Pigeon Blood
Paul Cain

THERE WERE A LOT of very bad writers who worked for the pulps. For a penny, or sometimes a half-penny, what could you expect? But there were some good ones, too, and even a few great ones. It is possible that Paul Cain (1902—1966) was one of the latter. Sadly, his output was too modest to make a positive judgment.

He wrote about a dozen short stories, seven of which were collected in *Seven Slayers* (1946), and one novel, *Fast One* (1933), which Raymond Chandler lavishly praised. The novel was really a collection of five closely connected novellas which ran in *Black Mask* magazine in 1932, then revised for its hardcover edition. Doubleday must have had meager enthusiasm for it, since it must have had a small print run because it is today one of the rarest and most valuable first editions in the collectors' market. Perhaps his publisher was right, as it was almost universally blasted by critics as too tough, too violent. Still, sophisticated readers loved it and it remains one of the high spots of the hard-boiled crime genre.

He was just a kid of sixteen when he showed up in Hollywood to write screenplays, at which he had fairly early success as Peter Ruric, a nom de plume for George Sims. When the movies failed to provide enough work (and income), he turned to the pulps and used the name Paul Cain. Nothing new was published during the last thirty years of his life. "Pigeon Blood" was first published in the November 1933 issue *of Black Mask;* it was collected in *Seven Slayers*.

Pigeon Blood

Paul Cain

THE WOMAN WAS BENT far forward over the steering-wheel of the open roadster. Her eyes, narrowed to long black-fringed slits, moved regularly down and up, from the glistening road ahead, to the small rearview mirror above the windshield. The two circles of white light in the mirror grew steadily larger. She pressed the throttle slowly, steadily downward; there was no sound but the roar of the wind and the deep purr of the powerful engine.

There was a sudden sharp crack; a little frosted circle appeared on the windshield. The woman pressed the throttle to the floor. She was pale; her eyes were suddenly large and dark and afraid, her lips were pressed tightly together. The tires screeched on the wet pavement as the car roared around a long, shallow curve. The headlights of the pursuing car grew larger.

The second and third shots were wild, or buried themselves harmlessly in the body of the car; the fourth struck the left rear tire and the car swerved crazily, skidded halfway across the road. Very suddenly there was bright yellow light right ahead, at the side of the road. The woman jammed on the brakes, jerked the wheel hard over; the tires slid, screamed raggedly over the gravel in front of the gas station, the car stopped. The other car went by at seventy-five miles an hour. One last shot thudded into the back of the seat beside the woman and then the other car had disappeared into the darkness.

Two men ran out of the gas station. Another man stood in the doorway. The woman was leaning back straight in the seat and her eyes were very wide; she was breathing hard, unevenly.

One of the men put his hand on her shoulder, asked: “Are you all right, lady?”

She nodded.

The other man asked: “Hold-ups?” He was a short, middle-aged man and his eyes were bright, interested.

The woman opened her bag and took out a cigarette. She said shakily: “I guess so.” She pulled out the dashboard lighter, waited until it glowed red and held it to her cigarette.

The younger man was inspecting the back of the car. He said: “They punctured the tank. It’s a good thing you stopped—you couldn’t have gone much father.”

“Yes—I guess it’s a very good thing I stopped,” she said, mechanically. She took a deep drag of her cigarette.

The other man said: “That’s the third holdup out here this week.”

The woman spoke to the younger man. “Can you get me a cab?”

He said: “Sure.” Then he knelt beside the blown-out tire, said: “Look, Ed—they almost cut it in two.”

The man in the doorway called to her: “You want a cab, lady?”

She smiled, nodded, and the man disappeared into the gas station; he came back to the doorway in a minute, over to the car. "There'll be a cab here in a little while, lady," he said.

She thanked him.

"This is one of the worst stretches of road on Long Island—for highwaymen." He leaned on the door of the car. "Did they try to nudge you off the road—or did they just start shooting?"

"They just started shooting."

He said: "We got a repair service here—do you want us to fix up your car?"

She nodded. "How long will it take?"

"Couple days. We'll have to get a new windshield from the branch factory in Queens—an' take off that tank…"

She took a card out of her bag and gave it to him, said: "Call me up when it's finished."

After a little while, a cab came out of the darkness of a side street, turned into the station. The woman got out of the car and went over to the cab, spoke to the driver: "Do you know any short-cuts into Manhattan? Somebody tried to hold me up on the main road a little while ago, and maybe they're still laying for me. I don't want any more of it—I want to go home." She was very emphatic.

The driver was a big red-faced Irishman. He grinned, said: "Lady—I know a million of 'em. You'll be as safe with me as you'd be in your own home."

She raised her hand in a gesture of farewell to the three men around her car and got into the cab. After the cab had disappeared around the street, the man to whom she had given the card took it out of his pocket and squinted at it, read aloud: "Mrs. Dale Hanan—Five-eighty Park Avenue."

The short, middle-aged man bobbed his head knowingly. "Sure," he said—"I knew she was class. She's Hanan's wife—the millionaire. Made his dough in oil—Oklahoma. His chauffeur told me how he got his start—didn't have a shoestring or a place to put it, so he shot off his big toe and collected ten grand on an accident policy—grubstake on his first well. Bright boy. He's got a big estate down at Roslyn."

The man with the card nodded. He said: "That's swell. We can soak him plenty." He put the card back into his pocket.

