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THE **SWINGING CORPSE**

A VEE BROWN NOVEL

by **CARROLL JOHN DALY**

The **DEVIL'S DOZEN**
by **MAXWELL HAWKINS**



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EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW

Vol. 9

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No. 3

SMASHING NOVEL-LENGTH VEE BROWN THRILLER

Crouch trembling beside

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As it dangles there at the cross-roads of the world—muta warning that the Black Death has struck once more.

COMPLETE HORROR-ACTION MYSTERY

Enter that ghastly dungeon where

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Cover—"Hanged There on the Corner of Fifth Avenue"

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From "The Swinging Corpse."

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Watch for the January 1st Issue

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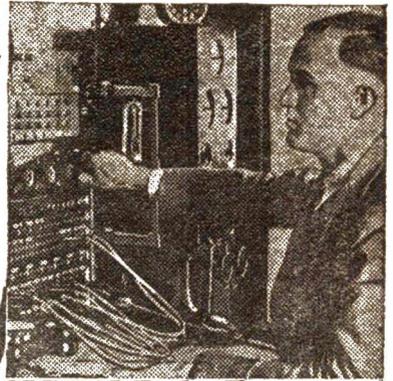
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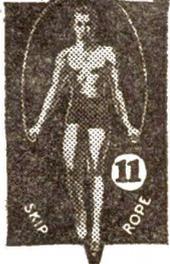
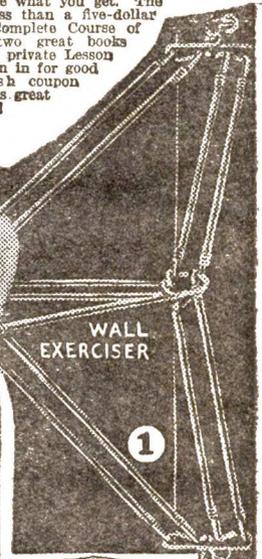
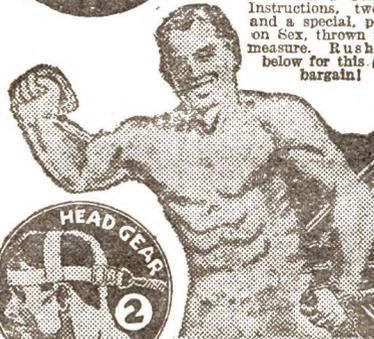
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The New York Times

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FIGURES SHOW DIRECT LINK

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 24 (AP).—The man who keeps his waistline small when he reaches middle age is the most likely to win the race for health, is the conclusion drawn from a new study of the relation of weight to physical defects just published by the Public Health Service. "By the time that middle age is reached, these figures indicate, it is a definite advantage to be under the average weight for height," says the report.

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The conclusions are drawn from records of more than 3,000 men from 1909 to 1928, showing the ratio of actual deaths to expected mortality, according to different weight groups. In the following table, figures below 100 indicate less than the expected death rate; those above 100 indicate more than the expected death rate:

Weight Class.	20-29.	30-39.	40-49.	50 and Over.
25 pounds or more underweight—				
10 to 20 lbs....	118	105	83	77
5 lbs. under to 5 lbs. overweight—				
10 to 20 pounds overweight ...	99	88	94	90
25 to 45 pounds overweight ...	113	123	125	119
50 lbs. or more overweight ...	167	143	144	130

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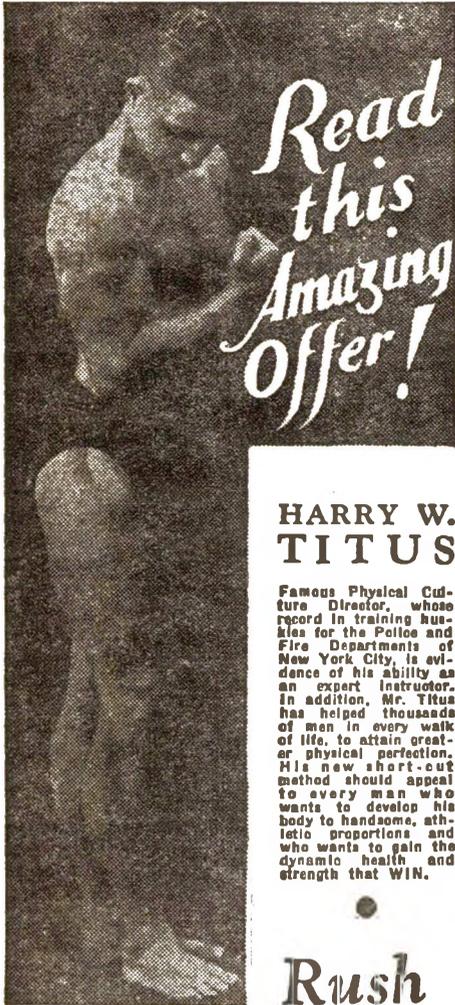
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The Swinging Corpse

A Vee Brown Story

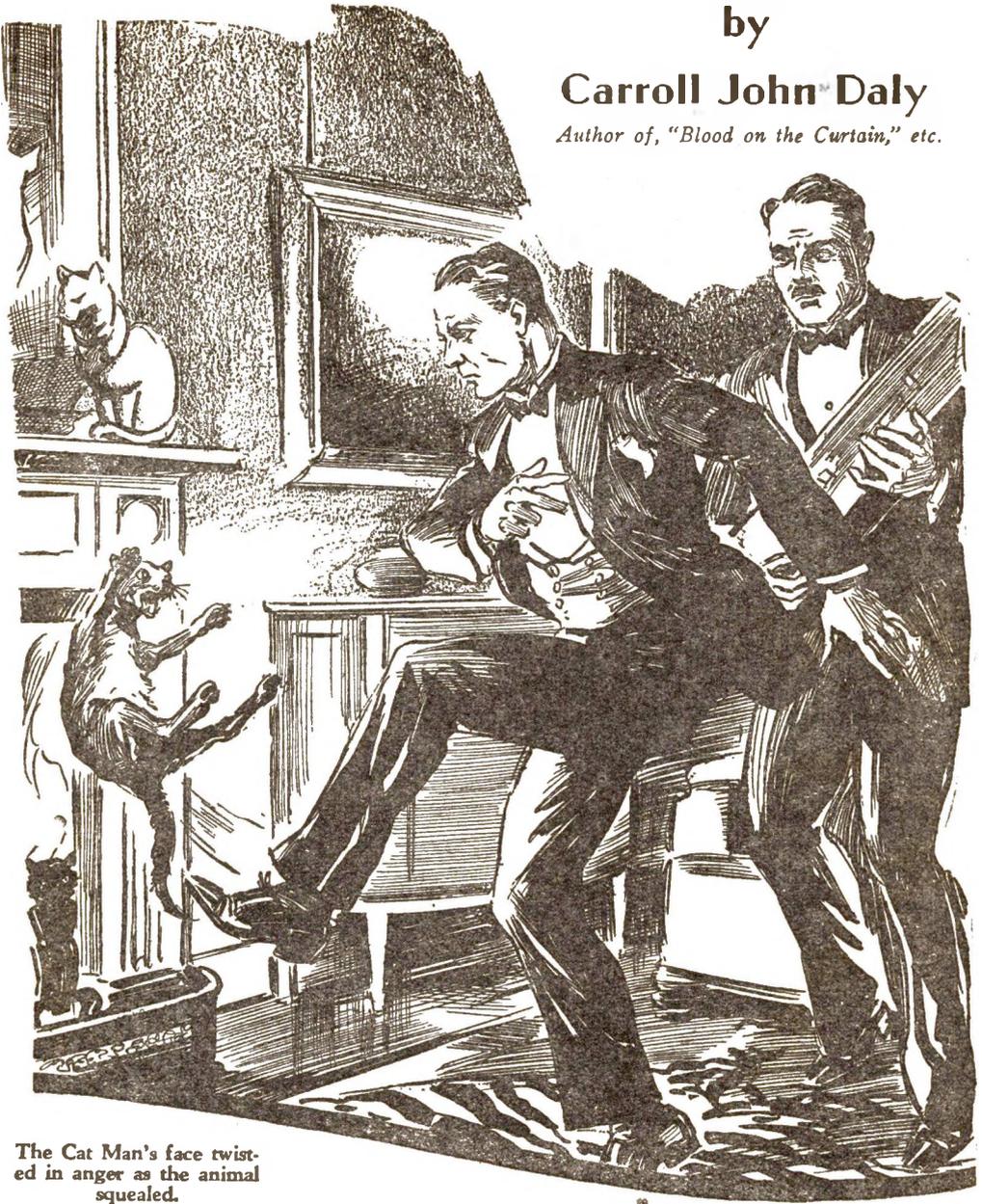


There it hung at the cross roads of the world—Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street—a ghastly, mutilated corpse. And on its chest was pinned The Black Death's final warning. How had it got there through the midnight fog? Why had the Cat Man swung it from a lamp post on the best-known corner in all New York?

by

Carroll John Daly

Author of, "Blood on the Curtain," etc.



The Cat Man's face twisted in anger as the animal squealed.

CHAPTER ONE

A Question of Honor

MARIA, the girl with the green eyes, sat beneath the darkened lamp seeking the shadows, as she always did when visiting us. Her hands rested very gently in her lap. Her

lips were a deep scarlet, her lashes and eyes heavily treated; all plainly visible despite the dimness. Maria—girl of mystery—who hated Vincent Van Houton, the man Detective Vee Brown was convinced was the blackmailer who preyed upon the unfortunate, the weak, even those who were simply indiscreet.

Her green eyes watched Vee from the

darkness. Finally her head bobbed back, then forward again. She half looked at me but spoke to Vee.

"Vivian!" she said slowly. "The greatest of song writers—Master of Melody. Detective Vee Brown—Killer of Men. You're licked as Detective Vee Brown. Quit this hunt for Vincent Van Houton." And as his dark eyes narrowed and his lips twisted at the corners, "Why not?" Her shoulders shrugged. "Super-men come and go. Sports, politics, crime; even the greatest national leaders must finally step down for a still greater man." And suddenly, "Gertrude la Palatin, the actress, saved your life. You made her a promise."

"Yes." Vee nodded. "You are very well informed. I made her a promise. Do you know what that promise was?"

THE girl laughed harshly, putting herself back in character; for surely, just now, her well chosen and well spoken words had hardly been those of the underworld—of the night, as Brown called it. She had suddenly, in speech and manner, if not in her appearance which still remained sinister, stepped out of her environment.

She hesitated before she spoke again, and then; "Yes, I do. You were trapped in Van Houton's house, trapped like a common burglar. Men hunted you with drawn guns, men who had orders to shoot to kill. She saved you then. You promised her your life if she demands it."

"But," said Brown, "she doesn't demand it."

"She demands that you give up your pursuit of Vincent Van Houton. Don't smile. You saved some lives, forestalled many of his plots and plans, deprived him of great amounts of money in his blackmail schemes. But he has defeated you. He's still active, still as unsuspected by the law, by the district attorney. You have simply made things worse."

"How—worse?" Brown asked.

"You cut down his income. You lost him a hundred thousand dollars that he had paid a hired killer to murder you. You took from his pocket many other thousands of dollars, and took from him the information that would free the big political leader, George F. Moffet, who, behind Van Houton, would have made him another fortune. That evidence was turned over to the district attorney. Moffet is already indicted; Vincent Van Houton is desperate. His need of money to keep his organization intact is great. Crooks, gangsters, murderers are crying for funds or blood, and he has not the money to give them."

"But they don't know him, these people whom he hires through others—through those leaders I have eliminated. How can they threaten him?"

"In one way—through one man. Through his biggest connection with the underworld—that is, in person. This is the only man who knows that Van Houton is the Black Death, the Emperor of Evil. The Frankenstein which Van Houton created is back-firing on this one man. Every penny of his vast fortune has been drained by your activities. Van Houton will give him no more; has no more to give the murderers, the thieves, the gangsters, and even the smaller crooked servants—taxi drivers, waiters and gigolos—that produce the information necessary for Van Houton's operations."

"Sounds interesting, and it's true," Brown said. "I worked up from the bottom, cut off those Van Houton trusted. Now, if we can eliminate this final connection, Van Houton can no longer remain unknown. He can still advise his friends in his own social circle, whom he fleeces through his hired murderers and blackmailers. But to those hired criminals he must make himself known, and once he does"—Brown tapped the side

of the chair—"his secret will be a secret no longer and I'll get him sure."

"There are no others he can trust," the girl said. "He won't come out in the open himself."

"Ah!" said Brown. "Then he must go out of business, and as we say in chess—it would be a stale mate. I would not have the pleasure of seeing Van Houton burnt to death, of course. But I would see him beaten and no longer a menace to society."

"You are wrong." The girl was very serious. "Contrary to the opinion of Van Houton's closest connection—this sole remaining man who knows him—Van Houton still has some money. Not enough, of course, to carry on against your activity; not enough, of course, to keep paying out more to these scores—perhaps hundreds—of hirelings. But enough to live comfortably himself until you are driven out, killed, or quit hounding him."

"That'll be a long time," Brown mused.

I HAD never seen Maria quite so serious as she answered: "I hope not. It will be an evil time, a time of wrecked homes. It will be a period of divorces, children torn from parents, mental torture and death." She leaned forward. Her lips were tightly set, her green eyes narrow. "For during this period when he cannot increase his income Van Houton will tear down the characters of many people. He will begin with the wife of a college friend of yours, perhaps more a friend of Dean's. Thomas D. Wilson's wife is caught in his net. I telephoned you about her this morning. She has no more money to meet the Black Death's demands. Will she welcome death rather than face her husband and two young daughters, to whom she has more than atoned for a past folly?"

Brown stroked his chin. "And I am to quit cold, so that Van Houton may pick

out the ones with money to fleece; so that he will not cause destruction to those who cannot pay! Is that your advice, Maria; you who have hated this man; you who have given me the names of those he would blackmail? Now you want me to walk out, so he may rebuild his crumbling horror; build again a great fortune through the misery of the unfortunate!"

"I bring you that message from Gertrude la Palatin."

"You're a strange girl. You know everything connected with this Black Death, everything except the evidence that will— But the song I have written for you! Let's go over it again."

"But your promise to Miss La Palatin?"

"I offered her my life, if necessary, in return for saving mine." Vee came to his feet, let his lips curve into that whimsical, twisted smile and bowed as he said half mockingly: "I did not offer her my honor."

"Your honor would not have been worth much that night at Van Houton's if Inspector Ramsey and the district attorney had found you there, attempting to rob Van Houton's safe. Remember—they have not the same belief in Van Houton being the Black Death that you have. You're licked, Vee, and you're not a big enough man to see it. You're without fear. Put a gun in your hand and one in the hand of a criminal, and you're invincible. But this time! Van Houton never carries a gun, won't have one in his house. You haven't got a man who'll shoot it out with you. Your honor—"

"Very well, then"—and this time Vee was serious—"I owe my life and my honor both to Gertrude la Palatin. If necessary—understand, only if necessary—I will sacrifice both that honor and that life for her."

"Then you'll—you'll quit; not bother Van Houton again?"

"No, I won't quit. Don't you see, Maria? I can't. After all I'm just a cop—a common cop. Personally I hate this Van Houton; personally I owe much to this Gertrude la Palatin." And after a moment's pause, "But above all I'm simply a machine—a crime machine—hired and paid by the State, the people of that State. I can not promise the lives nor the honor of those people."

"Not even—even for—if you loved a woman?"

Maria was on her feet now, facing him. Brown took a step forward; he was very close, his slender body not much bigger than hers. He stretched out those small hands with the long strong fingers—fingers that could pick melody worth thousands of dollars out of the air and strum it on the piano—fingers that could close upon a trigger and place lead straight between a criminal's eyes. He spoke very slowly and his words jarred me, surprised me. Silly that, for I'm not sure I fully understood them.

"Not even for a woman I love."

THEY stood looking at each other for a long moment. Oh, I knew that Maria loved Vee. But I didn't know before, and—damn it!—I didn't know now, that Vee loved her.

Maria half leaned forward. Beautiful? Yes. There were times when that cold cruel mouth became soft, those sinister green eyes almost kindly.

Vee laughed and said: "Damn it! Maria, we're treating Dean like the furniture—like an overstuffed chair." Unconsciously, I think, and resentful of his own lack of physical strength, he often made fun of mine.

Maria looked straight at him. "I guess," she said very slowly, "it's Vivian, the song writer. I'm in love with. Why do you think this Gertrude la Palatin wants you to quit?"

"To save her own hide, of course." Vee shrugged his shoulders.

Green eyes blazed. "And why do you think I want you to quit?"

"To save my hide," said Vee. "You have altogether too much respect for Mr. Vincent Van Houton and too little for me. But since it's Vivian, now let's have a last rehearsal of that song. Damn it! Maria, I'll see that my publishers find you a spot—a big spot. That song will make you, and you will make the song."

Vee winked over at me, and taking the girl by the arm passed from the living room to the music room, leaving the door open but swinging the curtains closed behind them.

I heard him say: "It's a tough, rough number and you'll have to get someone who'll know how to put the steps over. *Girl of the Night!* You won't need any make-up"—and so low I hardly caught the words—"that is, any more than you already wear. When, Maria, are we—to see the real woman beneath the paint and cement?"

CHAPTER TWO

Cat Man

UNLIKE the close friend and biographer of many great detectives I am unable to sit and think over a pipe. It goes out on me every few minutes. Bits of tobacco gather on my lips; burning, ill-tasting juice drops back into my throat. But usually I do fairly well with cigarettes—And now my thoughts, as Maria's voice, slightly husky but with a professional touch that even I could not miss, came from the music room—Well, maybe it was the lack of a pipe, but they did not fit like the well-placed pieces of a jig-saw puzzle. On the contrary, they were disordered, jumpy, unpleasant thoughts.

Brown's many victories over Van Hou-

ton did not stand up so well in a future picture. Certainly Vee went directly after men he wanted, pushed them into a corner, drove them to fight for their lives; or they attempted to take his, and death followed; quick and sudden—and sure.

Here was Van Houton; blackmailer, murderer—yes, as much a murderer as if he had pressed the trigger of the gun or driven the knife home! I shuddered. The knife! That was the method of the Black Death when killers did their work. And always on the body of a victim, mostly pierced by the knife that struck death, was a tiny card. **THE BLACK DEATH.** The warning to other victims that another unfortunate could not or did not pay.

Back in his beautiful home, with its well-trained, high-class and perfectly referenced servants, sat the Emperor of Evil, as Brown had called him. Quiet, serene, soft-spoken Vincent Van Houton—society man, lover of cats; and with a benevolent attitude toward his social associates who were threatened by his blackmailers. There were even stories that he had lent people money to pay this Black Death, that he was spending money to hunt down this criminal; and he had admitted to being blackmailed himself.

No one but Brown believed that Van Houton was this Black Death. Mortimer Doran, the district attorney, smiled condescendingly. Doran felt that Brown was getting results even if Van Houton was not part of those results. As for Inspector Ramsey! He was a shrewd, clever, efficient police officer. But he disliked Brown and so tore apart all of his theories.

And Gertrude la Palatin, the mimic; probably the greatest female impersonator on the stage today! Where did she fit? Did she love Van Houton? Hardly, for she had freed Brown. Did she hate him? Hardly, for— And I stopped there. She

might very easily hate him or fear him; just another of his victims.

And Maria, who knew so much; knew so many of Van Houton's moves before he fairly started them! Where did she—

And she was singing again. I raised my head. It seemed different; as if she had played a part before and now let herself go. It was the voice of the Maria we had first met; low, harsh, hard and cruel, perhaps, but yet with a certain—

The door bell buzzed far back in the apartment. Wong was out. I walked quietly into the foyer so as not to disturb Vee, turned into the narrow hall, opened the front door—and stepped back, my eyes wide, my mouth open. If a gun had been shoved into my stomach I could not have been more surprised.

But no gun was shoved into my stomach. I was looking into the soft blue eyes of Vincent Van Houton. Not only looking, but I had allowed him to slip through the open door, even pass me and go down the narrow hall, his cane dangling on his arm, his hat in his hand, his curly blond head just turning toward the living room.

I CAME to myself, stepped quickly after him, grabbed his arm and swung him back into the narrow hall. "What do you want?" I raised my voice almost to a shout; scraped my feet. The singing had suddenly stopped.

"Really!" He jerked his arm free of my grip, brushed carefully at his sleeve. "This is hardly the way to treat a guest. When you and our esteemed friend, Brown, call on me, you are better received."

"How did you get upstairs?" I demanded, now blocking his way to the living room.

"Get upstairs! Upon my word, Mr. Condon, you speak as if you were running a night club—and in these times!"

And when I did not smile in return, "There! I won't make a mystery of it. I simply paid more for the elevator ride up than you evidently offer to keep the unannounced rider down. But don't misunderstand me. I am not hinting that you and Brown are cheap. Indeed, I was forced to be more than generous."

Did I hear him? Of course I heard every word of what he said. It's stamped in my memory now. But only unconsciously was it stamped there then. For, paying no attention to him, I called out loudly for Brown. Maria was there. Maria, who gave us so much information. Did Van Houton suspect that? Did he know that? Would Maria and Vee walk directly from the music room? I called again.

"Vee! It's Van Houton. He's here—inside."

Silly that? It sounds silly now and it sounded silly then. But what could I do? I couldn't run to the curtains and whisper to Brown; I couldn't be sure that Van Houton wouldn't follow and look through the curtains too. But silly or not silly, that's what I did.

Vee heard me and Vee came. There was no surprise in his face. He did not offer to shake hands with Van Houton, nor did Van Houton raise his hand. He said simply: "I appear to be, if not an unwelcome guest, at least an alarming one; a most alarming one."

"Hardly that." Brown faced him. "You know what I think of you and I can guess what you think of me. I have been outspoken."

"Delightfully so." Van Houton nodded. "But really, outside your—well, impossible delusions about me, I think you are an efficient detective."

"I'm costing you money, anyway." Brown smiled slightly. "Now—why am I insulted by this visit?"

Van Houton stiffened slightly. "I have

something to say to you that will take a few minutes. May I come in the living room and sit down?" And when Brown hesitated, "Or perhaps you have another visitor."

"Come in," Vee finally said, and as he took up a position by the music-room door, "Is it a threat—or just bribery this time?"

Van Houton sat down in the chair, raised his head and sniffed the air. His eyes narrowed slightly; he seemed to sniff again. Then he said: "One would hardly threaten such a courageous man as you, Mr. Brown. As for bribery! I am afraid I am not in a financial position for such an attempt."

"No," said Brown, "you're not." He smiled slightly. I guess he was thinking also of the one hundred thousand dollars that Van Houton had paid Kelly to kill Vee; paid him in advance. "At least I've been stepping on your financial toes."

VAN HOUTON'S head went up again. His mouth was closed tightly, his nose sucked in air sharply, as he sniffed once more.

"If anything offends you," Brown said brusquely, "you don't have to stay."

"No, no," Van Houton said softly. "I am very sensitive; like the cats I admire. At times I doubt that it is entirely nasal; perhaps simply the same instinct of those soft, warm animals."

"Cats," sneered Brown, for he knew that was the one thing that got under the skin of Van Houton, "take everything and give nothing."

"Somewhat like a woman," Van Houton said as he watched the curtains. "It seems that I feel another presence here, now." He looked directly toward the music room.

Brown showed no alarm. He said simply: "If you expect me to clean out

my place because you sense an alien presence, why—”

“Not an alien one,” Van Houton cut in, “but a friendly one.” And lips setting tight, his eyes growing hard, “Or perhaps I should say a familiar one.”

“It’s no go with us.” Brown’s face never changed, except to smile perhaps. “Dean and I both read the advertisements.”

“Not you nor Dean”—and Van Houton turned his head suddenly and set his eyes directly on me—“but Gertrude la Palatin.”

If he had turned from Brown to catch me off my guard, maybe he succeeded. That is, he may have read surprise in my face, perhaps; too, a touch of fear. For if he suspected Gertrude la Palatin of visiting here, then he must know that some woman had preceded him to our penthouse and—maybe he suspected Gertrude la Palatin of letting Brown escape that night. He might—

The curtains of the music room suddenly parted. Maria stood there between them. There was a cigarette dangling from her lips; her eyes were very narrow. So narrow, in fact, that the green did not show at all; just slits of flashing, indistinguishable color. A small hat hung partly down over one eye. She spoke, and her words fairly snapped through tight lips.

“I didn’t get all the gent’s words”—she shot a finger toward Van Houton—“but I got enough to tell me he’s fussy about his company.” And to Brown, “I’m on my way. I got the fifty and you got the talk.”

She walked across the room; no cat-like steps now but long, manish strides. Her face twisted into a grin; more, a smirk. As she passed Van Houton she snapped up his head with her closed right hand.

“Look me up sometime, brother.” She

jerked a thumb toward Vee and myself. “The boys will give you my number”—and swinging just before she reached the turn in the foyer—“or maybe that educated beak of yours can hunt me out.” And she was gone, slamming the door closed behind her.

“Maybe it can.” Van Houton’s words were more a spoken thought. He half came to his feet, then dropped back in the chair again. He spoke lightly enough but he was thinking, and he was puzzled. “You have strange company, Mr. Brown.”

“Sure. Sure.” Vee nodded. “I get around. It pays.”

“She’s what you might call a stool-pigeon?”

“She’s what you might call—whatever you want to,” Brown snapped. “You didn’t come here to discuss the oddities or the necessities of my profession.”

“No, no—” Van Houton said very slowly. “It’s strange, that’s all. It might be such a person as that who supplied you with information about this blackmailer; as you would say, ‘about me?’”

“It might.” Vee nodded and looked directly at Van Houton.

It was a full minute before Van Houton spoke.

“You know, I was once blackmailed by this same Black Death. I have bent every effort in my small way to apprehend him. Tonight he telephoned and warned me that my further interference and advice to those dear friends who have been unfortunate was dangerous to them.”

“Yes,” said Brown, his eyes narrowing; no more humor in his voice. I knew how he hated this man.

VAN HOUTON nodded, “I believed him, took his warning and am ready to cease my activities. I did it partic-

ularly to save the life of Mrs. Thomas Wilson." And looking quickly at me, "I understand her husband was at college with you and Brown. This blackmailer"—he shuddered—"this hideous criminal also demands that you too cease annoying him; that you stop entirely trying to convict him. Otherwise this woman—this mother married to Dean's friend and your friend will die. Diabolical! Imagine simply taking a human life because of his dislike for you or through the necessity of convincing you that he means business. But what do you say?"

"I say—I'll get this blackmailer, this Black Death; and won't quit until I do."

"Shall I tell him that if he should call again?"

"There's no need to tell him." Brown leaned forward. "I have already told him—told you."

"Why—" And Vincent Van Houton switched suddenly. "Then the woman dies?"

"No, the woman won't die. I'll protect her; be sure of that."

"Really, I wish I could be sure of that. As sure as you are." He ran white, manicured fingers across his mouth. "I wonder, Mr. Brown, if you can protect her."

The phone rang. At a nod from Brown I answered it. Half surprised, I turned. "It's for Mr. Van Houton," I said slowly.

"With your permission." Van Houton came slowly to his feet, walked to the flat table and lifted the instrument.

"Van Houton. Vincent— Yes." A moment's pause, and his voice still lower; a touch of sympathy apparently in it, "Yes. I understand exactly, but I can do nothing for you. No. No one can do anything for you."

He started to lower the phone slowly back in its cradle, then shoved it quickly down. Did I hear a dull sound, or was

it just the sudden click mingled with the jar of the replaced telephone?

"You'll excuse me." Van Houton did not sit down again but walked directly toward the door. "I am depressed today. I came here on an errand that I hoped would be one of mercy. There is no use in trying to change your mind now?"

"No use. Now or later," Brown said.

"Dear me!" said Vincent Van Houton as I followed him to the door. "I fear I have failed—failed miserably. A woman's death!"

"You don't need to worry about her death," said Brown. "I can assure you of her safety."

"I hope so. I hope so. And I won't try to influence you further—yet."

CHAPTER THREE

Murder By Telephone

WHEN Van Houton was gone I asked Brown point blank how he could sit there and be so sure about the woman.

"Maria told me that Mrs. Wilson had received the final warning since she had no money to pay. I have surrounded the place with detectives. But perhaps we had better go to the Wilson home and have a talk with her."

"But, Maria! That was strange; her coming from the music room like that, and stranger still the fact that Van Houton didn't know her. I thought she was—She said— But she must be very close to him to bring you so much information."

Brown's eyes narrowed. "She might be very close to someone who is close to Van Houton."

"But why did she walk out like that?"

"To protect another. Van Houton knew someone was in that room. He voiced the thought that it was Gertrude

la Palatin. Maria might have made her dramatic exit to convince him that it wasn't."

"I can't believe in that sniffing, or that 'instinct.' It sounded too—"

"Impossible! Yes." There was no humor in Brown's voice now. "But it's possible, Dean. Some people are very sensitive to perfume, perhaps even to personalities. As for me, I can sense danger on occasions. But I think Van Houton suspected someone was here before he came up."

"Yes." I agreed wholly to that; I'm a practical man. "Since it wasn't Gertrude la Palatin his senses played him false. He was simply guessing."

"Was he?" Brown's black eyes were on me now, though I think he was looking through and beyond me. "He must have suspected her; suspected that she helped my escape that other night." He raised his eyes to the ceiling, shook his head, then nodded. "Maria did the only thing she could do; that is, if the protection of Gertrude la Palatin is so important to her. And— By God, Dean, I think I've got it! I think—" And stopping again, "No, no. I hope not. For if I got it certainly Van Houton got it."

"What—what do you think?"

Vee looked at me a long time before he spoke. Then, "I think that Maria and Gertrude la Palatin are very close." And breaking off suddenly, "Somehow Van Houton was very convincing tonight. I mean about the death of Mrs. Wilson. But he couldn't know then that her house was surrounded. Still, we'll go at once and have a talk with the woman."

We had lifted our hats from the costumer; were almost at the door when the phone rang.

"Answer it!" he told me. "Take the message, unless of course—"

I lifted the phone, gasped something

about being right down, replaced it and turned to Vee.

"Mrs. Thomas Wilson," I said, "was shot to death less than five minutes ago."

NOT a word was spoken until we were downstairs, into a taxi and on our way to the Wilson residence. Then it was I who said: "How—how could it happen?"

He looked at me in the darkness. "How did she die? You were on the phone."

"I—I don't know," I gasped. "She was shot to death. I was too surprised; too stunned to ask any questions."

"I know. That's why I didn't ask you for details. We'll find out shortly. She's dead; that's certain."

"Yes, that's certain." I guess I was just talking to hear the sound of my own voice. "But, maybe it wasn't the Black Death at all. Maybe— You see, they—the Black Death favors a knife."

Brown's eyes seemed to pierce the darkness. "You think," he said, "that it was done by someone else; just a coincidence that the woman was killed five minutes after Van Houton visited us, threatened us, even told us?"

"But how could he—"

"So a stranger slipped by an elaborate police net and killed her! Just passing and dropped in."

I didn't like the irony in his voice; in his words. I tried: "They can't blame you, Vee. It won't hurt you?"

"Hurt me!" His laugh was not pleasant. "No, not in the way of giving me a black eye in the Department. It's Ramsey's headache. I told him the woman's life was in danger. It was his job to guard her; his responsibility. I didn't mean to, but I did pass the buck to him; the official buck. But the personal one! Hurt me?"—and it was one of the few times I had ever heard his voice break—

"Yes, it tears and rips inside me."

"But how—" I started again.

"We'll know in five minutes—less."

And as the taxi pulled to the curb, "I see the medical examiner has beaten us to it; and there's Mortimer Doran's car."

"They—must feel it's important," I stammered.

"Important! After the woman had received the final notice of death! After I told them her life was in danger!" He shook his head as he muttered something to the uniformed man at the door and said to me: "If Ramsey's to blame for this he should be broken. It'll be his own carelessness or his stubborn, vindictive indifference because the warning came from me."

The room of death was in the front of the house, up one flight. A large bedroom. A cop stepped aside as we entered. Mortimer Doran stood over by the window, leaning against the wall; Inspector Ramsey was close to the door. He grinned at us unpleasantly. A man, leaning over a dressing table and partly shielding the body of a woman slumped there, turned suddenly. It was the assistant medical examiner.

"You're right, of course, Ramsey," he said to the inspector. "This woman shot herself just below the right ear. I can't be positive that's the gun clutched in her right hand until after the autopsy and the ballistic boys have done their job, but it's sure enough."

He whistled very softly as he picked up his bag and crossed to the door. Poking Brown in the ribs as he passed, his lips parted and his eyes twinkled. "Hello, Vee," the doctor said. "It's nice to find one that doesn't belong to you. Good-night."

"So it was suicide." Brown went over and examined the body. He lifted the hand that held the gun, felt of the fingers, pulled one back slightly. His shoulders

shrugged, his hands came apart. He looked at her other hand; the colored French telephone.

"You can't make anything else out of this." Ramsey came and stood beside him. "Six men outside, protecting her from what? From firing a shot into her own head. You can't lay this to the Black Death."

BBROWN'S voice was very tired. "No? I guess I can't lay it to your carelessness either, Ramsey. Just my own." He was opening and closing drawers. "She wouldn't keep them around." And to Mortimer Doran, "She had her third warning from this blackmailer. The fourth! This time they couldn't leave it with the body."

"How do you know she had a warning?" Mortimer Doran asked. And when Brown shrugged thin shoulders, "She was telephoning when it happened. At least, she was found dead with the receiver off. Ramsey's guess is that she lived long enough to wish she hadn't done it; tried to call for help but couldn't make it."

"That's right," Ramsey agreed. "The doc says she kicked right out, but it only takes a second to lift a receiver. I've seen guys, dead—or about dead, do strange things."

"We're checking up with the telephone company." Doran nodded. "It's a cinch someone noticed the receiver was off. They were buzzing hell out of it when we got here."

"What did the company say?" Brown's eyes were wide now.

"Housemire is downstairs on the other phone now." Inspector Ramsey looked directly at Brown. "Why don't you come clean? What's the racket this time? Why have the boys outside? You're not going to blame this on your Van Houton myth!" And when Brown just stood and looked at him, "I suppose I'll have to

check up on him; test his alibi for tonight."

"No. I'll be his alibi for tonight," Brown said listlessly. "He was at my apartment when the woman was murdered."

"Was murdered!" Mortimer Doran walked across the room and took Brown by the shoulder. "Come, come, Brown! You've got eyes. She shot herself."

"Yes, she did. But the Black Death is just as responsible as if he pressed the trigger himself."

"Sort of hypnotism?"

"In a way." Brown ignored Ramsey's sneer. "The hypnotism of fear. This woman was afraid to live; afraid to face it, and— Where's her husband?"

Mortimer Doran answered. "He's downstairs, in the back; the library. It knocked him. There's two daughters; two kids in bed, who didn't hear the shot. What was it she had to face, Vee?"

"The same as the others. Something that crept out of her past. This Black Death bled her of all she could raise; then—well—something snapped in her head and—"

A long, bony man walked into the room. His eyes peered through thick glasses. Ramsey said: "Let's have it, Housemire."

The bony man coughed, half read it from a small note book.

"She was calling Two-O-O-two-two," and he gave the exchange. "They'll give me the name as soon as—" He raised his eyes, broke off. His eyes bulged through thick glasses.

"What's the matter?"

But we all knew what was the matter. The number was familiar. It was the number of our apartment. Vee Brown's phone number.

"That's right." Vee was the only one who didn't seem surprised. And to me, "I think I knew, Dean, as soon as we

learned it was suicide. She called Van Houton, asked if there was any hope, I suppose. Remember what he said? 'No one can do anything for you.'"

"What the hell is all this?" Ramsey demanded. "This woman called Van Houton at your place, and then—"

"That's right. That's right," I cut in excitedly. "There was a queer sound just before Van Houton hung up. I thought it was his jamming down the receiver, but I know now it was a shot—the shot."

VEE BROWN looked at me a long moment, then at the insistence of Mortimer Doran he told him of Van Houton's visit. He didn't mention Maria.

He said: "It's quite plain, though I know neither one of you will agree with me. Van Houton is beginning to fear me; he wants me out of it. Can't you see? This woman's husband went to college with me, was very close to Dean. Van Houton told her that I might help her; she threatened to kill herself if I couldn't. Then she called him at my place, by appointment of course. And he simply—told her to go ahead and kill herself. He murdered her just as if he tightened a finger upon the trigger of that gun and—"

"Murder by suggestion, eh?" Ramsey laughed harshly. "A nice case for a jury, that; with you the witness to his whereabouts when the death took place."

"I say, Vee!" Mortimer Doran seemed disturbed. "You've harped about this Van Houton now for months. But there's never been the least shade of suspicion about his actions. He was even blackmailed himself."

"Sure," Ramsey cut in. "He's known a lot of people who have been blackmailed by this gang. But that's natural. He's

known around as a sort of sucker for a hard luck story. It's known too, that he rather fancies himself as an amateur detective. Lots of people confide in him; especially the women. He's that kind of a duck. Now, probably he didn't know anything about this woman's idea of doing the Dutch act. When she called up he told her the truth."

"What truth?" I demanded. I didn't like the quiet way Brown took it.

"Why—about Brown. Didn't Van Houton say he was scared out of the racket; this hunt of his against the black-mailer? And wasn't he to bring down the message that this Black Death wanted Brown out of it, and wasn't this message—that this woman would suffer? He told her he was going to Brown. Then she called and he gave her that message."

"The death message!" I said.

"But what else could an honest man tell her?" Mortimer Doran came in, turning to Brown. "After all, Dean, this Black Death has proved himself a real menace. Van Houton had to tell the woman the truth; had to warn her that—You see, Vee, the thing wouldn't hold water if it were true. We'll go and talk with him, of course." And raising his voice slightly, "Damn it! He should keep his nose out of this anyway. He's interfering with the law; obstructing the course of justice. I'll—"

"Leave him alone," Brown said quietly. "There's no evidence against him yet. I wouldn't be surprised if this Black Death promised her that her death would wipe the slate clean; that her husband would never know; her children would never know."

"And they won't," said Ramsey, "if we don't find anything; if there's nothing to find. So far it's all in your head."

"But why," said Doran, "would this Black Death wish her dead? In other cases there was the card with the mes-

sage on it; the card of death, that would be reprinted on the first page of every newspaper and naturally frighten others into meeting his demands by fearing the same fate. But here there is nothing; no advantage to him. Absolutely nothing."

BBROWN seemed to think that out a long moment. Then he crossed the room again, and lifting the face of the dead woman looked at it.

"There couldn't be much of bad inside her," he said slowly, "and a great deal of good. I wonder just how many of us—if our lives, our minds, our souls were laid bare—wouldn't, perhaps, prefer to go like that. I don't think I'd want my inner thoughts spread out in the morning papers." He smiled but it wasn't whimsical; rather, bitter; perhaps, sad.

Mortimer Doran laughed uneasily. "But we don't all put our thoughts in writing or allow our indiscretions to become public. Now—why should the man force this suicide? There's nothing to denote the work of the Black Death. Always, before, he's let the public know that the Black Death has struck."

"Because"—Brown turned on him suddenly—"this was not a public crime, not a warning to his victims. It was a warning to me. A warning and a hate—a private hate." And straightening slightly, "And perhaps a little fear."

Mortimer Doran grabbed Brown by the shoulders. "Sometimes you make me believe you," he said. "Damn it! Ramsey, if Brown's right about this Van Houton we're fools, and the man's too foul to—"

Ramsey nodded. "There's someone at the head of the Black Death, of course. But I can't believe it's this lad who keeps a houseful of cats and a roomful of pictures of them. That he happens to know five or six people who have been blackmailed seems reasonable enough. Let

Brown work up that alley if he wants to. I'll admit the thing is beginning to smell to high heaven down at headquarters. Van Houton's got money and he's got influence. If you want to drag him in, go ahead. Tonight! Well, the worst possible thing you could stick on him would be bad judgment in sizing up a woman, and who hasn't been guilty of that?"

For once Brown agreed with Ramsey. He said: "Ramsey's right on that. Leave Van Houton to me, Mr. Doran."

"Sure. Sure!" Ramsey grinned broadly. He liked seeing Brown down in the mouth. "Only, if Brown's suspicions are true I'd advise having his telephone disconnected." And he walked over to the corner and started picking his teeth with a match.

Vee Brown, with his snappy come-backs; his quick wit that used to make Ramsey fairly bluster with anger! There was none of it now.

"I don't know. I don't know!" Mortimer Doran said, a hand on Vee's shoulder. "You've always come through before. This Black Death has given us an awful shellacking in the press. I don't mind saying that if a card had been found on this body— Well — damn it! Brown, don't you think you need help? You've always played a lone hand, I know; but that was a hand with a gun in it. Now—"

"It's brain work." Vee's laugh sounded more like a gargle. "I'm sorry this happened—damn good and sorry. I'll give you the Black Death—Vincent Van Houton—within a week."

"Now, that's talking," said Ramsey from the corner. "And if you don't will you give us a rest?"

"After all," Vee said quietly, "I'm not the only cop on the force."

Inspector Ramsey's face reddened. "After all," he said, "you're the only cop on the force who asked particularly for

this job, and you're making it a life's work."

Vee said nothing. He took me by the arm and led me into the hall and down the stairs.

"Go in and see Tommy Wilson," he said at the front door. "He was your friend more than mine, and I don't think he'll want to see me after this."

"But he won't know that Van Houton came to you and—"

"Yes, he will." Vee nodded. "I feel that Van Houton would see that he does. You know, Dean—Van Houton knows character; knows men. I think he even knows me and knows that if I am beaten I must be terribly beaten."

CHAPTER FOUR

Two Hundred Grand

MY talk with Thomas Wilson, if it can be called a talk, was not pleasant. It is sufficient to say that he loved his wife very much, knew that she was in some trouble and that Van Houton had been advising her. That it could not be any great wrong he was sure of. I thought of the two children; the dead woman upstairs with the gun in her hand, and was not so sure. But I didn't dodge the issue. I told Brown the truth when I came out; I thought he would want it that way.

