if it's the last thing I do. I don't like bullets! Especially when they have my name on them!" He paused. His face was grim. "I haven't missed yet. I'll root Stanton out! He can't have left town. Every cop is on the lookout. That means I'll get him!"

CHAPTER V

LEAVING Dane, who was still furious, Cranston made his way down to the street. He looked across the thoroughfare. There was a cigar store there.

He got a supply of silver from the counterman. Then he went into a phone booth. He had two calls to make. The first was to Burbank. He called his handyman and left rather strange instructions. That done, he called Mr. Stanton senior.

After being passed along from phone girl to secretary, from secretary to assistant, from assistant to Stanton himself, when his supply of silver was perilously low, Cranston finally heard Stanton say, "Lamont? Good lord, man, what's happened? Where are you? Where's my boy?"

Keeping an eye on the window of the phone booth, making sure he was not being overheard, Cranston said, "We're both in Custer."

Stanton chuckled. "Is the boy ready to give up now?"

Rapidly sketching what had happened, Cranston finished up with, "I can't see anything to do but keep your son under cover until I can find the real killer. If I turn him over to the police he's going to wind up in

the chair."

"Well, good lord, don't just stay there, smuggle him out! Get him back here to New York where I have some connections. Where I can protect him. Tell him I've dropped the charges!"

"It's a little late for that, Mr. Stanton," Cranston said. He had not approved of what the older man had done in the first place. Cranston didn't feel that discipline at Stanton junior's age was going to do much good. To Cranston, the older man had failed much earlier in his duties as a parent. This sternness, coming now when the boy was full grown, seemed all wrong.

"You mean you won't bring him back home?" Stanton sounded amazed that anyone would go contrary to his wishes.

"It would be the most foolish thing we could do right now. There's a police net out around the city. The first move that Roger makes, he'll bounce right into the cops' hands!"

"Wh... what do you intend to do?"

"I've already told you that," Cranston said impatiently. "I'm going to keep him at the Alexis Hotel until I've caught the real killer. He's perfectly safe there."

"I see. You will not obey me, then?" Stanton sounded cold.

"Obedience at this point would be suicidal for your son."

"I see." Stanton hung up.

Walking out of the cigar store, Cranston could see why Stanton junior was the weakling he was. An eighteen ninety parent can do strange things to the human psyche.

He hurried to the hotel. Roger Stanton would probably be eating his finger nails by this time. A little reassurance at this point would not hurt.

The cabbie who was driving him suddenly said over his shoulder, "You goin' out with somebody's wife, chum?"

That rather startled Cranston until he followed the cabbie's gaze. The driver was looking in the rear view mirror. Cranston leaned forward so he too could see into it. In the reflection he saw a car behind them.

The cabbie said, "That boat's been tailin' us since you hailed me. I wanted to be sure before I opened my yap."

"Thanks," Cranston said. What did this connote? In the first place, the last thing to do was to continue to the Alexis Hotel. He changed his destination. The cabbie grinned, a wise, world-weary grin.

"Sure, no sense in goin' there with the old man hot on your tail. You can always phone her."

Cranston knew that protest would be futile. Instead he grinned and leaned back in the cab. He had nothing more to do at the moment. He might just as well do some sightseeing. If it had been the ubiquitous Shrevvie driving the cab, he would have tried to get rid of the tail, but with a strange driver, boredom might fit the situation as well.

The tailer must have gotten bored, for Cranston drove all over town. Night fell and still he drove on and on. The meter was up to ten dollars.

They had driven from the municipal building district of the town through the slums, up to the high rent area, out into a slightly suburban area, and then back into the more crowded section of town.

All that time the car behind had carefully and skillfully tailed them. Never getting close enough for recognition, but always appearing just when they thought they had lost him. The car was like a magnet. It was as though there were some invisible cord between the cab and the trailing car.

Cranston could see how upsetting his tailing of young Stanton must have been. There is something infinitely nerve-wracking in the chase.

It was getting quite dark. That meant that the tailer could come even closer with no fear of being recognized. If anything, the night was better for tailing than the day. Cranston wondered if he should have his cab stop, and get out and confront the tailer. That wouldn't get him anywhere, though... for all he knew, the tailer might rip off into the night if he tried anything like that.

It seemed more sensible to try and tire out the driver of the car that tailed along behind him. Cranston was rather grateful for the chance to just sit still and relax. He was bone weary.

Suddenly the cabbie laughed. He gestured behind with his thumb. Cranston looked back. The other car had run out of gas. It had pulled into a gas station.

"Now where, boss?" the cabbie asked.

"The Alexis Hotel. Make it fast before the tail can gas up."

"It's just in time. My gas is gettin' low."

They drove up in front of the run-down entrance to the hotel. The cabbie said, "Boy, you've had a bad day, boss!"

Cranston opened the door of the cab. There was a fuss of some kind going on. Three husky men were carrying between them a fourth who dragged along on unresponsive legs.

The cabbie said, "Oh brother, has that guy got a load on!"

The doorman of the hotel said, "You can't take him out in that condition."

One of the three men snarled. "No? Who said so?"

The doorman looked around helplessly. There were no police in sight. The trio had the man almost into a car by now. The doorman put his whistle to his mouth and blew it. It was a futile gesture. Even if a cop heard it, he would have assumed it to be a doorman whistling for a cab.

It was then that the sodden man who was being carried rolled his head back. It was Roger Stanton. Cranston had been prepared to interfere in any event. This merely made him act faster.

He sprang from the cab just as one of the three men slammed a blackjack into the back of the doorman's head. It made a dull sick thud.

Reaching under his jacket, Cranston loosened his .45 in his shoulder holster. He was out of the cab. The cabbie, seeing his hand go under his jacket, said, "Yipe. Lemme outta here," and put the car in gear despite the fact that Cranston had not yet paid him for the cab ride.

Slamming the cab door behind him, Cranston walked toward the car into which Stanton was being thrown. There was no one else around.

The street was quiet with that sudden silence that falls on even the busiest area. There was no sound but the huffing short breaths of the men who were putting their unconscious victim into their car.

The doorman was a huddle on the ground. The cabbie, suddenly afraid of living bullets, was frozen with his hand on the gear shift. "What was I doin' carryin' a hot rod around with me?" he muttered to himself.

"Put that boy back on the sidewalk," Cranston said conversationally.

The three men jumped. It was as startling as a midnight voice in a graveyard. One of them turned, ready to slash out with his blackjack.

Cranston flipped the muzzle of his gun down on the man's wrist. The blackjack dropped to the sidewalk. The man stifled a scream. His hand hung at an awkward and unnatural angle.

Stanton was half in and half out of the car. His head and shoulders were in the car, and his hips and legs dangled on the ground. The two other men stood frozen under the menace of Cranston's gun.

Thinking fast, Cranston realized that if a policeman were to come along right now, everything would really be in the soup. He said, "Put him in the cab and be careful."

The two men obeyed, obviously stalling for time. The cabbie was groaning to himself. "How do I get in these messes?"

The two men placed Stanton on the back seat just as the doorman came to. He sat up on the sidewalk groggily. He held his hands to his head. He opened his eyes. Then he closed them. He was startled at seeing the unconscious man being put into the cab.

Cranston eased into the cab next to Stanton, whose head wobbled as though his neck were broken. Keeping the gun pointed out the window, Cranston said, "Step back from the cab."

The two men backed up until they were almost on top of the man with the broken wrist.

"Get going," Cranston said to the frightened cabbie.

All told, the whole thing hadn't taken more than three minutes. To the cabbie it was like three lifetimes. He got the car going. His eyes were wide as he looked back and saw one of the men on the street pull a gun and aim at the back of his cab.

Before the man could fire, the man with the broken wrist used his good hand to knock the gun out of the other man's hand. The man with the broken wrist yelled loud enough for the cabbie and Cranston to hear, "Don't, we had orders not to shoot!"

As the cab hauled around the corner, Cranston saw the three men leap into the car and take off in pursuit. So did the cabbie. He said, "Ulp... uh... what goes?"

"Step on it!" Cranston turned to Stanton. They might have a fighting chance if the boy would come to. He pulled open the boy's lids. The pupils were turned up. Cranston ran gentle fingers over the boy's scalp. No lumps... the neck? No... there was no contusion there.

Cranston again lifted Stanton's lids, The pupils were widely dilated. Cranston leaned forward and smelled the breath that came from the flaccid lips. Knockout drops.

The cab was careening down a dark street when the first shot rang out. The men in the car behind were aiming at their tires.

The second shot got the back left tire. The whole cab slewed around like a jeep gone mad. They were now facing the opposite direction.

The trailing car was slamming closer. Cranston leaned out the window of the car, his hand heavy with the weight of his .45. He aimed as carefully as though he were skeet-shooting.

He shot the front tires out from under the other car. It twisted and slammed into a lamp post. The sound was like a cannon going off. The car bent around the lamp post.

The cabbie said, "One up for our side! Now what?"

"Get going!" was Cranston's only answer. He was watching the other car. There was no motion from it... yet.

The cabbie said plaintively, "But it'll ruin my tires."

Without a word, Cranston reached into his pocket, opened his wallet, and handed the cabbie a one hundred dollar bill. The cab got into motion immediately.

The cab, like a crippled bird, drove off into the night with a clunk of loose rubber slapping against the flat tire. In the car, Cranston sat with his arm around the unconscious boy. This really tore it. The first cop who saw a cab limping along with a flat tire would become curious... then what?

