

THE TELEVISION MURDERS
by Maxwell Grant

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A television mystery that comes true... thousands of people actually see a man being shot (but with the wrong bullet!) as a sinister plot is woven into a television drama... a plot that wasn't in the script. Then there was a second murder - also daring. In the subway - at rush hour - in full view of the crowds. Here was a killer who liked publicity... and here was a case for none other than... Lamont Cranston.

CHAPTER I

'CRIME PASSIONEL!'
A BOB DORRY VISUMYSTERY!
Directed by Cary Cummings

CAST:
Eliot Mannix (Forty, bluff, stupid)
Maria Mannix (Twenty-eight, pretty, not stupid)
Letty Branner (Twenty, and much prettier than Maria)
Homer Elwood (Thirty, jilted fiance of Letty)
Roddy Hogan (Forty, friend of Mannix)
Vic Todd (Thirty-five, handsome friend of Mannix)
Bob Dorry (Private detective, thirty, tough)

Props: Thirty-eight police positive blank gun; glasses, cocktail shaker, napkins.

SCENE: The home of the Mannix's. Very uppercrust, modernly furnished living room. Big fireplace across back of set. In front of this is a low cocktail table. Heavy carpet on floor. Working door to left. Windows across right. Six comfortable chairs.

Running Time. Thirteen Minutes

Camera One:

Anncr: Opening commercial; standard: "Pull your chairs up close to your big new Planet television set, folks, and get set to match your wits once more with those of that crack private detective, Bob Dorry! See if you can beat him to the solution of this strange drama of love and hate, of kisses... and death!

Take it away, Bob!

Bob Dorry: "As always, friends, you will be given all the clues that I had at the time this case actually took place. It's up to you to see if you can beat me to the solution!

It started one afternoon in December when I decided, since business was slow, that I might as well accept an invitation to a cocktail party.

Ordinarily

I give these a swift miss, but... I had nothing to do and the liquor was free, so..."

(Camera two pan to the living room. Mannix is shaking drinks.)

Bob Dorry: "When I got there Mr. Mannix, the host, was the only one around. I said hello..."

Mannix: "Bob! Long time no see. Sit down... the girls'll be in in a

second. They're powdering their noses."

Bob: "Where is everyone?"

Mannix: "Homer and Roddy are finishing up a gin rummy game that's been going on all afternoon."

Bob: "Vic Todd, he coming?"

Mannix (Bitterly): "Doesn't he always?"

Bob: "Oops, sorry, skip it. Let's have a drink... just to warm my corpuscles."

Door opens. Vic Todd, tall, good looking, self assured, comes in. His handkerchief is sticking too far out of his breast pocket.

Vic: "Well, isn't this cozy! Hi, Bob. Been catching any killers lately?"

Bob: "No more than usual... fewer if anything. How's things?"

Vic: "Can't complain. But I will if I don't get a drink soon."

Mannix: "Take it easy. You've got all afternoon to get drunk."

Vic: "Umm... so it's like that, is it?"

Mannix: "Yeah, it's like that!"

Bob, holding a drink, gets hold of Vic and pulls him away to a corner.

Bob (Voice low): "Tuck your handkerchief back in you pocket, stupid!"

Vic: "Huh?"

Bob: "The lipstick's showing."

Vick (Stuffing handkerchief down hurriedly): "Oh, thanks."

Mannix (Irritably): "What are you two whispering about?"

Vic: "Bob just gave me a good tip for a race down at Tropical."

Mannix: "What are the girls doing anyway?"

Bob: "You know women... uh uh... here they come."

Door opens. Girls, Mrs. Mannix and Letty Branner come in. Letty is blond and Mrs. Mannix brunette.

Letty: "And so I said..."

Mrs. Mannix: "Whoa..."

Letty: "Oops... hullo everybody!"

Letty: "Where's Homer?"

Mannix: "What difference would that make to you?"

Letty: "If it's going to be one of those parties, you'd better give me a drink!"

Door opens again. Homer Elwood, Letty's disappointed suitor comes in. He looks hangdog. He is slightly drunk.

Letty: "Homer! Hullo!"

Homer: "Why don't you beat it?"

Letty runs to Homer's side.

Letty: "Oooh... what I know about Homer! He's drunk!"

Homer: "I'm not drunk at all, I'm stiff!"

Mannix: "Here's a short one, my boy!"

Mannix has offered a drink to Homer. Homer slaps it out of his hand.

Homer: "I'll buy the drinks I drink... I mean... I'll drink the drinks I buy... I mean..."

Mannix: "Why don't you go over in the corner and sulk. This is supposed to be a party!"

Mrs. Mannix: "Well, why don't you act more as if it were, darling?"

Mannix: "Come over here, Maria!"

Maria walks over to the low cocktail table with her husband. In background

they talk angrily. In foreground, Vic smiles brightly at Homer and Bob.

Vic: "What a typical Noel Coward situation!"

Homer: "What a stinking situation!"

Vic: "Don't get so excited Homer, breathe deeply!"

Homer: "I'll breathe how I want to breathe; and I'd like to stop Mannix's breathing!"

Vic gestures behind Homer's back from Mannix to Letty.

Vic: "You know!"

Bob: "So it's like that!"

Mannix (His voice comes up loudly): "I'd see you dead first!"

Mrs. Mannix: "Aren't you cutting off your nose to spite your face?"

She flounces away from her husband. She joins Vic and looks at him adoringly.

Mrs. Mannix: "I can't make him see reason."

Vic: "No divorce?"

Mrs. Mannix: "If he keeps on seeing that little blond... I'll get the divorce without his help!"

Letty: "Don't you like my hair, Maria?"

Maria: "Not particularly, dear... the black roots show too clearly!"

Mannix: "Maria! I won't have you talk that way to Letty!"

Mrs. Mannix: "That's cute... that'll sound pretty in court! A wife can't talk about her husband's girl friend!"

Mannix (Placatingly): "Why don't we all have a drink and relax? Bob, what have you been doing lately?"

Bob: "Nothing too much, things have been pretty dull."

Mrs. Mannix: "Not like they are here?"

Mannix: "Maria, please! Haven't we washed enough dirty linen in public?"

Vic: "I don't know about you guys, but I'm going out on the terrace for a breath of air."

Letty: "Now that's a good idea!"

Show them milling around toward the door. Mannix sits down in front of the cocktail table in front of the fireplace.

Bob: "Coming?"

Mannix: "I must be getting older, my blood's getting thin. I'm cold enough."

Letty: "We'd better slip our coats on..."

The room empties out. Mannix is left alone. He rubs his hands over his forehead tiredly. He stares into the fire. It is completely quiet. Fifteen seconds go by. The door, which is on a direct line with Mannix, opens a trifle.

A hand with a gun in it comes into view. The hand holding the gun has a black glove on it. A man's sleeve shows. Besides the glove there is a handkerchief wrapped around the gun butt. The door is six feet from Mannix. Mannix stirs and

looks into the fire. The gun comes up slowly and points at his head. The gun fires. Mannix jerks erect and then falls slowly into the fireplace. Fade out to

Bob Dorry's face.

Bob: "That was the situation we walked into when we came back from our 'airing.' Mannix was dead, face forward in the fireplace. Near him was the gun with a handkerchief which had a lipstick smudge on it. I had gathered, as you have, that Mannix was sore at his wife playing around with Vic Todd who was on the make for Letty. Letty's boy friend, Homer Elwood, was in a stew about the deal. Homer knew that Mannix had enough money to set Letty up in the style to which she wanted to become accustomed. Mrs. Mannix and Vic Todd... well, it was

her lipstick I had spotted on Vic's handkerchief.

You know all the facts! Who killed Mr. Eliot Mannix?"

(Organ sting. Segue up. Fade out from Bob's face to the group of suspects, show their faces in a line. Mrs. Mannix, Vic Todd, Homer Elwood, Letty Branner.

Hold organ under.)

Bob: "Mrs. Mannix? Vic Todd? Homer Elwood? Letty Branner? Who did you decide was the killer? I don't know how you went about it, but the way I figured was this: The handkerchief with Mrs. Mannix lipstick on it let Vic Todd

out. He knew I had spotted the lip smudge. He would hardly have left a clue like that to himself.

Mrs. Mannix? She wanted to get rid of her husband, all right, but she also wanted Vic Todd. She would not have put his neck in jeopardy. That left only Letty and Homer. Letty wanted Mannix alive... not dead! That meant that Homer, while we were getting into our overcoats, swiped Vic's handkerchief. The gun he had in his pocket already. He waited until we were all out on the terrace moving around so that his absence for a second would not be noticed. He wrapped the gun in the handkerchief and shot Mr. Mannix. I found out after I had accused him that he had worked himself up into a deadly rage getting drunk. The lipstick of course, he didn't even know about. He swiped the handkerchief to throw suspicion on Todd. He couldn't know that the handkerchief would be the thing to absolve Todd and Mrs. Mannix.

Anncr: Well, how did you make out, folks? Did you beat Bob Dorry to the solution? Did you pick Homer as the killer? If you did, tune in next week and match wits with Dorry. If you didn't, maybe you'll get better as we go along! This has been a presentation of television station WBRRGX. (Organ sting up and out.)

Lamont Cranston threw the script down on the table. So that's the way it was supposed to have gone... instead... Cranston remembered the night, cold, blustery, when he had walked into a little side street bar.

He had let the drink warm his insides before he looked around; even then he didn't notice the television screen particularly. The playlet had been half over when he had looked at the screen. The men in the bar were quiet. They gave the screen their undivided attention. There was nothing much else to do. It was cold out, warm in, the bar was almost deserted. The bartender had a hangover and didn't want to talk. That left only the television screen perched up on top of a telephone booth.

At first, as the cocktail party proceeded on the screen, the men made cracks about the female stars. But then, as the actors got going, they wiped out the illusion of beings on a screen. They became real.

The bar was quiet. It got even quieter as the gloved hand came through the slit of the door. There was a circle of flame in mid-air. The bark of the revolver when it went off made everyone jump.

Cranston blinked unbelievably as on the black and white of the screen he saw black blood spurt from the actor's head who played the part of Mannix.

Mannix fell forward into the fireplace. Cranston stared as he saw that Mannix had fallen face forward into the burning logs. Something was wrong. That was no prop fire, it was real.

The door of the set opened and from the side, as though coming from nowhere, a nervous looking, thin, febrile man with scanty hair and a bristling moustache, ran onto the scene. He said, "Holy cow! He's dead!"

The actor who stepped through the door was the one who played Bob Dorry. He said, "Cary... what the hell are you doing on the set? Are we cut off the air?"

"Oh, my God no... we're not!" Larry, he's dead! He was really shot! His

brains are all over the fireplace!"

At that, but only then, the screen went blank.

The men in the bar looked at each other incredulously. The bartender, hangover forgotten, said, "Say, do you really think?"

One of the men, cynical, narrow faced, said, "Nah... it's another one of them Orson Welles, man-from-Mars things!"

Throwing money on the bar, Cranston left hurriedly. That had been no hoax.

No living man would have thrown his face into a burning fire. No indeed... besides, they didn't swear over the air... not if they could help it.

CHAPTER II

IT was no cinch, getting a cab in the slushy, ice covered street.

Cranston

looked up and down the deserted street. Two blocks away there was a subway station. That might be better, after all. Cabs with no chains on had a habit of

getting into trouble. Too bad Shrevvie was home.

He plodded doggedly through the two inch deep crust on the sidewalk. No one was out. The only people who were dressed and out were huddled in bars and restaurants. Cranston looked at his wrist watch. Ten thirty-two. The television

show had gone on at 10:15. It had been a fifteen minute show.

No cab passed until he was right at the subway station. He looked at his watch and then at the slick black tires on the cab. Then he looked at the street with its ice glare. The street lights hit down like stage spotlights. Spilled light made arcs in the night.

He shrugged and went into the subway. Probably be faster this way. He went

down the stairs holding on to the hand railing. Endless snow-covered feet had stamped snow all over the stairs. The pressure of feet had turned the ice and snow to water. Then the cold had frozen it.

Step by step, carefully, he made his way down. The subway station proper was deserted. He dropped his nickel into the slot and waited. Ten minutes went by. He glanced from his watch to the station clock. His watch was right.

He leaned forward and looked down the tunnel. No train in sight. He walked

back and forth impatiently. Finally, with a roaring sound, the train drew into sight. It was almost as empty as the streets. Red-nosed people huddled together

on the seats. A pretty girl away from the huddle of people was dabbing powder ineffectually at her nose.

Seating himself, Cranston glanced at his watch again. He had four stations

to go. Say three minutes a station. He should be at the television studio inside

of fifteen minutes. His stomach relaxed a bit.

He leaned back in his seat and stared off into space. He was conscious of eyes upon him. He slitted his eyes and looked out of the corners of them. It was the girl. She held a book up in front of her, but wasn't reading. She was looking straight at him.

Puzzled, he returned her gaze. She dropped her eyes. This time, she made more of a pretense of reading, but when he got up at his station, she hadn't turned a page.

He rose and left the train. He looked behind him. The girl had tucked her hook under her arm and was getting out of the train at the back door. He walked

up the stairs.

He heard high heels clacking on the steps.

On the street he stopped for a second as a gust of icy wind cut at his face. Having stopped, he made up his mind. He spun around and faced the girl who was hurrying up the stairs.

"Want to talk to me?" he said.

"Oh!" She was surprised. "Mr. Cranston... you are Mr. Cranston, aren't you?"

He nodded and took her arm. He didn't want to waste any more time than he had to. If she wanted to talk to him she could do it on the way to the television studio.

"I need help... pretty badly. I've read about you."

He waited. No sense in probing. They got to the point faster if you didn't. She was pretty, he saw on close up inspection. Black hair, shiny as good grooming could make it, a pert nose, big wide eyes, well set, a generous full mouth... yes, she was pretty all right.

She said, "I've been following you all night."

He hadn't been conscious of it. Was she lying?

"I saw you go into that bar... you stayed in there so long I thought I'd freeze. I waited out there in the cold thinking... trying to get my thoughts in

order. Trying to get up courage to come in and talk to you. I might have, but that was such a tough looking bar. I was afraid of what you'd think."

She knew he'd been in the bar. So she wasn't lying. Funny, he hadn't noticed her. But then, on second thought, it wasn't. He'd been chilled and miserable. He hadn't been keeping his eyes open.

"Mr. Cranston." She was breathless from trying to match his long legged stride. "I..." She stopped and looked at the building to which he had been hurrying. "Why this is the television studio! Are you going to the station?"

He nodded. He hurried her in the door. Inside, the warmth hit them like a benefaction. She shuddered and pulled her coat around her even tighter. The warmth didn't do her any good, Cranston noticed.

He stepped toward the elevator. She said, and her voice was thin, close to

hysteria, "Has... has anything happened?"

He turned and looked closely at her again. "What do you know about it?"

"I don't, but has anything happened? It has... it has! I can see from your face!"

She turned from him to hide her face. As she turned, her ankle turned on a lump of ice that someone's foot had kicked loose. She spun on it and fell. As she fell the elevator door opened.

So it was both Cranston and the elevator operator who saw her fall.

They saw too, as her coat flew open, that she had nothing on under the coat but a bra and panties.

No wonder, thought Cranston, she was cold.

She hurriedly pulled her coat around her, and as Cranston bent over to help her up, her face was scarlet. She blushed all the way down to her shoulders.

She shook her head as though to put everything out of her mind but the important thing. She gasped, "Is Johnny hurt? Is he?"

"Since I don't know," Cranston said, pushing her into the elevator, "who Johnny is, I can't tell you very much."

