
ALL STORIES COMPLETE
OCTOBER 15TH
10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
TWICE A MONTH
A POPULAR PUBLICATION
The BELL-TOWER TERROR by T.T. FLYNN
MR. MURDER, M.D. by MAXWELL HAWKINS
OCTOBER 15TH DIME 10¢ DETECTIVE MAGAZINE 10¢

FROM A FAT MAN... to a HE-MAN... in 10 MINUTES!

"I REDUCED MY WAIST 8 INCHES" WRITES GEORGE BAILEY

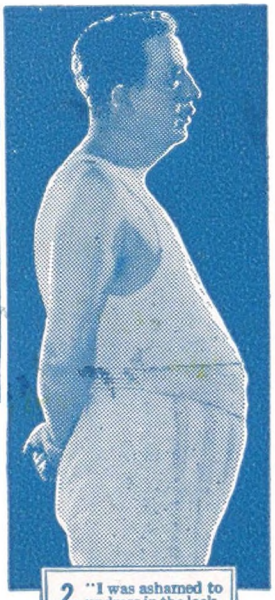
1. "I was just a fat man with a protruding stomach ill at ease and clumsy—no pep to do anything!"

"I lost 50 pounds" says W. T. Anderson. "My waist is 8 inches smaller" writes W. L. McGinnis. "Felt like a new man" claims Fred Wolf. "Wouldn't sell my belt for $100" writes C. W. Higbee.

So many of our customers are delighted with the wonderful results obtained with the Weil Belt that we want you to—

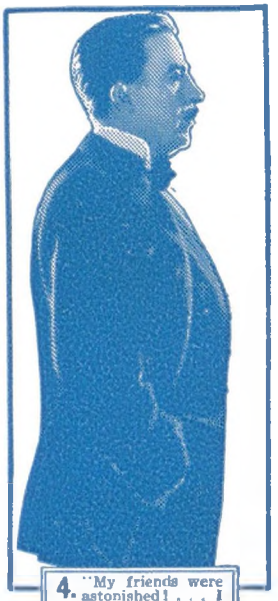
TRY IT FOR 10 DAYS AT OUR EXPENSE!

We GUARANTEE to REDUCE your WAIST 3 INCHES IN TEN DAYS!



2. "I was ashamed to undress in the locker room—my friends poked fun at me and I had no answer!"

3. "Then I slipped on a Weil Belt...a transformation took place... what a difference — pounds seemed to have fallen away!"



4. "My friends were astonished! . . . I looked better — my clothes fitted me—and I felt like a million dollars!"

. . . . or it won't cost you one cent.

If we had not done this for thousands of others . . . if we did not *KNOW* we could do the same for you, we would not dare make this unconditional guarantee!

Actual Photos Show Immediate Improvement In YOUR Appearance!

YES SIR: I too, promised myself that I would exercise but it was too much like work—and it's darn hard to diet when you like to eat. The Weil Belt was just the answer—no diets, no drugs—I feel like a new man and I lost 8 inches of fat in less than 6 months!

GREATLY IMPROVES YOUR APPEARANCE!

The Weil Reducing Belt will make you appear many inches slimmer at once, and in 10 short days your waistline will actually be 3 inches smaller—three inches of fat gone—or it won't cost you one cent!

It supports the sagging muscles of the abdomen and quickly gives an erect, athletic carriage.

Don't be embarrassed any longer with that "corporation" for in a short time, only the admiring comments of your friends will remind you that you once had a bulging waistline.

THE MASSAGE-LIKE ACTION THAT DOES IT!

You will be completely comfortable and entirely unaware that its constant gentle pressure is working constantly while you walk, work or sit . . . its massage-like action gently but persistently eliminating fat with every move you make.

Many enthusiastic wearers write that it not only reduces fat but it also supports the abdominal walls and keeps the digestive organs in place—that they are no longer fatigued—and that it greatly increases their endurance and vigor!

DON'T WAIT—FAT IS DANGEROUS!

Fat is not only unbecoming, but it also endangers your health. Insurance companies know the danger of fat accumulations. The best medical authorities warn against obesity, so don't wait any longer.

Send for our 10 day free trial offer. We repeat—either you take off 3 inches of fat in ten days, or it won't cost you one penny!

NO EXERCISES
NO DIETS
NO DRUGS

"REDUCED from 44 to 36 INCHES"

Gentlemen: I feel sure that you will be interested to know that I wore one of your belts for seven months and reduced from 44 to 36 inches. Yours very truly,
George Bailey,
293-295 Eighth Ave., N. Y.

SEND FOR 10 DAY FREE TRIAL OFFER

THE WEIL COMPANY, INC.
10210 HILL STREET, NEW HAVEN, CONN.

Gentlemen: Send me FREE, your illustrated folder describing The Weil Belt and full details of your 10 day FREE trial offer and Unconditional Guarantee!

*Name*_____

*Address*_____

Use coupon or write your name and address on a penny post card.

THIS BOOK Will give you an Arm of Might and a 16 inch Bicep!

Send for . . .
"MOULDING A MIGHTY ARM"
A Complete Course for Only 25c

GET AN ARM of might with the power and grip to obey your physical desires. In a very short time you can build your arm from a scrawny piece of skin and bone to one of huge muscular size. I don't mean just a 16-inch bicep but a 15-inch forearm and a powerful 8-inch wrist!

I Guarantee That This Specially Prepared Course will Build Every Muscle in Your Arm

I know it will . . . for it has been scientifically worked out for that purpose. You can develop a pair of triceps shaped like a horseshoe, and just as strong, and a pair of biceps that will show their double head formation. The sinewy cables between the biceps and elbow will be deep and thick with wire cable ligaments. In that arm of yours, the forearm will belly with bulk, and the great supinator lifting muscle you can make into a column of power, while your wrist will grow alive and writhe with cordy sinew. All this you can get for 25 cents . . . send for this course today and you, too can have a he-man's arm built to be as beautiful, brawny and magnificent as the village blacksmith's.

You can't make a mistake. The guaranty of the strongest armed man in the world stands behind this course. I give you all the secrets of strength illustrated and explained as you like them. You, too, can get an unbreakable grip of steel and a Herculean arm. Mail your order now while you can still get this course at my introductory price of only 25c.

I will not limit you to the arm. I can develop any part or all of your body. Try any one of my courses listed in the coupon at 25c. Or, try all six of them for only $1.00.

MAIL YOUR ORDER NOW
and you will receive a Free Copy of "NERVES OF STEEL, MUSCLES LIKE IRON."

It describes Geo. F. Jowett's rise from a puny boy to be one of the world's strongest athletes with a chest measurment of 49 inches and an 18 inch bicep! It explains why he is called "Champion of Champions" . . . and there is a "thrill" in every page.

It is a priceless book to the strength fan and muscle builder. Full of pictures of marvelous bodied men who tell you decisively how you can build symmetry and strength the equal of their own. Reach out . . . Grasp This Special Offer.

DON'T DELAY . . . MAIL TODAY!

JOWETT INSTITUTE of PHYSICAL CULTURE
Dept. 106Xb 422 Poplar St., Scranton, Pa.

George F. Jowett: Your proposition looks good to me. Send, by return mail, prepaid, the courses checked below for which I am enclosing $_____

- ☐ Moulding a Mighty Arm, 25c
- ☐ Moulding a Mighty Back, 25c
- ☐ Moulding a Mighty Grip, 25c
- ☐ Moulding a Mighty Chest, 25c
- ☐ Moulding Mighty Legs, 25c
- ☐ Strong Man Stunt Made Easy 25c
- ☐ All 6 Books for $1.00.

*Name*_____ *Age*_____

*Address*_____

*City*_____ *State*_____

10c DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

EVERY STORY COMPLETE — EVERY STORY NEW

Vol. 8 — **CONTENTS for October 15th, 1933** — **No. 3**

SMASHING NOVEL-LENGTH MASTER MYSTERY

Tremble at the grim tolling of

COMPLETE HORROR THRILLER

Draw the sting of

EXCITING MIDNIGHT DANGER TALE

Race with

GRIPPING DETECTIVE-ACTION NOVELETTE

Cringe back from those

Not many things are

Issued the First and Fifteenth of Every Month

This company has enthusiastically subscribed to the National Industrial Recovery Act and has signed the President's blanket code.

Watch for the November 1st Issue — **On the Newsstands October 15th**

Published twice a month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second class matter March 16, 1933, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office.

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J. E. Smith, Pres., Nat'l. Radio Institute, the man who has directed the Home Study training of more men for the Radio Industry than any other man in America.

BE A RADIO EXPERT

Many Make $40 $60 $75 a Week

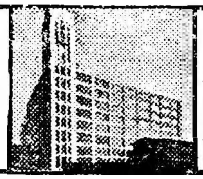
I'll Train You at Home in Your Spare Time for RADIO · TELEVISION · TALKING MOVIES

Set Servicing

Spare-time set servicing pays many N. R. I. men $5, $10, $15 a week extra. Full-time men make as much as $40, $60, $75 a week.

Broadcasting Stations

Employ managers, engineers, operators, installation and maintenance men for jobs paying up to $5,000 a year.



Radio Factories

Employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, for jobs paying up to $7,500 a year.

Aircraft Radio

Radio is making flying safer. Radio operators employed through Civil Service Commission earn $1,620 to $2,-600 a year.

Talking Movies

An invention made possible by Radio. Employs many well-trained Radio men for jobs paying $75 to $200 a week.

Television

The coming field of many great opportunities is covered by my course.

If you are dissatisfied with your present job; if you are struggling along in a rut with little or no prospect of anything better than a skinny pay envelope—clip the coupon NOW. Get my big, FREE book on the opportunities in Radio. Read how quickly you can learn at home in your spare time to be a Radio Expert—what good jobs my graduates have been getting—real jobs with real futures.

Radio Experts Make $40, $60, $75 a Week

In about ten years the Radio Industry has grown from a few million dollars to hundreds of millions annually. Over 300,000 jobs have been created by this growth, and thousands more will be created by its continued development. Many men and young men with the right training—the kind of training I give you in the N. R. I. Course—have stepped into Radio at two and three times their former salaries.

Real Opportunities Ahead in Radio for Trained Men

It's hard to find a field with more opportunity awaiting the trained man. Why, in 1932—the worst year of the depression—the Radio Industry sold $200,-000,000 worth of sets and parts! Manufacturers alone employed nearly 100,000 people! About 200,000 people worked in the industry. In 1932, broadcasting had a most profitable year. It's a gigantic business, even in the worst business years! And look what's ahead! Millions of sets becoming obsolete annually. 17,000,000 sets in operation that need servicing from time to time! Over 500 great broadcasting stations furnishing entertainment and news to 100,000,000 people. These figures are so big that they are hard to grasp! Yet they are all true! Here is a new industry that has grown quickly into a commercial giant. No wonder great business leaders predict a brilliant future for this great and growing business.

Get Into This Field With a Future

There's opportunity for you in Radio. It's future is certain. Television, short wave, police Radio, automobile Radio, midget sets, talking movies, public address systems, aircraft Radio—in every branch, developments and improvements are taking place. Here is a real future for thousands and thousands of men who really know Radio. Get the training that opens the road to responsibility, good pay, and success! Send the coupon now and get full particulars on how easy and interesting I make learning at home. Read the letters from graduates who are today earning good money in this fascinating industry.

Many Make $5, $10, $15 a Week Extra in Spare Time Almost at Once

My book also tells how many of my students made $5, $10, and $15 a week extra servicing sets in spare time, soon after they enrolled. I give you plans and ideas that have made good spare-time money—$200 to $1,000 a year—for hundreds of fellows. My course is famous as "the one that pays for itself."

Money Back If Not Satisfied

I am so sure that N. R. I. can train you at home satisfactorily that I will agree in writing to refund every penny of your tuition if you are not satisfied with my Lessons and Instruction Service upon completion. You'll get a copy of this Agreement with my book.

64-page Book FREE

Get your copy today. It's free to any ambitious fellow over 15 years old. It tells you about Radio's spare-time and full-time job opportunities; it tells you all about my Course; what others who have taken it are doing and making. Find out what Radio offers YOU without the slightest obligation. MAIL THE COUPON NOW.

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Dept. 3KK7, Washington, D.C.

SPECIAL Radio Equipment for Broad Practical Experience *Given Without Extra Charge*

My Course is not all theory. I'll show you how to use my special Radio equipment for conducting experiments and building circuits which illustrate important principles used in such well-known sets as Westinghouse, General Electric, Philco, R. C. A., Victor, Majestic, and others. You work out with your own hands many of the things you read in our lesson books. This 50-50 method of training makes learning at home easy, interesting, fascinating, intensely practical. You can use N.R.I. equipment in your service work for extra money.

THIS COUPON IS GOOD for One FREE COPY OF MY BOOK — mail it now

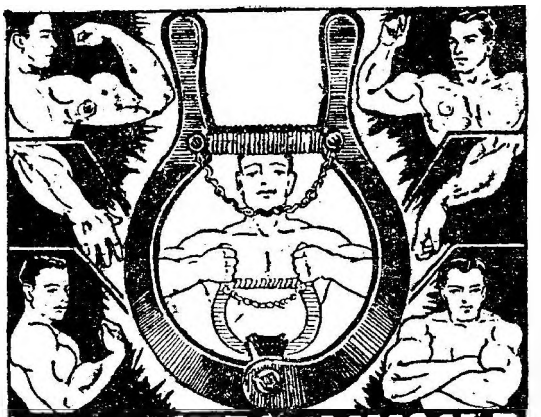
J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 3KK7
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send your free book about spare-time and full-time Radio opportunities and how I can train for them at home in my spare time. (Please print plainly.)

Name..... *Age*.....

Address .....

City..... *State*.....



4 INCHES OF MUSCLE PUT ON YOUR ARMS!

or we will refund your money!

The German Iron Shoe Muscle Builder . . .

is accepted as the greatest exerciser made to build giantlike arms, wide powerful shoulders, brawny back and tremendous chest. John Filepone added 5 inches to his arms, E. Peters 1 inch on each bicep the first week!

You Can Have Strength and a Physique the Equal of the

strongest professional athlete. You can become the center of attraction wherever you go. The question for you to decide is that you are going to have muscles that not only look good but are good. You have to get the steel sinews. The Iron Shoe will give you them in a super-state that cannot be equaled by any other apparatus or system. Some pupils report having put four inches on their biceps and got an increased shoulder spread of six inches.

SPECIAL FREE OFFER

The Iron Man's Famous 60-day illustrated Picture course of exercise instruction, and the Strength Resistor is included FREE! The greatest body building offer ever presented. Follow the choice of champions and get that grip of steel. Ring in now on our special offer for the lowest priced and biggest result getting exerciser under the sun. Send for free illustrated information. No obligation.

SEND COUPON TODAY!

American Athletic Appliance Company,
4324 Paul Street, Dept. PP10, Philadelphia, Pa.

Gentlemen: Without obligation and without cost, send particulars about your Iron Shoe Strength Builder and Special Offer.

Name .....

Address .....

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FREE FLYING TRAINING

given by the Army Air Corps, send for our booklet "FLYING WITH THE ARMY." Flying Cadets are paid a salary while learning, and get one year of training with 250 hours solo flying. Booklet tells how and where to apply. Prepared by a Veteran of the Air Corps. Price 20c, postpaid.

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USED AIRPLANES

$85 AND UP
CATALOG 10c

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SEND 25¢ FOR TRIAL SIZE

Don't be discouraged or alarmed when nature fails you. You can now depend on our new O. J. O. RELIEF COMPOUND (a Periodic Regulator) double strength. Often relieves unnatural irregularities, stubborn cases of long overdue delays, generally relieved very quickly. Absolutely safe, harmless. No inconvenience. Highly recommended and used by thousands of women for relief. We guarantee to ship orders same day received in plain wrapper, sealed. Send $2.00 box double strength, 3 for $5.00. Triple strength $5.00. Trial size, 25c. Don't delay, send order. FREE Booklet. A personal message to you.

O. J. O. MEDICAL CO., Dept. 214-D, 1434 N. Wells St., Chicago

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Help Kidneys

• Don't Take Drastic Drugs

You have nine million tiny tubes or filters in your Kidneys which may be endangered by using drastic, irritating drugs. Be careful. If poorly functioning Kidneys or Bladder make you suffer from Getting Up Nights, Leg Pains, Nervousness, Stiffness, Burning, Smarting, Acidity, Neuralgia or Rheumatic Pains, Lumbago or Loss of Vitality, don't waste a minute. Try the Doctor's prescription called Cystex (pronounced Siss-tex). Formula in every package. Starts work in 15 minutes. Soothes and tones raw, irritated tissues. It is helping millions of sufferers and is guaranteed to fix you up to your satisfaction or money back on return of empty package. Cystex is only 75c at all druggists.

Law!

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We guide you step by step—furnish all text material, including fourteen-volume Law Library. Training prepared by leading law professors and given by members of the bar. Degree of LL.B. conferred. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 64-page "Law Guide" and "Evidence" books free. Send for them NOW.

LaSalle Extension University, Dept. L-70 Chicago

NEW STUFF!

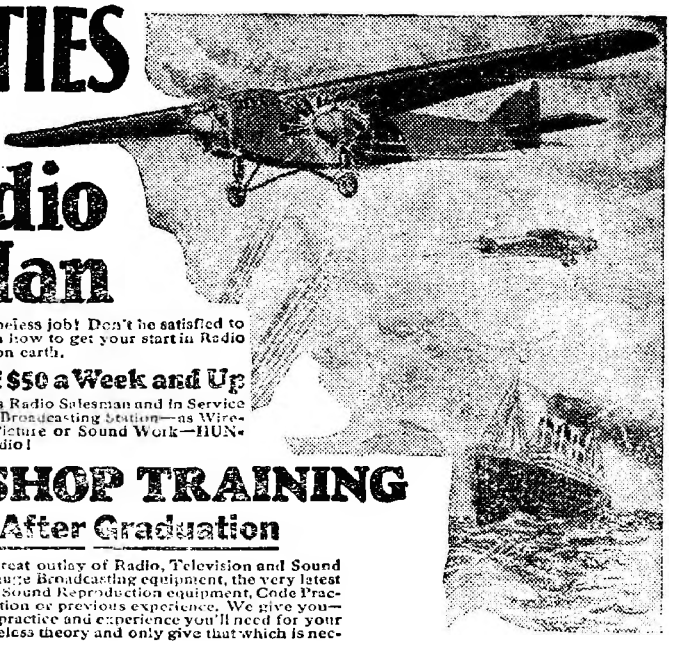
WINNIE WINKLE

For men only. Tillie & Mac, Toots & Casper, Boss & Bubbles, Fannie Hill, Only a Boy, Harold Teen & Lilums, Boob McNutt & Pearl, The Vampire, The End of Helen, What Tommy Saw Under the Parlor Door, Twelve Gay Love Letters Read Two Ways, Gay Life in Paris; also 50 Rare and Daring French type pictures. (Kind men like.) Also 50 Montmartre type pictures of beautiful girls in thrilling, snappy, artistic poses with their fellows. We fill orders the same day we receive them. All for only $1.00. Send cash, stamps or money order.

IMPERIAL NOVELTY CO.

175 FIFTH AVENUE NEW YORK CITY

OPPORTUNITIES *are many* for the Radio Trained Man



Don't spend your life slaving away in some dull, hopeless job! Don't be satisfied to work for a mere $20 or $30 a week. Let me show you how to get your start in Radio—the fastest-growing, biggest money-making game on earth.

JOBS LEADING to SALARIES of $50 a Week and Up

Prepare for jobs as Designer, Inspector and Tester—as Radio Salesman and in Service and Installation Work—as Operator or Manager of a Broadcasting Station—as Wireless Operator on a Ship or Airplane, or in Talking Picture or Sound Work—HUNDREDS of OPPORTUNITIES for a real future in Radio!

TEN WEEKS of SHOP TRAINING

Pay Your Tuition After Graduation

We don't teach by book study. We train you on a great outlay of Radio, Television and Sound equipment—on scores of modern Radio Receivers, huge Broadcasting equipment, the very latest and newest Television apparatus, Talking Picture and Sound Reproduction equipment, Code Practice equipment, etc. You don't need advanced education or previous experience. We give you—RIGHT HERE IN THE COYNE SHOPS—the actual practice and experience you'll need for your start in this great field. And because we cut out all useless theory and only give that which is necessary you get a practical training in 10 weeks.

TELEVISION *and* TALKING PICTURES

And Television is already here! Soon there'll be a demand for THOUSANDS of TELEVISION EXPERTS! The man who learns Television now can have a great future in this great new field. Get in on the ground-floor of this amazing new Radio development! Come to COYNE and learn Television on the very latest, newest Television equipment. Talking Picture and Public Address Systems offer opportunities to the Trained Radio Man. Here is a great new Radio field just beginning to grow! Prepare NOW for these wonderful opportunities! Learn Radio Sound Work at COYNE on actual Talking Picture and Sound Reproduction equipment.

PAY for YOUR TRAINING

After You Graduate

I am making an offer that no other school has dared to do. I'll take you here in my shops and give you this training and you pay your tuition after you have graduated. Two months after you complete my course you make your first payment and then you have ten months to complete your payments. There are no strings to this offer. I know a lot of honest fellows haven't got a lot of money these days, but still want to prepare themselves for a real job so they won't have to worry about hard times or lay offs.

I've got enough confidence in these fellows and in my training to give them the training they need and pay me back after they have their training. If you who read this advertisement are really interested in your future here is the chance of a lifetime. Mail the coupon today and I'll give you all the facts.

ALL PRACTICAL WORK

At COYNE in Chicago

ALL ACTUAL, PRACTICAL WORK. You build radio sets, install and service them. You actually operate great Broadcasting equipment. You construct Television Receiving Sets and actually transmit your own Television programs over our modern Television equipment. You work on real Talking Picture machines and Sound equipment. You learn Wireless Operating on actual Code Practice apparatus. We don't waste time on useless theory. We give you the practical training you'll need—in 10 short, pleasant weeks.

MANY EARN WHILE LEARNING

You get Free Employment Service for Life. And don't let lack of money stop you. Many of our students make all or a good part of their living expenses while going to school and if you should need this help just write to me. Coyne is 33 years old! Coyne Training is tested—proven beyond all doubt. You can find out everything absolutely free. Just mail coupon for my big free book!

H. C. Lewis, Pres. RADIO DIVISION Founded 1899

COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL

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Mail Coupon Today for All the Facts

H. C. LEWIS, President
Radio Division, Coyne Electrical School
500 S. Paulina St., Dept. 73-4K, Chicago, Ill.

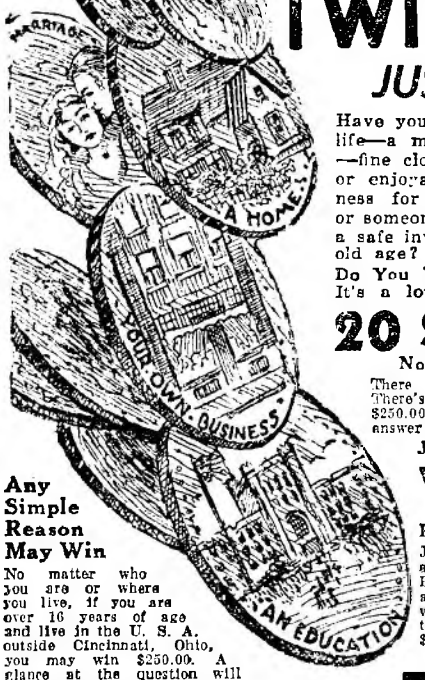
Dear Mr. Lewis:
Send me your Big Free Radio Book, and all details of your Special Offer, including your "Pay After Graduate" offer.

Name.....

Address.....

Town.....*State*.....

DO YOU WANT



I WILL PAY $250.00

JUST FOR THE WINNING ANSWER

Have you all the things you want in life—a motor car—a beautiful home—fine clothes—money for a vacation or enjoyable trips—to start a business for yourself—to give yourself or someone a higher education—or for a safe investment for a rainy day or old age?

Do You Want $3,500.00 . . . Why? It's a lot of money, in fact it's a FORTUNE. This very minute it will suggest much to you. You could do a lot with $3,500.00. Why do YOU want it?

I will pay $250.00 Cash for the best reasons for wanting that much money. That's a plain, simple offer. There is nothing to buy or sell to win the $250.00. Nothing else to do at all. I merely want the best reasons for wanting $3,500.00.

20 Simple Words WIN $250.00

Nothing More For You To Do! It Costs You Nothing To Win!

There is no way you can lose anything. There's nothing to buy or sell to win this $250.00 Prize. It will be given for the best answer to this question in the opinion of the judges. The answer that is in your mind right now may be the winning one! Simply tell me: "Do You Want $3,500.00 . . . Why?"

Just Sending Your Answer Qualifies You for the Opportunity to

WIN $3,500.00 CASH

First Grand Prize in Big $6,000.00 Prize Distribution—to be announced

Just think—you may actually win this fortune of $3,500.00 All Cash. Sending an answer immediately qualifies you for the opportunity to win $3,500.00 First Grand Prize in my big $6,000.00 Cash Distribution. 225 Grand Prizes! Everybody taking an active part will be rewarded! Before I give this money to the First Prize Winner, I would like to know how wisely this money will be spent. That's why I want you to tell me if you want $3,500.00 and why. You may be the one to win it:—besides $250.00 for sending the winning answer.

Use Coupon—Mail in Envelope or Paste on 1c Postal

Any Simple Reason May Win

No matter who you are or where you live, if you are over 16 years of age and live in the U. S. A. outside Cincinnati, Ohio, you may win $250.00. A glance at the question will quickly suggest some good reasons for wanting $3,500.00. Sending an answer will also qualify you for the opportunity to win $3,500.00 in our Final $6,000.00 Prize Distribution.

$100 Extra for Promptness

I will pay an Extra $100.00 Cash just for promptness or a total of $350.00 if the winning answer is mailed on the coupon within 3 days after reading this announcement. So write your answer and Rush it today — QUICK.

The Rules are Simple

Only one answer accepted from a family. Neatness, style of handwriting will not be considered. Judges will consider answer only for practical value of the idea. Duplicate prizes in case of ties. Answers must be postmarked not later than December 31, 1933. $250.00 will be paid for the best answer to "DO YOU WANT $3,500.00 . . . WHY?"—and $100.00 Extra if mailed within 3 days.

TOM WOOD, Mgr., H-O Bldg., Dept. HB-73-K, Cincinnati, O.

$250.00 PRIZE COUPON

TOM WOOD,
H-O Bldg., Dept. HB-73-K, Cincinnati, Ohio.
Yes, I want $3,500.00 and here are my reasons: (write your answer plainly on here, in 20 words or less)—

.....

.....

.....

Name.....

Address.....

Town..... State.....

Date I read this offer.....

EMPLOYES ONLY!

and Yet Ambitious Men are Getting in! The Question is "Are YOU Ambitious?"

COMMERCIAL Aviation is one of the very few industries that have grown in spite of the depression. A few years from now every town will have its airport or flying field. Air lines will cover the country like the railroads do today. Aviation is due for a big BOOM! It offers a lot, a great future, to men who train themselves for a place in it.

Right today, ambitious men who know something about airplanes and aviation as a business are getting through that gate you see up there. There's the same chance open to you, provided you'll do what most of them did **—back yourself with training.**

It doesn't matter what branch of Aviation appeals to you. Whether it's flying or a job on the ground—plenty of places will be open to the right men—the **trained men.** The question is—ARE YOU AMBITIOUS? Will you make the effort to make good?

Don't think that to learn aviation you must leave home, or give up your job. At small cost, I'll give you the important, fundamental "ground work" knowledge of Aviation that employers want. I give you this training right at home—by a home-study course that many other ambitious men have used and proved. The course is easy to understand — hundreds of photos, charts and diagrams make everything clear. In it I've packed the knowledge gained from eighteen years of practical experience and over 400,000 miles of flying. Send for my FREE book explaining everything — How I train you; what opportunities are open to you, and much more. Fill in the coupon and mail it today.

Walter Hinton
Former Navy flier, first to pilot a plane across the Atlantic (the NC-4), first to use an airplane in exploration work, instructor of war-time fliers at Pensacola, Florida. His home-study course, endorsed by prominent fliers and aircraft manufacturers.

Now District Traffic Agent

"When I finished your course I became connected with T.A.T., and am happy to state that promotion has come very rapidly. I shall always be grateful to you for your interest and cooperation." —C. E. McCollum, District Traffic Agent, T.A.T.-Maddox Air Lines.

Mail Now for Facts

Aviation Institute of U.S.A., Inc. 840-G
1115 Connecticut Ave., N.W.,
Washington, D. C.

Send me a FREE copy of your book, "Wings of Opportunity." I want to know about opportunities for me in Commercial Aviation.

Name .....

Address ..... Age .....

City ..... State .....

• • • •

Aviation Institute of U. S. A., Inc.
1115 Connecticut Ave., Washington, D. C.

The Bell-Tower Terror

By T. T. Flynn

Author of "The Golden Ghost," etc.

There by the bayou shore it hung, high up in its arched cubicle, that ancient devil bell, whose ghastly clangor sent murder echoes reverberating through the night. Why did its ringing always herald death? What phantom hands tolled out its brazen blood-song?

His fist hooked hard against de Lesseps' chin.

CHAPTER ONE

Beyond the Door

SHE came to the French Market for coffee and doughnuts at twenty minutes to midnight. It was Mardi Gras week and the world had converged on New Orleans. Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief—you found them all during this week of festivity. Found them at the exclusive balls, Comus, Momus, Proteus and Rex. Found them in the jammed hotels, the homes, in the masked crowds jostling sidewalks and streets. And of course in the French Market around midnight.

Grenville was thinking that, as he shook powdered sugar over a hot doughnut and surveyed the boisterous merry crew that filled the shabby room. If you know New Orleans, you know the rite of coffee and doughnuts late at night. The market stall stands open to the narrow street, sawdust on the floor, long narrow marble counters cracked and stained, and the haunting smell of fresh coffee and doughnuts strong in the air. Coffee and doughnuts only are served, and seldom forgotten. Wait long enough by those

worn marble counters and you are apt to see almost anyone. The shabby little market room is one of the famous crossroads of the world.

The place was crowded this night. Masked and unmasked men and women drifted in and out in a steady stream. A newsboy was crying his wares. The white-aproned waiters were bustling about with great nickeled pots of coffee and milk and plates of fresh doughnuts. Gaiety permeated the air as she came in out of the night and stopped inside the doorway.

GRENVILLE was probably the only one who noticed her. The battered shaker of powdered sugar stayed motionless in his hand for a moment as he stared. She was not masked. A light evening cloak was wrapped closely about her small, slender figure. Grenville barely noticed the departing cab from which she had emerged. Other women in the room were more striking, more beautiful, but she came out of the night with something none of them had. She came hurriedly, expectantly, lips parted with eagerness and dark eyes searching the room.

Grenville's quick glance marked the dark hair drawn low over her temples and caught up in the back in an imperious little mound. Her wide eyes were dark, slightly slanting at the corners with a haunting suggestion of oriental mystery. Her nose was finely arched, her cheekbones high, with faint shadows falling away beneath, and her mouth was large, with red parted lips of generosity. Beneath the imperceptible shading of her make-up the skin had a soft creamy tinge that Grenville recognized at once. There was Creole blood in this girl who stood searching so eagerly for someone. The old blended blood lines of the French and Spanish civilizations which had ruled the walled city of New Orleans in the past.

She stood aloof and alone, with a breath of that old imperiousness about her. Grenville marked the swift disappointment in her eyes. She had expected to meet someone who was not there. A couple got up beside her. She slipped onto one of the stools, gave her order and sat nervously while she was served. Her head turned quickly to scan each newcomer who appeared in the entrance. Grenville finished his coffee and ordered more. He was covertly watching her profile, fine, clean-cut, haunting. He had seen just such faces in old French prints. Grand ladies who had moved through history in the grand manner.

Watching her and the open doorway beyond, he noted subconsciously the shadowy figure of a man lurking beside a pile of market crates across the narrow street. It made no impression at the moment. Grenville was finding a small bit of adventure in watching for the person she expected.

Midnight came and went to the dull, distant booming of the bells in the St. Louis Cathedral on Jackson Square, south of the market. The crowd thinned out. Newcomers were more infrequent. And finally, with a last look about, she walked slowly out and turned west, afoot, without a backward glance.

Grenville fumbled for a cigarette regretfully, his eyes still on the doorway through which she had vanished. It had been a pleasant little interlude in the dry stretch of a business trip. She had given him imagination and the vision of things out and beyond the humdrum existence which flowed busily before the eyes. He wondered what had brought her here to the French Market with such expectancy; and felt a little envious of the person she had waited for. Memory of her dark, slightly slanted eyes was still with him when he snapped shut his cigarette case and rose slowly to his feet, staring out of the open entrance.

The dark lurking figure beside the piled crates across the street had galvanized into life and headed west also. West, not far behind the girl who had walked off alone.

IN Centre Street, in Manhattan, Tony Grenville was known as one of the most promising young men of the safe-and-loft squad. Which is to say his acquaintance among a certain strong-armed, sly, furtive and dangerous fraternity was extensive and his methods of dealing with them highly successful. That accounted for his presence in New Orleans, on the nebulous trail of a certain Anselmo Scarlatti who was supposed to be fencing the results of a series of daring safe robberies in the cloak-and-garment district. But Scarlatti had vanished for the time being, and this was New Orleans during Mardi Gras, and a slender girl was walking west through the dark narrow streets. . . .

Tony Grenville saw her under the street light half a block ahead as he left the lighted entrance of the coffee stall behind him. She was walking swiftly, not looking back, apparently unaware that a dark figure was pacing her on the other side of the street. Grenville crossed to that side of the street and became a part of the black shadowy night. It was not unlike some of the narrow little cañons off Grand Street in New York, through which he had tailed armed men more dangerous than that figure ahead could be. One thing only was absent—the feeling of teeming, restless life crammed and packed into tenements all about. Here in the Vieux Carre, the ancient walled city of New Orleans, was black, quiet, mystery. The ghosts of those freebooters and cavaliers who had gone before seemed to lurk about the streets and the dark hidden courtyards. Grenville breathed deep and flexed his muscles, content that he had no gun.

She walked swiftly past one street corner without looking back. The figure who trailed her crossed over to that side also. And as if that was a signal a closed car purred up and swung in toward the curb ahead of her. Grenville saw clearly what was going to happen and lengthened his stride.

She was just ahead of the machine when the trailing figure closed up on her. The car moved up in low gear, hiding what happened. And Grenville sprinted across the street on his toes, swearing softly under his breath.

She made no outcry. A hand across her mouth prevented that. Grenville saw the grim little scene silhouetted against the scabrous light at the next street intersection as he burst around the rear of the machine. A hand over her mouth from behind held her silent as she struggled against the sudden attack. The rear door of the machine had been opened. She was lifted bodily from the sidewalk, thrust toward it, arms pinioned helplessly.

Grenville saw dimly the driver twisted in the front seat, another figure in the back crouching in the open car door to receive her—and the next instant his hundred and seventy odd pounds of springy frame exploded on the scene without warning. His fist smashed full into her attacker's cheek, backed by the force of his rush.

He had a savage moment of satisfaction as the shock traveled clear to his shoulder, and the fellow spun helplessly away before him, groggy, half out.

A sharp oath of warning came from the front seat as Grenville pivoted toward the car. He had guessed right. The man in the back was lunging out toward him, snatching under his coat as he came.

"Yeah?" said Grenville through his

teeth, and he met the fellow with a looping uppercut. Not to the face—the jaw. Under the jaw that blow went, driving deep into the soft flesh, the cartilage of neck and windpipe.

It was a killing blow, numbing, shocking, certain when landed right, as now. The fellow, stocky and powerful in the vague light, uttered one sobbing gasp as he reeled into the door. A gun dropped metallically to the concrete; both hands went mechanically to his throat. Gagging, retching in agony, he fell back helplessly into the car.

GRENVILLE snatched the gun from the curbstone at his feet. It was a revolver, a thirty-two by the feel of it, and he smiled with contentment as he straightened with it in his hand. The man who had attacked her had reeled opposite the front bumper, saving himself from going down by his hold on her. Head and shoulders taller, he kept one hand across her shoulder and over her mouth while he grabbed at a rear pocket under his coat.

Another gun, and that slender girl for a shield! Grenville weaved in, knowing it must end quickly one way or the other. He half expected a shot in the back from the front seat of the machine as he went. This was worse than he had feared.

The motor beside him raced suddenly. Rear tires screeched on the asphalt as the machine leaped forward. Grenville saw the tall figure before him give one startled look—and then the girl was thrown violently into his arms. Her assailant hurled himself on the running board as the machine rushed past.

Thrown off balance, his arms going around her mechanically in support, Grenville saw the fellow dive into the back of the machine. The door slammed shut. The speeding car raced down the street with its red tail-light winking over a license plate he could not read.

It swung around the next corner and vanished.

"Damn!" Grenville said regretfully.

A choked voice against his chest said: "I think I can stand up now."

Grenville discovered that he was crushing her to him. He dropped his arms and stepped back, smiling apologetically. "Sorry," he said. "I—er—forgot about you for a moment. Hated to see them get away."

