

# **Who Killed Gilbert Foster?**

by

**E. Hoffmann Price  
&  
Ralph Milne Farley**

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## The Missing Manuscript

**R**AYMOND LANDON drove Eloise Foster's tan roadster down the dimly lit New Orleans street and stopped in front of her uncle's palm-shrouded mansion. As he eased his rangy, broad-shouldered frame out of the little car, Landon somewhat bitterly reflected that it was quite a come-down for a soldier of fortune, late of the army of Ibn Saud, to be translating Arabic manuscripts and running errands for a crack-brained old professor.

Of course the job had its compensations—for example, Eloise. But now that Landon had finally gotten her to the point of attending a *Vieux Carré* party with him, damned if old Foster didn't have to send a telephone message over from the Hotel Roosevelt, where he was to address a gathering of archeologists, asking Landon to run out to the house and fetch the manuscript, which the professor had absent-mindedly left behind.

Why hadn't Bert Collins, the professor's secretary, reminded his employer of the manuscript? That was *his* job, not Landon's. And why hadn't the old buzzard sent Collins after it, instead of him?

Meanwhile, the sappy blond Collins was probably at that moment hanging around Eloise. He might, in fact, have engineered the whole performance, just so as to break Landon's monopoly. Not such a sap, Collins, after all!

Landon shrugged and glanced up at the unlit house, bulking large in the shadows. The street was deserted. It might have been midnight or early morning, rather than slightly past ten,

Landon shuddered. He had not been in New Orleans long enough to accustom himself to the musty, somber old residential quarters of the city. Then he swung open the creaking cast-iron gate, wound his way along the stone-paved path between swaying broad-leaved plantains and clusters of rustling bamboos flanked by tall palms and white-blossomed magnolias, and mounted the



steps to the broad *piazza*. He applied Eloise's key to the massive door.

The door swung, noiselessly back, almost as though aided by some unseen hand. Landon groped a moment, found and snapped the switch. The ancient Napoleonic chandelier, with its scores of glass prisms, blazed to life.

The mahogany newel post and balusters gleamed dully as he soundlessly ascended the richly carpeted stairs. The thick, velvety silence made him unconsciously tiptoe.

At the top of the stairs he stumbled. The baluster creaked as he caught it for support, but the sound was swallowed by the stillness of the house.

He crossed the hall, opened the door to the library and jabbed the switch.

Instinctively his gray eyes swept around the room. The three desks—his and Collins' and the professor's—littered with papers as they had left them when they had knocked off work that afternoon; but the chromium plated circular door of the little wall safe stood ajar! Landon, sidestepping the central desk, bounded toward the safe. But he halted abruptly, in mid-stride.

Professor Foster, in full evening dress, lay sprawled grotesquely on his back, his eyes staring sightlessly upward, his mouth open and distorted, his arms outflung, his fingers clawed, and the carved hands of an Oriental dagger protruding from a red splotch in the middle of the left side of his starched shirt front.

Robbery and murder!

**L**ANDON'S first reaction was sheer horror. His next was pity for Eloise. Then he began to attempt to reconstruct the crime.

For several weeks, Professor Foster had been bargaining with Alcide Dumaine, a local dealer in antiques, for the purchase of Shah Ismail's prayer rug from one of Dumaine's unnamed clients. Finally the price of twenty-five thousand dollars had almost been agreed upon, and the professor that very day had sent Collins, his secretary, down to his safe-deposit box at the Hibernia Bank to get and sell Liberty bonds to that amount. The proceeds had been put in the wall safe. Professor Foster alone knew the combination.

Someone who knew that the purchase price

of the rug was in the wall safe had either tricked or forced the old professor into opening the safe. That the dagger was one of those which formed a collection of antique weapons on the tapestried wall of the room indicated that the murder had been unpremeditated.

Suddenly Landon thought of his own situation. Lord, what a jam!

He was a stranger in New Orleans. Foster had picked him up on one of his archeological expeditions to the Arabian desert. Who would vouch for him? Who would believe that he hadn't robbed and murdered his employer?

A frame-up from the start! Landon understood now the phone call from the bell captain at the Roosevelt, telling Landon that his employer wanted him to rush out to the house and fetch the missing lecture manuscript!

Wrath wiped the dismay from his features. His lips straightened into a thin grim line, and his eyes became cold as sword-points. The only way to clear himself was to stay and cut the web of treachery which, centering about Shah-Ismaïl's prayer rug, had brought death to Gilbert Foster.

Landon glanced about the spacious library. He saw a hundred-dollar note lying near Foster's desk, and stooped to pick up the loot the murderer had dropped. It was new, and must have come from the packets that had been in the safe. Landon's move was an instinctive impulse to salvage the property of his employer; but he restrained it, remembering that nothing must be touched.

His senses sharpened, now that the shock of discovery had subsided, he distinctly felt a menacing living presence in the room, and heard a faint rustle, as of the stirring of the window drapes or wall hangings. He wheeled around, but before he could complete the turn, a vase crashed against his head with a devastating impact that drove him flat to the floor. His fingers dug into the nap of the Feraghan carpet, as he sought by sheer force of will to recover and grapple with the enemy. Blinded and dizzy, he rose to a crouch and lashed out. But as his hands closed on his adversary's wrists, a second blow drove home. Landon pitched forward, his brain a globe of roaring fire. Despite his lingering vestige of consciousness, he could not force his nerveless limbs to act.

AS he lay inert, Landon felt the trickle of blood from his scalp. He heard, as from a great distance, the distinct note of a doorbell—someone ringing for admittance. Landon tried to cry out, but only a gasp resulted. Again the insistent jangle of the doorbell.

“Hell!” exclaimed a frantic voice nearby. Footsteps rushing across the room—the click of a window latch—the sound of the window being hurriedly raised.

Then the painfully distinct *tick-tick-tick* of the electric clock as it marked off the seconds during which the murderer was making his escape through the window, down the tree outside and across the lawn.

Through the window, from far away, the shrill cry of a police siren tore into his consciousness. The piercing note was repeated, came nearer. That whipped him to desperation. He regained his feet. He tottered dizzily, snatched a decanter of brandy from a tabouret, and took a deep draught. That helped. He shook himself and squared his shoulders.

“Knocked me cold, then turned in the alarm to make sure I’d take the rap!” he muttered. He gingerly felt of his blood-matted hair. “With these wounds on my scalp and the signs of struggle about the library, it’s a clear case against me. I’ll get ‘em all right—but I can’t do any detective work from a police cell!”

The gritting of brakes, the tramp of feet, and the sharp commands, as the police patrol drew up, told him that his chance of escape was slender. Retreat by way of the lower floor was impossible. Concealment in some corner of the mansion would be equally futile. The police were already pounding at the door.

### When in Doubt, Attack!

THE trap, however, was not complete. The open window and the limbs of a magnolia promised at least a momentary refuge. Landon leaped from the sill and plunged into the shelter of the dark, waxen leaves.

“Give ‘er hell!” commanded a voice in the shadows of the garden below. There was a grunt of men moving in unison, a crash of splintering

wood, and the tinkle of glass. Landon judged, from the prompt forcing of the door, that whoever had turned in the alarm had rendered a lurid report of what a dangerous character he was.

The entire police squad, however, did not pour into the house. Landon heard the order to surround the building. A second squad car disgorged its quota. He saw dark forms in plain clothes, caught the gleam of badges on uniforms.

“Horse, foot, and artillery!” he muttered bitterly. “Lucky I wasn’t knocked out completely!”

For a moment he hoped that the police would overlook his place of concealment; and then he remembered the betraying window. He wondered why his assailant had elected it as an exit, instead of the front door; then he remembered the insistent ringing of the doorbell, which he had heard just before the murderer had departed.

Landon peered into the darkness, seeking to estimate the distance to the low roof of the garage. If he could reach it undetected, he could clear the high, spike-tipped cast-iron fence and perhaps elude pursuit.

That plan, however, died at birth.

“He went out through here!” boomed a voice, as the burly form of a police sergeant appeared in the brightly lighted window of the murder room. “Oh, Duval! McCarthy!”

Voices from the ground answered the hail. Two uniformed patrolmen were directly beneath Landon, looking up into the light that streamed from the window.

“See where his tracks lead,” came the order from the sergeant, “and be careful you don’t gum up his footprints.”

Footprints! The very thing! Landon settled back less tense on his perch in the tree, for there would, of course, be the footprints of the man who had preceded him out the window. The police would follow those prints and leave him alone.

But his joy was short lived.

“There he is—up there!” shouted the police sergeant, pointing out the window toward the tree. “Look out! He may be armed!” The sergeant stepped back out of sight.

The two cops below circled the tree, staring stupidly upward into the leafy darkness.

Landon, his head by now fairly cleared of the

savage slugging he had received, poised himself, ready to take the aggressive. His desperate position warranted a desperate device. He jumped.

**H**IS descent was so swift that the rustle of leaves and the snapping of twigs did not warn the police below. The impact drove one officer flat and breathless to the ground, groaning and gasping. Landon scrambled to his feet just a split second before the other officer gathered his wits. The advantage, though trifling, was sufficient. Landon ducked the sweeping night stick; and as the cop's hand flashed for his pistol, Landon's fist shot out and connected with the point of the policeman's jaw. But the cop, although out on his feet, yanked the trigger with his last convulsive twitch.

The blast attracted the pack. The cop on whom Landon had crashed regained his breath and bellowed the alarm as he struggled to his feet.

Landon dashed across the grounds, but despite his start, the enemy gained on him. For a moment he was screened by a cluster of plantains, but as he emerged from their shelter, jets of flame stabbed the darkness behind him, and the crackle of pistol fire accented the roaring confusion. Landon zigzagged, weaving in and out among the shrubbery, taking cover as he ran toward the corner of the estate. He was gaining, for the pursuit, in order to fire more accurately, had halted, certain now of capturing him either dead or alive.

The cast-iron picket fence which checked Landon's flight was too high and too hazardous to risk vaulting. Scaling it deliberately was not to be considered, he would be too distinct a target silhouetted against the dimly lit street beyond. As he hesitated, a bullet sifted through the shrubbery at the foot of the fence and seared his ribs.

He was cornered. Then he saw a way out. The stalk of an exceptionally tall, sturdy plantain would give him the necessary elevation. He leaped and swarmed up. A volley spattered through the broad leaves. Then the police dashed forward, withholding their fire, certain now of an easy capture.

The stalk swayed perilously, bent the wrong way—then dipped back toward the spiked fence.

Landon's headlong dive took him clear of the

sidewalk. He landed on soft earth between paving and curb, rolled into the shelter of a tree, then recovered and sprinted down the street. A few seconds had been gained. The plantain stalk had collapsed under the concerted assault of the patrolmen. It was no longer available as a ladder. They had to double back to the gate.

Landon turned and ran down a private driveway that led to an adjacent estate, cleared the stone wall, worked his way toward the next street.

As he emerged he saw a cab parked at the corner.

"Down Saint Charles!" he commanded, and thrust a dollar bill into the driver's hand. "Illinois Central Hospital. Emergency case!"

This would fit in with the police sirens, and justify Landon's haste. The Yellow took off with a leap and nosed into the traffic. But Landon knew that by now radio squads would be combing the city. Whoever had turned in the alarm had undoubtedly given out an accurate and detailed description of him—for the frame-up must have been carefully planned.

**A**S the cab rounded the turn toward the hospital, Landon slipped to the curbing. During his brief ride he had wiped the blood and dirt from his hands and face; but his bedraggled evening clothes made him conspicuous.

Off came his dinner coat, vest and black bow tie, to be rolled up and stuffed under his arm—and, at the first opportunity, to be dropped into a waste-paper can by the curb. His shirt was too far gone to betray its style; and the piping on his dark trousers would not be noticeable. He strode swiftly down South Rampart Street, mingling with the Saturday night crowd of drunks, derelicts, and ragamuffins, both white and black.

