

The Murder of Silas Cord



By
Harold F. Sorensen

Someone had snuffed out the life of Harry Bligh's eccentric old boss. And when Bligh tried a little amateur sleuthing, he stuck out his own neck for a gallows garland.

AFTER the emotions and tumult aroused by the murder of Silas Cord had subsided, there remained the mystery. No one knew the murderer; none was more anxious than Cord's secretary, Harry Bligh, to discover him. Any suspect of so determined a detective as Lieutenant Ware would have wanted to gain the truth to save himself. But Bligh was haunted by a fear far worse than that

of execution for the murder of his employer.

The trouble began when Bligh learned that Mr. Cord was threatened with blackmail. Cord would not tell more than that, Bligh defiantly called in the law. But when the police arrived at the fine old house, Cord told them the entire matter was Bligh's mistake, there was no blackmailer.

Murder came the night of the second day thereafter.

The police credited the blackmail story then. Only they could not discover any reason why Cord might have been blackmailed. If ever a man had prospered and lived long without doing wrong or incurring hatred, it was Silas Cord. His life was confined to his home, his interests to his nephew and two wards who lived with him.

Harry Bligh was unquestionably the hardest hit. In hopes of gleaning some clue, his mind dwelt continually on that last day that Silas Cord had lived.

It was September, the weather characteristically erratic. Cord's last day was coldish; alternately bright and dark as the sun escaped, then again to be engulfed by clouds, at which overcast times the wind blew furtively, whipping the leaves about the extensive grounds surrounding the house. They were in the study, Cord in the big chair, the tartan plaid rug over his knees, Bligh working at the desk.

"Harry," Cord called quietly. And when Bligh looked up, Cord went on, "I want you to go downtown for me."

"Yes, sir."

Silas Cord smiled and winked his eyes behind his glasses. He had a round, creamy-skinned face with a rosy tint, fine, silver hair; a small mouth and large, blue, jovial eyes. A short rotund man, he was in the aggregate harmless and even angelic appearing. His air was that of impeccable benignness which confidence men strive to simulate. Bligh had never known any man to look so honest and not be a crook.

BLIGH had rescued Cord from a bandit-minded tramp one morning in the park. Silas Cord offered Bligh a job. Bligh laughed; he had rescued Cord because of the disparity in his size and that

of his attacker, and despite his appraisal of Cord's character.

Bligh wanted a job. A migrant orphan, he had no relatives. Wherever he went, he sought work, and though he got it often, he never obtained the lasting sort of job. But while he worked, he attended school and studied. At thirty he was tall, hardy, strong. He'd had enough fights so that he didn't care for any that had no sensible basis. His face was long and somewhat wide, with startlingly gray eyes under straight black brows.

To humor the old fellow, Bligh went home with him.

Whereupon Bligh received the surprise of his life. He learned that Silas Cord really owned this fine old house with its lawns and groves on the city's far outskirts. Silas Cord had long been the city's outstanding realtor, so that even now, retired as he was, Cord was a wealthy man.

Bligh took the job with grateful humility. In a few months he was a good stenographer, displayed a good head for figures and a fine spirit for imposing discipline on Mr. Cord's household.

On this September day, Bligh had thought they would work on Mr. Cord's book, which was to be about real estate values in relation to taxes. There was nothing unusual in it when Cord sat with the rug over his knees while Bligh worked at the desk, and Cord said he wanted Bligh to go to the city. Bligh leaned his elbows on the desk and waited for the silver-haired, rotund little man to tell him what errand he was to do.

"I wish you to stay in the city all evening." Cord smiled gently. "I'm having everyone go. I want to be here alone."

Bligh shuddered. A cloud obscured the sun at that moment, throwing the room into gloom. Bligh dropped his pen and

spread his strong brown hand flat on the desk.

"The blackmailer! He's coming here tonight for money. I won't have it. You can fire me, but—"

"Harry," Cord broke in, "you must not tell the police."