"You were right," I said as we walked slowly to the corner. "Van Houton is after you. I'm not sure if he wishes to drive you off his tracks by fear or remorse, or simply to break down—"

"My morale," Brown finished for me when I stopped lamely. "I hope he can't do that. I've given it, Dean; given it again and again. Now let me have the truth and see how I'll take it."

"Huh!" I gulped. "Vincent Houton rang Wilson up. He told him he was alarmed about Mrs. Wilson; that she was

very morbid and should be watched.”

“When was this?”

“A short while ago. If you mean—was she already dead? Yes. When Van Houton learned that she was dead he appeared greatly shocked; at least that’s what Wilson said. I didn’t disillusion Wilson about Van Houton. I wasn’t sure you wanted that.”

“No, I didn’t. What else?”

“Well,” I let him have it, “Van Houton told Wilson that he visited you; that Mrs. Wilson was in great trouble, and you—well, you did nothing. There’s no use to go into it, Vee. I had dinner with the Wilsons a few months back. He’s a different man now. It’s been a terrible shock to him.”

“Yes,” said Brown. “She was picked first for the slaughter because of me—of us.”

“It’s not your fault. You’re not to blame.”

We paused under a light, hailed a passing taxi. I had never seen Brown so white. His face was drawn.

“No. Legally I’m not to blame; that’s true,” Brown said when we were in the cab and he had mumbled directions I did not get. “But neither is Van Houton legally responsible. I can’t see sticking a gun to one’s head and taking an ‘out.’ Poor, unfortunate devil; she must have lived through hell to do that. And, Dean, I happen to know it was a very silly affair. She magnified its importance in fearful days and terrifying, sleepless nights. And Van Houton! He drove her to it. No doubt assured her that with her death the thing could not be made public because of the blame of her death attaching itself to the blackmailers. Think of it, Dean! He sat there in our apartment, took the message over the phone and calmly pronounced her death. Heard the shot too, as you seem to have heard it; then walked calmly from the room.

And the law I’m supposed to serve would no doubt disapprove of me if I went to his house tonight and shot him to death.”

“Don’t talk like that. Don’t—”

“It’s not one woman’s life, Dean; it’s many. Do you know what he may be planning now? He may be planning to take hundreds of letters, affidavits, proofs—and make them all public. The slaughter of the innocents along with the guilty. Racketeering, kidnaping, murder. Why—they amount to nothing when the blackmailer; the master fiend of crime steps into the picture. Broken homes, broken lives, the hundred agonies that precede the self-inflicted death. And those too strong to end it that way? He hires someone to stick a knife in them for fear that some knowledge may ruin him. Do you know why I don’t go to his house and shoot him to death?”

“Why—you couldn’t, Vee. You’re just not built that way. It would be murder.”

HE said: “Would it? I wonder. But maybe you’re right and I wouldn’t have the guts for it when the time came. But I like to think that the reason is—because it is unnecessary. At last I am in a fair way to turn Van Houton up.” His hands clasped together, his fingers opened and closed, and he said almost viciously: “Yes, turn him up to the law; maybe roast him for murder.”

“How—you didn’t tell me of this.”

“No. I kept it until the time came to strike. And the time has come. You recall our visitor, Theodore Lessenger, the lawyer; the lawyer Van Houton or Moffet, the crooked politician, sent to us, trying to bribe me when they wanted that evidence against Moffet. Well, Lessenger is Van Houton’s man; the man these criminals recognize as their leader; whose orders they take.”

“How did you find that out?”

“I guessed it.” He smiled slightly.

"At least I worked on him. Remember, in the Mandozza affair, I decided not to work against Mandozza but collected instead evidence against his lawyer, and by suppressing that evidence got the lawyer to furnish me with evidence against Mandozza!"

"Yes, yes." I was eager now. "You've got something on this lawyer then."

"No, I haven't." Brown shook his head. "Lessenger is a shrewd man. I could not find a thing against him, not one scrap of evidence. He is too clever. My guess in that direction had been wrong."

"Then what good did it do you?"

"I found out that Lessenger, who had been a rich man, was now a poor one, heavily in debt; and that it was not because of unwise investments, but because he was drawing his money in cash from the bank, turning every available security into cash, raising notes where he could. But all honest and above board. Now, what was he doing with that money?"

"He was hoarding it, turning it into gold and—"

"Not gold, but blood. He was turning it into blood—his blood. He was paying out his own money to a vast organization of criminals so they would not use the knife on him; the knife he had hired and paid them to use on others. He was paying this organization to keep the blood in his body. These creatures who served him demanded money. He was giving it to them to avoid the very death he dealt to others—the Black Death."

"You mean—mean that Lessenger is the—is Van Houton's last link?"

"Exactly. He is a criminal lawyer, therefore can openly associate with crooks. Van Houton controls him, probably through the same channels he uses on others—blackmail. Common sense should have told us before that there must be one big known leader; a leader

with many lieutenants in such a vast scheme. Well, that leader is Theodore Lessenger. Influence, politics—he had everything that Van Houton needed."

"And you have proof that he—"

"Proof? No, no proof. Not one bit of evidence against him. But it's from him that I hope to get the proof against Van Houton. Indeed, I am certain of it. But here we are at Irving Small's."

IRVING SMALL, the cleverest fence in the city, let us in the side door of his little shop, bowing and rubbing his hands ingratiatingly. Although his head was down his eyes never left us. Brown always said he was his most valuable asset in crime. Small knew every criminal in the underworld and sold much information to Brown. That Vee could at any time send him up for a twenty-year stretch was true. But he considered Small a far too valuable asset to lose.

"The stool-pigeon—the necessity of every detective worth his salt!" Vee had explained. "I could make him talk for nothing, Dean, but I don't. I pay him well. I imagine he is a very rich man, but he loves money, and his love of money makes me seem as necessary to him as he is to me. Otherwise"—he had grinned at the time—"Irving Small might be interested in seeing my throat slit some night."

Irving Small led us through a small unlighted vestibule and into a dull hall beyond. "He's come," he whispered to Brown. "In the room now; gave me the signal and I let him in. How you got a man like that to meet you here and—"

"You—you know who he is?" Brown cut in.

"I know everyone." Irving Small bobbed his old head up and down. "He is the most dangerous man in New York today."

"Not the most dangerous."

Irving Small cocked his head. "Per-

haps not," he said. "But this other you think of! You must strike quick, Mr. Brown. He is not to be so easily beaten. And where I see your reason for the gent inside, I can tell you this. The Black Death may not much longer need the man in that room." He stopped suddenly, then spoke rather loudly. "The unknown gentleman has come, sir, and is waiting."

I was looking over Irving Small's head and had not heard the door open nor seen the thin sliver of light that came from the long crack. But Irving Small, with his back to it, had heard it. Without another word we walked to that door. Brown pushed it open and I followed him into the room. Irving Small turned and passed through another door.

I saw Theodore Lessenger again. Tall, slim; yellow-gloved hands; the slight stoop to his shoulders and even the silver-headed cane. He had the same poise, the same assurance and polish—or had he? For the eyes that watched us through the black-rimmed glasses seemed to bulge more and were not as capable of a direct look. But most of all, he needed a shave; the black stubble was in strange contrast to his careful appearance.

"I see"—Brown spoke to him at once—"that you are all ready to accept my offer, and beginning a beard to start off with. A natural disguise when you flee the city—the country."

"So"—Lessenger looked at me—"he is to be in on our little talk."

"Sure!" said Brown. "You had no objection to his presence when you tried to bribe me."

"Bribe?" Lessenger raised his eyebrows. "This is hardly a bribe, Mr. Brown. You want certain letters, certain affidavits." He leaned forward on his cane. "I can tell you where Van Houton keeps every document, every letter he intends to use to bleed people; accumulated at great expense, through years of work."

"But the proof that he is the head of this Black Death! You can prove that?"

Lessenger laughed. "Certainly. By sitting in the witness stand; a witness stand that will later turn into an electric chair for me. I am not a fool, Mr. Brown, and—frankly, I have no desire to help anyone but myself. You offered me fifty thousand dollars for that evidence. I refused. Now you had me meet you here. I presume that you are ready to meet my price. That price was two hundred and fifty thousand in cash or a certified check."

And when Brown only looked at him, "Come, come! Let us not quibble. It's a lot of money, of course. For my part, I could not use those letters. This— Well— Van Houton, if you'll have it that way, can do things to me; knows things about me that are not kept with those documents. Frankly, I can't make use of the documents; not while you're so close. As for you! They would be worth millions to you. Of course, played carefully over a period of—"

"I am not interested in making money out of them."

"Well, then—in saving lives, aiding society, protecting the weak and unfortunate." Lessenger's lips curved sarcastically. "I am not built that way, Mr. Brown, nor did I understand that you were. I'm a man of few words, and perhaps a man who may find time valuable. My life may hang on wasted time."

"All right." Brown spoke quickly. "When I sent you word to meet me here I was willing to raise the price, but only on the condition that you would convict Van Houton for me. Now something has changed my mind. I want to buy all this evidence that Van Houton has collected. I have been able to raise two hundred thousand dollars in cash. I offer you that for the letters—Van Houton's information."

LESSENGER looked for a long time at the ceiling. He twisted the head of his cane in his hand, then finally snapped: "Done! I'll take it. You know, Mr. Brown, I always suspected a man of your talents wasn't simply in this detective racket for—" And seeing Brown's face. "We'll forget that. And don't misunderstand me. I would not double-cross any man, least of all such a power as Van Houton, except to save my life."

"And without you he has no power?"

"No? You think not? I thought that too. I didn't think he'd dare leave me to face the wolves of the night. I admire his brains, his keen understanding of human nature, his quick decisive method of striking or ignoring. If he had stuck to me I would have stuck to him. But I have paid out every cent I owned to protect this organization and save my own life; every cent I could borrow, thinking that he would—would eliminate all obstacles."

"Eliminate me, eh?"

"Perhaps." Lessenger smiled and the smile was really pleasant. "You must strike quick, Mr. Brown. Van Houton has been building another organization; building it from the inside of the organization I spent years to raise for him. A sort of new idea; a richer soil, that will eliminate the weeds. I am selling out because I am one of those weeds. A day, a week, a month even; then someone puts the knife in my chest. No. I'm too clever for this Van Houton. But we waste time! I have accepted your offer. It will be paid—how and when?"

"A certified check when the documents are in my hand and I am convinced that they are authentic."

"Placed in your hand. Exactly!" Lessenger nodded. "I think that is far better than telling you where they are. Since it is necessary that I have access to them I will obtain them and deliver them to

you at your apartment tomorrow night, say—eight o'clock."

"You think that safe—my apartment?"

"Quite safe. I am to call on you anyway tomorrow night, at the suggestion of this Black Death, whom we now both refer to as Vincent Van Houton. I am to suggest that your further activities against this society will cause the death of another of your friends."

"Who?" Brown looked startled.

"I am not sure; not sure at all. I might guess at it, but just guess." He was turning his coat up around his neck, tightening a heavy muffler, pulling his slouch hat well over his face when I broke in for the first time.

"But, Vee. You're giving this man every cent you have. For what? Simply to delay Van Houton. In time he will have built up more victims and—"

"Exactly!" Lessenger said to me. "But your friend, Mr. Brown, is a clever man. He has already directed suspicion to Van Houton. If this evidence, this list of victims with their letters and so on, should be found in Van Houton's house, I think that would prove embarrassing."

"The letters are there—at Van Houton's?" I gasped.

"No, no; not yet. But a clever man like Mr. Brown might see that they were found there. Most damaging—most convincing."

"Wait!" Brown stopped Lessenger at the door. "Will you kindly guess—just guess—who this next victim, a friend of mine, might be?"

Lessenger shrugged his shoulders. "I know a very charming, very intelligent, and yet a very dangerous woman. But I am not in love with her. Love deadens the keenness of the mind toward danger. Van Houton is—or maybe was in love with her. This charming lady I have suspected for some time. She is called Ger-

trude la Palatin." He smiled, bowed and was gone.

"So—" I turned to Brown. "That's why you've been attending to your own finances lately; selling, borrowing. Lord, man, that's every penny you have in the world! Why should you use it?"

"That's what I asked myself—until tonight," Brown said very slowly. "Until tonight, when I looked into the eyes of that dead woman. Now—Gertrude la Palatin."

"But two hundred thousand dollars." I whistled.

"A lot of money—a high-priced squeal. I guess that will go as an all-time record for any stool-pigeon, for that's all Lessenger is. Just a stool-pigeon—a glorified stool-pigeon!"

WE STEPPED out of the little room and turned toward the back of Irving Small's pawn shop, which for years had hidden his real activities.

Brown said: "We'll talk with Irving for a bit. He always has some news. Besides, we've got to give Lessenger a start. He's smooth. He was a good man for Van Houton until he went broke. Somehow, they've fallen out. I am the cause of it, I guess. Van Houton seeks vengeance; Lessenger seeks compensation. He strikes before he is struck, which makes him that much shrewder than Van Houton."

Brown tapped on the locked door and Irving Small opened it.

"Come in. Come in!" Irving Small returned quickly to the old flat desk with its many deep drawers on either side of it and placed his hand over a large object. A gun, I thought.

"Not going to kill a man, I hope." And Brown's voice was better; some of his—well, morbidity gone.

"No, no." Irving Small started to put the gun in the drawer.

"A hot rod, eh?" Vee asked.

A small head twisted, shoulders hunched, shrewd little eyes watched us. For a moment Irving Small slipped that gun toward the drawer, then he stopped and shoved it quickly into Vee's hand.

"You like guns. I wonder you never carried one like this. They say a man who knows his hardware can do wonders with it."

Brown took the gun, hefted it in his hand. "A nice rod," he said. "I don't use it for the same reason gunmen don't use it. Too easy to trace down if a lad wants quiet shooting." He hesitated a moment, laid it on the desk and repeated, "Quiet shooting!"

Irving Small shook his head. "I suppose I'll never get rid of it now. The boys won't fancy it. But the price was right and I took it. It belonged to Pete Stokes. You remember him. You should, Mr. Brown. You killed him."

"Of course. You remember, Dean." Brown nodded at me. "Peter Stokes. I shot him to death in a cellar in the first real attack we made against Van Houton. He made money as a bootlegger—when money was made that way. He visited Van Houton often." Brown stroked his chin. "It was the only real connection that could actually link Van Houton with the Black Death. But that was when Van Houton claimed he too was being black-mailed."

"Yes," I said, "I remember him well." And I shivered slightly. I had been close to death the night Stokes died.

"Could the police trace this automatic revolver; trace it to Pete Stokes?" Vee asked Irving Small.

"Sure!" Small pointed to a mark on the gun. "Pete, when he was young, was a fool. He put that mark on it. I think he quit carrying it, but everyone knew Pete's gun. It would be easy for the police to trace it to him. That is why I'll never sell it."

"Vee"—I sort of grinned at him. I knew he was upset but I meant it for just good-natured raillery. It wasn't often one caught Vee up on guns—"there are automatic pistols and there are revolvers. If you read your detective-story magazine you would see how easily readers are annoyed by careless authors who speak of 'automatic revolvers.'"

"Not this time, Dean!" Vee lifted the gun and handed it to me. That was how I came to examine it so carefully. And see the peculiar mark on it; the rough chipped, five-pointed star on the grip. "This time it is the reader who would be careless. That gun is actually an automatic revolver. I think it's the only one of its kind, but I'm not sure. It's a Webley-Fosbery."

"But an 'automatic revolver.' I never heard of such a thing. What's the point of it?"

"Not just to show up the annoyed reader, anyway; for I doubt if the makers thought of that. I'm thinking of using such a gun myself. There are many people who fancy a revolver and yet would like the speed of the automatic. That gun there is the fastest shooting revolver that I know of today. I would ask for nothing more in speed and accuracy than that automatic revolver."

"It looks like a heavy, dangerous gun," I said as he took the gun from me.

"Yes, yes." Brown put the gun down on the desk and we started toward the door. "It uses Remington revolver cartridges—four fifty-five, I believe. It—" And stopping as I passed out the door, "I'll be right with you; just one more word with Irving Small."

I heard Brown say to Small: "Does anyone know Pete Stokes left that gun with you?" And I heard, too, Small's answer, "No."

After that I heard nothing, for I had walked down the hall to the vestibule and

the little door and was peering or trying to peer through the dirty glass out into the deserted darkness of shabby tenements. Three minutes later Brown joined me.

CHAPTER FIVE

Girl of the Night

IT was close to eleven o'clock when we reached home. Brown picked up the phone, called the President Theatre, where Gertrude la Palatin headed the musical show. He seemed relieved to discover that she had not yet gone and in a few minutes was connected with her in her dressing room. The one-sided conversation was annoying.

"I had to call you," he said. "Have you had any threats from the Black Death?" A moment's pause, and then, "That's strange, or perhaps it isn't. You must let me know the very moment it happens. Good!"

He hung up the receiver and turned to me. "The Black Death is not running true to form. Miss la Palatin has not received any threats. Or perhaps Lessenger lied to us."

"Or was misinformed," I tried.

Vee shook his head, walked the floor, then swung on me. "I'm a fool, Dean. Of course she would not receive a card. She's too close to Van Houton. She even has an apartment at his house. Why—" He grinned for a moment, and then, "But I don't think that would cover it altogether. She helped me to escape from his house; therefore she either recognized him as the Black Death or that he was very close to the Black Death, or—" He shook his head again. "But he would let her know when her time came to die. His fiendish cruelty would see to that."

"But if she knew the truth about him, then he wouldn't warn her. Just strike."

"Why?" Vee demanded.

"Afraid she would talk; would—"

"But we can talk. Lessenger can talk. Perhaps many others can talk. It's the same old story. We know, but talk is not evidence. If it were, our prison population would go up by a thousand percent. Hundreds of electricians would be put to work pulling switches on wired chairs. Don't you know, Dean, that we have a murder every hour in the United States? But you don't hear of the states working overtime on the death penalty."

"Back to where we were, Vee. How will Miss la Palatin let you know?"

"In a way that will surprise me. That was how she put it." He rubbed his hands together. "Tomorrow night at eight. Not much longer. Not much longer."

"You think—you're sure Lessinger's on the level?" I couldn't help blurting it out.

"On the level!" He swung and faced me. "Did you see his face, his eyes? Why, it means everything to him. Greed and need. He'll be able to leave the country with that money, live abroad. And Van Houton can't expose him; that is, without exposing himself."

"I was only thinking that, after all your work—the months you have spent—it comes pretty easy at the end. Too easy."

"That's life." Vee nodded. "I knew a detective once who looked for a man half around the world, only to find when he was far off in China that a rookie cop had arrested that man in a lunch room; a lunch room that the detective had made a habit of eating in for years. Inventors work for a lifetime, unrewarded, and at the end stumable by chance upon the little trick that makes them world famous. Why—"

"But what good will all this do you?" I cut in. "Van Houton will start right up again."

"Perhaps." Vee nodded. "Things are not ending as I'd like them to end, of course. But you saw that dead woman's eyes and you heard the shot that killed her. At least the city will not be shocked by suicides, murders and—"

"But Van Houton is building up a new organization. Even now he may have other and worse murderers that he controls. He's starting over."

BBROWN cut in: "And I'll start over. There'll be an even break there. If he's thrust into the open I'll get him."

"But Gertrude la Palatin! If he suspects her, then—"

"Her letters will be with the other letters, and will be destroyed."

"But what he knows about Lessenger isn't with those letters."

"That's because he never intended to sell his evidence against Lessenger to Lessenger. He intended to keep that over his head."

"Then isn't that same thing true of this famous actress; hasn't he been friendly with her? Won't he—?"

"God in heaven! Dean, stop it," Vee cried out. "What can I do; what shall I do? Should I take those letters to Van Houton, make a deal with him, allow him to destroy the many to save the one? Gertrude la Palatin saved one life—mine. Am I to sacrifice a hundred lives, maybe more, to save hers? Am I—am I—" he put both his hands to his head. "Am I a cop, or a song writer?" And he turned and dashed into the music room.

For a while I heard the piano, the deep notes, the strange eery melody. *Girl of the Night!*

As for myself, I read or tried to read the evening papers. But all I remember was the hurricane in the south, the floods and destruction along the Atlantic coast, and the promise that New York would get the real force of the storm some time "tomorrow night."

All the next day Vee Brown was on edge. And after dinner he was worse, as the hands of the clock moved toward eight. It was ten minutes of eight when the phone rang. Vee jumped to it. It was not Lessenger—it was Vincent Van Houton.

Van Houton had two very fine seats for *Celebrities on Review*, Gertrude la Palatin's show, and he wanted Brown to take them. Vee hesitated, then said he was busy and hung up. But he was bothered by the phone call and paced the room, snuffing out butt after butt in the different ash trays. At eight fifteen we had another telephone call. This time it was Lessenger. Brown turned from the phone.

"He's lost his nerve, Dean. He didn't get his instructions from Van Houton to visit me here. I thought perhaps he hadn't when Van Houton rang up about the tickets. Lessenger won't come to our apartment. He's in a blue funk and I don't know that I blame him. But he's got the letters and will deliver them to me at one o'clock tonight—or rather, tomorrow morning. He's picked a prominent place. No, no, Dean. I can't even tell you the spot—he made me promise that. The man's frightened. But you're to go with me. I have the certified check, of course, for two hundred thousand dollars." He walked to the wide French windows and looked out. "It's a night for it," he said as the rain pounded against the glass. "It seems as if the promised hurricane from the south is making good this time."

For the third time the phone rang. This time I answered it. It was Vincent Van Houton again.

"Will you tell Mr. Brown about those tickets? I'm sending them around to him. He'll have to hustle."

"But he said he couldn't—"

"Maybe," said Van Houton very

slowly, "he'll change his mind when he learns that this is Gertrude la Palatin's last appearance."

"For—for the season?" I half stammered.

"Forever!" said Van Houton and hung up.

That was Thursday night, and the show was—was—I turned and told Brown; was still telling him when the messenger arrived with the tickets.

"He—he had already sent them, "I stammered. "What does he mean—'forever?'"

Brown's thin lips were a single straight line as he got into his coat. "You know what he means, Dean. Van Houton has never bluffed us. He—But come on. We'll see the show."

AT the stage door we were stopped. Yes, Miss la Palatin was expecting us; hoped to see us after the show. She had left a note for "Mr. Brown." Vee tore it open and read it.

Don't come to see me until the last curtain. This card that I received, explains.

Gertrude la Palatin.

And the card did explain. In the center in large type were the dreaded words, and below them but in smaller type—a message.

THE BLACK DEATH.

This is your last performance. You are playing tonight to Vee Brown and Death. I wonder if you can give it and if he can take it.

That was all. We didn't talk. We didn't need to. Vee took me by the arm and led me around to the front of the theatre. The play had begun.

As we slid into our seats Vee half whispered to me or to himself: "We'll see first if she can give it."

And she did give it. There was no doubt that she was America's foremost

impersonator. I won't mention the different actresses she took off, except to say that as usual her impersonation of Marie Dressler was almost startling, considering her slim figure. As for Marion Davies—But when she pulled off her wig and rubbed the grease paint from her face she was a most charming little woman; no more than a girl it seemed.

"Is that her real self?" I asked Brown. "At Van Houton's that night her hair seemed different. But you saw her and —"

"I saw her only in the darkness of that room before I slipped down the rope to safety," he said. "But tonight we see the real la Palatin, I think. Her hair is so short and clipped so close to her head—but they do say that on the street she wears a wig, though no one could tell it."

Yes, she could give it. Certainly no one in that vast audience, and the place was filled despite the rain and the storm, could possibly realize the strain she must have been under.

I looked at Brown. When Gertrude la Palatin was on the stage and she was on often for the show was built around her, his eyes were glued on hers. I wonder that she didn't feel them, there from the fourth row. But she didn't, or if she did she made no sign. She was giving just a wonderful—a finished performance. Finished! I didn't like the taste of that thought.

Between her appearances Brown's eyes searched the theatre. It was after we had returned from the lobby for the last act and just before the curtain went up that Brown nudged me and I looked in the upper box to the right.

The man must have just come in. His top hat was lying crown down on the flat surface of the box, a white muffler sticking from it, and he was just tossing his gloves into it. Blond hair, broad shoulders, fine features. Yes, it was Vincent

Van Houton. Begrudgingly I admitted he made quite a distinguished figure. Others were looking too, for Brown told me that Van Houton often occupied that box; had engaged it for the entire run of the show. More than one columnist had linked his name with a "famous impersonator."

Gertrude la Palatin saw him, almost as soon as the curtain went up. For a moment only she hesitated; for a moment only her low throaty voice broke while imitating a well-known radio star, then it was as if he had never appeared.

I am not going to describe that performance, except the end of it. Brown had sighed with relief the moment Van Houton had entered. He had whispered to me: "She's safe for the time, anyway. Do you know, Dean, I'm almost beginning to fear that man. When we got the tickets, his message, and hers! I was afraid something spectacular was going to happen; yes, happen right on the stage, before our eyes. But not now; he wouldn't be here. His alibis are always so perfect. We may expect nothing spectacular tonight."

IN that Brown proved a poor oracle, for to me perhaps the most spectacular episode or at least the most startling one—in the whole case of the Cat Man, the Black Death—was about to take place. And when it came, it came with a suddenness; too quickly for me to realize that—that—

The manager had appeared from the wings. He spoke loudly in a sudden lull in the music. "La Palatin, the great. A new creation—a new impersonation—a new triumph."

There was the music, the low notes ever rising—weird, eerie. And she was there, slipping, gliding from the wings. That was when I came to my feet, started to open my mouth and felt Brown jerk me back into the seat again.

Gertrude la Palatin was gone, her fine impersonation of famous personages was gone, and now the slim figure that swept catlike across that stage was— The same green eyes, the same curved lips with the cruel twist to them. Yes, there was no doubt. I was looking at Maria, the girl who brought us the information about the Black Death; the girl who—who—And there was the music—Brown's music—Brown's lyric. *Girl of the Night!*

"It's—Brown! Vee! How did—" And though I must have known it the very minute she stepped upon that stage; the very moment the strange familiar notes came, I certainly didn't realize it fully. At least, it didn't register in my whirling head.

"Yes," Vee whispered, "Gertrude la Palatin and our Maria are one and the same person. I should have known it. I asked you once if you noticed her hair. But truth is truth. I didn't know it. So now she lets me know, like thousands of others in the great city, what a great actress she is." And after a moment's pause, "And she lets me know too that Van Houton has struck."

"Van Houton!" I clutched Vee's arm. "He must suspect, must— God, Vee, he saw her in our apartment only yesterday!"

"Yes, yes. He's been cleverer than I again. Maybe he's right. I'm just a gunman."

Brown was absorbed in the girl. There is no doubt that the song was a hit, a stupendous success. Three times she had to repeat the final chorus. And Brown—

For the moment anyway he forgot the thing he faced; she faced. He clapped me on the back. "I knew it. I told her so. But partly I lied to her, Dean. I told her she would make the song, but I believed that the song would make her. Now she's made it and she'll keep it. No

one else will ever sing it. No one—" He stopped.

The curtain was going up and down amid the enthusiastic applause. Maria, or Gertrude la Palatin, was bowing and smiling; smiling right down at us; waving and— Not once did she look at Van Houton, and then she did. Looked straight up at him. Was there a defiance to the sudden tilt of her head; to the sharp twist of cruel lips before she tore the black wig and the little hat from her head? I don't know; I think there was. But Van Houton only clapped and nodded, then tossed upon the stage a great bouquet of orchids.

They lay there as the curtain dropped for the last time. The lights went on, the people were leaving. The show was over—was over!

CHAPTER SIX

City of the Dead

NEWSPAPER men! Admirers! She saw them all. It was some time before Vee and I were admitted to her dressing room. She dismissed the maid at once, was across the room and in Vee's arms; and Brown was holding her too. Nothing strange about that? No, there seemed nothing strange about it at the time; nothing strange in their talk either. It was of the song; her performance; a few arguments over some words—and all this in the shadow of death, the death that had never failed to strike on time.

And their talk was mainly a discussion of Brown's insistence that the name of the piece and the words of the chorus should be changed from *Girl of the Night* to *Girl of the Shadows*.

"Of course. Of Course!" She finally agreed. "You're Vivian now—just a sentimental song writer. I understand. You remember me so. Always in the shadows!"

"Always in the shadows." Vee echoed her words, and then holding her at arm's length, looked at her. "Wong was right. He saw, too, the inside of you."

"And you like me so? The red hair!" And with a laugh, "Even that is not true; it is really black. Simply henna. But you like me, now?"

"I liked you always—inside. I think I always saw you as I see you now."

"But you never suspected?"

"That you were la Palatin—the great la Palatin? No. No one could suspect that who had never really seen la Palatin close. Of course I knew you were heavily made up, that your hair was not real. Plainly you were disguised, but with that art that made the disguise very real. But I always knew you were playing a part."

She threw back her head and laughed. "You are wrong. I was not playing a part. You were seeing the real me, the only me. Made up? Yes. But the girl of the night, the girl I was born. Originally I came from the very underworld you hunt in. Even inside I was not disguised as a crook. I was one. I helped Van Houton with his dirty blackmail until—until I understood what it meant."

"You have paid for all that." Brown stiffened suddenly and said: "This card! Van Houton knows, of course, that you brought me the information."

"He knows everything." She nodded. "That's why I did that song tonight. I wanted you to know; to see it—just once. There is nothing you can do for me."

"There may be much I can do for you," Brown told her.

She shook her head. "I can—will never play again."

"You will play tomorrow night."

"I—"

The dressing-room door opened. We all swung and faced it. Van Houton was standing there; he was smiling. He walked over to a huge vase, lifted some

flowers from it and tossed them into the waste basket. Then he placed the orchids he was carrying in their place.

"The excitement made you forget them." He lifted her hand and touched it with his lips. "You were gorgeous tonight—divine. So—you will rest tomorrow; you will not play tomorrow night."

THE thing was ghastly. The blood left the girl's face. She opened her mouth but no words came. Here was a man who carried a message of death. But nothing could be done about it. Nothing—

Brown spoke very quietly. "I think you're wrong, Mr. Van Houton. Anyway I must thank you for the tickets. I never had the pleasure of seeing Miss la Palatin quite so perfect. She has promised me to play tomorrow night."

"Really! How charming. But, as her friend I must forbid it. I fear it would be a great mistake." He shook his head, knitted his brows. "Miss la Palatin loves nothing more than her art; sets nothing above it—not even me. Now, I may be wrong; she may set another above it. But, no. It is very sad. Such a great actress! Her health comes first. She must give up the biggest thing in her life. She will never play again.

And Maria! She looked at Van Houton—at Brown. Vee spoke and his voice didn't shake, but his lips were very tight.

"I think that Miss la Palatin will play tomorrow night, and I think she will be quite safe. I will call on you tomorrow, Mr. Van Houton, and I feel sure that you will advise Miss la Palatin to play."

"Indeed!" Van Houton spoke easily, free from restraint. "In a way I am Miss la Palatin's personal manager, but I am also her friend. Still—" he hesitated, looked at Vee and smiled— "since you wish it I will permit her to play tomorrow night, but only until the final number."

"You mean—not the—the *Girl of the*

Night!" Somehow I just had to say it.

"I mean—not the *Girl of the Night*, as you so quaintly express it, Mr. Condon. Miss la Palatin, perhaps, does not think so much of her health. Like all great artists she thinks only of her art; the name she has made in that art; the advancement she has contributed to it. She would do nothing to drag down that name. Indeed, I am sure she would prefer death first." He turned to Maria. "By all means, my dear, play tomorrow night. Telephone me how you feel just before the final number—the new number. I will tell you then exactly what to do."

And as the door opened now and the manager stood there, red of face, broad of grin, enthusiasm in his moving hands and sparkling eyes, Van Houton ran on easily: "I understand, my dear Gertrude, that tonight you will not be using the little apartment at my house, which I set up to assure you absolute quiet; that you are going to your hotel. Very well. You will be quite safe. This—er—Detective Brown here is evidently alarmed that your great success tonight may cause the envious to harm you in some way. At least, I noted several plain-clothesmen outside. You won't need me further. Good-ni—" Van Houton hesitated, lifted her hand and held his lips to it a long moment . . . "Good-bye!" he said, dropped the hand, and pleasantly tapping the manager on the back, and with a nod and a smile to us, left the dressing room.

"These detectives! It is a good thing." The manager jerked his head up and down at Brown. "She will need this protection. I was about to—" And to Maria, "But, there! You were magnificent. You surpassed yourself tonight, Miss la Palatin. Crowds gather even in the rain to see you leave."

RAIN was right. The tropical storm that had been for so many days

sweeping up from the south had arrived. The theatres were already emptied, the people swept to their homes. As Vee and I drove back home, Fifth Avenue was deserted as a country town. Just a cop now and then, the whiteness of his face hardly visible through the slit in the rubber helmet; only the toes of his great boots showed from beneath the long rubber coat.

An occasional figure slunk into a doorway. Homeless derelicts. But otherwise the wind and rain in ever increasing velocity produced a silent city. Silent! Well, yes—as far as human silence goes. But the wind whistled and the rain beat upon the cab, and occasionally signs rattled in their stanchions or, breaking loose, flopped against the side of a building.

Safely at our apartment, a few drinks under our belts, I stood behind the glass door of our private terrace and looked out at the storm; felt or thought that I felt the building rock.

"A bad night for a meeting," I told Vee. "You think this Lessenger will show up?"

"A good night for it. A man in a doorway with a suitcase in his hand could remain unseen for hours. Of course he'll show up."

"Bad, about Maria!" I raised my glass, twirled it so that the ice clicked pleasantly against the sides; more pleasantly as I looked out at the storm. "Think you can help her? Strange that she could so fool us!"

"Think that I can save her?" His lips smacked together. "I must. She and la Palatin are one. And I owed so much to both! Now, to just one. But it isn't strange that she fooled us, Dean. She's paid an enormous sum each week to fool thousands; thousands who are looking to be fooled; critical about being fooled, while we—No. I knew she was not the real thing. Maybe I should have guessed

the truth. Once I was very close—very close indeed. Of course, if you'll check back you'll see that several nights she hurried from here, quite evidently to reach the theatre. There were times too when Maria was with us, and la Palatin did not play. I remarked about it once to you. But of course it explains all Maria's information. As Gertrude la Palatin she worked in with Van Houton; he gave her his confidence. As Maria she gave that confidence to us. He won't be the first man—the first clever, even great man who made a fool of himself over a woman—” He drained his glass. “I wonder,” he said, “if I will.”

At twenty minutes of one we left the apartment again. And what a wind! Twice I gripped Brown's arm as his frail form was almost swept from the sidewalk and Wong bent his body against the open car door.

“God, what a night!” I said when we were in the car.

“Not so bad. Not so bad,” Brown muttered. “I remember a night—” And again self-conscious of his physical frailness he related some wild story of a tropical storm.

The car turned into Fifth Avenue. Big and powerful and heavy as it was I thought we were going to turn over. If the wind, before, had been terrific, it was worse now. And Fifth Avenue! Not a cop in sight. Perhaps there were many in doorways, who still guarded the city. But we didn't see them.

“I hope the car holds out,” I told Brown as the front wheels dashed water over the hood like a wave at sea. “We'd never make it on foot.”

“But we'll make the last of it on foot.” He nodded grimly. “Or we'll crawl it. Even tonight I can't chance the car to our final destination.” And he lifted the speaking tube and called to Wong.

We swung over to Madison Avenue.

An occasional light in a window stood out vaguely between the gusts of wind-driven rain like a beacon at sea. Again a turn, another burst of wind that I thought would drive the side of the car in, and we were creeping again downtown; passing Forty-sixth Street.

“One more swing like that,” I said, “and we crawl from under.”

“We could have gone straight down Park Avenue or even Fifth,” Vee told me, “but I thought it would be better to twist and turn a bit. It wouldn't be hard to spot a car following us tonight. Not many on the road.”

“Not many! Not one. Not a human being even. It's just a city of the dead.” I felt Vee flung up against me. The car came to a stop on Forty-third Street, a few feet from Fifth Avenue.

WE climbed out into the storm. Down the block, around the corner. We made Fifth Avenue all right, but at the turn the rain grew worse.

“Where do we meet him?” I shouted against the wind.

“Down— Only a block,” Vee shouted back over his shoulder as we fought our way along Fifth Avenue.

Peculiar, that storm. There would be great breaks in it, where you could see the rain swirling all around you; hear the whistling of the wind, yet feel yourself in a dead spot.

We pushed on, hugging close to the buildings. Once above the wind and rain there was a crash behind us, just about at the corner we had left. We huddled for an instant in a doorway, turned and looked back. There in the dimness was a figure; a hooded, coated figure desperately fighting his way across the Avenue to the scene of that crash.

“A window,” Brown shouted. “And a cop! You can't beat it, Dean. The minute he is needed he appears. A jew-

elry store, maybe, that needs guarding.”

“No crooks would be out tonight. None but fools—like us,” I shouted as I pushed forward.

Little visibility ahead; little behind, I guess—except for the single moment when we saw the cop. Heads down upon our chests, we fought every inch of the way.

I felt like a ship going to answer an S. O. S. at sea. But I plodded on, pushing Brown as much as following him, as his body would suddenly be swept up and crashed back against me.

And in that deluge, in that storm, straight into the heart of it came flashing lights. A bus. A bus that sent up waves on each side of it, splashed them over the curb and onto our feet; like a small steamer passing a bathing beach on the Sound. Then it was gone; gone as I half turned my head to see its disappearing lights.

I looked ahead again—straight ahead. I saw the man, of course. The crouching figure, the shabby figure. Plainly a poor unfortunate creature, without a home—on the streets a night like this. And in the glare of the street light I saw his face, the fear and terror in it. He stood against the wind, right on the corner—glued, riveted to the spot in horror. His head was flung back over his crouching body, his eyes followed his pointing finger.

My eyes also raised. Feet! I saw feet, just feet, hanging in the air. Then I saw it all, and gasped—cried out loudly. And my scream sounded but a whisper in my own ears.

A MAN was hanging there on the corner of Fifth Avenue. His body that had been held against the pole by the force of the wind was now beginning to swing grotesquely back and forth. And driven almost into the very center of his

chest was a huge knife, and held there by that knife was a square of cardboard; cardboard on which plainly and in large letters was printed the message—

BLACK DEATH—4

I guess I knew the truth before I saw his face; was close enough to recognize that face; the matted, storm-soaked hair, the stubble of a beard. The man was Lessenger. Theodore Lessenger, the stool-pigeon—the glorified stool-pigeon. The man who was afraid to come to our apartment but must pick a safer place. A safer place! There in white letters against the blackness of the stanchion above the man’s head glared the phrase W. 42 ST. and above it 5th AVE!

I tried to shout again, saw that Brown had bent low and was holding the man who pointed, forcing him with the aid of the wind toward the sign post. The wind sucked into my throat and choked my words. But they came just the same. At least, the thought was there.

“City of the Dead.”

A whistle blew, a cop was there. Two, three—half a dozen, maybe. A siren shrieked, a car jumped the sidewalk, skidded or was blown half around. Men climbed from it. The city was alive again. That great police system, which we so little respect but welcome so at such a time, was on the job.

After that, what? Just what I didn’t know. The body was cut down all right; an ambulance was there. Somehow Wong had swung the corner and I was in the car—and Brown was gone. To headquarters, I thought.

Maybe the storm was just as bad when Wong drove me back to the apartment; maybe it wasn’t. I didn’t know. But even after a stiff hooker and the warmth of our great open fire in the penthouse living room, I still shivered. The thing was terrible, certainly a defiant challenge.

I gulped, thought of the information Brown had expected from Lessenger, and realized that it was a challenge that could not be answered.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Stormy Weather

I DON'T know what time Brown came in. I had changed my clothes and was in a lounging robe, trying to be calm and collected. But it didn't work. Brown threw his hat and coat in a corner of the foyer and slouched into the room.

"Good God!" I cried out, "how did it happen? How could it happen? How long was he hanging there; stabbed before or after? Maybe there in the storm for hours, and—"

"Nonsense!" Vee went and stood with his back to the fire and dripped water over the floor. "He was stabbed to death some other place and brought there. No one on the street to be sure, Dean; not in such a storm. But after all, New York is not the back woods and Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue are the cross roads of the world, not of Wampus Junction. A bus had just gone by; people must have passed, cops may duck into doorways for a few minutes, but— Well, I'll hazard the guess that he wasn't hanging there over three minutes at the most. Even that poor unfortunate who had no home and was slinking from doorway to doorway saw him."

"Did he have anything to do with it?"

"No, certainly not. They're holding him of course, but he didn't even see it, though he thinks a car left the curb just before the lights of the bus came into view down Fifth Avenue. The driver of the bus saw nothing. Who would on such a night?"

"You think—think the message from Lessenger that he'd meet you there was a fake; that someone else sent it?"

"No." Brown shook his head. "It was Lessenger who telephoned me. He is—" he smiled grimly—"or was—a clever man. If the message was a forced one; if he was made to send it, he would have slipped me some hint; something in his voice. Damn it! I would have known." And then, with a shrug of his shoulders as he poured a stiff drink down, "Van Houton got him tonight. I went over the body. We won't go into detail, Dean." And I saw his shoulders tighten. "It's too ghastly even for me. Lessenger was tortured horribly before he died; I think, even after he told Van Houton where I was to meet him. The thing was—just fiendish. Lessenger was slowly tortured to death."

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"I—" he hesitated. "I doubled the guard on Miss la Palatin—Maria."

"Vee—" I took him by the shoulders, half shook him; there was a peculiar, staring look in his eyes. "That— But what about Van Houton; what about him?"

He looked blankly at me. "I don't want her to die like that." And his eyes suddenly blazing back to life, "I promised her that I'd take care of her. I thought—I was sure—I'd have those letters." He walked to the phone, stood by it, stretched out a hand and held it there.

"What are you going to do?"

"Do?" he said. "Tell her—tell her. Tell her what Van Houton told the other one. I—I can do nothing for her. I—"

I was across the room and reaching for his hand, but he had turned and swung back to the fire. "One more night of peace for her," he said. "One more night. She's safe with the guard I've got."

"Mrs. Wilson had a guard too, and—"

I stopped. That was not the thing I wished to say. But his lips twisted at the ends. It wasn't a smile exactly; it wasn't—I guess it was just a twisted grimace.

"She couldn't do that," he told me. "She's built of better stuff. She'd face it."

