HOW MANY CARDS?

By ISABEL OSTRANDER

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SYNOPSIS

Ex-Roundsman Timothy McCarty follows a figure—that of an undersized, narrow-framed man—into a palatial residence. When pulled up by McCarty the man protests he had "nothing to do with what's in here!" The chauffeur, the real policeman on the chase, the real policeman on the beat, appears and demands "what's going on." "I've been trying to get out of him what he did in there," says McCarty.

The three enter a large room on the floor of which lies a man in evening clothes, the white waistcoat and shirt stained crimson, in his pocket a cigarette case initialed "E. C. C."—Eugene Christopher Creveling—and beside his body a huge army pistol. On the person of the suspect is found keys, pistol and blackjack. In another room a table is set for two, with champagne and ice yet unmelted. The house is apparently empty of human beings, but McCarty thinks he hears a door open and close.

George Alexander, Creveling's partner, and uncle of Mrs. Creveling, suggests that Creveling may have been attacked by burglars. "You know the hands of a member of what you term the 'underworld,'" he added.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

THE inspector shrugged.

"The medical examiner who has just been here affirms that Mr. Creveling killed himself," he observed. "Mr. Alexander, you said that Mr. Creveling had no troubles of any sort. This may seem like an impertinent question, but we must know the truth, and it is bound to come out in the end. Was there in no domestic difficulty? He and his wife seem to have been virtually living apart and the house left in the hands of caretakers——"

"Nothing of the sort!" the banker interrupted indignantly. "I am of an older generation, an older school than was Eugene, and their friends were not mine, but his wife was my niece and I should have been the first to know of any discord. To my mind they were a model, modern couple, independent in thought and action, but mutually considerate, and I can assure you that very great affection existed between them. My partner was a man's man, a man of clubs, especially in the spring and autumn, when my niece—Mrs. Creveling—made a round of country house visits and Eugene preferred my home club to an empty house, naturally."

"You say their friends were not yours, that they moved in a different set," the inspector interposed. "You must, however, have heard your partner and his niece mention from time to time those with whom they were most intimate."

Mr. Alexander's lips closed in a tight line.

"Mrs. Creveling was twenty at the time of their marriage and ceased to be my ward a year later; Mr. Creveling and I seldom discussed anything but business."

"How long have you and Mr. Creveling been in partnership?"

Mr. Alexander stroked his beard for a moment in evident hesitation before he replied:

"Since about the time of his marriage to my niece, although his family ties have known each other for generations."

"Had Mr. Creveling been engaged actively in any financial pursuits prior to that?" Inspector Druet continued.

"I cannot say that he had, beyond speculating now and then on the market," the banker answered with yet more obvious reluctance. "But I really do not comprehend the significance of these questions at such a time as this. Mr. Creveling was a very rich man, and naturally the prospect of marriage with him ambitious to become somebody more than a—a mere art dilettante——"

"And Broadway speculator?" broke in McCarty irrepressibly.

Mr. Alexander's eyes shifted.

"I presume you refer to the unfortunate collapse of Mr. Creveling's coal stocks, and which erroneously clung to him for years after he had reached maturity," he said. "Irresponsible youth and the possession of too much money have formed a dangerous combination before now, but my partner has been unknown to the bright light district, save at any occasional theatre party with his wife and their friends, for several years——"

"Mr. Alexander," the inspector bent forward suddenly, "when I asked you just now if you knew who Mr. and Mrs. Creveling's intimates were you evaded my question; in the face of this tragedy we are bound to be discovered and investigated. You said also that I seldom discussed anything but business with your partner and that your granddaughter by his wife ended a year after their marriage. Does that mean, too, that your personal relationship there was unpermitted? That, in fact, there was any estrangement between you and them——"

"Most assuredly not!" The banker raised his voice at narrow shoulders. "Mr. and Mrs. Creveling have been home with me on every occasion and the greatest affection has always existed between us. As I said only relative I have been frequent visitor there, but as already told you that their lives are in a different circle——"

As he spoke the inspector measured tread by tread the hall outside, told of Eugene Creveling's departure, before his return for the final scene in which would be the principal but silent, and immediately his late partner, Creveling, standing again.

The inspector, detective from bureau, appeared in the doorway behind him, and stood awaiting further orders.

"There is nothing more for either of you to do," the inspector announced. "Sam, have your report sent to me downstairs. Clancy, make over to the Old Man and I'll look over later. If that young crook tries to get hold of a shyster lawyer, ask the commissioner to call him and keep him until I get back to Center street myself."