Her hair was disarranged. While her fingers made mysterious movements that magically brought it to order, her eyes studied him. She was pale through the dark shadows mantling them. He could see the rapid rise and fall of her small firm breasts under the thin black cloak. She had been through a shock that would have reduced most women to hysterics. She was shaken, but not unnerved. Indeed it seemed to Grenville that the suggestion of imperiousness he had first noticed about her was still there.

His soft gray hat had fallen to the sidewalk. He picked it up.

She said abruptly: "You were drinking coffee back at the French Market."

"Guilty."

He could see the slight frown that furrowed between her eyes. "Queer that you should be here now, when I needed you."

"Not at all," said Grenville. "Suppose you come with me to the nearest telephone while I report this. There's still time to pick them up. I should have emptied the gun at their tires. Might have hit one, or—"

"I'm glad you didn't," she said swiftly. "It would have brought the whole quarter about our ears."

Her voice was steady, low, pleasant, with none of the clipped accent he had heard on some of the lips in the French quarter.

"Perhaps you can tell me where there is a telephone," Grenville said.

"Don't bother," she told him. "I doubt if there is a chance to catch them. Besides, I—I don't want publicity."

Grenville wrapped the revolver in his handkerchief and slipped it in his coat pocket. "There may be some fingerprints left on the gun," he said. "And if not, there's a good chance the police can trace it down by the serial number."

"Isn't it yours?"

"No. The man in the back of the car dropped it."

"Oh—I thought you were armed." She tilted her head, looked into his face. "You ran into this unarmed, knowing you might be hurt?"

"I've handled their kind before," Grenville said briefly.

"May I see that revolver, please?"

Grenville surrendered it. She slipped it into a pocket of her cloak, said with a slight smile: "I think I'll keep it, if you don't mind, as—as a little memento of this."

"That's the only way we can possibly trace them," Grenville objected.

"I don't think I want them traced."

It was a new idea. Grenville bit his lip, eyed her narrowly. "You know who they are," he guessed.

"It doesn't matter. Didn't I see you at the French Market?"

"You did," he assented. "I saw you come in a machine, look for someone who didn't show up, and then walk off alone. Perhaps you didn't know it, but the chap who grabbed you was standing across the street while you were waiting. I saw him follow you and tagged along."

She considered that gravely, and then inclined her head with a thankful gesture. He was grateful that she did not break into profuse appreciation. She was, in a remarkable manner, holding true to the picture he had first built up around her.

"I am grateful, of course," she said slowly. "And I will be doubly grateful if you will forget what has happened. No one was hurt, and—and I think it best." Her eyes searched his face. When he did not answer, she asked anxiously: "Will you do that?"

GRENVILLE looked past the smooth dark hair crowning her head. He was listening to a still small whisper that had often served him well. A thumping mystery lurked here. Much was hidden from him. Perhaps that had first drawn his attention to her. Stranger things had happened. Queerer hunches had led him off on invisible trails that had proved worth investigating. Mystery always challenged—without the inducement of such a girl as now stood before him.

"My name is Grenville," he said abruptly. "I'll see you safely home, Miss —er—"

"Joan de Lesseps," she told him calmly. "And I don't think that is necessary, Mr. Grenville. I have only a short distance to go."

"I'm going," he said firmly. "I'm a stranger in town and I don't like the looks of these streets just now. You may run into more trouble. If you'll feel better, I'll keep it from the police. It's your business."

"A stranger in town?" she repeated with a note of relief. "Why—why, yes, you may then."

He fell into step beside her. They walked in silence. Under the next street light Grenville saw that her face was grave, preoccupied. She seemed to be thinking of things far from them.

They came to Royal. She turned left, south, still walking silently. Away from the tiny oasis of life in the French Market the streets were quiet, deserted. A street car rumbled past, filled with merry-makers from the Canal Street district,

and then it was gone and the quiet was about them again.

Her heels tapped steadily on the sidewalk. Grenville wondered who she had waited for so anxiously; wondered who she was; who the three men were who had tried to take her. The snatch racket was not new to him. This didn't follow the rules. He had not missed her relief at hearing he was a stranger in town. He made a note to look up the name of de Lesseps. It fitted her Creole blood and the brooding narrow streets of this ancient quarter. Broadway and Forty-second Street seemed far distant in those moments.

She turned right on Ste. Anne, turned left on Bourbon, walking steadily toward some certain destination. They passed low stone steps, walked under ancient handwrought iron balconies, left behind high blank wooden doors hung on old strap-iron hinges. The misty past lived about them on every side.

She stopped abruptly and said: "This is where I live, Mr. Grenville. Thank you for everything. Good night."

The hand she gave him in farewell was warm, firm, generous in its grateful pressure. Her face was grave, pale, as she looked up at him. And Tony Grenville, who had seen trouble in many forms, knew that it was heavy on her slender shoulders.

His reply was never uttered. He felt the quick convulsive contraction of her hand as she heard the same thing he did. The low, moaning chatter coming through the heavy wooden door behind her.

"Debbil done hit. Debbil done hit. Lawd he'p us. Lawd he'p us. Stop de bell, de bell, de bell. . . ."

Joan de Lesseps tore her hand away and turned to the door, gasping: "That's Aunt Crony! Something's happened!"

Grenville did not need her words to tell him that. Sheer, stark terror cloaked the mumbled words drifting out to them. The wild, terrible fear of an untutored mind fighting frightful phantoms.

CHAPTER TWO

The Body by the Pool

JOAN DE LESSEPS had produced a key magically, was fumbling feverishly at the door lock. Grenville had to stand by helplessly while the terrified mutterings droned on and on inside.

The house, like many others in the old French quarter, was divided in the center by a passage that ran tunnel-like under the second story to an inner courtyard. Flush with the sidewalk was a high, massive wooden door hung on great strap hinges. It was that door she was trying to unlock.

The key grated. She pushed the door in, slipped through. Grenville followed closely behind her. Pitch blackness filled the space inside. Enough light struck in from the street to show the old, black, withered crone hunkered against the brick side wall inside, staring vacantly as she chattered her eery terror.

"—de bell, de bell. Lawd he'p us. Debbil done hit. Debbil done hit. . . . "

Joan de Lesseps stooped, caught her shoulder, said sharply: "Crony! What is it?"

The old woman seemed oblivious of their presence. Her rheumy eyes continued to stare fixedly before her and her mutterings did not stop.

"Let me try," Grenville said briefly.

He bent, slapped one withered cheek smartly. "What is it?" he demanded gruffly.

The old crone, coal-black, little more than a bundle of bones in a voluminous dress, shuddered, lifted her eyes with the blank manner of one coming out of a trance.

"Crony—what are you doing here, acting like this?" That was Joan de Lesseps speaking with a curt note of authority.

Recognition flashed across Crony's wrinkled face. She threw herself forward, clasping Joan de Lesseps about the knees.

"*Mon dieu! C'est mort!* Ah, *mamselle, la cloche du diable* he reeng so las' week! *Il est mort! Mon dieu!* De bell—de bell—Lawd he'p us. . . . "

It was strange to hear the French from those black lips. Grenville had heard of Creole Negroes who spoke French as fluently as their white folks. This was the first time he had met it face to face. He understood the words well enough. Someone was dead. The devil's bell had rung last week—and now. . . .

Joan de Lesseps lifted the old woman to her feet. Her voice was clear, steady, without fright as she asked: "What do you mean? Who is dead?"

"De big marsta'!" gulped the old woman, whose years must have reached back to the days of slavery. She raised one trembling hand and pointed back into the blackness. And suddenly her emaciated body seemed to shrink, collapse, and she slid down on her heels once more and began to moan and mumble to herself.

The wan light from the street struck full on Joan de Lesseps' pale face as she looked up at Grenville. He noted her hands clenched tightly at her side. She was fighting for self-control.

"I—I'm afraid something has happened," she said unsteadily. "Would you mind seeing me through this?"

Grenville laid a hand on her arm. He could feel it trembling. It had not trembled so when she herself was in danger. Now even that slight rift in her cool imperiousness touched him. "Chin up," he urged. "I'll see about it. Is there a light handy?"

"There's a switch at the back of the passage. Crony must have been too frightened to think of it. I'll turn it on."

She moved ahead of him into the blackness, her black cloak melting into it. Grenville's following hand found her as she stopped. A moment later a switch clicked softly and the inner courtyard before them sprang into dim relief.

IT WAS perhaps thirty feet square, with the house walls rising high over every side, and second-story balconies overhanging it. A small brick curb in the center inclosed a little pool into which a tiny stream of water trickled musically. Tall graceful bamboo stalks rose from a flower bed in one corner, and near them a dwarf banana stalk grew to the height of a man's head. The light struck from white clusters of oleander flowers, and the heavy sweet, exotic smell of magnolias filled the air. Spring had come early this year.

Joan de Lesseps cast one quick look about and said: "I don't see anything."

"Stay here," Grenville replied. "I'll look."

He skirted the little pool and almost stumbled over the prone figure lying in the shadows on the other side. She saw him bend over, and reached his side in a little rush. A whimpering cry burst from her at the sight. Before Grenville could stop her she had dropped to her knees on the damp, lichened bricks beside the pool.

"Uncle Adrian! Uncle Adrian!"

Grenville reached for a wrist to feel the pulse, and dropped it as soon as he touched it. The flesh was already cooling. The man had been dead some time.

He lay there on the cold bricks, half on his side, one arm across his chest and the other out slack. Sparse hair was snowy white, and a white mustache and beard, close-clipped, gave an air of distinction to the thin, aristocratic face. At

least sixty, Grenville guessed swiftly, as he said: "There's nothing we can do. Better call a doctor."

She took his hand and stood up, staring at him dry-eyed. "I don't understand it," she gulped. "His health was perfect. I talked to him this afternoon and there was nothing wrong. He was starting for the plantation in the morning, full of plans and fight, and—" She broke off, as if suddenly realizing she had said too much.

"Full of fight?" Grenville repeated quickly. "What kind of fight?"

"It doesn't matter," she parried hurriedly. "He was planning on hard work for the next few weeks."

"Your uncle, I take it."

"Yes. Adrian de Lesseps. More like a father," she said in a tight voice. "He reared my brother and myself."

The old Negress was still mumbling where they had left her. The terror in her voice stole through the dim-lit courtyard. A chill current of air struck down from some point above. Joan de Lesseps shivered, drew her dark cloak more tightly about her.

Grenville leaned toward her, fingers of one hand outspread as they dropped on her arm. "What did she mean by the bell, and referring to the devil? She's badly frightened. Something besides your uncle is responsible for it."

"You—you understand French?"

"A little. Enough to get what she was saying. What is the devil's bell that rang last week?" Tony Grenville asked her, and as he waited for the answer the chill current of air struck them once more, and he had the mad thought that they were not alone. Death lay at their feet, and an old Negress was muttering in terror. The presence of something furtive, hidden, that one did not speak about, was with them, about them, between them. The pale mask Joan de Lesseps' face had become made him certain of it. She looked frightened.

And there was fright in her voice as she denied quickly: "Crony did not know what she was saying. Her kind are always superstitious. The old ones especially. She was probably saying the first thing that came to mind. She was alone here, and—and this naturally shocked her. I had locked the door. She could not get out. It—it upset her badly. You see—"

"I see," Grenville nodded.

She was talking to cover distress, confusion. Talking to get his mind off those references to a bell. The devil's bell that rang last week—and now Adrian de Lesseps, the big master, was dead. And terror had touched mistress and servant alike. There was mystery here, grim, threatening. . . .

TONY GRENVILLE looked down at Adrian de Lesseps. His mind was nimbly conning such facts as he knew. She had come in anxiety and eagerness to meet someone late at night in the French Market. Disappointed, she had started home afoot, and men who had followed her to the market had tried to kidnap her. Something had made her wish to keep it from the police. And from there she had walked straight into the presence of death, terror, mystery. Nothing concrete to put a finger on. But Grenville felt it.

How had Adrian de Lesseps died?

Enough had been said to make Grenville suspicious. He looked down at the body thoughtfully. There were no signs of violence.

Joan de Lesseps said: "The telephone is connected. Will you come with me? I'll call the family doctor." She could not keep the grief out of her voice.

Grenville barely heard her. He was conning the thing with a professional eye. Adrian de Lesseps was fully dressed

in a light, thin-textured business suit. A patch of white under the ruffled surface of the small pool caught his eye. He put a hand on the low, damp brick coping, brushed coat and shirt sleeve up against his side and reached into the water.

He brought up a sodden white panama of fine expensive weave. Water trickled from it, spatted loudly at his feet as he asked her: "Is this his hat?"

"Yes," she said thinly.

"He was dressed for the street," Grenvill said. "Would he be going out or coming in?"

"Coming in, I suppose," she assented wearily. "I believe he meant to go out this evening. I haven't been here since five o'clock. It must have been—heart failure."

And Grenville could have sworn she was trying to convince herself, against her better judgment, by that statement. Rapidly he checked off the things that might have pointed to murder.

A shot would have been heard, investigated.

A knife would have left blood as evidence. There was no blood.

A club or heavy instrument would have left signs of violence.

Poison could hardly have been administered with such uncanny accuracy that the man could walk into his own courtyard before feeling the effects, and drop there. Poisons left their traces also. They were not present here.

De Lesseps had walked home in good health, let himself in and proceeded as far as the courtyard. He had dropped there, after a struggle which had knocked his hat into the water. Grenville knelt by the body again and struck a match.

He found the skin broken on the back of the left hand. There was a slight stain of blood and tiny fragments of torn skin under the nails of the right hand.

More matches flared, cast their feeble light. Adrian de Lesseps' black string tie was awry. The top button of the collar had been torn loose. On each side of the windpipe were purple bruises where powerful fingers had dug deep.

The last match arced, winked out as Grenville flipped it away and rose to his feet.

"I'm afraid we'll have to call the police," he said softly. "This is murder."

Joan de Lesseps uttered a choked little cry. "It can't be! You must be mistaken!"

"He was throttled. Someone was waiting here when he returned. Where's the telephone?" Grenville asked gently.

She opened a door at the left of the tunnel-like passage, took him through a narrow hall into a long living room. Stood numbly there under the light while he talked to headquarters.

Grenville put the telephone down and said to her: "They'll be here shortly. Better have a drink if it's here."

Her eyes were dark pools of misery in a pale face. She seemed to have aged since he had first seen her. She was biting her lip, fighting for self-control. "I'll be all right," she got out jerkily. Her hand wavered to her throat, she swayed. . . .

Grenville caught her before she slipped to the floor, lifted her easily to a tapestried couch against the wall. She had held control magnificently until tightening nerves snapped.

"DAMN!" Grenville said regretfully, and scowled about for water. A key grating in the front door brought him around. A tall young man in evening clothes staggered into the room, brought up with a lurch, staring owlishly. His flushed face suddenly twisted in anger.

"Who th' devil are you?" he demanded loudly. "Wha's matter w-with m' sister?"

Grenville had already marked the re-

semblance, and the weak mouth and chin Joan de Lesseps lacked. Her brother was older by a year or so; perhaps twenty-five or six at the most. His blinking eyes were bloodshot as he glared, fists clenched.

"Take it easy," Grenville suggested. "She fainted. We found your uncle dead in the courtyard. I've just reported it. Where can I get some water?"

"'S' lie, damn you! Get out! I'll help 'er. Go on, get out!" He staggered forward a step and caught Grenville's arm.

Grenville knocked the hand away. "Watch it," he warned. "There's trouble here."

"Got her drunk, didn' you? Always preachin' t' me, 'n' look at her! Gonna throw you out!" A wild swing missed as Grenville ducked lightly.

"You drunken fool!" Grenville said in disgust. "You want it—and here it is!"

His bunched fist hooked short, hard, against young de Lesseps' chin, driving him staggering to the wall, where he slid down to the floor. De Lesseps sat there dazedly, supporting himself with one hand, rubbing his jaw with the other.

The screen door swung open, slammed shut. A biting voice said: "What is this? Did you do that? He's drunk!"

Taller than Jack de Lesseps, half a head better than Grenville himself, the newcomer was built in proportion, broad-shouldered, thick-waisted, with a big face all muscles and bone. His lips were heavy, nose bold, eyes sullen, challenging under thick black brows. He was about thirty. Despite his bulk there was something feline about him, even in formal evening clothes. He moved easily, with the perfect flow of coordinated muscles.

Grenville rubbed the knuckles of his right hand into his left palm. "Are you drunk too?" he asked.

"Damn you, no!"

"Then have sense enough to see there's trouble here," Grenville said curtly. "Miss de Lesseps has fainted. Her uncle is in the courtyard, dead. The police have been notified. If this young sponge gets noisy again before they come, I'll throw him out, and you too if you interfere."

White teeth bared for a moment; and then swift concern wiped the dark scowl away. "Adrian dead?" the other burst out.

"Yes. Murdered."

"I don't believe we've met. I'm Lloyd Freeman, a cousin."

"Grenville's my name. De Lesseps was choked to death. The marks are on his throat."

"The bell!" Lloyd Freeman burst out. "It rang last week!" He wheeled to Jack de Lesseps who was still fingering his jaw. He jerked the young man upright, shook him. "Did you hear that? Uncle Adrian's dead! Murdered! It's the bell!"

ONLY a shock could have wiped away Jack de Lesseps' fogginess so quickly. He gripped his cousin's shoulder, fingers digging deep.

"Wh-what's that?" he stuttered. "The bell? Uncle Adrian's dead?" He gulped. "You're lying! Trying to pull my leg! Mon dieu—I'm not that drunk!"

Lloyd Freeman shook him again.

"It's the truth! Get it through your head! The bell is ringing again! For us! All of us! It rang last week—and now Uncle Adrian's gone."

Jack de Lesseps' hand shook as the back brushed across his mouth. His glance, haunted, furtive, searched his cousin's face. Slowly it went to Grenville, to his sister.

"I don't believe it!" he whispered. "They've been lying to us about that bell! It's damn nonsense! I don't believe it!"

Freeman shrugged, released him. "It

doesn't matter. Adrian's gone now. But let's hope the bell doesn't ring again."

Jack de Lesseps pushed him away, sudden passion marking his loose mouth.

"Keep quiet about that damn bell!" he cried out violently. "I won't listen to such tales! You'll have me believing it next! Where's your flask?"

"Empty," Freeman told him. "Go upstairs and lie down if this upsets you. Keep your mind off the bell. It's probably coincidence."

"Sure—coincidence," Jack de Lesseps mumbled. "We'll forget about it." He left the room without glancing at his sister again.

Grenville had the uncanny feeling that young de Lesseps' last words were meant to cover a growing terror. He was talking—as Joan de Lesseps had talked—to convince himself against his better judgment.

Lloyd Freeman stood motionless while his cousin left the room. His head shook slowly, regretfully. There was concern on his face as he swung about, stepped lightly to the couch and looked down at Joan de Lesseps.

"Does she need a doctor?" he asked Grenville.

"I doubt it."

She confirmed this by stirring uneasily. A low, shuddering sigh slipped from her parted lips. Color began to tint her waxen cheeks. She opened her eyes, caught her breath, sat up, with Freeman's assistance.

"I just came in and heard about it, Joan. I—I can't believe it's true. But it must be, if it made you faint. Poor kid." Freeman's voice was surprisingly gentle as he sat beside her, holding her hand.

She drew it away, cast a look of apology at Grenville. "Silly of me. I've never done this before. You've met my cousin, Mr. Freeman, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Grenville.

A police siren wailed in the street outside. Grenville suggested quickly: "You'd better get that old woman to her room. She's talking wildly."

"Yes. Help me, Lloyd. Mr. Grenville, will you let the police in through this room and take them into the courtyard? I'm putting you to a lot of trouble, but —but—" Her plea was unuttered but plain. She needed help now and was turning to him.

"Gladly," Grenville said, and meant it. Not only for the chance it gave him to probe deeper into this mystery, but because Joan de Lesseps herself asked it.

CHAPTER THREE

Murder Madi Gras

A HEAVY hand rapped on the outer screen door as Joan de Lesseps and her cousin left the room. And abruptly Grenville found himself on familiar ground once more. He opened the door and found a detail from headquarters before him. Four of them, plainclothes coppers, like himself.

"We're from police headquarters—homicide squad," the nearest man said.

They tramped after him in stolid silence. Joan de Lesseps and her cousin were just taking the old Negress through a doorway in the opposite side of the courtyard. The leader of the detail, a spare, sharp-faced man in his late forties, saw them, asked in a clipped voice: "Who's that?"

"Miss de Lesseps and a cousin who came a few minutes ago," Grenville explained. "An old Negress who has been with the family most of her life is taking it hard. They're trying to quiet her."

"Niggers always get worked up over anything like this. Where's the body?"

Flashlight beams were already stabbing about the courtyard. One found Adrian

de Lesseps' legs beyond the brick coping. They gathered about the body. The tall spare one said to Grenville: "Who reported this as a murder?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"Look at his throat and under his fingernails."

The lights focused there. A detective whistled softly. "Choked the livin' life right out of him!"

Grenville said: "He evidently struggled. I found his hat in the water where it had been knocked from his head."

The tall one said bruskly: "You know a lot about this. How did you think to look at his throat?"

"It's my business. I'm Grenville, safe-and-loft squad, New York. I contacted your department day before yesterday. You can check me at headquarters."

Invisible barriers against an outsider cleared away. "I wondered," said the spare one drily. "Most folks are too excited to think in a case like this. I'm Welch, assistant head of homicide. These boys are Malloy and Hewett. And Rice, fingerprints. How do you happen to be in on this?"

"I came home with Miss de Lesseps," Grenville explained. "The old Negress found the body first. He's Adrian de Lesseps, an uncle. He had evidently been out all evening and just come in as far as the courtyard here. That's all anyone seems to know. As soon as I noticed his throat I called in."

Grenville admitted that, and nothing more, deliberately. He wanted to see how much Joan de Lesseps would tell them.

Welch shoved his hat on the back of his head, turned to his men.

"Malloy, see what you can get out of that nigger. Tell Miss de Lesseps I want to see her. Rice, I guess there's nothing much you can do about prints right now. Look around. You do the same, Hewett. What doors were open here, Mr. Grenville?"

"All the outer doors were locked as far as I know," Grenville declared.

Welch sucked his lower lip between his teeth. The gesture gave to his thin face a sharp, ferretlike, questing air. Here was a man, Grenville decided, who got his teeth into a thing and hung on doggedly until he had the answer.

"Got any ideas about this," Welch asked Grenville.

"Sorry. I don't know the family. Only met Miss de Lesseps this evening."

"You wouldn't know much, then," Welch agreed. He cocked his head, listened, said: "There's the ambulance siren. They always beat the coroner's men. Better let the interne in, Grenville, while I look around."

GRENVILLE went back through the house again, opened the front door, admitted a young white-coated interne with a black bag. The police and ambulance sirens had roused the neighborhood. A small crowd was gathering before the house. A young man, wearing a soft hat pulled low, tried to follow the interne in.

"I represent The Times-Picayune," he said briskly as Grenville barred his way. "What has happened?"

Grenville placed a hand against the young man's chest, propelled him outside and locked the screen door.

"Take the air," he growled. "And if I find you coming up through the drain, I'll put my foot in your face." He closed the door, said over his shoulder to the interne as he locked it: "Straight back into the courtyard."

Grenville put a cigarette between his lips and lingered in the living room, seeing it clearly for the first time. A large red rug covered the floor. The furniture was walnut and red plush. Flowered glass

vases and Dresden china bric-à-brac were scattered on a wooden mantel and two small tables stood against the wall. Three portraits, dark with age, hung on the walls. One was of a tall aristocratic man in clothes of the early eighteen hundreds. The other two were slender, gracious ladies in hoop skirts and bonnets. The younger was about the age of Joan de Lesseps. Her slightly slanting eyes looked down at him with the same hint of oriental inscrutability. The resemblance was startling.

Looking at the old-fashioned furniture and those portraits of past generations, Grenville realized that the de Lesseps family had its roots far back in the history of New Orleans and the Mississippi delta country. And he wondered what the mystery was that reached out from the past to threaten, terrify the members of this present generation.

The old Negress knew. Joan de Lesseps and her brother knew. Lloyd Freeman, a cousin, was no stranger to it. And none of them wished to discuss it.

The interne was finishing his examination when Grenville returned to the courtyard. "Dead a matter of at least two hours," he was saying to Welch. "Someone strangled him with bare hands. His fingernails show that he put up some fight. When you get the killer, you'll probably find him scratched pretty deeply on face or hands. This seems to be about all I can do. Good night, gentlemen."

Detective Malloy, stocky, red-faced, with a rolling gait suggesting a ship's deck, appeared as the interne hurried off. Joan de Lesseps and her cousin followed.

Malloy was chewing gum. His jaws continued their steady champing as he said to Welch in a colorless voice: "Couldn't get much out of the nigger. She's so old she doesn't get it all. She claims she dozed all evening in the kitchen, an' when she heard the cathedral clock striking midnight she came out to see if her white folks had returned. She was carrying a candle and had light enough to discover the body. Doesn't remember anything after that except she waited for her white folks to come back and take charge."

"Waited, did she?" Welch snorted. "Funny she didn't telephone the police or run out in the street for help!"

Joan de Lesseps, standing beside Malloy, said evenly: "Aunt Crony is over ninety. Her mind is cloudy. All she could think of was to wait for me."

"Yes, yes—of course," Welch agreed politely. "You probably know her best. Did she hear any sounds here in the courtyard?"

"No," Joan de Lesseps said calmly. "She was dozing all evening."

Welch pushed his hat forward, moved a step nearer her. He sucked his lip in, looked more ferretlike than ever. A tall lank ferret, polite, dogged. "You and Mr. Grenville returned together, I understand?" he said courteously.

"We—we did." Her inscrutable eyes sought Grenville. She seemed to be mutely inquiring how much he had told Welch. They could not talk. Grenville barely moved his head, hoped she understood.

"I'm sorry to touch on such a distressing subject, Miss de Lesseps," Welch went on smoothly, "but can you give me any reason why your uncle's life might have been attempted?"

Grenville found himself listening tensely for her reply, and when it came he was startled, mystified.

"No," Joan de Lesseps denied evenly. "He had no enemies that I know of. He was the soul of kindness and consideration."

"Are there valuables in the house? Has it been ransacked?"

"Not that I have discovered so far,"

she told Welch. "We never keep valuables here. The family silver and jewelry are in a bank vault. We transact financial matters by check."

"Where was your uncle this evening?"

"I believe he intended to spend the evening with Mr. Delbort, the president of the Delta Exchange Bank. They are old friends."

Welch thrust out his lip, looked baffled. "Safe enough company," he admitted.

LLOYD FREEMAN cleared his throat challengingly. "This neighborhood is thickly settled with foreigners," he said. "Some pretty bad characters live between here and the Market. A thief must have been surprised by Uncle Adrian. I suggest the man did not intend to kill. Uncle Adrian was getting along in years. The surprise, the shock undoubtedly hastened death."

"Perhaps," Welch replied noncommittally. His lower lip was sucking in between his teeth again. His eyes, small for his face, were half closed, shrewd, thoughtful, questioning.

Grenville stood there with a blank face, wondering why Freeman said no more. Joan de Lesseps had mentioned nothing of the terror which had struck at her family. Lloyd Freeman was talking far from the subject, trying to show that Adrian de Lesseps' death had been something of an accident. Grenville wondered if Freeman felt that himself. He doubted.

Nothing had been said about the mysterious bell which seemed to hang over their heads like the sword of Damocles. They evidently intended to keep all mention of it from the police. Why?

A menace that could kill and reduce an old Negress to gibbering of the devil, that could bring horror to a woman like Joan de Lesseps and fright to her brother, was nothing to be hidden at this time. Something more powerful than the shock of their uncle's passing was keeping them mute.

And at that point Grenville came against the blank wall of mystery which had been growing with each new discovery.

Welch said abruptly to Joan de Lesseps: "How many entrances are there?"

"Three," she told him. "All in front. The courtyard passage and the front doors to the rooms on each side."

"No back entrance?"

"Our property line abuts on buildings at the rear. Everything goes through the front to Bourbon Street. The old carriage shed and slave quarters are at the back of the courtyard. And they are reached through the passageway to the street."

"How about windows?" Welch probed.

"The only first-floor windows opening out are those on Bourbon Street."

"Then the man who did this came in off Bourbon Street," Welch decided. "Were all three doors locked when you came home?"

"Mr. Grenville and myself came in the passage door. The north living-room door was locked. I haven't tried the south door, but I suppose it is also."

"Please try it," Welch requested briskly. "Hewett, go with her. One thing more, Miss de Lesseps—is there anyone else in the house beside the old servant?"

"Miss de Lesseps' brother is upstairs now," Lloyd Freeman interjected. "Asleep now, I presume. He was—er—a bit under the weather."

"Too much Mardi Gras, eh?" Welch said cynically. "All right, go ahead, Hewett. Malloy, search the rooms you haven't seen so far."

They went off.

Welch said abruptly to Grenville: "It's queer. The killer had to enter from Bourbon Street. That means he had a

key. Must have been close to the family to get it." Welch's scrutiny of Grenville's face in the dim light was disconcerting. "Too bad you don't know more about the family," Welch suggested.

Grenville shrugged. "Sorry. I'm more or less a stranger."

"Miss de Lesseps a Mardi Gras acquaintance, eh?"

"In an manner of speaking," Grenville admitted. He thought Welch looked at him queerly, but the lanky detective said no more.

THE next half hour passed quickly. Joan de Lesseps reported the third front door locked securely. Nothing in the house had been disturbed.

The coroner's assistant came, performed his duties briefly, left. Welch prowled, asking fresh questions as they came to mind, getting nowhere. He admitted as much sourly to Grenville.

"Mr. Freeman's suggestion about a prowler may have some truth in it," Grenville hazarded.

"Bah! Do you really believe that?" Welch demanded truculently.

Grenville shrugged silently.

A police photographer arrived. The fingerprint man prowled about. Newspaper reporters were denied admittance or information. The crowd before the house began to melt away. Relatives arrived.

Grenville remained in the background. Joan de Lesseps was inside now. The few glimpses Grenville caught of her included Freeman, solicitous, attentive.

A little later Welch announced he was through for the night. His manner was disgusted, irritated. He sucked in his lower lip, peered at Grenville. "I'll crack it," he promised. "Watch me." And beneath the casual words lay stubborn threat.

Grenville went to the rear door to say he was going, too. Lloyd Freeman met him, heard him, said curtly: "Joan wants to thank you for all you've done, Mr. Grenville. She'll probably be busy for some time now. I'll tell her you're leaving, and—"

"What's that?" Joan de Lesseps spoke back in the hall. She came swiftly to the door. "I'll thank Mr. Grenville myself, Lloyd." And when Freeman had departed, reluctantly it seemed, she lowered her voice. "There's so much I want to say. You've been a rock of strength tonight. A perfect stranger, you've done more than a friend could. I—I can't talk now. But I don't think tonight will be the end of this. If you are still in the city, in a day or so, won't you call me?"

Her faint imperiousness was gone. That note in her voice might almost have been pleading. Grenville smiled at her. "I'll be here," he promised. "I'm staying at the Saint Charles."

Her hand lay in his for a moment, was withdrawn, and she turned back into the house.

And Tony Grenville, hardboiled copper of Manhattan, stepped out on dark, quiet Bourbon Street and walked unseeingly toward his hotel. He had read of such things happening. He had met mystery, violence, death in the daily round, and laughed at beautiful women with an ax to grind. But here, in old New Orleans, with the mad spirit of Mardi Gras in the air, he had come upon something different, astounding, absorbing. What lay ahead was a closed book, bound in death and mystery. And as he walked with long strides he knew he would be waiting restlessly until he had the answer.

It was almost daybreak when Grenville fell asleep, to dream of dark eyes, slightly slanting, and a great bell. A devil's bell, that brought death, terror and mystery. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Swamp Snatch

AN UNEXPECTED turn of the Scarlatti business sent Grenville to Atlanta for five days. Mardi Gras was over when he returned. The gay throngs, the masked revelers, the fantastic parades and balls had given way to the sobriety of Lent. A letter was waiting for him at the St. Charles. The single heavy sheet of cream-colored paper bore only a few lines.

> Dear Mr. Greenville:
> The hotel informs me that you have been called out of town. If we are here when you return, I should like very much to thank you personally for what you have done.
> Sincerely yours,
> Joan de Lesseps.

Grenville called the Bourbon Street house from his room and got no answer.

Later at police headquarters, he met the tall, sharp-featured Welch. "Hello, heard you were out of town," Welch greeted. He stopped, obviously desiring to talk.

"How's the de Lesseps case?" Grenvilled inquired.

Welch sucked his lower lip between his teeth and once more assumed that ferretlike air. "Still stymied," he admitted reluctantly. His eyes closed to slits. "I think they're holding out on me," he said deliberately.

Though not implied, Grenville had the feeling Welch included him among those withholding information. He recalled his first impression of Welch, a man who got his teeth into a thing and hung on doggedly. He smiled politely. "Seems to me they'd do everything to help you."

"You think so?" Welch grunted. "I'm wondering. The family's got a good record. Nothing to hide that I can see. But if the old man was murdered, an' if they know anything, why don't they open up?"

"Ask them, copper. I'm just back from Atlanta. Haven't seen them."

"You'll have to go out of town to do it now," Welch told him. "They're at the plantation, about forty miles southwest of town."

"I may run out," Grenville said thoughtfully. "How do I get there?"

"It's on Bayou Bleu. Sugar plantation. Big place. Come in my office and I'll mark a road map for you," Welch offered.

A little later he shoved the map across his desk and leaned back, puffing on a brier. His low-lidded eyes stared through the smoke at Grenville.

"If you go out there," Welch said abruptly, "keep your eyes peeled. You're with us on this case, I suppose?"

"What else would I be?"

Welch shrugged. "Nothing, I guess. But I've got a hunch they're holding out on me and I want to know where I stand. That Freeman was damn concerned when I told him you were a dick."

"You told him that?" Grenville said with annoyance.

"Sure. I thought he knew, since you were such good friends. Anything wrong?" Welch regarded him shrewdly.

"No," said Grenville. "I'll keep my eyes open."

There was a telephone at Bayou Bleu plantation. An hour after lunch Grenville was connected with Joan de Lesseps. He heard her low cry of pleasure as plainly as if she were there by him. "I thought you'd gone," she said.

"Had to run over to Atlanta. I mailed you a note before I left," Grenville told her.

"I didn't get it."

"Funny. You should have. I was hoping I'd see you."

"We were needed at the plantation. I

wonder—could you run down here?" Joan begged. "I'll send the car in for you late this afternoon."

"I'll come walking if I have to," Grenville chuckled.

He heard her laugh, too. "You won't have to. I'll have the car there before five. Bring your bag."

IT WAS twenty minutes after four when a short, squat sooty-black Negro with abnormally long arms bowed Grenville into the front seat of a small sedan with a flourish, and deposited his bag in the back.

"I'm Sam," he stated with a flash of white teeth, and a noticeable lack of the southern darky accent. "I'll have you out to the plantation right away, sir. If I drive too fast, slow me down."

"Let's see how fast you can go," Grenville suggested.

But their progress through the city was slow and careful. Their wait for the ferry long. And their speed through the countryside beyond the river not very fast. Twice the motor began sputtering and the driver got out to tinker with it.

"Carburetor trouble, sir," he explained. "Won't be long now, sir."

He was a peculiar fellow, looking more like a squat black ape with his retreating forehead, his enormous flat nose and his thick, wide-lipped mouth. A silent fellow too. He had uttered no more than a few words and brief answers to Grenville's questions since they left the hotel.

Grenville strolled along the road while Sam tinkered with the motor a second time. The countryside was strange, fascinating. Huge live oaks thrust up into the purple dusk, draped with ghostly festoons of Spanish moss that swayed uneasily in the slight breeze. The dull booming chorus of frogs in a nearby patch of swamp was ushering in the night. Each mile they had rolled out of New Orleans had borne increasing evidence that they were proceeding into the heart of the marsh country.

This was a land of dark winding bayous which ran to the sea, of vast old sugar plantations, great cypress swamps, cane grass and mud flats. Cajan French and the soft drawl of Negroes were the dominant tongues. The past still held sway and the modern world seemed far off. Grenville wondered what he would find at Bayou Bleu Plantation. He felt his nerves tighten with expectation as he thought of the old Negress gibbering her terror of the devil bell that brought death. And his memory of the frightened emotion that had gripped Joan de Lesseps, her brother and her cousin, only heightened the feeling.

By the time Sam had the motor going a second time night was over them. The headlights showed sprawling fields, patches of swamp land and wood land. Once they were ferried across the black waters of a bayou on a motor driven raft. A little beyond that a deer bounded across the road.

"Pretty wild country around here," Grenville commented.

"Ain't it?" said Sam carelessly. "What ain't in sugar grows wild. And the folks that don't have to work run around wild too."

"Some bad ones down here, eh?"

Sam turned his head slowly and smiled a vast, toothy smile. His eyes were little, close-lidded. He looked more like an ape than ever as he crouched on the seat with his long arms and huge hands resting on the wheel. There was something queer about him. And the chuckle that rumbled in his throat was queer too.

"Some folks call them bad," Sam said. "Just kinda wild, I reckon. Lots of land gone back in wood since the old days—and some of the folks have kinda gone brushy too."

Grenville thought again of the old crone who had rocked in terror, muttering of the devil. And he began to understand more clearly how such a thing could have come out of country like this.

