

# Terror Train

By  
Richard B. Sale



*Suddenly and with shrill horrific cadence, a macabre tortured shriek split through the nocturnal silence of the night. In that instant The Crescent Limited, snowbound in the Rockies, became a Terror Train...*

## CHAPTER I COLD STEEL

OUTSIDE the car window, the wind howled maniacally. Snow-flakes, fine and sharp, bit into the glass of the window as the rush of air hurled them wildly about, dancing, like wraiths through the ominous, deliquescent obscurity of the bitter cold night.

Roy Rand, lying in lower berth 3 of the first Pullman car of the Crescent Limited, wondered dully at the intuitive hunch which had brought him out into this forsaken wilderness of ice on the trail of an escaped killer.

As a special investigator, acting *sub rosa* in homicides, it had been his lot to hunt a quarry through many strange and nefarious locales. But never in all his years as a free-lance criminal nemesis, had he ever run into such a storm.

The Crescent Limited, crack transcontinental train, had left Spokane five hours before. It had been snowing then, but after the train had reached the first slopes of the Rockies and had started to climb upwards into the mountain recesses, the storm had increased in rising fury. And here, somewhere north of Hermit Mountain on the Cascade peaks, the Limited was marooned, snowbound by giant deposits of ice across the shining steel rails.

The other occupants of the Pullman car had retired an hour or two before. The car itself looked gloomy, curtained with the deep green drapes which hid each upper and lower berth from the aisle.

Rand, however, was fully dressed. As he gazed out of the frost-covered window in front of him, his mind was not on the turbulency of the careening snowflakes. He thought of Limpy Kirk. And again, to refresh himself on the subject, he glanced down at the newspaper in his hand.

It was one which he had purchased in Spokane, five hours earlier when the Limited departed for Chicago. In two-inch caps, glaring and truculent, the headlines of the paper screamed: "Kirk Escapes from Erwin Penitentiary!"

There was more about the killer in the story which followed the streamer, but Rand knew it all by heart. Limpy Kirk, gunman, had broken out. He was at bay, dangerous, homicidal. Limpy Kirk, one of the foremost public enemies of the country. Loose.

Rand had read that news story in the Union Station in Spokane. At the same moment, he had seen two men go by him. Two men whose records were covered with crimson gore. They were Rocco Faroni and Frankie Vincente. And—coincidentally—Limpy Kirk had belonged to Faroni's mob in Chicago!

So Rand had played a hunch.

He followed Faroni and Vincente, saw them board the Limited, take up bunks in the first Pullman behind the baggage car. Acting on the spur of the moment, Rand, too, had boarded the crack train. And he had been fortunate enough to procure a berth in the same car with Faroni and his bodyguard, Vincente.

The car was as still as death. Only the sound of the whipping snow against the glass broke the utter taciturnity of the marooned train.

Rand rose and left his berth. He went to the smoking room in the rear of the car. The Limited's chief conductor was there. Rand knew him. They had met before in chases of this sort.

"Hello, Kelly," Rand said, taking out a cigarette and lighting it. "Anything new?"

William Kelly, the conductor, grinned and shook his head. "I'm afraid you're out of luck this time, Rand," he said. "I've been through the whole damn train. And there's no sign of Limpy Kirk nor any one who looks like him."

"There's Faroni and Vincente in my car," Rand replied dryly. "If that doesn't smell funny, what does?" He paused. "Who else is registered here?"

"You mean in Pullman number one?"

"Yeah."

"Let's see ...." Kelly reached into his pockets and tugged at voluminous data on the occupants of the entire train. He finally found the correct list and perused it, his face gnarled into deep wrinkles. "There's yourself," he observed, "Faroni, Vincente, a Richard Barnes—"

"That's the young chap," Rand interrupted. "I saw him."

"And Lola Luce," Kelly continued. "She's a movie actress, ain't she?"

Rand nodded. "A poor one, too. On the way down. Who else on your list?"

"Sarah Pitts, She's secretary to Lola Luce. And there's a man named Tolbert, C. Emery Tolbert."

"Saw him," Rand said, "Obese, bald. Typical business man. Well," shrugging, "that seems to settle that car. You've checked all the others?"

"Sure, Roy," Kelly shook his head. "I tell you there ain't any sign of Kirk."

"How about the baggage car?" Rand asked.

Kelly made a wry face. "Not a damn thing up there. Mostly mail. Few crates. Small ones. A man couldn't hide in them. And—oh yeah, Roy, there's a coffin up there."

Rand's eyes narrowed. He flipped his cigarette to the floor and extinguished it. "A coffin?" he repeated.

Kelly nodded. "Belongs to this Richard Barnes in your car. He's taking it back East."

"What's his destination?" Rand snapped with acerbity.

"New York." Kelly squinted at Rand and smiled. "And if you've got any idea that Limpy Kirk is hiding out in that coffin, Roy, just lose it. There's a genuine bona fide corpse in that package. I seen the death certificate

myself. It's the mother of Richard Barnes."

Rand was plainly disappointed.

"The whole thing looks like a wild-geese chase," he admitted reluctantly. "But it seemed like a good hunch at the time. After all, it's once in a blue moon that you find two mobsters heading east from Spokane on the same day that one of their boys breaks jail. I expect that Kirk is hiding back in the city until the holocaust dies down a bit. But I'm keeping my eyes on Faroni and Vincente just the same."

"Why?"

"It stands to reason," explained Rand, "that it was no innocent coincidence they were in Spokane the day Kirk escaped."

Kelly grinned and opened his mouth to reply. Words never left it. He suddenly snapped taut, rigid. Rand himself tensed automatically into immobility.

Suddenly and with shrill horrific cadence, a macabre, tortured shriek split through the nocturnal silence of the train!

It rose up slowly in a mournful banshee wail, horribly inhuman, and then broke at its zenith into a harsh strident screech of pain and terror! The awful, unholy sound permeated throughout the smoking room and clamped down a terrible effluvium of eeriness and oppression upon the two men there.

Following the cry on the instant, a gruesome gurgling rattle floated dully and fantastically through the car.

**R**AND glanced at Kelly, speechless, shuddery tremors coursing weirdly up and down his spine. He had the oddest sensation of the hair on his neck standing straight out.

Kelly had blanched a deathly yellow. His lips moved soundlessly, and his eyes bulged from his head as though from acute ophthalmia.

Simultaneously, there was another sound—a sharp cutting scream! Rand identified it instantly as one of fright. A

woman. It seemed like years as he sat there, transfixed at the suddenness of the whole thing.

Then Rand leaped to action. He hurled himself from the lounge where he had been smoking, next to Kelly, and plunged headlong into the outside corridor back towards the belly of the Pullman. He tugged at his shoulder holster as he ran. An ugly blue-stepped Mauser leaped into his hand as his finger curled hungrily around its trigger.

The car was in an uproar. Kelly, with the natural instinct of a trainman, had also left the smoking room and had run to the end of the Pullman to lock the door. He finished the task with such alacrity that he was almost on Rand's heels when Rand reached the berths of the Pullman.

The green drapes of the car were all pulled aside. Heads were peering from them. In the center of the car, in front of lower six, Lola Luce stood, white as a sheet and wavering uncertainly on her feet. She was staring—staring in repugnancy and fear at something in lower six.

Then, with a low moan, she collapsed, just before Rand could reach her, into the arms of a man alongside. It was Frankie Vincente.

"Put her on one of the lower berths!" Rand snapped. "No one move! This car is locked. Stay where you are! Kelly!"

