



BLACK MASK

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K. S. WHITE, Editor

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I reached Selak just as he tossed George Herro over the edge of the balcony.

IT had been a slow winter. Cleaning and repairing had kept us going, but there isn't the money in cleaning that there used to be. Not if you've got any respect for rugs and if you clean them the real Armenian way.

It was spring and the door to the store was open. The shop was bright with color. In the window we had an eighteen foot Sarouk, a lovely piece with a sheen like silk—a floral design on a deep rose background. Usually, when Papa is unhappy he can get a lift out of just admiring a rug like that. But not today.

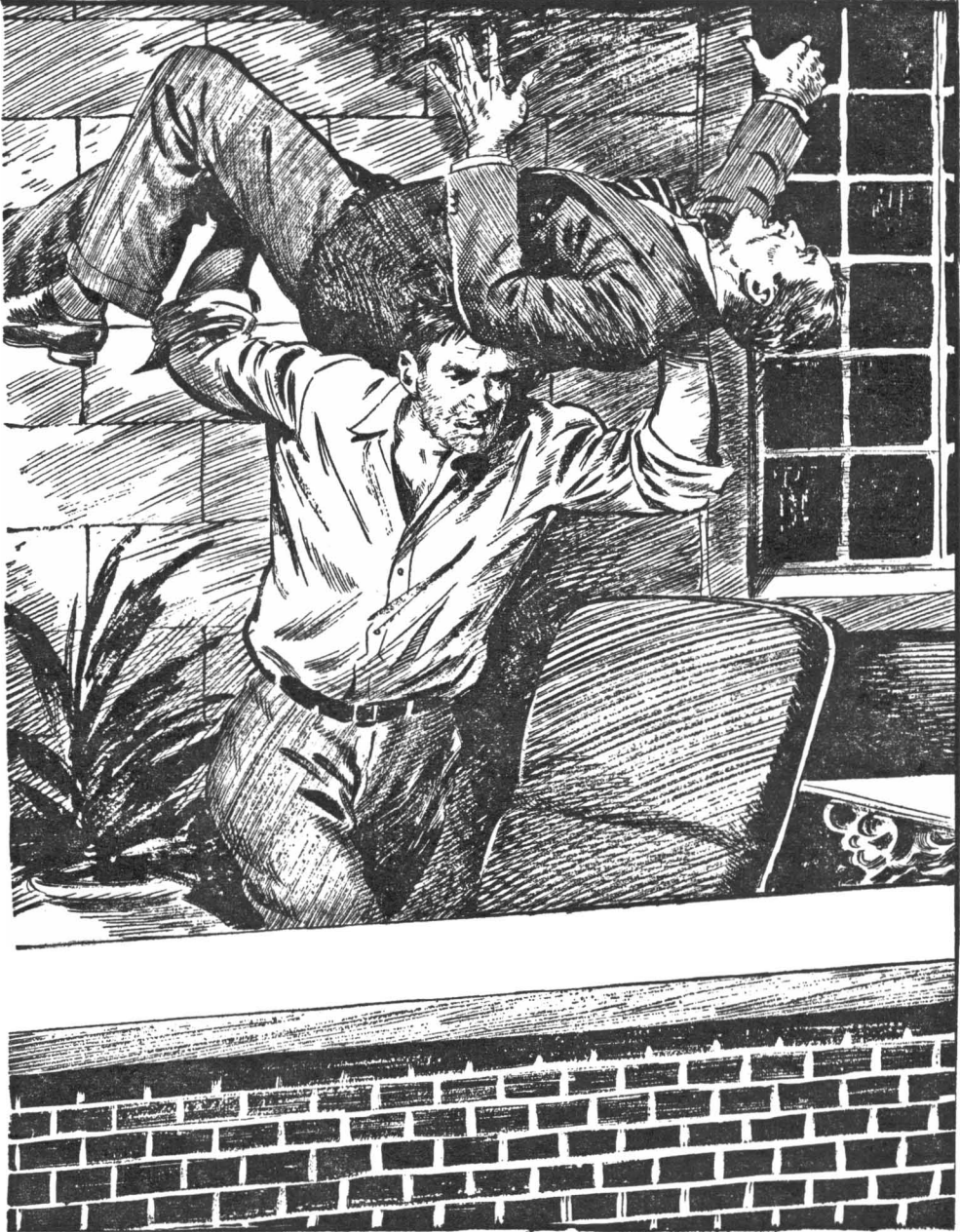
"Why," he said, "did I ever get into this business?"

Ever since I'd known him, Papa had asked himself that question. Even when business was good, he asked it. He didn't expect an answer.

I said: "The only thing wrong with this business is the people who are in it. It's your competitors who give you your gray hair, Papa."

"Competitors?" he said scornfully.





By WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

Cut-rate carpets were Kaprelian's business, but when an Oriental prayer-rug turned up with a corpse wrapped in it, that was more than he'd bargained for.

"Competitors—huh! I've got no competitors. Contemporaries, I got."

"It's contemporaries," I corrected him.

He shook his head. "For them, I have nothing but contempt. They are my contemporaries."

I started to laugh, and then an elderly couple walked into the store.

The frown on Papa's face was replaced by a smile as he rose and came forward to greet them.

"Good morning," Papa said. "A beautiful morning, Mr. Egan."

Years ago, the Egans had been good customers. Then they'd had their entire house carpeted wall to wall, in the fashion of the time.

Mr. Egan said: "Good morning, Mr. Kaprelian. I'm surprised that you remember me."

Papa's smile was beatific. "I never forget a friend," he said earnestly. To Papa, friend was synonymous with customer.

Mr. Egan looked faintly uncomfortable. "Our carpeting," he said, "is pretty badly worn, Mr. Kaprelian. We're thinking of having the house done over. Frankly, it's a choice between re-carpeting and orientals. I wondered how prices were on orientals these days."

I knew Papa was wincing inside. But his face gave no indication of it. "Prices," he said, "have never been more favorable, Mr. Egan. Values have never been better." He called to me: "Levon, you will help me, please?"

To everybody I know, I'm Lee. To Papa, I'm still Levon. I went over to help him take down and spread some rugs.

I knew the pile he'd go to. Egan was shopping. Egan was buying on price and price alone. We had some very loosely woven Lilihans Papa had picked up as trade-ins. They'd been used less than a year; they were new you might say.

Name alone means only the locality,

you understand. There are good, bad and indifferent weavers in all localities. These Lilihans were not of the best, but they were good, serviceable rugs.

The trouble is, they looked pretty bad against that Sarouk in the window. The memory of that was still in the Egans' mind, I could tell.

The price Papa quoted them made *me* wince. He wanted this sale. He wanted the Egans back.

Mr. Egan's eyebrows went up. He was interested. But Mrs. Egan was frowning. I thought of saying something to her, but I never interfere when Papa's selling.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" Papa asked.

Mr. Egan nodded. Mrs. Egan continued to frown. "I was wondering about the colors," she said doubtfully. "Our decorator tells me it's so hard to work a motif around an oriental rug."

Interior decorators . . . From the painter, the paper-hanger, the furniture and drapery dealer they get a cut. But not from the oriental dealers. No rake-off, no recommendation from them.

"These colors are not bold," Papa said. "They will blend with anything."

"Perhaps." She didn't look like she believed it. "The decorator also says we should not spend *all* our money on the floor."

All *their* money would buy three medium-sized banks. But maybe being careful like that is why they had it.

Papa looked grave. "Let me suggest something, Mrs. Egan. Let me bring some rugs up to your house, some rugs I will personally choose. Leave them there for a week or two. Then you can make your decision."

"That seems fair enough," Mr. Egan said.

But Mrs. Egan shook her head. "I want to look at some carpeting, first, this morning. If I don't find what I want, I'll be in again."

Papa started to say something, but Mr. Egan beat him to it. "Isn't your cousin over on Broad Street selling carpeting in addition to orientals, Mr. Kaprelian?"

"I believe he is," Papa said.

Sarkis had been selling domestic carpeting for seven years and Papa knew it well. Every Sunday, Papa and Sarkis ate chicken and pilaff together. Every Sunday, they played tavlú. The rest of the week they were busy cutting each other's throats.

Mr. Egan smiled. "Well, we'll be back. I'll see that she comes back, Mr. Kaprelian."

Papa smiled and nodded, his eyes sad.

HE SAID nothing as I helped him pile the rugs back. For minutes after we'd finished, and he was back in his chair behind the desk, he said nothing.

Finally, he said: "Carpeting—" and shook his head.

"It covers the floor," I said. "It serves the same purpose."

He looked at me as though I'd uttered a sacrilege—which I had. "It covers the floor," he repeated. "It serves the same purpose."

I started to explain but he raised a hand. "We will pretend I am Rembrandt. We will pretend I have a fine, beautiful idea, and I get my brushes and my paint, and I work like a dog. I work weeks, maybe months—maybe longer, I don't know. When I finish, I have this beautiful picture, this work of art. The dealer says it is the best I have ever done. He puts it up, so people can look, so somebody can buy. The customers come in and admire it. It would look beautiful, they know, on their wall. Am I right?"

"Sure," I said, "but—"

He raised a hand to silence me. "No buts. It would be a credit to the wall.

Now—do they say, 'Well, I want to look at some wallpaper first. I'll be back if I can't get the right wallpaper?' Don't they both cover the wall?"

"Rembrandt is dead, Papa," I said. "This is 1948."

"Both of these things I know. Have you some more things to say I *don't* know?"

"A Rembrandt is a work of art," I said.

"Oh. In the window, a Sarouk, a fine Sarouk. Maybe twenty-seven thousand knots to the square foot. Each knot is tied by hand. The finest wool is used, vegetable dye is used, care and cunning is used. This is not a work of art?"

"In a way," I admitted.

But Papa wasn't listening. He was rushing for the phone. "I forgot—" he said.

Now, he was calling Sarkis' number. Now, he had him on the wire.

"Sarkis, you're busy? No? Well, it's like this. One of my very best, one of my most loyal customers was in, a Mr. Egan and his wife. Old oriental customers. But the wife has some idea she would like to try carpeting and they were going to Acme, you understand, to look at some. But I told them you had a finer selection, Sarkis. I told them you had more reasonable prices. Together, we could make a dollar or two on these customers of mine. Right, Sarkis?"

A silence while Sarkis answered.

Then: "Oh, you know they have carpeting now? You sold them the carpeting they have now? They are your customers, Sarkis? Listen, my cousin, when you are still living in a mud house in Sivas, I was selling rugs to Mr. Egan. Good-bye." He hung up the phone angrily.