Sam turned off into a narrower road, where the lights stabbed through a pitch-black tunnel under the spreading branches of great moss-draped live oaks. Frogs boomed loudly on their left; and once as the road swung in a double curve past marshy ground the headlights struck past gaunt cypress trunks and glinted on black still water.

"Bayou," Sam explained. "Swamp up ahead." He laughed again, for no reason at all, a deep animal-like chuckle down in his throat. Grenville's nerves, muscles, tightened unconsciously at the sound. It made him think of a predatory beast, snarling in a thicket.

"Too much imagination over a plantation darky," he told himself. "If I don't watch out, I'll be hearing devil bells myself."

Half a mile beyond, Sam brought the car to a stop the third time. "Carburetor gone bad again," he muttered.

"Sounded all right to me," Grenville objected.

Sam was already sliding out the door. "You ain't used to it, white man," he said. "That's a bad carburetor for a fac'."

THERE was a subtle change in the sooty Negro's manner. His neutral silence seemed to have changed to sullenness as he rolled around across the headlights and jerked up the hood on Grenville's side. He tinkered for a moment, looked up, demanded: "Come here an' help me, white man. She's leakin' gas."

Angry by now, Grenville threw open the door and stepped out. "Keep a civil tongue in your head!" he snapped. "What sort of man did Miss de Lesseps send to get me?"

Sam turned to him in the blackness. His powerful, muscle-bound shoulders were sloping, his big hands hanging almost to his knees, and his receding, bulletlike head thrust forward. He laughed again, that deep animal-like chuckle.

"What kind of man Miss de Lesseps send to get you, white man? Me, that's who! You don't like it, eh?"

Sheer amazement held Grenville rooted in his tracks for a moment. The sudden change in his black companion was startling, mystifying. He could see no reason for it. The fellow had not been drinking. Nothing had been said to anger him.

They had stopped on a wild, lonely stretch of road. The headlights showed a weed-grown bank close at the right, running down to still, scum-covered water, fringed with reeds; and beyond, the gaunt, ghostlike trunks of cypress trees extended back into a marshy tangle as far as the eye could reach. The deep booming chorus of great frogs sounded in every direction. And in the moment he stood there Grenville heard the wild, harsh cry of some night bird or animal, far back in the swamp.

"Get that carburetor fixed and let's go on," he said curtly.

But Sam's shoulders sloped lower, his head thrust forward, his powerful prehensile arms whipped up as he leaped forward without warning.

Grenville knew as the apelike figure came at him that he was in danger. His gun was in the bottom of his kit bag in the back of the car. He was blocked on his left by the machine, on the right by the steep bank, the scum-covered water. And there was no time to turn and run. He met that rush by stepping inside the long arms and driving a one-two blow deep into Sam's stomach and to his jaw.

Rough-and-tumble fighting was nothing new to Grenville. His left fist sank into pads of muscle over Sam's stomach, and his right struck the jaw an instant later with a shock that would have felled any ordinary man. They seemed to make no difference here at all.

The fellow crashed into him, growling in his throat. The long arms wrapped tight about Grenville, crushing him close, smothering resistance. Their strength was almost unbelievable. Grenville felt himself picked up, carried back, slammed to the ground, while he struggled helplessly. And Sam came down on top of him, still growling in his throat.

The attack was so savage, blood-curdling, that for a moment Grenville half expected to find teeth tearing at his throat. He bridged in the middle, shoved his palms hard against a prognathous jaw close above his face. But it seemed in that moment as if he must be fighting a gorilla.

Sam wrapped legs and arms around him, brushed his hand away. One big, hamlike fist raised, struck down.

Grenville saw it coming, tried to jerk his head away. He failed. The massive fist struck his jaw—and everything went blank.

THE frogs were still booming—water was slapping softly, and there was an intermittent, steady scraping close by him. When Grenville's mind functioned again he opened his eyes, saw only pitch blackness. He tried to struggle up and found that his hands were tied behind him.

Something hard and wet struck the side of his head, knocking him on his back again half dazed.

A voice growled above his head: "Keep down there!"

He was lying on wet, cold boards that rocked under him. Gazing straight up, he caught glimpses of a star-studded sky, and realized suddenly he was lying in the bottom of a boat that was being paddled through the depths of a swamp. The stern paddler had knocked him down with a blow from the paddle blade.

His legs were free and he was not gagged. His jaw ached from the terrific blow that had knocked him out. And sharp pain and the warm feeling of blood marked where the paddle had struck him above his right ear.

After a moment Grenville asked with an effort:

"What's the meaning of this?"

A chuckle sounded in the bow of the small craft. Not that unnatural, savage snarl from the soot-skinned Negro. A mocking voice said: "You can't trust the women, buddy. That de Lesseps gal sho' put one over on you. You walked into it like a fat muskrat headin' into a trap."

"You mean," Grenville asked thickly, "Miss de Lesseps had this done to me?"

The mocking voice said: "She sent the car after you, didn't she? Had her own nigger bring you out?"

Grenville wondered if he was having a nightmare. His mind at first refused to accept the facts. It was unbelievable that she had done this. That small, slender girl, with the haunting suggestion of oriental mystery in her slightly slanting eyes, double-crossing like any common crook. Then cold reason drove the facts home.

Only she had known about the car she was sending. Her actions had been queer from the first. A perfect stranger, he had been thrown into the midst of things that were no concern of his. He had caught a glimpse of furtive, gruesome mystery that she had carefully witheld from the police. He had thought her unaware of his identity. But Welch had told Freeman, her cousin, who he was. She must know now. Had it made any

difference to her? Had that inspired her to trap him like an animal, send him off into the swamps like this?

Gradually cold rage took hold of Grenville. This was something he could understand, deal with. There would be a settling of accounts with the inscrutable Joan de Lesseps before long, he promised himself.

"Where are we going?" he asked the blackness above him.

The mocking voice in the bow said: "To a snug little nest on Bayou Bleu Plantation, buddy. Right under the de Lesseps gal's eyes. But you won't see the big house like you figured."

"What will I see?"

"When we get orders, we'll tell you, buddy. Maybe it'll be to heave you over in the swamp. The gars an' 'gators 'll leave damn little to sink in the mud. They're always hungry, them big fish. I seen a black heaved in once an' in half an hour he was nothing but bones." The speaker chuckled again.

"Shut up!" the stern man growled. "You talk too much. Hit a few licks wid dat paddle or we be all night."

And Grenville, gritting his teeth, lay there helpless while the canoe threaded its furtive, silent way through the swamp tangle. The smell of stagnant water, rotting wood, hung low. The paddles dipped, dipped endlessly. They scraped over submerged obstructions, bunted from cypress knees, pushed through patches of reeds and scraped under tangles of vines and low-hanging growth. Not a light other than glimpses of stars through the swamp roof reached them. Not a human sound broke the night voices of the swamp, the frogs, insects and occasional night birds, and once a deep, rumbling bellow that Grenville found out later came from a bull alligator.

There were only two men in the boat with him. They seemed to know where they were going. They worked like a well coordinated team. Half an hour later, or it might have been longer, the bow of the boat crackled and crashed into a tangle of reeds, and Grenville was helped roughly to his feet, taken over the bow into water halfway to his knees, and ashore.

THEY walked into a small clearing, ringed about with a solid wall of trees. Far off a dog barked faintly, the first sound of civilization Grenville had heard since leaving the automobile. The faint starlight revealed the squat bulk of a small shanty before them. And with one man holding his elbow, and the other following at his heels, he was taken into the shanty, where profound darkness surrounded him once more.

At no time had he been able to see what either of his captors looked like. The man who held his arm was tall. The other, who followed and who had sat in the stern of the canoe, was stocky, broad-shouldered. That much Grenville had seen and no more.

The stocky one had brought in his kit bag, dropped it on the floor.

"You'll be here a long time, buddy," the mocking voice said. "Make yourself to home. There's a cot over against the wall at your right." A shove sent him staggering there. His knees struck the cot edge and he sat down heavily.

The stocky one growled: "I be goin' get orders. You watch him, Fox."

"You damn fool, lay off names! Get going!"

And silently from the couch Grenville watched the stocky man step out into the starlight and vanish. He felt better. One man was easier to handle than two, especially this mocking, talkative one.

Fox stepped into the corner of the shack. A match scraped, flared and lit the wick of a thick candle. By its fee-

ble light Grenville saw that Fox, who was as tall as he was, had a stubble-covered face and jutting jaw.

"Are we on Bayou Bleu Plantation?" Grenville asked.

"Yeah," Fox said carelessly. He was dressed in old trousers and shirt, but he spoke with the slangy freedom of the city. He turned away, lighted a cigarette, sat down on an old packing box across the room from the cot. "So you're a dick, eh?" he queried with veiled amusement. "It always does me good to get one of you flatfeet down, Grenville."

"You seem to know all about me," Grenville commented.

"Sure. Why not? Don't Miss de Lesseps?" He chuckled as if enjoying himself hugely.

"Suppose we get down to business," Grenville suggested. "What's it worth to get me out of here?"

Fox spat. "Not a chance copper. I don't like your kind. I hope I get orders to throw you in the bayou, and watch them alligator gars do their stuff."

"You're a hard case, aren't you?"

"When I've got a copper I am," said Fox. He yawned, spat again. "Take it easy," he advised. "There's all night ahead of you." He got up, went to the door, looked out, turned back. "Got anything in that suitcase worth lookin' at?" he demanded.

"A pint of whiskey," said Grenville. And as Fox stepped to the kit bag, "It's locked."

"Where's the key?"

"In my right trousers pocket."

Fox came to him, grinning. Grenville leaned back, grinning too, and braced his shoulders against the wall. "Going to let me have a drink?" he queried casually.

"Maybe," said Fox, "if you're—"

He never finished, for Grenville's legs doubled up in the air, lashed forward, and his heels struck Fox in his lax unprotected stomach with all the force of twin battering rams.

Fox catapulted clear back across the cabin, struck the wall, dropped to the floor half unconscious and lay writhing and groaning.

Grenville was on his feet before Fox hit the floor. He stood for a moment over the doubled-up figure, retching, gasping at his feet.

"Coppers, buddy," he said, "don't like punks like you. Next time get another punk." And Grenville lifted one foot and drove it calculatingly against the point of Fox's jaw. It was better than a knock-out blow. The fellow went limp.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Devil Bell

SMILING grimly to himself, Grenville stepped to the upended box in the corner where the candle flame flickered and smoked. He turned his back to it, held his wrists over the flame. With tightening lips and taut jaws he ignored the heat, the pain, until the cords about his wrists charred through and his hands were free once more.

Fox was still unconscious on the floor. He would probably be that way for a long time. Grenville unlocked his kit bag and fished a thirty-eight automatic out of the bottom. Lighting a cigarette, he sat down and waited.

A full ten minutes passed before Fox stirred, groaned. He was fully conscious a moment later. Grenville jerked him upright by his collar and jammed the automatic in his back.

"Now, you punk, speak fast before I let you have it! Who did this?"

Fox, crestfallen, shook his head to clear it. "That other guy got his orders from

the plantation," he said. "That's all I know."

"You wouldn't lie to me, would you, sweetheart?" Grenville ground the muzzle of the automatic into bones and flesh.

Fox groaned, shrank away. "Truth!" he wrenched out. "That's all I know! We're hidin' out down here, runnin' a little liquor an' pickin' up odd jobs. This other guy comes to me an' says we're goin' to pick you off the road and bring you here to the shack. If you put a slug in my back that's all I can tell you, copper!"

And his voice carried the ring of truth.

"How do we get out of here?" Grenville asked.

Fox hesitated, said sullenly: "Have to wait for the boat."

"Pick up the bag and let's go out and wait for it then."

Fox did so with obvious unwillingness. But when they reached the point on the swamp bank where Grenville had landed, the canoe was still there. Grenville cursed Fox unemotionally. "So you tried to pull a fast one, punk? That sidekick of yours walked out of here. Let's walk too, before I throw you to these gar fish that make you so happy."

That got results. Without further argument Fox led off into the blackness away from the boat, the cabin, along what seemed to be a slender tongue of land traversed by a single narrow path. He walked it sure-footedly, lugging the kit bag. Now and then their feet splashed through water, sank into mud. The undergrowth reached out and clawed at them. But always the path stretched ahead, winding, twisting, leading somewhere.

Fox suddenly stumbled, went down into a tangle of bushes. The kit bag flew back, striking Grenville's legs, half tripping him. And as he kicked it away he heard a wild scramble in the bushes where Fox had vanished. Then a loud splash in the water, and silence. And a few moments later, gasping breath some distance away, the sound of a body crashing through undergrowth. Fox had made a neat escape, with all the cunning of a swamp animal.

It would be a waste of bullets to try to bring him down now. Grenville struck a match, saw the path leading on past the bushes and a slough of deep water just beyond them into which Fox had plunged, made his way to the other side and kept going. Grenville picked up the kit bag and continued on along the path, feeling his way with his feet.

Five minutes of that and the undergrowth suddenly ended. A path led through a patch of mossy ground and reeds, up a bank and on to the hard-packed surface of a road. And along that road, coming toward him, was the sound of a Negro voice singing. Grenville waited until it got close, then called: "Hi, there!"

The singing stopped abruptly. A startled voice answered: "Yas, sah."

"Where's Bayou Bleu Plantation?"

"Straight ahead, sah. I's goin' there."

"Carry this bag for me," said Grenville, "and I'll give you half a dollar."

"Yas, sah."

But in that moment, out of the night, sounded the deep booming clangor of a bell, solemn, measured.

Bong . . . bong . . . bong . . . bong. . . .

IT FILLED the night with blood-chilling vibrations that seemed to roll in from every side, uncanny, disturbing. Listening tensely, Grenville found it impossible to determine from just which direction the sound came, or how far off it was.

The deep bass notes were unlike any he had ever heard—ominous, threatening, sinister.

The man in the darkness beside him shuddered. "De bell! *Nom du chien*—de bell! It's ringin' ergain! Oh, Lawdy. . . ."

The booming strokes ended. The chilling vibrations that struck deep into nerves and senses died away.

"What do you know about that bell?" Grenville demanded. In the sudden quiet his voice was rough, loud. He got a stuttering answer.

"D-don' know nothin', sah! It's only de big sugah-house bell ringin', sah."

"The devil bell, eh?"

"Wh-what's dat?"

'The devil bell, I said."

"What you know erbout dat debil bell, sah?"

"Plenty," Grenville encouraged. "What do you know?"

"Don' know nothin'. It's only a ole bell ringin'. I sho' don' know nothin', sah. No, sah. An' I's goin' right back."

And before Grenville could do anything to stop it, his kit bag was cast on the road and running steps retreated.

Grenville swore, smiled wryly to himself, lighted a cigarette. He was near his destination at least, and the mystery was close at hand. This black boy had been affected the same as Joan de Lesseps' old Negress had been. It was plain at least what the reference to the bell had meant.

Grenville had to admit that there was something uncanny, nerve-shaking about it. The solemn notes had stirred him as no other bell ever had. Something about the tonal qualities, he decided. Just as the descending scale of vibrations in a tuning fork would pick out objects in a room of the same vibration period and set them humming in concert, so this great bell evidently had a period of vibration that affected the human nervous system. To put it succinctly, a horror pitch that brought terror to all within range.

But that still did not explain why those who knew of it refused to discuss it, why it could have had any part in the death of Adrian de Lesseps so many miles away in the heart of a great city. Grenville picked up his kit bag and walked forward along the road. His mouth was set, grim, thoughtful. There was much to be explained ahead of him.

He had gone perhaps a quarter of a mile when he heard the hum of a motor somewhere behind. Turning, he saw the gleam of approaching headlights. A moon was coming up over to the left. Frogs were there to the left also, and he heard the splash of a leaping fish. The road was skirting water. It ended suddenly, turning through white gate pillars arched overhead. He made out the whitewashed length of a plank fence, and beyond it, over what seemed to be a sweep of lawn, the lights of a house. But he had only an instant to notice that.

For suddenly, directly ahead of him, out of the green, lush wall of growth where the road ended, a strangled cry sounded.

Grenville dropped the kit bag, grabbed for his automatic, took a step forward, peering. Floundering footsteps came nearer. He heard harsh, gasping breaths, sobbing, groaning. Grenville took six steps through rough grass and weeds and stopped at the edge of the growth, waiting tensely.

Only for a moment he waited there. The headlights, rolling swiftly along the road, sent quickly brightening illumination over the spot.

And less than a yard from Grenville, where the lush growth rose in a tangled wall, the small, stooped figure of a white man plunged out.

ARMS outstretched before him as he dove into view, staggering to keep from falling, he reeled forward into the light. It might have been set on a small wild bit of jungle stage. The stranger wore old overalls and a torn shirt. Under the lopping brim of a stained felt hat an unshaven face was twisted in terror as he turned.

"Here, what's the matter?" Grenville called.

The bright headlights limned staring eyes, a gaping mask from which a choked scream issued. The outstretched hands seemed to be reaching for help, to supplicate.

Grenville ran after him, and, just as he caught up, the stumbling figure fell forward heavily into the road. The outstretched hands dug into the dust convulsively. The head half turned, bulging eyes staring up at Grenville. A harsh, sobbing gasp cried: *"Le diable!* Dat bell, she reeng! I ron, but he cotch me. . . . "

The gasping whisper died away. Another mighty effort to speak brought unintelligible sounds. Eyes rolled up until only the whites were visible, and the man shuddered, relaxed.

Grenville went to his knees in the dust, caught a wrist. He found no pulse, and when he bent over and saw the staring eyes with pupils rolled up out of sight, he knew the stranger was dead.

It had all happened in short seconds. The silent night closed down again, throbbing with the strident hum of insects and the frogs in the water a few feet away. The automobile slid to a stop two lengths off. Grenville stood up, looking at it, at the body. "Come here!" he called.

His shadow stretched across the body, long, monstrous, moving when he moved. Up into that shadow thrust the crude wooden handle of a knife which had been driven deep between the stranger's shoulder blades. He had not noticed it until this moment. The top of the handle was notched all the way around. Grenville reached down, touched it, let it stay. A little circle of red was seeping out over the grimy shirt cloth.

Grenville straightened, staring at the narrow path out of which the man had plunged. The headlights pierced the heavy growth for a few feet, and all beyond that was black. With his own journey through the swamps fresh in his mind, Grenville visualized clearly the little man fighting his way toward help that had been too late when he reached it. And this man had died, whispering of the bell!

Grenville felt a chill crawl up his back as he remembered that deep solemn clangor, the grisly sensation of fear that had accompanied it. This stranger had been in the jungle-like growth at that time. What had he met there, fled from? Perhaps even now the thing that had killed him was lurking back in there.

Grenville shook off the feeling, turned to the car again. "Who is it?" he asked sharply, going to it.

"Dey calls me Rink, sah. Whyn't dat Willie Broussard git up?"

Peering through the door, Grenville met the white rolling eyes of a slender young Negro, clearly terror-stricken.

"He's dead," Grenville said.

The other shrank back in the seat. "I knowed hit!" he moaned. "I knowed hit! Dat bell! Lemme drive away from here!"

"Wait—you going to the house? . . . Right. Take me."

Grenville caught up his bag, threw it in the back of the car and climbed in. They made the turn through the gate on two wheels and raced up a long curving drive. From the back seat, Grenville asked: "Who was that fellow?"

"Willie Broussard, sah. Keeps de time

on de field niggers, an' runs errands for Mistah Fritch, de overseer. Got er big brother, Alcide, what jus' hang eround. Kinda weak in de haid."

"You mean crazy?"

"Alcide never growed up. He stayed wid de boys in his haid, dat's all. He got him a pet rabbit an' a duck."

They swung around behind a big lighted house, all white and ghostly there in the night. It sat on a little rise of ground, two stories high, with an open veranda on all four sides, and great white pillars rising full two stories all the way around.

People were out on the porch. And as they stopped Joan de Lesseps ran down a wide flight of steps to meet them. A moment later her cool hand was in Grenville's and she was staring in astonishment, saying: "I expected you before dark. What—what happened? There's blood on the side of your head!"

TONIGHT she wore a thin dress with short sleeves, and a wondrous old silk shawl carelessly about her shoulders. She looked sober, worn, and the shadows beneath her cheek bones were darker. Her slightly slanting eyes still held their inscrutability. And the hint of imperiousness was there. Looking at her grimly, Grenville felt himself weakening. No sign of guilt was about her. She seemed pleased to see him.

"Had a little trouble," he said gruffly. "The car you sent didn't bring me all the way."

Her eyes widened in astonishment. "But—this is the car I sent for you."

Before Grenville could answer that astonishing statement hasty steps crunched on the driveway to his right. Three men strode out of the night into the headlight glare. Lloyd Freeman was at their head, big, brawny as ever in a belted canvas jacket and high leather boots.

Behind Freeman was a man even bigger, whose surly, flat face had a tight mouth under a heavy black mnstache. And trotting behind them, cradling a double-barrelled shotgun in his arms, was a small man who filled a white linen suit to the bursting point. The pinkish face that topped his stubby barrel-like figure was good-natured as he brought up, puffing and panting.

Freeman carried a large automatic in one hand and a flashlight in the other. A bulge in the larger man's pocket marked the presence of a third gun.

Grenville eyed them narrowly. Freeman nodded curtly to him, said shortly to Joan de Lesseps: "I didn't know visitors were expected tonight. I thought Mr. Grenville was out of town." The traditional Southern hospitality was not in evidence here.

"Mr. Grenville returned today, and I sent the car in after him, Lloyd. Did you—you find anything?"

"No," said Freeman, shaking his head. "We were too late. If there was someone there he had plenty of time to get away in the dark." He thrust the automatic in his hip pocket, gave her a warning look. "Perhaps we had better go inside to talk."

"There's a dead man down at your gate," Grenville said coolly. "I believe his name is Willie Broussard."

They looked at him blankly. Joan de Lesseps' hand lifted to her slender white throat and pressed hard. Freeman was the first to speak, bitingly.

"Is this a joke, Grenville?"

"I wish it were," Grenville said coldly. "That man in the car saw it."

The driver was still sitting behind the wheel, almost at Grenville's back; and now he burst out shrilly: "Willie Broussard sho' daid! I seen him! He come runnin' outa de bushes wid dis man runnin' at his back!"

"What's that?" Freeman queried harshly.

"Dis man chase him outa de bushes, sah, an' Willie daid. Got a knife in his back. I seen it."

"What does this mean, Grenville?" Freeman demanded harshly.

"You idiot!" Grenville snapped at the driver. "I heard him running toward me, and crying out. And I waited there for him. You came up just in time to see him burst past me. I followed him of course."

"But I don't understand it!" Joan de Lesseps exclaimed in bewilderment. "Rink here took the car into New Orleans for Mr. Grenville."

"Gemmun not at de Saint Charles Hotel," the driver explained hastily. "I wait till after dark, an' den start back."

Freeman's glance was contemptuous as it rested on Grenville. "So you slipped out here and were gumshoeing down around the bayou, Mr. Grenville?" he said unpleasantly. "It seems to me this is a gross imposition on our hospitality, and I think you're going to have some explaining to do about Willie Broussard's death."

Grenville felt his face redden with anger. On top of everything else he was now accused of murder. "You're right! There's a lot of explaining to do, Freeman. I'll do mine when the time comes. I suggest you call the sheriff."

"Do that, Joan," Freeman requested stiffly. "We'll go down to the body. No objections to returning, Grenville?" he asked with a slight sneer. "Rink, turn around and take us back there. Major Grigsby, will you come along?"

The pinkish face of the little roly-poly man with the shotgun was filled with sober wonder. He spoke in a high-pitched voice like a woman's, but surprisingly firm for all that. "With pleasure, sir. Anything I can do to assist."

They got in the back, Grenville in the front, and the sedan retraced its way along the drive, and stopped just through the gate. Freeman sprang out, directed his flashlight at the wall of green growth. "Where's Broussard?" he demanded sharply.

Grenville stepped to him and stood staring. His astonishment shifted to bewilderment. That prone, motionless body had vanished!

RINK'S terrified voice came from inside the car. "It's gone! De debbil am walkin' de bayou tonight!"

"Shut up!" Freeman ordered savagely; and to Grenville, challengingly, "Well, what about it? Was the man really dead?"

And Grenville laughed at him then, in spite of the gravity of the situation. "You have an answer to everything, Freeman. Pull one out of your hat for this. The body was here when I got in the car, and drove up to the house."

The marks where it had lain were plain in the gray road dust. Grenville's shoeprints also. But Willie Broussard who had lain there with a knife buried deep between his shoulder blades had vanished completely, utterly.

Major Grigsby exclaimed loudly: "Extr'ordin'ry! He wasn't here more than a few minutes. We saw the car come up the driveway."

"Dat bell—"

"Keep quiet, Fritch!" Lloyd Freeman broke in angrily. "A hell of an overseer you are! What was Broussard doing down here anyway?"

The big surly fellow shoved the palm of his hand across the end of his black mustache and shrugged, looked uneasily about into the night. Grenville eyed him appraisingly. This Fritch must be the plantation overseer, and a Cajan by his speech. He looked capable. The surly

flat face, the tight mouth under the heavy black mustache marked qualities the manager of a big plantation probably needed. But he sounded helpless now as he said: "Dat Willie Broussard walk about lots at night. Like an owl, he was."

Freeman turned on Grenville then. "Why didn't you bring the body up to the house?"

"Up to the coroner to order it moved."

Freeman snorted under his breath. Fritch rubbed the palm of his hand over his mustache again. "If dat Willie ain't found, de niggers'll be leavin'," he stated pessimistically. "They're powerful uneasy now. Dat bell—"

"Shut up!" Freeman broke in again. "Scatter out and look for him. He may have crawled off into the bushes."

Grenville got his flashlight from his kit bag in the car, and joined the search. They tramped up and down the bayou bank, beating the bushes, searching every spot where a man might be hidden. But there was no trace of Willie Broussard.

CHAPTER SIX

What Human Hand?

IT WAS uncanny. Grenville felt it getting under his skin. The black night about him seemed heavy with lurking menace. From the bayou bank his light struck out over the dark still water; unhealthy water, as if the black depths hid grisly secrets. A big fish leaped above the surface and splashed back. From the opposite bank a long squat shadow slid into the bayou smoothly. The light glinted on a wet, scaly snout. Two cold gleaming reptilian eyes regarded him fixedly, and then vanished, leaving uneasy ripples where the big 'gator had been. The whole business was like that—a dark pool hiding furtive secrets, with lurking danger all about.

They met back at the car, baffled, unsuccessful. "We might as well return to the house," Freeman decided. "Rink, you black devil, keep your mouth shut about this. None of your blasted ghost tales among the other niggers."

Rink's eyes rolled. "What happened to Willie Broussard, sah?"

"Dammit, I don't know!" Freeman snapped, as he opened the rear door. "But I know what's going to happen to you if you talk. Remember that!"

"Yes, sah!" Rink replied meekly.

Joan de Lesseps met the car, heard their failure in tight-lipped silence. She still looked bewildered as she said to Rink: "Give Mr. Grenville's bag to Philippe. I'll see you to your room before the sheriff gets here, Mr. Grenville."

"I think," said Freeman bluntly, "Grenville had better do some explaining. That blood on his head, mud on his shoes and trousers, and turning up here as he did are mighty peculiar."

"I invited Mr. Grenville here, Lloyd. I'll listen to his explanations," she rebuked.

And as he went with her Grenville saw Freeman scowling after him, and the big flat-faced Fritch, the plantation overseer, was staring too with an unfathomable expression.

Three women were on the veranda. Joan de Lesseps presented him to a Mrs. Raymond, gray-haired, buxom, motherly, plainly disturbed now; and to her daughter, Hollis, taller than Joan, with a curly corn-colored permanent, dancing blue eyes and a vivid red mouth.

The third woman was Miss Fitzhugh, an aunt. Miss Fitzhugh, with hands folded primly before her, surveyed him up and down, and ignored his disheveled condition. "We welcome you at a distressing time, Mr. Grenville. I trust you will enjoy your visit here."

If she were frightened it did not show.

If she regarded him in any other light than that of a priviledged guest it was not evident. Joan de Lesseps took him into a spacious entrance hall, up a wide curving staircase into a large, cool, high-ceilinged room, furnished with rare old pieces and fine simplicity. A white-haired Negro in a black alpaca coat brought his kit bag, shuffled out.

Joan de Lesseps stood by the door, her brow puckering as she looked at him. And still there was no guilt in her manner. Grenville came to the point bluntly. "A colored man came for me at the hotel, a man called Sam. I went with him." He described Sam, and what had followed to the moment when he had stepped out of the second machine by the house.

SHE listened carefully, faint color flooding up into her cheeks. Concern, dismay, fear passed across her face. And when he finished she said swiftly: "I don't know this man, Sam! I didn't send him. I—I cannot understand it!"

"Who knew you were sending for me?"

"I gave the order to Fritch, our overseer. And of course Rink, the colored boy who took the car, knew."

"Did you tell them I was a detective?"

"Why, no—are you?" And her astonishment seemed genuine.

"I am. New York City detective force. In New Orleans on business. Queer those chaps in the swamp knew all about me. Name and everything."

"But I don't understand it," she protested, and if a girl ever seemed to be telling the truth she did. She was either a consummate actress, Grenville decided, or the mystery was growing thicker at every turn. He probed further. "So the devil bell rang again tonight—and this Willie Broussard was killed?"

An imperceptible shiver ran through her. "Yes. And I'm glad you're here. And doubly glad you're a detective. I'm afraid. We're all afraid. That bell—"

"I wish you'd explain that bell," Grenville said wearily. "I meet it everywhere I turn."

"You'll have to know its history to understand it," Joan de Lesseps said slowly. "It was cast in Spain almost two hundred years ago, and killed two men before it left the foundry. During a storm it broke loose on the deck of the ship that was bringing it over and crushed the captain. The ship missed the river and was wrecked on an island outside of Barataria Bay. The survivors claimed the bell had a curse on it. My great-great-great grandfather, Lucian de Lesseps, took it from the wreck and hung it in the tower of the island's church. In less than a year the church burned and the bell tower collapsed and killed Lucian de Lesseps."

"Some bell," Grenville commented grimly.

She nodded. "That isn't all. Lucian de Lesseps' son built a tower on the beach and hung the bell there. It rang storm warnings and gave alarms. One night there was a great dance, attended by everyone on the island, and in the midst of it the bell began to ring. They went on dancing and drinking. And fifteen minutes later a great tidal wave struck the island and drowned almost all of them. The island has been a shoal ever since. But the heavy bell tower remained standing, with the bell hanging just above the water."

Joan de Lesseps' eyes were dark, far away, as she went on. "The heirs of the de Lesseps who died in that tidal wave brought the bell here to their plantation and hung it in a big tower they erected above the sugar house. It has been there ever since. They never rang it except when a member of the family died. And the superstition grew that whenever it rang there was a death on the plantation.

Generation after generation in these parts have remembered the bell's history, and been brought up to regard it as an omen of death." She drew a deep breath. "So you see—"

"You'd think," said Grenville, "they'd have melted it down or carted it away."

Her chin lifted. "Our family never gives in to fear. The bell is a tradition with us now. And two weeks ago, after being silent for years, it rang in the night. We waited . . . . And in New Orleans —Uncle Adrian—"

Clear now were many unexplained things. "But look here," Grenville protested, "it's all superstition."

She smiled, a trifle pityingly. "It seems that way, doesn't it? But strange things happen in this bayou country, Mr. Grenville. Some that can't be explained. Since I have been a child the door at the base of that bell tower has been nailed shut. No one can get up to the bell. And yet it rang, and Uncle Adrian died, and the door at the bottom of the bell tower is still nailed shut." She drew the shawl from her shoulders and draped it over her left arm slowly.

"Tonight," she said quietly, "the bell rang again. My cousin and Major Grigsby and Fritch investigated. You heard them say they found nothing. And yet —Willie Broussard was murdered."

GRENVILLE remembered those deep clanging strokes—and the foreboding chill they had brought. No sense to it at all. Around headquarters they'd hoot at the idea. "Who is Major Grigsby?" he inquired abruptly.

"A sugar man. He and his partners wish to buy the plantation. Their yacht is anchored down the bayou. I believe they have sugar interests in Cuba."

"Going to sell?"

"I don't know," she confessed. "Lloyd wants me to. Since this seems to be confession time, Mr. Grenville, I may as well admit that the de Lesseps fortunes have dwindled sadly in the past few years. Uncle Adrian, who managed our affairs, was not too good a business man. He lost heavily in the stock market. Mosaic disease almost ruined the plantation some years back, before the new Java varieties of cane were put into production. The low price of sugar the last few years has not helped. Uncle Adrian borrowed heavily from the bank. Our lawyer tells me we cannot borrow any more. And we must have money to carry the plantation until the cane crop is ready for grinding. Sugar plantations are almost impossible to sell these days; and Major Grigsby and his partners have made a generous cash offer."

"Do you want to sell?" Grenville asked her.

"Would you want to lose a place that has been the backbone of your family for over a hundred and fifty years?" she retorted with a flash of passion.

"No," said Grenville, and meant it.

"Then you know how I feel."

Through one of the open windows they heard an automobile drive up, and voices speak out. She said: "That must be the sheriff. Will you come down?"

Grenville went with her.

The sheriff and a deputy were standing beside an old touring car, talking to Freeman, Fritch and Major Grigsby.

There was a fourth man there too, standing beside Fritch, a stocky, powerful fellow whose black slouch hat came about to Fritch's shoulder. Below the brim a long, bony nose hooked down over a brown mustache, and a bushy tangle of beard hid the lower face. Cold green eyes that stabbed like twin steel blades looked at Grenville and his companion. The wide leather belt with a heavy steel

buckle, gypsylike reds and browns in trousers and blouse, and the barbaric tangle of the beard made this fourth man stand out, even in the bayou country where strange characters abounded.

The sheriff, named Linkhorn, was slight, mild, drawling of voice. He looked on the scene with tired, washed-out eyes, and said when Grenville was introduced to him: "I reckon, folks, we better mosey down to the bayou an' look around again. I've heard your story, Mr. Freeman, an' I'll listen to this man on the way down."

So Grenville climbed once more into a front seat, and related to the sheriff the story he had told Joan de Lesseps.

The sheriff listened intently. "Funny," he drawled at the finish. "I don't place that nigger, Sam. But these marshes an' bayous an' swamps are full of bad ones. I reckon your story will stand up if it's the truth. That driver was seen at the hotel, and headquarters in New Orleans will vouch for you. You got any idea why they wanted you?"

"No," said Grenville. He had not told the sheriff that Joan de Lesseps had been mentioned by Fox and his companion. "I'd say they didn't want a detective around here."

"Looks like that to me too," the sheriff agreed. "Well, we'll look around and see what we find here at the bayou."

THE search was more extensive this time. And again without result. As they gathered by the two machines the sheriff delivered his verdict. "Someone moved that body. If it was throwed in the bayou the alligator gars have got it by now. Mr. Freeman, suppose you tell some of your niggers to climb in a boat an' drag around."

Freeman turned and said: "Palto, you round up half a dozen men and get a couple of boats out."

"Quite so, Mr. Freeman," a distinct and cultured voice replied.

And Grenville turned, too, in amazement. For that well-bred, modulated voice with the purest of diction had come from the powerful fellow in the gypsy-like costume and the wild tangled beard. It was startling, to say the least. He was still staring when Palto strode through the gate and headed toward the house.

"Quite a surprise to hear that man speak," Grenville said to Freeman.

Freeman shrugged. "He was educated for the priesthood and changed his mind. Knocked all around the world, I understand. He's Fritch's assistant. I'm going back to the house."

"Guess you can go too, Grenville," the sheriff decided. "I can handle the rest of this."

Major Grigsby chatted volubly as they went. "Drop around to the yacht tomorrow and have a glass of wine, Mr. Grenville," he invited as they left the car. "I'm sure this is all an unfortunate mistake tonight. Perhaps we can arrange a little cruise out in the Gulf for a bit of deep-sea fishing. Tackle and everything aboard."

"If I have time, thanks."

Major Grigsby chuckled, slapped him on the shoulder. "Of course you'll have time. Down here for a bit of vacation, aren't you?"

Freeman snorted, stalked off, and Grenville, after a word of farewell with Grigsby, met Joan de Lesseps on the porch.

"Is everything all right?" she questioned anxiously.

"I'll probably not be hung for murder tonight," he replied drily. "And with your permission I'd like to remain here until this business is cleared up. Your cousin doesn't seem to relish my presence; but if you have anything to say about it—"

"I have everything to say. The planta-

tion belongs to my brother and myself. Lloyd is only assistant manager. And I want you to stay. Do—do you think you can do anything?"

"I hope so," said Grenville. "Right now I want to think."

She led him to the opposite side of the house on the great wide veranda, and had sandwiches brought. Sitting there, watching the bobbing lights gleam and glint through the growth on the bayou bank, Grenville pondered. Dead men were understandable. But when one threw in an old bell with a blood-stained history, and mixed a liberal dash of tradition, superstition and inherited fear, the result was chaos. Men had tried to kidnap Joan. Adrian de Lesseps had been murdered. And something very close to murder had happened to him tonight. Not to speak of the death of Willie Broussard. And the great bell in its old tower—he'd have to see it as soon as possible—seemed to dominate everything.

