OUT of the NIGHT

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CHAPTER XXVIII

This was the murderer, Cilly thought, yet she had not seen him nor could she guess his identity. This was the murderer. . . .

For one eternal second, the world spun madly around; she could feel her lungs bursting for air as those powerful hands slowly, relentlessly, choked off her breath. This was the end for her, as it had been for Amy, just a few nights before. This was death, the inevitable. . . .

Eventually she returned to a dull consciousness. At first she feared not open her eyes, for fear it was another world to which she would awaken. She had died, even as Amy had died, and this was a new beginning, a new life. . . .

It was a familiar voice which roused her. A voice which she had come to fear in these few days, but which would forever ring in her ears as the sweetest music.

"That's right, young lady," Sergeant Dolan said kindly, "open your eyes!"

Cilly opened them, looked around. Why, she was back in her own living room, stretched out on the divan! Perhaps she had never gone on the fire escape adventure; perhaps it was all a wild dream. But—

"Another 10 seconds and you'd have been a goner," Dolan told her. "Whatever took you up there?"

Cilly sat up, smiled, a little forlornly. There were a thousand demons pounding in her head, and her throat still felt as if it were encased in an iron band, but she was glad to be alive.

She held her hand out weakly to Sergeant Dolan.

"Thanks for saving my life," she said simply. "You've got him?"

"No, damn it, we haven't! My God, to think we were only 10 seconds behind him. . . ."

"What happened?"

"Well, I hadn't gotten out of the front door after leaving you when Martin drove up. Seems he got a report from Connecticut. They checked on every old lady within a dozen miles of the town this Eliott woman was supposed to be visiting. There's no such person. There's nobody with a mother living on St. Ann's avenue in Brooklyn. Mrs. Eliott is a phony. So I came back and got Johnson here to let me into 2-A with his passkey. Just as soon as we opened the door, we heard something like glass crunching, and by the time we got into the bedroom, the bird had flown. Down the fire escape, of course. There wasn't a trace of him, except the footprints where he landed when he jumped, and a few tracks to the sidewalk. But we did get there in time to prevent his finishing you off . . . thank heaven!"

"Thank heaven, indeed," Cilly repeated, with forced cheerfulness. She stroked her throat tenderly.

"Now tell me," Dolan insisted, "what took you up there?"

"Curiosity, I guess. I had a feeling that we'd find something in one of the vacant apartments, either the one above me or Carruthers'. Only," she slumped back, despairingly, "I didn't see. He turned off the light before I could get a glimpse of him. Lord! To think how close we were. . . ."

"What did you find up there?"

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Cilly told him about the empty chest of drawers, the man's coat in the closet; she emphasized the barren atmosphere of the room, as if it were not really a woman's permanent home.

"I'm sure the secret to the whole affair is in that apartment upstairs," she finished.

Dolan nodded. "You're right about that . . . we're going back for a more thorough search. I wanted to be sure you were all right first."

"I'm fine now, thanks. . . . I guess I don't choke so easily."

Dolan stood up and began to slip himself into his enormous raincoat. "Within 10 minutes," he assured her, "there'll be a man from headquarters to spend the night in Mrs. Eliott's apartment, just in case our friend does come back. In the meantime, you're not to open your door to anyone, understand that? Not to a soul! You don't know who this fellow may be. No matter who rings your bell, or whom you see standing out there in the hall, you're not to open the door. Remember that!"

"I won't," Cilly promised.

"Good. As soon as I can round up our fingerprint expert, I'll be back to go through that apartment thoroughly. And I'll bring along a good stout policewoman to spend the night here with you. Now, if you can just stick it out for 10 or 15 minutes. . . ."

"Oh, I won't be afraid," Cilly assured him.

"All right. If you hear anything that frightens you, yell your lungs out. Johnson will hear you. I've asked him to keep a watch downstairs. We don't want anyone tampering with the lights, or hiding in the engine room. . . . I'll be getting along; every minutes I lose gives our gentleman friend that much longer to plan his getaway. I want the fingerprints in that place upstairs . . . they'll tell the story."

