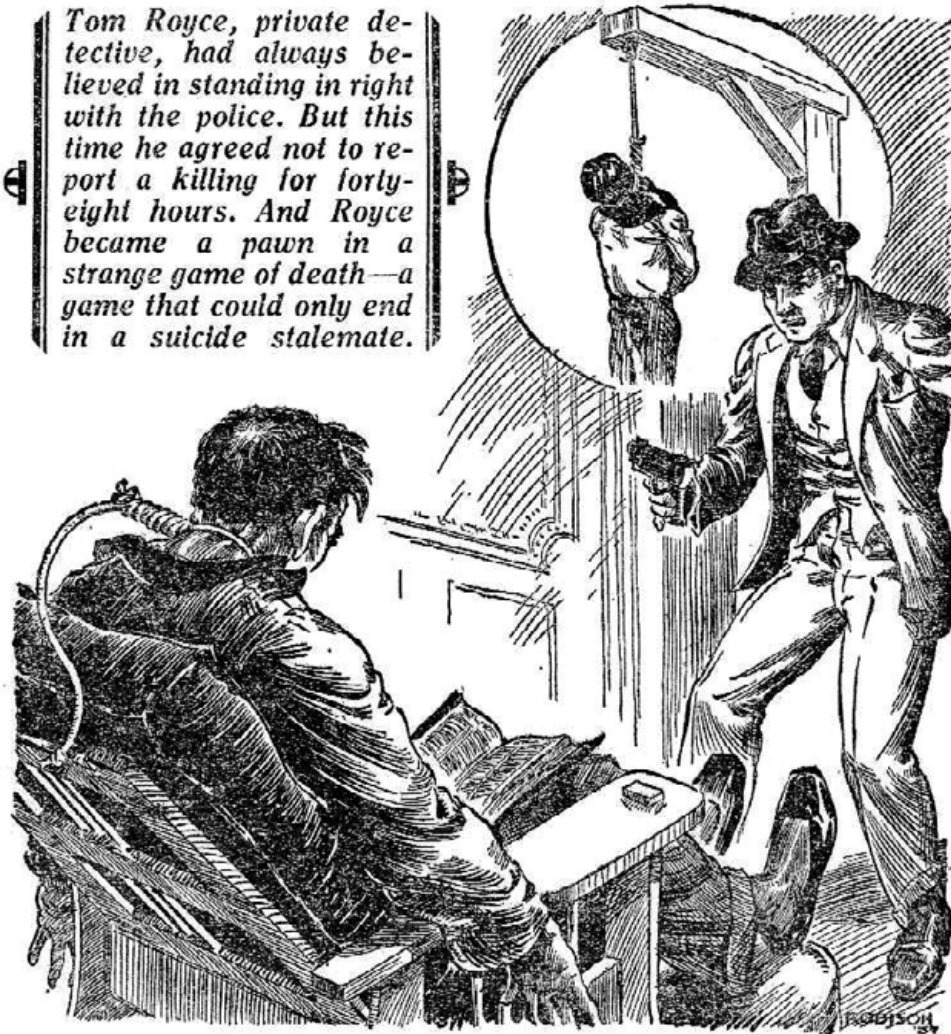


Homicide Domain

Tom Royce, private detective, had always believed in standing in right with the police. But this time he agreed not to report a killing for forty-eight hours. And Royce became a pawn in a strange game of death—a game that could only end in a suicide stalemate.



By Harris Clivesey

“DEATH,” said Mr. Savini philosophically, “is one of the things that we must all learn to accept. No one should be afraid of death.”

Tom Royce grinned sourly, took out his package of cigarettes. Then he seemed to think better of it, put it back, and helped himself from Mr. Savini’s humidor of costly cigars that stood on the bridge table between them. After he had lit the cigar he glanced at Savini, then at the man and woman who sat on the divan at the other

side of the room.

“I suppose,” Royce said, “that’s why you sent for me.”

