

To Hell with Death

By
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etc.*

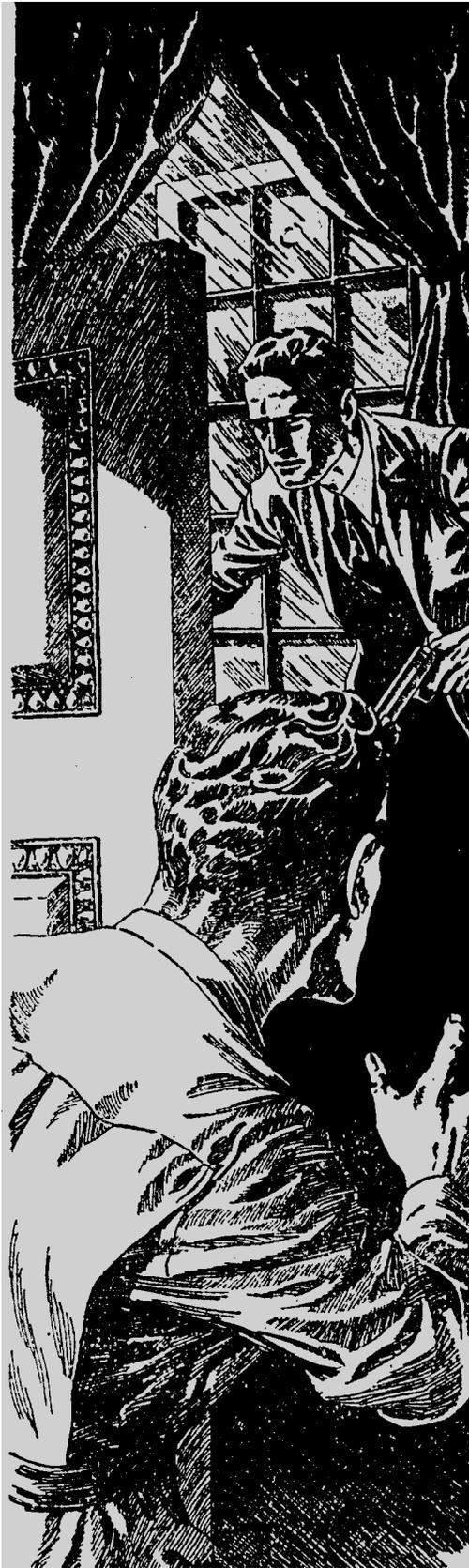
*The Gods of Chance Play Havoc with
Keith Craven's Plans!*

CRAVEN careened blindly out of the side road and into the highway. When he saw the headlights that he should have seen before making the hazardous turn, a flash of utter terror shook him. He was fleeing from the one thing he feared most tonight in life. Death! And here was death of his own making, split seconds away!

Craven swung the wheel and slammed on his brakes instinctively, his little pointed teeth biting into his lower lip. He closed his eyes a second before the crash.

But through the screeching of hard slapped brakes, the rending grasp of metal on metal, Death merely whispered and floated on. It was, in a sense, the second time that night.

His stocky body tingling from the jar, his breathing fast, Craven hoped with all the fervor in him that his cargo would not be discovered. He slid from under the steering wheel, stepped out into the road. With shaking fingers he drew out a cigarette, lit it and inhaled deeply.



Those few moments had ended with a gun in his hand

In the flare of the match he saw that his car had suffered a crumpled front fender, a gouge in the gleaming hood. But, miraculously, the radiator was not leaking and the front wheels did not seem badly sprung. Craven took a deep breath, turned and walked slowly toward the other car.

Craven saw then that the other driver, strangely, was not getting out of his coupe. The man had backed off, and was sitting behind the wheel, just staring. Craven moved stiffly through the raw December night, reached the coupe. The window was rolled down; the interior reeked of alcohol. Strength came back with a liling surge, and black hollows of Craven's eyes grew suddenly bleak and hard again. There was still a chance to carry the thing off!

"Don't you know it's against the law to drive in your condition?" he began angrily.

The other man nodded miserably. "Had to get back to town. Wa-wash my fault entirely."

"Do you know whose car you damn near cracked up?" Craven snarled. He didn't wait for an answer, went on grimly. "James T. Fleming's. And Fleming took a nasty jolt. It's a good thing that I, not he, came over to talk to you. A good thing for you."

"Fleming!" the drunk gasped. "My gosh—He runs Wellsport!"

"And breaks fools like you," Craven said harshly. "I'll go over and see what he wants to do about this accident."

HE RETURNED to Fleming's Packard, a sedan.

"Jim," he said loudly, "the guy takes all the blame. Wants to settle. Okay?"

And then, changing the pitch of his voice, he answered himself.

"Get his address, Craven. I'll send him my bill. If I wasn't in a hurry I'd punch him on the nose."

Craven got the drunk's address.

"Did you hear the old boy rave?" he asked, and grinned to himself when the drunk nodded solemnly and drove off.

Luck! What *luck!* A drunk who did not realize that the accident had not been his fault. A drunk who would swear he had heard Fleming talk! Craven stood in the road, laughing hysterically. It was the reaction, the release from

terror. It was—life!

