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LAST TRUMP

By Lee Thayer

Author of THE SILENT BULLET, DEAD END STREET, etc.

Around the one-cabin passenger ship *Sutherland*, five days out from New York, the fog lies thick. Her public rooms are lighted, gay and cheerful—but upon her decks Death stalks.

Peter Clancy, clever private investigator, with his faithful servant, Wiggar, wait and watch, knowing full well that behind some apparently commonplace personality a Killer bides his time. Theirs is the desperate task of unmasking the perpetrator of the brazen, braggart "Ace of Spades" murders before he strikes again.

The clues are few. The chance of error as long as the passenger list—less one . . . And Peter asks himself—Who marked the death card, found floating above the body? And why? Whose hand had switched the light off, and what had happened in the night mists that hid the afterdeck?

How Peter Clancy discovered the keys to the secrets of many hearts and minds, this book sets forth. The reader who takes it up will not lay it down until all the cards are on the table and Peter has trumped the last trick.

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A PETER CLANCY MURDER MYSTERY

LAST TRUMP

By

LEE THAYER

DODD, MEAD & COMPANY
NEW YORK 1937

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To

CARRIE OLMSTED ALLEN

AS A MOST INADEQUATE AND INAPPROPRIATE
TRIBUTE
THIS BOOK IS AFFECTIONATELY
DEDICATED

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NOTE

To those who have never sailed on so small a boat as the *Sutherland* a short description may be of interest.

Except for the radio room and the officers' quarters, her top or boat deck is entirely open.

Below that a broad sheltered promenade deck includes a lounge, writing room, bar and smoking room. The bridge may be reached from this deck by means of a short narrow canvased bridge that crosses the open forward space of A deck.

Commodious staterooms occupy the center part of A deck. Aft of them is a large unroofed deck in which is a bathing pool. Some distance behind that is a small superstructure used on occasion as a hospital. Narrow roofed decks, port and starboard, connect forward and after decks.

B and C decks are entirely enclosed, most of the space being occupied by staterooms, baths, and so forth. There is storage space, fore and aft, under the open main deck. Below B and C decks are the engine room and hold.

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CHAPTER I

EARLY dusk was falling. The good old ship *Sutherland*, plodding stolidly along her appointed sea lane, made only a slight fore and aft concession to the Atlantic swell beneath her sturdy hull.

Within an hour the wind had changed. The day's cool persistent drizzle had unaccountably given place to a strange oppressive heat, and fog lay thick above the gray slippery waves.

The decks were well nigh deserted for it was that moment of the unpurposed day when idleness reaches a kind of apogee. Too late and too wet for deck sports. Tea some time over and dinner not yet imminent enough to make insistent demands on the outer or inner man.

Through the open windows of the lounge the voice of the steward proclaiming the winning numbers of a horse race could be heard distinctly. In the shelter of the weather canvas, still laced to the forward deck rails, a man paused and very unobtrusively glanced inside. His movement was not exactly stealthy and there seemed nothing equivocal in his plain, open face under its thick thatch of red hair. A pleasant, idle fellow who gave his name as Cairns: Cairns, Mr. Percival, as the passenger list rather elegantly elaborated the man's simple statement.

A person of easy manners, he had made friends with all and sundry, and on this fifth day out from New York the possibilities of the *Sutherland's* human freight had by him been docketed with considerable care. There, under his eye at the

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minute, was the shrewd old German lady of quality, the period of her American visa having expired, reluctantly returning to her empty house and barren acres. She played the little wooden horses every afternoon and won with remarkable regularity.

Next her was a young American boy with a gay voice and eager laugh who made love to every length of skirt, slacks and shorts on board and referred to them all as "girls." Though he spoke scarcely a word of German, he backed the old lady's play much to her sedate entertainment.

Incongruous against the usual background of emancipated students and escaped school teachers "having themselves a time," was the man who drank far too much and had become the bane of the stewards; also a picturesque dark-skinned animal trainer and showman who called himself Rickard Zootorius but who spoke with an ineradicable brogue. Behind these two, on the outskirts of the crowd was another type, a man of even darker hue, who placed no bets but watched the more volatile occupants of the lounge with smiling, inscrutable oriental calm.

