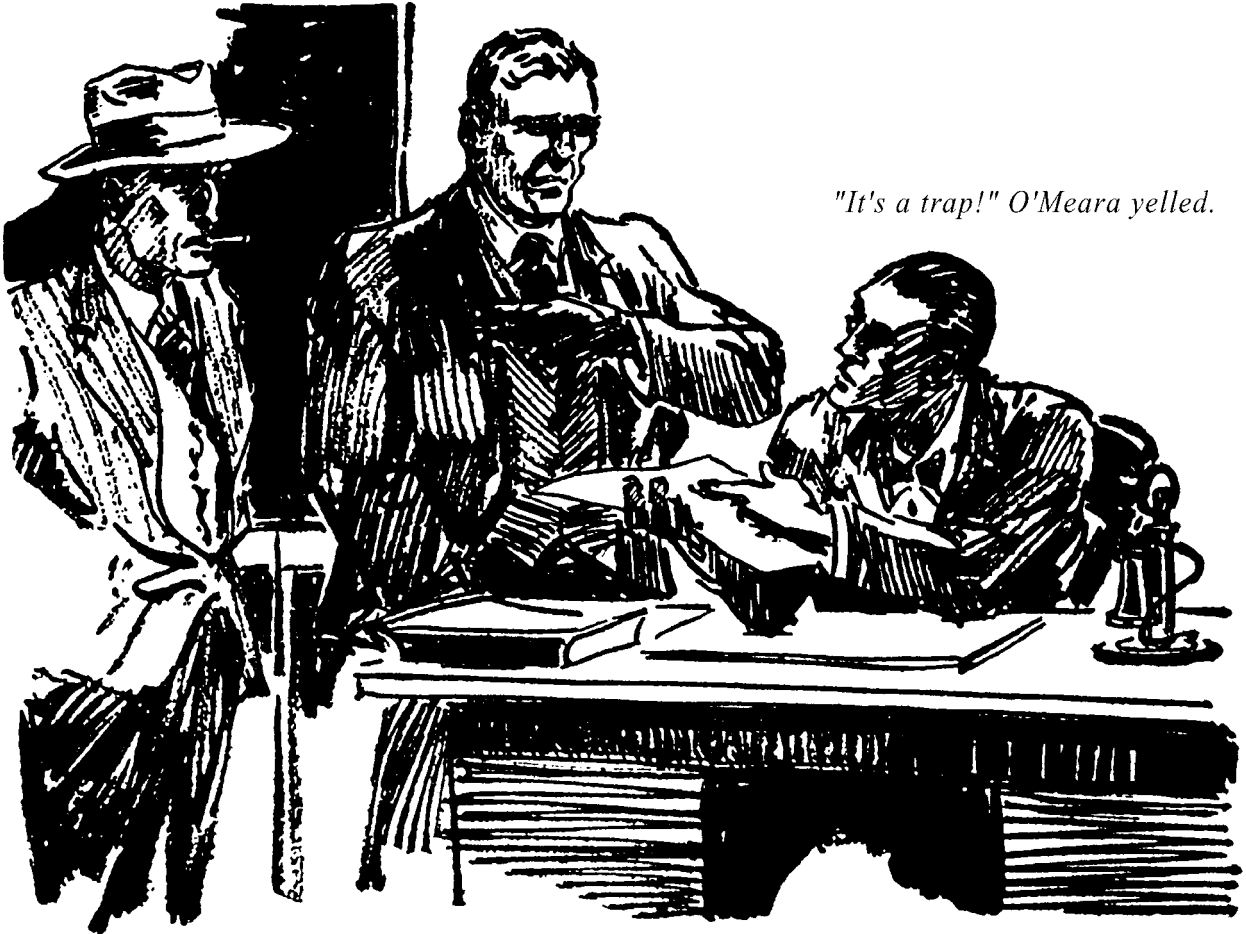


Three Smart Silks



"It's a trap!" O'Meara yelled.