"But we don't know what she has to face, Vee."

"That doesn't matter." Again he shook his head. "Van Houton has beaten me perhaps, but not Maria—not that girl. If she was built that way, why—why, Dean, I couldn't feel like I do about her."

AND there it was. His conceit. Even beaten at every trick, his pride came to the surface, unconsciously perhaps. It was not in his voice or even in his words, for they were spoken naturally; free from any such impression. But the pride was there, far back inside of him.

I tried to encourage him; tried to tell him that perhaps the information Lessenger was to give him wouldn't do any good anyway; couldn't convict Van Houton; couldn't—

And he said simply: "It's contrary to my whole life, Dean; contrary to every thought I ever had about being a servant of the State. I have never even admitted it to myself up to this very moment; this moment when it's an impossibility. But I am afraid I might have betrayed my trust; forgotten the millions I serve for the one—the one woman. Yes, I would have sold them all out; would have offered those letters for the freedom, for the life of Maria."

"No!" I said. And for the moment I rather liked what he had said. It was so different from the Vee Brown I knew—so human. But I shook my head. "You couldn't have done that. You couldn't have."

"That's what I thought until—until just now. But truth is truth, Dean. There's something about the girl that—"

The house phone rang. I lifted the receiver. We were to have guests at that time of the morning, and in that storm!

I turned to Vee. Mortimer Doran, the district attorney, and Inspector Ramsey were coming up.

Vee simply nodded and said: "You know, Dean—Van Houton has simply been a picture in a frame. Tonight he stepped out of that picture and hung a dead body on a lamp post. For I think he was with the boys who did it."

"But what a foolish thing—what a desperate thing! What purpose could he have in taking such a—"

"Purpose!" Brown laughed. "I told you that he knew I'd have to be terribly beaten. He laughed in my face tonight, Dean; laughed through the sightless, agonized eyes and twisted tortured lips of Theodore Lessenger. You should have seen his face beneath the arc light in the morgue. Yes, Van Houton stepped out of his frame and murdered this man himself. It's hard to believe that he could find another human who could so horribly mutilate his victim before killing him."

"He must be mad."

"Mad." Vee looked at me. "Well, yes—if you mean that he is without a soul; that some satanic agency has sucked all the blood of human feeling from his body. But if you mean his mind, his brain, then—no. I never was one to swallow the sob stuff that cruelty, viciousness and even fiendishness is in the literal sense madness." He shook his head. "But I couldn't convince Ramsey and certainly won't be able to convince Mortimer Doran that Van Houton pulled this job tonight." And as the bell of our private door rang, "We'll have a storm inside now that will make our hurricane a gentle zephyr. For I was there almost the very moment the body was strung up."

And we did have a storm.

RAMSEY started it and for once Mortimer Doran stood by, gravely silent. "There's been enough of them; too damn

many of them, Brown." Ramsey blustered now. "Mrs. Wilson—and you're not even surprised to find that she kicked herself in. Now Theodore Lessenger. But you're on the job almost the very moment he's strung up. A great detective you've turned out to be! Killer of Men, eh? Finder of Corpses, more like it. Always late. Some day it'll be you, the late Mr. Brown, we'll be cutting down. In front of the New York Stock Exchange at the lunch hour, I suppose."

"That would give you some pleasure in an otherwise drab career. You're never late, Ramsey, because you never know where you're going."

"Come, come!" Mortimer Doran came in at last. "You see, Vee—the knife and the card. Theodore Lessenger isn't much loss to the community, of course. But the Black Death again! What a riding the papers will give us tomorrow on this. Surely you're not going to tell us that Vincent Van Houton—smug, snobbish society man—stepped out in a hurricane just to string this body up at Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street."

"I'm going to tell you just that," Vee Brown said. "And the reason? Well, it's not in defiance of and jeering at the police. It was in defiance of me; a jeer at me; perhaps a warning to me."

"Pretty important, ain't you?" Ramsey started, and stopped.

Mortimer Doran had raised his hand. I never saw him quite so serious. "Put everything on the table, Vee—all of it. You knew this man was to be hung there and went out in the storm and found the body? That's it?"

"Not exactly. I expected to meet him there—yes, meet Theodore Lessenger there. He was afraid to come here. He was the Black Death's right hand man; I knew that. Theodore Lessenger was ready to hang out the white flag; deliver to me—" He hesitated there, and then,

"Or point out to me the place where I could find all the letters, information, documents, scandal about people that the Black Death has accumulated. He also told me—which I knew—that Vincent Van Houton was the Black Death."

"Yeah! You've told us that. Did he give you any evidence; anything more than you've already told us?"

"I might add that Dean Condon—" he looked at me—"was with me and heard what Theodore Lessenger said."

Mortimer Doran tightened his lips, stroked his chin, made clicking sounds in his throat. "It's the same stuff, Vee—has been for months. Lessenger, who makes the accusation, is dead. Dean, of course, is a prejudiced witness; and even if he wasn't, Lessenger's story is hardly evidence." And suddenly, partly in anger, partly incredulously, but mostly just spontaneously, "My God! Vee, what has come over you? If it is Van Houton, he's made a monkey out of you at every turn."

"But a live monkey," said Vee. "Was Vincent Van Houton's house watched tonight?"

Mortimer Doran looked at Ramsey. "Yes," Ramsey said after a bit. "There was a man there but he saw nothing."

"One man!" Vee cut in quickly. "There's a yard and a fence and an alley leading from the house to the other street. You should know that, Ramsey. The man was in front of course!"

"Of course," said Ramsey. "Van Houton's been tailed plenty. He complained to the commissioner. He's got friends, he's got money—so he's got influence. I couldn't give any reason for watching his house; I didn't even have any right to have a man in the front."

"Of course," Vee nodded, "they carried the body out the back, took it down to Forty-second Street and hung it to the

stanchion. By God! Every paper will have streamers about it."

"You can't lay it on me." Ramsey pounded a finger against Brown's chest. "If a guy made a live monkey out of me I'd make a dead monkey out of him."

"You'd like to see him a dead monkey, eh?" Vee said, and I felt better when I saw that little whimsical twist to his mouth. "It isn't often that you and I agree on anything, Ramsey."

THERE was more of course, much more. Mortimer Doran blustered, threatened too, perhaps. He was worried. Not the hearty friend he always had been to Vee, yet he seemed as if he wanted to be.

"You said to give you a week and you'd clear this Black Death up," Mortimer Doran said just before they left.

"When I said that—" Brown started and stopped. And then suddenly, "the week isn't up yet."

They were gone.

"What did you mean—the week isn't up?" I asked Vee. "You have some plan?"

"No plan; and I meant nothing. I guess I'm beaten, Dean, and didn't have the guts to admit it. You are looking at the real man now; the real Brown, stripped of his guns and the chance to use them. No headlines in the papers now about my courage and glory. No bombastical boast on my part of my guts—the guts that others lack. I'm like the others—the rats I hunt. I can see my course, see it clearly—but I haven't got the guts for it."

He lifted his wallet from his pocket, pulled a check from it, looked at it a long moment, then tossed it into the fire. "Two hundred grand," he said slowly. "I'm a great one for saving money anyway."

He took another drink, flopped into a

chair and put his head in his hands. I had never seen Brown like that before. I tried to read the papers, kept going to the window and looking out at the storm. Then I told him that it had let up considerably.

Vee jumped to his feet.

"I can't sleep." He fairly spat out the words. "And I can't go in that damned music room and lock the door on you; I can't go in there and think—think of her. For God's sake, Dean, go to bed! Leave me. I want to think. I've got to think." I had to leave him. But I knew I'd never sleep; knew it positively as I gulped down that final drink and without a word went to my bedroom. But I was asleep ten minutes later. Was it confidence in Vee—that he would finally work it out some way? No, I don't think so. Was it that I didn't have the same interest that he had in this—this—whatever the end was to be? No, I'm quite sure it wasn't that. I was tired, worn out—and I slept. And in my dreams a man swung back and forth—a man who hung at the end of a rope—and protruding from the center of his chest was a knife. A knife that pinned to that grotesque body a huge square card which read—BLACK DEATH 4.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Leather Box

WHEN I woke up Brown was gone. It was late in the morning and there was still a light rain. Wong served me with breakfast.

"Mr. Brown, Wong?" I finally asked.

"Mr. Vee go out," Wong explained. "He tell me tell you no worry about him. But in your place I would worry—worry very much."

"But, why?" I asked. "Why should I worry, Wong?"

"Well—" Wong seemed to give the matter considerable thought—"because he

is not the man you know and Wong knows."

"Did he say when he'd return, or what I am to do—or can do?"

"He said nothing. But he looks like a man who walks alone with his thoughts and knows not of the rain."

And that was that.

At three o'clock Maria telephoned. Her voice trembled over the wire. "I can feel it," she said. "I can feel it. The Black Death—just as it must have settled on others. I am to die too, Dean."

"Why talk such nonsense?" I told her. "You're well guarded. Vee has taken care of that."

"But Mrs. Wilson was well guarded." Her words were hardly audible but I got them, for they were the very words I had spoken to Brown earlier that morning. I guess I took a full minute before I spoke. Then I decided that it would be silly to try and ignore her meaning.

"Vee said you would not; could not—You understand. The stuff in you wouldn't permit it."

Badly expressed? Sure. But she understood it.

"Better that than the other," she said. "What is Vee doing?"

"I don't know."

"But he is to see Van Houton this evening. I heard him say so." And when I did not answer at once, "He is, isn't he?"

"I don't know," I said again. I couldn't tell her he had nothing to see Van Houton about—nothing to threaten him with—nothing to— But she cut in.

"Van Houton called me up. He told me that Brown was coming to see him tonight, at nine o'clock. He— Why don't you say something?"

What could I say? Tell her the truth? But, no. I said simply, and without sense: "I'll tell Vee you called when he comes in." But I didn't quite add the

words that hovered on my lips. If he does come in.

This time it was the girl who hesitated before she spoke.

"No, don't tell him; don't tell him I called. I think I know. I've read the papers. He's failed. Don't make it harder for him. There's nothing he can do. Please, later, tell him 'Good-bye.'"

There was a click. I sat there for a long time with the phone in my hand. She had said simply, "Good-bye." But it had brought a lump up into my throat, to drop back almost at once with a dull thud in the pit of my stomach.

IT was ghastly, unbelievable. New York! The city of millions. Twenty thousand policemen; Vee Brown, Killer of Men. And Vincent Van Houton, sitting back in his easy chair lifts his phone and condemns someone to death. Vincent Van Houton, who—

A voice spoke so suddenly in my ear that I half jumped from the chair. Then I realized that I was still holding the instrument to my ear and that the operator had said: "There's a party trying to get you; will I put them on now?"

And my own voice answered mechanically, probably naturally, for we are creatures of habit: "Thank you. Please do."

It was Vincent Van Houton.

"Condon, eh? Well, you'll do." Van Houton's voice was soft and quiet. "Don't bother Brown if he's resting. I've read the papers and understand that he had a very busy night—a very busy night, indeed. Must have been disturbing to even such a hard-boiled killer of men. I understand the papers don't dare print the full details of Theodore Lessenger's death. Horrible. Horrible!"

"Yes." I could hardly speak. "What do you want?"

"Oh, yes. Brown, and I presume you,

since you always travel with him, were to honor me with a visit tonight. There, there. Don't tell me you're not coming; that you have no reason to call on me. This is an invitation, now. I will be pleased to receive you both at nine o'clock. Indeed, you might tell Mr. Brown that it is imperative that he come." And very low and in sarcastic awe, "I've had a message from this Black Death—a message to give Mr. Brown. Nine o'clock, then." And though I never said a word, "Fine! I'll be expecting you."

This time I did not sit there with the phone in my hand. I dropped it back in its cradle as I turned and faced the door. Vee Brown stood there; swollen eyes looked at me.

"Where have you been?" I started toward him, turned quickly as he came into the room, and hurriedly tossed a stiff drink into a glass and handed it to him.

He half raised it to his lips, paused, grinned a rather ghastly sort of grin, then laid the glass down on the table. Though the rain still poured down his face he licked at his lips before he spoke.

"No. I need a shower and a bed. The whisky would be good for me but I can't take it now."

"Vee," I put an arm about him as he walked toward the bathroom, "where have you been? Just walking around? You're not—you haven't let Van Houton get you?"

He was tearing off his wet things, tossing them in the hall before the bathroom door. "No. Almost beaten—beaten to my knees, Dean. But not quite licked. I have made a decision. That's why I won't take the liquor. I don't want afterward to think— But there! Don't say anything—not now. That was Van Houton of course. He's expecting us tonight."

"Nine o'clock." I nodded.

"Good! We'll go, and we'll have a

surprise for him." A moment's pause. "A surprise for you too, I think, Dean."

For a moment his drawn face was there. Then the bathroom door closed.

IT was ten minutes after three that afternoon when Brown went to bed. Just before eight o'clock I was thinking of awakening him—when Irving Small came. He just slid into the apartment—*oozed* in is perhaps a better word. He always seemed to slip or glide or ooze along. But now his hands were not rubbing together ingratiatingly. They couldn't. He was carrying a heavy black case—a peculiar, long, and evidently heavy container of leather.

He slid into the living room, placed himself on the edge of a chair and grinned at me as he cocked his head. "I want to see Brown," he said. "I've got something better for him than bodies hanging to posts."

Brown was wide awake, but now very grim in his long dressing gown. Though the blariness had gone somewhat from his eyes, the pouches and black lines, even if not so marked, were still beneath them. His tight lips parted slightly when he saw the long black box at Irving Small's feet.

"You should'a' told me sooner," Small said. "I didn't see the papers until this afternoon. Being a careful man, I went to the morgue and had a look at the body. It was Lessenger all right."

"Well, what about it?" Brown demanded, but there was excitement in his voice and his eyes were riveted on the black leather.

"He was a clever man, though hanging to a post at Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street may not look like it. But he knew I recognized him last night, and he came back—came back and left this box with me. You see, he got a call to go and see a certain party. He was afraid.

If anything should happen to him, he asked me to give this box to you." Irving Small paused, licked his lips. "No one would deny that something certainly happened to Lessenger." He rubbed his hands together and chuckled gurgling sounds at his own gruesome mirth.

Brown, with a visible effort, lifted the heavy box and put it on the table. He made quick work of the small brass lock at the end and threw up the lid. It was a long filing cabinet. Cards inserted; names neatly typed below the printed letters of the alphabet.

Vee was running his fingers quickly over those cards, pulling out an occasional letter, a typewritten sheet. Then he shook his head at me.

"No 'Lessenger' and no—the girl. But it should serve its purpose." He clapped the fence on the back.

"Small, old child," he said, "there'll be a grand piece of change in this for you."

"Yes?" Irving Small's eyes widened. "You didn't know he left it with me? He didn't tell—drop a note even—didn't give you a hint?"

"Not a hint," said Brown.

"I guessed what it was. I knew what it was." Irving Small's head dropped. "I could have made a fortune out of it, sold it to the Black Death for a great deal of money. Lessenger led me to believe that you would expect it if anything happened to him."

"He knew you." Brown glanced toward the clock. "I'd have found out if you had tried any tricks, Small." And after Small had gone, "He would cut my throat in a minute, Dean. That is, if he could see the cash value of it."

Vee whistled now as he ran his fingers through the long row of cards in the case, before closing the lid.

"Vee," I said, "you're going to turn this box over to Van Houton for the girl's—for Maria's freedom?"

The brightness went out of his eyes; they seemed to suddenly grow lifeless and glassy. There was a peculiar choking sound in his voice.

"I hope so. I hope so." And with almost a plea in his voice, "I don't know what I am going to do tonight."

It didn't take Vee long to dress. He was back in that room again, at that file of letters—going over and over them.

"Vee," I said at last, "there must be some other way. Some evidence—something you can—"

"Not a scrap—not a scrap of evidence against him," he rasped. "I've been through it a dozen times. If I plant it in his place and you and I swear we found it there, we might get him. But we'd get Maria too."

"But we couldn't do that—it would be perjury."

"Perjury!" His laugh sent chills up my back. "I've heard enough perjury in my day not to be bothered about that. Don't you see, Dean? It's not the city, it's not the State. It's Maria I'm thinking about. And, damn it! This whelp from hell knows it."

NOT another word did he speak until we arrived at Vincent Van Houton's and I preceded him up the steps, the long leather box under my arm. Then, just before putting my finger to the bell button, I said: "This is a mighty precious package to carry with us. Yes, I know Vincent Van Houton hires only servants with the highest references and formerly with the best families. But, now—if he carted that body from here last night he must be using some pretty hard characters."

"That's right." Vee nodded. "Some pretty hard characters. Let us hope this box may tempt him to use them tonight." Then he shook his head. "But I'm afraid we'll have no such luck. He's too clever

for that. He knows that my strength is in my right hand and the finger that closes upon the trigger. He'll play against my weakness."

"Your weakness!"

"Yes." Brown grinned crookedly and tapped his head. "The old think box. Most men I've hunted have gambled their quick shooting against my quick shooting. He gambles his brains against my brains, and so far— But give the button a dig."

It was the same butler we had seen on other occasions who now let us in. The same dignity—perhaps, worried dignity—and the same politeness. He closed the door carefully and said: "Mr. Van Houton, sir, is on the telephone. He is expecting you and wishes you to wait a few minutes only, then he will receive you in his study above. He—"

The butler broke off suddenly. Brown and I both turned toward a closed door to our right. The same door that Ramsey stuck his head in when we had first visited the house. It was the room with the pictures of cats. We listened.

Queer sounds came from behind that door, like the frightened shrill shriek of a bird.

Vee Brown stretched out a hand and turned the knob. The door was locked. He looked at the butler. "What was that?" he demanded.

The butler stiffened. "I don't know, sir."

"But you can guess, sir; and I never speak of—of my employer. I might add, sir, that Mr. Van Houton has had my notice for the past two weeks."

"You're leaving! What did he say to that?"

"He doubled my salary, sir. Doubled a most generous salary. But the notice still stands. I—well, I don't like the new type of servant coming in."

"New servants, and undesirable?"

Brown kept his black eyes on the man. "Then why does he want you?"

"I am sure I don't know, sir." And without the trace of a smile, "Unless, sir, he wishes to retain an air of unquestioned respectability in the establishment."

The shriek of a bird again, and Brown held out his hand to the butler. "The key to this door! A simple lock," he said.

"I have no key to that door." The butler stood straighter, if that were possible. Then, without the least appearance of unbending in speech or manner, "A simple lock, as you say, sir—and you a detective. I could take a few minutes outside the study before announcing you, sir."

He turned, and walking straight to the stairs went slowly up then, not once looking back.

"And me a detective." Brown seemed to think aloud. "Old Butts is right, Dean." He dug a hand in his inside jacket pocket, produced a long skeleton key and with a few deft turns of his wrist unlocked the door.

He swung it open quickly. Darkness—and a form that darted by our feet and up the stairs, but not before I had recognized it as a cat. A huge gray ball that—that held something yellow in its mouth.

I was looking over Brown's shoulder when he snapped on the light and peered into that room. Yes, pictures of cats; but it wasn't that which made me gasp. It was the miniature trees and the half dozen living cats that wandered about in the dull light. Wandered? No! Skulked. Hunted their prey in a tiny forest—a forest that meant death for the victims.

"Don't bother to look, Dean." Brown clicked out the light, pushed me back and closed the door. Then seeing my face, "You saw it. The birds had no chance. Poor things! Their deaths were as hor-

rible and as certain as the victims of their master."

I said nothing; the thing nauseated me. I had to pull myself together. The butler was coming down the stairs.

"God!" I finally said to Brown as we followed the servant up the stairs, "the man deserves death—a hundred deaths."

"Yes." Brown nodded, then he spread his hands apart. "We would hardly feel elated, Dean, if we got him a twenty-five-dollar fine on a cruelty-to-animals charge."

CHAPTER NINE

Emperor of Evil

VINCENT VAN HOUTON met us in his study. He did not rise—just indicated chairs for us. His mild blue eyes that rested on the long box which I held turned for a moment to sharp dagger-like points. I was looking, as Brown was looking, at the gray ball that lay on his lap, and at the yellow feather that Van Houton plucked from the purring mouth and let glide easily to the floor.

"We happened to look in the room downstairs," Vee said abruptly, "and saw the cats—and the birds."

"Really!" smiled Van Houton. "I'm afraid someone left the door open again. But no matter. I am training the birds to get used to those pictures of the cats first. You've seen cats and mice friendly; at least in circus performances. I have a theory that cats and birds could very easily be—"

"I might have killed those cats," Brown cut in.

"You didn't dare. You—" Van Houton came to the edge of his chair so suddenly that the big gray ball was thrown from his knees, landed almost at Brown's feet and clawed viciously at his leg. Brown's foot shot forward and up. The cat hung for a moment on the end of his

toe, turned over once in the air, and with a squeal of rage or pain struck against the tongs by the open fire.

Van Houton was on his feet, his hands clenched at his sides; hands that rose suddenly and half stretched toward Vee. I had never seen such passion; such hate in a human face. Every fine feature of that face was gone; every line now was cruel, the lips snarling, twisted; the eyes burning like an animal's; the hands—

The hands fell to his sides. Van Houton turned and put another log on the fire, brushed some loose hairs from his jacket and dropped into the chair again. He was smiling. The real man, that had showed for a moment, was gone. He wore again that usual mask of the pleasant, perhaps slightly lazy but kindly gentleman.

"You are rather clever, Mr. Brown," he said softly. "I have strong hands, could very easily choke you to death. Anyone would believe that; and anyone would believe that to save your own life you were forced to shoot me to death." He shrugged broad shoulders. "What does it matter now? Your opportunity has passed." He looked at the cat that was sulking in a far corner of the room. "I am afraid that kick will cost you much heartache." He laughed slightly. "I have found your weakness, Mr. Brown; discovered something inside of you that no one else suspected. You have a heart, my friend."

"I have more than that." Brown looked at the watch on his wrist. "But we haven't much time. Dean, give that box to Mr. Van Houton."

Van Houton took the box and placed it on the long flat desk beside him, leaning from his comfortable chair to run fingers through the contents. His face never changed. He nodded once or twice, then to Brown, "Not the collection of the Black Death, surely. But it must be.

Why show this to me? It will cost me many friends; people I had thought beyond reproach, and in the hands of an unscrupulous man might—”

- “That box,” said Vee Brown, “can send you to jail—perhaps to the chair.”

VAN HOUTON looked startled, then he laughed. “Me! I see. You still believe I am this Black Death, this—is it ‘Emperor of Evil’? So—for the moment and for our amusement let us pretend that I am. There is nothing in this quite complete collection to connect this Black Death with any murder or even suicide. I note that those names have been withdrawn and no doubt destroyed. As for the rest of the documents, I deny of course any knowledge of them, and there is nothing to connect any individual with them. I presume”—and his smile was really pleasant now—“this box is a present from our dear departed friend, Theodore Lessenger.”

“That’s right,” said Brown. “You’re not afraid of its contents?”

“No, I am not afraid of its contents. But I recognize, of course, its value in dollars and cents, and I understand why you brought it here.” Vincent Van Houton leaned forward now. “Still pretending, Mr. Brown, that I am the Black Death, you are offering me this box in return for the freedom, for the life, of Gertrude la Palatin—really Myra Johnson, christened perhaps Maria—Maria St. John.”

“You are well informed,” Brown said. “But there is no evidence against her in that box.”

“No.” Van Houton came suddenly to his feet, walked over to the fireplace, and sliding back a panel beside it dug in his hand and drew out two envelopes. He left the panel open, revealing a compartment which might have accommodated the long box upon the desk. One of the

envelopes which he had taken out he tossed into the fire.

“Don’t worry about that,” he turned to Vee, holding the other envelope in his hand. “The document in the fire concerns one, Theodore Lessenger. Let us not malign the dead. You represent justice, Mr. Brown—stern and quick justice. I can assure you that Theodore Lessenger received all of that. Society has been avenged for his wrongs. But glance through this.” He thrust the long envelope into Vee’s hand.

Vee opened it, spread out the single sheet and looked at it. Van Houton went on talking.

“Just her name—a simple matter. Nothing like the others. You will see that she was convicted under the name of Myra Johnson. Poor Myra! She was a product of what we call Environment. Born to poor but honest parents in Cleveland, she was sent to relatives in New York. They could not keep her. They were poor too, but not quite so honest. A reformatory before she was twelve years old! Later, a conviction; no matter the offense, she will deny it. But the State found her guilty. You’ll see, Mr. Brown, that our great Gertrude la Palatin’s mistake was in leaving prison—leaving it a few years before her sentence had expired and without bothering with the formality of a pardon. And as Vee glanced toward the fire, “Toss it in; the memory is unpleasant.”

Brown did toss the paper and envelope into the fire.

“Poor kid!” he said. “Her record doesn’t show much chance in earlier years. I suppose you have a copy of that, which is why you let me destroy it.”

“No. No copy. Only the words so indelibly stamped upon my mind. I believe I am the only living man who knows who Gertrude La Palatin really is, except you and your friend—now.”

"But I never keep written records of the dead."

"The dead!" I jarred in. "She—Why, she's not dead."

"No, no." Van Houton seemed to choose his words very carefully. "To me she is dead. A few more hours, then to you and the world she will be dead. She will wish it that way."

"You hate the girl, don't you?" Brown's voice was low.

VAN HOUTON seemed really startled. "Hate her? You do not understand life and death and love. I love her, Mr. Brown. No woman can ever take her place. Her catlike tread; the smoothness of her arms; her hair, so like the fur of a cat! The warm breath. No, no. I could never hate her. I shall miss her when she's dead."

"Why," Brown asked, and he seemed very calm and cool now, "are you so sure of the girl's death?"

"Her art—her great love for the name that she made." Van Houton leaned far forward now. His lips were tighter, his eyes not so kindly. "She wants to leave an honest name for Gertrude la Palatin—a name that I can not destroy. She was in this blackmail business as deep as—as the Black Death. Then she changed, and was so clever about it that I did not for a moment suspect that it was she who struck so effectively at the Black Death. Sometimes I think it was something inside of her; sometimes I think it was the first time a victim died. But always I fear; always I wake up in the night and believe it was you. You"—his face was white now—"you love her, or at least she loves you. So—she dies."

"You expect her to kill herself?" Brown's voice was very steady now though I saw his hands tighten upon his knees. "What good would that do her? How would it save her name for her to take her own life?"

"Overwork. The strain on a great actress; ill health that forbade her to act. I know her well; am recognized as her friend. I will make the story protect her name. The thousands that have admired her will pity, understand, and have nothing but the kindest memories."

"You won't bring up her past, then—if—You promised her that; gave her your word on that, eh? Will she take that word?"

"She will take that word, and I will keep it. I have spoken to her at some length, tried to make the going easy. She will call me here on the phone tonight. It will be my duty, my very sad duty, to tell her that Vee Brown can do nothing for her, then"—he paused, spread his hands slightly—"she will shoot herself to death. Very simple."

"Yes, with some." Brown nodded. "But she's got too much stuff in her to take that way out." And when Van Houton's eyes grew hard, "Perhaps you may not answer the phone when she calls."

Van Houton shrugged. "I daresay you can arrange that. But if I do not answer, she does not need the answer. She knows that she may play until the final number—your number. After that—living, I will disclose her to the law. She has often said she would rather die than return to prison."

Brown looked at the file on the desk, toward the hidden length of oblong where it had at one time evidently been kept, nodded slightly and asked: "There is no alternative—no deal you'd like to make with me?"

"Well"—Van Houton stroked his chin—"love and hate are very close. The girl is to die because a man loves her; perhaps because she loves a man. But tonight—let us say that just before you came I had a message from the Black Death. I hope it doesn't strike you as

rather silly! But he told me, if you should leave her here tonight, go at once to your apartment and blow out your brains, the girl—Then I could tell the girl on the phone that Vee Brown could—was doing something for her.”

“God!” I shot in, “what an absurd idea. You must be mad.”

BBROWN kept his eyes on Van Houton. “No, no. Original, revolutionary, perhaps—but not mad. There are two other alternatives. One—that the girl won’t, at the final moment, press the trigger.”

“Possible!” Van Houton cut in. “But it will not matter. The suggestion about yourself I suppose you will not entertain.”

“Hardly,” said Vee. “A woman wouldn’t think much of a man who, given a problem to solve, solved it by shooting out his brains. Brains! I think you flatter me there. And a man”—slender shoulders moved—“could not believe that a woman he thinks a lot of could turn the same trick. I tell you, Mr. Van Houton, Mr. Emperor of Evil, Mr. Black Death—I am going to do a lot for that girl, for the citizens of this city, for the department that pays me.”

“Good God!” I cried, “you’re not going to do as he suggests and—”

“Hell, no!” said Brown, and his voice rang with his old time vigor. “Do you think I’d shoot myself and make a musical-comedy ending out of the city’s greatest tragedy? I—”

The phone rang. Van Houton reached toward it. “That will be Gertrude la Palatin now.”

“Wait!” Brown was on his feet, clutching at his arm. “I’ll call your bluff for you, Mr. Van Houton. That girl can take it. I can’t believe she’s yellow. There’s a chance of her going on the stand and convicting you. Let me tell

her that Vee Brown can do nothing for her—personally.”

“You know what that means. If I can’t answer the phone, she understands—”

Brown knocked his hand from the phone—grabbed it up. “Yes? Vee Brown talking, Maria. That’s right; I’m telling you in place of Van Houton. I can do nothing for you.”

“Vee!” I forgot my promise to Maria. “She’ll do it. She’ll—” But it was useless. Vee had jammed down the phone.

“Will she?” he said. “I hope not. That would be the biggest let-down of the whole case. No, no—Dean. I have something else up my sleeve.”

“Ah!” Van Houton clasped his hands, his elbows on his knees. “I’m afraid it’s too late now. You might hurry to the theatre and stop her, of course; but then—there’s the information still in my head, you know. Now let us hear the other alternative; the one instead of putting a bullet in your head.”

Brown swung on me. I had never seen his eyes blaze as they were blazing then, except when he had completed a case; when he was about to complete it. But he was pushing me toward the door, throwing it open.

“Outside, Dean. Outside!” His voice was quick, throaty. “I have something to say to Van Houton—something even too private for you.”

“But Vee, I— Of course, if you insist. But the box?”

“We’re going to let Van Houton keep his box.”

The door slammed, the key turned and I was left standing alone in the hall.

CHAPTER TEN

Behind the Door

SO BROWN had something up his sleeve. What was it? At the last minute would he make good? Would—

but what could he do? The girl, too! Why, he had been almost brutal to her. Was it possible that he didn't—didn't care? Would he, as he said, make some deal with Van Houton to sacrifice the many for Maria? But Van Houton wouldn't do that. Greed and love and hate! And hate had won out. He hated Brown. He—Maria had saved Vee's life. Maria had—But Vee had already told her on the phone that he could do nothing. I should have told Brown; told him of her call, what she said. There might be time yet! I raised my hand to pound heavily upon the door, and held it there without striking.

Voices from below—the slam of the front door. A gruff, loud voice that I knew well drowned out the well-modulated tones of the butler.

"So Van Houton's got company and cannot be disturbed, eh? Well, we'll go up and join him. Make a real party out of it—a surprise party. Who's he entertaining?"

A mumble from the butler that I did not get and then the voice I knew again.

"You're not permitted to tell. So that's it, eh? Come! Get that fat carcass of yours out of the way or you won't be able to tell anything for the next two or three hours. Come on, sir! I hate to take it on the chin like this from Brown, but the law's the law and there's some satisfaction in beating him to—Damn my soul! If it ain't Brown's little playmate, Dean Condon."

This last as I stood on the stairs blocking the passage of Inspector Ramsey and seeing behind him the huge, if not so muscular, Mortimer Doran, the district attorney.

"So the boy detective's with Van Houton," Ramsey said, and suddenly, "Has Brown got him this time?"

"Got him!" I guess I stammered. But

I did grab Ramsey by the arm as he thrust me aside and started up those stairs. "Wait"—I pleaded. "Vee's with him now. He's talking to him."

Ramsey shook me off. He shot his face forward, his chin thrust out. "I want to talk to him too. What's Brown—"

He stopped, raised his head, listened. Plainly came the report of a gun, dulled perhaps by the curve in the hall and the closed door, but unmistakable and certainly from Van Houton's study.

I didn't try to hold Ramsey then. I simply tried to beat him up those stairs and down that hall. But he kept ahead of me. Back of us came Mortimer Doran, panting heavily though he had run but a few steps. What had happened behind the closed door of the study? What did the shot mean? Perhaps I had those thoughts; perhaps I had other thoughts—many of them. But I don't remember them now. Just one single thought. Vee Brown and Vincent Van Houton were in that room alone, and a single shot had come from that room.

A single shot!

And it wasn't a single shot. Almost the moment we reached that locked door; almost the moment Ramsey had grasped the knob and found the door locked; almost the moment his huge shoulder had crashed against it, there was another shot; another roar of a gun. Louder this time. A moment of silence, and I was helping Ramsey; throwing my body madly with his against that door.

Splintered wood, groaning hinges! The sudden snap as the lock gave and the door crashed. We were in the room, Ramsey half on his knees as I stumbled against him.

Then Ramsey was on his feet, his gun dangling in his hand. Mine? In my pocket, of course. I had never even thought to drag it out.

VEE BROWN half sat, half crouched in front of the large flat desk. There was a gun in his hand, a surprised look on his face, smears of powder and a slight trickle of blood along his left cheek. He staggered to his feet; I half supported him. Then I looked at—at the body.

Yes, Van Houton was slumped over the desk. Under his right hand was the nose of the gun. Mortimer Doran gasped; Ramsey lifted up Van Houton's head. It wobbled slightly, hung to one side. The eyes were open, staring, glassy, and just between those eyes was a dull red hole.

"Dead?" There was no sense to the question I asked.

"As stiff as a mackerel." Ramsey let the dead man fall forward on the desk again, none too gently either. I shuddered as the body jarred the long leather filing case on the desk.

"Let us have it, Vee." Mortimer Doran finally spoke as Ramsey wandered about the room, jumped aside as the cat darted from under the chair that held the dead body and fled into the hall.

"I had Van Houton—had him on the Lessenger murder—had him cold." Brown wiped burnt powder and blood from his face with his handkerchief and looked over toward me. "Dean will tell you. But there was something else. This man, admittedly the Black Death, held hidden someplace letters, documents, information that would cause hundreds to suffer, perhaps take their own lives. So I wanted to know where those documents were."

"You mean you wanted to make a deal with him." Ramsey's mouth hung open.

"In a way." Vee turned to Mortimer Doran. "I chased Dean out of the room, then promised Van Houton that I'd get you to go easy on him if he delivered to me all this information which Lessenger said he had."

"Go on!" said Mortimer Doran.

"Van Houton agreed." I listened to Brown continue with my mouth wide open. "He told me all his information was in a leather filing case hidden in a secret compartment by the fireplace." Vee pointed to the long yawning hole. "For the moment I guess I was off my guard. You know the story that he never had a gun—wouldn't even think of keeping one in his house. Well, I swung back, with that heavy file of papers there on the desk in my hands—when he did it. He whipped a gun out from beneath the desk some place." Brown wiped his forehead now and shook his head. "It was my closest call."

"You must have been pretty close; there's powder on your cheek." Ramsey was staring at Vee, running his fingers along the file of letters. "Just what happened?"

"I was stunned, of course." Brown told the story easily. "Both my hands held the heavy leather file. I dropped it to the desk, leaned forward, clutched at his gun with my left hand and knocked it aside as it blazed. I thought I was gone. Powder burnt my face, a bullet creased my cheek. I was thrown back onto the floor. Then, before he could fire again I let him have it."

"Before he could fire again," Ramsey mused aloud. "There was a good seven seconds between those shots—maybe ten." He sneered slightly. "You were always pretty slow getting out a gun. Everybody knows that."

Brown was very calm. "Seven seconds, you say? Perhaps you're right. It seemed to me all in an instant. I must have been stunned—dazed there on the floor. Van Houton, I guess, thought I was dead. Maybe that's what happened." And nodding his head, "Yes, that must have been what happened. I remember the fear in his face when I raised my gun, just as he tried to fire again."

RAMSEY lifted Van Houton's head again. A single look and I turned my eyes away. Yes, there was fear in the dead face—terror—horror.

"Yeah, he saw it coming." Ramsey dropped the head back again. "And I guess he didn't like it. But it's—it's—You had a lucky break, Brown."

"Come, come!" Mortimer Doran was the efficient official now. "Take the phone and get on the job, Ramsey. As for Vee! He saved the State some money."

Brown wasn't listening. He was at the desk when Ramsey was telephoning, had lifted the box of letters, put them in my hands.

"Feel the weight of it, Dean. That's what got me. Now—hold it by the strap. Heavy, isn't it?" And putting the box down again and turning to Doran, "What brought you here?"

"We came to apologize to you, Brown. Ramsey and I." Doran jerked a thumb toward Ramsey, who scowled as he talked into the phone. "Lessenger left a letter with one of his law partners, to be sent to me if he died by violence. I got the letter an hour ago. I don't know if it would convict Van Houton or not—that is, with a jury. But with these letters, that file you discovered here, and Van Houton's attempt on your life it will certainly convict him with the public. Damn it! Vee, I never believed it; never really believed it."

Ramsey hung up the phone, strutted across the room. "Damn lucky you found those letters here and we had that note, Brown," he said. "Otherwise I might think you just staged this thing and simply shot him to death. That gun of his! We'll see if we can trace it to him. He always let it be known that he hated firearms."

"Don't be a fool," said Mortimer Doran.

"He's not a fool," Vee said. "I too be-

lieved that story that he abhorred firearms. Everyone believed it—his servants too. It was that belief that very nearly cost me my life. Damn it, if I hadn't believed it, I'd of had Van Houton for you! We'd have roasted him sure. And I wanted the law to—to have him."

"It's better as it turned out." Doran said. "He might have beaten the case."

"Vee—" I tugged at his arm and whispered. "Maria—the theatre. It's after ten. She—she—"

"Unfinished business." Brown looked at Doran. "And I want to have this scratch—" he touched his left cheek—"fixed up."

"Sure. Sure! Run along." But Doran grabbed Vee before he reached the door. "That stuff there." He pointed to the file of letters. "Dynamite!" He half looked toward the fire.

"I'd chuck them in," Vee said, "if you don't need them as evidence."

"Hell!" said Mortimer Doran, "you don't think we're going to put a dead man on trial. We've got enough to convict him in the newspapers certainly, after his attempt to kill you."

"Telephone the theatre. Let Maria know," I told Brown as we went down the stairs. "There's a phone in—"

He held me back as I turned toward the library. "No, Dean. No!" He shook his head. "You won't understand; maybe I don't even understand myself. But I never could feel the same way about that girl again if—if—"

I didn't understand and told him so. But he never answered me. Then I tried something else. "Why didn't you tell them the truth? Why those lies of finding the documents there?"

"I didn't know why they had come then," he explained. "I wanted them to be sure of his guilt." He smiled wanly up at me. "As for handing you the box—the file! The fingerprint boys would have

found your prints all over it." He dabbed at his face. "I'll have that burn fixed up later."

DESPITE all my pleadings and even my threats he wouldn't go to Gertrude la Palatin's dressing room and tell her she was safe; and what's more, he wouldn't let me do it.

"You may be making a terrible mistake," I told him when we entered the front of the theatre and Brown, after locating the head usher, insisted upon being escorted to Van Houton's box. "This is the time of that long interval, when the *Dance of the Fans* precedes the—that number—your number."

"*Girl of the Night. Girl of the Shadows.*" His words were calm; his voice was natural, but the hand that he unconsciously placed on the back of mine was wet and cold.

The manager was on the stage. He was talking. It was about the final number. *Girl of the Night!* I didn't catch his words, but subconsciously the enthusiasm in his voice reached me. I was looking about the crowded house. Crowded? Yes, every seat was taken; everyone was expectant. Gertrude la Palatin's conquest of the night before had been featured in every theatrical page.

The music came—Brown's music. The manager disappeared in the wings. A minute passed—two—three. The orchestra leader leaned forward; people grew restless. The manager came from the wings, he raised his hand. The music stopped. People were quiet. The whiteness of his face, his whole attitude, his two attempts to speak that failed! And then his voice rang out.

"I regret that Miss La Palatin, due—due to—"

Brown was on his feet; his fingers bit into my arm. "I was wrong—" He started to speak, dropped back into his

chair again, and finished, "I was right, of course."

The manager waved to the orchestra. The music started. Far back in the wings we could see Gertrude la Palatin. Slowly, with head down, she was walking toward the lights; then into the lights. And it was Maria—*Girl of the Night*.

"Guts," said Brown. "I knew it. Guts!"

And she sang. Never once did she raise her eyes or even turn her eyes toward our box. And then, just at the end of the chorus—the words—*Girl of the Night*, she did. She turned her head slowly and looked straight up; straight up at Vee Brown, who was leaning far forward, his elbows on the rail.

For one single moment her left hand went to her throat; her right clutched at the drapes behind her as her knees sagged. Then she straightened, nodded to the orchestra leader and swung into the chorus again.

"She's singing to bring down the house tonight." Brown's eyes were alive, dancing; the old twist was back in the corners of his mouth.

This time, when she reached the final chorus, she looked up at the box. And the words were changed—at least, the last word was changed. It was—*Girl of the Shadows*.

"She's not singing to bring down the house," I told Vee and meant it. "She's singing to you tonight. Somehow, she knows!"

"Somehow she knows," echoed Brown as we left the box to go back stage.

IT must have been a week later when Vee was in the music room with Maria and so was "out" to everyone, that Mortimer Doran called.

"Brown home?" he asked, and when I shook my head, doubtful if I should tell him, he went on. "Good! I've got a

present for him. We won't need it any more and I know how he likes to collect trophies of the hunt." He thrust a package into my hand. "Open it after I go and stick it up in his gun room as a surprise. It's the gun Van Houton used, and I guess it was Vee's closest call."