"Is that true what you told him, Papa?" I asked. "I thought you and Sarkis came to this country at the same time."

"I have been here some time when Sarkis arrived. A considerable time, Levon."

"How long?"

"Over a month." He went over to get his hat. "I am going to lunch." His face was stormy as he left.

I went into the back shop where Selak was washing rugs. Selak's a big boy, over two hundred pounds, with warm brown eyes and a timid smile. Selak's mind stopped growing when he was about nine, but he's kind and gentle. It's only his strength that scares you. He'd been with us for years.

"It's time to eat, Selak," I told him.

He nodded and smiled.

I wouldn't have to tell him it was time to start again, after lunch. Selak's old-fashioned; he likes to work.

I waited until he had unwrapped his lunch and started to eat before I went into the front shop again. That's when I saw the vision.

I knew it was a vision because no girl could be that beautiful. No hair could be that golden, no eyes that blue. Nobody could wear simple green linen and still look like a queen. A slim, regal vision, standing right inside the doorway.

She was smiling. "I've been admiring that rug in the window."

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" I said. I hadn't moved since coming through the door. I just stood there, like some oaf, staring.

"It certainly is. It's a Sarouk, isn't it?"

I came forward, now. We lived on the same plane for the moment. "It's a Sarouk," I agreed.

"I'm not sure it would go with my furnishings, though," she said doubtfully. "The place is almost *too* modern, if you know what I mean."

"Perhaps a Bokhara, or a Fereghan, then," I suggested. "They work in very well with modern decoration."

"Perhaps—" she said. "I've a Bokhara now. I mean a *real* one. There's so much confusion about Bokharas, isn't there? The *real* ones are called Khiva, sometimes, or Afghanistan. This was really made in Bokhara."

"You've been reading a book," I said.

Her laugh was music. "I have. For the past two weeks. You see, up until a year ago, I had no interest in orientals, at all. But a friend of mine died and left me these rugs. I kept them in storage until a month ago. But you're not interested in all this, are you?"

I wanted to tell her I was interested in anything she said. I said: "It's *very* interesting. It's possible you might have some very valuable rugs in the group."

Which was bad business, but I wasn't thinking about business.

"There's one," she said, "that could be valuable. It's an antique, I'm sure. I'd like to have you look at it."

"I'd be glad to," I said.

"This afternoon?" she asked, and handed me a card.

There was no reason why my legs should feel weak at that. She wanted an appraisal. Whatever I'd read into those two simple words hadn't been intentional on her part, I was sure.

"This afternoon," I agreed. "Would two-thirty be all right?"

"Two-thirty would be fine," she said. The smile again, and she was gone.

At the curb there was a Caddy convertible, and I watched her climb into that. I watched it until it disappeared up the street.

Papa would be unhappy, I knew. A girl with a Caddy convertible admiring the Sarouk and I hadn't sold her a thing. But I didn't care; I was looking forward to two-thirty.

When Papa came back and I told him about our visitor, he didn't look unhappy. He put his head on one side and studied me.

"You will stick to business, Levon. Maybe, it's because you look so much like Tryon Power?" He smiled slyly.

"It's *Tyrone*, not *Tryon*, Papa," I said patiently. "And there's no resemblance, none at all."

"Does the mirror lie? In the wash-room there's a mirror. Why don't you look?"

"Don't kid me, Papa," I said. "She was driving a Caddy, a new one, a convertible."

He shrugged. "You might as well take the station wagon. Then you can take the Sarouk along. How can she tell it won't go with modern unless she tries? Take the Sarouk along, Levon. Selak will go with you, to carry it up."

"I don't think she wants the Sarouk," I answered.

"It's time for your lunch," he said. "We will talk of it after lunch."

I went out to lunch. I still had her card in my hand. The name was engraved *Claire Lynne*. The address was penciled on the card, and I recognized it; the Prospect Towers. That meant money.

And the fact that the address was already penciled on the card indicated that she'd planned the appraisal *before* she entered the ship. Which dimmed the day only a little.

I don't remember what I had for lunch. I don't even remember everything

Papa told me before I left for the Prospect Towers. But I took the station wagon. I took Selak along, and the Sarouk.

CHAPTER TWO

Consignment on Murder

THE Prospect Towers was only about ten years old, a towering, modern apartment building of glass and white glazed brick.

The apartment of Claire Lynne was on the top floor, a studio apartment, a story and a half high. This would be the most expensive floor in the building with a terrace overlooking the bay.

It was modern, all right, but not obnoxiously so. Soft colors and bleached woods. The immense living room was carpeted; there were no orientals in here.

Claire Lynne was wearing black lounging slacks, and a white blouse. The blouse was low-necked, and I felt that weakness in the legs again.

"The Bokhara's in here," she said, "in the dining room."

I followed her across the carpeted expanse to the *L* at one end of the room. Here, separated from the living room by a low wall, at right angles to the living room, was the dining room. Here was the so-called Bokhara.

Finely spun wool, compactly woven.

Octagons on a background of Turanian red. A beautiful, finely finished piece, with a sheen that comes only from wear.

"Well?" she said.

"A lovely rug, and fine for modern furniture," I answered. "Any dealer would call it a Royal Bokhara, because that's the name they go by, in the trade. It's from the Turcoman group. It's a Tekke. The real Bokhara is called Beshir in this country."

She didn't seem surprised. "That's what I was told," she agreed. "The man I got it from told me just what you have."

I bent down again. There was a stain running through the red, darkening it. "It should be cleaned," I said.

She didn't seem to be listening. "I think you're qualified," she said, "to look at another rug I have." She seemed thoughtful.

I rose and smiled at her. "This was a test, Miss Lynne? You wanted to get my reaction to this one first?"

She smiled right back at me. "That's right. The other rugs are in here."

I followed her back into the living room and through that to the entrance hall. From there, she led me to a fairly large room that seemed to be an unfurnished guest room. There was a flat pile of rugs on the floor in here.

I went through them, one by one, identifying them as well as I could. There were some antiques and semi-antiques in this pile. There was a lot of money on the floor in here, all in wool.

When I'd finished, I said: "You said 'another.' That would mean one. Which one were you referring to, Miss Lynne?"

She opened the door to a closet. "In here."

I reached in and brought it out. I unfolded it, and stared.

I'd seen some fine pieces through the years, silk and wool and metallic. But this was far beyond any of those. This

was the kind the old timers talked about—the inspired work of a master weaver, an antique prayer rug.

It wasn't big, but it could easily be priceless.

She said: "Name it."

"An antique. A Persian, could have come from Kashan, but I wouldn't be sure. I wish my father could see this."

"That's why I had you come up," she answered. "You can show it to him. I want you to put it in your safe, if you would. You have a safe for your fine pieces, haven't you?"

I nodded. "For our silks. This—do you know what it is?"

"I think I do," she said. "You've heard of Maksoud of Kashan?"

I nodded. "He lived about four hundred years ago. The finest of the Persian weavers."

"That's right. His masterpiece is in the South Kensington Museum in London. It's called the Ardebil Carpet. His name is woven in a corner of the rug, in Arabic."

I nodded and looked down at the Arabic inscription on this rug. I looked up to meet her smile.

I said: "I understand he spent the better part of his life weaving that one in London. Thirty-three million knots. He wouldn't have much time for anything else."

"But if he had?"

I shook my head. I realized I'd been holding my breath and I expelled it, now.

"I think we ought to have a drink," she said, "don't you?"

"I could use it," I said.

We went back into the living room. I kept seeing that rug, I kept hearing the words, Maksoud of Kashan. And, for some reason, I kept remembering the blot on the dining room Bokhara.

I had Scotch with water. She drank rye. She sat on an armless love seat. I

sat straight across from her, on its twin.

I couldn't quite understand her. I had the impression she'd been coached for her role this afternoon. Her information was too glib and detailed, too 'bookish.' We get customers like that once in a while, who spout information verbatim from one or the other books on the subject.

While I was thinking these thoughts, I was looking at her, and that was an un-mixed pleasure.

"You clean rugs at your place, Mr. Kaprelian?"

"We do. I've a man waiting downstairs. I'll have him come and get that Bokhara."

She nodded.

"I brought the Sarouk along," I said, "but it would be too big for the dining room. I can have him put one of your other rugs down in there."

"Fine," she said, and studied her drink.

She was still looking thoughtful. She still hadn't said what was on her mind, I felt sure.

Finally, she said: "I'm not buying any rugs. I'm selling."

"The market's not too good," I said, "but of course, for rugs like those in that room. . ." I shrugged.

"The market's as good as the customers," she said. "I'd like you to sell those rugs for me on commission. I'll give you the leads."

"We'll be glad to try."

"I want *you* to sell them, not the firm. You see, the customers will be mainly women."

I frowned. "I don't follow you, Miss Lynne."

"Don't be modest," she said, and chuckled. "Oh, Lee, there's a mirror right down there at the end of the room. You can't be that blind. No one could be that naive."

I must have blushed like the village virgin, for my face was hot, my collar

tight. In my discomfiture, the fact that she'd known my first name and used it didn't register right away.

I said: "We do some wholesale business, Miss Lynne. We have a few dealers who sell rugs that way. I don't think I'd want to be—"

"You've sold Henri Ducasse some rugs. Rather, you've given them to him on consignment, haven't you? And he's paid you after he sold them?"

Ducasse was a Frenchman who specialized in the widow trade. I nodded slowly.

"Do you realize the kind of money he was getting for *your* merchandise?"

"I've heard of a few deals."

"Well, Henri's aging. He's beginning to get that mummified look. He's not the man he was."

"And you think his shoes would fit me? You'd like me to become one of those—" I shook my head. "I don't know what to call him."

"Call him smart," she said quietly. "And call him rich. Because he's both of those."

What she was asking me wasn't exactly dishonest, though it might be considered unethical. I looked at her, and realized I'd be spending some time with her, if I accepted the offer.

I said: "I'll get the man up here to pick up the Bokhara."

"You haven't answered me, Lee."

"I want some time." I rose.

"Get the man up," she said. "Take the Bokhara along. Perhaps you'd better wrap up that prayer rug inside of it. It's not the kind of piece to show just everybody, is it? It's too valuable to be advertising indiscriminately."

I went down and got Selak, and brought him up the back way. I helped him move the furniture in the dining room. Selak couldn't seem to get his eyes off Miss Lynne. When he first entered, he stared at her. All the time we

were working, he continued to glance at her almost hungrily.

I brought the prayer rug out, and laid it in the center of the so called Bokhara.

Selak's attention wasn't divided any more. He knelt, to feel its velvet texture. In Armenian, he said: "One of the old one. No rugs like this today. One of the old ones."

