

# The Crime Cat

By Leslie McFarlane

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Chapter IX

THE CHESHIRE INN had once been all that its name implied, a quaint little wayside hostelry providing food and shelter for man and beast. It had been built and operated by a huge, stolid Englishman, who was one of the best customers of his own bar. In 1919, because he took prohibition seriously, he went back to the tap-rooms of his native land whereupon the Cheshire Inn became a roadhouse under the management of successive dynasties of bootleggers.

Abrupt dismissal of a friendly Federal agent was followed by a series of visits from officials in the guise of customers, these visits culminating in the melancholy appearance of a padlock on the front door of the Cheshire Inn. Thereafter the long, gabled building was no more a place of revelry by night, and if occasionally shadowy cars drew up at the rear door and obscure figures could be seen flitting about perhaps the ghosts of other times persisted in their old haunt.

The Inn stood back some distance from the highway, beyond a discreet barrier of fir trees, with a semi-circular driveway. Padlocks now ornamented the rusty steel gates which had never been closed until the shadow of the law fell upon the hostelry, but an open gate at the rear gave access to a lane which, in turn, entered the main road some distance away, so that it was still possible to drive a car to the very back door of the Inn without attracting more than casual attention.

Dusk had fallen when a shabby man whose peaked cap and turned-up coat collar obscured his face trudged in the ditch along the highway. The headlights of an approaching automobile illuminated him for a moment, hands thrust deep in his pockets, head bowed against the cold wind. The car whisked by and when another car zoomed down the highway a minute later in futile pursuit of a bright radiance that cast every detail of road and ditch into momentary brilliance, the trudging figure disappeared.

He left the ditch and plunged into the friendly shadow of a clump of trees. Within twenty yards he encountered a wire fence which he promptly scaled. Then, in the gloom, he stood for a moment gazing at the dark mass of the roadhouse. There was not a glimmer of light.

He stalked through the tall grasses that whispered in the wind. The battered signboard above the entrance, erected by the departed Englishman as a professional gesture toward the late Lewis Carroll, creaked uneasily.

The man was no more than a shadow, and then this shadow melted into the deeper shades at the side of the Inn. The whisper of the grass, the creak of the signboard, the rustle of leaves drowned any sounds that may have followed, with the exception of a sharp, sudden snap and the distant tinkle of glass.

A cellar window opened expeditiously enough and silently enough save for the accidental dislodging of a piece of broken glass had been removed. The man struggled through the aperture; a hand appeared; the window was replaced.

He was now in the basement of the Cheshire Inn, enveloped in blackness. He waited a while, listening, peering about, before switching on a small electric flashlight, the beam of which stabbed the gloom and revealed a flight of steps only a few feet away.

The man snapped out the light, made his way cautiously to the stairs and slowly ascended. At the top he paused, listened, then tried the door. It was locked.

There was a faint jangle of keys. He made several attempts; finally there was a click. He thrust the door slowly open.

The man stepped into the darkened room. He stood motionless, then crossed the floor like a phantom. The stabbing ray of light flickered for a fraction of a second, revealing the doorway to a kitchen. In here, with its range, its ovens and ice-boxes, he felt his way toward the back stairs.

He was groping for the first step, his ears sharpened for the first murmur of a human voice he had heard since entering the Inn. Someone was talking in an upper room. This neither surprised nor startled him. He had known from the circumstances of one tiny streak of light at the bottom of an upper window as seen from outside that there was someone in the building. Furthermore, he knew that the Cheshire Inn had been secretly tenanted since the padlock had been affixed to the front door.

The sound of the voice, instead of frightening him, reassured him. He placed his foot against the bottom step.

And in that moment, from being a scarcely visible shadow in the gloom of the kitchen the man became the centre of a brilliant aura of radiance, like an actor in the spotlight.

He was drenched, bathed in a vividly luminous beam. Every detail of his shabby clothes and his rigid figure became instantly visible and clear. A fierce and pitiless light beat upon him and as he whirled about, an automatic appearing in his hand as if by magic, his pinched, vicious face with a ghastly scar branding one cheek, was cast into bold relief as he faced the source of that relentless glare. His shadow, gigantic and menacing, was like a threatening monster against the wall.