As the two men turned to go, McCarty went to the corner.

"You'll not be needing me now for a bit, inspector?" The statement was a question asked with the ingratiating smile by a roundsman could command, "I have another look over the ground."

"Go as far as you like, Mac," Inspector Druet responded heartily, then turned to Mr. Alexander.

"Now, as for the Crevelings' intimate friends, sir, I know——This Mrs. Creveling of yours, whom you know something about——"

The banker shook slightly in a manner relieved himself.

"She was born a Preston of Washington Square, I—I—Her late father was of old Manor Waverly, and her mother was a Douglas Waverly, known for generations but——in life, in Broadmead the Douglas Waverlys were a town house a block or two below here. I have met them occasionally."

"Who were the others in the Creveling set?"

"An Irish aristocrat, if there be such a thing left, named O'Rourke, and his wife, who, I believe, has a title in her own right but refuses to use it, at least in this country; then there is a Mr. and Mrs. Ford and I believe a Mrs. Culp or Kilp, or some such name—really you must ask my niece——!"

"We'll leave her out of it for the time being," the inspector interrupted crisply. "You said that Creveling was a man's man; who were his associates aside from those in his wife's social circle?"

"He belonged to most of the best clubs in town, but I am not in a position to tell you with whom he associated." The note of defense was again evident in the banker's tones. "If he had any hobby beyond an innate love of beautiful things and a desire to acquire them I never learned it, and I have found that it is only through a knowledge of a man's hobbies or predilections that one can gauge the type of individual to whom he would naturally be drawn as a congenial companion."

Mr. Alexander halted suddenly as though he had said too much, and the inspector glanced at him sharply.

"It did not occur to you to interest yourself in your partner's companions and mode of life outside of his family and business?" he asked.

"Why should it have?" the other countered defiantly. "My niece's married life with him appeared to be ideal according to modern standards, our partnership was successful and without friction of any sort and I was content. My own social interests, as I have told you, lay with an older, more staid school; a quiet round of golf or rubber of bridge, an occasional opera night or evening with my books or friends of my own generation; that for years has been my life after banking hours, inspector."

Inspector Druet frowned thoughtfully.

"Conservative, eh? Why, then, Mr. Alexander were you willing to enter into partnership with a man who you admit had no knowledge of business even if he was the husband of your niece?"

"Once more a dull flush swept over the features of the dapper little man before him.

"I consider that question an impertinence, sir, but I have no reason to evade a reply to it except a natural aversion to discussing my private affairs with those for whom they can have no possible concern. I have already told you that prior to our entrance into partnership Mr. Creveling had speculated occasionally in Wall street. Since he was to marry my ward I watched his operations and conceived a sincere admiration for his acumen. I realized that although he did not know the banking business I could trust his judgment; he brought the necessary capital into our concern and I the experience. It was an ideal combination which tonight's tragedy has so unfortunately broken."

"I see." The inspector nodded. "Was there any connection, Mr. Alexander, between that partnership and your niece's marriage? To put it bluntly, was the partnership a stipulation of the alliance? Mrs. Creveling was your ward; had she any fortune of her own?"

"You go too far, sir!" Mr. Alexander's eyes flashed. "The marriage was a love match; because of that alone I consented to it. Mrs. Creveling's fortune was not great, but there is no older family than ours in America and had she desired she could have made a far more brilliant alliance, in spite of Mr. Creveling's money."

"I—I decline absolutely to answer any more of your questions until I learn my rights in this affair. I do not understand the trend of this interrogation, nor do I consider it pertinent to the crime you are investigating. For it is a crime, no matter what your assistant medical examiners or any other so-called officials of the police department may assume. Eugene Creveling was murdered!"

"I beg pardon, sir!" A voice whose studied deferentiality was evident even in the shocked accents which now punctuated it was heard behind them, and both men turned. In the doorway stood a thin, smooth-faced individual of perhaps thirty-five and upon his austere, almost clerical features deep concern struggled with curiosity and alarm. "I have just returned—arrived, I should say—in accordance with Mr. Creveling's instructions, but he is not in his room. I hope nothing is wrong, sir? I knocked but you did not reply and I could not avoid hearing——"

"Oh, it's you, Frank!" Mr. Alexander spoke with obvious relief at the other's appearance, although his tone was fittingly lugubrious. "I regret to inform you that something very terrible has happened to your master. This is an inspector from police headquarters."

"Who are you?" Inspector Druet stepped forward.