For the rest they seemed to be merely confirmed travelers of the class idle but not too rich. The *Sutherland*, old but staunch, was a one cabin, seven day boat. She could not hope to compete with the large modern floating hotel. An excellent table, however, did much to offset her archaic athletic equipment and her modest efforts at diversion. The passengers now proceeding to place new bets on the little wooden ponies seemed amused and well content.

The watcher at the window, leaning idly, yet surveyed the ordinary scene with more than ordinary attention. The lights in the lounge had been put full on but it was comparatively dark in this canvas sheltered part of the deck. The noise

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and laughter within contrasted oddly with the great empty spacious rush of spray under the bows. There was no sound on the deck save the soft thud of the feet of an indefatigable little Englishman pacing his stipulated mile.

He made some casual remark as he passed and immediately disappeared around the curve of the deck. Mr. Percival Cairns replied with a pleasant word but his tone was somewhat absent. He shifted his position, drawing swiftly and smoothly back into the shadow.

Across the lounge, in the opposite window, for the briefest instant he had seen a pale face that disappeared with the eerie suddenness of dissolving mist. It was not the first time that the unaccented features of this passenger, Mr. Henry Williams, had thus dawned upon his vision only to vanish like the Cheshire cat. If Mr. Cairns was in the habit of observing others, he could hardly have had any doubt that he himself was an object of special and continued interest to his inconspicuous shipmate.

Upon this new occasion, instantly then, Mr. Cairns stepped farther back and, clear of the outstretched feet of deck chairs, went aft with silent space-devouring strides.

He passed the ship's writing room, situated directly behind the lounge, glanced through the narrow open passage that connected port and starboard decks, looked in at the nearly empty bar and went hastily across to the door of the smoking room.

Here his manner changed abruptly. With an air of detachment and infinite leisure he sauntered through the door and was greeted with obvious enthusiasm.

"You're almost too late for the party, Mr. Cairns," cried Kate Oliver, a thin, angular woman in late middle-age with a face like a very clever and intelligent horse, who let it be

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understood that she was a feature writer for some American newspaper syndicate. "We're all crowded up on this side of the table, but you can squeeze in over there. It's worth listening to, I can tell you."

"Oh, yes indeed, Mr. Cairns." Evelyn Heather looked up with an adorable but somewhat absent-minded smile. "Mrs. Temple's telling the most wonderful fortunes. You never heard anything like it."

"Simply amazing!" exclaimed John Suffern, leaning over the girl's shoulder until his bronzed cheek nearly touched her glorious red-gold hair. "Go on, Mrs. Temple. Tell us some more."

"You've spent too much time on Evelyn already, Mrs. Temple," urged June Worth, threatening the card layout with a slender outstretched hand. "It's my turn now. Please! And for goodness' sake make it exciting. I'm bored stiff. Nothing ever happens on a slow old tub like this!"

"Wait." Mr. Percival Cairns caught the pretty hand and held it. "What's this all about? May I hear, Mrs. Temple?"

She met his eyes with a faintly challenging glance. Sophistication, obviously shared, may be a bond between two people —or distinctly the reverse. What she recognized in the plain pleasant face bending over her caused Ariadne Temple to reply with a curious little smile. "You didn't guess that I had a Gipsy grandmother and that second sight was as commonplace to me as my own lipstick, Mr. Cairns?"

"And why have you been hiding these occult powers from us?" he replied swinging a chair into position on her left. "Be sweet, June, move over and give me room."

"Stop holding her hand. She's my girl," cried Bunny Travers, crowding in between them. "What's going on here, anyway?"

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"Are the horse races over, Bunny? Did your old German woman win again?" Miss Oliver laughed across at the irrepressible boy.

"You bet. And so did I, darling. What's on now? Fortunes? Oh, simply swell! Mrs. Temple, tell mine. It'll be good I know if you tell it."

