

By Carroll
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Lurking SHADOWS



*A vivid tale of
Chinamen, opium
traffic, Secret
Service, and
desperate
FIGHTING!*

*A Complete
Chinatown Mystery
Novelette by the
Author of Honor of
the Force*

Pictures by
H. M.
Picken

Rita had half-turned toward Clay when the gun was wrenched from her grasp by one of the half-dozen intruders.

ED, THE RAT, slunk behind the heavy elevator pillars on Sixth Avenue. His cap was pulled well down, his collar was turned far up; yet the night was warm. There was a shifty, furtive glance in his eyes and a nervous twitching about the corners of his mouth. His right hand, sunk deep in his coat pocket, clutched the stock of a heavy Colt automatic. Involuntarily, his thumb slid the safety lock up and down, and his groping fingers slipped about the unguarded trigger.

Ed was nervous and he knew it. Ed was frightened and he admitted it. For the first time in his life, he was leery of a gun. His shaking hand! His unsteady fingers! Why, the thing might go off in his pocket! Ed had never felt like this before, although it would not be the first time that he had shot a man down from behind. The Rat was bent on murder.

Was he a coward? All those slinking gunmen that frequent the dives of the underworld are cowards at heart; but tonight, Ed felt that he was a

man of courage. He wasn't stalking a helpless, cringing victim this time, but a man who was hated and feared. None had succeeded in getting Clay Hudson. Two had tried and missed; one had plugged him through the right arm. Ed shuddered. He had seen all three of these gunmen afterward; natural, placid, as if asleep. Just a tiny hole, straight through the center of each one's forehead, had told the story. The left or right hand made little difference to Clay Hudson.

And now—! If Ed missed! Just the slightest quivering of a finger, or the involuntary flickering of his shifty eye, would mean sure death. He could empty his gun at the unprotected back of another, but tonight he would get one shot only. He knew that. Yet, for all his fear, Ed held his position close to the great steel structure and listened with growing alarm to the ever louder pounding of his own heart.

Ed, the Rat, had been chosen for this job. Ten of them had drawn cards to see who would do the

bumping off of Clay Hudson. Stick-up men, gunmen, dope peddlers, second-story workers—each class was represented in that game of chance. In the little room upstairs above Grogan's place, their nervous fingers had shot into the pack and extracted a card, and Ed was honored.

Ed was to be the killer, and the others had gone about town to establish alibis. Clay Hudson must go. Grogan had handed down the word from above. It was a "big gun," a much feared power well up in political circles, that wanted Clay Hudson "put out."

Two o'clock struck. Ed tightened his grip on the automatic. Clay Hudson would be coming now. He always came out of the Chink's about this time—almost to the minute. The Rat knew the Chink's well. It was a high-class dope shop. He wasn't numbered among the clientele, and one couldn't slip by the searching, slit-like eyes of Wong. He did not know anything "for sure" about this Clay Hudson, but it was said that he was a pleasure smoker.

Ed worked according to system now. A tiny paper of white powder appeared in his left hand, fell open at a dexterous twist of bony fingers, and shot to that hawk-like nose. Ed snuffed his coke. He was known along the avenue as a snowbird.

A minute—two—passed. A door swung open a half-block away. A tall, broad-shouldered figure stepped out upon the sidewalk. A steady, measured tread came down the pavement. Two men were rubbing elbows with death. One knew it.

Ed crouched closer in the protecting shadows of the pillars. The dope had steadied his fingers, hardened to steel-like points the black, piercing pupils of those treacherous eyes; but his lips were dry and his tongue tasted of rotting leather. He tried to moisten those cracked lips, smacked them silently as the dark outline drew nearer.

The safety catch clicked downward; the index finger stole around the trigger, the gun came from his pocket. He couldn't miss at that distance. Right through the back of the bobbing head he would send his bullet.

The face of his victim passed beneath a light; stood out for a minute. Not a careless, unsuspecting face, the Rat thought. Both hands were sunk into coat pockets. As usual, Clay Hudson was ready. If Ed missed, that figure would swing up an arm, half-turn, and fire. It was uncanny the way the man could fire at a sound, locate the hidden enemy, and

get him before his head could disappear.

Clay Hudson passed, slowly, steadily picking his steps, his head turning neither to left nor right. Yet, Ed knew that his eyes were alert, his ears listening for the slightest sound, and his fingers wrapped around two quick-speaking guns.

Ed leaned out from behind the pole, raised his gun, and cocked an eye along the barrel. Thirty-five feet! He couldn't miss! His nostrils dilated. His thick lips set hard. His hand was steady. His fingers were free from the slightest tremor. The cruelty of the killer was innate in Ed; he felt a certain pleasure in his work. The snow had taken effect. Ed's finger closed steadily, tightened about the trigger.

One sharp report broke out upon the stillness of the night. Clay Hudson had turned. A gun flashed in his hand, then dropped slowly to his side. Ed, the Rat, had stepped out from the protecting shadows of the steel structure and pitched face downward in the street.

For a moment there was a dead quiet on the deserted street; then came the distant rumble of an approaching elevated train, followed almost at once by the shrill blast of a police whistle. A minute later, two policemen leaned over the dead body of the man in the street.

"Right through the back of the head," said one of the officers.

"And him with a gun in his hand—a gun what he never got a chance to use. Gawd! It's Ed, the Rat." The second officer raised his head and looked up and down the street. Not a sound, not a figure; a deadly quiet hung over that section of the city. An elevated train rumbled heavily overhead.

CHAPTER II

PRODUCTS OF THE UNDERWORLD



IN THE back room of a dirty saloon in the tenderloin four men sat talking. The dark-colored, evil-smelling liquid before them remained untouched as they whispered across the table.

"Grogan has passed down the word that Clay Hudson must go out." A thick-set man shot the words through the corner of the left side of his mouth. "There ain't no card-drawing; there ain't no planning to it. It's him!" He jerked an expressive thumb over his shoulder. "Or our protection is withdrawn. No more wire-pulling; and I hear it's straight from the 'big gun.' Who'll this bird,

Hudson, croak next?"

A sharp-featured man in a dirty gray sweater jerked up his cap, and, throwing the stub of his cigarette on the floor, addressed the speaker.

"You don't really think that Clay Hudson croaked the Rat, do ya?" he asked sarcastically. "Well, Grogan don't. The Rat was flopped with a bullet through the back of his head. Where'd he get off to show his back to a crack shot like that? Someone else bumped off the Rat."

"Maybe; who'd know, though?" The first speaker was unconvinced. "Maybe Clay spotted him first and dropped him from behind."

All three shook their heads in answer.

"You're off there." The owner of the dirty gray sweater spoke again. "Clay shoots quick enough, but he don't plug from behind; but—well, he don't need to shoot first."

"You think someone squealed, Riley?" The thick-set man leaned across the table, his face livid. "Why, I'd cut his throat from—"

"Save your words. We'll know tonight," Riley answered. "Grogan's checking up all our movements since six o'clock last night—that's confidential. I know you three but—here's the Kid."

The four men looked up quickly as a slim, youthful figure came softly into the room and approached the table. Somehow, the same thought shot through the four heads at once. The Kid was a snowbird, and, though never before under suspicion of treachery, was not to be trusted. The Kid slid into a chair and rapped his knuckles sharply on the table. Each man raised his glass and poured down the fiery liquid. None spoke as the glasses were filled again. The Kid broke the silence.

"I seen the Rat," he said suddenly; "and a nasty hole there was in his head—the side, not the back."

The four looked at each other, but said nothing.

"I seen Grogan, too," the Kid went on; "but he don't think Clay croaked Ed. I can't tell you all he said; but—well, Grogan and me are pretty thick."

The hard faces about the table softened somewhat. Perhaps, after all, they were wrong about the Kid. All of them must have wanted Clay Hudson dead.

"What did Grogan tell you?" The pig-like eyes of Riley sought those of the Kid and rested there. He had seen nothing of sarcasm in the other's voice. There was no reason to distrust the Kid, other than that he was a snowbird, and that the Rat

had copped his girl; but the Rat had copped other girls.

"Clay Hudson has got to go and—"

"And I'm the one to get him." Riley drew a long knife from his pocket, and planted the sharp steel point in the center of the little table. "If lead won't do it, steel will."

He had guts, had Riley; and he'd show these others. He leaned forward, and grasped the handle of the knife firmly, turning it around in the wood.

"You can tell Grogan I'll get Hudson," he said; "and I don't have to wait behind no pole, neither. I'll stick him the first—"

A slight cough sounded, as the stained-glass door that led to the bar closed softly. Unconsciously, Riley had raised his voice above a whisper. The back room belonged to them until they saw fit to leave it. The Wop had his orders and knew whom to let in and whom to keep out. Riley and two others swung about; the man in the gray sweater and the Kid looked up. None came to their feet, though two half-rose and fell back again.

Clay Hudson stood with his back to the little door. His lips smiled, but his clear blue eyes sparkled dangerously. No gun showed about his person. He stood there, hands on his hips, and eyed the five men.

"Rats, all of you; five cornered rats, and not a fight in any of you." Clay Hudson ran his eyes over each one in turn. "You first, Riley. You, the would-be killer! I'll give you all thirty seconds to pass out one by one. Come! Get!"

One by one, they passed without a word. Riley hesitated a moment; then, thinking better of it, left his knife sticking in the table. Clay Hudson stepped back against the wall as the little door swung back and forth as each passed out. Four times the door closed, and then remained closed. One man still sat at the table. It was the Kid. Clay let his eyes rest upon him.

"You, too," he said crisply. "Get out!"