"Mr. Creveling's man, sir. Frank Hill is my name." The valet's tone was still respectful, but there was a shade less of deference in it, although he spoke nervously.

"When did you last see your employer alive?"

"At eleven o'clock this—last night, sir, in his rooms at the club."

"Where have you been since then?"

The man wet his thin lips and replied in a low, hesitating voice:

"On a private matter. My time is my own, sir. I—I had rather not say."

CHAPTER IV

The Torn Card

MEANWHILE McCarty had taken advantage of his superior's offhand permission and slipped back into the study immediately after the body had been removed and Clancy and the detective had taken their departure.

Save for the dark stains upon the rug where the shattered form had rested and the strip of tapestry pulled awry from its accustomed place upon the refectory table, there were no visible signs left to the casual eye of the tragedy which had so recently taken place within those four walls, but McCarty closed the door carefully behind him and stood for a moment with his back against it surveying the room.

The chairs with their adjacent smoking stands, the bookcases, davenports, and every article of furniture which the room contained passed in swift but unerring detail before his vision and he whistled softly.

A delicate spring dawn was filtering in through the diaphanous curtains of the windows at the rear and turning the golden glow of the electric lights a sickly lemon yellow; why had the shades not been lowered or the thick draperies which hung on either side of the casements been drawn?

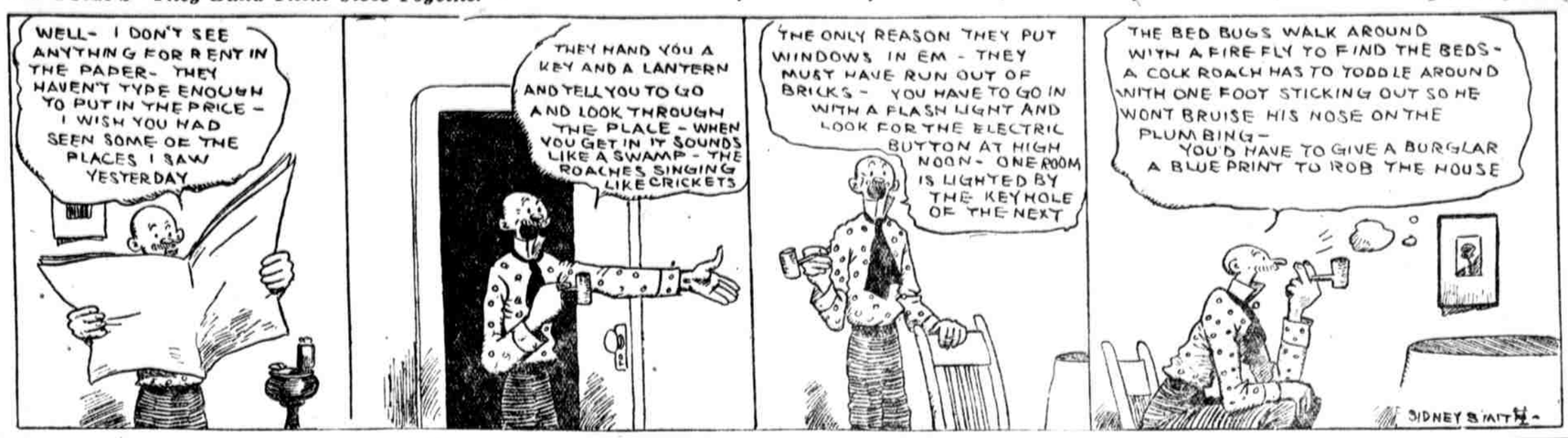
McCarthy switched off the lights and striding over to the nearest window thrust aside the curtains and opened it. The explanation for the disregard of possible onlookers was instantly apparent, for a sheer blank brick wall rose before him about six feet distant. He glanced swiftly each way and then withdrew his head, leaving the window open that the gentle breeze might drift through the room.

The blank space, or alley, had no opening at either end and had evidently been left when the Creveling residence was built in order to give light to its rear windows.

CONTINUED TOMORROW

THE GUMPS—They Build Them Close Together

By Sidney Smith



SOMEBODY'S STENOG—She's a Member of the Humane Society Now

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By Hayward

The Young Lady Across the Way

The young lady across the way says she's always wanted to visit Mt. Vernon, O., to see Washington's tomb.

PATHETIC FIGURES

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SCHOOL DAYS

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PETEY—It's a Funny World

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THE CLANCY KIDS—Clancy's Kids

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