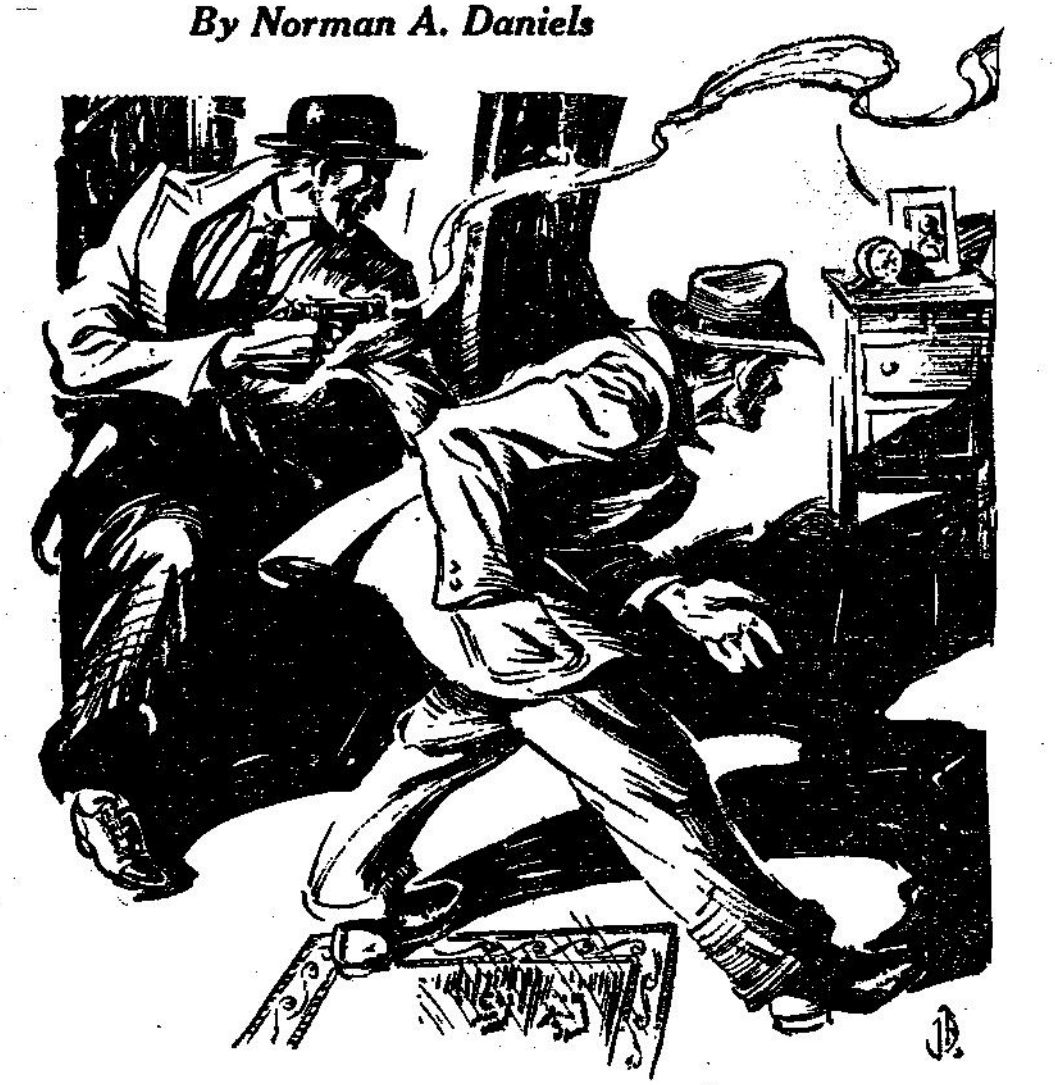
Ten Detective Aces, April, 1940

A Present from Hell

By Norman A. Daniels



Officer Kinkaid smelled trouble when he spied a florist truck making a mysterious delivery at a strange hour. And then Kinkaid followed a death-marked trail to a bullet rendezvous. For the object delivered was a corpse—which had been cremated two years ago!

