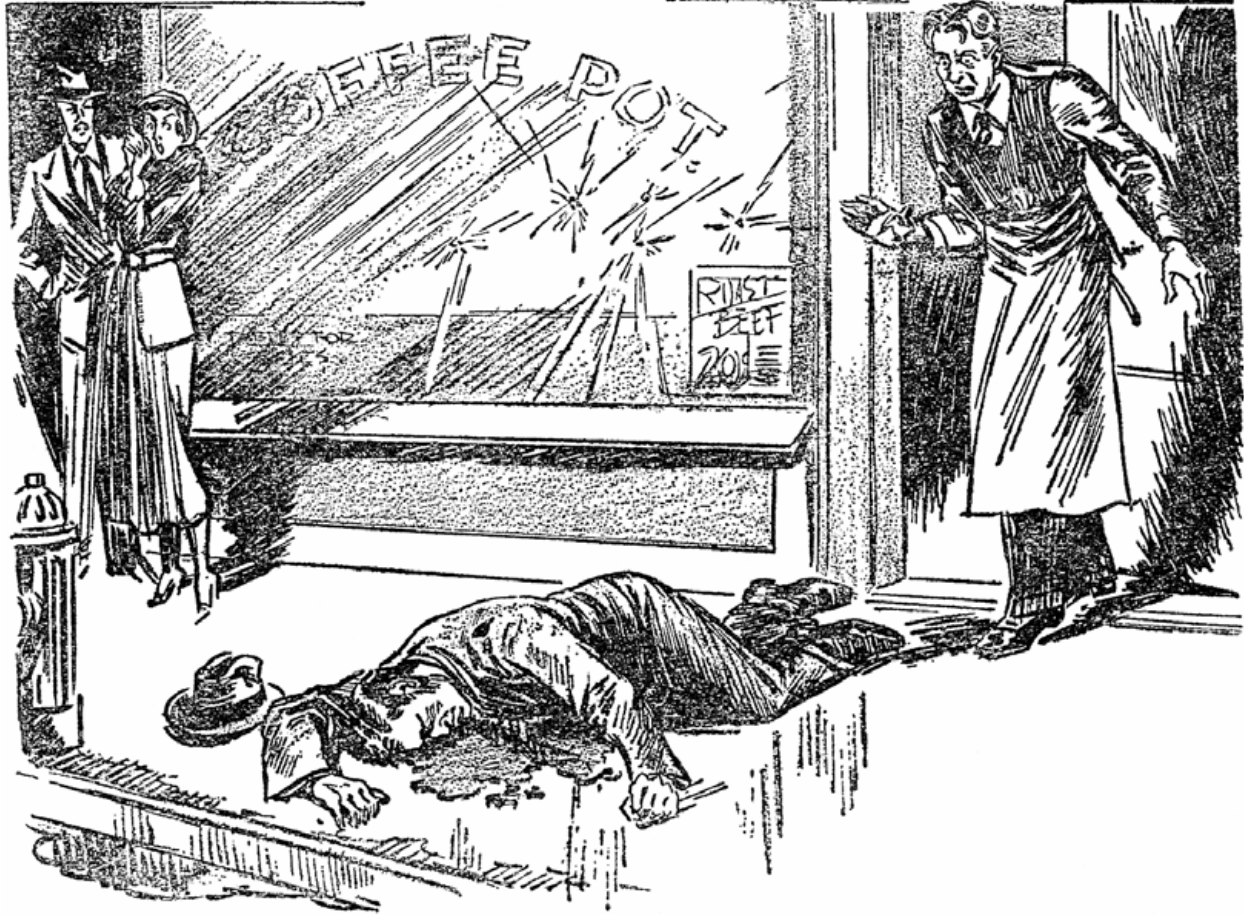


BLACK COFFEE



Tommy's Coffee Pot is the Scene of a Grim Drama of the Underworld

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THE pasty-faced Kid sidled through the half-open door of Tommy's Coffee Pot, hauled himself atop a high stool at the far end and hunched over the greasy counter.

"Whatcha want?" grunted the pockmarked attendant behind the marble slab, and slapped down a glass of water.

The Kid turned his head nervously and showed the whites of his eyes, which weren't white at all, but a sickly yellow instead. He cast quick, darting glances at the front door and then toward the back.

"Whatcha want?" pockmark blurted again. "Make it snappy!"

The Kid squinted his eyes and stared through the light of the tawdry entrance out into the darkness of the almost deserted street. His slight frame quivered a little and he sniffled. Then his

spare shoulders shrugged and he straightened erect and stared up rather vacantly at a badly soiled sign above the steaming coffee urn.

NO CHARGE FOR EXTRA
CUPS OP COFFEE

The waiter reached for the glass of water. "Just came in to get outta the rain, eh?" he snarled from one side of his mouth.

But the pasty-faced Kid reached the glass first.

"Make it java and sinkers," he said. "And let the java stand on its own feet."

"Getcha!" groaned pockmark, and drew a cup of foaming black from the steaming coffee urn. "D'you think it'll rain anymore t'night?" he added as sort of an apologetic afterthought. "Looks bad

outside.”

“Don’t know,” answered the Kid and reached for his two sinkers, attractively and conveniently displayed for the benefit of ravenous customers on an uncovered dirty glass tray within easy reaching distance. Then he added rather futilely: “I don’t much care.”

