

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE:

CALLED in by wealthy Mrs. Norman Ashcraft to locate her husband, who had disappeared after a quarrel, Continental Operative No. 7, hero of "The Thin Man," traced his quarry to Tiajuana's Golden Horseshoe Cafe. He scraped an acquaintance with Ashcraft, who had adopted the name of Ed Bohannon, and with a music hall girl called Kewpie, Ashcraft's companion. Returning to San Francisco to report to Mrs. Ashcraft, the detective finds her dead, murdered, together with a maid and a Filipino boy. Suspecting the girl and Ashcraft, Cont. Op. No. 7 rushes back to Tiajuana, with two aides, Gorman and Hooper. He contacts Ashcraft and the girl and tells them he suspects one Gooseneck Flinn, the cafe clean-up man, of having done the actual killing, but suggests that Ashcraft and the girl return with him to San Francisco.

CHAPTER IV—(Conclusion.)

THE Englishman was thinking hard. I knew I had him worried, chiefly through what I had said about Gooseneck Flinn. He bit his lip and frowned. Then he shook himself and chuckled.

Kewpie bent forward. Her left hand went under the hem of her skirt. The hand came up—empty. The flash from Gooseneck's gun lit on a knife flying like a streak through the air.

The girl spun back across the room—hammered back by the bullets that tore through her chest. Her back hit the wall. She pitched forward to the floor.

Gooseneck stopped shooting and tried to speak. The brown shaft of the girl's knife stuck out of his yellow throat. He couldn't get his words past the blade. He dropped one gun and tried to take hold of the protruding shaft. Halfway up to it his hand came, and dropped. He went down slowly—to his knees—hands and knees—rolled over on his side—and lay still.

I jumped for the Englishman. My hand brushed his coat, but he twisted away from me, and got his gun out.

His eyes were hard and cold and his mouth was shut. He didn't make a speech. A moment of hesitation in the doorway. The door jerked open and shut. He was gone.

I sprang to Gooseneck's side, tore one of the guns out of his dead hand, and plunged into the street. The maroon roadster was trailing a cloud of dust into the desert behind it. Thirty feet from me stood a dirt-caked black touring car.

"You know," he drawled, "I fancy your true name isn't Painless Parker at all. You don't act like it."

Twisting a handkerchief into a tourniquet of a sort, I knotted it around his wounded arm.

"Let's go upstairs and talk," I suggested, and helped him up the steep side of the gully.

We climbed into his roadster.

"Out of gas," he said. "We've got a nice walk ahead of us."

"We'll get a lift. I had a man watching your house, and another one shadowing Gooseneck. They'll be coming out after me, I reckon. Meanwhile, we have time for a nice heart-to-heart talk."

"Go ahead, talk your head off," he invited. "You've got nothing on me. You saw Kewpie bump Gooseneck off to keep him from peaching on her."

"So that's your play?" I inquired. "The girl hired Gooseneck to kill your wife—out of jealousy—when she learned that you were planning to shake her and return to your own world?"

"Exactly."

"Not bad, Ed, but there's one rough spot in it."

"Yes?"

"Yes," I repeated. "You are not Ashcraft!" He jumped, then laughed.

"Now your enthusiasm is getting the better of



Kewpie, young, pert—
fast with a knife.



Quick-thinking, quick-acting
Continental Operative No. 7.

CONT. OP. NO. 7 UNRAVELS A THRILLING DASHIELL HAMMETT WEB OF MYSTERY WITH A STRANGE AND SURPRISING CLIMAX THAT IS IN THE BEST "THIN MAN" TRADITION.

"You're balmy, Painless," he said. "But you—"
I don't know what he was going to say—whether I was going to win or lose.

The front door slammed open, and Gooseneck Flinn came into the room.

His clothes were white with dust. His face was thrust forward to the full length of his long, yellow neck.

His shoe-button eyes focused on me. His hands turned over. That's all you could see. They simply turned over—and there was a heavy revolver in each.

"Your paws on the table, Ed," he snarled.