When the cab stopped near the corner of Sixty-third and Park Avenue the woman got out, paid the driver and hurried into the apartment house. In her apartment, she put in a longdistance call to Roslyn, Long Island; when the connection had been made, she said: "Dale—it's in the open, now. I was followed, driving back to town—shot at—the car was nearly wrecked… I don't know what to do. Even if I call Crandall, now, and tell him I won't go through with it— won't go to the police—he'll probably have me killed, just to make sure… Yes, I'm going to stay in—I'm scared… All right, dear. 'Bye."

She hung up, went to a wide center table and poured whiskey into a tall glass, sat down and stared vacantly at the glass—her hand was shaking a little. She smiled suddenly, crookedly, lifted the glass to her mouth and drained it. Then she put the glass on the floor and leaned back and glanced at the tiny watch at her wrist. It was ten minutes after nine.

At a few minutes after ten a black Packard town-car stopped in front of a narrow building of gray stone on East Fifty-fourth Street; a tall man got out, crossed the sidewalk and rang the bell. The car went on. When the door swung

open, the tall man went into a long, brightly lighted hallway, gave his hat and stick to the checkroom attendant, went swiftly up two flights of narrow stairs to the third floor. He glanced around the big, crowded room, then crossed to one corner near a window on the Fifty-fourth Street side and sat down at a small table, smiled wanly at the man across from him, said: "Mister Druse, I believe."

The other man was about fifty, well set up, well-groomed in the way of good living. His thick gray hair was combed sharply, evenly back. He lowered his folded newspaper to the table, stared thoughtfully at the tall man.

He said: "Mister Hanan," and his voice was very deep, metallic.

The tall man nodded shortly, leaned back and folded his arms across his narrow chest. He was ageless, perhaps thirty-five, forty-five; his thin, colorless hair was close-clipped, his long, bony face deeply tanned, a sharp and angular setting for large seal-brown eyes. His mouth was curved, mobile.

He asked: "Do you know Jeffrey Crandall?"

Druse regarded him evenly, expressionlessly for a moment, raised his head and beckoned a waiter. Hanan ordered a whiskey sour.

Druse said: "I know Mister Crandall casually. Why?"

"A little more than an hour ago Crandall, or Crandall's men, tried to murder Mrs. Hanan, as she was driving back from my place at Roslyn." Hanan leaned forward: his eyes were wide, worried.

The waiter served Hanan's whiskey sour, set a small bottle of Perrier and a small glass on the table in front of Druse.

Druse poured the water into the glass slowly. "So what?"

Hanan tasted his drink. He said: "This is not a matter for the police, Mister Druse. I understand that you interest yourself in things of this nature, so I took the liberty of calling you and making this appointment. Is that right?" He was nervous, obviously ill at ease.

Druse shrugged. "*What* nature? I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm sorry—I guess I'm a little upset." Hanan smiled. "What I mean is that I can rely on your discretion?"

Druse frowned. "I think so," he said slowly. He drank half of the Perrier, squinted down at the glass as if it had tasted very badly.

Hanan smiled vacantly. "You do not know Mrs. Hanan?"

Druse shook his head slowly, turned his glass around and around on the table.

"We have been living apart for several years," Hanan went on. "We are still very fond of one another, we are very good friends, but we do not get along—together. Do you understand?"

Druse nodded.

Hanan sipped his drink, went on swiftly: "Catherine has—has always had—a decided weakness for gambling. She went through most of her own inheritance—a considerable inheritance—before we were married. Since our separation she has lost somewhere in the neighborhood of a hundred and fifteen thousand dollars. I have, of course, taken care of her debts." Hanan coughed slightly. "Early this evening she called me at Roslyn, said she had to see me immediately—that it was very important. I offered to come into town but she

said she'd rather come out. She came out about seven."

Hanan paused, closed his eyes and rubbed two fingers of one hand slowly up and down his forehead. "She's in a very bad jam with Crandall." He opened his eyes and put his hand down on the table.

Druse finished his Perrier, put down the glass and regarded Hanan attentively.

"About three weeks ago," Hanan went on, "Catherine's debt to Crandall amounted to sixty-eight thousand dollars—she had been playing very heavily under the usual gambler's delusion of getting even. She was afraid to come to me— she knew I'd taken several bad beatings on the market—she kept putting it off and trying to make good her losses, until Crandall demanded the money. She told him she couldn't pay— together, they hatched out a scheme to get it. Catherine had a set of rubies—pigeon blood— been in her family five or six generations. They're worth, perhaps, a hundred and seventy-five thousand—her father insured them for a hundred and thirty-five, forty years ago and the insurance premiums have always been paid…" Hanan finished his whiskey sour, leaned back in his chair.

Druse said: "I assume the idea was that the rubies disappear; that Mrs. Hanan claim the insurance, pay off Crandall, have sixty-seven thousand left and live happily forever after."

Hanan coughed; his face was faintly flushed. "Exactly."

"I assume further," Druse went on, "that the insurance company did not question the integrity of the claim; that they paid, and that Mrs. Hanan, in turn, paid Crandall."

Hanan nodded. He took a tortoise-shell case out of his pocket, offered Druse a cigarette.

Druse shook his head, asked: "Are the insurance company detectives warm—are they making Crandall or whoever he had to do the actual job, uncomfortable?"

