

The Corpse in the Cage

By David Manners
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When Detective Les Warren tried to solve the riddle of the lion tamer's death, he followed a hell-sent clue headfirst into the lions' den.



Les Warren was prodded into the cage.

DETEKTIVE LES WARREN moved a tiny bottle on the worktable before him. He picked up another one, read its label, growled, put it

down. He moved still another bottle and another from the mess of bottles and vials and chemical retorts on his table, and then, suddenly, he banged down his fist. The

bottles jumped and two upset with a tinkle.

The name was growled from his throat: "Polly!"

Les Warren turned from the stool on which he sat, looked back toward the adjoining room of his little two-room agency. There was no response. He was about to growl the name again when he heard the faintest lilt of chuckling laughter.

In a moment there was the patter of slippers feet, and a trim figure came through the door. A curvaceous figure with honey-blond hair that flounced to her shoulders. She was holding something in her hand, and brightness was dancing in her big blue eyes.

Polly Sheehan said: "Oh, Les. Will you listen to this? It's a new advertising scheme I have for the Krako-Zeppo contest."

"Krako-Zeppo?"

"You know, that new breakfast cereal for kiddies. Listen—"

Les stared at her, and banged down his fist again. Two more bottles upset. "Krako-Zeppo again! Krako-Zeppo! Ye gods, what kind of a detective outfit are we running here anyway? Here I am trying to work out a new formula for tear gas, and you come eternally bothering me with jingles and rhymes and that damn Krako-Zeppo!"

"I asked you who in hell's been monkeying with my stuff here. That's what I want to know! I can't find anything. And for Pete's sake, forget those contests and that nonsense. Pay a little attention to what's here."

"But how can you expect me ever to win any contests if you'll never give me your opinion on anything I do. I've got to get someone's reaction. Haven't I?" She brushed a stray blond lock into place. "What is it now?"

"That bottle of copper sulphate." She came up behind him and leaned over his shoulder so he could smell the perfume she wore. Polly Sheehan was young, pretty and

blonde. She was the one distraction Les Warren allowed himself in his work. He looked down to her slim-fingered hand and there was the bottle of copper sulphate.

She stared at him reprovingly. "It was right there all the time!" Les growled and batted his eyes like a sulky kid. He turned back to his work and picked up a small, cartridge-shaped bottle. He put it in his pocket and with a dirty towel started blotting up the mess he had made there in his crime detection outfit.

"*Krako-Zeppo!*" he said with mild exasperation.

But he drew the words out as he said them. Against the frosted glass of his front door a shadow moved. He saw it, and he stopped, the towel held in one hand. A shadow that stopped, poked something in the crack under the door, and then straightened.

Les Warren's eyes dropped to the floor. Something white and oblong-shaped was being shoved under the door. Les jumped out of his chair, threw down the towel, and picked up a blank, uncancelled government postal card. There was no address on it. He turned it over— But something had been stuck to its correspondence side!

Les jerked open the door and stepped into the hall. It glittered back emptily at him. His eyes swept its length again. He stepped back into his office and looked again at the card.

A TINY square of what looked like blotting paper had been fastened to the postal card by a metal staple. Under the blotter were the hand-lettered words: *Remove blotter and moisten. Rub on blank side and read message.*

Les looked at it for a long moment without doing anything. Then he raised the blotter to his nose. It had no chemical smell. He put the tip of his finger to his tongue and rubbed it across the top of the

card. In a moment, the message came clear. He looked down at the words:

Notice!
D E A T H
will visit Frazee Brothers Circus tonight

Les Warren stared at the card, pulled at his lip, then put the card into his pocket. He took his hat off a hook, his eyes troubled.

“Polly,” he said.

“Yes.”

“The Frazee Brothers Circus is opening at the Garden tonight, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just remembering a fellow named Reese Sperry.”

“That newspaperman who once threatened to kill you?”

“That’s the fellow. The guy who said it would be a pleasure to bisect my throat. He’s out of the pen now, and I understand he’s with the show. I kinda like the guy, Polly. He did get treated kinda rough. I have a notion I’m gonna do him a favor. But if I don’t show up tomorrow, you’ll know where to ship the body, won’t you, Polly?”