In the first pawnshop, he bought a cap and a clean shirt, and haggled just long enough to seem in character. A block closer to Canal Street he purchased a cheap linen suit and a string tie. The next shop equipped him with a razor, soap and brush. He put on the cap and the tie, slipped the shaving things into his pants pocket, and carried the suit and shirt.

The going was perilous. Audacity alone could serve him. Every radio that blared from the lunch counters and soft drink parlors reminded

him that the short-wave sets were picking up police calls that must be on the air; but he dared not hurry. With his bundle under his arm, he sauntered along, pausing to peer into shop windows.

The trickle of blood from his left side would again make him conspicuous. Some rooming house on the other side of Canal Street, however, would afford a temporary haven in which to staunch the seepage—the wound was hardly more than a scratch—clean up, and plan his campaign.

Attempting to leave New Orleans would be fatal. The ferries across the river, the railroad stations, and the highways would all be guarded. The city was his only refuge. And while he was the hunted now, he would have to turn hunter to vindicate himself.

An hour later he emerged from a cheap lodging house, his appearance completely altered. He wore a colored shirt and a linen suit. His old shirt he had torn into strips and used to bandage his side. And instead of removing his pointed black mustache, which had been his most conspicuously identifying feature, he had trimmed it to a couple of Hitler-like patches just beneath the nose, thus avoiding the obvious device of the fugitive. Finally, he had trimmed and narrowed his eyebrows.

He had stuffed wads of paper into his shoes, and had experimented with them until he had finally developed a slightly limping gait which, while not eccentric, was different from his natural stride and carriage.

As Landon strolled through the French Quarter, he favored various ash cans with bits of his discarded apparel. The entire lot in one place would attract attention. His smile was grim and bitter as he paused at a building from whose arched windows came music and laughter and the tinkle of glass. A party—the one from which he had been called by a fake message scarcely more than an hour ago. The party where Eloise still awaited his return—perhaps just beginning to wonder at his delay.

Or was she? Perhaps she had forgotten him. Or perhaps she and Collins were in the angle of the patio, where the fountain's silver veil screened out the artificial moon-glow. Then he realized that he had other matters to worry about. This was no

time for him to be mooning around the *Vieux Carré*.

So he hurried back to Canal Street, bought a second-hand suitcase, and took a taxi to a cheap hotel, where he registered under a name which matched the initials on the suitcase.

He turned in at once. Thus far he had no plans for taking up the trail of his enemies. That could await the morrow, when his head was clearer. What he needed now was rest.

## Landon, Public Enemy!

**T**HE Sunday *Picayune* and *Telegram* gave Landon an amount of space which would have been flattering, except for the contents. His photograph, reproduced from passports the police had found in luggage in his apartment, occupied the central position on the front page of both sheets. The headlines were lurid.

*PUBLIC ENEMY NUMBER ONE* read the *Telegram*. Landon carried the paper over to the mirror and compared the passport picture and the printed description with his present appearance.

The same clean-cut, bronzed features, the same keen gray eyes, stared back at him from the mirror, but the Hitler mustache and trimmed eyebrows gave such a different cast to the rest of his face, that no one but a very intimate friend would suspect his identity. The picture in the papers was at best a caricature. It would mislead, rather than help the police.

Satisfied on that score, Landon sat down on the bed and carefully studied the press accounts.

The stories in both papers were substantially the same. Raymond Landon, linguist and soldier of fortune, had robbed and murdered the employer who had befriended him. Then, with the same daring and vigor which had marked his cavalry operations against bandits of the Arabian desert, while in the service of Ibn Saud, Captain Landon had fought his way through the cordon of police who had surprised him at his crime.

The anonymous tip on which the police had acted was ascribed to an accomplice of Landon's, with whom he had probably quarreled over the division of the twenty-five thousand dollars in

loot.

The press report went on to say that the victim, Professor Gilbert Foster, had just completed delivering an address on Arabia to a convention of the American Society of Archeologists at the Hotel Roosevelt, when he had been called to the telephone. Thereupon he had left the hotel in considerable haste and obvious agitation.

The next paragraph mentioned Alcide Dumaine! The dealer in antiques admitted having phoned Professor Foster at the Roosevelt, to tell him that the owner of Shah Ismail's prayer rug had at last agreed to accept twenty-five thousand dollars for it. Foster had readily enough consented to leave the convention, and had made an appointment to meet Dumaine at once at Foster's home.

When Dumaine had reached the place, he had noticed Miss Foster's car standing at the curb. Though the house was lit, no one answered his persistent ringing. And then the police had arrived, arresting him as he stood on the gallery with the prayer rug under his arm.

A telegram from Biloxi, signed by Chris Panopoulos, and instructing Dumaine to sell the rug, confirmed the story. Dumaine had not been detained by the police. They had nothing on him.

"A perfect alibi," muttered Landon to himself. He frowned and shook his head. "Maybe, and maybe not. If it is on the level, it explains why the killer left by the window. But I'll bet Dumaine knows more than he's telling. His story is too damn good! Particularly from a sleek number like him."

Turning the page, Landon saw what was captioned as a picture of Shah Ismail's historic prayer rug. But even allowing for hasty press photography, it bore not the slightest resemblance to the rug which Alcide Dumaine had been trying to sell to Professor Foster.

"Something's all wet!" Landon said to the emptiness of his hotel room. "Dumaine gave the police a substitute to photograph. Why?"

Here was a clue to work on! Flimsy, but yet a clue. Landon continued his reading.

The police had interviewed the dead man's niece, Eloise Foster, and his private secretary, Bertram Collins, and had obtained the story of the

long negotiations between the professor and Dumaine for the purchase of the prayer rug. They even told of the afternoon when, as a final bluff to shake Dumaine from his demands, Professor Foster and the man who was later to be his murderer—Landon grimaced at that—had held the precious rug by its silken fringe, while Collins, operating the professor's miniature movie camera, had shot a reel of color films to record the matchless hues and luster of the antique fabric.

"Since I'm not going to pay such an outlandish price, I'll at least have a reel to illustrate some of my lectures," the professor had explained to the puzzled dealer. Dumaine had been so visibly disconcerted by the bluff that he began to weaken in his demands. A few days later Foster ordered Collins to sell the liberty bonds, so as to be ready for a showdown.

And then Landon's eye caught an item which caused him to jump off the bed with a whoop. Eloise was quoted as saying, "I know he didn't do it. I'd trust him anywhere."

So he had one friend! With the whole town against him, Eloise still had faith.

**J**AMMING his hat on his head, he left the hotel and walked briskly up town. Every telephone booth that he passed invited him to call Eloise and tell her how he appreciated her quoted remark.

"May be a trap," he warned himself. "That interview may be faked just to get me to phone her."

He passed several booths.

"But if she's really for me, she can dig into things and help me catch the real murderer—Hell, she *can't* believe I'm guilty!"

Thus he finally justified his foolhardiness in stepping into a cigar store and calling the Foster residence. It was really the sound of her voice, rather than her aid, that he desired.

"I've seen dozens of 'em hooked this way, but here goes!"

He held his nostrils pinched between thumb and forefinger, to disguise his voice; but this precaution proved needless. It was Eloise herself who lifted the receiver.

"Listen carefully," he cautioned her, "and don't mention my name."

He caught her gasp of amazement, heard her



say, "They've left. Oh, isn't it just dreadful—"

"Hop a cab," Landon interrupted, "and meet me at the Magazine Street entrance of Audubon Park. Right away. And wait for me to speak first."

He hung up, before she could protest or question him.

Landon boarded a Magazine Street car. The park would be crowded on a Sunday, and his altered appearance should protect him against any but close observers. Alighting at the first stop past the entrance of the park, he mingled with the crowd.

Presently he saw Eloise emerge, on foot, from the tree-shaded coolness of Exposition Boulevard. She was wearing a dark blue suit, with white linen cuffs and collar.

"All clear," said Landon softly as she approached.

She started, looked up furtively, and then stepped back from him, her eyes wide with suspicion.

"Why, Eloise!" he began.

She laughed nervously, then smiled.

"I would never have known you," she said. "That is—you *are* Ray Landon, aren't you?"

"Of course I am."

"You look so changed. Your face is entirely different. You've done something to your mustache and—and your eyebrows, haven't you? And even your walk is different."

"Very observant, Eloise." Then, noticing the drawn expression of her piquant face, the tightness of her lips, and the dark shadows beneath her eyes, he exclaimed, "Why, you poor kid! Here I am thinking of nothing but my own predicament. I know what it means to you, dear, but there is nothing I can say."

"It's awfully good of you to think of me, Ray," she said, her fingers closing on his arm. Landon's heart leaped at her acceptance of the endearment that had cropped out, but his expression of solicitude did not change.

"Never mind me," she continued. "We two have a job on our hands. But you shouldn't have taken such a terrible risk, meeting me—"

"No more risk here than anywhere else," he countered, feigning assurance which he by no means felt. "Let's sit near the merry-go-round—so much racket no one will overhear us."

UNDER cover of the blatant music, Landon outlined his suspicions. "Dumaine undoubtedly had something to do with it, and yet all that I have to go on is that he gave the police the wrong rug to photograph."

"But what good would that do him," asked Eloise, "since we have the colored movie which you and Uncle Gilbert took?"

"That's so. Where is it now?"

"At home. The police ran it through a projector down at headquarters, and then gave it back to me."

"Well," Landon continued, "if Dumaine's story is true, he couldn't have committed the crime himself. But one of his 'clients' may have. You remember how, all through the bargaining, Dumaine insisted on cash. He wouldn't even take a certified check."

"My uncle thought that that might be because the rug had been stolen or smuggled into the country; but it looks otherwise now."

"Exactly," Landon agreed. "I don't believe that shifty-eyed faker ever intended to sell the rug. He held out until he knew that your uncle had the money actually on hand. Then gave the signal for the robbery."

"And stood guard at the door, while his accomplice was inside," Eloise suggested.

"Mmmm—hardly," Landon decided. "The mur—robbery was committed before I entered, and yet Dumaine was not there when I arrived."

"But without Dumaine and the rug present, how was Uncle Gilbert induced to open the safe?"

"Who else had the combination?"

"Only Uncle Gilbert. He didn't even have a memorandum—just kept the numbers in his head."

"Nobody! Not even you—nor Bert Collins," Landon pondered. Then, abruptly, "Where was Collins last night?"

"You don't suspect him, do you?"

"No, of course not. Not that drink of water! But I'd like to know where he was last night."

Eloise eyed him narrowly. "Why, Ray! He was at the same party that you and I attended."

"And took you home, I suppose, when I failed to show up," Landon grumbled.

Eloise placed her hand on his arm, and looked up into his face. "Of course not!" she said

indignantly. "Bert had one of the *Vieux Carré* crowd in tow. A dizzy blonde. He paid no attention to me all evening. I waited and waited for you, and then—then the police came." Her voice broke.

"Poor dear," commiserated Landon, patting her hand. "Suppose you get the police to investigate Bert Collins. Find out who he has been running around with lately. That woman he was with last night may have been in Dumaine's employ. She may have fed Collins a few drinks too many, then taken his keys and slipped them out to Dumaine."

But Eloise shook her head. "Bert was perfectly sober, and the girl herself was too lit to have pulled a stunt like that," she said.

"Well," Landon persisted, "they may have lifted the keys off him earlier in the week and made duplicates. Returned them before he missed them. You get the police to check up on him. In the meantime, I'm going to work on Dumaine. If he's in on this, I think I can crack him wide open."

"How?"

"It's a wild shot." Landon shook his head and grinned. "A combination of bluff and burglary."