"Ain't going." The Kid looked up insolently.

Clay Hudson walked across to the table.

"You've got ten seconds, Kid," he said quietly. "I've stood a lot, and it's my turn now. Get out!"

The heavy, web-covered clock in the corner ticked off the seconds. Neither man moved. The Kid kept his thin white hands upon the table.

"I'll count five," he said slowly; but there was uncertainty in his voice. His lips set tightly. He could hurl the Kid from the room. He would have

to do that even though his own manhood rebelled at it. The boy was so slim and delicate, and even as he half-rose from the table to carry out the idea the Kid coughed, a rattling, racking cough that shook his whole frame and brought deep color to the pale cheeks.

"Tough on you, ain't it?" the Kid gasped, a sickly smile twisting on his lips. "Now, if I had counted five last night—why—you wouldn't be here now, you know."

Clay Hudson sprang to his feet, overturning his chair.

"It was you, then—you who—who shot last night?" His words were barely audible.

"Yep." The Kid nodded.

"Why?"

No answer came from the Kid.

"But why?" Clay Hudson bored searchingly into those black eyes opposite him. He read nothing there. The eyes were weak, with an occasional flash of passion, understanding, and the brightness that comes into the pupils of the habitual drug user.

The Kid's mouth set hard now. The easy smile of indifference vanished. His fingers twitched nervously; then, his hands closing, the long nails tore into his palms. His mouth opened and closed again.

"I can't tell you," he said, finally.

Clay Hudson leaned across the table and took him by the wrists. Unconsciously his strong fingers bit into the other's flesh.

"You must tell me," he said. "You must let me pay."

"That's it," the Kid replied quickly; "pay. Of course you must pay. I want a man like you—need a man like you. I gave you your life. I never killed before. They'll find out, and kill me. Snow, snow, snow! It took loads of it to make me pull that trigger; more of it to make me sit here and face you today. I tell you, Clay Hudson, there is something that makes men hate and fear you. Last night I saved your life. Tomorrow night, I might kill you. It's the stuff. Don't you see it's the stuff? Can't you see I don't belong!—and you? Who are you? What do you do here? You don't belong, either."

The younger man was trembling now from head to foot. The effects of the drug had passed off. He was a weak, pitifully frightened thing, clinging to Clay Hudson, pleading, begging for him to help him.

Clay understood. He helped the youth to his

feet, and set him back in the chair again. He had seen many of these poor creatures break just this way.

CHAPTER III THE KID PASSES



CLAY turned away as the trembling fingers of the other sought an inner pocket. When he looked around again, the Kid was himself, and treated Clay with cold suspicion; was shifty with his answers.

"You can trust me," Clay said calmly. "You saved my life last night, and I'll pay my debt to you, if it's within the power of an honorable man."

The Kid looked up from studying his twitching fingers. His eyes were steady again now. His voice was uncertain, but his words quick and clear.

"Honorable man!" he echoed the words of the other. "I often wonder why you're here. As for me." He rolled up his sleeve and displayed the tiny punctures in his delicate white skin. "There's my story, and—" He hesitated again.

"Write it out, if you can't tell me." Clay placed a kindly hand upon his shoulder. "If I can't help, I'll keep your secret."

"Write it out? Yes, that's it. I did; and now they'll find it on me—find it on my dead body. Tonight Grogan is checking me up. Hudson!" He grasped the older man by the arm and ran a trembling hand down to his wrist. "I should be rolling about in my own car—living on the best of the land, and—so you think it's dope, eh? Well, here! Promise not to read it until I tell you. Keep it hidden some place. Your life is sacrificed to the hatred of the Circle, and so is mine. You are strong and will live. I am weak and shall die. Don't read it until then; then strike for her—just for her. You can't believe all the raving of a drug-crazed fool. Since a boy, I've been adrift in a black night—but strike for the poor, weak, despised Kid, who saved your life to give to his—his sister. Hudson"—the boy had risen and backed the man toward the door—"you see, Hudson, I know the name of the 'big gun.'" One frightened look from deep, sunken, hopeless eyes, and the Kid was gone.

The door swished closed again. Clay Hudson stood looking down at a dirty envelope that lay in his hand. He thrust the letter into his pocket. Ravings of a lost mind, perhaps—and again, perhaps not. The Kid wasn't the kind that shoots a

man down for an illusion.

There came the sudden sharp report of a pistol, three shots in quick succession. A bullet tore a tiny hole in the little glass door, whistled close to Clay's head, and buried itself in the woodwork behind him with a dull thud. After a moment of silence, he heard the falling of a body. Then again there was stillness.

Clay Hudson flung open the door and stood poised, pistol in each hand, his keen, sharp eyes sweeping the outer room.

The lights burned low, for the hour was late; but the dusty room was deserted. At his feet the Kid lay—dead. Two bullets were buried in his body. Grogan had learned the truth!

A face appeared before the dirty window of the front door, and the helmet of a police officer showed plainly in the light from the street. Grogan, who must have been informed that he was there, might be trying to frame Clay Hudson for the murder of the Kid. With the thought, he slipped quickly across the dimly lighted room to the hall that led to the family entrance, pushed open the swinging door, and stepped back. Policemen were coming down the narrow passageway toward him.

He raced back to the barroom. Figures loomed up outside. The door creaked. A second or two more, and the room would be filled with officers. There was no place to hide; no place to go, except into that little room from which he had come. Clay Hudson was trapped.

The side door swung open to admit three policemen, who stood for a moment with drawn guns. The barroom, except for the body of the youth that lay sprawled upon the floor, was deserted. Clay Hudson had backed through the stained-glass door into the anteroom.

One minute later, the bar was a blaze of lights. Half a dozen uniformed men were gathered. Two leaned over the body of the Kid. One civilian stood well back, with the inspector of police. The man was Big Bill Grogan, the political power of the underworld.

"Tell you men to take it easy, Inspector," he cautioned. "The man you want is in that little room there. I saw him through the window. I like to keep things clean in my part of the city, and when I hear that one of the boys is set on murder I hand my information over to the authorities." With a magnanimous gesture of greatness, the pompous man threw open his coat and inserted two puggy

thumbs beneath the armpits of a mouse-colored vest.

"Looks pretty quiet." Inspector Raymond shook his head. "Guns don't bump a lad off and then hide in back rooms. I know this joint. If he's in there, he's caught."

"Two of you boys rush that room." Grogan's thick voice bawled out an order, but the inspector cut in upon him.

"I'll do the ordering here, Mr. Grogan," he said sharply. Inspector Raymond was lately in charge of the strong-arm squad. A shake-up in the department had put him in charge. He did not know Grogan over well, but he knew of him; and knew that somewhere up above, an invisible hand stretched forth and smote those who crossed the formidable ward-heeler.

Grogan's eyes narrowed as he looked upon the inspector. He was marking him, and Raymond knew it. He hedged slightly under the lowering knitted brows of the boss.

"If a dangerous man lurks in that room, I'll go in myself," he said. "Dorgan!" He called to one of his men.

Grogan bit into his huge black cigar as he slid it from one corner of his mouth to the other. This was the sort of courage he could not understand in a superior. His eyes squinted; his lips curved up as he stepped to one side of that little glass doorway. His keen eyes had seen the lights snap out as the police broke through the front door, but he said nothing. The shooting of the inspector would make the electric chair only more certain for Clay Hudson. Besides, Grogan had no special liking for this new inspector. He hunched his thick shoulders. The "big gun" had frowned the last time he had asked for the withdrawal of an all too zealous police lieutenant. He had said something, too, about Grogan's getting too finicky. It was easier and cheaper to have a man shot down than removed; easier for him, perhaps, but Grogan had seen the shadow on the wall. The long arm of the federal government was reaching out.

Inspector Raymond passed into that little room, but nothing happened. The swinging door closed behind him and Dorgan on deadly silence. Grogan's eyes opened wide in astonishment. Had Clay Hudson lost his nerve?—just stood there to be taken? That wasn't the way of the man whom he hated and feared. Hudson couldn't have escaped. Grogan's men had been watching since they were

driven from that room. Each door of the building was carefully watched. Besides, Grogan was sure that the figure of Clay Hudson had slunk back into that room. Two policemen stood by the door with drawn guns. A minute passed before Inspector Raymond came out.

"You were wrong about anyone's hiding in there," he said quietly. "Now then, Dorgan, take charge of things until the coroner comes." He stepped across to Grogan and took him by the arm. "A word with you, Mr. Grogan." His smile was friendly. "You know something about this affair; you tipped us off like a good citizen and an honest man. Let us have a talk alone." Turning, he led Grogan quietly from the saloon into the night.

Grogan went. Damn this Clay Hudson! A clever crook than Grogan had given him credit for being! How had he got from the building, let alone out of that room? The thing was uncanny. He turned and looked suspiciously at Raymond.

CHAPTER IV A PEDDLER IN SOULS



IN A large sumptuously furnished living room of a brownstone house on the upper West Side, a white-haired man known to his associates as Marshall Strong, sat behind the highly polished surface of a long mahogany table. His hands were clasped before him and his brown eyes looked beneficently across the table. His lips parted, and he smiled sadly at the slim figure of Grace Livingston, the golden-haired girl who stood before him, her bosom rising and falling rapidly as she talked.

"You hurt me, my dear." The old man tapped the desk lightly with a pencil as he shook his head. "All that I do is for you and—and your brother." For a moment his dull brown eyes flashed as they intently searched for that softening touch in the girl's face.

The girl's voice was determined when she spoke again.