Coldly, analytically, Grenville went over all he knew. Powerful fingers had throttled Adrian de Lesseps. A human hand certainly had driven that knife deep into Willie Broussard's back. Dead men did not walk either. Whether they found the body in the bayou or out, human hands had moved it. Those were the facts.

Against them were only the briefest of clues. The thirty-two revolver that Joan de Lesseps had taken from him. Her unwillingness to press the attempted kidnaping. The man who had called at the hotel for him. She claimed only Fritch, the plantation overseer, and the colored driver had known the machine was being sent for him. No one in New Orleans knew about it. The trail led out from Fritch and the black-faced Rink.

Fritch had resented his presence as well as Freeman, the cousin, who advised selling the plantation. Queer about that too. Was it possible the two were working together in some bit of cold-blooded business? Grenville looked over at the fine haunting profile of Joan de Lesseps. The mocking words of Fox returned to plague him. A man like that would lie, of course. Grenville decided suddenly that Fox had lied. And then decided to banish all opinion and see what broke.

That night in his room, after the sheriff had reported no success at the bayou, Grenville lay awake for some time, staring through his window at the full white moon which had crept over the bayou and was climbing into the sapphire vault of the sky. He remembered that Fox's companion had gone off to get orders. Somewhere on this Bayou Bleu Plantation was a cold-blooded killer, timing his acts and moves as carefully as pawns on a chessboard. Beauty in the sky—and lurking death on the ground. . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Duck Man

MORNING brought the glory of a sunny spring day. A fat colored maid served bacon, eggs, hot bread, black Creole coffee and thick cream over crisp red strawberries.

Joan de Lesseps said as she poured his coffee: "We'll walk over the plantation after breakfast."

Freeman had already breakfasted and departed to his duties. Some time in the night Jack de Lesseps had returned from New Orleans and was still asleep. The roly-poly little Major Grigsby slept on his yacht and breakfasted there. And as soon as he had eaten with the women Grenville left the house with Joan.

He asked as they walked off: "Does Freeman give the orders here?"

"Now, yes. He assisted Uncle Adrian before. It's a big place, requiring constant supervision."

And before they had gone far Grenville comprehended the vastness of the plantation. Well back from the spacious landscaped home grounds were the great mule barns, corn cribs, hay barns, tool sheds, blacksmith shop and machine shop. And near them lines of whitewashed cabins occupied by field hands.

To the left of the low knoll where the house stood was the gaunt mass of the sugar mill and boiler house, and on down to the bayou bank was the commissary and office building; and beyond that a great building of red brick stood on the bayou bank, with a tall, square tower rising high from the far end. The morning light glinted through arches at the top of that tower, and silhouetted sullen and dark the massive bulk of a great bell hung there. Even at a distance the bell tower looked ancient, gloomy, dominating the whole plantation now as it had for a hundred years.

The far-flung cane fields were laced by lines of narrow-gauge tracks converging on the sugar mill. From the mill more tracks led to the sugar house where the sacked crude sugar was stored until boats came up the bayou and got it.

The plantation was a little empire, with an army of field hands, mechanics, foremen, under the overseer, Fritch, who took his orders from Freeman. And somewhere in that army of men was a killer!

They walked to the sugar house on the bayou bank. The empty interior was high, cavernous, heavy with the smell of crude sugar. A few moments later they stood at the base of the square bell tower before a massive weather-beaten door studded with rusty nail heads.

"The only way to the top is from the outside here, through that door," Joan de Lesseps said.

Grenville tried it, found it as solid as the brick walls themselves. No ordinary ladder would reach up the sheer height to the bell tower above them, silent, gloomy.

"You win," Grenville grinned at her. "We'll forget about the bell for the present. Would you mind telling me who you expected to meet at the French Market?"

"Not at all, Mr. Detective. A girl friend was to meet me there and we were going to mask and do Canal Street after midnight. She found it impossible to come. I'm afraid it had nothing to do with what followed."

"What did? Who did you recognize in that kidnap car? And why did you take that revolver and refuse to do anything about the matter?"

Her face clouded. "I thought I recognized Fritch in the front seat," she said. "It didn't seem possible—but I knew he had been in town that day. I was upset. I didn't want sensational publicity. I was not certain. Fritch is a valuable man. My uncle leaned heavily on him. He would have been offended and probably quit if I had been wrong. There didn't seem to be any reason for the whole thing. I wanted time to think. And I didn't know who you were. We de Lesseps are conservative before strangers. I was safe and they had already escaped."

"With that revolver and a quick alarm they might have been nabbed."

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "Things happened so fast after that I thought no more of it."

"Was it Fritch?"

"I don't know," Joan confessed. "I've been wondering ever since. He was in town the next morning, for he got in touch with us as soon as he saw the papers. He has done nothing since to make me believe it might have been he. Frankly, I can't believe it. He had no reason to do such a mad thing."

A DUCK quacked as she finished. They were standing a few feet from the

front corner of the sugar house. From under the end of the landing stage where the bayou bank sloped down to the dark water a man crawled, stood hugely upright, and moved to them with a white duck under his arm.

"Mister," he asked in a broad Cajan accent, with the wistful simplicity of a child, "be you one detective man dat cotch people. I hear mamselle say so, me."

"Alcide, go away," Joan said gently, "we are busy."

Alcide was full six feet tall and built in proportion. A powerful figure. He was perhaps thirty, but his long, heavy face was open, artless. He paid no attention to Joan.

"M'sieu," he asked Grenville solemnly, "who kill Willie? He no come las' night an' dey tell me so?"

"I am not a detective, and I don't know who killed Willie," Grenville lied. "Who wanted to, Alcide?"

Alcide considered that as he cradled the pet duck under his massive arm. His blue eyes, mirroring the fogged mind behind, were wistful, sad.

"I hear you say so," he spoke slowly. "Me, I fin' dat man who killed Willie." He plodded past them and disappeared around the corner of the bell tower, carrying the duck tenderly.

"He'll tell everyone on the plantation that you are a detective," Joan said with a rueful smile. "And there's no way to stop him. Poor Alcide. Willie was his god and his protector. Will it make any difference to you?"

"Not at all," Grenville grinned at her. "Everyone probably knows it now. It may help to smoke something out. I've seen it happen. A guilty conscience is never quite sure just how much the other fellow knows, or what he is going to do."

"I hope so," she said gravely. "Somehow I'm relying on you. If all this isn't cleared up quickly, I feel it will be disastrous. I understand the field hands are badly frightened. They'll begin to drift away just at the time when we need them most. What are you going to do?"

"Walk in the sunshine," Grenville chuckled. "Where is this yacht of Major Grigsby's?"

"Down the bayou half a mile. It draws too much water to come up here to the sugar-house dock."

At Grenville's request they walked down to the yacht. Moored to trees against the bank, gang plank out, trim, white, of sea-going size, it looked strange here so far inland.

The high shrill womanlike voice of Major Grigsby hailed them from the deck delightedly. He insisted they come aboard, and a Cuban steward served them cold drinks in the luxurious salon. And again the little man urged the deep-sea fishing trip on Grenville. Then Major Grigsby lifted his glass, sipped from it and asked anxiously: "Have they discovered who killed that poor devil last night?"

"There has been no news this morning," Joan replied.

Major Grigsby beamed at Grenville. "I understand you are a detective, old chap. Going to look into this business?"

"I'm on the New York force," Grenville said. "This is out of my territory."

Major Grigsby sipped from his glass again. "Nevertheless," he said, "I would investigate it." His eyes twinkled as he looked at Joan de Lesseps. "If I ever own the plantation I'll bring a corps of detectives down and put a stop to all this nonsense at once," he told her.

Major Grigsby went ashore with them, and chatted volubly until he left them at the commissary building. "Going to go over some figures with Mr. Freeman," he said to Joan. "I'm bound to have this plantation of yours yet, my dear. With Cuban sugar duties uncertain, and political conditions growing worse there, my

partner and I are going to expand on the mainland. We like this property as a nucleus for our operations. Fine place for a sugar refinery."

Joan only smiled at him, and they went on. "He's nice," she said. "But I don't think I'll sell, unless I am forced to. His bait of a fortune in government bonds and leisure to travel and enjoy myself doesn't seem very attractive."

Freeman looked out of an open window as they passed the end of the building, said hello to Joan and nodded curtly to Grenville. Inside, the tall figure of Fritch, the overseer, was visible, scowling. Grenville wondered what his forthcoming interview with Fritch would produce.

HE and Joan strolled about the plantation until noon. There was much to see. And by the curious glances cast at him wherever he went, the furtive comments exchanged after they had passed, he knew that he was marked everywhere as a detective, come to investigate the terror.

After lunch, through which young Jack de Lesseps sat in sulky silence, Grenville looked up Fritch, the overseer, and found him talking with Palto, his wild-bearded assistant, outside the blacksmith shop. Fritch nodded shortly and stood in unfriendly silence.

Palto fingered the edges of his beard and watched curiously as Grenville said bluntly: "Miss de Lesseps tells me you and the colored boy she sent to get me were the only ones who knew I was coming to the plantation, Mr. Fritch. Did you speak of it to anyone?"

Fritch spat, ran the palm of his hand over his mustache, and growled: "Sure. I told dat Rink nigger to go get you, like she say. An' I tell Mr. Freeman de car being used; an' he say, you be one detective dat come to snoop around. We be in de store with half a dozen men standing around. How you like dat?" he finished challengingly.

Palto pushed his slouch hat back and his cold blue eyes twinkled sarcastically at Grenville. With a thumb hooked inside the heavy steel buckle of his belt, he said in his startlingly cultured voice with a trace of amusement: "I was there also, Mr. Grenville. I imagine quite a few people were in possession of that information at least two hours before the boy started with the car. Is it of any importance? I may say that your unfortunate—er—debacle is known to us also. Fritch and I were discussing it this morning. The cabin where you were held prisoner is over at the edge of Deep Swamp, on our land. I don't believe the two men you described are known to anyone on the plantation. But then desperate characters are not unknown along the coast here. They hide out very successfully. There are many sources of illegal income to keep them going."

The man was apparently in his middle forties, from what little of his face was visible beneath the tangle of beard. Grenville wondered again what odd course had led one of Palto's capabilities to a life like this. Then he shrugged all that away carelessly. There was apparently no way to trace down the apelike Negro, Sam, this way. "Have they found that chap's body yet?" he inquired.

Fritch stood there in surly silence and let Palto answer for him; and Palto shook his head. "They found no trace of him in the bayou, but bodies vanish quickly in such places. You are, I take it, absolved from the unfortunate charge of murder?"

"Evidently," Grenville assented. "And I've been wondering who killed him, and why."

Palto combed long slender fingers through ragged fringes of his remarkable beard His cold green eyes looked down

his hooked nose blankly. "On any plantation of this size, Mr. Grenville, there are innumerable feuds and hatreds. Fights are not uncommon. Murders, I regret to say, have happened before. Willie Broussard had no business on the bayou bank at that time of night. What he was doing, who he met, and what happened, the good God himself only knows. I doubt if we misguided mortals will ever have the answer."

And abruptly Grenville said: "His last words were about the bell. Something connected with that killed him." He was watching Fritch as he said it. The big man's surely flat face contracted in a silent spasm of surprise, fear, apprehension.

"*Nom de dieu!* Dat bell!" Fritch exclaimed. "There be no plantation here if dat bell ring much more. De devil live in dat bell, an' we all die an' de niggers run away. I think so, me."

Palto laughed indulgently. "It is only a bell, Fritch. I suggest you forget it. You're upset again."

Fritch scowled at Grenville. "Why you talk dat bell to me?" he burst out. "I don't care to hear no more. I am busy, man me. Good-by!" He turned away and strode off.

Palto shook his head goodnaturedly as he stared after the stiff, angry back of the overseer. "Fritch hasn't been himself since he was in New Orleans when Mr. de Lesseps died," he commented. "The superstition of the bell, of which you have probably heard, Mr. Grenville, is believed implicitly by him. He was raised on the plantation here, you see. A most capable man in every other way. And now I have work to do also. Good day, sir."

GRENVILLE strolled back to the big house in an irritated mood. Motives, reasons, clues were conspicuous by their absence. True, Fritch had been in New Orleans when Adrian de Lesseps had died. A man who looked like him had been in the kidnap car. But Fritch had not been near the great bell last night when it rang, for he had hurried there with Freeman and Major Grigsby.

That afternoon Grenville once more inspected the sugar house and the old bell tower. Without forcing the nailed door, there was no possible way to get up to the bell that he could see. He was standing on the dock before the sugar house when a duck splashed in the water below; and looking about, Grenville saw the shaggy head of the huge, childlike Alcide staring over the end of the dock at him.

Alcide asked: "You find dat man what killed Willie?"

"Nope, Alcide, not a sign of him. But when I find the man who rang that bell last night I'll know who killed your brother."

Alcide wrinkled his brow, struggling with a momentous thought. "Dat man kill Willie?"

"Yes," said Grenville, his eyes narrowing at a sudden thought. "Do you know who rang that bell, Alcide?"

Alcide wagged his head. "I don't know, but I find dat man." And his head went down out of sight and Grenville heard him scrambling under the dock where he evidently spent much of his time. Alcide whistled shrilly. The duck swam in toward the bank. Grenville smiled to himself and then grew thoughtful as he walked back to the house. Was it possible that Alcide, wandering about the plantation aimlessly, would stumble on that which was hidden to other men?

MAJOR GRIGSBY'S partner, Michael Cavanaugh, dined at the big house that evening. He was a big, bluff, square-shouldered Irishman. His mustache was grizzled and short, his eyes keen, twinkling, and his laugh loud and ready. But

he had a rocklike chin, a strong mouth and the manner and speech of a man who smashed through all difficulties to whatever he had set his mind upon. Over silver, linen, sparkling glassware and food not soon forgotten, Michael Cavanaugh lived up to his appearance. His booming voice recounted tale after tale of madcap deeds and high adventure in different parts of the world, before he had settled down and fought his way to wealth with his partner, Major Grigsby. The two men were so dissimilar that one marveled that they pulled together. A few chance words shed some light on it.

Grigsby had been a soldier of fortune, and a good one.

"Look at him," Michael Cavanaugh roared at one point in his conversation. "Baby face and pink cheeks, blast him! All built for a tea cup and little cakes. And yet when I first met him he walked around the corner of a warehouse down in Guatemala and stuck a machine gun under my nose. 'Wink one eye, you big no-account ashman!' he bawled at me, 'and I'll cut you down to pickle size and tramp you in the mud. Viva the Federals, and what have you got to say about it?' "

Her eyes popping, Miss Fitzhugh asked: "And what did you say about it?"

Michael Cavanaugh's gusty laugh rang through the room. "I said, 'Hurrah for the Federals too, you pink-cheeked little bantam cock. Get me a machine gun like that, too, and we'll clean up on these misguided *revolucionistas*. They're two weeks behind in my pay anyhow.' And from then on," Michael Cavanaugh chuckled, "we machine-gunned our way together."

Michael Cavanaugh made the meal lively, entertaining. For a time the dark terror, the ominous threat that hung over Bayou Bleu Plantation was pushed into the background. Even Grenville was content to enjoy the interlude. But when Lloyd Freeman looked at his watch, announced: "Sorry, but I have to run down to the store to go over some matters with our overseer," and departed, Grenville waited a few minutes and then said under his breath to Joan de Lesseps: "I think I'll take a walk."

She was lovely tonight in a filmy evening dress, trim little slippers, and her hair caught up at the back of her head in that familiar little imperious mound. Her inscrutable eyes contemplated him for an instant, and then she said: "I'll go with you."

Grenville went to his room first, and pulled the window shade. From his kit bag he took a soft leather shoulder holster and strapped it on, slipping the thirty-eight automatic in it. In his coat pocket he put his small powerful flashlight.

She met him on the driveway at the back of the house. The moon was not yet up. They walked through pitch blackness for a few moments before she asked: "What are you going to do?" It was a matter-of-fact question, as if she understood perfectly that he was not walking for pleasure.

"I understand Fritch is a bachelor. I'm going to search his house while he's over at the office talking with your cousin. If he had anything to do with your uncle's death in New Orleans, he used a key to get in, and he's probably still got it. Won't be carrying it now neither. If he's guilty of any of this business, he may have some evidence hidden away. Surprising how often they do."

She was silent for a moment, and then agreed slowly: "I suppose you're right, but Fritch has been on the plantation a long time. If he's innocent I don't want him to know this. I wish you'd do it as quickly as possible."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Terror Tolls the Bell

FRITCH'S house sat to the right of the feed barn, off alone in a patch of trees, and an arm of the cypress morass called Deep Swamp thrust up near the back of it. They could hear the steady booming chorus of the frogs as they walked under the trees and came to the front of the low, one-story house.

No lights were burning inside. The nearest houses were a line of cabins for the darkies a full quarter of a mile away. The porch boards creaked loudly underfoot. The hinges of the front door squeaked faintly as Grenville's hand pushed it in. Not until they were inside with the door closed did he use the light, and then only for an instant, disclosing a small, bare, living room.

A door opened to the left into a bedroom, even barer, with a second room back of it. A small dining room and kitchen were behind the living room.

A battered secretary desk stood in one corner of the living room. Grenville searched it first, swiftly, expertly. He found a few papers, letters, small drawers full of odds and ends, including some keys. But Joan de Lesseps looked at the keys and said positively: "None of those could have been used in our town house. They're not the type."

With the living room yielding blank, Grenville turned to the bedroom adjoining it. This was the room Fritch used. It was neat, orderly. Rows of shoes under a cheap pine dresser, a pair of khaki trousers folded neatly over a chair, the bed halfway made, and a big closet full of assorted clothes at one side. Grenville looked in the closet first, frisking the clothes hanging there. An old corncob pipe, a tin of tobacco and some old receipted bills were all he found in the clothes. He went to the dresser next, working quickly, methodically.

Joan said under her breath: "Hurry, please. He may come back at any moment. I—I wouldn't want him to find me here."

"Won't take long," Grenville assured her.

The house was silent about them. The room was black, save for the winking flashes of light as Grenville worked. Near an open window they could hear the steady beat of the frog chorus in the nearby swamp. It emphasized the isolation, the loneliness about them. Grenville recalled his journey through the swamp the evening before, and once more he found the feeling of desolation, of ominous menace, of tight-nerved expectancy coming back over him.

"Hurry!" Joan begged again.

Grenville opened the bottom drawer, ran his hands down quickly through a pile of clothing. He brought out a large, old-fashioned revolver and a box of cartridges. "Here's something," he said. "Fritch evidently believes in being armed. And here—what's this?"

His light dived at the pile of shirts under which the revolver had been lying. He pulled one of them up. The edge was stained in one spot with dried blood.

"Hasn't been worn since it was washed," said Grenville. "Something must have been shoved down in here." He felt down to the bottom of the drawer again; and this time his hand came out with a knife. A crude, wooden-handled knife with a blade at least nine inches long. A knife that had been made from an old file, sharpened to a razor edge on both sides, with a wicked gleaming point.

Joan de Lesseps said in a startled, frightened voice: "What—what's that on it?"

"Blood," said Grenville softly. "Human blood. This is the knife that killed Willie Broussard. I recognize it by the home-

made wooden handle. See, it's notched all the way around at the top. There couldn't be two knives on the plantation like it!"

The light showed her eyes wide with growing horror. She shivered, said: "Willie Broussard. Did—did Fritch—"

Grenville took out his handkerchief, wrapped it around the grisly piece of evidence, slipped it in his pocket. "If Fritch didn't kill Broussard, he evidently knows something about it," he stated grimly. "I don't know what happened to Broussard's body, but evidently the killer, afraid the knife would be discovered and traced down, hid it here."

She was white now, the little patches of rouge on her cheeks standing out clearly. "I can't believe it of Fritch," she said with an effort. "But if he is guilty, I—I—we must do something about it."

Grenville closed the drawer, keeping out the blood-stained shirt. "We will do something about it," he promised grimly. "Let me have a look in that other room, and then I'll go down to the office and see Fritch."

SHE followed him silently into the back bedroom. It was evidently little used. Two battered suitcases stood against the wall. A cardboard carton filled with old magazines rested at the foot of the wooden bed. The bureau drawers were empty. "Nothing here evidently," said Grenville, turning to the closet. "Half a jiffy and we'll get out." He opened the door flashed the light in, and . . .

Behind him Joan de Lesseps uttered a strangled, horrified cry. Grenville himself cursed, forgetting her. The skin at the back of his neck crawled and he recoiled involuntarily.

Directly before him, upright against the back of the closet, stood a stiff erect body, rigid arms straight at the sides, mouth half opened as if about to utter a horrible scream. . . .

Someone had hung the dust-covered, ghastly-faced body of Willie Broussard there.

Joan de Lesseps moaned: "It's Willie! Oh, how horrible!"

"Don't look!" Grenville begged, and stepped in front of her, hiding the macabre sight.

The back straps of Willie Broussard's overalls had been passed over one of the strong clothes hooks, holding the body up in that ghoulish position. Grenville slammed the cupboard door, swung to her. Ghastly pale, she looked as if she had seen a ghost, was about to faint. In a moment she drew a deep, shuddering breath, smiled at him tremulously and said: "I'm all right now."

"I'll take you back to the house and then get to the bottom of this," Grenville told her. "I don't think Fritch did this. It shows a grotesque sense of humor. Fritch would have hid the body at the back of the closet on the floor. The knife looks suspicious, but the body makes it too strong. Fritch didn't move it from the bayou bank, I know. Looks as if someone were trying to frame him."

They went out the front door, across the creaking front porch into the cool, open night.

She said: "I'm glad you feel that way about Fritch. He was a friend of Willie's."

"The chap who did it overreached himself. It'll be easier to find him now. I say, would you mind waiting here a moment while I run back and get that shirt and revolver, just in case Fritch is guilty and wants a weapon?"

"Not at all. I feel better out here in the open."

Grenville retraced his steps with the growing feeling that black deeds, gruesome terror were still to come on this lonely plantation. As he stepped through the front door a cold draft of air struck his face, as if clammy death hung heavy in the deserted house.

He slipped the old-fashioned revolver in his coat pocket, got the shirt and turned back into the living room and walked toward the door. And in that moment he sensed rather than heard a stir in the darkness at his back.

He threw up an arm instinctively, while the flashlight was still off. He heard an audible grunt as of a mighty effort being expended—and a terrific blow struck his upflung arm, glanced off, smashed the side of his head—and that was all Tony Grenville knew. . . .

A BRIGHT light—muttered oaths—a cold shock of water in his face were the next things of which Grenville was conscious. He opened his eyes, stared, groaned. Pain flashed up his left arm; white, blinding pain. It cleared his head as nothing else could.

"By damn, w'at you do here, you?" Fritch's angry voice demanded of him.

Fritch was bending over him, scowling down, with a dripping tin cup of water in one hand. Grenville struggled up, groaned with the pain, said to Fritch: "Help me up."

The overseer did so, and Grenville reeled, would have fallen had not the big fellow supported him. The vertigo quickly passed, but not the pain in his left arm, or his head. He put his right hand to his head. It came away smeared with blood.

A gasoline lantern hissing softly on a table in the center of the room showed Fritch's face black with anger.

"I say, w'at you do here with my gun an' one shirt?" Fritch rumbled furiously. "You sneak aroun' an' maybe do to me like William Broussard, eh?" Fritch waved his revolver threateningly.

Grenville swung to the door, oblivious to pain or the gun. "Is Miss de Lesseps out there?" he demanded.

Fritch's denial was not needed. Through the open front door bright silvery moonlight was flooding down. It had been dark when he reentered the house. Despair shook Grenville. No use to tell himself that she might have gone to the big house. She would have sent back help long before this. Grenville found the flashlight still in his right coat pocket as he ran outside.

She was not under the trees where he had left her. The light showed no trace of her about. No reassurance in that, for Grenville knew that death had touched him harshly and reached out to her.

Fritch joined him, still fulminating in his Cajan French. Grenville whirled on him. "Never mind that! I left Miss de Lesseps standing here! She's gone! Probably dead by now! Get your hands out to search!"

"You lie, eh?"

The automatic was still in the shoulder holster. Grenville dragged it out, jammed it into Fritch's stomach. "Drop that revolver!"

Fritch obeyed instantly, raising his hands. But the anger deepened on his face and he began to swear. "In the house!" said Grenville. He herded Fritch ahead of him through the living room and back to that rear bedroom. "Open that closet door!" he ordered.

Fritch did so sullenly. . . . and yelled in astonishment, leaping back into the automatic.

"*Nom de dieu*—dat bell! Dat Willie come back from de devil!" And stuttering Cajan French, he plunged through the bedroom door, rushed through the front door, stamped across the porch and was gone.

Grenville put up the gun. Fritch might be a good overseer but he was as full of superstition as the plantation Negroes. He would be useless until he calmed down. Looking, Grenville found blood on the floor where he had lain. The weapon was gone. The notched knife had been taken from his pocket also. It made

his scalp crawl to think the killer must have been in the house while he searched it, or lurking outside the open windows, watching, listening.

Fritch had vanished into the night when Grenville left the house hurriedly. He had thought his arm broken. Now he found it was probably only a bad sprain which could do without attention for some time; and he paid no more attention to it. He threw the beam of his flashlight to right and left as he went. But there was no sign of Joan de Lesseps, and sick fear grew and grew in him.

Willie Broussard came back to him—Willie, stumbling, staggering from that invisible terror. He saw again that little man's ghastly face, heard his cry. And the thought of Joan de Lesseps meeting the same thing tightened his throat, drove him into a run toward the big house.

But he had not gone more than a hundred yards when he stopped, pulses hammering. Through the still, clear moonlight the deep wild clangor of the bell rang out.

Bong . . . bong . . . bong . . . bong . . . bong . . . bong . . .

THE ominous feeling of horror again swept over Grenville. Far greater now; for the deep-toned terror clamoring on the still night must surely include Joan de Lesseps. Grenville swerved to the right, away from the big house, the people there, and ran as he had never run before toward the vast cavernous sugar house on the bayou bank. Men would be there quick enough.

The bell fell silent as he ran. Back near one group of cabins the mongrel dogs began to howl, and farther away others took it up. Dolorous, agonizing were those howls, as if the animals themselves sensed the horro. that was abroad. There were shouts too, over at the big house. Lights winked there.

But Grenville was first to the bayou bank, full five minutes after the bell stopped ringing. Stumbling, staggering, his forehead beaded with cold sweat from the pain in his arm, he reached the end of the building. Silent, ominously quiet, the high walls rose sheer above him, dark against the sapphire sky. Grenville's feet pounded on the worn weathered boards of the dock; and he leaped off the other end and flashed his light on the massive wooden door at the base of the bell tower.

The rusty nail heads seemed to mock him. The door stood solid against his lungeing shoulder. No man had passed in or out, and yet that bell hanging high above him had just rung . . . rung . . .

Grenville cursed it then, evenly, passionately, coldbloodedly, with that awful rage that comes without anger. And high above him the moonlight struck into the open empty arches of the deserted tower.

Men came running across the dock boards, panting, swearing, flashing lights before them. They surged around him as Grenville turned to face them—Lloyd Freeman, Michael Cavanaugh. And a few moments later the puffing, gasping Major Grigsby; and straggling after them a young bookkeeper from the store, a foreman and field hands. And almost at the same moment the wild-bearded Palto, carrying a drawn revolver. There were other guns in the group too.

And Lloyd Freeman, who was one of the first to come, brought up before Grenville, flashing the beam of a powerful torch in his face.

"What are you doing here?" he panted.

"I heard the bell and ran. The door is locked." Grenville put his light there so all could see. "There was no one around when I got here. Not a sound."

Palto cried out angrily: "Something should be done about this! The tower should be razed to the ground! We can't go on like this!"

Lloyd Freeman flung at Grenville: "I find it hard to understand how you happen to be so close to the center of things two nights in succession. Where were you when the bell rang?"

"Coming from Fritch's cabin," said Grenville. "Miss de Lesseps is not at the house, is she?"

"Blast it, no!" Freeman exploded. "Major Grigsby said she'd gone out with you. Where is she? What were you doing at Fritch's cabin? And what's the matter with your head? There's blood all over it again. Can't you stir out after dark without looking like a stuck pig?"

Grenville stepped close to Freeman, caught his arm.

"Damn you and your dislikes, Freeman! Listen to me and forget yourself! Joan is gone! Gone, do you understand? She went to Fritch's house with me to search it! We found the knife that killed Willie Broussard and Broussard's body hanging in a bedroom closet!"

"What's that?" Palto cried. "Willie Broussard's body in Fritch's house? I don't believe it!"

"Where is Joan?" Freeman demanded.

"Gone. She waited outside while I went back in the house for a moment. Someone was waiting in there for me—struck me on the head—damn near fractured my arm; knocked me out; left me there for dead, I guess. I just came to, and Joan's gone!"

Freeman struck Grenville's hand from his arm. "That means she's dead!" he burst out wildly. "She's gone like Willie Broussard! It's murder again tonight!"

And those words of despair had barely left Freeman's lips when the high wild scream of a woman in mortal terror rose on the silent night some distance away.

THE sound electrified every man gathered there. Then another scream. They turned in concert, crowding up the wooden steps at the end of the dock, running toward those agonized cries.

The sounds were coming from a point midway between the sugar house and the big white mansion. A blinking flashlight guided them to the spot. Grenville had passed some of the men in that mad run. He was the third to arrive; and his light and the lights of those before him, showed the prim figure of Joan's aunt, Miss Fitzhugh, kneeling by the gray-haired, buxom form of her guest, Mrs. Raymond. The tall daughter with her curly corn-colored permanent and vivid red mouth, was standing at her mother's head weeping. Grenville got there just in time to hear Lloyd Freeman gasp: "What is it, Aunt Emmeline? Is she dead?"

Miss Fitzhugh said in a choked voice, nevertheless clear: "She has fainted, Lloyd. We decided to walk toward the sugar house and see what you men found. And she stumbled over—over—" Miss Fitzhugh's voice only then rose to the breaking point, to a whimper. "Look there behind you, Lloyd. At the base of the tree there. Oh, dear God in Heaven! What have the de Lesseps done to deserve all this?"

Lloyd Freeman's light swung where Miss Fitzhugh's thin shaking finger pointed.

"Good God—it's murder again!"

The great magnolia tree under which they were standing arched its high leafy canopy out over their heads. And under that canopy, where the trunk reached down into the ground, young Jack de Lesseps sat quietly, peacefully. His hands were folded across his lap, his legs stretched straight out before him, his head lopped limply over, with a cheek resting on the right shoulder. He might have been asleep, but a deep ghastly red gash ran across his neck just above the collar. And his collar, his white shirt

front, and the lapels of his white linen coat were red, wet, horrible.

Michael Cavanaugh, the ex-soldier of fortune, who was as used to death as Grenville himself, bent over the body and made the examination all knew was unnecessary.

"Dead. Throat cut," Cavanaugh said, turning, blinking into the lights focused on the spot.

CHAPTER NINE

With a Knife

LLOYD FREEMAN swung on Grenville, towering half a head taller than the detective. The big face, all muscles and bone, was red with anger.

"Damn you!" Lloyd Freeman blazed at Grenville. "He went out to find his sister! She was with you! Now he's dead and she's gone! And you were at the bell tower when we got there! I lay it at your door! I charge you with responsibility for all this! I wish I had driven you off the plantation with a whip when I first saw you last night!"

And Freeman's big clenched fist whipped up and smashed Grenville in the face without warning.

Grenville reeled back, faint with pain, dumb with astonishment. His left arm was useless. Crippled as he was, he stood no chance with the bigger man. And Freeman was coming at him again despite the hurried advice of Major Grigsby to keep his head. There was only one thing to do and Grenville did it. His hand went inside his coat—

Freeman stopped, fell back a step before the cold menace of that blue-black snubby automatic as Grenville spoke through stiff lips.

"You fool! You blasted fool! I told you to keep your head! I don't know where Miss de Lesseps is. I don't know who killed this boy. I had in my pocket the knife that killed Willie Broussard. It was gone when I recovered consciousness. Fritch got it, or the man who struck me down in Fritch's house. The same knife evidently did this. We haven't found Miss de Lesseps yet. Make one more move at me before we do and I'll cripple you like a mongrel dog with a bullet through your knee. Keep your hands away from your pockets!"

Freeman, whose hand had been stealing to his right coat pocket, lifted both hands shoulder high. "I'll not give you a chance to shoot me!" he said hoarsely, and wheeling on the other armed men begged wildly: "Disarm him! Stop him! He may be the guilty one! He's holding us up!"

"Has anyone seen Fritch?" Palto asked in his ever surprising cultured voice. "Fritch should be here. It is queer that he is not." And Palto spread his hands and faced the men he spoke to. Without waiting for a reply, he turned back to Grenville and held out his hand. "Suppose you give me that gun, sir," he begged. "We haven't time for this sort of thing now. You were at Fritch's house. If you can tell us where he is, it will help in coordinating all this."

A slow smile curved Grenville's lips.

"Save your breath, Palto," he said. "One experience with Freeman is enough. I'll keep the gun. I don't know where Fritch is. I suggest the rest of you scatter out and get searching parties organized. Miss de Lesseps is on the plantation here somewhere. Alive or dead. You'd better try to help her. I'm through for tonight, myself. I've had enough. I'm going back to the house and telephone for a doctor. Freeman, it's your trouble now—and be damned to you!"

Palto ran his fingers through the tangle of his wild beard. His voice grew contemptuous. "No gentleman would think of himself at a time like this, sir. We need you. Stay here with us."

Grenville shook his head. "Not a chance," he said curtly. "I'm going." Still holding his automatic in full view he backed away from the spot, past Jack de Lesseps' body, past the gnarled trunk of the magnolia tree into the dark thick shadows beyond. And he could sense them all despising him as he went.

"Let him go!" Lloyd Freeman shouted angrily. "It's the best place for him. If he hadn't mixed in this, taken Joan out tonight, all this wouldn't have happened. Men, let's work fast. We've got to! Turn the field hands, the foremen, everyone out. Tell 'em to bring lights and guns. I'll get these women to the house and telephone the sheriff."

Grenville was out of sight now in the heavy shadows under the shade trees growing all about. Stepping behind a tree he watched them begin to scatter, run, their lights bobbing through the night.

But as he backed away into invisibility and oblivion, his eyes never left one figure of that group. Now, as they scattered out he saw that one person hurry off alone, back toward Fritch's house, and the cabins beyond the mule barns. The flashlight it carried went out. It became a dark shadow, invisible for seconds, then standing out dimly in the moonlight. And Grenville followed.

It went for a short distance toward the mule barns, turned abruptly to the left, stopped in a patch of shadow for a moment and evidently looked hard to place everyone within sight. Grenville made himself invisible during that moment. But quickly he was following again, away from the mule barns, straight toward the great gaunt bulk of the sugar mill and boiler house.

His quarry passed into the blackness beside the sugar-mill walls and vanished.

A hundred-yard strip of moonlight lay between Grenville and the sugar mill. The furtive figure he had trailed did not reappear. Some twenty yards to the left a short string of the little flat cars used to haul cut cane offered a measure of cover. Grenville moved to the left, came up behind them, crossed the last belt of moonlight and entered the shadows by the sugar-mill wall, keeping against it, gun in hand. A door, standing half open, revealed where the other had gone.

Grenville listened, heard nothing. A moment later he stood inside the big building.

The windows on one side admitted faint luminous bands that swept the floor and went no further. Silhouetted against them Grenville could make out the looming maze of machinery.

The man he had followed had vanished utterly. He might be in any part of the big mill. A yard away—fifty yards away. Ears strained for the slightest sound, Grenville edged away from the door. For he knew now, beyond any doubt, that he was on the right track. The killer of Bayou Bleu Plantation, the man who held the secret of that ghastly tolling bell, was somewhere in here with him. And he could only have come here at this time for one reason—one connected with the disappearance of Joan de Lesseps.

Yet with all that foreknowledge, Grenville was not prepared for what happened. He was ready to shoot at the first trouble. His throbbing left arm was a vivid reminder of what he might expect. But no sound warned him as strong fingers grabbed from behind at his gun wrist. A thin cold edge met his throat as a hand shot over his shoulder. Grenville could feel skin, cartilage, muscle yielding befor that sharp edge.

He needed no warning. He knew. A razor-like blade, ready to slash deep, instantly, was at his throat.

Grenville stood motionless, and a low laugh sounded behind him.

"Drop that gun, my persistent friend," an even, modulated voice said in his ear.

Grenville opened his fingers. The automatic thudded at his feet. Without daring to move or turn his head, Grenville said slowly: "All right, Palto. Now what?"

For Palto it was—Palto of the wild barbaric beard, the gypsylike clothes, and the speech and manner of a highly educated gentleman.

Palto laughed again. "Something about a sharp knife blade that carries conviction, eh, my friend?"

Grenville sparred for time. "I suppose you're going to cut my throat?"

"Probably," Palto agreed. "I have felt since you first appeared last night that I would eventually have to do so. But I am a man of peace and persuasion, Mr. Grenville. I had high hopes you would take warning from the misfortunes of others and return to your duties in New Orleans."

"Where is Miss de Lesseps?"

Palto ignored the question. The steady even pressure of the keen blade stayed at Grenville's throat. "Would you mind confiding to me," Palto asked in his ear, "what led you to follow me here? I confess you surprised me. Your excellent bit of melodrama before the others was perfect." Grenville said nothing.