The conductor moved to his side.

"Yeah, Roy?"

"Lock that front door, next to the baggage car," Rand ordered sharply. "No one leaves here."

Kelly nodded and tore recklessly through the Pullman to the end nearest the baggage car, where he also locked the door on that end. The Pullman was now sealed.

Rand shoved his pistol back in its holster. There was no need for it. He moved up to lower six and looked into it.

A raw gory horror lay there. It was a man. His throat was sliced wide open, exposing the inner parts of the gullet and trachea. The

jugular vein was spouting crimson blood all over the pillow and sheets. The hands of the cadaver were stretched towards the gaping throat in a grisly effort to stay the flow of blood. The eyes were open, glaring, horrible!

It was Rocco Faroni.

Rand turned quickly to Kelly, who gulped at the nauseating sight and wheeled away.

"Murder!" snapped Rand. "And some one here did it!"

He bent down over the corpse again and studied it with apparent reluctance. It was a nasty thing. There was no sign of the weapon. The killer had taken it with him. That Faroni had been slain with a long flat-bladed knife was glaringly evident.

Rand rose grimly and closed the green drapes in front of the berth. Silently he surveyed the occupants of the car. They had all assembled now and were waiting, watching him tensely.

Rand spoke to Vincente.

"Where were you when Faroni cried out?" he asked.

Vincente's eyes rolled in abject fright.

"Holy God," he whispered hoarsely, "you don't think I did this? I was with him. I was his body guard. I wouldn't have killed him like—"

"I asked you where you were," Rand said tartly.

Vincente's mouth closed with a snap. A furtive, canny look pervaded his eyes. "I was in my berth," he replied tersely. "Upper six. Above Rocco."

"Yeah?" Rand sounded sarcastic. "Asleep?"

Vincente nodded.

"With all your clothes on like that?" Rand said softly. "Or are you going to tell me you dressed since Rocco was killed?"

"I slept this way," Vincente replied warily. His eyes danced back and forth across Rand's face, never focusing in one spot. "I didn't want to struggle in that damn berth. I didn't undress."

**L**OLA LUCE, the movie actress, stirred where Vincente had laid her after her fainting spell. Her eyes fluttered and, when they opened, were quickly filled with loathing and fear at the memory of the disfigured corpse.

She began to sob hysterically right away. Rand grabbed her and lifted her to her feet.

"Now listen, Miss Luce," Rand said, shaking her gently to break the crying spell, "that won't do a bit of good. Stop it!"

She desisted at the commanding tones of his voice and looked up at him.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Roy Rand, special investigator." Rand flashed his honorary shield and nodded to Kelly. "He'll check on me. He knows me."

Lola Luce mumbled, "Police!" Then she fell silent, staring at Rand like a cat watches an unwary canary.

"Why did you scream right after Faroni did?" Rand asked.

Lola Luce's mouth tightened.

"I—I heard him as I walked by his berth. It was awful! I fell against the berth across the aisle. And then, suddenly, a man came away from Faroni's berth and shoved me aside! He ran down that way towards the baggage car."

"A man!" Rand exclaimed. "What'd he look like?"

"I couldn't tell," Lola Luce answered tremulously. "I didn't see his face. He was big and tall. And he limped."

"Limped?" Rand cried. He shot a glance at Kelly. A glance of triumph. "Kirk is on this train, Kelly! I knew he was!" He turned back to Lola. "What were you doing out of your berth? How did you happen to be passing Faroni's berth?"

"I—I was thirsty. I wanted a drink of water."

"Water's at the other end of the car," Rand snapped. "That's a pretty weak yarn, Miss Luce."

Vincente had been watching the questioning. He suddenly broke out, "She's

lying, Rand! I know it!"

Rand looked at the gunman. His face was curled up in hatred and anger. Rand asked, "What do you mean?"

"She's his moll," Vincente said, acidly. "Faroni's moll. It ain't no coincidence that she's on this train. Rocco arranged it. She's traveling with him. I know. And now she's bumped him!"

"No!" Lola Luce cried sharply. "That's not so! I didn't kill Rocco!"

"But you knew him all right," Rand said.

Lola Luce nodded. "Yes, I knew him. I was traveling with him."

"She's Rocco's wife!" Vincente snarled.

Rand waved at him to shut him up. "Is that true, Miss Luce? Are you—were you Rocco's wife?"

Lola Luce's head fell dejectedly. "Yes," she answered dully, her tones flat with despair. "I was his wife."

"Tell them the rest!" Vincente persisted. "Tell them how you and Rocco was separated. How he came after you, made you give up pictures. Tell them how you swore you'd get him for it. And why? Because he blackmailed you into giving up pictures. He had something on you!"

"All right!" Lola Luce cried out. "I did do all that. Rocco did have something on me. And now he's dead and I'm glad of it! But I didn't kill him! And you know it, Vincente! You might have done it yourself!"

Vincente paled perceptibly.

"I had nothing against Rocco," Vincente whined. "He was my pal. I didn't kill him."

Rand watched the byplay silently.

"I understand it now," Lola Luce said gratingly. "You knew how I stood with Rocco. So you planned to kill him and blame me for the job. Everything was fixed pretty for you. You threw me aside there and ran towards the baggage car. You wanted me to think that the killer limped that the killer was Limpy Kirk. He escaped this afternoon, and you knew he would be a good character to use. It would

make my story of a limping man sound crazy because Limpy Kirk isn't here."

"You're crazy!" Vincente replied harshly. "I wouldn't do anything like that! Why should I bump Rocco? He was my pal!"

"Was he?" Rand put in cuttingly. "Stand back, Frankie!" The ominous Mauser had jumped up again in Rand's hand. "Reach for the ceiling, Frankie," Rand said grimly. "I'm searching you."

Vincente was quivering with apprehension. A heavy cold sweat exuded fecundly from his face. His hands went up slowly.

Rand frisked the gangster quickly. He brought out a revolver from a shoulder holster.

"I've gotta permit for that," Vincente said.

Rand nodded. He went on in his search. There was no knife. Rand did, however, find a letter. He glanced at it. It was postmarked "Chicago" and in the upper left-hand corner was the return address. The letter was registered.

But it was the return address that fascinated Rand. The name was Maxey Gerron. And Maxey Gerron had been Rocco Faroni's rival for Chicago beer territory!

**R**AND smiled mirthlessly. He broke Vincente's revolver open, expelling its content of bullets onto the floor of the car. Then he handed the empty gun back to the sullen gangster, who immediately stuck it back in its holster.

Vincente then snapped, "Give me back my letter!"

Rand shook his head.

"I'm going to read it, Frankie," he replied. "A letter from Maxey Gerron to a bodyguard of Rocco Faroni should be very interesting reading."

An intense trembling seized Vincente. His black eyes sparked furiously as he bit his lip. With a swift, almost surreptitious action, he snatched at the envelope in Rand's hand.

Rand sliced down instantaneously with the

heavy butt of his Mauser pistol. It cracked into the flesh of Vincente's outstretched hand, thudding painfully, and left a livid raw welt flaming across the skin.

Maddened into a semi-bestial state by the detective's movements, Vincente clipped his good hand around in a lightning blow, clenched fist aimed bullet-like at Rand's jaw!

Rand saw the blow coming, but he was not agile enough to avoid it fully. He ducked away. Vincente's fist slammed into the detective's shoulder with a sickening crunch of flesh hitting flesh.