Mortimer Doran nodded. "I think the Van Houton case was Vee's greatest success. How he stuck to that man despite everything! And at the end he killed him." He grew very grave. "Do you know that the happiness of hundreds; the deaths of many lay in Van Houton's hands? Damn it! I gave it to Ramsey good and plenty after we had traced the gun and learned how Van Houton got it. Ramsey more than hinted that it was a set-up; that Vee smoked his own cheek after he had deliberately shot Van Houton dead. Not that Van Houton didn't deserve it. But the discovery of how the gun must have come to Van Houton silenced Ramsey on that. Still, you know how Ramsey dislikes Vee."

"Sure!" I held open the door as Mortimer Doran was leaving. "But where did Van Houton get the gun?"

"It came from a racketeer; a man who used to call on Van Houton some time back. Why, damn it, you were with Brown when he killed him! That gun belonged to Pete Stokes. Van Houton must have gotten it from him months ago. So that dislike of his for fire arms was just bluff!"

The door closed and I walked into the gun room. I laid the queer-shaped package down on the table. I didn't open it at once. I thought of the woman, months back, who had died with a knife in her chest; of Wilson's wife, who had shot herself just below the right ear; of the knife driven into Lessenger's body through the card that read—BLACK DEATH. I thought too of the birds and cats, and even of the tiny hole in the center of Vincent Van Houton's forehead. And of Maria, of course; of the gun that she had left lying in her dressing room; the gun that she didn't—couldn't use when the big moment came.

Then I slowly opened the package.

It was an automatic revolver, and there was a nick on the grip shaped like a five-pointed star.

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Trembling with terror he picked up the bills.

Murderer Take All

by
Stanley Day

When Ike Van started out to collect his winnings on the Fourth at Maryland he never guessed that Straight Flush, the horse he'd backed, would prove a dud even though she'd galloped in first. That filly turned out to be an electric rocking horse wired right to the hot seat.

IKE Van emerged abruptly from between the big double doors of Zimmerman's Restaurant and with short, quick steps trotted anxiously along the sidewalk. On his raised left hand Ike balanced a heavily laden tray covered with a sheet of spotless linen.

A nearby clock rang the hour of twelve noon and Van's steps quickened. Not more than fifty yards down the street

he executed a left wheel and disappeared through the dim entrance of a shabby apartment building. Climbing two flights of stairs he came out on a square landing and groped in his vest pocket for a key. After turning the key in the lock he rapped discreetly on the door and entered.

"Morning Ike." The greeting came from a short, stout man garbed in a flowered woolen dressing gown.

"Morning Mr. Creed." Ike deposited his tray on the table and straightened to bob his head in the direction of a younger man sprawled in a chair by a window.

"Morning," the young man muttered.

Deftly Ike spread a cloth over one end of the table and removed articles of silver from the tray. Then, drawing up a chair, he stationed himself behind it attentively.

The short fat man stopped striding about the room and sat down. He drank a glass of orange juice and poured cream over a bowl of oatmeal.

"Why," he demanded, looking at the youth, "don't you get a real job?"

The young man muttered an inaudible reply.

"You know what he wants to do now?"

The elder man looked indignantly up at Ike Van.

Ike said nothing. He was expected to say nothing.

"He wants to go into the movies."

The little man snorted. "And he expects me to pay his fare out to California. Besides supporting him, mind you."

"I told you it's practically certain I'll get some parts," the young man protested. "And all I need is a thousand dollars."

"Shut up," commanded Mr. Creed. Finishing his oatmeal he commenced on a ration of bacon and eggs and toast.

AFTERWARDS Ike Van cleared away the litter of soiled dishes, poured coffee from a silver urn.

Then, as the old man settled back comfortably in his chair Ike reached around and produced from his back pocket a daily racing form. This he unfolded and spread on the table.

Patrick Creed took up the paper leisurely, turned over a page.

"What," said Ike Van deferentially, "do you think about Straight Flush, today, Mr. Creed? Fourth at Maryland?"

"Straight Flush?" Mr. Creed expelled

a jet of smoke. "The horse can do it, Ike—if the owners let him."

"He hasn't won a heat since Christmas. And Mr. Creed"—Ike's voice dropped to a whisper—"Sam, the busboy down in Zimmerman's, had a wire from his brother. Sam's brother is with the stables. The horse is ready, Mr. Creed."

"Well Ike, if that's the case it might be a good idea to get a little bet down."

"I don't think you'd be making a mistake, Mr. Creed."

"All right Ike. I'll put fifty on his nose. And if he comes in ten dollars worth of the bet is yours."

Ike's head bobbed up and down delightedly. "Thanks, Mr. Creed."

"Don't mention it, Ike."

"And Mr. Creed?" Ike sounded slightly hesitant.

"Yes."

"Would you bet this for me, too?"

The waiter tendered a limp five-dollar bill. "You see, it's hard for me to get bets down over the phone. And Mr. Zimmerman don't leave me go out very often."

"So you're getting to be a gambler, eh Ike? A regular horse player."

"Not me, Mr. Creed." Ike smiled and shook his head. "I can't afford to gamble the way people are tipping these days."

"Did you hear that?" The old man turned to the youth who still sat sullenly by the window. "What would you do if you had to depend on tips for a living and no damn-fool uncle to shell out for you? . . . Why sure, Ike. I'll bet the five for you. Throw it in the drawer over there, will you." With a wave of his arm the speaker indicated an old-fashioned secretary standing in the corner.

Ike went across and pulled out a deep drawer, some two thirds full of carelessly heaped notes—fives, tens, twenties.

Ike, as always when he looked in this drawer, felt a queer faintness at the pit

of his stomach. One day Mr. Creed had put him to counting and sorting its contents. It held over six thousand dollars.

It was the custom of the wealthy and eccentric Patrick Creed to accumulate here the profits of his horse-race wagers until he chose—every three or four months—to carry them to the bank. Ike Van gazed longingly, shivered a little and dropped his five-dollar bill into the pile. Then he closed the drawer, returned to the table and began clearing away.

When he was all finished, Ike went out into a small, bare kitchen. From a four-ringed gas stove he took a kettle which he filled at the sink. Replacing the kettle on the stove he lit a gas flame under it and turned the cock on full.

He then took a glass tumbler from the table, washed and dried it at the sink and put it back on the table. From a cupboard above the sink he took a small bottle and set it down by the glass.

"It's five minutes to one, Mr. Creed," he said when he was again in the dining room. "I've put the kettle on."

"Five minutes to one. O. K., Ike."

Ike picked up his tray, strode to the door.

AT four o'clock that afternoon Ike Van, bedeviled by thoughts of the fifteen dollars riding on Straight Flush's nose, was rapping on the door of Patrick Creed's apartment. No one had seen him leave the restaurant and he hoped to get back before he was missed.

At Patrick Creed's full-voiced command to enter, Ike opened the door and went into the apartment. The old man, still in his dressing gown, was seated at the desk making notations on a sheet of paper.

"I owe you money, Ike," he called out jubilantly. "Straight Flush came in and paid eleven to one."

"Eleven to one!" Ike licked his lips.

"A sweet price, Ike. A sweet price. Want your money now?"

"If you could, Mr. Creed."

The old man reached down into the drawer and drew out a fistful of bills.

"You had fifteen on him, Ike. Eleven times fifteen makes one hundred and sixty-five dollars. With the five you gave me it comes to one hundred and seventy bucks." He counted out the sum rapidly.

"Thanks Mr. Creed." Ike's fingers closed over the bills fondly. "If you don't mind, I'll beat it back to work. I shouldn't be out at all this afternoon." As he spoke Ike's eyes dropped longingly to the heaped-up money in the open drawer.

When he had closed the door behind him Ike leaned weakly against the wall, eyes closed, brain racing fantastically. His jaws tightened. He knew suddenly that this was the moment he had been dreaming of, dreading, for months.

Suddenly he straightened, listening furiously. From the hall above came the sound of an electric polishing machine. But there was no one to be seen, either in this hall or on the stairways.

Quickly Ike turned, fitted his key into the lock and reentered the apartment. At the sound of the door opening Patrick Creed, who was now seated by the window, nose buried in the racing form, looked up in surprise.

"You back?" And then, noting Ike's expression. "What's eating you, Ike?"

"Nothing, Mr. Creed. It's just that I—I—" As the words died away Ike reached into his pocket and drew out a thirty-two-caliber derringer. He raised it quickly and fired two shots into Patrick Creed's forehead.

Trembling with terror he ran across to the desk, yanked open the drawer and rapidly put the bills into two piles which he folded and shoved deep into the pockets of his oversized trousers.

After that he went out into the kitchen.

The kettle was on the stove where he had left it at noon but the flame had been shut off. The glass was still beside the pill bottle but the inside was now streaked and there were drops of water in the bottom.

Striking a match, Ike relit the flame beneath the kettle and turned it on full. Then he washed out the glass, dried and polished it and set it back on the table beside the bottle.

With that he returned to the other room and was about to leave the apartment when there came a sharp knock on the door. Ike's face twisted as though with physical pain and it was all he could do to keep from crying out in terror.

"Uncle," a voice called loudly. "Uncle Pat. It's Leo. Let me in." This was followed by a series of violent knocks.

Ike breathed more easily. He recognized now that the man at the door was the husband of Creed's niece and that he would probably go away as soon as he concluded the old man was not at home.

In this Ike was correct. The rapping, punctuated with shouts, continued for another two or three minutes. After that Ike heard footsteps descending the stairs. As the footsteps died away on the stairs Ike could hear no other sound but the droning of the electric polisher on the floor above.

Opening the door, Ike darted out onto the landing. There was no one in sight. On tiptoes he ran down the stairs and into the street. As he entered the restaurant he saw by the clock above the cashier's desk that he had been absent no more than twelve minutes.

A NEARBY clock was tolling the hour of high noon as Ike Van let himself into Patrick Creed's apartment. He sniffed cautiously, and went over and put his tray down on the table. A heavy, gaseous odor hung over the place thickly.

Nerving himself, Ike turned to face

the corner. The body of Patrick Creed was still in the chair by the window.

Ike turned away, shuddering. As he fled out of the room his pretended panic became real. Pounding, terror-driven feet carried him down to the street and to a police officer strolling half a block away.

Back in the apartment the cop grabbed the telephone and sent in a brief alarm.

"What's that stink?" he demanded when he had finished.

Together they went out into the kitchen and discovered the smell, here sharply acrid, to be coming from a jet of burning gas beneath the kettle. Through the bottom of the kettle the flame had eaten a clean, round hole.

The officer shut off the gas and they returned to the other room.

Shortly there arrived a pair of plainclothesmen from the precinct station and a uniformed officer to relieve the one Ike had summoned. Then a doctor from the medical examiner's office and a few minutes later, from Centre Street, a ballistics expert and a homicide-squad detective. The latter, a man named Brennan, took charge.

After a short look round they went to work on Ike.

"Isaac Van," he said in answer to the first question. He had been a waiter in Zimmerman's for eleven years. Yes, he had a key to Patrick Creed's apartment. For more than five years now he had been coming up each noon with Mr. Creed's breakfast. In all that time he had not missed a day.

"He wouldn't have nobody but me to wait on him," said Ike a little proudly. "He give me ten dollars a week."

Here the medical examiner interrupted to make a preliminary report.

"Shot twice through the forehead," he stated. "I'd say early yesterday evening."

"Mr. Creed was shot between one and one thirty yesterday afternoon," put in

Ike. His voice sounded positive.

"How do you know that?"

"An hour after his meals he used to take pills. Two pills and a glass of hot water." Ike took a deep breath. "For his stomach he took them. Yesterday he was due to take his pills at one thirty. I put the kettle on for him before I left. The kettle was on the stove and the gas still burning up till an hour ago. The reason Mr. Creed didn't take his pills and turn off the gas at one thirty was because he was dead."

One of the precinct men went out into the kitchen and came back with the burned kettle, the glass tumbler and the medicine bottle.

"I guess he's right," Detective Brennan mused aloud. "The kettle must have been left on the stove till the water boiled away. Then the bottom melted out." He examined the tumbler.

"Did Creed ever have any visitors while you were around?"

"He had a visitor yesterday," Ike said. "His nephew."

"What was his name?"

"Fred. Fred Creed."

"Know where he lives?"

"Downtown somewhere."

"Have him picked up," Brennan said. And to Ike, as an officer went to the phone, "What was he doing here?"

"He was tryin' to get a thousand dollars from Mr. Creed. He wanted to go out to California and be a movie actor. Mr. Creed was mad and said he wouldn't give it."

"Are there any other relatives?"

"There's a Mrs. Yates. A Mrs. Leo Yates. She's his niece. She lives with her husband over on Central Park West."

"Do you know if Creed kept any money around? I mean, much at a time?"

IKE Van's face grew animated and he sat up excitedly in his chair. "He kept that drawer over there near full."

"Nearly full?" The detective was sceptical.

"It was near full yesterday. I seen it. It was like this here, you understand. Mr. Creed used to play the races pretty heavy. You ask any of the big books around here and they'll tell you he's about the smartest horse player in the country. Whenever he won any money he just used to drop it in that drawer."

"Well, the drawer's empty now." Brennan regarded Ike reflectively. "How do you know there was money in it yesterday?"

"Because I seen it, I tell you. Mr. Creed was goin' to bet five dollars for me on a horse." Ike's voice turned sad. "When I went to give him the five he tells me to put it in that drawer."

The three detectives drew off into a corner and talked in undertones.

One of the precinct men went out of the apartment whistling. The ballistics expert and the medical examiner, departed also.

After that there was further consultation in the kitchen.

Ike picked up the medicine bottle and toyed with it, rattled it nervously. Suddenly his eyes were gleaming acquisitively.

At this moment there was a sharp rap on the door and a uniformed officer went to answer. He opened the door to a man with a lean face. This was Leo Yates, the husband of the murdered man's niece. He was at once taken to the kitchen and interminable questioning was resumed.

The telephone bell rang shrilly and Ike started to answer but was interrupted angrily by Detective Brennan who came running from the kitchen.

"You sit down and mind your own damn business," he said. He picked up the receiver and listened intently.

"They picked up the nephew," he announced when he had finished phoning.

The precinct men questioned him eagerly.

"They got him in a speakeasy near where he lives. He was half lushed. And he had a roll on him—more than a thousand bucks."

"Did he crack?"

"Not yet. But he admits he was here at noon. He admits he was here after the waiter left. He says he left at twenty minutes after one and that the money was a present from the old man."

"Well, I guess that just about cleans everything up." The speaker was one of the precinct men. "When they put the blast on him he'll crack sure. These guys always do."

"Yes," Brennan agreed doubtfully. "But they haven't got the gun yet." He turned to Ike. "You can beat it now. But don't get far from home the next couple of days. We're going to need you."

Ike got up from his chair but instead of passing out of the room he stopped over by the door and stood gazing appealingly at Mr. Leo Yates.

"I told you you could beat it," Brennan said again pointedly.

Ike left the place dumbly then and went downstairs where he stood on the sidewalk. Some ten minutes later Leo Yates emerged from the building and went to the curb to flag a taxi.

"Oh, Mr. Yates." Ike was in an agony of indecision and stood twisting his apron with nervous fingers. "Mr. Yates, I wanted to ask you—Old Man Creed owed me a hundred and seventy dollars and I thought maybe you'd like to settle it up."

Yates gazed at the waiter with angry astonishment. "What kind of nonsense is this?"

"He made a bet for me on a race. Fifteen dollars on Straight Flush in the fourth at Maryland yesterday afternoon. You don't have to take my word for it, Mr. Yates. You can ask Mr. Fred Creed."

On the face of Leo Yates appeared expressions of anger and indignation.

"I wouldn't have mentioned it only I need the money bad," Ike hastened to placate him. "Besides that I give him five dollars out of my own pocket. And the horse came in at eleven to one."

"Why you cheap little chiseller," Yates cried angrily, "the old man hasn't been dead a day yet and you come bothering me for money. I'll turn you over to the police. Besides, that bet couldn't have been made. Mr. Creed was shot before one thirty yesterday afternoon so he wouldn't have been able to get down the bet. Actually he doesn't owe you a cent."

Ike shook his head emphatically. "Mr. Yates, that ain't so. That's what the police think, but they're wrong. Mr. Creed wasn't shot till after one thirty."

"How do you know that?"

"On account of the pills in the bottle. Yesterday noon there were eight pills. I remember for sure, because I was thinkin' I'd soon have to get the prescription filled again and I counted to see how long they'd last. There were eight pills yesterday and today there are only six so Mr. Creed must have taken his regular dose at one thirty."

"Rot." Yates' eyes gleamed angrily. "I'd advise you not to go to the police with that story or you'll find yourself in trouble. After what you've already told them it will look bad for you." He raised his arm to a passing taxi.

"But Mr. Yates." Ike's voice rose in a terrified wail. "You don't understand. I can't afford to lose that money." And as Yates stepped obdurately into the cab, "Just give me back my five—"

The cab jerked into motion, leaving Ike standing on the curb, his face blank with disappointment.

AT eight Ike put on his hat and instead of going home started downtown for police headquarters on Centre

Street. Having thought of a plan by which he might squeeze the ultimate drop of profit from his crime he was eager to put it to a trial.

At police headquarters, after a certain amount of difficulty, he was escorted into the presence of Frederick Creed who was being held in jail as a material witness.

Young Creed received him with no word and a look that was dully inquisitive.

"Mr. Creed," Ike began penitently, "it's on account of me that you're in here and I thought I'd better come and talk things over. If it hadn't been for me the detectives wouldn't have figured the murder was committed before one thirty and maybe they wouldn't have arrested you at all."

"Yes?"

Ike took a long breath and began anew. "Mr. Creed, I found out for sure that your uncle wasn't killed till after one thirty."

"Yes," said Creed, brightening perceptibly. "How do you know?"

Ike Van licked his lips and his eyes wavered shiftily. "Mr. Creed you heard your uncle say he would bet ten dollars for me on Straight Flush in the Fourth at Maryland and you seen me give him five more of my own which makes fifteen I had on the race. The horse come in at eleven to one, Mr. Creed, which makes me lose one hundred and seventy dollars if somebody don't pay me off."

Young Creed gazed at him in amazement. "You mean you want me to pay you that money?"

"If the old man wasn't shot before one thirty he got that bet down, Mr. Creed, and I got the money comin' to me."

"How do you know for certain he wasn't shot till after one thirty?"

Ike Van did not answer. His eyes darted here and there nervously. Into

Frederick Creed's expectant face there came slowly the light of understanding.

"You'll tell me if I pay you one hundred and seventy dollars, is that it?"

Still Ike did not reply.

"I can't pay you now." Creed kept his voice calm but his eyes were shocked, contemptuous. "The police took all my money but ten dollars. But if you help me I'll pay you. I'll pay you as soon as I get out of here."

"It wouldn't be so bad," said Ike slowly, "if I could only get back the five I give him."

Creed took two five-dollar bills out of his pocket and handed one of them to Ike.

"Yesterday noon," Ike began at once, "there was eight pills in the medicine bottle I left for your uncle on the kitchen table. Today there was only six. So your uncle must have been alive at one thirty."

"If he took his medicine at one thirty who put the kettle back on the stove again and turned on the gas?"

Ike pocketed the five-dollar bill and looked at his interrogator shrewdly.

"You're for sure goin' to pay me that money if you get out of here?"

"If I get out of here because of what you tell the police I'll pay the bet," promised Creed earnestly. "I'll have my lawyer phone you in the morning and you can talk to him about it."

Outside once more, Ike stood for a long time on a street corner, lost in reflection. Then, coming to a sudden decision, he took himself to an underground station and rode back uptown to the apartment building in which Patrick Creed had lived.

By dint of hesitant questioning he learned from the janitor of the building that as far as the janitor knew old man Creed had had no visitors the afternoon of the murder.

"But I ain't around much afternoons," he said. "Mrs. Reilly, now, you could ask

her. If there hadda been any one she mighta seen them."

Mrs. Reilly on any topic pertaining to "poor Mr. Creed" was more than voluble and Ike learned without difficulty what he had hoped to learn.

"It's a miracle I never heard the shot," the old woman declared. "For all anybody can say I was maybe right outside the poor man's door when it happened and never a thing did I hear."

"And at four o'clock," prompted Ike Van. "Where would you be at four o'clock?"

"At four o'clock," stated Mrs. Reilly reminiscently, "I'd be waxin' my linoleum on the third-floor hall."

"And you heard nothing—nobody?"

"I did too, now you remind me. There was a fella come knockin' at Mr. Creed's door and when he didn't get no answer he took to hollerin'. It was on account of his hollerin' that I went to the stairway and took a look down at him."

"You saw him?" Ike hardly dared breath. "You'd know him again?"

"I would. A tall dark fella in a gray hat. I seen him around before, too, more than once."

Masking an expression of triumph, Ike picked up his hat and rose. "I wouldn't mention this to nobody, Mrs. Reilly," he warned. "Not just yet, anyways."

ABOUT the middle of the next morning Ike was summoned to the telephone to speak to a man introducing himself as Frederick Creed's lawyer. Without any urging at all Ike talked to the entire satisfaction of his listener.

Two hours later Ike was again summoned from his work, this time by a fat plainclothesman from headquarters.

"Get your hat," he said amiably. "You're wanted downtown."

They rode downtown in a police car and Ike was escorted to a dingy office and told to sit down and wait.

In a short time he was taken to another, larger office where a keen-faced, silvery haired man sat at a desk. By the end of the desk, looking flustered and slightly angry, stood Brennan, the detective attached to the homicide squad. Seated about the office were Frederick Creed and his lawyer and Leo Yates. The face of the latter was drawn and anxious.

"I want you to tell Captain Lacey," said Creed's lawyer quickly to Ike, "what you told me this morning. About the medicine bottle, I mean, and the number of pills in it."

Leo Yates cried out angrily: "So that's what this is all about! Let me tell you, Captain, that this man is a crook. He came to me with the same yarn yesterday and tried to work a little discreet blackmail. But it didn't go."

"We'll hear what you have to say later on, Mr. Yates. And now Mr. Van—Isaac Van is it—let's hear this story of yours."

"It's like I said," declared Ike, a note of stubbornness in his voice. "At noon the day Mr. Creed was shot there was eight pills in the bottle. Next day there was only six. So Mr. Creed must have been alive at one thirty to take the two pills."

"Why didn't you tell Detective Brennan about that yesterday?"

"It didn't seem like he'd want to be bothered," Ike said stupidly.

Brennan burst out in vigorous protest until silenced by Lacey.

"If I might make a suggestion," put in the lawyer blandly, "it would appear that someone well acquainted with the murdered man's habits went to the apartment late in the afternoon. After killing Mr. Creed this person replaced the kettle on the stove and lit the flame under it, the purpose being, of course, to make it appear the murder had been committed before the medicine was taken. In other

words, prior to one thirty. Fortunately Mr. Van, here, knew how many pills the bottle contained.

"Then we have witnesses to prove that my client was downtown at shortly after two o'clock—and that therefore he must have left his uncle's apartment before one thirty."

"I have seen those witnesses," the captain said. "Have you anything else?"

"Tell us what you were doing at a quarter to three the afternoon your uncle was shot," the lawyer said, turning to young Creed.

"I was telephoning."

"To whom?"

"To my brother-in-law. To Leo Yates."

"What did you tell Mr. Yates?"

"I told him my uncle had given me a thousand dollars so that I could go to California."

"Did you tell Mr. Yates this money had been given to you in cash?"

"Yes."

"That's all. And now, Captain, I'm sure I can leave the rest to your own discretion."

"I'm sure you can," said Lacey dryly. Turning to Brennan he nodded significantly.

BRENNAN went to the door and signaled to someone waiting outside. He then stood aside to admit Mrs. Reilly. Mrs. Reilly, patently happy to be playing an important role in a murder case, smiled at everyone in the room and plumped herself into a chair.

"Mrs. Reilly," said Lacey gravely, "I understand that during the afternoon Mr. Creed was murdered you were at work near the entrance to his apartment."

"I was doin' my halls," said Mrs. Reilly, nodding vigorously.

"And I understand that Mr. Creed had a caller."

"He did." Mrs. Reilly nodded again.

"There was a man rapped on the door. And when he didn't get an answer he took to shoutin'—callin' Mr. Creed by name. I seen him at it myself when I looked down the third-floor stairway."

"Do you see that man in this room, Mrs. Reilly?"

"I do. That's him over there." Mrs. Reilly pointed a stubby, work-grained forefinger straight at Leo Yates.

Yates sprang to his feet and strode to Lacey's desk. Trembling with anger he shook a rigid forefinger in the police captain's face. "You can't do it," he stormed. "You can't implicate me in this thing."

"Sit down Mr. Yates." Lacey was unperturbed. "You haven't been accused of anything yet."

"But I see your drift," cried Yates bitterly. "You're trying to establish that I went to Patrick Creed's apartment that afternoon and shot him and stole whatever money there was in the place. You will say that I was inspired to do this by hearing that Frederick Creed had been in the apartment earlier the same day and had come away with a thousand dollars."

"You will say that I used this knowledge to try and put the blame on Frederick Creed; that I arranged things to make it appear the murder had been committed before one thirty, before my brother-in-law left the place."

"Sit down Mr. Yates," Lacey said again, his voice hardening. This time Yates obeyed. "And now, if you wouldn't mind telling me, just what were you doing the afternoon of the murder?"

Yates threw up his hands. "The woman was right enough. I was there, knocking on the door. But when no one answered I left."

Lacey looked inquiringly across at Mrs. Reilly.

"I went back to my work," the old

woman stated. "I didn't wait to see if he got in or not."

"Your behavior has been very suspicious, Mr. Yates," Lacey said. "I'm afraid we'll have to keep you here for awhile until we look into things."

There followed a strained silence which Frederick Creed's lawyer was the first to break. "I suppose my client may go free now?" he said.

"I'll see to that in a moment," Lacey promised.

Thereupon, Ike Van got up from his seat and crossed the room to stand expectantly before Frederick Creed. "I guess you'll be turned loose in a minute," he said suggestively.

Creed gave him a scornful glance and turned to his lawyer. "Can you let me have some money until I get back what the police took from me yesterday?"

"How much do you need?"

"A hundred and sixty-five dollars," put in Ike eagerly.

The lawyer took the money from a billfold and handed it to Creed. Creed, in turn, without counting it, handed it to Ike Van.

"What in hell is this?" Lacey cried out angrily. He pushed back his chair and stood up. "Bribing a witness?"

"I owed him the money," Creed explained.

"Hand it back," Lacey told Ike severely, coming over from his desk. "What do you think I'd look like if it came out in court that money had been passed to one of the prosecution's star witnesses in my office? Give it back to him."

Ike did not obey. Instead he thrust the money quickly into his pocket. "His uncle owed me the money," he said rapidly. "He bet fifteen bucks for me on Straight Flush in the Fourth at Maryland the day before yesterday. The horse won."

"That makes no difference. You can't pass money here. Give it back."

DETEKTIVE Brennan, who had been keeping a tight grip on Yates, handed his prisoner over to a uniformed officer and crossed the room.

"So Straight Flush is the name of a horse, is it?" He took a sheaf of papers from his pocket and ran through them.

"What does this mean?" he continued, reading from a slip of paper. "Straight Flush, fifty-five, zero, zero?"

"Did you get them papers from Mr. Creed's desk?" Ike inquired.

Brennan nodded.

"That means Mr. Creed bet Straight Flush fifty dollars to come first, nothing to come second and nothing third. In other words, straight, place and show."

"What kind of a cop are you, anyway?" said Lacey disgustedly. "Don't you know at your age how a horse player writes down his bets?"

"I don't gamble, sir," said Brennan shortly. And to Van, "Under the figures fifty-five, zero, zero is written six hundred and five, zero, zero. What does that mean?"

"That means Mr. Creed made six hundred and five dollars out of his bet. A hundred and sixty-five of that belonged to me besides five more I gave him out of my own pocket to bet for me. I collected five last night from Mr. Fred Creed and the rest just now."

"The figures here seem to tally with what you say," declared Brennan slowly. He then handed the paper to Lacey and indicated something thereon with his forefinger. Lacey nodded.

"What time, Van," he asked sharply, "did you say you left Patrick Creed's apartment the afternoon of the murder?"

"One o'clock," replied Ike promptly.

"And what time was the first race at Maryland, Van?"

"Two o'clock."

"So the fourth race would go about

three thirty and Mr. Creed could get the returns by phone about four?"

"About then."

Lacey regarded the slip of paper narrowly. "And you said, didn't you Van, that you hadn't returned to the apartment that afternoon?"

"Yes," said Ike. "I never went back till noon next day."

Lacey turned suddenly to Mrs. Reilly. "Who was the first person to ask you if you had seen anyone at Patrick Creed's door the afternoon of the murder?"

"Him." Mrs. Reilly directed her forefinger at Ike Van.

"And who," Lacey went on, turning to the lawyer, "suggested to you that Mrs. Reilly would make a good witness for your client?"

"Isaac Van."

Lacey commenced striding up and down the office in a fit of impatient reflection. He brought up suddenly, glaring coldly at Ike Van. "Van," he said, "isn't it true that you returned to the apartment that afternoon to find out if your horse had won?"

"No," Ike gulped.

"Be careful Van. Isn't it true you went to the apartment at about four o'clock and that a little later you made a second visit?"

"No," said Ike. "No." He sat down in a chair and his head drooped weakly.

"Van, you're not telling me the truth. We'll have to hold you here till you decide to come clean. Take him away, Brennan."

Brennan dropped a hand to Ike Van's shoulder and pulled him to his feet.

"What about the money he just got?" he said to Lacey. "It might be needed as evidence."

"Put it with the rest of the stuff on my desk."

Brennan twirled Ike around and reached down to grope in the waiter's pocket.

Ike screamed and twisted violently and fastened his teeth in Brennan's hand.

Brennan cursed and jerked his hand away. Then, flinging an arm about Van's neck he hugged him close, half choked. With his free hand he went into Ike's pockets.

As he withdrew his hand Brennan's face went blank with astonishment. He released his hold and Ike reeled into a chair, gasping. The detective thrust his hand toward Lacey for inspection. In his palm was a thirty-two-caliber derringer.

"Where did this come from Van?" Lacey demanded.

The little waiter lowered his head and began to sob.

"What did you do with the money?" Brennan said, seizing him by the shoulder again.

"Home," gasped Ike between sobs. "Don't hit me no more."

They took him away, then, tears streaming down his cheeks, to book him on a charge of murder.

"But I don't understand," Yates began faintly. "Do you mean that Ike Van killed—"

"He did. And he fixed things so that your brother-in-law would get the blame. But when he saw a chance of making another few dollars he changed his story to make you the fall guy," Lacey said.

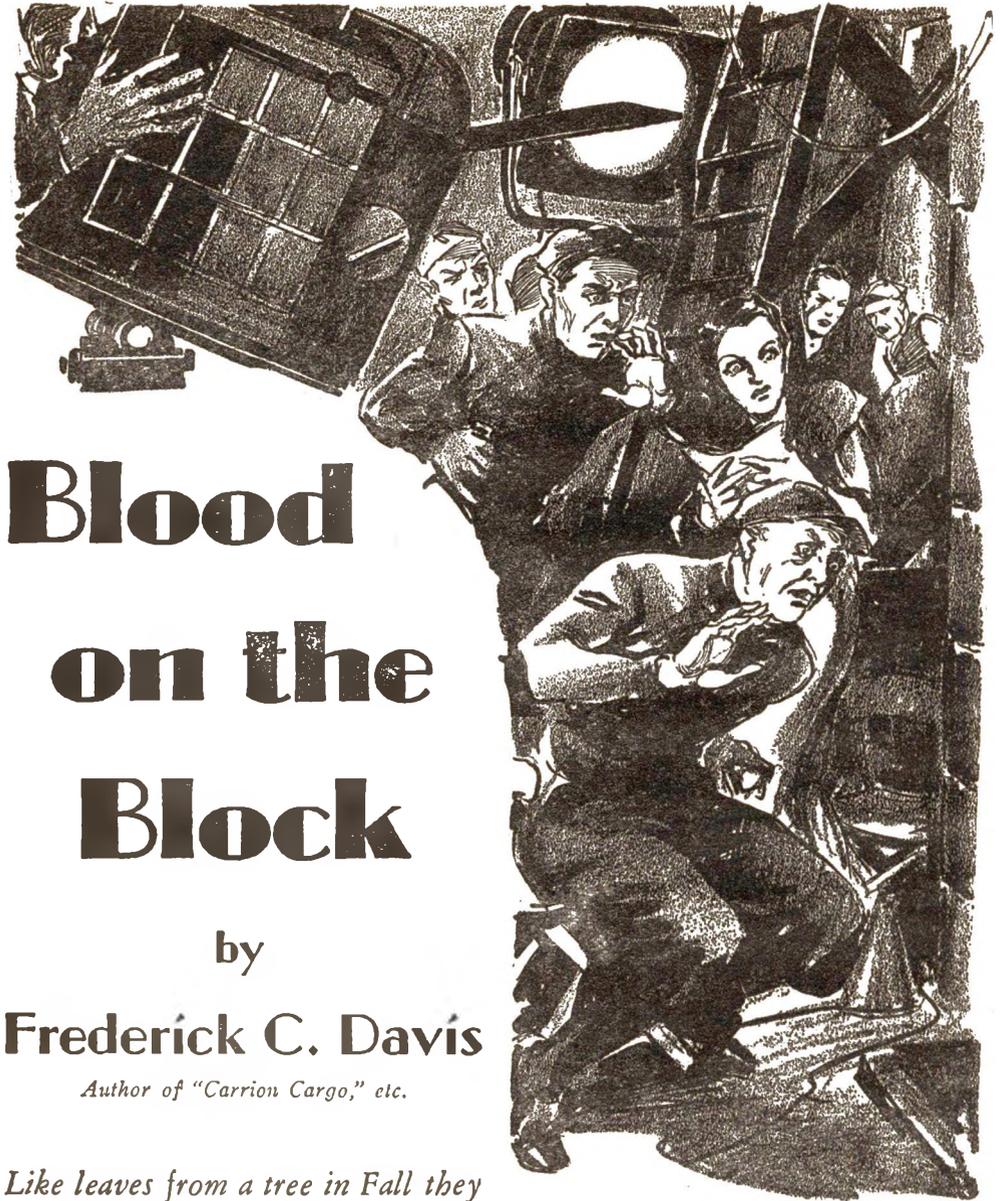
"I'm still in the dark," confessed Yates hopelessly.

"Look," said Lacey, holding out the slip of paper for Yates to read, "here is the result of the horse race marked down in the old man's handwriting. So he must have been alive around four o'clock."

"But how did you know Van was in the apartment at four o'clock?"

"Because of this." Lacey indicated a line of writing at the bottom of the slip.

The line read: "To Ike Van, for fifteen on Straight Flush to win, one hundred and seventy dollars. Paid."



Blood on the Block

by

Frederick C. Davis

Author of "Carrion Cargo," etc.

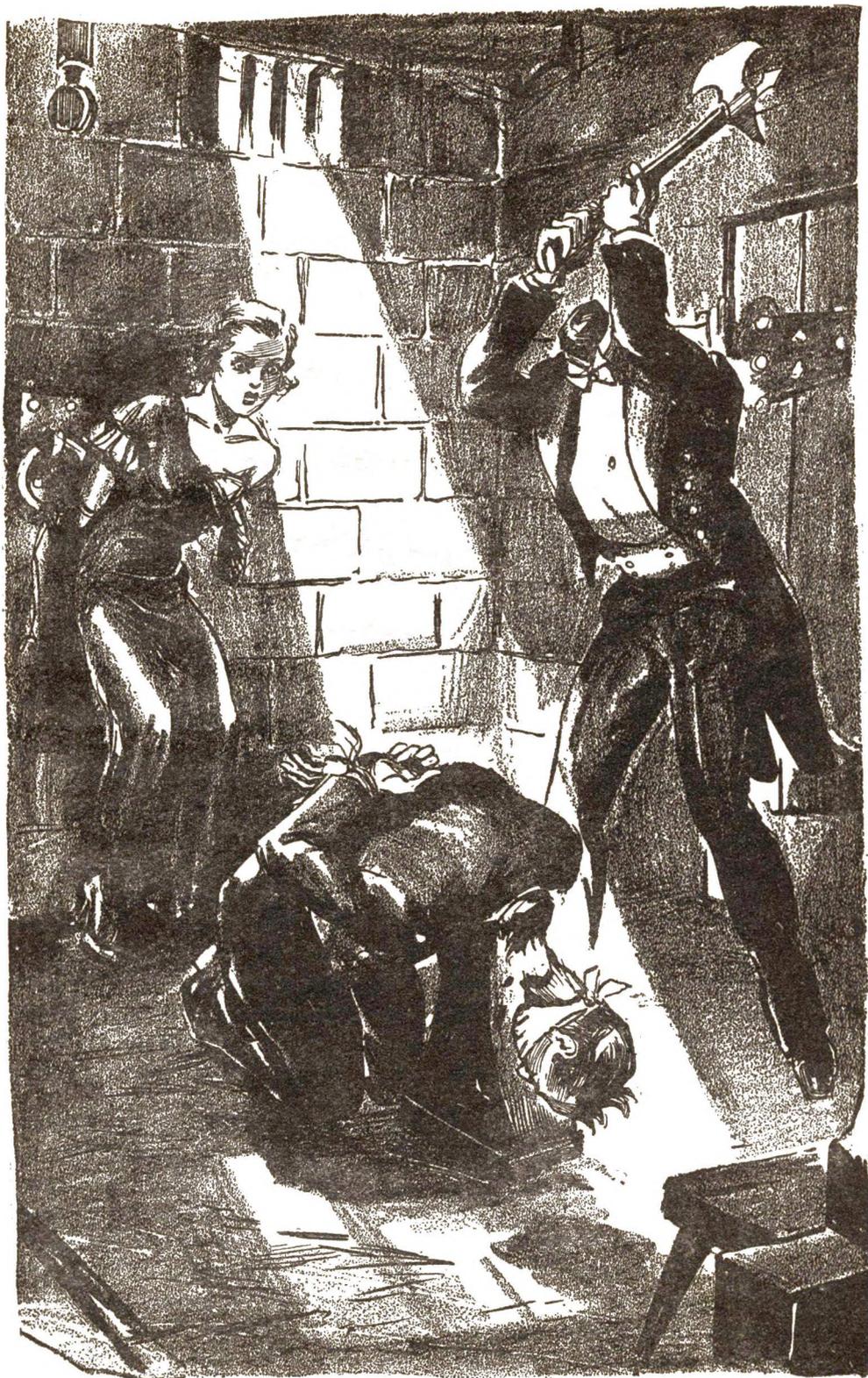
Like leaves from a tree in Fall they fluttered off—the heads of those murdered men—without the slightest warning that death was near. For ghastly horror stalked the sets of Super-Classics Studio—the Headless Headsman's ghost had come to life and no one knew his weapon or his motive.

CHAPTER ONE

The Headless Headsman

SOUND Stage Seven of the great Super-Classics Studio was bustling with preparations for a climactic scene in Hollywood's latest horror picture.

Activity centered on a huge set constructed at one end of the vast room. A battery of hot, blinding lights concentrated upon a reproduction of a castle



The head of the bound man dropped off the chopping block!

dungeon. Black electric cables snaked across the floor. Half a dozen "blimps"—sound-proofed recording cameras—were gazing upon the scene with crystal eyes. The place was alive with actors, technicians, gaffers—all of them waiting for the final word from Vladimir Kostov, the renowned director who was making the picture.

Kostov, a pudgy, cherub-faced little man whose hands were continually fluttering, strode on the set. His nervous gray eyes came to rest upon three men who were busy beside a wooden bench built against one of the set walls.

One of them was an actor garbed in full evening dress. The other two were minor assistants of Kostov's, and they were industriously binding the hands and ankles of the actor with strands of old rope. That done, they tied a handkerchief across his face, lifted him, and laid him on the bench.

Kostov's two assistants turned their attention to a young woman at the opposite side of the set. She was wearing a clinging evening gown of red velvet which was torn and stained. In spite of her fallen hair and the disarray of her dress, she was beautiful—the star of the picture, Elyse Seymore. Kostov stood by until her hands were bound behind her to a heavy iron ring in the wall.

"Remember, Elyse," the great director warned her in thick accents, "one scream only. When you see the ax go up, only one scream. Then we cut."

"Yes, Mr. Kostov," said Miss Seymore.

The director's assistant, Arthur Driscoll, was at his elbow.

"To your place, Arthur," Kostov directed. "You begin lowering the hidden trap as soon as the victim is placed on the block. By the time we cut, the trap should be entirely open. Are we ready?"

"All set," declared Driscoll briskly.

Kostov shouted an order which sent the men scurrying off the set. He walked majestically to the chair, which bore his name, and surveyed the scene through his fingers, formed into a frame. The sound cameramen waited for his word. The monitor in the double-glass-windowed booth high up on one wall bent to his dials and knobs. The gaffers kept their hands on the light switches. An assistant bawled out: "Quiet!"

Utter silence filled the cavernous room.

"Lights!"

Some of the lights blinked out. Others flashed on, completely changing the aspect of the scene. Beyond the walls of the set lay darkness; within them hovered a weird glow.

The dungeon of a castle. In the eery light the walls seemed to be of moldering stone, age-old, crusted with strange growths. In its depths a door could be seen dimly—a door that was heavy and stout, bound by rusted iron bands, held shut by a tremendous wrought-iron latch. On the stone floor were two patterned patches of light which shafted obliquely down from high, square windows criss-crossed with black bars. In the dim light and the silence it all looked uncannily real.

Kostov's voice came quietly. "Camera."

The big scene of Hollywood's latest horror feature, *The Headless Headsman*, had begun.

FOR a moment the silence continued. In the glow of the shafts of light, the man on the bench could be seen vaguely, bound hand and foot, his mouth covered by a tightly drawn handkerchief. He was lying still, as if exhausted. Across the black dungeon, her shadow cast against the wall to which she was fastened, stood the woman. Her head was lowered in abject despair, her lustrous hair falling across her bare shoulders. For long

seconds the man and the woman did not move.

Then a soft metallic sound echoed. The woman's head came up; she peered through the gloom in terror; and her gaze came to rest on the tremendous oaken door in the rear wall. Metal clanked again; and the heavy door began to open. Slowly it swung, while a ghostly glow came through it, spreading a fan of flickering light across the stone floor. And in the doorway appeared a figure.