"Come, come," Palto urged. "Must I go against my wishes and draw this knife so gently—and so deeply—across your throat?" And the knife moved ever so gently on Grenville's throat. He felt the skin part before it.

"Steady," he said with control that amazed himself. "If that's all you want to know, it's easy to answer. Your right wrist, Palto, up where the sleeve hides it. You bared it when you stretched out your hands back there. It's been scratched deeply, hasn't healed over yet."

"Yes?" Palto urged. "And why did that bring you here?"

Grenville knew he was in for it. Might as well make the best of it. As long as he kept Palto talking he would live, have a chance. "Adrian de Lesseps scratched the hands that killed him, Palto. I've been looking for scratches since then. Yours interested me. I followed here to have a better look at them."

Palto's hand released his wrist now and gripped his coat collar. "Straight ahead, my friend. Slowly, so you don't stumble. Or I must use the knife."

IT WAS long before Grenville forgot the nervous tension of that short groping walk. A stumble that might seem an attempt at escape would mean the end. He noted as they moved off that Palto failed to stoop and retrieve the automatic from the floor.

Palto guided him through a dark maze, talking under his breath as they went. "A very clever man, Mr. Grenville. Too clever to die, it seems. I thought I had disposed of you permanently at Fritch's house."

"Pretty clever yourself, Palto," Grenville encouraged. "I'm still wondering how you killed Adrian de Lesseps."

"A matter of a purloined key to their house, an evening of waiting for the gentleman to return, and a few dollars discreetly paid to some men in New Orleans to follow Miss de Lesseps and make certain she did not return and find me. Two hundred was the sum," Palto chuckled. "For four hundred they would have killed her and thrown her body in the river."

"I see," said Grenville. "And I suppose you had me trapped on my way here? And killed Willie Broussard, and put his body in Fritch's house? And also cut young de Lesseps' throat? Palto, it's too much for one man."

Grenville waited for the other's reaction to that. A certain type of mind, a

borderline mind, brilliant but unstable, seldom failed to rise to such bait.

Palto rose to it, with a note of unconscious pride in his softly modulated voice.

"All of it, my frend. Freeman, the young fool who hopes to marry Miss de Lesseps and work no more, grew angry when he heard you were coming. Swore at you for a prying detective. I wanted no detectives here at this time. There was time to slip through the swamp, see some friends of mine who are forced to live outside the law. It was a simple matter to rush a car to your hotel, pick you up and bring you to them. Willie Broussard was too curious for his welfare. He followed me last night. I ran into him when I left the bell tower. He recognized me. There was nothing to do but stop him. When you left his body there, I carried it away, and then joined the company at the house."

Palto chuckled. "While they were dragging the bayou and Fritch was busy with his search, I took Broussard's body to his house. It was amusing to think of his reaction when he found it. And the attitude the field hands would take when they learned the dead man had turned up there. There was a chance that Fritch would be accused of participating if the woman who cleaned his house discovered it before he did. But I evidently put it in the wrong closet," Palto said regretfully. "I had just entered the house this evening to remedy that oversight when you came in. I stepped out on the back porch while you searched the place, found the body, and revealed your brilliant deductions to Miss de Lesseps.

"I knew then," said Palto, his voice hardening, "that you were a dangerous man. I was on the point of following you when you so kindly returned. I thought the heavy poker from the kitchen would do excellently. And," Palto sighed, "I thought it had when you dropped. My word of honor, Mr. Grenville, your heart seemed to have stopped beating. I had no time to linger and make certain. I walked out to Miss de Lesseps, who though you were returning, and had my hand over her mouth before she could scream. She fainted, and while carrying her here to the sugar mill I had the misfortune to encounter her drunken brother.

"There was nothing to do," said Palto apologetically, "but to stop his mouth. He would have ruined everything I have been working for. It occurred to me then that if the bell were rung his body would be discovered in the ensuing excitement. And once more the superstition and tradition of the plantation would have been carried out. The bell ringing—another death—and by tomorrow morning half the field hands will have left."

It was a long speech, but their progress through the length of the sugar mill was slow enough for it all.

"I can't see," said Grenville slowly, "why you want the hands to leave. Why did you kill Adrian de Lesseps? What are you driving at, anyhow?"

Palto chuckled. 'That," he said, "is another matter. You wish to see the body of Miss de Lesseps? Ah, here—through that door."

CHAPTER TEN

Ring Out Murder!

THE door hinges rasped softly as Palto closed it behind them. A flashlight in Palto's hand brought illumination. They were in a small store room, a tool room, with dingy bins of supplies against the walls, a workbench, a wide assortment of tools hanging on nails above it, and on the floor, on a heap of waste, the body of Joan de Lesseps!

Grenville could have cried out with the rush of relief that ran through him. Her ankles and hands were bound. A gag was

over her mouth—but her eyes were open, blinking at the light. Joan de Lesseps was still alive.

Palto's voice came solicitously through the tangle of his dark beard. "I trust you have not been uncomfortable, my dear?"

She shuddered. Dark fear was in her eyes as she looked up at Palto.

"What are you going to do with her?" Grenville asked huskily.

"I will tell you in a few minutes," Palto promised. "Lie down on the floor, on your face, Mr. Grenville."

"Suppose we talk this over, Palto."

"Lie down!" said Palto. The keen point of the knife blade jabbed into Grenville's back muscles. He obeyed.

Palto took a coil of light rope off a nail. Dextrously he tied Grenville's ankles. Tied Grenville's wrists behind. Tied his elbows and then drew his ankles up and hog tied them to the elbow cords, so that Grenville was unable even to straighten out. The pain in his left arm increased. He bit his lip until the blood came, warm and salty. He was faint, dizzy when Palto unceremoniously jammed waste in his mouth and gagged him thoroughly. Palto chuckled as he stood up and looked at his handiwork.

"You will be here until I return, Mr. Grenville. It will not be long."

"And now, Miss de Lesseps," said Palto, throwing the coil of line over his shoulder, "it may interest you to know that you are about to substantiate the tradition of the de Lesseps. For you, the last of the direct line, the bell will ring tonight. And in the morning, when men look up at it, they will see you dead, as foretold by the bell. A ritual sacrifice, if there ever was one, my dear." Palto sighed, fingered his beard. "Ritual has always appealed to me," he said reflectively. "It brings home vividly to the eye what the mind would not otherwise fully comprehend."

Palto stooped, picked her up effortlessly despite her struggles, and tossed her over a shoulder. The flashlight in his hand wavered, danced, centered on Grenville's face.

From the black void behind it Palto's rich voice mocked. "When you hear the bell, Mr. Grenville, you will know that Miss de Lesseps has but a few seconds more to live. And within five minutes I shall be here with you. My work will be over then."

The light snapped off. Palto's feet shuffled. The door creaked open. Far down the long length of the mill a pale moonbeam glinted in. Palto, who had been educated for the priesthood, and who had come to cold-blooded murder and butchery, was silhouetted for an instant in the doorway with a limp burden across his shoulders, struggling no longer.

The door creaked shut. Palto vanished. Grenville was alone, helpless with his thoughts—nightmare thoughts.

THE slightest effort to free himself brought excruciating pain. Joan de Lesseps was doomed at the hands of that madman. For Palto was mad. No sane man could go about such cold-blooded butchery.

Profound silence had fallen again. The seconds fled. Grenville knew heartsick agony as he listened for the first deep strokes of that death bell. The strokes that would mark Joan de Lesseps' last seconds of life.

He fought his bonds despite the pain. It was useless. Palto had tied him well. Trembling, sweating, weak, he finally gave it up, confessed defeat, lay waiting for the bell.

And the door hinges rasped softly.

A match scratched on wood. The feeble glare in cupped hands fell over him, A broad Cajan accent whispered: "You like me to cut dat rope?"

Grenville could not speak past the gag. He nodded. And Alcide, the giant with the wistful face of a child, dropped down beside him as the match went out. A knife slashed the ropes. Free, Grenville tore the gag out of his mouth.

Alcide asked anxiously: "You find dat man w'at kill Willie? He ring de bell but I no cotch him."

Grenville staggered to his feet, jerked out: "I found him, Alcide! The man who killed Willie! He tied me up here. He's going to ring the bell in a minute."

Alcide sighed with relief. "I cotch him when he ring dat bell. I fix dat man, you bet."

"Alcide," said Grenville prayerfully, "do you know how to get up to that bell?"

"I show you," said Alcide.

"Hurry! Miss de Lesseps is up there! He's going to kill her!"

Alcide lumbered out the door ahead of him. Grenville still had his flash. He used it now as he followed. Used it to search the floor. And where he had dropped it he found it. His automatic, ignored by a madman intent on other things. Grenville scooped it up, followed Alcide out into the night.

Two hundred yards away, high, dark against the sky, rose the square bell tower at the end of the cavernous sugar house. Up there, now, if Palto could be believed, death was stooping to claim that helpless slender girl.

Alcide ran by his side, panting. "I see you slip in dat sugar-mill door, an' come see."

"Hurry up!" Grenville urged.

No time to wonder, to ask Alcide how he knew the secret of the bell tower. No time to ask anything, or think. Run—as he had never run before, ignoring all else. Alcide led him to the end of the sugar house, to the end of the dock, and instead of racing up the steps onto the dock itself, Alcide dived down underneath. Grenville followed, using his flash.

The bayou bank, free of weeds, sloped up from the black still water, went in level to the foundations of the sugar house. The free space was some three feet high. The light showed Alcide suddenly vanishing.

When Grenville reached the spot he found Alcide had wriggled through a two-foot hole in the concrete foundation, formed by removing stones and the cement in which they were set. One would have to be directly under the dock, in front of that narrow entrance, to notice it at all. And then would think nothing of it.

Under the sugar house was a forest of ancient tree-trunk piling. Alcide wriggled through like a big beast in his burrow. Grenville followed him to the end foundations. Alcide was crouched there, panting. Another hole had been knocked in the foundation at this point. The debris was scattered about.

Alcide pointed to it. "Dat come to bell tower," he panted.

And as if the words were a signal the booming clangor of the bell burst out overhead.

Slow now like a dirge.

Bong . . . bong . . . bong . . . bong . . . bong . . .

THE deep bass notes were strangely muffled, eery, gruesome, as they beat, hammered on the senses. Muffled, deadened, as if death were coming to the great bell itself....

Alcide screamed: "Dat man get Willie! I get him!" and started to crawl through the hole. Grenville thrust him back, hurled himself through the narrow opening. He sprawled on a brick floor, laid on the ground level, damp, clammy, cold. The flashlight showed the square windowless shaft rising black above him, with a

small opening at the top where the moonlight glowed wanly. A spiral flight of rotting wooden steps sided by a sagging hand rail wound up to that luminous opening.

Grenville threw himself at the steps and raced up.

The stairs shook under his weight. The hand rail gave dangerously when he caught at it. Once a rotten stair tread broke beneath his foot, throwing him forward. He wrenched himself to his feet and went on. Heedless of pounding lungs, danger of the shaking stairs. Heedless of everything but the mad urge to reach that opening and the bell-tower platform. For searing in his mind like a torture iron was Palto's statement that when the bell stopped ringing Joan de Lesseps would be dead.

Bong . . . bong . . . bong . . . bong . . .

Those crashing strokes thundered down about him. There was the opening just above him—he reached it—and, gun in hand, Grenville took the last three steps in one stride and plunged on the rotting boards of the platform.

An amazing, unbelievable, dreadful sight met his eyes.

The high round arches at each side of the platform let the moonlight flood in. There was the bell, tall as a man's head, thick, monstrous, dark with the weathered patina of long exposure. There, just around the circumference of the mighty rim was the powerful, slouch-hatted figure of Palto, swinging his weight on the bell rope. Palto's dark tangled beard framed a face aflame with madness. His stabbing eyes seemed to glitter and gleam.

And there on the bell was Joan de Lesseps!

It was monstrous, horrible, ghastly. Her slender white figure was roped to the cold bell metal, head thrown back to the length of her slim white throat, hair flying free and lovely in the moonlight, white arms hanging limply, soft filmy dress whipping with the motion. She lay bound with her back against that cold metal, swinging, swinging as the mighty clapper thundered against the sides beneath her.

It was ritual. Macabre ritual. Gruesome, grisly, a thing that only a mad mind could have thought of. Her slender body a sacrifice on the swinging altar of death.

Palto saw Grenville burst out on the platform, automatic in hand. Moving with animal-like quickness, Palto dropped the bell rope, dodged behind the bell before Grenville could fire. Grenville followed him, driven only by the thought that Palto must not escape. The great bell slowed quickly, its clamor dying away. And as Grenville rushed past the bell rope and followed the fleeing man a cry of warning reached his ears.

"Stop, or she dies now!"

Palto had circled the bell, stopped by Joan de Lesseps' head. Over the round top of the bell, which was still swinging slowly, the long keen knife in Palto's hand was clearly visible. The same knife that had killed Willie Broussard. It was at her throat, poised, ready to dive down.

Grenville stopped. He could do no more. Palto laughed at him through his beard. "Throw the gun out, my quixotic young friend!" Palto cried. He lowered the knife an inch.

Joan had fainted. She knew nothing, saw nothing. Grenville was grateful for that. For he himself was shaking with the terrible suspense of the moment. And the agonizing certainty came to him that he was going to toss his automatic out into space, and pray to the red gods that it might somehow help her.

He lifted the gun to throw it, while Palto waited menacingly.

And in that moment the miracle happened. Out of the hole in the floor behind Palto, the big bulking figure of Al-

cide rose up. Palto was oblivious to it as he watched Grenville.

Alcide stepped forward. His big hands dropped to Palto's knife wrist, jerked it back. Alcide's other arm encircled Palto's body, heaved it off the floor boards. Alcide turned, raising the struggling figure high before him. Two steps he took and halted in the arched opening. Grenville had no time to interfere. Alcide cried out: "You kill my Willie! For dat I do dis!" And Alcide cast the writhing figure from him. Palto screamed once as he fell. Down—down. . . .

THEY were massing by the bell tower when Alcide crawled out from under the dock and Grenville helped Joan de Lesseps after him. He had quickly freed her, and she had clung to him as he had helped her down the steps. But there had been no hysterics. There were none now as she stood upright, with her hair flying loose, and faced them. Her cousin, Lloyd Freeman, Fritch, Michael Cavanaugh, Major Grigsby, the foreman, technical men, Negro hands. Flashlights, lanterns, guns of all kinds in their hands, and their faces set with amazement and bewilderment. They fell back as Grenville helped her forward. Their lights showed a crumpled, broken form that moved convulsively on the ground.

Joan, are you all right?" Lloyd Freeman cried, pushing to her.

She nodded, smiled wanly.

Major Grigsby stepped to her too, pudgy and round, his pinkish face alight with relief. "This is a happy moment!" he cried.

The crumpled figure on the ground stirred, lifted up to an elbow at the sound of Grigsby's voice. Palto raised a shaking hand and pointed at the little rotund figure. His voice, strained, hoarse, that of a man half dead already, rose high and clear.

"I'm dying, Grigsby! But when I go I'll take your reputation and your good name. Hear me, men! Grigsby forced me into this. He found me here and recognized me. He knew that I was wanted for murder, that I was hiding here! He wanted this plantation. They wouldn't sell. He gave me the choice of making it possible for him to buy the plantation, and accepting twenty thousand dollars for doing it, or being turned over to the police. That's his way. It's always been his way. The face of an angel and the heart of a devil."

Major Grigsby, his face suddenly blood-red, his eyes popping with anger, shouted: "The man's delirious! He doesn't know what he's saying!"

Palto's arm sank to the ground. He supported himself on two hands—and laughed at Grigsby.

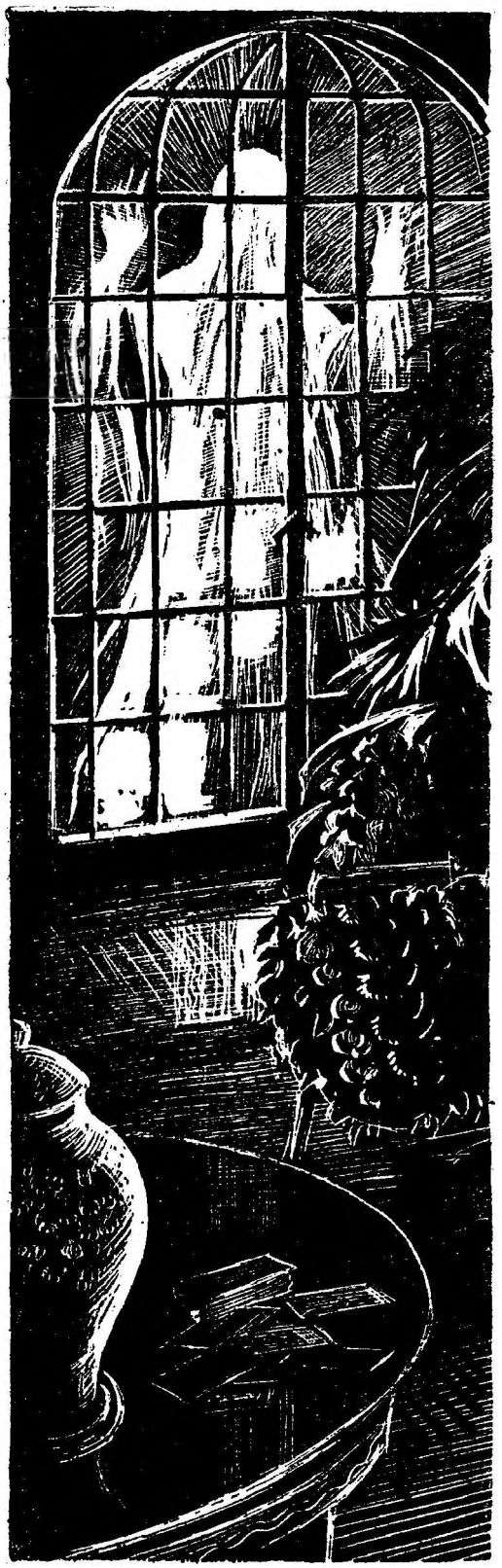
"In my cabin—in my suitcase—is first payment on account . . . check for five thousand dollars," he got out. "Been waiting here like a vulture to pick the bones after—I—drove the life from the plantation. Grigsby, I'll see you in hell!" Palto's arms went limp and he sagged down to the ground, grinning as if he had found high humor as he died.

Michael Cavanaugh stepped forward and confronted his pudgy little partner.

"I believe him, Grigsby. I know you of old. You said you'd get this plantation, and you went ahead, be damned to whom you smashed. I didn't know what you were doing. I never dreamed you'd stoop to murder. We part now—and if there's any justice I'll help to see it reaches you."

Grigsby backed away from his partner and found the way blocked behind him. He tried to move aside and men closed in seizing him, despite his wild protests.

And Grenville took Joan de Lesseps' arm, turned her firmly away from the spot and led her off into the moonlight.



The Crimson Scorpion

By

Erle Stanley Gardner

Author of "Dressed To Kill," etc.

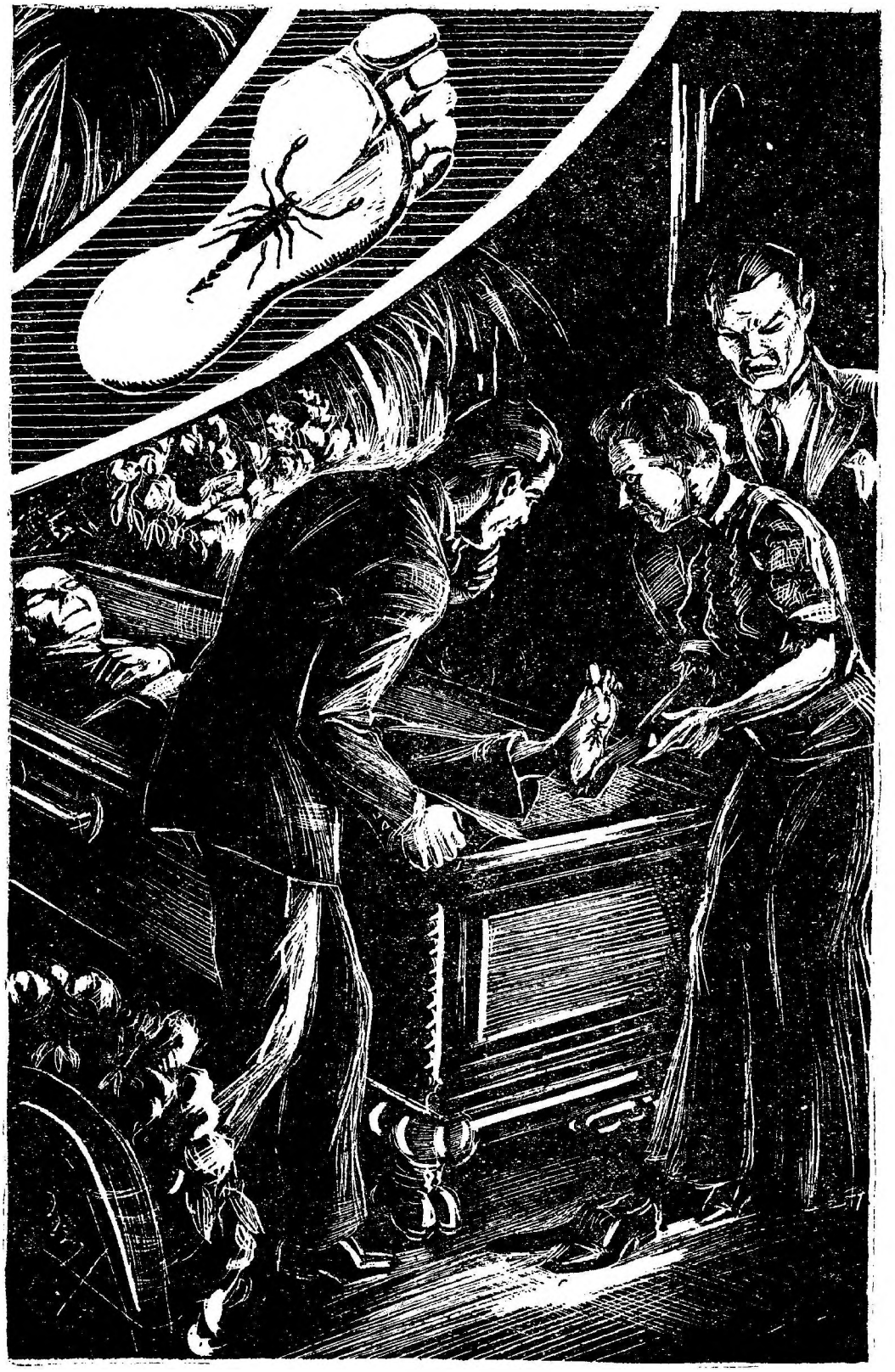
Gleaming like some malignant thing it stood forth on the flesh of those murder-marked members of the Chapman family—the sign of The Crimson Scorpion. No one knew from where it came and only two men guessed the one way to erase it. They knew it had to be blotted out with something more scarlet than its own dye—the blood of the ghoul who'd traced it there.

CHAPTER ONE

House of Death

THERE were three of us in the partnership of Small, Weston and Burke. Fremont Small, his body twisted and distorted with rheumatism, his wasted frame shriveled and puny as it was, carrying about a brain that was capable of concentrating thoughts in a fierce, white ray of cold intellect.

The man was a financial wizard. How he managed to sell our services for the prices he commanded, I was never able



There it gleamed against the white flesh.

to find out; nor when I questioned him, would he enlighten me. All I knew was that he made the financial arrangements, and that our compensation was frequently far higher than that of noted criminal lawyers for handling important cases.

My other partner was Burke, who had been a prize-fighter, until the searching eyes of Fremont C. Small, seeing in him something that could be translated to financial advantage, had brought him into the firm.

Strangest of all of Small's acquisitions was a man who was not a member of the firm at all, but who preferred to be kept in the background. The Doctor, we called him, although his real name was Lau Tze. He was pure Chinese. Not the small-boned, small-statured, wily Chinese of the South, but the big-boned, tall, ponderous, dignified Chinese of the North. A man who spoke half a dozen languages fluently, his impassive countenance never showed excitement.

Now we were all grouped in the office of Fremont Small, and the fact that Small had deemed it necessary to bring us all together, was all that was necessary to indicate the importance of the occasion.

THE woman who sat at Fremont C. Small's right was perhaps fifty-five years old. She was gaunt and leathery; her eyes were bright, black and snappy. Her skin was thick and sallow, absolutely without color. And her lips were a firm, straight line, stretching across her face in grim decision.

Fremont C. Small twisted his misshapen body in the huge swivel chair in front of the big desk. "Gentlemen," he said, "this is Mary Riceland."

She nodded her head with a swift, jerking motion, but did not smile.

The three of us acknowledged the introduction, Burke with a muffled formula of pleasure, I myself with a nod, since I considered the occasion was one purely of business and that she had something important to tell us. Lau Tze, with a characteristic politeness of his race, bowed low and clasped his own hands, as he expressed pleasure in the meeting, somewhat after the flowery fashion of the Orient, although he used, of course, the purest English.

Fremont C. Small hardly gave The Doctor time to finish. His voice, sounding particularly rasping in contrast to the polite intonation of The Doctor's, impinged upon my ear drums with that effective discord which the man's voice always engendered in my mind.

"Perhaps some of you have heard of Mary Riceland. You have if you've had occasion to consult any of the reports on the fifty wealthiest persons in the United States. Mary Riceland and George Chapman, her brother, are both mentioned in that list."

He turned to look at the hatchet-faced woman.

Once more she nodded her head with that peculiar pecking motion, which reminded me of a bird hopping up to a dish and picking out a seed.

"Very well," said Fremont C. Small, turning to the woman, "I think you had better show them, Mrs. Riceland."

I had long since grown accustomed to the weird and bizarre in my dealings with Fremont C. Small. No case which he undertook was like any other case. He specialized in the spectacular and the unusual. The fact that people could afford the huge fees which he demanded for our services as investigators, indicated of necessity that they were in desperate trouble, that the situation was one which they dared not communicate to the police, and that it was something which would baffle the ordinary private investigators.

Yet, in all of the strange experiences

that I have had with the partnership of which I am a member, I doubt if there is anything which gave me quite the same peculiar sensation I experienced, when Mary Riceland, one of the fifty wealthiest individuals in the United States, nodding her head once more with that peculiar bird-like motion, raised her skirts, calmly unfastened her stocking and, without a word, rolled it down to the ankle. Then she slipped off her low shoe, pulled the stocking over her foot and raised her black, glittering eyes in a swift survey of our faces, to make certain that we were watching.

She raised her foot.

Upon the bottom of her foot, blazing, brilliant, was a crimson scorpion! A scorpion which was, perhaps, over all, the size of a silver dollar and which had evidently been painted upon the sole of the foot with some peculiarly vivid, scarlet ink.

Fremont C. Small looked at us with his irascible red-rimmed eyes, staring at each one of us in turn. "You see it?" he rasped.

Of course we saw it. We nodded, one at a time.

Fremont C. Small turned to Mary Riceland. "That's all," he said.

The woman put her stocking back on, fastened it with garters, put on her shoe and moved her skirt into place. She looked at us in turn, as though to study the effect upon us of what we had seen.

Fremont C. Small let his smoldering, blood-shot eyes also go from one to another in a silent survey.

In the end he chose me.

"Weston," he said, "you will start an investigation of this case. I think you had better take The Doctor with you."

"May I ask something of the significance of what I have just seen?" I inquired.

Fremont C. Small scowled irritably, but then his irritation was nothing out of the ordinary.

It was the woman who answered. "I have an understanding with Mr. Small," she said, in a piping, high-pitched voice, "that the matter is not to be discussed, even amongst ourselves. You will come, and you will see, and that is all that is necessary."

I started to expostulate, but it was the voice of The Doctor that arrested the words on my lips.

"It is, perhaps," he inquired, "that the things about which we have asked are so unusual, that a mere statement of the case, makes them seem to have added significance of a menacing nature?"

She nodded her head, a swift, double jerk of the neck muscles.

"I think," she said, "we'll let it go at that."

THE Doctor had prepared me for the crepe on the door, by pointing out an article in the afternoon paper, an article dealing with the death of Edgar Chapman.

Chapman, it seemed, was a brother of George Chapman and Mary Riceland was his sister. While Edgar Chapman, himself, had assets of only a few hundred thousand, his brother and sister were rated as multi-millionaries.

The family, according to the newspaper report, had lived a life of virtual isolation for many years. They had but few social contacts and no relatives other than the immediate members of the family.

The newspaper article listed the family as being composed of George Chapman, the eldest; Edgar Chapman, who was next in age; Mary Riceland, the youngest of the three; a Mable Chapman, who was the granddaughter of George Chapman; and a Bruce Chapman, who was the son of Arthur Chapman, a deceased brother.

The family had a complete retinue of servants, including even a resident physician, who had no duties other than to attend to the health of the persons occupying the huge house. It was plain to be seen that the newspaper article would have referred to the eccentricities of the members of the Chapman family, in rather more forceful language, had it not been for the immense wealth of the family. As it was, the article passed lightly over the pecularities of the occupants of the big estate, and referred to them in polite deference.

The fact remained, however, that Mary Riceland was, undoubtedly, encountering some most serious menace to her happiness, or she would never have paid the exorbitant fee which was invariably demanded by Fremont C. Small, in exchange for our services.

The fact also remained that there was crepe on the door, and about the house hung that peculiar aura of oppressive silence and solemnity which marked the presence of death.

A funeral butler, moving upon noiseless feet, opened the door and bowed wordlessly. The dark interior of the house loomed ahead of us. The close atmosphere struck us with the force of a blow.

Mary Riceland, walking in long, loose-jointed strides, moved across the threshold.

Lau Tze, The Doctor, and I moved with restrained silence, fearful that we should intrude upon the grief of others.

Mary Riceland spoke with her thin, piping voice. "Graves," she said, "show these gentlemen to rooms in the west wing."

The solemn-faced butler regarded us without expression. "Yes, ma'am," he said.

"The chauffeur," said Mary Riceland, "will bring in your bags. Immediately after you have freshened up, will you please join me in the drawing room? Graves will show you the way."

She didn't wait for us to give any expression of acquiescence, but turned sharply to the right, down a cross-corridor, and we could hear the noise of her heels, clicking with rhythmic regularity upon the tiled surface.

"This way, gentlemen," said Graves.

The man walked with such silence that he seemed to be but a gliding shadow. The house was of Spanish architecture and the long corridors were floored with colored tile. I was conscious of the fact that my own steps, despite my rubber heels, were uncomfortably noisy. As far as Lau Tze, The Doctor, was concerned, he had mastered many languages and had acquired considerable education, but he had never been able to eliminate that peculiar shuffling walk, which is the heritage of the Chinese, and I was conscious of the fact that his footsteps, as they sounded upon the tiles, were distinctive.

GRAVES led us up a flight of stairs into a suite of rooms, handsomely furnished. The chauffeur appeared with our bags. A ratty-looking individual glided noiselessly into the room.

"Freeman," said Graves, "will act as your valet. Sam Freeman, gentlemen."

Freeman had huge ears which projected outward from his head at an abrupt angle. His cheek-bones were high, his eyes narrow. His fore-head came to a point at the top and his weird appearance was further accentuated by glistening, black hair, which had been cut in a close pompadour.

He bowed from the hips and grinned.

"Freeman," said the butler, "will attend to your wishes, gentlemen. When you are ready to join Mrs. Riceland, if you will notify him, he will ring for me."

Moving with the dignity of a major-

general, Graves turned and paced noiselessly from the room.

Sam Freeman flitted into action, moving with a swiftness which fairly startled me.

I heard the sound of water running in the bathroom. Then the noise made by the catches on my bags as they snapped open. There was the sound of glasses clicking together, of ice tinkling, and the man appeared carrying a tray in his hands. His lips stretched apart from his teeth in a grin, which was with his lips only. His eyes showed no expression whatever.

"Gentlemen," he said, "bath water is running in the two tubs, should you care for baths. I have placed your shaving things by the mirrors, if you desire to shave before dinner. Your clothes are laid out on the bed. I have here some very excellent Bourbon, some rye, which is fair and some Scotch, which is uncut. There is soda and ginger ale; or, should you care for a cocktail, I can mix one in a few moments."

Lau Tze looked at me and smiled.

I extended my hand to the glass on the tray. "Scotch," I said.

Freeman handed me the bottle. I poured a generous drink.

Lau Tze, The Doctor, picked up the other glass.

"Just ginger ale," he said, "with nothing in it."

The smile faded from Sam Freeman's face, as though someone had suggested an unpleasant potion. "Very good, sir," he said.

Lau Tze drained his glass, then stared at Freeman. "Do you," he asked, "by any chance know why Mrs. Riceland wishes to see us as soon as we have freshened up a bit?"

Sam Freeman's face was as grave as that of the butler. "No, sir," he said, then looked at us with sharp, gimlet eyes. "You're detectives, ain't you?" he asked.

I was the one who answered the question. "We are not," I told him.

There was some distinction, rather finely drawn, to be certain, but, nevertheless, a distinction, between a detective and an investigator who handled investigations of the type taken over by Fremont C. Small. I felt justified in shading the truth somewhat and relying upon this subtle distinction. Moreover, I knew that Lau Tze was, at times, a poor liar.

Sam Freeman's eyes shifted to me. "Very good, sir," he said, "I thought you were, and do you wish your bath quite warm, sir, or lukewarm?"

"Lukewarm," I told him.

He nodded, turned and flitted through the room, as silently as an owl slipping through a grove of trees at midnight.

I turned to Lau Tze. "Why did you ask him that?" I asked.

Lau Tze smiled at me, an enigmatical smile, of the kind which The Doctor was good at. "I merely," he said, "wanted to see his reaction." Nor did he make any further explanation of his strange request.

We bathed, changed our clothes and notified Freeman that we were ready, and the funeral butler appeared almost at once.

CHAPTER TWO

The Man In the Coffin

PERHAPS it was something about the atmosphere of the house. Perhaps it was the demeanor of the butler. Perhaps it was merely the realization of impending danger, but the aura of death hung over the little procession which we made, as we walked down the stairs and along the passageway, so that I felt like some condemned criminal being led from the death cell to the execution chamber.

I do not know if Lau Tze felt any of this strange sensation of oppression. If

he did, he gave no sign. His face was as gravely dignified as that of a carved Buddha.

The butler paused before a door, tapped lightly with his knuckles, heard some invitation to enter, which we could not hear, bowed deferentially, opened the door and stood to one side.

We walked in.

The coffin rested upon supports, the whole being literally banked with flowers. Mary Riceland stood in the center of the room, looking as impatient as some black crow waiting for an opportunity to descend unmolested, upon a newly planted cornfield.

"Graves," said Mary Riceland, "lock the door."

The butler entered the room, closed the door and locked it.

She nodded toward the coffin. "You know what to do," she said.

The butler gravely removed his coat.

Mary Riceland looked at me and said in her thin, piping voice: "Edgar was my brother. I loved him, but there is no use in mixing silly sentimentality with business. There is no use jeopardizing the safety of the living through a false sense of affection for the dead."

I said nothing.

Her eyes shifted to Lau Tze, The Doctor.

Lau Tze nodded.

The butler, working with swift efficiency, was pitching the floral pieces to the floor. Even as I looked, he whipped a screw driver from his hip picket and attacked the coffin with expert skill.

I looked inquiringly at Mary Riceland. "Graves," she said, by way of explanation, "was a mortician before he accepted service with us."

I looked at the man, and then recognized that the lines of his face were set in that expression of fixed mourning which characterizes the more lugubrious school of undertakers, a school which is, for the most part, fast passing.

He pulled back the cover to the coffin, stood to one side and bowed.

"That is all," said Mary Riceland, "leave the room."

Graves strode toward the door, moving upon his silent, padding feet. He twisted the key in the lock, turned, I thought curiously, then slipped out into the hallway.

Mary Riceland walked to the door, slammed it shut and turned the key. "Look here," she said.

We followed her to the coffin.

EDGAR CHAPMAN had been a man of somewhat excessive weight. His face, during his lifetime, had doubtless been molded into lines of grim, dignified respectability; but in death, even with the aid of the undertaker's skill, it was plainly apparent that terror was stamped upon his countenance.

His eyes were closed and an attempt had been made to get in his face an expression of the calm tranquillity which smug relatives like to associate with the death of a loved one. However, the attempt had been a dismal failure.

I looked at the expression on the face of the corpse, then looked at Mary Riceland. "How long was he dead," I asked, "before the undertaker was notified?"

"Several hours," she said.

"Was there an autopsy?" I asked.

"There was not," she said, "The cause of death is, beyond any question, a cerebral hemorrhage."

"What makes you so certain?" I asked.

"You forget," she said, "that we have our own private physician, who is in constant attendance upon the family."

"Was he in attendance upon your brother at the time of his death?" I asked.

"He knew my brother's physical condition," she told me, "and he knew what the

effect of a shock would be. My brother was suffering from very high blood-pressure and arteriosclerosis."

"I have," I told her, "seen many people who have suffered from what we call a 'stroke,' but I have never seen anyone who had exactly that facial expression."

"That," she said, "is a matter of no moment. The cause of death here was a cerebral hemorrhage."