Rand went down like a log! He rolled on the floor of the car momentarily, still stunned by the viciousness of the unwonted attack. Lithely, he slipped to one side as Vincente clawed at him for the letter. Frantically, now, Rand jammed the letter into a pocket of his coat, and then grappled with the madman.

His face was mottled from the pressure of Vincente's claws on his throat, digging in to close his windpipe. Blackness began to pervade his vision as a sparkling myriad of flashing stars surged before his eyes. With one last wild swing, he reversed the pistol in his right hand!

It smashed terribly into Vincente's face with terrific force and catapulted the enraged gangster over backwards!

When Rand could climb to his knees, he stared at the unconscious body of Vincente. The face was bruised and sore where the studded gun butt had flared its mark on the skin. The nose was bleeding copiously.

Rand caught his breath and rose, panting. He shoved the Mauser in its holster and took the coveted letter from his coat. With a defiant glare at the assembled occupants of the Pullman car—all staring at him in lethargic fascination—he stripped the envelope off and opened the letter.

## CHAPTER II DEATH IN THE DARK

THE Limited conductor, Kelly, moved over closer to him, curious.

"What's in it, Roy?" he demanded.

Rand shrugged. He cast a queer glance at the stirring bulk of Frankie Vincente on the floor of the car and smiled crookedly.

Vincente suddenly opened his eyes. They rolled oddly in half-circles until they were able to focus with clarity. Vincente wiped the blood from his nose dazedly and stared at the taut faces which towered over him.

Roy Rand pointed an accusing finger at the man.

"Frankie," he said grimly, "you're under arrest for the murder of Rocco Faroni!"

Vincente did not object. He eyed Rand maliciously and looked craftily around him.

But Kelly was amazed. "What the hell, Roy!" he exclaimed. "What is it? What did that letter say?"

Rand replied succinctly, "Here. Read it."

Kelly accepted the letter eagerly and skipped through it quickly, hungrily. The message consisted of one brief but culminative sentence. It said:

"VINCENTE—

If Rocco isn't bumped like we planned it, before he gets back to Chi, you'll not only lose that bonus I promised you, but my boys will meet you both at the station with a couple of typewriters.  
Maxey GERRON."

Kelly whistled. "He'll never be able to beat that letter," he said shaking his head. "That's evidence."

Rand smiled. He turned to Vincente.

"I'm putting the bracelets on you, Frankie," he snapped. "I'm cuffing you to your seat until we hit Chi. And if you try any funny business—" Rand tapped his chest, where his pistol rested in its holster, meaningly.

Vincente was pale and strangely calm as Rand cuffed him.

"Listen, Rand," he began in a low voice, hoarsely, "I swear I didn't do it."

Rand waved a contemptuous hand at him.

"I mean it!" Vincente cried fearfully. "You've got to listen to me! You've got to believe me!" His voice rose with hysteria and then quickly subsided into a mysterious whisper. "I swear I didn't do it, Rand. You can't lose anything by listening to me. I'm cuffed here to my seat. But I'm not taking this rap for any one else. And I'm not getting bumped for any one else either."

Rand's eyes narrowed.

"Spill it, Frankie," he cut in. "What's in your craw?"

Vincente shot an acidulous look at Lola Luce who was watching him intently, white as a sheet.

"If that dame is telling the truth," he said, "although," he added sneeringly, "I doubt it, then something's on the queer here. *I* didn't bump Rocco. That's straight. And if *she* didn't—"

Lola Luce interrupted shrilly, "I didn't! I didn't, I tell you! There was a big man! He was leaning over in the berth. And when I came by, he stood up and pushed me away. Look!" She pulled up the sleeve of the negligee which she was wearing. "Look at that black and blue mark. Do you think I did that for fun? That's where I hit the berth brace across the aisle after he shoved me!"

Vincente leaned towards her.

"You said the bird limped?" he asked tensely.

Lola Luce nodded.

"Yes," she answered tremblingly. "He limped. Like a lame man."

Vincente searched for Rand's eyes and found them.

"Rand," he rasped, "suppose Limpy Kirk—"

"—boarded this train after he escaped this afternoon?" Rand finished. "Yeah. I've been thinking about that. In fact, that's why I'm here!"

"That's why you're here?" Vincente exclaimed.

Rand nodded, his eyes shining.

"Yeah, Frankie. That's why I'm here. Limpy was one of Rocco's strong-arm men back in Chi. And it seemed damned funny to me that Limpy Kirk should escape from Erwin on the same day that you and Rocco took the Crescent Limited for Chicago. So I followed you both. I took a berth in the same car. I thought you might lead me to Kirk."

Vincente stared madly at Rand. He half rose in his seat, but the manacles held him back. His eyes glazed wildly. He tried to speak for a moment, but his lips only moved soundlessly.

Without warning, his voice gained strident audibility as he harshly emitted a despairing groan.

"God, Rand!" he breathed like a doomed convict. "You followed us because you thought we'd lead you to Kirk? You thought that Rocco somehow helped Kirk to break jail and lam East? Why, you damned fool, don't you know that Limpy was—"

The Pullman turned into Stygian blackness like a bolt of lightning. The velvet, turbid pitch engulfed the recesses of the train car and pervaded each pulsating heart with the effluence of lurking disaster which nocturnity insinuated.

There was a short silence for a minute.

"What's happened?" Lola Luce cried out, frightened.

Rand said, "Steady all." He called to Kelly.

"No go, Roy," Kelly replied. "Some one's pulled the switch to the compartment lights. I'll have to find them and put them on. Any one got a match?"

"Is that switch in this car?" Rand's voice sliced through the obscurity sharply. "*Inside* this car?"

"Yeah, Roy."

"But you locked both doors to this car!" Rand was taut with the proximity of danger. "No one on the outside could have turned the compartment lights off. The juice box is in here. That means that some one in this car

turned them off."

Silence. The blackness seemed oppressive.

"I—I guess you're right, Roy," said Kelly.

"Stand by!" Rand snapped. "I'm calling a roll. Answer to your name. Vincente!"

"Here," said Vincente.

"Lola Luce!"

"Here," replied the actress.

"Miss Pitts!"

Luce's secretary answered, "Present."

"Barnes!" Rand resumed.

"Here," Barnes returned quickly.

"Tolbert!"

"I'm here," answered C. Emery Tolbert. "What sort of a business is this anyway? I shall certainly take this up with—"

Rand retorted, "Stow it. All present and accounted for. Then who turned off those lights? Any one got a match?"

Richard Barnes broke in. "I think I have." He fumbled in his pockets in the darkness. Presently the irascible scratch of a match sounded. A tiny yellowish light flared up.

It was blown out by a strong gust of wind instantaneously!

"What's that?" whispered Vincente eerily.

**R**AND strained in the darkness, a queer instinct of unconscionable dread tugging at his stomach. His hand stole into his coat, feeling gingerly for the welcome butt of his lethal Mauser.

Clump! Clump! Clump!

A sodden, ominous thudding permeated through the miasmatic murkiness of the Pullman. It was some one—or something—walking, stomping awkwardly. But the gait was irregular and uneven, and the contact of the shoes on the carpeted aisle of the car was peculiarly distinct in audibility. It was a dull sound. Grim and somehow weird!

Like a lame man!

Roy Rand, his heart beating with excitement and dread, felt something brush by him. Something big and heavy. He reached out instantly and grabbed at it, his pistol ready



in his hand. The thing turned on him in silent savagery.