"You have done nothing about my brother. Since a little child, I have not seen him—not since he disappeared in London, nearly ten years ago."

The old man spread his hands far apart in a gesture of appeal.

"I have spent my all looking for him. Believe me, Grace, he is as dear to me as he is to you. You see, many years ago I loved your mother."

"But, guardian—" Her voice broke at the mention of the mother she had never seen. "I—oh—I sought advice, and I cannot sign that paper."

Marshall's Strong's head came up sharply. This was something he had not considered. The girl was so quiet, so docile, so eager to respond to his every wish. Into the deep-brown eyes flashed a glint of green—but just for a second. He was placid again at once, his hands rubbing together, his head turning slowly from side to side, a gentle reproach in his voice.

"I thought we had covered all that with our lawyer, Mr. Reubens. As for me, I am rich, but temporarily tied up in heavy investments. For myself I would not borrow. It is for your brother." His smile broadened. "It is so little you have my dear—five thousand. Mr. Reubens explained all that to you; and now—" His hands went wide again as if in gentle protest.

Grace looked searchingly into his face. Perhaps, after all, she had done wrong.

"Oh, guardian," she spoke at length, "I did not tell you—I was forbidden to tell you. My brother has written to me—written of you—and sent the young lawyer here."

"Here? Your brother has written to you—a lawyer here?—at this house?" The old man was on his feet, his hands clenched tightly, his lips set close. His eyes were a deadly green, the contortions of his face were cruel and malicious. Across the table he stretched a lean, bony hand toward the girl.

However, Grace did not see him. When she spoke she lowered her head. Mr. Strong had always been so kind and gentle. When she raised her head again the same kindly appearing old gentleman she always had known stood before her.

His face was sadder than usual and tears hung in the corners of his eyes. She came at once into his outstretched arms; told him all. As she talked, he listened and patted her golden head. Even as he calmed her fears, however, it was in his heart to lift the heavy steel paper-cutter from the table and plunge it to the hilt into her heart. He must listen though, and hear all she knew. His hand wandered near the knife and hesitated. Things could not be so bad, or she would not be in his arms like this.

Half in tears, Grace clung to him, the only human she ever had known intimately. A letter had come to her from her brother. He was in great misery—could never see her—had for the first time learned of her danger. She had met the little lawyer

by the gate. His name was Nathan Cahn. She had not put much faith in him, for he was poorly dressed; but later, her brother would send someone to her, someone who would free her at last. That was it—free her at last. She could not understand that; but Nathan Cahn had told her to say nothing to her guardian. More he would not tell her. Days had passed, and there had been no more news from her brother. She was so unhappy. She thought that he must be dead.

Marshall Strong patted her head affectionately.

"I suppose I must tell you," he said. "The money I would use is to save your brother. Two weeks ago, I found him."

All excitement now, Grace piled question after question upon the old man.

Her brother had fallen into evil ways, he told her; had contracted that terrible drug habit; was even now in a sanitarium where he would be cured. It was for that that he needed the money.

Grace was willing for anything now. She told her guardian of her fears and of her brother's warning against him. The old man nodded and explained that it was the curse of the drug, which made one fear his best friend.

"He broke his promise to me about writing you," Marshall Strong said, "and he will hate me until the craving for the drug has burned out of his poor, weakened brain."

Grace Livingstone's heart was full. Her love was suddenly divided between the brother she had not seen in ten years and the man who would bring him back to her. It was her wish now that he have her every penny, and she would not hear of its being delayed; she would call Mr. Reubens at once. "Dear guardian" must have money for her brother, George.

GRACE Livingstone approached the telephone with a heart that sang with happiness. There was the slightest tingle as she lifted the receiver from the hook. Then a voice inquired for Miss Livingstone.

"Yes, yes!" she answered, for she recognized the nasal notes of the young attorney whom her brother had sent.

"Your brother was shot dead last night and—"

She heard no more. The white-haired man in the next room heard simply her smothered cry; and, when he reached the door, Grace Livingstone lay on the floor in a dead faint. To his repeated clicking

of the receiver Marshall Strong got no reply.

All that night, Grace Livingstone tossed about on her bed. What dreams were these that tortured her mind? What terrible face was that that glared into hers? Not her guardian's, surely! Yet, when she had opened her eyes there in the hall by the telephone, she had stared straight into terrible, yellowish-green orbs. Hatred, malice, cruelty—all were in those terrible fish-like eyes; and they had been framed in the kindly face beneath the thick white hair of her guardian. She shuddered. She had, for a moment, looked into the soul of Marshall Strong and found it black.

In the morning the dreams passed. Marshall Strong stood in the room with the doctor, who spoke softly to her and turned toward the window. For a moment his side was to her, and the sunlight from the window shone full upon the folded morning paper in his pocket. Not in glaring type, and yet type that stood out to her like letters of fire, she read a headline.

NATHAN CAHN, ATTORNEY,
SHOT DOWN IN OFFICE

That was all, but in that line Grace Livingstone read the truth. Her guardian, turning, saw in her eyes horror, fear, suspicion. Without a word, he led the doctor from the room. In that one look, Grace Livingstone had sealed her fate. From then on, Marshall Strong was determined that she was through with the outside word—until . . . the one word framed up in his mind, the thing he lived upon, the thing that others paid for with theft, suicide, and death—*dope*. Marshall Strong was a peddler—a peddler in other men's souls.

CHAPTER V
A DIABOLICAL PLOT



MARSHALL Strong sat behind his long mahogany table and rubbed his hands together in beneficent softness. Across from him was a long, spare, wiry man, whose rat-like eyes spoke anything but trust. Above a crooked nose and a sharp chin that habitually rested upon his chest were eyes that stared at Marshall Strong with penetrating directness; yet, when the eyes of the white-haired man rested upon his, he looked away, shifted his glance back and forth, up and down, but never upon the elder man's

eyes. Jack Ripper was not capable of a direct stare, but he came as near to it as possible.

When the old man did not speak, Ripper broke the silence.

"You're so damned like a cat," he said suddenly, "I almost expect you to purr." If there was a touch of humor in the words, there was none in the man's voice nor in his face, which was set in hard, permanent lines.

"The opium?" Marshall Strong said presently.

"You heard, of course. It's been seized. That's the third—"

"Who—who—? The damned incompetence of those I pay and give and give! Now you come here for money." The brown eyes were an ugly green, and the white skin had turned to a pasty yellow. "I tell you I have no money." A long bony hand crashed down upon the table. "Thousands spent, and not one penny in return!"

"It's one man who knows someone on the inside and tells the government; but we must have money. How about—?" He jerked an expressive thumb toward the floor above.

"I can't touch it till she's twenty-one. She won't give it up. That brother of hers and Nathan Cahn."

"Both dead. Why not her? She'll be of age in a month, you say. It's several hundred thousand, isn't it?"

"Dead, I can't use it," the old man snorted in rage. "I'd stick a knife into her heart willingly. Don't you think I have listened to her simpering long enough? And you—you—!" he gasped in anger. "All of you who know the ins and outs, and her brother runs with the pack, and none of you know it for a year—a year and a half! He might have found out who I was long ago. God, and I thought that I had strangled him in London years before!"

The other paused a moment, then looked around the room.

"There is one thing yet, the never failing thing. You spoke of it once, you know. Turn her over to me, and I'll have her on her knees to you with the money. You ain't sentimental about her, are you?"

Marshall Strong looked his contempt, which was too great for words.

"It's Grogan," he said, more quietly. "He wants the girl, not her money—the fool!—and long ago I promised him he could have her—after I got the money."

The other nodded.

"I have thought of Grogan," he said. "He'll be here in an hour. Listen!" For ten minutes Ripper talked and Marshall Strong listened. Strong and Ripper knew the depths to which a human wreck will go for drugs; and they, the one well past his seventieth year, planned to take the soul of a young and innocent girl and enslave it to a deadly, destroying drug.

Then in silence, the two men sat and smoked, and awaited the coming of Grogan. Both knew that the girl hated the very sight of him; both knew that one thing could change that hate, and that one thing was *dope*.

BIG BILL Grogan's cigar shot in jerks from one side of his mouth to the other as Jack Ripper talked. Occasionally, his pig-like eyes would wander to those of Marshall Strong, who would nod his approval. At the end, however, he shook his head.

"I don't want no dope fiend." His teeth set tightly in his cigar. "I was half thinking of setting up a home—just a place up in the country to go to once in a while," he added, half apologetically.

Marshall Strong sneered.

"You don't quite understand, Grogan," he said sarcastically. "Two shipments of opium were confiscated. Our company is—was—rich, but now—well, no more police graft; no more gun money. Don't you see, you fool, we're stripped clean. Half a million in one lump. We must have the girl's money. As for her marrying you—!" He snapped his bony fingers.

Grogan laid his cigar on the table.

"Make her sign over the money. That ought to come easy. Where's your guts, Strong?"

Marshall Strong sneered.

"Talk sense." He rapped impatiently upon the table. "Money, fear, even death can't control the courts; and she'll have to go before them. What's to prevent her from telling them the whole story?"

"Aye, what is, then?" Grogan sneered in return.

Marshall Strong stretched forth a long, claw-like hand, and slowly closed the fingers.

"The drug—the terrible gnawing craving that eats into one's vitals," he whispered hoarsely across the table. "Within a month—two at the most—she won't be twenty-one until then—she'll be a cunning, willing tool, weak clay to mold as the controller of her greatest desire sees fit. Her mind, her ideas, her soul—all will have changed."

"All will have changed!" Grogan echoed in a far-away voice; "and then—where do I fit?"