The elevator zoomed up to the twenty-fifth floor. She said, "He's an actor... he works in television. He had a show tonight. A mystery show. It's on

sustaining every week. It's the Bob Dorry show."

"What part did your Johnny play tonight in the show?"

"Why..." She looked at him incredulously, amazed that he didn't know her Johnny. "He's Bob Dorry! Johnny Brokaw! He's one of the best known

tele-stars!"

"Far as I know he's all right," Cranston said as the elevator door opened at the twenty-fifth floor. He ushered the girl out of the car. As he exited, he

saw the elevator boy grin at him. The boy winked, a man-of-the-world wink. It said, clearly, little thing like a gal with no clothes on don't surprise me none. I seen plenty in my time. Puhlenty.

Cranston looked up and down the hall. He said to the girl, "What studio was the Bob Dorry show due to be televised from?"

"Studio C, right there." She pointed.

Behind that door, Cranston thought, was a dead man. A corpse who had been murdered in full view of at least ten thousand people. This was going to be a nasty one. He could feel it in his bones. The killer must have been awfully cocksure, to plan his murder under such circumstances. With a sigh, Cranston pushed the door open.

A heavy cynical voice said, "Well... that's the fastest I ever heard of a cop showing up when you wanted him..." The man who spoke saw the girl on Cranston's arm. "What goes? Isn't this the cops, Carol?"

She said, "No, Danny, it's Lamont Cranston." She paused. "Where's Johnny?"

"In with the stiff," the man said. Cranston looked at him and didn't particularly like what he saw. The man was a little above medium height. He wore extravagantly draped clothes. The padding in the shoulders of his blue serge coat hung off his real shoulders by about three inches. The front of his jacket bloused almost the way a woman's would. He was wearing a crimson shirt with broad checks of white on the red. A big knotted heavy blue knitted tie and

brown suede shoes completed his costume. And it really did look like a costume,

Cranston thought, not at all what you'd expect to see a man wearing on the street.

He asked, "Carol what, Danny what?"

Carol said, "How stupid of me! My name is Carol Sterne and this is Johnny's agent, Danny Depper."

"Johnny's agent?" the man said. "I'm the ten percenter for most of the people in this cast!" He turned the corners of his full lips down. "I was even the agent for the stiff. Now I own a fast ten percent of a grave." He turned away. "Big deal! I'm gonna get rich this way!"

Cranston listened, but his eyes were busy. A screen now cut off his vision

from the corner of the set where the corpse was. The rest of the set was exactly

as he had seen it on the television screen. Besides the set there were three big

odd looking cameras with long hooded lenses. Overhead the intense light so necessary for televising crashed down on the eyeballs with searing intensity. All the technicians wore green eye shades.

Seated on the big comfortable chairs, just as though the play were still going on, were the actors who still lived. Cranston looked from them down to the floor where a handkerchief-bound pistol made a center of focus.

Off in the corner was a switchboard with a girl at it. She was busy answering calls. The board was alive with lights. Cranston eavesdropped for a minute. People calling in to find out if the show had been a hoax or if any one had been killed...

He stepped to the screen and looked behind it. Someone had pulled the corpse out of the fire. Outside of that nothing seemed to have been moved. Before he could look any farther, he heard the switchboard operator say, "Wait a minute... say that again!"

He hurried to her side. She looked up impatiently and waved him away. He

paid no attention to her. She said, "Bring it right down! Sure, the company will pay you for it! Pay you well!"

The thin irritable-looking man whom Cranston remembered as coming into the scene of the murder, stepped over to the switchboard and said, "What is it?"

The girl pulled the plug out. She paid no attention to the red lights on the board. She said, "Some guy just called. Says he's a camera fan. He made a movie of the whole show!"

The man said, "Wow!"

"I told him to bring it right down. Said the company would pay him for it."

"Good girl."

Cranston said, "You're the director?"

"Cary Cunnings at your service." The thin man pulled at the corners of his thin mouth. "Who are you?"

Cranston introduced himself and asked, "How long ago did you call the police?"

"Right after it happened. Right after we were cut off the air."

"I see. They should be here any second." Cranston turned toward the actors and said, "Will you introduce me to some of them?"

"Come on." The director, nervous, quick moving, grabbed a bunch of mimeographed papers off a desk and said, "Here, this is the script. You saw the show?"

Nodding, Cranston looked at the first page of the script. It gave the cast. They stood perhaps ten feet from the actors and the director, talking impersonally, as though the actors were dummies, said, "The dead man played Mannix, his name is Charters. The girl who played his wife is Teddy Page. Vic Todd is Victor Blane. Bob Dorry is Johnny..."

"I know him."

"The other gal is the one who played Letty Branner, name is Iris Harrison.

That leaves Homer Elwood who is really Eric Jamison."

Cranston scribbled their real names down next to the printed ones on the script. (*Ed. note: Perhaps the reader will find it helpful to follow Cranston's lead, and jot the real names down for himself.) Cranston had by now met the murderer. But that, not even Lamont Cranston could know... yet...

CHAPTER III

WISHING he had the time to read it right then, Cranston pushed the script into his pocket. The door opened and an old friend came in. It was Joe Cardona,

face set, heavy, almost glowering. He said, "What the hell goes on here? The commissioner's been on the phone three times already!" Then his eyes rested on Cranston. "Lamont! You old dog! Long time no see."

They pump-handled their hands. Cranston said, "This is a beaut, Joe."

"Don't I know it, some of the guys on Homicide saw it on the television set in that bar near H.Q."

The door opened again. This time it was the medical examiner, his face wreathed in smiles as it always was no matter how annoyed his voice might sound. It sounded annoyed right then. "Can't murderers have any respect for rest? Not content with death, must they also murder sleep?"

"G'wan," Cardona scoffed, "you haven't been to bed before two o'clock in the morning in twenty years."

"You forget that once in a while I like to read before I go to bed." The

M. E. walked behind the screen and got down on his knees. He glanced from the gun on the floor to the hole in the cadaver's head. He said, "Humph."

"That's nice and non-communicative," Cranston said.

"Umph."

"Can you translate that?" Cranston asked Cardona.

"Not me. That can mean anything from 'a natural death' to 'death by the usual blunt instrument.'"

"In this case," the doctor said snappishly, "it means that I don't see how

a .38 bullet could leave such a little hole."

Cranston bent and looked. The doctor had cleaned away some of the shattered frontal bone and blood. It was a small hole. Cranston said, "I know you'd rather work down in your own morgue, but do you have a probe with you?"

"Of course. Do you think I'm in the habit of going out unprepared for any of the wild things that our estimable police force is likely to think up?"

Probing delicately, the doctor reached into the brain pan of the corpse. Cranston looked above the screen. Everyone was studiously not looking at the scene. Over in one corner Cranston saw a pile of cloth. Leaving the doctor to his task, Cranston strode to the cloth. He picked it up. It was a dress. Or rather, it had been a dress. The whole front of it had been slashed out. Dangling it from his hand, Cranston looked at Iris Harrison. It would not go with her complexion. It was too dark a shade of green for that. It would have gone well with Carol Sterne's hair. He said, "This yours?"

She shook her head no, but her lips, puckering, said, "Yes."

Cary Cummings said, "What's been going on tonight? Is that why you had the understudy take over?"

Nodding her head, Carol assiduously did not look at the two remaining women. Cranston realized that she was avoiding Iris Harrison. He asked, "Is this Carol's understudy?"

The director, making a sour face, said, "Yare. She has been up to now. But

that ends right here. I'm not putting up with nonsense like this!"

Iris gasped. "Cary, you don't think I did that?"

"You're so right!" The director turned on his heel and walked away.

The medical examiner said in a voice that carried over the room, "What do you know... here's the little bullet!"

Cranston went back behind the screen. He looked at the chunk of malformed metal that the doctor held between the jaws of a speculum. In unison, the doctor and the manhunter turned their eyes from the bullet to the gun which was

on the floor, still wrapped in the cloth of the handkerchief.

"That bullet never..." the doctor said.

"It's a .22, isn't it?"

Answering Cranston, the doctor looked back at the slug. "Can't tell yet, it's too battered. But it's either a .22 or a .25."

Cardona, looking over their shoulders, swore heatedly. "That's cute, that's real nice! A .22 he gets killed with when thousands of people sitting in

their homes saw him shot with a .38!"

"We had a Hooper taken tonight," the director said proudly. "If we didn't have better than ten thousand in our audience I'll miss my guess!"

Cardona groaned. "Ten thousand potential letter writers and all in the New York area!"

"Sure," the director beamed, "you know television. Fifty miles is just about the ordinary range. Our program is just a sustainer so it wasn't piped anywhere. That's what I keep telling the hucksters in the advertising agency to

emphasize in their sales talks. With television you get blanketing!"

"Every one of them will be writing indignant letters to the papers tomorrow, or my name ain't Cardona!"

"Take it easy, Joe," Cranston soothed. "No use in getting excited!"

"What a brain storm!" The agent leaped to his feet, his face almost as red as his shirt, "Gimme a phone. I want my press agent!"

He stormed at the telephone operator until Cardona put a stop to that. "Quiet. There'll be no phone calls made till I say so."

The quiet voice of Cary Cummings said then, and quiet as his voice was, it carried, "Then you'd better make this call yourself, Cardona."

The detective spun around to face the director. "What?"

"The studio is on fire, or hadn't you noticed?" The director underplayed it for effect.

It was indeed. Smoke, flames ten feet high shot out from behind a section off the end of the room. A cameraman said, "Hey. The cameras! They're in there!"

Cardona took over, rapidly and well. He hurried the people out of the studio into the hall. One of his men was busy with the futile task of trying to

put the flaring flames out with a fire extinguisher. The lancing jet of the extinguisher was swallowed by the flames and disappeared. It did no good at all. The telephone operator got up from the switchboard which was charred at the base. She said, "I called the fire station before the trunks burned out."

"Good," was all Cardona said as he hurried her out after the others. In the hall they waited nervously till the elevator door opened in response to frenzied pushings of the button. The elevator operator looked out irately.

He said, "Where's the fire..." then gulped and was silent as he saw the flames creeping out into the hall from the studio.

He let the people jam into the elevator. "That's all. There'll be time for another load!" The car disappeared.

Cranston looked around. With him on the floor menaced by fire were Cardona

and two of his men, and the medical examiner who looked about as flustered as if

he were buying his morning newspaper. Carol Sterne, standing next to him said, "Did Johnny get into the elevator?"

Cardona said, "He tried not to, but he was pushed in by that agent."

"Oh." She looked around her. The fire was out in the hall now, the flames licking greedily up the walls. She looked at Cranston. He was thinking clearly.

His forehead was wrinkled with strain. He did not look happy.

"Joe, that door over there."

"Yes, Lamont, what about it?"

"Hurry... maybe we can make it in time. You others will be safe enough waiting for the car. Joe... hurry!"

Cranston and Cardona ran to the fire exit door and through it. The M. E. looked at Carol. "Wonder what got into Cranston? He rarely gets excited. It certainly wasn't the fire..."

Racing down the stairs with what seemed like nightmare slowness, Cardona gasped, "What makes?"

Jumping down three and four steps at a time, Cranston said, "The killer must have set that fire... it's too fortuitous to be a coincidence."

"Yeah?"

"For what reason, I keep asking myself." Cranston glanced at the painted floor number in front of him. Three more flights to go and they might be too late at that. "I am sure the killer was one of those people in the studio upstairs."

"I think so too. So what?"

"All of them heard the telephone operator say that a camera fan was coming down with a movie of the murder."

"I get it." Cardona put on even more speed. There, just ahead, was the door to the street level. "The fire was to get the killer out of the studio so he can grab the movie!"

"That's what I fear!" Running still, the two men skidded on the concrete floor as they came out into the lobby. The actors and the agent and the director were separated in little groups.

En route to the entrance, Cranston asked, "Did the man with the movie get here?"

No one answered. Obviously he had not entered the building yet. The director, Cummings, said, "No one here but us mice."

Out on the street, the cold that cut at their faces felt good. Overheated by the fire and by their race down twenty-five floors, they stood still for a moment. Down the street, still blocks away, they could see and hear a careening fire engine approaching.

Cranston looked the other way. What was that?

They ran to the lump that was oddly incongruous in the snow. Black against white... with a little red.

CHAPTER IV

HE was such a little man. So wispy... a fringe of white hair around the nape of his neck fanned out on the snow and blended with it. The cold had closed the gash on the back of his head. It had bled briefly.

Cranston bent over. "He's still breathing."

"A couple more minutes out here and the cold would have finished him."

They picked him up and carried him toward the light of the building entrance. The fire engine careened to a halt. Cardona waved with one hand at the man who stepped off the engine. "Hi, Charlie!"

"Whatcha know, Joe?" the fireman said. He smiled.

Awkwardly, Cardona put his hand back under the little man's shoulders. As he did so, the little jouncing movement made the man's clothes move. Something dropped on to the icy snow. It made a clatter.

Stepping to one side with their burden between them, Cranston and Cardona looked down at the object. It was made of tin or aluminum and it was flat and round.

"Oh no... it can't be!" Cardona said incredulously.

"I wonder," Cranston said.

"Hey Charlie," Cardona called, "put this thing in my pocket, will you?"

"Sure," the fireman obliged. He asked, "What floor?"

"The twenty-fifth!" Cardona said.

"Wouldn't you know, on a night like this!" The fireman swore as he went back to his work.

Inside the lobby all the people gathered around as Cranston and the detective placed the little man down on the floor. Cranston said, "May I have that?" He pointed to a fur coat that was thrown over Iris Harrison's shoulders.

She flipped it to him and said, "He won't bleed on it, will he?"

The medical examiner turned the corners of his mouth down as he stepped past the girl. He got down on the floor where Cranston was edging the fur coat under the unconscious man. The doctor felt the wound on the man's head with gentle fingers. He flicked his pocket flash on and peered into the little man's ears.

"Any fracture?" Cranston asked.

"I don't think so. Just a concussion. He isn't going to be very happy when he wakes up, though."

"Can you bring him to in a hurry doc?" Cardona asked. "I'd like to find out if he knows who conked him."

"He'll wake up in a couple of minutes, normally. I'd rather not give him a shot. I don't know anything about his physical condition... his heart. Besides,"

the doctor got to his feet from the cramped position he'd been in, "I'm more used to corpses. My patients never complain."

"Everyone down from upstairs?" Cranston asked, looking around him.

"I'll count noses," Cary Cummings offered. He went down the line of people checking against his memory of who'd been at work upstairs.

"All present and accounted for," Cummings said. "That is, my people are all here. How about your men, Cardona?"

"They're all here." A thought struck Cardona. "The gun! Did anyone take it?"

"Relax." One of Cardona's men smiled. He reached into his pocket and took the gun, wrapped in the handkerchief, from his pocket.

"By the way," Cranston asked, "in the playlet, who really did the shooting?"

Cummings pointed to one of his men. "Tony Selkirk. He's one of the technicians. In television his job is the equivalent of a sound effects man in radio."

Selkirk grunted, "It's more like being a prop man in the movies."

"Did you aim at Mannix, or rather, Charters," Cranston asked.

"Sure. It was too far for him to get a powder burn from a blank.

"I wanted it to look good."

"It was a blank?" Cardona asked.

"Ya thick I'm nuts?" Selkirk was indignant. "No bullet coulda come out of that gun. Look in the muzzle."

Cardona did. About two inches inside the opening in the barrel was a bolt.

It went from the top to the bottom of the barrel. It effectually prevented a bullet from coming from a cartridge. It was a standard stage prop gun.

"That .22 never came from this gun, anyway," Cardona said. "That fire... now we won't be able to tell what the angle of the bullet that killed Charters was fired from."