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Three clever silks cooked up an air-tight swindle. they laid the cards on the table — all above board — within the law! The bluff worked great — until a bigger bluffer came along!

JOHN DRISCOLL looked up as Hopkins entered. The oil operator was frowning, intent upon a paper in his hand, and shoved it suddenly at his guest.

"A damnable outrage!" he exclaimed. "The third threatening letter this week—and this one has a kick in it."

Driscoll, unhurried, reached for a cigar. He did not look at all like a Canadian, or even a barrister; much less did he look what he was—one of the best lawyers in Toronto. His pleasant, even

features, with their level eyes seemed younger than their years.

He had been here in Beverley Hills only two days, having come out from Toronto to consult with Hopkins about the latter's eastern oil business and its Canadian branch, and was the guest of Hopkins.

"Did you get the papers from White?" he asked casually. Hopkins nodded.

"Yes. He's dropping in on his way home—I was a bit upset about this letter."

Driscoll held up the scrawl, which was upon blank stationery:

PEMBERTON HOPKINS,
Beverly Hills

Fifty thousand in cash will save us a lot of trouble and will save you money and notoriety. Fraud charges filed tomorrow connection Oil Corp'n. Unless cash deposited by eight tonight with Joe O'Meara. This is no bluff, brother.

COME ACROSS.

Driscoll's brows lifted as he regarded the letter, studying it carefully. His gray eyes scintillated, became alert with energy.

"I don't quite understand," he said. "The Oil Corporation?"

Hopkins made an impatient gesture. His iron-jawed features were a little weary.

"Yes, the combination, you know, of Coast companies—the Hopkins, Janiver and others. Three days from now we put it through; I'm to be president. Of course, if fraud charges are made, we'll have no end of trouble. My Hopkins Oil has wells in production up the San Carlos valley, with a lease on the entire Dominguez rancho, covering twenty thousand acres."

Driscoll frowned. "They can hit you, some way?"

"I don't know; my lawyers don't know. I've been pretty honest in my way, and I've made enemies. We know that for two weeks our stock has been heavily bought here and in 'Frisco. I whipped two big companies in a fight for that field, and they'd like to see me smashed—"

"What's this demand for fifty thousand cash to be given O'Meara? Blackmail?"

"I've just seen the postal inspectors; we don't know who writes the letters, and of course O'Meara would deny knowing. He's a shyster lawyer here, a personal injury shark with a big pull politically. No use trying marked money—we'd never catch him. He doesn't expect us to give him the money that way. This is to make us hold a conference with him and submit to robbery."

"It'd help you to know who wrote the letter, eh?" Driscoll picked up the paper and studied it again. As he was about to speak, Hopkins was summoned by the telephone buzzer.

"Send him right up," he said, and turned to Driscoll. "It's White."

"What time is it?" asked Driscoll. "Rather,

what time do offices close here?"

"Four ten. Offices? Oh, about five or so."

Driscoll picked up a reading-glass from the table and studied the letter. He was still at it when White, chief of the legal firm handling Hopkins' affairs, entered. He was a worried-looking man of forty, and shook hands nervously with Driscoll.

"Any luck with those investigators you put on the blackmail hunt?" asked Hopkins.

White shook his head, as he opened his briefcase.

"I'm afraid we'll get nowhere, Hopkins. I can't unearth any hint as to what fraud charges they might bring, but I've found that O'Meara is pretty thick with a chap in the district attorney's office—undercover man and fingerprint expert. That means we're up against something shady. By the way, Mr. Driscoll, here are the proxies and other papers you wanted."

"Thanks very much," said Driscoll, his trace of English accent rather pleasant. "Do I understand that you have engaged detectives about these anonymous letters?"

"Yes, I have two very good men—"

"Would it be possible for you or your men, or all of you, to get into O'Meara's private office, on some excuse or another, before it closes today?"

"Of course," returned White, surprised. "I could go to him in regard to this letter, which mentions him. But why?"