A vague crunching sound. Rand reeled as a clenched fist of muscle and bone catapulted against his chest and hurled him wildly sideways! The impetus of the stunning blow took him completely by surprise and sent him plunging headlong into the width of a lower berth at his aide. His knees buckled up as they hit the boarding of the berth, and he fell.

Sprawling there ludicrously in the darkness, he struggled insanely to regain his feet. It was too much of a risk to chance a shot at the intruder in the darkened car. Too many people around. He might plug the wrong person.

Then, hissing, like the hideous warning of an enraged fer-de-lance, a rough virile voice emanated out of the ebony veil which engulfed them all, close to Rand's ear.

It spoke one word, questioningly, searchingly.

"Vincente?"

Rand guessed the motive of the question instantly. He threw himself forward with his gun and shouted at the top of his lungs, "Vincente! For God's sake—don't answer!"

But he was too late.

Even as he spoke, Frankie Vincente stirred uncertainly in the place where Rand had manacled him for safety, and whispered, "Who is it?"

Some one moved through the jet pitch. The slap of a powerful blow into unresisting flesh sent Rand's blood coursing madly through his veins like ice water.

He flung forward out of the bunk. There was a stifled gasp—a gruesome exhalation of breath which seemed to last an eternity. Then Vincente emitted a grisly moan. It rattled bestially in his throat like the buzz of a carnivorous diamond-back. He coughed rackingly for a second or two. That did it. A terrible roaring stillness encompassed the Pullman.

It was broken instantly by a repetition of

sound. The uneven, macabre clump-clumping came to Rand as he stood helplessly in the dark and cursed himself for not being able to do something.

The clumping faded down the aisle in the direction of the front of the car towards the baggage car ahead.

"A match!" Rand cried hoarsely. "God, Barnes, light a match!"

Richard Barnes fumbled momentarily. A scraping noise suddenly sounded and the tiny guttering flare of a match swept aside the black curtain.

Rand peered—strained, his Mauser waving eagerly.

Mysteriously, the match blew out again like the first one had. But in the brief interval where its light had flickered up sulphurously, Rand caught sight of a lumbering black gargoyle at the furthest end of the car.

The Mauser shot up. Twice it vomited fire and lead through the darkness, emitting sparks and a bursting line of orange flame. The explosion of the pistol bellowed thunderously within the narrow confines of the Pullman.

A cry of pain flipped back from the fleeing invader.

"Winged him!" Rand cried. "Come on, Barnes! I'm going to need those matches!"

He groped his way down the Pullman aisle, stumbling against the berth rests and swearing softly. At the end of the aisle, he had Barnes light another match.

There was a trace of crimson blood on the carpet.

"He's going towards the baggage car," Rand exulted. "And the door is locked. Come on. We've got him!"

Kelly called, "Careful, Roy! He may be heeled!"

**R**AND laughed shortly and plunged ahead in the darkness. In the passage towards the platform of the Pullman, he bumped into the fuse box of the car. Barnes, at Rand's command, lighted another

match. Rand reached into the fuse box and plugged the main switch.

The Pullman exploded soundlessly into glaring light.

Rand blinked blindly at the brilliant flare of the sundry electric bulbs of the car. Dancing black spots jiggled insanely before his eyes as they strained swiftly to focus normally, the pupils contracting to mere pin points.

Gradually, the misty haze cleared from them, and with dubious clarity, Rand was able to see somewhat again. He sped quickly down to the end of the Pullman where the door led to the car platform and beyond to the baggage car ahead.

Rand grasped the knob and tried to open the door, wrenching it strongly. It refused to budge. It was still locked!

"Couldn't have gone out there," Rand muttered, disgruntled. "Must be hiding somewhere in the car!"

He wheeled around and tore back to the others.

"Kelly!" he exclaimed, "you come along up here. All you others, search this car. Women too. Search every nook and corner. Look under berths, in empty drawing rooms, lavatories, everywhere. If you find any one—yell. Come on, Kelly!"

Rand returned to the spot in the aisle where he had discerned the small pool of fresh blood, evidence of the fact that a steel-jacketed slug from his Mauser had hit home. Kelly followed right behind him, his elderly face gray and striated. Richard Barnes came along on Kelly's heels. His young face was frightened and anxious.

Rand dived into the smoking room at the end of the car. It was empty. And there was no other hiding place up in that part of the Pullman.

Yet a tiny twisting trail of blood showed plainly that the limping intruder had retreated by that route—and *had not come back!*

Rand said crisply, "There's only one

exit—that door!"

He pointed at the portal which barred the way to the platform and beyond.

"But that's locked!" Kelly cried protestingly. "I locked it myself!"

"And it still is locked," added Rand. "But that doesn't prove anything. Unlock, Kelly, I'm going to have a look up in that baggage car. This may be a trick. But it may be the real thing. Maybe some one is hiding in that car!"

Kelly gasped. He came forward with a ring of keys jingling in his hand. He inserted one in the lock of the door and turned it. Then he opened the door.

"Okay, thanks," said Rand. He took out his Mauser again. "You go back with those others, Kelly. See that the women are all right. And make sure about Vincente."

Kelly nodded and disappeared.

Rand turned and looked at Richard Barnes questioningly.

"I'd like to go along, sir," Barnes said hesitantly. "That is—if you're going up into the baggage car. You see, my mother's—"

"I know," Rand cut in. "You mean the coffin." He noticed the black mourning band on the young man's arm.

"Yes," nodded Barnes. "The coffin is there. And if some one is trying to hide—well, I wouldn't like to think of anything happening to it."

Rand appraised the young man. "Okay, son," he said. "Come along. But take care of yourself. If there is some one up there, he's a killer. Keep behind me. If we hurry, we can catch him. He hasn't had much time to hide."

Rand turned and stepped through the open door out onto the platform of the Pullman. Barnes followed him.

An icy, bone-piercing wind swept through the crevices of the car-joiners and up from the rounded steel platform slides. It cut them bitterly and their breaths leaped out in front of them like clouds of steam and smoke.

Rand stepped across the platform of the Pullman to the connecting joint of the two

cars. In a second he was on the rear platform of the baggage car.

But it was dark here. No welcome and disclosing electric bulb glowed overhead in the platform space.

He reached for the baggage car door.

As he did so, something fell on him from behind!

It seemed to have come from the sky. Two powerful lithe fingers came down and rapidly gripped into the skin of his throat, digging, digging cruelly, brutally for his larynx. Rand gasped at the terrible pain, of the tightening fingers. Wildly he tried to twist and fire his pistol.

It was no use. The deadly grip began to close with the tautness and power of a contracting python. Rand struggled, groaning and clawing for breath. The Mauser dropped from his nerveless fingers. He heard Barnes cry out behind him, dimly, far-away. The scene began to spin, revolving like a bizarre, starry pinwheel.

As the sable curtain of unconsciousness pervaded, his departing vision, Rand was barely able to feel a terrific blow on the rear of his skull.

Then he dipped down slowly into an ebony void.

And darkness!

### CHAPTER III THE INCREDIBLE TRUTH

**W**HEN Rand regained painful consciousness, he could see nothing. Only a whirling black pool of sparks. Dazedly, he stirred and tried to sit up. But the fracas had sapped his strength. He fell back for a second, panting hotly as though he had run a race.

Everything suddenly cleared. The cold sweep of the zero wind biting through his suit roused him sharply, cleaning his senses. Fortuitously he strove to gain a squatting

posture. He groaned at the effort, but succeeded.