"I think I know that."

They turned at the sound of a new voice. It was Miss Sterne's boy friend, Cranston saw. The one who played detective in the show. Johnny Brokaw.

"I haven't been making like a detective all this time for nothing," Brokaw

said getting into the character of Bob Dorry, master man hunter. "I took a good

look at the body and at the hole in his head."

"Nice testimony that'll make," Cardona said disgustedly, "when for all I know you're the killer!"

Cranston said, "I have a pretty good mental picture of the scene, Mr. Brokaw. Where do you think the bullet came from?"

"Right from where Selkirk fired with the prop gun!"

Cranston nodded. "I had that feeling too."

"If those firemen get to work fast enough maybe we'll be able to tell after all," Cardona said as the little man on the fur coat groaned and opened his eyes. Cardona fell to his knees next to him.

The little man said, "My film! Where is it?"

Cardona said, "Relax, we have it."

"Or do we..." Cranston said.

Cardona took the can from his pocket. "This it?" he asked the little man. "It looks like my film can, but is there anything in it?" the little man said, his voice muzzy. He blinked his eyes with pain as returning consciousness brought an ache in its wake.

Twisting the cover of the can, Cardona said, "We'll see in a moment." He was astounded when the can was wrenched from his hands by Cranston.

"The film hasn't been developed yet, has it?" Cranston snapped. There hadn't been time for that, he was sure.

"Oh no," the little man said, putting his hand to the spot on the back of his head where the pain emanated from.

Cranston held the can in front of the little man. "But this does look like your film can?"

"Let me look a little closer. There were three little scratches near the edge... yes, that seems to be mine."

Hefting the can, Cranston said, "It feels heavy enough to have the film in

it... but," he thought, then said, "That phone booth over there, Joe, have some

of your men hold their coats up in front of the glass in the door so no light comes through. Then we'll know a bit more."

"Just a second, Lamont." Cardona looked down at the man who was massaging his own head. "Did you see who hit you?"

"No, I'm afraid not. Is it important?"

"Umm... just a bit. Whoever it was is the killer of the man whose murder you took a movie of!"

"Oh dear... I might be able to 'put the finger' on a killer if I had seen him. My... isn't that exciting!" The little man did look excited. "You know, when I took a movie of that... I never foresaw all this. I just thought I was experimenting with mercury hyper-intensification of film." He saw, the puzzled look on Cardona's face and explained. "That increases the film speed. I thought

that taking a movie of a television show would be a good test of my speed because it's quite difficult to picture television, you know."

Cranston said, "Now, Joe?"

"Sure." Cardona delegated two of his men to go to the phone booth with Cranston. They effectively blocked off all the light with their coats. Inside the now pitch-black telephone booth Cranston opened the can of film. It held film, his fingers told him.

Quickly he replaced the precious film in its container and called: "Okay, let me out now."

He stepped out of the booth. He said, "If the killer didn't expose the film... and I don't see how he had time to unroll it all, expose it to the light and then neatly stuff it back in the can... why, we have the film..."

Another possibility occurred to Johnny Brokaw.

He said, "Look, do you think maybe the killer had another roll of film ready and switched in a dummy?"

"Could be," Cardona said impatiently. He didn't care for any amateur detectives outside of Cranston... and he was hardly an amateur.

"It's a little far-fetched that the killer could have predicted that anyone was going to take a movie..." Cummings, the director said.

Brokaw had an answer to that, "He didn't have to know that. All he had to know was where there was a roll of sixteen millimetre film and then switch that

in after he heard about the phone call."

"There's no use hypotheating," Cranston said, "till this roll of film has been developed."

"Sure, that's right," Cardona agreed.

Cranston realized that all the time that they had been occupied with their man hunt, the firemen had been busy putting the fire out. Some firemen came out of the elevator.

One said, "Under control."

"Can we go back up?" Cardona asked.

"Give us ten more minutes," the fireman said.

"Listen," Cardona was eager. "Is the corpse still all right?"

"A little crisp around the edges," the fireman said, which drew gasps from the women in the lobby, "but outside of that, it's as good as you can expect a corpse to be."

When they went back up to the studio, they had to walk carefully. The floors were drenched from the firemen's hoses. They entered the studio with Cardona in the lead. He went straight to the corpse. He said, "We better get you down to the morgue quick, pally, before anything else happens to you."

Cranston handed him the roll of film. "At the same time have one of the men in the photography lab develop this!"

The little man who still was not identified said breathlessly, "would it be an imposition if I asked to direct the development? The hyper-intensification is tricky, you know, and the film needs that extra speed to get the pictures, under the circumstances."

"That's not a bad idea, Mr...." Cardona said.

"Twittle. Jasper Twittle," the little man said, puffing his chest out like a pouter pigeon. "At your service. Always ready to obey the dictates of good citizenry. And it certainly seems to me that a good citizen should try to catch a murderer!"

He scowled ferociously and looked around from face to face as though expecting to be able to frighten the killer into confessing all.

Dan Depper, the agent, laughed and pounded his knee. "Now I've seen everything. A ferocious canary." It got a laugh, and the little man deflated. He scurried out with the man whom Cardona had delegated to take him down to headquarters.

"I don't know about the resta' you creeps," Depper said, "but, me, I want out. You holding us, copper? I got a date with a blond." He made a curving gesture in the air with both hands.

"And what a blond!" Cummings said. "Is it still that one that looks like an animated dishmop?"

"Why don't you do me a favor," Depper snarled, "and drop dead."

"One nice thing about her, you'll have to admit," Brokaw said, "she always leaves her broom outside the door when she comes in."

"That's right," Cummings agreed, "I don't think I've ever seen her riding it."

The director hired and fired actors, so Depper could not get too tough with him, Cranston realized. He watched as Depper turned his annoyance on Cardona.

"Do I have to call my lawyer or do I walk out of here?"

"Funny," Cardona pretended to muse. "Here's a whole flock of people all being kept up, being kept away from home on a lousy cold night, and only one, just one person is upset about it." He looked at Depper broodingly. "I wonder why..."

Depper flushed and turned away. As he did so, the door opened and four men entered with a long basket. One of them said to Cardona, "Sorry we're late,

but

they're dyin' like flies in this cold... you know, a lush has a couple too many; steps out in the cold, collapses, and the next thing you know, he's a D.O.A."

They looked at the charred body on the floor. One whistled, "A hot one on a night like this. You never know."

"Got your pics?" One of them asked Cardona, who nodded.

"Let's go." They carried their grim burden out with as much sentimentality as if they were carrying dirty laundry.

Cardona came over to Cranston, "Nothing else much to do tonight. I may as well send them home, no?"

Nodding, Cranston said, "Why not?" He paused, "We've got to know a lot more about what's been going on around here before we can do a thing. We don't know anything about motivations, or anything else for that matter."

"All we do know is a guy got shot by a gun that couldn't shoot, with a bullet that wouldn't fit, in front of ten thousand witnesses," Cardona said disconsolately. "For a reason we don't know, either!"

CHAPTER V

BEFORE Cranston left the studio, but after the people had left, Cranston asked that Cardona have the fire department scoop all the ashes out of the fireplace on the set. Cardona had wanted to know why, but all Cranston had said

was that he wanted a chemical analysis of the ashes and embers. Cranston had asked a question in querying Cummings, the director: "Who was the last of the television people to leave?" It had had to do with why a set would have a working fireplace. Cummings had said, "Just because it was cold up here in the studio. There's a flue here, so as long as the prop men were setting up a fireplace I had them make it a real one that worked. It kept us a lot warmer too."

That ended all that could be done that night, but for one thing. Cardona had kidded Cranston about taking home work along with him... the script that had been used for murder.

And now, at long last, safe and warm at home, Cranston had read the script. He didn't quite know what he had expected to find. A departure, perhaps, from the ordered way blueprinted by the script... some anomaly, some clue... but there was nothing. All that he had learned from the script was that

the show had been in complete accord with it, as far as his memory could prove.

Perhaps, he thought, as he put out the light preparatory to sleep, perhaps

the running of the movie would show some discrepancy between the script and what

had actually happened.

Tired out, he was soon asleep.

And what of the cast of that deadly drama? Eric Jamison, who had portrayed

Homer Elwood... a murderer in the script... was in a bar getting as drunk as he

could before the four o'clock last call went out. He was succeeding very well. He weaved as he made his way from the men's room back to the bar. His body was getting drunk but his mind wasn't. He could not erase that picture of Charters'

body falling face forward into the fireplace... the red of blood mingling with

the red of fire. He poured another futile drink down his throat.

Cary Cummings? Director and writer of the script that had turned tinselled death to real? He was sitting in his attractive bachelor home going over and over what had happened. Murder... fire... no, he was forgetting. First, Carol Sterne's dress had been torn so that she could not perform. Then had come the killing and the fire. Stirring some butter into a glass of hot milk, he drank it queasily, hoping that this would help him to woo sleep. That made him think of the line, 'To sleep, perchance to dream'... Yes, perhaps sleep would knit up the ravelled sleeve of care, but what when that sleeve has been burned and not unraveled? He forgot where he had read the misquotation from Shakespeare, but it seemed apposite to the spot he was in...

Carol Sterne? She and Johnny Brokaw were just coming out of an all night movie on Forty-Second Street between Broadway and Eighth. They had talked in tones so low that they had not awakened a single one of the sleeping men who surrounded them. No victims of the housing shortage these, but men who would ordinarily have gone to a flophouse on the Bowery. Tonight the cold had driven them indoors uptown.

"What can we do?" Carol said hopelessly.

Squeezing her shoulder reassuringly, Brokaw said, "The old medicine man prescribes a full night's sleep. Tomorrow things will look better. They always do. Look at the time. It's almost four!"

"Johnny... do me a favor?"

"Anything in the world, sweets, outside of going for a swim in the river! It's a little brisk for me." He pulled his overcoat collar up around his neck. A vagrant wind had driven sleet down between his collar and his bare neck.

"Don't play detective."

"Huh?" He looked astonished.

"Johnny Brokaw, you can be the most annoying... you're like a little boy. Do you think for one minute you're kidding me?" Her pert pretty face looked up at him. "You're hankering to show up the police and Lamont Cranston, aren't you?"

"You gotta admit," he said doggedly, avoiding her eyes, "it'd be swell publicity for the Bob Dorry show!"

"Uh huh." She turned away without a word and went to the subway kiosk. He ran after her.

"All right," he said, grudgingly, "I won't... I promise." She reached around behind him and pulled his hands into view. Her fingers uncrossed his. She said, "Think I don't know you that well?"

"Oh brother! What a wife you're going to make!"

"That's just it, I want you to live long enough to make me your wife. And if you start tangling with whoever killed Charters you may not live that long!"

"You mean," he grinned, "I should live that long?"

"Correct!" She smiled and kissed him. She turned and walked into the kiosk.

He said sharply, "Where do you think you're going at this time of night?"

"Home." She looked surprised.

"By yourself at this hour in the subway?" He grabbed her arm and went down into the subway with her.

"This is so sudden!" she said. "Maybe you do love me! You never took me home before!"

"I never kept you out this late before."

They were lost in the chaos that is Times Square.

Teddy Page - who had portrayed Mrs. Mannix? She was sound asleep in the well-kept apartment. Of course, the way she moved and made sounds in her sleep, she was probably having nightmares. But asleep she was. Next to her on a night table was a bottle of sleeping pills.

Iris Harrison, who might or might not have ripped Carol Sterne's dress to pieces so she could perform instead of Carol? She was the only girl awake in the apartment she shared with three others. She sat on an easy chair with an unread book in her hands. She was staring off into space. She put the book to one side and picked up her pocketbook. From it she took a compact.

She powdered her nose.

If only she hadn't had such a good motive to have killed Charters...

She sighed and turned the light out. Then she went to bed, but not to sleep.

Victor Blaine - who had played Vic Todd? He pushed his hat further back on his head, edged his chair in closer to the table and said, "Your five, and ten bucks better." The others folded their cards and threw them into the center of the table. One man said, disgust in his voice, "There's a boy that has all the luck in the world."

Blaine grinned. Yes indeed, he was Kid Luck in person. He raked in the chips.

Danny Depper, agent, ten percenter, flesh peddler as he was known to his enemies? He was having a fight. He just ducked as long red nails scratched down

the side of his cheek. He said, "But look, honey..."

The bleached blond looked at him with cold fury in her eyes and said, "Don't you honey me, you fat tub of lard! Now you listen to me for a change..."

It went on that way for a long, long time.

Larry Charters - who had played the part of Mr. Mannix, a man due to die, and had played his part too well?... He lay on a cold slab of stone, cut open from his neck to below his navel. His body was spread out like newspaper.

The top of his head, having been cut off by a saw, lay on the slab behind him like a horrid skull cap. He just lay there. His sightless eyes stared at the ceiling.

Having been a cynical man in life, if he could have made a toast he might have, saying, "Here's to the next man to die."

But of course, he couldn't.

Just the same there was an empty slab next to him. The question was, how long it would stay empty!

CHAPTER VI

CLAWING his way up through endless layers of sleep, Cranston forced his eyes open. When he saw the dim gray light coming in through his windows he wondered what had awakened him in the middle of the night. Not till he saw that it was nine-thirty did he realize that it was long past the time for him to be

up and around.

His phone was what had opened his eyes. He picked it up and grunted hello.

"Mr. Cranston, this is Timmy Rogers on the Globe. Remember me?"

Fresh young kid, reporter. Cranston smiled. "Yes, sure. What can I do for you?"

"Cardona has jailed Tony Selkirk. I wonder... is there any way you could get me an interview with him? It's some story... the guru who killed a man in the home of everybody who owns a television set!"

Selkirk? Selkirk... Cranston thought muzzily. Of course, that was the prop man, the technician, the one who had actually shot the gun. Aloud, he said, "Is Cardona holding him as a material witness, or what?"

"Material witness my foot! He's holding him as the killer. That's why I wanna get an interview with him!" The boy's voice was high with excitement.

Take it easy," Cranston counselled. "Call me later in the day. I'll see what I can do for you."

"Thanks a million, Mr. Cranston. Don't hesitate to call me if I can ever help you."

Hanging up the phone. Cranston smiled at the boy. The smile faded. What in the world had possessed Cardona to do this? He dialled Center St. Cardona had gone home for some sleep.

Should he wake him? Yes, this was certainly an important enough development. He dialled Cardona's number. It rang and rang.

Finally Cardona's voice, thick, barked, "Huh."

"Cranston here. Joe, why did you throw the book at Selkirk?"

"He fired the shot, didn't he?"

"Yes, from a blank gun."

"Look Lamont, I know that. But what can I do? Everyone's on my neck. I don't think he killed that guy any more than you did. I had to cover. Give me a couple of days till I can get a lead on the thing."

"I see. It can't be very pleasant for Selkirk..."

"He laughed at me!"

"I see. I think I'll pay him a visit later on today."

"Bring him some crumpets if you wanna, but now, right now, please let me go back to sleep, huh?"

Getting out of bed, Cranston thought, maybe it's not too bad an idea at that. The newspapers would of course be riding the police hard... this would shut them up for a while... and it also would let the killer relax a bit, unless Selkirk was the real killer, but that didn't seem very likely.

First things first, he thought, shaving. He had to go to the Fire Department and find out what had been in that fire in the fireplace.

Dressed, shaved, and on the icy street, he realized that he'd probably feel better, warmer, if he got some food in him. He bought all the morning papers and went into a restaurant in his neighborhood.

With a good breakfast inside him, he was able to pay more attention to the papers. They were sensational, to put it politely. The murder had certainly captured the public fancy.

There was no information he didn't already possess.