"One of the old ones," I agreed. "What kind, Selak?"

He started to answer, and then his eyes got crafty. I might be buying this rug. He wasn't going to build it up in front of the seller. He shrugged, but he couldn't take the admiration out of his eyes as he looked at it again.

"Kashan," he said.

Maksoud had lived in Kashan. It was like calling a Rembrandt an Amsterdam.

When he'd shouldered the rugs, and left, Claire said: "Why did he stare at me like that? He gave me the shivers."

"Selak admires two things," I told her. "Beauty and quality."

Her smile was mocking. "In that case, it would be my beauty."

"Now, *you're* being modest," I said. I wanted to reach out and pull her close. I wanted to do a lot of things that wouldn't be good business or good manners. "I'll let you know about—about the deal," I said.

She put a hand on my arm. "Come back tonight. There'll be somebody here I want you to meet."

"I've a date," I said.

"It'll be worth your while," she said. "After tonight, you can decide. I think you'll decide in my favor."

I could smell her perfume and her face was close as she looked up. I like to think there's no hay in my hair, but I felt like Selak at the moment.

"All right," I said. "About eight?"

"About eight."

The door closed and I was walking down the carpeted hall to the elevator.

Her perfume was still with me, but it might have been only in my mind.

In the station wagon, Selak waited. "Keghetsig," he said, which is as close as I can come to the American spelling. In any event, it means beautiful.

"Beautiful," I agreed. "Both the rug and the girl."

He nodded.

I was no child, despite the way Papa treated me. I was no child, but I had a child's sense of guilt as we drove back to the store.

Papa was busy with a customer as we drove around in back to unload the rugs. Selak kept the Bokhara in the wash-room; I brought the smaller rug into the store.

I opened the safe, and then decided to let Papa see the rug first. He would see it eventually, anyway; there was no reason to try to hid it from him. Nor was there any reason I should feel involved in whatever history it might have. It was just that damned unreasonable sense of guilt.

Selak came through from the back, carrying the Sarouk as the customer left.

"So she didn't want it?" Papa said.

I shook my head.

He started to say something, and then he saw the rug near the safe. He came over to stare at it. He knelt to study, to finger it, to turn it over. He was murmuring in Armenian too low for me to hear.

Then he looked up. "Levon, where did you get this?"

"She had it. The customer. She wants to keep it in our safe."

"It's been a long time since I've seen a rug like this, outside a museum, outside a private collection. Where did she get it, Levon?"

"I don't know," I said.

He was looking at me sharply. "Who is this woman? You think I wouldn't know if there was a rug like this in

town? How long has she been here? Who is she?"

"You know as much as I do, Papa," I said. "Her name is Claire Lynne and she lives in the Prospect Towers." I told him about some of the other rugs I'd seen, the antiques and semi-antiques.

He shook his head, and looked down again at the rug. "Silk warp and weft. Wool pile. Kashan, antique. But these Arabian letters?"

"Why don't we ask Sarkis," I suggested. "Sarkis can read Arabic."

He nodded. "Sarkis can read Arabian. But I don't want him to know we have this rug. Levon, I don't want *anyone* to know we have this rug in the safe. The Marines we should have, to guard this rug."

Reverently, Papa put the rug away while I went over to get down a couple of books from the shelf above his desk.

In one I read: *The Ardebil Carpet was the lifetime work of the greatest of all Persian weavers, Maksoud . . .*

In the other: *It is estimated that it took ten weavers more than three years to weave the famed 'Ardebil Carpet', credit for which goes to Maksoud, the weave master, who supervised . . .*

Both books were considered authentic. There was no reason to think he hadn't woven the one now in our safe. There aren't more than three or four rugs in the world signed by their creator. If this one was genuine . . .

"Books," Papa said. "What are you going to learn about this business from books?" He tapped his head and breast. "Don't you know—*here* and *here*—when you see a masterpiece? Do you have to look everything up?"

"I was looking up the Ardebil Carpet," I said.

"Ardebil—from the mosque, you mean." He stared at me. "You think Maksoud?"

Selak came in from the washroom,

then, looking troubled. I heard the word "Bokhara" and "blood" but the rest was too garbled for me.

Papa nodded. "A Bokhara will bleed. They must be washed carefully, Selak. Careful, you must be."

Some more I couldn't understand, and then Papa went back to the washroom with Selak.

It was quiet in the shop. Outside, on the street people went by, traffic went by. But it seemed unusually quiet in the store.

When Papa came back in, his eyes were questioning. "A Bokhara will bleed, but not *blood* it won't bleed, Levon." He looked tired. "What has happened, today? This woman, this rug—" He extended his hands, palms up. "What are you hiding from me?"

"I'll know more after tonight," I said. "I'm going back there tonight."

His face was grave. "The dance is tonight. The Junior League of the A.G.B.U is having their spring dance tonight, Levon. You aren't going with Berjouhi?"

I shook my head. "Maybe I can get there, later. Sam will take Berjouhi, and I can meet them there, later, maybe."

Sam was Sarkis' boy. Sam was my rival. And Berjouhi? She's a lovely, quiet girl. I'd been going with her, more or less, for three years. If Papa had had his way, we'd be married, right now.

"You promised you would take her? You are going to break your promise to her?"

The only answer to that was to use his own weapon, the one he'd taught me. "Business *first*, Papa," I said.

He opened his mouth to answer, and then clicked his teeth. He sighed, and went over to look out the huge plate glass window, the one where it says, *N. Kaprelian and Son*, in big, gold letters.

We don't get a paper downtown. We get the home edition. That's why I

didn't read about Henri Ducasse until just before supper.

Henri, who'd been described by Claire as smart and rich, was now something else. Henri Ducasse was dead.

He'd been found in a deserted garage stabbed to death. He hadn't, according to the authorities, been stabbed in the garage as there was very little blood on the cement floor, and it was obvious he had bled a lot. He was identified as a connoisseur of rugs and tapestries—and a bon vivant.

My sister, Ann, was reading the society page across from me, and I asked her: "What's a bon vivant, Ann?"

"Oh, a lover of good living," she said. "A man who likes fine foods. Thinking of taking it up, Lee?"

"Not until business gets better," I answered. And then, at something in her voice, I looked up.

The paper was in her lap, and she was regarding me. "Papa says you're not going to the dance, tonight."

"He told you the truth."

"You've called Berjouhi?"

"From the store, before I left."

Ann shook her head, and her dark eyes were quizzical. "You get away with murder. I know six boys who'd like to take your place with Berjouhi. How do you do it?"

"With mirrors," I said, and went back to reading about Henri Ducasse.

At the supper table, Papa was unusually silent. He would look at me from time to time, and I had the impression he wanted to say something. But he didn't.

Ann and Mom got into a discussion about one of Ann's customers at the hat shop. They carried the conversation.

After supper, Papa said: "A game of tavlu, Leon?"

"O.K.," I said.

It's called backgammon in this country, but Papa and his cronies still called

it tavlu. Also, they don't use a cup to throw the dice, a point I insisted on tonight.

"You think I would cheat, Levon?"

"No, of course not. But you get too many double sixes."

"That's the dice."

It was an old argument; there are more sixes than any other number they claim, and play accordingly. They get them and it isn't due to manipulation. What those experiments at Duke are trying to prove now, they knew for ages, these old-timers.

As we set up the board, Papa said: "I've been thinking about that Bokhara. I sold that rug, once. I'm trying to remember who I sold it to."

His memory was unbelievable, even for ordinary pieces.

"Maybe—Henri Ducasse?" I suggested. I kept my eyes on the board.

He shook his head. "Twenty years ago, or more, I sold that rug to somebody in this town. I can't remember." He tapped his forehead.

He played a sound game, making no mistakes, covered all the time, making all the traditional and routine moves. The only thing his game lacked was daring, and that's why I beat him three straight.

Which didn't prevent him from telling me: "You play a dangerous game, Levon. As you get older you will be more careful."

"I won," I said.

"You were lucky." He folded the board carefully, and put it in the bookcase. "You be careful tonight, Levon."

"I will," I promised, and went into my room to dress.

There wasn't any reason I couldn't wear the clothes I'd worn all day. No reason but that weakness in the legs. I wore my new gabardine suit and my best oxford suit. I wore a tie of rich and simple dignity. I was, I realized, also

wearing a smirk and I left that back in the bedroom, before going out into the living room.

Papa's gaze covered me over the top of his *Mirror-Spectator*. He said dryly: "You will remember the firm's reputation, Levon. You will make no promises for the firm before you talk to me." He went back to his reading.

I didn't answer him. He didn't expect an answer.

It was a warm night, a false summer night, and the moon was almost theatrical. The little convertible seemed to be humming to herself, as I cut over to Prospect.

The Prospect Towers were alive with light, the white brick reflected the moon's glow, the full length windows of the top floor were like a battery of beacons against the sky.

Over at the Parkleigh Hotel, the party would just be getting under way and I felt a moment's regret. I hadn't seen the gang all together for a long time.

Across the street, a broad, poorly-dressed man stood under the shadow of a budding maple tree. For a moment, I stared that way for it looked like Selak. But he made no move to leave the shadows, and I couldn't make out his face clearly from here. There'd be no reason for Selak to be up at this end of town, anyway.

As I waited outside of Claire's door, I could hear music inside. It was Aram Khachaturian's *Saber Dance*, a current juke box favorite. The timing was too pat; I felt like a fly waiting outside a spider's web. But perhaps I could turn into a bee, or perhaps this web wouldn't be as strong as its creator thought it.

Claire Lynne was wearing something misty in a pale green, something about as substantial-looking as a cloud. "You're on time," she said, her smile warm and friendly.

This didn't look like the start of an

ordinary dealer-customer relationship.

We went in, and she asked: "Recognize the music?"

"Strauss, isn't it?" I answered.

She sighed. "And all the work I went to—" She chuckled. "No, it's not Strauss, Lee."

A man was sitting on one of the armless love seats, and he rose as we entered. A short, dark man with one of those unlined faces. He could have been forty or seventy. But I knew he wasn't forty.

It was George Herro, a Syrian we had frequently dealt with, another Henri Ducasse, another social salesman.

"Good evening, Lee," he said. "How's your father?"

He extended his hand, and I took it. I said: "He's worried about business as usual. And tonight, he's worried about me."

Claire went over to turn off the record player. Herro said: "About you? You're in trouble, Lee?"

"Not yet," I said. "But I'm young and innocent and don't know Khachaturian from Straus. And here I am, in the major leagues."

Herro frowned. Claire laughed.

Herro said: "I don't—quite follow you, Lee."