PATROLMAN Jerry Kinkaid ducked back into the protecting shadows of a big elm tree. It was almost one thirty in the morning and the florist delivery truck certainly couldn't be making any deliveries in this neighborhood at such an hour. Patrolman Kinkaid definitely smelled trouble.

The driver of the florist truck seemed to know the address very well, for it slowed and then turned sharply into a driveway leading to William Van Cleve's estate. Kinkaid trotted toward the gate and was in time to see two men open the back door of the truck and haul out something long and white.

Kinkaid blinked. If anything ever looked like a corpse, this object did. But a florist truck, delivering a corpse to Van Cleve's house at this hour of the morning! It was sheer nonsense.

The two men, carrying their burden by each end, stepped up onto a porch a beneath the portico under which the truck had stopped. The man walking backwards tripped and almost fell. His burden swayed and one section of the cloth encompassing it fell away. Something dangled from the object—something that looked like a human arm.

Kinkaid drew his gun. This might all be on the level, but he was taking no chances. He saw one of the men insert a key into the door and open it. Then they vanished from sight with their eerie burden.

KINKAID rubbed his chin. Under ordinary circumstances he would have walked up to the front door, banged on it and demanded to know what was going on. But William Van Cleve was rich and influential. Kinkaid didn't want to be shipped off again into a dead beat. It was bad enough here, in this exclusive section.

After ten years as a cop, working up to lieutenant in command of a Broadway Squad shift, it had been tough going down the ladder. What had taken him ten years to accomplish was lost in as many minutes when an irate police board had broken him back to patrolman.

Kinkaid thought of that day often, during the long hours on his beat. Matty Crehan had been responsible for it all. Crehan, with his ritzy gambling dives that Kinkaid had raided. Then the night when Crehan set a plant and Kinkaid's raid had turned into a fiasco during which a lot of important people were insulted, or thought themselves insulted, by the raiding squad. No evidence of gambling. Crehan had seen there would be none. And worst of all Crehan walked the city a free, pompous man, taking the suckers every chance he found.

But Kinkaid visualized that dangling arm again. He had noticed one other significant thing—that even though the two men had entered the house, not a light had been turned on.

He looked over the florist truck for a moment. It seemed to glisten. He touched his finger against the side of the vehicle and discovered that it had been freshly painted. Kinkaid made a mental note of the license plate, although he realized that if trouble had been taken to disguise the truck, certainly the number plates would be phoney.

The side door to the house was slightly ajar. Kinkaid transferred his nightstick to his left hand and gripped his service pistol with his right. He pushed the door open, taking care to make no noise. Only darkness and silence greeted him.

He stepped into what seemed to be a small sitting room. He took about three steps before an avalanche of fury swirled out of the darkness and struck him. Kinkaid heard the attacker coming and was in time to duck and avoid the sapper which swung down toward his skull. The weapon did clip him across the shoulder, but the padding in his heavy coat dulled the blow.

Before the attacker could use his blackjack again, Kinkaid moved in. He swung his right fist, still clutched around the butt of his pistol. It flashed upward and connected with an unprotected chin. The attacker was too busy trying to get in the first blow to defend himself. His head snapped back, but he was tough and took the punch well. Now he barged in himself.

Kinkaid grinned tightly, stepped back a few paces and let the unknown thug lunge for him. As he came, Kinkaid

danced agilely aside and at the same time thrust his nightstick between the legs of the advancing man.

The thug howled an imprecation as he went down. Kinkaid moved toward him, grabbed him by the necktie and raised his head from the floor. Then he smashed home a knockout blow.

Drawing his flashlight, Kinkaid rushed into the hallway. There was still another of those crooks in the house. He heard the sound of feet padding across the rug in another room. Kinkaid stepped on tiptoe between thick portieres that concealed the doorway.

SOMETHING moved out of the darkness to meet him. An upraised chair whistled through the silence. One of the legs struck Kinkaid across the head. He reeled back a few steps and before he could move to intercept the assailant, the man made a wild dive through the curtained doorway.

When Kinkaid reached the hall, he heard a motor roar to life and the faked florist truck pulled out of the drive. Kinkaid's first prisoner was also gone. Either he had awakened sufficiently to follow his pal—or the second crook had carried him out. Either way Kinkaid had met bitter defeat.