Savini smiled, showing a set of perfect, white teeth. “For my own part, Mr. Royce, I am quite used to the idea of dying.” He shrugged carelessly. “I have been close to death for many years. In fact, I can truthfully say that it does not matter to me whether I meet him for the last time today or ten years from now. But Mrs. Blake here, and Mr. Lewis, do not share my feelings.”

He nodded toward the man and the woman.

Royce looked across at them again. "I can't blame Mrs. Blake much for wanting to live. It would be a shame to deprive the world of so much beauty." He smiled at her while his eyes studied the soft curve of her throat, the caressing way in which the golden curls nestled against her forehead. Her mouth was full, rich, voluptuous. She was under thirty, of that he was sure; but there was a sort of worldly wisdom about her, a kind of scintillating hardness.

Now her eyes, which were ordinarily an agate gray, were filled with nameless terror. She was holding tight to the hand of Ross Lewis, who sat beside her. Royce could see that her knuckles were white with strain.

She exclaimed: "I don't want to die, Mr. Royce; not like—my husband! You must save me—you must save us all." Suddenly she released Lewis' hand, and covered her face. She sobbed softly. "I can still see Henry hanging there, with the rope around his neck—"

Lewis put an arm on her shoulder. "Buck up, Gloria," he said sharply. "Now that Mr. Royce is here, we should be safe. Henry is dead, and we can't help him by crying."

Lewis was a large man, with a wide phlegmatic looking face. His ears were large, and his eyes were small. He took his arm off her shoulder, stood up. Royce saw that he must have been in the army at some time or other. Lewis' figure had a pronounced military stiffness.

Mrs. Blake raised her head, looking the prettier for her wet eyes, which she made no effort to dry. She looked at Royce appealingly.

"You *will* save us, Mr. Royce?"

Royce arose too, shrugged. "Not the way I feel about it now. So far, all I know is that your husband, Henry Blake, is hanging dead in the next room, with four stab wounds in his body. This place is four miles

off the Nassau Turnpike, which puts it in Suffolk County. Offhand, I'd say I'll have nothing to do with it. It's murder, and when it's murder, the police like to be notified. In fact, they insist on it.

"Yet I get here two hours after you found him, and you're still keeping it a secret. I don't do business that way. In my game I have to keep on the right side of the cops."

Savini thoughtfully tapped a new cigarette on his thumbnail, lit it, and glanced at Mrs. Blake and Lewis. Lewis lowered his eyes as if he did not want to commit himself. Mrs. Blake said nothing. Suddenly there seemed to be a prolonged hush in the room.

Royce stared from one to the other, then said hotly: "All right, I get it. You're like all the rest of them. You want a private detective to help you, without telling him anything. Well, I don't do like that. I never work in the dark. I found out long ago that it's cheaper not to take the case at all." He started for the door.

"Wait!"

Royce stopped with his hand on the knob, turned slowly at the imperative command from Lewis. His eyes narrowed.

The big man had stepped away from Gloria Blake, and was holding a small automatic.

Royce's lips tightened. With his left arm he nudged forward the clip under his armpit, where nestled his own automatic pistol. He said softly: "You're starting something you may not be able to finish, Lewis. Just what is the idea of the artillery?"

Lewis' small eyes bore across the room at Royce. "I'm not trying to start anything, Royce. Only we can't afford to have the police here. You can go, if you'll promise to say nothing for the next forty-eight hours about the murder of Henry Blake."

Royce glanced at Mrs. Blake, who was staring at him, wide-eyed; at Savini, who

showed his teeth in a placating smile. "It is regrettable, Mr. Royce, that we must take this step. But Mr. Lewis is right. To have the police now would be, for us, almost worse than death. Can you not be reasonable?"

Royce's face was a dull red. "Not with a gun poked at me," he growled. "I'm going out of here, Lewis—now!"

He dropped to one knee, his hand flashing under his coat to reappear with his gun.

Lewis didn't fire. Gloria Blake had seized the big man's arm, dragged it down.