"Yes, you do," I said. "And I want you to admit it before we go any further. If we're going to sell some rugs, we should understand each other, first."

Herro looked at Claire, and now they were both smiling. Herro said: "I underestimated you, Lee. Let's all sit down, shall we?"

We all sat down, neat and cozy.

Herro looked down at his hands, and up at me. "You've seen those rugs in the other rooms?"

I nodded.

"They need to be very carefully sold," he said. "They are not something to dump on the market."

"Any really fine rug needs to be carefully sold," I said.

His eyes were reflective. "That's right. In 1911, Lee, I sold an antique Kirman for thirty thousand dollars. Later, at an auction, the same rug was sold by its owner for seven hundred." He paused. "I sold an Ispahan for thirty-five thousand to the same customer. At the auction, it brought twelve hundred."

"I wasn't alive, then," I said, "but those were the golden years, at the beginning of this century. A lot of very wealthy men collected orientals as a hobby. Those were the collector's years."

"And those are collector's rugs."

"But this isn't 1911."

He stirred. "No. It isn't. A lot of bad management has come into the business since then. Throat and price cutting has come into the business, and dealers who try to compete with carpeting. This isn't the business it was—nor are those the kind of rugs you'll find on the market today."

"Miss Lynne said something about customers—" I put in.

"That's what I was coming to. There are still some of the discerning customers left. We know quite a few."

"Mostly women?"

He nodded, watching me, looking for a reaction.

"That's *your* field, George," I pointed out.

"It was." He smiled. "Before I became—emotionally involved with a few of them."

"And these rugs—where'd they come from?"

"Most of them are from a St. Louis collection. I picked some of them up there. The rest are from town, here. They were bought, through the years, by a man of breeding and taste and discernment. I don't have to tell you these aren't the kind you're buying today."

I looked at Claire Lynne. I said: "That's a different story than you told me when you came to the store today."

"I wasn't revealing my hand, at the time," she said. She looked at me levelly. "I thought it was a little early."

For a moment, nobody said anything. Then George Herro said quietly: "Well, Lee?"

I waited until my silence got through to them, and then asked: "What happened to Henri Ducasse?"

Neither of them flinched. Claire shrugged. Herro said: "I understand he was trying to sell a rug to a man named Dykstra. I understand the deal was almost completed when Dykstra discovered the rug wasn't as represented. This is just rumor one hears in the trade. I cannot vouch for it, personally."

"Dykstra—" I said. "We sold him some rugs a few years back. War profiteer, wasn't he?"

"Among other things. He was something of an expert on repeating weapons, I understand. And explosives, generally. Had a rather thriving, if illegal, trade in things of that sort." He smiled dimly. "Why do you ask about Henri Ducasse, Lee? What has he to do with this business?"

"I didn't know. That's why I asked. Claire mentioned him, today."

She said: "It was just a coincidence, Lee."

"All right," I said, "I'll work along with you." I didn't mention the Bokhara, then; I was saving that. "How about that rug you have in our safe? You've got a customer for that?"

Herro said: "We won't worry about that for a while. I've an idea we can get our price for that." He looked at the thin gold watch on his wrist. "Well, I've an engagement at nine-thirty." His smile tried to read some intriguing meaning into the words, some romantic rendezvous. He rose. "I'll leave you two

young people to amuse yourselves now.”

Claire went to the door with him. I went over to the record player. She had all of The Gayne Suite there, and I put it on.

When she came back, I was sitting on one of the love seats.

“So?” she said.

“So, it’s settled. You don’t mind if I’m a little uneasy about it, though?”

She didn’t answer that right away. She was bending over a decanter on the cocktail table between us. “Scotch, again, with water?”

“Fine.” I averted my eyes, like a gentleman.

As she handed me my drink, she said: “Why are you uneasy?”

“For one thing—Ducasse, who was killed. Then—Herro. He’s never been arrested, but he’s had some close calls, I remember. And one other thing—that blot on the Bokhara. It was blood, Claire.”

Poise, she had. Or innocence? I would settled for poise. Her eyes didn’t waver, there was no visible tenseness in her.

She frowned. “Blood?”

“Blood. Enough of it to make me wonder how it got there.”

“I can’t tell you, Lee, because I don’t know. It was that way when I got it. And I got it yesterday; George brought it up.”

“You know where he got it?”

She nodded. “I know. But it would involve someone I don’t want involved, Lee.”

There seemed to be a lot of faith required from me in this business. I said: “All right. We’ll forget about it—for now.”

We didn’t talk about rugs for the rest of the evening. We drank a little, and listened to some music. We went out onto the terrace, and there I obeyed that impulse I’d had at the door this afternoon. I pulled her into my arms and kissed her.

She seemed to enjoy it. She seemed to expect it.

When I got down to the car again, it was two-thirty. The broad man no longer stood under the maple tree. He was asleep in the seat of my car. It was Selak.

His mouth was open, and he was snoring heavily. I went around to the driver’s side quietly and climbed in behind the wheel. I’d driven him more than half-way home before he woke up.

He shook himself and straightened in his seat, rubbing his eyes. I stole a glance at him. He seemed embarrassed and looked straight ahead. The clothes he wore were tight. But I knew they were his best.

I said: “I didn’t expect to see you up at this end of town, Selak. Been to a show?”

Something that sounds like "Voch" which is "no."

By the tone of his voice, I realized he didn't relish any questioning. I said no more. He shared the silence.

When I stopped in front of his house, there was a light on. His sister, a thin, prematurely gray girl, was waiting on the porch, and she came down to the walk as the car stopped.

"Selak—where have you been?"

Then she saw me. "Oh, Lee—he was with you? Everything is all right?"

"Everything's all right," I assured her. "He was out with me."

"He's never been out this late, before," she said. "You were at the dance?"

"No. No, we were over to see a friend of mine."

Selak had left the car, was going up the steps to the porch. He hadn't said good-night. I didn't know if he was miffed or embarrassed. He'd probably been hit as hard as I was.

I said good-night to his sister, and turned the little convertible toward home. There was no reason I should sing, but I sang. There was no reason I should feel smug and sophisticated and adventurous. But all these things, I felt.

Papa's curiosity was greater than his temporary annoyance with Sarkis, evidently. For Sarkis was at the store when I got there the next morning, and Papa was getting the prayer rug out of the safe.

Sarkis looked at it in awe, and some ejaculation escaped his throat. He knelt like a man in church.

"Maksoud of Kashan," he read, and "the year is 940." He looked thoughtful. "That would not be our calendar. That would be about 1560 or 62." He looked at my father. "Where did you get this treasure?"

"It isn't mine," Papa said. "Can you believe it's genuine?"

Sarkis' broad face was grave. "It's an

antique. But that rug from the mosque. It's an Ispahan, isn't it?"

"You could ask Levon," Papa answered. "He read the books."

"Not enough of them," I said. "In three books I got three dates for the Ardebil Carpet and no designation. What do you honestly think about it?"

He shook his head, and looked at it again. "What does it matter? There are none like it, today. A rug like this, if you owned it, you could ask anything, anything the customer could pay. There would be no other limits."

"Ethics, Sarkis," I chided him.

"Ethics?" Both of them looked at me blankly.

Then Sarkis said: "Across from me is a picture store. In the window, something you couldn't call a picture. Two weeks I've been seeing that picture every day and can't figure what it is. But the price card I can read—twenty-five hundred dollars. That's plain enough. Ethics?"

"All right, then, how much would you pay for that rug, Sarkis?"

"I'm a poor man," he answered. "My money is all in merchandise. I am a dealer, not a collector."

"You are a wolf, not a lamb, you mean?" I grinned at him.

He sighed, and looked at my father. "These young ones," he said.

Papa frowned at me. "You will remember Sarkis is my cousin."

Yesterday, Sarkis had been his contemporary. Today he was his cousin. Today they shared a reverence for craftsmanship.

I said no more. I concentrated on the Serapi I was repairing. I was only vaguely aware of the small, dark man on the walk outside, looking in through the open door.

Papa was saying: "And how did you make out with Mr. Egan, Sarkis?"

"All carpeting, the whole first floor,"

Sarkis answered. "And the rugs that man used to buy . . . But his wife, you know. His wife has the money, and it's carpeting for her." He shook his head sadly.

The small, dark man was in the doorway now, and I looked up. He was staring at the rug still on the floor in front of the safe. I don't know why I was suddenly nervous, but I was.

He had a thin face, this man, and a nose like a parrot's beak. He had the small, round eyes of a bird, too, eyes black as sin. He was wearing a black derby, which he removed, now, disclosing a completely bald head, glistening with perspiration.

"That rug, gentlemen—" he said. "It is for sale?" He reached into an inner pocket as he said this.

With one motion, Papa had tossed the rug into the safe and clanged the door shut. There had been something so malevolent about that gesture of his, Papa had reacted instinctively.

But the man had a handkerchief in his hand, now, and he was wiping the perspiration from his shining head. "It is for sale?" he repeated.

Papa shook his head. "It is not ours, sir. We are keeping it for a customer."

"I may see it? I believe I once owned it."

Papa shook his head stubbornly. "It is not ours to show."

The black eyes went from Papa to Sarkis, and back. "It is a secret? Or you do not trust me?"

Papa said: "It is a very valuable rug. It is not ours. I am sorry, sir."

Silence. The man looked at Sarkis, then at me, as though sizing up his adversaries before making an attack. Finally: "You gentlemen are Christians?" The voice was faintly tinged with contempt.

We all nodded.

"You would not know, then, the value

of that rug. In the mosque at Ardebil, it was woven by the slave, Maksoud. To Allah it was dedicated, and to his Prophet, Mohammed. It was never intended for Christian use nor Christian admiration."

"We can not help but admire it," Papa said. "We are not using it. If you will pardon me, sir, it is a busy morning . . . If there is something else, I can show you—"

"There is nothing else you can show me. But you can tell me the name of the one who owns this rug?" A pause. "I can deal directly with him."

Sarkis said something to Papa in Armenian, and Papa's face was suddenly stone. Papa said: "You are—Turkish?" There was no 'sir' this time. Papa had spent his youth under the Turks.

The man looked at Sarkis and Papa. If he felt any fear, he didn't show it. But he must have felt it; they were related to me, and still I felt the goose-flesh form on my arms and neck. The two men who stood there near the safe were no longer rug dealers in an American city. They were no longer rational.

"What does it matter?" the man said.

All of Sarkis' family had been massacred by the Turks. Papa's sister had been killed by the Turks. What does it matter? the man had asked.

