



Sneaky Pete turned toward the divan, holding the gun

SNEAKY PETE'S CHRISTMAS EVE

By JOHNSTON McCULLY

When reformed pickpocket Jones becomes a Yuletide guest of Ricardo and Carlotta, he is thrust into a dangerous role!

CHRISTMAS EVE always had fascinated "Sneaky Pete." The happy jostling crowd thronging the shops and streets, making last-minute purchases, dropping dimes in the Christmas pots on the corners and nodding to the bell-ringers beside them, trying to get somewhere with their arms filled with bundles—that happened only once a year.

On an occasion like that, people were inclined to grow careless. They were excited and restless and had their minds on

a variety of things other than purses and wallets. In the jam of human beings in shop aisles and on crowded sidewalks, the pressure of another body against them went unnoticed. So a pickpocket, a professional dip, could work easily, undetected, and with profit.

Not that Sneaky Pete Jones was a pickpocket now. But he had been. Down at Police Headquarters, they had his fingerprints and a couple of official photographs, and measurements, and the

record of two convictions for pocket picking and purse lifting.

A little more than a year ago, Sneaky Pete, as he was known to the police and others of his type, had finished a term behind prison bars, and had sworn it would be his last. He had paid his debt to Society, as the prison sky pilot put it. He came out a free man to go straight and start a new life.

Sneaky Pete had done it. Not that he had acquired religion listening to the prison sky pilot, but because he had stood alone in a corner of his cell, looking out of a small barred window, and had thought it out. Crime did not pay, as many reformers declared. He had made a false start in life, but he would correct that when he got out. He did not like confinement, and he had no yearning to be sent up again as an habitual criminal.

When he was freed, Sneaky Pete had avoided all his old companions. And the man who helped him most to get started on the honesty trail was, of all men, Inspector Tom Wilkes, who had once been a court witness against him. .

INSPECTOR WILKES was a humanitarian in a sense. He knew a born criminal when he saw one, but he also knew that many men get a wrong start through environment. Pete Jones, a product of the slums, never had had a chance for a life of decency. His first lessons in life had been how to dodge cops, how to violate the laws and get away with it.

Inspector Wilkes had talked to Sneaky Pete after he was released, and had found a willing listener. He got Pete a job as janitor in a big barber shop, and another with a window washing company. By combining the two jobs, Pete could live decently in a decent room, have good food and clothing, and be able to attend the

sporting events.

It had been a year now since Pete's reformation. He had withstood the pleas of old friends to come to his senses and join with them in criminal activity. Pete had gone straight, and he let everybody know it.

But he could not forget the past entirely. This Christmas Eve, as he went slowly along the thronged street, he was thinking how, in the old days, he would have lifted several leathers since nightfall. On every side he saw prospective victims, men who, excited with last-minute shopping and nervous about getting home or to Christmas Eve parties, were careless as to their well-filled wallets.

But Sneaky Pete resisted all temptation. He came to a corner near a huge department store and stood back against a show window to watch the passing throng. He watched a fat man waddle along chuckling about something, his arms heavy with bundles, saw him prop himself against the front of the building long enough to tuck a thick wallet into the side pocket of his coat.

Pete was thinking that it would serve a man as careless as that right to be robbed. He watched as the fat one went on through the crowd, trying to elbow his way. And Sneaky Pete suddenly heard a low voice beside him:

"Get your mind off it, Pete, because I've got an eye on you!"

Pete jerked around nervously and saw Detective Dan Halloran beside him. Halloran, Pete knew, had been a uniformed pavement-pounding cop until recently. Caught in a series of regular promotions, Halloran now found himself working in plain clothes, and his manner told the world that the Department could not get along very well without his services.

"Howdy, Mr. Halloran!" Sneaky Pete

greeted him, gulping. He never had liked Halloran.

"Trying to locate some easy pickings?" Halloran asked.

"What you mean?"

