

One Hundred Bucks per Stiff

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[Mr. Peck was dead ... the papers said so. Yet Mr. Peck performed his own autopsy and saved eight men from death!]

„There’s a guy outside wants to see you, Chief,“ Charlie Ward’s assistant announced through the door.

„What’s he want, Joe?“

„I don’t know. Says his business is confidential and urgent. Wouldn’t say what. Looks harmless though, in spite of he drove up in a Rolls Royce with a chauffeur.“

„Well, send him in.“

Ward busied himself with a sheaf of morning mail and miscellaneous police circulars. Presently a small, immaculate looking individual with an apologetic, breathless air entered the room and approached the desk timidly. Silently, without even so much as a nod, he laid a newspaper clipping before the Chief of Police. Adjusting his glasses, Ward reached for the item and glanced through it hastily:

MAN KILLED AT EL GATOS GRADE CROSSING

El Gatos, November 1. The decapitated body of a man tentatively identified as J. Peter Peck, address unknown, was discovered by a company track walker early this morning on the South West Pacific grade crossing half a mile south of the town of El Gatos. Local police believe that the man was killed some time after midnight, possibly by the San Francisco milk train. Identification was established by a wallet containing papers of the deceased.

Ward laid the clipping on his desk, rolled a bulbous wad of chewing tobacco into one cheek and expelled it into a spittoon some ten feet away with a resounding plunk. Wiping his chin inexpertly with the back of a grizzled hand, he looked up and eyed his visitor interrogatively.

„I clipped it from last night's San Francisco Bulletin," the latter explained quietly. „I drove practically all night so as to be here this morning."

„You're a relative?"

The stranger smiled weakly and placed a pair of painfully thin hands on the desk as though to steady himself.

„Well, no, not exactly; that is, somewhat," he answered obscurely.

Charlie Ward eyed the little man curiously. „Come again, please?"

„Well, it's this way," slipping nervously to the very edge of a convenient chair. „There appears to have been a slight error made. The clipping is somewhat inaccurate."

„Sure. Half the stuff you see in the papers these days is cockeyed. Them guys never get anything straight. I always tell my wife you gotta believe only ten per cent of what you read and doubt that."

The stranger smiled thinly. „Precisely. Now the real truth of the matter in this particular case is that I happen to be J. Peter Peck and, to the best of my knowledge, I'm not dead. In fact I'd take issue with anyone who questioned the fact. I therefore feel that the report has been exaggerated; just a tiny bit, at least." He paused for breath. „I thought you'd like to know."

Ward arched his brows and smiled calmly. As a veteran police officer, he was used to surprises. „Well, now that's one for the book, ain't it?"

„Rather."

„So, if you're the guy that's supposed to be downstairs on ice," Ward supplemented, fumbling in a drawer of his desk, „how come we find this here wallet with your name all over the papers inside on him?"

Mr. Peck glanced at the wallet.

„Very easily explained," he answered. „I was held up last Monday evening in San Francisco. The wallet and the papers it contains were among the things taken from me. Incidentally, there were several thousands of dollars in the wallet when I last saw it."

Ward whistled softly. „How much?"

„About twenty-four hundred dollars."

„That's a lot of dollars."

„It would keep a man in cigars for a day or two."

„And this guy, after he stuck you up," Ward reasoned, „left Frisco and come North where he had the bad luck to meet with an accident."

„Precisely.“

„What'd he look like?“

„There were two of them. One had red hair and his left ear was missing. The other was short; about my size, I would say; rather thin, with a small, black, straggly mustache and swarthy skin. I should judge he were either an Italian or possibly a Spaniard.“

„The second one fits the guy on ice. Want to take a squint at him?“

Mr. Peck jumped to his feet.

„I'd be delighted,“ he said with what sounded to Charlie Ward like unwarranted glee.

Ward picked up a flask of corn whiskey and slipped it into his hip pocket.

„I warn you,“ he cautioned as he rose, „this guy's pretty much worked over in spots. A train went through him you know. Some people get goose pimples looking at them kind of things.“

„I'll risk it.“

The pair left the office and descended a flight of steps. At the end of a dark corridor, Ward led the way into a basement room. Upon one of two marble slabs in the center of the room, lay a sheeted corpse. Ward pulled the shroud back, revealing a horribly mangled body. Mr. Peck leaned over the corpse, revealing none of the repulsion that Ward was sure he would exhibit.

„Yes, that's unquestionably one of the men who held me up,“ the little man said quietly. „I'd know that face anywhere, what there is left of it. Er—seems to be quite dead, doesn't he?“ he added wryly.