"Answer me, damn you!" Papa's voice was hoarse; it was a voice I had never heard before. His face was white. "You come into my store in this free country. You speak of my religion with contempt. You interfere in my business. You—"

Now, the man was frightened as Papa stepped toward him.

I was up quickly standing between them. I had my hands on Papa's shoulders. "Please, Papa, no trouble—" I put an arm around him. "Your heart, Papa."

Sarkis said to the little man: "You had better go. You had better get the hell out of here quick."

The man surveyed us all. "I will be back," he said. "You will see me again." He turned abruptly and went out the door.

Papa expelled his breath and sat down on a pile of rugs, gasping. His eyes were reminiscent. His mind, I would guess, was back in Sivas, under the Turks.

Sarkis said: "I'm late, now. I must get back to the store. Be calm, Nishan. Do not think about the man."

Papa didn't answer. His face was still white; he seemed to be having some difficulty getting his breath.

I went to the washroom and got him a glass of water. Sarkis had left when I came back with it. Papa drank it slowly, his eyes watering.

"You're in America, now, Papa," I said quietly. "You must forget the old country and the people you hated."

He nodded and looked up at me. "I am in America. Levon, one thing you must always, always be thankful for. One thing you must thank God for, every night. You are an American."

"It's for me," I agreed. "How do you feel, now?"

"All right. Better." He wiped his eyes. "Levon, what kind of business is this you're in? What kind of people are these you're dealing with?"

"I don't know for sure," I told him. "I'm being careful. Don't worry about that. George Herro's in the deal, too."

"Oh." His glance traveled my face. "George is getting old. You are going to be the new George Herro?"

"Not if I can help it. The rugs I'm going to sell are worth anything I can get, Papa. Nobody has to be ashamed of asking big money for rugs like those."

"But you will sell to women?"

"Some of them, I suppose."

"You've told Berjouhi this?"

"No," I said impatiently. "I'm not married to her, Papa. We're not even engaged."

"So? All right. But you haven't told me about everybody, Levon. You haven't told me about Mr. Egan."

I stared at him. "Egan? What about him?"

"I remembered this morning who I sold that Kokhara to, Levon. It was Mr. Egan. Twenty years ago I sold him that rug for his study."

I remembered Claire saying: "It would involve someone I don't want involved." I said: "I didn't know Mr. Egan was involved, Papa. And maybe he isn't. He might have sold that rug years ago."

Papa nodded. "Maybe. But I am going to ask around, Levon. Next time the Pinochle Club meets, I'm going to ask the dealers."

I thought of Herro saying: "They were bought through the years by a man of breeding and taste and discernment." Mr. Egan was a man who could fit that description. Mr. Egan had a wife who controlled the purse strings. But I couldn't see him as an accomplice in anything questionable.

A little later, Papa went out to deliver a rug and I was alone in the store. I phoned Claire.

I told her about the little man who'd been in.

"He's after it," she said, "and that's why he came to the store. He must have seen you take the other rug yesterday. H wants it pretty badly, Lee. He means to get it, one way or another. Our job is to see what he *pays* for it."

"It will be a pleasure," I said. "Anything lined up?"

"Yes. This afternoon. I've a customer I wanted you to show that Feraghan to."

"Good-looking customer?"

"She's lovely. She's well over sixty—or I wouldn't let you even talk to her, smarty. I'm changing the strategy—after last night, Lee. I think Herro will handle all the trade under sixty."

"We'll talk about that when I see you," I told her. "And I'll probably see you about one-thirty. Will that be all right?"

"I'll be waiting," she said.

When I turned from the phone, there was a man standing near the doorway just inside the store. He was a big man in a worn brown suit. He had a broad, pugnacious face and he didn't look like a customer.

"Mr. Kaprelian?" he asked.

I nodded. "Lee Kaprelian. My father is out, just now."

He displayed a shield in his wallet. "Sergeant Waldorf," he said, "out of Homicide, Mr. Kaprelian. I'm checking on a Henri Ducasse."

My breath was a little short. I said: "I read about him in the paper yesterday."

He nodded. "Knew him, did you?"

"He's handled some rugs for us. Or not exactly that. We've let him have some rugs on consignment and if he sold them, he'd pay us our price."

Waldorf seemed to be studying me. "Your price. But his price could be about anything, couldn't it?"

"So I've heard," I said. "This is a strange business, Sergeant."

"I'm beginning to find that out. And I've heard of buyer's strikes, too. But I can't quite see murder as a means of combating inflation, can you?"

"It would depend upon the customer," I said, and managed to smile. "Is that your theory, Sergeant?"

"No. But it's Vartanian's and Bogosian's and Herro's. They all told me about Dykstra. There seems to be a rug dealer's agreement that Ducasse tried to stick Dykstra and Dykstra bumped him."

I breathed easier. This was a routine check. I said: "I've heard that, too. I don't know much about Dykstra. My dad sold him a few pieces during the

war, but I was in the army then, so I never met him."

He lighted a cigarette and watched the smoke for a moment. "And there's another gent walking through this case, too. Little guy in a derby hat. He's been hanging around all the dealers, but he didn't leave any name, with any of them. Seen him?"

"About a half an hour ago," I said. "But he didn't stay long. Papa found out he was a Turk. You almost had another homicide on your hands, Sergeant."

He smiled. "He doesn't like Turks, huh?"

"He came to this country to get away from them," I said. "He spent his boyhood in Armenia."

"What do you think he was after? This little gent with the black derby, I mean."

I hesitated. I said: "He was very much interested in a rug we have in the safe. He wanted to buy it."

Now, there was interest in the sergeant's eyes. He looked at me steadily. "Price?"

"No—it wasn't ours to sell. We're just holding it for a customer."

"Valuable rug?"

"Very."

"Who's the customer?"

Again, I hesitated. "I don't like to say, Sergeant. I don't like to involve our customers in this kind of investigation."

"He won't be involved," the sergeant said, "unless he should be."

For the third time, I hesitated. But I'd opened the door to this line of questioning; it was too late to shut it. I said: "It's a woman. A Miss Claire Lynne, who lives on the top floor of the Prospect Towers."

He put it down in a notebook he had. Then: "I suppose I'd better look at the rug. Not that it will mean anything to

me. But I might have to identify it later."

I opened the safe and brought it out.

He studied it for seconds, some awe in his eyes. He nodded and I put it away.

"Anything else that might help, Mr. Kaprelian?"

I thought of the Bokhara. I said: "That's all, Sergeant."

"O.K. I think I'll check this Miss Lynne before I go up against Dykstra. I'll need all the ammunition I can get before I hit him." He looked at me closely a moment. "Thanks."

I nodded, saying nothing.

I watched him leave the store and climb into a car out at the curb. There was another detective behind the wheel of the car. When it pulled away, I went to the phone.

Claire answered almost immediately.

I said, "A detective was here, checking on Henri Ducasse. I told him about the rug, Claire."

A silence. Then in a low voice: "*Which rug, Lee?*"

"The one in the safe. He's on his way up to see you, now."

Something like relief in her voice. "O.K. I'm glad you called. Don't forget—one-thirty."

I went back to repairing the Serapi. *Which rug, Lee . . . It would involve someone I don't want involved, Lee. . . I remembered who I sold that Bokhara to, Levon It was Mr. Egan. . . But his wife, you know. His wife has the money, and . . .*

Mr. Egan had been described as a man of breeding and taste and discernment, if Herro had been talking about him. Maybe, all the rugs were Mr. Egan's. That St. Louis story was too glib; one of the finest collections in the world was in St. Louis, and Herro would think of that town if he was looking for a fast answer.

The clock above the safe read twelve

o'clock, and I went back into the rear shop.

"Time to eat, Selak," I said.

He didn't look at me today. He didn't smile as he had yesterday. He nodded, sulkily, and turned off the rotary-brush machine. I'd never expected to see Selak jealous of me.

When I went back into the store again, I heard the machine start. Evidently, he didn't have any appetite, today. Or maybe he didn't want to leave a rug half done and full of soap.

About twelve-thirty, Papa came in, and I told him about the deal I had for the afternoon.

He looked unhappy. "You're working on commission on this, Levon?"

"That's right. We'll split the commission, Papa."

He waved that away. "No. Not those kind of sales."

"It's an antique Fereghan," I said. "You think I should sell it cheap?"

He looked interested. "Green in the border?"

"All Fereghans have that. It's like velvet. Yellow, rose, blue, purple, violet, red. And they all blend. It's an odd size, narrower than most."

He nodded. "Mr. Egan's?"

"Not that I know of."

"It sounds," Papa said, "like a rug he bought from Bogosian, years ago."

"Well, maybe it is, then. Maybe he sold it years ago."

"Maybe," Papa agreed. "I took some rugs over to Grace to be repaired."

Grace was Selak's sister, and she did our finer repairing. I didn't say anything.

Papa said: "She told me Selak was with you last night. You brought him home."

"That's right."

Papa put a hand on my arm. "I'm glad he was with you. I was worried about you, Levon."

"Don't worry about me," I said. "I'm a big boy now." I didn't feel any more like Judas than Judas must have felt. "I think I'll take Selak this afternoon if he's finished the cleaning. This is a high class sale, and I don't want to be lugging the rug like some peddler."

"Sure," Papa said. "Take the station wagon, too."

I went back to the washing room, where Selak was running the big squeegee over the rug, taking out the surplus water. "Don't start another one, Selak," I said. "I'll need you after lunch."

He nodded, not looking at me.

When I came back from lunch, he was sitting in the station wagon. He'd changed from the sweat shirt he wears for washing to a semi-clean white shirt. His hair was plastered in a crooked part.

"Did you eat lunch?" I asked, as I climbed behind the wheel.

He nodded, looking straight ahead. I cut out of the alley, and over to the Avenue, up the Avenue to Prospect.

Using the station wagon, we didn't need to stick to the streets designated for trucks. And it looked better than a truck for this business.

The false summer weather still held. Most of the traffic along Prospect was toward the beach and the picnic grounds in the Park. When I stopped in front of the Towers, I could see Claire up on the top floor terrace. She waved, and I waved back.

I told Selak: "You can come along. I'm going to pick up a rug."

He was still staring up at Claire.

She met us at the elevator. She said: "I didn't expect you'd bring a chap-erone."

"I thought I might need one. Have you made the appointment?"

She nodded. "For two o'clock. It's Mrs. Harlan Cooke. Do you know her?"

Mrs. Harlan Cooke was a woman of sixty who tried to look forty and looked

eighty. "I've sold her a rug or two," I said.

We went into the apartment. Claire asked: "What do you think we could get for that Feraghan?" She paused. "George thought about six thousand—"

"Maybe. And maybe more. I'll get her reaction to the higher figure first."

