



The Crime Cat

By Leslie McFarlane

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Chapter XI

"Vale. When we round this crowd up you'll have enough evidence to hang him. Vale killed Heath in the apartment. And he killed Seeley in the launch, at about eleven o'clock last night. He did it because he knew they had learned who he was, and he had to silence them."

Kelvey nodded, quickly, "Make this look good," he said. "for your own sake. Make a racket. Break the light."

Donlin whipped a revolver out of his pocket. "Run for it!" At the same moment he gave a shout, smashed the globe of the electric light with the weapon. The room was plunged into darkness. The table went over with a crash. "Luigi!" shouted Donlin. He flung open the door. "Luigi! Quick!"

A clamor of thudding footsteps resounded in the corridor. Donlin out in the hall, was yelling; "He got away from me! Down those stairs! After him!"

"Shoot him!" shrieked Luigi. "My rod ain't loaded. Hurry!"

They stormed into the little room. Someone lit a match. The dark narrow opening loomed before them in the wall. Luigi, an automatic in his grasp, stalked toward it.

"He got a gun?" Donlin's excitement had vanished.

"Get him, Luigi!" he said. "He is trapped. The door down there is locked, he hasn't got a gun."

Luigi uttered a grunt of satisfaction. He stepped into the opening and emptied the clip of his automatic in a rattling storm of lead down the black staircase.

"That fixes him!" growled Luigi. "Turn on the light."

"It's broken." One of the men who had crowd into the room handed Luigi a flashlight. He snapped it on and the bright beam illuminated the narrow stairs.

"He's not there!" yelled Luigi, startled at the view of blank steps when he fully expected to see a human form huddled in death in front of the locked door below.

In the same instant a sudden commotion broke out. Bill Corrigan, who had been standing a few feet behind the others, a revolver held lightly in his hand, uttered a howl of astonishment and dismay as a dark figure plunged toward him from the shadows. The reflection from the flashlight had been just sufficient to silhouette the weapon, and Corrigan felt it wrenched from his grasp while at the same time he received a violent push that caught him off balance and sent him reeling back against Donlin. The flashlight dropped from Luigi's hand and went clattering down the steps. Thrown into confusion, unable to grasp what had happened, men blundered against one another, cursing. The door slammed with a crash.

"After him!" yelled Donlin. "It's that dick! He was hiding here all the time!" The room was in pitch blackness. They made a concerted rush in the direction of the door, pushing, crowding, panting with fear, snarling oaths at one another. They heard a shout of command from beyond the door.

"Stay in there! I'll shoot the first man who comes out!" The order was grimly emphasized by the bark of a revolver, the sound intensified in the narrow hall, and wood splintered as a bullet ploughed its way into the framework of the door. They scrambled back, unable to distinguish one from the other in that black darkness, all dominated by one fear, their nerves plucked by a common panic.

"He's got us!" snarled Corrigan. Luigi yelled; "The stairs! The stairs!" "That door's locked from outside," yelled the little foreigner--The gorilla mouthed

stupid oaths and blundered into everybody--"We're five to one! Raged Donlin. "Rush him! Rush him, I tell you. Somebody's sure to get him!" "Yeah, somebody is bound to get killed!" howled Luigi. After all, it was the little foreigner who made the first move. He wrenched the door open, thrust his arm around the side and blindly raked the corridor with bullets. The passage was a roaring tumult, stinking of powder and acrid smoke and then the little man squealed with pain his automatic went spinning and crashed to the floor of the hall. He fell back and hopped about in agony, uttering gasps and whimpers of pain.

"He shot it out of my hand! Right out of my hand!" "There was only five shells in that rod," shouted Corrigan, "and he's used three of them already!" "Can't we break down that door at the foot of the stairs?" demanded Donlin, but Luigi smashed this hope when he screamed; "It's barred from outside!"

Kelvey, crouching in the shelter of the doorway of the room in which he had originally been captured, eyed the narrow corridor watchfully. He thumbed the chamber of the revolver. It was true, as Corrigan had said, that there were but two shells left. Two shells--and he had to contend with five desperate men, only two of whom were disarmed.

Light flooded across the hallway from the room the gangsters had quitted at Donlin's call. Kelvey's position was strategic. The light from this room dispelled some of the gloom of the corridor and he had a clear view of the doorway of the room in which his enemies were trapped, while his own doorway was in complete darkness. That they would meekly surrender was unthinkable! They knew too well the consequences of that. If they rushed him, he could account for only two at the most. He could not advance. The best he could hope for was a deadlock and the others might take advantage of this to risk a drop from the window of their involuntary cell, or they might even batter down the door at the bottom of the secret stairway, in spite of the bar.