“For goodness’ sakes, what is this?”

Les Warren paused and his hand went into his pocket to feel the card there. He checked the quick answer that came to his tongue, then said it anyway: “Oh, nothing. It’s really nothing.”

But he himself could not help noticing the queer, high pitch of his voice.

The Colt Special .38 was a comfortable bulge under Les Warren’s arm as he crossed the avenue to the circus. He pressed his arm tight to it. The crowd was already flowing toward the Garden, and hawkers were everywhere, selling peanuts, popcorn, whips, canes—sucker souvenirs.

“Holding a circus in a building!” Les muttered to himself. “That’s city life for you!”

He glowered at the banners flying, just to show his contempt for what the march of civilization was doing to the old big-top. The huge Garden marquee signs proclaimed:

7 Gala Days 7
Frazee Brothers
Colossal Wild Animal Circus
Clowns—Cowboys—Thrills
Free Menagerie

Les Warren came abreast of the building and his pace hurried. Then he stopped abruptly. A cloud spread over his face and the lines of it deepened into dark, irregular valleys. He found himself looking up at a huge, colored poster. It was a poster with a picture of a lion tamer in a cage full of cats.

But this lion tamer was no ordinary one. He wore a full dress suit with swallow tails, and a high black hat such as an undertaker might wear. And his face—over his face he wore a hood, a black hood, so painted as to give the illusion of a death’s head, a skeleton. And above it all, in bold lettering, was proclaimed:

See

DEATH!

Lion tamer Extraordinary—and
His Performing Troupe

Les muttered a curse to himself. He was cussing himself so thoroughly for being a dupe that the man had to pull twice on his sleeve before Les felt it. Les turned and looked up into a slim, wanly-grinning face.

The man said: “Howdy, Les. Some publicity stunt, eh? Well, it’s all been my idea. I’m Death’s manager. I’m in charge of this act.”

Les said: “I mighta known. Hello, Sperry. I had an idea you were in charge of it. I might’ve known that card was a gag.”

Reese Sperry said: "You're not sore, are you, Les? I've forgotten all those damn fool things I said. I don't see why we've got to let the past stand between us."

"No, I'm not sore," said Les.

"I'm glad then. We can bury the past. I assure you, it's all forgotten. Yeah. Every bit of it. And I'm gladder to see you, Les, than anyone I can think of."

HIS face had a frightened pallor. His lips twinged nervously. He extended his thin bony hand. Les took it and observed that it was cold. But as he took it, he looked past Sperry and saw for the first time the man beyond them, up the street. A man apparently watching them. A dark-faced man. Reese Sperry seemed to catch the direction of Les's glance, but Les's quick averting of it threw him off.

Sperry said: "Managing Death and his act isn't all cake and gravy. But here's some gravy for you now. More than anything I want you to see the act. Here's a couple passes. I've got to talk with you afterwards."

Les thought: That postal card wasn't all publicity, after all. This guy's in some kind of a jam.

He said: "I know somebody who could take some lessons in publicity from you, Sperry, even if you might scare a person to death with your stuff. But I don't see that I have time to see your show. Thanks. I—"

Les looked up the block to where the dark-faced man had been watching. The man made a sudden move now to the shelter of a store front. It seemed, obviously, designed to avoid someone who was just about to pass. Then Les saw who that passerby was.

He looked no more than two feet tall. He sat on a wooden platform that moved on casters, and he was propelling himself with a pair of irons that he held in either hand, shoving himself along on the

sidewalk. The man had no legs. They were cut off almost at the hips.

With a quick swing of the arms he propelled himself down the street, past the store front. He wheeled sharply now, turned into the main entrance of the Garden.

Reese breathed an exclamation of dismay, then said quickly: "Oh, never mind. We've missed him, but you can meet him later." And in answer to Les's puzzled glance, as a slow nervous twitching grew on his own lips: "Believe it or not—and forget this as soon as you hear it—it's a secret. But that's our lion tamer. That's—"

"Your lion tamer?"