She was looking uneasily at Selak. Selak's heart was in his eyes. I took him into the room that held the rugs and helped him pull the rug from the pile.

"Wait for me in the car," I said. "I'll be right down."

When he'd left, carrying the rug, Claire asked: "What's the matter with him? Why does he stare at me like that?"

"It's spring," I said. "It's been a long winter."

She studied me. "It's not spring for you, is it? You're all business, today."

"That's my training. The days for business, the nights for romance."

Annoyance was on her face. "There's something wrong, isn't there? You're different from—from last night."

"Maybe. Last night I hadn't met the Turk with the derby nor Sergeant Waldorf. Last night, I didn't know that was Mr. Egan's Bokhara."

She was quiet. She was chewing her lower lip vexedly and thoughtfully.

"I thought I was a partner," I said quietly, "not a stooge."

"Lee—" She looked up pleadingly. "You're not that. You know you're not." She took one of my hands in both of hers. "After you've seen Mrs. Cooke, come back. There isn't time to explain it all now, but I will when you come back."

"All right," I said. "But one thing before I go. How did you make out with Waldorf?"

"How should I make out with him? He was investigating Henri Ducasse's death, and I had nothing to do with

that. As for the rug, I told him I'd had it for years. Which is a lie, but I didn't think it was any of his business."

"We'll talk about that, too, later," I said. "Good-bye for now."

She was looking up expectantly. I kissed her and my legs got rubbery again, and I had a hunger I knew pilaff wouldn't satiate.

"O.K.," I said, "it's spring. But I'll want the story just the same, Claire, when I come back. I'll want it straight."

"You'll get the whole story," she said.

CHAPTER THREE

Soul for Sale

MRS. HARLAN COOKE lived on in River Hills, the gold coast of this town of mine. She was a very careful woman with a dollar unless the dollar was to be spent for oriental rugs or male companionship. For these two, she would unlatch the roll. She was canny enough to try for both in the same deal. Henri Ducasse had been her boy, there.

A maid opened the door and led the way into a mammoth living room, expensively and ornately furnished.

Mrs. Harlan Cooke was waiting for us in here, posed graciously in a wing-back tapestry chair, smoking a cigarette through a long, ebony and gold holder.

The room was dim; the illusion was almost complete at this distance. But it needed distance. As I came closer, the make-up was too obvious, the sag in her thin figure too evident. Ducasse, I was beginning to realize, had earned his money.

"Back from the wars?" she said in a high voice. "It's been a long time, Lee." She came forward to greet me.

"You haven't changed," I said. "Nor has this beautiful house. You've the most delicate and artistic taste in this town, Mrs. Cooke."

After that, the chiseling started.

It was a battle. The old girl knew how to dicker, and she held the upper hand, being the buyer. But when Selak spread out the Feraghan, I saw the expression in her eyes as she looked at it and I knew it was just a matter of time. She wanted that rug.

She got it, finally. For seventy-one hundred dollars, which was just four hundred under my opening price and eleven hundred higher than her opening offer.

As she wrote out the check, she said: "I'd expected Mr. Herro to bring the rug. He's still in town, isn't he?"

"I think so," I said. "He was last night. He certainly—admires your taste, Mrs. Cooke. He insisted there was only one customer in town who had the background to appreciate that Feraghan. I would have waited for him to come back this afternoon, but Miss Lynne had another customer who wanted the rug badly, and I wanted you to have the first chance at it." I smiled. "Regular customers first."

"Thank you, Lee," she said, and tried a smile herself. But the makeup threatened to crack, and she killed it half-born. "I wish you would tell Mr. Herro that I'm still in the market for anything worthwhile, though."

I felt faintly let down. Not that I believe what Papa says about Tyrone Power, but I didn't expect to run second to George Herro.

"I'll be sure and tell him," I said, and folded the check carefully.

She was frowning, as she walked with me to the door. There, she said; "By the way—who is this Miss Lynne? A friend of—Mr. Herro's?"

"A friend of *mine*," I said, and smiled reassuringly.

"I see," she said archly. "Well, be sure and tell Geor— Mr. Herro I was asking about him."

This kind of business wasn't for me. My conscience was elastic enough to charge what the traffic will bear, but not enough to trade on an old woman's sentiment. Not that she wasn't a fraud. Not that she wasn't able to take care of herself—and her purse. It was just that I didn't believe a piece of your soul should go with every sale.

I dropped Selak off at the store on the way back.

When I got to the Towers, it was only three o'clock.

Claire said: "It didn't take you long."

I handed her the check. "It was a straight sale," I told her. "Mrs. Cooke's heart belongs to George Herro."

She nodded. "I know. But he's disciplining her. She bought a rug from Henri Ducasse a month ago."

I lighted a cigarette, saying nothing. I went over to stand near the door leading to the terrace. "I don't like this way of doing business, Claire," I said. "We wouldn't lose much if we were careful, selling them straight."

"Straight?" She cocked her head to one side. "There wasn't anything crooked about that sale, was there? I don't understand you, Lee."

"You understand me," I said, "and it isn't anything illegal, but I wasn't only selling her a rug, I was selling her a chance to see Herro. I don't like it. It's—messy." I paused. "And now, I'd like

to hear the story, the true story, about those rugs."

"Sit down and relax," she said.

I sat down, but I couldn't relax.

"The rugs are Mr. Egan's as you guessed. He's got a bill of sale for every one of them. He wants to sell out, and because he's known me a long time and trusted me, he's stored them here. He's the one who suggested George Herro. He's the one who suggested you." She paused. "Anything illegal in that?"

"Why doesn't he sell them from his house?"

Claire shrugged. "I don't know. He's willing to sell them to us, to George and me, but neither of us had the money. So we give him a share, as each one is sold."

"His wife knows about it?"

Claire's face stiffened. "I don't—what are you driving at, Lee?"

"She has the money in that family," I said. "Mr. Egan buys some fine rugs with her money. To her, a rug is just a floor covering, and after a number of years must be replaced. After fifteen or twenty years, those rugs haven't lost a nickel of value. He was a very careful buyer. He has a big wad of money in a stack of rugs she considers worthless. Now, he sells out—and gets out?"

"You're guessing," she said. "It isn't fair to Mr. Egan guessing those kind of things about him."

"All right, I'm guessing. I'll find out,

later, how well I'm guessing. And now the Turk?"

"Ismet?"

"I don't know his name."

"Ismet Bey," she said. "He ran a cult out in the town of cults, Los Angeles. It was part Mohammedan and part voodoo and part pseudo-science, I guess. He went out of town for a week on a trip with—one of his disciples, and the law stepped in. The disciple's papa had called them in. Ismet left town again when he heard the police were looking for him. His temple furnishings were sold at auction." She shrugged. "George was at the auction."

"That's where he picked up the rug?"

"That's his claim. I don't believe everything George says, though, do you?"

"Not always."

"Well, that's what I know. Your imagination will probably fill in a lot of things that aren't true, but that's my story."

I got up and went out to the terrace. I wanted to think about these things, without looking at her. I couldn't be rational while I was looking at her.

It was phoney enough. It was as phoney as a lead dollar or seemed that way to anybody who was sane. If I was going to get out, now would be the time.

From the doorway, she called: "Scotch, Lee?"

"No," I said. "I'll be running along. I'd like to get over and see Mrs. Egan this afternoon."

"Don't," she said. "It's his business, Lee. You've no right to go messing into his domestic life."

"O. K., I won't. That's answer enough for me. You can count me out of it—as of now."

She stood in the doorway like a statue, her face blank, her body motionless. "Now—what caused that decision?"

"An accumulation of bad angles," I said. "It wasn't any one incident. Let's just pretend we never met."

And then, because the weakness was on the way back, because she looked so startled and innocent there in the doorway, I got out fast.

I didn't look back when I reached the street. I had a hunch she'd be up there on the terrace.

At the store, Papa was in back talking to Selak, his voice high and excited.

When he came back to the front again, he said: "Selak wants to quit. But he won't tell me why." He shook his head.

"He's in love and jealous," I said. "Jealous of me, but you can tell him there's no reason to be."

"So—" Papa said. "So it wasn't all business?"

"It was mostly business, but bad business. I don't want to talk about it."

He shrugged and went over to check his books.

I felt noble and moral and miserable. The trouble was, it was still spring.

The afternoon dragged on. About five, Papa put his books away and said: "I think I'll go home. You can close up, Levon."

We closed at five-thirty. I nodded.

He paused in the doorway for a moment, and I could feel his eyes on me. Finally: "Levon—Berjouhi is beautiful, too."

"I know," I said. "I know. I'm all right. I'm no baby."

Papa sighed. "No . . . All right. I'll see you at supper."

He left and I went back to see Selak. But Selak wasn't there. I went back into the store, just as Mr. Egan entered.

He's a good looking gent, despite his years. He's close to sixty, I'd say, but he's the kind of thin, tall gent who can wear clothes. He never had enough troubles in his life to age him.

He seemed exceptionally uncomfortable, his face faintly flushed.

"Good-afternoon, Lee," he said. "Miss

Lynne has asked me to explain some things to you."

"It's not necessary, Mr. Egan. You don't owe me any explanations."

"Perhaps not. But I'd like you to understand that—" He paused. "That my wife is fully aware I'm selling those rugs." Again, he paused. "You may phone her right now, if you wish."

"I'll repeat," I said, "that you don't have to explain anything to me, Mr. Egan. I'm out of it."

"That's why I'm explaining," he said. "I—don't want you out of it, Lee. I have too much faith in your sales ability. And too little faith in George Herro's integrity."

I didn't say anything for a moment. I was thinking of Claire.

Mr. Egan said, "This is very embarrassing for me. I'm not conditioned to— begging, Lee."

It was embarrassing to me, too. Whenever I'd seen the word "gentleman" used, I'd always thought of Mr. Egan. He'd symbolized all the things an ignoramus like me thought of as a gentleman, a cultured person.

But I'd sold a lot of the carriage trade; I wasn't completely naive. I said flatly: "How about that Bokhara, Mr. Egan?"

He frowned. "It's mine, of course."

"I know that. But whose blood was on it?"

"Blood?" His surprise, I felt, was honest. "You're talking in riddles, Lee. I bought that rug from your father, more than twenty years ago. I—"

"Miss Lynne didn't tell you about the blood?"

He shook his head, saying nothing, staring at me.

"There was so much of it," I said, "so much, it was suspicious. Maybe my imagination was too active. But you see, Henri Ducasse's death was in the papers that same day, and Claire—Miss Lynne

—had talked of him. The whole set-up looked bad."

