

JUST MEAT

He strolled to the corner and glanced up and down the intersecting street, but saw nothing save the oases of light shed by the street lamps at the successive crossings. Then he strolled back the way he had come. He was a shadow of a man, sliding noiselessly and without undue movement through the semi-darkness. Also he was very alert, like a wild animal in the jungle, keenly perceptive and receptive. The movement of another in the darkness about him would need to have been more shadowy than he to have escaped him.

In addition to the running advertisement of the state of affairs carried to him by his senses, he had a subtler perception, a FEEL, of the atmosphere around him. He knew that the house in front of which he paused for a moment, contained children. Yet by no willed effort of perception did he have this knowledge. For that matter, he was not even aware that he knew, so occult was the impression. Yet, did a moment arise in which action, in relation to that house, were imperative, he would have acted on the assumption that it contained children. He was not aware of all that he knew about the neighbourhood.

In the same way, he knew not how, he knew that no danger threatened in the footfalls that came up the cross street. Before he saw the walker, he knew him for a belated pedestrian hurrying home. The walker came into view at the crossing and disappeared on up the street. The man that watched, noted a light that flared up in the window of a house on the

corner, and as it died down he knew it for an expiring match. This was conscious identification of familiar phenomena, and through his mind flitted the thought, "Wanted to know what time." In another house one room was lighted. The light burned dimly and steadily, and he had the feel that it was a sick-room.

He was especially interested in a house across the street in the middle of the block. To this house he paid most attention. No matter what way he looked, nor what way he walked, his looks and his steps always returned to it. Except for an open window above the porch, there was nothing unusual about the house. Nothing came in nor out. Nothing happened. There were no lighted windows, nor had lights appeared and disappeared in any of the windows. Yet it was the central point of his consideration. He rallied to it each time after a divination of the state of the neighbourhood.

Despite his feel of things, he was not confident. He was supremely conscious of the precariousness of his situation. Though unperturbed by the footfalls of the chance pedestrian, he was as keyed up and sensitive and ready to be startled as any timorous deer. He was aware of the possibility of other intelligences prowling about in the darkness--intelligences similar to his own in movement, perception, and divination.

Far down the street he caught a glimpse of something that moved. And he knew it was no late home-goer, but menace and danger. He whistled twice

to the house across the street, then faded away shadow-like to the corner and around the corner. Here he paused and looked about him carefully. Reassured, he peered back around the corner and studied the object that moved and that was coming nearer. He had divined aright. It was a policeman.

The man went down the cross street to the next corner, from the shelter of which he watched the corner he had just left. He saw the policeman pass by, going straight on up the street. He paralleled the policeman's course, and from the next corner again watched him go by; then he returned the way he had come. He whistled once to the house across the street, and after a time whistled once again. There was reassurance in the whistle, just as there had been warning in the previous double whistle.

He saw a dark bulk outline itself on the roof of the porch and slowly descend a pillar. Then it came down the steps, passed through the small iron gate, and went down the sidewalk, taking on the form of a man. He that watched kept on his own side of the street and moved on abreast to the corner, where he crossed over and joined the other. He was quite small alongside the man he accosted.

"How'd you make out, Matt?" he asked.

The other grunted indistinctly, and walked on in silence a few steps.

"I reckon I landed the goods," he said.

Jim chuckled in the darkness, and waited for further information. The blocks passed by under their feet, and he grew impatient.

"Well, how about them goods?" he asked. "What kind of a haul did you make, anyway?"

"I was too busy to figger it out, but it's fat. I can tell you that much, Jim, it's fat. I don't dast to think how fat it is. Wait till we get to the room."

Jim looked at him keenly under the street lamp of the next crossing, and saw that his face was a trifle grim and that he carried his left arm peculiarly.

"What's the matter with your arm?" he demanded.

"The little cuss bit me. Hope I don't get hydrophoby. Folks gets hydrophoby from manbite sometimes, don't they?"

"Gave you fight, eh?" Jim asked encouragingly.

The other grunted.

"You're harder'n hell to get information from," Jim burst out irritably.

"Tell us about it. You ain't goin' to lose money just a-tellin' a guy."

"I guess I choked him some," came the answer. Then, by way of explanation, "He woke up on me."

"You did it neat. I never heard a sound."