"No. The theft was well engineered. I don't think Crandall is worrying about that." Hanan lighted a cigarette. "But Catherine wanted her rubies back—as had, of course, been agreed upon." He leaned forward, put his elbows on the table. "Crandall returned paste imitations to her—she only discovered they weren't genuine a few days ago."

Druse smiled, said slowly: "In that case, I should think it was Crandall who was in a jam with Mrs. Hanan, instead of Mrs. Hanan who was in a jam with Crandall."

Hanan wagged his long chin back and forth. "This is New York. Men like Crandall do as they please. Catherine went to him and he laughed at her; said the rubies he had returned were the rubies that had been stolen. She had no recourse, other than to admit her complicity in defrauding the insurance company. That's the trouble—she threatened to do exactly that."

Druse widened his eyes, stared at Hanan.

"Catherine is a very impulsive woman," Hanan went on. "She was so angry at losing the rubies and being made so completely a fool, that she threatened Crandall. She told him that if the rubies were not returned within three days she would tell what he had done; that he had stolen the rubies—take her chances on her part in it coming out. Of course she wouldn't do it, but she was desperate and she thought that was her only chance of scaring Crandall into returning the rubies—and she made him believe it. Since she talked to him, Wednesday, she had been followed. Tomorrow is Saturday, the third day. Tonight, driving back to town, she was followed, shot at—almost killed."

"Has she tried to get in touch with Crandall again?"

Hanan shook his head. "She's been stubbornly waiting for him to give the rubies back— until this business tonight. Now she's frightened—says it wouldn't do any good for her to talk to Crandall now because he wouldn't believe her—and it's too easy for him to put her out of the way."

Druse beckoned the waiter, asked him to bring the check. "Where is she now?"

"At her apartment—Sixty-third and Park."

"What do you intend doing about it?"

Hanan shrugged. "That's what I came to you for. I don't know what to do. I've heard of you and your work from friends…"

Druse hesitated, said slowly: "I must make my position clear."

Hanan nodded, lighted a fresh cigarette.

"I am one of the few people left," Druse went on, "who actually believes that honesty is the best policy. Honesty is my business—I am primarily a business man—I've made it pay."

Hanan smiled broadly.

Druse leaned forward. "I am not a fixer," he said. "My acquaintance is wide and varied—I am fortunate in being able to wield certain influences. But above all I seek to further justice—I mean real justice as opposed to *book* justice—I was on the Bench for many years and I realize the distinction keenly." His big face wrinkled to an expansive grin. "And I get paid for it—*well* paid."

Hanan said: "Does my case interest you?"

"It does."

"Will five thousand dollars be satisfactory— as a retaining fee?"

Druse moved his broad shoulders in something like a shrug. "You value the rubies at a hundred and seventy-five thousand," he said. "I am undertaking to get the rubies back, and protect Mrs. Hanan's life." He stared at Hanan intently. "What value do you put on Mrs. Hanan's life?"

Hanan frowned self-consciously, twisted his mouth down at the corners. "That is, of course, impossible to—"

"Say another hundred and seventy-five." Druse smiled easily. "That makes three hundred and fifty thousand. I work on a ten per cent basis—thirty-five thousand—one-third in advance." He leaned back, still smiling easily. "Ten thousand will be sufficient as a retainer."

Hanan was still frowning self-consciously. He said: "Done," took a checkbook and fountain pen out of his pocket.

Druse went on: "If I fail in either purpose, I shall, of course, return your check."

Hanan bobbed his head, made out the check in a minute, illegible scrawl and handed it across the table. Druse paid for the drinks, jotted down Hanan's telephone number and the address of Mrs. Hanan's apartment. They got up and went downstairs and out of the place; Druse told Hanan he would call him within an hour, got into a cab. Hanan watched the cab disappear in east-bound traffic, lighted a cigarette nervously and walked toward Madison Avenue.

Druse said: "Tell her I've come from Mister Hanan."

The telephone operator spoke into the transmitter, turned to Druse. “You may go up—Apartment Three D.”

When, in answer to a drawled, “Come in,” he pushed open the door and went into the apartment, Catherine Hanan was standing near the center table, with one hand on the table to steady herself, the other in the pocket of her long blue robe. She was beautiful in the mature way that women who have lived too hard, too swiftly, are sometimes beautiful. She was very dark; her eyes were large, liquid, black and dominated her rather small, sharply sculptured face. Her mouth was large, deeply red, not particularly strong.

Druse bowed slightly, said: “How do you do?”

She smiled, and her eyes were heavy, nearly closed. “Swell—and you?”

He came slowly into the room, put his hat on the table, asked: “May we sit down?”

“Sure.” She jerked her head towards a chair, stayed where she was.

Druse said: “You’re drunk.”

“Right.”

He smiled, sighed gently. “A commendable condition. I regret exceedingly that my stomach does not permit it.” He glanced casually about the room. In the comparative darkness of a corner, near a heavily draped window, there was a man lying on his back on the floor. His arms were stretched out and back, and his legs were bent under him in a curious way, and there was blood on his face.

Druse raised his thick white eyebrows, spoke without looking at Mrs. Hanan: “Is *he* drunk, too?”

She laughed shortly. “Uh-huh—in a different way.” She nodded towards a golf-stick on the floor near the man. “He had a little too much niblick.”

“Friend of yours?”

She said: “I rather doubt it. He came in from the fire-escape with a gun in his hand. I happened to see him before he saw me.”