"*Burglary!* Oh, Ray!" Eloise cried.

"Right," said Landon. "In my position, a bit of breaking and entering is only a trifle. And now you'd better run along, before we push our luck too far."

"But please, Ray, don't take the risk!" she pleaded. "Better lie low and wait for the police to turn up some clue."

"We'll see," he said noncommittally.

Eloise shook her head, pressed his hand, made a gesture of farewell, and mingled with the crowd. Landon watched her lithe figure blend and disappear in the confusion of shifting color; then he strode rapidly toward the car-line.

## The Congress of Crooks

**T**HAT afternoon Landon reconnoitered the block in which Alcide Dumaine's antique shop was located. An alley led to the rear, and here at night one would be quite unobserved; but the heavy steel fire doors and window-shutters

made some other approach preferable.

The Sparta Hotel, next door to Dumaine's establishment, was the answer. But, as he needed to purchase certain supplies, and as the day was Sunday and the stores were not open, Landon was forced to wait until the following day for the next step.

Sunday evening he took in a movie—no danger of being identified in the darkness of the picture house. When the show was over, he decided to take a long walk to work off the nervousness caused by enforced inaction. And because he intended to keep to the more poorly lighted streets, he slipped the pads of paper out of his shoes.

He wandered aimlessly until he suddenly realized that a homing instinct had led him to Eloise's somber mansion. He paused on the opposite side of the street, and leaning back against the fence, stared across at the big house, which loomed black and curiously ominous amid palms and magnolias.

Scarcely twenty-four hours ago he had stared at that same house, with feelings of instinctive dread, while a murder was being committed inside. And tonight—

A dark figure came skulking down the opposite sidewalk and halted at the Foster gate. Then, very gently, the prowler swung the gate open and slipped inside. The black shadows of the shrubbery swallowed him.

Eloise was in that house! Landon dashed across the street, slipped quietly through the half-open entrance, and then stealthily followed the winding path through plantains and bamboo clumps to the front door.

No sign of the intruder. Landon tip-toed across the gallery and jabbed the push-button. He waited, back half turned to the door, alertly scanning all possible approaches.

The door swung silently open. Landon wheeled. The Fosters' Negro butler, startled by his sudden appearance, stared at him without recognition.

"Quick!" snapped Landon. "Where is Miss Eloise?"

The Negro turned slate gray. He recoiled a pace, his eyes widening to black-centered white globes.

"Mistah Landon!" he exclaimed. "Ah—Ah—"

A woman's scream shrilled from the upper reaches of the house. Thrusting the stupefied Negro aside, Landon bounded up the thickly carpeted stairs.

There were lights in the library. A man gruffly commanded, "Shut up, you little fool, and give me that film! It won't do you any good to holler for help. If anyone does come, I'll drill 'em!"

Landon bounded into the library.

**E**LOISE stood just beyond the central desk, a flat tin container clasped in her hands. Across the desk from her was a swarthy man of about Landon's own build, threatening her with a .45 caliber automatic.

Landon charged. The swarthy man wheeled and jerked a shot. The blast shook the house, but Landon, ducking, flung himself at the intruder's legs. The flying tackle was good, but as they fell, his quarry smacked Landon's head with his pistol. The blow grazed his head, cutting, rather than stunning. Landon snatched the man's wrist before he could strike again.

Two more shots, as the intruder strove to force his weapon into line. Landon wrenched fiercely and the automatic clattered to the floor, but the gunner jerked free, clutched Landon's throat with both hands. Landon's fists smashed home, but the throttling grip closed tighter.

Breathing was impossible. Landon's blows became weaker. The room swam in a red haze, through which he could hear as from a great distance the voice of Eloise crying, "Ray! Ray! Hang on!"

She swooped in, hammering the intruder about the head with the tin film box. He ducked and squirmed, then loosened one hand to ward off the blows. That gave Landon his chance to break away. He staggered to his feet—only to be seized from behind by two strong arms passing around him and pinioning his own arms to his side.

The imprisoning hands were black. "Ah done got him, Miss Ellie," said a familiar voice in his ear.

Meanwhile the swarthy raider had regained his feet, seized Eloise and held her as he scanned the floor for his missing gat.

"You fool, Isaac!" cried Eloise. "That's Ray! Let him go!"

Landon jerked away from the dismayed Negro and charged back into action. But the prowler flung Eloise between them, blocking Landon's rush. Before he could swing clear of her, the enemy's fist caught him on the point of the chin. That piled him into a corner—but within reach of the missing automatic! He seized the weapon, blinked, staggered to his feet. The raider, meanwhile, had snatched the tin film box from Eloise and was diving for the window.

Landon snapped the gun into line and fired, but his head was still swimming and his hand wavered. He missed. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to fire deliberately. That was as bad—the target won by a hair, clearing the sill a split instant ahead of the blast.

Landon rushed to the window. A dark shape was streaking through the shadows and foliage. Landon's head was now clear, but gloom and a swiftly moving target were too much for three deliberate, closely spaced shots—then the slide locked open. The gun was empty. The fleeing intruder dodged into the shadows of the bushes which lined the lawn.

**L**ANDON, cursing wrathfully, turned from the window just in time to catch Eloise as she tottered and swayed dizzily. For an instant she clung to him, then opened her eyes and drew out of his arms.

"I'm all right," she said, with forced steadiness. "But you, Ray?"

"Oke now," he said lightly. "Well, they got the color film!"

"And that answers your question of this afternoon as to what good it would do them to give a fake picture to the newspapers, with this film still in our hands," the girl added.

"Also it ties Alcide Dumaine all the closer to this mess," Landon said. "He gave the fake picture to the press, so he must have sent this thug to rob you. Lucky I happened to be walking by."

"*Happened?*" she teased.

Before he could reply, an approaching police siren cut in on their conversation. Despite brick walls and muffling vegetation, the shots had been heard.

"Oh—they'll find you here!" gasped Eloise.

"Tell them I've escaped, and send them hunting me." Landon, though tense, was unperturbed. "Here you, Isaac!" The Negro servant was still standing open-mouthed in the doorway. "Tell the police that Mr. Landon is upstairs fighting with Miss Eloise. Just that, and not another word. Now scram!"

"Yassah, yassah!" Isaac hastened to the head of the stairs.

"Come," said the girl, leading Landon across the hall and opening a door. "Hide in here—and give me the gun."

It was a spare bedroom. Landon hurriedly surveyed the room, opened the window, gauged the distance to the ground, and noted a wistaria trellis which ran up beside the window. Then he closed the door to just a crack, and sat behind it, in darkness.

The doorbell jangled. Isaac flung open the front door.

"Yassah, yassah," Landon heard him say. "Mistah Landon done been fightin' wiv Miss Ellie in de liberry."

A gruff command, the thudding of feet as the police charged up the stairway.

"Oh, I'm so glad you came!" Eloise gasped out, meeting them at the top. "Landon was here. I was terribly frightened. He demanded the film which showed the prayer rug. He pulled a gun on me, but I wouldn't give up the film. He tried to grab it—it was lying on the desk here, before I snatched it up. Isaac helped me. The gun went off a couple of times. I got the gun, but he got the film and escaped through the window."

"There were more than two shots heard," one of the policemen asserted suspiciously.

"Yes," Eloise readily admitted. "I fired at him as he was going out the window, and again as he was running across the lawn. I—I guess I'm not a very good shot."

"Neither were we, the first time we tangled with Landon," grinned the sergeant.

Then he turned to question Isaac. Landon, listening from cover, wiped the sweat from his forehead and crouched, ready for action, as the Negro answered; but his replies were a masterpiece of incoherence and confusion.

"Very good, Isaac," Landon whispered,

relaxing as the sergeant finally cut him short.

Then they tramped down the stairs and slammed the front door.

Landon emerged from his hiding place. "Great work, darling." Then, catching her arm: "Now we can have a few words to ourselves."

But Eloise shook her head. "Better leave right away, they may come back. Isaac will show you out the back way. And please, Ray, don't go robbing Dumaine. You may get caught."

"It's our best bet, Eloise," he insisted. "Tonight's performance convinces me all the more that he is in on all this."

Then he pressed her hand, and followed the waiting Negro.

**T**HE next day Ray Landon kept to his room, going out only to purchase, one at a time, a glass-cutter, a coil of stout clotheslines, a flashlight, and—from a toy store—a set of rubber-tipped arrows.

The newspapers featured his daring raid on the Foster mansion and the theft of the color film, but contained no information Landon could use.

Late that afternoon, packing his newly acquired belongings into his suitcase, he walked over to the Hotel Sparta and engaged a room for the evening.

He had no difficulty in justifying his demand for a room whose windows opened directly on the flat roof of Dumaine's store. "So I can check out in a hurry, if her boy friend follows us," he explained, with a wink at the hotel clerk, and paid three dollars in advance for the one-dollar room. "And if anyone asks for me, remember I'm not in."

He registered with a name which obviously bore no relation to the initials on his suitcase. The clerk, noting the discrepancy, winked, grinned knowingly, and pocketed the over-payment.

From the window of his new room, Landon carefully studied the roof of Dumaine's store, noted the location and the construction of the skylight, and took into account the obstructions that might hamper him in the dark.

That done, he crossed over to Exchange Alley, where the bartenders are too busy to note individuals. His supper was a sandwich and one of the big beers that make the place popular—and

crowded.

From observing Professor Foster's dealings with Alcide Dumaine during the prayer rug negotiations, Landon knew that the little Frenchman dined late, and usually stayed in his store until dinner time. Accordingly, after his own meal, Landon phoned Dumaine.

He dropped his nickel, and a moment later recognized the antique dealer's perceptible French accent.

"Nice work last night, Dumaine," said Landon. "You know who this is—uh-huh. Don't blat my name out that way! When do we split that dough you picked off on Saturday?"

Dumaine's startled exclamation contained enough alarm to prove that the random shot had not missed. He had mistaken Landon for Chris Panopoulos, the "client" who had wired from Biloxi.

"Don't stall!" he snapped, driving home his advantage. "You call up the boys and tell 'em to meet us at the store tonight."

Landon hung up. Dumaine's alarm was a fair assurance that, whether or not he was holding out on his allies, he would take the course of an innocent man. He would call together "the boys"—whoever they were—and try to convince them that he was on the up and up.

There was one flaw in Landon's strategy, but he had not overlooked it. "Panopoulos may show up or run into some of 'the boys,' and may deny that he phoned Dumaine to arrange the meeting. But he and the boys are likely to suspect that Dumaine lied about the call so as to slip something over on them. And Dumaine may suspect that Panopoulos *did* make the call, and lied out of it so as to cast suspicion on him, on Dumaine. And if they get excited enough in their wrangling, someone will spill something."

**L**ANDON waited near the entrance to Dumaine's establishment until, shortly after dark, he saw the little Frenchman hurry out for his evening meal. Landon at once returned to the Sparta, grinned at the clerk, and ascended the two flights to his room. Then, emerging from a window, he dropped to the flat roof and set to work with his cutter. The skylight was not of reinforced glass, so his work was easier.

First he moistened with his tongue the sucker-end of an arrow and pressed it against the surface of one of the panes until it stuck by vacuum. Then he cut a small circle around it, tapped the piece lightly until it broke loose, and lifted it out. Thrusting his left hand through the hole and applying his palm to the under surface of the pane, he cut out another piece. Finally an entire pane had been removed, leaving an opening large enough to admit his body.

Placing his piece of gas pipe athwart the hole, he doubled the clothesline around it and lowered himself into the black depths. Then, separating the two reaches of the rope, he pulled down on one and gradually eased up on the other, ending with a jerk and a let-go, which spun the pipe off the skylight and brought it and the rope to his feet.