"I have to!" Bligh retorted. "You're starting something that will never end. You've got to fight, not submit—"

"You mustn't." Cord's round, rosy face was a trifle stiff. "For your sake. You were a hobo. It doesn't matter that you were always seeking work. The police do not like your background."

"I know that." Bligh's eyes clouded.

"But you don't know that they think you the blackmailer."

"How can they be that dumb," Bligh demanded disgustedly, "when I'm the one that brought them into this?"

"That, in their opinion, is the beauty of it." Cord smiled at Bligh's perplexity. "The police think you discovered some secret and demanded money. I refused to pay and threatened to have you arrested. You called my bluff by sending for the police. You defied me to tell them the truth and have my secret come out." Cord cocked his head. "The police worked on me a long time, Harry, trying to convince me to tell the truth about you and rely on them."

Bligh loosed a string of heartfelt curse words.

"But I still don't care! I'm not sitting by while you are bled white for something that happened in the past."

CORD'S blue eyes dwelt on Bligh. The sun broke out and poured into the room, lighting up Cord's face. His eyes had filled, he closed them quickly.

"Mr. Cord!" Bligh cried out. "What have I done?"

"You do me little credit, Harry," Cord

sighed.

"I think you're the greatest guy that ever lived," Bligh gasped. "That's why neither fear of losing my job nor of the police is going to get me out from between you and this blackmailer."

"Harry, I have been informed that the extortion was a momentary madness, something never intended to be consummated. I have given my word that this person can reveal himself and tell me all. You will not inform the police. You protected me before from what you thought my weakness. But now you must respect my pledged word."

Tom Grayson burst into the study. He shot Bligh a disgusted look and addressed his uncle.

"What's this about you wanting the house quiet tonight?" Grayson yelled. "I've invited my friends here. I got a stack of new phonograph records and a lot of other stuff, and now you want me to call the party off." Grayson never remembered that the preparations he made for his friends were paid for with Cord's money. "Fine dope it would make me. I won't do it."

Cord indulged this boy far too much. The bad feeling between Bligh and Grayson was the result of Bligh's interference. Gray was an exhibitionist, insane in his efforts to impress his importance on those about him. He drove the fastest cars over the worst roads, while drunk. He was the big noise and the big spender at the parties he gave his cronies.

Yet he suffered a fear that he had not made himself important enough even in their eyes. He courted catastrophe, as if he would give limb or life if only it would make him the imperishable hero of a moment no one would forget.

The light in which Bligh saw this young fool opened Cord's eyes, too. Bligh could not keep Grayson from being a fool,

but he saw to it that Grayson had less money to be a fool with. Besides, Grayson had been involved in a few scrapes, and Bligh had prevented Cord from helping. Having extricated himself from his predicaments, Grayson had less appetite for them. He hated Bligh.

"There will always be tomorrow, Tom—"

"You can put off whatever it is you want quiet for," Grayson shouted. "You take tomorrow, I want tonight."

"Your uncle wants to have an old friend here tonight." Bligh took a slow step toward Grayson. "That's enough for you."

Grayson shook with anger, but kept his mouth shut. He had gone too far with Bligh once, he wouldn't again. With a cry of rage, Grayson flung out of the study, slamming the door behind him.

Bligh made one last appeal to Cord.

"I don't see why I can't be here tonight."

"Please do not be difficult," Cord pleaded.

"I won't," Bligh swallowed. "I am only an employee. It would do me good to remember that more often."

"Harry!"

"I'm as spoiled as Grayson."

"Take care of everything, won't you, Harry?"

"Of course I will."

Bligh had no trouble with Cord's two wards.

LOUISE ENVERS was twenty-two. Her mother and Mrs. Cord had been lifelong friends until their deaths, at nearly the same time. Cord took Louise in, made her one of the family.

Maurice Rooper was the son of a man now dead who'd been Cord's partner in the early days. Cord had taken Rooper in, too. Whereupon Maurice Rooper settled

down to a life of ease. He was a nut on hobbies. And Bligh suspected that Maurice's friends enticed him into one hobby after another, knowing he would buy superb equipment, tire of it, and give it to the one who wanted it.