"Yet there was no autopsy," I pointed out.

"Our private physician conducted a sufficient post mortem to make absolutely certain the cause of death," she said.

"I think," I told her, "I should like to talk with your private physician."

"I didn't call you in here," she told me, "to comment upon the facial expression of my brother's body. I called you in here to show you this."

She moved to the other end of the coffin. With deft fingers she unlaced the left shoe and pulled down the sock from the cold, rigid foot.

I felt my face stiffen in an attempt to keep from showing surprise.

There, on the left foot of the dead man was a crimson scorpion, looking strangely vivid against the dead skin. It was, as nearly as I could ascertain, an exact duplicate of the scorpion which I had seen upon the foot of Mary Riceland.

She looked into our eyes, shifting her glance from face to face, until she had satisfied herself with what she saw there. Then she replaced the sock, put on the shoe, laced it, strode to the door, unlocked it and said: "You may come in, Graves."

Graves, who had been standing at rigid attention in the hallway, marched into the room, with that air of funeral solemnity about him, walked to the coffin and calmly and methodically began putting back the cover of the coffin. When he had finished with that, he picked up the flowers and carefully arranged them in position.

I took occasion to study the man's face, to see if there was any expression of curiosity which I could detect, and found absolutely no expression whatever, save that look of funeral mourning which clung to him as butter clings to a glass surface.

"That," said Mary Riceland, "is all we can do here. We will now go and meet the others."

She walked to the door, unlocked it and turned to the butler. "Graves," she said, "when we have left, you will please lock the door."

He nodded and said in a deep voice, vibrant with synthetic sympathy: "Yes, ma'am, you may rest assured that I will do so at once."

SHE flung open the door, walked out to the corridor and we followed. After a few seconds, we heard the door slam and the lock click into place.

I turned to look at her.

"He's always that way," she said, "whenever anything happens to bring up his former profession. He was one of those tenderly sympathetic chaps, who collected six prices for the casket and charged ten times as much as the embalming was worth."

"Do you think, for a moment," I asked, "that when he is in there alone with the corpse, with the door locked, he is not going to take occasion to reopen the coffin and see what it was that we were so eager to inspect?"

She stared at me with those beady, bird-like eyes, then nodded her head in a swift, jerky motion. "Yes," she said, "I think he will. That's why I took steps to make certain that nothing was touched without my knowing it."

"I had a bit of wax concealed under my thumbnail," she said. "I put wax on the cover and side of the coffin and

stretched a hair between the two bits of wax. If the coffin is tampered with, I can tell, simply by removing the flowers and looking at the place where I left the hair.

Lau Tze looked at me with a significant glance, then turned to the woman and bowed. "An expedient," he said, in his peculiar, stilted English, "which my ancestors have used upon occasion, and one which is most effective."

She gave him a fleeting look, then nodded her head in jerky affirmative, and dismissed the subject with only that nod. "Now," she said, "we will meet the others." She glanced at her wristwatch. "They will be having cocktails," she said, "in the upstairs lounging room. Come."

We ascended the stairs and entered the room where the others were sipping cocktails. It was very apparent that they had been awaiting us and that our arrival had been a subject of conversation.

Mrs. Riceland presented us to each of the party in turn. There was Doctor Charles Cole, a tall individual, with eyes that were a peculiar, filmy white, like those of a dead carp. There was Mabel Chapman, young, vivacious and just a little too boisterous in her manner, as though she had, perhaps, partaken of too many cocktails. There was George Chapman, a tall big-boned individual, whose age had commenced to levy its toll. He had a grizzled, close-cropped mustache, a mouth that was like a steel trap, eyes that once had been possessed of cold fire, and despite his age, an air of assurance. I gathered that he was well past seventy, yet he was still a vigorous fighter. There was also a Miss Sara Denton, a young woman who acted as general social secretary for the family.

Either years of training, or a certain innate reserve made her very much aloof from the others. She seemed to have a glass barrier in front of her through which she could peer at the outside world, but which prevented the outside world from getting close to her.

She gave me a cool hand, exerted just the proper amount of pressure, and then relaxed her fingers.

Mary Riceland raised her voice. "These gentlemen," she said, "are the income-tax experts, who are here to go over the business matters in connection with Edgar's death. There are certain rather complicated matters of taxation to be adjusted and these gentlemen are going to try to point out the most economical way of settling the estate."

She paused and looked about her defiantly.

As her flittering, bird-like eyes rested upon the faces of the gathering, each one bowed in turn, with the exception of George Chapman.

George Chapman announced, in a rich resonant voice: "I have asked you for no explanation, Mary. If you offer a gratuitous explanation, which I do not care to accept, I will not insult my intelligence by pretending that I believe it to be true."

For a moment their eyes locked in calm defiance. Then Mary Riceland looked swiftly away. "Graves," she said, "cocktails for our guests."

The butler, apparently, had been waiting for the signal. Almost instantly he appeared at our elbows with cocktails.

Lau Tze took one, touched his lips to it and put it down. As for myself, I drained mine.

I'LL say this for Mary Riceland, there were two things which were distinctive about her. One was that she was a first-class extemporaneous liar, and the other was that she certainly knew how to order strong cocktails.

I don't know who had mixed up the cocktail, but doubtless it had been done

under instructions. It tasted smooth, refreshing, and harmless as a glass of cool fruit juice. But ten minutes later, the front of my head seemed to raise an inch or two and my brain expanded into a warmth of loquacious well-being.

I doubt if I ever felt as talkative in my life.

It is perhaps as well, that the first rule to be observed in the firm of Small, Weston and Burke, is that of complete silence as regards all business matters. I knew that my tongue was being unleashed and caught the amused twinkle in the eyes of Lau Tze. The Doctor knew also that Mabel Chapman was deliberately pumping me and that Sara Denton was standing always within earshot.

I flatter myself that I talked quite well upon our foreign-credit policy and the inflation of the currency. I know for a fact that I dodged many questions concerning income-tax matters, and I am equally certain that I dried up like a clam when Bruce Chapman, who had joined our group, asked me whether I had seen the body of Edgar Chapman and, if so, if I had noted the peculiar facial expression.

It was a house of death and yet there was alcoholic levity on the second floor, a levity which seemed forced and strained.

I took two of the cocktails and managed to keep my conversation well under control; but I knew that my eyes were sparkling, that my tongue was well lubricated, and that the warmth of good-fellowship, which I felt for the entire party, that sense of the universal brotherhood of man, which permeated my soul, was due entirely to the insidious cocktail which had been introduced into my system.

It was after the second cocktail and while there was talk of the third, in order to enable me to "catch up" with the others, that I missed Lau Tze.

Perhaps it was intuition. Perhaps it was merely a knowledge of the character of the man with whom I was associated but, in any event, I felt certain that I knew exactly where Lau Tze was at the moment.

I waited until there was an opportunity to slip from the room, then oozed out into the corridor and raced down the stairway.

Once more I was conscious of the painfully, loud sounds which were made by my feet as I ran along the flagged corridor. I tried to run on the balls of my feet so I would make no sound, but the echoing walls betrayed my passage with hollow mockery.

I realized then that with the possible exception of Mary Riceland, everyone in the house wore rubber soles, and that the impression of death and silence was accentuated by the fact that no noise whatever attended the motion of the inmates of the house, as they walked through the corridors.

I came to the downstairs room, where I knew the coffin was resting.

CHAPTER THREE

Marked In Crimson

I HESITATED for a moment at the door. Perhaps there was some feeling that I was violating my right as a guest which held me back momentarily; but, offsetting that, was the realization that I was there in a professional capacity and that I must overlook nothing which would tend to increase my efficiency or my knowledge. Further than that, the effect of the two cocktails had been such as to relegate my more sane judgment to the background and give my impulses an irresistable force.

I turned the knob on the door, but it was locked. I dropped to my knees and sought the keyhole. There was a key in

the lock, but the key was on the inside. Someone was within that room.

I took a penknife from my pocket, opened the blade and started gently manipulating the end of the key, until I finally had the flange of the key directly opposite the opening on the other side of the keyhole. Then I pushed with the point of my knife. The key dropped to the carpeted floor with hardly a sound.

I applied my eye to the keyhole.

The coffin was directly opposite the keyhole. I could see what was taking place. Lau Tze, The Doctor, had removed the flowers from the coffin, had taken off the top and evidently had been inspecting the naked foot on the cold corpse.

Now he looked up, staring at the door, with an expression of glittering concentration in his eyes, an expression such as I had seldom seen. I knew then that he had heard the sound of the key dropping to the floor and was trying to determine what had caused the noise.

He was holding the cold foot of the corpse in his left hand. His right was pressing what appeared to be a piece of paper against the sole of the foot.

For a moment he stared at the doorway with that peculiar expression of glittering concentration. Then he stepped from behind the coffin, dropping the naked foot back into the casket and came toward the door with long, purposeful strides.

Involuntarily I recoiled and got to my feet.

I heard a dry cough at the end of the corridor and whirled to face the gloomy countenance of Graves, the butler.

"I beg pardon, sir," he said, "but Mrs. Riceland insisted that you should have a third cocktail, sir. She asked me to find you and see that your wishes were taken care of. There will be an interval of approximately fifteen minutes before dinner."

I took a deep breath and faced him. "And you came directly here?" I asked.

"I came directly here," he said.

I started to ask him why he had come to that particular place, and hearing a rustle of motion on the other side of the door, knew that I must protect Lau Tze.

"Very well," I said, "I will come."

Graves turned without a word and I followed him along the flagged corridor, up the stairs and into the room, where a strange tension seemed to have gripped the entire party. I gathered that my absence had been noted and commented upon.

Mary Riceland came toward me and regarded me with unsmiling eyes. "I sent Graves for you," she said.

"So he told me," I remarked.

Graves appeared at my elbow, bearing another cocktail and, inasmuch as there seemed nothing else to do, I took it from the tray and sipped it. I was conscious, however, that my cocktails, undoubtedly, must have been loaded much stronger than those served to the other members of the party, and could not help but wonder who was responsible for it.

I DECIDED that I would get away from the general crowd, keep to myself and see who came to talk with me. Undoubtedly, the person who was responsible for the loading of my cocktails, would be the one who was interested in seeing what I would have to say when the liquor had taken effect.

I moved over to look out of one of the windows.

"You must get a bunch of sunlight in here," I said, inanely, and swept aside one of the drapes to regard the dark window pane.

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Riceland said, "there's plenty of sunlight only it happens that the window you are looking through faces the north."

I made some casual remark but continued to stand by the window. Mrs. Riceland turned her attention to one of the others and I noticed that Sara Denton left the party and moved toward me.

"Tell me," she said, "is it true that you have come here because of the death of Edgar Chapman?"

I looked at her with as much of a semblance of surprise as I could put upon my countenance. "You heard what Mrs. Riceland said," I told her. "I think that I could add nothing to it, no matter what I might say."

"Would you say that what she said is correct?" she asked.

"I think," I told her, "that I would merely say that I could add nothing to it."

"Very well," she said, "you'd make it a lot easier for me if you'd open up and talk but, inasmuch as you apparently won't do so, I guess it's up to me to make the break. I want to tell you something about how Mr. Chapman died."

"I understand it was a cerebral hemorrhage," I told her.

"It was," she stated. "Doctor Cole says so."

"And you have confidence in Doctor Cole's verdict?"

"Of course, he's a doctor and he's been treating Mr. Chapman for some time."

"Then what was it," I asked, "that you wanted to tell me about his death?"

"He was shocked in some manner, before he died," she said.

"Are you trying to intimate that it was murder?" I asked.

"No," she said, "that was due to natural causes."

I decided to keep silent, and merely nodded my head.

Abruptly she changed the subject. "Did you," she asked, "know that the house was haunted?"

"No," I told her, and smiled. "I take but little stock in haunted houses after the third cocktail."

A frown creased her forehead. "Please be serious," she told me. "I'm in deadly earnest. I've something to tell you."

I looked at my wristwatch. "If my computation of time is correct," I said, "dinner will be served in approximately eight minutes, so if you have anything to tell me, you had better tell me."

"Very well," she said, "I'm going to tell you what killed Edgar Chapman. He saw a ghost."

"And what did the ghost do?" I asked.

"The ghost excited him so much that it brought on a cerebral hemorrhage," she said. "He had been warned against any excitement. For years he had known that any sudden shock would kill him. He was kept here in the house in complete seclusion. That is one of the reasons that the family had no more social life than they did. Everything about his life was carefully guarded, and the result was that when he finally received a sudden shock the excitement killed him just as surely as though he had been hit with a bullet."

"And you think he saw a ghost?" I asked.

"I know he did," she said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because," she told me, "I saw the same ghost."

I LOOKED at her, conscious of the fact that my face was flushed, and that my eyes held that peculiar moist appearance, which comes to the eyes of a man who has been drinking a goodly quantity of excellent liquor. But I tried, nevertheless, to keep my features grave and judicial.

"Why tell this," I asked, "to one who is interested in income-tax and inheritance-tax accounting?"

"I don't know," she said, "except that I thought you would be interested."

"I am," I remarked inanely, "always interested in ghosts."

"Even after the third cocktail?" she asked.

"Yes," I told her. "Go ahead and tell me what you saw."

"It was a figure," she said, "clad in luminous white."

"Phosphorescent?" I inquired.

"No," she said, "it wasn't. It was a weird light. The light seemed to come in a cloud from diaphanous draperies. The figure moved across the corridor, going from one room to another. I had only a momentary glimpse of it. It was coming from the room in which Edgar Chapman was subsequently found dead."

"And his body was found several hours after death?" I inquired.

"Yes, as nearly as the doctor can fix the time of death, it was approximately at the time I saw this peculiar, luminous figure drifting across the corridor."

"It made no sound?"

"No."

"You do not think it was human?"

"It was the most weird thing I have ever seen," she said. "It was clothed in white draperies that gave forth a peculiar subdued light. It wasn't the sort of light that comes from phosphorescence, but it was the kind of light that emanates from some independent source of light."

I continued to watch her, waiting to hear more.

"I can," she said, "tell you something else."

"And that is?" I asked.

"That George Chapman has been marked for death," she said, "and knows it. But he is not letting anyone else know it."

"And just how do you have this information?" I asked.

"Because," she said, "I happen to know George Chapman very well indeed."

"And relations between him and Mary Riceland are cordial?" I asked.

She laughed. "You had," she said, "better ask Mary Riceland about that or, perhaps, Mr. Chapman himself."

"Would either of them tell me?" I inquired.

"No," she said.

"But I gather that their relations are not cordial."

"I would not call them cordial," she admitted.

"Can you tell me anything else about the death of Edgar Chapman?" I asked.

"I was the one who found the body," she said. "Never have I seen such an expression of terror on the countenance of any human being. The body had become cold and the expression had frozen upon the face. The eyes were staring wide open. The mouth was open, as though the man had tried to scream, and his lips and tongue were all blue. The teeth showed a ghastly color against that awful blueness."

She broke off and shuddered.

Mary Riceland's voice, shrill and piping, impinged upon my ears. "Whatever are you two talking about?" she asked. "You seem to be altogether too serious. Graves, I think that Mr. Weston needs another cocktail. I want to cheer him up before we eat."

I SAT with Lau Tze, The Doctor, in the privacy of the room which had been assigned to us, and conversed with him in low-voiced whispers.

"Did you hear about the ghost?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Who told you?

"Sam Freeman."

"What did he tell you about it?"

"He said that the house had been haunted; that several people had seen the ghost; that there was talk in the serv-

ants' quarters that Edgar Chapman had seen the ghost; that the ghost had killed him."

"Did he describe the ghost?"

"Yes, he said he had seen it."

"A white, luminous figure?" I asked.

"With a crimson scorpion upon the front and the back," he said. "The ghost is supposed to be on the level and those whom it marks for death, it stamps first with the sign of the crimson scorpion."

"My description wasn't that complete." I said.

"Who did it come from?" he asked.

"Sara Denton, the social secretary."

He nodded, slowly, musingly.

"I noticed," I said, "that you were in the room, looking at the coffin."

He nodded once more.

"Had the hair which Mrs. Riceland placed there been disturbed?"

"Yes, it was pulled loose from the wax."

"And the coffin lid had been raised after we left the room?"

"Yes."

"What were you doing there?"

"I wanted to inspect the scarlet scorpion more closely."

"What did you find out?"

"It is," he said, "a stain, a very brilliant water-proof stain. It cannot be washed off. It seems to impregnate the pores of the skin."

"Have you any idea how it could have appeared there?"

He nodded gravely. "There are several ways," he said. "I am going to conduct some experiments."

I COULD tell from the tone of his voice that he was working upon some clue and knew him too well to ask him to share that knowledge with me. The Doctor was peculiar in that respect. He liked very much to work along his own independent lines, and I know that I, myself, liked to pursue my own methods of investigation. Perhaps it was for that reason that Fremont C. Small almost invariably paired us on cases of major importance.

The ordinary executive would have felt that two men who did not work together were impairing their efficiency; whereas, it was just like Fremont C. Small to figure that the opposite of the obvious thing was the logical course of conduct.

"Did you hear anything about George Chapman?" I asked.

"George Chapman," he told me, "is a very worried and defiant individual."

"What do you think about the crimson scorpion that we saw upon the foot of Mary Riceland?"

"It means," he said, "that the luminous ghost has marked her for its own."

"Do you believe in that ghost business?" I wanted to know.

"In China," he assured me gravely, "the entire population believes in ghosts. They worship the spirits of the ancestors. Then there are the homeless ghosts. The ghosts that have no place to go. The ghosts of people who have met death through drowning, suicide, or other misadventure. These ghosts can only drift around the country, seeking to find some place where they may be welcome, and they can never find such a place. The houses are constructed so that they cannot get in. There is always the Door God, whose duty it is to keep out the homeless ghosts. Then the homeless ghosts are further handicapped because they can only travel in a straight line and no Chinese house ever has a door opposite a door, or a window—"

"Please forget all that," I said. "I know when you're trying to change the subject through roundabout conversation. Let's be frank. Do you believe anything in the menace of this ghost?"

He looked me straight in the eyes. "Yes," he said.

I undressed, put on pajamas, got my feet into bedroom slippers, lit a cigarette and came over and sat down once more by Lau Tze.

"Ghost," he said, "is very menacing."

I stared at him in amazement.

Lau Tze could talk quite correct English, when he desired and when his emotions were not aroused. But whenever something happened to excite the man, he was inclined to leave out the connective words. He had explained to me, upon occasion, that this was due to the fact that he invariably thought in Chinese and translated his thoughts before he spoke. The Chinese language has no connectives, but deals largely with nouns, verbs and adjectives. It is up to the listener to supply his own connectives.

I stared at The Doctor, wondering what had happened to arouse his emotions.

He was looking at me in a most peculiar manner. "I believe ghosts," he said. "Believe Chinese people can sometimes see ghosts when American people cannot see ghosts. Have you looked your foot?"

"My foot?" I asked.

He nodded.

I looked at the taut, strange expression of his face and suddenly realized what he meant. I whipped the slipper from my right foot. There was nothing.

The eyes of The Doctor shifted to my left foot. I took off my left slipper.

There, on the sole of the left foot, was the imprint of a scorpion, outlined in deep crimson. The luminous ghost of the Chapman mansion had marked me for death!

CHAPTER FOUR

Sting of the Scorpion

I SAT for a moment in stupified wonder, staring at the sole of my left foot. I was about to rub my finger over the sole, when there sounded a blood-curdling scream. Then a rush of thundering feet, down the corridor, past my room.

I dropped the left slipper to the floor, taking no time to slip my foot back into it, and ran toward the door, one foot slippered, one foot bare. I jerked the door open and stared out into the hallway.

I saw a shadowy figure running toward the end of the hallway, but I saw it only as a momentary glimpse, for what held my eyes centered in horrified incredulity, was a white, luminous figure, which was running down the hallway, with billowing draperies floating out behind.

I sprinted out into the corridor. The shadowy figure enter a room and slammed the door. A moment later, I heard the sound of a pistol shot. Then a scream.

The luminous figure suddenly vanished, as though it had been swallowed up in the darkness of the corridor. A moment later there was another shot, then the sound of something heavy thudding to the floor. After that, there was silence.

I had never before appreciated the immensity of the building. Running down what seemed to be endless miles of flagged corridor, I realized that the mansion occupied almost an acre of ground. The corridor down which I was running was long and narrow. It was but poorly lighted and now that the luminous ghost had vanished, it seemed to be filled with dark shadows.

A door opened. Mary Riceland, a kimono thrown around her, stood staring down the corridor, then turned toward me. Running as rapidly as I could, I could still see the surprised incredulity of her countenance.

"What is it?" she asked.

I swept on by, one slippered foot *ker-*

klumping along the flagged floor of the corridor, the other bare foot making but little sound.

Lau Tze, The Doctor, was running close behind me. I knew that he could have passed me had he so desired, but felt that the reason he was standing by me was on account of my own safety.

It had long been a rule with Fremont C. Small that none of his men could carry a weapon of any sort. "Private detectives," he said, "always carry guns and sling shots and private detectives never draw more than eight dollars a day. As soon as you start carrying a gun, you will grow to rely on the gun. Moreover, the time will come when you will use it, and the sound of the gunfire will attract the neighbors and ruin what would otherwise have been a speedy and quiet solution, without notoriety."

I heard steps coming down a branch corridor, and as I reached the turn in the corridor, I encountered Doctor Cole and Sara Denton, standing before the door of a room.

The room was in darkness, but there was sufficient illumination in the corridor to show that Doctor Cole was in pajamas, while Sara Denton was attired in a filmy nightgown, over which a green silk wrap had been hurriedly thrown.

"It's in here," said Doctor Cole.

"T-t-t-turn on the s-s-s-switch," stammered Sara Denton.

Doctor Cole reached his hand gingerly inside the room and switched on the lights.

I think we all crowded across the threshold at approximately the same time.

DOCTOR COLE was the first one to recover from the shock. Doubtless, his medical experience had inured him to such sights. He stepped forward and dropped to his knees beside the form which lay on the floor.

Doctor Cole went through the formality of grasping the wrist of the figure, between his thumb and forefinger, but I could have told him the verdict from where I stood.

George Chapman had been ruthlessly butchered. A knife had stabbed him, apparently in the back. There was also a hideous gash across his throat, and a slash had been made down his breast.

The man was clothed in pajamas and was barefoot. A revolver was held by the clasped fingers of his right hand. The lights showed plainly the bare feet of the dead man. Upon the sole of the left foot was a crimson scorpion, looming lurid in its brilliant menace, against the growing pallor of the skin.

"Dead," said Doctor Cole.

I walked forward and dropped to my knees, beside the body.

Blood was still welling from the wound. It was a ghastly sight. I was not unprepared for the shrill scream of terror, which came from the lips of Sara Denton.

So confident was I that the scream was wrung from her lips merely because of the gruesome spectacle, that for a moment I did not turn to stare at her. It was not until she screamed for the third time and I felt a strange tension about me, that I turned to look.

She was staring with frozen horror, not at the corpse, but at the sole of my left foot, and her arm, with a rigid index finger, was extended.

I knew then that the cat was out of the bag. Everyone had seen that telltale mark upon my left foot.

I heard a gasp and turned to my right.

Mary Riceland was standing at my side. Her eyes had followed the direction of Sara Denton's extended forefinger, and was staring at the sole of my left foot.

"How dare you!" she demanded.

"What in the world do you mean by—"

Abruptly she broke off and clamped her jaw shut. Her personality dominated the room, despite even the gruesome thing which lay on the floor.

"You will," she said, to those who were present, "say absolutely nothing about this to anyone. The fact that Mr. Weston has been marked in the peculiar manner you have seen, is not to cause any comment, nor is it to be gossiped about.

She placed a clawlike hand on my shoulder.

"You can rest assured," she said, "that I will do everything possible to protect you."

It was only then that she turned to give attention to her dead brother.

"There is nothing we can do, Mrs. Riceland," said Doctor Cole, putting his fingers around her wrist and pulling back the hand with which she would have touched the body. "This," he went on, "is something for the police. This is something which cannot be hushed up."

"Who wants anything hushed up?" she demanded indignantly.

Doctor Cole shrugged his shoulders.

I couldn't help but think of the death certificate which had been so readily signed for Edgar Chapman.

I GOT to my feet and looked about me at the growing circle of white, strained faces.

It was at that moment that I suddenly realized that Lau Tze, The Doctor was not in the room. He had followed me down the corridor, running behind me, yet he had not entered the room in which the body had been found.

I think Mrs. Riceland noticed this at the same moment. "Where," she said, "is your friend, the Chinaman?"

"Perhaps," I said, "he didn't hear the commotion and is safely in bed."

She said nothing, but the peculiar stare of fixed concentration which she gave me was more eloquent than words.

I was staring at her eyes, trying to read something of that which she had in mind, when darkness abruptly descended upon the room. I could hear the sounds of quick, gasping breath. Someone muttered a whispered oath. All about us was the scent of death and impending danger, and the room was in utter, absolute darkness.

I groped my way toward the door, feeling in my pocket as I did so, for matches.

Someone cried: "Look out, the wires have been cut. It's the crimson scorpion."

There was the sound of feet shuffling across the floor. Someone stumbled over the corpse. I could hear the *thud,* as the feet struck the inert body; then heard the noise as the person fell flat; the exclamation of horror, then the sound of a mad stampede toward the doorway.

I think that virtually everyone in the house had gathered in that chamber of murder, and now they were all trying to crowd through the door at one time. I had started first and I was the first into the hallway.

I noticed that the corridor was also entirely dark. Apparently, the entire lighting apparatus of the big mansion had been completely disabled.

I was groping my way along the corridor, pushed and jostled by those who were debouching from the room, when suddenly a shrill, high-pitched, feminine scream sounded in my ears.

I thought it was Mrs. Riceland who screamed but could not be sure.

I looked down the hallway.

There was that same, luminous figure that I had seen before, a figure which floated along, apparently without the effort of walking; billowing robes drifting about, illuminated by some peculiar white light which seemed to be contained within the robes themselves.

This time, however, I saw something which I had not noticed before; that there was a crimson scorpion upon the back of the figure. At the sound of the shriek, the apparition turned, and I saw that this same crimson scorpion was also in evidence.

Once more the scream of the woman sounded shrill and penetrating.

A man muttered, "Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" then turned and started to run. I could hear the sound of his steps as he plunged madly down the corridor, in a blind panic. I noticed that the luminous figure was drifting toward us. Then, taking a deep breath, I set my teeth, crouched low and rushed toward the apparition.

In my younger days I had been a football player and I had learned the advantage of tackling low and tackling hard. I gauged the distance and extended my arms. . . .

Apparently, at that moment, the apparition became conscious of my approach. I heard a quick intake of breath, saw the garments move in a swift, flickering motion.

I summoned every ounce of strength which I possessed and launched myself forward, in a low, hard tackle. I had just flung myself entirely into the air, when the figure vanished.

I DO not know exactly how to express what happened. One moment I was charging at the figure—and then suddenly the whole thing vanished. It was as though the light had been blotted out into darkness, as though the figure had been abruptly extinguished.

Yet, after that figure had vanished, after the wall of darkness had completely absorbed the luminous draperies, I was conscious of sound. I could hear the quick rustle of garments.

My hurtling weight crashed through the atmosphere harmlessly. I flung my arms down in a desperate effort to break my fall, and as my left hand swung around, I felt for a moment that my fingers encountered some peculiar, clothlike substance. Then the flagged floor crashed up to strike me hard.

For several seconds I lay quiet, trying to get over the jarring effect of the impact, and, as I lay there, I felt that there was motion somewhere ahead of me. To the left a door gently closed.

I thought I heard a soft, mocking laugh.

The sound of peculiar, shuffling steps became audible in the corridor, and I knew that Lau Tze was approaching.

I heard someone back of me shout: "Get that gun and shoot. Let's see if the damned thing's human!"

I managed to roll over to my side and get my voice. "Don't shoot," I shouted, "I'm here!"

At that moment, there was the brilliant glare of an electric flashlight and my eyes blinked against the white torture of the pencil of illumination, as it centered about my face. I heard the voice of Lau Tze, The Doctor, exclaiming in that peculiar sing-song, which characterized his utterances, particularly when he was excited.

"My good friend! Not hurt?"

I recognized the symptoms and knew that the Doctor was hot on the trail of something. His unconnected speech showed it.

"I'm all right," I said. "The thing was down here somewhere. I tried to tackle it and it vanished."

The flashlight beam left me and slid along the corridor, showing a row of closed doors. Then it slid back in the other direction and illuminated the white faces of the group that had clung together for support.

I tried to check those who were in the group, so as to determine, if possible, if

any of the occupants of the house were missing. I noticed that Sara Denton was there; that Doctor Charles Cole was present. I even detected the funeral face of Graves, the butler. There was Mable Chapman and Bruce Chapman, and Mary Riceland.

Yet I could not place some of them as having been present in the room when the lights went out. There was Graves, the butler, for instance, and now that I stopped to think of it, I could not be certain about either Mabel or Bruce Chapman, the two younger members of the family, who had appeared from nowhere. I was certain about Doctor Charles Cole and Sara Denton. The pair had come down the hall together and there had been something peculiar in their manner; a certain self-consciousness.

The voice of The Doctor, was in my ear.

"Be careful," he whispered. "An attempt will be made to kill you, Try to find who is making that attempt. Keep away from the others."

Then Lau Tze stepped past me and approached the panic-stricken group. "What has happened?" he asked.

They all tried to tell him at once. There was a babble of voices, a deluge of warnings.

It was Sara Denton's voice that finally made itself distinguished above the other sounds.

"Everybody else can do as they want to," she said. "The lights are off in the house. Here's a man with a flashlight. I'm going to ask him to pilot me outside. I am going to stay outside until this thing is cleared up."

"Me too!" exclaimed a masculine voice, that I recognized as being that of Bruce Chapman. "I'm going outside right now."

"Wait a minute," counseled Lau Tze. "Let us call the roll and see who is here."

His words fell upon unheeding ears. There was the general shuffle of an exodus.

"Wait a minute," The Doctor repeated, "I want to know who is here."

They paid no attention to him. The Doctor switched off his flashlight. "Very well," he said, "if you wish to use my flashlight, you will do as I request."

He had hoped, perhaps, that the effect of the darkness would bring them to him, begging him to use the spotlight, but he reckoned without the force of blind panic. As soon as the darkness filled the corridor, I heard the piercing scream of a woman, and then they rushed in a mad swirl of panic-stricken stampede.

There was nothing for The Doctor to do but to trail along behind them, and in order to keep them from trampling each other in blind panic, he switched on the flashlight once more.

I saw the group of figures running madly down the corridor; heard the sound of their thudding feet on the stairs; then the banging of a front door.

A moment later and silence gripped the corridors.

CHAPTER FIVE

Luminous Ghost

I SAT there, wondering at the message Lau Tze had given me, knowing that I was in danger, yet determining to discharge my trust, by seeing the thing through.

The banging of a door somewhere jarred the house. Then there was complete and utter silence for a moment. Following that silence, I distinctly heard the click of a doorknob somewhere. There was a sudden rush of air down the corridor, as though a door had been opened, and then I was conscious of the rustling of garments.

I moved slightly, flattened myself against the wall. I could feel the chill of the cold perspiration which slimed my forehead. I put my hand to my head, seeking to wipe it away and became immediately aware of something warm and sticky, which flooded my skin.

I clenched my hand and opened it, spreading the fingers apart. The skin of the fingers stuck together and I knew that there was blood on my hand, yet I had felt no pain.

How seriously was I hurt? Was it possible that the apparition had in some manner managed to wound me and, if so, where was the wound?

I raised my hand to my forehead once more, trying to determine, by patting with my fingers, if the skin of my forehead had been cut, but I could feel no cut. Yet I was painfully conscious of the odor of blood, of that warm, sticky substance which flooded my hand and the skin of my face.

At length I determined that the cut must be somewhere in my hand, probably somewhere in the palm of the hand. I felt with my fingers, found a sore place, and then noticed a sharp, pricking sensation. I felt around in the place where the pain was, and finally pulled out a small piece of thin glass.

Standing there in the dark, with the feeling of impending menace about me; knowing that this was a house of death and that figures were marked for murder by the sign of a crimson scorpion which mysteriously appeared on the soles of their left feet; realizing that I, too, had been marked with this insignia of death, I felt with my fingers that curved bit of thin glass and tried to concentrate my mind on the problem before me.

It was at that moment that I heard once more the rustle of garments, the sound of heavy breathing.

For the second time that evening, I braced myself for an attack.

Suddenly, and without warning, there was a mushroom of weird, unearthly light which appeared before me. The apparition was there, standing in the corridor and leering at me, with the huge, crimson scorpion upon the front of the garment.

I estimated that the figure was, perhaps, fifteen feet from me, and without being able to tell exactly how I got the feeling, I felt certain that the apparition was as much surprised at my presence, as I was at the sudden appearance of the luminous figure.

I charged.

Once more the figure was blotted into darkness, but this time I had a short distance to go and my muscles had already been tensed for the spring. I felt certain that the figure could not elude me.

I swung my left fist, and felt draperies brushing against the back of my hand. I pivoted and sent my right fist crashing home.

ABRUPTLY, something crashed upon my head. I felt a white burst of illumination, as though a meteor had exploded within my skull, then knew that I was falling forward, realized that the luminous ghost had me entirely in its power.

As I crashed to the flagged floor, I remembered the gory horror of that body, which lay in the other room, and I rolled swiftly to one side, fighting off the black nausea which swept over me.

I heard the swish of garments, then the scraping of a bit of steel on stone, and knew that the apparition had plunged a knife downward. But the point had missed me and had, instead, bit into the flags of the floor.

I flung out a right hand and grasped blindly with my fingers. I was, however,

worse than punch-groggy. I was almost out and the things that I did were done blindly, with little realization of what I was doing; merely the instinctive attempt on the part of a man who is facing death, to die fighting.

I rolled over and clutched with the other hand. There was the sound of cloth ripping. Something caught my middle finger and almost pulled it from my hand. Then there was the noise made by running steps.

I rolled over, tried to get to my feet and was gripped with a spell of nausea, which made my stomach loop-the-loop, and made my joints turn to water. I was robbed of every bit of strength I possessed, wanted only to lie down upon the cool floor and relax completely.

It was as I lay on the floor, doggedly striving to get my senses together, that something pricked my cheek. I moved my head impatiently and felt the bite of a cut.

Abruptly I knew what I had been suspecting in a vague way, and the knowledge gave me strength.

I got to a sitting position, took a deep breath, fought back the black nausea. A moment later and I was on my feet, staggering somewhat, but making progress down the hall. I felt of my forehead. There was a great welt on it, where I had been hit with some weapon, either a club or a slung-shot.

I ran down the corridor, found the stairs, groped down them and paused to listen. I could hear someone coming down the stairs at the other end of the hall.

The front door was open. Air from the outer night came in with a feeling of freshness, dissipating somewhat, the stale odor of musty death which clung to the house of horror.

I heard steps in the corridor, the sound of a door opening and closing.

I made my way toward the place where I had heard that sound, moving cautiously, having kicked off my right slipper, and walking now upon my bare feet. I came to the place where I had thought the door had slammed, and paused, listening. As I listened, I could hear the sound of a window-sash being raised.

I took a deep breath, steadied myself as well as I could, moved forward and groped for the door that I knew must be somewhere in front of me.

I found the knob of the door, twisted it silently and pushed the door open.

I STEPPED into a spacious room and was conscious at once of the fact that the room was tenanted. I could literally feel the presence of others, even before I was conscious of their breathing, or could adjust my eyes to the starlight, which seeped in through the window.

I saw a figure outlined against the window. A figure that was kneeling, with its arms extended. Abruptly there sounded a peculiar *plunk . . . plunk . . .*

I knew that there was a second figure on my right. Heard the quick intake of breath and a husky command, but I paid no attention to it. I flung myself forward, toward that figure which crouched in front of the window.

Abruptly, I became conscious of that sudden luminosity which surrounded the thing I had met in the upper corridor, heard the rustle of the luminous garments, yet paid no attention to them. I was hurtling my weight toward the figure at the window. Hands clutched at me, but I shook them off. It was the old sensation of rushing down the football field with a runner coming toward me, surrounded by interference, that tried to fight me off.

I flung myself on the figure at the window, just as there was another of those peculiar, muffled noises.

I crashed the figure to the floor. Was conscious of the luminous garments which suddenly enveloped me, as though a glowing fog had descended upon me.

Hands beat at me. A fist crashed on the angle of my jaw. A knife stabbed downward and caught me somewhere in the shoulder. I could feel the grating of the point on bone, but I did not deviate from my purpose. The figure that I had smashed into at the window, I held in a viselike grip, with my left hand on the throat, my right hand moving steadily downward.

At last my fingers closed upon what I had been looking for, the long barrel of a rifle. I braced myself for one terrific heave, shook off the figure that clung to me, swung the rifle about me in a hissing circle, felt the stock strike something solid, shatter and crack. A figure stumbled and staggered into a crashing fall, which took a chair with it. The luminous figure was coming toward me.

I raised the rifle.

The rifle was equipped with a silencer. The stock was a splintered mass of wood, which was useless. I could only point the rifle by instinct.

I pressed the trigger guard against the trigger and with my left hand slid the repeating mechanism.