„Quite,“ Ward mimicked, wondering at the same time what strange complex could cause a man of Mr. Peck's evident refinement and good breeding to jest under such circumstances.

The little man leaned over the corpse again.

„Odd marks on his face, aren't they?“ he observed.

„Huh?“ Ward seemed startled.

„I said those were odd marks on his face,“ Mr. Peck repeated.

Ward's face clouded and he stepped closer to Mr. Peck.

„It's funny you should notice them red blotches, Mr. Peck,“ he said. „I been kind of wondering about them myself.“

The two men eyed one another for a moment of tense silence, and marked suspicion.

„Why?“ Mr. Peck asked abruptly.

Ward scanned the little man's face with an air of uncertainty.

„Er—do them marks mean anything to you?“ he finally asked, his voice tinged with caution.

Mr. Peck made no immediate answer, but turned and leaned closer to the corpse, examining the faint red blotches on the cheeks with more care than he had at first taken.

„To the casual observer, that is, to the layman,“ he said, removing his glasses and facing Ward, „it might appear that the deceased was suffering from a mild case of measles“—he paused, glanced at the corpse again, then turned once more to Ward—„but to the trained eye, I would say that this man has received a shot of xetholine caniopus into his system.“

„A shot of what?“

„The name means little. Xetholine caniopus is a drug; not rare, not common, but violently poisonous. Contact, even to the lips or to a flesh abrasion will

bring about practically instantaneous paralysis of the cardia.“ The little man blinked. „Er—the heart, I refer to. Xetholine invariably leaves its mark, as you perceive, in the form of faint red blotches on the cheeks.“ He thumbed in the direction of the corpse. „Putting the diagnosis into simpler words, this man has been poisoned. He died from the effects of the poison as is indicated by the slight carmine tinge to the blood. The effect of this poison on the blood stream is similar to that caused by asphyxiation by coal gas or a similar substance, only not quite so brilliantly red. If this man had died as a direct result of injuries received by the train passing over his body, the blood would be darker, almost purple. Offhand, I would say that the train passed over his body some several hours after his death. Depending upon the determination as to whether the poison was self administered or otherwise, will settle the question as to whether you have a suicide or a murder case on your hands.“

Ward stared into the little man's eyes in astonishment.

„Say,“ he interrupted, „who are you, anyhow?“

Mr. Peck smiled benevolently.

„My name,“ he explained, „you already know. I happen to be deeply interested in criminology. It's been an avocation of mine for many years. My specialty is toxicology. I...“

„Tox—tox...?“

„Toxicology; the study of poisons. The circumstances of this particular case are unusually close to home and I feel a personal interest.“ He paused and peered into Ward's face hesitantly and then added in a voice that half pleaded and half apologized—„I—could I—would you allow me to—er—work with you in this matter, Mr. Ward? I'd expect no pay, of course,“ he hastened to add, „and I can assure you that my efforts will be sincere and my intentions entirely honorable. My only interest is in clearing up the matter, or at least attempting to do so, for the—well—the fun of doing it.“

„Some fun, all right,“ Ward observed wryly. „But, at that price, the County can't lose much. You're hired.“

„That's fine,“ Mr. Peck enthused, his eyes shining brilliantly. He rubbed his palms together briskly. „I can't tell you how deeply grateful I really am.“

„Okay, Mr. Peck,“ with a shade of doubt. „It's your funeral. The paper says so.“

„Now first, I must make a test to satisfy myself that xetholine caniopis was the actual cause of death. There are a few things I'll need; a glass, an ordinary water glass will do, a small quantity of commercial alcohol and a bit of lime water. My chauffeur will get the latter two, if you'll supply the glass. Please notify him.“

Ward hesitated, as though doubtful about leaving this unusual person alone in the morgue, but finally assented.

A few minutes later he reappeared with the glass, followed almost directly by the chauffeur with the alcohol and lime water.

„Thank you, Christian,“ Mr. Peck said in the chauffeur's direction. „You may wait in the car.“

Ward's eyes followed the chauffeur as he left the room.