But had they taken the object that looked like a corpse? Kinkaid thought not. He headed for the living room, holstering his revolver. As he approached the portiered doorway, hall lights flashed on. A man in a dressing a gown was coming down the stairs and he held a gun in his hand.

Kinkaid waited for him. "You can put the gun away; Mr. Van Cleve," he said. "The men who invaded your house are gone. They carried something inside—it looked like a corpse to me. Let's have a look around, eh?"

"Stay exactly where you are," Van Cleve ordered quietly. He was a broad-shouldered man of about thirty-five. Usually he seemed to be always smiling and gay, but now he was perfectly white and a lurking horror shone in his eyes.

"But wait a minute," Kinkaid protested. "I'm an officer of the law. I witnessed the breaking into of your home—and something I think was a corpse carried inside. I've got to look for it."

"Where," Van Cleve asked, "is your search warrant? If you want to search this house, you'll get one before you take another step. If two men broke in, you should have arrested them. This talk of their carrying a corpse in here is preposterous. I suggest you report back to your precinct and have your sergeant smell your breath. That's all, officer. You can go now."

Kinkaid eyed Van Cleve narrowly. There was something wrong with this picture. An innocent man would certainly have permitted a search of his house under these circumstances. Kinkaid shrugged and moved toward a telephone on a small table in the hallway.

"Okay—I'll get a warrant," he said. "I know what I saw and I'm not drunk. We'll just sit around until a squad shows up with the papers."

But Van Cleve was just a little bit faster. He reached the phone before Kinkaid, pulled the instrument cords out of the box and hurled the phone to the floor. Kinkaid growled something and stepped close to Van Cleve. The millionaire's gun pressed against Kinkaid's stomach.

"One more move," he said in a husky, dry voice, "and I'll shoot. Even a police officer has no right to be in my home if I do not choose to have him here. Get out—get out before I change my mind and use this weapon."

Kinkaid had both hands raised slightly. There was no chance to go for his gun or use his nightstick. He thought of something then.

"Okay," Kinkaid said softly. "You win for the moment, Van Cleve, but I warn you, I'll be back. And besides a search warrant, I'll have an arrest warrant for you."

He opened the front door and scampered down the porch. He swung onto the sidewalk in front of the house and began running. But Kinkaid didn't travel far. Van Cleve wanted to get rid of him—and for a mighty important reason. Before he could get back, the millionaire would be gone—and so would that mysterious corpse. Kinkaid no longer doubted what he had seen. But why was Van Cleve risking his neck to prevent the discovery of the corpse?

Kinkaid returned to the house via back yards of neighboring estates. He saw a dark figure move out of the rear door of Van Cleve's house and hurry toward the garage. The figure carried something slung over one shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Lights flashed on in the garage, but only for a second. Apparently Van Cleve had turned them on automatically and instantly extinguished them when he realized what he had done.

KINKAID vaulted over a hedge, drawing his gun as he did so. A car was nosing out of the garage as he rushed toward the driveway. He knew he was too late, for the car gained momentum with every passing second. Kinkaid yanked his flashlight out of his pocket and turned the beam on the car.

There were two people in the front seat. One was Van Cleve, and beside him sat a grisly object. It was a man whose thin face was perfectly bloodless; whose mouth gaped open to show toothless gums; whose eyes were half closed, yet staring. All this Kinkaid glimpsed in a single flash as the car whisked by him.

He began running after it, gun extended. He fired two quick shots, but they only ripped through the back of the car. Before he could aim for tires or gas tank, the car swerved crazily out of the driveway, hit the street and roared away into the night.

Kincaid ran up to the open back door of the house, rushed through rooms, turning on lights as he did so. A big mansion like this would have more than one telephone. Kinkaid wanted to send out a radio car dragnet for Van Cleve. He discovered another instrument in what seemed to be a study.

Kinkaid dropped into a chair behind the desk, drew the phone toward him. As he raised it to his ear, he happened to glance above the fireplace at the farther end of the room. There was an oil portrait hanging there. The painting of an old man.