One look into the cab would show the unconscious Roger Stanton. The second look would show that Stanton was badly wanted. The cab drove on.

CHAPTER VI

DOWN at police headquarters, Brett Dane plunked his big body into a chair next to the chief of police. He said, "What did you say?"

"I didn't say a damn word as you well know!" The chief looked at the newspapers which were spread across his desk. The screaming headlines tore at the core of him. All of them were attacking him. The main point they made over and over again was, why raise taxes to increase the pay of an incompetent police force?

"That's good for police morale, that is!" he said, pointing to the papers.

"It should make the boys hustle their bustles!" Dane said.

"You were a homicide dick long enough to know what these papers either don't know or pretend not to know. You know blasted well that we on the force can't drop everything else just to go after a single killer. We do the best we can, but crime goes on. This doesn't stop one heist, nor one numbers runner from operating, you know!"

"Sure, take it easy," Dane said, and smiled. "It's rough, but the minute you grab Stanton, the papers will sing a different tune. They'll all be on the side of the boys in blue!"

The chief grunted and drew on his pipe. "We had the papers mention the glass eye. Wonder if that'll get any action..."

"It's a long shot... but there's just a chance it'll turn up somewhere. Stanton may have taken it for some bizarre reason, and then lost it... you can't tell, and anyway, we haven't anything else to go on."

The phone rang. The chief growled into it, "Huh?"

A timorous voice on the other end said, "Uh... about the eye in the papers... is there a reward for it, maybe?"

The chief barked, "No, but if you got it and don't turn it in, your reward will be a small vacation for free in the can! Get it down here!"

Dane sat up. "You mean the thousand-to-one shot came in?"

"Umm." The chief nodded. "Wonder where he found it. Might be a lead to where Stanton is hiding out."

Before Dane could say anything, the phone rang again. "Hello," the chief said. "WHAT?"

The voice at the other end of the line this time was rasping and harsh. It said it, loudly enough for Dane to hear across the desk, "Yare, I found a glass eye. Want it?"

"The hell you say..." was the chief's only comment. "Sure, bring it downtown."

"Another glass eye?" Dane wrinkled his brow. This didn't stack up.

"I don't get it. How many guys in our town wear phony eyes?"

"The phone, chief," Dane said, gently.

This time it was a rather officious female voice that snapped, "Will you send someone for this glass eye, or shall I bring it to you?"

Weakly, the chief said, "If you wouldn't mind, would you bring it to us?"

The woman said, "It's certainly my duty as a good citizen to help you in any way I can. I shall be right down."

Groaning, the chief put his hands to his head. "You know, Brett, sometimes I wonder if you weren't right in leaving the department. You can't have the headaches I do."

"Most of my headaches are from hangovers, not from helpful members of the citizenry..." Dane smiled.

The phone rang again... and again. Ten times in all. By the tenth ring, the first man who had called was at headquarters. He came into the chief's room with his hand out in front of him. He said, "Do I give it to you?"

The chief nodded and rolled the eye on to the desk. It lay there, a small semicircle of glass. The pupil, jet black, looked up at the chief. The iris was brown. It looked odd, just an eye, in the center of the desk, it might have been from a painting by Dali.

The man left.

"Ally's eye was blue, chief," Dane said.

"One of the ten that came in should be blue... we should have every color in the rainbow." The chief was upset.

He was even more upset when at eleven o'clock, ten eyes were lined in a row on his desk. They looked at him accusingly. Three were brown, three blue, two green, and the others were off shades of hazel and

green.

Dane said, "You pays your money and you takes your choice."

"If Stanton did this just to confuse the issue..."

"It's a smart move if that's the reason..." Dane agreed. "But will you tell me how in the name of every unhung killer in this town, how a man badly wanted by the police can calmly mope around and buy up ten glass eyes. You'd think some oculist or optometrist, optician, or whatever the hell you call them, would check with us, wouldn't you?"

"You would," the chief said grimly. "If I catch the guy who sold these, he's going to wish he had called us!"

"Maybe whoever it was that sold them hasn't seen the papers yet. Keep your fingers crossed." Dane pushed his slouch hat on the back of his head and got up to leave.

"How come," the chief looked up at his friend, "how come," he repeated, "you're so interested in all this?"

"In the first place, I demanded a fee from Ally before I ever went to see him. So... in a way, I should try to earn the five G's he gave me. In the second place, as I told you before someone took a pot shot at me... I don't like that. It's a bad habit for hoods to get into. If I let one get away with it, you don't know how many are going to take a whack at me. One of them might even get me..."

"I see how you feel," the chief said. "I guess I'd be a little annoyed if some scout took a shot at me. But listen, Dane, take this easy. Everyone knows you're a friend of mine... don't go taking the law into your own hands! If you get anything, turn it over to me!"

"Of course!" Dane grinned at his friend. "You know that no private detective can exist without being on good terms with you guys, no matter what the movies show about us!"

They grinned at each other, two men who knew the score.

Dane left the chief sitting there, glaring at the ten eyes which winked and glistened in the light from the overhead light.

Dane poked his head into the reporter's room. The interminable game which had been going on uninterruptedly for something like ten years, was in the doldrums. The men sat around the table. The dealer shuffled listlessly. One of the reporters looked up. "Hey! New money! Siddown, Dane."

"Okay, but just for an hour, win, lose or draw." Dane said.

"Yeah, yeah, we know," the dealer said. "We've heard that before." He shuffled the cards now with some animation. "Stud, fifty and a buck."

"Run 'em," Dane said. He looked very down in the mouth as he looked at his hole-card and saw that he had aces back to back. "I dunno what happens to my luck," he said as he pushed a half dollar out into the center of the table.

"Don't start cryin' before you get hurt," said the dealer, as he raised a half. "Let's keep the ribbon clerks out."

"Look," Dane said, "brave guy, kings up!"

They squabbled happily as the game went on. The desk sergeant poked his head into the door. "You guys, a funny one just came in."

They looked up from their cards incuriously. One said, "Yare?"

"Uh huh, an old doorman in front of the Alexis Hotel just got conked by some guys who were dragging a drunk out of the hotel."

"So what?" a reporter asked. "Drunks get dragged in and out of hotels all day long." He paused. "All night long, too."

"Yeah, but, wise guy, this don't happen, the three guys dragging the souse into a car, when a cab draws up, a guy bounces outa the cab with a cannon, puts the chill on the three guys, and waltzes off with the souse!"

The reporters looked at each other. One said, "Ah, to hell with it. Let City News cover it. Don't sound like much of a much to me."

"What hotel was that?" Dane asked.

"The Alexis... an old fleabag," the sergeant said. "Why?"

"No reason," Dane said. "Just wondered what our hotels were comin' to." He looked at the dealer, "Run 'em."

The sergeant left, muttering, "How those guys think they earn their salaries is beyond me."

Dane had a pair of deuces on the board and a queen in the hole. He was bluffing. He'd raised all the way. There was a pair of aces on the board. He drew a second queen.

The aces said, "A buck."

"Come again," Dane said.

"Once more, just for fun."

The rest of the players stirred. One said, "Whyncha wait'll you get the cards, boys?"

"Okay," Dane said. "I see."

The cards fell. Dane saw the aces and raised. The aces said, "Brett, if you're bluffing me, I'll have your heart for lunch on rye toast. I see and raise."

Dane grinned and raised again. The aces saw. Dane flipped his hole queen up. The aces grinned and showed a third ace. He said, "The case ace, kid."

Dane grunted. "The case ace... that's too much. My hour's up." He rose. "You boys can keep my sawbuck. Wear it in good health."

They waved good-bye and he left.

ACROSS the town there was no laughter, no gaiety, no camaraderie in the cab that slowly inched its way up a steep hill. The cabbie said, "Look, I got a wife and three kids. I can't louse around with you two guys. You're hotter than a fire engine."

"Don't worry. Let us off at the top of this hill." Cranston had spotted a bill board on the crest of the rise.

Cranston got Stanton out of the cab over his shoulder in a fireman's lift. With his one hand he reached into his pocket. He took a fifty dollar bill out of his pocket.

He dangled it in front of the cabbie's nose. "That hundred was for the ride. This is for you to forget all about the ride!"

"I got a sudden attack of amnesia," the cabbie said.

"And get far away from here as you can without any cops spotting us."

"Don't worry. From here I should be able to get back to my garage."

The bill board was lighted in the front, but pitch black behind. Cranston took his burden into the complete darkness. There was only one thing to do. That is, there was only one thing he could do. A stomach pump would have been the thing.

Under the circumstances, all he could do was to walk Stanton back and forth... back and forth... hoping that he could exercise some of the poisonous substance out.

For the moment they were in comparative safety. There didn't seem to be much likelihood that anyone would meander behind the bill board.

But someone did.

CHAPTER VII

IN the stillness behind the bill board, in the darkness which Cranston had hoped would protect him and his helpless friend from alien eyes, suddenly there came a scratch of sound then a flickering light.

Cranston moved to the rear so his back was to the bill board. He had Stanton in his arms. The flickering light came from a wooden match. The match was held in the grimmest hands Cranston had ever seen on a man. The dirt was so thick that it splintered off as the man moved his fingers.

Stanton moved a trifle. Cranston held him so that the movement was unnoticeable. The little penumbra that spread from the match showed a face which was incredibly lined, and, if anything, dirtier than the man's hands.

Tatters pinned together with rusty safety pins made a costume that had to be seen to be believed. The tramp took a crust of stale-looking rye bread from his pocket.