To see Marshall Strong as he leaned forward was to understand the cruelty, the malignancy which was no longer hidden beneath the shriveled skin of the human vulture.

"You?" The old man Strong spoke slowly through lifeless, blue lips. "There is nothing to the girl's mind; nothing to the girl's soul. You, my friend, will have her beauty, her golden hair, her deep, soulless eyes, and the soft luxuriant clinging of her fresh young body. Think! She hates you—repulses you! I offer you the chance to own her. What do you say, Grogan?" The old man's lips slipped back, baring sharp, fang-like teeth. He read the rising passions in the other's eyes.

"How—how do I get—get all this?" The thick voice of Grogan was as low as that of Marshall Strong had been.

"You are the magnet that holds the attraction. The girl will be yours, and the drug that controls her whole being will be for you to give or to refuse. Think, Grogan; think! The one thing you want, always have wanted; and the only time you spoke to her of marriage she shrank away from you, crouched trembling in the corner. Since then she has avoided you, turned white at the touch of your hand. If it is revenge you want, I offer it to you. If it is she you want—want her to crawl to you on hands and knees, pleading to you, her arms about your neck, her cheeks close, begging you to give her some of the drug—and it is for you to command, to—"

Grogan was on his feet, his hands clenched tightly at his sides, his eyes ablaze.

"By God, I'll do it," he said. "Where is the girl?"

"Upstairs! The door is locked and guarded, the windows are barred; but it is not here that we shall begin our—" Marshall Strong paused a moment. The green receded from his eyes, the mild brown returning as he finished with the one word, "treatment."

"Where?" Grogan paced back and forth about the room. His hands were clasped behind his back. His cigar bobbed up and down in his mouth as he bit nervously into it. Grace Livingstone was the one thing that Grogan wanted above all else.

"At Wong See's. It is there that she shall see all the products of the soulless world; experience all the horrors and the dangers of defiance, so that she

will more quickly succumb to the lure of the—the inevitable."

"Rita Rogers will take care of her," Jack Ripper smirked with an evil grin. Rita was his find and he claimed with some pride that she had cajoled more innocent weaklings into the fiendish habit than any member of the great drug-circle.

"And after the habit is thoroughly formed, when every nerve and every brain cell cries out in longing, we shall deny Grace nothing. Every luxury shall be hers. All the dreams of her deluded brain will be gratified until after the proceedings, and the money is safely in—" Marshall Strong broke off and swung suddenly around. "What was that?"

Footsteps! Light, soft-moving feet were plainly heard on the stairs.

CHAPTER VI

"WHERE'S GROGAN?"



NOTHING alarming, perhaps, in footsteps passing up or down those broad, thick-carpeted stairs, or was there? Marshall Strong had given strict orders that no one was to move about the house while he was in conference. Jack Ripper had come to his feet and stood halfway between the long table and the door. Marshall Strong had slid his chair back closer to the wall. His hand slipped inside his shirt and clutched the stock of an old-fashioned, long-barreled revolver, which he habitually carried beneath the left armpit, despite the discomfort.

Grogan unlocked the heavy oaken door and swung it open. A single electric light burned in the hall. Silence, and then, unmistakably, came again the sound of footsteps on the stairs, turning, to beat rapidly along the landing above.

Ripper was in the hall as Grogan turned to the front door. It was heavily bolted and locked. A bell sounded sharply. In another moment, the house was alive with servants. Several soft-stepping Chinese came noiselessly from above and along the lower hall from the kitchen.

The old man sat by his desk and waited. His voice rang out in a shrill falsetto to the servants that crowded in the doorway. His eyes, a deadly green, studied each of those stolid, placid, yellow faces. One was missing. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"Go search the house and bring Lee to me."

The doorway was deserted. Silent figures glided in and out of the great rooms, up and down the

stairs. In less than five minutes, two of the largest Chinamen returned, dragging between them an emaciated, trembling little Oriental, whose shifty eyes searched the room—then rested on Marshall Strong with a cunning, insane curiosity.



“Take him above and beat him . . . leave the door open tonight; I would listen.”

“My blother—I take a look-see. Tonight him callee me. Him no here?” The demented little creature crooked his twisted neck and peered about the room.

Marshall regarded him fixedly before he addressed the taller of the two men that held Lee.

“Take him above and beat him,” he said. “And, Cling,” he added, as the two dragged the whimpering, pleading little figure from the room, “leave the door open tonight; I would listen.”

So deadly calm and tranquil were his words that Jack Ripper turned and looked at him.

“Why don’t you get rid of that damned Chink?” he said, shuddering. “He gives one the creeps.”

“We all have our weaknesses,” the old man answered; “mine is Lee. His brother was a thief, and I killed him. Oh, I was younger and stronger then. Twice since, Lee has tried to kill me. You see, he hates me. You couldn’t understand, Ripper. You see nothing in this world but money; but”—his lips slipped back like an animal’s as he smiled—“Lee is my hobby. He is harmless now; but still I hate him, and, if his head were normal, he would kill me. My

weakness, to be sure, Ripper; and yet, my only weakness.”

Ripper shook his head. He hated only those who interfered with his greed, and only while they interfered. He would willingly shake hands with his most deadly enemy, if the doing of it would bring him personal gain.

The agonized cry of the little Chinaman came feebly from the back of the house. Ripper paced up and down. Marshall Strong sat back, his hands folded across his lap, his face calm and peaceful, his head nodding up and down. He did not seem to notice when, between those whimpering cries, came a shrill, frightened scream of terror, the scream of a woman. The scream was repeated.

Ripper paused in his pacing and swung around. Marshall Strong came to his feet, and when he spoke his face was livid.

“Where’s Grogan?” he croaked.

Ripper looked toward the door. The old man’s peculiar hatred for Lee had taken up all his attention. This was the first time he had missed Grogan. He hurled back his chair and dashed toward the door.

Despite his youth and vigor, Ripper had difficulty in keeping at the old man’s heels as they mounted the two flights of stairs to the top floor of the house.

There, by a partly open door, sprawled across the threshold, lay a Chinaman who groaned, rubbing a bruised eye. Ripper followed Marshall Strong through the open door.

In one corner of the room the huge Grogan held the girl in his arms as she struggled violently, beating with her tiny hands upon his thick, coarse face.

“Grogan!” The single word came from Marshall Strong like the snap of a whip. Grogan dropped the girl and turned. He looked squarely into the mouth of a long-barreled revolver.

“Get out of the room!” the old man ordered, and though his voice was deadly cold, it was his eyes that held Grogan. He read death, quick and certain, in their blazing, green depths. With a sickly, half-apologetic grin, Grogan turned, walked into the hall and down the stairs. It was in his mind to flee the house, but he did not. What was the girl to Marshall Strong, anyway? Grogan was as important to Marshall Strong as Marshall Strong was to him. He shrugged his shoulders, and stepped back into the room downstairs.

Ripper followed Grogan and stood leaning against the mantelpiece. For the life of him he did not feel as sure for Grogan as Grogan did for himself. Ripper had always feared Marshall Strong, and gave the old man no reason to distrust him. When he did, Ripper would shoot him dead. Get your man first! That was Ripper's code of ethics.

Upstairs in that little room, Grace Livingstone, crazed with fright, rushed to the side of her guardian. He had saved her; driven the terrible, leering Grogan from the room. She clutched frantically at his arm!

Marshall Strong raised his hand and struck her across the mouth. So violent and so unexpected was the blow that the girl staggered back and fell to the floor. Her golden hair was draped across her heaving shoulders, her eyes wide with fright. A tiny trickle of blood appeared upon her lips where the man had struck. Terror-stricken, she crouched there clutching her torn garment to her.

Marshall Strong breathed spasmodically as he descended the stairs. The exertions had played heavily upon his vitality. That girl was to blame for it! What Grogan could see in her was beyond him. Women—always women to ruin everything! However, he smiled as he entered the room below. Any man that would risk his life for a moment alone with a girl would not be hard to lead. Above all else, Grogan wanted the girl. Strong held a great power there; Grogan would do his bidding in all things. As for the girl? The old man's lips come tightly together. He was beginning to regard her as he did Lee. Grogan could have her when he was through. Yes, Grogan might have his reward.

It was to the surprise of Ripper and suspicion of Grogan that Marshall Strong spoke pleasantly and with little allusion to his sudden anger above.

"We must hurry things for our gay Lothario." He shook a bony finger at the heavy-jowled Grogan, then turned to Ripper. "Tell Wong—see Rita—tonight," and Marshall Strong took his regular seat behind the long, highly polished mahogany table.

CHAPTER VII WONG SEE'S OPIUM DEN



WONG SEE'S opium den was run on a system that sent many American dollars back to the little bank in China to await the coming of the proprietor. Someday

Wong would smoke his pipe in peace, and his ears would be free from their perpetual task of listening beyond closed doors and at drawn curtains. The lights in Wong's were so arranged that one saw nothing but thick curtains, and stretches of heavy carpet upon which trod slipped feet. Wong knew no friend but Wong; trusted no man but Wong. He did business with the Circle; but that was all. The list of Wong's patrons was known to him alone.

No shooting ever had taken place at Wong's. No guest was ever informed of the coming of another. Criminals came there. Hated enemies smoked their pipes in adjoining rooms, neither knowing of the presence of the other. Men had died there, but none that were not known to Wong, no deaths that were not arranged by Wong. Even the head of the great drug-circle did not question Wong about his clients. Wong See was as silent as the grave.