"Yeah. That's the guy we call Death. You surprised? If he wasn't so sensitive about it, we could plug him as the legless wonder. What a gag that would be. But he doesn't want anybody to know he hasn't got legs. He's sensitive, touchy, that way. It's torture for him to wear the contraption he's got to, or you'd never see him without his phony gams—like now."

Les looked through the crowd to the store front. The crowd was getting thicker now, streaming in as the hour for the show approached. The noise and excitement were rising in pitch. He did not see the dark-faced man now whom he'd seen before. Les's fingers closed down on the pass stubs that Reese Sperry still held in his hand, singled out one of them.

"That's in B box," Sperry said. "I'll see you up there."

"Yeah," said Les Warren, and studied Sperry's eyes.

Reese Sperry had wanted him here for something, something menacing and important. Deadly important. Or he would not have sent that mysterious card. Reese Sperry might be a good one at playing games, and that card might be something of a gag, but still he wanted the detective here. And this lion tamer without legs . . .

Nodding a "So long," Les turned up the main entrance into the Garden. The dressing rooms were on the same floor as the Exposition Hall, which, for the circus, had been converted into the combined menagerie and sideshows.

One judicious inquiry and Les found these rooms. He followed down a green-painted hallway, his eyes fixed on the floor. The tracks made on the linoleum floor were long and undulating, plain to see. Tracks made, clearly, by a four-coaster platform. By a legless man propelling himself on such a platform.

Les stopped where the marks turned off through a door. He paused near the threshold, waited as some troupers went by. Seeing no one in the short length of hall, he pressed close to the door.

Inside, chimed the sound as of a coffee cup being placed on a saucer. Then the scrape of movement. Les pressed closer.

Abruptly, he whirled. His balled fist arced just as the man reached to grab him from behind. The fist cracked against the man's jaw throwing him back. The assailant bounced off the wall and his own right fist sledged down. Les ducked in, doubled as the man brought up his knee. It was the dark-faced man who had been watching him in the street.

A haymaker went over Les's shoulder, and the man cursed. He grabbed Les, kicking out at Les's shins. Les slipped and stumbled backwards. The man piled on top of him as Les hit the floor with a crack.

Les unleashed a smash at the man's meaty face, but the man's knee on his middle held Les short of range. The man weighed better than two hundred and every last ounce of his strength was in his digging fingers as he threw his weight behind a stranglehold on Les's neck. He pounded Les's head on the hard floor as he squeezed tighter.

LES felt the blood swelling in the veins of his neck, in his head. His eyes were like two bursting balloons in their sockets. Les put a prayer in a right smash and the blow caught the dark man behind the ear. Les felt the grip ease. He twisted and pulled out of it. He dumped the man back and lunged on top of him as the dry scrape of hurrying feet told him of someone's approach.

"Holy Joe!" exclaimed a voice.

"That's Vince. You're beating up Vince!" Les Warren stopped a blow in mid-delivery. His eyes left the man's thick face. He looked up and saw Reese Sperry. Then he straightened and got up off the prostrate figure.

The man arose slowly, looking obliquely at Les, wiping at the side of his mouth with the back of his hand and then slapping the dust from his sharply pressed pants. Les saw the dark-faced man had a scar that whitened one side of his upper lip.

"Les, this is Vince Chase," Sperry explained hurriedly. "I was hoping you'd meet but, but—"

"This guy was poking his nose in at the boss's dressing-room door. He was—"

Reese Sperry interposed quickly. "Les, I want you to meet Vince Chase. Vince is a private detective too. He—I—I've hired him to guard, well, to guard myself and my client against threats and possible harm." He laughed briefly, self-consciously. "I'm afraid Vince has been a little overzealous."

"To protect you? You been threatened?" Les Warren looked at Vince Chase. Chase's clothes were too loud, too spiffy.

"No, not really anything." Reese Sperry's eyes were worried. "Oh, I'm terribly sorry, Les, that this has happened. Yes, we were being threatened—anonymous threats they were. Rather than take chances, we had Mr. Chase—"

Sperry paused, and his eyes moved toward the dressing-room door at the sound of its creaking hinges. It opened slowly. From the room a figure dressed completely in black emerged. It turned to speak and the words came slowly, wearily from its lips.