Dinner was early that evening. Bligh told the servants to take the family car and go where they wished. Louise Envers said she was going out, and went. Tom Grayson loaded his booze and phonograph records into a sporty roadster and departed sulkily. Maurice Rooper had been gone since midday, and was not likely to return. He was in the throes of a passion for chemistry and had gone to a friend's laboratory.

Bligh informed Cord that the house was empty. Cord did not invite him to remain. Bligh drove off in his secondhand coupe.

He drove away, but he couldn't stay away. He tried, he fought himself, but it was no use. He parked off the road and walked back through the darkness. The only light was in the study. Taking every precaution, Bligh gained the side of the house. Bushes grew in a long row here, and he hid crouched between them and the wall.

The study window was large, with a low sill and commonly used as an entrance and exit. The curtains were drawn, the light streamed out. But the bushes ended short of the window. Bligh could not approach to look in without being boldly silhouetted to anyone watching the house.

The colder Bligh became the more he worried for Mr. Cord. With no heat and the window open, Mr. Cord must be freezing. Maybe the blackmailer had lost his nerve and would not come, and Mr. Cord would get pneumonia.

The clock within the house chimed nine. At the last stroke, the bright study light went out.

Bligh sprang up. He thought he heard a door close. He broke through the bushes into the open. He restrained an impulse to dash through the window into the study. The closing of that door was an indication that someone had left the study and gone into the hall, and would be coming out by the front.

Bligh rushed round to the front door, unlocked it and ran down the hall. He fumbled and fumbled for the study door knob, till he thought he was in a nightmare, and then he discovered the door was not closed at all. He reached in and snapped on the ceiling lights, not the lamp that had been burning.

Bligh's tan face turned greenish. His knees knocked. He clutched his shirtfront. His stomach rolled. He tottered into the study, breathing laboriously through his nose with his mouth clamped shut to control nausea.

The bust of Plato that always stood on the marble column just within the study door was what had been used. There was no question about Silas Cord's death. One solid blow with that bust would crush any head.

Bligh recovered, and dashed out by the window. As before, he neither saw nor heard anything. Still, he ran. He turned the corner at the back of the house, his foot caught in something solid, and he fell heavily. Bligh leapt up, expecting to have to fight for his life, but there was no such necessity. He had tripped over Tom Grayson, who sprawled insensibly, foully drunk. Bligh dragged Grayson into the house and phoned the police.

AFTER the emotions, hysteria and general tumult aroused by the murder of Silas Cord had subsided, there still remained the mystery. And Harry Bligh's anxiety to know the murderer.

The servants were not suspected. They had all been together the entire evening.

Louise Envers and Maurice Rooper lacked alibis, yet their activities had been normal. Louise had gone to the theater, been bored and gone out. She dropped into a surrealist friend's studio later, but even under grilling it was obvious that his knowledge of time was limited to the fact that it was A. D., and the police could do no better with him.

Maurice Rooper was even worse off. He had left his friend's laboratory at eight o'clock. Rooper admitted that he had driven home, but declared he felt restless, went past the house and for a long ride.

Tom Grayson came in for the worst grilling. The police had three hooks in him. He had been at the scene of the crime. His car was found up the road, as if he'd approached the house stealthily. Third, he was the important heir. Louise Envers and Maurice Rooper were left substantial amounts under Silas Cord's will and permission to make lifelong homes in the house. But Tom Grayson got the bulk of the considerable estate.

The three hooks pulled loose. Though Grayson had been at the scene of the crime, the doctor testified that he was far too drunk to have struck the blow that killed Cord, especially in the dark. The car was up the road not far from the house, but that looked legitimate too, for it was out of gas. And though Grayson inherited so much, still he had never lacked money while Cord lived and therefore had little motive for the crime in that respect.

What was more, the police favored Bligh as the killer. His blackmail talk ruined any case they might work up against Grayson, Louise or Rooper. The police considered the five thousand dollars Bligh inherited, as considerable to him as all the thousands were to Grayson.