"No, no, Ross," she shouted. "There's been enough—"

She stopped, seemed to wilt as she realized that Royce now controlled the situation. Royce's gun traveled in an arc from her and Lewis to Savini.

"Thanks, Mrs. Blake," he said. Then he rapped out at Lewis: "Drop the gun!"

LEWIS threw a venomous glance at Mrs. Blake, let the automatic slide from his fingers. He was breathing hard through his nose, and he looked as if he wanted to break the woman's neck.

Savini was entirely self-possessed. He had not moved. Now he smiled a wryly. "You see, Gloria," he said, "you were wrong to insist on sending for Royce. He is like a bull in a china shop. He will wreck everything for us."

Royce crossed the room to a small table on which stood a large Japanese doll in a colorful costume. Still keeping the others covered, he lifted the doll, revealing a telephone. He took up the receiver, waited for the operator.

Lewis said suddenly: "Royce, don't do that. You're doing a terrible thing to us!"

Royce grinned thinly. "What do you want me to do—love you, after you pull a gun on me?"

Lewis lowered his eyes. For a moment

Royce had seen raw hate in those little pinpoint pupils of his.

Savini took a half step forward, stretched out a thin, graceful long-fingered hand. "You do not under—"

He stopped as Royce put down the phone with a frown. "The line is dead," he announced. "Somebody must have cut your wire."

For a minute a hush of fear followed his announcement.

Then Savini said: "We are doomed. The murderer of Henry Blake will kill us all today, as he promised." He lit another cigarette with a steady hand, glanced at the woman. "I am sorry only for you, Gloria. Lewis and I have little to lose."

Royce looked bored. "You birds sound like a movie. I'm going and get the cops."

Mrs. Blake ran toward him, disregarding his gun. "Please, please, Mr. Royce, stay here and save us. If you go, we will all be dead before the police return; and if we are not, then it will be just as bad."

Royce looked down at her trembling hands, smiled at her. "I'd like to help you, Mrs. Blake, even though your friend here got nasty with a gun. But I can't help you if I don't know what it's all about."

Impulsively she turned to Lewis and Savini. "Tell him," she urged in a desperate, throaty voice. "It's our only chance."

Lewis was surly. But Savini suddenly exclaimed: "All right!"

Mrs. Blake breathed a sigh of relief. She turned away, went to the window, and stood with her back to the room. Her shoulders were heaving. She was sobbing again.

Lewis started toward her, but Royce said: "Leave her alone. She's got to get it out of her system. Now let's get down to business. Understand, I don't promise anything till I get the whole story."

"Yes, yes," Savini said eagerly. He had made a decision, and now appeared anxious to go through with it. "Show Mr. Royce the

note, first, Lewis," he directed.

Lewis still hesitated. "But—"

Royce sighed. "Must we start all over again? Do you talk, or do I go?"

Unwillingly Lewis drew a folded slip of paper from his vest pocket, handed it to Royce, who still kept his gun out. He opened it with his left hand, read the scribbled, sprawling message.

Blake is dead. We have caught up with you. Savini is next, then Lewis, then Blake's wife. When you are all dead, the money will turn up. A little neck-stretching will do you all good. Pray. By morning you will be dead.

"Very nice," said Royce. "Who wrote it?"

"We don't know," Lewis told him. "It must be someone who's followed us from Manila."

"From Manila?"

"That is right," Savini interrupted. "Blake, Lewis, and I ran the National Lottery in the Philippine Islands, together with two partners who were native Filipinos. Under the new constitution which has been submitted to Congress, we would have been deprived of our franchise. So the five of us decided to depart—and—er—since there was some three million pesos in the treasury of the lottery which remained to be distributed, we—ah—"

Royce raised his eyebrows. "You took the pesos along?"

Savini nodded. "Those Filipinos would not know what to do with their winnings. We, on the other hand, felt that we could use the money to good advantage."

"Hmm," said Royce. "Three million pesos, eh? Where are these two Filipinos who ran the lottery with you?"

Savini fidgeted uneasily. "It must be they who killed Blake and left the note. You see, we—er—neglected to notify them that we were leaving. Only the three of us—Blake and Lewis and I—came here."