Nothing now to indicate that anyone had entered, except the open pane, and that would not show against the overcast sky.

Landon snapped his flashlight and swept it around the room. The entire second floor was a dusty, somber confusion of antique furniture, genuine and synthetic.

Right beneath the skylight was the clearest place in the whole loft. Here was a modern desk, strewn with papers; a telephone set, several chairs, and a large double-doored safe. Evidently it was Dumaine's "office," although open to the rest of the storeroom. Nearby stood a huge walnut wardrobe—a perfect observation post from which to watch the congress of crooks.

Landon then explored further among the helter-skelter collection of museum pieces. Two flights of stairs, boarded in, led down from this story. Landon tried the one to the rear and found that it ended at the ground level, in a pair of heavy steel fire-doors, secured by a massive hinged bar that dropped into sockets. He tried the bar and found that the door easily opened. Beyond it was an alley.

Landon then returned to the second-floor storeroom and took cover, leaving the wardrobe door open perhaps a quarter of an inch. After waiting about fifteen minutes, he heard a key slipping into the lock of the front door. A wall switch clicked, snapping on a cluster of lights well past the middle of the shop. Furtive footsteps

echoed in the front stairway, and then a short, stocky man stepped into the room.

It was Dumaine. By the dim illumination, Landon could see that the shabby little Frenchman was worried. He paced the length of the central aisle that roughly divided the tangled confusion of furniture, statuary, *bric a brac*, large cloisonné vases, and great curved earthenware jars in which olives had been shipped from Spain years ago. He finally seated himself, shifting uneasily in his chair, and from time to time glanced nervously around the storeroom.

A few minutes later there was a heavy pounding on the street door. Dumaine started apprehensively, then rose and hurried down the stairs to admit the unfortunate visitors.

CONVERSATION began almost immediately, and continued as the three men tramped up the stairs, but Landon could catch only fragments.

Muttered cross fire of query and accusation; then, a strangely familiar gruff voice: "Shut up, Schwartz! I'll handle this!"

A flash of Dumaine's rapid fire sputter, ending with, "*Mordieu!* But it is jus' as I have told you!"

The gruff voice again: "Skip that tripe, Alcide. We was complimenting you on bumping off the old guy so nice, and pinning it on Landen!"

They reached the top of the stairs and crossed the room to the office space. And then the watcher in the wardrobe saw that the gruff-voiced speaker was the tall, swarthy raider Landon had grappled with in the library of the Foster home the evening before. His companion was a short, heavy man with a close-cropped bullet head: Schwartz who, despite having been silenced a moment ago, resumed: "Alcide, you should divide up the loot right now, even if you did shoot the professor."

"He *stabbed* him," corrected the tall dark man. His grin was a wolfish flash of ivory and gold. "Anyhow, Alcide, you did a good job. But it's pretty smart not to try and run out on us."

Dumaine gestured toward several chairs near his desk. His guests eyed them, decided that the antiques would support their weight, and seated themselves.

"Listen, Pichetti," protested Dumaine,

becoming more and more uneasy, "I don't know what you and Schwartz mean, asking me why I killed Foster."

"Never mind that bunk!" growled the tall dark man, glancing significantly at Schwartz. "Get down to business! Whatever Panopoulos told you goes for us. And you might as well cough up—he sent us to get you straightened out."

"Didn't I prove to the police that I *couldn't* have killed Foster?" Dumaine desperately challenged.

Schwartz chuckled faintly, and winked. "Nice work, ain't it? Instead of stallin' around until we faked the holdup, he shot Foster, and now we have both dough and rug. Only—he should not try to hold out."

"I tell you, Schwartz, he *stabbed* him," snarled Pichetti. "Get your story straight. You'd be a hell of a witness in a police round-up!"

"But, gentlemen," reiterated the little Frenchman, "I swear by the—"

A flash of lightning illuminated the skylight overhead, and the windows at each end of the loft. It was followed by a crash of thunder which blotted out Dumaine's words.

"—anything of the kind," he persisted. "And you may as well give up the idea of trying to blackmail me. I have not the money. Take the rug, and leave me alone."

"Yeah, leave you alone with the dough!" snarled Pichetti, his lips curling back in a gold-filled leer. "If you didn't get it, who the hell did?"

"And that phony picture in the paper—" Schwartz objected.

"You *know* why I handed the reporters a rug from my own stock," explained Dumaine. "Someone might have recognized the real one, and then we'd all be in a jam with the customs authorities."

"Customs authorities, hell!" snarled Pichetti. "You mean Barloff's gang would land on us for hijacking the rug *they* smuggled into the country. And what good did it do us to have the papers print the wrong one, while those phony pictures with the colored film are still loose?"

"I thought—I hoped—" Dumaine began nervously.

"That we wouldn't read the papers?" Pichetti cut in.

"Landon," interposed Schwartz, "*he* has the film."

"Landon hasn't got it any more than he killed Foster," Pichetti asserted. "I got it. And that wasn't Landon at Fosters' last night at all. It was one of Barloff's men I socked hell out of!"

That was a bombshell!

"For the luvva—" gasped Schwartz. "Are you sure?"

Dumaine shivered, seemed to shrink perceptibly, and said nothing. Pichetti gloated wolfishly.

There came another flash of lightning, followed by a long rumbling roar of distant thunder.

"Well, Dumaine," snapped Pichetti, "we want our cut, so we can haul out before Barloff makes a nuisance of himself."

"But gentlemen—"

Pichetti whipped out a gun from beneath his left arm pit. "I said we want our cut!"

Dumaine made a despairing gesture and tremblingly suggested, "Let's open the safe. I'll show you I have no money. And you can take the rug right now."

Schwartz nodded approvingly, as Dumaine slowly rose from his chair. Then suddenly his expression changed from approval to mild surprise. He tilted back his bullet head, stared incredulously above him, then held out his hand palm up.

"Rain!" he exclaimed. "From the skylight! It's open!"

A large drop splashed on Dumaine's desk. Then another, and another. Schwartz blinked as one caught him in the eye, and pushed his chair out of range of the downpour.

Pichetti jumped to his feet, yanked a flashlight out of his pocket, and played it on the ceiling above.

"Hell!" he exclaimed. "One big pane's out. And no glass on the floor. Been that way long?"

Dumaine despairingly shook his head. "Maybe Barloff is here right now!" he muttered.

This was Landon's chance! Catch them flat-footed, before they began the inevitable search for an eavesdropper.

He flung the doors of the wardrobe apart and flashed forward in a low, swift lunge that

connected as Pichetti half turned toward his place of concealment. Landon's fingers closed about Pichetti's wrist, throwing the pistol out of line. The shot, going wild, shattered a mirror; and as they plunged headlong into a group of Sheraton chairs, Pichetti's automatic clattered to the floor.

**P**ICHETTI, dazed by the shock and the pain of his wrenched wrist, was for the moment out of action; but before Landon could snatch the pistol, Schwartz, remarkably swift for one of his stocky build, drew his own weapon, whirled, and fired as Landon flattened to the floor. The tongue of flame singed Landon's hair. Pichetti, recovering, struggled forward and across Landon to reach his own automatic. Schwartz, not daring to risk a second shot for fear of hitting his ally, swung at Landon with the butt of his weapon.

The surprise attack had gone sour; and the uproar would soon bring the police.

Schwartz's pistol crashed home, but Landon, jerking his head, evaded the full force of the blow. Though shaken, he twisted, jack-knifed, and shot his feet upward, catching Schwartz in the pit of the stomach and sending him crashing against Dumaine's desk. In that instant's respite, Landon snatched Pichetti's pistol, smacked him across the head with it, and whirled in time to confront Schwartz, who, groggy but determined, was struggling to his feet. He still gripped his clubbed pistol by the barrel; but before he could shift the weapon to fire, Landon's boot lashed out, catching him on the jaw. Lights out! Then, with the two thugs temporarily out of the battle, Landon covered Dumaine with Pichetti's pistol.

"Open that safe!"

Landon, taking his coil of clothesline from the wardrobe, followed Dumaine. At the best he had but little time—yet if the safe did contain the loot, it would be worth the risk.

"Hurry, Dumaine! If the police pick me up, I'll tell them an earful about your peddling stolen property!"

Dumaine seemed relieved, rather than worried at Landon's demands. The combination was simple, and he made no attempt to fumble. The doors swung open. Landon slipped Pichetti's pistol into his pocket, pushed Dumaine to a chair, trussed him up, and then investigated the contents

of the safe.

Shah Ismail's prayer rug, which Landon recognized in spite of its being compactly bundled, lay on the bottom of the safe. Pulling it out and setting it to one side, he began his search through the confusion of pigeon-holes and drawer compartments. The scream of a siren told him that the police were on the way from the third precinct, only a few blocks distant.

Landon swiftly cleared a few more pigeon-holes.

Again the siren blast. He dared not risk another instant seeking the loot that would clear him. He snatched the ill-omened prayer rug and dashed down the rear stairs. Swinging the hinged bar from its socket, he pulled open the heavy steel door and stepped into the alley. The brief tropical shower had stopped. From beyond the low roof of the store, Landon heard the scream of brakes and police pounding for admittance. It would be but a matter of seconds before they forced the front door, and at any moment part of the squad might cover the mouth of the alley.

A six-foot wall directly across the alley offered the safest escape. Landon heaved his bundle over the barrier and gathered himself for a leap upward to catch its crest.

"Steady, there!" said a low voice at his side. "And keep your trap closed!"

The muzzle of a pistol prodded Landon's ribs, and a heavy hand caught his shoulder...

## Criminal's Alley

**W**ELL, the police had him at last. No use to risk certain death with that gun in his ribs. Better go along meekly, and watch alertly for a break.

"Straight ahead!" An arm reached past Landon. A latch clicked. A doorway right beside Dumaine's opened in the darkness, and his captor pushed him through and closed the door.

They were now in an angle of the courtyard of the building which adjoined Dumaine's store. A moment later the iron exit of *Dumaine, Inc.*, clanged open, and the police came charging out into the alley.

"Better come along quietly, if you don't want

the cops to get you," whispered his captor.

So he was not in the hands of the law after all!

"What the hell's all this about?" he whispered back.

"Wait and see," countered the other, with an ominous chuckle. He took the pistol from Landon's pocket. "And don't try any monkey work. Walk straight ahead now."

Landon advanced through the darkness of a narrow passageway and emerged onto the street in front of Dumaine's establishment. A car was waiting at the curbing, just behind the squad car of the raiding officers. A dark, stocky man, with cap pulled low over his eyes, sat alertly at the wheel.

"Get in!" commanded Landon's captor.

Landon, as he complied, wondered whether in escaping the law he had made a profitable exchange. He had only to shout to the driver of the police car ahead in order to find out, but he decided not to take the chance. He turned and sized up his captor, a heavy-jawed, swarthy giant with graying hair. This might be the Barloff Dumaine's allies feared. But his features were not Slavic. Perhaps—

"Careful of that pistol, Panopoulos," hazarded Landon as the car started out into the traffic. "And what's all the fuss about?"

**T**HE Greek started at mention of his name and prodded Landon with the muzzle of his automatic. He studied his prisoner intently from beneath thick black eyebrows, then said, "When Dumaine phoned me tonight and asked why I hung up so quick, I had the hunch someone was pulling a fast one. So I tell the boys okay to come see him, just like he ask—and here I find you, just like I think."

The Greek, instead of blating out that he hadn't phoned Dumaine, had planned to trap whoever had impersonated him!

"You punks ought to know when we got you beaten," continued Panopoulos. "Barloff might as well forget that rug. You birds'll never get it."

Landon laughed. "Is that so?" he mocked. "Well, now, it happens that I have got it."