“Where’s the gun?”

“I’ve got it.” She drew a small black automatic half out of the pocket of her robe.

Druse went over and knelt beside the man, picked up one of his hands. He said slowly: “This man is decidedly dead.”

Mrs. Hanan stood, staring silently at the man on the floor for perhaps thirty seconds. Her face was white, blank. Then she walked unsteadily to a desk against one wall and picked up a whiskey bottle, poured a stiff drink. She said: “I know it.” Her voice was choked, almost a whisper. She drank the whiskey, turned and leaned against the desk, stared at Druse with wide unseeing eyes. “So what?”

“So pull yourself together, and forget about it—we’ve got more important things to think about for a little while.” Druse stood up. “How long ago?…”

She shuddered. “About a half-hour—I didn’t know what to do…”

“Have you tried to reach Crandall? I mean before this happened—right after you came in tonight?”

“Yes—I couldn’t get him.”

Druse went to a chair and sat down. He said: “Mister Hanan has turned this case over to me. Won’t you sit down, and answer a few questions?…”

She sank into a low chair near the desk. “Are you a detective?” Her voice was still very low, strained.

Druse smiled. “I’m an attorney—a sort of extra-legal attorney.” He regarded her thoughtfully. “If we can get your rubies back and assure your safety, and”—he coughed slightly—”induce Mister Hanan to reimburse the insurance company, you will be entirely satisfied, will you not?”

She nodded, started to speak.

Druse interrupted her: “Are the rubies themselves—I mean intrinsically, as stones—awfully important to you? Or was this grandstand play of yours—this business of threatening Crandall— motivated by rather less tangible factors—such as self-respect, things like that?”

She smiled faintly, nodded. “God knows how I happen to have any self-respect left—I’ve been an awful ass—but I have. It was the idea of being made such a fool—after I’ve lost over a hundred thousand dollars to Crandall—that made me do it.”

Druse smiled. “The rubies themselves,” he said—”I mean the rubies as stones—entirely apart from any extraneous consideration such as self-respect—would more seriously concern Mister Hanan, would they not?”

She said: “Sure. He’s always been crazy about stones.”

Druse scratched the tip of his long nose pensively. His eyes were wide and vacant, his thick lips compressed to a long downward curved line. “You are sure you were followed when you left Crandall’s Wednesday?”

“As sure as one can be without actually knowing—it was more of a followed feeling than anything else. After the idea was planted I could have sworn I saw a dozen men, of course.”

He said: “Have you ever had that feeling before—I mean before you threatened Crandall?”

“No.”

“It may have been simply imagination, because you expected to be followed—there was reason for you to be followed?”

She nodded. “But it’s a cinch it wasn’t imagination this evening.”

Druse was leaning forward, his elbows on his knees. He looked intently at her, said very seriously: “I’m going to get your rubies back, and I can assure you of your safety—and I think I can promise that the matter of reimbursement to the insurance company will be taken care of. I didn’t speak to Mister Hanan about that, but I’m sure he’ll see the justice of it.”

She smiled faintly.

Druse went on: “I promise you these things—and in return I want you to do exactly as I tell you until tomorrow morning.”

Her smile melted to a quick, rather drunken, laugh. “Do I have to poison any babies?” She stood up, poured a drink.

Druse said: “*That’s* one of the things I *don’t* want you to do.”

She picked up the glass, frowned at him with mock seriousness. “You’re a moralist,” she said. “That’s one of the things I *will* do.”

He shrugged slightly. “I shall have some very important, very delicate work for you a little later in the evening. I thought it might be best.”

She looked at him, half smiling, a little while, and then she laughed and put down the glass and went into the bedroom. He leaned back comfortably in the chair and stared at the ceiling; his hands were on the arms of the chair and he ran imaginary scales with his big blunt fingers.

She came back into the room in a little while, dressed, drawing on gloves. She gestured with her head towards the man on the floor, and for a moment her more or less alcoholic poise forsook her—she shuddered again—her face was white, twisted.

Druse stood up, said: "He'll have to stay where he is for a little while." He went to the heavily draped window, to the fire-escape, moved the drape aside and locked the window. "How many doors are there to the apartment?"

"Two." She was standing near the table. She took the black automatic from a pocket of her suit, took up a gray suede bag from the table and put the automatic into it.

He watched her without expression. "How many keys?"

"Two." She smiled, took two keys out of the bag and held them up. "The only other key is the pass-key—the manager's."

He said: "That's fine," went to the table and picked up his hat and put it on. They went out into the hall and closed and locked the door. "Is there a side entrance to the building?"

She nodded.

"Let's go out that way."

She led the way down the corridor, down three flights of stairs to a door leading to Sixty-third Street. They went out and walked over Sixty-third to Lexington and got into a cab; he told the driver to take them to the corner of Fortieth and Madison, leaned back and looked out the window. "How long have you and Mister Hanan been divorced?"

She was quick to answer. "Did he say we were divorced?"

"No." Druse turned to her slowly, smiled slowly.

"Then what makes you think we are?"

"I don't. I just wanted to be sure."

"We are *not?"* She was very emphatic.

He waited, without speaking.