Ed's gun—if that was what he had in his pocket—was blocked from a shot at the man in the doorway by a corner of the table. He took his hand out of his pocket, empty, and laid both palms down on the table-top.

"Stay where y'r at!" Gooseneck barked at the girl.

She was standing on the other side of the room. Her knife was not in sight.

Gooseneck glared at me for nearly a minute, but when he spoke it was to Ed and Kewpie.

"So this is what y' wired me to come back for, huh? A trap! Me the goat for y'r! I'll be y'r goat! I'm goin' to speak my piece, an' then I'm goin' out o' here if I have to smoke my way through the whole damn' Mex army! I killed y'r wife all right—an' her help, too. Killed 'em for the thousand bucks —"

The girl took a step toward him, screaming: "Shut up, damn you!"

Her mouth was twisting and working like a child's.

"Shut up, yourself!" Gooseneck roared back at her. "I'm doing the talkin'. I killed her for —"

I jumped for it, climbed in and pointed it at the dust-cloud ahead.

The car under me, I discovered, was surprisingly well engined for its battered looks. I nursed it along, not pushing it. There were hours of daylight left.

For half an hour or more the dust-cloud ahead and I held our respective positions, and then I found that I was gaining.

The going was roughening.

I missed a boulder that would have smashed me up and looked ahead to see that the maroon roadster had stopped.

The roadster was empty. I kept on.

From behind the roadster a pistol snapped at me, three times.

He fired again from the shelter of his car, and then dashed for a narrow arroyo off to the left. On the brink, he wheeled to snap another cap at me—and jumped down out of sight.

I twisted the wheel in my hands, jammed on the brakes and slid the black touring car to the spot where I had seen him last. The edge of the arroyo was crumbling under my front wheels. I released the brake. Tumbled out. Shoved.

The car plunged down into the gully after him.

Sprawled on my belly, Gooseneck's gun in my hand, I wormed my hand over the edge. On all fours, the Englishman was scrambling out of the way of the car. One of the man's fists was bunched around a gun—mine.

"Drop it and stand up, Ed!" I yelled.

Snake-quick, he swung his arm up—and I smashed his forearm with my second shot.

He was holding the wounded arm with his left hand when I slid down beside him.

He grinned at me.

your judgment," he kidded me. "Could I have deceived another man's wife? Don't you think her lawyer, Richmond, made me prove my identity?"

"Well, I'll tell you Ed, I think I'm a smarter baby than either of them. Suppose you had a lot of stuff that belonged to Ashcraft—papers, letters, things in his handwriting? If you were even a fair hand with a pen, you could have fooled his wife. She thought her husband had had four tough years and had become a hop-head. That would account for irregularities in his writing. And I don't imagine you ever got very familiar in your letters—not enough so to risk any mis-steps. As for the lawyer—his making you identify yourself was only a matter of form. It never occurred to him that you weren't Ashcraft. Identification is easy, anyway. Give me a week and I'll prove that I'm the Sultan of Turkey."

He shook his head sadly.

"That comes from riding around in the sun."

I went on.

"At first your game was to bleed Mrs. Ashcraft for an allowance—to take the cure. But after she closed out her affairs in England and came here, you decided to wipe her out and take everything. You knew she was an orphan and had no close relatives to come butting in. Now if you want to, you can do your stalling for just as long as it takes us to send a photograph of you to England—to be shown to the people that knew him there. But you understand that you will do your stalling in the can, so I don't see what it will get you."

"Where do you think Ashcraft would be while I was spending his money?"

There were only two possible guesses. I took the more reasonable one. "Dead."

I imagined his mouth tightened a little, so I took another shot, and added:

"Up North."

That got to him, though he didn't get excited. But his eyes became thoughtful behind his smile. It was even betting that he thought I meant Seattle, where the last record of Ashcraft had come from.

"You may be right, of course," he drawled. "But even at that, I don't see just how you expect to hang me. Can you prove that Kewpie didn't think I was Ashcraft? Can you prove that she knew why Mrs. Ashcraft was sending me money? Can