"Jim," the other said with seriousness, "it's a hangin' matter. I fixed 'm. I had to. He woke up on me. You an' me's got to do some layin' low for a spell."

Jim gave a low whistle of comprehension.

"Did you hear me whistle?" he asked suddenly.

"Sure. I was all done. I was just comin' out."

"It was a bull. But he wasn't on a little bit. Went right by an' kept a-paddin' the hoof out a sight. Then I come back an' gave you the whistle. What made you take so long after that?"

"I was waitin' to make sure," Matt explained. "I was mighty glad when I heard you whistle again. It's hard work waitin'. I just sat there an' thought an' thought... oh, all kinds' of things. It's remarkable what a fellow'll think about. And then there was a darn cat that kept movin' around the house all' botherin' me with its noises."

"An' it's fat!" Jim exclaimed irrelevantly and with joy.

"I'm sure tellin' you, Jim, it's fat. I'm plum' anxious for another look at 'em."

Unconsciously the two men quickened their pace. Yet they did not relax from their caution. Twice they changed their course in order to avoid policemen, and they made very sure that they were not observed when they dived into the dark hallway of a cheap rooming house down town.

Not until they had gained their own room on the top floor, did they scratch a match. While Jim lighted a lamp, Matt locked the door and threw the bolts into place. As he turned, he noticed that his partner was waiting expectantly. Matt smiled to himself at the other's eagerness.

"Them search-lights is all right," he said, drawing forth a small pocket electric lamp and examining it. "But we got to get a new battery. It's runnin' pretty weak. I thought once or twice it'd leave me in the dark. Funny arrangements in that house. I near got lost. His room was on the left, an' that fooled me some."

"I told you it was on the left," Jim interrupted.

"You told me it was on the right," Matt went on. "I guess I know what

you told me, an' there's the map you drew."

Fumbling in his vest pocket, he drew out a folded slip of paper. As he unfolded it, Jim bent over and looked.

"I did make a mistake," he confessed.

"You sure did. It got me guessin' some for a while."

"But it don't matter now," Jim cried. "Let's see what you got."

"It does matter," Matt retorted. "It matters a lot... to me. I've got to run all the risk. I put my head in the trap while you stay on the street. You got to get on to yourself an' be more careful. All right, I'll show you."

He dipped loosely into his trousers pocket and brought out a handful of small diamonds. He spilled them out in a blazing stream on the greasy table. Jim let out a great oath.

"That's nothing," Matt said with triumphant complacency. "I ain't begun yet."

From one pocket after another he continued bringing forth the spoil. There were many diamonds wrapped in chamois skin that were larger than those in the first handful. From one pocket he brought out a handful of

very small cut gems.

"Sun dust," he remarked, as he spilled them on the table in a space by themselves.

Jim examined them.

"Just the same, they retail for a couple of dollars each," he said. "Is that all?"

"Ain't it enough?" the other demanded in an aggrieved tone.

"Sure it is," Jim answered with unqualified approval. "Better'n I expected. I wouldn't take a cent less than ten thousan' for the bunch."

"Ten thousan'," Matt sneered. "They're worth twic't that, an' I don't know anything about joolery, either. Look at that big boy!"

He picked it out from the sparkling heap and held it near to the lamp with the air of an expert, weighing and judging.

"Worth a thousan' all by its lonely," was Jim's quicker judgment.

"A thousan' your grandmother," was Matt's scornful rejoinder. "You couldn't buy it for three."

"Wake me up! I'm dreamin'!" The sparkle of the gems was in Jim's eyes, and he began sorting out the larger diamonds and examining them. "We're rich men, Matt--we'll be regular swells."

"It'll take years to get rid of 'em," was Matt's more practical thought.

"But think how we'll live! Nothin' to do but spend the money an' go on gettin' rid of em."

Matt's eyes were beginning to sparkle, though sombrely, as his phlegmatic nature woke up.

"I told you I didn't dast think how fat it was," he murmured in a low voice.

"What a killin'! What a killin'!" was the other's more ecstatic utterance.

"I almost forgot," Matt said, thrusting his hand into his inside coat pocket.

A string of large pearls emerged from wrappings of tissue paper and chamois skin. Jim scarcely glanced at them.

"They're worth money," he said, and returned to the diamonds.