"The face of the man I saw in the car with Van Cleve," Kinkaid grunted. "Now I'm getting somewhere."

He noticed that there was a small brass name plate attached to the frame of the picture. Kinkaid replaced the phone on its cradle, got up and walked over to the portrait. He read the inscription on the brass plate and as he did so, a feeling of intense horror crept through him.

GODFREY VANCE
BORN AUGUST 12, 1870.
DIED MARCH 30, 1938

"That was a dead man I saw in the car," Kinkaid muttered. "It was Godfrey Vance—but how could it be? Vance died two years ago according to this plate. A man can't be dead for two years and still look as if he'd died only a week ago."

Kinkaid went back to the phone. He

dialed a newspaper office and asked for a reporter whom he knew. Best to get facts straight before he made his report to headquarters.

"I want some information," he told the reporter. "You know William Van Cleve. Did he have a relative or a friend named Godfrey Vance?"

"Did he?" the reporter answered with a laugh. "Godfrey Vance was Van Cleve's uncle. He died a couple of years ago and left Van Cleve about a million bucks. Crabby looking old bird, as I remember him. They cremated his body. Say—you haven't hit on something interesting, have you, Kinkaid? You've made plenty of headlines in your day."

"It's nothing so far," Kinkaid answered. "I'll keep you posted if anything develops. Thanks."

He hung up, leaned back in the chair and looked at the portrait of old Godfrey Vance.

"So they cremated your body, did they?" he grunted. "I doubt you're even dead. If Van Cleve got himself a million bucks by your death, I've got an idea he has a lot of things to explain."

Kinkaid noticed a crumpled piece of paper lying on the floor near the waste basket. He picked it up and found that it was an envelope—a thick papered thing which had been ruthlessly ripped open. Something was typed on it.

"Key to Knoll Lodge for William Van Cleve. Will call."

In the corner was a printed return address of a real estate company. Kinkaid looked up the firm in a phone book, found the home number of an official listed and called him.

"Did William Van Cleve buy a place known as Knoll Lodge and if he did, where is it? This is the police."

BACK came the necessary information. Knoll Lodge was located about two miles out of the city. Kinkaid got specific directions as to how he could reach it. He hung up, ran out of the house, dousing the lights on his way. There was a second car in Van Cleve's garage—a swanky, sleek roadster.

Kinkaid piled into it—Van Cleve couldn't kick. Millionaire or no millionaire, he had too many things to explain. The only thing that worried Kinkaid was what headquarters would think if he failed. Where they'd send him would make this quiet beat seem like Coney Island on a hot summer night.

Kinkaid rolled uptown, left the city limits and finally slowed up to watch for a narrow lane described by the real estate agent. He found it easily. A sign, revealed in the headlights of the roadster, indicated that Knoll Lodge was located a mile up this lane. Kinkaid turned the roadster into it, switched the lights and proceeded very slowly. Several times he narrowly missed sharp bends in the lane and he finally pulled off onto a strip of level ground. He left the car there and hurried forward on foot.

Suddenly he ducked to the side of the lane where trees would protect his approach. Hoarse voices reached him and a moment later he spotted two cars. One was drawn across the lane to stop any traffic from passing. The other was William Van Cleve's expensive sedan. Kinkaid crawled closer and saw that three men, with drawn guns, stood near the driver's seat door of the sedan. All lights on both cars were out.

"We knew you'd blow for this place," one of the men said. "That's why we came here after that nosey copper almost nailed us. You did a nice job, Van Cleve, in stalling him. It'll pay dividends because you give us the dough—a check will do

okay because you won't dare stop it—and we turn what you want over to you. How about it?"

"A check for a quarter of a million dollars will look suspicious," Van Cleve protested. "Oh, I'm willing to hand it over because you've got me. Innocent or not, I'd never convince a court of law that I hadn't murdered my uncle."

"We know your bank might look into things so we fixed that too," one of the men explained. "Under a phoney name, we bought up a piece of land for a few hundred bucks. You'll buy it from us for a quarter of a million. Tell the bank you thought there was oil on it—or a gold mine. Anything you want; it will seem like a business transaction and that's all there is to it. Now how about the check?"