She glanced at him sidewise and saw that he expected her to go on. She laughed softly. "He wants a divorce. He asked me to divorce him several months ago." She sighed, moved her hands nervously on her lap. "That's another of the things I'm not very proud of—I wouldn't do it. I don't know why—we were never in love—we haven't been married, really, for a long time— but I've waited, hoping we might be able to make something out of it…"

Druse said quietly: "I think I understand— I'm sorry I had to ask you about that."

She did not answer.

In a little while the cab stopped; they got out and Druse paid the driver and they cut diagonally across the street, entered an office building halfway down the block. Druse spoke familiarly to the Negro elevator boy; they got off at the forty-fifth floor and went up two flights of narrow stairs, through a heavy steel fire-door to a narrow bridge and across it to a rambling two-story penthouse that covered all one side of the roof. Druse rang the bell and a thin-faced Filipino boy let them in.

Druse led the way into a very big high-ceilinged room that ran the length and almost

the width of the house. It was beautifully and brightly furnished, opened on one side onto a wide terrace. They went through to the terrace; there were steamer-chairs there and canvas swings and low round tables, a great many potted plants and small trees. The tiled floor was partially covered with strips of coco-matting. There was a very wide, vividly striped awning stretched across all one side. At the far side, where the light from the living room faded into darkness, the floor came to an abrupt end— there was no railing or parapet—the nearest building of the same height was several blocks away.

Mrs. Hanan sat down and stared at the twinkling distant lights of Upper Manhattan. The roar of the city came up to them faintly, like surf very far away. She said: "It is very beautiful."

"I am glad you find it so." Druse went to the edge, glanced down. "I have never put a railing here," he said, "because I am interested in Death. Whenever I'm depressed I look at my jumping-off place, only a few feet away, and am reminded that life is very sweet." He stared at the edge, stroked the side of his jaw with his fingers. "Nothing to climb over, no windows to raise—just walk."

She smiled wryly. "A moralist—and morbid. Did you bring me here to suggest a suicide pact?"

"I brought you here to sit still and be decorative."

"And you?"

"I'm going hunting." Druse went over and stood frowning down at her. "I'll try not to be long. The boy will bring you anything you want—even *good* whiskey, if you can't get along without it. The view will grow on you—you'll find one of the finest collections of books on satanism, demonology, witchcraft, in the world inside." He gestured with his head and eyes.

"Don't telephone anyone—and, above all, *stay* here, even if I'm late."

She nodded vaguely.

He went to the wide doors that led into the living room, turned, said: "One thing more— who are Mister Hanan's attorneys?"

She looked at him curiously. "Mahlon and Stiles."

He raised one hand in salute. "So long."

She smiled, said: "So long—good hunting."

He went into the living room and talked to the Filipino boy a minute, went out.

In the drug store across the street from the entrance to the building, he went into a telephone booth, called the number Hanan had given him. When Hanan answered, he said: "I have very bad news. We were too late. When I reached Mrs. Hanan's apartment, she did not answer the phone—I bribed my way in and found her—found her dead… I'm terribly sorry, old man—you've got to take it standing up… Yes—strangled."

Druse smiled grimly to himself. "No, I haven't informed the police—I want things left as they are for the present—I'm going to see Crandall and I have a way of working it so he won't have a single out. I'm going to pin it on him so that it will stay pinned—and I'm going to get the rubies back too… I know they don't mean much to you now, but the least I can do is get them back—and see that Crandall is stuck so he can't wriggle out of it." He said the last very emphatically, was silent a little while, except for an occasionally interjected "Yes" or "No."

Finally he asked: “Can you be in around three-thirty or four?… I’ll want to get in touch with you then… Right. Good-bye.” He hung up and went out into Fortieth Street.

Jeffrey Crandall was a medium-sized man with a close-cropped mustache, wide-set greenish gray eyes. He was conservatively dressed, looked very much like a prosperous real-estate man, or broker.

He said: “Long time no see.”

Druse nodded abstractedly. He was sitting in a deep red leather chair in Crandall’s very modern office, adjoining the large room in a midtown apartment building that was Crandall’s “Place” for the moment. He raised his head and looked attentively at the pictures on the walls, one after the other.

“Anything special?” Crandall lighted a short stub of green cigar.

Druse said: “Very special,” over his shoulder. He came to the last picture, a very ordinary Degas pastel, shook his head slightly, disapprovingly, and turned back to Crandall. He took a short-barreled derringer out of his inside coat-pocket, held it on the arm of his chair, the muzzle focused steadily on Crandall’s chest.

Crandall’s eyes widened slowly; his mouth hung a little open. He put one hand up very slowly and took the stub of cigar out of his mouth.

Druse repeated: “Very special.” His full lips were curved to a thin, cold smile.

Crandall stared at the gun. He spoke as if making a tremendous effort to frame his words casually, calmly: “What’s it all about?”

“It’s all about Mrs. Hanan.” Druse tipped his hat to the back of his head. “It’s all about you gypping her out of her rubies—and her threatening to take it to the police—and you having her murdered at about a quarter after ten tonight, because you were afraid she’d go through with it.”

Crandall’s tense face relaxed slowly; he tried very hard to smile. He said: “You’re crazy,” and there was fear in his eyes, fear in the harsh, hollow sound of his voice.

Druse did not speak. He waited, his cold eyes boring into Crandall’s.

Crandall cleared his throat, moved a little forward in his chair and put his elbows on the wide desk.

“Don’t ring.” Druse glanced at the little row of ivory push-buttons on the desk, shook his head.