It was a man garbed in immaculate evening dress. His gloved hands moved slowly as they dropped from the latch; his polished shoes glistened as he stepped into the dungeon; and he stood a moment silhouetted against the glimmering light coming from beyond. He stood erect, dignified—a walking horror.

For, above his white wing collar and tie, his neck was a ghastly red stump. He had no head.

The headless man walked slowly from the open door into the depths of the dungeon. The woman was staring at him, recoiling in speechless terror. The headless one turned as if to regard her—turned toward her a head which did not exist! Then he turned again, toward the man lying bound on the bench.

The man without a head had no eyes with which to see, but he moved with certainty. He lifted the man from the bench. The still form made no response; the bound man was unconscious. Carrying the form in his arms, the headless horror stepped toward the center of the dungeon.

In the middle of the floor stood a black object. It was a stout wooden block, tapering upward from its base; it was eighteen inches high, ancient and stained. The headless man lowered his prisoner carefully to the floor behind it. He propped the unconscious man on his knees, and balanced him so that his neck

rested across the narrow top of the chopping block.

Then he turned again, while the terrified woman watched, and walked to the wall beside her. In the shaft of light, as he passed through it, his stump of a neck glistened redly. His gloved hands lifted, from two iron pegs in the wall, an ancient battle-ax.

The headless man returned slowly to the center of the room. He balanced himself on straddled legs beside the chopping block. He lifted the weighty ax and placed its sharp edge against the nape of the neck of the bound man, gauging his mark. Then he began to lift the ax—to swing it upward. Higher and higher it went—its edge glistening, a frightful thing in the shaft of light—poising for a powerful downward swing.

Suddenly a shrill scream of terror rang through the gloomy silence.

In the darkness beyond the set, Director Vladimir Kostov rose, on his lips the call to end the scene.

But something happened.

There was no warning. There was no preliminary sound. There was nothing to prepare those who were watching for the ghastly horror they were about to witness.

The head of the bound man dropped from the chopping block.

It struck the floor with a dull thump. It rolled once, while blood streamed down the block and splashed the artificial stones. Then it came to rest on one cheek, staring out into the darkness with widened, popping eyes.

At the same instant the air vibrated with a booming tone—a pulsing note like that of a deep-voiced bell.

For a moment—quiet, while the reverberations of the bell died away.

Then another scream shrilled through the silence—and another and another—while the severed head lay in the patch

of ghostly light and grimaced from the center of a slowly widening blackish pool.

VVLADIMIR KOSTOV forgot to cry "Cut!" The script girl, who had been seated beside him, sprang from her chair whimpering, and rushed away through the darkness.

Kostov took three quick steps toward the set and stopped short.

"Lights!" he bellowed. "Lights!"

The stunned gaffers threw their switches. A flat glare flooded the sound stage. The weird lighting effect of the set vanished in the brilliance of the powerful globes which blinked on. For an instant there was a stunned, tense silence.

Then Elyse Seymore screamed again.

In the center of the set the headless apparition was still standing. He was erect beside the chopping block, but he lowered the battle-ax to the floor. In the blinding light the horror that was his neck lost its ghastliness. It was revealed as nothing more than a contrivance made of varnished *papier maché*.

The headless man dropped the ax, and his gloved hands tore at his shirt-front. A stud went flying as he ripped it open. From inside a pair of horrified eyes peered out as the tall, headless man became a short one with a head hidden below a pair of artificial shoulders.

Vladimir Kostov stood pale and trembling, peering at the chopping block, at the head lying beside it. He strode forward swiftly.

The blood on the block was wet and real. The head was a real head, the face, that of the actor who had played the part of the prisoner in the dungeon. The decapitated body was still braced against the block, bound hand and foot.

This was not part of the script of *The Headless Headsman*. This was something totally unexpected.

Arthur Driscoll rushed onto the set,

stopped beside Kostov and stared, pale as death. "Good God, what's happened?" he blurted.

Kostov turned away, shaking from head to foot. He saw that two men were releasing Elyse Seymore from the ring which fastened her to the artificial stone wall; she was babbling hysterically.

"Go back—clear away!" he shouted hoarsely. "Stay off the set. Call the police!"

CHAPTER TWO

Clients For Oke

CLAY OAKLEY, private investigator of affairs Hollywoodian, was sitting at his desk in the *sanctum sanctorum* of Secrets, Inc., listening to a woman client talk.

She was a very beautiful woman, with golden hair and bright blue eyes and ripe red lips; hers were legs which might make Marlene Dietrich blush with envy.

It was Oakley's business to know Hollywood in all its sordid and glamorous phases, and knowing about Valerie Vance was one of the more pleasant elements of his job. Her first part, a year ago, had brought her remarkable notice. She was being groomed for stardom by Super-Classics. It was all the more remarkable because she was thirty and married and a mother. This morning, as she talked with Oakley, she looked unhappy and harassed.

"Why," asked Oakley when she paused, "do you want me to keep an eye on your husband? Are you contemplating a divorce?"

"No—not at all!" Miss Vance exclaimed. "Divorce is farthest from my mind, Mr. Oakley. I love my husband. I want you to watch him—to keep him from doing something rash that might—lead to trouble."

"As for instance?"

"My husband sometimes becomes insanely jealous—without just cause. He knows as well as I do that I love him devotedly—that I would never be guilty of even a slight indiscretion—but at times he loses control of himself and makes threats. Not to me, of course. Maurice is never harsh to me. But to those he thinks are—interested in me."

"It must keep him busy," Oakley commented dryly.

Miss Vance smiled. "You see," she went on, "it was Arthur Driscoll who started me in films. I was just another Hollywood wife until he induced me to take a part. He is devoting himself to building me up into a star. He is Kostov's assistant now, but he is soon to be made a full-fledged director, and he has arranged a contract whereby I work with him exclusively. You must understand, Mr. Oakley, that between Arthur Driscoll and me it is purely business—nothing more.

"It's absurd for Maurice to be jealous. Arthur—well, Arthur is as happily married as I am, and as devoted to his wife as I am to my husband. But we are together a great deal of the time, talking over my part, and planning new pictures. It has become very difficult for me because Maurice—has threatened to kill Arthur Driscoll. Only last night he gave way to a savage burst of temper—the worst I've ever known."

"And threatened murder?"

VALERIE VANCE paused a moment, caught her breath visibly. Then, "Yes," she said. "Arthur and I were alone in Arthur's office at the studio, working over a new script. Maurice rushed in, without warning. He accused Arthur of—of absurd things—and gave Arthur no chance to defend himself. He shouted, 'If you ever lay a finger on Valerie, by God I'll kill you,' and then he rushed out."

"And you want me to watch your hus-

band to prevent any such thing happening?"

"Yes."

"That means I'll have to keep an eye on him all the time he is not at home with you—when he's in the studio, included. That's a big order, Miss Vance."

"I am ready to pay any fee rather than—have Maurice do something so frightful. In time I'm sure he'll see how silly his suspicions are, but until then I must make sure that he doesn't give way and—kill Arthur."

Oakley eyed Miss Vance keenly. "Are you being absolutely honest with me?" he asked softly. "Your concern is for your husband and not for Arthur Driscoll?"

She lifted her clear eyes to Oakley's and returned his gaze unflinchingly. "My concern is for Maurice alone," she said.

Oakley teetered back in his chair. Bright sunshine splashed on his desk, and through the open window behind him came the noises of Hollywood Boulevard. Mixed with the grinding of a street car were the shrill cries of a newsboy. "Hextra-a! Hextra-a paypah!"

"Very well, Miss Vance," Oakley said quietly. "I'll take the case."

"Thank you," she said. "I—I'll give you a retainer."

Oakley rose as Miss Vance opened her purse and removed a check-book from it. He stepped to the door of the waiting room and looked through.

Seated at a typewriter in the outer office was Miss Charmaine Morris. She was pretty, pert, red-headed, and could do things in the way of private investigating. She was powdering her patrician nose when Oakley said: "Cherry, darling, hop downstairs and grab one of those extras."

She went out of the door, a trim slender figure with perfectly curved

ankles, her red hair sparkling in the sunlight. Oakley, smiling, returned to his desk, and Miss Vance handed him a check.

"Thank you. Where is your husband today?"

"Working at the studio," Miss Vance answered. "I will see that you get passes so that you can go on the set with him. I'm particularly worried because Kostov is making the picture, which means that Maurice and Arthur are working on the same set. I—I am placing full reliance on you, Mr. Oakley, and—"

The door opened swiftly and Cherry Morris's red head appeared.

"Oke!" she exclaimed.

She came in hurriedly, her eyes wide, alarmed. She placed on Oakley's desk, before him, the newspaper, and said not a word. Oakley peered down at the black headlines which screamed across the front page of *The Examiner*.

MAURICE VANCE BEHEADED ON SET!

A low moan came from Valerie Vance. She was leaning forward, peering at the electrifying headline. As she passed one perfect hand across her forehead, Oakley sprang toward her. But even as he moved, her eyes closed, and she slumped down in the chair. She had fainted.

HALF an hour later Oke Oakley was seated at his desk, frowning at the extra, snatching sentences here and there from its column. It had been a bad half hour for him. With Cherry Morris's help he had brought Miss Vance back to consciousness, then called a physician from the adjoining building. The doctor was escorting the actress home now. Cherry sat in the chair which Miss Vance had occupied and watched Oakley's grim face.

"It was a stupid thing for me to do,"

she said sheepishly. "Only, I'd heard everything she said, and when I saw that headline I came rushing in—"

"Not stupid, Cherry—brilliant," Oakley said. "Even if you didn't know what you were doing. She had to learn it anyhow. It was a shock, the way it came, but at least it provided me with a reaction to observe. She fainted. Interesting."

"She wasn't lying to you, Oke."

"Nope. Not any. She did love her husband and she really was worried about him. Queer. She wanted me to save him from committing murder, and suddenly it's the other way around—her husband gets it."

"No doubt that it was a murder?"

"None whatever. It certainly wasn't suicide—nobody'd choose to bump himself off that way—slice himself, rather. It couldn't be an accident either because, apparently, nobody knows how it happened. Murder, certainly."

Another voice spoke. "Very bloody," it said.

Mr. Archibald Brixey made the remark. He was Oakley's second assistant, a dapper, foppish young man of social lineage, whom hard times had forced into association with Hollywood's chief private investigator. Beneath Brixey's dandyish clothes were hard, lean muscles; behind his placid, aristocratic forehead there was real brain-matter.

"Very bloody," Oakley agreed. "And damned strange. I'd like nothing better than to jump into the middle of this case, but—"

The telephone rang and Cherry Morris reached for it. She announced, "Secrets, Incorporated," listened, said, "He's right here." handed the phone to Oakley and added in a whisper: "I'll bet a dinner against a new lipstick that you've got your wish. It's Kostov."

Oakley's eyes brightened. "Oakley speak—"

"Mr. Oakley, please come to the Super-Classics Studio at once!" came Kostov's thickly accented voice. "It is very important. "I will be waiting for you in Mr. Madtz's office."

"I say, what—"

But the line had clicked and gone dead. Oakley smiled, replaced the instrument.

"I am being consulted on the subject of the recent decapitation," he told his assistants. "In fact, I'm commanded to report to Kostov. In this instance I don't mind being ordered about. Archie, stay here and hold down the fort. Cherry, put another dusting of powder on your elegant nose and grab my arm. We're off."

OAKLEY pulled his car up at the gate of the impressive Super-Classics Studio. It looked like a high-walled fortress and he had to talk his way past the gateman and three of the omnipresent studio cops before he got to the executive offices. With Cherry Morris at his side he finally entered a door labeled in gold—Samuel Madtz.

"Wait here, beautiful," he bade the young lady, "while I beard the movie lions in their dens."

Mr. Madtz's secretary, upon hearing Oakley's name, punched a number of buttons and spoke through an inter-office telephone. She conducted Oakley to a connecting door and opened it for him.

A chubby little man was beating his heels back and forth across the rug. A huge, sullen-faced man was slumped behind a desk. Both jerked and stared at Oakley as he came in.

The chubby one jabbed a quivering forefinger at the detective. "You've got to keep them away from me!" he exclaimed hoarsely, in heavy accents. "They're driving me crazy!"

Oakley was accustomed to the eccentric

behavior of movie people. The little man, he knew, was the tempestuous Kostov. The larger one behind the desk was one of the principal supervisors of the studio, Sam Madtz, credited with some of its outstanding box-office hits. Kostov looked frantic and Madtz dismal.

"You're Oakley?" asked the supervisor, half rising. "Sit down, Oakley. It is Mr. Kostov who sent for you. Excuse me, please."

The supervisor stepped from the office as Oakley turned to Kostov. The dynamic little Russian was a bundle of nerves. He sputtered as he paced back and forth again.

"You want me to protect you from somebody?" Oakley asked him.

"Those—those police!" Kostov spat out the word. "They follow me around. They ask me questions, questions, questions. They think I am the murderer who chops off actors' heads. They're driving me crazy."

"Naturally, there's an investigation," Oakley commented.

Kostov glared. "Mr. Oakley, since it happened, this has been a madhouse. Everybody has been grilled by the police. Nobody can work any more. Everybody is suspected. Everybody is upset. A big detective talks like he thinks I'm a head-chopper."

"Sounds like McClane's on the job," Oakley said.

"McClane—that's his name!" Kostov blurted. "He hounds me. He thinks because I am the director of the picture, I am a murderer. Questions—he asks me millions of questions. Probably he will try to arrest me. Oakley, you have got to keep him away from me."

"I can't very well stop a police investigation, you know," Oakley pointed out.

"No—you can't stop that," Kostov answered. "But you can save me from that idiot. You can investigate the case for

me, and prove to him that I had nothing to do with it. That's why I want you to help me—to prove I am innocent—so I can go on with my work. Every single minute lost costs us thousands of dollars. You—you must clear this matter up, Oakley."

"A large order," Oakley smiled. "I'll tackle it, but it will cost you money. Are you retaining me personally?"

"Yes, because I am personally responsible for the completion of the picture on schedule. I will pay you anything you want. Oakley, for God's sake do something!"

Oakley rose, briskly. "If each lost minute costs thousands of dollars, let's not waste any," he said. "Take me to the place where this happened. I want to see that spot before—"

Suddenly the door swung open. Sam Madtz lumbered back in, still chewing his cigar, his face beet-red. Following Madtz came a tall, aesthetic-looking young man wearing an artist's smock. He looked gravely frightened and he was talking excitedly.

"Why does he think I should kill Vance?" he was demanding indignantly of Madtz. "I built the set, but does that make me a murderer? Is he crazy—accusing everyone in sight of being a criminal? I've put up with enough of it!"

KOSTOV signaled Oakley from the room, and as they passed through the outer office Cherry Morris joined them. Oakley introduced her to the director, then asked quietly: "Who's the excited chap—the one who built the set?"

"Stephen Devine," Kostov answered. "A true artist—a fine man. He has done marvelous things for me. Everyone is like that now—upset, half crazy. Devine, being questioned! It's senseless."

Kostov led the way rapidly out of the executive offices. As Oakley and Cherry

Morris were following him down the steps, a young man rushed up. He was Arthur Driscoll. Oakley knew him by sight. Driscoll spoke to Kostov.

"Chief, the rushes are ready. The police are going to look at them. Will you come?"

"We certainly will come," Oakley spoke at once. "The cameras were running at the time, weren't they, Mr. Kostov?"

"Yes—you will be able to see everything," Kostov said.

"Lead the way," Oakley bade.

Kostov conducted them along one of the studio streets. Oakley glanced back at Arthur Driscoll, and saw that Driscoll was not following. He noted also that Driscoll seemed distraught. Then he lost sight of the young man as Kostov entered the lobby of a small theatre built into one of the studio buildings. In the theatre it was the custom to display the films of rival producers, and also to show the rushes of any shots made during the day of pictures under production. The pace, Oakley noticed, was thronged with uniformed police and plainclothesmen.

In the doorway a huge, bull-necked detective stood. He tapped Kostov's arm and grinned at Oakley.

"Dear old McClane," Oakley greeted him. "How are things coming?"

McClane grunted. "Oakley, you're a smart boy, so see what you can make of it." To Kostov he remarked: "Well, we've gone all over the sound stage and we're through with it. You've been howling about losing time on the picture, so you can use it again whenever you like."

"Thank God for that!" Kostov said heartily.

He stepped into the theatre; and Oakley, following him, made an imperceptible signal to Cherry Morris. Cherry paused in the doorway and turned her wide eyes upon McClane. Oakley chuckled as he

found a seat beside Kostov. Within a few minutes, he knew, Cherry would be reporting to him facts which McClane would never have told him directly.

CHAPTER THREE

The Second Head

THE little theatre was furnished with luxurious seats. In the rear, just under the ports of the projection room, were a desk and several movable chairs on a platform. In front of the platform, the seats were filled with actors and actresses, technicians, executives, and fully a dozen police and plainclothesmen. McClane ambled in and seated himself as Oakley waited.

In a moment Cherry appeared, snuggled beside Oakley, and fluffed her red hair. "Darling, I learned everything McClane knows, but since he doesn't know anything that's not much help. Literally, he's stumped. He doesn't know what did it, or who might have done it, or anything else."

"No instrument of murder?"

"None whatever."

The lights went out. Kostov touched Oakley's arm. "Now you shall see exactly what happened. We have had the sound track trinted in, so you will hear too.

"The story of the picture is laid in an ancient castle in England, which is supposed to be haunted. The ghost is the Headless Headsman. The dungeon you will see is a relic of the past, and the ghost is that of a man who was once beheaded there. He has captured two prisoners and intends to kill them. That is enough so you will understand."

The screen began to flicker. Abruptly the scene appeared, dark, foreboding, sinister. It was immediately blotted out by a young man in shirt-sleeves who stepped into the center of the screen,

exhibited a slate bearing cabalistic symbols for the information of the cutter in assembling the master negative, and clapped two sticks together to mark the start of the sound track. He stepped away, and the scene returned.

The dungeon looked dank and ancient. The two shafts of light, shone on the floor, illuminating the crusted walls in a dim glow. On the bench at one side, a bound man was lying—Maurice Vance. Against the opposite wall Elyse Seymore was standing in an attitude of silent despair. For a moment there was no change in the scene.

The theatre was silent save for the faint hissing that issued from the loud-speaker.

Now a metallic sound echoed from the screen. The woman on the screen gazed toward the huge door in the rear wall; its latch was lifting and it was opening. It swung wide, and the headless figure appeared in silhouette.

Every person in the theatre knew that the headless man was a clever bit of costuming, but at sight of his stump of a neck they gasped.

The headless man came slowly into the room. He stooped, lifted the still figure of Maurice Vance in his arms, carried it to the chopping block, and placed the man so that his neck rested on its apex. Then, while the woman against the wall watched hypnotically, the headless figure lifted the battle-ax from the wall, and returned to the block.

A horrified tension filled the projection room as the headless figure placed the edge of the battle-ax against Vance's neck. Then the blade rose—higher and higher. When it flashed in the light, a terrific scream rang from the screen—uttered by Elyse Seymore. Then—

The head of Maurice Vance simply dropped to the floor. Those in the theatre gasped again. Dark blood flowed on the screen. The head rolled to a stop, looking

out at the audience. At the same time the note of a bell sounded, deep, resonant, donging softly through the darkness.

The scene flickered off.

The lights flashed on.

OAKLEY blinked. Cherry Morris was gripping his arm tightly. Kostov was muttering curses. Those in the audience stared at each other in horrified silence. The quiet was broken by Detective Lieutenant McClane, who reared out of his seat and shouted toward the projection booth: "Show that again!"

Now there began a long wait while the film was rewound.

Oakley sat back, his eyes grim. "Who played the part of the Headless Headsman? McClane has probably grilled hell out of him?"

"Yes, he has," Kostov answered. "Charles Beck plays the part—because he is short enough to seem headless, in that outfit, without appearing too tall. But he had nothing to do with it. You saw for yourself, the battle-ax never came down on Vance's neck."

"The police have it? Was it stained?"

"They have it, and it was not stained. Not a drop of blood was on it. The ax did not kill Vance."

"That bell—was it part of the scene?"

"That's the strange thing," Kostov answered. "No—it wasn't. I scarcely remembered that sound until I heard it again just now. It was not part of the scene as it was planned. I am positive that there is no bell on the sound stage, either."

"It means something," Oakley declared. "That bell-note sounded the instant Vance's head dropped."

The theatre went dark. The scene began exactly as before, and ran through to its termination in exactly the same manner. Oakley was particularly interested in the sound of the bell. He noted

again that the tone rang softly the moment Vance's head dropped off."

Oakley remained in his seat when the lights flashed on. As the others left he asked Kostov: "Was the scene enacted exactly as it was rehearsed?"

"No. One thing went wrong. The trap did not open."

"The trap?" Oakley asked.

"In the side wall there is supposed to be a secret door. It was to begin to lower as the headsman raised the ax. By the time the ax got all the way up, the trap was supposed to be all the way open. The hero of the film was supposed to rush in and shoot the headsman. But the trap didn't open."

"Why didn't it?"

"I don't know. In the excitement I forgot all about it. Arthur Driscoll was supposed to be in charge of that piece of business because it was important. The trap is pulled open by a wire attached to a lever. I put Driscoll in charge of the lever with exact instructions. But for some reason he did not obey orders—and I haven't been able to ask him about it."

"I'll ask the questions," Oakley said rising. "First of all I want to look at the sound stage."

"I will take you."

KOSTOV led the way out of the theatre. It was growing dark. Cherry Morris kept her hand on Oakley's arm. They walked along the studio street toward the heavy sound-proof door of Sound Stage Seven.

Kostov tried it and found it locked. He produced a key from his pocket, used it, and drew the weighty door open. Oakley strode in first. The door thudded shut behind Cherry Morris. Kostov stepped past, to lead the way; but Oakley's hand shot out, gripped his arm and stopped him.

Except for a few bare bulbs burning

high against the ceiling, the sound stage was dark. The flat light threw deep shadows, and at the far end of the stage the set of the dungeon was a black, ominous hollow.

"Wait a minute!" Oakley said in a tense whisper. "Somebody's in there!"

Suddenly a dark figure darted out of the set. It was a man, his coat-collar turned up to shield his face, a hat pulled low over his eyes. He moved swiftly, darted behind the set, and disappeared. One moment after he vanished in the darkness, his heels beat upon the floor; then even the sound died away.

"Funny," Kostov said. "Who could it be? The stage was locked."

Oakley was staring into the dungeon set. "Great Lord!" he gasped. "There's somebody—somebody on the chopping block!"

He broke into a swift run toward the set. Cherry Morris hurried after him. As he came closer, he could see the vague form more clearly. It was the figure of a man, kneeling—kneeling beside the ghastly block, his neck across its top! His collar had been torn away, and his head was lolling, his arms dangling limply.

"It's Driscoll!" Kostov exclaimed. "Driscoll! For God's sake—"

Suddenly, without warning, the head of Arthur Driscoll dropped to the floor!

Blood ran down the block. The head rolled and lay still. And in the silence of the stage rang that same vibrant tone that had sounded upon the death of Maurice Vance—the deep-toned ringing that seemed to come from a full-throated bell. Kostov and Oakley and Cherry Morris stood stock still, staring, their ears pulsing with the weird sound.

Then Cherry Morris screamed.

Oke Oakley blurted a curse and sprang forward. He darted past the set, glancing in horror at the body of Arthur Driscoll—a headless body now that had slumped

to the floor. He sped into the dark recess into which he had seen the unknown man dart. Utter blackness enveloped him, darkness that baffled his eyes and halted him momentarily.

His hand snatched at the automatic in his arm-pit holster. He crouched, ready to fire. But there was only silence ahead of him—silence and black emptiness.

Suddenly a sound—a dull thump.

Oakley whirled. He dashed into the open again, peering about. Kostov and Cherry Morris were still in the center of the vast room, staring in horror at the dungeon set. Oakley moved fast—guessing at the source of the sound.

A movement in the gloom brought him to a sliding stop. He whirled, and glimpsed a figure against the wall—a black tall figure. A white face was peering, scarcely visible in a shadow. Oakley leaped toward the man.

He grasped an arm. Instantly a hard fist crashed into his face. He jerked his gun up to fire; and another blow caught him just below the ribs. Gasping, disabled by reflex reactions which he could not control, he was helpless a moment. He scrambled to keep his grasp, but the man snatched his gun away, tore out of the shadows, leaped toward the side wall.

Oakley pulled himself up, gulping in air, and leaped. It was a flying tackle. His shoulder crashed against the legs of the man who was struggling toward the door. The impact tore him down. Oakley wriggled over, received a hard kick, then leaped up and planted a knee in the small of the other man's back. His gun clattered to the floor; he snatched it up and held it ready, panting.

The man beneath him writhed, gasped, struggled to get up. Oakley pushed the gun against his face.

And then over his shoulder he howled: "Get a light!"

Kostov was running toward Oakley.

After a moment of fumbling Kostov's hand found a switch. Then a snap, a bright glare. Oakley reached down, grasped the shoulder of his captive, and turned the man face up.

His prisoner was white as paste, terror-stricken. He was garbed in an artist's smock. Kostov peered into the face of the man who was scenic designer for Super-Classics and blurted his name—"Steve Devine!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Find The Weapon

OKE OAKLEY clambered to his feet. The blow he had received in the solar plexus was still making him gulp. He fastened a fist in Devine's smock and jerked the man erect. The scenic designer's aesthetic features pictured horror. Convulsively he covered his face with his hands and gasped: "Oh, God!"

Oakley kept his automatic leveled.

Kostov was staring at Devine, his hands fluttering nervously. "What—Devine, what are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Well, well!" Oakley said, "we've caught a fish. Kostov, beat it out of here and get McClane. He must be somewhere near. Snap it up!"

Kostov, his hands still fluttering, loped toward the door through which they had entered. Devine backed away in horror, staring past Oakley at the ghastly sight on the set. The brighter light revealed the spectacle in all its gory frightfulness. Devine shuddered violently and tore his eyes away, covering his face.

"Suppose you cut out the acting," Oakley suggested sourly. "It won't go with McClane."

Devine was gripped in a spasm of revulsion. Oakley regarded him puzzledly. If this was acting, it was superb work. The scene designer collapsed into a chair

and sobbed while Oakley kept him covered and waited.

A dull thump came from the door. Oakley glanced back to see McClane plodding in. Kostov followed him, and Sam Madtz lumbered after the director. Three plainclothesmen continued the grim parade, and one of them latched the door behind him. The big police detective hurried, stopped beside Oakley, and peered at the set.

"Great Lord!" he gasped. "Who's that? What's happened?"

"It's Driscoll," Oakley answered. "We've had another nice decapitation. Take Devine off my hands, will you?"

Sam Madtz was peering stolidly. "This is horrible—horrible!" he mumbled.

"You should not come, Sam!" Kostov ejaculated. "I told you you should not come."

McClane was looking bewildered. He grumbled an order, and two of the plainclothesmen closed in on Devine. Devine was scarcely aware of what was going on around him; he sat with his head in his cupped hands, shuddering.

"I was just ready to go—stopping in to see Madtz," McClane said confusedly. He glared at Devine. "What's the matter with him?"

"Just as Kostov and Miss Morris and I came in," Oakley explained, "we saw somebody rush off the set. It must have been Devine. Then we saw Driscoll on the chopping block, and the next moment Driscoll's head dropped off like a ripe apple. Devine was trying to beat it out of here when I grabbed him."

Devine heard that. He jerked erect and blurted: "That's not true! I wasn't trying to get away. I wasn't on the set. I—"

"Save your talk until I want it!" McClane snapped at him.

He turned and strode toward the set but Kostov and Madtz remained with the

detectives and Devine. Oakley went with McClane, and they stopped on the artificial stones, eyeing the head and the headless body lying at the base of the chopping block.

"One sweet mess!" McClane diagnosed. "Did you see the face of the guy who ran off the set when you came in, Oakley?"

"No. It was dark and he moved fast. He beat it around behind the set. Then we saw Driscoll—and it happened—and Devine must have had time to run out again, along the wall toward the door."

McClane's eyes were searching the set. "No ax in sight this time—no nothing. What the hell did it, anyway? Did you see anything?"

Oakley wagged his head. "Not a thing. I'll swear on a stack of Gideons that Driscoll was alone on the set at the time. There was absolutely no one else in sight—not even the headless headsman this time. Just Driscoll, bent over the block, with his neck across the top of it. And suddenly—" Oakley made an eloquent gesture.

"How can a guy get his bean sliced off when there's no weapon and nobody around to use a weapon if there was one?" McClane questioned savagely.

"Then there was the sound of the bell," Oakley continued explaining. "It sounded the instant Driscoll's head dropped. Finding out what it is may mean something."

McClane grimaced and turned away. He called aside one of the plainclothesmen and ordered the medical examiner and fingerprint expert and photographer to be brought back. As the detective hurried away, McClane ordered one of the others: "Look all around the stage, Garson. Hunt for some kind of a bell. Don't let anything slip past you."

"There is no bell," Kostov said softly.

"Hunt for it anyway, Garson," Mc-

Clane ordered, and plodded back to the set. "Though why in hell a murderer should take the trouble to ring a bell when he kills a guy is more than I can see."

"We'd better check up on doors, McClane," Oakley suggested. "Devine was already in the place when we came in, but he was probably heading for a different way out."

Oakley led the way to the narrow recess between the wall of the set and the wall of the sound stage, into which he had seen the furtive figure dart. It was lighted now. Wooden supports and dangling, snaky cables made a jungle of it. They crept back to the rearmost wall of the set, behind which there was only a narrow space filled with more braces and lights.

"Hello!" Oakley exclaimed. "Another door." This one filled almost half the rear wall of Sound Stage Seven. It was provided for the erection and removal of whole sections of sets; but in it was a smaller, ordinary door. Oakley tried it, and saw that it was fastened shut by a spring catch. McClane opened it and inspected the lock carefully.

"Easy to open from the inside, but locked from the outside," he said. "Probably fifty different people have keys."

Oakley was frowning puzzledly. "This is one way out. Devine could have made it. Then why the devil did he turn back into the stage? If he hadn't done that he could have slipped away clean."

"Maybe he found somebody outside the door and couldn't beat it without being seen."

"Then where was he heading when I grabbed him? He was halfway along the side wall."

Oakley and McClane groped their way back to the edge of the set. Beyond another jungle of lights and cables, they saw another door, in the side wall. It was a small one, heavy and soundproof.

Oakley inspected it and found that it was fastened with a spring lock, too.

"That's it," he said. "Devine was heading for this door when I grabbed him."

McCLANE tramped across the stage to Devine. The scene designer looked up haggardly at the big detective. McClane demanded: "You've got a key to this place, haven't you?"

"Yes, of course," Devine said breathily. "Everybody—most of us have—"

"All right!"

McClane snapped the man short, and trudged back to the dungeon set. Oakley went with him. They walked slowly to the grisly chopping block. Again they looked around, searching for a weapon; but there was none. A glance was enough to show them that death had come to Arthur Driscoll instantly, that whatever had severed the head had done so cleanly.

Oakley stepped close, inspecting the block. He saw that it was of solid wood, treated with acids so that it appeared to be very old. On its tapering sides designs were traced, made by a hot iron. The decoration was a series of concentric circles charred into the grain. Oakley stooped and made a close inspection.

"May mean something," he said. "Two small tacks on the front side."

He pointed them out. They were ordinary tacks imbedded in the wood at opposite sides of the outer circumference of the largest circle of the design, which was about fifteen inches across. They had not been driven home; their heads stood perhaps a sixteenth of an inch above the stained surface.

"Well?" McClane demanded.

"Don't know," Oakley answered. "Here's something else."

He was gazing directly down at the top of the block. With a pencil he probed at what seemed to be a small spot in the

exact center. It became a hole, a quarter of an inch in diameter, obviously cut by a drill, and it extended down into the wood—how far, Oakley could not tell. McClane made impatient noises as he examined it.

"The carpenters probably drilled it when they built the block. It can't mean much," he said.

Oakley said nothing. He grasped the block and heaved against it, attempting to shove it aside. It would not yield; it was nailed or bolted to the raised flooring of the dungeon set. McClane pulled him back, mumbling something about not disturbing any evidence, and went plodding out across the stage again.

Oakley followed. Garson, dusty and moist, came from a far corner. He reported to McClane glumly. "I've looked over every square inch of this place, Mac—but there's no bell anywhere."

"There wouldn't be," McClane said sourly.

Oakley paused in thought. He stepped to Cherry Morris' side and spoke quietly. "Skip out to a telephone, beautiful," he said. "Get Archie on the wire. Tell him I want him to begin keeping an eye on Valerie Vance. He's not to let her out of his sight an instant. It's just a stab in the dark. But it seems a bit peculiar to me that the two men Valerie Vance was worried about—her husband and Driscoll—have both literally lost their heads. Run along now, like a good little girl."

McCLANE, his hands in his hip pockets, teetering on his bulldog toes, was regarding Devine grimly. The scene designer was still seated, exhausted, in the chair, trying to compose himself. McClane's gaze shifted to Kostov, then to Madtz.

"What'll this do to the picture?" he asked.

Madtz shrugged. "It's publicity, but what kind? Who knows what will happen? Maybe we won't be able to show the picture."

"Going ahead with it just the same? Who do you think you can get to put his neck across that chopping block now, instead of Vance?"

Kostov's hands fluttered. "If you don't make trouble for us, we can go on with the picture and find an actor to take the part. Plenty of them would be glad of the chance. My God, do you think everybody who takes the part will be killed?"

"What do you think?" McClane demanded, and fixed his glittering eyes on the director.

Kostov colored. "You look at me like you suspect me! Are you crazy? Because I am the director of the picture—"

"Did I say I suspected you?" McClane interrupted. "We've got the guy who ran out of that set just before Driscoll died, haven't we? Well?" He peered at Devine. "You can talk any time."

Devine rose unsteadily. "You're mistaken," he said. "I wasn't on the set before Driscoll was—killed. I wasn't even inside the stage. I—"

"If you're going to try to lie out—"

"I'm not lying!" Devine blurted. "Give me a chance, and I'll tell you exactly what happened. I came in the side door. I saw Kostov and the young lady standing in the middle of the stage, staring at the set. I saw Oakley running behind the set—and Driscoll—Driscoll was already dead."

"In other words," McClane remarked. "you're trying to say you didn't even come in the side door until after Driscoll was beheaded."

"That's true," Devine said, and he ran his tongue over his dry lips. "Kostov and the young lady were so intent on the set that they couldn't have noticed me

coming in. Anyway, it was getting dark outside—and it was pretty dark in here. I was so stunned for a moment I didn't know what I was doing. And then Oakley rushed at me. I must have gone crazy, I guess. I tried to get away from him, to get out of here—and that's all there is to it."

"Yeah?" McClane drawled. "And why did you come into the set in the first place?"

"I was told by one of your detectives—this one"—Devine indicated Garson—"that I might. I'd left my hat and coat inside, and I was going home. Just before I opened the door I thought I heard a scream, but the door is sound-proof, and I wasn't sure."

"A scream?" McClane asked.

"Miss Morris screamed," Oakley remarked. "That was just after she saw what happened to Driscoll."

McClane teetered again and his shoes squeaked. "And," he went on, "can you prove that you were outside the sound stage when Driscoll was getting killed?"

"Yes," Devine said.

McClane jumped. "What?"

Devine said: "I certainly can prove it. I wasn't alone when I was outside the door. This detective"—and again Devine indicated Garson—"was with me."

"I met him outside the stage, in the street. I asked him if I could go in, and he said I could. Just as I took out my key to unlock the side door, we heard the scream—both of us—very faint. I said 'Probably it's a rehearsal—Kostov's behind schedule and he must be going right ahead'. He said 'I hope so'. Somebody came along and spoke to him, and I went in. That proves I was outside the stage when it happened, doesn't it?"

"God's sake!" McClane blasted. "Garson, is that right?"

Garson said solemnly: "That's the truth. Devine was with me outside when

he heard the scream and thought it was a rehearsal. There's no chance of a mistake about it."

McClane snapped: "What the hell, Oakley—you telling me Devine was the man you saw beat it off the set! What Garson says proves he couldn't've been. It was somebody else. He did get out the rear door—he got away clean! By now he's God knows where!"

"I know, I know," Oakley moaned. "I've pulled a boner. The man I saw must've been the murderer—and he slipped me."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Unknown

OKE OAKLEY was burning the midnight oil. In the inner sanctum of Secrets, Inc., he was bent over his desk, studying a mass of material taken from the voluminous files of the office. In the big green cabinets in an adjoining room he kept stored every scrap of information it was possible to glean concerning anyone and everyone working in the film industry. Those heaped before him now revolved around Maurice Vance and Arthur Driscoll.

Oakley had come late from the Super-Classics Studio. He had been working at his desk for hours. Archibald Brixey was on the job of shadowing Valerie Vance; Charmaine Morris was dozing in an easy chair. Oakley kept reading assiduously.

On Arthur Driscoll he had been able to find nothing but a few clippings taken from the Film Daily and Variety. They were merely notes about Driscoll's activities in pictures then under production. The latest mentioned that he was soon to become a full-fledged director for Super-Classics. Concerning Maurice Vance there was a great deal more.

Oakley glanced over pages clipped from

a motion-picture monthly. The article was headed, "Day By Day With Maurice Vance," and it purported to be excerpts from the actor's diary. It had been published six months past and it consisted of intimate sidelights on other movie personalities.

Oakley put it aside and took up a page of smaller clippings, more recent. There was a series of them.

May 5

Maurice Vance's contract will not be renewed when it expires in two weeks. The reason is said to be waning popularity. Vance is planning a vaudeville tour.

May 14

Maurice Vance has signed a new contract with Super-Classics. The studio reports he is being held because several suitable parts have come along for him.

August 14

Maurice Vance's option was taken up yesterday by Super-Classics and he will handle several prominent roles in forthcoming pictures. He is supposed to have received a sizeable advance in salary because of recent good work.

Oakley sighed and pushed the stuff aside. He found the prosperous shift in Vance's fortunes interesting but unprovocative. He sat a moment, then rose, trudged into the file room, and returned carrying a sheaf of newspaper clippings somewhat yellowed with age. On them Vance's name was ringed with blue pencil.

The headline of the first clipping announced—

MRS. SAM MADTZ KILLED AT MALIBU

Oakley remembered the sensational case, and recalled that Maurice Vance's name had entered into it.

Sam Madtz was at his Beverly Hills home when the news reached him. He was conferring with Maurice Vance concerning a new picture about to go into production. Madtz and Vance rushed at once to Malibu Beach.

Later—

Madtz has stated that he is forced to accept the police theory that Mrs. Madtz was shot and killed by a thief whom she discovered in the act of rifling the safe of her beach house. The missing jewels bear out the theory. Maurice Vance, one of Madtz's closest friends, who was with him during the entire evening when the crime occurred, and who accompanied Madtz to Malibu, declared that Madtz had tried to prevail upon his wife not to take her jewels to the beach house, but she insisted.

Oakley sighed and pushed the clippings away. "Cherry," he said, "Oke is buffaloed. Has that bright head of yours been evolving any theories?"

Cherry Morris sighed and opened her eyes at Oakley. "Lady detectives," she yawned, "have got to get *some* sleep. Seriously, Oke, it's beyond me."

"I'm going to try my damndest to crack this case," he declared, "because I came such a cropper this afternoon. There's no doubt of it—Devine is perfectly innocent. And I thought I had him cold!"

"I," said Cherry, "would like a hamburger sandwich."

Oakley's fingers drummed. "No weapon," he mused. "No murderer in sight. No bell, even though we heard a bell. No motive hinted. Nobody to suspect, unless you suspect the whole studio full of people. Only one interesting new angle—Driscoll's being knocked unconscious by a blow on the head before said head was lopped off."

"Would you," asked Cherry, "like a hamburger sandwich?"

Oakley kept drumming. "Rotten break—Driscoll's getting it just when he did. Remember what Kostov said about the thing that went wrong with the scene? The trap door didn't open as it should have. Driscoll was in charge of that, and he didn't follow orders to open the trap. Why didn't he?"

"With mustard," Cherry sighed.

"Why did he go back into the sound stage? What was he after? The man we saw must have followed him in, blipped him on the bean, then put him on the block. I've got a hunch that Driscoll knew something—perhaps suspected who the murderer was—and the murderer got to him before I could. Well, he won't talk now."

"And relish," Cherry added.

The telephone rang. Oakley placed the receiver to his ear and a voice twanged through—the clipped, broad syllables of Archibald Brixey.

"Oke!" gasped Brixey. "Listen. I've been watching Valerie Vance. I'm down at Santa Monica Beach. I followed her down here in a car. She's gone into Stephen Devine's place, Oke—and they're alone there together."

Oakley tightened. "Stick, Archie!" he snapped. "I'm coming down!"

OAKLEY whirled the roadster out of the parking space beside Grauman's Chinese, whipped around corners and swung into Wilshire Boulevard. Straight to the west lay his destination. He whizzed through Beverly Hills, Westwood Village, Sawtelle, and hit Santa Monica at a good clip. When he spun into Ocean Avenue the broad, moonlit Pacific stretched away on his right.

He swung down to the Palisades Beach Road. With the surf beating on his left now, the high earth cliffs rearing on the opposite side of the road, he skirted behind the rows of beach houses. He passed Harold Lloyd's, Norma Shearer's, and began to slow when the immense edifice that was Marion Davies' place loomed into sight. Somewhere in here, Oakley knew, was Stephen Devine's cottage.

The road was usually lined with parked cars, but now there were few about. Oakley pulled onto a slope of sand, locked up, and slid from the seat. In only one of

the houses along the beach was a light burning. It was a stucco building with a court in the rear which was separated from the road by an iron-posted gate. Oakley was striding toward it when a shadow emerged from a doorway and fell in step with him.

"You don't waste time getting places, Oke," said Archibald Brixey. "But you're too late. The lady stayed only a few minutes, and went back. I didn't follow her because I knew you'd want information right here. Devine's place is the one with the lights."

"Well?"

"Well, nothing," said Brixey. "They were in one of the rooms off the court and I didn't dare try to get in. Couldn't hear a word. Very sorry."

Oakley started in. "Devine seems to be up. I'll shoot a few question marks at him. Archie, enoble the place with your presence until I come back. Better keep on the alert."