The new theory was that Bligh had known he was going to murder Cord, so he had prepared for it by starting this blackmail fuss. Bligh stayed on at the house as the will gave him the right to; besides, the police would never have permitted him to leave.

The electric clock in the study developed into a piece of evidence. Mr. Cord never could remember when to turn on the radio so this automatic clock had been bought. It could be set and it would turn on the radio at any appointed time. Someone had unplugged the radio and connected the lamp to the clock. Just as the clock could turn appliances on, it could turn them off too. And it was the clock that had turned out the lamp just when Bligh had heard the large hall clock chime nine.

There was a strong presumption that the murderer had set the clock, for Cord had been killed in the dark. Only a killer who expected darkness at that moment, could have been prepared to act. Bligh had heard the blow struck after the light had gone out. Only Bligh had thought it was a door closing.

Whoever struck the blow had been waiting just outside the study door. With Cord's position in the chair charted, the killer grasped the bust of Plato the instant the clock put the light out, took swift strides to Cord and murdered him before he could move.

BLIGH was sitting on the bench atop a knoll some distance from the house, in corduroys and sweatshirt. He felt warm, for the Indian Summer sun was hot, and he was thinking about these things. Yet, for all his superficial warmth, there was an iciness in his heart and his stomach that he believed would never thaw. The iciness had been there since the moment when he had realized the responsibility for Silas

Cord's death might be his.

Bligh hunched over, chin in hands, his almost closed eyes turned down to the brown earth. And so he meditated, until suddenly a pair of tan shoes intruded upon his vision. Bligh snapped his head up. Lieutenant Ware stood over him. Except for Ware's efforts, all police work on the murder had come to a standstill. Ware alone was on the case, and he would not quit. Bligh gripped the edge of the bench.

"We're sick of that blackmail angle," Ware hurled at him. "We've checked and checked it, and there's nothing to it, I tell you." Ware grasped him roughly and hauled him up off the bench. "You're not telling everything. You're holding back."

Bligh nodded. Ware was a man as big as Bligh, wider at the shoulders, much thicker at the waist. His face was frozen into a scowl, his eyes always narrowed. Bligh liked one thing about Ware: Ware would not give up; the man was fretting himself into a state where soon he would smash this case regardless how.

"You low-down tramp," Ware shouted, shaking him. "Five thousand is a fortune to a bum. You couldn't wait to get it. Your feet itched—you wanted to be on the go, but not without that money. I've known from the beginning that you're holding back."

Effortlessly, Bligh pushed Ware away, breaking his grip.

"I'm holding back." Bligh touched his forehead. "There are thoughts in here that won't focus. Let's go to the house."

Ware fell in step beside him, grumbling, "All right, what is this all about? Who are we going to see?"

Bligh led him into the house and up the stairs. Bligh tapped on a door, waited, then turned the knob and pushed the door.

Following him in over the threshold, Ware gasped. The large room was more exotic than feminine. One wall, covered

with cloth-of-gold, furnished a backdrop for a large, squat porcelain Chinese idol, five or six feet high and as broad at the base. Its whole bald head, enormous grinning face and thick neck were leprous white; its blue robe, slipping from its fat shoulders, revealed that the entire body to the waist was the same dead white.

The head was tilted over on the right shoulder, the shapeless mouth open in a smile. Bligh had thought him a Buddha, but Louise had explained that he was not. She told Bligh his name, but Bligh could not remember, except that he was the god of joy or smiles or something like that. The room was done in lacquers and gold, the whole in keeping with the idol and the cloth-of-gold backdrop.

Louise Envers sat on a white chaise longue, wearing a simple black dress. Her hands were together in her lap, the back of one in the palm of that beneath, and though she was only sitting she gave the impression of having been disturbed.

"Louise, maybe you can help us." Bligh shut the door and pulled a stool over to the lounge. "Lieutenant Ware—" Bligh nodded to the big detective who remained standing, his eyes fixed on Louise's slim face, tightly drawn hair and the jade pendants hanging motionless from her ears—"doesn't think Mr. Cord was killed over blackmail. Ware thinks I killed him. But that doesn't count."