Two o'clock, and Wong crept, listening, down the long narrow corridors. Number Five had received plenty of opium. Number Five was a customer upon whom Wong looked with eyes of distrust. He was not good for Wong's business. Each day he grew more seedy. Wong saw his face grow more haggard; his clothes begin to take on patches. Some, Wong trusted, criminals especially; but Number Five was not a criminal. He was not one to trust, and Wong, listening now at the drawn curtain, realized that his last generous dose had amply repaid him.

Signaling two Chinamen, Wong watched them carry the unconscious man along the narrow hallways, far down the steps, and beneath the ground to a little house across the street. The door opened, and Number Five was set upon the sidewalk a half-block away. There was nothing to do but to leave strict orders with the man at the little door in front. Wong rubbed his hands. There had been no disturbance, and none would ever say that Wong had put out a patron. Wong never ordered them out; but Wong saw thereafter that they did not get in.

Word came that Wong was wanted above. Wong didn't pause to question who it was. Wong knew and rubbed his hands. Rita had told him. He was to be honored with a little business by the head of the Circle. Much money would pass through those thin tapering fingers, and find its way to that little bank across the ocean. Miss Rita had told him of a certain little lady who was to be broken to the way of—of the poppy, perhaps. Wong wasn't sure

yet. However, a luxurious room was fitted up far back in his ample establishment. Miss Rita was a fine young lady. Miss Rita could smoke her pipe like a Chinaman. A greater compliment Wong could not bestow. So it was that his thoughts were pleasant as he made his way noiselessly above.

Up in the little room kept for special visitors, four persons awaited Wong. Jack Ripper sat placidly watching Big Bill Grogan. He often wondered why the big man wasted so much energy. He looked from the nervous, restless Grogan to the slip of a girl who was stretched, unconscious, on the gaily-covered couch. She was pretty in a delicate, refined way, a quiet sort of beauty that Ripper could not understand. Give him tall women, with some dash about them!

He looked over at Rita Rogers, who sat in one corner of the room smoking a cigarette. There was a woman for you!—tall, willowy, with a flash in her eye. How easily Rita had handled the girl, and how dexterously the woman had administered the shot in the arm that had laid Grace Livingstone out! Imagine trying to carry a woman like Rita off against her will! It would be about as easy as handling a wildcat.

Wong slipped quietly in and stood in the center of the room before they were aware of his presence.

Ripper looked up, startled. Grogan scowled. He didn't like to be popped upon like that. Rita Rogers laughed outright. There was something fascinating about these Chinamen, and she knew Wong well enough not to fear him.

Wong smirked knowingly from one to another; then his eyes rested upon the little figure upon the couch. Grogan's eyes, too, rested there. Wong leered up at the hulking frame of the ward-heeler in understanding.

"Pretty—real pretty." He rubbed his smooth, yellow hands together in appreciation. "She smoke—dream happy in land of poppy, and perhaps she love, eh?" He looked back to the girl as he spoke.

"She'll get a shot of coke, that's what she'll get," Grogan cut in brutally. "This ain't no excursion. You can't force the pipe, and we haven't got—"

Rita Rogers stepped quickly to Grogan's side and placed a hand on his arm.

"Wong and I understand," she said; "the one leads to the other. Don't worry, Bill."

Grogan only grunted. He had not been easy in

his mind since Marshall Strong had come smiling in upon him earlier in the night. It wasn't Marshall Strong's way to smile and flatter. A distrust—more than a distrust, an actual suspicion—was stealing over him. The drug part was good, but he wished he had played it alone. There seemed to be a secret note of understanding between Wong and the others. Marshall Strong had not come along. Grogan eyed each in turn. He was in the thing, and he shrugged his huge shoulders and let Rita do the talking.

"Come, Wong," she said; "everything is left to you and to me. Let's move along before she opens up." Rita Rogers glanced indifferently at the unconscious girl who half-turned on the couch and groaned.

Wong bowed and faced the door. Rita and Ripper dragged Grace Livingstone to her feet and held her between them. Grogan turned toward the door with them when Ripper spoke.

"Better beat it along, Grogan," he said. "There's that matter of Clay Hudson, you know. It's important."

Grogan hesitated. He had no business there, he knew. Did they simply wish to get rid of him? However, he could do nothing there alone. With a scowl that could not be hidden, Grogan turned and, stepping quickly across the room, disappeared behind thick curtains. A silent Oriental rose and opened the door. Grogan passed down a narrow flight of stairs.

It was like Grogan to be suspicious. He wouldn't have hesitated a moment to betray a trust, when there was anything in it for him, and the scowl remained as he passed into the night.

The bent, inhuman figure of Lee, the demented Chinese, darted from a doorway and stopped directly in the big man's path. Grogan took him roughly by the shoulder to hurl him aside. The withered face looked up. Grogan recognized him.

Lee spoke rapidly and Grogan listened. Though Lee lied with the crafty volubility of his race and the cunning assurance of the insane who believes in his own fancy, Grogan drank in every word. It was all in tune with his thoughts.

"Mr. Strong he need money. Wong he like missey. Wong he give money." The scowl on Grogan's face turned to a look of intense viciousness. Of course, Strong needed money; and Wong had plenty of it. It was the double-cross, that was all. Grogan understood. He had done the same

thing over and over again to those that trusted him. He cursed bitterly and bit deep into the long black cigar. He turned back toward Wong's door, paused, looked up and down the dimly lighted street. They wouldn't let him in, perhaps, or if they did they'd murder him alone in there. With another oath he swung about and hurried up the street. Grace Livingstone was the ace in the hole, and he would hold her.

CHAPTER VIII CLUTCHING HANDS

WITHOUT NOISE, Wong led the way down the darkened corridors. Rita Rogers and Ripper followed with the unconscious girl between them. Their feet sank deep in the rich carpet. Silence came from the thick curtains that draped the bunks of the sleeping opium smokers.

Wong paused. A long bare arm had stretched out, clutching at his sleeve. Gold flashed for a moment in an open palm, clinked pleasantly as the fingers tightened upon his sleeve. Wong stopped, leaned down close to the curtain and listened. The gold meant that one in the land of poppy would buy some imaginary luxury. Wong would get the money, and there was the little bank in far-off China.

"You go on," the Chinaman turned and whispered to those who followed. "Me follow quickly. Wong have business."

"I know the room," Rita said simply. "Go get it, Wong!" With the girl, Rita and Ripper passed down the tiny aisle and turned into a still darker corridor.

Wong patted the strong brown hand that had reached out toward him.

Came a voice from behind the curtain.

"Wong, listen! The ship comes in with gold and wine, rare wine, and beautiful—" The voice of the speaker was far distant, trailing off in an inaudible whisper.

"Yes," Wong encouraged; "the ship sail with wine and beautiful women. Wong is to be trusted. He buy the wine—beautiful women perhaps—bring them here—Number Thirty—yes?" He softly rubbed his itching fingers about the closed fist that held the gold.

"Lean over—listen!" Wong barely caught the words. He leaned down anxiously. He feared the

dreamer would fall into a deep sleep again with the gold clutched in his hand. It was not Wong's policy to take anything by force.

Wong parted the curtains slightly and put his ear close to the tiny slit. The dreamer's other hand came out and lay against the Chinaman's cheek as if to press him feebly nearer. Wong bent lower, closer.

The large fingers groped about, drew closer to the attentive ears, crept toward the Chinaman's throat; and then, the arms came suddenly to life—moved quickly. The fingers opened, the hands shot outward, clutched quickly at that stretching, yellow neck, and closed upon it like a vise.

Wong's eyes bulged; his hands went quickly to his throat; his mouth opened, but no scream came. There was not a sound in the long corridor, not a skulking figure visible. Down the passageway, presently, came the soft treading of feet. An attendant was making his rounds, ready to administer to the wants of the smokers.



The fingers opened. The hand shot out, clutched quickly at the yellow neck, and closed on it like a vise.

The Chinese attendant turned down the main corridor, which led past Number Thirty. All was quiet. Not a figure broke the long tramp to the end of the passage. He listened here and there, noted that the curtains of Number Thirty were swinging slightly. Placing a hand upon them, he hesitated, listened a moment and passed on. If he had parted that curtain, he would have seen the grim form of his chief, Wong, stretched upon the little berth, his hands cuffed behind him, his legs bound with thick cords, and his mouth tightly gagged. Only Wong's darting, frightened eyes were alive, but useless to their owner now.

The attendant went leisurely upon his way, pausing, listening, and at the end of the passage turned down another. His quest was an endless one.

His sliding feet had no more than turned into the next passage when the curtains of Number Thirty parted, and a broad-shouldered man, who carried his shoes in one hand and a gun in the other, stepped out on the thick carpet. The shoes were stuffed into the pocket of his coat. In the dim light, he consulted his watch. Time was passing slowly. Drawing the curtains carefully together, he went quickly along the corridor, following the winding course that Jack Ripper and Rita Rogers had taken. For a time, at least, he must play a lone hand, and his game was a waiting one. Still, the girl must be protected. This broad-shouldered man who had so suddenly cut short the cry of terror in Wong's throat owed a debt—a debt to the dead Kid.

CHAPTER IX

CLAY HUDSON GETS INTO ACTION

GRACE LIVINGSTONE recovered consciousness with a great weight pressing down upon her brain. Her lips were dry, her tongue thick as she called weakly for water.

Rita Rogers drew a glass of water from the faucet above the marble basin in one corner of the room. With a nod to Ripper, she walked over and held the glass to the girl's lips.

Grace drank. The water burned at first, and then refreshed. She struggled to a sitting position and looked about her. She had never seen the woman before. The man she knew as one that often dropped in upon her guardian. This recognition gave her little encouragement.