Oakley stepped toward the recessed door of Stephen Devine's house. As he waited for an answer to his ring, Archibald Brixey melted away into the shadows. Presently a port-hole opened in the door.

Oakley announced his desire to see Devine to the head which appeared, and a moment later the door was open. He was conducted by a maid through beautifully decorated rooms to a small one on the opposite side of the court. It was outfitted for work. Devine was rising from a drafting-board as Oakley entered.

Devine looked pale and wan. His hand was clammy in Oakley's, and he signaled his caller to a chair with a worried jerk. Oakley sat on the far side of a desk; Devine took the chair behind it, and teetered back. The window directly behind him was the one through which Oakley had seen the light shining; it was open a few inches. Devine flicked the ashes of a

cigarette through it as he talked.

"I hope," he said, "I convinced you this afternoon."

"Quite," said Oakley. "A major *faux pas* on my part, for which I beg your pardon. I'm quite sure you're not the man who ran off the dungeon set when we came in. However—"

"However?" Devine questioned as Oakley paused.

"Assuming that that man was the murderer is only assuming," Oakley went on. "He may not be. My suspicions center around the set itself—I think some strange engine of death is concealed in it. Since you built the set—"

"Designed it," Devine corrected. "The carpenters built it. I supervised the work, but I did not take part in it. As for some strange machine of death being concealed in that set—I can't imagine what it might be."

"Nor I," Oakley admitted, "but something certainly decapitated two men while their heads were on the chopping block."

Devine turned pale at the mention. "The block is solid wood," he said. "It is nailed to the floor. The floor is quite ordinary, raised a foot or so above the sound-stage floor. I see no possibility—"

"What about the little hole drilled in the top of the block, and the two tacks on the front of it?"

"What?" Devine looked puzzled. "I know nothing about them. What could they mean?"

"What about the visit of Valerie Vance here tonight?" Oakley asked quietly. "What could that mean?"

Devine studied Oakley. He teetered back in his chair, eyes narrowed.

"Miss Vance and I are old friends," he said at last. "Also, Arthur Driscoll was a close friend of mine. She was so upset tonight, after hearing of his death, that she had to talk with someone. And she came here. She naturally wants to see

the murderer of her husband and Driscoll punished. She has become obsessed with a suspicion. She has a feeling—no evidence, you understand—only an intuitive feeling that she knows who did it. She came here to talk it over with me.”

“Why with you? Why didn’t she go to McClane?”

“Because she has no tangible evidence—and to accuse this man mistakenly would be—dangerous.”

“Dangerous? Why?”

Devine hesitated. “For many reasons. It’s dangerous to accuse anyone of a serious crime mistakenly, isn’t it? In this case it’s especially so. I listened to Valerie, and sent her home to rest but—” Devine leaned forward. “It is very strange. She named the man whom I suspect myself.”

“You too?” Oakley exclaimed. “Why the devil are you keeping so close-mouthed? Are you making this up as you go along, or what?”

Devine studied Oakley’s face, teetering back in his chair. For a long moment he was silent. Suddenly he sat up straight, balanced against the window sill.

“Oakley, I’ll come clean with you,” he stated abruptly. “Valerie’s suspicions I can’t very well discuss, except to say that she has a strong hunch. To make it all the more terrible, Arthur Driscoll suspected the same man—the same man Valerie and I suspect!”

“What! Driscoll knew who killed Vance?”

“No, he didn’t know. But he had a suspicion. I believe he became convinced of it immediately Vance was killed—but he didn’t speak to me about it. He didn’t dare—for the same reason that I have hesitated to speak. I believe he began to reason it out, to make an investigation—an investigation of his own—and he must

have stumbled upon the truth, because the murderer silenced him!”

OAKLEY pondered this a moment. “You mean he went back into the sound stage while the place was empty—while the rushes were being shown—because he thought he could find evidence—”

“Yes—it must be true. The murderer must have been watching him—or perhaps was hiding in the sound stage for some reason. He attacked Arthur—silenced him—to save himself.”

“But what could Driscoll have known that no one else—”

“Listen to me, Oakley. Driscoll and I were working together on the set for *The Headless Headsman*. Kostov was especially fussy about the atmospheric effect of the dungeon. The set was finished the day before Kostov was ready for it—yesterday. Scenes were scheduled for shooting this afternoon. Last night, after checking over details in the script, Driscoll and I went into the sound stage to make sure everything was all right.

“Kostov had cautioned us to see that the trap in the dungeon wall would work properly. I’d helped rig up the lever arrangement. Driscoll was going to operate it, and I wanted to explain it to him. It was really very simple—a pull on the lever would allow a weight to shift, and a counterweight would lower the trap door—yet it had to be done carefully. We went into the sound stage—”

Devine’s eyes narrowed as he remembered the scene.

“—and it was dark, except for a single light beside the set. We were alone there. At least we thought we were alone—but as we went toward the set, we heard footfalls. They seemed to be behind the walls of the set. We called, but there was no answer. We thought that was curious, so we walked together behind the set. We

were just in time to see the rear door closing—a man stealing outside.”

“The rear door!”

“Yes. He was in the dark, but we could see him dimly. The light was in our faces—I fancy he could see us better than we could see him. He hurried out, closing the door. Arthur and I opened it and looked across the lot—but he was gone.”

“Did you see his face?”

“No. We came back, wondering what it meant, but it was late and I began to show Arthur the lever arrangement for the trap in the wall of the set. It didn’t work. That surprised me, because I’d tested it only a short time before, and it was right. Now it wasn’t. I went over the contraption and discovered that someone had twisted a wire off the lever. It was only a few minutes’ work to fix it again—but it was strange—”

“Why should anyone have changed that arrangement?”

“I had no idea at the time. I showed Arthur how to work the thing, and he did it several times. We went out and prepared to leave the studio—then I discovered that I’d left my pipe on the set. We went back together. As soon as we opened the door we saw—”

Devine paused, leaning back, eyes narrowed. “We saw someone hurry off the set. This time we got a better glimpse of him. We still couldn’t see his face, but both of us thought it was the same man. He hurried out of sight again, and slipped out the back door. Well—it was late, but I took a look at the trap arrangement and found it all right. Arthur and I left. We thought nothing more of it until—until Vance died. Then I began to feel—”

Devine’s voice became a tense whisper. “I felt that the man we had seen had, somehow, been preparing to kill. I felt that he had been doing something—what,

I don’t know—that he had intended to keep an absolute secret. Whatever he did, it was to kill Vance.”

Oakley gestured impatiently. “Who the devil was it you saw? You didn’t see his face, but both you and Driscoll recognized his build—is that it? You agreed on the man? Good Lord, Devine, what’s his name?”

Devine hesitated again. His lips moved to form the name of the man he had seen lurking on Sound Stage Seven. And suddenly—

A terrified gasp came from Devine’s mouth. He straightened in his chair as if in a spasm. His hands flew to his throat and a horrible choking sound broke out of it.

Oakley leaped up. “Devine! What’s the matter?”

Devine was kicking crazily; he was clawing at his neck. His eyes popped in horror; he gave another gasp which broke off sharply. Oakley sprang around the desk toward him, vaguely conscious that somewhere outside the house the motor of an automobile was roaring. Then Oakley stopped short, staring.

Devine’s clawing fingers were wet with blood. Crimson was streaming over the man’s collar. His face was twisted into a horrible grimace; his eyes were popping. And then—

Devine collapsed off the chair. As he spilled over, Oakley caught at him. Nausea hit at Oakley’s stomach as he stared. The scene designer’s body slipped from his numbed hands and spilled onto the floor. And beside it, now, lay—Stephen Devine’s severed head!

CHAPTER SIX

Six Cakes of Soap

OAKLEY sprang back. His ears were ringing with a strange reverberation—a sound like a muted bell. It had struck through the air the instant Devine col-

lapsed, headless—now it was gone. But, somewhere outside the house, the rushing of the automobile engine could still be heard, swiftly moving away.

Oakley stood a moment, frozen, staring at the decapitated corpse on the floor. Suddenly he tore away. He leaped from the room, snatching crazily at his automatic. He bounded through two rooms and grabbed at the knob of the outer door. He flung it open and howled: "Archie!"

He whirled as he heard a slow step through the sand which bordered the sidewalk. A tall figure was slouching toward him, arms bent to his lowered head. He stumbled, tottered; and Oakley jumped toward him.

"Archie! God's sake!"

He shook his assistant violently and was immediately sorry for it. Brixey's head lolled. Blood was flowing from a cut in his temple.

"The car—stop the—car!" he gasped.

"What car?" Oakley snapped. He peered along the road. "What about it?"

Archibald Brixey summoned strength. He fumbled a flask from his pocket. Oakley unscrewed its cap and dashed a shot of rye down Brixey's throat. Brixey took in air, steadied himself, and peered at Oakley with brightening eyes.

"He—socked me with a tire iron."

"Who did? What happened? Good Lord, Archie, speak up! Devine's in there now with his head cut off—and it happened right in front of my eyes!"

Brixey gasped. "I didn't notice that car until it—it started up, all of a sudden. It was just parked here, that's all—just as they are all along the road. I didn't know there was anyone in it. But all at once the engine roared and it started up with a jerk. Only it didn't move—"

"Archie, make sense!"

"I'm jolly well telling you what happened, Oke!" Brixey sighed. "The en-

gine raced like mad, and the wheels spun—but it scarcely moved. Just a few inches. I stepped out of the doorway and went toward it. Just trying to be helpful, I poked my head in the door and began to ask what the trouble was. I received a very undeserved blow upon the head."

"Who was in that car, Archie?"

"I don't know. I didn't have time to see. A man, that's all. He made a swing and clipped me with the iron. I staggered back, and at the same time the car went off like a shot. Funny thing—I heard a bell strike—"

"You heard that, too? Out here?"

"It was right out here," Brixey answered. "It seemed to come out of the air all around me. But I was seeing and hearing so many odd things—"

"Come inside, Archie!" Oakley snapped.

He dragged Brixey in through the open entrance. In the room adjoining Devine's study he left Brixey. The connecting door was open. Oakley peered in, half believing the thing he had witnessed was a weird dream; but the reality of the horror on the floor was only too vivid. Devine, like Vance and Driscoll, had suffered swift and terrible death. Oakley closed the door, went to the phone.

"Police headquarters," he said.

THE police came—in swarms. First a detachment from the Santa Monica headquarters swooped down on the beach house of Stephen Devine. While Oakley was subjected to a barrage of questions, a radio squad car from Los Angeles whined down the Palisades Road, and stopped; and another horde of detectives crowded in. Leading them was McClane.

Oakley was again subjected to cross-examination. Then McClane plodded into the death room and viewed the cadaver.

"Whatever does it makes a neat job,"

he observed. "Sliced off as slick as a whistle, just like the other two."

Oakley sighed. "I was looking right at Devine when it happened, McClane. Suddenly he was choking and his neck was bleeding, and the next moment he collapsed, headless. We were alone in the room, absolutely. I didn't see any weapon. It's the damndest thing I ever ran up against."

McClane grunted. "Well, there's nothing to do but try to fit it in with the two other killings—but how it's going to be done is beyond me. You heard that bell again—and a car starting up and—aw, hell!"

Oakley asked: "Do you mind if I look around a bit, McClane?"

"Go as far as you like."

He watched glumly as Oakley moved about the room. The investigator paused at the window which looked out into the court. Its curtains were stained with blood, and there were streaks of red across the panes. Oakley covered his hands with a handkerchief and carefully raised the sash.

Peering at the upper edge of the lower frame he remarked: "Here's something, McClane. Two nicks."

McClane came and peered also. Oakley indicated, on the inner edge of the upper cross-piece of the lower sash, two indentations in the wood. They seemed to have been pressed deep; they were about six inches apart and an eighth of an inch wide. McClane said nothing as Oakley stooped and peered again.

On the lower edge of the upper sash he found similar nicks, the same depth and width and the same distance apart.

"Make something of it?" Oakley asked.

"Might be anything," McClane grunted.

Oakley straightened, and pushed the curtains away. He inspected the frame of the window. Suddenly he took a sharp breath, and reached up. He ran his fin-

gertips over something protruding from the wood—a tack. It was quite ordinary, driven within a fraction of an inch of its head. Turning quickly, Oakley found another on the opposite side of the frame.

"Same as on the chopping block!" he exclaimed.

McClane gave another grunt. "Maybe they mean something," he said, "but damned if I can see it."

When the medical examiner and fingerprint expert and police photographer arrived, Oakley was forced to abandon the death room. He had no idea that the experts would discover anything of importance. He, an eye-witness, was completely at a loss. Returning to the forward rooms, where the frightened maid and Archibald Brixey were being bombarded with questions, he relapsed into silent thought.

The investigation came to a bewildered standstill. McClane plodded about morosely, poking aimlessly. The police detectives settled into chairs and smoked. Reporters began coming, crowding the place anew. Cornered, Oakley could not escape them. Hours passed before he succeeded in shaking himself free. At last, grasping Brixey's arm, he negotiated the door.

In Oakley's roadster they started back toward Hollywood, silent, thoughtful.

Dawn was breaking.

IT WAS past noon when Oakley opened the door labeled *Secrets, Inc.*, and strode into his inner sanctum. Cherry Morris was there, her red hair resplendent in the eternal California sunshine shafting through the window. Archibald Brixey was also present, a plaster on his injured temple.

Oakley sighed and asked: "Anything new?"

"Nothing new, Oke," said Cherry brightly. "The rest of the population of God's Country still have their heads.

Where've you been, may I ask?"

"Trying to get a little sleep. Hopeless," Oakley sighed. "I'm hungry. Hold down the fort, Cherry, darling, while I grab a bite. Archie, come along if you like."

"I jolly well like," said Archie.

They trod down the steps and walked a short distance along Hollywood Boulevard. Oakley led Brixey into a small lunch room.

They perched on stools at a counter and a comely blond waitress approached. Brixey ordered coffee; Oakley asked for a sliced-egg sandwich. They lapsed into silence while the girl began to produce the food before their eyes.

The cups of coffee slid before them. The waitress took a hard-boiled egg from a refrigerated glass counter and began peeling it.

"Well named, these waitresses," Brixey observed. "They're all waiting for a director to spot them and hand them five-year contracts in the movies."

Oakley said nothing. The girl peeled the last of the shell from the egg. She deposited the white ovoid on a little patented contraption and brought a lever down upon it. The egg was magically converted into slices. Oakley peered, jerked, came to his feet.

"Good Lord!" he gasped. "Good Lord!"

"I say!" Brixey gasped. "What can be the matter?"

Oakley snatched at his hat. "Archie—come along!"

He slapped a dollar bill on the counter, whirled and dashed from the restaurant. Brixey scurried after him as he darted across the boulevard toward the parking space. Through the restaurant window a goggle-eyed waitress watched in amazement.

OAKLEY shot his roadster into the street and whipped around a corner,

whizzed along a broad street, penetrating deep into the studio environs.

At last he swung to the curb beside the tremendous Super-Classics lot and, with Brixey trotting beside him, pushed through the gate into the outer office.

Moments later Oakley was past the guard at the door and climbing the steps of the executive offices. Without a glance at costumed figures walking past him, he pushed through the door labeled *Vladimir Kostov*. To the girl at the desk he said briskly: "I want to see Mr. Kostov—in a hurry."

She recognized Oakley. "Mr. Kostov is in Mr. Madtz's office."

Oakley tramped down the corridor. He pushed through Madtz's door, repulsed the girl at the desk with a glance, and without ceremony trod into the modernistic room beyond. Madtz was at his desk, chewing on a cigar; Kostov was pacing up and down the rug.

"Sorry, to come barging in like this," Oke said quickly. "But I've got it! At least, part of it."

"Part of what?" Kostov demanded.

"I think I know how these men were killed. I want to go to Sound Stage Seven right now. I need your help. Come along, will you?"

Madtz rose, his cigar dangling in his teeth. Kostov's gray eyes widened. Oakley turned and walked out, with Brixey trotting beside him. Kostov and Madtz followed. They strode quickly along the studio street to the door of the sound stage. Trying it, Oakley found it locked.

"You mean to say you know—who did it?" Kostov demanded excitedly as he produced a key and inserted it in a lock.

"No, not who," Oakley said. "How."

The door swung open. Oakley marched into the vast realm of darkness of the sound stage. Kostov snapped switches, and lights appeared. The weird dungeon set emerged from the gloom fantastically.

As the door thudded shut, Oakley walked toward it, stopped, and regarded it grimly.

"What have you found out, Oakley?" Madtz demanded. "If you know—"

"I'm not sure yet," Oakley interrupted. "More lights, if you please. Kostov, I want you on that set."

Kostov snapped more switches, and a greater brilliance flooded the dungeon. Oakley trod into the set peering around; and his gaze stopped on the sinister chopping block. Turning to the wall, he perceived a large rectangle faintly marked against the squares of artificial stone.

"The trap?" he asked.

"Yes," Kostov said.

"Open it," bade Oakley.

The director turned away puzzledly. Against the side wall a large metal lever hung. It was mounted on an iron plate bolted to the wall, and a wire was attached to it. Kostov grasped the handle of the lever and slowly moved it. It swung an inch—two inches—then a full foot. And the trap in the side of the set did not move.

"It doesn't work," Kostov said.

"I thought so!"

Oakley strode toward the lever. He pulled it back and forth; it moved without resistance. The wire attached to it ran upward along the wall. Above, under the ceiling, were metal grille platforms, on which a number of lights were arranged. Iron ladders led up to them.

Oakley peered at the bewildering maze above, then turned back. At the edge of the set, he paused, and dropped to his knees. The flooring of artificial stones was raised a foot above the floor of the sound stage. Kostov, Madtz and Brixey looked on in surprise as Oakley went flat and began to wriggle under the set.

Oakley pulled himself completely out of sight beneath the flooring. Brixey, unable to restrain his curiosity, lowered his head and peered under. Oakley was wrig-

gling along, groping through the darkness. "Deuced strange," Brixey muttered as Oakley began to slide out again.

"What the devil are you up to, Oakley?" Kostov demanded.

Oakley's eyes were gleaming. "Listen," he said. "I want you to get me, say, six bars of soap. Any kind of bar soap. Also a bucket of water. Also a screw-driver and a small hammer. Hurry!"

Kostov turned, bewildered, and trudged out of the corner door. Sam Madtz watched Oakley pace back and forth in front of the set. Oakley's eyes were shining. Suddenly he turned, went to one of the iron ladders fixed to the wall and climbed up.

HE crept along one of the elevated platforms, and fumbled along the wall. Presently he found the loose wire which connected with the lever below. Dangling it, he saw that its other end was attached to a heavy weight which was hanging low, on another wire. Oakley gripped the second wire and began drawing the weight upward.

He heaved it to the edge of the metal platform and balanced it there. It was plummet-shaped, and the wire was affixed to a handle on it. Immediately he turned, slipped down the ladder, and hurried back to the set. Again he dropped on all fours. This time face up, he slipped beneath the flooring of the set and wriggled out of sight.

A faint noise came from beneath the flooring. Presently Oakley wriggled himself out again. His eyes were still afire. He was coming to his feet when the outer door opened and Kostov hurried in. Under one of Kostov's arms the screw-driver and hammer were held; in one hand he was carrying a bucket of water, and in the other half a dozen bars of laundry soap.

Oakley took the odd assortment, put the things on the floor next the chopping

block. And as he set to work, silently, the others drew close and watched.

From the hole in the center of the block a loop of wire was protruding. Oakley grasped it, pulled, drew it into a larger loop. Then he carefully loosened the two tacks on the front of the block. He bent the large loop of wire forward—it was steel and springy—then tapped the tacks down on it. When he straightened, the loop of wire lay in the outer circle of the burned-in decoration; it was scarcely visible.

"Notice," said Oakley. "The wire is discolored. The discoloration is blood."

Rapidly he peeled the wrappers from the six cakes of soap. He immersed them one by one in the pail of water. Then he stuck the six cakes together, like bricks; the moisture made them adhere. That done, he placed the cube of soap on the top of the chopping block.

"Soap," he said absently, "is about the same consistency as flesh—offers the same resistance. Ballistic experts fire bullets into big cakes of soap in order to see what effect they will have when entering a human body. That big cake of soap on the block there, represents a man's neck."

"My word!" said Archie Brixey.

"Now, watch!" Oakley warned.

He strode from the set toward the side wall. He placed his hand on the metal lever. One moment he waited, gesturing that the men should not look at him, but at the chopping block. When their eyes were directed to the cake of soap on the top of it, Oakley began slowly to pull the lever.

The thing happened swiftly.

The loop of steel wire, almost invisible, hidden in the burned circle in the wooden block, suddenly disappeared completely. The block of soap jerked. At the same instant a sound filled the great room—the vibrant tone that had seemed to be the single toll of a deep-throated bell!

Oakley sprang toward the set. He lifted the soap from the block and exhibited it. Now it was in two pieces—it had been cut through the center as cleanly as though a knife had slashed downward through it!"

"That," said Oakley quietly, "is how it was done."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Loop of Death

KOSTOV and Madtz stared at Oakley. "But I don't understand!" the director exclaimed. "What did you do? What—"

"It explains a great deal," Oakley said swiftly. "And it is not difficult to understand. That's why the trap door didn't open. The lever arrangement which was to move it had been disconnected, and this other murderous arrangement substituted. Arthur Driscoll didn't fail to follow your directions during the taking of the scene, Kostov. He did as he was told. He pulled that lever. And when he pulled that lever, Vance died—beheaded."

"Great Heavens—you mean Driscoll murdered Vance?" Sam Madtz asked swiftly.

"No—not at all. Driscoll didn't realize what he was doing. He thought he was opening the trap in the wall of the set. In reality, he was setting off the machine of death—but he didn't know it. It's a damned diabolical thing. Driscoll actually committed the murder of Vance, unintentionally—the machine was arranged by the murderer, and Driscoll was his unwitting tool."

"How do you know—" Kostov began.

"It's perfectly evident, isn't it, that Driscoll himself was not guilty of planning Vance's murder?" Oakley asked quickly. "He died himself, by the same machine. He was killed by the same man who killed Vance—because Driscoll suspected both the identity of the murderer

and the means of killing Vance. That's why Driscoll came back to this set alone, after the police investigation was ended—to try to find out what had happened. The murderer surprised him, knocked him unconscious, and killed him on that chopping block."

"But—how?" Madtz demanded.

"Very simple. Beneath the floor of this set a wire is stretched—a strong, fine, steel wire. One end of it is fastened over there, at the far side of the set. The wire runs under the floor, directly beneath the chopping block. It passes from under the floor at the opposite side of the set, and around a pulley, and runs up to the ceiling. There it passes over two more small pulleys; and the other end of it is fastened to that heavy weight you see hanging against the wall.

"When the machine was set to kill, that weight was hoisted high up and balanced on the edge of the platform above. That gave the wire under the set floor some slack. The murderer doubled the wire into a loop, beneath the set floor, and passed it up through the block, through the hole drilled down its center. The hole goes completely through the block and the floor. Then the loop which came out the top of the block was bent over and tacked down loosely, hidden in that large circle of the decoration. It was done just as you saw me do it."

"But—"

"Then the machine was all set. Notice how it worked. Vance's head was on the block. The weight at the other end of the wire was balanced on the edge of the platform above. Another wire leading from the weight was attached to the lever which was supposed to open the trap in the side of the set. Driscoll, at the proper time, began to move the lever to open the trap.

"The moving lever pulled the one wire which tilted the weight off the edge of

the high platform. The weight fell instantly. The sharp pull jerked at the loop of wire hidden in the design of the block. Torn from under the heads of the tacks, it sprang to a vertical position—a loop of fine steel. The heavy, falling weight tightened that loop instantly around Vance's neck. The momentum of the weight was enough to draw the wire through Vance's neck.

"Still pulled by the falling weight, the wire loop disappeared down the hole in the block. Beneath the floor it snapped taut. It made the sound we heard—the sound like a bell, or a plucked harp string. Muffled by the floor of the set, it sounded more like a bell. And there you have it—the way Vance was beheaded, the way the weapon of murder vanished, the way a killing was done when the murderer was not near his victim!"

"Great God!" gasped Madtz.

"THE murderer killed Driscoll in the same way," Oakley went on. "By setting the machine, after knocking Driscoll unconscious, and putting him on the block. Driscoll was silenced because he learned too much. Almost exactly the same thing happened to Stephen Devine last night.

"In the case of Devine, the loop of wire was hidden behind the curtains of the window of his study, and held in place lightly by two tacks. The wire ran out through the window, through the crack between the upper and lower sashes. There was free passage for it because the window was partly opened. The murderer had stolen into Devine's beach house—probably climbed over the gate into the court and in through the study window while Devine was away. He led the wire out along the wall and tied it to some part of his car, which was parked just outside.

"He waited until Devine sat in his chair and leaned back. Then, like a flash,

he started the car up. The pull on the wire snapped the loop down over Devine's head. Imagine all the power of a big car's motor drawing that loop of fine steel wire tight about Devine's neck! The car had a little trouble getting away because the sand, which is always blowing across the road there, made the wheels spin. But when they caught, the loop passed completely through Devine's neck—and it was done. The car rushed away, trailing the wire after it—making the instrument of murder vanish. The murderer must have stopped a short distance away and dragged the wire in."

"Then it was the murderer who bopped me on the head last night!" Brixey gasped.

"It was," Oakley declared solemnly. "And if Devine hadn't died at the very instant he did, I would have heard him speak the murderer's name. He suspected the man, as Driscoll did. We know perfectly well now why Driscoll and Devine died—because the murderer knew he was suspected by them, and feared them. As for a motive for Vance's death—that's still a mystery. And the identity of the man who did it—I'm still in the dark."

"It doesn't seem possible that a wire could behead a man in that way, Oakley," Sam Madtz said in a breath.

"That thin steel wire is as effective as a razor-edged knife, with all the power of that falling weight behind it," Oakley insisted. "Powerful enough to cut through even a man's vertebrae like a falling ax."

"Yes, yes!" Kostov exclaimed. "Oakley, I want you to come to my office at once."

The director was peering at Oakley strangely. Oakley noted the menacing glitter in his eyes—a cold, deep gleam. He said, softly: "Very well."

KOSTOV turned abruptly and marched toward the door. Sam Madtz followed. Oakley trod along be-

side Archibald Brixey. Without speaking they walked to the entrance of the executive building, and up the stairs. Kostov went into his office with Madtz behind him. Oakley gestured Brixey to wait in the reception room.

The director sat at his desk, jerked open a drawer, withdrew a check book, and scribbled. He ripped the check out and offered it to Oakley.

Oakley took it, puzzled. The check was made out to the amount of three thousand dollars. "What's this?" he asked.

"Your fee. Is it enough?"

"Plenty—but I'm not through with the case, Kostov. Not nearly through."

Kostov's face was white. "You are definitely through, Oakley. I hired you. I've finished with you. It is not necessary for you to handle the case further. You are a private detective, and I am discharging you. You may go."

Oakley's eyes narrowed. "Just like that?" he asked slowly. "Firing me out like some dumb extra, are you? Not quite, Kostov."

Kostov jerked to his feet. "You are not wanted here!" he snapped. "I tell you, you are finished. You are paid off. Now you may go. Leave here at once!"

Oakley began to smile. He leaned across the desk toward the director.

"Kostov," he said, "I don't do that. When I take hold of a case, I keep hold of it. I don't let go—ever."

He tore the check deliberately in two, then quartered it and tossed the fragments on Kostov's desk. Turning, he walked out of the office.

A SINGLE light burned in the inner office of Secrets, Inc., concentrating its brilliance on Oakley's desk. Busy noises came through the open window—swarms of cars leaving Grauman's Chinese following the night's performance. In the office, Oakley paced back and

forth. Cherry Morris and Archie Brixey watched him curiously.

"I say," Brixey remarked, breaking the silence, "I am very suspicious of this chap Kostov. His throwing you out of the case so abruptly, Oke—it was very rude."

Oakley scarcely heard. He paused at his desk, fingered through a mass of data taken from his files. With a baffled gesture he pushed them aside; and his heels thumped across the room again. Presently he remarked absently to Cherry: "Try to get Valerie Vance on the wire again, will you? It's damned strange that nobody at all answers her phone. If she—if she suspects the same man Driscoll and Devine suspected—"

His voice trailed off. Cherry reached for the telephone. Before her rosy fingertips touched it, the bell clattered. She picked it up quickly.

"Secrets, Incorporated," she announced. "Oh, yes. He's been trying to get you." And holding the instrument toward Oakley, she said quietly: "It's the lady herself."

"Miss Vance," Oakley said into the transmitter.

"Mr. Oakley," the actress's voice came strainedly, "if you're not busy, will you come to my place at once? I'm worried—very worried. If you—"

"I'll come at once," Oakley told her. "I've been trying to get you on the phone all day."

"I've been at the studio, and the servants are away," Miss Vance answered. "Perhaps I'm—I'm unduly nervous, but I'm alone here now, and I've been hearing strange noises about the place. It sounds as if someone were prowling about. I'm so uneasy—"

Oakley's eyes grew grim. "Lock yourself in," he told her sharply. "You have cause to be worried. You're the only living person who has any sound suspicion

of who perpetrated the three murders, Miss Vance. Do you understand—the need for caution?"

"Yes. If you'll come—"

"One thing before I start," Oakley went on. "I've noticed in an old movie magazine an article by your husband called *Day by Day with Maurice Vance*. It was written in diary form. Now, did he choose that form as a convenience, or did he actually take excerpts from a diary he kept?"

"He kept a diary," the actress answered, "and he used it as a basis for the article. Why do you ask that?"

"I want to see that record. I realize it's private, but my reason is important. I'm leaving at once."

Oakley set down the phone. Cherry was already on her feet, powdering her shapely nose. Archibald Brixey eagerly rose. Oakley pulled on his hat and smiled grimly.

"Come along," he said.

He left the office with his assistants at his side, crossed to the parking space and got his roadster. With Cherry between him and Brixey, he pulled into the boulevard and sped away. He turned toward the north. The Vance place, he knew, was located in the hills outside Hollywood, in a comparatively unsettled section.

The cement road soon turned to tar, and the tar to unpaved dirt. Hollywood lay behind, a glow against the sky. The moon was obscured; the open hill country was black, swept by a wind from the ocean. Oakley drove swiftly, silent; Cherry and Archie Brixey said nothing.

At last Oakley turned off the road, toward a high iron gate. A hill lay before him, bordered by a tall iron-spiked fence. It was the Vance place. The house itself was out of sight beyond the crest of the hill. The driveway had been cut through, so that it rose between two

steep banks. The gate was closed and locked.

Oakley slipped from the wheel, went to the gate, and rang the bell. He waited thoughtfully, long minutes. Getting no response, he rang again. Oakley peered at Cherry and Brixey, who were still in the car. "I don't like this," he said.

He was reaching for the bell again when his hand froze in midair. He grew rigid, and stared through the darkness blanketing the hillside. On the sighing wind came a sound—a scream!

It was prolonged, shrill—and it disappeared, quavering, in the silence.

"I say!" Brixey exclaimed.

Oakley whipped about. "Archie, stay here with Cherry!" he snapped. "Keep an eye on this gate. I'm going in."

Oakley fastened hands on the iron bars of the gate. He braced against it, pulled up. A sharp heave brought him to its top; there he balanced above the sharp pointed spikes. With a twist he threw himself over. Inside the gate he paused again, listening, his hand stealing toward the automatic in his arm-pit holster.

He started on a run up the driveway. The house over the crest loomed suddenly. It was a sprawling hacienda, white-walled; lights were shining through half a score of windows. Oakley trotted on, peering into the darkness intently.

And abruptly another scream, penetrating, bearing a note of terror, carried on the wind!

CHAPTER EIGHT

Wired For Murder

OAKLEY ran faster. The driveway curved to the broad front of the house and passed a door above which a light was burning. Oakley sprang toward the door, clacked its latch. It yielded against his shoulder.

As he darted into the dimly lighted hallway beyond, he sensed movement ahead.

Swiftly he swung toward a door through which shaded light was streaming. He brought up short on the sill, his automatic leveled.

The room was empty. Whatever had caused the rustle of movement was gone now. But someone had been in the room a second before. On the opposite side half of a French door was standing wide open. Near it a large chair was overturned. Against one wall stood an antique Spanish desk, and the cupboard space beneath its leaf was open. Out of it spilled bundles of papers, and a bond box which had been jerked out lay open on the rug.

Oakley started across the room—and stopped. He heard a moan behind him—a low cry of pain. Oakley spun, returned to the hall, went along it swiftly. He passed a dark door, turned back. From inside the sound came again, an anguished groan.

Oakley slipped through. His hand passed the wall near the door jamb, found a switch, and pressed it. Amber lights flooded the room with a dim glow. It was a bedroom. Oakley whirled toward the bed.

Valerie Vance was lying there, sprawled on the spread. Her hair was torn down, as though she had engaged in a struggle. Her dress had been ripped from one shoulder. A red bruise shone on the delicate line of her jaw. Oakley bent over her swiftly. Her eyes fluttered, and she clutched at him.

"He came!" she gasped. "He—" She covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

"Easy! Who came? Who did this to you?"

Her eyes widened in terror. She blurted: "I—I didn't see his face!"

"Stay here," Oakley commanded her grimly. "He can't be far away. My assistants are at the gate. If anything else happens—call!"

HE hurried from the room, along the hall, into the library. He glanced swiftly at the disarray as he crossed to the open French door. Quickly he slipped outside into the darkness, his automatic ready for action. He peered across the slope of the hill, alert for any sound or movement—but the darkness was silent.

Oakley skirted off. The estate covered many acres. It had been extensively gardened; the blackness of the trees and bushes made it a bewildering jungle. All around it ran the high iron-spiked fence. Oakley spent precious moments circling the expansive grounds. At last he paused, breathing hard, grimly disgusted.

The prowler was gone.

He hurried back to the French door. The library was still empty; Miss Vance had remained in the bedroom. Oakley went at once to the rifled antique desk. He fumbled through the contents of the bond box, flipped over a packet of papers. He saw correspondence addressed to Maurice Vance, sheafs of personal papers. The prowler had ripped into all of them in a hasty search.

Oakley straightened, looked around. The overturned chair indicated a swift exit. Perhaps the prowler had been in the room when Oakley had reached the front entrance! The chair had been standing in front of the French doors. Oakley peered at it, and half consciously raised it to its legs. He saw that something had lain hidden under it.

The object was a small, black, leather covered book. Oakley snatched it up, flipped through its pages. Maurice Vance's name was stamped in the leather in gold; it was a diary. The entries flicked under Oakley's thumb. His eyes lighted as he paused and read swiftly a score of finely written lines under the date of May 10.

"That's it!" he exclaimed aloud. "That's it!"

He realized that the prowler had been after this diary—searching for it in the desk. Oakley's sudden entrance had surprised him. He had darted toward the French doors, tripped over the chair, and dropped the book in his desperate hurry to get out of the room before he was seen. Oakley looked around swiftly, stepped toward the open door; then he paused, peering again at the open page of the diary.

The lines drew his intent gaze. He did not glimpse a furtive movement beside him. He did not see a thick arm swing from behind the heavy drapes which curtained the closed half of the French door. The arm raised; the hand was gripping an automatic by its butt. It poised—slashed downward.

The weapon cracked against the side of Oakley's head. Oakley groaned as his knees bent. The diary dropped from his numbed fingers as he collapsed.

Swiftly a heavy-set man stepped from behind the curtain. His hat was pulled low to shade his eyes; his coat collar was turned up. He leveled his automatic at the sprawled form of Oakley, his eyes glinting madly in the shadow of his hat brim. Then, swiftly, he snatched the diary of Maurice Vance from the floor and thrust it into his pocket.

He whirled, darted out of the room, then ran quickly through the darkness, across the slope of the hill, toward the fence. The unpaved road circled past the side of the estate, and in the center of the side fence was a gate. The man stopped at the gate, threw it wide. He hastened to a heavy sedan which was waiting outside in the darkness.

Quickly he started the motor. Without turning on the lights, he backed the car through the open gate. Quickly, still backing, he sent the sedan crawling up the slope toward the house.

AT the main gate Oakley's roadster stood lightless and still. In its front seat Cherry Morris and Archibald Brixey sat and listened. Brixey raised his head alertly. Abruptly he stood, peering into the darkness beyond the fence.

"I hear a car," he said. "It's inside the place. Wait here a moment. Archie is going to investigate."

He slipped out of the roadster and ran along the road with his long legs swinging swiftly. When he reached the corner of the fence he ran still faster. Abruptly he stopped, peering. He saw a gate ahead—open. And from beyond it the sound of an automobile motor was audible.

Brixey sped back toward Oakley's roadster. Cherry Morris had climbed out of the car. Archie exclaimed: "Something's up. I'm going in through the side gate. Stay here, Cherry!"

He bounded off again. Cherry Morris heard his swift footfalls beating in the gravel along the fence. She held tight to her purse and spoke to herself disgustedly. "Stay here," she said, "my foot!"

She went to the locked gate. She could still hear Brixey running, and the motor spinning inside the estate. Cherry Morris threw modesty to the winds. She pulled up her skirts, exposing perfect silken legs, fastened her shapely hands on the iron bars of the gate, and began to climb.

In a moment she was over.

THE soft whir of the motor sounded hushed in the night. The heavy sedan was easing to a stop near the open French door of the hacienda. The big man at the wheel ducked out, letting the motor run. Quickly, from beneath the floor mat of the rear seat, he removed a coil of fine, steel wire.

Working quickly, he twisted one end of the wire about the rear bumper of the car. Moving quickly toward the house, he trailed the wire after him. Beside the French door was a window; it was un-

latched. He threw it up a few inches, then slipped the looped end of the wire through the crack between the sashes. Then he entered through the French door, made sure the slip-loop was loose, and peered at the still form of Oke Oakley on the floor.

He pulled his hat still lower, and stepped past Oakley, then eased into the hall, toward the lighted door of the bedroom. When he appeared in the frame of the door, Valerie Vance was rising from the bed. She saw him; a stifled cry broke from her lips; she fell back in terror. With a savage bound, the big man was upon her.

He clapped a hand over her mouth. She struggled desperately to tear away from him, but his strength was too great for her. He pinned her to the bed with his weight, lifted his gun. On the point of crashing it against Valerie Vance's head he paused. The actress' body trembled, and went lax. Her eyes closed; she had fainted.

The big man chuckled gutturally. He pocketed his gun, looked about quickly. Jerking open a dresser drawer, he removed half a dozen handkerchiefs. Swiftly he knotted them together, and bound the actress' ankles and hands. Then he forced a gag into her mouth, lifted her, with a heave, and strode out.

He carried her across the library, where Oke Oakley still lay, trudged out the French door, and put the limp body of the actress in the rear seat. Then, turning back, he reentered the library. He picked up the loop of steel wire from the floor, turned toward Oakley, holding the loop to slip it over Oakley's head.

Oakley moved. He opened his eyes to see the immense figure over him, reaching one hairy hand toward his shoulder, to lift him. He saw the steel loop poised above his head. He jerked back, kicked out desperately. His heels thrust against

the stomach of the towering man above him. The big man staggered back, gasping. Oakley tottered to his knees, to his feet.

His gun had fallen from his hand; it lay out of reach. The big man was crouching, still holding the loop of steel wire ready—reaching to drop it about Oakley's neck. Oakley saw the shining strand passing through the crack of the window beside the French door. He heard the car running outside. He realized that that glinting circle meant death—the death Stephen Devine had suffered.

Suddenly the big man leaped.

Oakley met the rush desperately. The blow on the head had weakened him, but dizzy, tottering, he grappled. The tremendous weight of the other man bore against him, thrusting him back. Oakley lowered his chin to his chest and struck out blindly.

He beat the hulking body with his fists. He threw his arms up, desperately striving to clinch. The big man shrank under the power of Oakley's blows; twisted to free himself. Oakley flailed him again, madly. Then one of the big man's fists crashed past his arms and clicked to the point of Oakley's chin. Oakley swayed back.

Outside he heard, dimly, a call: "Oke! Oke!" It was the voice of Archibald Brixey.

The huge man jerked about. He snatched at the automatic sagging in his pocket. With a last desperate effort Oakley grabbed for that gun arm.

The big automatic jerked; a blast of fire came from it and a bullet drilled into the floor. A hoarse cry of rage came from the huge, menacing figure. He whirled in desperation, and darted outside as Cherry Morris's voice called: "Oke! Oke!" from the side of the house. She saw him spring to the wheel of his waiting sedan.

The big car lurched off as Oke Oakley staggered to the window. He caught the glitter of the steel wire in the light—a wire streaking outward through the French door. As the car shot away, the wire snapped tight. One instant it sang; the next the vibrant bell-like tone filled the air.

Oakley was peering at the car. He saw the black figure at the wheel, the head bent forward. And he saw that head disappear as if by some weird magic—vanish off the shoulders of the man who was sending the car hurtling away!

The sedan lurched. It swung crazily. Its twisted front wheels slowed it as it nosed toward an oak. The crash came suddenly—a ringing of metal as the front bumper bent, a rending shock as the fenders crumpled. The car bucked to a stop, its collapsed hood buried against the side of the tree.

Cherry Morris cried out.

Brixey's call came again—"Oke!"

"Here," Oakley answered. Then said in a breath: "He got it—as he gave it to Vance and Driscoll and Devine—as he tried to give it to me!"

Archibald Brixey ran into the light and stopped short. "Good Heavens!" he blurted. "The man at the wheel of that car hasn't any head!"

Oakley took a deep breath. "I know," he said. "He had the wire run in through the window, all set to decapitate me. While he was fighting with me, the loop went over his own head. He didn't know it, but it was still around his neck when he ran out the door and started the car. The wire coming in the window and out the door—one end fastened to the car and the other to his neck—that did it."

"Oke—are you all right?" Cherry demanded.

"Almost all right," he said.

"Who is it—out there in the car?"

"Madtz," said Oakley. "Sam Madtz."

IN McClane's office at police headquarters, Oakley explained it all again. Vladimir Kostov was there, and Valerie Vance; and, of course, Cherry Morris and Archibald Brixey. McClane listened glumly.