"Oh, stop it, all of you, for goodness' sake and let her finish with Evelyn." John Suffern's cultivated English voice rose pleasantly above the din. "Come on, Mrs. Temple. She has great artistic ability and is on her way to study in Paris. What else? Can you see into the future as well? It's a wonderful thing, Cairns." He turned excitedly. "Mrs. Temple's told Evelyn things none of us could possibly have known. And the same with me. The only mistake she made was about my looking just like my father, which I don't in the least. Oh, yes, and she slipped up on two of his initials, but she had the first one right. Everything else was absolutely correct. It's really marvelous."

"You read it all out of the cards, I suppose." Cairns smiled teasingly into the clever face of the perfectly modern seeress, pointing as he spoke. "I see the knave of clubs has his back toward the queen of hearts. That's obviously Bunny's defection to June. He was in love with Miss Evelyn for the first three days out. A perfect nuisance to the rest of us in fact."

"Until Suffern cut me out," retorted the boy unblushingly. "There he is in person, see? John or Jack of hearts. And is he some knave? You can take it from me!"

"What card shows she's going in for art?" Cairns asked looking down into Ariadne Temple's slightly narrowed eyes. "That's a new one on me and I used to know 'em all pretty well. Here's old ten of diamonds for plenty of money . . . And the deuce there is a letter, isn't it?"

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"News," Mrs. Temple corrected briefly. The thin line of her mobile lips tightened a little. "I don't read it as a letter."

There was something odd in her voice. She put out her hand to sweep the cards together when John Suffern stopped her. "I say, you know," he urged. "You didn't tell us about that. What kind of news? Does it break before we land?"

"Maybe it's just she's going to be engaged," put in Bunny Travers, looping his slender young body along the back of June's chair until he could reach Evelyn's arm. "Don't do anything rash, my girl. I'll be twenty-one in four more years and I wouldn't advise you to miss the catch I may be by then!"

"A two of spades," Cairns persisted in a low tone. "Could that mean news of an engagement, Mrs. Temple, according to your reading of the cards?"

He was surprised by the sudden and quite inexplicable violence of her reaction. Her face paled under her careful makeup and though she kept her voice down it quivered perceptibly as she replied: "You mean to imply that spades are usually considered bad luck, Mr. Cairns. And so they are. But wouldn't Evelyn's engagement be bad luck to all you men who didn't get her?" She laughed, but to the trained ear of Mr. Percival Cairns it sounded a trifle forced.

"Sure it would," cried young Travers, who rarely missed a trick. "Listen, John. Wasn't that good what Mrs. Temple just said? Hey! What's the— Oh, I see." He lowered his fresh young voice as he followed the direction of the general attention which had been caught suddenly by an incident in process in the passage before the door of the bar.

"Good Gosh!" whispered Bunny gleefully. "If that poor drunk, Innes, hasn't hooked onto your uncle Francis, John —and that other little Englishman—what's his name—Williams, the shyest man on the ship! Let's see what they'll do

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with him. Some fun! He's been trying to persuade everybody to buy his drinks, but he's tackled two stiff ones this time."

The pale face of Mr. Henry Williams that had but recently appeared at and disappeared from the window of the lounge could now be seen quite clearly. That the present situation was causing this retiring individual considerable distress was easily understood, for one indecorously plaided arm of the ship's principal alcoholic problem was thrown about Williams' neat shoulders while the limp figure depending therefrom with difficulty kept its feet by clinging to the tweed lapel of Mr. Francis Buckleigh. Swaying grotesquely the small group inadvertently pivoted itself away from the bar and toward the door of the smoking room.

"John!" burst out Buckleigh. "Stop grinning like an idiot and come here at once. Can't you see—"

"Cummon, folks!" shouted the inebriate, stiffening suddenly. " 'S drinks all 'roun'. Health Br'sh Empire. Mis'r Williams, Mis'r Buckleigh. Three cheers! Yip, Yip, ray! Britons never ne—ver—"

"Innes, for God's sake brace up," growled Francis Buckleigh, as the legs of the unwelcome burden spasmodically executed a weird tap dance that brought the group with a ridiculously undignified swing, inside the smoking room door.

The young people rose from the card table in some confusion and John Suffern started to his uncle's aid. Mrs. Temple stood with her hands on the scattered cards. The expression on her face was one of disgust and contempt hardened, not softened, by the toleration of wide experience. Or it was thus that one observer interpreted it as he turned swiftly away?