Stanton, opening his eyes for the first time, saw for his return from consciousness a strange sight. The tramp was not eating the crust. He was using, it as a strainer. From another pocket he took a can of Sterno. This is solidified alcohol. Wood alcohol.

The tramp had difficulty in juggling the lighted match to the can of sterno and the crust. He set fire to the alcohol. And when it was sending streamers of flame up, he turned the edge of the can and poured the flaming mass onto the bread.

As it started to pour, he blew the flame out. Only the stray flickers of light from the street showed his avid gaping wound of a mouth straining to catch the precious drops that fell from the bottom of the crust.

Knuckling his eyes, Stanton tried to turn and see who it was that held him. Cranston whispered,

"Shhh..."

Stanton craned and his neck turned so that he saw Cranston's face. It was reassuring in the nightmare setting that hailed his return from limbo. He relaxed. Things couldn't be too bad if he was with Cranston.

The tramp sucked the last of the drippings from the bottom of the crust. He straightened his bowed shoulders. A grin of despair split his hatchet face. He took a deep breath. He threw the crust away.

In two minds, as to whether to bribe the tramp or just to sit it out and hope the tramp would go away, Cranston watched carefully.

Just when Cranston was sure that the tramp was ready to meander away, he turned and peered into the patch of darkness in which the two men were hidden.

He scratched a match on the seat of his dilapidated trousers. He looked straight at the two men. He said, "Hi, 'bo."

"Hello," Cranston said. Bribe it would have to be, then.

"Why didn't ya speak up, woulda give ya some alky."

"Uh... no... I'm not in the mood," Cranston said.

"Not in the mood?" the tramp said incredulously. He came closer. "What kind of a 'bo has to be in the mood?"

His beady tiny eyes looked at Cranston, saw his arms around Stanton. "Muggin'?"

Maybe that would be the best way to get rid of him. Cranston reached in his pocket and took out a five dollar bill. "Yeah, here's some for you to keep your yap shut."

The five vanished in the tramp's paw. He waved a hand. He walked around the bill board and was gone. Stanton stepped away from the arms that had held him upright. He staggered a little. "I'm all right now... I think. What happened?"

"I was hoping you'd be able to tell me."

"All I remember is that somebody knocked on my door." Stanton rubbed his aching head. "Three men came in... they told me to come with them. They showed me a badge. I thought they were cops. I figured the jig was up. But... then something strange happened. The 'cops' got friendly. One took a flask out of this pocket. He took a drink..."

"Pretended to take a drink," Cranston said.

"I didn't want a drink, but I figured as long as they were being friendly, I might as well go along with the gag. I took a drink... I put my hat on... then it felt as if I'd been hit on the head with a blackjack."

"Chloral hydrate does make you feel that way."

"And that's all... until I came to and saw that... what was the bum doing? Why'd he do that with the bread?"

Bracing Stanton with one arm, Cranston began to walk. "That's standard practice. Sterno is wood alcohol with wax in it. The heat melts it, the bread is supposed to strain the wax and the wax poison out of the wood alcohol... It must, because some of those tramps live for years on it. It would kill us in one

gulp. I suppose the human stomach can get used to anything."

They were at the end of the bill board now. The street lights showed Cranston that two figures were toiling up the hill toward him.

One figure was that of the tramp. The other was a policeman. Stanton and Cranston could hear the cop saying, "If this is a drunken daydream, bum, you're gonna be sorry you were born!"

"I'm spinnin' it straight. What'd I lie for?" the tramp whined. "I'm not a gay cat. I know which end is up. I tell you there's somethin' funny goin' on back of that bill board. Those two guys were no tramps... that was no muggin', neither..."

The cop loosened his gun in its holster. "A guy about forty or forty-five, and a youngster about twenty-five or six... Funny set up."

Stanton sighed, "This is the end. I better go give myself up. You beat it. You can do more good on the loose than involved with me."

That was right, Cranston thought. That was the sensible thing to do. But he hated to be defeated by circumstances. Behind them there was a little gully. It was perhaps two feet deep. It was designed to take rain water away from the base of the bill board, so that water could not weaken the supports. Cranston whispered, "Get down in that gully. Flat on your stomach. Don't make a sound."

Lighting a cigarette, Cranston stepped back and walked behind the bill board. He came out at the end opposite where the policeman and the tramp were coming.

"Officer!" Cranston said sternly. "Will you make that tramp stop annoying me?"

The tramp looked from Cranston's stern, self-righteous face to the cop's. The policeman stared at Lamont Cranston, well dressed, impressive looking, and then to the tramp.

"I gave the man five dollars after he whined and annoyed me so much that it was cheaper to pay him and get rid of him."

"You got a pound on you, bum?" the cop asked.

The tramp whined. He held his hands in his pockets. "He guv it to me! He told me he was muggin' the other slob!"

The patrolman used his night stick to poke the tramp's hands away from his pockets. He found the five dollar bill. He said, "You couldn't have gotten this any other way." Standing close to the tramp as he was, the cop sniffed. "Alky! I been taken in by a smoke drinker! The tank for you, bud!"

Cranston said, "Can I help, officer?"

"No thanks. If I couldn't handle one of these wood alky boys, I'd hand in my badge. Sorry you were bothered, sir."

The two turned and walked back down the hill. The tramp, sniveling... the cop annoyed. The nerve of the tramp... feeding him drunken dreams! They were at the far end of the bill board now. Cranston could sigh a deep sigh of relief. Except, as the cop passed the end of the bill board, his hand went to his hip pocket!

Could Stanton have stood up? Revealed his presence by a sneeze? Cranston watched, frozen, as the cop

peered back of the bill board. His hand came from his hip. Something shiny flashed in his hand.

Suddenly a broad beam of white light flicked from the shiny thing. It was a flashlight. Not a gun. The cop sprayed the area with the light. He said to the bum, "See anybody back there, crumb?"

The tramp sniveled, "Nah..."

That was all. The cop had wanted to assure himself there was nothing to the tramp's tale. The anti-climax made the breath rush out of Cranston's lungs. He waved his hand to the policeman as he strode off up the hill.

As soon as the uniformed patrolman was completely out of sight with the tramp, a matter of five minutes, Cranston ran back of the bill board. "Roger... Roger... come on, we're in the clear now!"

There was no answer. Cranston lighted match after match. There in the gully, smudge marks showed where Roger Stanton had hidden.

But of the boy there was no sign.

CHAPTER VIII

IT was the last match that picked up an eerie suggestion of reflection. Cranston held it until it almost burnt his finger tips. He peered through the darkness that had been a friendly cloak such a short time before. It was now an enemy, keeping him from finding what he was looking for. Finally the charred stub of match fell from his hand. Its dying sparks showed him what the reflection had come from.

In the mud, half buried, an eye looked up at him.

He picked it up and walked back out to the street. In the bright light that poured from the street lamp, he saw that the eye was glass. Black stains around the rim showed where the eye had come from. This was Ally Mingus' eye that Brett Dane had been so curious about.

It was obvious that it must have fallen from Roger Stanton's pocket when he threw himself down in the gully. But why had the boy not mentioned that he had it?

Of course, he didn't know of the city-wide search that was being made for the glass eye... was it possible that he had picked it up at the scene of the crime, then, with all the confusing events that had followed, forgotten all about it? That seemed to make sense, but why had he picked it up in the first place?

What significance did it have? Under what circumstances had Stanton found it? Cranston now had a double reason for getting hold of the boy.

Mud streaked, almost fainting from the pain in his head, nauseous from the remains of the chloral hydrate in his system, Stanton staggered across the fields that he had found himself in after leaving the gully.

Ahead were lights, the city. As he staggered along, his brain about as much use to him as a bowl of mush, he wondered vaguely if he were doing the right thing.

Hidden there behind the bill board, he had come to a decision. He would not have been in the position he was in now if, in the first place, he had faced the music. Now, he felt that he could no longer hide behind his father's power, or Cranston's friendliness. The thing to do was give himself up, keep Cranston from being involved, so as to give Cranston a free hand in tracking down the real killer.

It had all seemed so clear when he was lying in the mud there. Now that the street was ahead, when the

overhead light showed the figure of a burly policeman phoning in from a call box, Stanton was no longer sure that his decision was the correct one.

But the die was cast. He lurched up to the cop. The patrolman looked at him distastefully. Drunk... did he have to get all the drunks in the city? At least that's the way Stanton's muddled mind interpreted the expression on the red face that looked at him.

"I'm not drunk," Stanton croaked.

"Prove it."

"No, look... you've got to take me downtown. I'm wanted by the police."

"Figuring on a free ride, bud?"

"My name is Roger Stanton."

That was all he got out. The effects of the knockout drops surged back through him and he passed out at the feet of the incredulous cop.

Lamont Cranston came to a decision of his own. He could not see how Stanton could keep at liberty under the circumstances. It was clear that he'd be picked up by the police. Therefore, the place to look for him was at headquarters. Cranston had to know about the glass eye.

A cab dropped him off at headquarters a matter of minutes after Stanton was taken there. Cranston walked in as Brett Dane came stalking out of the chief's office. Dane grinned. "It's all over but the shouting!"

"Ah?"

"The kid's in there. He's pretending to be sick! He was not very sick when he took that shot at me!"

"Who caught him?"

"That's a funny thing, he wasn't caught. He surrendered."

"Hmm," Cranston said. "Any chance of my seeing him?"