LOUISE rolled her big dark eyes up to Ware, holding her head still, as if her neck were stiff. She smiled to Ware, her lips a strange dark red against her white teeth.

"What does count?" she asked softly.

"That I feel responsible for the murder," Bligh replied: "I swear Cord told me someone wanted to extort money from him. Yet I constantly recall that when I said I would not let him be robbed for

something in his past, he said: 'You do me little credit.' Why did he say that? And, someone in this house killed him. The clock that was set to turn out the light at nine o'clock proves that. You see, there are hazy thoughts way at the back of my mind. You will have thought these things out by this time."

"I haven't." She continued smiling up to Ware, and Bligh thought it was almost wicked, the way she mocked him to Ware.

Bligh rose stiffly. He and Ware nodded to Louise, and left the room. They walked toward the stairs.

Bligh said, "That's odd!" in a tone hushed by its fervidness.

"What?" Ware snapped.

"Didn't you see how she sat when we went in? She often sits like that, thinking. She can think the way you or I can read. You can't sit and think unless you're intelligent. Yet she has nothing to say."

"Maybe," Ware gave him a sharp look, "she doesn't think about the kind of things you suppose she does."

They whirled at the sound of, "Psst! Psst!"

Maurice Rooper beckoned from down the hall. They hurried to him. In a voice constrained because of Rooper's mysterious manner, Ware demanded, "What is it?"

"I've been thinking," Rooper announced, goggle-eyed.

Plump and only of medium height, Maurice Rooper had a head of wild black hair and a profuse mustache. Because of these, his eyeglasses and dark skin, he looked much older than he was, although his immaturity was stark.

"You've been thinking!" Ware fumed disgustedly.

"What about?" Bligh dropped a hand to Rooper's shoulder. He glanced into Rooper's room. It was always weird, but an unusual conglomeration of junk

cluttered it now. "Ye gods! Wait! Let me guess! I know, it's a criminal laboratory!"

"Right!" Rooper exclaimed ecstatically; "I've found my field at last. Criminology." He drew Bligh into the room, not seeming to know Ware came in too, eyes popping. "Bligh; I have every room wired. I heard you and Ware in Louise's room."

"You got no right!" Ware bawled. "You learn anything?"

"No," Rooper admitted. "Except that I've been thinking of what Bligh said to Louise."

Rooper branched off, telling them about the 'bugs' he had hidden in every room. He had a switchboard rigged on the table. Money being no object, as was always the case with Maurice, there were several stages of amplification, so that there was no need for headphones. Rooper brought everything in on a speaker.

He demonstrated. There was an argument in progress between the maid and cook in the kitchen, and in the pantry the butler mumbled figures, every so often calling out for the maid and cook to shut up. The rest of the house was silent.

Rooper proudly shut off the sound pickup system.

"All right, smart head," Ware grouched. "Go ahead, talk."

Rooper lit a pungently Turkish cigarette.

"Uncle Silas was hurt because Harry Bligh thought he had done something he could be blackmailed about." Rooper laid a finger alongside his flat nose. "Ergo, there was no blackmailer."

Bligh asked simply, "You mean I'm a liar?"

"Don't you see?" Rooper pleaded. "Uncle Silas was being asked for money, but it was one of us that the blackmailer was threatening. We had only our allowances. But if the blackmailer went to

Uncle Silas and said he could send Grayson or me or Louise to prison, Uncle Silas would pay to save us."

"Then why—" Ware smacked fist into palm—"the murder?"

BLIGH had an answer to that. The blackmailer had murdered because he had feared prison. Bligh had frightened him by calling the police. A blackmailer who wanted only money had been turned into a killer by Bligh's interference. Which made Bligh morally responsible—the haunting thought that left Bligh careless whether or not the police arrested him, since if he were morally responsible he would feel as guilty as if he had struck the death blow.

It was not the identity of the killer that concerned Bligh so much. It was the killer's motive. If a blackmailer, threatened by the fear of arrest, had become desperate enough to murder Cord through Bligh's calling in the police, then Bligh had no taste left for life.