THE waiter walked away, and the Kid, between furtive glances toward the rear and the front doors, swallowed his portion of coffee and showed the empty cup back toward the waiter.

“Fill it up again,” he said.

The waiter filled the cup overfull and sloshed it back on the counter. The Kid downed it as he munched his second sinker.

“Fill it up again,” he piped.

The waiter frowned, but he took the cup and filled it up again. The Kid’s thin face paled slightly, and he shook his head noticeably as he began to drink of the third cup of coffee, interspersing the short nervous sips with sharp furtive glances to either side of him. Once more he drained the cup and shoved it back toward the rear of the marble slap.

“Fill it up again,” he said.

“Ya must like our Java?” the waiter sneered grimly.

“Not especially,” the Kid replied, casual-like. “But there isn’t much else for me to do but drink the slop.”

“Whatcha mean!”

“I said there wasn’t much else for me to do, so I might just as well be drinking coffee. Fill it up again.”

The frown faded and the waiter’s bulging brows wrinkled in inquisitive lines. “If ya don’t like it, watcha drink it for?” he questioned as he automatically refilled the cup.

“I’m on the spot,” the Kid replied, matter-of-factly.

“On the spot!”

The pasty-faced Kid nodded.

SOME little of the milk of human sympathies began to pump through the heart of the pockmarked waiter. “Why don’t cha beat it out the back?” he suggested.

The Kid shook his head and quivered. “No, it wouldn’t do any good. They’re watching the back.”

“Why not beat it outta the front then?”

The Kid shoved his empty cup away from him.

“Fill it up again,” he said. “They are watching the front, too.”

Five more cups of black coffee went the way of the first one, only considerably slower; while between sips the Kid continued to glance furtively toward the front and rear.

“Ain’t there nothin’ ya can do to stave ‘em off?” the now worried waiter asked when the Kid had finished his tenth cup of black coffee.

“No, nothing,” the Kid answered resignedly and quivered a little more and then shrugged his shoulders again. “And I can’t drink anymore of this slop. My stomach won’t take it. I guess I’ll be going out.”

The anxious waiter’s lower jaw dropped and he thrust out a restraining hand, but the Kid paid no heed. He shrugged his spare shoulders again and slid off the stool. Cold sweat was coagulating in glistening beads on his pasty forehead, and all color had drained from his thin face, while set lips were vibrant with motion.

He stood up unsteadily while his right hand went to his pocket and came out clutching a dime. He spun it on the marble counter in the direction of the pockmarked waiter.

“It’s all I have,” he said sort of cheerfully. “But I won’t be needing more where I’m going,” he added.

Then he turned about and faced the front, drew in a deep breath, threw out his chest, set his mouth in a grim, thin line and made for the door with eyes fixed straight ahead.

“Good-by,” he said, as he strode out into the darkness of the deserted street, still erect, still with perfect control.

“Good-by,” the waiter repeated dazedly, simply because he could think of nothing better to say.

THE cold sweat beads stood out lividly on the Kid’s pasty forehead now. His teeth crunched and his knees began to tremble just as he stepped over the threshold and down the single step to the sidewalk.

The waiter turned his head away and closed his eyes.

Rat a-tat-tat! Trr-r-r-r-r-r!

A screaming fusillade of sub-machine-gun slugs splattered against the brick front of the Coffee Pot, ricocheted off the walls and crashed the plate glass windows with shattering impact. Then came the

ratching sound of clashing gears as the killers' car was jerked into motion. The waiter opened his eyes and let out a yell, caught a fleeting glimpse of the big car as it hurtled past the doorway.

He was around the counter and out the doorway in an instant.

The pasty-faced Kid lay sprawled out face downward, inert and motionless, on the littered sidewalk. A dark pool flooded from the region of his head and trickled down the cracks of the walk.

The waiter let out another yell and rushed back in, made for the phone in the rear.

"Police—Murder—Front of Tommy's Coffee Pot!" he shrieked into the mouthpiece, then slammed the receiver back on the hook and fell back against the wall, too weak, too scared to do another thing—but wait. The police came, an ambulance surgeon with them. They bent over the inert form of the pasty-faced Kid and dragged him into the lighted area of the Coffee Pot.

"The gang got him," the waiter wheezed.

But the gang hadn't, as the surgeon discovered when he searched the Kid for bullet wounds which he didn't find. "He's just fainted," the surgeon said.

"Help me lift him up on a stool and we'll pour some black coffee down his throat. That'll bring him out of it."

THE KID opened his eyes and rolled them as two policemen held him steady on the stool, while the surgeon pressed a cup of steaming black to his lips. The Kid drained it quickly and shoved it from him automatically. "Fill it up again," he said weakly, coming out of his daze.

"But I don't understand," the waiter remarked and scratched his head. "That's his twelfth cup. And how'd he escape that hail of slugs?"

The surgeon's eyes lighted.

"I see it all now," he said. "The coffee made him sick and he fell in a faint on the sidewalk the minute he stepped out. The bullets passed over his head."

But the waiter's bulging brows were still wrinkled in thought.

"But that pool, that dark pool that trickled from his head; what was that?"

"Black coffee," the surgeon said.