Crandall laughed soundlessly as if the thought of ringing had never entered his mind. “In the first place,” he said, “I gave her back the stones that were stolen. In the second place, I never believed her gag about telling about it.” He leaned back slowly, spoke very slowly and distinctly as confidence came back to him. “In the third place, I wouldn’t be chump enough to bump her off with that kind of a case against me.”

Druse said: “Your third place is the one that interests me. The switched rubies, her threat to tell the story—it all makes a pip of a case against you, doesn’t it?”

Crandall nodded slowly.

“That’s the reason,” Druse went on, “that if I shoot you through the heart right now, I’ll get a vote of thanks for avenging the lady you made a sucker of, and finally murdered because you thought she was going to squawk.”

All the fear came back into Crandall’s face suddenly. He started to speak.

Druse interrupted him, went on: "I'm going to let you have it when you reach for your gun, of course—that'll take care of any technicalities about taking the law into my own hands—anything like that."

Crandall's face was white, drained. He said: "How come I'm elected? What the hell have you got against me?"

Druse shrugged. "You shouldn't jockey ladies into trying to nick insurance companies…"

"It was her idea."

"Then you should have been on the level about the rubies."

Crandall said: "So help me God! I gave her back the stuff I took!" He said it very vehemently, very earnestly.

"How do you know? How do you know the man you had do the actual job didn't make the switch?"

Crandall leaned forward. "Because *I* took them. She gave me her key and I went in the side way, while she was out, and took them myself. They were never out of my hands." He took up a lighter from the desk and relighted the stump of cigar with shaking hands. "That's the reason I didn't take her threat seriously. I thought it was some kind of extortion gag she'd doped out to get some of her dough back. She got back the stones I took—and if they weren't genuine they were switched before I took them, or after I gave them back."

Druse stared at him silently for perhaps a minute, finally smiled, said: "Before."

Crandall sucked noisily at his cigar. "Then, if you believe me"—he glanced at the derringer— "What's the point?"

"The point is that if I didn't believe you, you'd be in an awfully bad spot."

Crandall nodded, grinned weakly.

"The point," Druse went on, "is that you're still in an awfully bad spot because no one else will believe you."

Crandall nodded again. He leaned back and took a handkerchief out of his breast pocket and dabbed at his face.

"I know a way out of it." Druse moved his hand, let the derringer hang by the trigger-guard from his forefinger. "Not because I like you particularly, nor because I think you particularly deserve it—but because it's right. I can turn up the man who really murdered her—if we can get back the rubies—the real rubies. And I think I know where they are."

Crandall was leaning far forward, his face very alive and interested.

"I want you to locate the best peterman we can get." Druse spoke in a very low voice, watched Crandall intently. "We've got to open a safe—I think it'll be a safe—out on Long Island. Nothing very difficult—there'll probably be servants to handle but nothing more serious than that."

Crandall said: "Why can't I do it?" He smiled a little. "I used to be in the box business, you know—before I straightened up and got myself a joint. That's the reason I took the fake rubies myself—not to let anyone else in on it."

Druse said: "That'll be fine."

"When?" Crandall stood up.

Druse put the derringer back in his pocket. "Right now—where's your car?"

Crandall jerked his head towards the street. They went out through the crowded gambling room, downstairs, got into Crandall's car. Crossing Queensborough Bridge Druse

glanced at his watch. It was twenty minutes past twelve.

At three thirty-five Druse pushed the bell of the penthouse, after searching, vainly as usual, for his key. The Filipino boy opened the door, said: “It’s a very hot night, sir.”

Druse threw his hat on a chair, smiled sadly at Mrs. Hanan, who had come into the little entrance-hall. “I’ve been trying to teach him English for three months,” he said, “and all he can say is ‘Yes, sir,’ and ‘No, sir,’ and tell me about the heat.” He turned to the broadly grinning boy. “Yes, Tony, it is a very hot night.”

They went through the living room, out onto the terrace. It was cool there, and dim; a little light came out through the wide doors, from the living room.

Mrs. Hanan said: “I’d about given you up.”

Druse sat down, sighed wearily. “I’ve had a very strenuous evening—sorry I’m so late.” He looked up at her. “Hungry?”

“Starved.”

“Why didn’t you have Tony fix you something?”

“I wanted to wait.” She had taken off her suit-coat, hat; in her smartly cut tweed skirt, white mannish shirt, she looked very beautiful.

Druse said: “Supper, or breakfast, or something will be ready in a few minutes—I ordered it for four.” He stood up. “Which reminds me— we’re having a guest. I must telephone.”

He went through the living room, up four broad, shallow steps to the little corner room that he used as an office. He sat down at the broad desk, drew the telephone towards him, dialed a number.

Hanan answered the phone. Druse said: “I want you to come to my place, on top of the Pell Building, at once. It is very important. Ring the bell downstairs—I’ve told the elevator boy I’m expecting you… I can’t tell you over the phone—please come alone, and right away.” He hung up and sat staring vacantly at his hands a little while, and then got up and went back to the terrace, sat down.

“What did you do with yourself?”

Mrs. Hanan was lying in one of the low chairs. She laughed nervously. “The radio—tried to improve my Spanish and Tony’s English—chewed my fingernails—almost frightened myself to death with one of your damned demon books.” She lighted a cigarette. “And you?”

He smiled in the darkness. “I earned thirty-five thousand dollars.”