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Left alone, Cilly shuddered. She was not nearly as brave as she had pretended to the sergeant. She sat there on the divan, where he had left her, straining her eyes to watch every nook and corner of the apartment at once. From where she sat, she could see into the bedroom next door; she could watch the fire escape window. If but a shadow crossed that window, she told herself, she would scream loud enough to wake the dead.

She watched the banjo clock on the wall, listened to it tick away the seconds. She wondered which echoed loudest through the room—the sharp, staccato ticking of the clock, or the dull, thundering beat of her own heart.

Ten minutes, Sergeant Dolan had said. Fifteen minutes at the latest, until there would be a policeman on guard upstairs and a policewoman down for company. She would breathe easier when they arrived.

But nothing could happen to her now. Over and over, she assured herself of that. The murderer would never risk a visit to her apartment, where all the lights were on, where he could not enter without her seeing him immediately. That would be walking into his own death sentence. He wouldn't dare. . . .

Nervously, she rubbed a moist palm down her throat; it still pained from the pressure of the man's iron fingers . . . she remembered his hand as it slowly, cautiously reached in and switched out the lights.

Suddenly she wanted to scream. She imagined she could see that hand now, reaching to the switch on her wall; once more she felt those strangling fingers on her throat. . . . Why, that man would dare anything! He was a fiend, diabolical and cunning, and he did not fear a dozen Sergeant Dolans. If he suspected that she knew something, he would not hesitate now. . . .

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Then he eyes, glued on the fire escape window in the bedroom, noticed something she had quite forgotten. The window—that window alone of all those in the apartment—was not latched. She remembered leaving it open that way—about an inch—so that she could open it if she came down the fire escape.

She must close that window, and lock it. But her feet would not carry her into that other room. She was shaking like a leaf; she could imagine a thousand demons at her back if she but stepped beyond the living room.

Then, in the next instant, the room spun around to the insistent, intense ringing of the front doorbell. In sheer relief, Cilly ran to press the lock-release buzzer in the foyer. Anything was better than the terrifying uncertainty of the empty apartment. . . .

Halfway across the room, she stopped. Sergeant Dolan's words rang in her ears: "No matter who rings your bell, you're not to open the door!"

She stood there, afraid to open the door, and equally afraid not to open it. The bell rang again, loud and demanding. Still she hesitated.

For the third time it sounded, but this time it was not one long, imperious ring. Three short rings sounded this time, three short, friendly rings.

Instantly, Cilly ran to the foyer and pressed the buzzer. She pressed it eagerly, joyously, a new courage in her eyes transcending every vestige of the previous moment's fear. . . .

Three short rings she had heard distinctly, and the one person in all the world who rang a bell with three short rings was Jim Kerrigan.

(To Be Continued)

New Group Forms In Fall Creek Area

FALL CREEK, Oct. 20.—(Special)—The ladies of Fall Creek have organized a new club to be known as the Welfare club of Fall Creek. The first meeting was held at the Fall Creek schoolhouse last week. In the business meeting election of officers was held. The ones elected include Mrs. Frank Graham, president; Mrs. J. W. Richardson, vice-president; Mrs. Frank Kintzley, secretary, and Mrs. Soderstedt as treasurer.

Projects planned to be undertaken by this club will be providing hot lunches for the school, manual training and sewing.

It was also decided to charge a small sum of 50c per year for dues, and that meetings of the club be held on the first Friday of each month.