„He's a big guy all right,“ he observed, thumbing toward the vanishing driver. „Sure must have et his mush every morning when he was a little boy. Looks like he's about six foot six.“

„Six, six and one-eighth in his stocking feet, to be exact,“ Mr. Peck corrected. „Before meals he weighs two eighty-eight; after meals two ninety-eight.“

„Wouldn't want to run into him on a dark night.“

„Hardly,“ Mr. Peck agreed. „When he first came to me, he applied for the position which he now holds under the name of Mike Dennis and explained that he generally answered to the intimate and thoroughly quaint cognomen of ›Butch‹. But I changed that to Christian. Of course ›Butch‹ is more in keeping, but I do believe that Christian adds to his dignity in spite of his ears. Don't you think so?“ Ward grunted vaguely. „I have it on good authority that he put Mr. Dempsey to sleep one evening about fifteen years ago in an amateur boxing meet.“ Mr. Peck's eyes sparkled as he glanced up from his work for a moment. „Unfortunately, I happen to be worth several million dollars. There have been two attempts to abduct me. Christian makes an excellent body guard as well as chauffeur. Not much intellect, but most conscientious and as faithful as an old watch dog. I've had him with me twenty-two months now and to date he's uttered not more than twenty-two words; except, of course, when I speak with him. A handy person to have about; most handy.“

By now Mr. Peck had sterilized the glass with the alcohol and was prepared to make his test.

„In the glass,“ he explained, holding the object toward the light, „I have poured some lime water. By blowing one's breath into the liquid, through a common cigarette holder, the lime water becomes a milky white; thusly,“ and he suited the action to the word. „The balance of the test is quite simple. Several drops of the deceased's coagulated blood are now added to the water. As you see, there is no change. In a moment, I will add a little alcohol. If the lime water clears and becomes colorless again, and shows indication of a volatile oil on the surface, you may rest assured that xetholine caniopus exists in the blood stream. Although the test is simple, the chemical reaction is rather involved, being a combination and then a dissemination of structural heraetixae and third power phincus. I shall not, therefore, bother you with its details. Suffice to say, the test is infallible and conclusive.“

Ward scratched his head in hopeless perplexity and stared in mild anticipation mingled with a great deal of skepticism as Mr. Peck poured a small quantity of alcohol into the glass. Immediately, the liquid became pure and colorless and the surface indicated a distinctly oily film.

„All of which bears me out,“ Mr. Peck said quietly, placing the glass on the table. „This man has been poisoned. Our next step is to determine whether the poison was self administered or otherwise. We...“

„Just a minute, Mr. Peck,“ Ward interrupted, raising his hand. „There's a couple of things here I ought to explain.“ Ward floundered for a moment of hesitancy. „You see, it's this way. For about twenty years, now, about twelve people a year have died in this here town; one a month; that's the average.“

„Yes; yes?“ Mr. Peck interjected interestedly.

„But in the last month, eleven people have turned in their rain checks. This guy's the twelfth.“

„Which more or less upsets the law of averages.“

„That's just what I'm getting at. But what's worse, is that ten out of these twelve met with deaths from accidents of one kind or another.“

„Just how do you mean?“

„Well, this guy, for instance,“ motioning toward the slab, „was bumped by a train. The rest met with other accidents ranging all the way from hit and run, down the line to falling off hay lofts and being kicked in the head by a mule. Nobody seen any of the accidents, but the evidence was such that you couldn't help see what happened. For instance, the guy that was kicked by a mule, he had a hoof mark on his head and his mule had a bloody hoof. The hit-run guy, we found in the middle of the high way.“

„Coincidence. Accidents almost invariably occur in threes or fours.“

„Sure; threes and fours, but not tens and twelves. But there's something else.“

„...yes?“

Charlie Ward moved a little closer and glanced behind him as he spoke.

„Of the ten who met with accidents,“ he said, „nine had these red marks on their cheeks.“

„Excellent! Gorgeous!“ Mr. Peck enthused through grinning lips. „A multiple murder! Nothing could be clearer or more fortunate!“

„Well, you may be tickled, Mr. Peck, but I ain't. Several of the victims were close friends of mine.“

Mr. Peck's attitude changed at once.

„I'm deeply sorry, Mr. Ward,“ he apologized. „My enthusiasm carried me away for the moment. Please proceed.“

Ward nodded and went on. „At first I didn't think very much about these blotches, but when this guy was brought in this morning, I began to get kind of nervous. As a matter of fact, I was just going to phone Frisco for help when you come in.“

Mr. Peck nodded and smacked his lips thoughtfully. He removed his glasses and wiped them slowly and carefully, polishing each lens with meticulous care.

„You of course have a coroner or medical examiner of some kind,“ he finally said.