A silence fell on the two men. Jim played with the gems, running them through his fingers, sorting them into piles, and spreading them out flat and wide. He was a slender, weazened man, nervous, irritable, high-strung, and anaemic--a typical child of the gutter, with unbeautiful twisted features, small-eyed, with face and mouth perpetually and feverishly hungry, brutish in a cat-like way, stamped to the core with degeneracy.

Matt did not finger the diamonds. He sat with chin on hands and elbows on table, blinking heavily at the blazing array. He was in every way a contrast to the other. No city had bred him. He was heavy-muscled and hairy, gorilla-like in strength and aspect. For him there was no unseen world. His eyes were full and wide apart, and there seemed in them a certain bold brotherliness. They inspired confidence. But a closer inspection would have shown that his eyes were just a trifle too full, just a shade too wide apart. He exceeded, spilled over the limits of normality, and his features told lies about the man beneath.

"The bunch is worth fifty thousan'," Jim remarked suddenly.

"A hundred thousan'," Matt said.

The silence returned and endured a long time, to be broken again by Jim.

"What in hell was he doin' with 'em all at the house?--that's what I want to know. I'd a-thought he'd kept 'em in the safe down at the

store."

Matt had just been considering the vision of the throttled man as he had last looked upon him in the dim light of the electric lantern; but he did not start at the mention of him.

"There's no tellin'," he answered. "He might a-ben gettin' ready to chuck his pardner. He might a-pulled out in the mornin' for parts unknown, if we hadn't happened along. I guess there's just as many thieves among honest men as there is among thieves. You read about such things in the papers, Jim. Pardners is always knifin' each other."

A queer, nervous look came into the other's eyes. Matt did not betray that he noted it, though he said--

"What was you thinkin' about, Jim?"

Jim was a trifle awkward for the moment.

"Nothin'," he answered. "Only I was thinkin' just how funny it was--all them jools at his house. What made you ask?"

"Nothin'. I was just wonderin', that was all."

The silence settled down, broken by an occasional low and nervous giggle on the part of Jim. He was overcome by the spread of gems. It was not

that he felt their beauty. He was unaware that they were beautiful in themselves. But in them his swift imagination visioned the joys of life they would buy, and all the desires and appetites of his diseased mind and sickly flesh were tickled by the promise they extended. He builded wondrous, orgy-haunted castles out of their brilliant fires, and was appalled at what he builded. Then it was that he giggled. It was all too impossible to be real. And yet there they blazed on the table before him, fanning the flame of the lust of him, and he giggled again.

"I guess we might as well count 'em," Matt said suddenly, tearing himself away from his own visions. "You watch me an' see that it's square, because you an' me has got to be on the square, Jim. Understand?"

Jim did not like this, and betrayed it in his eyes, while Matt did not like what he saw in his partner's eyes.

"Understand?" Matt repeated, almost menacingly.

"Ain't we always ben square?" the other replied, on the defensive because of the treachery already whispering in him.

"It don't cost nothin', bein' square in hard times," Matt retorted.

"It's bein' square in prosperity that counts. When we ain't got nothin', we can't help bein' square. We're prosperous now, an' we've got to be business men--honest business men. Understand?"

"That's the talk for me," Jim approved, but deep down in the meagre soul of him,--and in spite of him,--wanton and lawless thoughts were stirring like chained beasts.

Matt stepped to the food shelf behind the two-burner kerosene cooking stove. He emptied the tea from a paper bag, and from a second bag emptied some red peppers. Returning to the table with the bags, he put into them the two sizes of small diamonds. Then he counted the large gems and wrapped them in their tissue paper and chamois skin.

"Hundred an' forty-seven good-sized ones," was his inventory; "twenty real big ones; two big boys and one whopper; an' a couple of fistfuls of teeny ones an' dust."

He looked at Jim.

"Correct," was the response.

He wrote the count out on a slip of memorandum paper, and made a copy of it, giving one slip to his partner and retaining the other.

"Just for reference," he said.

Again he had recourse to the food shelf, where he emptied the sugar from a large paper bag. Into this he thrust the diamonds, large and small,

wrapped it up in a bandanna handkerchief, and stowed it away under his pillow. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed and took off his shoes.

"An' you think they're worth a hundred thousan'?" Jim asked, pausing and looking up from the unlacing of his shoe.

