



# BEAUTY TREATMENTS FOR CORPSES

by RALPH OPPENHEIM

*On four slabs in the morgue lay the girls who had fallen victim to the mad master of rotting flesh. But to Daniel Craig they marked only the beginning of a murder plague which was to bring him within the very jaws of hell!*

## CHAPTER I FLESH THAT ROTS

**T**HE NIGHT DANIEL CRAIG SAW the girl die, was dark and chill with a knife-like drizzle that turned the pavements of Narick Street, to black mirrors. Few people

were about; but Craig, known as the Bystander, was roaming the streets as was his nightly wont. . . .

Chance brought Craig's steps to the lonely swathe Narick Street cut through the slums, just as the girl came from the opposite direction. A street-lamp dimly revealed her fur-coated figure, her hatless head with the hair tumbled mist jeweled by rain-drops. She was staggering, tripping over high-heels which clicked and skittered on the wet pavement.

"She's drunk," thought the Bystander. Perhaps she'd come out of the bar whose window was a fogged

square of light—but, no, Craig remembered seeing her appear further up the block, and now, as she passed the swing-doors of the bar, two luses swaying in the doorway greeted her alcoholically: “Hi, sweetie! Come on in for a drink!”

The girl’s faltering steps tried to quicken, and that was when prescience came to the Bystander. He no longer thought her drunk; nor did she fit into this neighborhood. That fur coat was mink.

As the two luses staggered towards her, Craig’s long-legged strides brought him quickly between them and the girl, and he said succinctly: “Lay off!” The drunks turned to Craig with alcoholic belligerence—and then in the light of the bar window they saw his hard, keen face, his agate eyes, under the brim of his hat. They retreated.

Daniel Craig caught up with the girl who had staggered right on. He spoke gently now: “If you’re in trouble, perhaps I can help.”

As his voice penetrated her daze, she turned to Craig a face white and haggard, yet of an almost classic beauty.

“Marvelous,” she said. And then she died!

Craig’s long arms had no chance to catch her, she fell so swiftly, collapsing like a rag-doll to the wet pavement where she lay still, her eyes glazing.

The Bystander bent over her, his face a cold mask the sight of death had put there before. There was an ugly welt on her scalp, where the tumbled blonde hair was dark and matted. That must have caused a concussion, bringing delayed death.

But as he pulled her fur-coat open, he could distinguish cruel marks on her white throat: finger-marks. Someone must have tried to choke her, too. . . .

Over his shoulder Craig heard the two drunks. “Ish she fainted?” the fat one wheezed. But the other one screamed, sheer revulsive horror driving all drunkenness from him: “Gawd! Look—look at her!”

Craig’s own eyes had gone wide. The dead woman’s dress, under the opened fur coat, was torn—as he’d examined the marked throat the bodice had slipped from one shoulder. And the flesh of that shoulder—flesh that should have been satiny white like the neck and face—was blotched and livid, with decay!

“She’s rotting!” sobbed the grizzled drunk. “Rotting like she’s been dead months, and she was walkin’ a minute ago! She—”

“Shut up!” Craig grated. “Go and call the police!”

The authority in his voice and their own sobering terror sent both men scampering, the fat one wheezing: “Maybe it’s some plague—contagious!”

If it was, Daniel Craig risked his own skin as he searched the dead woman for some sign of identification. He found none. Knowing the police would soon arrive to take command, the Bystander left the corpse with the rotted flesh, slipped off into the rainy murk. . . .

“YES, Mister,” the lean-faced morgue attendant pocketed the ten-dollar-bill gratefully. “I’m glad for you none of these is your missing relative. Seen some messes here, but these—*ugh!*”

It was cold in the big white disinfectant-smelling room. Daniel Craig, who had invented the missing relative, still gazed grimly from one to another of the four marble slabs pulled like drawers from the huge ice-box of the city dead.

All four cadavers were women’s; one the woman Craig had seen die two nights ago. The others had been found, before and since, in the city’s south side ‘dump’—a section cleared in boom times for developments the depression prevented; now a blight, garbage-littered.

The women had all been murdered. Strangulation had killed the three found in the dump—finger-marks were on their throats. At first it was taken for granted all had been dead for weeks, because all were in stages of decomposition that would take weeks, even in abnormal conditions, to arrive! Nor did the police believe two drunks who had claimed to see the woman found on Narick Street actually alive, a moment before she was found rotting!

Yet other evidence—internal organs, blood, and more, indicated that the deaths had all been recent! And even in the cold storage of the morgue the awful deterioration of flesh had continued. Craig saw that now, just before the attendant covered the cadavers again. The bodies were entirely decomposed, the flesh falling away in rotted shreds; faces almost reduced to grinning skulls.

“You say two have been identified?” Craig asked.

“Yes, Mister.” The attendant’s lean finger indicated the second and third cadaver. “Families identified ’em—before their faces went. Well-to-do folks. That one was Mrs. Barclay, society matron, whose two sons swear she was missing only a day before we got her. Other one’s a Miss Hamilton.”

“Younger woman?”

“Not much. Around forty. Other two are between thirty and forty. They can tell from the teeth and other signs.” Craig’s eyes returned to the now-covered corpse

of the woman from Narick Street. She'd looked about twenty-two or three. For a woman of over thirty she'd certainly been well-preserved—an ironic thought!

"Police made any arrests yet?"

"Nope. First off they suspected the families, wills and all that. But now they see all the deaths are linked, and they're stymied—especially with this rotting business!"

Craig thanked him and went out into the gray morning—for the bad weather had clung to the city. The Bystander drove his little coupe to the Franklyn Building, midtown, where by day he kept office hours. As he entered the building's chrome and onyx lobby, his glance was drawn involuntarily to two women, apparently arguing with one another.

Both were good looking, but though there seemed a resemblance between them, they were different types. One was tall, stately, her figure in a half-length leopard coat suggestive of voluptuous curves. The other—and it was on her that Craig's eyes lingered—was small, delicate, in a neat-tailored suit revealing a slim but perfect body. Under a modernistic hat, her hair fell to her shoulders like two sheets of shining copper leaf—unlike the garish red of her tall companion's hair.

The tall one was talking, gesturing, pulling nervously at her purse, while the smaller girl seemed to be pleading with her. Craig could not hear their words as he passed, but he caught the faintest aroma of perfume which seemed to emanate from the slim, delicate girl. As the closing elevator doors shut both of them from view, Craig's hard eyes went momentarily soft, misty with a memory the sight of a truly beautiful girl always brought back, with all its vivid pain.

HE COULD see himself, young Daniel Craig, then a humble clerk, walking proudly to the marriage-license bureau with the lovely girl who had consented to be his bride. They had been strolling past a bank when the hold-up gang had barged out with their loot, guns blazing a thoughtless swathe. Craig and his fiancée had been what the newspapers called "innocent bystanders." Craig had only been wounded, but the slug that hit the girl had ripped the life from her; she had died in Craig's arms.

Daniel Craig had left all vestige of humble, happy youth in the hospital; he'd come out like tempered steel. In a month he'd hunted down that bank-gang, and killed the man whose thoughtless slugs had slain his fiancée. After that, giving up clerking, Craig had opened this office—into which he now strode—as a

private detective. But rarely did a case come whose storm-signals he had not seen beforehand; for as the Bystander, no longer an innocent one, he roamed the streets looking for crime. . . .

At his desk, Craig thrust from his mind the memory the sight of the girl in the lobby had revived, gave his mind to the mystery of the premature rotting corpses. The police might be skeptical, but Craig had seen, with sober eyes, the death of the woman on Narick Street after she had said, strangely: "Marvelous." She must have gotten away from her killer or killers even though they'd smashed her skull after strangling her and—

The Bystander's conjectures were cut short by the opening of the door, and he looked up to see the tall, stately woman from the lobby! She was alone; her companion, to whom Craig had felt strangely drawn, was not with her now.