She sat up, said eagerly: “Did you get the rubies?”

He nodded.

“Did Crandall raise much hell?”

“Enough.”

She laughed exultantly. “Where are they?”

Druse tapped his pocket, watched her face in the pale orange glow of her cigarette.

She got up, held out her hand. “May I see them?”

Druse said: “Certainly.” He took a long flat jewel-case of black velvet out of his inside coat-pocket and handed it to her.

She opened the case and went to the door to the living room, looked at its contents

by the light there, said: “They are awfully beautiful, aren’t they?”

“They are.”

She snapped the case closed, came back and sat down.

Druse said: “I think I’d better take care of them a little while longer.”

She leaned forward and put the case on his lap; he took it up and put it back in his pocket. They sat silently, watching the lights in buildings over towards the East River. After a while the Filipino boy came out and said that they were served.

“Out guest is late.” Druse stood up. “I make a rule of never waiting breakfast—anything but breakfast.”

They went together through the living room, into the simply furnished dining room. There were three places set at the glittering white and silver table. They sat down and the Filipino boy-brought in tall and spindly cocktail glasses of iced fruit; they were just beginning when the doorbell rang. The Filipino boy glanced at Druse, Druse nodded, said: “Ask the gentleman to come in here.” The Filipino boy went out and there were voices in the entrance-hall, and then Hanan came into the doorway.

Druse stood up. He said: “You must forgive us for beginning—you are a little late.” He raised one hand and gestured towards the empty chair.

Hanan was standing in the doorway with his feet wide apart, his arms stiff at his sides, as if he had been suddenly frozen in that position. He stared at Mrs. Hanan and his eyes were wide, blank—his thin mouth was compressed to a hard, straight line. Very suddenly his right hand went towards his left armpit.

Druse said sharply: “Please sit down.” Though he seemed scarcely to have moved, the blunt derringer glittered in his hand.

Mrs. Hanan half rose. She was very pale; her hands were clenched convulsively on the white tablecloth.

Hanan dropped his hand very slowly. He stared at the derringer and twisted his mouth into a terribly forced smile, came slowly forward to the empty chair and sat down.

Druse raised his eyes to the Filipino boy who had followed Hanan into the doorway, said: “Take the gentleman’s gun, Tony—and serve his cocktail.” He sat down, held the derringer rigidly on the table in front of him.

The Filipino boy went to Hanan, felt gingerly under his coat, drew out a small black automatic and took it to Druse. Then he went out through the swinging-door to the kitchen. Druse put the automatic in his pocket. He turned his eyes to Mrs. Hanan, said: “I’m going to tell you a story. After I’ve finished, you can both talk all you like—but please don’t interrupt.”

He smiled with his mouth—the rest of his face remained stonily impassive. His eyes were fixed and expressionless, on Hanan. He said: “Your husband has wanted a divorce for some time. His principal reason is a lady—her name doesn’t matter—who wants to marry him—and whom he wants to marry. He hasn’t told you about her because he has felt, perhaps justifiably, that you knowing about her would retard, rather than hasten, an agreement…”

The Filipino boy came in from the kitchen with a cocktail, set it before Hanan. Hanan did not move, or look up. He stared intently at the flowers in the center of the table. The Filipino boy smiled self-consciously at Druse and Mrs. Hanan, disappeared into the kitchen.

Druse relaxed a little, leaned back; the derringer was still focused unwaveringly on Hanan.

"In the hope of uncovering some adequate grounds for bringing suit," Druse went on, "he has had you followed for a month or more— unsuccessfully, need I add? After you threatened Crandall, you discovered suddenly that you were being followed and, of course, ascribed it to Crandall."

He paused. It was entirely silent for a moment, except for the faint, faraway buzz of the city and the sharp, measured sound of Hanan's breathing.

Druse turned his head towards Mrs. Hanan. "After you left Mister Hanan at Roslyn, last night, it suddenly occurred to him that this was his golden opportunity to dispose of you, without any danger to himself. You wouldn't give him a divorce—and it didn't look as if he'd be able to force it by discovering some dereliction on your part. And now, you had threatened Crandall—Crandall would be logically suspected if anything happened to you. Mister Hanan sent his men—the men who had been following you—after you when you left the place at Roslyn. They weren't very lucky."

Druse was smiling slightly. Mrs. Hanan had put her elbows on the table, her chin in her hands; she regarded Hanan steadily.

"He couldn't go to the police," Druse went on—"they would arrest Crandall, or watch him, and that would ruin the whole plan. And the business about the rubies would come out. That was the last thing he wanted"—Druse widened his smile—"because he switched the rubies himself—some time ago."

Mrs. Hanan turned to look at Druse; very slowly she matched his smile.

"You never discovered that your rubies were fake," he said, "because that possibility didn't occur to you. It was only after they'd been given back by Crandall that you became suspicious and found out they weren't genuine." He glanced at Hanan and the smile went from his face, leaving it hard and expressionless again. "Mister Hanan is *indeed* 'crazy about stones.' "

Hanan's thin mouth twitched slightly; he stared steadily at the flowers.

Druse sighed. "And so—we find Mister Hanan, last night, with several reasons for wishing your—shall we say, disappearance? We find him with the circumstance of being able to direct suspicion at Crandall, ready to his hand. His own serious problem lay in finding a third, responsible, party before whom to lay the whole thing—or enough of it to serve his purpose."