Kinkaid drew his pistol and thumbed back the trigger. Whatever this was all about, he had his men now.

"Freeze!" he snapped. "One move out of any of you and I'll shoot. This is the law!"

The three men turned toward Kinkaid, but even in the darkness they could see his gun. Kinkaid moved forward several steps. Then, very suddenly, the high beam headlights of the blackmailers' car were turned on. A fourth man must have been behind the wheel. The powerful light caught Kinkaid full in the eyes, blinding him. Involuntarily he drew up his arm to protect his eyes.

Two guns barked. Lead whined by his head. Kinkaid pulled the trigger of his gun twice as he made a dash to get out of the way of those blinding rays. He was aware that the gunmen were running toward the car and piling into it.

Kinkaid reached a darker section, raised his gun and blazed away. But the gunmen's car was already maneuvering on the lane and backing up fast until it reached a spot where the land on either side was clear. These men had apparently selected very carefully this spot to stall Van Cleve's car, for the driver seemed to know exactly what to do.

The car made a wide swathe through the field, went clear around Van Cleve's parked sedan and hit the lane again about five hundred feet below where Kinkaid was standing. It straightened out and raced down the lane. Kinkaid ran up to Van Cleve's car. If he could get started fast enough, he'd be able to overtake them.

Kinkaid yanked open the door of the car. Van Cleve, leaning against the door, tumbled out, almost knocking Kinkaid off his feet. Kinkaid quickly seized the man and began hauling him out. Something wet and warm encountered the back of his hand. It was blood! Kinkaid ripped open Van Cleve's vest and shirt, slid a hand toward the millionaire's heart and felt more blood. Van Cleve was dead—shot through the chest.

Kinkaid swore softly and then became aware that some one else was inside the car. He turned on his flash, swept it across the other man and gulped. It was the two-years old corpse, miraculously preserved!

HE PUT Van Cleve's body into the back seat, gingerly shared the front seat with the grinning corpse of the man long dead, and drove up to where the lodge overlooked a small lake. Kinkaid rolled the car into a garage and then trudged back to where Van Cleve's swanky roadster was hidden.

He wondered just what he might do now. He'd been off his beat for more than an hour. Sergeant patrols would be out searching for him. If he explained what had happened, there would only be censure and criticism of his methods. This job theoretically belonged to the homicide squad, but Kinkaid couldn't see it that way. It all began on his beat. He was the

man to end it—if he could figure out the next step.

Kinkaid drove back into town, slumped low behind the wheel. He took his uniform cap off so he wouldn't be spotted. He parked the roadster along a quiet street, got out and walked rapidly toward the nearest all-night drugstore. He called his friend at the newspaper office again and thanked his good luck that the undertaker who had embalmed and supposedly cremated Godfrey Vance, was still in business and not very far away.

There was an assistant on duty. Kinkaid learned from him that Godfrey Vance's corpse had been taken to the crematory in a hearse driven by a man named McGrath. Armed with this driver's present address, Kinkaid hailed a taxi and went there.

It proved to be a rooming house. A sleepy porter let Kinkaid inside and pointed out McGrath's room. Kinkaid stepped close to the door, listened a moment and when he heard no sound, he tried the knob. The door swung open and Kinkaid's wits worked fast. He reached for his gun as he charged into the room.

Two men swept toward him. Kinkaid's gun blazed and one of the men doubled up. The other made a dive for the doorway and raced down the hall. Kinkaid started after him, but a groan from the bed brought him to a skidding stop. He turned on the lights, saw a middle-aged man writhing and groaning on the bed and quickly approached him.

"Where are you hit?" he asked.

"Chest," the man groaned. "They used a knife on me. I'm gonna die. I know it. I'm gonna die, I tell you."

Kinkaid ripped open the man's blood-stained pajamas. He nodded somberly. "Who did it and why?" he asked.

"I don't know," the wounded man groaned. "I never saw them mugs before in my life. They just sneaked in and let me have it. Do something, will you? Get an ambulance! Get a doctor!"