"Why was Cord killed?" Ware demanded louder.

"Something just went wrong," Rooper supposed.

"That leaves us where we were," Ware griped.

"No, this is the link I've been trying to think out," Bligh insisted. "Ware, the blackmailer didn't murder Cord. His victim did. Cord was easygoing, but he had his scruples. Suppose he had learned something from the blackmailer that he could not forgive? It would have been the end of someone who had a comfortable home here and a sizable inheritance in prospect. That must be it!"

"Then you have a sulky blackmailer somewhere," Ware snarled. "He must know that the one he had the goods on murdered Cord. So why doesn't the blackmailer tip us off?"

“That is what blocked my thinking,” Bligh admitted. “But I see now that the blackmailer can’t speak. The moment he confessed he had tried extortion, you’d accuse him of murder. No one has a good enough alibi for that night to take a chance at flinging accusations about. Besides, how would he tip us off? With modern police scientific methods, it is hard to convey information without leaving a trail to yourself.”

“There’s one way he could tip us off.” Ware’s face was terrible, and Rooper cringed. “He could tell us he was Sherlock Holmes. He could tell us he doped it out of his head.” Ware grabbed Rooper as if he would kill him on the spot. “You little hand-fed louse! Spill it! Who’d you have the goods on?”

“No, no!” Rooper begged. “I swear! Bligh!”

“Don’t treat him like that,” Bligh protested.

Ware dragged Rooper out of the room. Bligh followed them downstairs and out of the house. Ware flung Rooper into his car and got in too. Then he turned a face livid with rage to Bligh, saying fiercely:

“You better hope hard as prayers I get something out of him. Because don’t ever forget that if I don’t get someone else, you’re the patsy, and always were.”

Ware’s car shot away, a thick cloud pouring from the exhaust.

Bligh snuffled the gasoline stench out of his nose. He strode aimlessly from the house. He felt real pity for Rooper. Yet he realized the justness of Ware’s suspicions. It could be Rooper. That hobby-minded young man was poorly fitted to face the world if someone told Silas Cord something that would cause Cord to turn Rooper out of doors.

A car careened to the house, braked violently. Tom Grayson leapt out and dashed into the house.

Bligh ran into the house. Grayson was at the head of the stairs. Bligh bounded up. He was about to call when Grayson rushed into Louise’s room and slammed the door.

Bligh put his hand on the knob. He snatched it away and raced down the hall to Rooper’s room. Dropping into a chair at the table, Bligh threw switches, heard voices, from some room or other—Rooper had the switches identified with hieroglyphics.

THEN Grayson’s voice burst from the speaker:

“I can’t stand it another minute! I’ll go mad, do you hear, mad!” He sounded as if he’d been drinking heavily.

“Get out!” Louise’s normally languid voice crackled. “You spineless sot, get out of this room and never enter it again, or I will tell them you did it.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” Grayson gasped.

“I wouldn’t dare?” Louise’s voice dripped scorn, and it sounded as though she’d risen. “You think I wouldn’t have, if there’d been any reason? I’ve made up my mind about you, worm. I don’t want you at any price. I’ll tell them! Wouldn’t dare! No one ever said I wouldn’t dare anything, I’ll tell you—”

“You put that phone down!” Grayson screeched. “You won’t tell. But I will. I’ll tell them I’ve killed you!”

Bligh heard her sharp intake of breath.

“You?” she forced a laugh.

Then she screamed.

Bligh got out of Rooper’s room and down the hall faster than light. He flung open the door and burst in upon them.

Louise held a gun. Grayson crouched, advancing upon her. Her back was to the wall, her hand tightened over the gun, death like a black fascination in her eyes.

“Stop!” Bligh shouted.

Grayson sprang at her.

She fired and Grayson lost his impetus.

Bligh leapt at her. She snapped the gun at him. It was Bligh's life or her face. Bligh struck her down.