"The chief's being a softy. He's putting him in the jail infirmary. You can probably see him when the chief gets him all tucked in. I'd tuck him in with a pair of these..." Dane held up a fist.

Since there was nothing to do for the moment, Cranston sat down and said, "Look, Dane. Just for the sake of argument, assume that the boy didn't kill Mingus. Can you make a list of the people most likely to have been interested in the death of Mingus?"

Dane pushed his hat on to the back of his head. "I can go along with a gag." He sat down and pulled out an envelope. He took a stub of pencil from his vest.

"Mind you," Dane said, "I think you've got rocks in your head. I think Stanton did the stabbing. But I've been wrong before. Let's see..."

Watching the list that Dane wrote down, he could see why the police and Dane would be much happier if Stanton could be proved to be the killer.

The list in Dane's hand ran like this: 'Any cop, every other crook, Mary Dustine, Betty Carroll, twenty

other girls... Darrel Firm.'

"Who's Firm?" Cranston asked when Dane had reached that name in the list.

"Ah... I thought you knew him. He's the nominal head of Mingus' political district. Mingus' money put him in office and it kept him there. Believe me when I say that Mingus got his money's worth out of it. He led Firm around by the nose."

Remembering something he had read in the papers, Cranston asked, "Isn't the D.A. trying to pin the kill on Firm?"

Dane nodded.

"I see. The D.A.'s office could make more political value out of it if Firm was in it."

"Oh yes... it might even end up with the D.A. in the governor's office... it's hot." Dane said.

"Is a machine in power in City Hall?" Cranston asked.

"No, that's what made it so important to Mingus that he keep Firm in. Without Firm, the cops would have put Mingus away years ago."

Cranston rubbed his forehead.

"It's a headache, all right." Dane agreed. "But if Stanton is the killer, then the D.A. gets the dirty end of the stick, the cops get the credit for catching him, the bill goes through the state legislature raising the pay of the police, the noose hangs high, and it's a happy ending."

"Except for Stanton," Cranston said, wryly.

"Somebody always has to get hurt. Besides; his old man has plenty of what it takes. They never fry a million bucks," Dane said cynically.

"Would you go on with your list, please?" Cranston asked.

Dane started to write. Then he threw the pencil down. "Look, do you know how a shylock works?"

"Sure, he gets back six or seven for every three or four dollars he lends you... and the interest goes up weekly!"

"Correct. Now... how many people in this man's town do you think like to pay that kind of interest? Don't you see that any sucker Mingus was in to see is a potential suspect?"

"His money lending business was well organized?"

"But solid. You paid up or you got a broken arm... that was the first time... the second time you got the boots..."

"The third time?"

"The river with concrete booties!" Dane said, "Mingus was a bad boy, or haven't you got the idea yet?"

Cranston looked at the big clock face up above the desk sergeant's chair. He realized that in another hour it would be seventy-two hours since he had slept.

He rose and stretched. "Nothing much more I can do tonight. I'll see Stanton tomorrow."

"I'm pooped, too," Dane agreed. "I'll drop you off. Where you stopping?"

"The Alexis."

"Did you hear about the funny business there earlier tonight?" Dane asked.

Listening to the tale of his own exploits, Cranston realized that the story had gained in the telling. Now, it seemed that he was about six and a half feet tall and carried two guns...

When Dane finished re-capitulating, Cranston realized that there was the danger that the doorman might recognize him. But if he changed his mind about where he was going, Dane might find it suspicious... he went ahead.

In the car, Dane said, "Funny thing about that pickpocket taking it the hard way."

"The one who committed suicide?"

"Yare. I don't figure that... of course he did have a date with Mingus at just about the time that Mingus got it."

Cranston nodded. "You don't think he was the killer and killed himself out of remorse?"

"That scut? Remorse? Besides, the cops had him at the time Mingus was killed."

There was a different doorman outside the hotel, Cranston saw with relief. Dane said thoughtfully, "You don't think Stanton was the one that was picked up here by the three hoods, do you?"

Cranston shrugged. He got out of the car. Dane looked up at Cranston, who, standing next to the car, seemed even taller than usual. Dane said, "You're pretty tall, at that..."

"So I've been told," Cranston said. "Thanks for the lift." He turned into the hotel.

"Oh, say..." Dane said. Cranston turned.

"Did you hear about the glass eyes?"

"Eyes?" Cranston said, feeling the glass eye in his pocket.

"Yeah... that Stanton kid is a joker. He stashed about ten eyes all over town where they'd be sure to be found. The chief was going batty when all ten eyes showed."

Ten glass eyes? Cranston wondered what had happened to the other two he had told Burbank to have spread around town. They'd probably turn up tomorrow.

"Good way of scattering attention, wasn't it?" Dane asked.

"Sure. It'll be difficult to know which is the real eye, now..."

"Not too difficult," Dane said. "Mingus' eye was a distinctive blue." He thought, then said, "I still don't get why Stanton stole the eye. It must have been pretty grisly, taking an eye out of a dead man's eye socket."

That was it! Cranston thought... must be pretty tired not to have spotted that. Stanton would not have taken the eye out... he didn't even know that Mingus wore one. How could he?

Dane got the car in gear. "See you manana."

Cranston waved good-bye as the car drove off. Now for bed. That was the only thing he could think of at the moment. Seventy-two hours had dulled even his razor-sharp mind. He did not realize even then that he knew now who the killer was. Knew it as soon as he realized that Stanton would not have pried a false eye out of a cadaver...

CHAPTER IX

AT the same time that Lamont Cranston was stretching and rolling restlessly on his bed, too tired to fall asleep directly, a curious colloquy was going on downtown, a block from the prison hospital.

"It'd be a cinch..."

"It's always easier from the hospital."

"What are we waitin' for?"

"There's gotta be some planning here. We can't louse up the way we did the last time."

There were three of them. Three men who had one thing on their minds. Money. One of the men had an impromptu bandage on his wrist. He was feeling it. "I don't get this deal one bit. What'd the tall guy grab the kid for, if he was gonna turn him over to the cops?"

"The paper said that Stanton gave up himself." This was a short squat man.

"Ya believe everythin' ya read in the papers?" the third asked, disgustedly.

"I bin in this can. The hospital's a cinch to crash out of," the squat man said. "Look." He scribbled a sort of floor plan for them on a scrap of paper. "There's a guy here at this door."

"Only one guard?"

"Just this one at this end of the corridor. There's some more at the other end. But this guard is at what seems to be a dead end."

"What's the good of that?"

"The dead end only seems to be a dead end. I was all set to beat it when my lawyer sprung me. The gag is that there's a door at this end that's never used. Nobody knows that if ya get the door open there's just some old junk there. A brick wall that'll fall down if ya blow on it."

"How come?"

"It's an old building. They musta walled it up when they built some new stuff."

"If he's right," the man with the bandaged wrist said, "we can grab the kid and beat it."

"Let's go," said the third.

On his bed in the jail hospital, Roger Stanton stared at the ceiling with sleepless eyes. The opiate he had been given had worn off.

He was going around and around in a rat race. He had thought out his problem at least ten times, but that didn't stop him from going over the same ground again and again.

Down at the end of the corridor, he could see the prison guard nodding. It was late. All the other men in

the ward were asleep. It made it harder, being the only one awake.

He looked around him. To one side, an old, old man grunted in his sleep. His face was a yellow, gaunt mask. On the other side, a youngster groaned in his sleep.

Roger Stanton yawned. When he opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was that the guard was gone from the doorway. He blinked and looked again.

The guard had fallen to the floor. It wasn't possible that anyone could sleep so soundly that he could fall to the floor without waking was it?

Sitting up in bed, Stanton looked again. The guard was indubitably on the floor. Nothing stirred. No one had awakened. There was a suggestion of someone... he looked, staring unbelievably as a man stepped into view. The man had a gun in his hand.

The man was the peak of a triangle. The other men were now in sight. They stepped carefully, as though on eggs. The man in the lead... Stanton recognized him. It was one of the men who had pretended to be detectives... the ones who had given him the mickey...

He was at the side of the bed now. He gestured with the gun. "Up," he whispered.

Stanton thought, why, what goes on? Wasn't he safe even in jail?

The answer, obviously, was that he was not safe, even in jail. The men looked menacing enough to shoot him right there and then. He looked around the ward. So many men, so many sick men. There certainly was no chance of their helping, even if he roused the whole ward.

In the next bed to him there was an old sick man. The other side held a boy who had been shot in being captured. He was under opiates, but even so, the pain of his gun wound made him stir restlessly.

No, there was no help. There was not even a sign of a guard, aside from the one who was on the floor, unconscious. Stanton whispered to the man who faced him, "What do you want me to do?"

"Get dressed. We're goin' for a little trip." He smiled a crooked smile, "Just what the doctor ordered."

He got unsteadily to his feet. He grabbed on to the bed for support. The man took one hand from in back of him. The hand held some clothes. The man whispered, "These mayn't be so good a fit, but get 'em on."

There was not much point to disobedience. Stanton got dressed. All around them there was no sound but that of sick men stirring in their sleep.

He was half-dressed before the first interruption. A guard came down through the space between the two rows of beds.

He was not very wide awake. He did a double take when he saw the three men with guns and a prisoner calmly getting dressed. He fumbled for his gun.

He got it out much too late. He was on his way to the floor before it cleared his holster. The squat man wiped his gun on his trouser leg. It had crashed into the guard's head hard enough to break the skin.