"Sure," was the answer. "I seen a dance-house girl down in Arizona once, with some big sparklers on her. They wasn't real. She said if they was she wouldn't be dancin'. Said they'd be worth all of fifty thousan', an' she didn't have a dozen of 'em all told."

"Who'd work for a livin'?" Jim triumphantly demanded. "Pick an' shovel work!" he sneered. "Work like a dog all my life, an' save all my wages, an' I wouldn't have half as much as we got tonight."

"Dish washin's about your measure, an' you couldn't get more'n twenty a month an' board. Your figgers is 'way off, but your point is well taken. Let them that likes it, work. I rode range for thirty a month when I was young an' foolish. Well, I'm older, an' I ain't ridin' range."

He got into bed on one side. Jim put out the light and followed him in on the other side.

"How's your arm feel?" Jim queried amiably.

Such concern was unusual, and Matt noted it, and replied--

"I guess there's no danger of hydrophoby. What made you ask?"

Jim felt in himself a guilty stir, and under his breath he cursed the other's way of asking disagreeable questions; but aloud he answered--

"Nothin', only you seemed scared of it at first. What are you goin' to do with your share, Matt?"

"Buy a cattle ranch in Arizona an' set down an' pay other men to ride range for me. There's some several I'd like to see askin' a job from me, damn them! An' now you shut your face, Jim. It'll be some time before I buy that ranch. Just now I'm goin' to sleep."

But Jim lay long awake, nervous and twitching, rolling about restlessly and rolling himself wide awake every time he dozed. The diamonds still blazed under his eyelids, and the fire of them hurt. Matt, in spite of his heavy nature, slept lightly, like a wild animal alert in its sleep; and Jim noticed, every time he moved, that his partner's body moved sufficiently to show that it had received the impression and that it was trembling on the verge of awakening. For that matter, Jim did not know whether or not, frequently, the other was awake. Once, quietly, betokening complete consciousness, Matt said to him: "Aw, go to sleep, Jim. Don't worry about them jools. They'll keep." And Jim had thought that at that particular moment Matt had been surely asleep.

In the late morning Matt was awake with Jim's first movement, and thereafter he awoke and dozed with him until midday, when they got up together and began dressing.

"I'm goin' out to get a paper an' some bread," Matt said. "You boil the coffee."

As Jim listened, unconsciously his gaze left Matt's face and roved to the pillow, beneath which was the bundle wrapped in the bandanna handkerchief. On the instant Matt's face became like a wild beast's.

"Look here, Jim," he snarled. "You've got to play square. If you do me dirt, I'll fix you. Understand? I'd eat you, Jim. You know that. I'd bite right into your throat an' eat you like that much beefsteak."

His sunburned skin was black with the surge of blood in it, and his tobacco-stained teeth were exposed by the snarling lips. Jim shivered and involuntarily cowered. There was death in the man he looked at. Only the night before that black-faced man had killed another with his hands, and it had not hurt his sleep. And in his own heart Jim was aware of a sneaking guilt, of a train of thought that merited all that was threatened.

Matt passed out, leaving him still shivering. Then a hatred twisted his own face, and he softly hurled savage curses at the door. He remembered the jewels, and hastened to the bed, feeling under the pillow for the

bandanna bundle. He crushed it with his fingers to make certain that it still contained the diamonds. Assured that Matt had not carried them away, he looked toward the kerosene stove with a guilty start. Then he hurriedly lighted it, filled the coffee-pot at the sink, and put it over the flame.

The coffee was boiling when Matt returned, and while the latter cut the bread and put a slice of butter on the table, Jim poured out the coffee. It was not until he sat down and had taken a few sips of the coffee, that Matt pulled out the morning paper from his pocket.

"We was way off," he said. "I told you I didn't dast figger out how fat it was. Look at that."

He pointed to the head-lines on the first page.

"SWIFT NEMESIS ON BUJANNOFF'S TRACK," they read. "MURDERED IN HIS SLEEP

AFTER ROBBING HIS PARTNER."

"There you have it!" Matt cried. "He robbed his partner--robbed him like a dirty thief."

"Half a million of jewels missin'," Jim read aloud. He put the paper down and stared at Matt.

"That's what I told you," the latter said. "What in hell do we know about jools? Half a million!--an' the best I could figger it was a hundred thousan'. Go on an' read the rest of it."