"What would I mean, Sneaky, by asking that of a two-time losing dip? How many leathers have you lifted already this evening? Maybe I'd better give you a frisk. But that wouldn't do any good. You've got sense enough to ditch a leather as soon as you clean it out."

Pete felt anger stir within him. "Halloran," he said, "I've been goin' straight since I got out of stir. Inspector Wilkes got me a couple of jobs, and I've been workin' at 'em. The Inspector knows all about me."

"Maybe yes, and maybe no," Halloran said. "Wilkes is a busy man. He can't spend time keeping track of a third-rate crook like you. I don't believe a lot in this reform stuff, Sneaky. I saw you watching that fat guy. You were drooling at the corners of your mouth when you saw his wallet."

"I tell you I'm goin' straight," Pete replied. "I'm not out tonight to do anything but watch the crowd and maybe get me a hamburger and beer later and go home to bed."

"Then you won't have anything to lose if I send you in, Pete," Halloran told him. "The desk sergeant will probably apologize and send you home with an escort."

"Why should you send me in?" Pete asked, a little fear coming to him. A year outside had taught him a dread of bars. "For what?"

"We've got orders to watch out for dips," Halloran explained. "Got orders to send in any professionals we see. Keep you out of mischief until the Christmas Eve rush is over."

PETE'S heart seemed to contract with fear.

"Don't send me in, Halloran," he begged. "I'm clean and square. Ask Inspector Wilkes."

"Yeah? I see myself bothering the Inspector about the reputation of a professional dip. He'd put me back to pounding pavement again."

"I've been clean for a year," Pete protested. "If you send me in, I'll lose my job. I've got to clean out the barber shop early in the mornin'. And the window wash company will be 'phonin' me. Double pay if I work part of tomorrow, 'cause it's Christmas Day. The window wash company is thinkin' of makin' me a foreman—"

"You'll have me sobbing," Halloran broke in.

"Don't do it, Halloran! Please! I'll go home right away, and stay there. I've gone straight—"

Sneaky Pete broke off his talk. Halloran's face was grim, and Pete knew a promoted officer trying to make himself a reputation when he saw one. Halloran probably was out tonight to send in as many regulars as he could spot in the crowd, to convince his superiors that he was very much on the job.

"Please, Halloran!" Pete begged.

The crowd surged against them. Pete caught a whiff of rare perfume in his nostrils. A hand touched his arm, and he saw Halloran straighten suddenly and put one hand up to adjust his necktie.

"Ah, here you are!" a throaty feminine voice said. "We almost missed you in the crowd."

Before him, Sneaky Pete beheld a vision of feminine loveliness. She was tall, svelte, exotic, the Latin type. She had wafted that perfume into Pete's nostrils. She was dressed in garments even Pete could tell were ultra-expensive, and wore a

fur coat that had cost somebody plenty. Jewels flashed at her throat and on one ungloved hand.

Behind her stood a tall, distinguished-looking, gentleman in evening dress. His face expressed a patrician calm. He looked bored as he watched the feminine beauty he was escorting.

"Wh—what?" Sneaky Pete gulped.

"We are a little late, and may have missed you," she said, in that thrilling throaty voice. "I'm sorry. But at last we are here. The car is at the curb. Come along."

"What's this?" Halloran put in. "I'm a police officer."

The lady's look went right through him, and a fleeting expression of scorn touched her pretty lips for an instant.

"I am Carlotta Perez, the musical revue star from Rio," she announced, as if speaking to a policeman were beneath her. "This gentleman is my husband, Ricardo Perez, the celebrated dancer. No doubt you have read in the theatrical news that we are preparing to open in a new show here."

Halloran gulped and bowed. Halloran was a theatre lover. He salaamed to the mere mention of anyone who trod the boards.

"I—I beg your pardon," Halloran said. "But this man—do you know him? He's a—"

She lifted a restraining hand in a beautiful gesture. "Whatever he is does not concern me," she interrupted. "It is the custom of my husband and myself, when we are away from home in a strange land, to make a friend of some unfortunate man, some one without a home of his own, somebody downhearted, and have him as our guest on Christmas Eve."