The gun gave forth that peculiar, light recoil, which is common to small-calibre weapons, but there was hardly any noise of the explosion. The silencer muffled it into a peculiar, hollow *plunk*.

Four times I worked the mechanism. Four times the gun spat forth its small leaden pellets.

Abruptly, the luminous figure was blotted into darkness. I was left standing in the darkened room, with the hot weapon held in my hands.

There were running feet in the corridor. The beam of a flashlight stabbed into the room. I heard the voice of Lau Tze, The Doctor. "Thank God you are safe! I thought it was the other room."

FREMONT C. SMALL sat at his desk and looked at me with those peculiar blood-shot eyes.

"Well," he rasped, "there was a lot of newspaper notoriety."

"It couldn't be avoided," I said.

He twisted his misshapen hulk, and looked across to The Doctor.

Lau Tze nodded his head in grave acquiescence.

"Well," said Fremont C. Small, "let's have your report. Exactly, what happened?"

"The house," I said, "had the reputation of having been haunted. The murderer capitalized on that reputation. He knew that there was something in the family about the mark of a crimson scorpion, which presaged some calamity. Naturally, he capitalized upon that.

"As far as the luminous ghost was concerned, it was simplicity itself. A robe was made, which was literally studded with small electric light globes. These globes were illuminated by a series of batteries carried in a belt about the waist. Then silken folds were flung over the entire figure. When the lights were turned on, there was enough cloth over them to diffuse the illumination and make it merely a vague, indefinite light.

"Naturally, the figure was so swathed in garments, that it was more or less hampered in its motions. The actual murders were, therefore, committed by an accomplice. The trouble was, that the figure was too good. The ghost was too carefully planned. Therefore, it became necessary for the ghost to show itself to too many different people, upon too many occasions.

"They knew that Edgar Chapman had high blood pressure and was superstitious, that any sudden excitement would

prove fatal. That was the original reason for the creation of the ghost. It was to bring about the death of Edgar Chapman. Then they decided to use it when they killed George Chapman. To make certain that everyone saw it and would, therefore, attribute an element of the supernatural to the man's death, they put out the lights in the house by cutting the main feed switch. The ghost was then supposed to wander around in the darkness, until everyone had seen it.

"It was, of course, a crazy idea, the idea of an amateur murderer. But they thought that by utilizing all of the weird setting they could possibly think of, they would throw the police off the trail.

"In order to do this, they resorted to the simple expedient of putting dyes in the bedroom slippers of the persons they had marked for death. These dyes were coated in the form of a powder, on the inside of the slipper. When the foot was put in the slipper, the moisture of the skin would make the dyes become active and make an imprint upon the sole of the foot.

"Both Lau Tze and I realized at once that it was an inside job and knew that, as soon as it became generally understood that outside detectives had been brought in to investigate, the murderers would necessarily rush their scheme through to completion.

"Both The Doctor and myself gathered that an attempt was to be made to kill both George Chapman and Mary Riceland. There was some ground for directing suspicion toward Mary Riceland, but she was too wealthy. A woman who is a multi-millionaire, hardly stoops to murder in order to get more money.

"The logical persons, then, who would benefit by the death of the wealthy relatives, would be the younger heirs, Mable Chapman and Bruce Chapman. It became necessary for us to work quickly, since we knew the murderers would work quickly and that they probably had enlisted the aid of at least some of the servants. I think that Lau Tze and I, myself, reasoned along exactly parallel lines to that point."

I PAUSED to look at the Chinese Doctor. He nodded his head in silent acquiescence. "What happened after that," I said, "was rather peculiar. Lau Tze, realizing the manner in which the stain of the crimson scorpion had been placed upon the feet of the victims, decided to place a scorpion upon my own foot, and then call attention to the fact that the grim stain had appeared on my foot. In doing this, he felt that the murderer would naturally come to the conclusion that I had been experimenting with the method of application, and was getting hot on the trail; that the murderer, then, in suspecting that I knew exactly what was in the wind, might try to attack me, and, in doing so, give his hand away.

"I tackled the luminous figure, missed the tackle, caught a corner of the garment, and smashed one of the small electric light globes. I cut myself with the thin, rounded glass and stuck a piece of it in my palm. When I pulled out the glass, its shape told me exactly what it was, a part of a small light globe, which had been smashed. I figured that either Mabel Chapman or Bruce Chapman would be the logical murderers and, naturally, suspected the man, rather than the woman. I went to his room and was just in time.

"Sam Freeman, the valet, who was the accomplice who actually committed the murders, had a small calibre rifle with a silencer. The other members of the household had rushed out into the night and were standing in a group on the lawn. Freeman was trying to shoot Mary Riceland. With her out of the way, Bruce Chapman would have become independently wealthy. There were millions in-

volved in a strange murder plot, which had originally started only with an attempt to hurry up the death of a man who was suffering from chronic heart trouble and hardening of the arteries. His fortune was small compared with that of the others, only a few hundred thousand dollars, but Bruce Chapman would have inherited a part of that. It was, however, when he realized that Mary Riceland had more than a vague suspicion that the death of her brother was due to other than natural means, that Bruce decided to murder her.

"Having gone that far, he saw no reason why he shouldn't make a good job of it, so far as the family was concerned, particularly in view of the fact that he had enlisted the services of Freeman, the valet, and Graves, the butler. Those two servants were crooks, who were ready for anything. Graves had been a mortician and had become implicated in crime. He had fled into another state. I became suspicious of him as soon as I knew that he was a mortician. I felt that he would hardly have given up his profession to become a butler, unless there was something in his past which he was trying to conceal."

Fremont C. Small nodded his head. "I," he said, "had been inclined to suspect Doctor Cole. The manner of Edgar Chapman's death indicated to me that someone, with medical knowledge had been implicated in it."

"No," I told him, "Doctor Charles Cole and Sara Denton, the social secretary, were carrying on a bit of a clandestine love affair. That was all."

There was a moment of silence. Then I broached the subject which was on my mind. "If," I said, "I had carried a weapon, the matter would have been terminated without so much danger to myself and to others. Also—"

Fremont C. Small grunted an explosive comment. "Where would you ever get," he demanded sarcastically, "if it wasn't for my directing genius? If you want to carry a weapon, you fool, then you become a private detective. Bah! We do not get ourselves in the classification of detectives. Nor do we get their compensation."

I got to my feet, feeling my face flush. "If you feel that way about it," I said, "you can—"

Fremont C. Small jerked open the drawer of a desk, pulled out a tinted, oblong paper. "You," he said, "are entitled to a third of that. How much of it would you have earned if you had carried a weapon?"

I stared at the tinted, oblong paper.

It was a check signed by Mary Riceland, payable to Small, Weston and Burke, and the amount caused me to forget my rage.

After all, Fremont C. Small might be right.

He brandished his glittering knife.

Mr. MURDER, M. D.

By Maxwell Hawkins

Author of "Alias The Corpse," etc.

Through those wards and operating rooms a killer raced, knife in hand. And Detective Coe, who'd gone to The Samaritan only as a patient, found he'd picked a horror-hospital to recuperate in. For a madman had taken his M. D. in Murder that night—set up in practice as a death doctor outside Coe's very door.

CHAPTER ONE

Night Nurse

THE door was opened and closed swiftly, yet with a click so faint it would have been soundless to ordinary ears. But to Henderson Coe, it might as well have been a crash of thunder. He whipped out of a deep sleep with every sense wide awake.

His long thin body motionless, he lay there and listened. Someone was fumbling around on the other side of the room. An instant later, the light was snapped on. Coe sat up abruptly, the revolver which had been resting beneath his pillow leveled at the intruder.

Standing just inside the door, his hand still on the electric switch, was Doctor Guernsey, the superintendent of the hospital.

"Well?" Coe replaced the gun under the pillow.

Doctor Guernsey put a warning finger to his lips, lips drawn taut in a white, frightened face. "I—I'm sorry, Mr. Coe, to come in like this, but—well, I'm sure you'll understand—"

"What's up?"

Guernsey didn't answer at once. He took a deep breath, tugged at his collar, ran a forefinger around inside it, as if to loosen it and permit the blood to return to his face. Even his plump body seemed to be jellying with suppressed agitation, and his thin gray hair was damp and tousled.

Sliding out from under the covers, Coe dropped his feet into the slippers beside his cot. "Snap out of it, man!" he ordered. "What the devil's wrong?"

"I—I'm afraid," Guernsey replied, moving closer to the cot, "that it's—it's murder!"

"What?"

Guernsey nodded jerkily. "It—it looks like it. That's why I came to get you."

"Murder!" Coe was reaching for his clothes, draped over a chair. "When did it happen?" He was already poking his long skinny legs into his pants before Guernsey managed to answer.

"We just discovered it. But she's been dead about half an hour."

"She?" Coe's straight heavy brows knitted above his deep eyes.

"Ye-es. Miss Meredith."

Coe stood up, grabbed his shirt from the chair. "Who's she?"

"The night nurse in charge of the third floor."

"A nurse, huh?"

Guernsey nodded, began to wring his pudgy hands. "My God, it's terrible!"

"Have you notified the police?"

"No—no! Not yet!" Guernsey placed trembling fingers on Coe's arm. "We can't have police running around here at this time of night. Why—why, the excitement would prove fatal to some of the patients. News like that travels fast—and, well, we just can't have the police here till morning."

Coe glanced at the hospital superintendent with a funny smile. "O. K." He pulled on his shoes and socks and stood up. "Come on!" With a quick movement, he transferred the pistol from under the pillow to his pocket.

They started toward the door, but before they passed into the corridor, Guernsey again warned: "Remember, Mr. Coe, we must be discreet, quiet. We simply can't have the hospital thrown into a panic." He was struck with a sudden thought and looked anxiously at Coe. "Are you—do you feel equal to this? To help us?"

"Never felt better in my life. I'm due to leave in the morning, you know."

ALTHOUGH he was six feet three inches tall, Henderson Coe was so thin that he would hardly have been considered more than a mediocre target. But it had been a bullet which had sent Coe, president of Henderson Coe, Inc., private investigators, to the Samaritan Hospital.

There were a good many individuals on the seamy side of the law, who would have relished the privilege of pumping that bullet into Coe. The doubtful pleasure had fallen to one Monty Bellou in the course of an investigation by Coe on behalf of the Bankers' Association—a little matter of bank hold-ups.

Firing first, Bellou had put one shot into Coe's attenuated frame. Firing second, Coe had pumped three into Bellou's ugly torso. Coe had gone to the Samaritan Hospital. Bellou had gone to the morgue.

Three weeks had sufficed to patch up the damage done by the bank bandit's marksmanship, but Coe, seizing an oppor-

tunity to get some much needed rest, had voluntarily remained in the hospital an extra week. And so, when he assured Guernsey that he never felt better in his life, he was speaking the truth.

Quietly, they emerged from Coe's private room into the dimly lighted corridor.

Off both sides were private rooms; at one end was a convalescent ward, and at the other a cross-corridor with additional rooms. Just outside the ward was a small desk with a heavily shaded light over it. The night nurse in charge of the floor was sitting there, a book before her. She glanced up as they came out and nodded to Guernsey, but immediately dropped her eyes again to the book.

Coe gave Guernsey a questioning glance.

"I told her there'd been an attempt to rob the office," Guernsey whispered softly. "We'd better take the stairs."

It was one flight down to the third floor, which was identical in lay-out with the one on which Coe's room was situated. A long corridor and cross-corridor with private rooms opening off, and at the bottom of this "T" arrangement, a large ward. But on the third floor, the nurse's desk was deserted, although the light was on and glowing dully.

Guernsey walked down the corridor a short distance and opened a door. Beckoning to Coe to follow, he entered.

The room was a typical small hospital room, furnished with a regulation hospital bed, dresser, table and two chairs. It was austere and smelled faintly and unpleasantly of disinfectants.

Guernsey closed the door behind them, taking care that the latch caught. A short full-bosomed woman with a heavy jaw and traces of a mustache rose from one of the chairs. She wore a uniform, but it was disarranged and had lost its white crispness.

"Miss Hogarth, the night supervisor of nurses," Guernsey murmured.

Coe nodded, but said nothing. He moved swiftly to the far side of the room, to a spot beyond the undisturbed hospital cot and just below the window. There he halted and looked down thoughtfully at the body which was stretched on the hard sound-proof floor.

Miss Meredith was lying on her back, her head twisted sideways so that it showed the profile of her face. Her arms were resting at her sides, her legs straight out. On her face, which Coe saw was of unusual beauty, was a calm and peaceful expression. Death had come to her with no attendant agony. It had been swift, unexpected.

And that death had come from a wound behind her left ear, a wound which was hidden beneath a gob of coagulated blood. The collar and dress of the dead nurse's white uniform were stained an ugly red. Her cap lay nearby on the floor. And beside it was a pool of blood.

Coe turned sharply to Guernsey. "Somebody's moved this body," he said. "It must have been close to that blood on the floor."

Guernsey seemed overcome with confusion. But finally, he nodded. "I did that. I slid the body a few feet. To get it out of the mess. But in all other respects it's in the same position it was when we found it." He looked anxiously at Coe. "I—I guess I shouldn't have done that."

Coe's response was a shrug. "Get me some alcohol and absorbent cotton, please," he said to Miss Hogarth.

WHEN the night supervisor had departed, Coe moved around the body to the one window and looked it over. It was closed, locked. He walked then to one of the chairs, sat down, crossed his long legs and contemplated the dead girl in silent thought.

She was, he decided, about twenty-five years old, and even the chill hand of death had not erased her loveliness. Her reddish-brown hair, bobbed short, waved away from a softly rounded cheek, on which rested the long curling lashes of her closed eyes. Her nose was straight, with delicate nostrils, and her mouth had just enough of a cupid's bow to give it a sensitive expression.

Coe lifted his eyes from the dead nurse to Guernsey, who was watching him closely. He ran a meditative forefinger alongside his thin, slightly hooked nose, and said: "Tell me about this. How was it discovered?"

"Miss Hogarth found her about ten minutes before I woke you up. She was making her rounds and noticed that Miss Meredith was not at her post. She began to look for her. After going into the ward, and all the occupied rooms, she started looking in the empty rooms. This was the second one she went in, so she told me."

"Then Miss Hogarth notified you—and you decided to call on me?"

"Yes. Except that I stopped here first. When I found that—that Miss Meredith obviously had been murdered, I thought of you."

"Obviously been murdered?" Coe's straight brows moved up a bit. "Couldn't she have taken her own life?"

"It would have been possible, but—" Guernsey took in the room with a gesture —"in that case, the weapon would be somewhere around."

"And there is no weapon—right!" Coe replied. He looked at his watch. It was quarter to three. "You had, of course, retired when you got the word," he said. But he noted at the same time that Doctor Guernsey was not only fully dressed, but showed no indication of having put on his clothes in a hurry.

"No. I was in my office on the first floor. Tomorrow is the first of the month, and I was checking over some of the accounts that the cashier had prepared."

"Who knows about this?" Coe asked suddenly.

"Only you, Miss Hogarth, Billings and myself."

"Who's Billings?"

"The night orderly in the reception room downstairs."

"How'd he know?"

"I told him. When Miss Hogarth came to my office she was very upset. He saw her and could guess that something terrible had happened. I thought it better to tell him—and warn him to keep it quiet."

Coe resumed his study of the body and the room in which the crime had been committed. Two things struck him. First, the room was in perfect order, except for the gruesome pool on the floor. The hospital cot bore a smooth coverlet, the articles of furniture were in their usual places. Even the small rug beside the cot was perfectly aligned, unwrinkled.

But it was the position of the body that seemed to hold greater significance. It was evident that the murdered nurse had not been allowed to fall after the death blow had been dealt. Whoever had killed her had held the body upright for a moment, and then stretched it carefully on the floor. Probably to prevent noise, Coe surmised. But it also seemed to show that she had not been taken by surprise, but knew her killer.

"Tell me about Miss Meredith." Coe said finally.

Guernsey ran his hand through his damp hair. "Well, I don't know very much. She was a graduate nurse—took her training here and finished about three years ago. Six months ago she returned to the hospital and Miss Elligott, the superintendent of nurses, took her on. That's about all I know. We've her ad-

dress on file, of course, though she lived at the nurses' home."

"Good-looking girl," Coe murmured appreciatively. "Have any affairs? I mean anyone around the hospital—show any special interest in her?"

Guernsey stiffened. "Why, naturally, such a pretty girl would awaken interest. But I assure you, the hospital regulations are very strict about—"

Coe interrupted him with a wave of his hand. "I understand," he said, letting it pass.

The door was opened and Miss Hogarth came in. She glanced at the still form on the floor with an involuntary shudder, then handed a square bottle and roll of cotton to Coe.

WITH Miss Hogarth and Guernsey looking on attentively, Coe kneeled beside the body of the murdered nurse. Dampening a bit of cotton with alcohol, he removed the clotted blood from the wound behind the left ear. When he had finished doing this, he handed the cotton and bottle back to Miss Hogarth, and bending low, began to inspect the incision minutely.

It was only about half an inch long, a clean even cut. The death weapon had scraped the mastoid process and driven into the brain. Death, certainly, had been just a matter of seconds, unconsciousness instantaneous.

For a long time, Coe studied the wound, finally placing his thumb and forefinger on it and forcing the edges slightly apart. Then he stood up.

"Take a look at it, Doctor," he said.

While Guernsey dropped to his knees beside Miss Meredith's body, Coe moved over close to Miss Hogarth.

"Miss Meredith was an unusually attractive girl," he said casually.

Miss Hogarth nodded. "And she was one of the best nurses in the hospital. Minded her own business. Nothing frivolous about her."

"Any of the internes, or attending doctors, pay any special attention to her? Seem sweet on her, perhaps?" He brought the question out sharply, his eyes fixed on Miss Hogarth's stern-jawed face.

"Well—" she hesitated.

"Let me remind you," Coe said solemnly, "that this is a very serious matter. Anything you can do to help find the murderer must be done."

She took a slow deep breath, plucked nervously at the skirt of her uniform. "To be frank," she said at last, "there were two or three of the younger doctors who were crazy about her. Always trying to make dates. She told me so herself. And I kind of think some of the older ones maybe did, too. . . . I couldn't name any of 'em but you can bet she'd have nothing to do with them," Miss Hogarth added emphatically.

"What—ah, young doctors, for example?"

"Well—she said thoughtfully, "Doctor Smythe and Doctor Yawle."

"Internes?"

"Yes. Doctor Smythe has been here about six months. He finished his medical course last June. Doctor Yawle is almost through with his time here at Samaritan."

Guernsey rose to his feet and looked at Coe. "What was it that you wanted me to decide?" he asked.

"What kind of a weapon, in your opinion, caused that wound?"

Guernsey considered the question for a bit. Finally, he said: "It was certainly a very sharp instrument of some sort."

"Perhaps—a surgical instrument?" Coe suggested.

"Very possible."

"Let us say a scalpel? Or lancet?"

Guernsey gave a faint shrug. "I'm not

a surgeon. I'm an M. D., but my specialty has been hospital management."

Coe's glance dropped to the dead nurse. A little puzzled frown appeared on his high forehead. There was something about the nature of the wound that struck him as odd.

Pulling out a cigarette pack, he offered one to Guernsey, and then lit his own.

"Doctor Guernsey," he said slowly, "I'd like to question—"

A low regular knocking on the door caused him to leave the sentence unfinished.

CHAPTER TWO

The Mad Menace

FOR a moment, there was a tense silence. All eyes turned automatically toward the door; then Guernsey and Miss Hogarth looked questioningly at Coe.

"Who would know we're here?" Coe asked in a low tone.

"Nobody. That is nobody except Billings."

Coe rubbed his long thin nose thoughtfully. "See who it is!" he finally ordered.

Opening the door a crack, Guernsey peered out. After a short mumbled conversation, he closed the door and turned back to Coe. "It's Doctor Finister."

"Who's he?"

"Chief resident surgeon. He just came in, and Billings told him something was wrong up here."

"Chief resident surgeon," Coe repeated. He smiled faintly. "Just the man I want to see. Let him in!"

Guernsey threw wide the door. Doctor Finister, a tall imposing man with a professional-looking Vandyke and dark eyes, shielded by nose glasses, walked into the room. Guernsey shut the door behind him.

"Billings said—" Doctor Finister began, but suddenly stopped. His gaze wandered from Coe and came to rest on the body of Miss Meredith. He took a quick step forward, then looked from Coe to Guernsey. "Good God! That's—that's Miss Meredith."

Coe answered. "Yes, it's Miss Meredith."

"Wh-what happened?"

"She's dead! Murdered!"

Finister turned horrified eyes toward Guernsey. "Good Lord! Murdered! When did this happen?"

While Guernsey told him rapidly about the finding of Miss Meredith's lifeless body, and explained Coe's presence, the detective appraised Doctor Finister carefully.

He was close to fifty years old, Coe judged, and a man whose appearance gave an impression of skill and efficiency. His bearing was self-confident, even though at the moment he betrayed considerable agitation over the fate of the nurse.

"Would you mind examining the body, Doctor?" Coe asked him.

"Why, of course, not," Finister replied. He crossed the room and stooped down. A little later, he said with a shake of his head. "Killed her instantly."

"Yes," Coe nodded. He was leaning over Finister's square shoulder. "With what kind of weapon?"

Finister turned his head quickly, looked up into Coe's deep-set eyes. "A knife of some sort."

"A very keen knife," Coe suggested. "Say a surgical instrument?"

"It looks like it."

"What kind of an instrument, Doctor? As a surgeon, you can probably identify the instrument."

Instead of replying at once, Finister bent even lower over the dead girl. He placed his hand on the death wound, subjected it to an intense scrutiny for some time. Finally he straightened up slowly,

dusting his muscular hands together.

"That incision was made by a scalpel."

A sudden strange look came into Coe's eyes. "A scalpel," he repeated softly. "You sure?"

Doctor Finister's reply held a hint of reproof. "I've been a practicing surgeon for twenty-five years, Mr. Coe. I believe I'm qualified to give an expert decision on such a matter."

Coe smiled dryly. "Quite true. I only wanted to be certain. Now that we've discovered the kind of weapon, all we need to find out is who wielded it so expertly." His manner became brisk as he turned to Miss Hogarth. "I want you to remain here with the body. Keep the door closed, and don't let anybody in."

"We—we can't move the body?" Guernsey asked. "Take it to the morgue?"

"Not yet. We'll have to let the police look it over, you know."

"Then you haven't notified the police, Doctor?" Finister asked in surprise.

"No. Not yet," Guernsey replied hastily. "I—I didn't want to have the hospital put into a panic by a lot of policemen. As long as Mr. Coe was here, I felt he could take charge. When he thinks it necessary, he can notify the police."

Doctor Finister looked dubious. "It may get us into a lot of hot water."

"Don't worry," Coe said. "We will have no trouble with the police. Inspector Haynes is a square guy and a good friend of mine."

COE walked over to the door; Guernsey and Finister followed him, the surgeon stealing a final glance over his shoulder at the body. Miss Hogarth, looking more resigned than pleased over the task Coe had given her, sat down heavily in one of the chairs and folded her hands in her lap.

Before opening the door into the corridor, Coe asked: "Where do the internes sleep?"

"On the first floor, at the rear of the building," Guernsey replied.

"Good. I want to see Smythe and Yawle."

Finister shot a quick glance at him, but Guernsey merely said absently: "They're internes."

"So Miss Hogarth mentioned."

The three men made their way down the corridor toward the elevator. On the way down they fell silent, conscious that the operator, an elderly man with watery blue eyes, was wondering why the hospital superintendent, the chief of the surgical staff and this long-legged, lean-faced stranger were moving about at three o'clock in the morning.

After they left the elevator, Guernsey led the way.

"This, as you may have noticed, is the new wing of the building," he remarked to Coe. "It's only been up a couple of years."

"What do you use the old part—the other wing—for?" the detective asked.

"Mostly psychopathic cases, although the top floor is occupied by the isolated ward. For contagious cases," Guernsey explained.

"Where are the operating rooms?"

"All on the fifth floor of this wing."

They continued down the wide hallway, past numerous closed doors, toward the back part of the building. Suddenly, from behind them came the soft swish of running footsteps, muffled by the soundproof cork flooring, but still distinct in the quiet precincts of the building.

Coe swung around and looked back. Coming toward them, he saw a short broad man dressed in the white uniform of a hospital orderly. He motioned to them to wait, and as he drew near he called out in a voice which, although ob-

viously he was trying to keep it low, nevertheless, sounded shrill with excitement.

"Doctor Guernsey! Doctor Guernsey!"

Guernsey stared at him in surprise, mingled with indignation. "Billings!" he snapped. "What the dickens is wrong with you? Don't you know enough not to run down a hospital hallway?"

"I—I'm sorry, sir," Billings panted. He shifted his prominent eyes from Finister to Coe. "May I speak with you privately. A matter of importance."

Guernsey stepped down the hall a few paces, while the others waited. Coe heard him say impatiently; "Well, what is it? Speak up!"

The only part of Billings' reply that Coe could get was the phrase: "Conroy's in your office." The rest was an excited, but indistinguishable whisper.

But in a moment, Guernsey came hurrying back to them. His face was filled with alarm.

"You'll have to excuse me for a moment, gentlemen," he said. "If you'll just wait here, I'll be right back."

"We'll wait," Coe nodded. Then as a sudden afterthought, he said: "Perhaps, Doctor Finister'd better go ahead with me and we'll talk to Yawle and Smythe."

"That would be a good idea," Guernsey agreed quickly. "I'll join you there." He started down the hallway toward the entrance of the hospital at a waddling dog-trot, Billings at his heels.

IT SEEMED to Coe, as he and Doctor Finister resumed their course toward the quarters occupied by the internes, that there was an air of reluctance on the surgeon's part.

"Who's Conroy?" Coe asked.

Finister gave a little shrug. "I don't know. Probably one of the employees around here. Guernsey gets stirred up very easily."

A few feet farther on, Finister detained Coe with a light touch of the arm. "Wait just a moment," he said, lowering his voice. "We're almost there."

Coe regarded him curiously. "Well?"

"I'm naturally assuming that you want to question Smythe and Yawle in connection with the murder of Miss Meredith," Finister said, weighing his words. "Is that right?"

Coe nodded.

After a moment's hesitation, Finister continued. "Naturally, Mr. Coe a doctor tries to avoid idle gossip. But under the circumstances, I believe you ought to know that Doctor Smythe has—well, he's pretty generally known to have been smitten with Miss Meredith."

One of Coe's eyebrows lifted faintly. "How about Yawle?"

"You're wasting your time, I believe."

"Think I'll talk to him, anyway."

"That's up to you," Finister replied with a little frown.

"By the way, did Miss Meredith seem to have any affairs? Say, a casual flirtation with anyone in the hospital?"

Finister made a little gesture. "So far as I've heard, or noticed, she played no favorites. Perhaps, I should say, she refused to be drawn into even a mild flirtation with anybody."

"Much obliged," Coe said. "Suppose we go on."

Moving only a few steps around a turn in the hall, Finister came to a stop. "This is Smythe's room. Do you want to talk to him first?"

"Either one." Coe checked Finister's upraised arm before he could rap on the door. "We'll not bother to knock." He seized the door knob. At that moment, Doctor Guernsey appeared around the corner. His fat figure was shaking with fright; his thin gray hair looked damper and more disarranged than ever.

"First a nurse is—is killed! And now

—Oh, God!" He began to wring his fat white hands frantically.

Coe grabbed his arm and steadied him. "Take hold of yourself!" he snapped. "What's wrong?"

"Belknap—Belknap," Guernsey panted. "He's gotten away. Conroy just came over to tell me—and Belknap's been free for two hours! Oh my God!'

Instantly, some of Guernsey's alarm seemed to be transmitted to Doctor Finister. But he recovered his poise quickly and grabbed the supintendent by his other arm.

"Good heavens, Guernsey, what's the matter with them! Belknap at large for two hours—and they just notify you!"

"They thought they could find him. If they could, it'd mean that no one would be hauled up on the carpet. But they finally got scared."

Coe cut in crisply: "Who in hell's Belknap?"

"A mental case." It was Finister who replied.

Guernsey was mopping at his brow with a handkerchief, but he added to this explanation. "Belknap's a patient in the other wing. The psychopathic ward. He was to be committed tomorrow to the state asylum as hopelessly demented."

"A lunatic!" Coe explained. "Is he violent—dangerous?"

"Not—not exactly violent," Guernsey gulped. "But dangerous? Good heavens, I can think of nothing more ghastly than to have him at large in a hospital."

"What do you mean?" Coe demanded.

"He used to be a male nurse—before his mind gave way. Now his maniacal delusion is that he's the world's greatest surgeon!"

CHAPTER THREE

Man-hunt

AT GUERNSEY'S announcement, Coe's mind flashed back upstairs to the private hospital room where the body of the pretty Miss Meredith lay.

The picture of her still figure came back to him vividly—the neat and expert gash behind the ear, inflicted apparently with a surgical instrument. A scalpel, Doctor Finister had insisted. Coe made a swift mental calculation. Miss Meredith has been murdered about an hour and a half ago. And Belknap had been on the loose for two hours.

Guernsey continued to wring his hands helplessly. "I knew we shouldn't have kept him so long. His case was hopeless. But it had all the doctors interested."

"Calm yourself, Guernsey," Finister said sternly. "Don't blow up now. We've got to get after him."

"Yes—yes! Let's get started. Do something!"

Finister looked at Coe. "Guess that solves your murder," he said.

Coe didn't reply. Instead, he spoke to Guernsey in a calm reassuring tone. "Just a minute, Doctor. We're not going off on this hunt half-cocked—turn the place topsy-turvey. Did this fellow Conroy say whether Belknap had any clothes?"

"Yes," Guernsey replied, bobbing his head vigorously up and down. "He'd managed to get hold of an orderly's uniform."

"You said he wasn't violent."

"He never has been. On the contrary, he was mild-acting. Except for his one crazy delusion, nobody'd ever realize he was insane."

"That's bad," Coe murmured. "If he'd go tearing around, we'd grab him in a hurry. As it is, he's probably got an abnormal cunning that'll give us a devil of a time. What does he look like?"

Guernsey thought a moment. "About forty, short and wiry. Light hair and a little mustache."

"Pretty inconspicuous, as far as appearances go. That it?"

"Yes."

"How could he get in this wing from the old building?"

"Several ways. The front entrance—the ambulance entrance and emergency receiving room. But he'd have to slip by Billings at the front, and by the driver, nurse and interne on emergency call the other way."

"How else?"

"Through the connecting passageway that joins this building and the old one. He could come through the basement, too."

Coe shook his head. "And of course, he might even scramble in a window."

"What—what'll we do?" Guernsey asked, addressing the question to Coe.

"A man with Belknap's delusion would probably head for the operating rooms—the fifth floor," Coe said decisively. "First, we'd better find out if anything's been disturbed up there. Will you do that, Doctor?" he added, turning to Finister.

"Glad to," Finister said. He turned on his heel and swung down the hall.

"Where's a phone?" Coe demanded.

"In my office."

They made their way to the front of the building. On one side of the entrance was a reception room of considerable size. Billings was sitting at a desk. He was talking to another man, a lean hollow-chested fellow, also in an orderly's uniform. Coe gave them a swift glance and placed the second orderly as Conroy, who had brought word from the psychopathic ward of the escape of the madman.

Guernsey's office was directly across the hall from the reception room. It consisted of a small anteroom with a stenographer's desk and a number of tall steel letter files. Beyond was the hospital superintendent's private office.

Coe entered alone, closed the door after him, and picked up the telephone. A short time later he had police headquarters on the wire, was put through to Deputy Inspector Ed Hayden, in charge of the detective division at night.

"Hello, Ed," Coe said. "This is Hendy Coe. I'm out here at the Samaritan Hospital." He paused then, gave a brief chuckle. "You wouldn't think I was on the sick list if you could see me now. Listen, Ed, there's real hell popping out here. . . ." Coe lowered his voice and pressed his lips close to the mouthpiece.

After he had hung up, Coe returned to the outer office.

"Doctor, I want you and Conroy to start going through all the rooms—especially the empty ones—in the building. Start on the fourth floor and work down. Get me?"

"Yes. And you?"

"Billings and I will give the basement a going-over and work up."

"But—but who'll be at the front entrance?"

Coe smiled. "We'll fix that." He strode from the superintendent's office into the hallway, then to the big double plate-glass doors. Guernsey followed, and from the reception room, the two orderlies watched them curiously. Coe turned the heavy lock.

"Closed for the night," he said dryly.

"That'll keep people out," Guernsey admitted. "But it won't keep them in. If Belknap wants to get out he can—"

"I hope he does!" Coe cut in. "Come on!"

Guernsey looked at him in blank amazement. Coe grinned and led the way into the reception room.

ACCOMPANIED by the stocky, pop-eyed Billings, Coe started for the basement, while Guernsey and Conroy took the elevator to the upper part of the building.

"When'd Doctor Finister come in?"

Coe asked idly, as they walked down the stairs.

" 'Bout an hour ago."

"Lives here, huh?"

"Sure. He's a resident surgeon."

They reached the bottom of the stairs, which ended in a long passage, where several low-power lights battled at intervals against the darkness.

"Listen," Billings said suddenly, peering narrowly up into Coe's face. "Do you think this nut killed Miss Meredith?"

"What do you think?"

"You can bet your last buck he did," Billings replied earnestly. "He's a bad actor. Conroy was just telling me about him. Thinks he's a surgeon."

Coe nodded and started down the passage. "We'll start at the front of the building. What's there?"

"The laundry."

Five minutes later, they had pried into every nook and cranny of the huge room in which the laundry for the hospital was done. The insides of the washing machines, the numerous closets, the big wicker hampers, and even the bin, now half filled, into which the soiled linen was dropped from a chute above, were looked into.

But there was no sign of Belknap.

Leaving the laundry, they made their way back along the passage. The doors to the various store rooms that were locked, they passed by. The rooms that were open, they searched. At last, they came to the end of the passage.

"What's back here?" Coe asked.

"The kitchen, and the dining room for the help."

In the big hospital kitchen, they continued their hunt, but with no better results. They moved on through to the engine and boiler rooms, lying beyond. There they found the gray-haired night engineer sitting on a backless chair beside the emergency lighting plant. He was reading a soiled newspaper and puffing contentedly on a blackened clay pipe. At their entrance, he looked up with an air of mild surprise, then recognized Billings.

"Hello, white-wing," he said with a grin. "What you doing down here?"

"Looking for a guy."

Coe spoke up. "A patient—a delirious patient—is missing from one of the wards."

The engineer took a deliberate pull on his pipe, shook his head and said: "There ain't been no patients down here, my friend. Maybe you've noticed that this is the boiler room."

Coe laughed, then grew serious. "How do you get into the other wing through the basement?"

Clutching his pipe between his thumb and first finger, the engineer pointed the stem toward a door beyond the emergency dynamo. "You go right through there," he said. "And if you keep on going, you'll pretty soon be in the basement of the other wing. The bug-house department."

"That's where the patient we're looking for is from," Coe said sharply. "Keep your eyes open—and don't tell anybody about it."

The engineer sat up with a jerk. His mouth fell open. "The hell you say! Is he bad?"

"No. But we don't want him roaming about the hospital at this hour." Coe beckoned to Billings, and started toward the door the engineer had indicated. "And if you see anyone coming through here, hold him!" he cautioned the pipe-smoker over his shoulder.

"Anyone?"

"Right."

"Wait a minute!" the engineer suddenly exclaimed. "You just asked me had I seen a patient. Well, I ain't. But a couple of hours ago, or thereabouts, a

fella come out that door and went through here into the kitchen."

Coe halted, swung on his heel so swiftly that he almost collided with Billings, who was close behind.

"What's that?" he whipped out.

The engineer was deliberate. "You asked me had I seen a patient down here. I said I hadn't. Cause I hadn't. But I did see somebody come out that door and go into the kitchen a couple of hours ago."

Coe was at his side in two long strides. "Who was it?"

"Never saw him before," the engineer shrugged. "But he was an orderly."

"How do you know?" Coe's voice was brittle, tense.

"He had on a white-wing uniform."

"Why the devil didn't you say that before!"

Coe dashed toward the door which led from the engine room to the kitchen. Billings, after a moment's indecision, followed.

"Hey!" the engineer shouted after them. "I didn't tell you, cause you didn't ask me!"

But Coe was out of earshot.

CHAPTER FOUR

Phantom Fiend

COE had been assailed with ominous suspicions, gruesome forebodings when he had learned that Belknap was missing from the psychopathic ward. Those suspicions and forebodings were increased tenfold by the information he had just received from the engineer.

The madman had stolen an orderly's uniform. A man wearing such a uniform had passed through the engine room into this part of the building. And he had done so prior to the time Miss Meredith had been murdered.

These thoughts occupied Coe's mind as he rode upward in the elevator, after leaving Billings to patrol the first-floor hall and keep an eye on the basement door, to make sure Belknap didn't sneak back down.

The thought of the crazed Belknap, laboring under the delusion that he was a surgeon and roaming through this hospital in the dead of night, was enough to freeze one's blood, Coe admitted. There was no telling where he might strike, what helpless patient or nurse might fall a victim to his madness. Then, for a fleeting instant, the thought flashed through Coe's mind that Belknap might have been helped to escape. That releasing of the madman might have been engineered for a sinister purpose—as a screen for a sane, cunning killer.