They read on silently, their heads side by side, the untouched coffee growing cold; and ever and anon one or the other burst forth with some salient printed fact.

"I'd like to seen Metzner's face when he opened the safe at the store this mornin'," Jim gloated.

"He hit the high places right away for Bujannoff's house," Matt explained. "Go on an' read."

"Was to have sailed last night at ten on the Sajoda for the South Seas--steamship delayed by extra freight--"

"That's why we caught 'm in bed," Matt interrupted. "It was just luck--like pickin' a fifty-to-one winner."

"Sajoda sailed at six this mornin'--"

"He didn't catch her," Matt said. "I saw his alarm-clock was set at five. That'd given 'm plenty of time... only I come along an' put the kibosh on his time. Go on."

"Adolph Metzner in despair--the famous Haythorne pearl necklace--magnificently assorted pearls--valued by experts at from fifty to seventy thousand dollars."

Jim broke off to swear vilely and solemnly, concluding with, "Those damn oyster-eggs worth all that money!"

He licked his lips and added, "They was beauties an' no mistake."

"Big Brazilian gem," he read on. "Eighty thousand dollars--many valuable gems of the first water--several thousand small diamonds well worth forty thousand."

"What you don't know about jools is worth knowin'," Matt smiled good-humouredly.

"Theory of the sleuths," Jim read. "Thieves must have known--cleverly kept watch on Bujannoff's actions--must have learned his plan and trailed him to his house with the fruits of his robbery--"

"Clever--hell!" Matt broke out. "That's the way reputations is made... in the newspapers. How'd we know he was robbin' his pardner?"

"Anyway, we've got the goods," Jim grinned. "Let's look at 'em again."

He assured himself that the door was locked and bolted, while Matt

brought out the bundle in the bandanna and opened it on the table.

"Ain't they beauties, though!" Jim exclaimed at sight of the pearls; and for a time he had eyes only for them. "Accordin' to the experts, worth from fifty to seventy thousan' dollars."

"An' women like them things," Matt commented. "An' they'll do everything to get 'em--sell themselves, commit murder, anything."

"Just like you an' me."

"Not on your life," Matt retorted. "I'll commit murder for 'em, but not for their own sakes, but for sake of what they'll get me. That's the difference. Women want the jools for themselves, an' I want the jools for the women an' such things they'll get me."

"Lucky that men an' women don't want the same things," Jim remarked.

"That's what makes commerce," Matt agreed; "people wantin' different things."

In the middle of the afternoon Jim went out to buy food. While he was gone, Matt cleared the table of the jewels, wrapping them up as before and putting them under the pillow. Then he lighted the kerosene stove and started to boil water for coffee. A few minutes later, Jim returned.

"Most surprising," he remarked. "Streets, an' stores, an' people just like they always was. Nothin' changed. An' me walking along through it all a millionaire. Nobody looked at me an' guessed it."

Matt grunted unsympathetically. He had little comprehension of the lighter whims and fancies of his partner's imagination.

"Did you get a porterhouse?" he demanded.

"Sure, an' an inch thick. It's a peach. Look at it."

He unwrapped the steak and held it up for the other's inspection. Then he made the coffee and set the table, while Matt fried the steak.

"Don't put on too much of them red peppers," Jim warned. "I ain't used to your Mexican cookin'. You always season too hot."

Matt grunted a laugh and went on with his cooking. Jim poured out the coffee, but first, into the nicked china cup, he emptied a powder he had carried in his vest pocket wrapped in a rice-paper. He had turned his back for the moment on his partner, but he did not dare to glance around at him. Matt placed a newspaper on the table, and on the newspaper set the hot frying-pan. He cut the steak in half, and served Jim and himself.

"Eat her while she's hot," he counselled, and with knife and fork set

the example.

"She's a dandy," was Jim's judgment, after his first mouthful. "But I tell you one thing straight. I'm never goin' to visit you on that Arizona ranch, so you needn't ask me."

"What's the matter now?" Matt asked.

"Hell's the matter," was the answer. "The Mexican cookin' on your ranch'd be too much for me. If I've got hell a-comin' in the next life, I'm not goin' to torment my insides in this one. Damned peppers!"

He smiled, expelled his breath forcibly to cool his burning mouth, drank some coffee, and went on eating the steak.