"I've heard of that bein' done," Halloran admitted. "It's an old stunt."

"Indeed? Whatever the age of what you call a stunt, I consider it an act of

friendliness!" Each word Carlotta Perez spoke was a burning thrust. "Come, my man! Let's be going. Pardon me, but I've forgotten your name."

"Pete Jones."

"Ah, yes! Senor Pete Jones. The car is right here."

Sneaky Pete was bewildered. He was quite sure he never had seen this woman before, and certainly she had not made an engagement to pick him up and use him as a Christmas Eve guest. She was making a mistake, undoubtedly.

But here was a chance to get away from Halloran. Pete dreaded being sent in for safe-keeping until the following day, picked up as a professional crook, after his year of decency. So Pete said nothing, but allowed the woman and the man in evening dress to lead him between them to the curb, through the jostling crowd, and to the waiting car, a long limousine with a chauffeur in uniform standing ready to open the door.

INSIDE the car, sitting on deep cushions, Pete had a glimpse through a window of Detective Dan Halloran, who had followed them, with a puzzled expression on his face. Halloran was inspecting the car and no doubt getting the number of the license plate.

The uniformed chauffeur closed the door and hurried to get behind the wheel. The car purred away from the curb and started through the congested traffic.

"You—you've made a mistake, ma'am," Pete stammered.

"Oh, I think not," the woman said.

"But I never saw you before. You let on like I was to meet you."

The man in evening dress took up the conversation. "My man, I'll explain everything, but do not rush me," he said. "I do not like to be rushed. My wife and I desire to take you to our apartment. We'll

have a sort of Christmas Eve party—the three of us. We are prosperous and happy, and we want to make somebody else happy. And we'll send you away finally with a hundred-dollar bill for a Christmas present."

"But, why?" Pete asked.

"Let us say it is a whim of ours," the man replied.

"Oh, let me tell him!" Carlotta Perez broke in. "Mr.—Jones, isn't it?—we are rehearsing for a new revue. My husband and I are artistic workers. We demand perfection in everything. From what we overheard before I spoke to you, you are a professional pickpocket—"

"I was once, but I'm goin' straight now," Pete interrupted her.

"I'm glad to hear that, and I know you'll make good," she told him. "But that makes no difference. What we want is this: In the new revue we have a comedy sketch in which my husband plays a pickpocket. He wants to learn from a professional just how a real pickpocket works, so his stage movements won't appear foolish. We don't want to be made ridiculous in our debut in this your great and famous city."

"You want me to show you the tricks?" Pete asked.

"That is it!" she replied. "So, when he picks a pocket on the stage people in front won't laugh and perhaps say that anybody so clumsy could never pick a pocket. You understand?"

"Sure!" Pete replied. "I can do that."

"We'll serve you a nice little supper, with wine, and give you a hundred dollars besides," Senor Perez added. "And there'll be more money for you if I need further instruction during rehearsals."

"How'd you pick me?" Pete asked, naturally enough.

"We knew that on such a night pickpockets would be at work," Carlotta

Perez replied. "We waited on the street in the crowd, hoping to catch one at work, and overheard your conversation with that policeman."

"Anyhow; I'm glad you got me away from him," Pete told her. "He'd have sent me in for nothin'."

The limousine had fought its way out of the congestion and was purring along a side street. It stopped in front of an imposing apartment house, where the windows were ablaze with lights and a doorman dressed like a comic opera general strutted around under a marquee.

The doorman bowed low as he helped Carlotta Perez and her husband out, but his eyebrows lifted slightly and his nose tilted a trifle skyward when he saw Sneaky Pete.

The lobby was ornate, the elevator lifted seemingly without sound or motion, the corridor down which Pete went with his benefactors was thickly carpeted. The apartment they entered was one like Pete never had seen before except in the movies. He shivered when he thought what the monthly rental must be. No servant appeared. Senor Ricardo Perez took Pete's hat and shabby overcoat and bade him be seated in a deep easy chair before burning logs in a fireplace. Senor Perez and his beautiful wife retired for a few minutes and came back without their coats and hats, immaculately dressed in evening clothes. Sneaky Pete blinked rapidly to assure himself that all this was no dream.