“What is this? What is this commotion I have been hearing out here?”

Reese Sperry said: “Les, I want you to meet, to meet—Mr. Death. Yeah, that’s the only name we use. Boss, this is Detective Les Warren.”

Les stared at the man. He wanted to crack wise, but the sight of the man stopped him. Dressed in a black cutaway, and with a mask suggesting a skull, the man looked very much indeed like the grotesque picture of the advertising billboards. He moved with a slightly swaying motion, but aside from that there was nothing to indicate that he had artificial legs. He wore a gunbelt with blank cartridges and carried a whip.

Les knew that the mask served not only for an effect, but also to hide the pain he must feel in wearing those artificial limbs. And he felt pity for the man. For he knew that lion tamers could get insurance written by no companies, and that, therefore, the loss of his legs, had surely left him without compensation. Even if he were not solidly enthusiastic about the game, he would probably have no other choice or way of making a living than this.

The clasp of the hand of the man known as Mr. Death was cold and clammy. Les opened his mouth to speak, but then the man was gone, the echoing thump of his feet loud as he stalked away down the hall.

“His act,” Reese Sperry explained. “He goes on now.”

Les turned to Vince Chase. And Vince Chase was suddenly gone too.

“What in hell is this?” Les stared about in mild perplexity. The cheers and the

tumult rose in a sudden roar in the auditorium above.

“Vince has gone on to supervise the running of the lions and other cats into the arena,” said Sperry. “That’s where he’s gone. Hurry. The act’s starting. You better go on, if you want to see it.”

“Aren’t you coming?”

Sperry dropped his eyes. His voice took on an evasive; an uncertain tinge. “Who, me? I—no, I—” He paused suddenly.

The shrill scream cut him off.

Les looked to the steps. He swung to them, took them two at a time, Sperry just behind him. The screams were magnified a thousand-fold as he came up to the auditorium level. The auditorium rocked. About a dozen policemen were rushing toward the one entrance leading inside the main arena—an entrance near Les. Others were rushing at the other entrances. Men inside were shouting.

“That lion act,” one of the men said. “The tamer. He got his. The cats. They ganged up—”

Les turned swiftly. He caught but a glimpse of Sperry’s pale, thin face. Then Sperry was lost in a milling crowd that seemed to be storming the exits and entrances, all trying to get in or out at the same time. Les plunged toward the milling crowd, was thrown back by it. He realized the futility, the impossibility of bucking his way through.

“Is he dead?”

“Dead? Who wouldn’t be with thirty cats on him all at once?”

The crowd blocked Les and Les moved away. The staircase ahead led back down to the lower hall and the dressing rooms. He followed it quickly now, a sudden chill taking him. He stopped near the door from which, only a moment ago, it seemed, he had seen Death step out.

Now, upstairs, he heard the band blare forth again. The show was carrying on, he

knew. Carrying on, to forget with pranks and laughter and gaiety that death—real death—had visited them only a moment before.

He listened only briefly. Then, in one motion, he was pushing at the dressing room door and inside it. He closed it behind him, looked about.

AT one end of the room was a makeup table and bench with a circle of lights above a mirror. At the other end, behind a draw-curtain, was a wardrobe closet consisting of a long pole and mostly empty clothes hangers.

But over against a third wall, snuggled up close to a daybed, was a trunk. On the bed were the lion tamer's clothes, neatly folded. On the floor was the wheeled platform. The two irons he used to propel himself looked somehow grim and pathetically forlorn now.

Les pulled out the trunk—a big steamer trunk—and snapped its catches. The lion tamer known as Death had been murdered. Somehow in Les's mind, there could be no question of that. From the postal card he'd received and on—everything had pointed in that direction. Yet why—or *how*—he did not know.

And how was Reese Sperry mixed up in this? Les knew he had not been hired by anyone to do what he was doing—and that maybe he was only making a damn fool of himself over some silly notion that he owed this to Sperry. Maybe Sperry, for insurance. . . .

Yet surely Death had not been killed for insurance. Only too well Les knew that lion tamers, just as men engaged in other perilous occupations could get no insurance. No company would write it. The risk was too great. Then why . . . ? And even more than that—how?