Rita stood back and watched as the girl tried vainly to stand upon her feet. She winked at Ripper

as Grace fell back upon the rich divan.

"Never mind, kid," Rita addressed the now trembling girl, "you'll come around all right. You and me are going to be little pals together, take long trips about the whole world, and take them without leaving here." She half-turned and looked at Ripper. There is a certain pleasure in bringing new victims under the curse of the drug, a pleasure that is difficult for one not addicted to the habit to understand.

Cocaine was quick and sure, Rita knew; but she wanted to see the girl humbled before her fall, as she had fallen; to find her only relief in the little black cooked-opium pill, which Rita's experienced fingers could roll so well. She stepped toward the forlorn, hopeless figure and laid a hand on her shoulder.

Instinctively, Grace Livingstone shrank away. Rita drew up as if she were struck. An ugly sneer slipped over her thinly lined red lips. She eyed the girl malignantly. A cruel light flashed into her lust-filled eyes. Again she stretched out a hand toward the girl. No friendly greeting this. She would shake that pious look from the face of this helpless brat! Ripper, however, interrupted.

"I don't like the whole thing, Rita," he said. "Didn't Wong say there would be a man here?—one who guarded the door? It isn't like Wong to leave things like this. Ten minutes have passed."

"Don't cackle. Wong knows that I know this dump like a book. He had a chance to shake a lad down for big money, that's all. Let Wong alone; he's a good skate."

Ripper nodded, but he was not satisfied. His eyes involuntarily kept darting toward the locked door to his left.

"Let's dress up the silly thing." Rita turned to Ripper. "That box there—the one you're sitting on—is full of Chinese stuff. Open it up. If Grogan should come back and want to see her, we'll make his eyes open."

Ripper rose slowly from the gaily draped box on which he had been sitting. Rita took Grace roughly by the shoulders and dragged her to her feet.

"We'll make a Chink out of you." She laughed coarsely. "Say, Ripper, if Grogan's so stuck on this dame, we might slip him in once in a— Say! What's wrong with you?"

Ripper had thrown off the coverings from the box and had tossed up the lid with a careless hand. He gasped and stepped back. In answer to Rita's

repeated question, he simply pointed at the box. Rita dropped the girl back on the divan and stepped to Ripper's side. One glance into the box, and she drew back. Bound hand and foot, and with a thick towel across his mouth, lay a Chinaman. Rita slammed down the lid.

"What did you do that for, you fool?" Ripper cut in.

"Ain't he dead?" The woman looked up without resentment.

"Of course he isn't. Let's get him out of there." Ripper turned and glanced quickly about the room. Someone might be lurking behind the many hangings; but, no; Ripper had searched the whole place when he first had entered it. He always did that. He would search his own rooms if he had been out of them for five minutes.

Ripper stepped toward the box.

"A pretty story he'll have to tell. I'd like to know how the devil anyone got into the Chink's here. It's like breaking into the Tombs."

His hand was on the lid when Rita spoke.

"Let him be. Go get Wong. No one could break in here. It's Wong's doing. He's got something on that Chink."

Ripper faced the woman.

"Maybe"—he stroked his neck nervously—"but why didn't Wong tell us? It ain't like Wong to forget."

"No, nor it ain't like Wong to tell. Go get Wong—get him now. I'll wait here."

Without a word, Ripper walked across the room. With his hand on the key, he hesitated, felt for the gun on his hip, changed it quickly to his coat pocket, and turned the key. One look back at Rita, and he threw open the door. This damned place of the Chink's gave him the creeps! Why the devil people wanted to smoke opium in a funeral parlor, like Wong's, he didn't know.

Ripper's hands shot suddenly into the air, empty. He was a quick shot; had his hand on his gun when he opened the door; but he did not attempt to draw it. He knew better. In that doorway bulked the figure of a man that poked a gun threateningly into Ripper's stomach.

Ripper backed into the room, hands upraised. Just a name slipped from between lips he moistened with a nervous tongue.

"Clay Hudson!" In his voice was a deadly fear; in his eyes a gathering horror.

Clay Hudson followed the retreating figure into

the room, slipped his free hand behind his back, and turned the key in the lock. Rita turned now and saw the menacing gun. Her face turned a shade whiter, but she said nothing. Rita Rogers was the "gamest" girl that the underworld had produced.

Clay Hudson's gaze passed over the shoulders of Ripper and rested on Grace Livingstone.

"Can you walk?" he questioned.

Grace Livingstone did not ask who he was, why he was there. Instinctively, she knew that he was there to save her. One look into his blue eyes and she was willing to offer him her entire trust. The clear, fearless eyes, the kind but determined mouth, and the sharp, dominant chin! Here was no murderer of men; no persecutor of helpless women! She would go with him anywhere.

Try as she might, however, Grace could not walk, even across the floor. Her head was clear, her brain active, her muscles responded to her effort, until she got to her feet; then everything went black.

Clay Hudson noted her condition at once.

"You needn't feel alarmed, Miss Livingstone," he said quietly. His voice was calm, as if he were speaking to her across a drawing room. "You may feel sure that you are perfectly safe. We will wait; friends will be here any minute."

Grace Livingstone tried to smile back at him. There was nothing coarse in his face, no lack of refinement in his speech; just the threatening muzzle of the automatic, which unwaveringly covered the man and the woman, connected him even remotely with the criminal world into which she had been thrust.

Frightened though she was, the girl thrilled as she watched him. He was so calm, so confident, so self-reliant; and this man and this woman, whose very presence threw her into overpowering fear, cowed before him, huddled in one corner, their hands high above their heads.

Even Rita Rogers feared for her life. She could not understand that her life was in no actual danger. Why should this man be different from others? The code of the underworld recognized no sex when death hung in the balance. If she moved or lowered her hands, Rita Rogers expected to be shot down. It was so her world acted; and she would be the last to condemn such a cowardly act. She saw little harm in it. Rita Rogers packed a gun of her own.

Ten minutes passed in deadly silence. No one moved; no one spoke; the threatening gun stayed

steadfast. Came the distant slamming of a door, an unheard of thing in Wong's, and Rita and Ripper raised their heads in a new alarm. All along, they had entertained the hope that Wong would come. Clay Hudson smiled and nodded to Grace, and in that smile and nod she read her freedom.

The distant crack of a revolver came to their ears. Another and another! Came the splitting sound of breaking wood, a heavy object breaking the paneling of distant doors! Weird shrieks, stifled screams, and terrified cries were followed by the cursing of angry men, as poor wretches, who slept for a while in the luxuriant arms of the poppy queen, were awakened.

Clay Hudson backed to the door. Heavy feet trod in thick, padding sounds along the halls. There came a loud pounding on the door. Clay smiled reassuringly at the girl. His gun still covered the cowering man and woman as he slipped his free hand behind his back and spun the key in the lock.

The door crashed open. Clay Hudson still kept his back to it. He must cover that treacherous pair. He looked over at the girl to encourage her to bear up in the hour of her deliverance.

Something must have gone wrong, horribly, disastrously wrong. He read it in her face, in her great, terror-stricken eyes. She screamed, and fell forward in a faint.

Clay Hudson swung half around, but too late. A heavy object, wielded by a strong arm, whistled through the air and fell on his upturned forehead as he looked straight into the glaring, evil eyes of Big Bill Grogan. Clay Hudson clutched desperately at the empty air, felt his gun slip from his grasp, and then—darkness—deadly, nauseating darkness.

CHAPTER X DEATH AND LOVE



HOW far he was dragged down that black pit of oblivion Clay Hudson did not know. In his dreams he knew that many men tore rapidly across the thick carpets. Loud and close came the distinct report of at least one pistol shot; and clearly he heard the frightened, piercing cry of a woman in deadly terror. He opened his eyes. His lids were heavy, his eyes glassy, and his vision as that of one who looks through the wrong end of opera glasses. Far distant, across the room, he saw the figure of Ripper sitting upright in a corner. His figure was stiff and straight, yet his

eyes were closed. By his feet, huddled in a heap, lay Rita Rogers. In the center of the room, a man in a dirty gray sweater lay sprawled upon his face, one arm outstretched, the other held grotesquely clasping the back of his neck. Despite his efforts, Clay Hudson's lids snapped closed, shutting out the hazy vision.

Lying on his side against the box in which he had placed the Chinaman less than an hour before, Hudson fought against the giddiness that was overpowering him. Things were far from clear; but three things were etched deeply in his sluggish brain. Those he had expected had not come when he opened the door; Grace Livingstone was gone; and that last upward glance had told him she had fallen into the hands of Big Bill Grogan.

Clay Hudson's eyes opened again, and he looked across at Ripper. His vision was clear and uninterrupted by thick mist now. Ripper's eyes were open, and they looked straight into his. Ripper moistened his lips; fear, then understanding, flashed across his face. Clay Hudson could not move. Ripper's hand dragged slowly across the floor. His eyes never left Clay's as his uncertain fingers crept toward his gun.

Clay set his lips tight; his determined chin protruded, and moisture gathered on his forehead; but not a protecting movement could he make.

Ripper leered evilly as his groping fingers disappeared for a moment and came slowly to view again. A pistol was clutched in his shaking right hand. Slowly, very slowly, as if each movement was an agonizing one, Ripper raised the gun until the hand that held it rested on his outstretched knees.

Clay Hudson watched, fascinated, for the end. From the distance came three shrill blasts of a whistle. Hope, the faintest glimmer of hope, shone in Clay's eyes, for, following the whistle, was heard the tread of heavy feet on the floor below.