FROM an adjoining room, Carlotta Perez wheeled in a tea table upon which was spread a supper such as Sneaky Pete never had seen before, let alone eaten. There was a subdued "pop" as Senor Perez deftly uncorked a bottle of champagne he had taken from an iced cooler.

Carlotta Perez explained that they had dined a short time before, but she and her

husband indulged in champagne to keep Pete company as he devoured the food, scarcely knowing what he ate. Pete had tasted champagne only once before, and his method of drinking was that of a man formerly used to gulping cheap hard liquor with a nauseating taste.

Finally, he finished the repast, and Senor Perez and his wife led Pete into a larger room lavishly furnished.

"Now for the lesson!" Carlotta said, laughing musically. "Let me see—jewels, a wallet, a gun?"

"The jewels first, my dear," her husband suggested.

She had seated herself on a divan. "Oh, yes, of course! Mr. Jones, that wall safe in the corner. The combination is off. Please open the door and bring me the jewel case just inside."

"You leave jewels in an unlocked safe?" Pete asked, his eyes bulging.

She laughed musically again. "Only paste jewels," she explained. "That safe—it is the kind they usually put in these apartment houses. I imagine a skilled burglar could open it with a hairpin. I'd never keep valuable jewels in it."

Pete was eager to be of service. He crossed the room and pulled the safe open, left it open and returned with the jewel case he had been instructed to get.

"Put it on that small table," she told him. "Come, Ricardo, stand here! Now, Mr. Jones, slip some of the jewels—say that imitation emerald necklace you'll find on top—into my husband's right-hand coat pocket."

Sneaky opened the case and got the gleaming emerald necklace and put it into Perez' pocket as ordered.

"Now, Mr. Jones," Carlotta explained, "show us how you would brush against my husband and get those jewels out of his pocket and slip them into your own."

Pete demonstrated to the best of his

ability. He brushed against Perez, stumbled slightly, begged his pardon, and got the necklace without much trouble. Carlotta laughed, and at her gesture Sneaky put the necklace into his own pocket.

"I think I have the idea, Mr. Jones, but we'll try it again later," Perez said. "I'll endeavor to get it out of your pocket next time. Now, the wallet. I have it in my inside coat pocket, Mr. Jones."

Sneaky obligingly brushed against Mr. Perez again and got the wallet, whisked it into his own pocket quickly and moved away.

"You gotta be quick with that," Sneaky explained. "Soon as you get away, you put your hand into the pocket, slip the money out of the leather, and ditch the leather—I mean throw away the wallet—soon as you can without bein' seen."

"Very clever," Perez praised. "I'll try it on you later. And now—the gun. Where is the gun, Carlotta?"

"Gun? Oh, over there in the table beneath that newspaper. I had it all ready. Mr. Jones, get the gun and put it into my husband's right-hand coat pocket, where he'll have to carry it in the play. Fix it just as you would want it to be, so he can notice how you do it."

Sneaky was enthusiastic now. Here he was in a sumptuous apartment, filled with good food and champagne, instructing a famous actor in the technic of pocket-picking. And he was not forgetting the hundred dollars he had been promised.

He got the gun and slipped it into Perez' pocket. Perez walked over to the small table against the wall of the room.

"I'll be standing by a table like this," he explained to Sneaky, "bending over it slightly. You'll come up and put your hand on my shoulder and talk to me, and while you are talking you will get the gun out of my pocket. After that, I'll play the

pickpocket part and you can correct me if I make an error.”

“I getcha!” Sneaky said.

He played the part admirably and stood there holding the gun in his hand.

“That is fine!” Perez praised. “I believe I have it now. Put the gun on that table by the divan, and we’ll start again with the jewels, and I’ll pick your pocket.”