Kinkaid said soothingly: "Those shots will bring plenty of help. Before anyone comes, I want to know something. You drove the body of Godfrey Vance to a crematory two years ago. You didn't deliver that corpse. You substituted another one for it. If you're as badly hurt as you think you are, you might square things with the guys who knifed you. They know something about Vance and his body."

"I'm dying," McGrath moaned. "I'm dying and he asks me a lot of crazy questions. Okay—okay, copper, if it'll get you the guys who gave me the business, I'll talk. Sure I got rid of Vance's body. Another guy's was substituted and cremated. Vance's corpse was taken to a tomb and put in this other guy's casket. I was paid five hundred to forget all about it."

"Who paid you?" Kinkaid insisted.

"A rat named Crehan. Listen, copper, do something for me. I told all I know and I'm dying."

Some one came running up the stairs. Kinkaid gave terse orders and then sat down beside McGrath to wait for the ambulance and the police.

Captain Bliss arrived in command of a squad. He listened to Kinkaid's story, sent out orders to go after the bodies of Van Cleve and his uncle, and then arranged to see that McGrath was taken care of. On the way back to headquarters, Bliss was ominously quiet.

"I pulled a boner, captain?" Kinkaid asked.

"You pulled about nine of 'em," Bliss snapped. "You should have reported this thing at once. Then Van Cleve would be alive today. We'd have that fantastic corpse you're trying to convince me really

exists and we'd know what this business is all about. Now we're stumped. Don't forget, Kinkaid, you're not a detective lieutenant any more."

AN HOUR and a half later Kinkaid listened to a pale, excited young man talk so fast that his words fell over one another. He was Louis Stewart, cousin of Van Cleve; and like Van Cleve, a nephew of Godfrey Vance.

Stewart said: "Of course it's Uncle Godfrey's corpse. I saw it in the morgue. Don't you think I'd know? But it was supposed to have been cremated. Van Cleve was in charge of all that. Vance left every penny of his money to him. I didn't get a red cent."

"Why?" Kinkaid asked from his chair beside the captain's desk.

Bliss glared at Kinkaid and motioned him to keep quiet. He faced Stewart.

"Your uncle was murdered," he explained. "An autopsy was performed. He was poisoned — with antimony. The action of that chemical has fooled plenty of doctors. It has a peculiar property of preserving the tissues. Bodies of people poisoned with that stuff have been dug up three and four years after burial and found to be almost intact. Vance's corpse was entombed in a vault and would be in even better condition."

Louis Stewart nodded. "So that's it! Then I think I know just what really happened. Van Cleve killed Uncle Godfrey. He murdered him—but someone else must have found out and switched bodies. Then, I suppose, those who knew about it started to blackmail Van Cleve."

Captain Bliss nodded. "There's no other answer. You can go home, Stewart, but stick around the house. We might need you again."

When Stewart was gone, Bliss favored Kinkaid with a scowl. "Still think you're a detective instead of a harness bull, huh? Sticking your oar in again. Listen, you did enough damage to this case. We got a murder on our hands—Van Cleve's."

"And Godfrey Vance's," Kinkaid put in.

Bliss closed his eyes and sighed in resignation. "Will you go home, Kinkaid? Get out of here; so I can think. We haven't Vance's murder to consider. We know who killed him. It was Van Cleve—for the old man's dough. What I want to find out is who bumped Van Cleve and you can't help me. Listen—shove your chin out once more, Kinkaid, and I'll bust you. I swear it."

Kinkaid got up and brushed an imaginary speck off his uniform. "Yes sir. I'll keep out of your way, captain. I'm off duty now and unless I actually spot the killer with my own eyes, you won't hear from me."

He wheeled and walked out. But Kinkaid didn't remove his uniform. There wasn't time enough for that. It would be dawn before long and Kinkaid had plenty of work to do before then. He crossed town in a cab, approached the darkened night club operated by Crehan. It looked empty of life but that didn't stop him. Crehan and his mob worked until after dawn. Right now they'd be figuring up just how much they had tapped the suckers for.

Crehan knew just what he was doing. Before Kinkaid was demoted, he had spent weeks keeping Crehan's place under observation. The best means of entrance was through a roof door. That was about the only entrance left unwatched.