"Mr. Craig?" her voice was husky as she stood before him.

"I'm Craig, yes."

"I've heard you can be trusted." She put her purse on his desk, took off her hat and leopard coat and put them on a chair. Her tight blue dress had full, long sleeves. "I'm Helen Gifford—Mrs. Charles Gifford, that is." She moved red-lacquer-nailed hands nervously. "Perhaps you've heard of my husband."

"The lawyer?"

She nodded. "He—he mustn't know I came here, though. He wouldn't like it. But I had to come to someone, I just had to. . . ." Her voice had risen sharply, and looking at her burning eyes now Craig thought suddenly: she's almost insane with fear!

"Look!" she cried wildly. "Look!"

With a sudden, swift movement, she ripped at the sleeve of her dress, tearing the fragile cloth almost up to her shoulder. For a moment, Craig stared at her in amazement—and then the amazement turned to revulsion and shock!

There on the creamy whiteness of her arm, a strip of livid gray extended from just below her shoulder down to her elbow. A strip of rotting flesh!

## CHAPTER II MURDER AWAITS YOU!

**D**ANIEL CRAIG WAS ON his feet, all previous conjectures scattering from his mind. "How did you get that?"

His harsh voice shocked her into a semblance of sanity, "Oh God!" she sobbed. "What am I going to do? It keeps on spreading, faster and faster!"

Craig had regained his own calm. Gently but firmly he guided her to a chair. "It's all right, Mrs. Gifford," he reassured her. "Suppose you tell me what you came here to tell."

"Yes." She spoke like an obedient, frightened child. "But I hardly know where to begin."

"Have you seen a doctor—?"

"No!" Her eyes were wide with dread again. "I haven't dared to tell a soul except my husband. . . he had to know of course," she added ashamedly. "But I've told no one else because I'm afraid. . . I'm afraid!" She was glancing nervously about the room.

The contagion of her terror caused Craig to stride to the door and turn the key in it. As he came back to his desk, he casually loosened the Colt .45 in his coat holster. "You needn't be afraid here," he said.

"I didn't even tell Janet—my sister—though she does know I came to you!" Mrs. Gifford went on. "I wouldn't tell her why. Good God," it was as if a new dread thought had struck her, "maybe *she's* in danger of—but even if she isn't, knowing about me would spoil everything for her! She'd refuse to announce her engagement to Vincent Travers. . ."

Craig, his reactions masked, knew of Vincent Travers—a wealthy socialite playboy who, though he'd aged so he no longer played so hard, would be a 'catch' for any girl.

Mrs. Gifford now reached for her purse, opened it, took out a wad of bills that made Craig's eyes bulge. She slid them across his desk. "You—you must help me, Mr. Craig! So that I won't be afraid, so that I can go to a doctor!" She leaned over the desk, put all the appeal she could in her harassed eyes. "I know I can trust you, so I'll tell you everything I know about—"

She broke off with a gasp, and Craig almost jumped from his chair at the harsh jangle of the telephone.

Cursing himself for his own jitteryness, the Bystander lifted the handset. "Craig speaking."

A harsh voice came through the receiver. "Craig, eh? Is Mrs. Gifford still there?"

"Who?" asked Craig, stalling.

"I said is my wife, Mrs. Gifford, still there? If she is, put her on the wire!" The harsh tones were a command, if not a threat. Covering the mouthpiece, Craig turned to the woman: "It's a man says he's your husband. Seems to know you came here."

Her face drained still more under its make-up. "But how—how can he know? Wait: I'd better speak to him." Craig passed the phone to her, saw it tremble in her hands. He could hear the harsh voice of the caller, but not the words—only the woman's half of the conversation: "Yes, Charles. . . But how did you know? . . . What? . . . Then—then—but are you telling me the truth, Charles? Of course, I take your word, darling, but I—all right, dear. I'll do just as you say. Goodbye. . ."

She hung up, and she was a different woman as now she stood to face Craig. Dignity had returned to her. "I'm sorry, Mr. Craig. This has all been a ghastly mistake." She picked up her leopard coat, reached for her hat. "Can you be chivalrous enough to forget what I said?"

It was hard to say anything to that, and in the next moment Mrs. Gifford had unlocked the office door. She closed it behind her, and her heels clicked down the corridor.

THE Bystander sat, undecided. Then he saw the fat roll of bills—still on his desk! Had Helen Gifford forgotten them; or had she left them purposely? Her own husband had sealed her lips and yet . . . did she still inwardly want Craig's help?

He put the money in his wallet, grabbed hat and coat, and hurried out. He caught the next elevator down, and when he reached the main lobby he saw no sign of his visitor. He ran out to the street, but she was gone. His hard eyes narrowed. Whether she'd left the money purposely or not, the Bystander had felt himself involved in the case of the rotting corpses; and now he had seen a woman alive, yet with her flesh starting to rot, to decompose!

Ten minutes later, having consulted a directory, Daniel Craig was entering another modern office building not far from his own. He rode up to the eleventh floor, strode hurriedly to a frost-glass door marked: *Gifford and Waldron, Attorneys-at-Law*.

The door was unlocked, but the ornate, carpeted



reception room was empty; a switchboard near the door deserted. On the right an open door bearing the name Mortimer Waldron, revealed an empty office. Diagonally across from it was a closed door, which said: Charles B. Gifford.

Craig, with a feeling that the whole place was empty, tried the door. It opened, and as he walked into a spacious office whose dark-draped windows let in only the gray light of the dismal day, he saw a gray-haired man seated at a big mahogany desk, facing him as he came in.

The Bystander walked towards him. "I'm Daniel Craig, Mr. Gifford." He had recognized the lawyer. "I came here to find out just why you stopped your wife from giving me her case. . .

Even as he was speaking, Craig's own voice sounded strange to him, loud, and the utter silence that followed his words sent him forward to the desk with the hackles prickling his scalp. He saw Charles Gifford clearly then, saw Gifford's eyes staring at him sightless and glazed, saw blood drooling from a corner of the gaping mouth, blood oozing from the man's back, where the haft of a large knife protruded!

Then, perhaps due to Craig's own tread or some vibration in the building, the body toppled grotesquely sidewise, lolling over the chair. Craig touched it. It was still warm. Straightening, the Bystander tried to get his bearings. Gifford had silenced his wife, and then he had been killed! Why—?

Craig's nostrils twitched. He had noticed it vaguely when he first came in; now he was sure he detected, in this room of blood, the odor of a faint perfume. As he brooded on this, his attention was caught by a memorandum book on the desk; on it a notation scrawled in still-damp ink, evidently by Gifford: "*Tune in on radio station, 5:30 PM. today.*" What—? His eyes jerked up sudden, tense, as once more prescience came to him. Had he imagined it, or had one of those window drapes moved? The Bystander, whirling in its direction, reached for his gun.

Before he got the weapon out, he heard movement—behind him! Only the sudden *swish* of air warned him to duck, and perhaps that saved his skull from being split like an egg-shell. As it was, the heavy sap smashed through his soft hat, detonated on his head like a bass-drum. As his knees gave, as blackness was enveloping him, he had a hazed glimpse of two figures—one, a huge hulk of a man emerging from the draperies, the other wiry, smaller, carrying the vicious sap. Craig's brain tried to make his muscles use his

gun, but the blackness blanketed him; there was a long moment before he came out of it.

When he did, struggling to his feet with his head throbbing, he was alone in the office with the slumped body of Gifford. Knowing the two men would have had plenty of time to get out of the building and safely away, Craig grimly picked up a telephone. He called police headquarters and asked for Inspector Rawlings, of Homicide.