Sneaky Pete turned toward the divan, holding the gun. As he took the second step, something crashed against his head, and it seemed as though the roof had caved in upon him. Red flashes came before his eyes. He felt himself falling. Then the red flashes were gone, everything was black, and oblivion came to him. . . .

A MUMBLE of voices was the first thing he realized as he started to regain consciousness, and the second was a pain in his head and a feeling of nausea.

As his disjointed thoughts struggled to focus, fragmentary bits of knowledge filtered into his realization. One of the voices seemed to be that of Detective Dan Halloran, another of Inspector Tom Wilkes, now the chief of the Homicide Squad. He thought he heard the glamorous Carlotta Perez, too, and her husband.

He sensed that someone was lifting his head. He inhaled a pungent odor that he could feel stinging his nostrils and even his eyes. He rolled his head slightly, and groaned.

“He’s coming out of it,” a man’s voice said. “He’ll be fit to question in a few minutes.”

Sneaky Pete regained his senses rapidly, but he did not let those around him know that at first. He kept his eyes closed, and only groaned at intervals. Somebody held the bottle of pungent stuff to his nostrils again. Pete gasped, sneezed, and opened his eyes.

He sustained a shock. The room was

filled with men—members of the Homicide Squad. Inspector Wilkes stood before him. The medical examiner was kneeling beside him. Detective Halloran was leaning against a wall. The police photographer and fingerprint man were going about their work. And on the floor a short distance from Pete was something covered with a rug.

Pete’s second glance around the room revealed Carlotta Perez and her husband sitting on the divan side by side. Perez looked pale, and Carlotta seemed nervous.

“Wh-what happened?” Pete gulped.

Inspector Wilkes gestured, and a couple of squad men lifted Pete and put him into an easy chair, where he relaxed, holding his hands to his head.

“Head hurts,” he complained. “I feel—sick.”

“Not astonishing,” the medical examiner told him, as he felt for Pete’s pulse. “You’ve got a knot on the back of your head as big as a billiard ball.”

“Wh~what happened?” Pete muttered.

“It’s a little matter of murder, Pete,” Inspector Wilkes told him. “Halloran saw these people pick you up on the street. He caught the license number of the car. You tell me everything that happened from the time they picked you up. Think carefully, and tell me everything.”

“Murder?” Pete asked, shaking his head. The medical examiner handed him a glass, and Pete gulped the contents. “Who’s been killed?”

An elderly gentleman known as ‘Uncle Jose Carranza,’ Inspector Wilkes replied. “He’s a friend of these Perez people. Tell your story. And everybody else keep quiet!”

Speaking slowly, Sneaky Pete told the yarn. He described his meeting with Halloran, how the Perez couple had taken charge of him, and related everything that had happened since he had arrived at the

apartment—the supper, champagne, the instruction he had given Ricardo Perez in pocket picking. Wilkes and the members of the squad listened intently, Halloran with a sneer on his lips.

“Listen carefully, Pete,” Wilkes said, when Pete had finished his recital. “You pulled the safe door open and got the jewel case?”

“That’s right,” Pete admitted.

“Leaving your fingerprints on the front of the safe and its combination knob, and also on the jewel case, as we have learned already. And you put the jewels into your pocket, as they told you to do?”

Pete nodded assent.

“And you lifted the wallet out of Mr. Perez’ coat pocket? Yes, we found your fingerprints on it. You were out a long time, Pete. Must have been a bad smash you got on the head. We got a call that a murder had been committed here—got it almost an hour ago. Oh, yes—the gun! You reached into Mr. Perez’ pocket and got that, as he told you to do?”

“Yeah,” Pete admitted. “And he told me to put the gun on the table and I turned to do it, and somethin’ smashed me on the head, and that’s the last I remember.”

PEREZ gave a snort of disdain and glared at Pete.

“What a shaky story!” he exclaimed. “I told you exactly what happened, Inspector Wilkes.”

“Pete didn’t hear that, for he was unconscious. Tell your story again in a few words.”