„Oh, sure. Old Doc Kraus handles the cases for the whole county when they come up. There ain't enough to keep him on full time, but we send for him whenever we need him. He makes the examination and runs the inquest.“

„What did he think about the red blotches on the faces of the nine corpses?“

„Nothing. To tell you the truth I never thought enough about them to bring it up.“

„And he's never mentioned it to you.“

„No.“

„I can't possibly conceive of anyone missing them.“

„The Doc's getting pretty old,“ Ward explained. „He don't see so good. We been trying to get a younger saw-bones for a long time, but nobody had the guts to tell him he was fired, I guess. He was born here; lived here for seventy-two years. He's a nice enough old guy. Matter of fact, everybody sort of looks up to him as the town granddad. He's a kindly old duffer; always doing things for folks and going out of his way to help a neighbor and things like that. I'll send for him and ask him if he noticed the marks and what he thinks about them.“

„No, I'd prefer it if you didn't. For the present, let's work quietly. As far as I'm concerned, everybody's under suspicion and any word getting out that we're working on the case might spoil things.“

„Old Doc Kraus under suspicion!“ Ward scoffed with a loud guffaw. „Say, that's rich. Why, I'd trust him ahead of my own Dad and that's saying a lot.“

Why he brought me into this world forty-two years ago. Used to spank me when I was a kid and needed one. Why...“

„I did not say I suspected Doctor Kraus,“ Mr. Peck interrupted. „I merely inferred that everybody was under suspicion until we begin to find something definite to go on. The reasons, I believe, are obvious.“

„I get you Mr. Peck.“

„Now then, the inquest has been performed in this last case?“

„Yes; early this morning; just before you got here. They handed down a verdict of accidental death.“

„Have you made any attempts to identify the corpse?“

„Certainly. We figured it was you on account of the papers. We been trying to trace you through the Frisco police. So far no information has come in.“

„That’s quite possible. I lead a very quiet life; live at a bachelor club and am not listed either in the phone book or the City Directory.“

„I sent finger prints to the Frisco Police. If this guy’s got a record, we’ll know who he is pretty quick.“

„That’s fine.“

Mr. Peck stood for a moment with a thoughtful finger to his lips.

„I think we’ll visit the spot where the body was discovered,“ he decided abruptly. „We can go in my car.“

Ten minutes later, J. Peter Peck, accompanied by Charlie Ward and followed by Christian, stepped from the machine at a point opposite the spot where the body had been found.

„A machine has stopped here at the side of the road quite recently,“ Mr. Peck offered, pointing to the tire marks in the dust. „The occupant, as is indicated by those very clear foot prints, stepped from the car, crossed the ditch and walked to the railroad tracks. He was a heavy man, at that, or at least he has big feet. And they turn out more than the feet of the average person.“

Charlie Ward nodded agreement.

„Now if you’ll look closely,“ Mr. Peck went on, „you will observe that there are two sets of foot prints; one coming and one going. The return prints, significantly, are not as clear as those that go to the tracks, indicating that he was carrying a load to the tracks, but did not return with it.“ He glanced at Ward for a moment, then added, „It is pretty obvious what that load was. All of which gives us practically undeniable proof that a murder was committed. The deceased died of poison. We have definitely established that point. And his body was placed upon the tracks to conceal the fact; or to attempt to do so. If the deceased had walked to the tracks himself, which of course he didn’t because these are not his foot prints, there obviously would be no return prints. Dead men, especially decapitated dead men, seldom, if ever, retrace their steps.“ He paused for a moment of conjecture. „We’ll take plaster casts of the foot prints as well as the tire marks. Will you attend to that Christian? I believe you’ll find sufficient plaster of Paris in the tool compartment.“

Christian set to work and Mr. Peck and Ward retreated to the machine. When Christian had completed his work, the trio returned to headquarters, Mr. Peck leaving again to „do a little thinking.“

Two hours later, Mr. Peck entered Charlie Ward’s office again and eased himself into a chair.

„I have an idea,“ he informed Ward, „that the apprehension of the murderer is but a matter of moments. As a matter of fact, I can put my finger on him in ten minutes should I care to.“

„You can put your finger on him right this minute if you want to,“ Ward supplemented, taking his feet off the desk and flipping a cigarette butt through the window.

„How so?“

Ward unlocked a drawer in his desk and drew out a tin box from which he produced a thickly padded envelope.

„I been doing a little scientific snooping myself,“ he announced with a proud ear to ear grin.

„That’s extremely gratifying.“

Ward thumbed toward a cigar butt in an ash tray.