He looked at the Packard. Fleming's form was vaguely visible, sitting with his head drowsily against the door. But Fleming's body was not too obvious. Craven crawled in behind the wheel, trying to avoid the eyes that were looking at him, half open, leering, the eyes that seemed to say, "Sure I'm dead, Craven. But your life isn't safe yet—not by a long shot!"

The wind swayed the car. And presently snow stabbed downward in the white lance of the Packard's headlights. The cold was not all in Craven's mind, and he damned the necessity that had started him off on this wild ride without an overcoat.

But there had not been time to worry about overcoats; or now about heaters that apparently had been damaged in the crash. Or about sleep.

He caught himself nodding, jerked upright. The snow was so quiet, and the motor dreamy. He began to smell the gas.

More than the heater had gone wrong in the accident, obviously. The feed line, or a gasket or something like that. Hell, though, he could stand a few fumes, couldn't he? In return for life? Craven opened the window a crack, breathed deeply of the cold, clean air—and caught himself nodding again.

Sleep.... He had scarcely slept for a week. Not at all the night before. The nearness of the showdown with Fleming had not let him sleep. Too much was in jeopardy. His future—he was only thirty-five—every cent he had, every prospect of making more.

It was a question of Fleming kicking in with a hundred thousand.

Tonight, Fleming had said over the phone, "Sorry, Keith, I'm leaving the state in an hour. I've got to be in Capitol City first thing in the morning.... Yes, I know you'd planned to see me, but this other matter comes first."

Keith Craven had muttered an oath over the phone, had said he would be right over.

"I've *got* to talk to you, Fleming!" he had cried. To a line already dead.

He didn't want to think about these things now, after it was all over, but his mind was like a treadmill. Grabbing up the revolver had been an angry gesture. He had taken a cab to Fleming's house, the quickest way. He had forgotten to don

overcoat or hat. And he had met Fleming in the hall.

"You fool," Fleming had growled, "I told you I was in a hurry."

"Then I'll go with you! Fleming, you can't do this. You're my silent partner. The business goes if we don't meet those notes tomorrow. You lose, too!"

"Certainly the business goes." Fleming had chuckled callously. "And I pick up what's left for a song. Craven, you're too small for me. I'm done with you. Now get out of my way. I'm in a hurry."

HAD he trotted beside Fleming like a little puppy pleading for a bone? Had he sobbed, and caught at Fleming's coat as the financier was climbing into his car in the dark loneliness of the winding drive? Those few moments were still a blind spot. But they had ended with the gun in his hand, the stab of flame. And dull surprise on Fleming's face. And silence....

As there was silence now. Only the motor, throbbing; only the wail of wind. No one had heard the shots. Craven cried those words out shrilly here on the highway.

"And they won't take my life!" he screamed. "They won't send me to the chair. Fleming tricked me in business, but he won't cost me my life!"

Oh, he knew he had done no clever murder. He knew it would seem premeditated. Didn't the bank know that Fleming had been his only hope? Wasn't Fleming insured, and he, as surviving partner, the beneficiary? And hadn't he foolishly taken a cab to Fleming's house? And been seen by the butler, and been heard to cry, "Then I'll go with you!"

They would call him a stupid bungler. They would accuse and swiftly convict. Ah, but *life* was the important thing. In the instant after murder, his sweeping, consuming passion. And he had seen the way to save it.

Fleming planned crossing the state line tonight, on business. "Then I'll go with you," implied just that, a continuation of their argument en route. And the northern state, a hundred and sixty miles from Wellsport, didn't have capital punishment.

"Oh, God," Craven prayed for the hundredth time, "let me cross the state line safely! Let it seem that I killed Fleming then."

He noticed the gas gauge. It read one gallon.

For a moment Keith Craven did not believe his eyes. The tank had been full. But he remembered the crash with the drunk, the contact which he had believed would help him, and he remembered the fumes in the car ever since. Now he realized that he had been losing gas with every mile.

He had to stop for fuel, no matter what ghastly freight he carried here on the seat beside him. He had to have gas to reach the state line with Fleming's body. He had to do that to live. So he sat up, stiffly, eyes searching the highway. Blinking, heavy lids, for all his nervous tension.

The place sat back from the road, unpainted, barren in the cold sweep of wind. There was a light over the door and the weathered sign, "GAS—REPAIRS," appeared to have been drawn by an untutored hand. Craven turned in warily. He was out of the car by the time the attendant reached the door.

"I WAS just fixing to take a nap," the man said, yawning. "Say, been in a wreck, ain't you?"

"Little accident. Nothing serious. Fill the tank."

"That motor don't sound too good," the attendant said then. "Gasket, maybe more. She's leaking fuel, by the smell. Want it checked?"

"No time," Craven snapped. "My friend and I"—he motioned to the front seat, to the figure slouched there as though dozing—we're in a hurry to reach Capitol City. How far are we from the state line?"

"About forty miles. Me, I'd have that motor checked. Them fumes alone would make a body sick. Get 'em inside, don't you?"

"A bit," Craven agreed shortly.