"What do you think about the next life anyway, Matt?" he asked a little later, while secretly he wondered why the other had not yet touched his coffee.

"Ain't no next life," Matt answered, pausing from the steak to take his first sip of coffee. "Nor heaven nor hell, nor nothin'. You get all that's comin' right here in this life."

"An' afterward?" Jim queried out of his morbid curiosity, for he knew that he looked upon a man that was soon to die. "An' afterward?" he repeated.

"Did you ever see a man two weeks dead?" the other asked.

Jim shook his head.

"Well, I have. He was like this beefsteak you an' me is eatin'. It was once steer cavortin' over the landscape. But now it's just meat. That's all, just meat. An' that's what you an' me an' all people come to--meat."

Matt gulped down the whole cup of coffee, and refilled the cup.

"Are you scared to die?" he asked.

Jim shook his head. "What's the use? I don't die anyway. I pass on an' live again--"

"To go stealin', an' lyin' an' snivellin' through another life, an' go on that way forever an' ever an' ever?" Matt sneered.

"Maybe I'll improve," Jim suggested hopefully. "Maybe stealin' won't be necessary in the life to come."

He ceased abruptly, and stared straight before him, a frightened expression on his face.

"What's the matter!" Matt demanded.

"Nothin'. I was just wonderin'"--Jim returned to himself with an effort--"about this dyin', that was all."

But he could not shake off the fright that had startled him. It was as if an unseen thing of gloom had passed him by, casting upon him the intangible shadow of its presence. He was aware of a feeling of foreboding. Something ominous was about to happen. Calamity hovered in the air. He gazed fixedly across the table at the other man. He could not understand. Was it that he had blundered and poisoned himself? No, Matt had the nicked cup, and he had certainly put the poison in the nicked cup.

It was all his own imagination, was his next thought. It had played him tricks before. Fool! Of course it was. Of course something was about to happen, but it was about to happen to Matt. Had not Matt drunk the whole cup of coffee?

Jim brightened up and finished his steak, sopping bread in the gravy when the meat was gone.

"When I was a kid--" he began, but broke off abruptly.

Again the unseen thing of gloom had fluttered, and his being was vibrant with premonition of impending misfortune. He felt a disruptive influence

at work in the flesh of him, and in all his muscles there was a seeming that they were about to begin to twitch. He sat back suddenly, and as suddenly leaned forward with his elbows on the table. A tremor ran dimly through the muscles of his body. It was like the first rustling of leaves before the oncoming of wind. He clenched his teeth. It came again, a spasmodic tensing of his muscles. He knew panic at the revolt within his being. His muscles no longer recognized his mastery over them. Again they spasmodically tensed, despite the will of him, for he had willed that they should not tense. This was revolution within himself, this was anarchy; and the terror of impotence rushed up in him as his flesh gripped and seemed to seize him in a clutch, chills running up and down his back and sweat starting on his brow. He glanced about the room, and all the details of it smote him with a strange sense of familiarity. It was as though he had just returned from a long journey. He looked across the table at his partner. Matt was watching him and smiling. An expression of horror spread over Jim's face.

"My God, Matt!" he screamed. "You ain't doped me?"

Matt smiled and continued to watch him. In the paroxysm that followed, Jim did not become unconscious. His muscles tensed and twitched and knotted, hurting him and crushing him in their savage grip. And in the midst of it all, it came to him that Matt was acting queerly. He was travelling the same road. The smile had gone from his face, and there was on it an intent expression, as if he were listening to some inner tale of himself and trying to divine the message. Matt got up and walked

across the room and back again, then sat down.

"You did this, Jim," he said quietly.

"But I didn't think you'd try to fix ME," Jim answered reproachfully.

"Oh, I fixed you all right," Matt said, with teeth close together and shivering body. "What did you give me?"

"Strychnine."

"Same as I gave you," Matt volunteered. "It's a hell of a mess, ain't it?"

"You're lyin', Matt," Jim pleaded. "You ain't doped me, have you?"

"I sure did, Jim; an' I didn't overdose you, neither. I cooked it in as neat as you please in your half the porterhouse.--Hold on! Where're you goin'?"

Jim had made a dash for the door, and was throwing back the bolts. Matt sprang in between and shoved him away.

"Drug store," Jim panted. "Drug store."