He quickly searched for his gun. It was in front of him on the floor. He picked it up and pocketed it

He glanced around him.

Richard Barnes lay prone, directly behind him and to one side. The young man was face down, his arms and legs sprawled awkwardly.

Rand grunted and climbed laboriously to his feet. He bent down over Barnes, grabbed the young man by the shoulders, and dragged him slowly into the adjoining platform of the Pullman where a single electric bulb illumined the scene.

Rand turned Barnes over, lifting his head. He slapped it gingerly and rubbed the young man's skull. There was a big bump and a slight red bruise on the fellow's forehead.

Rand continued his resuscitative efforts vigorously. In several seconds, Barnes began to move slightly, a vague trembling running throughout his frame. His breathing quickened slightly. Rand felt his pulse and watched the young man closely.

Finally Barnes's lips moved soundlessly. His blue eyes fluttered open uncertainly and stared unseeingly, apparently, straight ahead.

"Wake up!" Rand said with acerbity, shaking Barnes. "Come out of it, you're all right!"

Richard Barnes looked at Rand stupidly. The uncomprehending glare of his eyes slowly passed away as he took cognizance of the detective.

"Wh-what happened?" he mumbled whisperingly.

Rand gritted his teeth and his eyes narrowed.

"Somebody beat us to the punch!" he snapped bitterly. "Somebody slugged us when we started to go into the baggage car. Come on, boy. Up on your feet. We're still going on."

Barnes struggled weakly to his feet with Rand's aid.

"Yes," he gasped. "Let's go on. My mother's coffin. . . if anything has happened to that—I'll—I'll kill—"

"Skip it," said Rand. He took out his gun. "Follow along. And watch yourself this time."

Rand resolutely crossed through the dark platform and confidently opened the door to the baggage car. He walked through it steadily and raised his Mauser, ready for anything.

Barnes trudged weakly behind him, and closed the door to the car after them.

The baggage car was dimly lighted, but sufficiently so.

At the nearer end of the car, a lot of wooden crates were piled. They were small crates. Too small for human occupancy. Packages were also heaped around.

And against one wall—by itself—a large pine box coffin sat up on the floor, lengthwise. It was all by itself in the narrow space it occupied and looked strangely somber.

Near the mail racks in a rickety wooden chair which was tilted back against the wall of the baggage car, sat the baggageman.

He was apparently asleep. His hat was down, half over his face. His arms were folded comfortably across his chest. A buzzing, sawlike snore rose from him with astonishingly clear, monotonous cadence.

Rand crossed the car to the man and shook him roughly.

The fellow stirred, started, and awoke.

"Huh?" he muttered, half awake. "What's up? What's the matter?" He looked up at them suddenly. "Hey!" he exclaimed. "What's the idea? Passengers ain't allowed in here!"

"What's your name?" Rand snapped.

"Joe Brown," the man answered automatically. He caught himself quickly. "Say, I'll ask the questions. What're you doin' in here anyhow? Passengers ain't allowed in here. Vamoose!"

Rand flashed his badge and lowered his pistol.

"Oh, cops," Brown said. "I didn't know that. What's wrong?"

"See any one in here at all tonight?" Rand asked.

"Nary a soul," replied Brown.

Rand scowled. "Are you sure?"

Brown shook his head and sighed.

"Course, I'm sure! Ain't I been here all along? Nobody but Bill Kelly's been in here since we left Spokane."

"You haven't seen a big man—a limping man?" Rand prompted.

"I tell you, I ain't seen a soul outside Kelly."

Rand nodded disappointedly. Brown settled back in his tilted chair without getting up.

"How about that coffin?" Rand asked. "Has any one bothered it? Has any one been near it?"

"Listen," Brown said, disgustedly, "I just told yuh that I ain't seen no one. No one's been in—"

"Skip it," snapped Rand. "I heard you the first time. But you've been asleep. You were asleep when we came in. God knows how long you were asleep before that! Any one could have come and gone through this car while you snoozed and you'd never have known the difference!"

Brown colored and gulped.

"What the hell," he said shamefacedly, "I ain't no nursemaid for this train. I gotta right to sleep. My work's done until we hit Denver."

Rand sighed and moved over to the coffin. Richard Barnes was examining it anxiously.

"It seems to be all right, Mr. Rand," Barnes said, in apparent relief.

**R**AND inspected the pine box. It was solidly put together, the spikes plainly visible in the strong boards. Nothing had been jimmied or torn apart. Rand knocked inquisitively but firmly on the coffin box. It sounded solid. All was intact.

Rand was disturbed. "No one's been in or out of here unless it was a ghost," he

remarked, frowning. "But where in hell did the fellow go?"

The tired baggageman made a wry face. "You oughta write mysteries!" he scoffed chidingly. "The spook in the baggage car!" He laughed gruffly. "That's a hot one. Listen, brother, I've ridden about two hundred stiffs across the country in my time. And I ain't never seen one get up and walk away yet. When they're dead—they're dead."

"Skip it," snapped Rand. He glanced nastily at the baggageman and retraced his steps to the rear door of the car. "Keep your eyes open, Brown. If you see anything, let me know. I'll be in the first Pullman."

"Nuts," Brown returned, settling himself again.

Rand eyed him angrily. Then nodded to Barnes.

"Come along," he said.

They left the baggage car. Rand was about to stride across the steel connecting joint of the two cars, baggage and Pullman, when a flashing glint of silver struck his eye. He stopped.

A single long key lay on the steel floor in front of him. He bent down quickly and picked it up.

"Skeleton key," Rand murmured, turning it over in his hand. "So that's how he did it! Used a skeleton key on the locked Pullman door to get in. Then relocked it after he got out. Must have dropped the key making a get-away."

"What does that mean?" Richard Barnes asked.

Rand eyed him.

"It means," he replied ominously, "that Limpy Kirk, escaped killer, is on board this train somewhere!"

Barnes gasped. "Not really!"

"Yes, really." Rand looked thoughtful. "I didn't think so when Rocco Faroni was killed. It looked like Vincente sure. But Kirk fooled me. He's on this train all right. I thought at first that he might be—that Rocco and

Vincente had helped him break jail this afternoon in Spokane and were aiding him in a lam east. But Vincente tried to tell us something just as the lights went out. He never finished what he was going to say."

They crossed the platforms and entered the Pullman again. The warmth of the car felt good after the biting teeth of the icy wind outside.

"What was Vincente trying to say?" Barnes asked curiously.

Rand shrugged as they walked.

"I don't know," he answered. "But I can guess. He was going to say that Limpy Kirk was not on the lam with them. He was going to tell me that Rocco had crossed Kirk, and that Kirk was gunning Faroni and all his double-crossing mob."

Barnes shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"No?" questioned Rand. "Well, it's just this. Kirk was up in Erwin Penitentiary doing a life term. He'd been convicted of murder in Spokane. And at the time, I didn't quite understand the whole business. Maybe Kirk did do it, but Rocco Faroni should have sprung Kirk. Rocco always used to spring his boys if they got in a jam. But, oddly enough, Rocco laid off Limpy Kirk. Rocco didn't raise a finger to help Limpy."

Rand paused for breath.

"Now it's just possible that Rocco thought Limpy Kirk was getting ideas and becoming ambitious. Rocco wanted to put Limpy out of the way for good. So Rocco might have framed Kirk into that homicide charge which sent him up for life. Rocco might have hoped that Kirk would get the death penalty. I remember at the trial, the prosecuting attorney asked for it enough. But the jury gave a verdict of life imprisonment because of insufficient evidence."