"Well, please do it," said Driscoll. "And do it now, before his office closes. You'll find one or two penholders on his desk—not fountain pens, but old-fashioned ones. Get hold of them, by force if necessary; take one or both of your men with you, however, and slide them away without being seen, if you can. Have them marked, not on the pen holder, but on the pens themselves; they may be important evidence. Your detectives will understand."

White stared rather blankly at the Canadian.

"Are you in earnest, Mr. Driscoll?"

"If O'Meara is behind this matter," said Driscoll, "then these letters were probably written in his private office. Certainly this letter was dictated, and he'd be the logical person."

THE lawyer turned to Hopkins, with a bewildered air, but met with a curt nod and a gesture that sent him hastily away. Hopkins, who conducted him to the door, returned to find Driscoll again poring over the anonymous letter.

"Look here, Driscoll," said the oil operator

brusquely, "what makes you think that letter was dictated?"

Driscoll leaned back, lighted a fresh cigar, and gestured toward the letter.

"It's indicated by the uneven spacing between the words—in this case, a clear deduction. I'd say that the man who wrote it sat at O'Meara's desk, using one of the pens there. He was a man of fifty or more, of French parentage or extraction, was formerly a telegraph operator, was well dressed, and has a police record. Perhaps these points will help to identify him."

Staring blankly at the speaker Hopkins uttered an oath of amazement.

"I didn't know you were a detective, Driscoll—or is this a joke?"

"Not a bit of it."

"But how the devil can you tell all this about the writer of the letter?"

"Simplicity itself. There are five words to a line, many of the words connected; that shows an old telegraph operator, who always wrote his words thus by force of habit for easier counting, five to a line. This fact also determines his approximate age, for nowadays machines are used in most telegraph offices.

"His French extraction is proven by the capital 'T' which has the base oval on the right side instead of on the left, as we make it; the capital 'Q' is finished very low, and the small 'S' has a tip at the top, which might come from German—but the capital 'T' makes it definitely French. Certain of the words are not connected like the others, pointing to pauses in dictation.

"The paper," went on Driscoll, "is a soft, porous, cheap paper such as is used for second or carbon sheets. On the left side are two peculiar rigid indentations; my guess is that they were made by the seams of a glove. The writer kept his left hand gloved, then, while he held down the paper. Only very carefully dressed men wear gloves in California. Under the circumstances, it was odd that the writer did not remove his gloves entirely; why not? He was exercising habitual care to leave no fingerprints. Obviously he has a record somewhere."

Hopkins gave him a hard, amazed glance. "My lord! That's clever."

"Not particularly. I've made a study of documents. By the way, do you know anyone who might answer such a description?"

"Hm! The French part of it helps. Might be Jack Legrand—he was San Francisco French. He

dabbles a bit in oil and is crooked as a dog's hind leg. He was one of the men after the Dominguez tract when I beat 'em to it. Still, he'd hardly be the writer of these letters; he's too big a man."

"Do you consider fifty thousand dollars a piker's bet?" asked Driscoll dryly. "Certainly no underling would be trusted with writing these letters. Have you the other two here?"

Hopkins nodded, and produced the letters.

DRISCOLL was still examining them minutely when White returned, accompanied by two men—investigators from a private agency. He came to Driscoll and laid two ordinary ink-stained pen-holders before him.

"There you are, sir—both are marked; all three of us can swear to them. They were taken from the desk while I talked to O'Meara, and he paid no attention. Hopkins," and the lawyer faced around, "that crook is too slick for us. He laughed at mention of the letter, and said we were trying to frame him. Then he let go his broadside.

"He's acting for Jack Legrand and several others who have bought stock in the Oil Corporation. It seems there was a prior lease made two years previous to yours by the Dominguez heirs, to some wildcat company that failed even to sink a hole. However, the lease ran for five years, and completely invalidates yours."

"The hell you say!" Hopkins flushed angrily. "Is it genuine?"

"Apparently. It goes to the District Attorney in the morning, with a demand for an investigation and with fraud charges."