He scaled the fire escape rapidly, reached the roof and forced the lock on the door without making much noise. A moment later he was on the fourth floor of the building. Kinkaid knew the layout of the club, could have made his way about

blindfolded so the darkness didn't delay him. He crept down the staircase to the third floor.

Peering into the hall he saw one of Crehan's gorillas leaning against the wall just outside the big shot's office. Kinkaid smiled, grimly, drew his gun and stepped out. The gorilla reached for his own weapon, but his hand froze. He had recognized Kinkaid and knew that this ex-detective wasn't the type to fool.

Kinkaid walked softly toward the man, indicated he was to turn around, raise his hands and submit to a search. He extracted the killer's gun, used it as a club and caught the man as he slumped to the floor. Kinkaid stepped up to the office door. It was always kept locked, but he knew how to get in. He tapped on the panels. .

"It's Mower," he said hoarsely, naming one of Crehan's henchmen. The door was quickly opened. Kinkaid, two guns in his fists, walked in. Crehan, an oily, smooth article, half arose behind his desk and then sat down again, being very careful to keep his hands on the desk top. His two aides promptly reached for the ceiling.

"Crehan," Kinkaid snapped, "it's been a long time since that night you framed me back into a uniform. I'm getting back at you now. I want dough—every nickel you got. I'm all washed up as a cop. Before noon Bliss will bust me completely and I'm not getting out before my pockets are lined. Open the safe!"

"You're crazy," Crehan gasped. "That's plain robbery. I'll have you put behind bars, you fool."

Kinkaid laughed bitterly. "After they catch me, pal. Are you going to open that safe or do I start blasting?"

CREHAN gulped. Kinkaid had been known as one of the toughest, most ruthless detectives Broadway had ever known. Crehan didn't doubt but that Kinkaid, desperate, would resort to anything. It was much better to let him take the money. Later on he'd get it back—when the cops landed Kinkaid.

Crehan smiled thinly, got up and slid back a panel that concealed his safe. He opened it. Kinkaid herded the two gorillas against the wall where he could watch them, removed their weapons. When Crehan had the safe open, he brushed the gambler out of the way.

Three minutes later Kinkaid was racing down the stairs toward the street floor. Some one took a pot shot at him but missed by yards. He hit the sidewalk, yelled to a cab driver and climbed in. He waited until the taxi had rounded the next corner and then he removed a sheaf of papers from his pocket.

They were notes, running into the thousands. Some of them were over two years old, some much more recent. He smiled, tapped on the glass panel behind the driver and gave directions that took him to Louis Stewart's apartment house.

Stewart answered the door, started back at the sight of Kinkaid, but he made no attempt to keep him out. Kinkaid walked to the living room.

"We'll just stick around for a little while," he said. "I'm expecting company. A guy named Crehan. Pal of yours, isn't he?"

Stewart turned deathly pale, sat down on the edge of a davenport and began sweating profusely.

"Just relax," Kinkaid said. "Maybe this is all for the best. Crehan told you that Van Cleve murdered your uncle, didn't he? He said Van Cleve didn't dare let the body be cremated for fear somebody might notice it was murder. Crehan said he dug up the body and was going to force Van Cleve to turn the inheritance over to you because it was rightfully yours.

"So far that's logical and probably legally correct. Your uncle cut you off because you gambled too much. Don't lie—I was watching you plenty before Crehan framed me. I know your losses run way up in the thousands. Crehan took you for a sap. His whole gambling place is crooked—always has been. Now do you get what I'm driving at?"

"Van Cleve did murder Uncle Godfrey." Stewart finally discovered his voice. "He did it to get the money. I'm Van Cleve's next of kin so if he dies, I get it all. And he is dead now. He deserved to die."

Kinkaid glanced at his watch. Stewart opened his mouth to continue the argument when some one banged on the door. Kinkaid's gun leaped into his fist. He motioned that Stewart was to open up. Crehan and his two bodyguards barged in.

"It didn't take you long to find out what I swiped out of your safe," Kinkaid said gleefully, as he stepped from behind the door. "No—don't reach for guns because I'd enjoy mowing you rats down. Crehan, have a chair and keep your hands on the arm of it. You gorillas walk over to the wall, face it and play with the wall paper."