"What?" Panopoulos sat bolt upright, and regarded Landon sharply. Then he addressed the driver: "Jake, pull up to the curb when we come to



the next street light. I want to get a good look at this guy."

"Here's a flashlight, Chris," suggested the man at the wheel, passing it back. Panopoulos snapped it on, and scrutinized Landon's face. Then, "Say, what you think we got here?"

"Barloff?"

"Hell, no! Nobody I ever seen. Say, punk, who *are* you?"

"Maybe he's the guy who bumped off the professor," suggested the driver, without looking back.

"I think you're right, Jake," said Panopoulos. "He don't look at all like his picture, but he's tall and dark and about the right age, and he jumps when you say he kill Foster. Yes, I think you're right."

"You've got me wrong, Chris," said Landon lightly.

"I got you dead to right, you mean. Jake, turn around. We'll take him to the police."

"And lose the rug?" Landon asked calmly. "No. I don't think you want to do that."

"I don't believe you got the rug."

"No? Well, skip it for the present. Do you want my testimony about tonight's hold-up added to Dumaine's against Pichetti and Schwartz? And furthermore, I can prove that it was Pichetti who stole the color film from Miss Foster last night. And she'll back me up in the identification. I guess that will pin the murder of Professor Foster on Pichetti, all right."

Landon's arguments did not make any impression at all upon the huge Greek. But the driver was worried.

"Chris," he said, "turning him in might play hell with the boys. Why not take him to our room, so we can study on it awhile before we do anything?"

"All right," agreed Panopoulos after a moment's reflection.

Jake turned into a side street, then cut down an alley, where he parked. It opened into a court. Landon was piloted toward a doorway, and thence up two flights of stairs to a furnished room.

"Tie him up," commanded Panopoulos, "and gag him."

A few minutes of well applied effort left Landon securely lashed to a chair.

"Now we get a cup of coffee and study on this."

So saying, Panopoulos and Jake left. Landon began to realize how weak his bluff had been. His captors might conclude that Pichetti and Schwartz, held on charges pressed by Dumaine, could—by proper bargaining with the police—be released in exchange for the surrender of Landon. That would be too tough!

He heard footsteps in the hall, a murmur of conversation, and the sound of a key slipping into the latch. Panopoulos and Jake stepped into the room.

"Untie his feet."

Jake did so.

"It's a long drive out to the Rigolets," objected Panopoulos, as Jake boosted Landon upright. "Isn't there some place just as good—and closer?"

That implied something worse than being turned over to the police. The Rigolets, which drains Lake Ponchartrain into the Gulf of Mexico, was something like ninety feet deep in spots. Anyone properly weighted would sink into the bottomless mud beneath those black waters.

"But I still don't see why we gotta croak this guy," Jake protested, "even if he is one of Barloff's outfit—which I think he ain't. Don't get us anywhere, does it?"

"Do I have to go into all that again?" demanded Panopoulos.

"But how the hell you going to get the boys outa the can?" Jake's perplexity was evident. "Dumaine will say they made him open the safe. Then had a fight and beat each other up. No matter how much they squawk, they can't touch *him*—he's a business man—and with that skylight out, and everything, they're framed for burglars."

**W**HY was Jake arguing for Landon's life? And then, in a flash, Landon understood. Jake, a small-time gangster, looked up to soldier-of-fortune Ray Landon, the daring murderer who had made a monkey of the police. It was the admiration of an apprentice for a master craftsman.

"But, Jake, I tell you this fellow will spill the beans!"

"Chris, how the hell can he spill any beans?"

Afraid he'll make it worse for Pichetti and Schwartz?"

Panopoulos shook his head and chuckled. "No, he'd make it better for them—his story would get them loose! Right now they're just where I want them. If Dumaine killed Foster and got the money, I won't have to split with them if they're in the jug. And if Dumaine didn't get the money, they'll think that I did, and be coming after me. Leave 'em in the jug."

"But this guy says he's got the rug."

Panopoulos sniffed contemptuously. "Where's he got it? He didn't have it coming out of Dumaine's."

"Hell!" muttered Jake sadly, giving in at last. "But he's one great guy."

And Landon, gagged, bound, but with his feet untied, faced his captors. He would be dead in a few minutes, so what did it matter if he overheard their plans?

He glanced past them to the door of the room. It was not latched—stood slightly ajar. He felt a slight current of air, noted that the door was slowly, almost imperceptibly swinging open.

The Greek's pistol, covering Landon, had shifted slightly out of line. When the draft opened the door enough, he'd lunge forward, butt the Greek in the stomach, and make a break! Landon tensed, ready for the leap.

Meanwhile Panopoulos was saying, "We'll take the money and the rug off Dumaine and sell it in New York. Get forty grand, perhaps. Why not? I've got Pichetti and Schwartz just where I want them."

"Oh, yeah? Leave us in the can, eh?" snarled a gruff voice. The door swung all the way open. On the threshold stood Pichetti, gun in hand.

Panopoulos fired as he whirled, but Pichetti's shot was a split-second early. He charged into the room, followed by Schwartz. Jake, flinging himself aside, returned their fire.

Landon dropped flat to the floor. Panopoulos, riddled with lead, kept his feet. His .45 drowned the sharply barking .38's. Schwartz dropped, blasted into a corner. Panopoulos sagged to the floor.

"Drop it, punk, and get on your feet!" snapped Pichetti turning to Jake, who had taken cover in the angle of the mantelpiece. The deck

was cleared—but you can't be chief without at least one henchman.

Now Panopoulos, mortally wounded, was forcing his pistol into line. Landon held his breath, fascinated by that grim, vengeful courage.

Pichetti sensed his peril—but too late. The Greek's heavy slug pitched him end-for-end against the wall. Bull's-eye! And then Panopoulos slumped face down, finished.

A police whistle shrilled outside the house. Landon, hands tied, struggled to his feet in a desperate effort to leave by the back way before the police came in from the front. Then he saw Jake crawling toward him, with gun in hand.

## Troubles Pile Up

"STEADY, fellow! I'll cut you loose." Jake drew a knife. As the blade passed between Landon's wrists, there was a pounding at the back entrance, two flights down. No escape that way. Landon snatched a pistol from the floor. Jake paused to latch the door of the room. "Out this way!" Jake stepped through a window to a balcony that ran along the side of the rooming house. From there they swung across to the gallery of the adjoining building, entered the house and descended to the ground level. Then a swift dash across a court, and down an alley opening into a side-street.

Jake reeled, recovered. He coughed and wiped a red froth from his lips.

"How much lead did you stop?" demanded Landon, catching his ally by the arm. "I'm still wondering why you turned me loose—"

Jake grinned and shrugged. "Chris is dead, and his gang is all shot. You're worth teaming up with."

He staggered again. Landon saw that quick action was imperative.

"Come on. I think I know where you can hide out." Then, as he hailed a cruising taxi, "Do you know any doctor in town?"

Jake shook his head. "I'll get turned in sure as hell when the doc reports gunshot wounds."

"Where are you hit?"

Jake indicated his side. Some blood oozed out of his mouth and trickled down his chin.

"Can't merely paint you with iodine and mark you duty," Landon muttered. Then, to the driver, "Uptown, buddy. I'll tell you when to stop."

Jake regarded him inquiringly, his face drawn and gray.

"Only chance," said Landon, "but I think it'll work."

Landon's plan was dangerous, but he saw that Jake needed immediate attention. Changing cabs would avail them little; they would eventually be tracked to their destination.

"Cover this bird," he whispered. "And see that he doesn't pull any fast work. I'm going to phone a friend who'll hide us. Then I'll get a doctor, blindfold him, and poke a gun to his ribs."

"Gosh, you got your guts!" muttered Jake admiringly.

Landon, though disheveled, was not conspicuous as he stepped into a drug store. He called the Foster, house. Eloise answered.

"Careful what you say," he cautioned. "Hop into your car, park on Saint Andrew, just off Prytania Street. I'll hail you from a cab."

Landon instructed the driver to circle the block he had designated to Eloise. They had not made more than three trips when he recognized Eloise's roadster, parked on a side-street. She herself was standing on Prytania.

"Clever girl!" said Landon to himself, as he instructed the cab driver to draw up by the curb. "He won't even notice her car."

He stepped from the taxi. Eloise came running up.

"Oh!" she exclaimed in dismay. "What ever in the world have you been doing—your face is a sight!"

"I've got a wounded comrade," he whispered. "Take him to the house, and I'll rustle up a doctor."

"Haven't you enough grief of your own?" she protested hysterically.

Landon returned to the cab.

"Jake?"

No answer. Jake was slumped in a corner. He muttered hoarsely, made a feeble gesture of protest as Landon sought to lift him from the seat.

"Never mind me, I'm through. Get the hell out!" He coughed, shuddered, and then Landon

recognized the wheeze and rattle in his throat. Death had cancelled the debt.

Landon backed out of the cab and handed the driver a bill.

"Straight down the street!" he said. "Don't stop, and don't look back. If you don't want to die of lead poisoning, be damn sure there was one—get me?—*one* man who hailed you. And stick to it. One crack out of you—" Landon regarded the driver intently, then concluded in a tone that matched the steel gray glitter of his eyes, "I've got your number and I'll remember it. So give me a chance to give *you* a break. Beat it!"

**H**E watched the tail-light disappear down Prytania Street, then turned to Eloise. "I didn't know he was hit that bad or I'd not have pulled you into this. But he saved my hide, and—"

"I know. But let's move on, before that cab driver gets over his fright."

As they drove by a long round-about way to Eloise's home, Landon outlined his encounter at Dumaine's and his escape from Panopoulos.

"It's all such a dog fight that you can draw almost any conclusion you want," he summarized. "When Dumaine called your uncle from the convention, under the pretext of selling him the rug, the stage must have been set for a faked robbery, to get possession of both rug and cash. But someone, working almost on a split-second schedule, beat them to it—and, for good measure, framed me."

"That looks like the fine hand of Panopoulos," suggested Eloise.

Landon shook his head. "I don't think so," he said thoughtfully. "Panopoulos seemed to think that Dumaine has the money. But I'm quite sure that neither of them has. And now the Greek's gang is blotted out."

"There goes your chance of clearing yourself," sighed Eloise. "You'd better fade out of here. I—I can join you somewhere later, after it all blows over."

"Do you mean that?" he said.

She averted her gaze, and nodded.

"Then I'm going to stick right here in New Orleans till I clear myself."

"But how can you solve it, if everyone is dead?"

"Everyone except Dumaine," he corrected. "And somebody named Barloff, from whom Panopoulos stole the rug." He told her how Panopoulos had mistaken him for one of the Barloff gang.

There was no chance that they had been followed. Landon accompanied Eloise into the somber old mansion.

"Where do we go from here?" Eloise said.

"To the library."

Hand in hand they ascended the broad stairs.

"Eloise," he said, "we've got to figure out who got your uncle to open the safe, and then *prove* it. Who else would have had the combination?"

Eloise sighed wearily. "Nobody. Uncle Gilbert opened the safe often during the bargaining, but never while Dumaine was here, so *he* couldn't have noted it. He'd not have had any reason to until after Bert Collins sold the Liberty Bonds for uncle."

"By the way," wondered Landon, "where has Bert been ever since Saturday?"

"He's kept away from here," said the girl.

"He'd better! Did you have the police check up on his whereabouts for the last week or so?"

"Yes. But he not only gave a straightforward account of himself, but also still has the keys—showed them to the police."

"He might have lent them to someone," Landon hopefully suggested.

"At least not on the night of the—the robbery," said Eloise, with a little catch in her voice, "for that girl he was with at the party had her hooks on him all evening. Anyway, why worry about keys, with that magnolia tree standing right there within easy reach of the window?"