Hopkins was aghast. "But I tell you, it can't be genuine!" he exclaimed. "There were three Dominguez heirs; none of them mentioned it to me! They swore they'd given no other lease!"

"Where are they now?"

Hopkins shrugged. "Spain, I think; one was in New York at last accounts. It can't be possible—eh? What is it, Driscoll?"

The Canadian had risen, and was holding out one of the pens to the lawyer.

"Here you are, Mr. White—your evidence. Defective pen; one of the nibs has been damaged, probably by a fall from the desk. Nearly every downstroke in that letter is imperfect, except where the pen was fresh dipped. With a little careful measurement of enlarged photos, we can absolutely prove that this pen wrote this letter. No two pen-points, even of the same identical make and model, are exactly alike, you know. Better put

your investigators to work on this, and check up on the other two letters and the other pen.”

Hopkins, waiting at the telephone, turned to Driscoll.

“Are you sure you want to handle this?”

“I’m sure of nothing, my dear chap,” said Driscoll calmly. “I’d like to handle it, if you’ll give me free rein. I think I can put it across for you, but I guarantee nothing.”

“You’re all right,” said Hopkins. It was nearly six o’clock, and he had just located Joseph O’Meara at the latter’s home. “Sure you want no one else present?”

“No; why try to scare him! Meet him anywhere—”

Hopkins leaned forward.

“Hello, O’Meara. This is Pemberton Hopkins. My attorney tells me there’s some question about a prior lease to that Dominguez tract; correct? Well, if your clients would consider anything in the nature of a compromise—or in other words, if they’d sell me that prior lease—you imagine they might, eh? Very well. Have to discuss the matter tonight? Can’t be done; I’m tied up in a business deal. I could have a friend of mine, here from the east, meet you—he’d want to look over your document anyway, and he could bring a blank check. Suit you?”

Hopkins turned to his guest, with an eloquent wink. The fish was hooked.

“Oh, anywhere you say—sure, I can trust Driscoll to the limit, and he can make the bargain if your document is genuine. Right. Cigar stand of the Ambassador Hotel, at seven sharp. Driscoll? Oh, young chap, English accent. Right.”

Scarcely had Hopkins hung up the receiver, when one of White’s two investigators arrived, with a report on Jack Legrand.

“It sure checks up with what you said about the letter writer, Mr. Driscoll,” said the operative admiringly. “Legrand went to France with relatives, as a boy, spent some years in England, and returned here as a young man. He was a telegraph operator upstate for years, at Ukiah and points north. His age is a trifle over fifty, so far as we can find.”

“Hm!” said Driscoll. “He came here from England about 1905? It was just before then that King standardized the fingerprint identification system in England. Did you get anything on this Legrand?”

“Not a thing. He made money just after the war, probably in some racket, in San Francisco.

For six or seven years he’s been in straight business, dabbling in oil around down here. He wears gloves, like you said.”

“Better get your blank check ready, Hopkins,” said Driscoll. “What does O’Meara look like?”

“Medium height,” said Hopkins. “Wears a choker collar and puff tie, rather old-fashioned; ruddy face, pleasant smile, just a suspicion of Irish brogue.”

“Right. Then I’ll be off. You’d better wait here, in case I want to telephone you, Hopkins. Then we’ll meet at eight, say, for dinner!”

“If you can get back here, yes—or I’ll come downtown and meet you. Say, at the Ambassador.”

“Until later, then.”

FIVE minutes later he was heading down Wilshire Boulevard in Hopkins’ car.

Driscoll walked into the hotel at six fifty-five. Selecting a cigar at the counter, he saw his man just beyond—genial, slightly pompous, with a keen Irish eye.

“Mr. O’Meara, I believe? Driscoll is my name.”

O’Meara smiled, shook hands. “Let’s go to the writing room upstairs—it should be empty now.”

They mounted, found the writing room off the main lobby deserted, and made themselves comfortable at a table.

“Now, am I to understand, sir,” asked O’Meara cautiously, “that you’re acting with full authority for Mr. Hopkins?”