"BETTER come right over here, Inspector," he said, giving the address. "Charles B. Gifford, the lawyer, has been murdered. Two hoodlums must have just knifed him when I came in—" He described them as best he could.

"Gifford—murdered?" Rawlings was barking. "Say, who are you?"

"Just a bystander."

"Bystander!" Rawlings' voice held recognition. "So it's you again, Craig! What—?"

"I'm in a hurry," Craig snapped, deciding he must know much more before he could confide in the police, who sometimes resented his private crime-war. "Just wanted to tip you off, and tell you not to worry if I'm not here when you come." And he hung up on Rawlings' sputtering protests and questions.

The Gifford residence, Craig had learned previously from the directory, was in the fashionable North Side section. Craig sped there in his coupe. On his way from Gifford's office building he had made casual inquiries—but the elevator men had not remembered the two thugs who must have been their passengers. Also, Craig had bought a paper and scanned the radio page. Seven local stations were slated for air-time at 5:30 p. m. None of the listed programs seemed to have even remote bearing on the case.

Now Craig was slowing the coupe before an expansive stucco house which even in the chill air held an opulent and shining look. He parked, glancing behind him down the block. The possibility that he might have been followed had made him take devious routes. Every instinct told him that danger would stalk him now. His head still throbbed; and next time he mightn't be so lucky!

A liveried butler opened the large oaken door at his ring, answered his inquiry politely. "Mrs. Gifford, sir? She isn't at home just now."

"What is it, Prout?" came a soft, musical voice—and once more Daniel Craig became aware, as he stepped into the foyer, of a faint perfume. He was

looking again at the other girl from the lobby, the small, delicate girl with the glossy copper hair. She was dressed in jodhpurs now, a trim leather jacket around her slender waist.

"I'm Janet Russell—Mrs. Gifford's sister," she said. "Was she expecting you?"

"My name is Daniel Craig. Your sister hired me to do some investigating." After all he still had the money.

"Oh." A shadow seemed to darken the girl's lovely hazel eyes. "Well—won't you come in, Mr. Craig?"

The butler took his things, and Craig followed the girl, noticing her firm yet graceful carriage, the more feminine in jodhpurs. She led him into a vast, oak-paneled living room, and a man, also in riding habit, looked up with wearied interest from the highball he was stirring with a glass spoon. Craig knew from countless news photos that this was Vincent Travers, the playboy.

"Craig, eh?" the man repeated after Janet's introduction. "The detective called the Bystander. . . ." His voice was languid. "Must be excitin'—wish I could find somethin' excitin'."

His hair was grayed, and a face once handsome was deep-lined with dark pockets under weary eyes. Craig thought of the many legends of how the playboy threw around the money left him by his father, the lumber king; how he'd started a whole number of careers, from medicine to art, but always ended up by playing again. Now evidently he'd decided to settle down, and vague unreasoning resentment stirred Craig as he remembered Mrs. Gifford saying the engagement of this jaded playboy and her slim lovely sister was soon to be announced.

PERHAPS that resentment gave added harshness to Craig's words: "I came here quickly because the police will be here soon. Charles Gifford has been murdered."

Janet Russell's hazel eyes were large pools before him: Travers slowly put down his high-ball glass with a large capable hand which could still swing a polo mallet. But Craig kept watching the girl; her surprise and shock seemed genuine, yet that faint perfume—

"I—I can't believe it," she whispered. "Who—"

"I think the killers were hirelings, thugs," Craig said.

"But why—Poor Helen!" The hazel eyes were filled now.

"Where is she—do you know?" Craig demanded.

Janet seemed to pull herself together, looked at the clock across the room. It showed a little past two. "She left here over half an hour ago—took the

Mercedes. She said she was going downtown to do some shopping, stop at the beauty parlor, and then call for her husband. By now she should be at the beauty parlor."

Craig's eyes hid grim puzzlement. Ironical for Mrs. Gifford to go to a beauty parlor—unless with some pitiful idea of having that disfigurement covered, hidden. "You say she came home first. Did she seem in good spirits?"

"Oh yes," the girl replied. "I'd been so worried about her—she'd refused to tell me why she was going to you. But now she said she wasn't worried any more; Charles would take care of everything. And now Charles. . . ." she steadied her voice. "I'll go and meet her at the beauty parlor, Mr. Craig—I want to be with her when she learns. . . . I can phone you then, at your office." She turned to Vincent Travers. "You'll—you'll have to excuse me from that ride."

"Of course, darling," came his languid drawl. He had risen, a big figure though a wasted one. "Want me to take you to the beauty parlor?"

"No, Vincent. I'll take a cab—you must go for your ride as if nothing has happened."

"Well, all right," he said dubiously. He put one arm around her, drew her to him as she stood passive, kissed her cheek—and Craig wondered why such an innocuous kiss should disturb him so.

Excusing herself, Janet Russell went upstairs to change from her riding habit. The playboy turned to the Bystander: "Coming along, Craig?"

"I have a few questions I'd like to ask Miss Russell first."

"I see. I'll toddle off then. . . . Janet needn't worry about the police; I'll call headquarters and tell them not to turn this house into an inquisition." The lines seemed to deepen on his face. "Bad enough, the way it's been around here—"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't know, but something's been going on—tension, secrets, intrigue. But I can't see why anyone would want to kill poor Charlie Gifford—he's not a criminal lawyer. Of course he had that quarrel with Waldron, his business partner—but Waldron's in Florida now, I hear."

"What was the quarrel about?"

"Oh, some argument over a case—graft rearing its ugly head. Don't know. I should be more upset, I suppose—but even murder doesn't get a rise out of me." For a moment he spoke with a frankness Craig could admire. "Truth is, I'm burned out—seen too

much, played too hard. But,” he added with a sly, suggestive wink, “maybe a lovely young bride will fan back some of the old spark, eh?” And Craig disliked him again.

A few minutes after Travers took his departure, Janet Russell came downstairs, a sheered off fur-piece around a heather-skirted street dress, her slim legs showing now over suede, high-heeled shoes. Craig met her surprised look with: “My car’s outside. I’ll drive you to that beauty parlor, Miss Russell.” He had decided while waiting that he must get to Mrs. Gifford without delay. Now he felt a strange inner thrill when Janet Russell made no objections—and she had refused the more weakly-proffered company of her fiancé.

They went out together, towards Craig’s parked coupe. And the Bystander could never understand what prompted his sixth sense then. Certainly there was no visible sign. There was the coupe, exactly as he had left it at the curb, and yet—

“Wait!” he ordered the girl, and leaving her in the middle of the sidewalk, he approached the coupe cautiously. He looked it over from rear to front. When he lifted the engine cowl, his eyes went to slits. A gas odor too-pungent had met his nose, and he saw the splash of gasoline in the engine pan, saw the disconnected ignition wire trailing in it . . . an old underworld trick!

Breathing hard, he quickly repaired the damage. He turned to the girl. “Maybe you’d better go in a cab after all.”

“But why?” Her appealing eyes were wide, bewildered.

He didn’t want to tell her and thinking, lightning shouldn’t try to strike twice in the same place—he helped her into the coupe, but his foot actually shook as he pressed the starter. Had he pressed it before looking into that engine, he and this lovely girl would have been blown to kingdom come—the spark from the disconnected wire would have set off that pan of gasoline! He drove fast, took several corners and turns. He must have been tailed before, as he’d feared, despite his precautions.

### CHAPTER III DEATH ON THE AIR-WAVES

**C**RAIG FELT THE GIRL’S SLIM BODY nestled against his, breathed that fragrant perfume, as now he drove at her directions. He thought fearfully that Mrs. Gifford had said danger might menace her sister, too. . . .