Rising, he left the restaurant. He looked up and down the street. Shrevvie

was parked there, ready and waiting. He gestured to him.

The cab drove up to him. Shrevvie leaned out the window belligerently.

"Ya send me home early to put chains on my tires and what happens? Ya walk right smack into the middle of trouble! Next time I'll stick with you till

you're safe in bed!"

Smiling, Cranston got into the cab. He had given Shrevvie directions. Going downtown they passed cabs, cars, stuck in the snow, people slipping, sliding all over the icy streets. "When it's hot in summer, ya pray for the winter... then ya get this and ya wonder why ya didn't keep yer yap shut in the summer." Shrevvie said philosophically, "People just ain't never satisfied with what they got."

"That's right, Shrevvie, and if they had ever been satisfied, we'd probably still be living in caves with no fires, and very little food."

"A cave? No fire?" Shrevvie shivered sympathetically. "Guess this ain't so bad at that." As he said this he pulled the wheel over hard, which allowed the cab to just miss a jaywalker who strode head down, blind to what went on around him.

"There's a guy should be back in one of them caves. He'd be better off."

Cranston smiled and looked about him. They were but a block away from his destination. He was putting a lot of hope in what the fire department experts would find in those ashes, he realized. It was a long shot... but if it didn't win, there would be another angle to shoot at. He, hoped.

The lab assistant said, "Oh yes, Mr. Cranston, Dr. Farrell is expecting you. Won't you go into the office?"

Walking past the tables filled with paraphernalia that ranged from test tubes to an electron microscope, Cranston thought, at least we'll have the best of what science has to offer.

"How do you do, Dr. Farrell?"

"Good to see you, Lamont. Grab a chair. Here's the report. I'll go on working till you finish reading it."

Glancing over it, Cranston saw that the quantitative report was about what one would expect: charcoal, potash, charred sulphite paper (that would be the remains of some newsprint used to start the fire). He ran his eye down the list. Odd... unless... he asked, "Did you find anything in this list that you would not have expected to find?"

The doctor glanced up from some paper work he was busy with. He looked off into space. "You're on the trail of something?"

"I don't really know. It's a little better than a hunch, that's all."

"Then the answer is yes, there is something I would not have expected to find in the remains of a fire in a fireplace."

Cranston mentally crossed his fingers. "What?"

The doctor ran his finger down the list that Cranston had read, and said, "There's too much potassium nitrate for one thing, and there's more sulphur residue than I'd expect from some newspaper."

"And a lot of charcoal in one spot!" Cranston said triumphantly.

"Right. I didn't know you knew, but there was." The doctor looked at Cranston quizzically. But Cranston said nothing for a long moment.

When he did, he said, "May I use your phone?"

"Of course." The doctor pretended to go back to work, but his ears were alert.

Cranston dialled the police laboratory. "Hello, this is Lamont Cranston. Ah, hello, Dick. Got the ballistic report on the .22 bullet yet?"

There was a silence during which the doctor could hear the thin-voiced answer that came from the phone: "Yeah, sure. Here it is, right here. It is a .22, not a .25. It has been fired from a fouled barrel. It's pretty battered,

but I can match the rifling with whatever it was fired from."

Hanging up, Cranston smiled a crooked smile. He said, "That's fine. Now I know the method and not the killer." He stood up.

Dr. Farrell said, "If I know you it won't be long."

"Bye and thanks a million," Cranston said.

"See you in church." The doctor went back to his work.

As Cranston reached the street, a newsboy was hawking papers. Cranston bought one and glanced over it as he got Shrevvie's cab. Nothing new. He folded

it up. Getting in the cab, he said, "Forty-Fifth and Broadway."

Shrevvie did a double take at that, but obeyed directions. He stopped in front of a battered old theatrical building. Getting out, Cranston said, "You can't park here, so keep riding around the block."

"See you," Shrevvie said as he drove off.

Even the mid-winter chill, Cranston saw, was not enough to keep the members of the theatre off the street. Men in long, too long, camel's hair overcoats with white buttons and long wrap-around belts, lounged in front of the building. They spoke to little men who looked like bookies. If they were not talking to men, they were talking to flashy looking girls who, at first glance, were clad in mink and stone marten. A second glance showed that the coats were muskrat in various dyes.

Cranston wondered, as he always did, how they kept themselves alive. One man said, as Cranston walked into the building, "So he offers me two fifty! Me!

Two bills and a half!"

The girl said, as if she didn't know, "What did you say, honey?"

The ham said, "What do you think I said? I walked out on him after tellin' him what he could do with his lousy two hundred and fifty bucks. I slammed the door in his face!"

"Tch tch," the girl said, just as if she didn't know the ham would work three shows a night for ten dollars and be grateful, too.

It was easy to tell which men were the 'acts' and which the booking agents. The 'acts' all had a little rim of reddish brown around their collars where improperly cleaned-off make-up had left a tell tale mark. The bookers, besides not having the edge of color on their collars, looked better-fed.

Cranston looked at the names on the directory. There it was, Mickey Caller. Ten twelve. He crowded into an elevator filled with men and women all of whose voices were pitched high enough so that they could have been heard at two hundred yards.

A rather pretty girl was saying, "No matter how bad the summer seems, there's always the mountains to fill-in. But winter... oh, brother!"

The man she was with said with a grin, "What's the matter darling, got the miss-meal cramps?"

"Either that," the girl said with a grim smile, "or doughnut and coffee ulcers."

"If the bookers don't get you the ulcers must," the man sang in a monotone.

At the tenth floor, Cranston got out of the car along with three men and a

girl. They walked as if they owned the earth. Heads held high, they wore neckties so loud that they distracted your eye from the ragged cuffs, the worn,

thin coats. They went into the same office he was heading for. Without looking up a thin girl said, "Sorry, kids, not a thing today."

They roared with a single voice, "Stop! Don't say that till you've heard who we are. The finest quartette since the Ink Spots!"

She looked up incuriously. "Oh," she said, dully, "it's you again." She looked at the leader of the group. "Why don't you see if you can get your job

back as an usher, Willie. It's gonna be a long hard winter."

He grimaced at her. They all went over to a long bench and without another word sat down upon it. Finally one said, "I wish Mickey would at least listen to our new orchestrations."

The girl behind the desk said without looking up, "Been listening to the radio again?"

Cranston interrupted, "Will you please tell Mr. Caller that Mr. Cranston is here to see him."

"Mr. Caller yet!" the girl said as she flipped the switch on the inter-com. "Aren't we formal!"

Waiting, Cranston looked at the photos on the wall. They were invariably glossy eight by tens, and just as invariably, be they men or women, they were signed with extravagant protestations of undying love to the best booker in the world.

The voice that came back on the inter-com was harsh. "What? What do you want?"

"A guy out here to see Mr. Caller."

"Only bill collectors call me by my second name. Tell him to go away."

"His name is Cranston," the girl said. She was rather surprised at the response this got. The voice crackled on the inter-com, "Send him in. What are you waitin' for?"

As Cranston pushed the little gate to one side, he heard the girl on the bench say, "How do you like that for nerve! Comes in after us and gets in first!"

The door opened. Mickey was about fifty and could have passed as the original Mr. Five By Five. He was as wide as he was tall. Years of wrestling had given him the inevitable cauliflower ears, and shiny skin under and around the eyes that come from mat burns and having elbows shoved in eyes.

He grabbed Cranston in a bear hug and said, "Professor! C'mon in!"

The door closed. Feeling his ribs beginning to cave in, Cranston eased out of his friend's grasp. He put out his hand cautiously to shake hands. He made sure that he got a good grip on the extended hand. That done they went through a regular routine. Caller grinned and squeezed as hard as he could, Cranston squeezed as hard as he could, and pretended that his hand didn't feel as if it were coming off at the wrist.

That taken care of, Caller sat down behind his desk, pushed a box of cigars toward Cranston with his foot, opened a desk drawer, took out a bottle and said, "Have a drink, have a cigar, tell me what's on your mind. I got all day."

Taking a cigar and refusing the drink, Cranston said, "All day? What about the people outside?"

"You kiddin'? I couldn't book them into a flea circus. The fleas would take the draw away from them."

"Hasn't anyone ever told them they're no good?"

"Nobody but everyone. But they won't believe it. You know, they win first prize in an amateur night, or they sing at a party or a bar and everyone says, 'Jeez, you're good... whyncha go on the stage? I heard an act, at the Paramount

last week wasn't half so good!'" The booking agent grinned. "That's all, brother. They quit their jobs and start botherin' people like me.

"Now... what's on your mind? The sky's the limit. You know that... after what you did for me that time..."

Cranston shrugged that away. "Forget it. I just need some information."

"Fergit it he says!" Caller said incredulously. "You only saved my life!"

Smiling, Cranston threw a slip of paper on the desk. There was a list of

names on it. "What do you know about any of those people?"

Rotating his stub of a cigar from side to side in his mouth without using a hand, Caller slitted his battered eyes and read the list.

He said, "Humm... quite a tidy little collection."

"You know any of them?"

"Most of them. They generally start around here and then work into radio, television or the movies if they got anything on the ball." Caller looked at one name and said, "This guy I don't know from a snake act."

"Who?" Cranston asked, wishing his friend would smoke better cigars.

"Eric Jamison. Although he coulda changed his name. They're always doin' it fer luck... or because they were in some stinker and don't want people to remember it. You get some guy who's worked in men's rooms all over the country"... Cranston knew that 'men's rooms' meant cheap night clubs... "and he

finally gets a break, so he don't want some creep to come up and say I saw you when you worked the little Tivoli out in Kenosha. So they change their names."

Caller always spoke of actors as though they were some inferior form of animal life, about on a par with chipmunks... or weasels. He said, "But this creep, Cummings, Cary Cummings yet. His name's Charley Crumbo as far as I'm concerned."

"Not a nice guy?"

"A creep. He'd promise to sell his mother down the river if he thought it would get him to Hollywood."

"How about Charters?"

"The guy that got his last night? Worse than Cummings. Cummings would promise to sell his mother; but Charters woulda come through with her!"

"How about the girls?" Cranston asked, discounting a lot of what Caller said for he knew what the agent thought of actors.

"This here Carol Sterne was a nice kid last time I saw her. Don't know what's happened to her since then, but she used to be nice."

"When did you see her last?"

"A couple of days ago," Caller said. He looked puzzled when Cranston roared with laughter.

"But," he said, when Cranston had stopped laughing, "this Iris Harrison! There is a nogoodnick if there ever was one. A wrongo from the word go."

His eye lit on Danny Depper's name. His face contorted like a rubber doll's and he said, "That louse! If agents didn't have a bad name already there's a boy who would ruin us all by himself."

"That louse!" Caller repeated. "Listen, you could sit right in that chair for a week and I could talk steady and I still wouldn't be finished at the end of the week, telling you the crumby deals that guy's put over! He's a rat with a small 'r.' No kiddin', I never can figure how that guy's lived so long!"

CHAPTER VII

STANDING looking up at the flickering lights that spelled out news as they

went off and on around the rim of the Times Building, Danny Depper drew his white camel's hair coat closer around him.

The letters spelled out, "Cold and getting colder."

He put his hand to his neck and pulled the muffler which was a bright yellow, closer to his neck. It was about time he went to Florida, he figured. No use in hanging around this place. He walked away from Times Square toward Eighth Avenue. He looked at a girl who was walking toward him. He grinned. She stared right through him. He was used to that. He threw his shoulders back farther and walked on cockily.

He passed the all-night grind shows, the frankfurter stands, the Army and Navy stores, the theatre that used to house burlesque but was now a movie, the flea circus, the office buildings, then the bank. He stood at the corner of

Eighth. He looked at his wristwatch. He glanced around him, ogled a girl.

That jerk! Thinking about how stupid the killer was, he grinned. This was going to pay for a lot more than the trip to Florida. In his pockets the palms of his hands got sweaty as he thought of how much money this was going to make him.

He grinned. Old age insurance, that was what it was.

He looked at his watch again. Three more minutes. He'd put the screws on... A policeman passed. That made Depper smile again. A lot of good the cops would do the murderer.

A milling crowd of people hurrying by, scurried down into the subway next to him. He looked at them. The sheep... they were not smart... they wouldn't have known what to do with the plum that had dropped into his lap. But he knew!

He jumped as a voice came over his shoulder. It said, "The subway?"

Without looking around he nodded and walked down the steps to the subway. It was almost five o'clock. The rush was beginning. Used to crowds from birth, he felt completely safe surrounded by humans. If he'd been alone he might have worried a bit about what he was doing. But here, with all these people he was completely safe... as long as he kept away from the edge of the station. No use

in giving the killer a chance to push him under the wheels of a train.

The jam was so bad that he couldn't even turn around to face his companion. They went, like Siamese twins, into a train that was going uptown.

He phrased it carefully so that anyone nearby would not understand. He said, "Shall we make the arrangements now?"

"Why not?" the voice whispered over his shoulder.

The train pulled out of the Times Square station. It was the Eighth Avenue

subway, which makes the longest unbroken hop of any subway to the city. It went

from Forty-Second Street to Fifty-Ninth, and from Fifty-Ninth all the way to One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street with no stop in between.

Depper said, "You got the ough-day with you?"

"Of course," the voice said over his shoulder, "I'll put it in your overcoat pocket."

He felt something go into his pocket. His arms were up, the jam was so tight that he couldn't bring an investigating hand to his pocket. But he grinned anyway. He said, "You understand this is just the first installment!"

He felt a convulsive shiver go through the body of the killer which was jammed so close to him.

"You rat!" The voice, was husky with rage. "I might have known."

"You mean to say," Depper said, "That you believed me when I said this would be all? You know what a liar I am, kid."

"Yes," the voice said, "I know."

The train came into the Fifty-Ninth Street station. Eeling, fighting, the killer made a path out of the train.

Not many people got off the train at a Hundred Twenty-Fifth. Between a Hundred Twenty-Fifth and a Hundred Thirty-Fifth a woman wrenched her neck around and said, "If you do that once more..." She looked at Depper. His eyes were closed. Pretending to be asleep... that was an old gag! She wrenched her hand up and slapped him in the face as he touched her again. The slap jarred his head back on his shoulders. But he didn't say anything. She turned her head

back feeling vindicated. She'd shown him a thing or two. Suddenly she felt his hand rap against her again. The man must be crazy!

She hurried out of the train at One Hundred and Forty-Fifth Street. That made a little more space. Depper crumpled in on himself. There still was not room for his body to fall straight down.

People drew back even farther. This allowed his body to uncrumple a bit.

A

man who had been behind Depper looked down at the body stupidly. Then he looked at the front of his overcoat. It was all wet. He felt it. He looked at his fingers. They were all red.

A little rivulet of blood seeped out of Depper's back into the interstices of the wooded strips that cover the floor of a subway car.

So Danny Depper died unmourned and without ever knowing that his was the important murder; that the other, the death of Charters had just been a prelude to this killing.

The report of Depper's death reached H.Q. as Cranston was reading over some evening papers. Cardona had come into work looking tired out. He had gone about his work paying no attention to his friend who sat with his nose buried in the papers.

He picked up the phone and snapped his fingers for Cranston's attention. Cranston lowered the paper and looked up. He heard Cardona say, "On the subway?"

I see... go ahead. Uh huh..." He hung the phone up.

He grimaced, "Depper got his in the subway."

"How?" Cranston asked.

"Knife in the back," Cardona said. "Died instantly. No outcry. No one knew he was dead till the crush thinned out and he fell to the floor."

"Eye witnesses?"

"Nah... nobody realized anything was wrong! The killer stabbed him and beat it out of the train, I'll bet. I'll bet too that the killer wasn't on the train when the corpse hit the deck."