But nothing happened. Rapidly, the room fell into darkness again. The beam of light swept across the room, past the man, shone momentarily on the back door and vanished. Outside there was the crunching of tires upon gravel, the throbbing of an engine, a faint rasp of brakes. The light that had startled the man had been cast by the headlights of an automobile turning into the yard at the back of the Inn. Shining through the uncurtained window it had glared full upon him and passed by. He was a shadow again.

He went up the stairs so rapidly and silently that he might have been a ghost. At the top of the stairs he paused, gazed down a long corridor broken by a band of yellow light that streamed across the floor, and went on, catlike. The light emanated from a room, the door of which was partly closed.

The voice he had heard when he was in the kitchen droned on. There was an interruption, in a harsher tone, and then the other voice resumed. Two men were in this room, talking, and the other rooms along the corridor were deserted.

The intruder drew closer to the door through which streamed the band of light. Now he could hear other voices, down at the back door of the Inn. He heard the rattle of a key in a lock.

Suddenly, he disappeared. One moment he had been in the corridor; the next he was not. Having gone as near the band of light as he dared he had slipped into the adjacent room and hidden himself behind the half-open door.

He was none too soon. Voices echoed downstairs, the back door opened and closed. He heard one of the men in the next room saying; "That's him now," and the other answered; "It's about time."

Thudding footsteps. Two men were coming up the stairs. "Remember!" came the voice from the next room. "It's all through him that Sam Bodansky was killed. He's got to pay."

"We'll make him pay." Then they were silent. The newcomers tramped down the

corridor and entered the next room.

"Good night, Luigi. Good night Bill. All on deck, eh?" said a genial voice.

"When it is a matter of money said the one who had reminded his companion of Sam Bodansky. His voice had a slight accent. He was evidently the man addressed as Luigi. Perhaps Luigi Rapallo, who owned the Cheshire Inn.

"When it's a matter of dough, you're here ahead of time, huh? Well it won't be long now."

"Where is our other friend?"

"He'll be along later."

"We shall drink?"

The soft splash of liquor clinking in the glasses. A general shuffling and scraping of chairs. Whispering.

The man behind the door pressed forward. He was trying to identify the voices of the newcomer who had greeted Luigi and Bill. He had heard that voice--somewhere-- sometime-- but the connection eluded his memory.

"We have run many risks in this business," sighed Luigi. "My good friend Sam Bodansky is dead, and we are all in danger. It is too great a risk to run-- for the price."

"Trying to back out of your bargain?" snapped the newcomer. "I don't see where you have any call to start talking about risks. Sam is dead. Could we help that?"

"If he had not been sent there he would be still alive."

"Maybe. Sam ran risks every minute of his life. If he hadn't fallen off that fire-escape he might have lived to be caught at some bit of second storey-work and knocked off by a cop tonight, tomorrow night, the next night. It's too bad, but it was just one of those things."

"Five hundred dollars is not much money if it brings me to the electric chair," objected Luigi. "You? The chair! You didn't kill Heath. You didn't kill Seelye, did you?"

"No, but--"

"Then, why worry? Let this guy Arthur Vale do the worrying. He is the one who will burn if anyone does. I'll bet he has seen the hot seat in front of him all day."

"I kinda hope they don't get him," growled one of the others. "If they do get him, are you figuring on stepping up and yapping for your share?"

"You know damn well I would--n't."

"Get this into your heads--all of you. Vale killed those two men and if any of you talk you'll be in just as deep as him. If he is nabbed, that's too bad for him. Vale killed them, remember. That right?"

"Yeah, that's right. You don't need to be scared of us talkin'."

"Why should we argue?" asked Luigi, wearily. "Let Mr. Vale fix up his own troubles. Everything is fine as it is. But the money--"

The man behind the door in his anxiety to hear every detail of the conversation, leaned forward a trifle too far. The door creaked a little. Instantly, at his very ear, he heard a snarl: "Come out with your hands up!"