Les's fingers dug through shirts, socks, past a shaving kit and neatly tied bundle of

letters. His fingers stopped as a yellowed clipping came into them. He clamped his teeth tight and his breath quickened. The fire in his eyes lit up.

He folded the clipping and put it in his pocket. A small bottle lying in the corner caught his eye. He went to it, picked it up. It looked like a perfume bottle. He held it to his nose and his face went wry. Les checked himself as he remembered an obscure fact he had heard somewhere about lions. He'd been interested in wild animal training once himself.

He closed the door, his back to it. Footsteps were brisk coming down the turn in the hall. His thoughts were on the automatic so convenient in his shoulder holster. If—

The man turned the corner, and the breath went out of Les.

"Reese," he said. "I've got to talk to you right away."

Reese Sperry's face was pale, washed out. "Death," he began weakly. The word caught in his throat.

"Listen," said Les. "The lion act is over; the cats are back in their cages. They'll be just beyond here in the stock menagerie, won't they?"

"Yeah. . . ."

"Well, I'm going in the cage with them. In the cage with those cats. I—"

The newspaperman stared. His jaw dropped. "What the hell—"

"Listen. I've got to try something. That lion tamer didn't get killed by an accident. I trust you, Reese. That man was murdered. I want to get to those cats."

"They'll tear you to pieces. You don't know how to handle lions. They'll—"

"They don't know that. But you think I'd be scared maybe? And the cats would know." Les's smile was grim. As if by that very smile he meant to drive home a point.

"You're right," he said. "They'd know that I was scared to death and they'd go for

me. Like they went for Death out there. They smell the fear. No. Maybe I don't need to go try it out on those cats. I'm sure of it now. They get the scent of it. They—"

Reese Sperry's eyes were a mirror of terror. "Les—"

"Sure. I know. I figger this little game. I know it now. How do those cats know when a man's scared? They smell it on him, that's how. Any cat trainer knows that. Fear smell. Hell, even the papers and mags are playing it up, trying to sell soap by telling you about it. Get scared or nervous, and you got it. That's an old story to cat trainers.

"Those cats got brains in their noses. But not quite sharp enough to tell the real from the phony. I don't know the chemistry of it exactly—mostly butyric and some damn aminol acid, I think—but whatever it is, some of that kind of dope was planted on Death's clothes. So those cats would go for him the minute he stepped in that cage. If I'd go to their cages now—"

"You know, it might not be a bad idea if you did go to that cage?"

The voice, cool, sharp, cut at Les Warren from behind. There had been no sound of anyone approaching. No warning.

The prod of a gun-snout jabbed hard into the right lower ribs of Les's back. Les's splayed fingers moved out clear as his hands came up. His slowly turning head saw the man.

Vince Chase was grinning. Chase said: "So you would like a visit with the cats, huh? Maybe it can be arranged."

Les said: "You dirty skunk. I never *did* peg you for a dick."

Chase stepped close to conceal the gun, as some performers came through the hall. Les flung a glance at Reese Sperry. The man's eyes told nothing. The hall cleared.

"Move," Chase said. The prod of his gun accented his command. "You're just a little too damn bright for your bodily health

and vigor. No. Wait a minute. Sperry, pat him down. Search him."

Les growled: "You too, huh, Sperry?"

Sperry said nothing. He moved as if cowed, dominated by the dark-faced man. Sperry found the gun, took it from the shoulder holster.

"Okay," said Chase.

THE cat room was in an uproar. It was separated from the rest of the menagerie because it had to be close to the arena, close so a tunnel could run them through when needed for their acts. With the act done, no keeper was about.

Chase pointed to one cage with two jungle-born killers. "That one," he said and the scar on his lips glowed lividly and his entire dark face with it.

Les looked to the double compartment cage. At the lithe, tawny bodies of the two huge cats, baring teeth in snarling bellows as they padded restlessly, rubbing the bars and walls, their long nails slapping. He knew the cats were not fed until after the performance, to keep them alert and edgy. They hadn't been fed yet. He looked to Vince Chase. The gun prodded Les deeper in the back.