"And Mrs. Blake?"

The woman turned from the window, her eyes flashing. "I didn't know about it until yesterday. I had been living here in the States. Yesterday, Henry phoned me, told me he had just arrived from Manila. I came here to meet him, and was informed of what these two had made him do." She stretched out her hands impulsively. "Oh, Mr. Royce, believe me, Henry was no thief. But he was under their influence."

Royce stared at her suspiciously. "You seemed pretty friendly with Mr. Lewis just a while ago."

She lowered her eyes.

LEWIS explained gruffly: "What she says is true, Royce. She's my cousin. She came here last night, and tried to convince us we ought to give back the money. She almost had us sold on the idea, and we went to sleep, resolved to talk it over some more this morning.

"But—this morning we found Henry's body hanging in the next room. Someone must have broken into the house, but all the doors and shutters were latched. The note was on the floor below the body."

Royce looked thoughtful. "If all the doors and shutters were latched, that kind of narrows it down—"

Lewis' eyes suddenly widened. His big hands clenched. "Are you accusing—"

Royce raised a hand. "Don't take it personally, Mister. You three aren't the only ones in the house. How about the Filipino who let me in when I came?"

Lewis relaxed. "That's Basilio, my house boy. I brought him over from Manila. We promised him a share in the—proceeds. He's devoted to me. And he didn't kill Blake. In fact, he couldn't."

"Couldn't?" Royce asked.

"That's what I said. He sleeps in the attic, and my room is on the floor above, at the head of the stairs. I'm a light sleeper

myself, and I'd positively have heard him coming down during the night. I awake at the slightest sound."

"I see," said Royce softly. "That seems to narrow it down to you, Mr. Savini, and Mrs. Blake."

"Damn it!" Lewis exclaimed hotly. "There you go again—"

Savini interrupted, putting a restraining hand on Lewis' arm. "There is something else I should tell you, Mr. Royce, before you jump to conclusions. This is an old house, which we rent. It is said to be haunted. Do not laugh at me, Mr. Royce, but we of the old world have come to believe—"

"Look, Mr. Savini," Royce stopped him with exaggerated patience. Old world or new world, there's one thing you'll never get me to believe—that a spook can hang you. Suppose you let me take a look at the body of Mr. Blake."

Savini nodded eagerly. "Of course. Then you are going to help us?"

Royce didn't seem any too happy. "I can see I'm being dragged into this against my better judgment. But if I work this out, find out who's in back of it, you'll have to promise to return all those pesos. Otherwise I don't touch it."

Lewis glanced at his partner. Savini hesitated.

Mrs. Blake exclaimed impulsively: "Of course you will. It's the only thing to do!"

Reluctantly Savini nodded. Lewis shrugged hopelessly.

The little man showed his white teeth in a wry smile. "It's a lot of money to give up. You know, the peso is worth fifty cents. That makes a million and a half dollars. Yet—"

"Okay," said Royce. "Let's get a look at the body."

Savini stepped to the door, pressed a button. A bell rang out in the hall, and a moment later the door opened to admit the

Filipino servant who had let Royce in.

He was a little inclined to stoutness, and his face was round, oily. "Did you wish something, sir?" he asked Lewis in a squeaky voice.

"We're going next door to look at Mr. Blake's body," Lewis told him gruffly. "You stay here with Mrs. Blake."

"If you don't mind," Royce said quietly. "I'd like to arrange it a little differently. We'll let Basilio come with us, and Mr. Savini will remain with Mrs. Blake."

Lewis shrugged. "Just as you say." He turned to Savini. "Give me the key, Alec."

Savini handed it over. He explained to Royce: "We locked the room next door, so the body wouldn't be disturbed. We thought that whoever we called in would want—"

"Sure, sure," Royce broke in. He started for the door, pushing Basilio ahead of him. "After all this nonsense, it's about time we took a look at the body. You first, Basilio."