"That's right," Landon agreed. "And say! That magnolia gives me another idea. Someone, posted in that tree with a pair of field glasses, could have watched your uncle and gotten the combination! I'll see how far away I can read the numbers with my naked eyes."

He backed slowly toward the window.

"Look out!" she warned.

Landon wheeled and reached in his pocket for his gun. He tripped on the fringe of the rug and crashed against the front of one of the desks.

"Oh, I'm so sorry! I was trying to warn you not to bump into that desk."

Landon ruefully eyed the front of the desk as he regained his feet; but he suddenly dropped to his knees before it.

"That's odd!" he muttered, frowning. "I never saw that before."

He indicated a place in the back of the desk a few inches above the floor, where a round plug about the size of a quarter-dollar, and stained to match the color of the wood, had been pushed in slightly.

He pushed the plug. It slipped through, leaving a small round hole slanting downward and into the large double drawer on the right of the desk. He jerked the front of the drawer. It came off, leaving the rest still in place. He pulled out the remainder of the drawer.

"What on earth are you doing?" said Eloise.

"Frankly, I don't know," Landon replied. "It's just odd—and it's certainly no accident, this freshly drilled hole."

"Oh, by the way," Eloise broke into his pondering, "I told the police about your getting that call from the bell captain at the Roosevelt, saying that Uncle Gilbert wanted you to hurry home and get the manuscript of his lecture. But the bell captain and all the bellhops deny having sent any such message."

"Which proves that that call was framed. Well, let's not get led off on a tangent. I'll get out into the tree and see how the safe looks from there. You stand in front of it, to represent your uncle."

"I'm too small," she objected. "You stand in front of the safe, and I'll take your picture with Uncle's Cine-Kodak from inside the window, but from the direction of the tree, while you pretend to be opening the safe."

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "*That's* how they did it. Your uncle himself suggested the method. His bluff. Shooting a reel of film, and declaring that, even if he didn't buy the rug, he'd at least have a color-picture of it. And that got to Panopoulos, or to Barloff, whoever he is. A man in the magnolia tree could have photographed your uncle opening the safe, could have done it weeks ago. The film could have been enlarged where it showed the end of each spin of the dial.

Let's try it."

**E**LOISE brought her uncle's movie camera, and placed it on one of the desks, pointing, toward the wall safe.

"Now you twirl the dials," she said. "No need for me to get out into the tree. All we want to find out is whether the numbers will register on the film. This camera will work by electric light."

"Oke. Shoot!" He spun the dial of the safe. Then, "Go ahead and run the camera."

"I am," she replied. "Can't you hear the motor?"

He shook his head, and continued to operate the safe. Finally she snapped the control.

"But," she objected, "it will be about five days before we can get this reel back from the finisher."

"No," said Landon. "I'll take it to my room, cut off a two-foot strip, and develop it just like Kodak film, by hand. I can get a developing set in a drug store. Then in the morning, if we're on the right track, I'll dope out some means of getting the company to check their records. There can't have been so very many motion picture reels developed for New Orleans customers during the last few weeks."

He removed the exposed reel from the camera and thrust it into his pocket.

"And now I must hurry along," he said. "Among other things, I'm going back to get the prayer rug from the alley near Dumaine's store."

"Why?"

"Give it back to Dumaine. Then tip off the police to keep an eye on him, to see who goes after it."

"Good night—dear. And do be careful."

She let him out through the back door, near the garage. From the rear drive he stealthily approached the street. All clear—until he reached the sidewalk.

A man emerged from behind a nearby tree. Landon wheeled, reaching for his pistol, but a heavy hand caught his shoulder from behind. A voice rasped in his ear, "Hold it, brother!"

And the one approaching from the front disclosed a silver shield gleaming in the glow of distant street lights.

"We rather figured we'd find you here,

Landon," he said. "Come along with us to Headquarters."

## Out of the Frying Pan

**R**AY LANDON meekly submitted to arrest. His two captors led him to a waiting car, parked in the next block. There they searched him thoroughly, and removed his gun and the reel of film.

"Ah!" one of them exclaimed. "The missing color film of the prayer rug! I figured it hadn't been stolen."

"That's one on you!" chuckled Landon. "It's unexposed film. Take a look if you don't believe me!"

They handcuffed Landon, boosted him into the car and started off. He slumped down in his seat, trying to devise a line of argument to persuade the police to investigate his flimsy clues.

Suddenly he sat erect. "This is a hell of a way to go to police headquarters!"

"Police! We're taking you to Barloff!"

Landon settled back against the cushions of the car. He concealed his elation. Nothing could be better than meeting the one man who was the key to the tangle. That is, if Landon survived the encounter.

"So this is Captain Landon!" sneered one of his captors. "The police must be saps to call you a hard guy!"

Landon ignored the gibe.

"Better blindfold him," suggested the other. "We're getting near."

They bandaged his eyes; and long before the car crunched to a halt in a graveled driveway, Landon had lost all sense of direction.

His captors dragged him from the car, prodded him up five steps, across a broad gallery, and down a hallway. There they halted. A soft voice purred, "The master will receive the guests here in the library."

Something odd about that voice. Though not familiar, its subtle overtones awoke lurking memories.

Landon's two guards hustled him ahead, then swung right.

"At your pleasure," one of them respectfully announced.

"Remove the blindfold." A second purring voice, and with that same subtle, lurking ghost of familiarity.

Landon blinked at the sudden glare of light. He stood in an ornately furnished drawing-room, confronting a portly man in full evening dress. His face was dark and grim as his black eyes; his nose was a commanding beak. A small gardenia blossomed on one lapel.

"Well, Captain Landon!" he purred, stroking

his short black beard. "This is a pleasure!"

Barloff—his allies were Russian, but he obviously was an Arab. Then it clicked: Shah Ismail's rug must have been smuggled out of Persia and across Russia; and this self-styled Barloff tallied closely with descriptions of a bandit whose doings were a by-word from Cairo to Turkestan.

"*W'aleikum as-salaam wa barakat 'ul-lahi, ya skaykh!*" Landon greeted in Arabic. Then, grinning amiably, "Barloff—but this is as good as any of the names mentioned when the King of

*"That's how they did it!  
Your uncle himself suggested  
the method. His bluff!"*



Iraq put a price on your head. So you're a rug dealer now, eh?"

Barloff started, and his lips tightened; then they relaxed in a smile and he replied in Arabic, "Captain, perhaps we two can trade?"

"You might," countered Landon, wondering at the implied proposition, "release my hands."

**T**HE Arab murmured an order, and as his Russian henchmen unlocked the handcuffs, he continued, "I am certain you did not kill Foster. I've heard as much of you as you have of me. Captain Landon would not kill a benefactor. And since you could easily leave New Orleans, you must be staying to try and clear yourself."

Landon nodded. Things were coming his way.

"Neither did *we* kill Foster. We want Shah Ismail's rug. Help us get it and we will help clear you. Allah will make it easy for you."

Maybe Allah would, but Landon temporized: "How should I know where it is? Ask Dumaine."

"Dumaine, before he died—" Barloff paused to let his smile drive the words home—"said you took it. That rings true."

Little doubt how Dumaine died—or why!

"Too bad, Barloff. That spoils my best chance of clearing myself."

"I have information that would help."

"Maybe." Landon was on thin ice. Dodging Dumaine's fate would require slick work. "Anyhow, I hid the rug."

"Where?"

"We'll get to that," evaded Landon. "Your frankness about Dumaine hints that you'll make it darn sure I'll never be talkative."

Barloff laughed and gestured reassuringly.

"My careless remark, even if made to the whole world, wouldn't hurt me. And once I get the rug, I'll be gone before you could get anyone to listen to you. Clearing yourself will leave you little time to worry about Dumaine's—ah—mishap, one might call it."

"Reasonable," agreed Landon. Which it was; reasonable. But still—it did have fishhooks. "Let's go, then. I'll play. But give me the roll of film."

"Very well. Vassili, handcuff him again, while I change my clothes. And stuff the film into

his pocket. You can see it hasn't been developed."

Barloff presently returned, wearing an inconspicuous business suit. Landon, again blindfolded, was led out to the car.

After a few minutes' drive the blindfold was removed. They were entering the downtown New Orleans. It was now around midnight, and the streets were nearly deserted.

Landon directed them toward Dumaine's place. The car halted at the end of the alley.

"Ivan, you sit in the car and watch this end of the alley," Barloff commanded. "Vassili, you go on ahead of us to guard the other end. Yakushev, you come with us. And, by the way, Captain, better go ahead of us. And be careful. No false moves."

As Vassili ran on ahead, Landon, Barloff and Yakushev entered the dark depths of the alley.

"And now where is the prayer rug?" Barloff said.

"I'll show you," Landon replied. Barloff's eagerness to *know*, instead of waiting to see, renewed Landon's suspicion that the deal was to be one-sided. While Barloff scarcely needed resort to treachery, he might decide to play safe. And Landon saw his chance to beat him to it.

Instead of heading to where the rug was hidden, he led the captors toward the doorway through which Panopoulos had taken him earlier in the evening—this same evening, though it seemed weeks rather than hours ago.

"It's in here," he lied. "Just a second—I'll drag it out."

"Where?" That same eager reiteration.

"Get the key so you can turn me loose," temporized Landon, "when I hand you the rug. This neighborhood is tricky, and if we have to run for it, I want my hands clear. We can meet later, where you can give me the evidence I need—"

"Hmmm...cautious," murmured Barloff. Then, after getting the key from Yakushev, he added, "And that reminds me. Just to be sure you'll be discreet, I'll mail the evidence to Miss Foster."

Barloff's show of counter-caution almost masked his play to lull Landon's suspicions—almost, but not quite.

Landon opened the door. Barloff followed, closing it after him. The locality was dangerous,

and if the police were on the prowl, the closed door would help.

Landon advanced across the courtyard, and into the passageway through which Panopoulous had led him to the street. Barloff's gun prodded his back. .

With his manacled hands, Landon groped slowly along the walls of the passageway.

"Here! Feel in here!"

**B**ARLOFF eagerly pressed forward. His pistol-muzzle shifted. This was the moment for which Landon had been waiting. He wheeled, knocking the barrel out of line, and driving one knee up to Barloff's groin, and followed through with both shackled fists sinking him in the stomach.

Pay-day! The Arab collapsed, paralyzed. His gun clattered to the flagstones.

Landon retrieved the gun, then fished in Barloff's pockets and found the key. He held it in his teeth, and in a moment unlocked the manacles. That done, he snapped them on Barloff, so as to fasten him to an iron window-grating.

Barloff, though breathing, was still too weak to groan.

One end of the passageway led to the street, and safety. The other was guarded by Yakushev. Beyond him was the wall over which Landon had thrown the bundled up prayer rug earlier in the evening. He retraced his steps. Must get the rug. It was evidence.

As he stepped from the courtyard to the alley, he turned and over his shoulder remarked, as if to someone just following, "Well, Barloff, I hope you're satisfied, now that you have the rug."

Yakushev exclaimed and crowded close. Landon's pistol checked him.

"Not a yeep, or I'll plug you," he warned, taking the Russian's gun. But instead of pocketing the weapon, he smacked Yukushev across the head with it.

Then he crossed the narrow alley, pocketed both guns and bounded up, to catch the crest of the wall with his hands. And then Vassili, at the further end of the alley, sensed trouble. As Landon pulled himself to the top of the wall, a shot rang behind him. A slug jerked through his coat, raking his back. Another blast—but he

dropped from the barrier as lead whizzed past and ricocheted from a wall beyond. Recovering from the impact, Landon groped in an angle of the courtyard. He found a bundle, seized it, and struggled to his feet.

Landon was concealed by dense gloom; but someone, clearing the wall he'd just scaled, was silhouetted against the skyglow. Someone else was running down the alley. Vassili and Ivan! In their position, they had nerve to spare, chasing Landon!