"Make it snappy before we have more company" he said.

Struggling into the jacket that had been provided for him, Stanton realized, with that eerie sense that we have inherited from our cave man ancestors, that eyes were on him.

The old man in the next bed was watching him through slitted eyes. It didn't mean anything to Stanton... but it was to add something to the sum of his troubles...

Dressed now, he preceded the three men. They walked to the door. The guard on the floor did not even move as they passed. Stanton wondered where they could be going. As far as he had been able to see, this door led to a corridor that went back to the jail proper.

When he went through the door, he was astounded to see another door. It was open. It led off the corridor. He saw around the casement of the door, some bricks... some old mortar.

A gun in his back convinced him that there was no time for sightseeing. He stepped over the fallen bricks. A long tunnel-like alley led off into the distance. It was the last touch to the completely nightmare-like quality of the proceedings. Stanton walked into the cave. The three men followed him closely. The door closed behind them.

A flashlight in the squat man's hand was the only light now. They walked silently or as silently as the rubble on the uneven ground would allow.

"Where are you taking me?" Stanton hazarded.

"Shaddup." A poke in the ribs with the muzzle of a gun ended the conversation.

In the ward behind them, the old man who had watched so secretly, got out of bed. Dressed in a hospital wrapper and slippers, he sneaked away from the bed. He looked at the guard. He was still unconscious. This was it!

Send him to jail for six months just for gettin' a potsy on, would they? He'd show them! He went around from bed to bed. He spoke only to the men whom he knew were well enough to get about.

Once they were awake, he told them gleefully there was a jail break on. All they had to do was follow him.

There were ten of them well enough to follow his lead. He showed them how the unused door opened. Silently, on cat feet, they followed him. Far, far ahead, there was a will o' the wisp of light.

It blinked out suddenly. Stanton and his captors had just left the corridor. Roger shook his head dizzily as he walked out into the street. It seemed completely impossible that the whole thing could have been done so simply. A car waited at the curb.

There was no one in sight. All the luck seemed to be on the side of the men who were forcing him into the car. He looked around despairingly. No one anywhere.

He got into the car. If only he knew what this meant. Why should they help him escape from jail... unless... There was one explanation... if they meant to kill him.

The car drove off. The squat man drove. The other two men sat with guns in Stanton's ribs. It went around a corner and disappeared into the night.

Five minutes passed, then ten. A head poked into sight. It was the old man. They made a bizarre procession. The sick, the halt, the criminal. Slippers pattering, hospital gowns wrapped around them, they slid out of the building.

One minute they were there, the next they had split up and each had gone his separate secret way. Each was sure that only he would be able to get help, to get some clothes and money and make his escape...

each, in his own heart, considered the others stupid for leaving in the night, dressed as they were, moneyless and alone.

THE headlines didn't help Lamont Cranston's breakfast go down very well. They read, "Mass Jail Break! Old Jail Yields Twelve!" The story didn't tell much more than that. All that was clear was that Roger Stanton was again on the run.

Why would the boy have given himself up if he intended to escape? Cranston spooned his egg into his mouth while he pondered. He was in his bedroom. His breakfast was spread out on a tray.

The door resounded with a knock. Cranston called out, "Come in."

Dane took him at his word. He slammed the door open, waved a paper in the air, and said, "How d'ya like this!"

"I don't know that I like it particularly. Coffee?"

"I just had some, but I guess I can force some more. Y'know," Dane said, as he sat down on the only chair in the room, "what I can't dope out, is how the kid does it. In the first place, I still can't figure out how the hell he got those eyes all over town without being spotted. Now this crash out... you'd think he had a whole gang here in town..."

"The jail break certainly would seem to be part of a well laid plan," Cranston agreed.

"How could he have come into town for the first time, and know that the old door in the jail hospital was the way out? It doesn't add up..." Dane shook his head.

Cranston thought he knew who was behind the jail break, but he couldn't voice his suspicions without checking up. Instead, he said, "This all makes it much worse for Stanton."

"It sure does," Dane agreed. "The cops have been given orders to shoot him on sight!"

CHAPTER X

INSIDE of three hours, eight of the escaped prisoners were caught. It was pre-ordained, with the men dressed as they were, that they were sure to be picked up by the first cop that saw them.

The old man who had led them was still at liberty. Until he was arrested, the police had no way of knowing how they had found their way out. As a result, they were positive that Stanton had led the men. They paid no attention to the men's stories that an old man had been the one to wake them and show them the exit.

The phone in Cranston's hotel room rang. He picked it up. This was awkward. It was one of his men sent to town by Burbank. Cranston spoke as noncommittally as he could with Dane sitting not five feet from him.

"Fine." That was in answer to how the glass eyes had been parked around town. "Good. Keep at it." That was in answer to the question about whether or not the search for motives for killing Mingus should go on. Dane was reading the papers.

Cranston ended the call by saying, "Check with me later on today."

Puffing on a cigarette stub which was close to burning his lips, Dane said, "This case will never go down in history as one of my triumphs. I just cannot seem to get anywhere with it!"

"There seem to be too many things working at cross purposes," Cranston agreed. "By the way, did you ever get a lead on whoever it was that shot at you?"

"Nah... that's one of the things that's burning me," Dane said, pinching his cigarette. "This is one of those cases you and I know the police can handle much better than we can. There's no use in any private operative kidding himself. Occasionally the free lance worker can make the cops look like dopes, but there are ten times as many cases in which the police machinery can handle things much better."

"How too true," Cranston agreed, getting into his clothes.

"I can sit in my office with my feet up in the air, making a lot of fancy guesses, but the boys in blue with the dragnet out are going to be the ones to pick Stanton up.

"You know," said Cranston, "I don't think they're going to. If they'd been able, I think they would have had him by now."

"That's right... he's been on the loose all night. If he got out of town, he's well on his way by now.

Dane ran his hands through his tight curly hair. "I'm gettin' a little punchy. This thing's gettin' my goat."

"Mine, too. You see..." Cranston said, as he tied his neck tie, "I still don't think Stanton is the killer."

"You're a hard guy to convince, aren't you?" Dane grinned. "Give you an idea and you stick to it."

They went downstairs together. Out on the street, Cranston said, "I want one more look at the room where Mingus was killed."

"I'll go along for laughs," Dane said. "Hop in my car. I'll drive you there. God knows, I haven't anything else to do."

"No other cases on your calendar?" Cranston asked, as he seated himself in Dane's car.

"No. I had a good one last month." Grinning at his own folly, Dane said, "But... where are the snows of yesteryear... I had a few tips on the horses, you know."

"Drink and damsels got the rest," Cranston quoted.

"How right you are." They drove along in pleasant silence. Dane said, "There's the house."

They went up the stairs together. A cop was on guard at the door, but Dane knew him and they were allowed in. They looked the shabby rooms over together.

"How can a room tell you so little," Dane said.

"If Stanton is not the killer, and I am convinced, as you know, that he is not, this kill comes close to being the perfect murder," Cranston said. There just was no clue in the rooms.

"There's plenty to be read about Mingus' character from these furnishings, from the neighborhood in which he lived, despite all his money, but that's about all," Dane said.

"Curious quirk, that he should live here," Cranston agreed.

"He could have afforded to live pretty high."

"Yes, I am convinced of that." Cranston sighed. "We may as well go."

They waved good-bye to the bored cop who was on guard. On the street they parted. Cranston said, "See you later."

"Sure. Don't take any wooden nickels." Dane drove off.

As soon as Dane was gone, Cranston went into a candy store and dialed long distance. He had his silver ready. As soon as he had gotten through to Mr. Stanton senior, he barked, "Are you satisfied?"

"Really, I don't know what you're talking about... and I don't like your tone of voice, Cranston!"

"I don't like the way you operate any more than you do my voice!" Cranston was angrier than he usually allowed himself to get.

"What is this all about?"

"Don't tell me that it wasn't your goons who sprung Roger."

"Well... I acted as I thought best." Stanton's voice was edgy.

"You realize you've come pretty close to ruining any help I may be able to give your son?"

"I don't realize that at all. I won't allow my boy to be thrown in a cell like a common felon! He's home now, being taken care of."

Cranston smothered a groan. "I see. Now will you tell me what you intend to do next?"

"Certainly. I have retained the best criminal lawyer in New York. We will fight this thing if it takes every cent I have!"

"But... even if your son is tried and acquitted, he's always going to have this hanging over his head. Don't you see that?"

"If I were in your position. I don't think I should take this attitude. You certainly bungled a comparatively simple assignment."

"I..." Cranston hung up. He had taken on an onerous job because of his friendship with the elder Stanton. He certainly had not looked at it as an 'assignment'... he stomped out of the candy store into the street angrily.

No point in losing his temper, he thought sourly. This whole thing was so messed up, he needed a clearer mind. So the boy was in New York hiding out in his father's home! The goons were probably guarding him.

The police were on the lookout. They would not be happy to find out that the boy had slid right out of their dragnet. The boy was now wanted for a jail break and murder. That made everything just dandy.

All around him, the busy life of a tenement section went on. Children, forced out of dark railroad flats, played games that would have made any child educator tear his hair out. The street was their living room...

It was then, feeling the glass eye in his pocket, rolling it over and over in his fingers, that he realized who the killer was... had to be.

Proving it was going to be a tough assignment...

He strode off down the street, a tall dark man with a good-looking face, a determined man with menace in him. He knew, now, and nothing was going to stop him from bringing a ruthless, double killer to justice.