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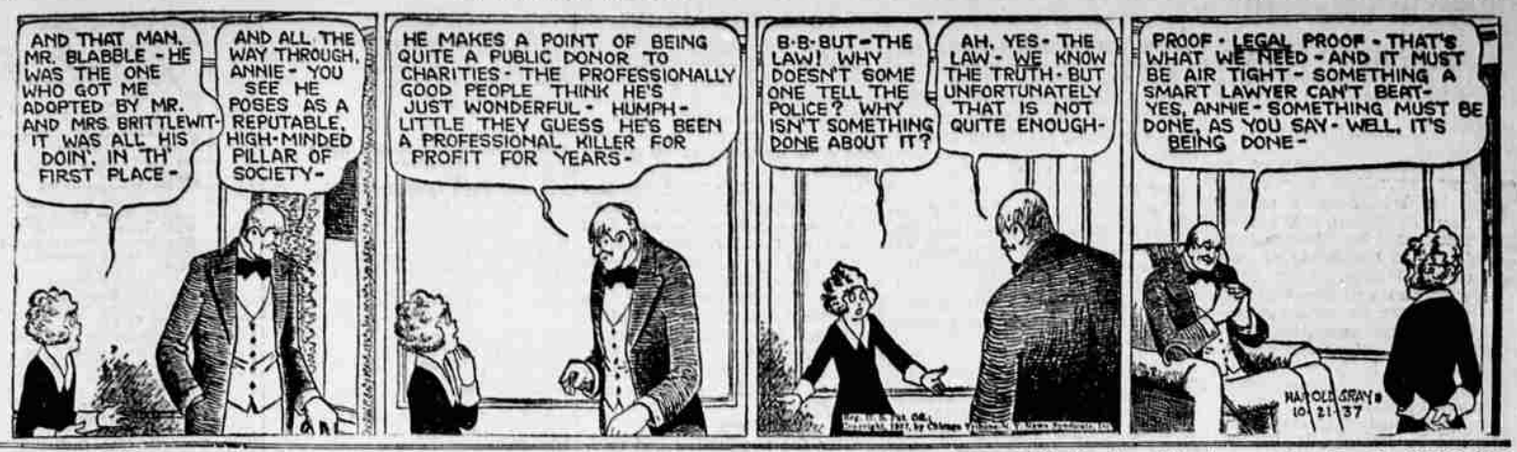

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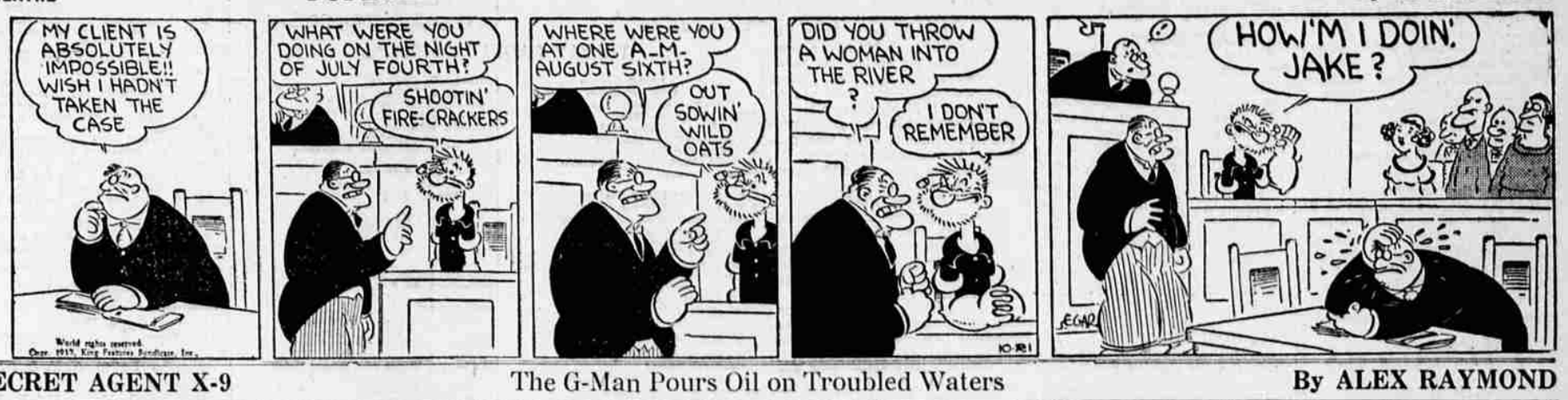

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