Les said: "You better make it good, Chase. Maybe I know a thing or two about lion taming."

Chase snorted, ignored the taunt. "Get that two-by-four, Sperry." The dark-faced man nodded to a piece of planking. "Keep them back in the second half of the cage until we get this buzzard bait in the first. Damn if we ain't gonna make this look like an accident."

Chase turned, and Les moved quick. He swung his fist at the dark-man's jaw. Chase chopped down with the barrel of his gun as the blow landed. Les slumped. Chase grabbed him, prodded him up the stairs, opened the door of the cage and shoved him roughly inside. His laugh was sharp,

curt.

“So you know something about training lions, eh? Well, try your hand at these for a spell. Okay, Sperry. Here, let me help you pull that plank outta there.” He latched the cage door, moved down to Reese Sperry.

Chase grabbed the plank. Les struggled up off the floor where he’d been shoved, watched the cats stopping, waiting, at the small connecting hatch that cut them off from his compartment, knowing he knew nothing that could stop these beasts.

Chase jerked at the plank. It edged free. Now half the door was clear. Les held his breath. In a moment these deadly jungle cats would be free to rush him. If he only had a chair—anything.

Les looked about desperately, groping, searching. His hand went up to the shoulder holster beneath his arm, felt its sickening emptiness. Chase pulled, a last pull on the blocking plank. The cage door was clear.

Les could not look out to the men. He watched the two big cats. The smooth-necked sleek one, and the brutish, maned one. He felt the sweat on his forehead and under his armpits and he cursed it. These cats were killers and now they smelled blood. He felt the draught at his back, chilling past his neck and carrying his scent to the cats.

He hardly heard Chase’s words. The uncertain nausea of his tone. Dread of seeing something that would sicken even the strongest of men.

“Come on, Sperry. Let’s get out of here. I—I—oh hell, let’s go.”

Les stood perfectly still in the corner of the cage, cursing the scent-carrying breeze at his back, yet knowing how little it mattered anyway. His right hand went into his coat pocket. His fingers felt the newspaper clipping he had picked up in Death’s dressing room—that information

was a laugh now—the smooth surface of a small glass bottle, his cigarettes and pipe.

Les’s eyes fixed on the two cats. The cats hesitated uncertainly, then one huge, padded paw stepped over the threshold of the connecting door. With a hop and a bound the maned lion eased through. Slinking off to the side, its body rubbing the bars, it moved forward, eyes bright, mouth relaxed so the black gums showed. Black gums and a flash of white teeth.

The second cat moved quickly in. It slowed, went to its haunches. It moved to the other side, its flank rubbing the back wall of the cage.

It bared its fangs. The roar burst from its throat like a hurled weapon. The muscles of its legs tensed. Electric. Resilient. But Les knew it was the maned cat that was to be the first to leap. To leap to the attack.

He saw it coming now. He braced himself. Alone. Moving only slightly from his corner. Then, with a throaty rasp, the first cat leaped. Les’s right hand lashed out in what looked like a weak, futile gesture. The desperate, last-chance hope of a man against two lions

VINCE CHASE and Reese Sperry were alone in Reese Sperry’s room. They spoke in low tones, but their words carried, nevertheless, to the men waiting outside the room’s door.

Vince Chase said: “I’m glad you called me and had me come here. You’re right, Sperry. We got to stick together and talk this over so everything will be straight.”

Reese Sperry smiled, but there was still a tenseness in his thin face, as of a man who has done a thing that runs slightly against his grain, but who has done it nevertheless.

“I didn’t want to do this,” he said. “You know I didn’t want to do it.”

“You’re in this as deep as me now. Don’t squawk. For Pete’s sake, don’t squawk.” The dark man snarled, rubbed at the scar on his lip.

Reese Sperry said: “I never bargained to kill a man. There have been two men killed. Les Warren was my friend.”

“Yeah, your friend. Your fine friend who railroaded you to the pen. Didn’t you always used to tell me up there what you were gonna do to him when you got out? You forgettin’ that? You forgettin’ what you used to tell me?”