He wasn't listening. "Blood—" he said. "Dry, Lee?"

"Dried. So maybe it wasn't so important. Henri was just killed yesterday, I guess."

He shook his head. "Haven't you read the evening papers? Henri Ducasse was *found* yesterday. He was killed three or four days ago." His eyes were reminiscent. "Ducasse—" he said, and he was talking to himself. His face grew tight. "Lee, we'll talk about this later. Don't decide against us just yet."

He turned and was gone from the store.

It was nearly five-thirty, now. I locked the back door, and turned out the lights in the washing room. I checked the windows back there. In the store, I checked the safe also and set the alarm system.

All this I did automatically, thinking of Claire every second. Even Egan's sudden departure didn't interest me; there didn't seem to be any room in my mind for anything but Claire.

As for Selak, I felt sure he'd be back tomorrow. Grace would talk to him and straighten him out, if he told her he'd quit.

At five-thirty, I got the signal from the alarm system and left.

I went home by way of Prospect Avenue. It isn't the direct route, but I took it for the same perverted reason you'd prod a sore tooth with your tongue.

I didn't look up as I passed the Towers. It was an effort of will, but I managed it. That's how I happened to notice the derby going through the front door, and the narrow back of Ismet Bey.

It wasn't any of my business. I was well out of it. I was due home for supper, and after supper I intended to get drunk.

Only there was this parking space at

the curb, beckoning almost and I slid the convertible into it.

So he'd found the owner of Maksoud's rug. Or, at least, the possessor. Had he come to make an offer? Or had he come to make a claim? There was danger in this ridiculous little man, I sensed; there was a threat to Claire.

When I reached Claire's door, I could hear their voices inside. I could hear the Turk saying: "It was my rug originally. I know how much it went for at the auction. I don't know what you paid for it, Miss Lynne, but I'm prepared to give you forty thousand dollars for it. In cash, of course."

Claire's voice: "I'll have to talk this over with Mr. Herro."

"It was Mr. Herro," Ismet Bey said, "who sent me to you, Miss Lynne." And now his voice was lower. "I mean to have that rug one way or another, Miss Lynne."

That's when I rang her bell.

She didn't smile when she saw me there. She said: "I can't think of any more you'd want to tell me, Lee."

"I saw Bey come in here." I took a breath. "I worried about you, Claire. I thought—"

"Come in," she said, without expression.

When I entered the living room, Ismet Bey rose and smiled. He bowed slightly. "The boy from the store." He nodded. "We'll make a deal, now?"

"First," Claire said, "I want you to tell Lee the history of your losing the rug, Mr. Bey." Her voice was brittle and she avoided my eyes. "Lee seems to think he's being hoodwinked."

He looked from me to her, and back to me. "Of course." The smile, again, and he seated himself. "As soon as we're all comfortable."

The story he told was substantially the same she'd told me about him. The only difference was that he put his own

position in a more favorable light. His trip out of town had been a business trip, purely a business trip.

"That was in January," he told me. "At the auction in February, the rug was sold to settle some claims. I did not know who bought it. I heard only last week that it had come to this town. Today Mr. Herro contacted me and gave me this address and Miss Lynne's name."

"You want to buy it back? For how much, Mr. Bey?"

"For forty thousand dollars."

"You must want it badly."

"Who can value an altar? Who can appraise the symbol of a faith, Mr. Lee? If it were cotton and machine-made, it would still have value under those qualifications. But this—this could conceivably be the work of Maksoud. My disciples believe it is; I almost believe it is myself. There is no proof of this; there can be no proof. But there remains the faith."

"Forty thousand dollars' worth of faith?"

His face grew faintly harder. "We've mentioned the sum enough, I think. It will be cash and no record of the transaction need be made. It will be tax-free money. I am not a poor man, Mr. Lee, and it was the rug which helped to make me a rich one. The price I am suggesting is more than fair. It will be my only offer."

"It's the merchant blood in me," I said. "I like to haggle."

"I am not here for that purpose."

I looked at Claire. "You're the boss." She looked at Ismet Bey, and I thought I saw uneasiness in her eyes. "It seems like a fair offer to me," she said quietly.

"It's a small rug," I said, "and even if Maksoud wove it, that's a lot of money, an awful lot of money."

"It is settled, then?"

"It's settled," Claire said. "Tomorrow morning, at ten o'clock, here. Bring the money. The rug will be here."

He nodded agreeably and rose.

I said: "Was it Mr. Herro who told you about the rug being in this town, Mr. Bey?"

He looked at me questioningly. Then he nodded.

"You've known him for quite a while?"

"For some time."

"He's—not a *disciple* of yours."

He shook his head. "No. No, I'm afraid faith is not one of Mr. Herro's virtues." He looked down at his derby. "Why do you ask, Mr. Lee?"

"Just curious," I said. "And the name is Kaprelian, Mr. Bey, Lee Kaprelian. I'm the son of the man who owns that shop."

His smile was dim. "You were fortunate enough, it seems, not to have inherited his disposition. Good-evening, Mr. Kaprelian."

She went with him to the door. When she came back, her face was still grave. "Just a quiz kid, aren't you? I hope you have enough answers now."

Golly, she was beautiful as she stood there, looking down at me. To Papa, Berjouhi was beautiful, but no girl I was ever likely to meet could match Claire, I knew.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I came here, didn't I? I—worried about you. What did you expect, that I'd crawl? How truthful have you been through all this?"

"More questions," she said. "Allan had some, too, after you talked to him. He came up here screaming about the blood on that Bokhara."

Allan was Mr. Egan. I said: "Did you give him a satisfactory answer?"

She said tautly: "Yes. He trusts me."

"And Sergeant Waldorf trusts you?"

"He seemed satisfied."

"You're so beautiful," I said. "You're so damned beautiful. I wonder how your answers would sound if you weren't."

Her face was white, her blue eyes blazed. "We've nothing to say to each other, Lee. Nothing can be gained by this bickering." There was the glint of tears in her eyes. "Oh, why did you have to come back?"

"I don't know," I said. "But I had to, Claire."

And she was in my arms again. She was sobbing in my arms and I was soothing her as well as I could, feeling soft and rotten. But way under the softness, the hard core of my skepticism remained.

I called up Mom and told her I wouldn't be home for supper. I went out and got a couple of steaks and some rolls. Claire broiled the steaks and we ate out on the terrace.

Later, we sat out there and watched the stars, watched the lights of the traffic below, watched the lights of the downtown section grow. There were things about this business I was to regret. There was nothing about the night I would ever regret or forget.

I like to think she'll never forget it either. Maybe, just because for those hours I didn't ask any questions. Or maybe because she'd felt, at least for the moment, some of the emotion many must have felt for her.

It was around midnight when the phone rang, and she went to answer it. It was for me.

It was Papa. "Levon, Selak is with you?"

"No. I haven't seen him. He left the store before I did. I didn't see him leave."

"Grace called, Levon. She's worried. He didn't come home."

"I've no idea where he could be," I said.

A silence on the wire. Then: "Well,

maybe it will be all right. Maybe he's with a friend somewhere." Another silence. "Berjouhi called, too."

"O.K., thanks. You'd better notify the police about Selak if he doesn't come home soon."

"That I'll do," he said, and hung up.

Claire said: "What's happened, Lee?"

"Selak is missing," I told her.

"Selak?"

"Your silent admirer. That man who works for us. He left the store in a peeve this afternoon and he hasn't come home yet."

Her eyes were wide. "You don't think —" She looked around as though half-expecting to see him standing behind her. "I mean, the way he stared at me and—"

"Last night," I said, "he stood right down there across the street. When I left, he was sleeping in my car."

"He's—harmless, Lee?"

"He has been up to now. I suppose he still is."

We went out onto the terrace, but it wasn't comfortable out there any more. A wind had come to life from the north, and there was a chill to it.

In the living room Claire put a stack of records on the player and called to me: "Mix a drink, will you, Lee?"

I shook my head. "I have to go. I'm worried about Selak. I'll see you in the morning, when I bring the rug over."

"You're worried about that—that man? It's not your concern, Lee."

"Selak's always been my concern. It was my idea that my dad should hire him, and Grace, too."

She shook her head. "All right. It's been a grand evening. I suppose I shouldn't complain."

She came to the door with me and I kissed her. "Sleep tight," I said, "and dream of tomorrow."

She ruffled my hair. "Big day, tomorrow."

Big day, tomorrow. And a bad day, too, though I didn't know it at the time.

The downtown Western Union office was open all night, and it was from there I sent the wires. They were to some dealers I knew on the coast, and in them I inquired about Henri Ducasse.

The rain had started before I went into the telegraph office, and it was worse when I came out. The wind was cold; there was sleet mixed with the raindrops. Our false summer was over.

The wind howled down the Avenue, driving the rain before it. My little convertible was headed directly into it, and she shivered from time to time as the gusts hit.

It all shaped up. I'm no detective, but Ismet Bey had told me something that gave me a sequence. Tinker to Evers to Chance; was that the famous infield? Was that the triple play trio, or was it double play?

When I turned in the driveway, the lights were on in the living room and on the porch. I could see Papa in the living room talking to someone. When I came up on the porch, I could see who it was. Sergeant Waldorf. He was working late; it was after one.

His eyes appraised me as I came into the living room.

"Anything about Selak?" I asked Papa.

He shook his head. "The sergeant thinks it has something to do with Henri Ducasse. And you didn't tell him about the rug, Levon, about the Bokhara."

Waldorf still hadn't said anything. I said: "How about Dykstra? Have you talked to him?"

"Dykstra's in the clear all the way," the sergeant said. "I've no idea where that rumor started."

Papa said: "I told him it was Mr. Egan's rug, Levon. He's been checking Mr. Egan."

I looked at the sergeant. He was still

appraising me. I said: "You came here to see me, Sergeant?"

"More or less. Egan was in to see you just before you closed this evening, wasn't he?"

"That's right."

"What did he want?"

"That's a short question," I said, "but it would require a long answer. I'd have to give you some background first, Sergeant."

Somewhere a door slammed, and I could hear the wind roll the garbage can over.

"I've stayed up this long." Sergeant Waldorf said. "I may as well stay up a little longer and hear your story."

I told him about Egan, Herro and Bey. I told him some of the things about Claire. Papa sat there while I talked and missed none of it. The sergeant didn't interrupt me once.

"And his wife knows he's selling them?"

"He said she did. He said I could ask her."

"Does his wife know Miss Lynne has them?"

"I don't know if she does or not."

"Does she know they planned to leave town together?"