"Mmmm." Cranston thought, then said, "From what I heard this afternoon: Depper has knifed enough people on his own."

"Literally?"

"No. Cheating, bad business... that kind of thing," said Cranston. Then he said, "Got Depper's address?"

"Sure. I got all their addresses last night."

"Shall we go?"

"Sure."

In the police car, Cranston made conversation. "Read the papers, Joe?"

"Some."

"'Constant Reader' has had time to take pen in hand and express himself."

"Yeah, I read some of them. Dillies, aren't they?"

"The general tenor seems to be that they saw the murder and when they saw it they knew the detective in the playlet was wrong... that it wasn't Homer Elwood at all."

"What's his real name again?"

"Eric Jamison."

The driver of the car turned the siren on. Cardona snapped, "Turn that damn thing off!"

"Yeah, sure. Sorry." The driver didn't look sorry, but puzzled. Cardona must be having trouble.

"Everyone, including Johnny Brokaw, seems to have the idea they'd be better detectives than the police force," Cardona said, irritably.

"Brokaw has been bothering you?"

"He's been on the phone with some screwy idea or other about fifteen times

today." Cardona stopped and said, "Didn't I tell you to turn that siren off."

"I did!" The driver was indignant. "That's not from our car. Look... down the street there. That's a fire engine!"

"Oh no!" Cardona shook his head in disgust. "This is too much! That house that's on fire! That's where Daniel Depper lived and ran his office!"

The whole top floor of the seven story building was ablaze. Flames shot high in the winter sky, red against the grey they looked even redder because of the contrast.

"What floor did he live on?" Cranston asked hopefully.

"The top," Cardona said, completely deflated.

CHAPTER VIII

STANDING on the street, they looked at the busy firemen. Cranston said, "We'll just be in the way here."

"Let's have some coffee till they have it under control." Cardona agreed. They stepped across the serpentine coils of hose that filled the street in front of Depper's house.

Across the street in a lunch counter, the two friends sat and sipped their coffee and watched the firemen going about their business of outwitting man's oldest friend, and enemy. There was no smoke coming from the roof now.

"Firebug besides being a killer?" Cardona asked.

"I don't think so. The fire in the studio was for a reason. I think this one was set for a reason too. Wouldn't be surprised if the reason was one of the causes of Depper's death."

"Could be," Cardona said tiredly. The firemen were just about finished now.

Cranston gulped down the last of coffee and said, "Say, I meant to ask you before, but things have been popping so fast I haven't had the chance."

"What?"

"The movie film. Is it developed?"

Looking even more disconsolate, Cardona said, "Yeah. It's been developed."

"Have you run it off yet?"

"Uh huh."

"Well?"

Cardona ran his hands through his thinning hair. "Without giving this murderer credit for being a superman, do you think he could have known that Jasper Twittle was going to make a movie of the television show?"

"Seems pretty far-fetched, unless Twittle and the killer are friends."

"I know... I know. And yet... when I ran the film off... it was of the kill."

"I see."

"Only thing I can figure is that the killer had a dummy film taken at rehearsal maybe... and he switched it in!"

"I wonder."

"Why would a smart character like our killer set fire to the studio, get away from a group of people without anyone noticing it, clout Twittle on the head, open the can of film and then not fog it or set fire to it?"

"It doesn't seem to add up, at that."

"If on the other hand the killer had a dummy film and that was switched in, why then the thing makes a little more sense."

"You think," Cranston said, "that there was some clue to the killer's identity in the actual filming of the murder?"

"Some little thing that he got worried about when he heard Twittle was on the way down..." Cardona poured his coffee down his throat and lit a cigarette.

"Knowing how unreliable eye witness testimony is, he figured he was safe even if ten thousand people were watching the playlet. But he feared what would happen if we could run the film over and over again."

"Seems to me if your hypothesis is correct, it shouldn't be too hard to find which of the people concerned could have been a friend of Twittle."

"That little guy!" Cardona shook his head. "I couldn't get him out of headquarters after he acted as overseer on developing the film. Characters... nothing but characters."

They walked out of the luncheonette.

Cranston said, "In one way, that's the most important thing for us to keep in mind in this case."

"Huh?" Cardona's attention was focussed on the building across the street.

From what he could see the top floor was gutted.

"They're all characters. Actors... who have a different slant on life than

the man in the street. They get so used to their little world of make-believe that they react differently to stimuli than an ordinary person: They have a different sense of values, we must remember."

"I see what you mean."

"For instance," Cranston said as they walked across the street, "take the question of billing. An agent friend of mine was telling me this afternoon that

he had just lived through a fight with two of his acts. He booked both acts, both men, into the same hotel.

"They both were making the same amount of money. But one was booked in as the star act and the other as the 'extra added attraction.'"

"Sounds like they're big time."

"They are. That's what makes this so curious. The star got upset because the other had the 'added attraction' billing. So he started a feud."

"A feud? That's kind of stupid isn't it? Customers don't like that."

"Well... this was a rather unusual feud. Let's say both their acts were to run thirty minutes. That's a long time for a single to perform."

"It is indeed." Cardona was interested now.

"The feud began this way. The star, on the first night performed for thirty-five minutes instead of half an hour."

"And?"

"The 'extra added attraction' got annoyed so when he came on he performed for forty minutes!"

"Ye gods!"

"That was at the first, or supper show. It got worse! At the midnight show

the 'added attraction' stayed on for three quarters of an hour. The other went on and stayed on for an hour!"

"Isn't that stupid!"

"Yep. The agent was trying to beat some sense into their heads when I left... but I doubt if he'll be able to get anything done."

"They'll both wind up being cancelled out!"

"Sure, that's what my agent friend is afraid of. But here are two grown men engaged in a fight that neither can win, jeopardizing their professional lives for the sake of the difference between being the star act and the added attraction act."

"To say nothing of the fact that they're making more work for themselves... and not getting paid for it!"

"Right. I say we must keep that kind of thing in mind in dealing with these people."

"You're so right," Cardona said as they went into the building. A fireman

saw them and walked over.

"And where do you think you're goin'?"

Cardona flashed his badge on the fireman. "We don't think! We're going upstairs!"

"Like that, huh?" The fireman got out of the way.

The elevator only went up to the floor below where the fire had been. The operator said, "I don't think I better go all the way up yet."

"Okay. One flight won't kill us," Cardona said as he and Cranston heeled and toed their way out of the car and up the stairs.

Whimsically, as is the way with fires, the door to the apartment was uninjured: As a matter of fact, it was still locked on the inside.

They looked at the door standing all by itself. The wall around the door was gone. They could see into what remained of the apartment.

There had once been an office in this room they saw, as they stepped over a charred jagged remnant of wall. In the center of the room was the skeleton of a desk.

With their backs to them, two filing cabinets stood almost completely uninjured. They were metal and the fire had messed up the paint on them, but that was all.

Cardona said, "What luck!"

"You think so..."

"Sure; the fire couldn't have injured anything in the filing cabinets... maybe we can get a line on Depper's affairs after all!"

They walked around and looked at the front of the cabinets. Cardona groaned. The doors were pulled all the way out. A pile of ash in front of the cabinets showed that the one who had set the fire had emptied the contents of the cabinets on the floor.

"That would have been too much to hope for," Cranston said. "Our killer is no fool!"

"But I'm beginning to feel like one," Cardona answered as he walked around the remains of the apartment. The metal coils of a couch and an arm chair as well as the bent shape of a typewriter were the only other things in this room.

Water was an inch deep around their feet as they walked into what once was a bedroom. Cardona said, "An office and a bedroom... there was a one-track minded boy."

"The one track was pretty unpleasant, too." Cranston said.

"You got some dirt on him from your agent friend, didn't you? Anything useful?"

"Just what I told you before, that Depper was not a very nice person," Cranston said, "and that's the understatement of the week."

"We better let the fire department take over sifting these ashes," Cardona said.

A dry voice said, "Thanks."

They turned around. A fire chief stood in the doorway.

"Hi, Wardlow," Cardona said. "Can you tell how this was torched?"

"Not yet, but give my boys down in the lab time and they'll tell you," the big, bluff, hearty, red cheeked man said.

They left the building. In the police car, Cranston said, "Have you read the script of the playlet?"

"I've read it and I've looked at the movie film till I'm blue in the face.

But I don't get anything from them."

Cranston took his copy out of his pocket. He pointed to the list of

characters. Next to their names he had pencilled their real names.

The list read, Eliot Mannix - Charters. There was an X next to his name.

Maria Mannix - Teddy Page

Letty Branner - Iris Harrison

Homer Elwood - Eric Jamison

Roddy Hogan - after this was a series of question marks.

Vic Todd - Victor Blane

Bob Dorry - Johnny Brokaw

Cary Cummings - Director

Danny Depper - agent. This too had an X.

Cardona looked at the list. "Who's Roddy Hogan?"

"The invisible man," Cranston said. "I wondered the first time I read the list, for he wasn't in the show I saw on the television broadcast. There were just the two girls and four men, not five."

"We'll ask Cummings about that."

"It may be one of the things to tell us whether the movie film we have is the real one or a duplicate that's been switched in."

"How's that?"

"Looks to me as if he were meant to be in the show and then for some reason was taken out. If he was in all the rehearsals and not in the real show,

we'll know about the film. Was there a stranger in the film you saw?"

Corrugating his forehead, Cardona looked out the window of the speeding car. "Talk about eye witness testimony... I don't remember."

"We can check easily enough."

"What's the other way of checking the film?"

"A ball of fire," Cranston said cryptically. The car drove up in front of headquarters. They got out of it.

Before Cardona could ask the meaning of this, a uniformed policeman came up to him.

"Phew," he said, "the commissioner is hopping like crazy. He wants to see you, but quick."

"Wouldn't you know," Cardona swore under his breath.

"Want me to come along to ease the tension?" Cranston smiled.

"That'd be a life saver."

"Where is he?" Cardona asked the policeman.

"Up in the projection room looking at that movie."

They hurried to meet the commissioner. He was sitting in the dark as they came in. On the little projection screen the film had come to the point in the playlet where Mannix, or Charters, was sitting looking into the fireplace.

The door on the screen opened as Cardona and Cranston sat down next to the

commissioner. Through the door the hand with the gun came into view.

Cranston glanced at the commissioner. He was leaning forward, all attention on the screen. Cranston looked at the screen just as the finger tightened on the trigger.

There was a blast from the muzzle of the gun, followed a split second later by a little corona of light just this side of Charters. They saw the actor's head jolt forward. Then he fell into the fireplace.

"Cut." The commissioner called. The screen went blank. The commissioner turned to Cardona and opened his mouth. Before anything could come out, Cranston spoke.

"Joe, that's the real film, there's been no switch!"

That shut up the commissioner. He looked from Cardona's face to Cranston's.

Cardona said, "You're sure?"

"Pretty positive. We'll have to check with Cummings about the invisible man before I can be a hundred percent positive."

"That did it," Commissioner Weston said, with his voice sounding as pleasant as a nail scratching on a blackboard. "Of course, I'm only the

commissioner of police. I suppose there's no reason why I should know what's going on!

"Invisible man, switched films, murder on a television show... murder in the subway! Has everyone gone mad?"

CHAPTER IX

CARDONA added another factor for the commissioner's tirade; he said, "Don't leave out the small factor of 'a ball of fire.'"

Puffing his upper lip out till he looked even more like C. Aubrey Smith than usual, Commissioner Weston stormed. "I won't stand for being kept in the dark this way. Both of you stop it and tell me what this is all about. You start, Lamont!"

"Hold your horses." Cranston paid no attention to the apoplectic look that came over Weston's face. Instead he asked Cardona, "Is there a phone in here in the projection booth?"

"Yeah, right over behind that pillar."

Cranston went to the phone and heard Weston bark at Cardona, "Who's he calling?"

"I'm sorry, Commissioner, but I don't know."

Both the irate commissioner and his homicide ace sat and listened as Cranston got his number. He said, "Cary? Cary Cummings? This is Lamont Cranston. I'd like a piece of information. Who is Roddy Hogan?"

There was a silence and then they heard Cranston say, "I see, thank you very much."

The commissioner looked threateningly at Cardona, who said nothing till Cranston was reseated with them. Then he asked, "Who is the invisible man?"

"Cummings."

"Huh? I don't get it!"

"Cummings was going to pull an Orson Welles and write the playlet, direct it, and then act it. At the last minute, when Carol's dress was torn to shreds,

he dropped out. His part wasn't important anyhow, and he edited his part out of

the scripts that they studied from. I happened to get a script which still had the Hogan name on the first page."

"I see."

Before Weston could explode, as seemed imminent, Cranston said, "Have you wondered about that torn dress at all?"

"In what way? We saw the costume all torn." Cardona looked puzzled.

"Indubitably the costume was ripped. How does that explain anything?"

"Sure! That's right! If the costume was torn, nobody'd be able to play the part. How come... that other broad took over?"

"There's another part to the problem!"

"What?"

Neither of the men seemed to be paying any attention at all to Weston. He was puffing like a walrus.

"Let us say that the costume was ripped, as it was. How does that explain why Carol Sterne had nothing on under her coat but her underwear?"

Cardona slapped his forehead. "Yipe!" he said in mock dismay. "I missed that one!"

"You seem to have been missing quite a lot!" Weston said. "What's all this about a girl with no clothes on?"

They gave him a precis of what had happened. When they finished he looked even more puzzled and annoyed. He said, "Correct me if I'm wrong. Two men have

been killed and you still have no idea at all of what's behind it? No shred of a clue to the motivation?"

Cardona nodded.

"I wouldn't say that. If I'm right as to who the killer is, then I know the motive." Cranston smiled. He got up and said, "Don't be too hard on Joe, Commissioner. This is a tough one and he's doing everything humanly possible to get to the solution."

Cranston waved goodbye to Cardona and gave him a wink which said, "That should have spiked him."

Lamont Cranston, hat at a debonair angle, walked into the lobby of the hotel. He saw a line of house phones on a counter. He went to it and asked the operator for the room of Carol Sterne. He was connected with room 1544. He said, "Carol?"

She said, "Johnny?"

"Sorry to disappoint you. This is Lamont Cranston. May I see you for a couple of minutes?"

"Of course. You wait right there. I'll be right down."

"Wouldn't your room be more private than the lobby?"

She giggled with real amusement. "You may know a lot of things, Mr. Cranston, but I can see you don't know the first thing about women's hotels." She hung up after saying she'd be right down.

It was only then that Cranston looked around the lobby. Of women, young, old, well preserved, badly dressed, smartly dressed, there was a plethora. But of men there was no sign.

He realized then that it was an arrangement like the Allerton House for women, which allows no men guests at all.

He smiled at himself. If he'd attempted to go up to Carol's room, a house mother or matron would have been at his heels. And they, he knew, are much more punctilious than hotel detectives.

She bounced across the lobby in a way that was very easy on the eyes. He smiled hello.

"Hi, Mr. Cranston... I've been meaning to ask you. Did they let that poor prop man Selkirk out of jail yet? That was silly. You know as well as I do that Selkirk never did it!"

"No," Cranston wondered how the young reporter had made out with the interview which had been arranged with the prisoner. "No, he's still in durance vile, But... I'd bet a lot of money he won't be much longer."

"I'm so glad. One other question," she said, "have you seen anything of Johnny?"

"Not a sign. He's been calling police headquarters all day however. He keeps getting ideas which he insists the police drop everything and take care of."

"And after he promised me!" She looked angry. It didn't fit her young pretty face at all.

Cranston realized that every woman in the lobby was looking at him. He said, "I feel as conspicuous as if I were in a Turkish Bath on Ladies Night. Can't we go get a drink?"