„That,“ he said, „is what’s left of a cigar you give me this morning. It gives off a pretty thick aroma.“

„It ought to. They cost me a dollar each.“

„Just take a whiff of this,“ Ward said, handing the envelope to Mr. Peck.

The latter smelled cautiously. „Why, it smells like my cigars.“

„Exactly. Now take a squint in the envelope.“

Mr. Peck opened the envelope and extracted a sheaf of currency.

„There’s about twenty-four grand there,“ Ward offered.

„All of which is mine. It’s the money that was taken from me when I was held up. I had the wallet and several of the cigars in the same pocket. The currency evidently became impregnated with the odor of the cigars. Where did you get it?“

Ward shuffled leisurely through some papers, finally producing a telegram.

„This wire,“ he said, flourishing the message with an extravagant gesture, „come in from the Frisco police while you were out. It says the guy downstairs on ice is Dominic Diaz. He was a guest at San Quentin up to four days ago where he was serving ten to fifty years for some mistakes he made when he was younger.“ Mr. Peck nodded interestedly. „It also says that when he so rudely walked off the premises without stopping to say goodbye, he was with a red headed monkey, minus one ear, that answers to the name of Mike McSweeney.“

„I see.“

„Mr. McSweeney had the bad taste to try to stick up our local drug emporium about half an hour ago.“

„And he is now incarcerated in your bastille.“

„Right. And he had your dough on him.“

Ward sat back in his swivel chair, hooked his thumbs into the arm holes of his vest and beamed. „Well, I guess that makes it pretty clear. Eh, Mr. Peck? Diaz, the dead pigeon, and this guy McSweeney take it on the lam from the big house. They sticks you up, then blow North and land here. They’re going to split, but McSweeney’s a pig. He wants the works. So what does he do? He croaks his pal.“ Ward cocked his head and extended his hands, palms outward. „Okay?“

Mr. Peck scratched his chin thoughtfully.

„Well, fairly so,“ he answered without enthusiasm. „But before I say how clear, I’d like to see this McSweeney person.“

A moment later a very sullen and defiant Mike McSweeney was ushered into the room.

„Turn around slowly,“ Mr. Peck ordered.

The man sulked, but with a little persuasion, he finally did as he was told.

„Now take your shoes off.“

„Say, what is this, a racket?“ the prisoner snarled.

„That will be all,“ Mr. Peck murmured after a hasty inspection of McSweeney’s feet. „You may return him to his cell. And unless you care to have him prosecuted for his attempted robbery of the drug store, you may just as well notify the Warden at San Quentin to come up and get him. His list of crimes, I am sorry to say, Ward, does not include the murder of Dominic Diaz.“

„Why—why it’s as plain as the nose on your face,“ Ward spluttered as McSweeney was led from the room. „The cigar smelling currency...“

„You’ve tried hard,“ Mr. Peck interrupted, „very hard, in fact. Your efforts are indeed commendable and I do say that your deductions are plausible, but the fact remains that McSweeney is not the man we are looking for.“

„Well, couldn’t have McSweeney poisoned him and then thrown his body on the tracks?“

„He could have,“ Mr. Peck conceded, „but there would be no object in attempting to conceal his method of killing his confederate. Besides he is not mentally equipped to think of such things. Offhand, I’d say that his I. Q. is that of an eight year old boy. Remember also, that we are looking for a man—or possibly a woman—who has killed several persons within the past thirty days, using the same method; that of the injection of xetholine caniopus. McSweeney couldn’t have killed any of the others, for the very simple reason that he has been behind bars up to four days ago.“

Mr. Peck raised his hand to silence Ward. „In addition, Mr. Ward, please remember that I have a motor car full of foot print casts. Even in his bare feet, which you saw with your own eyes, he’d overlap those prints a half inch all around. That’s why I had his shoes removed. Also, you recall that the man who carried Diaz’s body to the railroad tracks possessed feet that pointed outward. McSweeney is decidedly pigeon toed.“ Mr. Peck raised his hands, palms upward, and then dropped them to his chubby knees with a sharp slap. „Now how clear does your case appear?“

Ward grunted and stared out of the window.

„On the other hand, Mr. Ward, as I before stated and now repeat, I can put my finger on the murderer within ten minutes, should I care to.“

„Who is it?“

„I’ll tell you later. There are one or two points I must clear up before I order the arrest. I’d like to drop in and have a talk with Doctor Kraus first. I believe he can furnish what little information I require.“

„This is Mr. Peck, Doctor Kraus,“ Ward said as the pair entered the doctor’s study ten minutes later.