“I’ve heard of you often, Mr. Craig.” She was looking at the hard, uncompromising profile of his face as if trying to probe that mask. “Why do you call yourself the Bystander?”

“I like it, that’s all.” Having looked back to see that they weren’t being followed, he framed the question he must ask. “I like that perfume you use, too—only maybe you’d better change to another now.”

“Why?” she asked, but he caught the note of apprehension.

“The police have noses, and the odor might still linger in Charles Gifford’s office.”

He felt her body tense. Her voice came small: “You don’t think that I—”

“You went to Gifford’s office and told him his wife came to see me,” he stated rather than asked. “You were the only one who knew that.”

He felt her relax a little. “All right . . . that’s true. I was worried about Helen. But Charles was alive and healthy when I left.”

“Was he alone? Where was the office staff?”

“He said he’d dismissed them for the day. He didn’t say why—” Sudden passion came into her voice. “Did Helen tell you something nasty, Mr. Craig?”

Craig was silent, so she would continue in her anger.

“It’s her silly imagination, of course!” came her next words. “Her thinking there was something between Charles and—and me. She had the idea she was getting too old for him—even though she doesn’t show her age at all . . . and she’s really not much older than me.”

Craig, recalling what he’d learned in the city morgue, wished he could learn the ages of both, but held his tongue. . . .

“I thought when I became engaged to Vincent—Mr. Travers, Helen would get over her suspicions.

But she began acting more strangely than ever. I thought she might be going to you with this imagined intrigue—that's why I went straight to Charles."

Craig negotiated another turn, then spoke quietly. "Funny her still being suspicious of you after you accepted Travers. Unless she didn't think you really loved him. . . ." There was more in the words than he'd intended.

Her chin set stubbornly. "Of course she knows I love the man I'm going to marry."

Craig changed the subject. "Know anything about Gifford's will? I suppose all his money goes to Mrs. Gifford?"

"Yes, what there is of it," the girl gave a rueful laugh. "He's made some unfortunate investments, Helen tells me—and he and Waldron haven't been doing so well. We had to sell one of the cars, and Charles had been scolding Helen for her extravagance—she used to be thrifty, but lately she ran through her entire savings."

Could she be as naive as she sounded? From her own words, her marriage to a wealthy playboy would be most convenient—

But now she was pointing out a square, modern three-story building from which hung the sign: *Madame Sari's Beauty Salon*. Craig parked the coupe a few blocks away, lest they'd been followed—and he and Janet walked to the establishment. It was swank in every sense of the word. The reception room, where a few other men waited, was done in gleaming modernistic style.

A pretty brunette secretary looked up at Janet's inquiry: "Mrs. Gifford hasn't shown up yet. She did have an appointment for two, and it's almost three now."

"She's always punctual," Janet insisted. "Perhaps you just didn't see her come in. . ."

"Madame Sari will know for sure; she'll be down presently." The girl spoke into an intercommunicating phone.

CRAIG and Janet waited. Presently a black door opened, and from an oval aperture came sounds of vibrators, odors of perfume—and through it walked a tall woman, exotic even in a white smock. She had raven black hair, coifed like a tight helmet around a perfect-moulded head. Her face was fine-chiseled, with a slight suggestion of the oriental in its cast. Madame Sari, thought the Bystander, was a good ad for her establishment.

"Miss Russell, what's this about your sister?" A faint

foreign accent threaded the low, musical voice. "She has not yet come."

"She wouldn't miss an appointment; she must have been delayed," Janet said, turning to Craig. "I'll wait here—she's sure to show up." She felt the glossy copper hair under her hat. "I could use a fingerwave," she told Madame Sari, "and perhaps a facial."

"You may have to wait, but I think it can be arranged before closing time—we close for the day, at five you know."

But Daniel Craig did not tarry here, for another hunch had prodded him. Telling Janet Russell he'd either come back for her or get in touch with her at her home, he left the swank, crowded premises, hastened back to his coupe which he found intact this time.

It had started to rain again. Craig set the windshield wipers going as he drove—southward.

The odor of it came to him when he was still blocks away; the odor of fetid garbage and decay—an odor that fitted well with his grim thoughts. He turned a corner, and again parked in an unobtrusive spot. A short walk—and the city's blight, the 'dump', spread out before him in the rainy grayness; acres of ripped-up dirt, spewed with garbage, wrecked jalopies, tin cans. . . .

The Bystander climbed over a rickety fence, and descended a steep incline, his feet slogging in mud. Then he commenced a grim reconnoiter. Soon the hat on his head, still wrinkled over the egg left by the thug's sap, was soggy and dripping; his coat was soaked through. A squeaking furry shape slithered past his mud-covered shoes; a swamp-rat. He came across some stray cats too, eating of fetid garbage.

When, after a long fruitless search, he saw the beat-cop, hooded and raincoated, walking out of the opposite end of the dump, he felt his hunch must have been wrong—and some fleeting hope returned. The cop had doubtless looked to see if any more bodies were here; he was leaving, disappearing in the rain.

Craig flicked up a wrist-watch. It was past five! The beauty parlor would have closed; Janet must have gone home. Perhaps Mrs. Gifford had shown up after all, and both would be home. Craig started for the incline to climb out of the dump—

Abruptly he halted, as the normal city sound of a purring motor on the street above changed to a bedlam of groaning springs and screeching joints! He saw it then—a car, plunging down the embankment of the dump! A long, sleek Mercedes! Running forward, Craig watched it hurtling past—glimpsed a woman



at its wheel. But her figure was jouncing limply with the vehicle's lurching descent. *A dead woman was the occupant of that car!* Another instant and there was a rending crash as the Mercedes struck a hillock of mud and rocks—came to a stop.

Craig whirled, started running there.

Two shots rang out in the deepening gloom, blurring almost into one detonation. A slug whined past his face. The Bystander crouched, dragging out his own Colt and thumbing back the catch. He waited until he saw a flame-stab in the murk, from behind refuse on the incline. He fired at it. A second flame-stab tongued from another pile of refuse, and again Craig fired. This time the roar of his Colt was followed by a cry of pain. . . . A man's figure came into blurred view, fleeing up the incline, clutching a wounded shoulder. Craig was sure he was the wiry thug who had sapped him in Gifford's office. He would have hurled after him, but the second gun still blazed in his direction until, as Craig kept ducking, firing—he saw the second man in retreat. The big hulking one!

Both had vanished when Craig reached the top of the incline—doubtless they were mingling with city crowds so near by. Nor, with the beat cop gone, had the shots in this dismal dump been heard. . . .

CRAIG swore grimly, and made his way back to the wrecked Mercedes. He got a door open, and looked in by the gray twilight.

Helen Gifford's body had ironically escaped any further damage from the crash itself—it lolled there in the seat. But the leopard coat was askew, and over the low-necked blue dress the shapely neck showed the cruel, ugly fingermarks of the strangler of women!

Lines of defeat etched Craig's face. Yet he knew Helen Gifford must have been dead some time—the thugs had probably driven her car here with her corpse in it, sent it plunging down . . . and somehow he couldn't associate the strangle-marks with them; the gun or knife would be their way, as with Gifford. . . . Sudden remembrance made the Bystander glance hurriedly at his watch. It was five thirty-one! Gifford's memo: tune in radio, 5:30. . . . And here Craig was, stranded in this dismal dump—

Then he saw the radio in the Mercedes. Though instruments on the panel had been broken, the set seemed intact. Craig tried the switch, and the set came to life. He had no idea what station to listen for, nor whether he'd even know if he got the station Gifford meant. . . .