"It was pretty well known, wasn't it," Oakley asked the police detective, "that Mrs. Madtz had a habit of playing around with handsome young juvenile actors—that she was two-timing Madtz right and left?"

"Yeah. That's why we suspected him of bumping off his wife at the Malibu Beach cottage nine months ago," McClane answered. "But Madtz had an iron-clad alibi, and we had to let it go as a burglar job, even though it looked fishy to me."

"An iron-clad alibi—and a fake," Oakley said. "A faked alibi supplied by Maurice Vance. Vance said Madtz was with him the entire evening, when Mrs. Madtz was killed—but it wasn't true. Vance's diary proves that. He was at Santa Monica Beach, alone—the entry he made under that date proves it."

"There's the picture. Madtz, in a fit of jealousy, killed his wife. He made Vance supply him with an alibi. Vance was fading out of pictures—he helped Madtz, and Madtz helped him by giving him new contracts. It wasn't blackmail on Vance's part—Madtz was buying him. Vance's fake alibi saved Madtz—but Madtz brooded—he was worried."

"He was never the same after the death of his wife," Kostov agreed.

"Worried," Oakley went on, "because he feared that Vance might make a slip—in one of his bursts of temper. Vance was a continual menace to Madtz. One word from Vance, one slip, and Madtz would go to the chair. He brooded over it until he was half mad, and determined to save himself in the only way possible—by silencing Vance."

"So he killed Vance. He was forced

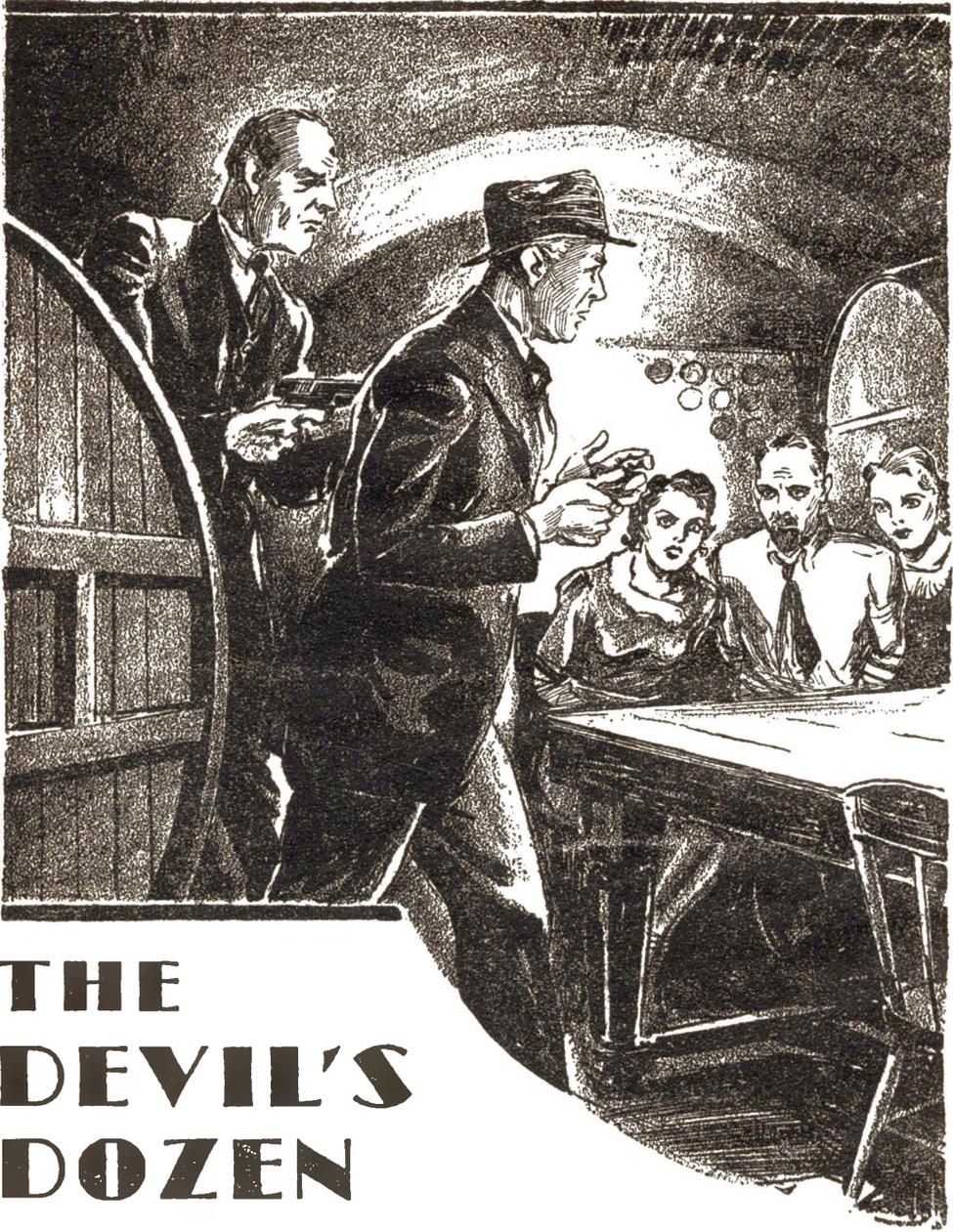
to kill Driscoll and Devine because they both had seen him on Sound Stage Seven the night he rigged up the decapitating machine. Even that didn't clear him. He had been forced from one murder to three—and yet he wasn't safe. Vance's diary was also a menace. He went to the Vance place last night to get it—and that was the end of him."

Kostov sighed. "Perhaps," he said, "I did not behave like a good citizen, Oakley, in calling you off the case so suddenly. But as soon as you discovered how the murders were committed, I knew Madtz had done it. Why? Because Madtz had a small cut on his hand. I'd noticed it once, in the studio room, when the bandage slipped off. It wasn't a knife cut—it looked like a burn made by a cord. When you discovered the machine of death, I knew a wire had made that cut on Madtz's hand and—I only wanted to save myself, my job, like everyone else working in the studios. Madtz was the most powerful executive in Super-Classics and—"

"You wanted to protect him, the same as Devine did," Oakley nodded. "You weren't absolutely sure, but sure enough to know that if Madtz chose to get rid of you, he'd do it instantly. In a way, I don't blame you for wanting to avoid trouble with him. He was a madman—desperate to save himself. If Driscoll and Devine hadn't happened to see him on the set that night, he probably would have gotten away with it."

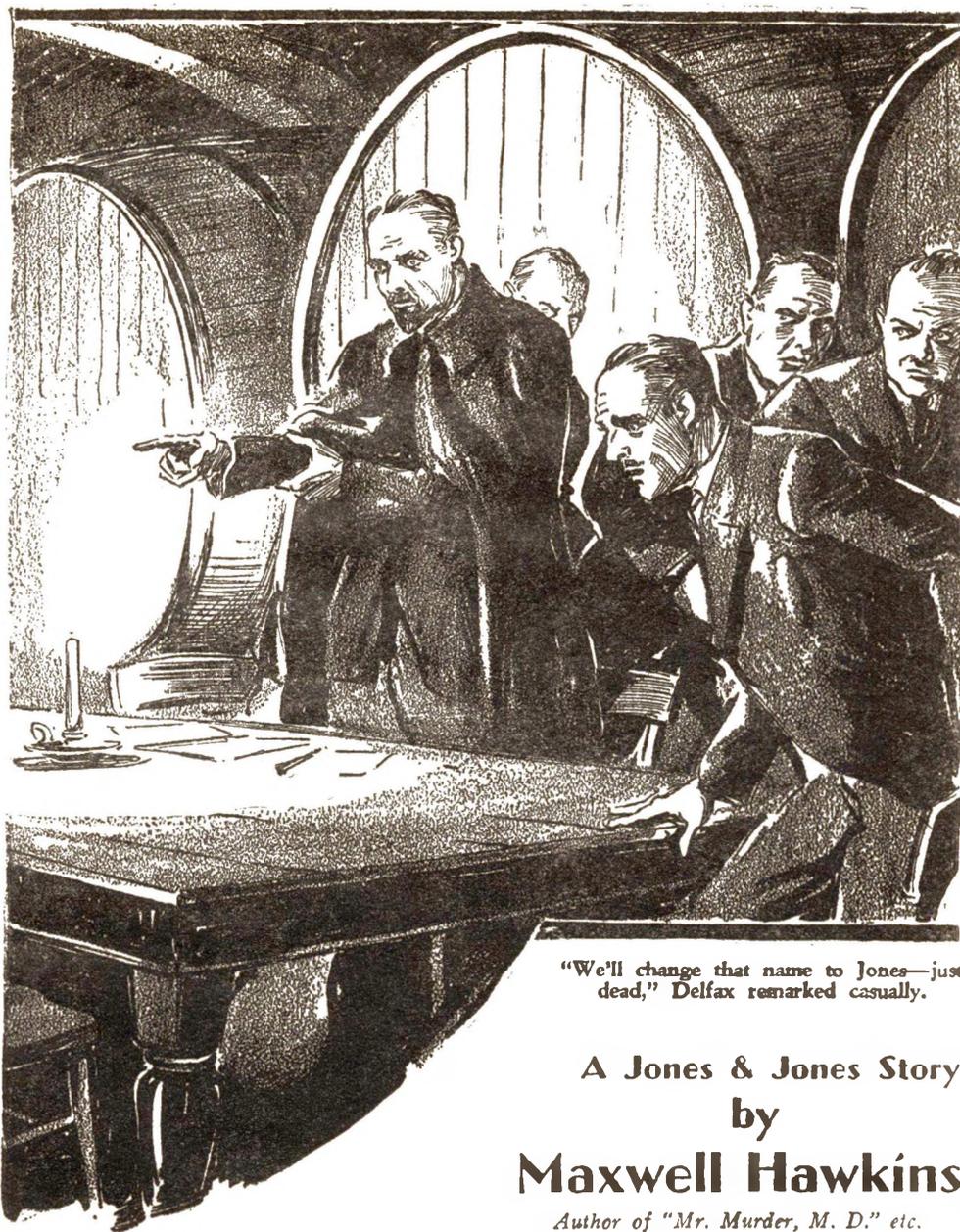
"And I probably would never have doped out how it was done if I hadn't happened to order a sliced-egg sandwich in a restaurant and seen a little contraption with wires cut an egg into slices at one stroke!"

McClane sighed deeply. "Shamus," he said. "I hand it to you. You cracked the case. But then I always take my eggs scrambled."



THE DEVIL'S DOZEN

The only lead Leander had was the horror-look he saw mirrored in a pair of hazel eyes. But that was enough to set the brothers Jones off on a blood trail that didn't end until a madman shrieked, "The Devil dies tonight!" in the secret meeting place of a cult of fiends.



"We'll change that name to Jones—just dead," Delfax remarked casually.

A Jones & Jones Story
by
Maxwell Hawkins

Author of "Mr. Murder, M. D." etc.

CHAPTER ONE

The Girl In Brown

TO THE other passengers in the subway car who noticed her, and they were more than a few, the girl across the aisle from Mr. Leander Jones was just another unusually pretty girl.

She was simply dressed. But her suit, of some soft brown material, was of modish cut. All her clothes had an air of costly smartness.

That she was unusually pretty, one sensed rather than saw, for she kept her face demurely lowered.

At a casual glance, she might have been

one of the well-groomed business girls who journey daily by the thousands to their offices in the skyscrapers of Manhattan. Considering the hour — nine o'clock in the morning—this would have been a natural assumption.

But Leander Jones, lifting his mild blue eyes over the top of his newspaper, suffered no such delusion. Although forty-two years old, bald headed and a bachelor, Leander possessed a surprising fund of knowledge about feminine apparel, as, indeed, he did about a great many things.

He knew, for example, that the fur which adorned the collar and cuffs of her plainly styled suit was real sable. The suit itself, he decided instantly, had been designed and tailored on upper Fifth Avenue, if not on the *Rue de la Paix*.

"My, my!" Leander murmured to himself. "Must've cost eight or nine hundred at least to turn her out in that simple little costume. And riding in the subway!"

As if his thought wave had crossed the aisle, the girl suddenly raised her head. For a single moment, her large hazel-brown eyes stared straight into his pale blue ones. Then, abruptly, she bowed her face again.

Leander lowered his own glance to the paper before him. His manner was apologetic, half-embarrassed, as if he had been caught in some heinous act, instead of the common pastime of the New York male—filling the eye with anything pretty in skirts that happened to be sitting nearby.

But whatever Leander's manner may have been, his reaction to that one fleeting glance from her eye was quite different. His hands imperceptibly tightened on the edge of his newspaper, he sat up just a little straighter, and although he seemed to be reading, he was totally unconscious of the words.

He had noted the rich perfection of her attire, before she had looked at him. And when she had lifted her face, he had seen

that her eyes were large and hazel colored. But whether her face was beautiful or not, he couldn't have told you. For the expression in those eyes had driven everything else from his mind for the moment.

They were filled with stark, wild terror.

LEANDER considered. He knew he was not mistaken as to the significance of that look in the girl's eyes. In his twenty years as a specialist in criminology, as the senior partner of Jones and Jones, he had often seen similar expressions in the eyes of many persons, men and women.

It was not an expression such as any ordinary worry or fright would cause. It was unreasoning, an elemental terror, a panicky thing, stirred up by some ghastly experience.

He stole another glance over the top of his paper.

The girl was sitting motionless, hands still clasped on her lap, her eyes cast down.

Leander felt a surge of admiration for her calmness and self-control. It was something he could appreciate, even more than the girl's obvious attractiveness.

The business of Jones and Jones was not merely tracking down criminals, solving mysterious crimes, but also discovering crimes that probably would never have been known had it not been for their shrewd and searching investigations.

From apparently trivial things, this unique firm of criminologists was accustomed to work.

And so there was nothing strange in Leander's professional interest in this expensively dressed girl. Even if he had not had that momentary glimpse of the haunting terror in her eyes, her presence in a subway in the midst of this work-bound throng would have been sufficient to set his mind speculating as to why she was there.

As it was—well, this might be another blind lead. But again it might—

“Twenty-thoid! Twenty-thoid Street!”

The guard's husky voice bellowed through the car. A large number of the passengers elbowed, pushed, squeezed their way to the platform.

The girl in brown remained rigid in her seat. She didn't so much as raise her eyes.

Normally, Leander left the subway at this station. His office was in the Flatiron Building, almost directly overhead. But now he, too, kept his place, and gave a first-rate impersonation of a meek little business man engrossed in reading about the latest counter-revolution in Cuba.

AS THE train pulled into City Hall Station, the girl lifted her head, flicked a glance up and down the car. Then she rose to her feet with an abruptness that bespoke the tension within her.

Leander waited until the car door had opened and she was stepping to the platform. Dropping his newspaper on the seat, he followed—on up to the street.

She spoke a few words to the policeman on the corner, then started west. She walked north on Broadway to Chambers Street. Once or twice she glanced quickly over her shoulder. But if she recognized Leander as the man who had been sitting across from her in the subway car, she made no sign.

Indeed, there was nothing about Leander Jones to attract even the most casual notice. His appearance was nondescript, his manner self-effacing.

Clad in a slightly rumpled gray suit and brown hat, Leander was completely inconspicuous, a condition entirely to his liking.

The girl in brown continued west for two blocks, walking with long athletic strides. At the Chambers Street Station of the Seventh Avenue subway she dis-

appeared into the kiosk. Leander, close behind, lingered a moment to buy a newspaper and then followed, edging down through the crowd that was jostling its way up the steps.

He caught a glimpse of her brown hat as she slipped through the turnstile and headed for the uptown platform. A moment later, an uptown express roared into the station. The car was crowded, but the girl obtained a seat near the front platform.

Leander worked his way up the aisle until he was standing only half a dozen feet from her. Half hidden behind his paper, he stole a cautious glance.

Again she was sitting with downcast eyes, although now she seemed to be less concerned with keeping her face hidden. Several times she looked up and gave her fellow passengers a brief survey. And Leander, missing no move that she made, saw that her wide hazel eyes were still clouded with that look of mortal dread.

“Strange,” he said to himself. “She rides downtown on one subway line, and walks a few blocks and goes right back uptown on another.”

Fourteenth Street, Penn Station, Forty-second, Seventy-second—but at none of these express stops did the girl in brown rise from her place. The crush of passengers had ceased. Now the aisles were cleared, half the seats unoccupied. Leander had dropped onto the rattan cushion near the middle of the car, where he could watch the girl from behind the shield of his newspaper.

As they pulled out of the Seventy-second Street station, he suddenly became aware that he was not the only passenger who was covertly keeping an eye on her.

At the far end, a *glint*-eyed man with a complexion the color of satin-wood, repeatedly glanced from beneath tilted black brows in her direction. But there was a stealthiness, an obvious attempt not to

have his scrutiny noticed, that convinced Leander it was not mere admiration for the girl's good looks that prompted the glances.

Then, with an inward start, he realized he had seen the man with the yellow-tan skin before. He had ridden downtown on the other subway train, the one on which Leander had first noticed the light of terror in the eyes of the girl in brown.

He was of medium size, but there were indications of a lithe, muscular body beneath his neat, dark blue suit. Something oriental in his face, Leander thought, although he couldn't identify the nationality.

THE train came to a stop at Ninety-sixth Street. For a moment, the girl seemed to hesitate. She peered through the windows trying to catch a glimpse of the signs which would tell her where she was. Then, abruptly, she got to her feet and made her way to the platform.

The man with the tilted eyebrows also rose hastily. He slipped out the middle door of the car.

They emerged from the subway kiosk onto upper Broadway, an odd procession for the heart of New York at ten o'clock in the morning. First, the expensively clad and pretty girl with the frightened eyes; next, the man with the satin-wood complexion, following at a discreet distance; and lastly, Leander, inconspicuous and harmless-looking, keeping a sharp eye on both the others.

A block up Broadway, the girl turned into a drugstore. The man with the tilted eyebrows paused uncertainly, stepped to the curb where a taxi was parked. He spoke to the driver, who nodded, and the man walked into the store.

Leander strolled past and looked in the open door. He couldn't see the girl, but the man was standing at the cigar counter at the front and from the direction

of his gaze, Leander surmised that she was in one of the phone booths. He retraced his steps slowly, finally halting before a shop window a few doors down the street, where he waited.

Presently, the man with the tilted eyebrows came out of the drugstore. He walked to a point near the taxi. Soon, the girl appeared. She started to swing up the street, but the man with the tilted eyebrows took two swift strides and touched her on the elbow.

She stopped, drew herself up, took a backward step. But the man's hand closed on her arm, and almost before Leander realized what was happening, he had flung open the door of the taxi and pushed her inside. The smoothness and dispatch of his maneuver bespoke a thorough familiarity with the procedure.

A short scream, quickly choked off, came from within the cab.

Even as Leander sprang forward, the man with the tilted eyebrows leaned through the window and pressed a pistol against the side of the driver's head. The cab lurched from the curb.

Pursuit on foot was hopeless. But a second later, Leander had jumped to the running board of a second cab, cruising up Broadway. He jerked the door open, and clambered inside.

"Follow the blue cab!" Leander emphasized his command by shoving a banknote over the driver's shoulder. "Another ten for you, if you don't lose it!"

The driver grabbed the money and stepped on the gas simultaneously. The car leaped ahead. Leander, tense on the edge of the cushion, could see the other taxi about two blocks in front. While he watched, it swung off Broadway, east toward Central Park West.

Although there were a number of pedestrians on the sidewalks and a considerable flow of traffic on the street, the abduction of the girl in brown had been ex-

ecuted with such swiftness and efficiency that it had gone unnoticed.

As they slued into Ninety-fourth Street, the blue cab was still in sight. But almost at once it disappeared around the corner, heading south.

They were only a block behind as they crossed Ninetieth against the lights, racing south on Central Park West.

And then from one of the side streets, a small coupe sped out into the main thoroughfare, directly in the path of the blue car. The taxi driver swerved violently. Too late. There was a terrific crash. The coupe spun around several times, slid along the pavement, and turned completely over.

The blue cab caromed crazily off. For a moment the driver seemed about to get it under control, but suddenly it slithered across the street, leaped the curb and brought up with a rending of metal against the stone retaining wall of the park.

CHAPTER TWO

Rescue

WHEN Leander reached the smashed cab beside the park, the driver was slumped over the wheel. He raised his head and stared dazedly about. Blood was trickling down his face from a gash over one eye.

Looking through the open window of the rear door, Leander saw the man with the tilted eyebrows lying in a crumpled heap on the floor. One hand still clutched his revolver.

The girl in brown was bolt upright on the cushion. Her eyes were wide with panic. Her hands were pressed to the sides of her ashen face. At the sight of Leander, peering through the window, she opened her mouth as if to give voice to a scream of hysteria.

Then, with a quick deep breath, she

gained control of herself. "Please!" she leaned forward. "Please—get me away from here!"

Leander yanked the cab door open. She got out, and he took her arm. A crowd was beginning to collect, but the coupe, lying upside down in the middle of the street, was attracting most of the attention.

The driver of his cab was standing only a few feet away, and Leander beckoned to him. "Hurry! We're going!"

Driving swiftly away from the scene of the crash, the girl partially recovered her composure. But Leander, observing her closely saw that look of terror still in her hazel eyes. "I know you probably are wondering what—what—" She hesitated.

Leander smiled reassuringly. "No, no!" he murmured. "I understand. Don't try to talk now. You're perfectly safe."

Her eyes suddenly grew wider. "Why—why, you were sitting in the subway car that I rode downtown in," she said.

"Yes."

"You—you've been following me?"

He nodded. "I hope you'll excuse it. But you see—well, your expression—that is, you awakened my interest. I knew you were in trouble. That's our business—helping people in trouble."

She didn't say anything for some time. Then, she asked with an air of bewilderment: "Who are you?"

"My name is Jones," he said, and added almost apologetically, "Just Jones."

"Just Jones," she repeated wonderingly.

"We—my brother and I—comprise the firm of Jones and Jones," Leander explained. "Specialists in criminal investigation. Perhaps, we might even be called detectives."

"Detectives!"

She looked at him steadily, and little by little the frightened look in her eyes

seemed to fade. Somehow, this mild-mannered little man had awakened a feeling of confidence in her. "If you are a detective, then you can—help me."

"Quite likely," he agreed. "But we'll wait until we get to my office and then you can explain why you need help. Meantime, you'd better just relax."

HORATIO JONES, junior member of the firm, was in the office when they arrived. If he was surprised to see his brother appear, accompanied by a beautiful and smartly dressed girl, he gave no evidence of it. It was difficult to make either of the brothers Jones display any emotion other than their habitual meekness and air of embarrassment.

"Good morning, Horatio."

"Good morning, Leander."

Leander turned to his lovely companion with a smile. "This is my brother, Horatio, Miss—" He lifted a questioning eyebrow.

The girl in brown smiled for the first time. She looked from Horatio to Leander and then back to Horatio. A tiny puzzled frown appeared on her forehead, and Leander, observing it, said quickly: "Yes—we're twins. However, I'm ten minutes older, so I'm generally considered the senior member of Jones and Jones."

She gave a low musical laugh. "Please forgive me for staring," she said. "I am Miss Chauvenet. Eloise Chauvenet."

Horatio made a stiff jerky bow. Leander spoke to a girl who was sitting at a desk at one side of the office. She was a tall girl, wearing a simple black dress with stiffly starched collars and cuffs.

"Miss Millard," he said. "This is Miss Chauvenet."

"I think, Horatio," Leander said, "we'd better conduct Miss Chauvenet into the private office."

Horatio opened a door with an upper panel of opaque glass, and followed Miss Chauvenet into the inner sanctum he shared with Leander.

When they had been seated, Leander at his old-fashioned roll-top desk and Horatio at the duplicate of it on the other side of the room, with Miss Chauvenet occupying a comfortable armchair between them, Leander said: "Perhaps it would be best, if I explained for Horatio's benefit, just what has happened."

With a keen instinct for essential facts, he rapidly sketched the events which led up to his bringing Miss Chauvenet to the office of Jones and Jones.

"This man who forced you into the taxicab," Horatio said. "Did you know him?"

Miss Chauvenet shuddered. "I'd never seen him before in my life. But—" She stopped suddenly, and that look of deadly terror, which Leander had noticed in the subway, began to creep back into her eyes.

"You have nothing to fear now," Leander said. "But you mentioned needing help. If you'll explain, you can rest assured that Jones and Jones will help you."

"I—I'm certain you will!" she exclaimed gratefully. For a little bit, she was silent, as if trying to determine how to begin. "I suppose," she said at last, "I should tell you my whole story."

"By all means," Leander agreed.

OUTWARDLY calm, yet speaking with a breathless earnestness, Miss Chauvenet began. "As you can tell from my name, I'm of French descent, although I was born in this country. Here in New York. My father was one of the two partners of Chauvenet Brothers. The name may be familiar to you."

"Yes," Leander said, with an almost wistful smile. "*Chauvenet Frères*—importers of fine vintage wines."

She nodded. "My uncle, Henri Chau-

venet, was the other partner. But when prohibition came in the States, they retired from business.

"In nineteen twenty when I was ten years old, we moved to France, and I was placed in a convent school. A year later, my father died, but my mother and I continued to reside in France. The land of her birth.

"Three years ago, shortly after I had finished at the Convent of the *Sacré Coeur*, my mother also died. I was alone in the world, except for my Uncle Henri, here in New York. But all my friends were in France, so I had no reason for returning here.

"My uncle, who had never married, apparently wasn't much upset by the law which had put an end to his business. He remained here, taking over the house in which we had lived and where I was born, on Murray Hill. From what I remember my mother telling me, Uncle Henri welcomed the opportunity to pursue without restraint what had been a lifelong hobby."

She paused and wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. Leander noticed that her eyes were clouded.

"What was this hobby?" he asked.

"Religions. The study of strange and obscure religions. He was quite an authority, I believe, on odd rites and ceremonies, both ancient and modern."

"Your uncle, Henri Chauvenet, is possessed of ample means to indulge in this unusual hobby of his, I assume."

"My father left an estate of more than a million dollars. And I've always understood that Uncle Henri was even wealthier. He was the older, and also more conservative in his way of living."

"You control your inheritance, Miss Chauvenet?"

"No. It's in trust until I am twenty-four. My uncle is my guardian, and looks

after my affairs. All the investments are in this country."

"Until you are twenty-four? When will that be?"

"Why—tomorrow."

Leander nodded slowly. "Ah, yes. Please continue, Miss Chauvenet."

"Two weeks ago, a cable came signed by my uncle. In it he said that it was imperative for business reasons that I make a trip to the States at once. I crossed on the *Ile de France*. Because of the fog, we didn't dock until rather late yesterday afternoon. I took a taxi directly from the pier to his house on East Thirty-eighth Street.

"I had expected my uncle to be waiting for me. I'd cabled him when I would arrive. But there was no one at the house except the servants. However, the butler, who admitted me, said they were expecting me and that my rooms had been prepared. My uncle, he said, had been obliged to go out of the city for the day, but would return sometime during the evening."

Eloise Chauvenet paused, as if dreading to go on with her story. Her hands were tightly clasped, and most of the color had drained from her face.

Leander looked at his twin brother. "Smelling salts, Horatio!"

When Horatio had disappeared into the outer office, Leander gave the girl a reassuring smile. "You say you have no friends here in New York?"

She shook her head. "I was only a child when I left. Of course, some of my childhood friends must still be here, but I had no way of locating them. There was only one person I could go to—when I fled from that ghastly house."

"Who was that?"

"My old nurse. When you first saw me in the subway, I was almost out of my mind. I had only one idea. To get away. I had gone into the first subway

entrance, because I imagined that I would be safe where there was a crowd. I wanted time to think, to decide what to do.

"Then I thought of Madame—Madame Renoir, who was my nurse. All I remembered was that she had lived somewhere on the upper west side of the city. That's why I rode directly back uptown on the other subway. I went into the drugstore to try to find her name in the telephone directory. I found a Renoir, but it was not the right one.

"When I came out— But you know what happened after that," she said.

Horatio returned with smelling salts. She put them to her nose.

"After you arrived at your uncle's house—" Leander prompted her.

She set the bottle down. "I went immediately to the rooms that had been set aside for me. They were the rooms I had had as a little girl. The bedroom and nursery on the third floor.

"I asked the butler to have a maid come up and help me unpack. He informed me that my uncle employed no women servants. I decided to let the unpacking go for a while, and lay down to rest. I fell asleep and when I awoke it was dark—almost nine o'clock.

"It seemed strange that no one had awakened me for dinner. I hurriedly dressed and started downstairs. On the second floor, I met the butler. He told me that my uncle had left instructions that I was to have my dinner served in my room.

"That seemed strange to me. But I returned to my rooms and a little later, the butler brought dinner on a tray. I was beginning to have a feeling of uneasiness, and it was a great relief when, just as I finished eating, he came up and informed me that my uncle had returned and wished to see me in the library."

ELOISE CHAUVENET took a deep breath, and plunged on with her story. "It had been thirteen years since I'd last seen my uncle, so my memory of him was naturally vague. But I was overjoyed at the prospect of a reunion with my only living relative.

"He was sitting at the big desk in the library. I noticed, as I entered the room, that it had changed very little from the way I recalled it. There were the same old-fashioned book cases, with the books behind glass doors. The same heavy drapes over the windows, the same heavy Empire furniture.

"He greeted me cordially. As he rose from his chair, it seemed to me that he was taller than I had pictured him in my mind. But he still had the pointed beard and the peculiar droop to his right shoulder, which I remembered.

"We talked for some time. Chiefly about family matters. My father and my mother, my life in France. He asked me numerous questions and said he was sorry to put me to the inconvenience of a trip to this country. It was necessary to have me sign certain papers in connection with receiving my inheritance next month.

"After about half an hour, he said that I was probably weary from my voyage, and suggested that I retire. The discussion of the business matters could wait until morning.

"As I climbed the stairs to the third floor, I was deeply puzzled by one thing. Although my uncle had seemed glad to see me and had been unusually gracious, there had been no instinctive response on my part.

"I sat in my room thinking it over for a long time. Gradually I realized that not only did I have no feeling of affection toward him, but that the man down there in the library actually repelled me. And almost in that instant the explanation

came to me. It left me filled with terror, panic-stricken.

"The man with whom I had just been discussing family matters, who seemed so familiar with the affairs of the Chauvenets was not Henri Chauvenet at all!"

"My word," Leander murmured. "How Miss Chauvenet, did you know this man was not your uncle. You hadn't seen Henri Chauvenet for thirteen years."

"Because of his ears."

"Ears? My word—ears?"

By way of answer, Miss Chauvenet pushed back the soft waves of her brown hair until one of her ears was exposed. She turned her head slightly so Leander could see it better.

"You'll notice that my ears are small and set close to my head. But they have unusually large lobes. Do you see?"

He nodded.

"My father had the same kind of ears, and so had my Uncle Henri. Chauvenet ears—a family characteristic."

"And this interloper who was posing as your uncle?"

"Had large ears." She closed her eyes, as if to refresh her memory. "They came to a point at the top and grew right out from the side of his head—without any lobes at all."

Horatio moved his head slowly up and down. "I believe they are sometimes called satyr ears, Leander."

"Quite right, Horatio. Or devil's ears."

"I must have observed them subconsciously," Miss Chauvenet said. "When I was talking to him, I don't remember thinking about his ears. Not till I was back in my room, trying to analyze my strange feeling of abhorrence, did I suddenly realize he couldn't be my uncle. In making up to resemble Henri Chauvenet, he'd overlooked one of the most distinguishing physical points."

"When you'd made this discovery, what did you do?" Horatio asked.

"I didn't know what to do at first. I was frantic—terrified. My only impulse was to get out of that awful house as fast as possible. I packed a small bag and started downstairs. It was after eleven o'clock.

"When I reached the lower hallway, I heard voices in the library. I recognized one as that of the man who was impersonating Uncle Henri. I listened. I can't repeat the exact words of the conversation, but it concerned me. This man was saying that he was certain I believed he was Henri Chauvenet. The other man seemed unconvinced.

"The man who was posing as my uncle said—and I do recall this part distinctly, because the words were burned into my brain—'If she discovers the truth, it doesn't matter. She's in our power. I'll put her in an asylum, or put her out of the way forever.'

"I waited to hear no more. I rushed toward the front door and pulled it open. But as I stepped into the vestibule, a man was standing there. He seized me and dragged me back into the house.

"At the sound of the commotion, the two men came out of the library. I have never seen such a look of insane fury on anybody's face as appeared on the face of the man who pretended to be Uncle Henri, when he discovered I had attempted to leave the house. At his order, I was dragged back to my rooms. The door was locked. I was a prisoner."

MISS CHAUVENET paused, looked from Leander to Horatio. "I know this must sound fantastic to you."

"No," Leander said solemnly. "It doesn't sound fantastic. Please go on, Miss Chauvenet."

"It was a night of horror," she said. "For when I thought of what I heard—'I'll put her in an asylum or put her out of the way forever—' it seemed to me I really was going mad.

"Somehow I fell asleep. Probably from sheer exhaustion. And when daylight came, I was more calm, able to think more clearly and plan how to escape.

"The rooms that had been set aside for me were, as I mentioned, my childhood bedroom and nursery. I remembered that there was a door opening from the nursery into the upstairs servants' hall. It was put there so the nurse and maids could reach me without passing through the front part of the house.

"If these men were not thoroughly familiar with the house, they might have overlooked that door. I hurried to it. It was locked—but from the inside. As cautiously as I could, I managed to get down the rear yard, and finally through a nearby apartment to the street.

"I rushed away from that horrible neighborhood as fast as possible, entered the first subway I came to—and then you saw me," she said, looking at Leander.

Leander nodded slowly and thoughtfully. "And somebody also saw you leave the house. The man who tried to abduct you on upper Broadway must have followed you. Probably your escape was discovered only a few moments after you had left your rooms. That was the first chance he had to recapture you—and he almost succeeded."

Leander stood up. The shrewd and alert air with which he had listened to Miss Chauvenet's story had vanished. In its place was his customary mask of self-effacement and mildness. Horatio, also, had an apologetic air about him similar to that of Leander.

"What am I going to do?" Miss Chauvenet asked anxiously.

"Nothing," Leander replied. "We'll arrange for you to stay with Miss Millard. You're safe there. Leave everything to Jones and Jones."

She looked at him eagerly. "I don't know how I can ever thank you. And

whatever the cost is, I'll be only too glad to pay it."

"There is no fee," Leander said.

"You mean you—you don't charge for your services?"

"Exactly."

THE firm of Jones and Jones, consisting of the identical twin brothers, was probably the only one of its kind in the world. In the usual sense it was not a detective agency. Having inherited a considerable fortune, the brothers were not concerned with profits. They usually worked for nothing; now and then if their client was very wealthy, they charged a fee. But at once it was turned over anonymously to one of a number of pet charities in which they were interested.

When Miss Millard and Miss Eloise Chauvenet had left the office of Jones and Jones to go to the former's apartment on the upper east side, Leander picked up the telephone. He gave the number of police headquarters, and a moment later he was talking to Captain Colby in the detective bureau.

"This is Jones, Captain," he murmured. "Leander Jones. There was an automobile smash-up this morning on Central Park West near Eighty-sixth Street. I'd like to find out—if it isn't too much trouble for you," he added apologetically, "what happened to the man who was riding in the blue taxicab."

Leander listened then for a short time, while a funny little smile appeared on his face. Horatio watched him curiously.

"It's just one of those things, Captain," Leander continued. "We don't know yet what it means. What's that? No—no, we don't need any help yet. But if we do, I'll call on you. Thank you, Captain, thank you." He hung up.

"It strikes me, Leander," Horatio said, "that Mr. Henri Chauvenet has been the victim of a diabolic plot."

"Victim? You believe he is dead?"

"Assuredly. Don't you?"

"No," Leander murmured, shaking his head. "I don't believe he is dead—yet. But unless we do something very quickly, I feel certain he will be, Horatio."

"Evidently a scheme to gain control of Henri Chauvenet's money," Horatio said.

"And also the fortune of his niece, Eloise Chauvenet," Leander added. "However, I believe they are blocked there, so long as we keep her out of their clutches."

"They'll probably make an attempt to capture her again."

Leander smiled. "They'll first have to find her."

There was a moment of silence, then Horatio asked: "Any idea who this imposter might be?"

The tinkling of the telephone interrupted. Leander lifted the receiver and pressed it against his ear.

"Jones speaking. Leander Jones." He waited a few seconds. "Oh, yes, Captain. What is the news?"

As he listened, Leander's face became grave. He made a little clucking sound, and finally said: "My word! Most unfortunate. But thank you very much, Captain, thank you." He turned from the telephone to Horatio. "Colby says the police report several witnesses say a girl got out and drove away in another cab with an unidentified man in a gray suit. Also a man was seen to climb out and disappear into the park. The driver is in Bellevue. They found a pistol on the floor of the cab. The police are puzzled," he added with a low chuckle.

Slowly and thoughtfully, Leander rose from his chair. He walked to the hat tree by the door and took down two identical brown soft hats, one of which he handed to Horatio and the other he clamped on his own bald head.

"Come, Horatio," he said, "I feel that

we should call at the Murray Hill residence of Mr. Henri Chauvenet."

CHAPTER THREE

Death Plays Host

DISMISSING their taxi at the corner of Fifth Avenue, Leander and Horatio walked east on Thirty-eighth Street. A short walk and they came to an old-fashioned brown stone-front house, which differed from its neighbors chiefly in the fact that it occupied a slightly larger plot of ground.

Leander glanced at the number. "This is it," he said softly.

It was a four-story structure, the facade perfectly flat and unadorned with any bay windows or other protuberances. All the window shades were drawn, but the brass knob and lock on the double, plate-glass doors were brightly polished. So also was the brass railing that ran along the edge of the stoop.

They climbed the dozen steps that led up to the entrance. Leander pressed his finger against the bell button. They waited, but the ring brought no response. Again Leander pushed the button.

"No one here," Horatio murmured.

"At least, they refuse to answer," Leander said. "We'll try the basement door."

They returned to the sidewalk, then down a flight of steps that led beneath the stoop.

Here, Leander found another bell button. But once more all his efforts to obtain a response proved fruitless. He lifted his brown felt hat and rubbed his head meditatively over the shining baldness of his head. "Dear me," he said.

"Gone," said Horatio.

"I hope so."

"Why?"

"Since they won't answer the bell, I intend to enter uninvited. It might prove embarrassing, if they haven't gone."

Horatio shook his head dubiously. "That's house-breaking, Leander."

"Quite right, Horatio," Leander agreed blandly.

From the inner pocket of his coat, he produced a flat leather case. Selecting one of the dozen oddly shaped tools which were fastened to the inside of it, he went to work.

It was little more than a matter of seconds, before the lock yielded to his expert manipulations.

Followed closely by Horatio, he stepped inside, closed the door behind them.

The air in the place was stale and dank. For a little while, the two brothers stood in tense silence, peering about them.

From his vest, Leander drew a fountain-pen flashlight. A slender, brilliant beam of light cut through the gloom.

"Come, Horatio," he whispered.

SILENTLY, they moved along the passageway, which led toward the rear of the house. They came to a door. Leander opened it and flashed the rays of his light about. It was a storage room of some sort. Dust lay thick upon everything.

Shutting the door, Leander continued on down the passage. At the end was a second door. It opened into a furnace room with an ancient hot-air heating plant, and beyond was visible the black opening of the coal bins.

With only a cursory glance around, they continued on their way. The next room of the basement was a laundry. But it had long been unused. The enameled tubs were dusty, the small gas range for heating the sadirons covered with rust. Leander brought the light to rest on a door at one side of the room.

"That must lead upstairs," he murmured. Horatio nodded.

Step by step, careful to prevent any loose board from creaking, they mounted

the stairs into the kitchen. Here Leander spent a longer time, peering into the cupboards and even swinging open the doors of the big ice chest and gazing within. He placed his lips close to Horatio's ear.

"No sign of any food in the place. Nobody's been living here for a long time. That's why they served Miss Chauvenet in her room, instead of the dining room. Brought that tray in from outside."

The butler's pantry was of good size. High on the wall along both sides were china closets, filled with stacks of china and glassware. Everything was in perfect order, arranged in neat and precise piles and rows.

At the far end of the pantry was a swinging door, and in the middle of the upper panel a small glass window, not more than three inches square. Once upon a time, it had enabled the servants to observe the progress of the meal they were serving.

Leander tip-toed forward, placed his face against the glass.

An instant later he drew back; then he reached out and seized Horatio's arm in a fierce clutch. Snapping off his flashlight, he drew Horatio to his side.

"Look!" he breathed.

Horatio peered through the little window. He found himself looking into the dining room. It was almost in darkness, except for a ghostlike glow of many colors that entered through a stained glass window above a huge mahogany sideboard.

In the center of the room was a large oval dining table. Three chairs were drawn up to it, a fourth was pushed back a little way. The chairs at the table were occupied by three men.

For a long moment Leander and Horatio stood there, undecided just what to do next. Then Leander again placed his face close to the little window and stared into the dining room. A beam of bluish

light from the stained glass was falling directly on the man who was facing the pantry door.

"Gracious!"

Leander pushed the door open swiftly, stepped into the room. Horatio was hard on his heels, and as he released the door, it swung closed with a noisy swish. But none of the figures at the table moved. Leander took a step forward, stopped. For a moment he seemed stunned. But at last he turned to Horatio, and when he spoke there was stark horror in his tone.

"Dead! They're all dead, Horatio!"

IN AWED silence, Leander and Horatio stared at the grisly scene before them. The uncanny colored glow from the great stained glass window added to the macabre picture of the three corpses, sitting as if alive at a festive board.

"A banquet of death," Horatio said softly.

"Not a banquet," Leander amended. "Merely a drinking bout." He pointed to the table.

Before each of the dead men was an amber wine goblet. At the unoccupied place, where the chair was pushed back, was a fourth one. And beside it stood a bottle.

Leander stepped close to the table, peered into the glass. It was empty. He flashed his light on and turned it toward the floor. As it came to a rest on a broad dark stain on the thick rug, he smiled grimly.

"The murderer sat here," Leander murmured. "He didn't touch his drink. He poured it on the floor."

"Poison?"