A dark form suddenly hurtled across the corridor. Kelvey fired but he was unprepared for this abrupt move and the other man reached the shelter of the opposite doorway unharmed. He had

plunged directly across the open space of the hall, counting on the sheer unexpectedness of the move for its success.

One shriek! And he now had two doors to watch.

The purpose of the trick was soon obvious. The man who had gained the opposite doorway poked a revolver out into the night and bullets spanged into the woodwork above Kelvey's head. At the same time someone else opened fire from across the hall.

He drew back. He could not waste that last shot.

They were trying to draw his fire, tempting him to shoot once more. Away from the doorway he was safe.

A loud gabble of voices from the men in the room. Donlin was berating them for their cowardice. "His bullets are gone! That's why he isn't shooting! What's the matter with you? Yellow? If we stay here he'll get away. He knows everything! Enough to put you all away for years!"

"You go first!" snarled Luigi.

Kelvey heard sounds of a scuffle, a strangled yell, then stumbling footsteps and a heavy thud. "There!" shouted Donlin. "Rush him now! If you step back, I'll drill you!"

He had thrust the unfortunate Luigi directly into the corridor. With a menace of the invisible enemy before him, with Donlin's weapon levelled at his back, the gangster chose the enemy. He advanced at an unsteady run, his automatic streaming flame.

Kelvey slammed the door. Let Luigi come on! If he fired that last shot he would be playing into their hands, doing exactly what was expected of him. And, with the slam of the door, came a chorus of yells, shouts of triumph and fury, a confusion of thudding footsteps in the hall.

The woodwork of the door began to splinter under the impact of bullets.

Kelvey backed over toward the window. He felt for the catch but it eluded him. A bullet whined its way through the door and shattered glass almost at his elbow.

He leaped back. Donlin was raging. "Throw open the door! Let's get a look at him. He hasn't any bullets left. We've got him where we want him!"

A hand fumbled at the knob. The door fell open. Kelvey fired. But the gangsters had been

cautious. The doorway framed a space of empty corridor. The man who had turned the knob had pressed himself back against the wall.

The last bullet was wasted!

It had the effect, however, of disturbing the attackers. Donlin had said the quarry had no bullets left; clearly, Donlin was wrong, and a man had nearly paid for the mistake with his life. They hung back, afraid to advance further, arguing in hoarse whispers--"You said his gun was empty, damn you!" "It's empty now. That must have been his last"--"You go in first, if you're so sure"--

Kelvey fumbled at the window catch again. If he could only open it he would risk the jump. There was nothing else for it. But the door of the room was open. One of the gangsters--the gorilla--came surging into view, revolver spitting death.

Kelvey flung himself flat on the floor. The windows were riddled with bullets. Glass showered tinkling about him.

The gorilla shouted.

"I got him! He's down!"

The man was peering into the room, his revolver raised. The others crowded cautiously into view behind him.

Then, from the end of the corridor, came a sharp, imperative voice;

"Put up your hands!"

Two shots punctuated this command. The gangsters, clearly revealed in the light that streamed into the hall from the adjacent room, whirled about in sudden panic.

But the end of the corridor was in darkness. Someone was crouching on the stairs, protected by the gloom, and his bullets were singing unpleasantly close to their heads. They heard him shouting to invisible followers;

"Come up, Max. You and George come this way. Tell Tom to cover the other stairs." Then, to the huddled men in the corridor. "Throw down your guns! Throw 'em this way! Quick!"

The gorilla plunged toward the room in which Kelvey was hidden, but the man in the corridor fired at the first move and the fellow sprawled cursing on the floor with a bullet in his leg. If the others had any lingering thought of opposition, this dispelled them. One by one, the weapons were hurled the length of the hall, and one by one, at the command of the hidden marksman, the gangsters lined up against the wall, arms in air. The wounded man on the floor threshed helplessly.

"Mr. Kelvey!" shouted the newcomer, advancing a little into the light and scooping up the weapons.

"Here!"

"Safe enough now, sir."

Kelvey, smeared with dust and looking very disreputable in his disguise, emerged from the room. He glanced at the sullen captives against the wall, strode down the

corridor and snatched up an automatic which the other man extended.

"Where's Max and George and Tom and the rest of your army?" he asked.

"I'm quite alone, sir."