From the car with its gruesome, rotted corpse,

came gay jazz, giving way to an advertisement for breakfast cereal, then to a foreign news broadcast, a piano concerto, and an unctuous voice announcing that this was Your Personality half-hour. . . . Craig started to turn the dial again when the same unctuous voice said: *"And as our very special guest, may we present Madame Sari, well-known beautician, who will talk to our women listeners on the secrets of beauty she learned in her native Tibet."*

Craig's hand froze on the tuned-in dial, as the faint-accented voice of Madame Sari came liquidly through the set of the wrecked car:

"Ladies, it is true I am Tibetan, but I am of the Western type—that is why you will want to know how you too can remain, like me, everlastingly young. To those of you who view with misgivings the coming wrinkles of age, my message will bring new hope, new life. For I can help restore you to youth—to glorious, irresistible beauty. Come to my salon, and ask for my personal treatment—administered only by me. Not for sale in any store is the beauty cream I use—the cream compounded of secret ingredients of Tibet—the cream which I have called, so appropriately, by the name: *Marvelous*."

Something colder than the presence of death seeped into Daniel Craig's being. It was as if the exotic voice from the radio had blended with a voice in his memory, a voice uttering with dying breath on Narick Street that single word, "Marvelous." Now Madame Sari's persuasive words continued . . . words poor Helen Gifford, her glorious flesh rotting, could not hear. But had she heard them before? Baffling though the mystery still was, a vague light was dawning on the Bystander. Had Janet taken the 'Marvelous' cure—Janet whom he'd innocently left at that beauty parlor—?

He was stunned to find himself feeling panic over a girl he hardly knew, who was engaged—yet who had reminded him of that other girl in the past. He must think clearly now. Janet had left the beauty parlor long ago; it was closed; its proprietress was talking from Station WXRU, would be talking for some time yet. . . .

Daniel Craig snapped off the seductive voice. He turned away from the wrecked Mercedes, leaving Helen Gifford's awful decomposing body to the deepening rainy gloom; nothing could be done for her now. Craig climbed out of the dump and hurried to his coupe.

MINUTES later he parked around the corner from the towering skyscraper whose antenna-topped roof

held the studios of station WXRU. Though he had no radio in his car, he felt the program must still be on. He strode to the street opposite the building entrance. In a small cigar store he found a phone-booth from which he could still command a view of that entrance. He called the Gifford residence—spoke impatiently to the butler, and somehow felt a surge of relief when Janet Russell's musical voice slid into the receiver.

"Mr. Craig? My sister didn't show up. . . . I haven't heard—"

He broke in, harshly. "Listen, Janet—Miss Russell! Did Madame Sari use 'Marvelous' cream on you—did you ever use it?"

"You mean her special treatment?" the girl asked in surprise. "I think that's just publicity—probably the same routine treatment used for young and old, only she's given it this new name."

"But did she use it—?"

"I never notice what she uses. I had a facial today. . .

He tried to quell the panic in him. The doomed woman on Narick Street had known the name well enough!

"Listen, Miss—Janet. I think it's safest for you to remain at home until I see you. Is someone there with you now?"

"I expect Mr. Travers. But the servants are here. . . ."

"You can trust them?"

"Of course. Prout's been here for years, and so have the cook and maid. Why—?"

"You stay home. If I don't call you back in about an hour." He looked at his watch. "Say around seven, you must do something for me. . . . That fur-swathed figure coming from the studio building now, was it—? He speeded his words. "If you don't hear, call the police, ask for Inspector Rawlings. . . ."

"That's the detective who was here when I got home—asking questions! He left some time ago."

"Tell him," Craig hurriedly finished, "to raid Madame Sari's beauty parlor. And to be careful what they handle—to take chemical experts and make a thorough search. But only if I don't call. . . ."

"I'll do it, but I can't understand. My sister—?"

He couldn't have got himself to tell her now, even if he'd had more time. "You must trust me," he said grimly, and hung up, still feeling that panic, thinking of her slim beauty. . . .

Telling himself he was shooting in the dark, he strode from the cigar store—his eyes still on the fur-swathed figure he had spotted from the booth. She was walking slowly down the block. He crossed the street,

diagonally, first ascertaining that no one suspicious-looking was about. When he reached the woman's side, he saw she was Madame Sari.

"May I offer you my car?" Craig said softly.

In the rainy gloom she saw at first only his straight bearing, and she raised her exotic face archly, as if this were nothing new to her. "Thank you, but just now I prefer walking . . . alone."

Thought that she might have friends nearby prodded Craig to haste. "I have a gun in my pocket," he said in the same soft tone. "I'm the Bystander, if that means anything to you. Coming my way?"

She didn't even flinch, and he had to admire her nerve as she said coolly: "If you insist."

#### CHAPTER IV

### HAUNT OF THE STRANGLER

**S**HE STAYED AT HIS SIDE, and he guided her round the corner. A traffic cop shaking rain from his coat saw them both, but the woman did not try to get his aid. They reached the coupe.

"Can you drive?" Craig asked.

"And if I say no. . . .?"

"Then I'll have to knock you out or tie you up. I like to keep both hands on the wheel."

She slid into the driver's seat. "I hold a license," she said. Getting in beside her, Craig put the gun across his lap. He was wary.

This exotic, cool woman was, his instincts told him, as safe as a coiled cobra.

"Where to, Mr. Bystander?" the woman asked casually.

"Your beauty salon."

"It's closed now—everyone gone home."

"Then we'll have privacy."

She didn't try any tricks on the way, and she only spoke once: "Isn't there a law against kidnapping?"

"Yes, but this state doesn't burn you for it—like they do for murder." She became silent.

He made her park a block away, still playing safe with his known coupe. Presently she fitted a key into the locked door of the dark beauty parlor, and inside he kept his gun on her as she pressed light buttons.

They had come into the reception room, and it was stuffy with the windows closed. Craig watched her take

off her coat. Beneath it she was wearing an evening gown, despite the early hour—a strapless vivid red gown; her shoulders, white as any western woman's, tapered gloriously from her slender columnar neck, and the startling whiteness of her face contrasted sharply with her coal-black eyes and hair.

Then Craig noticed she still clung to her handbag. He took it from her, opened it, and removed a dangerous little pearl-handled .22 revolver, fully loaded. He pocketed it.

"Let's see a jar of Marvelous," he said.

The smile which had been on her face remained fixed. "But certainly. You speak like a drug or food inspector. An advertised product like Marvelous is open for inspection any time."

"Guess I'll have to find the *right* jar myself," Craig said, wishing he were as confident as he made his voice. "Lead the way. We go through the premises. And if anything happens to me—at least I'll have a lovely companion to go to hell with."

"You're flattering, Mr. Bystander." She conducted him through the first floor, turning on indirect lights on the way. Wave-instruments, coils, reducing apparatus made a ghostly, surrealist array in the deserted place. The second floor, to which they ascended in a self-operating elevator, was completely a gymnasium. The third and top floor held a door saying: *Madame Sari's Private Treatments*.

They entered a reception room here. On a table were a display of hexagonal opaque white jars, with embossed labels saying: Marvelous.

"Those are for drug inspectors, eh?" Craig said. "Where are the *others*?"

She denied there were others, so he had to search the room and then the only other room on the floor—a white room with a massage-table, sun-lamps, cabinets. It was not until he came to one paneled locked door that he saw the woman flinch almost imperceptibly.

"Open it," he commanded, waving the gun at her.

"It only contains smocks," came her faint-accented voice.

"I'll look at smocks then. Open it; or shall I smash it?"