"What then?" Barnes queried, his eyes shining.

"Then," Rand continued, "Limpy was sent up. He was 'doing it all' in the big house and

planning some day on a break. Somehow, with an accomplice, he found out Rocco and Vincente were in Spokane. He had had this accomplice track Rocco and Frankie. So he struck while the iron was hot—made his break and got away with it!”

“But the accomplice—” began Barnes.

“—arranged everything,” finished Rand. “The accomplice, let’s say Mr. Jones, followed Faroni’s movements, knew that he and Vincente were leaving on the Crescent Limited for Chicago. Mr. Jones told Limpy Kirk, and Kirk followed—to kill them for the double-cross!”

“Gee, Mr. Rand,” Barnes exclaimed boyishly, “you certainly have got the motive down. But where is Kirk now? And where is the accomplice—the Mr. Jones?”

Rand looked dumb. He shrugged. But there was a peculiar gleam in his eyes. “Don’t know where Kirk is. But he’s here—somewhere. A man couldn’t live outside tonight very long. It’s below zero, and that snow is damned deep. And Mr. Jones—well, he could be anybody.”

THE Pullman was weirdly still when they entered the berth section past the corridor and smoking room. The passengers, Lola Luce, Sarah Pitts, and C. Emery Tolbert, were all huddled together with William Kelly, the Limited conductor, at one end of the car.

Kelly rose as Rand and Barnes approached him.

“Find anything?” Rand asked.

Kelly shook his head. “We’ve looked throughout every cranny in this car, Rand. There’s no one else in here. How about you?”

Rand shook his head cannily.

“Nothing either. How’s Vincente?”

Kelly made a face which held an effluence of repugnancy. He motioned over his shoulder down the aisle and said, “You’d better take a look yourself, Roy.”

Rand passed the group and walked down

the aisle to the berth where he had handcuffed Frankie Vincente. Richard Barnes joined him curiously.

Vincente was dead. Dead as hell. There remained nothing but a grisly ghastly cadaver, slowly stiffening in *rigor mortis*. Vincente’s eyes were open, bursting from their sockets in pure amazement at the satanic thrust which had murdered him.

He sat there quite naturally, his legs folded under him and his arms at his sides, one handcuffed to the berth brace. The coat of his suit was open. Something protruded up, shaftlike, from the white shirt underneath the coat.

It was the hilt of a dagger. Rand looked at it more closely. The blade, thin but evidently wide, was buried gruesomely in the dead flesh right up to the crest of the dirk’s grip. The wound was directly over the heart on the left side of the chest. Around the aperture which the killing steel had made, quantities of darkened desiccated blood had soaked through the white shirt.

Rand took a deep breath. It wasn’t very pretty. He stooped over and felt the face of the dead man. It was already cold with the chill of death.

Richard Barnes had blanched terribly. His stomach seemed to heave, and he gasped for breath at the repulsive sight. His hand shot to his mouth and he gulped, trying to swallow the excess saliva which filled his mouth at the glimpse of the corpse.

“God!” he rasped, finally. “Excuse me! I feel sick!”

He ran hurriedly down the aisle of the car for the smoking room, one hand on his mouth, one on his stomach. Rand smiled crookedly as he saw the young man go. Barnes finally reached the narrow corridor towards the smoking room and platform and disappeared from sight.

Instantaneously, Roy Rand snapped around and also ran down the aisle. He stopped in front of the car occupants and

looked straight at Kelly.

"Bill," he said tartly, "have you got a Joe Brown in the baggage car on this trip?"

"Why, no," Kelly replied in surprise. "Steve McGilley is the baggage-master of the Crescent Limited. And at Denver he picks up Jim Bennet as an assistant until Chicago."

"I knew it!" Rand exclaimed. "There's no Joe Brown at all?"

"I never heard of the fellow," said Kelly.

Rand grabbed Kelly by the arm and started into the corridor, dragging the conductor after him.

"Where you going, Roy?" Kelly asked, in stupefaction.

"After Richard Barnes," replied Rand.

"But he's only in the smoking room," Kelly said.

"Is he?" Rand sounded sardonic. "Well, we've got time. Here's the smoking room. Just stop off and look it over. Tell me what you find there."

Kelly entered the smoking room quickly. It was absolutely empty. He left the room and returned to Rand swiftly.

"Where is he?" Kelly was profoundly puzzled.

"Where else could he be?" Rand shot back.

Kelly stared at him. "You mean, he's gone up into the baggage car?"

Rand nodded.

"To see his mother's coffin?" Kelly persisted.

"Don't be dumb, Bill," said Rand acidly. "That death certificate was a phony. They pulled the wool over your eyes like you were a baby. That coffin didn't have a corpse in it! Barnes's mother isn't in it! That coffin carried Limpy Kirk out of Spokane this afternoon!"

"What?"

"Yes," Rand said swiftly. "A coffin of death—death which struck down Rocco Faroni and Frankie Vincente in revenge for a double-cross. A coffin which carried a living man to deal death! The whole thing had been

planned for months in advance. Kirk wanted to get the other two. He had an accomplice track them, trace them, plan the whole holocaust!"

Kelly was astounded. "And you mean that young Barnes fellow is—"

"Exactly!" replied Rand, biting off each word. "Richard Barnes is the accomplice of Limpy Kirk!"

#### CHAPTER IV THE KILLER

THEY stole stealthily across the cold metal floors of the connecting platforms of the two cars and paused before the door to the baggage car.

The wind still howled furiously like an enraged demon and dug its icy claws into their faces like an invisible cat. But it had stopped snowing and the night had become suddenly beautiful as the silvery hue of a riding moon cast down an iridescent, unreal glow across the white powdery snowdrifts.

"Stay behind me," Rand whispered. "And keep low. There may be gunplay."

Kelly nodded silently.

Rand opened the door to the baggage car with advertent slowness. He slipped soundlessly into the car and held the door for Kelly who squeezed through the narrow opening. Then Rand softly shut the door and they both cowered carefully, expectantly, in the deep, dim shadows of the baggage car.

The tones of two masculine voices drifted back to them from the front end of the car. Silently, and with utmost caution, they peered over the piled crates at the speakers.

There stood Richard Barnes. Next to him was Joe Brown, the former baggageman whom Rand had questioned. Brown had only sat in the chair before, but now on his feet next to Barnes, the man towered like a giant. Barnes was protesting and wildly gesticulating with waving arms.

"A hell of a thing!" the baggageman cried.

"I'm clearing out of the car and you light a match for the dick! Look at that shoulder. He sent a slug through it! What were you trying to do? Cross me and have me killed?"

"Listen, Limpy," Barnes retorted pleadingly, "I had to do it. Can't you see that? Rand asked me a couple of times for a match. I had to light them or he would have suspected me. I blew them out as quickly as I could without being seen. I'm sorry you got plugged, but I couldn't do anything else! I'm not crossing you, Limpy. Didn't I work out this whole thing for you? Didn't I help you with your break, bribing that guard, smuggling a rod to you?"

Joe Brown, alias Limpy Kirk, frowned.

"Okay, Johnny," he said. "I guess you hadda do it. What's up now?"

Rand swore to himself. "I thought I'd seen that Barnes mug somewhere else," he whispered softly to Kelly. "His name isn't Barnes! It's John Kirk—Limpy's younger brother! What an ass I've been!"

Kelly gripped Rand's shoulder. The detective fell silent.