"Parkes!" exclaimed the detective. "You're the best valet a man ever had. Handcuffs, Parkes?"

"Yes, sir."

There was a jangling of steel as Parkes fished two pair of handcuffs from his pocket. Dexterously, Kelvey snapped them about the wrists of his prisoners, with the exception of the wounded man who was scarcely in any position to escape.

"Car outside?"

"Their own car, sir."

Good. We'll drive 'em back to town."

Covered by two revolvers and securely linked together by thin chains of steel, the prisoners were helpless. At Kelvey's command they trudged silently, in single file, down the stairs.

(To be concluded)

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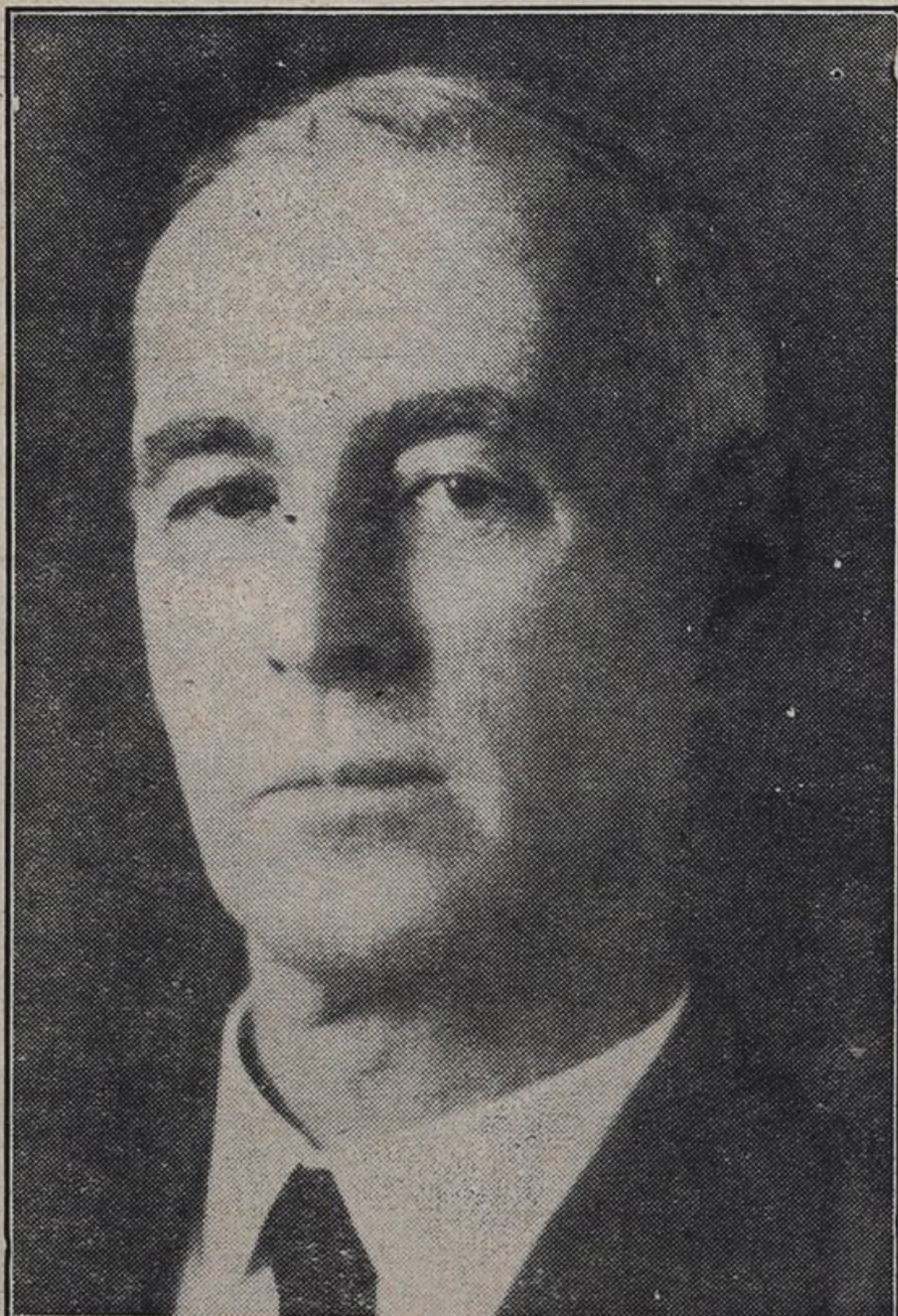
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