"By all means." She took him by the arm. She led him across the lobby to a glass door. He opened it for her and then stepped into a garishly lighted store.

Cranston squinted at all the neon. She had taken him literally, about a drink. It was a soda fountain. She was already seated at the fountain.

She called, "Milk shake, vanilla."

The clerk looked at Cranston. "I'll have the same."

"Now then," she said, "what can I do for you?"

Cranston idly watched the soda jerk making the drinks and said casually, "I'd like the truth of why you had no dress on last night and why the other girl took your place."

That set her back a bit. She gulped and said, "But... but we talked about that last night. I found my costume all ripped..."

"What costume did she wear?"

Carol let the air out of her with a whoosh. "So that's what's been bothering you. I'm a nine and that was the only size nine they had on hand. She

wears a twelve or fourteen."

"They had other dresses in her size on hand?"

"Sure, that's much more common. I'm quite small." She smiled and sucked at the straws in her milk shake.

Looking at her, Cranston could visualize her a couple of years ago sharing her soda through an extra straw with her boy friend. She couldn't be more than twenty, he realized, looking at her in the neon light. Nevertheless he said in a harsh voice, "And what happened, to your dress?"

She took a deep suck on the straw and said, "Oh, oh, I wondered when somebody was going to ask that!"

He waited.

"I didn't mention that, because... I don't know. I know it sounds silly, but I don't."

"Can you clarify that any?"

"Well..." She paused, getting it straight in her own mind, if her face was any indication. "I went to the studio early for the last dress rehearsal, and it was only then that we heard that Cary wasn't going to act in the thing after all."

"Ummm, I know about that. Do you know why he changed his mind?"

"No. Now that I come to think of it, I don't. He just said something about there'd been a last minute change in plans."

"I see... go ahead about your street dress."

"After he said he was dropping the character out of the play, we went out to get dressed. I slipped out of my dress and opened the box that my costume was in. I took it out and laid it over a chair while I put the finishing touches to a manicure I'd just had at the beauty parlor. The polish was still a little tacky. I'd touched something and made a nail smudge."

Cranston waited patiently, hoping she'd come to the point.

She did. "I slipped my dress off before I went over my nails. I put it on a hook near the door of the dressing room where I always hang it."

"I took the costume out of the box. I held it up in front of me... I wanted to cry when I saw what had happened to it. It was such a lovely dress..."

"I put it to one side to get back into my own dress so I could go out and tell Cary what had happened. But when I went for the dress it had happened!"

"What?"

"My dress! It was gone... and I just bought it a week ago. It was a lovely thing, princess style, except for a little bow in the back and a..."

Cranston held up his hand to halt the fashion notes. "You would have heard

someone come into the dressing room, wouldn't you?"

"They didn't have to come into the room... you see I hung it right near

the door. All they had to do was open the door enough so that their hand could come in and swipe the dress."

"I see. You saw no flicker of movement?"

"Not a thing. I was concentrating on my nails."

Having seen women manicuring their nails, Cranston knew that nothing less than a four gun salute would attract their attention. It could have happened as

she described it. Cardona was going to be disappointed.

"Who was it?" she asked ingenuously.

"I don't know. At least not for sure. If I knew that I'd be able to have some handcuffs put on the killer."

She made a little shriek. "It was the murderer who stole my dress? I thought it was Iris. She's such a cat. She wanted my part so desperately."

"If it was she, then in all probability she's the killer!"

Carol examined his face. "But you don't think she was the killer, do you?"

He shook his head and threw some silver on the counter to pay for the drinks. The soda jerk pushed the money back to him.

"Pay on your way out, sir."

"Oh, of course." They walked toward the cashier's desk.

Cranston said, "I'm almost positive the killer was a man."

She looked much more upset. Evidently she'd been quite happy considering Iris Harrison the murderer. She said, "You don't think Selkirk did it... you don't think either of the girls... or I... did it..."

"I don't think any of the technicians did it."

"That rules out a lot of people." The thought struck her. She said, "Why, that leaves only Cary Cummings or Victor Blane!"

"No," Cranston said, "you've left out one possibility. Johnny Brokaw."

CHAPTER X

IT was a case of speak of the devil. For as Cranston and Carol left the drugstore and went back into the hotel lobby, Johnny Brokaw, hair disheveled, a

cigarette stuck to the corner of his mouth, was yelling into a house-phone, "What do you mean she's not in her room? She said she'd wait there for me!"

Carol called, "Johnny, I'm over here!"

He slammed the phone down on the hook and turned around. He was still angry. He looked even angrier when he saw that Carol was with a man. Then they could see him realize that it was Cranston. Brokaw relaxed. His face broke into

a boyish smile. He said, "Hi, kids."

"What are you all in a hassle about?" Carol asked.

He was near them now. "What am I fussed up about? A killer busy knocking off everyone connected with the show and you not in your room. I pictured you cut up in small pieces feeding the fishes in the Hudson."

"Johnny... your feet," the girl said, "look at them!"

Cranston and Brokaw looked at Brokaw's feet. They were wet with slush.

"What about them?" Brokaw asked.

"You don't have any rubbers on! And you said you would till the snow was over!" She shook her head dolefully.

He laughed and said, "Mr. Cranston, you have pull with the police, don't you?"

"Do I?" Cranston smiled.

"Yes, you do. I saw that Cardona character with you. He waits for you to speak up before he dares to have in idea!"

Poor Joe, Cranston thought. That would burn him if he had heard it. "What are you getting at?"

"I know who killed Charters. And if I can prove that, it should mean that

the same killer did for Depper, no?"

"Perhaps, what's your proof?"

"A gun!" said Brokaw, his young face set. Cranston could see that he was pretending to be the master detective that he portrayed on the television show.

"What kind of a gun?"

"A .22 target pistol. You know the kind, a .22 on a .45 frame."

Cranston nodded. Yes indeed, he knew the kind. The heavy .45 frame took the recoil. The light .22 bullet was cheap for target shooting. Most good shots

practiced with target pistols of that description. "Where is the gun?"

Cranston

asked.

"In the killer's desk!" Brokaw said with the same air that he cleaned up the mystery at the end of the Bob Dorry show.

"And who is the possessor of the weapon?" Cranston asked curiously.

"The killer, like I've been trying to convince those blockheaded cops all day!"

"Johnny Brokaw!" Carol said, "Stop making like a mystery man! Who?"

"Vic," Brokaw whispered, looking around the crowded lobby as though suspecting spies in the woodwork.

"That's interesting. Shall we go look at the gun?" Cranston asked.

"Sure. I'll show you where it is. I didn't even think of it last night, but this morning when I got up and began thinking of the murder last night, I remembered Vic bragging about how good a shot he was! I didn't connect it up, right away. Not till I read in the papers that a .22 had killed Charters."

"That's right," Carol said, "the gun in the show was bigger than that, wasn't it?"

"It was a .38," Cranston said, as they left the hotel lobby. So Victor Blane had a .22 on a .45 frame. That was very interesting.

Blane lived in one of those pseudo-fancy theatrical hotels just off Broadway. Cranston looking about him as they entered and thought, all these places look as if they were molded in the same place and then dropped at certain localities. They all seemed to come equipped with the same type of wise

guy young-old bell hops and desk clerks.

"Blane," Brokaw said, "Room 615."

The clerk looked up from his racing form. "So what do you want me to do? Turn handsprings?"

Brokaw set his jaw. "We want you to give him a ring and say we're on the way up."

"What do you think this is, the Ritz? Take the elevator."

The clerk went back to improving the breed.

In the elevator, the operator stared at Carol. Brokaw said, "How about eyes right, bud, before I put them that way!"

"Sure, anything to oblige, boss," the operator said, wrenching his eyes off Carol.

On the sixth floor, they walked down the corridor to Blane's room. Brokaw rapped his knuckles on the door. There was no answer. He rapped again. He said,

"That blasted clerk. He let us come up knowing that Blane was out. It's a wasted trip."

Carol opened her hand bag. "Maybe it's not completely wasted." Somewhere in the hidden and mysterious recesses of her bag, underneath thirty or so different objects, she found a key with a tag on it. She gave this to Cranston and said, "Sometimes a hotel key will work on other doors."

He smiled and put the key in the key way. He turned sharply. The lock

didn't turn. He stepped in close to the door. He pressed the key slightly to the left and holding the doorknob in his other hand, he pressed hard and at the same time lifted. He jiggled the key. The combination of the pressing and turning made the key work. It clicked open.

Brokaw said, "Count that day lost which sees the setting sun go down on no new thing learned!"

Cranston opened the door. It was just a hotel room. A bed, a chair, two windows, a radio, coin operated, a basket next to the bed, and to one side of the bed, a bureau that was a complete inventory of the room. Include two bad prints on the wall and you have a blueprint of the average four dollar a day hotel room.

Cranston stepped to the bureau. He opened the top drawer. Brokaw said, "This is slightly illegal, no?"

"It's slightly illegal, yes." Cranston said. There, right in front of him, under a shirt, was the target pistol. He picked it up. Just then there was a knock on the door.

He spun around. The door slammed open. It had been kicked open by a rather large foot. The large foot was fastened to a fat middle aged titan with a set heavy face. His jowls quivering, the fat man looked pop eyed at the gun in Cranston's hand.

The words that had been tumbling out of his pudgy lips, something about "Open up in there, this is the hotel dick," died on his mouth.

His hands held high at his sides, he looked scared. His ordinarily beefy red face was white. He did not look happy.

Cranston said in a surprisingly mild voice, "Hello, Rourke. Been a long time."

"Cranston!" The breath whooshed back into the hotel detective's lungs. He said, "You gotta admit it's a little bit of a surprise to get sent up here by the desk clerk to throw some people out and find a guy pointing all that artillery at you!"

"I can see how it might be a little surprising," Cranston said.

Brokaw, his detecting instincts aroused, said, "We're trapping a killer! The television murder... that's the murder gun!"

"No kiddin'?" Rourke said.

"No kidding?" another voice said. "This is very pretty: Shall I phone down

for cocktails? Not that I remember inviting anyone here!" Victor Blane said.

"Keep the gun on him," Brokaw said, "he's the killer!"

Blane looked from Brokaw's excited face to his gun in Cranston's hand and from there to Rourke's face. He said calmly, "Nice to see you when for once you're not saying, 'Get that girl outa the room!'"

Rourke shrugged his shoulders. "A guy's gotta job he's gotta do it."

Carol turned around in surprise. She started to giggle. She pointed to the

door through which still another person was coming. She said, "This is getting like that Marx Brothers picture where all the people get into the stateroom!"

Joe Cardona walked into the room. He looked around in some surprise. The room was getting a bit crowded. There was Carol and Johnny, Cranston and Rourke

and Victor Blane. Cardona said heavily, "I've got a warrant."

They all looked at him. For the first time the atmosphere got heavy. Brokaw looked out of the corners of his eyes at Blane. Blane looked at Cardona.

"Put your hands out, Brokaw." He took a pair of handcuffs out of his pocket.

"I arrest you for the murder of Lawrence Charters and the death of Daniel

Depper." He grabbed Brokaw's arm and flipped one cuff around his wrist. The other he fastened to his own wrist.

There was no sound in the room after the click of the handcuffs. Rourke looked from the handcuffs to the gun in Cranston's hand. He shook his head and then looked from the gun to Blane.

Cranston put the gun back in the bureau drawer. He said, "You've got a license for this, of course, Blane?"

"Of course. If you sniff the muzzle you'll see that it hasn't been fired in months."

"I know," said Cranston as Brokaw, pulled by Cardona, left the room. "In any event, the .22 bullet that killed Charters came from a .38, not from this .22."

CHAPTER XI

CAROL, looking twenty years older, said, as Cardona and Brokaw left the room, "May I come along with Johnny?"

Cranston nodded and took her arm. She hadn't said anything else. She was probably in shock. There wasn't a sign of emotion on her face. She just looked old. The hysterics, if there were to be any, would come later when this had really seeped in.

At headquarters the prop man, Tony Selkirk was at the desk as they entered. He said, "This housing shortage is really serious! They had to let me go when they arrested Brokaw. Needed the cell." He tried to smile. It wasn't much of a success.

"You're still a material witness. And don't forget it!" Cardona said, as he unlocked the handcuffs from Brokaw and himself. Cranston and Carol were in the background. They stayed there while Brokaw went through the standard fingerprint and photograph routine.

She said nothing as Brokaw was led away. She said nothing when Selkirk left. She still was silent when Cranston guided her into Cardona's room.

"What's your case against the boy?" Cranston asked.

"Not in front of her," Cardona said grimly.

"My dear," Cranston said to Carol, "do you want to wait outside for me? And don't worry too much. I'll be out in a minute or so."

Head held high, mouth set in a straight line, the girl left. Cardona looked after her admiringly. "What a thoroughbred!"

"She's taking it well," Cranston agreed. "Now Joe, spin your story. Have you found out something since I saw you last?"

Cardona leaned back in his swivel chair and ran his hands through his hair

tiredly. "Plenty." He thought a moment. Then he repeated, "Plenty. Same motive in both murders."

"You finally found a motive," Cranston said.

"The best and oldest one in the world. The oldest two in the world. Sex and money," Cardona said, as though that settled everything. "First, sex. Depper and Charters were both on the make for Carol Sterne, and I mean on the make!

"Depper went all out. The regular routine... the ring... promise of marriage... the works!

"Charters got her a fur coat instead of a ring, but the routine was the same."

"Where'd you find this out?"

"Talking to people who worked with them, I've been a busy little bee today," Cardona said, "but let me go on. There was a fight between Charters and

Brokaw. Brokaw flattened him with one punch. He stood over him and said that he'd kill him if he didn't lay off!"

"And Depper?" Cranston asked.

Cardona whistled. "That was a beaut. Brokaw wiped up the floor with him."

"Another fight."

"And what a fight. Depper was out of circulation for a month after it. That was two months ago."

"Where does the money come in?"

"Cummings and Carol Sterne were just signed up with an independent producing company out in Hollywood. Some kind of a good deal. Cummings to write

and direct with Carol to star. Lots of do re mi."

"And?" Cranston prodded.

"And Depper was Carol's business agent as well as her booking agent."

"Oh oh..."

"Yeah," Cardona said. "He'd sold a hundred and ten per cent of her. She couldn't make any money no matter how much she was paid. It was one of those deals where she'd have to pay plenty to buy herself back."

That happened only too often, Cranston knew. Some very well known performers had had the same experience. Depper, supposedly acting in Carol's best interest, had sold pieces of her, just as you sell pieces of stock.

"If Brokaw beat the daylights out of Depper for making a pass at her, you can imagine how he must have felt when he found out about the swindle."

"I see."

There was a silence. Then Cranston asked, "How about the mechanics of the television kill?"

"I see it like this. Brokaw figured that since he was acting in the playlet as a detective, he'd be the least likely to be suspected. Because he was in love with Carol he didn't even want her on the set when the murder was going on, so he ripped up her costume and then to make sure she had to go home,

he swiped her street dress.

"That done, he figured she was safe and he could go ahead with his murder.

He knew just when the prop man was going to fire the blank. He was off the set,

with the other actors, but he knew just where Charters would be sitting. After all, they had rehearsed the thing over and over again. Everyone had to be in a specific place. So... he was off the set with the two girls and Blane and Eric Jamison. I've questioned them. They just walked behind the set and stood there talking for a minute. Then, and this was when he committed the murder, just before he knew the blank was due to be shot off, he said something to them about being thirsty.