“As I said before, it is the custom of my wife and myself to pick up some stranger, somebody who looks down in his luck, on Christmas Eve when we are away from our Rio home, and treat him as a guest.”

“Admirable,” Wilkes admitted.

“We overheard this man talking to

your detective, and got him and brought him here. He seemed an honest fellow, though the detective seemed to think otherwise. Here, we gave him his supper and some champagne. Then, at my request, he agreed to show me the tricks of pocket-picking for a hundred dollars.”

“Intend turning pickpocket?” Wilkes asked, smiling.

“I explained that. My wife and I have a little dramatic skit we intend using in a new revue. In it, I play a pickpocket. I wanted to act like a real one—”

“I remember,” Wilkes interrupted. “What else happened?”

“My wife and I stepped into the kitchenette to make some fresh coffee. We left this man in here, forgetting that he had the jewels and wallet in his pocket and that the gun was on the table. When we came back into the room, Senor Jose Carranza, our uncle, was dead on the floor, and this man was bending over the body, going through the pockets. I slipped up behind him and struck him on the head with the tongs from the fireplace and knocked him out. My wife and I tied him up quickly with that cord from the portieres, and then I called the police.”

“Your uncle was shot twice in the breast,” Wilkes pointed out. “You didn’t hear the shots?”

“No. My wife and I were talking and laughing in the kitchen, and as you have seen the automatic this man used is equipped with a silencer. He had the jewels and my wallet in his pocket, of course. After this, my wife and I won’t pick up any more strangers and try to be kind to them.”

Sneaky Pete had been listening to this recital with growing horror. He glanced at the humped-up rug on the floor with a body under it, gulped and felt at the point of strangulation.

“This man’s lyin’, Inspector,” Pete

shouted at Wilkes. "It's all lies! I never saw anybody but him and his wife. It was all just like I told you!"

"Be quiet, Pete!" Wilkes ordered. "I'll question you more later." He faced Ricardo Perez again. "Where was your uncle, Mr. Perez, while you were entertaining Pete?" he asked.

"Asleep in the bedroom. He had complained of a headache after dinner, and took a couple of sleeping pills. He must have awakened and come into this room while Mrs. Perez and I were in the kitchen."

WILKES frowned with disbelief. "And why do you suppose Pete attacked and shot him?" the Inspector asked. "Your uncle was wearing a dressing gown. Do you think Pete meant to rob him, and perhaps shoot him when he resisted?"

"Probably not. My uncle may have caught the man at the safe again, looking for more valuables. He was my wife's uncle, really, but we both called him Uncle Jose. This man may have shot him down when Uncle Jose was ready to give an alarm, hoping to escape before we came back from the kitchenette."

"Sounds plausible," Wilkes admitted.

"Please attend to things, Inspector," Perez begged. "Do whatever is necessary. I do not know the police customs of your country. My wife can endure little more. Please have Uncle Jose's body removed to your regulations. And take this red-handed murderer away, out of our sight. In Brazil, he would have been incarcerated long ago. Rio police do not waste time on such a worthless fellow."

"You seem to think the police here are inefficient," Wilkes said, smoothly. "We manage to get along. We are used to clever criminals, too, and this affair—well, it has not been notable for cleverness."

Sneaky Pete came to life again. "Inspector, I swear I didn't do anything wrong," he said, a whimper in his voice. "It was just like I told you. Somebody knocked me on the head!"

"Keep quiet, Pete!" Wilkes cautioned. "I have everything but the motive. A sloppy crime, this."

"Undoubtedly, the motive was either robbery or murder to keep Uncle Jose from giving an alarm," Perez put in. "What else could it have been?"

Wilkes smiled slightly. Pete's senses were clearing swiftly, and he felt greater alarm. He seemed to be in a trap. Perez had lied for some reason Pete could not fathom, but that did not alter the fact that things looked black for Pete.

"Let's listen to the medical examiner," Wilkes suggested. "Tell us, Doc."