He snapped his pistol into line. *Smack!* A yell, and the head disappeared. Pursuit was checked, but the heat was on now!

Landon turned and groped his way toward the house that enclosed the court. In the darkness he found a door. It was locked. Feeling along the face of the building, he found a window—open. He stealthily cleared the still.

He was in a perfumed silence. A decidedly feminine sweetness burdened the air. But not a sound. Bundle under his arm, Landon picked his way, his free hand feeling ahead of him for unseen obstacles. Once out of the house, he had a chance.

Another pace...and another...some *Vieux Carré* beauty did go for *Nuit Amou-reuse* in a large way! Thank God she was out—or was she?

A chair blocked him. He turned, but a shoe threw him off balance—and something low and soft, catching his chin at the wrong instant, completed the job. He pitched forward, landing on a low bed. A shrill scream, and someone slight, energetic and feminine writhed clear of him.

Landon flung himself backward. Landing afoul of the chair, he crashed to the floor. A light snapped on. He scrambled to his feet—but not in time.

"Don't move, or I'll shoot!"

A tiny pearl-handled Luger stared him in the face. Behind the unwavering weapon was an extremely pretty olive-skinned girl, clad in a smart blue robe of Russian design.

## When Danger Pursues

**L**ANDON swallowed his admiration and his heart at one gulp. Something had to be done in a hurry. "That gun makes me



nervous," he began, making a good effort at an engaging smile. "I lost my keys and—"

But before he could get as far as reminding her that burglars don't *enter* with baggage, she snapped, "Drop that bundle, and reach for the ceiling!"

"Absolutely," agreed Landon. "And speaking of bundles—"

But instead of dropping it, he flung the rug at her pistol-hand. The Luger crackled, but before she could jerk a second shot. Landon had closed in and wrenched it from her grasp.

"Sorry, darling," he apologized, as he retrieved his bundle, "but I'm in an awful hurry!"

Her violet eyes narrowed, and she nodded knowingly.

"Why didn't you say so?" she asked, smiling amiably. "I heard the shooting out there and—but if you're in a jam, better hide here. They'll never imagine—"

"Thanks a lot." She was right, but her sweetness was a bit overdone—like her perfume. With significant abstraction he fingered Barloff's pistol as he added, "Better stay right where you are—you look perfectly lovely that way—while I check out. Be seeing you sometime later."

"That's a promise!" she smiled. "And don't forget the address."

The sudden intentness of her eyes contradicted her lips. She must have recognized him and was hoping to trap him, later.

"Not a yep out of you," he warned.

Pistol leveled, Landon backed toward the door. The encounter, though brief, had cost precious seconds. The screech of brakes, the pounding on doors, and the uproar of voices in the alley told him that the police had arrived. Flashlight beams criss-crossed the courtyard he had just left.

The door behind Landon was locked.

"Where's the key?" he snapped.

"Try and find it!" the girl challenged, laughing maliciously.

"Suit yourself!" retorted Landon. "If I have to stay and shoot it out, you're going into that clothes closet with me, and—"

He advanced a pace, shifting his pistol to his left, and reaching out with his right. That settled her. She cried out and gestured toward the dresser.

There was her key. But as Landon snatched it, two uniformed figures dropped into the court. He lost an instant snapping off the lights. A yell from without: a command to halt.

Landon sprayed the window with lead. The machine-gun rattle would make them keep their heads down as they advanced. During the scant seconds he won, Landon unlocked the brunette beauty's door. She was shrieking to the whole *Vieux Carré*. A pistol blast, the smack of lead, and a yard of plaster clattered to the floor as Landon bounded to the hallway. Slugs riddled the panel; but he paused, locking the door from the outside. The barrier would gain him the time he had lost.

As he reached the rear gallery, he heard a rumble of gruff voices, accented with feminine hysteria. Then a pounding, and the creak of wrenching door-panels. But that faded as he scaled a low wall and dropped into an adjoining court. The occupants of the building he had left had either ducked for cover, or were heading for the main disturbance.

He finally emerged on Bourbon Street and headed uptown. He reached his hotel, once more in the clear—for a while.

The first thing that he did was to shave off the rest of his mustache. Enough people had now seen him with it, even in its changed form, so that it would no longer serve as a disguise.

His bullet-creased back was becoming annoying. But with the aid of two mirrors, he determined that the wound was superficial—a dab of iodine and an awkward bit of bandaging settled it. But, tired though he was, he had to develop the film.

He ventured out again, picked up an amateur developing kit at an all-night drug store, and, on the way, mailed the prayer rug to Eloise. To keep it in his hotel room would add to his risks. Thin and of silk, it folded readily; he guessed the weight, and twenty-four-hour service at the main post office provided stamps.

When he finally turned in for a few hours' sleep, his fingers were stained with chemicals and his head was swimming. But the developed film demonstrated that a clear picture could be taken at night with the professor's movie camera—clear enough so that the combination of the safe could be seen with a glass.

LONDON slept late the next morning. Around ten o'clock, he came down for breakfast. And since the absence of his mustache might be noticed if he ate where he had been seen recently, he went to a small arm-chair restaurant a short distance from the hotel. He'd need a new hideout, quickly!

On the way he bought a morning *Picayune* and spread it out and read it as he had his breakfast.

The front page was good: "Captain Landon overpowers Alcide Dumaine and two customers—" Customers, eh? So that's what Dumaine called the two gunmen of Panopoulos? No wonder the police let them go!

"—and escapes police with customary daring. Soldier of fortune kills three accomplices—" Accomplices! Two of 'em were customers a minute ago!

"—in desperate gun-battle in rooming house, quarreling over division of the loot.

"Fourth victim dies while escaping in taxi-cab." Poor Jake!

"Landon later returns and murders Dumaine in cold blood." Barloff's work!

"Then holds up Glenn Thomas, a cotton buyer from New York—" Couldn't Barloff think up a better alias than that?

"Wounds Thomas' chauffeur in the head, but not seriously." Too bad about that not seriously part!

"Escapes through house of Jeannette Levaseur, cabaret dancer. Blocks police with fusillade while fleeing from her bedroom. The Levaseur woman is being held in jail on suspicion. She denies knowing Landon." Landon grinned reminiscently.

Then his grin faded as he saw, pictured on the page in front of him, the steel-trap features of John Healy, Chief of Detectives, and read his promise:

*"Landon, dead or alive, within twenty-four hours!"*

His eyes strayed from Healy's picture to that of the alluring Jeannette Levaseur. Eloise must already have read the account. And the reporters

of course would feature the dancer and his midnight call. Murder was one thing, but to be branded as a friend of the notorious Levaseur woman—!

He hurriedly gulped his coffee, paid his check, and headed for a telephone booth. Healy or no Healy, he *had* to speak to Eloise.

Eloise herself answered the phone.

"Darling, this is Ray," he said. "I never saw that woman before I escaped last night."

"Silly!" she laughed. "Of course you didn't! But who killed Dumaine?"

"Tell you later. I've got to skip out before they trace this call. *Our experiment is okay.*"

He hung up and hurried from the restaurant, glancing both ways as he emerged. In one direction were two policemen, talking together on a corner. And from the other direction came the one man in all New Orleans whom Landon most feared to meet, the one man who knew him intimately enough to recognize him in spite of his trimmed eyebrows and absent mustache: Bert Collins, private secretary to the late Professor Foster.

But Collins hadn't yet seen him, so Landon ducked across the street. Glancing back, he saw that Collins was following him, but still apparently unaware of his identity. Landon ducked back into a doorway.

ONCE inside, he looked about him. The room was crowded with men, mostly standing up. Along one side of the room was a large blackboard, on which a clerk standing on a stool was chalking figures: "20 1/8, 20 1/4, 20 1/2."

This was the stock-brokerage office of Bennett & Keene.

Landon seated himself in an inconspicuous corner and pretended to be studying an investment bulletin. Neither Collins nor the police would think to look for him here. The hangers-on, either actual traders or tape-worms, would be too much interested in the market to have any thoughts for trifles like murder.

And then came a familiar voice, low, but clear above the clatter of the teletype and the orders snapped into the battery of hand-sets on the desks of the customers' men: "Buy Fourth Liberty Loan—ten one-thousands and a five hundred.

Yes, at market.”

Landon froze against the leather upholstery of his chair. Bert Collins was speaking. Landon dared not even risk a glance; nor was a glance necessary to assure him that fate stood at the nearby desk.

“Just take a seat,” the customers’ man was saying. “We’ll have a confirmation for you in a minute, Mr. Collins.”

Of course Collins might walk into the reference room to wait, but the seats right beside Landon would be the most handy. Landon felt the perspiration cropping out on his forehead and trickling down his cheeks. Bennett & Keene’s, of all places—with half a dozen other houses that Collins could have picked!

So this was why Collins had seemed to follow him across the street—Collins had been bound for the very doorway into which Landon had ducked to avoid him. What beastly luck!

Landon drew a deep breath, clenched his fists, tried to relax, to control himself, to assure himself that Collins would not expect to find him watching a quotation board.

Someone was taking the next seat. In spite of himself, Landon could not resist the temptation to glance up at his neighbor. He felt eyes boring into him. Then he saw the man get up again and go toward the reference room. The tall slouching form and the gray suit were familiar. Collins had undoubtedly recognized him, and was now on his way to the telephone to call police headquarters.

“I can beat that,” was Landon’s thought. “Just as he clears the door—” Landon rose slowly from his seat. There was plenty of time.

And then he saw that he had jumped at conclusions. The man in the gray suit had not been Collins. Collins himself was now standing directly before him. Their eyes met!

**T**HE consternation on Collins’ pale features, and the expression of his blue eyes, left no doubt that he was terrified at confronting such a desperate killer face to face.

For an age-long instant both men stared. Landon recovered first, but before his fist could drive home it was too late.

“It’s Landon!” shrieked Collins. “Stop him!”

Landon’s fist connected like the smack of a

baseball bat; but Collins, recoiling in mortal terror even before the blow started, missed its full force. Even as he crashed backward into a chair, he repeated his outcry.

That precipitated a panic.

Landon charged into a knot of customers that blocked the narrow hall. Those nearest him gave way. Some dropped to the floor to avoid the burst of pistol fire which they expected. Those in the rear crowded forward, valiantly yelling to the others to seize Landon. He knew that he could reach the door in a few seconds. Those whom he could not hurdle he could knock down; but Gravier Street, the heart of the financial district, had hair-trigger nerves. At any moment bank guards, armed with sawed-off shotguns, would be in the street. Policemen would come dashing up.

A final rush, and Landon reached the sidewalk. Clear—but which way? There was an alley across the street, but Landon had no idea of what lay at its further end. He glanced swiftly, right, left, trying to see a way of escape.

A traffic officer was at that moment racking his motorcycle at the curbing to Landon’s right front.

“What the hell’s up?” he demanded, as he turned from his machine. Cries of “Landon! Landon!” came from the crowd that surged out of the brokerage house in the wake of the fleeing man.

No time for parley or strategy. Landon saw the officer’s querying expression harden into grim recognition. But as the cop reached toward his holster, Landon charged, striking the officer’s wrist. An instant after that paralyzing slice checked the draw, Landon’s fist crashed home against the officer’s jaw.

The impact sent the patrolman spinning to the gutter, his pistol clattering on the paving. Landon swung into the seat of the motorcycle, kicked the starting pedal, and roared off down the street. There were still a few seconds to spare before the pursuit could be organized and directed, but the odds were against him. A police department motorcycle ridden by a bare-headed civilian is harder to conceal than a carnival parade. A traffic officer hailed him as he sizzled past the first intersection, then blew his whistle.

Landon jammed on his brakes, whipped

around the left of a street car, and charged through the cross traffic.