Mrs. Hanan had turned to face Hanan. Her eyes were half closed and her smile was very hard, very strange.

Druse stood up slowly, went on: "He had the happy thought of calling me—or perhaps the suggestion. I was an ideal instrument, functioning as I do, midway between the law and the underworld. He made an appointment, and arranged for one of his men to call on you by way of the fire-escape, while we were discussing the matter. The logical implication was that I would come to you when I left him, find you murdered, and act immediately on the information he had given me about Crandall. My influence and testimony would have speedily convicted Crandall. Mister Hanan would have better than a divorce. He'd have the rubies, without any danger of his having switched them ever being discovered— and he'd have"—Druse grinned sourly—"the check he had given me as an advance. Failing in the two things I had contracted to do, I would of course return it to him."

Hanan laughed suddenly; a terribly forced, high-pitched laugh.

"It is very funny," Druse said. "It would all have worked very beautifully if you"—he moved his eyes to Mrs. Hanan—"hadn't happened to see the man who came up the fire-escape to call on you, before he saw you. The man whose return Mister Hanan has been impatiently waiting. The man"—he dropped one eyelid in a swift wink—"who confessed to the whole thing a little less than an hour ago."

Druse put his hand into his inside pocket and took out the black velvet jewel-case, snapped it open and put it on the table. "I found them in the safe at your place at Roslyn," he said. "Your servants there objected very strenuously—so strenuously that I was forced to tie them up and lock them in the wine cellar. They must be awfully uncomfortable by now—I shall have to attend to that."

He lowered his voice to a discreet drone. "And your lady was there, too. She, too, objected very strenuously, until I had had a long talk with her and convinced her of the error of her—shall we say, affection, for a gentleman of your instincts. She seemed very frightened at the idea of becoming involved in this case—I'm afraid she will be rather hard to find."

Druse sighed, lowered his eyes slowly to the rubies, touched the largest of them delicately with one finger. "And so," he said, "to end this vicious and regrettable business—I give you your rubies"—he lifted his hand and made a sweeping gesture towards Mrs. Hanan—"and your wife—and now I would like your check for twenty-five thousand dollars."

Hanan moved very swiftly. He tipped the edge of the table upward, lunged up and forward in the same movement; there was a sharp, shattering crash of chinaware and silver. The derringer roared, but the bullet thudded into the table. Hanan bent over suddenly—his eyes were dull, and his upper lip was drawn back over his teeth—then he straightened and whirled and ran out through the door to the living-room.

Mrs. Hanan was standing against the big buffet; her hands were at her mouth, and her eyes were very wide. She made no sound.

Druse went after Hanan, stopped suddenly at the door. Hanan was crouched in the middle of the living room. The Filipino boy stood beyond him, framed against the darkness of the entrance-hall; a curved knife glittering in his hand and his thin yellow face was hard, menacing. Hanan ran out on the terrace, and Druse went swiftly after him. By the dim light from the living room he saw Hanan dart to the left, encounter the wall there, zigzag crazily towards the darkness of the outer terrace, the edge.

Druse yelled: "Look out!" ran forward. Hanan was silhouetted a moment against the mauve glow of the sky; then with a hoarse, cracked scream he fell outward, down.

Druse stood a moment, staring blindly down. He took out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead, then turned and went into the living room and tossed the derringer down on the big center table. The Filipino boy was still standing in the doorway. Druse nodded at him and he turned and went through the dark entrance-hall into the kitchen. Druse went to the door to the dining-room; Mrs. Hanan was still standing with her back to the buffet, her hands still at her mouth, her eyes wide, unseeing. He turned and went swiftly up the broad steps to the office, took up the telephone and dialed a number. When the connection had been made, he asked for MacCrae.

In a minute or so MacCrae answered; Druse said: "You'll find a stiff in Mrs. Dale Hanan's apartment on the corner of Sixty-third and Park, Mac. She killed him—self-defense.

You might find his partner downstairs at my place—waiting for his boss to come out… Yeah, his boss was Hanan—he just went down—the other way… I'll file charges of attempted murder against Hanan, and straight it all out when you get over here… Yeah—hurry."

He hung up and went down to the dining room. He tipped the table back on its legs and picked up the rubies, put them back into the case. He said: "I called up a friend of mine who works for Mahlon and Stiles. As you probably know, Mister Hanan has never made a will." He smiled. "He so hated the thought of death that the idea of a will was extremely repugnant to him."

He picked up her chair and she came slowly across and sank into it.

"As soon as the estate is settled," he went on, "I shall expect your check for a hundred and thirty-five thousand dollars, made out to the insurance company."

She nodded abstractedly.

"I think these"—he indicated the jewel-case—"will be safer with me, until then."

She nodded again.

He smiled, "I shall also look forward with a great deal of pleasure to receiving your check for twenty-five thousand—the balance on the figure I quoted for my services."

She turned her head slowly, looked up at him. "A moralist," she said—"morbid—and mercenary."

"Mercenary as hell!" he bobbed his big head up and down violently.

She looked at the tiny watch at her wrist, said: "It isn't morning yet, strictly speaking—but I'd rather have a drink than anything I can think of."

Druse laughed. He went to the buffet and took out a squat bottle, glasses, poured two big drinks. He took one to her, raised the other and squinted through it at the light. "Here's to crime."

They drank.