"I examined the body of the victim when we arrived," the medical examiner said. "Two gunshot wounds in the breast. Gun fired close enough to leave powder burns on the clothing. Death practically instantaneous."

"What else, Doc?"

"A strange thing. When the victim was shot, he was already doped to a state of unconsciousness. Eyeballs revealed that. Needle prick in his right wrist shows where he got the dope."

"In such a condition, could he have walked into this room from the bedroom and caught Pete up to mischief?"

"In that condition he couldn't have moved off the bed, if he was sleeping in that bedroom."

"Find anything in the bedroom, Doc?" Wilkes asked.

THE medical examiner nodded. "Plenty. A couple of drops of blood on a sheet and some more on the rug. The victim, in my opinion, was doped while asleep, shot in bed, and his body brought

into this room.”

“Ridiculous!” Perez exclaimed. “Why would this fellow you call Pete bring the body into this room?”

“Probably didn’t,” the medical examiner replied.

“What about Pete’s condition?” Wilkes asked.

“That smash on the head was terrific, but it wouldn’t have kept him unconscious so long. It’s been more than an hour since we got the call here. Pete was smashed on the head, all right. Mr. Perez said he did it with the tongs. And the fireplace tongs have some blood smeared on them—but not a hair. At least a few hairs would have come off with the blood and adhered to the tongs, looks like. Looks to me as if blood was smeared on the tongs after Pete was smashed with something else.”

“We haven’t found any other weapon, have we?” Wilkes asked.

“No. But traces of blood in the catch pocket of the washstand in the bathroom tell us somebody washed bloody hands there. And on that mantel are a pair of heavy metal vases. One has a slight film of dust on it, but the other had been wiped clean-washed, in fact.”

“And you think what, Doc?” Wilkes asked him.

“The victim was shot and killed in the bedroom while he was in a drugged sleep—cold-blooded murder. Sneaky Pete was smashed on the head with that metal vase, then the vase was cleaned. The person who smashed him smeared some blood from Pete’s head on the tongs, then washed blood off his hands in the bathroom.”

“Pretty good for a medical examiner,” Wilkes praised, smiling. “You’re a one-man homicide squad, Doc. How about Pete?”

“After he was smashed, he was given a shot of dope to keep him unconscious.

Needle wound in his left wrist. He was still unconscious up to a few minutes ago, remember. While he was, the old man was carried in here and sprawled on the floor. The stage was set to make this man Perez’ story look true.”

“Are you policemen daring to intimate I have falsified?” Perez demanded, with a show of anger.

“Intimate is not the word,” Wilkes told him. “Halloran!”

“Yes, sir?”

“You did some work in this case. Tell us.”

“I caught the number of that limousine in which they took Pete away,” Halloran reported. “Checked with the desk and found that those license plates belonged to an old coupe owned by an elderly doctor in the suburbs. Phoned him and found his car had been stolen.”

“What about the limousine?”

HALLORAN grinned. “Checked that on your orders, sir,” he replied. “It is parked in a garage at the end of the block. The license plates had been changed after the car was taken back after bringing Pete and this couple here. Night man in the garage confessed doing that. Chauffeur not found yet. Foreigner of some sort.”

“Good!” Wilkes praised. “The gun?”

“Serial number filed off.”

“Now, let’s hear from the fingerprint man,” the Inspector said.

“Took Sneaky Pete’s prints right here and checked,” the fingerprint man reported. “His prints are on the front of that wall safe and on the knob, also on the jewel case. No other prints on any of ‘em.”

Wilkes faced the Perez couple. “That seems strange,” he said. “Surely one or both of you have touched that safe and knob and the jewel case. And you had Pete pull the safe door open and get the case for you, so his prints would be on everything.

Looks to me like the safe and jewel case had been wiped clean of other prints before Pete touched them."

"This—it's preposterous!" Perez cried. "What are you trying to do? I'll telephone the Brazilian consul!"