She stood between him and the door, her voice icy:

"Before you make yourself ridiculous, let me ask you, do you believe that I, Madame Sari, known to the beauty public for years, would jeopardize my reputation by anything illegal—as you seem to suspect I do. You see my place; I am a rich woman: hundreds come here for treatments. Now why do you not go,

and I promise to forget your foolhardiness." The Bystander hesitated. She sounded convincing, this woman who ran a swank parlor, advertised on the radio; and yet—

"Open that closet!" he repeated.

SHE sighed, fetched a key from a drawer, and opened it. There was a smock, but it was rubber; with it were rubber gloves, a rubber mask. The rest of the space was filled with jars of Marvelous.

Craig, feeling a strange chill seeping through him, took out a jar with one hand, kept his gun on her with the other. "Now open *this*."

Either she still had nerve or she had nothing to fear; she put the jar on the table, unscrewed the cap and laid it aside. Craig looked at a cream like cold-cream, but giving forth an exotic, heady scent. "Satisfied?" came her voice, faintly mocking now.

"Scoop out a handful of the stuff."

"Uncovered hands carry germs. I shall get my rubber gloves."

"No you won't. I'll pay for the cream. Scoop it out."

A stubborn look came over her exotic face.

"I shall not do it," she said coolly. Craig's eyes slitted; his free hand reached and caught her shapely right hand like a vise. She began to struggle. He pushed her fingers towards the cream with slow relentless strength. Closer, an inch away, half an inch—

She broke then. "Stop!" she cried suddenly, shrilly, her exotic accent gone. "Stop, you fool—you damn meddling fool!"

Craig gave a harsh, mirthless laugh. "So I was right!" He pushed her brutally to the wall, and she stood panting. "Your reputation, eh? Why you—"

"Wait," she cried. "You're wrong, whatever you think! Listen to me—!"

"Where's your Tibetan accent now?"

"Oh, I'm not trying to fool you—you're too clever. I never saw Tibet, I'm not married and my name isn't Madame Sari! But you've got to give me a break—this thing's bigger than I am. Please. . . ." She flung herself impulsively at him, her arms coiling around his neck.

He pushed her away and when she saw the set of his face she screamed shrilly. He still had the gun, but at the moment it wasn't trained on her. . . . With a move swift as a tigress' she snatched that open cream jar and—Craig ducked sidewise as the jar, spewing cream, came through the air, missed him by inches. It shattered against the wall, leaving a great white blob of dripping cream and broken glass.

Craig, his nerves grating as if they'd been filed, grabbed her arm, twisted it until she moaned. "You hell-cat!" he rapped. "Try anything like that again and I'll break your neck!" He got a grip on her, menacing her with the gun in his other hand. He managed to see his wrist-watch: it was ten after seven. Perhaps Janet had already called the police.

Again the panic was in him, as now he was sure of his surmise about this cream. He must get to her again. And just to play safe, he'd call the police himself. There was a telephone in the next room. He forced 'Madame Sari' in there. He dialed police headquarters, asked for Inspector Rawlings.

"No," the woman moaned now, pleading again. "Don't have me arrested—please—" He still held her arm tightly, taking no chances.

"Hello," came Rawlings' voice.

"You probably got a call on this already," Craig said. "But about those rotting corpses, there's a beauty parlor—"

He'd got only that far when he saw a sudden light as of surprised triumph come into the woman's eyes. And two things happened at once. A huge paw-like hand snatched the phone from him—from its very wires in fact. And into the small of Craig's back jabbed something hard and cold!

"Reach, Mister Craig! Reach, you dirty—"

THERE was murder in that voice, and the Bystander reached. In front of him now, as the woman had stepped aside, stood the hulking thug from Gifford's office and the dump—huge in a leather jacket and a cap, with a simean, flat-nosed face. He was holding the ripped-out phone, saying easily: "Don't get noivous, Blackie."

Behind Craig the man jabbing the blue-steel automatic into the Bystander's back—a smaller, wiry man with hate writhing his face, rasped: "I could give it to him right now, way I feel. I could pay him right now. . . ." His left shoulder, Craig saw in a brief backward glance, showed the bulge of bandages; the wound, though not serious, probably hurt.

'Madame Sari'—still looking strangely surprised, a little frightened, said: "Get him out of here!" She moved into the room of the real Marvelous, evidently to clean up the mess. The big simean-faced thug frisked Craig, took his .45. And Craig thought: Janet surely must have called the police by now—her call, and Craig's own broken off message before he could say anything vital, should bring the coppers in a rush .

. . . any moment, any second. His only real suspense was about Janet's—flesh. He still didn't know. . . .

"Come on, Mr. Bystander," the big simean man said. "We're goin' places . . . and you better behave. You can see Blackie's sore."

The gun twisted, dug painfully into Craig's spine as if in corroboration. His face a mask, Craig went with them. He was curious. He was thinking of what 'Madame Sari' had said about this being bigger than herself . . . besides the police must come here soon. Janet wouldn't have failed him. He'd go with these thugs instead of trying to make a fight of it here; he'd see where they meant to take him. . . .

They took him down in the automatic elevator to the street. Rain met him again, and night gloom, as they emerged at a side-entrance. A dark sedan was parked there. They shoved him into the rear, made him squat on the floor, and the small, wounded thug sat over him, his good arm keeping the gun trained unwaveringly. . . .

The simean hulk drove. Craig could not see where they were going. Once he tried to lift his head to look. The gunman kicked his head viciously, and Craig ducked back to the floorboards, his eyes burning slits. If he weren't so curious, he'd—

Minutes, and then the car slowed, turned. Gravel crunched under its tires; it stopped. "Out, shamus!" snarled Blackie, and Craig crawled out—the simean man joining them on the graveled private roadway. In the gloom beside the road reared a house whose Gothic magnitude looked vaguely familiar, though Craig knew he'd never been in it. Windows were dark. But Craig's two captors marched him to a side door leading down steps to a cellar; they passed through a dim-lit furnace room, into another chamber, bare-walled and bright-lit. Craig was ready now. If this was where they meant to finish him they'd get a fight first, and—

He could feel his blood slowly congeal, feel his skin literally shrink. For now as his eyes had stopped blinking in the light, they had focussed on the one ornate piece of furniture in the room—a huge plush couch of maroon velvet, bedecked with cushions. On it, the bound figure of a girl writhed faintly. She was making moaning sounds. She was Janet Russell. . . .

The Bystander lost his head at that moment. He forgot the move he had planned—whirled crazily towards the wiry man with the gun, his hand snatching at that automatic with the strength of frenzy. He almost got it, even as the big hulking man barged towards him—

And a languid, weary voice said: "Stop it, Craig. No use."



SURPRISE rather than the sense of new menace, did stop Craig's muscles—and then a sledge-hammer blow from the simean-faced man caught the side of his jaw, rocked his head on its neck. When he really came out of it, he was bound hand and foot to a straight-backed chair, facing that couch, and the dazed girl.

The small, wiry gunman, the, homicide light again in his eyes, stood close with his automatic. The bigger thug was running a calloused thumb along the blade of a glittering knife—a knife such as had been plunged into Charles B. Gifford.

But Craig's eyes were on the third man coming across the floor. At the sound of that man's voice, the Bystander had felt a sense of utter defeat, yet at the same time one fleeting hope. The hope was for Janet's flesh! When he'd first seen her, his instant thought was that she was doomed like the others whose flesh . . . but now that still might not be true. What was true, he was sure, was that Janet had never had a chance to call the police, and that with his own call stopped at its vital point, there would probably be no raid on that beauty parlor; the police would remain ignorant. . . .

"Really, Craig," drawled the man who had brought these conclusions home, "you must bear a charmed life, and until I see your demise with these tired eyes. . ."

Somehow he looked different now. Still the jaded, deep-lined face, the graying hair, as he stood in an ornate silk dressing gown, pocketing an automatic. But in the eyes a strange, avid glint, as of dead fires horribly rekindled.