Bligh took the gun, then put her unconscious form on the lounge. He lifted Grayson to a chair. Grayson had been shot in the shoulder, but he didn't seem to notice the wound. He sat sobbing his heart out. Bligh phoned the doctor, then Ware.

"All right—" Bligh held a towel to Grayson's bleeding shoulder—"you tried to blackmail your uncle. So she killed him."

"You know?" Grayson's face was as white as the huge idol's.

"Yes—now. You knew the house was to be empty that night before anyone else knew. You pretended you'd asked friends in and that you were angry. You were allaying suspicion."

"Understand this," Grayson said emphatically, "I never meant to blackmail my uncle. I was only trying to scare Louise. You see, though I never liked her, she tantalized me and I couldn't stand it. She wouldn't have anything to do with me. So I told her if she didn't go out with me I would tell uncle lies about her. He could be terrible if women disgraced themselves by the sort of men they mixed with.

"I told Louise I'd invent stories about her and uncle would kick her out. I didn't mean it. But she mocked me. Before I knew it, I'd done it. Uncle didn't know who I was—I phoned him and said only that I knew something disgraceful about one of his wards and would reveal it if I didn't get money. Louise was with me when I phoned. Uncle said he would pay. Then you got wind of it and sent for the police. I was scared sick."

AFTER a moment Bligh said, "But you made an appointment with your uncle on the night he was murdered. You were

out with your friends and crazy drunk, but you remembered the appointment and tried to keep it. Your car ran out of gas and you even managed to walk."

"I intended to tell uncle the whole thing was a joke in bad taste. But I had to get drunk before I could face him," Grayson moaned. "Bligh, I didn't want him or you to discover the real truth. Here is the truth—I threatened Louise that I would tell uncle lies about her. Then I began to wonder what she did do with herself. I began spying, following her.

"Bligh, she's the basest woman who ever lived. I could never have told a lie about her that would have been half bad enough. But I didn't want uncle to know. I intended to tell him the whole blackmail scheme was a joke I'd been playing on Rooper."

Bligh grunted. "How about the night of the murder?"

"I don't remember anything," Grayson confessed, "until I was standing in the hall. The study door was open a bit and I saw Louise. I knew she meant to do something terrible. She thought, you see, that I would tell uncle about her. I tried to tell her I wouldn't. But she kicked me in the stomach. Then the light went out. A minute later she ran out the back of the house and I went after her. But I fell and couldn't rise.

"I think I knew what she had done, and what danger I was in. I had a bottle of whisky in my pocket. I drank it all. With what I had already had, it made me so drunk that I had sort of an alibi. Next day she told me if the police ever found out I was the one blackmailing uncle, they would think I was also the one who I murdered him. I've tried to keep my mouth shut. But I know she killed him and I had to tell. I can't go on."

"It's going to be tough proving it," Bligh growled. "The fact that you were

drunk isn't going to make your testimony guilt-edged. She'll have your uncle's money to fight us with."

"I don't care—" Grayson threw his shoulders back—"even if I'm arrested for attempted extortion. I can prove what places she's gone to, what kind of people she's been with and what she's been doing. A lot of that is on film, and I have friends to testify to the rest. So I can prove she had reason to fear uncle might learn unpleasant truths about her. She can't beat this case."

Louise sat on the chaise longue, her hands in her lap, her face calm.

"You can't yogi yourself out of this," Bligh warned. "You're in a jam. You have things to worry about, lady."

"Have I?" she asked languidly. She stuck out her tongue, a capsule on the end

of it. Then she took in tongue and capsule and chewed. She swallowed before Bligh could get to her.

Lieutenant Ware burst into the room. "What is this?"

"I murdered my uncle," Louise said.

"What?" Ware thundered. "Why?"

She said nothing, only gazed at Bligh. The doctor had entered and was at work on Grayson, who also looked to Bligh.

"We don't know why she did it," Bligh snapped. "Temporary insanity, I suppose. All Grayson and I know is that she took poison and then confessed. Leave her alone! Can't you see—well, you might figure she wouldn't confess a thing like that if she couldn't have depended on her poison to work fast."