HE checked with his man, the man whom Burbank had sent to town to help him. The man was nicknamed with a childish pseudonym that fitted him well. He was called Hawkeye, and for good reason. Put him on a trail and nothing could deflect him.

They sat in a luncheonette and Cranston said. "Then as far as you can find out, anyone who came in contact with Mingus would have good reason to kill him?"

"You're right!" Hawkeye said. "What a swine!"

Cranston reached into his pocket and took out the envelope on which Brett Dane had written the names of the people whom he considered most likely to have killed the usurer. They looked at the scribbled names. One of the names on the envelope was that of the killer, Cranston assured Hawkeye.

Hawkeye said, "You're sure?"

"Positive."

"I see. Then it's up to us somehow to nail the killer."

"Uh huh. Right now I don't quite see how. But I will not leave town until we have the evidence."

"So if I don't want to live out the rest of my own life here I'd better get a wiggle on. It'll be easier now. Before, I felt like a man in a coal cellar at midnight looking for a black cat. Now that you are sure of who it is, I can act more directly."

They finished lunch and Hawkeye left. Cranston headed for police headquarters. Perhaps there, he could find a slender thread... or at least the end of a thread which, when unraveled, would lead to the murderer.

Smelling the odor of unwashed humanity, the heavy manifold reminder of the misery that was a daily concomitant of running a police force, Cranston could understand why so many cops got hard in face and manner. It was necessary to callous oneself...

The chief looked up expectantly when Lamont walked into the office. The expectant look vanished. "Oh, it's you. You're the guy who thinks Stanton is as innocent as a new born babe."

"Uh huh."

"Despite all the evidence that has been added, despite the jail break?"

Cranston nodded.

"Then you either are thicker than a cement outhouse, or you know something I don't know."

"That's right."

"Which, that you're thick?"

"No. I know who the killer is." Cranston reached into his pocket and rolled Mingus' glass eye across the desk.

"Another of those damn phony eyes?"

"Not at all. This is the real one."

The chief looked his disbelief.

"Turn it over and look inside it."

"So? There's nothing inside it but glass."

"Precisely."

"You're ribbing me." The chief did an Edgar Kennedy burn. "And I'm not in the mood for ribbing."

"Not at all. The importance of the clue of the glass eye is that it is just that, a glass eye. There are no mysterious messages inside the eye, there is nothing startling about the eye. It is just what it seems to be."

"Now, wait a minute..."

"You wait a minute. I'll tell you why this eye tells us the name of the killer," Cranston said firmly, "I'll tell you all, in a couple of hours! I am wrapping up the whole case tonight!"

On that he left the chief.

CHAPTER XI

IT was turning from day to night when Cranston left the police station. The sun was setting behind some decrepit buildings off to his left. He looked up at the red haze the sun was leaving behind it. Red, red for blood.

Blood on the moon... on the moon and on a man's hands. A man who must feel himself above the law, beyond the ordinary rules that apply to mundane humanity.

Cranston wasn't aware of how he got there, but Hawkeye was at his side. They walked down the street quietly. Cranston spoke first. "Get anything?"

"Puhlenty."

"Give."

"Just what you figured."

"Good."

"Use the rig tonight?"

"Yes. Cover me. I'm going after him. I'm going to wind this up once and for all."

Some reporters clattered down the steps of the police station. Hawkeye and Cranston turned to look at them. They were piling into some battered cars that were parked at the curb in direct violation of the city ordinance about fire plugs.

"Hi!" Brett Dane separated from the mass of men.

"Hello Dane." Hawkeye was gone from Cranston's side.

"Anything new?" Dane asked.

"Yes. I guess you could say there is."

"Secret?"

"No. I'm going after the killer as of now." Cranston's face was set.

"Need any help?" Dane was eager.

"Yes. Always glad of an extra hand. You see, as I told the chief, there is no real proof of my conviction. I have to bluff to a degree. I have no way of knowing what's going to happen."

"Was that list I gave you of potential suspects any use?"

"Yes indeed. The name of the killer was on it."

"I'll be damned!"

"Did you tell the chief who it was you suspected?"

"No, I didn't think it would be fair... after all, I may be wrong. And if I am, there's no use in having the police after an innocent person."

"Decent of you," Dane said, and then, "Where away? I know you don't have a car with you."

"Down toward the waterfront, if my informant is correct."

"You mean," said Dane as they both got into his car, "that the Stanton kid is in the clear despite all the evidence?"

"That's exactly what I mean. It's what I've been saying ever since Mingus was found with the knife wound in his belly."

"You stick with an idea when one hits you, don't you?"

Cranston nodded as he shifted his shoulder. He felt the reassuring weight of his .45 in his shoulder holster. You never know.

Aloud, he said, "Without your help I doubt if I could ever have taken the noose from Stanton's neck. Thank you."

"You're welcome, but I wish I knew how I helped you. I feel like a jerk... after all, I'm supposed to be a detective, too. Do I know all the things you do?"

"I think so. I have some verification that you don't, but you have the basic facts..."

The car drove through traffic that got lighter as they went. Most of the cars were driving the other way. People were going home from work, and going uptown, not down toward the docks. Cranston looked in the rear view mirror. There... yes, that was Hawkeye in that other car. Leave it to him to stick like a corn plaster.

"Where now, master mind?" Dane kidded. "There're the docks, up ahead."

"Pier number forty two."

"Right you are."

They drove along in silence until they reached the pier Cranston had asked for. Dane applied his brakes. "Now what?"

"We leave the car here."

As they got out of the car, Dane asked curiously, "Is the killer someone I know?"

Cranston nodded. "We have to go down toward the end of the pier."

"You lead, I'll bring up the well known rear, since I'm definitely in second place on this deal."

There was no one in sight. Dane said, "Wonder where the watchman is?"

"Probably too early. The day men have just gone off..."

They walked out to the very end of the dock. Cranston sat down on the very edge of the dock with his feet hanging off. His back was to a pile that reared up at a Tower of Pisa angle. He said, "May as well get comfortable. This may be a long wait."

Dane sat at his right. He let his feet dangle off the edge, too. They might have been two kids playing hookey from school. "Can we talk, or is this one of those hush-hush vigils?"

"We can talk." Cranston looked at his watch.

Dane took a pocket knife from his vest pocket. It was one of those with a spring where you push a button and the blade pops out. He hacked at a piece of wood at his side. He got out a long splinter and sat whittling it.

He said, "You keeping the surprise for the last chapter, or can you go over the thing with me? It should be good for me. I rarely monk up this badly." He paused. "As a matter of fact, of the maybe fifty cases I've had since I left the cops, I don't think I ever wandered around in as much of a fog as I have on this little dilly."

"Ummm..." Cranston said, looking out over the water at the grimy tugs, the long slender pleasure boats, the heavy wide cargo boats, that made a pattern on the water. "This should go down on the record as the perfect murder that went wrong."

"If, as you say, the kid, Stanton, is in the clear, then it does stack up as the perfect murder."

"You see," Cranston said, still looking at the changing patterns in the water, "the philosophers of murder, the writers, have done so much thinking about the perfect murder, that they wind up in a veritable fog of murder devices, of faked alibis, of unknown poisons... when we practical men of trade know very well the perfect murder is the one that takes place in a dark alley where a bludgeon beats the brains out of a careless head."

"Sure. Those are the tough ones to crack. No clues, no witnesses, nothing to get a toe hold on."

"The man who killed Mingus knew that. Knew too, that more important than strange poisons that leave no trace, or getting rid of the corpus delicti, is the small matter of handing a suspect over to the police neatly wrapped up in a package."

"Let's face it," Dane agreed, "cops are rather poorly paid civil servants, one of the reasons I left the force, and they are as overworked as they are underpaid. They do have a tendency to grab at the handiest

suspect."

"I wouldn't go that far... the police have seen so much violence that everything begins to fall into a pattern. For instance if a husband calls the police and says that he has just come home and found his wife shot, the cops figure, and rightly in ninety per cent of the cases, that the husband is the killer and is calling to throw suspicion off himself."

"How true," Dane agreed. "That is the danger of the professional cop. He has, as you say, seen so many patterns that a killer who breaks the accepted patterns has a good, or at least better chance of getting away with murder."

"The smart killer," Cranston said in rebuttal, "is not the one who breaks the pattern because that brings more attention to him, but the one who frames his kill so that it falls into an accepted pattern, you see?"

Dane had whittled his splinter down to a toothpick. He idly picked at a space between his two front teeth and said, "A frame up?"

"Exactly."

"All this is leading to the Mingus kill, of course. How did your smart murderer conceivably frame the kid? No one but a mind reader could have known that Stanton was going to duck away from the cops in time to waltz into the frame."

"Not even a fortune teller could have predicted that... however, since our killer had a blueprint, he just fitted a new character into the blueprint."

"That's over my head." Dane said, as he carefully split the toothpick in half. "I don't get it."

"Look," Cranston said patiently, "Stanton was not the one that the gilt-edged frame was rigged for."

"Now you're really confusing me."

"You remember a pickpocket who was arrested for picking Stanton's pocket?"

"Sure. That was the first inkling the cops had that Stanton was in town."

"That's where the plot really started. The pickpocket said, just before he dipped Stanton's wallet, that he had an appointment with Mingus."

"The dip was meant to be the pigeon?"

"As far as I can see, yes. The killer must have come close to cracking when he looked out the window after stabbing Mingus and saw his clay pigeon being arrested. Here he had done the killing, all that was left was to hand someone over to the police..."