He produced three ones, and did not wait for the change. He was about to climb in behind the wheel when the voice came from the blackness of the road behind.

"You in the Packard—wait!" It was a man in peaked cap and breeches and puttees. It was—the LAW.

To flee was Craven's first reaction. But his legs felt paralyzed. They would not carry him on into the seat. He stood there, teeth chattering.

"Hello, Lafe," the station man said. "Where

the hell have you been?"

"Some danged farmer thought thieves were after his sheep. My car slid off Fascet Road on the way back. You with the Packard, Mister—you're a life saver!"

"This is Lafe Masters, the sheriff," the attendant volunteered. "I suppose you want a haul out, Lafe?"

Masters was a wide-shouldered man, powerfully built. His face was vague in the near darkness, but it seemed craggy and strong. Craven found himself holding his breath.

"A haul, yes—and a lift to town. Allowed you'd run me in first, but now.... Say, Mister, no objection to me hitching a ride with you, is there?"

Craven wet his lips. To refuse would be suspicious, damning afterward. But carry a sheriff along with the body of the man he had murdered?

"I—I'd like to oblige," he said. "It's Mr. Fleming's car and he's trying to catch up on a little lost sleep—"

They all looked at the blot of Fleming's body, sleeping.

"Pshaw," Masters grunted. "I'll keep mum. Man, you'd better get in out of the cold. You're shivering!"

"It—it's warm in the car," Craven chattered. He sank behind the wheel.

The motor, accelerated, covered the noise of Lafe Masters getting into the rear seat. Craven's right hand inched over, and screened by the backrest, touched Fleming's arm. He gave the arm a jerk upward. Fleming seemed to be hunching his left shoulder, irritable at this interruption of his rest.

"He's stirring," Masters murmured.

"It's okay, Mr. Fleming," Craven managed then. "A friend we're driving into town."

The body swayed perilously to the left as the car began to move. Craven bit off a scream, twisted the wheel the other way instinctively. The lolling head seemed to nod, sank awkwardly to the chest. Lafe Masters chuckled.

"Can't figure out how a guy can sleep riding." A little later, he coughed twice, and the rear window squealed when he rolled it down.

"Leak in the motor, I guess," Craven called, his heart racing.

FOR awhile he watched for every bump. He kept telling himself that any instant Masters would get wise to his game. But the miles wore away, smooth and uneventful, and gradually the sense of desperation, long suffered, became like a suffocating drug.

He had never felt so tired. His legs jumped. His eyelids were jerking as though on strings. Houses, barns, hills, even passing cars, all clothed themselves in curious blue-black shadows, nodding breathlessly, alive; and alive to this grotesque cortege. The worried snow danced all around them.

Craven did not know if he had driven five minutes with the sheriff as his passenger, or five hours. He tried to tell himself he no longer cared. But he did care. His mind found and recited a delirious, agonizing litany.

"Lafe hasn't guessed—yet. I'll win out—yet. I'll cross the state line and beat the law!"

It became a muddled, maddening jargon, and when Lafe Masters called softly, "Slow down at the next turn," Craven jumped, startled, unbelieving that they had reached the sheriff's town. But Masters got out, grunted at the cold blast of wind.

"Thanks for the lift. You'd better stop for the night, though. You were driving pretty much all over the road."

"Eh?" Craven said dumbly. The wind whipped it from his mouth, made it sound unnatural and far away.

"So he's waking up, huh?" Masters grinned, fooled by the croaking voice. "Well, tell him thanks for me."

And he turned and walked away, and Keith Craven sat mumbling to himself: "I'm going to make it. I'm going to live, to laugh about this night!"

Driving on, he did laugh. Another few miles! Another half hour! Once across the state line no court could charge Fleming had not met death there. The cold weather would account for the body's rigor. He would say he shot Fleming just before reaching Capitol City. He would take his rap of twenty years, and pull maybe could cut it down to four or five. Years didn't matter, anyway; only *life* mattered, and that was almost won.

The will to sleep came back to taunt him, and the fumes, and the cold that was like little icy men

scuttling up and down his back. They were the aches in his shoulders and the pains in his head—and they whispered ridiculous things in his ears.

They jeered a little, too, that he, Keith Craven, was foolish now to still worry so about his life; that he had gone all this distance safely, and wasn't it about time to draw up for a rest? A nap? But Craven was dogged in his purpose. First the state line, then perhaps the rest.

HE SAW the sign at last. It was white and shining and so very beautiful. He sobbed his relief aloud. He had outwitted Death. Yes, to hell with Death! And with the law and its silly courts and electric chair. He drew up finally in a

sheltered, lonely lane, where he could say he had shot Fleming and where no one could have heard.

And here he leaned back and closed his eyes and sighed.

Fleming, you crook, you got what you deserved. Go on, stare at me; leer. Who cares? I've won, and now I lay me down to sleep....

How sweet was that childish doggerel! How sweet to relax and face the future, the certain opportunities once he had served his few years in prison. Yes, and sweet to feel that the quiet snow was blanket soft. To listen to the idling motor and bask in the warmth that now, parked, its heater sent forth; to drowse and dream.

The fumes continued to creep through the car—but monoxide doesn't smell....