Dryades Street and its slums seemed the best refuge. There were alleys and crazily constructed buildings which concealed mazes of backyards. And then he saw Dryades Market looming up.

Landon snapped his fingers.

"Better yet!"

He ran the red betrayer into an alley, where he abandoned it, emerged on a parallel street, doubled back around the block, entered the long public market, and mingled with the crowd of shoppers. No one connected the noise of pursuit with this apparently casual arrival. He purchased an armful of vegetables, a bag of bananas, and several coconuts. The load, supported on his left forearm, afforded a partial screen of celery and turnip tops. He quite naturally cocked his head to one side to keep his purchases from falling; and with his free hand he held a banana, which he ate as he strolled up Dryades Street, paralleling Saint Charles, through slums within a stone's throw of the main drive of New Orleans.

**H**IS thoughts, sharpened by his recent narrow escape, began to assemble the contradictory fragments of evidence that pointed to the slayer of Professor Foster. Thus far, he had been dodging too much lead for thought.

Foster had not been forced by the thief to open the safe. On the contrary, the thief had obtained the combination by photography, had opened the safe himself, *had been surprised by the professor's unexpected return*, and had killed in self-defense. This eliminated Dumaine: the professor was returning to meet the dealer. It let out Chris Panopoulos and his thugs. They would have been in touch with Dumaine's movements, unless the Frenchman had staged the robbery—and that likewise was out. Barloff was the only remaining suspect—but how hang it on him?

Landon suddenly halted. The pieces clicked.

He glanced about. No pursuit in sight. He was in front of a cheap clothing store.

Entering, he asked, "Can you fix me up with a hat?"

The proprietor could, and quickly did.

"You keep these vegetables for me—I'll be back later."

With his new hat pulled down over his eyes, he strode briskly and resolutely to the Foster mansion.

Eloise admitted him, her dark eyes dismayed.

"Oh, Ray, what in the world do you mean coming here in broad daylight? I tried to tell you, but you hung up. The police know that you met me last night. That cab driver's story in the paper was faked, to trap you. Get away from here—"

"You don't know the half of it!" he retorted with a wry smile. "Collins recognized me at Bennett & Keene's stock exchange a few minutes ago. Let's go up to the library, and I'll tell you all about it."

On the way up the stairs, he briefly sketched his clash with Barloff, and his run in with Collins only a few minutes ago.

Eloise sighed and sank into a chair. "You simply must get out of town, Ray! Don't stay here another moment!"

"Nothing doing. I'm playing a hunch."

"Collins will surely lead the police—" She stopped. A car drew up before the house. Eloise parted the window drapes. "They're here now! Hide in that little storeroom, and when they enter you can—"

"No go," said Landon, stepping to another window. "The whole place is surrounded. Plainclothes and uniformed cops."

Another car pulled up to the curbing. A riot squad with sawed-off shotguns emerged. Landon regarded Eloise with a grim smile.

"Can't make it. Dozens of 'em, and they mean *dead or alive*. Pay day, darling!"

"I know where you can hide. They'll never think of looking in the—"

But before Eloise could name the corner that would afford a refuge, they heard footsteps in the hallway.

## The Murderer at Bay

**E**LOISE screamed. Landon whirled. Four plainclothesmen, with drawn pistols, stood in the entrance of the library. At their head was John Healy, the Chief of Detectives who had promised to take Landon, dead or alive, within twenty-four hours.

"Stand fast, Landon, and hoist 'em! Way up!" Healy's voice was calm, but the fierce gleam in his steel-blue eyes and the unwavering muzzle of his service thirty-eight told Landon that the gray-haired veteran was more formidable than a whole squad of his subordinates.

"Oh, all right," agreed Landon. Then, with an amiable grin, "Mighty glad you brought Mr. Collins along."

In the background Landon saw Professor Foster's secretary. It must have been his keys that had enabled the police to make their silent entry.

"Put the irons on him," snapped Healy. "I'll keep him covered. And watch your step!"

"If you have some extra handcuffs," said Landon, as the steel clicked about his wrists, "put 'em on Bert Collins."

"Come along, and cut out the bull!" growled one of the coppers, prodding him with the muzzle of his pistol, but Healy's eyes gleamed with sudden interest.

"What's that?" he demanded.

"I'm telling you who killed Professor Foster," answered Landon. "Shall I prove it to you now, or after you've let him go?"

Eloise regarded Collins with dark eyes narrowed and glittering. Healy turned to the secretary and sized him up.

"Wait a minute! Let's listen to this!" he said.

"Ridiculous!" protested Collins. "He's crazy. I was at the same party as Miss Foster until after midnight, and I can prove it by—"

"Your lady friend was so pie-eyed that she wouldn't know whether you left her alone for two minutes or twenty," retorted Landon. "Or long enough to kill Foster, shag me, and call the police. It's only a short taxi ride from here."

Collins started; then, after a perceptible pause during which he vacillated between derision and dignified denial, he countered, "Preposterous! Who saw me leave the party? And why should I have killed my employer?"

"Because you'd embezzled a bunch of his Liberty Bonds," said Landon. "There had been fifty thousand in bonds in Professor Foster's box in the bank. The professor never visited the box himself—always sent you. You stole—and sold—exactly ten thousand five hundred, I think, Bert."

Collins paled at Landon's mention of so

exact a figure.

Landon continued, turning to Healy, "When the twenty-five thousand dollars was placed in the professor's wall safe, to buy the prayer rug, Collins saw his chance to make a theft which would not be traced to him. He intended to use part of the stolen money to replace his earlier speculations, and still be nearly fifteen thousand to the good. *He did use part of the stolen money that way this morning!*"

Collins swallowed, licked his lips. He dropped his eyes to avoid Eloise's accusing eyes. But Healy looked incredulous.

"You and Collins may have been in cahoots," he suggested. "How about it? Can you prove your story?"

"He can't." But Collins' protest was a prayer.

"Hell I can't!" retorted Landon. "You were buying bonds at Bennett & Keene's this morning—to replace your theft before the estate was settled. Where'd you get the ten thousand five hundred dollars to pay for them?"

"Spit it out, Collins," growled Healy. "Either Landon is nutty, or you've got plenty to explain. Why were you so anxious to have us catch Landon?"

"Open Foster's safe deposit box at the bank," said Landon. "That'll prove it."

"Look into it, O'Toole," directed Healy. "Right now!"

"I took the bonds," admitted Collins, seeing the futility of denial. "But I didn't kill him. And you can't—I didn't leave the party, I tell you!"

"Shut up!" barked Healy. "If you'd steal, you'd kill. Never mind the bank right now, O'Toole. Take charge of this bird."

Steel closed about Collins' wrists.

"But I didn't kill him! He didn't catch me opening the safe. I couldn't open it. He never gave me the combination."

"He's right," Eloise reluctantly admitted, as Healy caught her eye.

"So of course he'd have given it to me, a comparative stranger?" was Landon's ironic retort.

"But you could have asked him to open it on some pretext, and then stabbed him!" cried Collins, regaining his courage.

"No fingerprints were found on the dial,"

countered Landon. Then, as Healy nodded, he continued, "If Foster had opened his own safe, would either he or the person that killed him have wiped Foster's prints off?"

"Bull's-eye!" exclaimed Healy. "Someone that knew the combination to open that box—and you, Collins—"

"But I didn't know the combination, I tell you!"

"Oh, yes, you did," contradicted Landon, his face grim, his eyes hard and relentless. "You made a movie of the professor when he opened the safe, and you read the numbers from the film. Eloise, get the camera. Sergeant, pull out the big drawer of that desk."

The front of the drawer came away in the officer's hand.

"Now pull out the rest of the drawer." The officer did so.

"See that plugged-up hole in the back? This camera"—Landon took the Cine-Kodak from Eloise—"isn't cranked. It runs by clockwork, and by jerking a string tied to the release Collins could have made the film without anyone's noticing that he was operating a camera concealed in the desk."

"How about it, Collins?" demanded Healy.

"Suppose there is a hole in that desk?" Collins' face was white. His voice cracked as he desperately denied Landon's assertions. Then, a sudden, triumphant gleam in his eyes, he said: "Find the film! That'll prove his point!"

Healy gritted his teeth. Collins' ready defiance proved that there must have been such a film—and that it must also have been destroyed.

"Too bad," he muttered. "Take 'em both along."

"Too bad hell!" countered Landon cheerfully. "I found a piece of the film. He forgot to burn all of it. It's in my left coat pocket. Somebody get it."

**H**EALY reached into Landon's pocket and produced about a foot of miniature movie film. Collins slumped into a chair. He exhaled a long sigh.

Healy snatched the scrap of film from Landon's fingers.

"Quick! Give me that reading glass!" Then, as he peered at the film: "You could get those numbers if you enlarged it enough on a screen."

He whirled toward Collins, who was staring dully at the mocking, silvery-gleaming safe, and thrust the scrap of film under his nose.

"Come clean!" he barked. "Thought you burned it all, eh? D'ya want to confess now, or"—Healy's heavy hand clutched him by the shoulder—"do I have to take it out of you at headquarters?"

Collins shrank from the scrap of film as though it were a living serpent. His muttered reply was scarcely articulate.

"I was sure he—everyone would be away. But he came back and caught me opening the safe. I killed him, but I didn't intend—in the beginning—"

"And then you phoned Whitman's party and got me to come to the house, to take the rap?" demanded Landon.

Collins nodded, muttered, "Yes."

"Take him away," commanded Healy. "Landon, you're still under arrest, until I can check up on the rest of your doings."

Healy removed Landon's handcuffs, phoned headquarters, then listened to Landon's account of the intricate mesh of treachery and counter-treachery that had been connected with Shah Ismail's prayer rug.

When Landon concluded, the gray-haired detective put his hand on his firm chin, pursed up his lips and narrowed his eyes thoughtfully.

"Hm!" he said. "And no wonder! Shah Ismail's prayer rug, is it? Faith, and it's *Satan's* prayer rug I call it. We have a request in at Headquarters right now to send it to the Persian *chargé-d'affaires* at Washington, for return to his country. It's a national relic and sacred to an important sect of Moslems. No wonder it caused all this trouble!

"But where did you find that little piece of film? How would a smart fellow like Collins be that careless and leave it lying around?"

Landon glanced at Eloise and grinned. "I didn't find it. Miss Foster and I *made* it."

"What?"

"Sure. Look closely. That's me in front of the safe. Miss Foster shot it last night to find out whether you could really get the combination that way. I noticed the plug in the desk, but didn't connect it up in my mind with the camera until

about half an hour ago. It had never occurred to me to bluff the case. But when Collins fairly asked for it, I finally tumbled. This piece is a negative, but Collins didn't notice that. And luckily, it caught fire while I was drying it, so that he thought it was a piece which he himself hadn't completely burned. He was too scared just now to be observant."

"But why didn't you bring the film to Headquarters?" demanded Healy. "Your story would—"

"If I had come to Headquarters, I'd have gotten a hunk of rubber hose over the bean, and the papers would have said, '*The police are momentarily expecting a confession*'. Furthermore, I didn't get the embezzlement slant until I heard Collins *buying* bonds instead of *selling* them. And

it wasn't until after I'd stolen that motorcycle and made my escape and calmed down again that it occurred to me that the pictures had been taken through the hole in the desk. That made things click."

"But just the same," objected Healy, "you shouldn't have shot at those cops last night, and socked that motor cop this morning. He might have shot you. You took an awful chance making that useless getaway."

"So did Bert Collins," grinned Landon. "And as soon as you get out of here, I'm going to take a much longer chance."

As he spoke, his eyes shifted and he regarded Eloise inquiringly.

"If you never take any worse risks," she said, "you'll live a long time."

(The End.)