No one had left the other room, to his certain knowledge. But now the barrel of a revolver was pressed against the narrow opening between the door and the wall, and beyond the weapon loomed a sinister shadow who seemed to have materialized from the gloom of the corridor. He was helpless. Silently he emerged from behind the door, his hands raised.

The man in the corridor stepped back, warily, his revolver still covering the intruder. There were sounds of confusion in the next room. "What's that? What's that?" Luigi was shouting, excitedly. But the man who appeared to dominate the gathering merely replied; "It seems we have caught a spy." And he called out "Got him, Soapy?"

"I got him!"

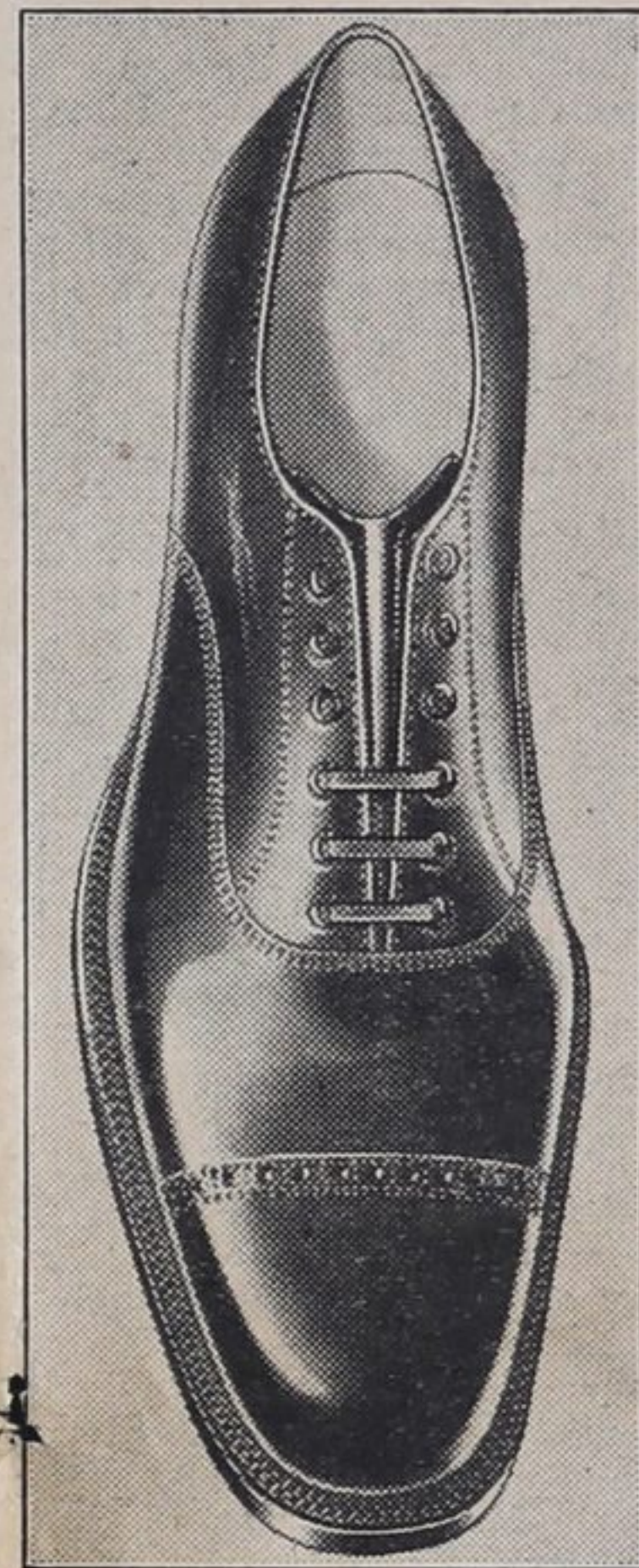
"Bring him in."

The captive, with the revolver

thrust against the small of his back, was urged into the room. He faced four men, three of whom had leaped to their feet, startled and frightened. The other man, who lounged indolently in his chair and who looked up with calm approval, merely stroked his chin with a slender hand. He was Mr. Donlin, legal acquaintance of Sol Pincus, whose appointment with Herbert Seelye that morning had been unfortunately cancelled by the client's death.

(To be continued)

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