Ripper, too, heard. He raised the gun once, then lowered it. His eyes shifted toward the door, and returned to the helpless man across the room. He moistened his lips again. The gun raised and remained steady, unwaveringly trained upon its helpless victim.

Clay Hudson read death in those closely set eyes, that steady hand.

Involuntarily, Clay closed his eyes. The roar of a pistol, one sharp report, crashed to his ears, followed by the smell of powder and a deadly

quiet. There was no pain, no feeling that he had been hit; yet he knew that, at that distance, it would have been impossible for the other to miss. He wondered whether he had been paralyzed beyond all feeling.

No! His hands could move. The feel of life was rushing quickly through his numbed body, the itching tingle of returning circulation.

He opened his eyes and looked across the few feet that separated him from the gunman. He gasped in surprise. The gun was no longer in Ripper's hand. His eyes no longer held that rat-like cunning of the killer. The erect figure had slipped sidewise; the gun lay upon the carpet; the eyes were glassy, and an ever widening circle of red was appearing on his shirt.

Rita Rogers was sitting up, a small revolver in her hand. She had shot Ripper!

Why? Clay asked himself the question. The next instant, the room was filled with men.

Rita had half-turned toward Clay when the gun was wrenched from her hands by one of the half-dozen intruders. Two of the men were uniformed policemen; the others, members of the United States Secret Service.

"Missed you down below, Chief. Would have come sooner if I had known. We were pretty busy with the wagon, though. The dopes cut up rough." A gray-haired man who directed the others spoke to Clay Hudson as he helped him to the empty divan.

Rita Rogers climbed uncertainly to her feet. She looked across at Clay and laughed.

"Secret service, eh?" she said. "Well, I always half-suspected. No one would listen to me; called me hophead. That lad's dead." She spoke to the officer who turned over the grotesque body in the dirty sweater. "Riley's his name. I bumped him over when I missed Grogan, the skunk!" She hissed the final words through her teeth.

"And this one?" One of the men jerked a thumb toward Ripper. "Got him, too?" He procured a little book and looked over at the girl, who now leaned against the wall, her face a deadly white.

"Croaked him, too; just naturally put him out." For all her tone of light banter, however, there was a certain wistful sadness in her face.

Clay looked at her and shook his head. He could not understand. He didn't know Rita very well, but all that he did know about her was bad.

A HALF-HOUR later Clay was his own man again.

But for a bump across the forehead and an ugly, but not deep, gash where the heavy weapon of Grogan's had slipped downward, he was unhurt. A dull aching in the head alone remained.

Rita turned a deaf ear to all questions as to why she shot Ripper.

"But I'll remember when the trial comes off," Clay told her. "You saved my life and I won't forget."

"You can save yourself any feeling toward me," she cried, with unnatural vehemence. "I didn't see Ripper's gun trained on you. If I had, I'd have waited before I shot. Don't let—don't let no word get around that I favored a dick. I hate the lot of you." Rita Rogers drew up her head and looked the men over with defiance. Her cheeks were a deadly white beneath the rouge. Just a moment she stood so; then, before any of them could reach her, she slumped to the floor.

Clay was at her side in an instant. Kneeling, he raised her head and called for water. A moment later, Rita opened her eyes, and Clay read death in them. She spoke now in quick, sharp jerks.

"Grogan did it, the dog! I missed him." Sitting up straight, she shouted, "You fool! That's why I killed Ripper. I didn't want to go to hell alone—and I love him." Rita Rogers fell back into Clay's arms.

From Inspector Raymond, who waited down stairs with the rest of the raiders, Clay learned that Grogan had got away.

"He must have gone out the front when we came through the back, beneath the street." Inspector Raymond shook his head. "He gave us a clean pair of heels and no mistake, but we weren't looking for Grogan."

"No," Clay said slowly, "you're not to blame. I wasn't looking for him either."

"I think he has always suspected, since the Kid was killed. He seemed to guess that I saw you in the Wop's back room. You have all the evidence on Marshall Strong now?"

"All," Clay answered in a far-off voice. His thoughts were elsewhere. What of Grace Livingstone? What of his debt to the dead Kid? Better go through with it now and go straight to Marshall Strong's. He might know something, might tell something. His plans were well laid to surprise the head of the Circle; Lee was a willing ally. Clay Hudson closed his hands tightly and turned to Inspector Raymond.

CHAPTER XI
LEE'S QUEST IS ENDED



HERE was a chill in the night air, and the dampness bit deep into the dried old bones of Marshall Strong. Before the open fireplace bent the twisted form of the Chinaman, Lee, who hummed silently to himself as he tossed on a log. His distorted face was placid beneath the drawn yellow skin. A smile might have been there; but that would be impossible to tell, so misshapen were his features.

"Get out!" Marshall Strong made no attempt to hide his true nature with Lee. It was Lee alone who saw the man as he really was. Perhaps it was relief to Marshall Strong. At least, he felt a certain pleasure in having Lee about him.

At his bidding, Lee went, scampering out into the hall and up the stairs. At the top he paused and listened. Not a sound in the great house was to be heard.

The clock below struck the hour of midnight. Lee counted off each sound, nodding in rhythm. When the last stroke had died away, he muttered, "My Mother." Turning, he crept softly down the stairs. Without making a sound, he passed the curtains before the large living room and crept back to the kitchen. An Oriental sat by the stove, his eyes upon a smoking pan. Lee passed noiselessly and turned down to the cellar. He would be safe. He knew where to hide.

Once down the cellar steps, he lit a candle. Then from beneath some rubbish he produced a soiled and torn photograph.

Replacing the picture beneath the heap, he took out a knife and ran the edge of it along his finger. As the cold steel crossed the edge of his thumb, he nodded in satisfaction. He placed the knife beneath his long blouse. His eyes narrowed and his lips slipped back. He walked to the coal bin and counted the many indentations that the sharp point of his knife had made during the months. He was pleased. Lee had not forgotten.

Going to the stairs, Lee blew out the candle and waited. A half-hour passed; then footsteps. A door opened above. Lee crouched beneath the staircase.

An electric light was snapped on from above. The dull glare lit up the center of the cellar, and Marshall Strong came slowly down the steps. At times like this, he was careful to see that not a bolt was neglected. Each iron-barred window he

carefully inspected; and, as he paused before each one, Lee came noiselessly from behind the steps and raised the knife above his head. A half-twist he would give the razor-like blade, and then quickly put it back beneath his blouse. Hundreds of times Lee had so dogged Marshall Strong, but never had he hurled the knife. Always the fear that he might miss had stayed his hand. If he missed he would be beaten until nothing but his bones were left. Unlike most insane people, Lee's fears were not entirely imaginary.

Marshall Strong examined four windows, and four times did the knife come from Lee's blouse to hang for a minute above his head. However, it did not whistle through the air and bury itself in the old man's back, as it often had buried itself in the thick wood of the coal bin.

"Plenty soon all hell come loose. Not yet." As he had always done, Lee slunk again into the protecting shadow of the stairs as Marshall Strong went slowly up them.

Lee went to the largest of the four windows, which led to a little alley and the rear street. He unlocked the heavy bolt. Missey Grace was kind to him. Mister Clay—he give him money to bury himself back in the land of his ancestors, and besides—maybe Lee, he take a "look-see" through long iron bars—maybe he see Marshall Strong caged up like a monkey.

UPSTAIRS, behind his long mahogany table, Marshall Strong grew restless. Not a word had come from Ripper; not a word from Grogan. He had not liked the spirit in which Grogan left his house. Twice he placed his hand on the receiver of the telephone, and twice he drew back.

The third time he gripped the instrument with determination. Wong could tell him what had happened. Just a word would be enough. As he gripped the receiver, the phone rang sharply.

Marshall Strong's "hello" was a weak one. There was an ominous note in the sudden ringing of that bell. Someone else was sending him the word he would have sought.

The call came from one of Grogan's friends, one of those creatures of the underworld that betray friends for money, one that had more than once received the confidence of Marshall Strong and hoped to take Grogan's place in the Circle. Marshall Strong promised all that was asked, resolving at the same time to keep just as much of

his promise as suited his convenience. So he gained the address of the house to which Grogan had taken Grace Livingstone. He smiled evilly as he hung up the receiver.

Turning to the large safe in the back of the room, he spun the dial several times and opened the heavy steel door. He would need money. He chuckled as he counted off a pile of yellow-backs. He would hire jackals to hunt wolves. Returning to his desk, he scribbled off a short note, just an order, and the address at which Grace was held a prisoner. He pressed a button that rang the bell in the kitchen. In half an hour Fong would deliver that note, and the girl would be in his hands again. This time he would make no mistake.

Marshall Strong placed the money and the note in a long, strong envelope and turned again to the safe. He shouldn't have left it open like that even for a minute.

He heard a step behind him. He turned and glanced over his shoulder.

Clay Hudson stood in the doorway, and he looked at Marshall Strong over the cold black barrel of an automatic. Behind the stalwart form of the young secret service man smirked the twisted features of Lee. Others were crowding into the room.

Trapped, Marshall Strong hesitated. It would be useless to try to open the safe. Besides, they would open it anyway. The envelope in his hand! Damn the girl! Why let them find her? With a dexterous movement, Marshall Strong turned and flipped the envelope into the open fire. It landed squarely on the blazing logs, hung there a second, and blazed up.

With the others in the room to watch the old man, Clay Hudson made a dash to the fireplace, but Lee was before him. Thrusting his bare hand into the flames, the little Chinaman extracted the charred envelope. Many of the bills were black and crisp, but the sheet of paper that was folded between them remained unscathed. Taking it from Lee's blackened fingers, Clay read the message. He looked up.