Craig found his voice; they hadn't gagged him, and he knew this cellar room must be sound-proof. "I didn't figure you in this, Travers—though perhaps with more time, I would have. There were a few clues . . . You wouldn't have had me brought to you if you didn't think I'd guess the truth, would you? Well, I guessed most everything else; but, after all, Janet's your fiancée. . . ."

Vincent Travers' smile was tired, like his face. "Please don't misunderstand my sentiments, Craig; in my way I love Janet." A dazed moan from the couch showed that the girl heard even though she was too stunned to speak. "But, as I told you, I'm burned out. When it was a choice between letting her convey your message to the gendarmes . . . but don't blame yourself for her plight. In time, she too would have guessed. . . ." Then he lifted his two hands, those two strong polo-playing hands and looked at them.

"I'm afraid that sooner or later, Janet would have had to die anyway. . . . I wonder, Craig, how much you know?"

## CHAPTER V THE DEVIL IN HIS DEN

**A**NYTHING TO DELAY HIM, Craig thought—until he himself could regain some strength, try despite his bonds. . . . His eyes were on the moaning figure of Janet.

"I can guess most of it," the Bystander said, while the glaring Blackie kept the gun on him, and the simean-faced man stolidly kept toying with that evil knife. "You're the real brains behind this rejuvenating racket of Madame Sari's—or whatever her name is. Though why a playboy who always hated work should go in for—"

"It would be a shame, really, to let you die with that one trivial piece missing from your brilliant solution of the case. So before I let Monk use his handy knife on you—you see, man-killing doesn't appeal to my finer instincts—I'll help you complete your case. The answer to that one moot point is really mundane and obvious—money. You see, in time even a few millions can disappear, if you let them run through your fingers like sand. The thought of poverty appals me, Craig, even more than the thought of work. Sarah Porter—you might as well know her name—owed me a sort of debt ever since, in an impulsive moment, I'd taken her out of the south side where she was just a little tart, and set her up in the beauty business. I decided now to become her silent partner. She told me that if she had a rejuvenation cream that would really work, there would be a million in it. . . ."

"In my sporadic interludes, I've puttered with medicine and science. I'm really quite brilliant, Craig. I turned part of this basement into a laboratory. I studied and worked, and gave Sarah cream after cream; she tried them, and to our mutual surprise, one of them actually worked! Applications of it restored youthful lustre to matronly skins . . . and we went to town, Craig. We advertised, used radio, made up our Tibetan hokum—Sarah had already started that when she made-up herself to look vaguely oriental. I spent what was left of my waning fortune developing a clientele whom dear Sarah soaked heavily. And then. . . ." He sighed, wearily.

"Then," said Craig, "you found out this cream of yours rotted the flesh it restored."

"You put it picturesquely, Craig. Sounds almost like retribution, what?—as if the flesh must pay the piper. Yes, it's true. A certain bacteria in the cream—I shall not bore you with scientific detail—virtually fed on the flesh after a number of applications, and the decay spread with hopeless, irreparable rapidity. Of course Sarah was in a panic—not that she felt the cream had endangered her person: from the start she'd used rubber gloves, knowing the dangerous substances any cream might contain; and she had not let her honest staff use the stuff. . . . But she too had always been honest at heart. Now . . . well, I had to point out to her that we were already in this thing up to our neck, we had spent a fortune—we were in a position to clean up. . . ."

"So," said Craig, "you decided to kill the women when they started to rot, and go right on using the cream. Now that I think of it, it all fits you, Travers. Like any 'work' you've done, you bungled this from the start. You bungled on the cream; you bungled on your cover-up kills. The dump was a good idea—putting corpses there so that when they were found rotting it would seem natural. Only you didn't hide them so they were found after a reasonable length of time. And one victim you even let get away. . . ."

"So you know that, too—really, Craig, you're uncanny the way you get around. The woman in question—I made the mistake of trying to kill her on a lonely street where my men here waylaid her." He nodded at the two waiting thugs, who were beginning to shift impatiently. "Incidentally, both these boys are old friends of mine. They have co-operated handsomely. . . . Yes, we did bungle on that one woman. The others were all brought here where I could make sure of them. Meanwhile, there was Mrs. Gifford—promoting that match between me and her sister." Again Janet moaned on the couch, but Travers went on languidly. "The Giffords thought I had money: I thought *they* had it—our motives were the same, and so was our error. And all the time, Mrs. Gifford, worried about keeping her husband's love, was taking Sarah's little rejuvenation treatment. . . ."

"You bungled on her, too. She came to me when she discovered that rotting flesh."

"YES, but her husband, when she told him about it, suspected its source—came unwittingly to our aid. As a lawyer, he saw the legal stink he could raise about it all. He dismissed his staff, called Sarah, and told her what he meant to do."

"And she managed to stall him off with her clever spiel," Craig's head, the only part of him he could move, nodded. "Told him that a big reputable firm like hers could naturally not be running risks. . . ."

"Precisely. Before she was through he was practically convinced that the blight on his wife was not serious. . . just an allergic reaction—for he hadn't been brainy enough to associate it with the bodies found in the dump, owing to the insistence of the police that they must have rotted naturally. His legalistic mind swallowed the bait, especially when Sarah told him that this very day she was going to advertise her cream openly on the radio—would she do that if it was dishonest? Of course, having started to publicize the cream we couldn't suddenly stop—that *would* have been suspicious. Gifford was temporarily stalled, and Monk here, with his knife, made it—ah, permanent. Mrs. Gifford was captured in her car when she next left her home . . . she was a prisoner here when you arrived at the Gifford house, Craig—and I came here and made sure she'd do no more talking. . . ." Janet's torn-clothed figure writhed in revulsion on that couch. . . . "Meanwhile, there was you, Craig. Your ubiquity was getting alarming—my men had reported that you turned up at Gifford's office—we didn't know how much you knew, and so—"

"You fixed my coupe when you left the Gifford home. That's one clue I should have seen pointed to you—for I'd taken pains not to be followed by anyone. You didn't know, of course, that Janet was going to accompany me in the coupe—that was decided after you'd left. Not that it would have mattered—"

"Ah, but it would. I didn't want to hurt Janet until at seven I found her phoning the police. I told her you were outside—in person. She must be rather fond of you—for believing it was your say-so, she voluntarily stopped her call, and the servants were none the wiser. . . . By then, Monk and Blackie had seen you at the dump, tried once more to eliminate you—and I realized you'd probably head for the beauty parlor, so I sent them there. Now," he finished wearily, "I think we'll attend to you—first. You're dangerous alive, Craig. And—"

Blackie spoke for the first time. "Let me plug him, Mister Travers!"

"There's no use making unnecessary noise, Blackie," drawled Travers. "I think we'll let Monk attend to Mr. Craig."

Craig was just beginning to test his muscles against the bonds. With his death and Janet's, Travers could safely go on with his hideous game, using the cream,

killing off the clients! . . . Craig was still unable to move when Monk, at a weary nod from Travers, took a step forward, gripping the haft of the knife now. The long blade gleamed. Monk's left paw brutally pushed Craig's head back. . . .

There came the sound of sudden rapid steps, descending the stairs. Monk stopped, whirling apprehensively with the rest. Into the cellar came the breathless but beautiful figure of Madame Sari—or Sarah Porter. Craig, who had felt some unreasoning hope at the interruption, felt frustration again at the sight of Travers' partner in crime.

"Vince!" the dark-haired woman cried. She was panting; and she wore neither hat nor coat—but stood in that strapless red gown. "Vince, something terrible has—" She stopped as she saw the slim bound figure on the couch. "Why that's the Russell girl! Why have you got *her*? We didn't use the cream on her!"