My heart stopped, I was sure. I couldn't get my breath for a second. "You're kidding, Sergeant."

"No, but she might be."

"Mr. Egan's a—he's old," I said. "It doesn't make sense."

"The older the wackier," he said. "I'm no spring chicken, myself, but I can't think of anybody I wouldn't leave, if *she* wanted me to." His voice was weary. He rose. "Well, I'll see this Mrs. Egan tomorrow." He looked at me quietly a moment. "You want to come out on the porch a second?"

Papa frowned, but I said: "Sure."

Out there, the sergeant smiled. I could hardly hear his voice, above the sound of the rain and the wind. "Anything you want to tell me privately? How bad you might be involved, I mean?"

I shook my head. "I gave it to you straight, Sergeant. You're positive Dykstra's in the clear?"

"Positive. Nobody I'd rather nail, but he's clean."

"All day," I said, "I've been worrying about this. All day I've been hoping against hope that it was Dykstra. I don't know the man, so that wasn't fair."

Sergeant Waldorf was looking out at the rain. He seemed to be miles away. He said: "She's a beauty, kid. I've never seen anyone quite like her. Years ago, I felt as you do tonight, and this babe didn't have half of what that Lynne girl's got." He turned to face me. "I'll try to keep it as clean as I can. You ought to get an answer to those wires in the morning, don't you think?"

I nodded.

He put a hand on my shoulder. "O.K. I'll see you in the morning. It's been a long day." Then he was trotting through the rain to the department car.

In the living room, Papa still sat in the chair he'd occupied through my recital. He looked at me sadly. He started to say something, then changed his mind. He rose.

"Time for bed, Levon," he said. "Another day, tomorrow."

Another day, big day, bad day . . . Outside, the wind grew stronger, and I wondered if Selak was out there somewhere in that wet, miserable night.

From upstairs, Mom called: "Is that you, Levon? Nishan, is Levon home?"

"Levon's home," Papa said. His voice was as sad as his face. I couldn't sleep that night. Didn't sleep. Laid down on the bed and thought about Claire. Sat up and watched the storm wear itself out, and thought about Claire.

I thought about Selak, too, but mostly about Claire.

At breakfast Ann and Mom had enough to talk about, so my silence and Papa's wasn't so noticeable.

At eight-thirty, I was at the store. At nine, Sergeant Waldorf came in.

"You put in a long day, don't you, Sergeant?" I said.

"It's not usually this bad," he said. "I've just been over to Egan's. She knows, all right. He told her he expected to get at least five thousand dollars for that pile of rugs."

I shook my head.

"That seem reasonable to you?"

"There might be twenty rugs up there," I said. "I didn't count them, but that's a good guess, I'd say. I sold one of them yesterday. I sold it for *seventy-one hundred dollars*, Sergeant."

He whistled. He said: "Oh, oh." He shook his head. "So that's the angle. He gets a nice wad, clear, and he and Miss

Lynne take off on the luxury trail. Or that's what he hopes, huh? She'd have the money, wouldn't she? And it might be good-by, Mr. Egan."

"I don't know," I said.

"You look tired, kid. No sleep?"

"No."

He went over to the window. It was a gray day, outside. The rain had stopped, but the chill was still with us.

"You didn't get an answer to those wires, yet?"

"Not yet."

He turned. "I'm going out to get a cup of coffee. I'll be back before you leave with the rug."

There was one answer to my wires when he came back. It read:

Ducasse was out here in January and February. Made a few deals, but nothing sensational that I heard of. It's a bad town for orientals, as you know.

Jack.

Sergeant Waldorf looked at me when he'd finished reading it. "It still doesn't prove anything. I'll need more than that." He was looking thoughtful. "You take the rug up there and get your money from Bey. Find out what you can. I've an angle or two to check, yet."

He left then, and I went to the safe, got out the prayer rug. Papa came in as I was looking at it.

"Selak came home at three o'clock," he told me. "Grace called. He left again around six. Where do you think he goes?"

I shrugged. I said: "I'm going to take this rug up to Miss Lynne. I'll be back before lunch."

He nodded, saying nothing. He went back to the washing room, as I went out with the Maksoud masterpiece.

There wasn't much traffic; the weather was keeping the shoppers at home. I made time getting to the Towers, even though I was earlier than I'd promised.

George Herro was there when Claire

let me in. And so was Ismet Bey. We were all early.

The Turk's black eyes were gleaming as he looked at the rug. His face was enraptured.

"It's worth the money," I said.

He looked up at me. "Yes. About the money. I said cash, I know. This is the same." He handed me the check.

It was a cashier's check for forty thousand dollars, on the First National Bank. It was made out to George Herro.

"You've made it out to Mr. Herro," I said.

He nodded quickly and his bird eyes were shadowed. "That was all right with Miss Lynne."

I looked at George Herro. "And it would be all right with you, too, wouldn't it?"

His hard old eyes met mine. "Why shouldn't it be?"

"You can prove ownership?"

"For heaven's sakes, Lee," Claire said, "you're not going back to the questions again, are you?"

I didn't look at her. I continued to look at George Herro.

"What's on your mind, Lee," he asked.

"Murder," I said. "You didn't pick this rug up at the auction, George. The auction was in February. You were in Europe, then."

"Oh. Who did pick it up at auction?"

"Henri Ducasse," I said.

Ismet Bey was looking at George. Then he was looking at me: "Henri Ducasse? He is the man who was murdered?"

I nodded. "He knew rugs, too. He knew he had a good buy. But he didn't know the history of this one. You did as soon as he showed it to you, George. And you can read Arabic."

George Herro was very quiet in his chair. The hardness in his face had brought out his age and his cynicism.

I looked at Claire and tried to smile. "Baby, why don't you come clean? You're in fast company with George. I thought, at first, that the blood might have got on that Bokhara at Egan's house. But it was too much of a surprise to him. Ducasse was killed here, wasn't he, in your dining room?"

She was ready to crack up, again, just as she had last night. Her face was tight, her body rigid, as she stared at me.

Herro said: "Mr. Bey, I believe our transaction is completed. Thank you very much for the check. And good-bye."

The little Turk gave us all one last glance before nodding. He folded the rug carefully and walked out. Nobody went to the door with him.

"And now," George said, "I'll have the rest of your ridiculous story, Lee."

"It's all guess work," I said. I paused. "The first deal," I said, "was between Claire and Egan. Egan wanted the rugs

sold from here, so his wife wouldn't know what he was getting for them. You were called in, George, as the kind of salesman who could get the last dollar out of them. I'd say Ducasse heard about the deal and came here to chisel in on it. Henri was your biggest competitor, George, and he usually knew what you were doing. He brought the Maksoud piece along as an inducement, maybe, to let him in on the deal?"

Herro said nothing, nor did he move in his chair.

I looked at Claire. "That's right, isn't it?"

She nodded, still in that trance-like stage.

"For a rug like that one," I went on, "a man like you would go pretty far, George. As far as murder." And now I tried a lie. "We'll know if that was Ducasse's blood on the Bokhara. The police lab has a sample of the blood from the wash water, now."

That got to him. He stirred in his chair. He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again.

I said: "You started the rumor about Dykstra among the dealers. You saw all the dealers from time to time, working on consignment as you do, and you started the rumor to throw Waldorf off the trail."

He said nothing.

"I don't know why Claire came down to the shop," I said, "but maybe it was at Egan's suggestion. Maybe she wanted an outside appraisal of those rugs, just to make sure you weren't holding out. And maybe they wanted a legitimate dealer in the business to give it some tone." I looked at her. "Was that it?"

I said: "You overestimate yourself, Claire. You're too young for a couple of old men like Egan and this one. You've been kidding yourself, Claire. You're too young and too soft."

She was crying. She said, "Lee, there

was nothing between us. They were—" She put her face down into her hands.

"They were stooges, you thought," I finished for her. "Maybe Egan would be. But you don't know this Herro, baby. You don't know him like I do."

Herro's voice was an Arctic wind. "You don't know me well enough either, Lee. You didn't think I'd come to a deal like this unprepared, did you?"

He was still sitting in the chair. But now there was a gun in his hand. It was an automatic. It wasn't a big gun, but it was big enough to kill.

Claire looked up quickly and some ejaculation escaped her throat.

The gun was pointing at me. Herro said: "She won't talk as much as you hope for, Lee. She didn't see me kill him, but she knows I did. And that would get her some time in jail. She's too soft, you're right about that. Jail is rough on the soft ones." His smile was thin and cruel. "I'll take the check, now."

"Come and get it," I said.

"Don't fool with me, Lee. Bring it over."

Claire said: "Give it to him, Lee. You aren't involved in this. Don't get involved with him." Her voice was high.

In Herro's hand, the gun lifted. In Herro's eyes, I saw death. He would kill.

Then Claire was up, standing in front of me shielding me, facing the gun. "George, you'll get the check. Don't—"

That's when Selak walked in.

I'd left the door unlocked hoping Waldorf might break in on something incriminating. But I was glad to see anybody, including Selak.

He looked like a drowned grizzly bear. His face was black with beard, his rough hair matted, his dull eyes glaring. The gun, you see, was pointing at his Claire.

The sound that came from his big throat was nothing that could be called human, a rough, threatening grunt.

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Herro turned to face him as I rose, to get away from behind Claire. Herro's gun was pointing at Selak, and Herro talked to him in broken Armenian.

Selak kept coming—and the gun jumped in Herro's hand.

Selak trembled as the slug hit him, but he kept coming. I was almost to Herro, now; I grabbed his wrist and twisted it as Selak closed.

The gun fell to the floor, but Selak's big arm sent me sprawling.

Then Selak had lifted George off his feet by the throat and one leg, and he lifted him high.

I heard Claire scream as Selak headed for the terrace doors, still carrying the struggling Herro high above his head.

I was up as Selak smashed through the doors, kicking them open. I was up and scrambling after him . . .

I was out on the terrace and shouting at Selak as he stood there on the edge and now Herro was screaming.

I reached Selak, grabbed him blindly by the neck from behind—just as he tossed George Herro over the edge . . .

Waldorf came five minutes later. I'd called the ambulance by that time for Selak. Somebody had called the police.

I told Waldorf all about it, and Claire told him her part, not sparing herself. Selak died, in the hospital, while we were still talking.

When we'd finished, Waldorf said: "I'll do what I can, but you can count on five years, anyway. Miss Lynne."

Papa says I'm foolish. He says all young men have experiences of one kind or another, and the thing to do is to forget them. He says there's no sense in writing to her every week, up there, and going up, once a month. Papa says five years is a long time for a young man to wait, an awful long time.

As though I don't know it.

THE END