"He's probably at some Christmas Eve party," the Inspector replied. "He might not be interested, anyway. Let me continue. Take the wallet. That was in your pocket, Perez, according to what you said, and Pete got it out after the manner of a pickpocket to show you how it was done."

"That is correct."

"So his fingerprints are on the Cordovan leather of the wallet, and no other prints! You must have handled the wallet when you put it into your own pocket, but your prints are not on it. Quite strange. The fingerprint business was overdone, if I may say so."

"What do you mean to imply?" Perez demanded.

Wilkes faced the fingerprint man again. "What about the gun?"

"Pete's prints on it, and no others."

"Strange! Mr. Perez had the gun in his pocket and asked Pete to take it out, 'lift' it. Mr. Perez must have handled it, carefully to keep from getting his prints on it. Too much precaution at times is worse than not enough; it arouses suspicion."

"I demand to know what you are implying," Perez said. "I demand that you let me call the Brazilian consul."

"He would not be interested," Wilkes told him. "Why should he be annoyed about the troubles of a national not under his jurisdiction?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I happen to be something of a linguist," Wilkes replied. "I'm fairly familiar with both Portuguese and Spanish. There is quite a difference between the two languages. True, a person

to whom one is native can understand the other enough to get along. But even in similar words, there is a difference in enunciation and accent. You, sir, are Spanish, not Portuguese."

Perez and his wife both looked startled, Sneaky Pete saw. Pete did not understand all this, but it dawned upon him that his friend, Inspector Wilkes, was proving him innocent in some manner.

"It occurs to me, Mr. Perez," Wilkes summed up, "that you went to great pains to arrange this crime. You pick up a strange man as if to befriend him on Christmas Eve. You dope your Uncle Jose and kill him at the proper moment, knock Pete out, dope him to keep him quiet, set the stage here and call the police. Pete is a man with a record. You thought the somewhat blind American police would be duped easily, no doubt. Why did you and your wife kill Jose Carranza?"

WILKES suddenly was standing in front of the pair seated on the divan, his face grim and accusing.

"The stupid American police in every city of any consequence have been warned to be on the lookout for Ricardo and Carlotta Perez, man and wife, and an elderly companion known as Senor Jose Carranza," Wilkes said. "They are notorious jewel thieves who recently finished a term in prison. Possessed of ample funds. Known to have started for the United States from Paris, where the police frowned on their presence. Pose as dancers and actors. Natives of Madrid. Need I go on?"

"What drivel!" Perez said.

"Our jewel squad has been combing the city for you," the Inspector went on. "Possibly you were living in modest surroundings and moved here recently to start operations. I understand Senora Perez, being charming and attractive,

always gets acquainted with owners of fine jewels, works in her husband and Uncle Jose, and then—”

“You’re a devil!” Carlotta Perez screeched suddenly. “You fool, Ricardo! Cleaning everything of prints!”

“Why did you kill Jose Carranza?” Wilkes barked at the pair again. “Thieves’ quarrel, wasn’t it? You didn’t need him any more, something like that?”

Sneaky Pete was in a state of turmoil by this time. He was mentally dazed. He listened to the rest of it as if the talk was coming from a great distance. He heard Wilkes break down the Perez couple and get a confession. He saw them taken away, and heard the medical examiner phone for the morgue wagon, and heard the Inspector assigning guards to the apartment.

Then he was out in the hall walking beside Inspector Wilkes, who was patting him on the shoulder.

“Merry Christmas, Pete!” the Inspector said. “Be careful how you pick up with glamorous strangers after this. Halloran!”

“Yes, sir?” Halloran stepped up and joined them.

“Pete Jones is okay, Halloran. Don’t bother him again because of his past record. If a transgressor can be reclaimed and taught to go straight, let’s let him alone. Don’t make another mistake like you made tonight, or you’ll be back pounding the pavement. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Halloran answered, gulping.

Pete went down in the elevator with the others, trying to realize what a miserable Christmas he had escaped. And he took a silent vow that his year of honesty would be stretched into many such years, as many as he lived, in fact.