"No you don't. You'll stay right here. There ain't goin' to be any

runnin' out an' makin' a poison play on the street--not with all them jools reposin' under the pillow. Savve? Even if you didn't die, you'd be in the hands of the police with a whole lot of explanations comin'. Emetics is the stuff for poison. I'm just as bad bit as you, an' I'm goin' to take a emetic. That's all they'd give you at a drug store, anyway."

He thrust Jim back into the middle of the room and shot the bolts into place. As he went across the floor to the food shelf, he passed one hand over his brow and flung off the beaded sweat. It splattered audibly on the floor. Jim watched agonizedly as Matt got the mustard-can and a cup and ran for the sink. He stirred a cupful of mustard and water and drank it down. Jim had followed him and was reaching with trembling hands for the empty cup. Again Matt shoved him away. As he mixed a second cupful, he demanded--

"D'you think one cup'll do for me? You can wait till I'm done."

Jim started to totter toward the door, but Matt checked him.

"If you monkey with that door, I'll twist your neck. Savve? You can take yours when I'm done. An' if it saves you, I'll twist your neck, anyway. You ain't got no chance, nohow. I told you many times what you'd get if you did me dirt."

"But you did me dirt, too," Jim articulated with an effort.

Matt was drinking the second cupful, and did not answer. The sweat had got into Jim's eyes, and he could scarcely see his way to the table, where he got a cup for himself. But Matt was mixing a third cupful, and, as before, thrust him away.

"I told you to wait till I was done," Matt growled. "Get outa my way."

And Jim supported his twitching body by holding on to the sink, the while he yearned toward the yellowish concoction that stood for life. It was by sheer will that he stood and clung to the sink. His flesh strove to double him up and bring him to the floor. Matt drank the third cupful, and with difficulty managed to get to a chair and sit down. His first paroxysm was passing. The spasms that afflicted him were dying away. This good effect he ascribed to the mustard and water. He was safe, at any rate. He wiped the sweat from his face, and, in the interval of calm, found room for curiosity. He looked at his partner.

A spasm had shaken the mustard can out of Jim's hands, and the contents were spilled upon the floor. He stooped to scoop some of the mustard into the cup, and the succeeding spasm doubled him upon the floor. Matt smiled.

"Stay with it," he encouraged. "It's the stuff all right. It's fixed me up."

Jim heard him and turned toward him a stricken face, twisted with suffering and pleading. Spasm now followed spasm till he was in convulsions, rolling on the floor and yellowing his face and hair in the mustard.

Matt laughed hoarsely at the sight, but the laugh broke midway. A tremor had run through his body. A new paroxysm was beginning. He arose and staggered across to the sink, where, with probing forefinger, he vainly strove to assist the action of the emetic. In the end, he clung to the sink as Jim had clung, filled with the horror of going down to the floor.

The other's paroxysm had passed, and he sat up, weak and fainting, too weak to rise, his forehead dripping, his lips flecked with a foam made yellow by the mustard in which he had rolled. He rubbed his eyes with his knuckles, and groans that were like whines came from his throat.

"What are you sniffin' about?" Matt demanded out of his agony. "All you got to do is die. An' when you die you're dead."

"I... ain't... sniffin'... it's... the... mustard... stingin'... my... eyes," Jim panted with desperate slowness.

It was his last successful attempt at speech. Thereafter he babbled incoherently, pawing the air with shaking arms till a fresh convulsion stretched him on the floor.

Matt struggled back to the chair, and, doubled up on it, with his arms clasped about his knees, he fought with his disintegrating flesh. He came out of the convulsion cool and weak. He looked to see how it went with the other, and saw him lying motionless.

He tried to soliloquize, to be facetious, to have his last grim laugh at life, but his lips made only incoherent sounds. The thought came to him that the emetic had failed, and that nothing remained but the drug store. He looked toward the door and drew himself to his feet. There he saved himself from falling by clutching the chair. Another paroxysm had begun. And in the midst of the paroxysm, with his body and all the parts of it flying apart and writhing and twisting back again into knots, he clung to the chair and shoved it before him across the floor. The last shreds of his will were leaving him when he gained the door. He turned the key and shot back one bolt. He fumbled for the second bolt, but failed. Then he leaned his weight against the door and slid down gently to the floor.