"And then like a gift from the gods, the door opened and Stanton walked in."

"Walked into the blackjack that was designed for the pickpocket. If anything, that made the frame stronger, because Stanton was on the run, wanted by the police."

"Neat, very neat." Dane said.

"The killer smashed Stanton, put the murder weapon, the knife, into the boy's unconscious hand, and walked out."

"Cute. That left him completely in the clear."

"Except for one small item."

"What was that?" Dane asked curiously.

"Mingus, with his dying breath, left a clue that points directly to the killer." Cranston said, looking at the swirling rainbows that oil from the ships had left on the surface of the water. For no earthly reason, a vagrant thought flickered through Cranston's mind. It had something to do with the fact that whale oil will calm wild water down much faster than regular petroleum. Cranston smiled at himself. Of all times to be thinking of extraneities!

"What in the world kind of clue could a dying man leave?" Dane scowled at the water. "I can't buy these stories where the dying man gets up and scrawls out a double talk message that only the great brain of the detective can ever figure out.

"They seem pretty silly to me, too." Cranston agreed. "However, the thing that Mingus did was something that could be done with a dying breath."

"What was that?"

"He plucked out his glass eye."

"You mean the kid didn't take it?"

"Oh, yes. Stanton took it all right. But he took it from the dead man's relaxing hand. He didn't pluck it out of the eye socket." Cranston paused. "How could he have? He didn't know the dead man wore a prosthetic eye."

"I don't know if I can buy that, either. After all, the muscles in the eye might have forced it out in his death throes."

"I considered that, too, Dane. But I had the matter checked with a doctor. The glass eye is kept in place not by muscular contraction, but by lifting and stretching the eyelids. Epileptics have worn glass eyes and there is no record of an epileptic popping a glass eye out. I assure you that no death throes could be quite so violent as the convulsions of epilepsy.

"No, Dane, Mingus plucked his own eye out and held it in his hand as he died, so that the first cop that came along and found the eye would know..." Cranston saw that Dane wasn't listening to him. Instead, he sat with his head cocked to one side.

"Shh." Dane said. "I hear someone!" He paused and they both heard the old wood of the dock complain as heavy footsteps pounded towards them. Dane whispered, "Is this your killer, come to call?"

Before Cranston could answer, a suave, rounded voice said, "Hello? Anyone here? Why the mysterious phone call?"

CHAPTER XII

DANE said under his breath, "That fat slob! Darrell Firm!"

"Oh - it's you, Dane! If I'd known you were behind the call I would not have come!" Firm said.

Cranston looked at the politician, the man who had been kept in political prominence by Mingus' dirty

money. The man was about forty-five, with a paunch, a too red face, a smile that came and went as though turned on by a button and a real ham's voice. "I was the one who called you, Mr. Firm. My name is Lamont Cranston."

With Firm still about ten paces away, Dane whispered to Cranston, "If I stay here there's going to be a fight. I can't stand this guy!"

"I don't need you; if you want to, you may leave."

"Sure you don't need me?"

"Positive. Perhaps it would be better if you left. I can get more done that way."

As Dane passed Firm the two men puffed their chests out like lighting roosters. Firm waited till Dane was quite a bit away. Night was falling and Dane was out of sight before he reached the land end of the pier. Firm said, "Now then, what can I do for you, Mr. Cranston? I know you by reputation, of course." His voice dribbled off as he waited for Lamont to speak.

Alone on the end of a pier that jutted out into the river, Cranston and Firm took each other's measure. Cranston said slowly, "You were very close to Mingus, weren't you?"

"You've been listening to that louse Dane."

Shrugging, Cranston persisted, "You knew a bit about Mingus' business?"

Firm nodded. "What do you want to know and why?"

"Do you know who was indebted to Mingus?"

"Some of the ones, yes."

"Who owed Mingus the most money?"

"That's a hard one. I couldn't be sure. Mingus had his money spread around where he thought it would do the most good."

"I see. You don't know where he kept his records?"

"He didn't. He couldn't because of the income tax boys. He had a phenomenal memory and he trusted it completely. No, you won't find any papers with the information you want."

There was a silence. Then Firm said, "If it will help you any, I know that Brett Dane was in hock to someone else!"

"Who?"

"Landers. Know him?"

Cranston shook his head.

"He's a very bad boy. I heard not long ago that Dane dropped a big bundle to Landers in a crap game."

"I see."

"I guess that isn't much help - after all, you want to know who owed Mingus money." Firm looked at Cranston, "Why do you want to know that?"

"I am sure that Stanton, whom the police think killed Mingus is innocent. I am just trying to find out about any other motives that might fit the pattern."

Standing up, Firm said, "Then I am afraid I can't be of any help."

As Firm turned to walk away, Cranston said quietly, "How much did you owe Mingus, Mr. Firm?"

"That damn Dane! Did he tell you I was in debt?"

"No, but were you?"

"No, not a blessed penny! I think you have said all I want to hear, Mr. Cranston!" Firm stalked off highly indignant. Cranston did not even turn around to watch him as the politician walked away.

Instead Cranston looked out over the water. He could hear Firm's footsteps echoing back to him. He sat on the edge of the pier.

Soon it was quiet. Quiet as the water front must have been before man brought the hurry-burly of his complexities and superimposed them onto the placidity of the water.

Getting to his feet, Cranston turned his back on the peace and quiet and walked towards the man who waited to kill him.

Cranston felt the presence of someone else on the dock as he walked towards a dense black patch of shadow cast by a high piling. A watchman's shanty, jutting upwards like a broken finger, cast its own shadows.

There was a too solid shadow in the darkness. Cranston put his hand to his chest. He slid his fingers over the cold reassuring weight of the gun that was holstered there. Aloud he said, "You can come out now." His voice was tired. This was the showdown, the end of the case. The killer waited for him. It was a death trap.

The dark patch that was a murderer said in low tones, "How did you know?"

A scurrying cloud passed over the face of the moon. It blacked out the whole area like a deadly blanket. "Does it matter now?" The man stood up. He was a menacing figure that had no identity except to Cranston who knew who he was. Cranston said, "If you move again, I'll shoot you."

The answer could have been predicted. A bullet came out of the darkness. It missed Cranston only because he had thrown himself flat on his belly as he spoke. From his prone position he pointed his gun up and said, "Drop it."

The man tried to aim, and as he did, Cranston shot his gun from his hand. Then the silence was broken by the clatter of the gun landing on the wood of the dock. The man, instead of nursing his injured hand, leaped at Cranston. He threw his whole weight into the charge. He landed solidly.

It knocked the pins from under Cranston. In the quiet that now lay heavy, there was the sound of rasping breath. The two men rolled over and over. They were perilously close to the edge of the dock.

Cranston could not bring his gun to bear on the man, for the man, using his uninjured hand in a vise-like grasp, bent it backwards. The pain must have eased up in the man's hand for somehow he got it into his pocket and came out with a knife which flashed open. Rolling over and over like two children playing, the two men rolled off the edge of the dock.

The knife flickered in the light as the moon came out from the cloud. The knife flashed down at Cranston's throat as the battling men vanished under the water.

The surface of the water smoothed out. The oil acted as oil always does. It calmed down the little waves that the men had made.

Soon a rainbow remade itself.

Under the water, Cranston was able to move his injured arm more easily. Gravity lessened, it felt almost normal. He slitted his eyes and saw the knife driving toward his throat.

The water made the motions fantastic, like a slow motion picture. Fast or slow, however, that razor-edged knife would do things to Cranston's throat.

Loosening his grasp, Cranston arched backward, away from the menace of the knife. This had to end fast, or they'd both drown. The knife slashed through the water, leaving a train of bubbles in its path.

Getting the gun out of its holster was a job, underwater. Keeping out of reach of the knife, Cranston brought the gun up. Dane jackknifed his legs and swooped down like a chicken hawk... or a shark...

He grabbed the gun from Cranston's hand. The blood was making little, almost pretty, swirls in the water as it oozed from Cranston's arm.

The man grinned, and he was like a shark. He pointed the gun at Cranston. Both of them were at the end of the air supply that tortured lungs were doling out in fast disappearing quantities.

Knife in one hand, gun in the other, Dane could afford the luxury of a grin. Cranston was out of reach of the knife. The trigger of the gun pulled back.

Even in the murky water, Cranston could see the finger tightening on the trigger. He knew that, turn and twist as he might, he could not evade the speed of a bullet... but a thought made his mouth curl in a smile.

He stopped trying to evade the gun's menace. He stayed stock still, making a perfect target for the bullet.

The hammer fell on the back of the cartridge.

CHAPTER XIII

COMING out from under the cover of the pier, Hawkeye swore. The rowboat was clumsy, and the weight of the storage batteries under the seat in front of him didn't make the boat any the less unwieldy.

He scanned the water, seeing bubbles that denoted the position of the two men who were hidden under the water. Suddenly a little mountain of a bubble rose to the surface and burst.

There was a low muffled sound, and then, Hawkeye sniffed. He could smell the unmistakable fumes of cordite. Once smelled, it is never forgotten.

He knew that a gun had gone off under water... but who had fired it?

Brett Dane's head broke the water first. Hawkeye had to quell the desire to bash Dane's head with an oar. He was glad he didn't when he saw Dane's face.

It was Cranston who had pushed the unconscious body of the private detective into view. He smiled at Hawkeye. "Grab hold."