“Les Warren didn’t railroad me. And he was so damn sorry for his part in the thing anyway—whatever it was—that he wanted to do anything to straighten it out. Anyway, he wasn’t the kind who would stab a man in the back. He trusted in me, believed in me. And I crossed him. If the cops find out—”

“Oh, good Lord! How will they ever find out? That dumb dick Warren was lucky. Anyway, he didn’t know only half of it. He didn’t know that coffee was doped, your lion tamer had. He didn’t know that he woulda got it in the neck even if that trick smell we put on his clothes hadn’t worked. Anyway, Warren didn’t know *why* we did it.

“He didn’t know about all the dough the guy got when he lost his legs in that train accident a couple years back. No, no insurance, but the railroad settled for plenty. A hundred grand, Reese. That smells like big coin to me, and now you’ll be getting it. Those partnership papers of yours take care of that.”

“Yeah. I’ll be getting it, Chase. And maybe that doesn’t mean you. You pulled those fake threats so you could get close to the boss. Acting like you were a detective. You said you just wanted to shake him down for some small change. You bulldozed me into that. I didn’t bargain for

murder, Chase. I’m not splitting with you now. I’m—”

Chase’s chair rasped as he stood up. His curse was a cracking whip. He lunged toward Reese.

The door crashed in that moment before the onslaught of a half dozen lunging bodies. Chase swiveled, dragged a gun as the first officer came through. A bullet shattered his wrist.

Three plainclothes men took Vince Chase, pinned his arms. Reese Sperry watched emotionlessly, his thin face relaxed. Les’s hand touched his sleeve. He said: “Nice work, fella. We got it all down in black and white. Heard every damn word. You did it nice. Say, you look like you need a drink.”

Sperry said: “I guess I do. I had a bad few minutes there after Chase and I left the cage. I was banking on you to hold off those cats till I could get away from Chase and back to let you out. There was no other way with that tough gungel. I thought you would be able to manage it, but if you hadn’t—”

“Lucky the wind was to my back,” Les nodded. “It carried that damn tear gas I had there in that little bottle in my pocket right into those cats’ eyes and away from me when I threw it. It was better than a gun—till those big cats began throwing themselves around that cage and yelping in blind pain. I just stayed in a corner and said my prayers then. I guess I *was* lucky.”

A wan smile came to Reese Sperry’s lips then. He moved slightly away from the cops, so when he spoke they might not hear. “I guess it’s all right,” he said, “but I still don’t figure how you knew I wasn’t mixed up in it.”

“You sent me that card, didn’t you? Hell, that made it simple. You wouldn’t have wanted me around and invited me in if you were pulling anything, would you? I

knew you were clear from that. If nothing else.”

“Card? What card? I didn’t send any card?”

Les Warren’s face darkened. Two wrinkles came between his eyes and just above the bridge of his nose. His fingers went into his pocket, brought out a newspaper clipping. The headline of it said: “Railroad settles for \$100,000 in train crash.” Beneath the clipping was the postal card. Reese Sperry took the card, squinted at it.

“This card—I never sent this card. What the hell!” His lips twisted. “Who’s been giving us free publicity? What—?”

Les Warren heard the tinkle of feminine laughter behind him and he turned. It was Polly Sheehan. She’d probably heard about the killing here tonight, and had come.

“Wait a minute. Don’t tell me,” Les said.

His finger was busy at the tip of his tongue. It came away moistened. He rubbed the moistened end of it over the

card. Additional words came clear—words he hadn’t brought out when he’d moistened the card before.

Notice!
DEATH

will visit Frazee Brothers Circus tonight
and twice daily thereafter.

But danger and perils mean nothing when you fortify yourself with Krako-Zeppo, the new breakfast cereal that makes kiddies big and strong. Death, the lion tamer, says. . . .

Les Warren groaned. “Krako-Zeppo!” Polly laughed with her blue eyes.

“Oh, so you *did* get the card,” she said. “Well, what do you think of that as a publicity stunt?”

Les’s face was cloudy. “Honey,” he said. “What I think of this can’t be said in public.” But then his face brightened and he added with a smile:

“But I have a notion it’s going to cost me a five-buck raise for somebody.”