"Quick poison." Leander picked up the bottle gingerly, squinted at the label. "Peach brandy! A strange beverage to—" He stopped, lifted the empty goblet and sniffed it lightly.

Horatio was watching him curiously.

"Clever! My word—a clever fiend," Leander muttered.

"Why clever, Leander?"

"What, Horatio, is the most deadly poison you can name off-hand?"

Horatio thought a few seconds. "Hydrocyanic acid."

"Right. Sometimes called prussic acid. And one of its most distinguished characteristics is its odor. The odor of peaches. Do you see, Horatio?"

"By gad! In peach brandy, the odor of the poison would never be noticed."

"Certainly, Horatio. The perfect way to administer it to the victims."

He replaced the bottle on the table. Then with his handkerchief, he carefully wiped the spot on the neck where he had grasped it, and also the stem of the goblet he had lifted.

For a moment then, Horatio and Leander stood looking at the three gruesome forms in the chairs.

The man who had been facing the pantry door was sitting almost bolt upright, one hand outstretched with the lifeless fingers closed about the stem of his goblet. His glazed eyes were wide-open, staring. A batwing collar with a bow tie encircled his neck, and where his coat was open was visible a waistcoat with black and red horizontal stripes.

"The butler," Horatio said.

The man next to him was clutching the edge of the table with both hands. Apparently, he had suffered a brief agony before the swift poison stilled his heart. His head was dropped forward. A burly man with coarse black hair and a fat nose with flaring nostrils. From the position of the body, he might have been deep in his cups and sleeping off the ill effects of drinking too heavily.

The third was sitting up. His hands were in his lap and beneath tilting eyebrows his eyes were closed. Even in the

dim light his peculiar yellowish-tan complexion was noticeable.

"Good God, Horatio!"

"What is it?"

"That's the man who tried to abduct Miss Chauvenet!"

UNCERTAIN what they might come upon next, but prepared for anything, the brothers Jones began a room-by-room search of the big and gloomy mansion. From the first floor to the fourth, where the servants' quarters were situated, they made a noiseless cautious way. They peered into closets, looked everywhere for a trace of the mysterious poisoner or a clue to his identity.

They found nothing, not even Eloise Chauvenet's luggage. So far as they could determine, the premises were deserted, except for the three dead men.

At last, Horatio and Leander returned to the first floor, to the library, the room in which Eloise Chauvenet had conversed with the bearded man, who had posed as her Uncle Henri. It was as she had described it, austere, filled with heavy pieces of furniture and lined with glass-doored bookcases.

Leander ran his flashlight over some of the titles. There were sets of standard and classic authors in morocco bindings. But one entire group of cases was filled with volumes devoted to religious subjects, ancient and modern. Some of them, Leander noted, bore titles that showed they were concerned with Dionysian and Eleusinian mysteries.

He shrugged faintly, dropped into a chair at the big library table. "A trap, Horatio. Just a trap."

Horatio looked puzzled. Leander explained.

"You must have noticed that the house shows every sign of not having been occupied for some time. Perhaps several months."

"Yes."

"The hardware on the front door, however, has been recently polished. The hallways, this room, and the rooms which Miss Chauvenet occupied have been cleaned, the dust covers removed from the furniture. Also the dining room. That was done so that Miss Chauvenet might get a first impression that her uncle was still living here.

"But this—let us call it a gang for convenience—moved here temporarily and for only one purpose. So Miss Chauvenet would walk right into their clutches."

"And where are they now?"

Leander made a little gesture. "Who knows? But we must find out, if we hope to save the life of Henri Chauvenet. I'm satisfied of that."

"It may be too late already."

Leander said nothing for a long time. He sat slumped down a little in the big chair, his eyes half shut in thought. It was Horatio who finally broke the silence.

"The killer may come back."

Leander shook his head. "No. I thought of that, too, but it's not likely. The killer made no effort to remove the bodies. That means he expected the house to remain closed, maybe for months, and this was as good a place as any to hide them."

"But, Leander, you forget that the poisoner may have been the man who posed as Henri Chauvenet. If he knew Miss Chauvenet had escaped wouldn't he expect her to go to the police and bring them here?"

"By gad, Horatio, that sounds reasonable." A sudden look of alarm spread across his face. He snapped to his feet. "Unless he felt certain he'd soon have her in his power again."

Leander walked swiftly across the room to a small table, on which rested a telephone. He lifted the receiver. A faint

buzzing informed him that the phone was still connected. He put his finger in the dial holes and started to call a number. But he never moved the dial. A slow knowing smile touched his mouth and he placed the receiver on the hook.

"No," he said, almost to himself. "We won't need the police." He turned briskly to Horatio. "Come! We'll search the bodies, and then leave this awful place."

From the library, they made their way back along the hall to the dining room. Leander opened the door and entered. The next second he gave a gasp of surprise.

The man with the tilted eyebrows was gone!

LEANDER and Horatio stood in stunned silence for a brief moment. Then down in the basement a door slammed. The sound was faint, but unmistakable. Instantly Leander turned and ran through the hall toward the front door of the house. Horatio followed.

Boldly, they dashed out the main entrance, and looked up and down the street. In the Fifth Avenue direction were several pedestrians; from the east, a taxicab was approaching. But nothing that might be taken for a man bearing a corpse, or a vehicle in which he might take it.

"Damn!" Leander exploded.

"We'd better go back in. Perhaps the door slam was a ruse."

"No matter. We've got to get Miss Millard and Miss Chauvenet first. You get the big car. I'll meet you at the office in an hour. Go to Miss Millard's apartment and pick them up as soon as possible." He turned, without waiting for Horatio to speak, and swung down the street.

Horatio hailed the cab that had reached him by now.

A little later, he drove a large black sedan from a garage on the upper East Side.

His first stop was in front of a modest apartment building on Eighty-second Street. He took the elevator to the eighth floor, walked down the hall and rang the bell of an apartment at the rear. A white-haired woman with a pleasant face answered.

"How do you do, Mr. Jones," she said cordially at sight of Horatio.

"How are you, Mrs. Millard?"

A sudden look of anxiety appeared. "What—what's wrong?" she asked.

He smiled reassuringly. "Nothing. Nothing at all. I only want to speak to Janet."

"Janet?"

He nodded. "Just for a minute."

"Why, Janet isn't here. Isn't she at the office?"

Horatio's heart sank. He could feel a cold sweat breaking out on his forehead, which he hoped Mrs. Millard wouldn't notice. He forced a smile. "Oh, yes she was at the office," he said, keeping his voice calm with an effort. "But we had to send her on a short trip out of town. A little matter of business. We had more instructions to give her. I hoped she might have stopped here on the way to the station."

With a feeling of relief, he saw that his explanation seemed to have quieted Mrs. Millard's apprehension.

"No, she didn't stop here. But if she does, I'll say you want to see her."

"Thank you."

"Will she be gone long?"

"She should be back tonight," Horatio lied smoothly. "If not, she'll probably wire you. She's in a—a—Asbury Park."

But as Horatio hurried back to his car, he told himself that unless he was mistaken, there was a slim chance only that Janet Millard would return to her mother's side tonight. Or ever—unless he and Leander could do something, fast. For Horatio was sure of one thing.

The sinister gang who had taken possession of Henri Chauvenet's house, in order to capture his niece, and who, in all probability, had killed three men, had struck once more. Somewhere between the Flatiron Building and East Eighty-second Street, the two girls had been seized. Where were they now?

He drove quickly back to his office. When he put his key in the door and opened it, a folded sheet of paper caught his eye. It was lying on the floor, as if it might have been pushed over the jamb.

Horatio picked it up, unfolded it, read its brief message in pencil.

Death is the only reward of those who interfere with the Devil's Dozen.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Devil Dies Tonight

IT WAS well along in the afternoon, when Horatio and Leander, in their big sedan, headed out of the city on the Albany Post Road. Their destination was the hamlet of Fox's Glen, in the Catskill Mountains of western Greene County.

As they drove up the shore of the Hudson River the sky began to cloud up. By the time they reached Bear Mountain Bridge, night was beginning to come on, and a fine drizzle had set in.

At the town of Catskill, where they left the river and pointed back into the hills, the rain stopped. But in its place came fog, a thick yellow blanket that obscured the sides of the road.

The tiny particles of moisture reflected back the rays of the headlights and made driving difficult. Their progress was slow. It was only a little before midnight when they crept into the small cluster of houses and stores that was Fox's Glen.

Horatio stopped the sedan in front of the general store, and Leander got out.

Three men looked up with curiosity as he entered. One, a tall man with scraggly

gray hair and steel-rimmed glasses was behind the counter, and obviously the proprietor. The other two appeared to be farmers. One sat on a cracker box; his companion leaned against the store counter.

Leander smiled apologetically. "How do we get to the Chauvenet estate?"

The two rustics exchanged glances. The man with the glasses jerked up his head and peered down his long nose at Leander.

"The Chauveny place?"

"If you please."

The proprietor squinted. "Well," he finally said, "I can tell you just exactly how to get there." He gave his head a doleful shake. "But, mister, if I was you, I'd not go messing around that neck of the woods at night."

Leander stared at the long proprietor with an air of surprise. "Is it—dangerous?"

"For a fellow your size, I'd say it might be right dangerous."

Leander gave a nervous cough. "My word! I—I'm afraid I don't quite understand. Why should it be dangerous to go to the Chauvenet estate?"

The man sitting on the cracker box answered. "What Zeb means is that they don't have no welcome mat out up there."

There was a moment of impressive silence. Finally, Zeb leaned over the counter and waggled a bony finger in front of Leander's face. "Mister," he said solemnly, "I don't know what your business is. But if it makes it necessary for you to go up there to Chauveny's, you'd better change your business. There's strange goings-on there, since you happened to ask me."

"Perhaps you'd tell me—that is—I suppose I don't understand," Leander faltered.

Zeb appeared to hesitate, but finally he said: "This here Chauveny place—I re-

member when it was built about thirty year ago—ain't been open for a long time. But a while back, it was opened up again. Chauveny, himself, opened it, they tell me. There's a lot of other men up there, too. In the old days, Chauveny used to come down here to the village right often and was real friendly. But now he's made it plain as the nose on your face he don't want anybody bothering him or his friends. They got men guarding the place," he added.

"Guards?"

"Yes, sir! About a week ago, Bud Peeler's boy and some of his pals decided to take a peek in. They skinned over the fence and was going for the house, when up pops three men. Bud's boy and the rest started to run. These men begun shooting at 'em. They got away, but Bud got hit in the arm. He can't do nothing about it, because he was trespassing, wasn't he?"

"Yes," Leander conceded. "How do we get to the Chauvenet estate?"

Zeb and the two loafers looked at the meek Leander aghast. "Well, I declare!" Zeb burst out. He shook his head ominously. "If you insist on going up there, all right. But don't say I didn't warn you. Keep right on this road in front till you come to the fork. Then, take the right-hand road. About a mile down you cross a bridge over Beaver Creek and almost right off there's a road off to the right again. You go up that—it's every foot uphill—and you'll come smack up against the main gate. 'Bout three miles from here, all told."

AS THE big sedan crawled forward through the dense fog which enfolded them like a ghastly yellow pall, Leander repeated to Horatio the substance of his conversation in the general store at Fox's Glen.

"Means we can't drive all the way," Horatio said.

"Exactly. We'll have to walk."

Leander put his hand into the pocket of his coat and pulled out his gun. He spun the cylinder, reassured himself that it was ready for use, then slipped it back into his pocket.

They came to the fork, and Horatio eased the car into the right-hand road. It was slow going. Only by constant vigilance did Horatio keep from getting off the course and into one of the ditches that lined it. Beyond the bridge, he stopped.

"Hadn't we better leave the car here?"

"Yes, Horatio."

Leander got out, groped around in the fog till he found a place where they could run the car to one side and park it.

As they toiled slowly up the winding road that led to the Chauvenet estate, the fog thinned somewhat.

Suddenly, a vagrant gust of wind rolled apart the bank of mist. For a few seconds, they had a clear glimpse ahead, before the fog again closed in about them. Leander, who was in the lead, glided to the side of the road, drawing Horatio after him with a quick gesture.

The tall wrought-iron gates, flanked by lofty stone columns, were barely fifteen feet away. And in that swift moment, when the fog was swept aside, Leander made out the blurred figure of a man.

He was standing with his back to the gates and facing down the road toward them. A tall man, his hat pulled low over his face, his body protected from the wetness by a coat that came almost to his ankles.

Breathless, Leander waited with a warning hand on Horatio's arm. Had they been noticed? It seemed impossible that he could have failed to see them. Yet no sound came from in front, no menacing form emerged from the mist.

Leander began inching forward with his pistol leveled. Horatio was on his

heels. The soaked grass of the roadside made their movements noiseless. Five feet—ten, they advanced, their eyes straining to pierce the yellow-murk. With a few quick strides, Leander covered the remaining distance to the gates.

"Don't move!"

Leander jammed the muzzle of his revolver hard on the tall figure before him. There was no answer, no move. With his free hand, he reached out and touched the man, then pushed up his hat. He gave a quick, low gasp.

"The light, Horatio! Hurry!"

A tiny beam shot from Horatio's pencil flash. It fell full on the man's face, a horrible face, in which the eyes seemed to be popping from their sockets. The mouth was half open, and out from between the parted lips protruded a black and swollen tongue.

"Strangled to death!" Leander breathed.

A HASTY examination explained why the corpse was standing upright. The strangler evidently had come upon his victim from behind, reaching through the iron bars of the gate at which he was standing guard. Around the dead man's neck was a stout cord, and this was drawn through the grillwork and securely tied. The instrument of death was supporting the body.

Horatio laid a probing hand upon the purple cheek. "Hasn't been dead long. Still warm."

Once more in the clammy fog, Leander felt his way along till he came to where the gates joined together. He found a massive knob, tried it, and to his relief discovered that the gates were unlocked.

Inside was a gravel driveway. Moving to one side until they reached the yielding turf, they started forward in the direction where Leander had surmised the house was. They advanced with greatest

caution, pausing from time to time to listen.

Above lay a thick canopy of foliage from the trees which lined the drive. Beneath it, the fog was exceptionally dense. But presently they came to a point where the trees ended, and through the ghostly gloom ahead, they saw a dozen or so yellow blurs.

"Lighted windows," Leander breathed.

"Do we go into the house?"

"We do, Horatio."

They resumed their advance, guided now by those furred gobs of light, like great gold eyes watching them through the mist. And as they drew nearer to the house, the fog itself seemed to take on a different character, to be less opaque.

Leander stopped abruptly. Horatio, following just behind, almost bumped into him. He caught a low warning hiss from his brother, as Leander placed his lips close to his ear.

"There's someone right ahead."

They waited with straining eyes. Leander, who had sensed rather than seen a crouching form alongside a clump of shrubbery, began to think that his taut nerves might have deceived him. And then, like a gray specter, something floated between them and the lighted windows. A second afterwards, the phantom appeared in front of another window and was gone.

"What was it?" Horatio's whisper was barely audible.

"A man—I think."

At that instant, from somewhere off to the left, came a brief shrill scream of agony. It ended, as suddenly as it had broken out, in a ghastly choking gurgle.

Leander paused in indecision. The fog had echoed and reechoed the horrible cry, and it was impossible to tell exactly where it had come from. But there could be no mistaking the nature of the sound.

It was the wild outburst of someone already in the paroxysm of violent death.

Leander cursed, sprang forward blindly. Almost without thinking, he chose the direction the mysterious gray form had taken. Fighting for a foothold on the slippery grass, he plunged ahead. Horatio was right in his tracks.

His foot struck an object on the ground, and he tumbled headlong. As he scrambled to his feet, shaken but uninjured, Horatio was beside him.

"Look—look, Leander!" he gasped.

"Where?"

"By the bushes! You tripped over it!"

Leander peered intently. They were standing near the house. From one of the windows poured forth a prism of yellow light; it appeared almost to have substance, to be solid, as it cut through the fog. And where it ended on the lawn, the feet and ankles of a man were plainly discernable, sticking out from beneath a mass of shrubbery.

Before Leander and Horatio could start to investigate, the awful quiet was broken again. But this time the sound was not so loud. It was a low maniacal laugh. In the fog its direction was elusive, and immediately it was followed by a voice, hoarse and grating.

Like the voice of doom, came to their ears the words: "The devil dies tonight!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Murder Mansion

ON hands and knees, Leander crawled beneath the shrubbery. For a few seconds Horatio caught the tiny glow of his flashlight. Then, Leander reappeared. He jumped to his feet, seized Horatio by the arm.

"We'd better get away from here!" he panted.

Not until they had retreated a con-

siderable distance from the house, where the ominous yellow eyes formed by the windows were barely visible, did Leander offer any explanation. When he decided they had reached a point of temporary safety, he stopped and whispered: "Didn't want to talk while we were so close to that light from the window."

"What about the man?" Horatio asked.

"Dead! Blood was pouring from his throat."

"Good Lord!"

"Had a knife clear through it," Leander continued. "That's what choked off his cry."

They were silent then for a bit, appalled by the phantom horror that was roaming the grounds of this lonely mountain estate and striking in the fog. At length, Horatio said in an undertone: "The devil dies tonight! Good God! What does that mean?"

"My word, Horatio, I wish I knew," Leander murmured. "I expect that scream and crazy laugh may bring somebody from the house to investigate. It must have been audible indoors."

They remained watchfully waiting for a long time. But no indications that the death shriek and the mad cry of the phantom voice had been heard came from the house. No doors opened, no sounds of commotion within those lighted precincts fell upon their listening ears.

As Leander stared speculatively at the glowing windows that marked the country house of Henri Chauvenet, he wondered if those walls hid Eloise Chauvenet and Janet Millard? Or their dead and mutilated bodies? And what of Henri Chauvenet? Was he dead or alive? Had he been following a blind trail in coming up here to this mountain retreat in the Catskills on this dismal night?

Leander doubted it. The strangled guard at the gate, the man beneath the bushes with the dagger in his throat—

both were signposts on a warm and blood-stained trail.

And yet, Leander asked himself, were not these dead men here on the grounds members of the murderous band which had abducted Eloise and Janet? If so, who was so brutally killing them, and for what reason?

Finally he touched Horatio lightly on the shoulder. His voice was hard, determined, far different from its usual apologetic softness. "Come—we're going in!"

Slowly, under Leander's guidance, they circled the building till they had reached a point in the rear. It was a brick house, of three stories, a square solid-looking house, with an air of stolid respectability about it.

There were no lights at the back. But after a little time, they managed to locate a door which opened onto a small porch, hardly more than a glorified stoop.

While Horatio stood watch, Leander tip-toed up the short flight of steps. He tried the door. It was securely fastened. For the second time that day, he drew forth the little black case with its assortment of oddly shaped tools and began to pick the lock. It took him but a minute or two. He opened the door a crack, then soundlessly shut it again and returned to Horatio's side.

"Wait here, Horatio," he said softly.

"You're going in?"

"Yes."

"Hadn't we better stay together?"

"No. If anything happens to one of us, the other will still be able to carry on. Keep your eyes open."

INSIDE the house, Leander risked a brief flash of his light. He was in the kitchen, a big room, with two windows in the far wall and two on the left. All were closed. In the center was a large table, and on it were half a dozen bottles.

Leander picked one up, examined it

swiftly. "Pol Roget 1906," he murmured to himself. "One of the best vintage years."

And in the second before he snapped of the light, he noted two things. The labels were old and stained, as if from moisture, and about the necks of the bottles clung a few shreds of cobweb.

Replacing the bottle carefully, he crossed to one of the doors in the far wall and cautiously opened it. Beyond all was dark, but another quick flash of light revealed a small hallway, at the other end of which was a closed door. At the bottom was a thin line of yellow. Whatever lay beyond was illuminated.

Little by little, he eased the second door open and peered through the crack. He was looking into the main entrance hall, leading to the front of the house. He could make out the balustrade of the stairway, and near the stairs a couple of arched doorways, one on the right and one on the left. Both were hung with heavy portieres.

Leander's hand darted into his pocket and came out with his pistol. He opened the door wide, stepped through and closed it noiselessly behind him. He waited then, listening, alert. Only one sound broke the tomblike silence of the house. It was the regular tick-tick of a pendulum clock somewhere ahead. Probably on the stair landing, he decided.

He started forward and had taken only a few steps, when a voice, low, threatening, came from the stairs just above him.

"Drop that gun! And stick 'em up!"

The fingers of Leander's right hand relaxed; the gun dropped to the floor. It made only a soft thud, as it struck the heavy carpeting of the hallway. Hands held high, Leander waited for the next move of his unseen foe. He heard footsteps, and then a man appeared around the foot of the stairway. He was holding an automatic before him.

"Who are you?" he demanded, coming to a stop before one of the archways.

He was a short man, with glittering dark eyes and a bristling black mustache.

"The name is—Jones," Leander said.

The man with the gun frowned blackly. "Jones, huh?"

"Yes. Jones—just Jones," Leander repeated evenly.

"Well, Jones," the other man snarled, "come here! And if you can't explain what you're doing in this house, you'd better start saying your prayers!"

There was no mistaking the deadliness in the tone, as well as the words. Leander started forward slowly, and on his face was a funny little smile, disarming and apologetic. His customary mask of meekness, however, was hiding a deep chagrin that he had walked into this fix, more than any feeling of fear.

He had taken only a couple of steps, when his alert glance caught a gentle movement of the portieres. A faint swaying. And almost immediately, the heavy drapes were forced out roughly. There was a loud crack, sickening in its violence.

The man with the gun gave a spasmodic grunt, collapsed heavily to the floor. His pistol rolled from his hand.

Instantly, Leander wheeled, took two swift steps and picked up his own weapon. He sprinted down the hallway in the direction his rescuer had gone. Somewhere a door slammed, a second before he burst through the portieres.

He was in a long, comfortably furnished room, obviously the living room. It was brilliantly lighted. But there was no one in it.

He stood still for a moment, looking around. He could see no place where anyone might conceal himself. But at the rear of the room was a door, and re-

calling the slam he had just heard, he knew that his mysterious rescuer had made his escape in that direction.

His rescuer? This time, yes, Leander told himself. But remembering the strangled guard at the gate, the corpse beneath the bushes, he was far from certain that he had not been saved only temporarily from the mysterious killer who had struck through the portieres. The next attack might be on him.

He walked back to the man in the hallway, bent over. The blow that had felled him had been delivered with terrific force. The back of the fellow's skull was dashed in; blood was welling out upon the floor in an ugly crimson pool.

And then Leander saw the murder instrument. It was lying beneath the drapes, where the murderer had dropped it. A heavy iron poker with an ornate brass handle. A quick survey of the living room disclosed that it was part of the fire-place set there.

WALKING to the wall, Leander snapped an electric switch. The living-room lights went out. Apparently the phantom slayer was familiar with the layout of the house. But in the darkness this advantage would be more or less neutralized; there would be less chance that he could make one of his deadly and unexpected assaults.

Stealthily, feeling his way, Leander started toward the door at the back of the living room. He was not hoping to find the killer beyond it. He was bent on quite a different mission, for he had suddenly interpreted the meaning of the cobwebs on the empty champagne bottles.

Ready in every nerve and muscle to meet an attack, Leander groped his way through the darkness. He made slow headway. But eventually he had progressed through a dining room, pantry, and back once more into the big kitchen.

He located one of the two doors on the left of the rear entrance.

Unwilling to chance even a momentary flash of his light, he opened it in the dark. He put his foot out and felt around cautiously.

"Stairs," he murmured to himself. "But leading up."

He shut the door and moved to the one beside it. This time he found what he wanted. A flight of steps going down into the basement, and as he shut the door and started to descend, he caught a feeble glow beneath.

At the bottom, he located the source of the glow. It came through an open doorway from a room beyond. Step by step, he moved forward.

In the second room, a single light bulb hung from the ceiling. As he entered, a faint breeze fanned his face. It was cool, damp, and bearing a sweet odor of decay, which brought an odd smile to his pressed lips. He crossed quickly to a half-open door, passed through and found himself in another lighted room. It was a vegetable cellar, with huge bins lining the walls, and above them shelves for holding preserves.

But what caused him to breath a trifle more rapidly, take a firmer hold on his pistol, was a massive door of oak. It had wrought-iron hinges and a ponderous lock. On either side were heavy cleats, into which an oaken cross-bar could be dropped.

Before this stout portal, Leander came to a halt. He brought his light into play for a moment, directing its beam at the hinges. Both of them had been recently oiled.

He gave the oak door a tentative tug. It yielded easily and he gradually pulled it open. Before him stretched a long tunnel-like passage with an arched ceiling. It was barely high enough for a man of average height to walk erect,

and extended straight ahead for about a hundred feet. At intervals, dim electric lights were suspended from the top.

He paused. Faintly there came to his ears the sound of voices.

With the tread of a panther, Leander moved down the tunnel. It was built of large stones, roughly hewn, and covered with green mold and fungus growths. The air was dank and redolent with that sweetish decaying odor, which had caused him to smile when he had first smelled it.

The voices grew louder. He could catch an occasional word now and then. His progress became slower and slower, till he was scarcely creeping.

He came finally to a point where the tunnel made a right-angle turn. For a long while, he waited there, his ears tuned to hear the conversation which was coming from around the bend. The speaker's voice was vibrant, deep, and he spoke with a cultivated accent. But beneath was an undercurrent of vicious intensity, a thinly coated hatred and threat.

"Tonight you sign! The time for compromise is over!"

Leander pressed against the slimy wall of the tunnel and wormed forward till he could see around the turn. He stiffened, and instinctively his right hand with the gun in it came up. Almost immediately, however, he changed his mind and slid back out of sight.

The glimpse he had had around the bend revealed that the tunnel ended in an arched doorway. Beyond lay a vast stone chamber with a vaulted ceiling—an old-world wine cellar such as one would never expect to find on this side of the Atlantic. Great wooden casks and butts were ranged along the sides. In the dim shadows at the back were tiers of racks, filled with bottles tilted neck down to keep them from "corking."

In the middle of this huge wine vault was a long refectory table. Chairs were

arranged around it. The ones at the near end were occupied by six men, but Leander had given them only momentary notice for his stunned gaze had been fascinated by three figures at the far end of the table.

The middle one was an elderly man with a gray beard. On his left sat Eloise Chauvenet. On his right, Janet Millard. All three were tightly bound to the chairs they were occupying.

CHAPTER SIX

Satan's Cellar

HARDLY daring to breath, Leander listened as the speaker with the deep voice continued. "You will sign the necessary papers which will enable me to convert all your security holdings into cash. Also the securities of your niece."

"So that you may steal them." The voice was bitter, with a faint French accent, and Leander knew it belonged to Henri Chauvenet.

"Not steal. Merely a contribution to the Cult of the Devil's Dozen."

"And if I refuse?"

"I have told you before—you die. And with you, your niece and this young lady who has had the misfortune to meddle in our affairs."

This time Henri Chauvenet's tone was defiant. "Well, Delfax—or whatever your right name is—I do refuse!"

"Think carefully. It is not a pleasant death I plan. You shall die in the wine-press. All three of you."

Leander's eyes grew dark, his hand tightened on his pistol. In all his years of dealing with murder, he had never heard anyone promise it with such casual ruthlessness.

The man whom Chauvenet had referred to as Delfax continued. "Your fate will never become known. We shall close this wine vault—which you so conveniently

provided when you built this lovely estate—with masonry. You will rest in a tomb that will never be discovered."

"By God! You are a devil!" Henri Chauvenet burst out.

Delfax chuckled. "Exactly. The Devil of the Devil's Dozen. And I have planned well. I knew of your interest in strange cults—and so I schemed long and carefully to awaken your interest in a cult that I devised for no other purpose than the one I have just mentioned. Do you think it was only by chance that we encountered each other in the Public Library, where you were pursuing your researches?"

"How do we know that you won't kill us anyway?" Eloise Chauvenet asked.

"My dear young lady—you don't! Indeed, it might be a better idea to dispose of you all. I bear a strong resemblance to your uncle. In some quarters I am taken for him. A bit of carefully executed forgery—and we have accomplished our purpose!"

"In that way, we would get the real estate, too. As it is, we are leaving you the real estate investments."

Abruptly Delfax dropped his casualness and became brisk and efficient. "I will give you," he said, "just five minutes to agree to sign!"

LEANDER considered. Something had to be done at once. He was armed, but there were six men in the other room. He could steal in, take them by surprise, cover them with his pistol and release Chauvenet and the girls. And yet he knew that as one against six, even though armed, he would be taking a chance.

He decided too much was at stake for needless risks, determined to get Horatio. Five minutes allowed ample time for him to leave this house of violence and

return with his brother. Together they could well handle the six members of the Devil's Dozen there in the wine vault.

He turned on noiseless feet and glided back toward the entrance to the tunnel. With a sudden hollowness in the pit of his stomach, he saw that the great oaken door which guarded the entrance was shut. He distinctly remembered that he had left it ajar.

He reached it, pushed gently, then more firmly. But it refused to yield, and Leander knew that his worst fears were realized. He was trapped in this dank underground passageway. And if Henri Chauvenet, Eloise and Janet were to be saved from a horrible death, he must accomplish their rescue alone.

Before he could turn from the door, a snarling voice came from behind. "Up with your hands!"

Leander's pistol clattered to the stone floor of the tunnel. His hands moved slowly above his head, and a funny little twisted grin flickered for a second on his face. Then his customary mask of apology and self-effacement returned.

Something hard was pressed against his back, and the snarling voice spoke again. "Turn around!" A prod from the gun in his back emphasized the order.

Leander turned, but he was unable to see his captor, who moved round behind him. Propelled by repeated and painful jabs, Leander was forced to walk down the tunnel, around the bend and into the wine vault.

At his entrance, Eloise Chauvenet gave a little cry. Janet Millard stared with eyes that were wide with surprise and alarm. Five men jumped to their feet. And one of them had a pointed gray beard, glowing dark eyes, and large and tapering ears that had no lobes. Leander knew instinctively he was Delfax, the Devil of the Devil's Dozen.

"What's this, Prontius?" Delfax de-

manded. He fixed his cruel eyes on Leander.

"I caught him. At the tunnel door. He was just sneaking out," the man behind Leander said.

"Good. Very good!" Delfax spoke suavely, but there was no mistaking the threat that lay beneath his words. "And how did you get in here?" he demanded.

"I'm afraid I walked in," Leander said with a wry grimace.

Delfax stiffened. "Who are you?"

"Jones—just Jones," Leander murmured.

"Jones—just Jones," Delfax repeated mockingly. "Well, Jones—just Jones. In a minute we're going to change that to Jones—just dead! Take him!"

The men about the table moved forward to obey, but before they could so much as lay a hand on Leander they were suddenly halted. From out of nowhere, yet seemingly from all directions, came that weird maniacal laugh that Leander and Horatio had heard in the fog. The laugh that was connected with the murder at the gate, the murder on the lawn, the murder in the hall.

And instantly floated into the wine cellar that harsh, grating voice.

"The devil dies tonight!"

THE effect on the members of the Devil's Dozen was startling. They stared from one to another, some with their mouths open, the rest with gaping eyes.

But it was Delfax who exhibited the greatest amazement. He took a step forward, then drew back against the wall. Wildly he swept his gaze in all directions. And again it came, that ghastly warning of death.

"The devil dies—"

The rest was lost in a report, a report that resounded in the vaulted room with hideous significance. Delfax gave a cry,

pitched forward and his skull cracked on the edge of the great refectory table. But he didn't feel the blow. Between his eyes was a round hole, from which the blood was welling.

A wisp of smoke drifted from the back of the vault. A second roar filled the wine cellar, and a second member dropped to the floor with a scream of agony.

Then mad panic seized the others. They forgot Leander, they forgot the man and girls bound to the chairs, they forgot everything but this deadly unseen avenger, striking apparently from nowhere. They fled, three fighting, clawing men in a wild scramble to escape through the tunnel.

Leander stooping low, ran after them. And as he left the vault, he swept up from the floor the gun which the man who had captured him had dropped in his terrified flight. Around the corner of the tunnel he dashed, his weapon ready.

The three members of the Devil's Dozen were at the oaken door. They were pounding upon it, screaming and cursing in their effort to get it open. Leander's pistol came up.

"Throw up your hands!"

One of the men let out an insane growl and lunged toward Leander. Leander's pistol poured forth an orange streak, and the fellow staggered back from the impact of the slug. The others raised their hands high.

At the back of the wine cellar was a sudden commotion. Two figures locked together came rolling, writhing down over the wine butts. They struck the floor with a violent crash. One of them groaned, then lay still. The other rose slowly and painfully to his feet.

It was Horatio Jones.

His hat was gone. His gray suit was covered with dirt and cobwebs. But his face was flaming exultantly. The light of battle was in his eyes. He dragged the

unconscious figure of his foe into the light of the vault and turned him over.

The evil face of the man with the tilted eyebrows stared up.

IN THE living room upstairs a little later, Horatio and Leander, with Henri Chauvenet, Eloise and Janet, awaited the arrival of the sheriff and his deputies. The members of the Devil's Dozen who were not dead lay tightly bound on the floor nearby.

" . . . after you went into the house, Leander, I concealed myself nearby," Horatio was explaining. "In a little while, a man came sneaking out the back door. I knew it wasn't you. Too tall. And so I followed.

"He made his way toward one side of the house. Finally, he stopped and I waited. Pretty soon I heard a grating sound, and right after that he vanished before my eyes. I crept forward in the fog and when I came to the place where he was last seen, I found an iron grill, which had been moved from a small round opening on the side of a little hill.

Henri Chauvenet nodded understandingly. "That was the ventilating shaft to the wine cellar. Naturally it was necessary to have some fresh air get into it."

"So I found out," Horatio murmured. "And, my word, what a dirty air shaft. I could hear this fellow moving along ahead of me, and I thought I'd better find out what he was up to.

"A short distance in and there was a faint light ahead. I could make out his figure. As soon as I heard the shooting, I knew it was time to take a hand and went on after him. We tumbled out of the opening at the other end. Luckily I landed on top," Horatio added dryly.

"Dear me, Horatio, you might have been killed," Leander said. He got up and walked over to the recumbent figure

of the man with the tilted eyebrows.

"What," he said, "was the idea of trying to kill everybody around the place?"

The man with the tilted eyebrows looked up with sullen eyes. "If you want to know, it was because he tried to poison me with Bayles and Munter. He wanted to get us out of the way, so he'd get all the money. He'd have killed the rest later. But I was onto his scheme and didn't take the poison.

"I played dead dog, till he left, cause I was planning to let him carry out his plan to get the money. You almost caught me at the house, but I heard you coming and slipped back to the table, figuring you'd think I was dead as the others."

"My word," Leander murmured.

"After that, I changed my plan and decided to kill the whole dirty double-crossing gang. But I wanted to scare hell out of them first. That's why I went around throwing out wild laughs and threats. I thought at first I'd find Delfax in the house. When he wasn't there, I knew he was in the wine cellar. I saw you in the tunnel and shut you in."

"And you'd already found out about the air shaft," Leander suggested.

"Yeah. But I was the only one who knew about it."

"My, my, let's see. Two men died in town. Two on the lawn and one in the house. Delfax and two others in the cellar. We've got three prisoners." He looked at Chauvenet. "That's only eleven. A Devil's Dozen should have twelve, it seems to me."

Chauvenet made a wry face. "I was Number Twelve. But I joined only out of curiosity to see what sort of an organization this Delfax had," he put in hastily.

Leander smiled faintly. "And you found out."

"Only when it was too late—and I've

you to thank for my life." He looked up with sudden puzzlement. "How did you happen to decide to come out here?"

"I hope you'll excuse me," Leander replied with a touch of embarrassment.

"Excuse you? For what?"

"Posing as your secretary. When I discovered the phone in your town house was connected, I went to the company and obtained a duplicate bill. There were a number of long-distance calls to Fox's Glen."

"LEANDER," Horatio asked the next day, when they were back in his office, "how do you suppose Delfax knew Miss Chauvenet had been brought here?"

"The curiosity of the driver who drove us down," Leander replied. "He cruised back to the scene of the crash. Delfax, after he pulled his poisoning, hurried over there and was lucky. He met him and learned what had happened. The driver was most voluble. Then Delfax watched this building and when the girls left, trailed them with some of his gang.

"It was no job for him to snatch them, as I believe it's called, as they were entering Miss Millard's apartment building. Then he tried to frighten us with that note."

Horatio picked up a green slip of paper from his desk. It was a check for ten thousand dollars, signed by Henri Chauvenet.

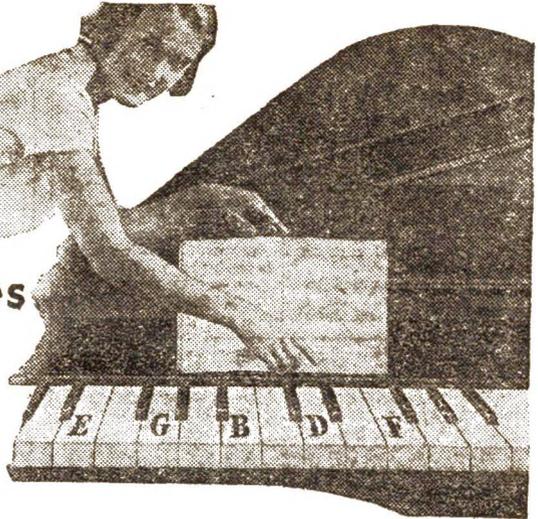
"What do you think we should do with this?" he asked.

Leander thought a moment. Suddenly he grinned widely. "I believe, Horatio," he murmured, "we should give it to some deserving church organization."

"Any special reason for giving it to a church organization, Leander?"

"My word, yes, Horatio!" Leander exclaimed. "We've chased down one devil. But somebody else will have to keep after the other."

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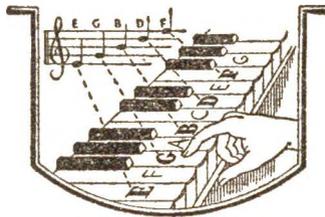
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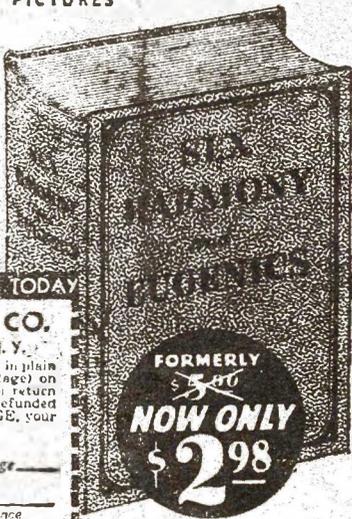
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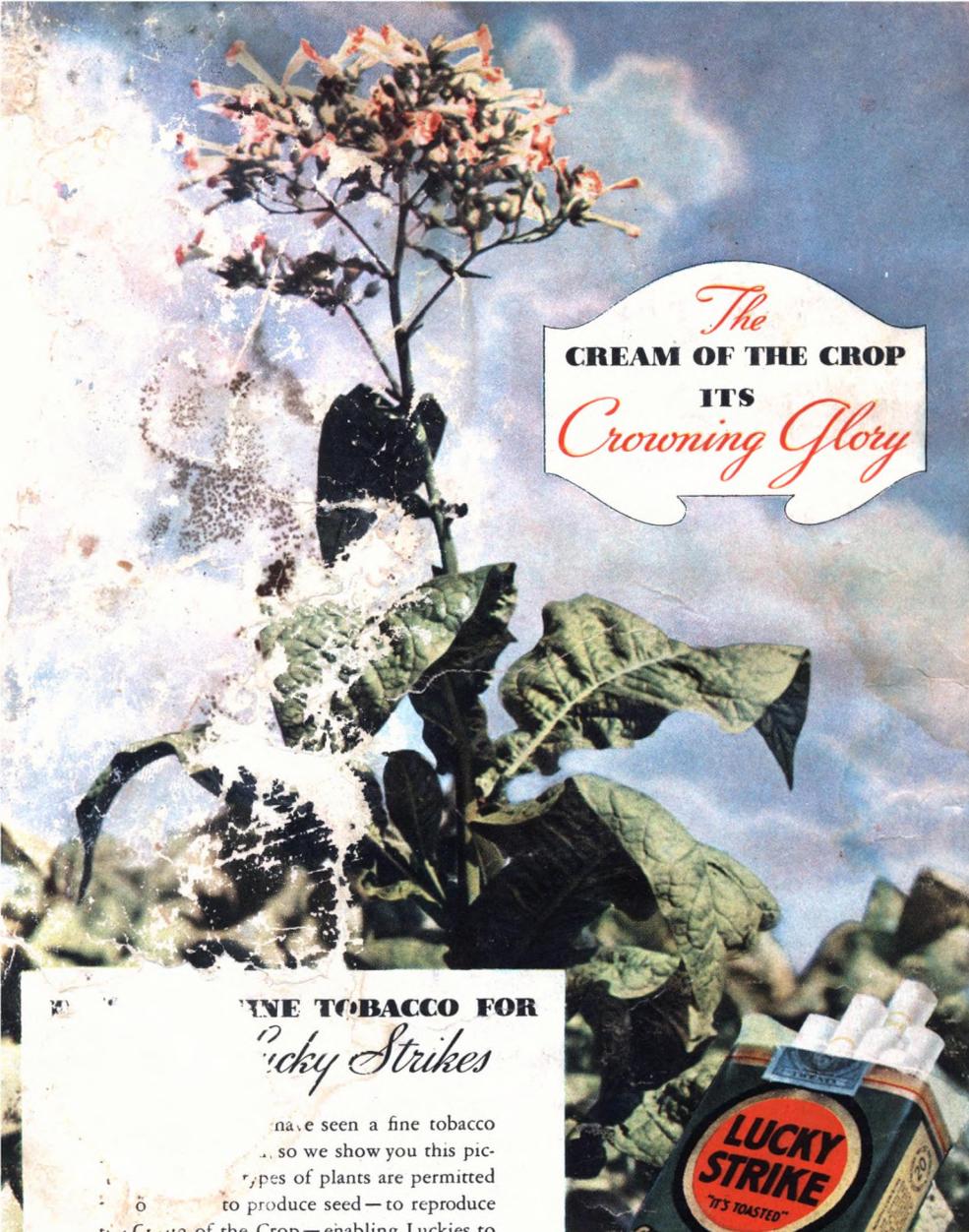
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