"It's the dick," said the younger Kirk. "He's wise, Limpy, I swear he is. He mapped out the whole thing to me as we walked back to the Pullman after he questioned you and thought you were the baggage-master. He's got the whole layout perfectly. He guessed that Faroni and Vincente framed you on that rap. And he guessed that you're on board to get them for it. And I think he's sizing me up. He's been looking at me funny."

Limpy Kirk was thoughtful.

"Maybe you're right," he said. "Rand's no dumb flatfoot. What do yuh think we oughta do?"

"Lay low!" answered Johnny Kirk. "Get back in the coffin and the hell with playing baggageman. If the conductor ever sees you—"

Limpy's face darkened, and an expression of terrible hatred swept across it.

"Nothin' doin', Johnny," he snarled

savagely. "I'm not through' yet! There's one more I'm gonna get in this deal. The dame! Rocco's dame!"

"She had nothing to do with it, Limpy!" Johnny cried.

"I don't give a damn!" Limpy returned hotly. "She's getting it too. And then, they can fry me if they want!"

He grated his teeth.

"I shoulda bumped her when she saw me leave Rocco's berth after I gave him the steel. But I didn't have time. Rocco cried out. I didn't do a good job there. Then she screamed. But I'll get her now."

Roy Rand's sharp voice sliced through the conversation.

"You'll get no one, Limpy," he said coolly. "You're through, under arrest. And don't try any tricks or you'll get a hot bullet through your head. It's dead or alive, you know."

Limpy Kirk wheeled around in amazement. Johnny did likewise, but there was terror in his face.

Limpy just looked at Rand for a second.

"Hello, Roy," he said casually.

Then he ducked down like a shot, knocking his brother, Johnny, aside, and clawing frantically for a revolver in his back pocket.

The blue-steel of the gun glinted in the dim light and flew up to a bead like lightning.

Crack! Crack!

The two shots sounded like the ticking of a gigantic clock. The Mauser in Rand's hand belched fiery death at the same split second that Limpy Kirk's trigger finger gripped back and fired his revolver.

Rand heard the lead pellet whizz grimly by his ear with the peculiar whine its speed created. His own slug cracked into the side of the boxes and sent splinters careening about.

He ducked down behind the piled crates, yanking Kelly after him unceremoniously. Kirk's revolver crashed booming twice more. The crates in front of Rand jumped



under the slashing impact of the slugs. A bullet tore through one of them next to him and went zooming on to slap dully into the wall of the car behind him.

FOR several moments, there was oppressive silence as the car filled with acrid smoke. Rand crouched there cautiously, his pistol ready. He heard Limpy.

"You packing iron, kid?"

The voice of Barnes, alias Johnny Kirk, replied, "Yes, Limpy, but I'm not using it. I've had enough of this. It's murder!"

Limpy's voice became hard, menacing.

"You use that rod, kid, or I'll—"

Rand stuck his head above the crates and fired with rapid dexterity at the momentarily diverted Limpy.

Kirk cried out in pain as Rand saw the sleeve of his coat jump where the bullet hit.

"Damn!" Kirk bellowed. "He got me in the same arm as before! I'll kill you for that, Rand!"

He shot wildly, blindly at the crates. Rand sucked in his breath as the slugs zipped precariously close through the frail crates. Kelly, behind him, had edged the door to the car open. Taking the hazard, the conductor hurtled through the hole and disappeared out on the platform.

"He's gone!" Johnny Kirk wailed. "Limpy—Kelly's gone to get help! They'll shoot us!"

"Maybe so," said Limpy grimly. "But not before I get this Rand and that dame Luce!"

Rand shot up his head again and fired. He shot without aiming, in the vague vicinity of Limpy, but he saw to his horror that Kirk had moved. The Mauser slug thudded dully into unresisting flesh!

There was a low moan. Rand risked a glance. Johnny Kirk was on the floor, on his back, and his mouth was streaming a fountain of blood.

Another bullet from Limpy's revolver hit

the crates at the same time.

Limpy's voice reached Rand.

"All right, Rand," it said coldly, brimming with unconscionable hatred and seething fury. "You got him—right through the throat. Now, damn you—!"

Rand looked. He was astonished to see Limpy Kirk rise from his crouching position and catapult forward, the deadly revolver still in his hand.

Rand tried to fire, but the lame giant was upon him in two daring strides. Frenziedly, Rand jammed his Mauser back into its holster to grapple with the criminal. He had just got it there and arisen to meet the charge when a roar of thunder detonated before his eyes!

Rand saw the orange fire spit out from the yawning black muzzle of Limpy's blue gun. He saw that before he heard the ear-racking explosion so close to him.

Then he felt something like a white-hot iron sear his chest on the left side. A terrible iron which reached under his flesh and probed swiftly, tortuously into his torso, searching for his heart

For a moment after that, he felt nothing, only an awesome, unholy numbness which left him senseless to pain, to thought, to sight, to sound. He was, for an instant, an un-dead zombi, a being whose body could still move but whose powers were destroyed.

At last a delicious soft lassitude seeped through him like morphine, warming him somehow painlessly, and making him feel so welcomingly tired.

Rand slumped slowly, down to the floor and rolled on his side. His eyes closed and he could see nothing. He could hear nothing. He could not even feel the brutal sting of Limpy Kirk's heavy shoe upon his wounded ribs.

A swimming whirlpool. . . . then oblivion!

Limpy Kirk stared down at the spreading bloodstain on the front left side of Roy Rand's coat. His eyes gleamed sadistically. They stole back to his revolver. He broke it open. There was a single slug in the revolving chamber.

"For the dame," he muttered. He glanced at Rand again and kicked the detective's body savagely. "Dead all right. Damn him!"

He reached down, pocketing the gun, and lifted Rand up in his long arms. He dragged Rand loosely along the floor of the baggage car to the sliding doors in the center. He opened one with some effort. Then, with a harsh laugh, he picked up Rand bodily in his arms and hurled the detective out into the bitter cold night.

Rand slapped into the snowbank next to the train with a puffy sound and half sank from sight.

LIMPY KIRK cackled again and took out his revolver. He closed the door of the car and then sped to the rear. Here, looking cautiously around, he crossed the wind-swept platform onto that of the Pullman, opened a door to the latter, and entered.

Kirk warily limped down the narrow corridor past the smoking room. He peered around the corner of the corridor into the belly of the Pullman.

Lola Luce, Sarah Pitts, Tolbert, and another man, a stranger, apparently from another car, were sitting there. At the same time, a group of trainmen appeared at the far end of the aisle with shotguns and began to head for the fore end and the baggage car, headed by Bill Kelly, the Limited conductor.

Limpy cursed softly to himself and dodged back. He leaped into the smoking room, then into the lavatory. There, he locked the door.

He discerned the heavy padding of the men's feet on the carpet of the corridor as they passed the smoking room, glanced in, and then passed by and onward.

Limpy waited until he heard the front Pullman door swing closed. It told that the men had gone into the baggage car. It told that there was no one here to guard the women—and Lola Luce, the moll of Faroni!

Limpy's eyes burned with an insane fire.

He stepped out of the smoking room and treaded softly down the aisle. He was halfway to the group in the Pullman before they saw him.

Sarah Pitts caught sight of his limping frame, then of the revolver swinging carelessly at his side. She screamed stridently and fainted.

Tolbert swung around; his face grew purple with fright.

Lola Luce was pallid as death. She rose and faced him defiantly, but tremors shook her like a leaf.