The Filipino wasn't any too anxious to go into the room next door, but when Lewis opened the door and snapped on the lights, Royce gently propelled the servant inside.

They all stopped just inside the doorway. Lewis stood there, openmouthed, his phlegmatic face for the first time registering some sort of expression, his eyes roving to every part of the room.

Royce heaved a deep sigh, said nothing.

Lewis turned to him, raised a shaking hand and pointed to the chandelier. "I tell you, Royce, the body was hanging from that chandelier this morning. Now it's gone!"

ROYCE looked at Basilio. The Filipino muttered some unintelligible words. He shrank back toward the hallway.

Royce surveyed the room, noted that the furniture was not disarranged. It was a library. Along one wall was a row of bookshelves. An easy chair with a small end table beside it, another chair or two, and a couple of floor lamps completed the

furnishings.

It had originally, perhaps, been a dining room, and had been converted at some time into a library, which accounted for the chandelier in the center. Royce stooped and examined the rug directly beneath the chandelier. There were several dark red stains upon it.

A short length of rope hung from the center rod of the chandelier. It had been cut by some sharp instrument. Royce went to the two windows, raised the shades which had been drawn all the way down, and examined the catches of the windows. They were all fastened tight, and the shutters on the outside were all securely fastened.

Lewis was saying: "Royce, no human being could have got in here. And anyway, what would they want with Blake's body?"

Royce shrugged. He turned to Basilio, who was still cringing against the wall. "You!" he snapped. "Were you in this room today at all?"

"No, sir!" the Filipino returned. "I no come near here all day, after we find Misser Blake's body here. I no have key."

"Savini was the only one who had a key," Lewis suggested.

Royce gazed at him thoughtfully. "You think—"

Lewis exclaimed: "I don't know what to think!"

"Well," Royce said, "neither do I. This begins to look screwier than ever. Let's go and talk to Savini."

They went out of the room, and Lewis carefully locked the door after them.

Basilio walked down the hall first, keeping as close to Royce as possible. Lewis walked nervously, jerkily, glancing behind his back often.

The door of the sitting room was open. Royce took a step inside, and swore.

Savini and Mrs. Blake were gone. Lewis pushed in beside him, said: "They must be upstairs."

"They shouldn't have left the room," Royce said irritably. He turned back to Basilio, who was peering over their shoulders. "Call Mr. Savini," he ordered.

Basilio bowed, started for the staircase. He didn't seem very anxious to go up.

"You go with him," Royce said suddenly to Lewis. "I'm going to take a look at the outside of this place."

Lewis nodded, started after the Filipino. At the foot of the stairs, he called up: "Gloria! Where are you?"

Mrs. Blake's voice came to them from above. "Up here. Mr. Savini has gone to his room to see if the money is safe."

Lewis sighed with relief. Basilio was wiping his forehead with a handkerchief.

Royce said: "All right. Go on up and keep them company. I'll be back in a little while."

"Shall I go with you?" Lewis asked.

"No. I want to do this by myself."

Royce watched them mount the stairs, then went to the front door, opened it, slammed it shut, but stayed on the inside. He tiptoed back down the hall. He could hear Basilio and Lewis walking on the landing above. They weren't talking.

Royce stole back to the door of the library where Blake's body had been found, bent to the floor. He had noted the slight stain on the boards here, similar to the stain on the rug inside. Farther back there was another stain.

With his gun in his hand he crept noiselessly toward the back, where it was dark. He could now hear conversation from above, could hear Gloria Blake saying:

"Savini is in his room, Ross."

Lewis answered: "Damn it, why does he take so long?"

Royce kept working back along the hall until he came to a door which must lead to the cellar. He was tense now, for there was another stain on the floor here. Royce tried the cellar door, found it open. He took out

his flashlight, snapped it on, and descended the short flight of wooden stairs.

The floor of the cellar was of concrete, and there was no hiding place except the coal bin. This was the middle of the summer, and there was no coal in the bin; but there was a pile of rags in one corner. Royce pushed them aside with his foot, drew in his breath sharply as he stared down at the stiff, bloody body of a man that lay underneath. The front of the dead man's clothing was seeped in blood, and there was a rope around his neck. The rope was about a foot long.