"Stan' to your glasses steady," sang Innes, clinging tightly to his reluctant captives. "For moment—va—va—"

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He lifted bleared eyes as a sudden gust of air swept in through the window. "For moment—see—" he gurgled—"vapor flies. Or—or maybe—'tisn't vapor. No. Seems t'be a card. Maybe 's your card, lady? So? Yesh. Allow me!"

He swayed wildly, reaching for one of Mrs. Temple's cards that the wind had carried across the room. It lay face down, square between Buckleigh's feet. The drunken effort only served to turn it over.

Cairns heard a sharp gasp behind him but he did not look back. His glance was fixed on the blanched face of Francis Buckleigh who, staring downward, had recoiled with an oath and a strange gesture of abject horror.

" 'S matter, ole pal?" gurgled Innes. Even in his besotted condition he seemed to sense something vaguely amiss. He took in the whole company with his vacant grin and winked. "Jus' a bit seedy, maybe. Poor ole fella. Needs pick me up. Come on, ole Lion an' th' Uni—unicorn. Drink 'sealth. Evr—body's health. . . . Stan' t' your glasses steady," his voice rang out in the sudden silence, "Here's health— Cummon, Williams. Buckle, ole pal! George's awaitin' us atta bar. Here's a heal'—a health t'—"

Cairns turned then to discover that Mrs. Temple was leaning stiffly upon the table, her eyes fixed on the card that lay behind him on the floor. He thought at the time that the look of dread on her face was merely the effect of a common superstition, deeply rooted.

The card was the ace of spades.

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CHAPTER II

"Stand to your glasses steady
For a moment the vapor flies.
Here's a cup to the dead already
Hurrah for the next that dies!"

THE woman's voice, scarcely above her breath, sounded unexpectedly deep and rich in the ear of Mr. Percival Cairns as Kate Oliver attached herself to his arm and drew him a little aside upon the dim deck.

A steward had appeared opportunely and Lawrence Innes was by way of being persuaded to return to his cabin. His blurred accents could be plainly heard demanding to "she th' Cap'n find out why one gen'l'man shouldn' treat 'nother t' lil' drink." Buckleigh and the other Englishman had adjourned to the bar. The party in the smoking room was breaking up.

"Here's a cup to the dead already." The voice hummed again the old refrain. The shrewd eyes of Kate Oliver searched the face of the man who was looking intently into the gathering fog. "Doesn't that remind you of anything, Mr. Cairns?"

Under the suggestion of the hand upon his arm he stopped beside the rail. "Should it? What do you mean, Miss Oliver?" he asked somewhat absently. "It's an old song I know, but I don't see any connection—"

"You're from New York, Mr. Cairns?" She interrupted with a sharp upward inflection.

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"Why—er—yes, Miss Oliver," he answered smiling, "I was even born there, which puts me in a small but distinguished class."

"So was I," she countered shortly. "And all New Yorkers read the papers."

"Well," his voice was amusedly tolerant, "with few exceptions I should say that was a demonstrable fact. That is, if the circulation claimed by the newspapers were added together and compared with the population at the last census—"

"Don't you know what I'm talking about, Mr. Cairns?" she broke in again in a crisp decisive tone. "You aren't dumb—far from it. You saw how scared John Suffern's uncle was when he saw that ace of spades. Just an accident that it blew over to his feet, of course."

"And just an accident that it was the ace of spades and not some other card," he appended.

"Was it?" asked Kate Oliver darkly.

"Why of course. It couldn't possibly have been deliberate. I mean it was the wind. No one touched the cards that you saw?" His voice was for that instant sharply focussed but she evidently did not notice for Kate Oliver went on with her own own train of thought.

"I'm no more superstitious than many other people," she remarked half to herself; "Mrs. Temple, for instance. She dodged telling Evelyn about that spade card in her fortune. You know as well as I do that the two of spades is bad news—and the ace—is the death card."

"Yes," he admitted slowly. "So what?"

"Did you see Mr. Buckleigh's face? Do you think he doesn't know what that card stands for?"

"Oh, yes. Perhaps. But—it doesn't seem possible that—"

"That anyone in his senses could take a thing like that so

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