"Listen, Kinkaid," Crehan said. "You said you were in trouble. If I fix it up and maybe add, say—ten grand for your pocket—will you give me back those papers?"

Kinkaid drew the sheaf of notes from his pocket and waved them. Stewart strained forward, one hand reaching for them. Kinkaid jerked them out of his reach.

"Stewart," he said grimly, "you signed these notes for your gambling losses. You're a sap because only the biggest fool in the world would go on gambling as you did.

"Now listen to this. Van Cleve didn't murder your uncle. Crehan did! Crehan arranged to have the corpse hidden until well after Van Cleve had liquidated most of his dead uncle's estate. Then Crehan tried to blackmail Van Cleve, and he had him framed so prettily that Van Cleve agreed to pay out.

"That wasn't all—Crehan also was set to take you for a sucker. Things were arranged so that Van Cleve would pay a stiff price. Then he'd die, apparently by suicide, only I spoiled that angle. You'd come into the fortune and then Crehan would go to work on you.

"These notes would account for a good portion of the estate and the rest you'd pay out because Crehan would have you framed too—as the blackmailer. Now—how much am I bid for these notes and what bonus am I offered to keep my mouth shut?"

Crehan arose. "A quarter of a million, Kinkaid. Enough so you can live like a king for the rest of your life. Stewart will come into the fortune and he can't buck us. I'll get every penny he owns."

STEWART looked blank for a moment and then his face grew crimson with rage. "You can have every penny," he yelled. "If you fix it so this—this rat pays for murdering my uncle and my cousin. He couldn't collect his dirty winnings from me so he fixed it so that even if he had to wait a, couple of years, he'd get every penny with interest. It's because of Crehan that Uncle Godfrey didn't leave me part of his estate.

"I've been a fool, but I'm one no longer. Crehan went to see Uncle Godfrey, trying to make him pay my losses. He went several times and he must have poisoned him the last time. I see it all now. This is no time for bidding, officer. You can have all of the estate. I don't want it. I—I'm partly responsible for the death of

two men. I'll square things as best I can."

Crehan smiled contemptuously, brushed back his hair with one hand and suddenly came out of the chair as though thrown by a spring. He yelled to his men. Kinkaid's gun answered. It barked twice and one of the thugs crumpled up. The other got in close and a knife flashed in one fist.

It slashed upward, in a savage attempt to cut Kinkaid wide open. All it did was ruin his uniform forever. Then Kinkaid's gun came down, raking across the killer's face. The thug shrieked with pain, backed up a step and Kinkaid finished him off.

Crehan, crouched near the davenport, had drawn a gun. Kinkaid remembered he hadn't searched the gambler. Crehan had the drop and he was set to shoot before Kinkaid could even raise his own weapon.

"Here it comes," Crehan gloated. "I'll hide your body, keep Stewart under my thumb and milk him dry."

Crehan squeezed trigger. Suddenly Stewart poised on the edge of the davenport, hurled himself at the gambler. The exploding pistol sent a slug ripping through his chest. Crehan tried to shoot again, but Kinkaid was already hurtling toward him. Kinkaid wrested the gun out of Crehan's grasp. Kinkaid snapped cuffs around his wrists and then turned to Stewart.

"You'll be okay," he said. "The slug got you high in the chest, near the shoulder. Thanks for what you did."

Stewart closed his eyes slowly. "It was about time I did something. I saw you were right and I remembered that you used to be head of a raiding squad that hit Crehan's place plenty. Well, I know he framed you that time, just like he framed me and Van Cleve. I always thought Crehan was my friend, until he started bidding for those notes. Without them he didn't have a thing on me."

Kinkaid put a pillow under Stewart's head. "It's all right. Crehan or his men will crack and talk. They engineered the whole business. I knew he held notes of yours which he couldn't collect unless you came into money. When I figured out that you'd inherit from Van Cleve, the pieces of this puzzle fell into place.

"I'm sorry I had to pretend being a crook myself, but this whole affair reached a desperate stage and called for desperate measures."