It was a job, getting the slack body into the rowboat. Cranston couldn't be of too much help because of his arm. They finally managed it. Hawkeye said, "Gotta be careful he doesn't drip on the wire."

"That's all we'd need." Cranston said.

They both looked at the mangled remains of what been a good-looking face. Dane breathed stertorously. Hawkeye asked, "What'd you do to him?... Not that he didn't deserve whatever it was..."

"I didn't do anything." Cranston explained about how Dane had wrested the gun from his hand because of the wounded arm which had refused to mobilize itself.

"Yeah... so he points the gat at you and pulls the trigger... so?"

"I figured... down there..." Cranston looked at the oily water, "that either of two things were likely to happen; a: the cartridge would not go off because the primer was wet... or b: that the gun would explode when the violent forces set off by the impact of the pin met the blanketing effect of the water."

"B: happened. The gun blew up in his face," Hawkeye said.

"It almost deafened me, but outside of that I seem to be all right. We'd better get him to the hospital."

"Him?" Hawkeye was indignant. "What about you? What about your arm?"

"I suppose it should be cleaned out and bandaged." With that, Cranston leaned back. Wavering lines were flickering before his eyes. He realized that he was a little faint from the wound, and the exertion of moving the damaged arm.

In the prison hospital from which Stanton had been kidnapped... or rescued... depending on how you looked at it, the doctor finished bandaging Cranston's arm as the chief of police entered.

The chief looked at the bed on which Dane lay. The man moaned, even under the opiate that had been given him. His head was a white mushroom of bandage.

"Don't I have enough trouble without detectives fighting among themselves?" the chief asked.

Cranston, instead of answering said, "May one of my assistants come in, chief?"

"Why not?"

Hawkeye entered with a package under his arm. "Is there an outlet, an electric socket I can use?"

The doctor pointed to one and Hawkeye squatted on his heels. "This is a lot more convenient than the batteries in the boat, huh chief?"

The chief of police looked puzzled until Cranston said, "He means me, chief, not you."

"What is all this?"

"All this," Cranston said, pointing to the bed where Dane lay, "is the end of the Mingus murder. That..." pointing to the package which Hawkeye was connecting to the wall socket, "is a wire recorder."

"A which?" the chief asked.

"It's not particularly new. A recorder which translates sound waves into magnetic impulses."

"I know... uses wire instead of wax. I always meant to find out about them," the chief said. "I don't

understand how they work. Does the needle scratch the record into the wire the way it does into wax?"

"I can't explain a whole recondite subject in the time it will take Hawkeye to get the setup, so, simply, a wire is run between the jaws of a magnet. An electrically amplified sound jams the magnetic pattern into the molecular structure of the wire. That sound is then later translated back into sound... ah, ready, Hawkeye?"

"Sure, boss."

"A few words first, chief." Cranston said. "I jockeyed Dane down onto a dock where he could see that there was not a soul around for miles. Then I stalled until I was sure that my assistant, Hawkeye, had enough time to get under the dock in a rowboat. He had the wire recorder, which can record a full hour of conversation, in the rowboat. He started it as I began to set up the case of the two murders."

"Murders? Plural?" the chief asked.

"Yes, Mingus and the pickpocket. However," Cranston said, "the wire record will explain almost everything. I think."

The chief sat with his chin in his hands as the wire spool unwound itself and its sordid story.

When the spool had finished, the chief turned and looked at Dane, whose body moved in pain. "The dirty..." He paused. Words did no good. He just sat for a few minutes.

"Dane owed a lot of money to Mingus," Cranston said.

"Twenty thousand... that's a lot of money. A lot more than a private detective can ever hope to pay back..." Dane said, speaking through his pain.

"I never intended to pay it back," the killer said. "I built my credit up very carefully. I'd borrow a grand and pay back eleven hundred in a week. Then I borrowed two grand... I had it up to twenty fast..."

"Why did you need that much?"

Dane grinned sourly. He had never been able to talk over his problem with anyone. "I was between the devil and the deep blue sea, if anyone ever was. I dropped the twenty grand in a crap game with Andy Lander."

Cranston remembered what Firm the politician had said.

"Oh, I forgot. You don't know all the characters in this town. Lander is a bad boy. I knew that if I didn't pay him back, I'd wind up in the river... with concrete booties to keep my feet warm. I knew the worst that Mingus would do the first couple of times he wanted his money, anyway, was to have me beat up... well, I been beat up before... but I never been dead before..."

"So you got the heat off from Lander's end by paying him the money you owed him..." Cranston prompted.

"And then I was in the soup with Mingus. I had to kill him... it was him or me... and I like to live."

"Did you have to kill the pickpocket?" Cranston asked.

"Of course. Don't you see... I had phoned the dip, disguised my voice, said I was Mingus, told him to be there about five minutes after I figured on making cold meat of Mingus."

"Then, when he was arrested, you didn't want him telling anyone about his 'appointment'?"

"Right. You're no dope, Cranston. When Stanton put his neck in the noose, I wanted the dip forgotten about... the quickest way out was to pay a visit with the cops. I sneaked off, took care of the dip with his own tie, and wandered back to the uniformed boys. They never even realized I was gone."

"You traded on the fact that your face is so well known down there that people take you for granted."

"The way it worked out, I was right. No one even mentioned the fact that I was there, did they?"

"Oh, you were seen, the only reason it didn't come up was because the question wasn't raised," Cranston said coldly.

"So you raised the question?" Dane grinned.

"Correct."

"Like I say, you're a cutie pie," Dane said.

"It worked the same way as your appearance at Mingus' flat. What did you do after you'd killed him? Run up and over the roof, come down the next house and calmly go right back up into Mingus' flat?"

"You're so right. But the cops didn't pay me any mind because I've shown up at plenty of murders. It's a nice cover-up."

"Very... you're the invisible man as far as the police are concerned."

Dane grinned. "Sure, I've made it my business to be on the right side of them. Lots of them don't even realize I'm not on the force any more."

"I saw that."

"You seem to have seen too damn much." Dane said.

"It took me a minute to see through your misdirection with the bullet!" Cranston said.

"Bullet? Oh, you mean in my office."

"Who did the shooting? The girl?"

"You wouldn't think she could shoot that well, would you? That's one of the reasons I hired her. Sure, she waited till you were all set in my office, then, she screamed, shot at my shadow... we had that figured out to the inch... and then pulled the phony faint."

Cranston said, "It was you who tailed me all over town till you ran out of gas, wasn't it?"

Dane nodded. "I just wanted to see what you were up to."

"That was a confusing pattern, because after I ducked you, Stanton's father's goons picked up Stanton at the hotel, and I had some trouble with them."

"It's not a pretty picture," the chief said, "but there's still some things that don't add up to me. Like..."

"Let me explain one thing first," Cranston said. "I'm a lip reader, that's how I knew what the pickpocket said to his friends..."

"But how, in the name of all that's holy, could Dane have known that Mingus and the pickpocket had an appointment? There was no earthly way that I could see that."

"Dane slipped there. He mentioned the date casually, as though it were a well known bit of information!"

"He wasn't in sight when the dip said that he had to see Mingus?" the chief asked.

"Of course not. He was up in Mingus' room killing the man when the conversation took place. The only way he knew about the date was because he made it! He had called the pickpocket, pretending to be Mingus, and asked the dip to be there at a specific time! That's recorded on the wire, if you remember."

"That didn't even occur to me," the chief said. "Someplace on that spool, you said that the name of the murderer was on the list that Dane gave you. Do you mean to say that Dane put his own name down?"

"That was misdirection," Cranston said, "and yet, it was true. You see, he wrote out the list on the back of an envelope that he had received... well, naturally, his name was on the front of the envelope. So..."

"I think after turning this killer over to me, you might be able to make a deal with me about Stanton." The chief smiled. "I've been hounding the city fathers for more money to fix the rat trap of a jail for ages. This escape has brought the thing to a head. I think I'll get the appropriation now."

"I think, too," said Cranston, "that the rise in pay for the police should go through now, don't you?"

"Are you telling me," said the chief, unbelievably, "that you're allowing the police credit for capturing Dane?"

"Yes. I think you would have, anyway, in the long run."

"I can't thank you enough, Mr. Cranston. This'll be a big help."

"You see, that was one of the factors that weighed so heavily with Dane. He knew that because of the legislation on the pay increase, the police would be doubly anxious for a quick conviction."

"How right he was. That was some real dust he threw in my eyes..."

"And speaking of eyes..." Cranston said, "I think your last question was to be how I knew in the first place that Dane had killed Mingus?"

"That's right," the chief agreed. "Unless you knew something I didn't, I can't see how you..."

"I did know something you didn't know, and that's why I don't take any credit for perspicacity. You see... Mingus... dying..."

"Yeah," interrupted the chief. "The eye! What'd that mean?"

"You're too close to see, chief. What are the slang names for private detective?"

"Shamus... private dick.. private eye..."

"The private eye... precisely... you see, Mingus knew who killed him... and wrenched his private eye from its socket so as to leave a clue!"

Cranston left with Hawkeye while the chief was still muttering, "Private eye..."

There'd be good news for Roger Stanton... no murder rap... no arrest for breaking jail... and certainly by

now even Roger's stupidly adamant father would have seen the futility of prosecuting his son for forgery. And Roger... Cranston smiled to himself, for he was sure that Roger had learned a lesson he would never forget.

It was raining as they walked out onto the street. Cranston wondered if Burbank, back in New York, had dug up anything interesting...

THE END