"He walked off to the water cooler, which happens to be on a straight line

with the fireplace on the set. The door onto the set, you remember, was opened by Selkirk, the prop man. All Brokaw did was stand at the water cooler and as Selkirk brought the gun up to fire, Brokaw shot over Selkirk's shoulder! The two shots blended as one. The blank covered the sound of the real shot. He used

a .22 so it wouldn't make too much noise... so that the extra sound wouldn't give his gaff away!"

"Have you found the gun you think he used?"

"Nope, it's probably at the bottom of the Hudson by now. That's why he used a knife on Depper in the subway! Then, and this is the repeat you see, he set fire to the set because he was afraid that maybe we could find something out about the angle of the shot. He fired the set so as to upset things enough so we could never prove exactly where the shot came from.

"The second fire, the one in Depper's apartment, he set so as to destroy the records of the transactions where the agent had sold off Carol! The fire took care of that for him. Now there's no record of the transaction, Depper is dead, no one can prove that Carol was ever sold!

"He's in the clear, he figures, and as soon as the heat is off he goes to

Hollywood, marries Carol, and he's in on the dough she makes out there!"

"How are you going to prove the knifing in the subway?"

"I can't. As near as I can see that was a perfect murder! But he can only fry once. I'll nail him for the sources of Charters. That I got proof about." Cardona reached under his desk and brought out a cardboard box. It was rectangular, about two inches deep and two feet long.

Cranston leaned forward as Cardona slipped the string off the box.

"This is one of the little things that are going to take care of Brokaw..."

remember, we can prove by eye witnesses that he was the only one away from the other actors at the moment when Charters was shot. The others alibi each other.

Cummings was out front next to the camera, in full view of twenty people.

Blane

and Jamison, Iris Harrison and Teddy Page each cover each other.

"Carol was out somewhere. We know she wasn't in the studio."

"I alibi her," Cranston said. He smiled as Cardona did a double take. He was still taking the string off the box.

"How's that?"

"She was out trailing me! I met her in the subway right after I saw the murder on the television screen. She could not have come down from the studio that fast after the kill."

"Okay. That just makes it tighter for Brokaw." Cardona had the box open. Inside it was a dress. He took it out and held it up. He looked quite ridiculous. He stood up with the dress in front of him as though he were modeling it.

It was quite small. Cranston remembered what Carol had said about a size nine. He asked, "Where did you find it? In Brokaw's possession?"

"He's not that stupid. No, he thought he was being real cute. We found a key in his rooms. It was a key from one of those lockers in the subway. I roused out one of the men who runs the lockers. He was with me when I opened the locker and found the dress."

"I see," Cranston said.

"Brokaw was making all that noise about how good a shot Blane is! Well, in

the Army, Brokaw had every kind of sharpshooter medal and record." Cardona grinned. "That won't help him a bit in court. Selkirk's gonna make a fine witness in court because he's mad. He figures that Brokaw framed him. He was a witness to both fights that Brokaw had with the two dead men!"

Cranston looked at the ceiling, deep in thought, Cardona leaned forward over the dress which he had replaced in the box. Anxious to convince Cranston, he said, "Look... motive, the best in the world... opportunity... he was the only one without an alibi at Charters' murder."

Cardona held his fingers up and ticked off each item. "I've checked; when Depper was stabbed in the subway, Brokaw was out. He's got no alibi for the time involved. He's a sharp-shooter. The key for the locker with the dress was in his possession..."

"And one last thing!" Cardona looked triumphant. "Everyone who knows him has seen him whittling at one time or another with one of those spring pocket knives! It had a four inch blade!"

Feeling that his case was complete, Cardona leaned back. He said, "You with me? You figure I got a case?"

"Oh, you've got a case all right. With a good D.A. you could send Brokaw to the chair. There's only one drawback."

"Yeah, what? I can take care of anything you bring up! Let's see what you got?"

"Just this," Cranston said standing up. "You've got the wrong man!"

"Oh no... you can't do this to me, Lamont! It's gotta be Brokaw... he's the only one that could have fired the shot!"

"You've got that wrong too. Selkirk fired the shot that killed Charters!"

Cardona slumped back in his chair. "You mean I gotta re-arrest the guy?"

"No, he's not the killer. He was the innocent instrument of the murderer. His finger pulled the trigger. But he didn't know he was shooting a bullet at Charters. Only the murderer knew that!"

Cranston was at the door. Cardona jumped up from his chair. He said, "Hey, you can't leave me now. Tell me..." But the phone on his desk rang. He swore. He picked it up and barked, "Whaddya want? Oh... it's you, Commissioner... well, it's like this..."

Closing the door behind him, Cranston left as Cardona was saying, "Sure, I got him in a cell right now. I'll come and tell you my case right now. Except," his voice lowered. "Except Cranston says I'm wrong."

CHAPTER XIII

THERE was nothing to show that anything unusual had ever happened in this building. Cranston looked about him. It was the office building that housed the television station. The even tenor of the old way of life had been resumed.

Going up in the elevator, Cranston's arm pressed against his chest. He heard a rattle of paper. He smiled grimly. It was the report from the fire department laboratory. That should help trap the real killer.

He stepped out of the elevator. He knew that most of the people concerned in the fatal show were to be on hand tonight for another show. He opened the door of the television station. He saw Cummings talking to a couple. They were Vic Blane and Iris Harrison.

Cummings was saying as Cranston approached, "Now I want this done my way. Forget everything you think you know about acting and do it my way for a change!"

Blane grinned but said nothing.

The announcer, a tall, good looking young man, watched with wry amusement.

It was obviously a scene that he had watched often. Cranston realized, looking at him, that he didn't know the announcer's name. It was the same man who had announced the deadly playlet of the night before. Cranston walked to him and asked, "May I have your name?"

The announcer said, "Sure, Jay Barshall. Why?"

"Just for the record," Cranston said. He gestured at Cummings. "Does Cummings go through that routine often?"

"Everytime he directs. Why?"

"Is it usual?"

"Mmmm... Cummings hams it up a bit more than most of the directors. But it's paid him. He's going to the Coast, you know."

Nodding, Cranston walked over to Cummings. Cummings was saying, "No hysterics when he goes out the door. Stand perfectly still, Iris, and then straighten your shoulders. Hold that for five seconds, then walk slowly across the room. When you get across the room, suddenly pick up the vase of flowers and throw it at the floor. I want the action to come as a complete surprise. Got it?"

Iris Harrison nodded wearily.

"And you," Cummings said, "when you go to the door, Victor, don't slam it.

Hold it open for a second, then begin to close it slowly. While you're closing it, I want you to register disappointment. Just that. No faces... just look disappointed."

"I catch," Blane said. He looked at the door. He said, "Hey Tony! Good to

see you, kid!"

Cummings said, "Selkirk! I knew the police would come to their senses!"

"For a while there," Selkirk said sarcastically, "I began to wonder if I was going to be able to come to work tonight." He walked off the set toward a door at the end of the room. He waved to two cameramen who were playing gin rummy while waiting for the action to start.

Teddy Page, looking like an ad from the pages of Mademoiselle, was the next to come to work. She had her face set. She assiduously did not look toward

the corner of the room where Charters had died the night before. Workmen had removed all visible signs of the murder.

She said slowly, her voice husky, "Is this the only studio we can work in?"

"Yes, and forget about what happened last night," Cummings said sharply, his thin face set. "It's over. Tonight's another night and another show. Get ready for rehearsal, Teddy."

She made a face but obeyed.

"Where's Carol?" Cummings asked.

"I doubt if she'll come to work tonight," Cranston said, but he was wrong.

She came in as he spoke. Her face was poker still. She had been crying, that he

could see. But make-up hid most of the ravages of emotion.

"That leaves who?" Cummings looked around. "Oh, Eric. Where's he?"

"Drunk," Teddy Page said quietly. "I saw him in the bar downstairs when I came in. He's all slopped up."

Cummings swore. He turned to one of the men in the studio. "Go down and get him, will you? Get some black coffee in him. We need him."

The man nodded and left. Cranston looked about him. Business going on as usual was the order of the day. The show must go on. Corny as it sounded, Cranston could see that all of the performers were carrying on the tradition without even realizing that they were. This was their work. It was a job and it

had to be done.

Carol joined Iris and Victor Blane. She said, "Where are you up to?"

Blane pointed to a line on the script. She read it over. "I remember now," she said.

Cranston said, "Have you told anyone, Carol?"

She shook her head. "It's not in the papers yet, I looked."

Teddy Page asked, "What cooks? What're you two jabbering about?"

"Cranston can tell if he wants to," Carol said. Her lower lip quivered, but aside from that she hid her feelings.

"Johnny Brokaw's been arrested for the murder of Charters and Danny Depper," Cranston said conversationally.

He watched their faces carefully. But they were, after all, actors, trained to fake emotion. Their reaction was unanimous.

Cummings voiced it. "That's utter rot. Johnny never killed anybody!"

"Of course not," Teddy Page said.

Iris Harrison said, "That's as ridiculous as arresting Selkirk." She made a face. "Leave it to the flatfoots!"

Victor Blane said, "Of course I know about it. I was there when he was arrested, but even so, I don't believe it. A punch in the nose, yes; I've seen Johnny go berserk... but not a knife in the back. Never!"

"Nor a shot in the back of the head!" Teddy Page said resolutely.

"There are," Cranston said, taking a slip of paper out of his pocket, "some things that are of interest in this case. For instance," he turned sharply on Victor Blane, "where were you at four ten today?"

"Huh?" Blane looked puzzled. "Gee, I don't remember... wait... I was in a bar having a drink sometime around then... I think. But I'm not sure. It could

have been later or earlier."

"How about you, Cummings?" Cranston asked the director.

Scowling, Cummings glared off into space, "That's a tough one. You know you read in stories where people are questioned and they can tell precisely what they were doing at thirty seconds past twelve o'clock. I... I'll have to reconstruct it."

They waited silently. Even the technicians stopped their interminable puttering and watched the people concerned.

"I have it, I think. I bought a hat at a store at Forty-Fifth sometime after three o'clock, then... I don't think I did anything but go to the club...

the Monks, you know. It's a theatrical club. Someone should be able to tell when

I got there... and I didn't leave till after six." He stopped then and looked at

Cranston... "Why?"

The door opened then. The workman who'd been delegated to bring Eric Jamison back had succeeded. Jamison, eyes unfocussed, mouth slack, was hanging on the workman's arm. He wobbled across the floor toward Cummings; he wriggled his forefinger under the director's nose.

"An' wha' do ye want?" he said blurrily. "Whatcha draggin' me out of a nice warm bar for?" He stared at Cummings. "Huh? Wha' for? Tell me that!"

"How much coffee did you get in him?" Cummings asked the workman.

"Three cups. Didn't do much good."

Cranston asked the drunken man, "Where were you at four o'clock today? From four to ten after?"

"Huh?" Jamison asked. "Huh? What's that? Speak up man, don' mumble so!"

Cranston repeated the question. Cummings said, sotto voce, "Bet he doesn't even know what day it is."

"I heard that!" Jamison said, with too much dignity. "I heard it, you dirty rat of a director! I know your kind!"

"Why is he a rat?" Cranston asked.

"No reason," the drunk said, "except that all directors are rats. You gotta be a rat before you can be a director. Part of the rules."

Cummings slapped Jamison across the cheek. "That's enough, you sloppy pup!" Cummings glared at the man. "We have a rehearsal to get through. Now answer Mr. Cranston's question! Then we'll get to work."

Jamison opened his eyes owlshly, "Where was I at four ten? I wonder," he mused. "I wonder. Maybe I was in a bar." He looked proud of himself. "Sure, that's where I was... a bar!"

"What bar?" Cummings asked before Cranston could.

"Who knows?" Jamison shrugged happily. "Some bar. I been in lots of bars. Lots and lots of bars..." His voice trailed off.

A look of inspiration came across his slack face. He tried to snap his fingers but couldn't. He said happily. "I got it!" He beamed. "I know where I was. I was in a bar near a fire! Biggest fire I ever saw. Whole top floor of building went up. Pretty it was, too!"

Carol said, "He means the fire at Depper's house!"

Cranston nodded, "It would seem so. I don't imagine there was more than one such fire today."

"And you said the one who set the fire was the killer!" Carol said breathlessly. "And you said it was a man who was the killer... not a woman..." Iris and Teddy looked at each other. "And... and Cummings has an alibi for the time of the fire; so has Vic!"

"Yes, only Eric seems to be out in the cold as far as that is concerned!" Cranston said.

"Ah..." the drunk said unheedingly, "don't put poor little old Eric out in the cold, please don't..."

Cummings said. "Does this mean, Mr. Cranston, that you don't think Brokaw is the killer?"

Cranston said, "Yes."

Teddy Page pointed at Eric Jamison who was lurching toward her. "Get him away... get that dirty killer away from me! My God, don't let him touch me!"

Like an idiot child. Jamison came closer, his fingers clutching at Teddy. "Don't be mad at Eric. Aw, don't... I won't get drunk again, honey. I promise. Come on, give Eric a little kiss."

She screamed then.

CHAPTER XIII

BLANE and Cummings pried the drunken man away from the girl. She was sobbing as she rubbed the back of her hand across her mouth.

Cranston said, "I came here tonight to present my case against the real killer. I do not intend to let Johnny Brokaw spend this night in jail."

Smiling, Carol walked over so that she was near Cranston. She said, "That's the way I like to hear you talk. You have it all set against Jamison? You have proof?"

"I have proof that will convict the man who killed two men, yes."

Cranston

said, as he watched Blane and Cummings place Jamison flat on his back on a cot.

Cummings walked over to one of the cameramen who lolled against one of the big television cameras.

Cranston, out of the corner of his eye could see that there was a whispered colloquy going on.

Blane had slapped Jamison's face so hard that some kind of normalcy had returned to the drunken man. He said, "Wha' goes? Wha'd you hit me for?"

"Snap out of it kid, this is no time for laughs."

Behind them, Cranston was aware of a man's clipped voice speaking. He was talking into a microphone, Cranston saw, as he turned. Some kind of news announcer. Cranston became aware as he had before, of the fact that a voice pitched for a mike doesn't carry far. Strange to think that his voice booming into homes like the sound of doom, barely reached ten feet away. Straining his ears. Cranston could just make out the man saying, "So sit tight folks and we'll bring you all the news right up to the minute... We can't promise, but we

hope in a matter of minutes to present the most dynamic television show ever seen. Stay tuned to this station!"

Blane said, "Cranston, I think you can talk to Eric now. He's snapping out of it."

Walking ten paces, Cranston was at their sides. He said, "I'll make this as fast as I can. I know you want to get on with your rehearsal." He paused. "By the way, when does this show go on?"

"In an hour," Blane answered.

"I'll snap it up. If I may I'd like all of you to sit in a row here. That's one way to speed it up."

They responded. Cummings and Blane were at one end, then the three girls, Iris, Carol and Teddy, and on the other side of the girls, Eric Jamison sat. His eyes were bloodshot. He looked at Cranston.

Cranston cleared his throat. "Selkirk was obviously in the clear all along. No one would be fool enough to shoot a man the way Selkirk seemed to do in the show."

"Not unless he were being over-subtle and figured that you'd figure that way," Blane said, his handsome face stern.

"Umm, that sounds better in books. In life a man who intends to kill

someone is afraid of that kind of subtlety... generally," Cranston said. "Of course, it has been done. But it is rare."

"I can see your point," Blane said. "Suppose some dumb cop were put in charge; he wouldn't be likely to look for anything but the obvious."

"Without underestimating the police," Cranston said, "there would be that danger. However, I think I can explain the blueprint of the murder so that you can see why Selkirk is in the clear."