Royce flashed his light into every corner of the cellar, found nothing. He left the body uncovered, and started upstairs again. Before he reached the top, a high-pitched, terrified shriek filled the house. It was the voice of Gloria Blake, and the scream was repeated again and again.

Royce sprinted to the top, swung down toward the front of the hall. The screams suddenly ceased. Lewis' excited voice now came down to him:

"Gloria! Open the door!"

Royce leaped up the stairs to the upper floor, taking them three at a time.

On the upper landing he saw Lewis and Basilio pounding at the door of one of the rooms on the left side of the corridor. Basilio had a long knife in his hand, that glittered under the electric lights.

Lewis continued shouting: "Gloria! Open the door! Can you hear me?" His voice was frantic, almost hysterical.

When he saw Royce, he swung on him, seized him by the arm. "Gloria's in there," he exclaimed breathlessly. "Something has happened. She went in to call Savini, and suddenly she screamed. We just got a glimpse in through the open door, and there was Savini, hanging by his neck from a rope in the middle of the room! Basilio was nearest the door, and he started to go in, but just then Gloria must have fainted or

something, and fallen against the door. It swung shut. Now we can't open it."

ROYCE'S eyes were on the knife in Basilio's hand. The Filipino saw him looking at it, and hastily put it away.

Royce pushed him aside, leveled his gun at the lock, fired once. He aimed upward so as not to hit Gloria Blake if she were slumped just inside the door.

The cheap lock shattered under the impact of the bullet, and the door gave a little. Royce pushed it, stuck his head through, and peered inside. Mrs. Blake was lying on the floor, keeping the door from opening further. But there was no body hanging in the room.

In fact, there was no sign of Mr. Savini at all. The bed was neatly made, and in one corner, beside it, stood a large trunk, open, full of currency. This much Royce saw in his quick glance into the room, and two things more—the window was raised, the shutters thrown wide open; and a length of rope hung from one of the rafters in the ceiling—a length of rope that had been cut off just like the one in the library below.

Mrs. Blake stirred and moaned, opened her eyes. All natural color had fled from her face, leaving the rouge on her cheeks and lips to stand out in startling contrast.

Royce eased in through the opening, helped her to her feet. Lewis and Basilio came in after him, stood gaping at the room.

Lewis said in a hushed voice: "I could have sworn I saw Savini hanging from the ceiling!"

Royce felt Mrs. Blake shudder violently in his arms; she raised her head, stared out of frightened eyes at the rope hanging from the rafter. A scream gurgled in her throat, died as Royce gripped her arm, said:

"Take it easy, Mrs. Blake. Tell me what you saw. Was it Savini?"

She nodded, gulping. "The—the room was dark. I switched on the light, wondering

where he was. And then I saw him—hanging there—” She buried her face in her hands. *“I can’t stand it!”*

Royce led her to the bed, set her on it, motioned to Lewis to take care of her. Then he went to the window, looked out into the night.

The ground outside rose here, so that there was hardly any difficulty presented to anybody who wanted to get in or out of the window. The shutters had not been forced open.

Royce frowned, started to turn away, when from outside, not far away, came the explosion of a revolver.

Instinctively, Royce ducked. The shot was high, anyway, and the glass of the window was shattered, crashing into the room, littering the floor and the bed.

Mrs. Blake screamed. Lewis swore. Basilio dropped to his knees. Royce crouched near the window, shouted, “Get to the floor!” just as another slug tore into the room, this time lower.

Royce fired at the flash out there in the darkness, and as the roar of his explosion died away he heard a gurgling sound from behind him. He turned, saw Lewis sprawled on the floor, with Mrs. Blake staring at him in horror.

The second shot had caught the big man in the throat, and he was not a pretty sight. He writhed a moment, tried to utter something, and failed. A shudder ran through his frame, and he lay still.