Driscoll nodded and produced his blank check. “Yes, here’s the check. I say, though I’ll have to glance at the lease. As I understand it, you hold a prior lease to the property, including the oil rights?”

“Exactly, and very much prior it is,” said the other dryly. “But I’m not carrying the documents about with me, y’ understand. It’s already gone to the district attorney.”

“What?” exclaimed Driscoll.

The other smiled broadly. “Yes, you’d better realize to start off that we’re not bluffing, my friend. However, the charges will not be formally entered or the complaint signed, until morning.”

“Eh? Oh, I see.” Driscoll relaxed, looking slightly puzzled. “But, my dear fellow, I gathered that I was to turn over this check, after filling in the amount, and you were to give me the original of the lease! You know, I can’t do that if you haven’t the document, and I can’t bargain with you before I

examine it."

O'Meara chuckled and slapped his thigh.

"This isn't the old country, Mr. Driscoll. If we make a deal, I can get the document here within ten minutes. Here's a photostat of it, and a copy of the charges."

He produced a rolled photostat copy, which turned the original black writing into white, and several typed carbon pages in a legal folder, constituting a copy of the charges made against Hopkins and substantiated by the original lease.

Driscoll studied these very briefly, paying small attention to the charges and much to the photostat, which showed both front and back of the lease in question—a typed document occupying both sides of a sheet.

"I suppose it's quite legal over here," and Driscoll glanced up, "to conclude a document on the back of a sheet, instead of using a second sheet? A minor point, perhaps."

"Legal enough," said O'Meara complacently. "Looks pretty clear, eh? The last paragraph carries the kick, Mr. Driscoll—mineral rights."

"So I perceive," Driscoll, with a helpless gesture, laid down the papers. "Well, I take it there's no use beating around the bush, what? As you say, the last paragraph has—er—the kick. As to the price—"

"Fifty thousand, my boy, and not a nickle less." O'Meara hooked his thumbs in his vest and surveyed Driscoll with beaming air. "No argument. If you try to beat me down, the price goes to sixty thousand."

"Eh?" Driscoll looked flustered. "I say, I haven't tried to beat you down, though!"

"And," pursued the other, "in cash. Cash, understand? I'm not turning over that document in exchange for a check that can be stopped. On the Day and Night Bank, eh? Fair enough. We can wait here until a friend of mine cashes the check, then I'll give you the paper."

"I suppose that's quite all right," said Driscoll. "Fifty thousand, eh? You'll not mind if I telephone Mr. Hopkins to give him my opinion?"

O'Meara waved his hand grandly. "Not a bit, not a bit! And I'll be getting my friend Legrand to help us out with the bank—"

"I'll want to look at the original document before I sign the check," said Driscoll, with a stubborn air. The other chuckled.

"And so you shall, me lad! I'll meet you here in fifteen minutes, say."

Driscoll nodded.

Five minutes later, ensconced in a telephone booth, he had Hopkins on the line. "Everything's fine, Hopkins," he said crisply. "I'm going to gamble with fifty thousand of your money, whether you like it or not. In fifteen minutes, O'Meara will endorse your check for fifty thousand, and I believe Legrand will take it over to the Day and Night Bank to cash it—you drew on that bank. Whoever cashes it, will telephone us, and the papers will be turned over to me.

"Now, Hopkins, it's up to you to have Legrand arrested—the minute after he has telephoned, understand? Not before. Arrange with the bank to give him marked thousand dollar notes, and be sure they're taken from him and held as evidence."

"I don't know what you're driving at, but I'll do it," said Hopkins. "On what charge can he be arrested?"

"Charge conspiracy to get money under false pretenses," and Driscoll laughed. "I warned you it's a gamble. Are you game?"

"Go the limit," growled Hopkins. "And depend on me."

"One thing more—and it's highly important. Send one of your private detectives along with the officer to make the pinch. Have him remark, so that Legrand can hear it, that I am the chief investigator of the documentary section at Scotland Yard. Get that?"