Before Cranston could continue, Blane said, "Anyhow, the bullet couldn't have come out of the blank-gun that Selkirk used." He looked very proud of himself.

"Ah, that's where the real subtlety comes in. The point of that first murder was that the deadly bullet did come from the blank gun! What's more, it is that subtlety that gives the killer away!"

"How do you figure that?" Cummings asked.

"The murder method left traces. When I saw the murder committed on the television screen in the bar that I was in, I was conscious of a flare of flame

that came out of the muzzle of the gun behind the bullet."

"There'd be a flare of flame in any event, wouldn't there?" Cummings asked.

"Not much from modern powders. Let us get this established. The bullet came from the blank gun. It was propelled by the charge in the blank cartridge."

"How can that be?" Blane asked.

"If you stuff a bullet without a cartridge into the barrel of a gun, and if you pack it well, the gun will work at close range. That's a discovery that juvenile delinquents have made, unfortunately. They've been using toy guns as real ones. That can be checked in any police headquarters where there is a juvenile gang war."

"I see," Cummings said. "The packing would be blown out with the bullet though, wouldn't it? It'd be left as evidence of what happened!"

"Our subtle killer took care of that." Cranston looked at the fireplace in the room. "He packed the gun with gun cotton!"

"Whew..." Blane whistled. "The flash from the blank set fire to the gun cotton and the wadding disappeared!"

"That was the plan," Cranston said, "but the killer got a little over-subtle. Fearing that the purchase of such a strange thing as gun cotton might be traced to him, he made his own!"

"How on earth can you know that?" Cummings asked, his thin face set in puzzlement.

"Because the murderer did not have the facilities of a munitions plant. He

could not wash all the impurities out of his home-made gun cotton. It left chemical traces. The technical report from the fire department showed traces in

that fireplace!" Cranston gestured at it.

"He left traces there and at his other fire! He used the gun cotton, which

as you know is highly inflammable but is not explosive, to set fire to Denny Depper's rooms!"

Eric Jamison asked querulously. "You have proof of that?"

"Oh yes," Cranston patted his chest. "I have a report right here. I'll read it to you all now if you'd like me to."

"We don't have the time, Mr. Cranston," Cummings said glancing at his watch. "Won't you continue about the murders?"

"As I have pointed out to the police, we probably will never be able to prove the murder of Depper. However, we can prove the case of the television kill. That should suffice."

"You can't burn even a two-time loser twice," Jamison agreed. "Probably

what the killer figured."

"Of course, they always do. That's the big danger. As far as I can see in this case, the one we'll be able to prove was not even very necessary, except as misdirection!"

"That I don't get," Cummings said frankly. "How do you figure that?"

"There's plenty of motive on the killer's part for murdering Depper, but to date I have found no motive for the first murder. I think Charters was killed so that it would look, after Depper's death, as if the killer was a person who had a motive to hate both Depper and Charters!"

"Nice kid," Teddy Page said, making a face. She glanced out of the corner of her eye at Eric Jamison who still kept his eyes on Cranston.

"The fire set here in the studio which seemed on the surface to have been set so that the killer could get down stairs to attack Twittle and get the film

record of the murder, seems now to have been set to get rid of any evidence up here in the studio."

"Wait a minute," Blane said. "let me chase that around my brain for a second. I don't follow it. The fire here in the studio was set to get rid of any gun cotton in the studio?"

"Yes. The killer saw the telltale flare, too."

"I see. Now whether that phone call had come in from Twittle or not, the fire would have gone off?"

"That's right."

"The killer took advantage of that to make it look as if the fire were set

so that he could get away from the crowd and take a whack out of Twittle."

"Yes, and that was the first mistake. Curious in a case where the murderer

used fire so much that he didn't set fire to the film to carry his bluff through. Having hit Twittle on the head, he didn't even touch the film. If he had any real reason for fearing what was on the film, he certainly would have set a match to it, or at least have exposed it to light so that the film would be fogged."

"He may have been disturbed by some passerby," Cummings said thoughtfully.

"For all we know he may have meant to destroy the film and been interrupted."

"True. Except that if that were true, why hasn't the passerby shown up as a witness?" Cranston said. "No, it was a mistake and a real one. The murder got too fancy, that's all."

"It gets a little fatal when it gets fancy, doesn't it?" Blane asked.

"Generally. He was thinking on the spur of the moment and he didn't think it through, that's all," Cranston said.

"Hey!" Blane said, excitement in his voice. "A thought finally penetrates the bone of my skull! With Selkirk having fired the bullet, even though he did it innocently, that means all our alibis are out! Even though I saw Jamison all

the time when we were back of the set, that doesn't mean a thing!"

"Certainly. That's one of the things that to me clears Johnny Brokaw. If he were the killer, I don't think after having set up such a murder device that

he would have been out of your sight. He certainly would not have wandered off for a drink of water. He would have wanted an alibi from all of you!"

"That meant..." Blane said and then paused. "Why, that throws it back at all of us. I could have rigged up the gun and then been covered by being out back with the others."

"That thought had occurred to me," Cranston said gently.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to be so stupid. I'll shut up," Blane said.

"As a matter of fact," Cranston said, "your other alibis don't mean a thing either. There's no way to know just when Depper was stabbed in the

subway..."

"But the fire!" Cummings said. "You know when that was set."

"Yes, we know that," Cranston said slowly.

"But?" Blane asked.

"But that doesn't mean much either," Cranston said. "The fire at Depper's apartment was set off by remote control."

"Huh?" Jamison asked stupidly.

"It's an old gag," Cranston said wearily. "I don't know why people think that they can get away with it. Every fireman knows about it."

"The killer set the rig before he killed Depper. The set up is simple. He fastened a match to the clapper of the phone. He glued some sandpaper near this, then stuffed gun cotton all around the inside of the phone box."

"Then he went out and killed Depper in the subway. That accomplished, he established an alibi by being seen somewhere."

"And to set off the fire," Carol Sterne said, speaking for the first time,

"all he had to do was dial Depper's number."

"The ringing phone set the clapper in motion. That set the match on fire because the friction of the match on the sandpaper ignited it. The flame lit the gun cotton. Result? A four alarm fire and Depper's apartment was gutted."

"But that means that the killer has gotten away with murder! He wasn't seen in the subway," Cummings said, "he wasn't seen going into Depper's apartment to set up the fire trap... he is in the clear for the murder of Charters... how can you trap him? Two perfect murders!"

"I wouldn't say that," Cranston said, grimly. "Two imperfect murders and two faulty fires. We have evidence of the fire trap in Depper's apartment."

"We have evidence of his motive; we have him, as a matter of fact, all set

for a trip to the chair!"

Teddy Page could stand it no longer. She said, and her voice was shaking, "Then why don't you arrest Jamison?"

Cranston smiled wryly at the pretty girl. "He's not guilty."

CHAPTER XIV

LIKE the lull just before a roll of thunder when it seems the weather is inflating its chest for an all-out try, there was a silence.

It was broken by the phone operator, who irritably plugged the line into the board: They could all hear her voice. It was the only sound. She said, "Who? No... not now. He's very busy." She snapped the line out of the board. She shook her head in a "the-very-nerve-of-him" gesture. Then she focussed her attention on Cranston and the line of people who sat very properly like good children in school.

Cummings asked, "Who is the murderer?"

"If you think for a moment, you'll see that it can only be one man. Only one man has the proper motivation and has had the time and the necessary knowledge of the people involved and of what was going to happen."

"You mean he could foresee the future?" Cummings asked sarcastically.

"To all intents and purposes, yes," Cranston said. "He could foresee the future to an extent because he made that future!"

Jamison said, "All of a sudden I feel drunk again. Is he making any sense?"

"Yes, I think he is," Carol said. "I know a man who makes the future as far as we are concerned."

All of them looked at her.

"Let's be a little less cryptic, shall we?" Cummings asked.

Cranston held his hand up for silence. "A moment, Carol. We've talked about how Depper was in a position to ruin your future. In a way, you are very indebted to the killer. He has made your future possible."

"Possible with Johnny dead?"

"He won't die except in the normal course of events. But remember, the same motivation that would have explained why Johnny would kill Depper so that you could be free of the commitments he made for you - that same motivation also applies to the killer."

"That doesn't explain why he killed Charters!" Carol said, her young pretty face stern.

"No. I wanted you to see that so that you wouldn't feel sorry for him.

Now

tell the others who controls their future."

"The writer of any show, picture, radio, theatrical, or television script controls what we actors are to do for the course of the show."

"How true," Victor Blane said.

The phone operator swore to herself. The red light on her board was lit again. And just when it was getting interesting. Just like a movie, she thought. She answered the phone. "Yes? No! You can't speak to him right now! I told you he was busy!" She pulled the jack out of the board.

The person who was trying so desperately to get through to Lamont Cranston

was the young reporter whom Cranston had helped to interview Selkirk. He slammed

the receiver down on the hook and hard heeled his way out of the telephone booth. He stepped to the bar and said, "Gimmie a whisky sour." He hated them but it sounded very man-of-the-worldish to order them. He knew people drank them when they had a hangover. He glanced from the rim of his glass back to the

television screen that he had been watching for the last ten minutes.

In harsh black and white on the ten-by-fourteen screen the people looked like tiny marionettes. The scene was that of the studio in which Cranston was breaking the murder case. Clearly to be seen was the row of people whom Cranston was standing and facing.

The bar was completely quiet. The reporter thought, if I could only get through to Cranston... but there's no time to go there in person. And the operator won't call him to the phone.

On the screen Iris Harrison was saying, "Then that means that Cary Cummings is the killer?"

Cranston nodded. The reporter watched, eyes narrowed. The director was edging towards the edge of his chair. The reporter thought, there's a character

that isn't going to take this lying down!

From the television set Cumming's voice came clearly. It was low. He said,

"After you have just shown us how the murderer operated, after you have shown that there is no way that the police can conceivably have any evidence, you now

accuse me of murdering Depper and Charters? That's a little ridiculous, isn't it?"

"I don't think so," Cranston said. "You see, the cover-up was excellent, but the imp of the perverse has been operating in our favor, not yours!"

Cummings stared at Cranston. "What do you mean?"

"I mean we have an eye witness who will help us to convict you!"

The young reporter gasped. He knew that Cranston was lying, but would Cummings? Eyes straining, he watched to see what the effect of Cranston's bluff would be.

It was a good bluff, the reporter thought. Cummings, if he were the killer, must be punch-drunk at the way Cranston had deduced the modus operandi of the gun gag. The routine about the impurities in the gun cotton must have hit hard. Add to that an eye witness and Cumming's goose really would be cooked.

Carol jumped to her feet and clasped her hands ecstatically. She burred, "Oh, Mr. Cranston, you're wonderful! This mean's Johnny will be out of jail in a little while!"

Before Cranston or anyone could do anything, Cummings, who was seated just behind Carol, reached up with one hand and pulled her to him.

His voice was still low and self-controlled. He said, "Don't move. Anyone!"

Then, as he rose to his feet and moved Carol to one side, the people watching the screen could see the gun in his hand. It was pushed in Carol's soft back.

Cummings said, "The slightest move will send a bullet into Miss Sterne's back."

Everyone in the bar, eyes still glued to the screen, gasped as Lamont Cranston launched his body in a flat tackle at Cummings.

The television screen, went blank. There was the sound of a gun shot.

CHAPTER XV

"THAT'S just fine!" the bartender said dispiritedly. "You'd think it was one of them cliff hangers - 'continued in our next installment'!"

The young reporter swore and ran out of the bar as the calm voice of the studio announcer said, while the screen still stayed blank, "Sorry, folks, but conditions beyond our control have cut our television facilities off the air.

A wild bullet from Mr. Cumming's gun has broken the camera. We are, however, delighted to be able to tell you that Mr. Cranston, with the aid of what seems like half the police in New York, has quelled Mr. Cummings.

"As Cranston dove at Cummings, the doors of the studio opened and police poured in in a swarm. Seemingly they have had the studio surrounded for the last twenty minutes. Mr. Cranston had knocked the gun out of the killer's hand by the time the first policeman had come close enough to help. Miss Sterne is uninjured."

The polite, schooled voice hesitated for a moment and then continued, "It seems the height of irony that it was Mr. Cumming's own idea to hold off the regular news broadcast intended for this time and to run, instead, as a surprise, the capture of the murderer of Mr. Charters and Mr. Depper.

"No one," the announcer said, "but the cameramen and Mr. Cummings and I knew that the scene was being broadcast." His voice went on for quite a time while he rehashed what had just happened.

When the young reporter finally got to the studio, Cummings was gone, taken away by the police; and Carol Sterne had left to get Johnny Brokaw. Cranston, Blane, Eric Jamison, Iris Harrison and Teddy Page were the only ones still in the studio.

As the reporter entered the studio, Blane was asking, "But what was his motive?"

"Danny Depper was playing both ends against the middle. Just as he had sold one hundred and ten per cent of Carol Sterne, he had over-sold Cummings. This trip to Hollywood that Carol and Cummings were due to take wouldn't have meant any money to Cummings at all."

"And he killed Charters just as a build-up to his murder of Depper?" Blane asked unbelievably.

"Unless there was some hidden hard feeling, that is all I can see," Cranston said.

"Perhaps I may have been part of the reason," Iris Harrison said heavily. "I used to go with Cummings... then, when I met Charters, I..." She swallowed,

"I dropped Cummings and began to go out with Charters."

"That may be a small part of the motive," Cranston said, "Somehow it would seem better if there were some motivation like that." Cranston broke off as he recognized the reporter. He called, "Come on over and join the post mortem, Timmy."

"Mr. Cranston," the reporter said, "when you told Cummings that you had an eye witness, you were lying, weren't you?"

Nodding, Cranston said, "I was trying to bait him into making a move. As you know, I had the police all around the studio. I figured that, if he made any move, it would help to give him away."

"Then your bluff won't hold up in court?" Blane asked incredulously.

"No, I'm afraid not. I risked everything on the bluff... Cummings responded by trying to make a break for it, but that won't mean a thing to a smart lawyer. They'll say he tried to get away because he was being unjustly accused."

Cranston looked weary. He ran his hands over his eyes. "However, now that we've smoked him out in the open, Cardona will have enough to hold him on till I can chase around and get more proof. There will be plenty of time between now and the trial."

"You won't have to chase around, Mr. Cranston!" The young reporter literally beamed.

"How's that?" Cranston asked in some surprise.

"I've been trying to get you on the phone to tell you..." the reporter turned around and glared at the switchboard operator, "but she wouldn't put you on the phone."

"Mr. Cranston, there is an eye witness! You remember the movie fiend who took the movie of the murder of Charters?"

"Don't tell me he's the eye witness! That would be too coincidental!" Cranston said.

"No coincidence at all," the reporter said, "Twittle works in a camera store at Forty-second and Eighth avenue! He was going out for lunch when he saw Cummings walk up behind Depper. He followed the two men down into the subway. He saw Cummings and Depper go into the train!"

"Good Lord," Cranston said, "Why wasn't I told of this?"

"Nobody else knows it, yet!" the reporter said. "Twittle read about Depper's murder so he came down to the office to tell the editor..."

"Yes?" Cranston said.

"You know what a crackpot he looks like. The editor sends me out to reason with crackpots. When I heard Twittle's story, I grabbed him and yanked him out of the office. He's home in my house now."

"Why?" Cranston asked. This was perfect. It sewed Mr. Cary Cummings right into the seat of the electric chair.

"Why?" The reporter sounded astounded. "But, Mr. Cranston! You know my paper's a morning paper! I put him on ice until after the last edition of the evening papers! It'll be a scoop when we break it tomorrow, under my byline, Timmy Rogers! Yipe!"

THE END