"You take care of this man, Raymond." He turned to the inspector. "I have found out where the girl is, and I'll want you to send a detail down to—Sixth Avenue."

"I don't think we'll be troubled with him very long. Look at his face." Raymond pointed at Marshall Strong. "I think he put something in his

mouth when you ran to the fire."

Clay looked intently at the old man. The white skin was slowly turning to a pasty yellow and the brown eyes were taking on a sudden brightness, a vivid brownish green. Marshall Strong stood by his long mahogany table and leaned upon it for support. All his life he had cheated the law, and now, in death, he was about to cheat it again. In the one moment, when the eyes of all were on him, he had swallowed a little pill, a pill long prepared to meet such an emergency and give him a speedy and painless death.

"Yes, I took poison," the old man croaked. "The game is done. You may have my body, but—"

A weird cry broke from the lips of Lee, who had stood behind the others, nursing his injured hand. One thought now possessed him. His victim, the man he had stalked for so many nights, was about to outwit him at the end. Once again that long-bladed knife shot from Lee's blouse and flashed in the air, but this time it did not pause and return to the blouse. Just a split-second it hung above his head, then it whizzed through the air.

Marshall Strong half-turned in time to see—to know. The next instant, it was buried to the hilt in his chest. Lee had avenged his "blother."

Raymond bent over the fallen man and examined the wound.

"Killed instantly," he muttered; "right through the heart."

"Knife killee him? Poison no do it?" Lee questioned eagerly.

"You killed him all right, you fool," one of the officers cut in as he laid a heavy hand upon Lee's shoulder.

Lee smiled. His quest was finished.

CHAPTER XII DENIZENS OF THE NIGHT



BELOW the street level in a smoke-filled room a colored jazz band tirelessly blared its raucous melody. A dozen couples danced between the circle of small tables. Others drank and laughed. Some there were that sat about talking in whispers, a few who suspiciously watched their neighbors, occasionally patting the reassuring bulks in bulging pockets. Baron Mathews's Rathskeller was a slumbering volcano with periodical eruptions. Strong-armed, singing waiters packed deadly blackjacks for use on unruly

customers. Altogether, it was a representative gathering of a great city's underside.

Small fights were plentiful. Gangsters with reputations to sustain smiled indulgently as the flying wedge of waiters would hurl some fistic pair into the side alley. These leering-eyed denizens of the night, who habitually talked through the corners of their mouths, were above such petty disturbances. When they started something, it began and ended in a cloud of smoke!

Up and down among the tables Baron Mathews made his way, a smile here, a bow there, and perhaps a drink at the table of the more favored. This night, however, there was a slight tremor to the lips that smiled. An extra loud noise or the sudden smashing of a tray of glasses caused his heart to miss a beat beneath his ample, mouse-colored waistcoat.

At the back of the public room, Baron Mathews passed between little curtains quickly down a narrow passageway, and into his private office, a stuffy hole at the end of the hall.

He closed the door quickly, locked it, and looked at the huge bulk of Big Bill Grogan, who sprawled easily back in the large desk chair.

"Well?" Grogan looked up with a scowl. "You've been as coy as a young girl all evening. What's eatin' you now?"

Baron Mathews rubbed his hands together. He did not wish to offend, and yet he was worried, frightened.

"A phone call just came for you." He looked Grogan intently in the eyes. He wished to see how much the other would be affected.

Grogan slipped his cigar across his mouth before replying.

"And if it did? I told you to say I wasn't here."

"I did; I did!" Mathews glanced over his shoulder. A deadly fear held him. He felt that he stood between Grogan and the head of the Circle. "Grogan, you've got to get the girl out of here. I know who she is. Marshall Strong's men are coming. That was the warning on the phone. Someone has double-crossed you."

Grogan came to his feet, clutching at the desk. He tried to brazen it out, but his voice shook.

"What of it? What if they are? She's safe here. No one can find that hidden room, you say so yourself."

"No one but him. Marshall Strong knows of it—knows of everything. He owns this place—owns

me—knows of the killing of Jacobs last spring, and he'd use it, too."

"What of me?" Grogan sneered. "What about my using it?"

"I'm between the two of you"—Baron Mathews made a helpless gesture—"but for your own sake you must move her. At least ten in that room outside belong body and soul to Marshall Strong. When they hear—get their orders—all hell won't save you."

Grogan paced the tiny room. He wished now that he were well out of it. Yet, he must keep the girl! In a safe place, she would be a weapon over Marshall Strong's head. Why had he brought her there?—and why had he let so many in on it? That was past, however, and it had taken more than a handful to break up Wong's place. In his heart, Grogan feared Marshall Strong, wished him dead. If he had but known the truth!

"Who telephoned?" he demanded.

"Don't know. A friend of yours that feared Strong, I guess. Just a voice and a message, that was all. I could protect you from the police; they never would find the girl; but Marshall Strong! For God's sake, Grogan, get her out of here. I'll lie to him for you—help you all I can."

"How?" Grogan bit into his cigar. "I could take her up to that place in the Bronx; but you can't trust the gang in the front. How?"

"A car on the side street—drop her by a rope to the alley. It's black as pitch. You have time; it'll be an hour before they come." Baron Mathews leaned on the desk and outlined his plan clearly and rapidly. Two trusted men could wait below. Grogan could let the girl down. Mathews would watch in the main room to protect the retreat.

For a moment Grogan hesitated.

"I'll do it," he said, banging the desk. "Get out front with those cutthroats. Send Lawson and Jake Blake to me."

THE JAZZ band toiled on incessantly. The beating of the drum came faintly to the two waiting figures in the alley. Protected by a large stone wall on one side and the huge bricks of the house on the other, they slunk there in the dark, hardly distinguishable from the shadows of the cans and heaps of rubbish. Caps pulled down, collars turned up, they waited.

Two flights above, a window creaked as it opened. A blackened hole, a white face for a

second, and all was silent above. Those below drew closer to the wall and waited. A white face appeared at the window, flashed away again, and a long black bundle, which bore but slight resemblance to a human form, hung for a moment on the sill. It swung outward, and in sharp jerks bounced its way down the side of the building.

The two dim outlines below waited with arms upstretched until a soft, yielding human form was in their arms. The rope dropped from above into the alley. The window closed noiselessly as the figures bore the tightly bound form of Grace Livingstone to the waiting car.

The chauffeur of a big gray limousine that stood by the curb jumped from his seat and flung open the door of the car.

"In she goes and make it snappy," spoke one of the men. "The boss will be out—" His speech broke off in a curse, which froze half-uttered on his thick lips. An automatic had been shoved close against his face. Practiced hands slipped steel cuffs about his wrists, and he was ordered into the car. His companion and the chauffeur met a like fate.

Three minutes later, Grogan came briskly out of that little alley. There was no suspicion in his mind as he crossed to the car and flung open the door.

"One of you might have waited by—"

An arm shot out, clutched him by the collar, and pulled him in so violently that he fell to the floor. When he recovered, the door half closed behind him. A gun was poked into his chest, and a sharp command warned him to lie still.

"Not a word now, Grogan; the temptation to pull the trigger is great," the man holding the gun spoke.

The car sped away, A light flashed from a street lamp as Grogan looked up. The man behind the gun was Clay Hudson. Beside him, her head resting upon his shoulder, was the unconscious girl. On the other side, Grogan's chauffeur stared straight before him, his eyes appearing like two slits above the handkerchief that gagged him.

"She's all right," Grogan broke in sulkily. "I didn't mean any harm by her. I was protecting her from Marshall Strong. That'll be my plea against the kidnapping charge; and I've got friends, Clay. Come, let me go and I'll pay you well."

"No!" Clay Hudson shook his head. "We won't hold you on any kidnapping charge, Grogan."

"You can't connect me up with Marshall Strong

and the dope-circle. I don't know what you've got on him, but I've been mighty careful. You may know a lot, Hudson, but you can't hang it on me."

"We won't hold you on any dope charge," Clay answered quietly.

Grogan's brows knitted. He was puzzled.

"What then?" he asked with a sneer.

"Murder, Grogan; the murder of Rita Rogers. I think we can hang that on you."

Grogan set his lips tightly, but said nothing. It came to him that his wire-pulling days were over. Five minutes of silence, and a uniformed policeman opened the limousine door as it drew up before a police station.

TWO months later, a slim figure in black knelt before a grave on which the grass was green. Each day she had prayed there, and in her prayers was a material as well as a spiritual wish. As she rose and turned, her material wish was granted. Clay Hudson stood looking at her, his hat in his hand.

Grace Livingstone didn't speak. No words would come. She just stretched out a tiny hand and placed it upon his arm. So, clutching him tightly, almost convulsively, the two walked from the little cemetery.

"I have never thanked you—never seen you since—never even had—oh, for a while I thought I was to have a friend."

Clay patted her hand.

"You have," he said; "and your letter reached me. You see, I owed a debt to Lee, too. It was he who told me they were taking you to Wong's. There, don't cry. I have used a bit of influence. Lee's up on a state farm, and I think they can cure him."

Outside the great gates two cars were waiting. Grace Livingstone dismissed her chauffeur, and watched him drive the car away. She turned to Clay.

"You won't mind taking me with you, will you?" Grace looked shyly up at him.

"I'll drive you wherever you wish." Clay Hudson helped her to the front seat and climbed up behind the wheel. "Where to?" he asked cheerily as he slipped the car into gear.

"Far out into the country—anywhere away from the city." Her voice was very soft and low, but he heard the last word distinctly.