"Eh?" queried Hopkins. "But you're no such thing!"

"Never mind. Don't fail, now!"

LEAVING the booth, Driscoll made his way back to the writing room, and was smoking placidly when O'Meara hove in sight, accompanied by a thin, swarthy man in evening dress.

"This is Mr. Legrand, Mr. Driscoll," and O'Meara beamed. "Well, we have the papers in the case—you want to look over the lease, I believe?"

"A mere glance at it," said Driscoll, sitting down.

O'Meara produced the document, remaining at his elbow and spreading it out. Driscoll fumbled in his pocket and produced a magnifying glass, then took a look at the front and back of the lease. He leaned back and shrugged.

"Very good, gentlemen. That blank check—ah, yes! Here it is. I suggest that Mr. Legrand cash it, and then telephone us—it's a bit of a ride from here downtown, you know, and we might conclude

the matter more promptly. I'm a bit pressed for time."

"Suits me," said O'Meara assuredly. "I was going to propose the same thing. Give us a call as soon as it's cashed, Jack."

Driscoll filled out the check, then glanced up.

"I've made it out to you, Mr. O'Meara."

"No matter, my boy—I'll endorse it, and they know Legrand there."

It was all very pleasant, very open and aboveboard, a little business deal among gentlemen. O'Meara dashed off his signature, blotted it, and with a bow Legrand took the check and then departed.

Driscoll picked up the carbon copy of the fraud charges, and idly glanced over them, then turned abruptly to O'Meara.

"Oh, I say! You'd better write me out a receipt—here, on the back of this will do," and turning over the papers, he presented the reverse side of the carbon sheets. "Merely a matter of form to show Hopkins—a receipt for the payment for the lease."

"As Legrand's attorney, yes, yes," and O'Meara, producing a fountain pen, indited the requested receipt and signed with a flourish. "You don't mind if I turn this receipt over with the document when we get that 'phone call? Always well to be careful, my boy."

"Of course." Driscoll produced his cigars. "By the way, what do you know about the racing down at Tijuana? I was told that if I came here I should look up the place."

O'Meara knew all about horses and racing, and talking brilliantly and with enthusiasm, was astonished when a call boy summoned him to the telephone. He was gone for five minutes, then returned, rubbing his hands and beaming.

"Everything settled, Mr. Driscoll! Very sorry to show perhaps undue caution, but you know how careful one must be, eh? Here is the lease—here, receipt, charges, everything! And you might tell Hopkins he got a bargain. If we'd been inclined to hold him up, we might have asked double the money."

"Quite so," said Driscoll, and pocketed everything in sight "Charmed to have met you, sir. Perhaps we'll meet again in the near future. Good night!"

So he departed to his waiting car, and O'Meara chuckled.

AT NINE o'clock on the following morning, a curious company assembled in the handsome private office of Hopkins' suite in the Wilshire building. Since the previous night, very hot telephone wires had brought this company together.

Joseph O'Meara was present, and he looked like a ruffled and angry turkey-cock. With him was Legrand, who was out on bail, thinner and more sallow than ever, his black eyes flaming with restrained fires. Behind the flat-topped desk of Hopkins sat Driscoll, very amiable, with a number of documents piled before him. Hopkins sat at his side. White, the lawyer, was at a table by the door. Somehow the place took on the air of an official bureau.

"Let me tell you, sir," said O'Meara impressively to Hopkins, "we're going to have the satisfaction you have promised for this outrage! In causing the false arrest of this gentleman on trumped-up charges, you've gone too far!"

"One moment, if you please," intervened Driscoll smoothly. He caught the eye of Legrand and smiled. "Kindly remember your dealings are with me, as agent for Mr. Hopkins."

"You, yes!" O'Meara swung on him hotly. "I hear you're an English detective, here from Scotland Yard."

"Not in any official capacity. Will that reassure you? Or Mr. Legrand?"

"I have nothing to do with Scotland Yard," drawled Legrand, with a shrug.