„It’s a pleasure,“ Mr. Peck conceded coolly. He drew a newspaper clipping from his pocket and handed it to Doctor Kraus. „To settle an argument, would you read this and give me your opinion?“

The doctor read the clipping through hastily.

„Why trepanning is nothing new,“ he scoffed. „The ancient Egyptians practiced it successfully five thousand years ago. They...“

„Never mind,“ Mr. Peck interrupted sharply. „I don’t care a rap if the practice is new or old.“ He glanced sharply at Ward, who stood gaping in astonishment, then back at the doctor. „The point is, Doctor Kraus, how does it happen that

you are able to read fine news print and yet, while performing autopsies on nine different corpses, you missed the fact that each of those persons had died from a shot of xetholine caniopus as was clearly indicated by the red blotches on the face of each individual victim?"

Doctor Kraus stiffened and stared at his inquisitor with cold precision.

„I'm afraid I don't quite follow you, Mr. Peck," he said smoothly.

„That likewise makes little difference. I also note that your toes point out considerably more than the toes of the average person."

„Your remark, Mr. Peck, is not alone vague, but makes no sense; at least not to me."

Ward intervened with a snort.

„You're crazy, Peck," he asserted heatedly. „I tell you I've known Doctor Kraus all my life. I'll vouch for him. I..."

Mr. Peck silenced Ward with an impatient gesture. Then turning again to Doctor Kraus, he said slowly and clearly, enunciating each word with care and precision. „There has been a murder committed, Doctor Kraus. As a matter of fact, there have been several murders, but I refer to one in particular; that of one Dominic Diaz, an escaped convict. Diaz died from xetholine caniopus poisoning. Later, his body was placed on the railroad tracks to make it appear that he had been killed by a train and to conceal the fact that he had been poisoned."

„Yes, I am aware of the incident," Doctor Kraus answered evenly. „I performed the autopsy. But..."

„And you also murdered this man, Doctor Kraus!" Mr. Peck glared into the doctor's eyes as he shot the accusation.

The old man sucked in a great breath and fell back a step and Ward saw, to his deep consternation, that the kindly light that had shown in Doctor Kraus's eyes for many a year, was no longer there.

„The tire marks that we found on the road near the scene of the train accident, Doctor Kraus," Mr. Peck continued, „were made by your car. In addition, Doctor Kraus, the poison was administered most carefully and professionally with a hypodermic needle. Only a physician, or one skilled in the use of such an instrument could so inject a poison as delicate and as deadly as xetholine caniopus. Obviously, because of the fact that you yourself were the autopsy surgeon, and because no other person in the County is familiar with such matters, you estimated your chances of detection as being extremely small. But..." Mr. Peck hesitated for a split fraction of a second. „Drop that!" he shouted, pouncing upon the aged physician and slapping a small glass vial from his hand.

But his action was just an instant too late, for the next moment, the old man slumped to the floor. Through eyes already dimmed by the instant action of the deadly poison, he peered up at Ward.

„I—I'm sorry, Charlie," he breathed softly as Ward dropped to his side. „After all these years, I—I've brought disgrace to—to our midst."

Ward, panic stricken and terrified, looked up at Mr. Peck, who stood frowning down at the pair.

„There's nothing we can do, Ward," he said quietly. „Look closely. The red blotches are already forming on his cheeks. Just hold him another ten seconds."

Presently Ward settled the body of the old man back to the floor. Then he rose and faced Mr. Peck.

„I can't believe it," he murmured, looking away. „I just can't believe it. I can't see why he should have done it. There wasn't any reason for it.“

„Ah, but there was a reason for it," Mr. Peck asserted confidently. „Through various channels, I discovered this morning that Doctor Kraus was deeply involved financially. His circumstances were desperate. It was vitally important that he raise two thousand dollars at once.“

„But I can't see how his killing anybody could have brought him any money. He..."

„You forget, Mr. Ward," Mr. Peck elucidated with a wry smile, „that Doctor Kraus was not a permanent employee of the County. He was retained, as needed, to perform an autopsy and preside at the inquest. For these services, he was paid at the rate of one hundred dollars a case. Twelve inquests at one hundred each, comes to twelve hundred dollars; or at least it did when I studied mathematics as a small boy. Now, Mr. Ward, is the motive clear?“

Ward nodded.

„The doctor needed eight hundred dollars more," Mr. Peck concluded. "But for a strange set of circumstances which brought me here, you, Mr. Ward, might have been his next victim.“