Royce sprang across the room, snapped the electric light switch. The room was thrown into darkness. He could hear Mrs. Blake moaning softly, could hear Basilio’s noisy, frightened breathing.

There were no more shots from outside.

Royce stole across the room, said softly: “I’m going out through the window. You, Basilio, close the shutters after me.”

Basilio stuttered: “Y-yes, s-sir.”

Royce swung a leg over the sill, dropped to the ground. It was rocky here, and the going was hard, but he made little noise, working over in the direction from which the shots had been fired.

There was no sign of movement anywhere.

Suddenly Royce’s foot touched something soft. He jumped to one side, holding his gun straight out in front of him. But there was no movement from the thing he had touched.

He set his lips grimly, held the flashlight out at arm’s length, clicked it on, held it there for a second, then clicked it off and quickly changed his position. No shots greeted him.

He put his flashlight and gun away, stooped grimly in the darkness and raised the body of the man whom his light had revealed. In the second that he had kept his light on, he had seen who it was. It was the body of Savini, and he was quite dead—with the rope still around his neck.

Royce heaved the dead man over his shoulder, stumbled back toward the house.

Under the window of the bedroom he called out softly: “Basilio.”

“Y-yes sir.” “Open the shutters.”

The shutters were pushed open from within, and Royce swung Savini over the sill. “Drag him in, Basilio,” he ordered in the darkness.

Basilio helped him get the body, then Royce climbed over, swung the shutters to, and switched on the light. Mrs. Blake stood in the center of the room, her hand at her throat, staring down at Savini’s body. “He—he’s dead!” she said, very low. “The—the note said he was next, and then Ross, and then—”

Royce stooped beside Savini. He had a hole in his forehead. The rope around his neck was drawn tight, but his face was not blue.

ROYCE looked up at Basilio, and the woman. "I don't think you need to worry any more, Mrs. Blake," he said. "You're safe."

"W-what do you mean?" she asked. She put out a hand, steadied herself against the bed.

For answer, Royce reached down and opened Savini's coat, tore away his shirt. A strange contraption was revealed. It consisted of a kind of chain mail shirt that rose in a high collar around the neck. It had been tinted flesh color, so that it was almost indistinguishable to the casual or excited glance. It was around this steel collar that the noose of the rope as had been drawn.

Mrs. Blake said weakly: "I—I don't understand."

"It's easy," Royce told her, grinning. "You saw Savini hanging here all right, but he wasn't dead. He hung himself up here, then when you fainted he cut himself down and scrambled out through the window. That hole in the head is what killed him—my shot from the window."

"B-but why—"

"Because he wanted to do away with all of you, and take all those pesos in the trunk for himself. He figured if we thought he was dead we'd surely blame the two Filipino partners. The note would be found later, the police would figure he'd been killed off along with you, and his body taken away, and they wouldn't even look for him. He could go to South America."

Mrs. Blake shuddered. "And—Henry?"

Royce lowered his eyes. "He's dead. His body is downstairs."

The Filipino had been listening intently to Royce's explanation. Now he said: "Mis' Blake, ma'am. I so sorry about you' husband." He glanced sorrowfully at the body of Lewis, which lay alongside the bed. "I no got boss now. Maybe I can work for you?"

She said absently: "I'll see, Basilio."

Royce got up from beside Savini's body, stared down at the trunkful of money. "I guess you're broke?" he asked her.

She sank back on the bed, nodded listlessly. "I—I don't suppose it matters," she said. "I have a couple of hundred dollars—was going to use it to pay you with."

Royce grinned. "You won't have to. In fact, I think you won't be so broke from now on."

She looked up at him inquiringly.

He pointed to the trunkful of money. "Don't you think I read the papers? The minute I walked in here I knew who Lewis and Savini were. But I didn't let on. It never pays to show your hand."

She still didn't seem to understand.

He explained: "Don't you know that the Philippine Government has offered a reward of fifty thousand pesos for the return of this money, and the capture of the absconders? Well, you and I are going to share it!"