She whispered, "So you got away?"

Limpy Kirk grinned. "Yeah, Lola. I got away. I swore I would get Rocco and Frankie for that frame. And you, too."

"I had nothing to do with it, Limpy," Lola Luce said, her eyes wide in horror as the revolver lifted up and aimed at her frightened face.

"Maybe you didn't," Limpy snapped. "Maybe you did. I can't argue. They'll be back in a second. And I've got just one slug left. I saved it for you. Rand got my brother, Johnny, back there in the baggage car. So whether you knew about the frame or not—you're paying for him!"

Lola Luce screeched horribly as Limpy Kirk's trigger finger lightened convulsively.

But the revolver never fired!

Instead, there was the incongruous tinkle of shattered glass. No sound but that. And Kirk, his ugly face still gnarled into a hideous evil grin, fell forward on his face like a tall redwood. He thudded into the aisle, twitched once, and then lay still.

And Lola Luce, gaping in, mingled repugnancy and stupefaction at the yawning crimson hole in Kirk's head directly behind his big right ear, knew he was already a corpse.

Her eyes raised uncertainly and rolled slightly as though she were going to faint. She swayed perceptibly, but steadied herself to peer beyond Kirk's cadaver at the broken

window in the Pullman.

There was a small round hole in the glass from which, radiating like crooked rays in a translucent sea, a corona of jagged lines stretched. The night wind filtered quickly through the hole.

C. Emery Tolbert, who had watched the drama in abject terror, leaped to the window with amazing dexterity despite his obesity and looked out into the snowbanks.

Something black and misshapen stood out there, thigh-deep in the heavy white blanket. Something which cried out and waved.

“Good God!” Tolbert roared. “It’s Rand out there!”

He left the window and scuttled down the aisle like a monstrous lumbering crab, crying, “I’ll get the conductor! Wait here! I’ll get him!”

**H**ALF an hour later, Roy Rand, weak and piqued, sat comfortably in one of the vacant drawing rooms of the Pullman, wrapped in blankets drinking a glass of toddy.

Bill Kelly, the Limited conductor, sat next to him, his eyes anxiously surveying the detective.

“You all right now, Roy?” he asked.

Rand nodded. “Yeah, thanks, Bill.”

“But what happened after I left you up there in the baggage car?” Kelly queried. “I didn’t mean to leave you alone. I thought I would get some men to help. I didn’t run out on you.”

“I know,” whispered Rand. “I know you didn’t, Bill. It just couldn’t be helped. I plugged Limpy’s brother by mistake; killed the kid.”

“You mean—Richard Barnes?”

“Yeah.” Rand sighed and shook his head. “Then Limpy just went sort of wild. He charged me, guns and all. I saw I was in for a tough grapple, so I jammed my Mauser into my shoulder holster and got up from behind the crates to meet him.”

Rand sipped the toddy.

“But he wasn’t fighting,” Rand continued. “He was killing. He fired at me in a range of about two feet. I felt the slug slam me and then I went down. I came to out in the snow.” He smiled grimly. “Limpy should never have tossed me out there. There’s nothing like cold snow and a zero wind to bring a man back to life if he’s been knocked unconscious. When I came to, the door of the baggage car was closed. I stumbled down the track through the snow to the Pullman. I thought, perhaps, you’d be in the Pullman, and help me get in out of the night.”

Rand paused and sipped again.

“Go on,” urged Kelly impatiently.

“But you weren’t there,” Rand resumed. “And then I saw Limpy standing in front of Lola Luce. I couldn’t hear what he was saying, but I could read his face. And when he lifted that rod and played it on her head, I beat him to the trigger and let him have the lead from my Mauser. One shot did it.”

Kelly marveled. “That’s neat work, Roy! But how in hell did you ever escape Limpy’s slug hitting your heart or lung?”

Rand grinned crookedly.

“You see, Bill, I had just put my own gun away when Kirk shot me. Look!”

Rand exposed his Mauser pistol to the Limited conductor. Along the steel barrel of the heavy gun, there was a lone curving line as though a trail of acid had eaten the metal.

“The bullet hit the Mauser,” Rand explained, “and then ricocheted and hit one of my ribs. Thank God for ribs! Because the bullet ricocheted again on the rib and slid off sideways through the flesh on my left, coming out the back. A flesh wound that should have killed me!”

Kelly whistled. “When I took the men into the baggage car, we found young Kirk dead there. So we opened the coffin.”

“And found nothing,” said Rand.

Kelly nodded. “There *was* a coffin inside. But it was all outfitted to take care of a living

man. And the sides of both the coffin and the pine box had a latch *on the inside* by which Kirk could get out without ever disturbing the boarding!"

He hesitated. "Roy, I don't quite see yet how you solved the whole thing. Mind telling me?"

"Sure," Roy Rand replied. "When Rocco was murdered, I honestly thought it was an inside job, and after Vincente fought with me over the letter, I was certain he had done it. Remember—I had come on this train after Limpy Kirk and thought, finally, I was on a wild-goose chase. I thought Kirk was a friend of Faroni's and Vincente's. But when Vincente was murdered—well, that was different. In the first place, the Pullman lights went out while all my suspects were with me. That showed plainly the killer was on the outside. Then that limping thump in the darkness. Kirk's walk. I knew then that Kirk was the murderer and guessed the motive easily. Kirk came down in the darkness and then called Vincente, using Vincente's reply to guide him to his prey. I tried to stop Vincente from answering, but I was too late. Kirk stabbed him in the dark." Rand paused for breath.

"You remember, I asked Barnes for matches. Whenever he lighted one, it would blow out. I thought that queer, because there was absolutely no wind in the car, and suspected him as Kirk's accomplice right off, for Kirk certainly had to have an accomplice. Then Barnes had to light one for me while Kirk was making his escape. It didn't stay lighted long, but it gave me a chance to nick him in the shoulder. So I went after him into the baggage car. I let Barnes come along with me on the pretext he wanted to make sure his 'mother's' coffin was all right. On the platform, some one slugged me. When I came

to, I found Barnes next to me on the floor, apparently slugged too. But when I brought him out of it, I knew instantly that *he* had been the one who got me and faked being knocked out!"

"How'd you know?" Kelly asked.

"When a man's knocked out," answered Rand, "his eyes are not normal when he comes to. The pupils are widely dilated, and you have to focus for several seconds before you can see. Also the pulse is slowed down considerably. But Barnes's eyes were perfectly normal. And his pulse was rapid. I felt it."

"But why did he knock you out anyhow?" Kelly asked.

"He had to," said Rand. "I was close on Limpy's trail. He hit me to give Limpy time to get back in the coffin. But Limpy didn't do that. Instead he shot and killed Steve McGilley, your baggage-master and changed clothes. Then he threw McGilley's corpse out in the snow. I found it there when I came to after he threw me out also. Thus, when I finally did reach the baggage car, I talked to Limpy as Joe Brown and didn't know him!"

"So when Barnes made believe that he was sick, but really went to warn Limpy to lay low, you followed him with me," said Kelly.

"That's right," answered Rand. "And you know the rest, the motive and how it was all done."

"I'll be damned!" said Kelly.

The Pullman gave a groan and then a sharp lurch forward. It rolled slowly, a peculiar whining noise emanating up from the wheeled trucks.

"Moving," Rand exclaimed.

"Yeah," said Bill Kelly. "The ploughs have cleared the snow ahead of us. We're going on to Chicago."