"Precisely. But you recall that Scotland Yard has had something to do with you, my dear sir. Or is the cable which I have just received mistaken in saying so?"

At this suave thrust, Legrand shrank into himself and kept quiet.

"Now, O'Meara, let me state the premises simply as possible," said Driscoll, becoming very crisp and business-like. "We have here a perfectly legal lease of the Dominguez tract for grazing purposes, containing at the end an added clause covering oil and mineral rights for a period of five years. This lease was bought from the holders by Mr. Legrand. There is no question as to its legality. Am I correct?"

"You are, sir," returned O'Meara with dignity. "A lease on the oil and mineral rights was later and illegally granted Mr. Hopkins, causing my clients great distress."

"Let us stick to the point at issue," intervened Driscoll. "It is the added clause of the elder lease—"

you note, I say the 'added' clause. In two places, the typing of this added clause crosses portions of the signatures to the lease. The clause is brief but comprehensive. With a due regard to possible investigation, the clause was written by the same typewriter, the identical typewriter, which drew up the body of the document. This displays great acumen."

O'Meara sprang to his feet, purple with rage.

"Are you inferring, sir—do you dare to infer, that this clause was added to the document at a later date?"

"I infer no such thing," said Driscoll calmly. "I state it as a matter of fact. A stereoptic microscopic photograph of these crossed lines shows that the ink signatures had become oxidized and set long before the typing which touches them was applied to the paper. I happen to have made a study of such things and can qualify as an expert. A new typewriter ribbon was used for the body of this document, and also for the added clause—a ribbon thick with ink, which the microscope shows ran into the fibres of the paper. It did not run into these fibres at the intersections, for there the ink of the signatures had already filled the fibres."

O'Meara sat down. "This is absurd! It's childish nonsense!"

"Undoubtedly; of a sort to send you to San Quentin, sir," said Driscoll. "We have here two pens, taken yesterday from your desk by Mr. White; that was the real purpose of his visit to your office. They will be established as evidence. One was used by Legrand in writing the last anonymous letter; the other pen was used on the two previous occasions. He was so unfortunate as to leave a very clear thumb-print on one of these pen-holders—but perhaps I need not go into that, Legrand? The subject of certain prints still on file in London, I mean."

Legrand, who had turned deathly white, said nothing. O'Meara, chewing an unlighted cigar, watched Driscoll with ferocious intensity.

"Now, the subject of our present meeting," continued Driscoll suavely. "You gentlemen owned this lease, drew up certain charges in connection with it, and abandoned them when we made an open purchase of the lease. You have fifty thousand dollars of our money, at present being held by the courts as evidence—marked money. It is now our turn to hand this lease and the accompanying evidence to the district attorney, charging both of you with conspiracy, fraud, and several other felonies—Mr. White has drawn up quite a list of the alleged offenses, and two officers are now waiting outside to take you both into custody."

"It's a damnable outrage!" shouted O'Meara, springing up again. "You've no proof that we extorted money from you by threats—"

"I have your own charges against Mr. Hopkins; on the back of them you very kindly wrote out a receipt for the fifty thousand dollars."

O'Meara stared at him, turned purple, and mopped at his brow.

"It's a trap!" he exclaimed. Driscoll smiled.

"You realize it, then? Good. Take your choice, O'Meara and Legrand. One hundred thousand dollars in a check to be cashed before you leave this room—or you go out of here as prisoners and this evidence goes to the district attorney. Eh, Hopkins?"

"You're damned right!" said Hopkins, with obvious and cruel enjoyment.

One hour later, Hopkins, alone with Driscoll, handed his guest a check.

"There's your half the loot, Driscoll," he exclaimed, laughing. "And you've earned it. But what about that thumb-print of Legrand on the pen?"

"He didn't leave any," and Driscoll smiled. "Neither am I an official of Scotland Yard. But how was he to know? Let's have a drink."

"Keno!" said Hopkins heartily, and clapped him on the shoulder.