A flood of half-relief surged through Craig. Not *her* flesh then, not—

SARAH PORTER spoke again, without waiting for answer. "The police, Vince. They raided the parlor! I just slipped out in time—no, don't worry; no one followed me. I was careful . . . but they're in that place; they'll find the cream." Craig laughed aloud then. "You get that, Travers? More bungling. You must have let Janet say something when she called the police—what did she say?"

"I said," suddenly Janet's voice came now, alive with game hope, "I said 'You must make a raid, but be careful what you touch.' I started to give the name of Madame Sari when Vincent—"

"And I mentioned a beauty parlor, rotting corpses when I phoned the police," Craig said. "From the two calls, Rawlings must have been smart enough to figure where to go. Your game is finished."

Travers was silent. But Sarah spoke wildly. "Vince, what about *me*? They'll be after me—that's why I came to the one place they'll never think of looking. You're covered, you've kept your name out of this—but you've got to get me safely away, Vince . . . Vince!"

"Don't try anything rash, Sarah," drawled Vincent Travers. "Blackie could shoot you first." He was looking at her shapely body, which terror and panic seemed to make the more appealing. "Do you think, dear, you'd enjoy being a fugitive, especially when your gorgeous beauty . . . I thought I'd noticed it earlier today; now it's quite distinctive. Your hands, I mean—the backs of them. . . ."

Sarah Porter jerked up her tapering white hands whose softness Craig himself had felt. She looked at them. She kept looking at them as her face turned to the color of dead ashes.

"Oh God, you devil! You said rubber gloves would prevent—but somehow it got through the gloves! And I was afraid to touch it only once when Craig tried to make me—as if that would have hurt! You must have known, Vince, yet you let me go on—you knew in the end I'd—I'd *rot like the rest!* Rot!" she screamed.

"I knew our game could not go on forever, dear," Travers said. "Though I did think the gloves would protect you, I knew that possibly when the game was up and your name involved, you might be inclined to talk . . . so in any event. . . His voice had become a trifle hoarse, a strange thread in it.

"Vince! Vince, what are you going to do?" Sarah shrilled, trying to back away. "Your eyes, Vince. . . ! Stay away from me—keep your dirty foul hands off me—Vince, no, *no!*" She screamed—but her scream was choked off. . . .

VINCENT TRAVERS turned. His face was no longer weary; it was the face of a man gone insane. His big hands were still held before him, like claws. His voice came thick. "Craig can wait . . . Janet now . . . Janet."

Craig was no longer even trying to hide his own efforts to fight off his bonds. He had been working at them all this time, with the two thugs' attention held by Travers' actions. The Bystander had succeeded in partially loosening his right hand, tied behind the chair . . . was trying to use its fingers to undo knots. But now, already, Travers was bending over Janet his hands reaching for her throat—and Craig knew with despair he himself was still powerless to stop them. . . .

And then, suddenly, Blackie's gun swiveled from Craig to the playboy. "Hold it, Mister Travers. You double-crossed that Sarah dame." He nodded toward the pitiful corpse. "How do we know you won't cross us? When are we going to get all that dough you've been promising. We'll kill the shamus, but that girl's going to stay alive until we get paid. We're top men in this game now."

Travers straightened up. He looked frightened. "You'll get your money."

Blackie stepped forward and Travers backed away from Janet. He was trembling. "Yeah?" snarled Blackie. "When? Don't lie, Travers. You were planning to kill the girl and Craig and then beat it with all the

dough—leaving us to hold the bag. Well, it won't wash. When we leave here, the girl goes with us . . . and if we don't get our cut very quick, she might have an interesting story to tell the police. Maybe you think you've been pretty clever covering your tracks. Maybe you figure the police never'd believe any story we told them—but they'll believe her!"

Travers was silent. Blackie turned to Monk. "Untie the girl," he ordered. "We're getting out, now."

CRAIG now had part of that right wrist loosened, too—his hand had more play. He was watching Monk unfasten Janet's bonds with a fury that goaded his every muscle. Travers stood, weary again, held at bay by Blackie. Unless Craig could do something, the outcome must be hellish, no matter what it was. If Travers had his way, the girl would be horribly murdered; if not, Monk and Blackie would take her with them.

At last the ropes that had bound Janet came free and Monk pulled her roughly to her feet. "Come on, baby," he said. "We're leaving this dump. An' maybe if you're nice to Blackie an' me, we'll treat you right."

The girl's hand slid down Monk's coat, under it. But Monk playfully pushed it away. "Naw, you don't want that knife now, kid. You know you don't. . . ."

Craig's right hand came free. Revulsion and rage made him desperate. With all eyes off him, he sent his chair crashing over backwards, with a force that splintered it. Still, as he'd feared, some of the ropes held—but his right hand was free—

Blackie whirled at the sound of the crashing chair. His automatic swiveled from Travers to Craig—

There was a sharp report—a report too high in pitch to be made by that big automatic! It was the report of a spitting little pearl-handled .22—the .22 of the hapless, dead Madame Sari, who had failed to tell the thugs Daniel Craig had that gun on him—so they had not looked for it when they'd taken his .45. Now the Bystander's right hand had whipped out that little gun; and the .22 slug proved more serious for Blackie than had the wound made by the .45 before—Blackie fell, writhing, spitting blood.

It had taken all this time for Monk to shove the girl from him, for she'd clung to him tightly to delay his getting into action. But now Monk charged towards Craig, knife upraised. And the girl flung herself upon Travers, who was trying to aim his automatic. . . .

Craig in that instant had extricated himself from the bonds of his broken chair; he was on his feet just

as Monk loomed with the knife. This time Craig used the small but heavy .22 like a club—swinging it to that simean jaw with a crunching impact. Monk went down like a heavy tree.

"Look out, Dan!" the girl cried then, and at her own shortened cry of his first name, Craig felt a fiercely joyous thrill—rather than alarm at the sight of Vincent Travers, who had flung the girl aside, and was leveling his automatic.

Craig fired two shots from the .22—both of them almost drowned out in the almost simultaneous roar of Travers' larger gun. But Travers' slug dug harmlessly into the ceiling . . . as two neat holes, close together, appeared in the playboy's forehead. His face went weary as it went blank: he fell slowly, languidly, it seemed. And Craig felt no regret.

"So you've beaten us to it again, Bystander." Twenty minutes later, Inspector Rawlings, grizzled Homicide chief, whom a phone-call from the upper part of Travers' house had summoned here with his men, spoke in his crisp voice. Daniel Craig was standing there close to Janet. "The two hoods are talking plenty . . . and we've found cream and chemicals in this cellar—enough to see you're right about Travers being the man. You're in the clear, as usual, Bystander."

But the Bystander wasn't listening. He was taking Janet Russell out of there . . . and then he was driving her home in his coupe. When he stopped before the Gifford residence, he knew lots about this lovely girl . . . knew that from the moment she'd learned the truth, she had loathed Vincent Travers, and that she hadn't really loved him anyway—

Now Craig handed the girl a roll of bills—for he'd got back his wallet. "This belonged to your sister," he said.

"She would have wanted you to keep it," the girl replied. "You earned it—Mr. Craig." But he remembered she had called him 'Dan' in that moment of stress—this girl who reminded him so much of another girl of long ago. . . .

He forced the money into her small hand. "Goodbye, Janet."

"I—I hate to go in. Charles, Helen—both gone." She didn't mention Vincent. "I wonder how one can stand it."

"One can," Craig said, but the mask wasn't on his face. "But maybe one doesn't have to. . . . Shall we talk that over some time?"

"If," her hazel eyes met his, "sometime means—soon."