"If this weren't a hospital," Coe muttered to himself, "we'd soon catch him. Turn the place upside down." But he knew that such a course was impossible. At this time of night, a frenzied manhunt would put the institution in a turmoil. The excitement, as Doctor Guernsey feared, might well prove fatal to a number of the more critical cases.

Coe began to wonder about Guernsey. Was there something behind the superintendent's reluctance to call the police, something more than concern over the welfare of his patients. For the moment, Coe decided to accept Guernsey's reason.

"Fifth floor, sir!"

The elevator came to a halt, but before the elderly operator could open the door, Coe spoke.

"If an orderly with light hair and a small mustache calls for the elevator, take him to the first floor. Then shout for Billings. Those are Doctor Guernsey's orders. Understand?"

The old man looked puzzled, but nodded. "Yes, sir."

Coe stepped off the elevator and the door slid shut behind him. He stood then for a moment, looking about him. The

top floor of the hospital was of different arrangement from the others. There was only a short hallway adjoining the elevator, instead of a long corridor, ending in a cross-corridor.

Opening off each end of the hall was a large waiting room, and beyond them, Coe caught glimpses of still other rooms. The entire floor was ablaze with light. Doctor Finister, apparently, was conducting his hunt for the escaped Belknap.

Coe listened. At first, he heard nothing. There seemed to be only a forbodding silence; the sweet sickening odor of ether touched his nostrils. Then his ears caught a peculiar low crackling sound, coming from the front part of the building. There was something about it that set his teeth on edge, sent little chills prickling up his spine.

Swiftly, but soundlessly, Coe darted forward. Through the reception room, into a second room, filled with glittering sterilizers and other equipment, and finally into a large square operating room at one of the fore corners of the building.

It was empty.

He turned, and a gasp of stark horror choked in his throat.

THROUGH an open door, he had a clear view into the adjoining operating room, a duplicate of the one he was in. The massive flood light was turned on, its white beams falling full upon an operating table beneath.

Stretched on the table, arms and legs held fast by straps, was Doctor Finister. And bending over him was a short wiry man in the white uniform of an orderly. His blond hair was disheveled, seeming to stand on end. His eyes, pale and wild, were bulging as he stared down at his victim.

In his right hand, poised just above Finister's bared breast, he was holding a long glittering knife.

Coe's hand groped for his pistol. But in that brief second, the maniac looked up. Coe leaped for the door. Belknap, however, moved even faster. He uttered a hoarse cry and ducked to one side of the room. Even as Coe rushed in, a door slammed.

Without pause, Coe dashed across the big room, flung wide the door. He found himself in a smaller room, filled with cabinets and instrument cases. There was no one there. And then, from somewhere in the distance, he fancied he heard the sound of still another door being slammed.

Back through the reception room, across the hall, through the operating rooms at the rear of the building, Coe made his way with all speed. But finding no sign of his quarry, he hurried back to the room where Doctor Finister lay helpless upon the very table where he had performed so many operations.

"Thanks—thanks," he panted, as Coe released him and took off the towel that had been wound about his mouth. "You got here just in time." He raised his hand to his head and felt tenderly of a large bump, covered with blood and matted hair. "He sneaked up on me," Finister said.

Coe examined the wound. "You got a nasty wallop. I didn't dare shoot. You were in the way," he added.

"He laid me out," Doctor Finister explained. "When I came to I was—" he shuddered "—there!"

"Feel better?"

The surgeon nodded weakly. He walked to the water tap and bathed his face and head. When he had finished, Coe handed him his glasses.

"Found them on the floor," Coe said. "Lucky they didn't break."

As soon as Doctor Finister had put them on, Coe led the way through all parts of the fifth floor again. But once more it was useless. Belknap had van-

ished. Coe looked speculatively at Finister.

"I'd like to have someone stay on this floor, but—" He hesitated.

Doctor Finister scowled reminiscently. Without a word, he walked into the instrument room, and when he returned he was carrying a long pointed surgeon's tool.

"I'll stay," he said grimly.

"Good!" Coe exclaimed. "I'll send someone up as soon as I can."

He walked rapidly to the stair door. Before he opened it, he glanced back over his shoulder. Through the doorways of two rooms, he saw Doctor Finister watching him with an odd intensity.

THE stairways at Samaritan Hospital were on the opposite side of the corridors from the elevator. They ran down a well of their own, each floor being cut off from the stair-well by a heavy steel-cased fire door.

Coe was almost on the landing of the fourth floor, when he came to a sudden halt, head thrust forward slightly, ears straining. From beyond the door came the soft patter of running feet. In an instant, it was gone.

Flinging wide the door, Coe rushed into the corridor. Just outside the ward, supporting herself with a hand held against the desk behind her, Coe saw a short, plump girl in the white uniform of a nurse. It was Miss Parker, night nurse in charge of this floor, on which Coe's own room was situated.

When she recognized him, the expression of fright on her face gave way to one of relief. She beckoned to him and he hurried to her side.

"He—he was here!" she gasped. "Just a moment ago."

Coe shot her a quick questioning glance.

"Belknap!" Miss Parker added breathlessly. "Doctor Guernsey told me, when he talked to me a little while ago."

"Where'd he go!"

"Around—that corner!" She pointed.

Coe sprang down the corridor. In a dozen swift silent bounds, he had reached the cross-corridor. He looked both ways. No one was in sight. For a brief moment, he stood there with his straight brows knitted in a frown. The hospital was strangely, uncannily quiet.

Miss Parker came to his side.

"I—I was sitting at my desk," she whispered. "I happened to look up, and he was coming down the corridor toward me. When he saw me looking at him, he turned and ran. I was frightened—terribly frightened."

"We've got to go through all the rooms," Coe said grimly.

But a thorough search of the dozen private rooms which opened off the cross-corridor—about two-thirds of them were occupied—failed to disclose any sign of Belknap. None of the private nurses or those on floor duty had seen anything of a man in an orderly's uniform, although one of them said she thought she had heard someone running.

At either end of the cross-corridor was a window looking out onto a fire-escape. But both proved to be locked. Belknap had not gone out that way. Yet, somehow, he had disappeared.

When they had concluded their hunt by going through the large linen room, with which each floor was equipped, they returned to the main corridor. Miss Parker raised her round white face and looked up earnestly at Coe as they walked toward her desk.

"I—I'm positive I saw him, Mr. Coe," she said. "I—I couldn't forget that wild look in his eyes."

"Don't be afraid," Coe said, giving her a reassuring pat on the shoulder. Then,

as they reached her desk, he asked: "Do you know how to use a gun—a revolver?"

She nodded. Coe slipped his automatic from his pocket and laid it on the desk, covering it with the magazine which was there.

"I'll leave this for you," he said. "And I'll see that someone comes up to guard this floor, just as fast as possible."

"I—I'm not afraid," she said, but there was a look of gratitude in the smile she gave him that belied her words.

Once more, Coe took to the stairs. His long legs carried him down three steps at a time to the third floor where Miss Meredith had been killed. Entering the dim third-floor corridor, Coe started toward the ward end. Then, he saw that the door of the murder room, about halfway down, was slightly ajar. A narrow ribbon of brighter light showed through it. He increased his speed.

He pushed the door open, stepped quickly inside. And as he closed the door behind him, he uttered a low oath.

Lying in a crumpled heap on the floor was Miss Hogarth. The left arm of her uniform was soaked with blood, which was spreading down over her back and ample bosom. Her eyes were closed, her face colorless.

COE dropped to his knees beside her and reached for her pulse. It was feeble, irregular. Ripping the sleeve of her uniform, he examined the wound from which the hideous red smear was coming. It was a long gash, extending from her shoulder almost to her elbow. A painful and ugly wound, but not serious.

The night supervisor of nurses, he decided, had fainted with pain and fright.

As if to confirm his conclusion, Miss Hogarth's eyelids fluttered faintly. Wetting a towel at the basin, Coe applied it to her forehead and wrists. And while he was binding up her wound with another towel, she opened her eyes. For a few seconds, she stared at him in terror. But immediately gave a relieved gasp.

"Wh-where is he?"

"Who?" Coe asked softly.

"B-Belknap."

"Never mind. He's gone."

She looked at him with an apologetic smile. "I must have fainted."

"How are you now?"

"Better. Please—help me up."

She sat down on one of the chairs. The gash on her arm was still bleeding a little, although Coe's crude bandage had stopped most of the flow.

"Feel well enough to tell me what happened?" he asked.

She nodded. "I—I was sitting here, thinking about poor Miss Meredith. Doctor Guernsey had been in shortly before and told me about Belknap getting away. I was thinking how horrible it must be to have a lunatic attack you—" She shuddered, then went on. "And just then, he came in—without a sound.

"I started to get up. But he pulled out a knife—"

"Knife?"

"A knife with a long blade. At least, it looked long to me," she replied. "He leaped toward me—and that's all I remember till just now."

Coe's eyes instictively swept around the room. They rested for a few seconds on the still, stiff form of Miss Meredith lying beneath the window. With a sudden stride, he crossed to the bed and bent over. When he straightened up again, he was holding a blood-stained knife with a pointed blade and a black wooden handle.

"You're right," Coe said. "It's a long-bladed knife. Looks like a bread knife." And then he remembered that Belknap had passed through the hospital kitchen

on his way into this wing of the building.

His thoughts were broken by a low knock on the door. Putting the bloody knife on the dresser, he moved to the door. Billings, his hands plucking nervously at the bottom of his blouse, was standing outside.

"Doctor Guernsey sent me to find you," he said.

Coe beckoned. "Come in!"

Billings seemed to shrink back for a moment, his pop-eyes looking beyond Coe into the room. At a second command from Coe, however, he stepped through the door. When he saw Miss Hogarth, his lips fell apart.

"Wh-what happened to you?" he stammered.

"Belknap!" Coe said significantly. Then he added: "You stay here with Miss Hogarth. I'll go and see what Doctor Guernsey wants. I'll have him send up somebody to dress her injury."

"Yes, sir," Billings nodded. He looked around the room nervously. As his glance fell on the body of Miss Meredith, he drew a quick breath, then turned his face, white and twitching, toward Coe.

"I can tell you what Doctor Guernsey wants," he said huskily.

Coe, at the door, paused.

"Doctor—Doctor Smythe's been—killed!"

CHAPTER FIVE

The Fiend Breaks Cover

COE found Doctor Guernsey in the cell-like room at the rear of the first-floor hallway, where Doctor Smythe, the young interne, had lived. The superintendent was panic-stricken. He was working his hands continuously, crackling the joints.

"My God—Coe!" he exclaimed, as the detective strode into the room. "We—we'd better call the police!"

Coe jerked a thumb toward the door. "Get out!" he ordered. "Wake up some of your internes. Send one of them to the fourth floor. Miss Hogarth's been injured."

"M-Miss Hogarth?" Guernsey stammered.

"Belknap slashed her—not seriously—but she needs attention. Have the other internes help you carry on the search of the building!"

He gave Guernsey a little push to start him on his way. When the superintendent had passed out into the hallway with a shuddering backward glance over his shoulder, Coe shut the door. Then he turned to the narrow iron bed, beneath the covers of which lay a figure—a ghastly still figure.

Coe threw back the covers. Doctor Smythe, he saw, was a young man; not more than twenty-five. He was clad in pajamas of a gaudy pattern and was lying on his side.

There was nothing to indicate that he had suffered before death had overtaken him. His expression was serene, the lips slightly apart as if in sleep.

What caused Coe to drop his straight brows low over his eyes, eyes in which a fierce anger smoldered, was the great pool of blood in which the dead man lay. It stained the sheets and pillow cases, it had all but obliterated the gaudy pattern of the pajamas. And even Smythe's neck and the lower part of his hair were crimson.

Bending over, Coe verified what he had immediately suspected. The death blow had been dealt behind the ear. But this time, the murderer had struck twice, into the brain. And with one of the blows, the small sharp blade of his weapon had evidently punctured a carotid artery.

Coe, in all his years of experience, had never seen such a gory corpse.

"In a bigger hurry than when he killed Miss Meredith," he muttered to himself. "His first jab hit the brain—but he wanted to make sure. Must have been dark in here. Only the light from the hall."

He touched the body. It was still warm; the bloody puddle in which the corpse lay had barely started to congeal.

He straightened up, stood for some time with his eyes narrowed into a speculative squint, his finger rubbing thoughtfully alongside his beaklike nose. Then, swiftly, he pulled the covers back over the gruesome sight.

As he did so, something on the top of the spread near the foot caught his eye. Several long streaks, starting at a sharp point and widening out, somewhat in the manner of a comet's tail. Coe moved his head slowly up and down.

"Took time to wipe off his weapon," he murmured.

With the realization that the mad Belknap was still skulking somewhere within the hospital, Coe wasted but little time on an examination of the room. It wasn't large enough to need more than a few minutes for a cursory inspection.

Besides the bed, the furnishings consisted of a dresser, a small table-desk, two chairs and a rug. A glance into the dresser drawers showed only the usual articles of clothing. Coe turned to the desk. He lingered longer over it, and he finally moved away, he was holding in his hand a packet of letters, which he slipped into his pocket.

A hasty glance at several of them had brought forth a startling and significant piece of information.

The killer had not merely slain a nurse and an interne. He had murdered a man and his wife. Miss Meredith and Doctor Smythe had been married for two weeks!

REMOVING a key, which he found on the inside of the door, Coe returned to the hallway, carefully locking the door behind him. At that moment, Guernsey emerged from the adjoining room. With him was a young man, who was drawing on the jacket of his white uniform. His eyes looked swollen, as if he might just have been awakened. But his face bore an expression of horror.

"This is Doctor Yawle, Mr. Coe," Guernsey said. "Doctor Nelson, another interne, has gone up to look after Miss Hogarth."

Coe shook hands with Yawle. He gave the unsuccessful rival for the affections of Miss Meredith a veiled but shrewd appraisal. Yawle was about the same age as Smythe, perhaps a year older. He was a good-looking man, with brown curly hair and regular features, marred to some extent by the fullness of his lips and a surly droop to their corners.

"Doctor Guernsey told me," Yawle said. "Poor Miss Meredith! It's hard to believe."

Coe caught the choke in his voice. "It's true," he said. Yawle made no mention of Smythe, and Coe concluded that for some strange reason Doctor Guernsey hadn't told him of the interne's murder.

Yawle clenched his hands. "God!" he gritted. "If I can get my hands on Belknap, I'll—"

"If you're any good at hide-and-seek, you may be the one to find him," Coe said, giving Yawle a sharp look. "Let's get going!"

"Where to?" Guernsey asked.

"Second floor." Coe started down the hallway toward the stairs, the others following.

As they walked up, Guernsey wanted to know what Coe had discovered in his rounds of the building. Coe explained to him in a few words what had taken place. Yawle was a few steps behind, as Coe

asked in a low tone: "How'd you find out about Smythe?"

For a moment, Guernsey didn't reply, merely moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue. Then, finally, he said: "To tell the truth, after I'd come all the way down from the fourth floor without finding Belknap, I sort of lost my head. I decided to rout out all the internes and orderlies. So I took Billings with me and started to wake them up. Smythe's room was the first one we went in."

Guernsey gave an involuntary shudder.

Coe opened the door into the second-floor corridor and held it while Guernsey and Yawle passed through.

"This is the only floor I haven't been over," Coe said.

"I have," Guernsey shrugged. "Went through every room with Conroy. Miss Wilks, the floor nurse, said she hadn't seen anything of a strange orderly here."

They moved down the corridor toward the ward, at which Miss Wilks was sitting. She was looking toward them as they approached. Suddenly she sprang from her chair. Her hand flew to her mouth to stifle a scream, but a low inarticulate cry burst through her fingers, nevertheless. With her other hand, she pointed wildly toward a spot behind the three men.

Guernsey stood as if hypnotized with astonishment. Doctor Yawle sprang toward the terrified nurse. But Coe, wheeling swiftly, started back along the corridor. He had a brief glimpse of a short white-clad figure running at top speed.

And as Coe, in hot pursuit, also swung into the cross-corridor, his foot struck a shiny object which slid across the floor and brought up against the baseboard with a metallic clang.

He came to an abrupt halt. The cross-corridor was empty. No sound of a door opening or closing had come to his ears, yet along both sides of the passageway in front of him were closed doors. Behind one of them, it seemed inevitable that the crazed Belknap must be hiding.

Coe stooped down and recovered the object his foot had encountered, just as Doctor Guernsey came panting up. It was a knife with a pointed blade and a black wooden handle. Exactly like the weapon with which Miss Hogarth had been attacked, except that the blade was a couple of inches shorter. Another kitchen knife, obviously, and one of a set.

Coe gave it only a second's attention. Motioning to Guernsey to follow, he whispered: "He's in one of these rooms."

THEY went to the far end of the cross-corridor. The window there, which opened onto the fire-escape, was closed, locked. Coe himself examined the vacant rooms, while Guernsey stood watch in the hall, and at the rooms which were occupied, they reversed the process.

A little later, they stood again at the intersection of the two corridors. They had found not the slightest trace of the elusive Belknap, the phantom lunatic who seemed to dissolve into the air when pursued. If Coe had not seen him twice—as he bent over Doctor Finister with upraised blade, and just a few minutes ago on this very spot—he might have been skeptical that the fellow was even in the building.

But there was no doubt that he was around somewhere, trying for a chance to plunge a shining steel knife into another innocent victim, urged on by a diseased brain. How many more of those deadly knives did he have?

"What'll we do?" Guernsey's voice shook.

Doctor Yawle, followed at some distance by Miss Wilks, approached. Instead

of answering Guernsey, Coe spoke to the young interne.

"Go up to the fourth floor!"

Yawle nodded and made for the door to the stairway. Coe stood for a long time with lowered brows. At last, he turned to Guernsey, who was watching him anxiously, hopefully.

"You'd better stick on this floor. I'll—"

He stooped abruptly. Slowly, the semblance of a smile glided across his face. A significant feature of Belknap's mysterious disappearance had suddenly occurred to him.

When the madman had first been observed, after his entrance into this wing of the hospital, it was on the top floor. That had been only a short time after his absence from the psychopathic ward had been reported by Conroy. Dressed in an orderly's uniform, he might easily have walked up the stairs to the top floor without arousing suspicion. But since the time he had first been spotted, his wraith-like progress had always been downward. In short that seemed to be the only direction in which he could effect his mysterious escape.

Coe spun on his heel. While Guernsey and Miss Wilks stared after him in open-mouthed amazement, he dashed to the cross-corridor, raced its full length, and flung open a door. His hand found the light switch.

The room he was in was the floor linen room, a room of good size, lined with shelves full of clean sheets, pillow slips, towels and other white goods. His eyes moved swiftly about. Then he smiled grimly, crossed the room in a stride.

He was standing before a small door, scarcely more than two feet square. Coe's hand seized the latch, then he suddenly stopped. Walking rapidly back across the linen room, he turned off the light. Groping his way back, he again reached the small door and slowly and silently pulled it open.

He put his head into the opening and listened. At first, all he could hear was the beating of his own heart. But presently, he detected the faint sound of breathing, drifting up from just below.

For a moment he hesitated. The mad Belknap was there in the clothes chute. A quick calculation satisfied Coe that the chute, instead of dropping vertically, was constructed at a fairly steep angle, in order to pass through all the different linen rooms. This fact had enabled Belknap to check his descent by pressing the rubber-soled orderly's shoes he was wearing against the sides. But the incline was too steep for him to go up.

Coe was on the point of closing the door, going for help to block the basement exit, and then drive this murderous lunatic into waiting arms. But a faint scuffling sound scattered all such plans from his mind.

Belknap was starting downward again. There was no time to lose.

In a second, Coe had wriggled his long legs into the opening. An eel-like squirm and he had pushed his narrow body through, was holding by his hands to the edge of the door-frame. Setting his jaw, he let go.

Unable to slow his progress with his leather soles on the slippery surface of the chute, he shot downward.

CHAPTER SIX

Murder, M.D.

AS COE began his swift descent upon the maniac below, he was vaguely conscious of light pouring into the chute, of muffled excited voices above.

But at that moment, his sliding body was momentarily checked, checked by his feet striking something soft. There was a grunt, a cry of pain and alarm. At

once, it was followed by a wild insane scream as the two men—Coe and his mad quarry—plunged toward the basement down the smooth-walled slide.

Ten feet—twenty—thirty!

Down that steep incline, pursuer and pursued shot to an accompanying pandemonium of gibberish shrieks. Then, abruptly, the maniac tumbled from the mouth of the chute into the huge dirty-clothes bin in the basement laundry. Instantly, his cries ceased.

Coe was only a second behind. His feet hit the pile of soiled linen. The momentum pitched him forward onto his face, his head grazing the side of the bin. Before he could recover himself, Belknap had rolled onto his back. With insane ferocity the wiry little lunatic fought for a hold.

The dirty clothes had broken their fall, prevented them from suffering any injury. But now they handicapped Coe, whose long legs were entangled in the mass of sheets and towels. Belknap, on the other hand, seemed to find them no hindrance.

Again and again, he struck with furious fists at Coe's back and neck. Coe, straightening up, hurled him away. There was a thud as Belknap slammed against the bin. For a few seconds, he seemed stunned. Coe strove fiercely to untangle his legs so he could follow up his advantage. But before he could work free, Belknap was upon him again, squirming, kicking, clawing.

Suddenly he tensed, and then Coe guessed rather than felt that a knife had plunged down and the blow had ripped through his coat, grazing his body. He put all his strength into a mighty heave, trying to hurl this wild man off before he could strike again.

Belknap's hold slipped and he shot to the other side of the bin. There was a frantic scuffling, as he started to climb out. Kicking viciously at the sheets, which clung to his legs like quicksand, Coe half rolled, half crawled in pursuit. His hands groped about in the darkness. Then his long fingers closed about an ankle.

With a violent jerk, he pulled Belknap back from the bin's rim. The madman tumbled in a wriggling heap. But in a flash, Coe was on top of him. The detective's hands shot with serpentine speed up Belknap's body, along his arm to the wrist of the hand that gripped the knife.

There was a sharp crack, a cry of anguish, as Coe bent the wrist back. His left hand hunted and found the smaller man's wind-pipe. With that as a guide, his right fist jabbed. It smacked against Belknap's chin. Again and again, till suddenly the madman's struggles ceased and he went limp. The lights in the laundry suddenly snapped on. Doctor Guernsey's frightened voice called out: "Coe! Coe!"

"Here!" Coe had managed to clear his legs. He stood up, holding Belknap in his arms like a sleeping baby.

Guernsey, breathless with excitement and fright, rushed over to the bin. At his heels were Billings and Conroy.

"Take your lunatic!" Coe said. "But watch out—he seems to be coming to."

He hoisted the semi-conscious Belknap over the top of the clothes bin. Conroy and Billings immediately seized him in a firm grip. Coe stooped down and picked up a black-handled knife. It was just like the two others, but with a still shorter blade.

"Better return this to the kitchen," he said dryly, handing it to Guernsey.

He was about to spring from the bin, when a bright flash from the dirty linen in one corner caught his eye. He moved over and bent down. The object which had reflected the light rays was a small steel knife with a razor-sharp, double-edged blade. A surgeon's lancet.

"And Finister said it was a scalpel,"

Coe murmured thoughtfully to himself.

For a few seconds he remained hunched over, examining his find. The blade was clean, no sign of blood on its shining surface. Slowly a queer introspective smile flickered at the corners of Coe's mouth. When he stood up again, it was gone. The lancet, too, had disappeared into his pocket.

Putting his hands on the edge of the bin, he swung himself over to the laundry floor.

DOCTOR GUERNSEY looked at Coe in bewilderment. They were standing in the first-floor hallway just outside the superintendent's office. Conroy and Billings had gone to the psychopathic ward with the now thoroughly subdued and whimpering Belknap.

"You mean," Doctor Guernsey said, "that you want everyone to come down here to this office? Now? At this hour?"

Coe smiled coolly. "Not everyone. Yourself, Doctor Finister, Doctor Yawle, Billings and Conroy—just the one's who had any part in tonight's excitement will do," he said. "And Miss Hogarth. I almost forgot Miss Hogarth."

Doctor Guernsey shook his head uncomprehendingly. "Very well. If you insist."

"I do."

"I'll get Finister first of all," Guernsey said, and walked toward the elevator.

Coe strolled into the ante-room of the superintendent's office, sat down, touched a match to a cigarette. He blew the smoke meditatively through his nostrils. One of his deep-set eyes was partially closed, his mouth curved in a funny little half-smile.

Ten minutes later, Coe stood beside the desk in Guernsey's inner office. He let his glance run rapidly over the group that had assembled there at his direction. Miss Hogarth, lantern-jawed and full-bosomed, her injured arm in a bandage; Finister tugging at his Vandyke and staring at Coe; Billings, pop-eyed and puzzled; Yawle, and Conroy. Guernsey stood at Coe's elbow.

Coe smiled, cleared his throat.

"I hope," he said quietly, "that you'll excuse this rather unusual procedure, after you hear what I have to say." He glanced around the group again. All eyes were fixed on his calmly smiling face.

"We've captured a dangerous lunatic tonight," Coe continued, "whose intentions were murderous—as Miss Hogarth can testify. But we haven't captured the one who murdered Miss Meredith and Smythe—her husband!" he added with a snap that drove all traces of amiability from his face.

An astonished gasp, a quick intaking of breath rose from the group.

"Belknap didn't commit those murders. He had only long-bladed knives. He picked them up in the kitchen. Miss Meredith and Smythe were killed with a surgical instrument." His glance sought out Doctor Finister. "A scalpel, I believe you decided, Doctor."

Finister coughed. It was a jarring sound, falling on the stillness of the room. "Yes, that's what it looked like to me," he nodded.

"Well, Doctor, you were mistaken," Coe said calmly. "If you had been a little more observant, you would have seen that Miss Meredith's death wound had been made by a very keen *double-edged* instrument. I noticed it at the time. A scalpel is a knife with only one cutting edge. Am I right?"

"Well—yes," Finister conceded.

Coe's hand came out of his pocket. He laid the lancet on the desk with something of a flourish.

"There is the weapon that killed Miss Meredith and Smythe!"

Finister moved forward quickly. The

others pressed close behind him. Finally, Guernsey looked up at Coe's solemn face with staring eyes.

"Where—where did you find it?" he asked.

"In the clothes bin in the laundry. The murderer evidently was hard pressed to dispose of it. Didn't have much time. He tossed it down the clothes chute, intending, no doubt, to recover it later."

Coe's manner grew stern and uncompromising. "But he left behind the indisputable proof of his guilt," he said with slow significance. "Look—at the handle! See that little brown smear. That's dried blood—a fingerprint made from the blood of one of the victims!" he added fiercely. He glared from one to another of them then, but gradually his face became calm, half-smiling again.

"I'm sorry, but you'll all have to go down to the police station immediately."

Doctor Finister broke in, his face dark. "Oh, I say, Coe! At this time of night? Is that necessary?"

Coe didn't answer at once. Just stood there looking down at Finister, boring into him with his eyes. But, at last, he said: "It's absolutely necessary. So necessary that I'll have to put anyone under arrest, who refuses to go to the station willingly."

Then he continued in a softer tone. "Don't forget, Doctor, that the object of this is only to take your fingerprints—and have them compared with the print on that lancet. Before the proper authorities." He gave an ironic smile. "I don't suppose anyone here made it. So there should be no objection to this chance to be cleared of all suspicion in connection with these crimes."

He looked at his watch. "Four-thirty," he said. "It's cold out. You'd better all get some wraps. I'll give you—ten minutes to get ready. Be in the lower hall here at twenty of five!"

He turned to Guernsey, who was looking down at the floor, biting his lip nervously. "This is the day I'm to be discharged, Doctor. I might as well go up and pack my bag and check out now."

HENDERSON COE, grip in hand, stepped off the elevator and walked to the front entrance of Samaritan Hospital. He had tossed his things into his grip in a hurry, and not more than five minutes of the time he had allotted for getting ready had elapsed.

He unlocked the door, looked out. Then he shut it and began to pace slowly back and forth in front of the reception-room door. There was a hint of worry in his manner, but he managed to keep most of the tension he was under concealed. Having staked everything on one daring move, was he doomed to fail?

He saw the bearded figure of Doctor Finister coming toward him down the hallway. He stopped his pacing abruptly and looked at him with a little frown.

"I seem to be the first of the suspects to show up," Finister said.

"Yes," Coe shrugged.

"That was shrewd of you to determine the weapon by examining the incision. Rather embarrassing for me." Finister's voice was smooth, but he was watching Coe closely. "By the way, mind if I have another look at that lancet?"

Coe removed the handkerchief-wrapped lancet from his pocket and held it in his palm. But as the surgeon reached out to take it, he drew his hand back and shook his head. "Sorry, but I can't let it out of my possession. It's our conclusive evidence," he added dryly.

Finister shrugged. His manner suddenly became serious. "You know, of course, that I lied to you deliberately about that incision."

"I knew you either lied or were a damn poor surgeon."

"My reputation as a surgeon is pretty well established," Finister smiled.

"Then why did you lie?" Coe's words whipped out.

"Because of—"

There was a sudden commotion at the big plate-glass doors. Without waiting for Finister's answer, Coe swung about. Dashing to the doors he threw one open. A broad-shouldered man with a clipped gray mustache, accompanied by a younger but equally husky man in a pulled down fedora, entered.

Ahead of them, his arms pinioned securely behind him, they were propelling a cursing, straining Billings.

For a moment, Coe looked at them without speaking. But at last he said: "So that's what you got, Ed?"

Inspector Ed Hayes grinned. "He was trying to sneak out the gate the ambulance uses. I happened to be right there myself. I've had half a dozen men surrounding this place ever since you phoned. What's the rap on this bird?"

"Murder!"

Hayes whistled. Coe surveyed the prisoner from head to foot, deliberately, piercingly.

"I figured the killer would try to lam out, as soon as he learned about the print on the weapon," he said. "That nails you, Billings! The print is proof. But your trying to run tightens up our case against you."

Billings shut his lips, glared at Coe out of his pop-eyes.

"Why'd you do it?" Coe asked quietly.

Billings didn't answer.

"I know you killed them. First, Miss Meredith. You've been round hospitals enough to know an effective way to do it. I don't believe you planned to kill Smythe to begin with. But when you found out that Belknap was loose, and he'd probably get the blame, you took another chance. Sneaked into his room. But it was pretty dark—only the light from the hall. So you stabbed twice. Isn't that it?"

Still, Billings refused to open his mouth. He just stared at Coe with burning eyes, flashing hatred and malevolence.

COE'S manner and tone changed. He stepped close to Billings, seized his arm. "Listen!" he said fiercely. "I know you killed her! Killed her, because you learned she'd married Smythe!"

It was a shot in the dark. But the effect on Billings was electric. His mouth dropped open. He gasped.

"How—how—did—you—"

Coe interrupted him with a slow smile. "Because it's my business to add two and two together and get the truth. Come clean now!"

Without further warning, Billings gave way. Be began to blubber; his face contorted; his protruding eyes rolled in their sockets.

"Sure—sure! I killed her!" he raved. "She'd promised to marry me! Came back here to work—so we'd be near each other. I got her to come here in the first place—to get her training. I was crazy about her! Crazy about her—do you hear! And she threw me down! For that stuck-up Smythe! Married him! And I killed her! And I killed him, too, damn his dirty soul!" Billings ended in a gibbering wail.

Coe turned to Inspector Hayes, who was looking a little goggle-eyed himself at the rapidity of the developments. "That enough, Ed?" Coe asked. "I'll explain what it all means later."

"Yeah," Hayes grunted. He motioned to the man in the fedora. "Take him away!"

As they dragged the ranting Billings out the door, Coe turned back to Finister, who had been watching the proceedings with fascinated interest.

"As you were saying, Doctor, you lied because—"

"Because of Doctor Yawle," Finister replied.

"Yawle?"

"Yes. My nephew. I've raised him, educated him, expected him to be my successor in time. He'd confided in me that he was in love with Miss Meredith. She had refused him, let him know her partiality for Smythe. He was furious and wouldn't take no for an answer. I tried to reason with him. But he's hot-headed and wouldn't listen to me."

Finister looked at Coe anxiously.

"When I saw Miss Meredith's body, the horrible thought flashed through my mind that he might have killed her. I decided to do everything I could to confuse you, at least until I had had a chance to talk with him. You understand?"

Coe nodded slowly. "You came within an ace of landing in jail yourself—and it would have been your own fault."

AS COE and Hayes drove toward police headquarters in the deputy inspector's car. Coe suddenly leaned over and began to examine one of his fingers in the light of the dash-lamp.

"What's the matter?" Hayes asked.

"Cut my finger."

"Accidents will happen."

Coe gave a soft chuckle. "This wasn't an accident."

"Huh?"

"Did it to get a little blood. With this." He pulled out the lancet, held it so the rays from the dash-light fell on the handle with its tell-tale smudge.

"That the fingerprint you were telling about? The one that made Billings scram?"

Coe nodded.

Suddenly Hayes slammed on the brakes, jerked the car to a grinding stop. "Listen!" he burst out. "You mean to say—"

Coe cut him off with a hearty laugh. "Hell, yes! That's my fingerprint on the lancet!"

"I felt the sting of his terrible claws."

Talons of Doom

By Edward Parrish Ware

Author of "The Gallows Clue," etc.

Out of the night he came, a black-garbed figure whose terror talons wreaked a ghastly toll. Catlike he stalked the human jungles—and catlike he vanished when his work was done. What grisly power did he wield to keep his victims silent? What was the grim purpose of this scratch-racket fiend?

CHAPTER ONE

Claws of the Cat

SERGEANT Michael Callan, commanding Radio Patrol Car Number 77, reclining at ease in the seat beside Police Chauffeur Hamp Conley, suddenly snapped erect and gave an attentive ear to the metallic voice that abruptly began droning from nowhere.

"Squad Car Number Seventy-seven! A murder at Thirtieth and Park! Squad Car Number Seventy-seven! Go to Thirtieth and Park!"

"Not in our territory!" exclaimed Conley.

"Everywhere is our territory, Hamp," Callen corrected, "when the Commissioner himself is riding with us! Step on the gas, lad!"

A chuckle came from the darkness that shrouded the rear seat of the touring car, and a tall, lean man of thirty-five or so, clad in civilian garments, leaned forward and said: "Orders were to call Seventy-seven if anything big broke, no matter where. Don't spare the gas, Hamp."

PARK Drive is vulgarly called Millionaires' Row, by most of Kaw City's half-million inhabitants, and it was a bold crook, or an ignorant one, who risked pulling a job there.

Park Plaza is a hollow square, the center a grassy oasis, the sides lined with up-to-the-minute shops of all descriptions. On the corner of Thirtieth and Park stands a palatial motion-picture theatre. When the squad car reached the theatre it was closing time, but the arcade was still brilliant with lights, and the pavement in front was thronged with chattering patrons. A policeman in uniform stepped to the running board.

"Just across Thirtieth, Sergeant, on Park. We've kept the crowd back as well as possible." Then he saw who it was the car carried as a passenger. "A fine evening, sir!" he stammered, saluting.

"Yes, so it seems for murder," Commissioner Durant agreed. "Let's get over there."

A small crowd was grouped on the pavement where the light from a corner electric revealed it vaguely, and a few feet away lay the motionless figure of a man, with somebody kneeling beside him. As Durant walked from the car toward the curb a uniformed policeman came to meet him.

"It's Morgan Oldham, sir!" he exclaimed. "And it is not murder, as it looked to be at first. Knocked cold, Doctor Lothan says, with a sap of some sort. He's living, but may have a bad fracture. Mrs. Oldham was with him when it happened, and she fainted. Doctor Vance, whom you probably know, sir, happened up and I let him take her inside. Hope that was all right?"

"Sure, Kinney," Durant told him. "Was Mrs. Oldham hurt?"

"She was, and she wasn't," Officer Kinney replied. "Not hurt bad, I mean. There were three scratches on her right cheek, I noticed, with a bit of blood in them. And, sir, the same kind of scratches, same number, are on Mr. Oldham's right cheek. Queer, I'm thinking!"

Durant, by then, was standing beside Doctor Lothan, a young practitioner with considerable vogue in the city, who was ministering to the stricken man.

Morgan Oldham, in his early thirties, was a wealthy descendant of an old and aristocratic family. His marriage the year before to Mildred Stoneman, of the Park Drive Stonemans, had been a high spot in the city's social activities.

"How bad is it, Doctor?" Durant inquired.

"Good evening, Commissioner," Lothan greeted, looking up. "Can't say, just yet, but it's a hospital case. I've called an ambulance."

Durant was eyeing three long, bloody scratches that marked the fallen man's right cheek, extending from a point almost at the temple down to the lower jawbone. They looked as though an unusually large and vicious cat might have put them there.

"What do you make of the scratches?" he asked.

"Nothing sensible," Lothan replied. "I am informed that the right cheek of Mrs. Oldham was likewise scratched. Deuced

odd, Commissioner, since you ask me!"

Durant's brow furrowed, and his gray eyes squinted thoughtfully. "What do you know about it, Kinney?" he asked the officer.

"Very little, sir. I was on the corner by the Park Theatre, and heard a woman scream. It came from this direction, and she screamed again as I turned. When I got here I found Mr. Oldham as you now see him, and Mrs. Oldham in a dead faint on the grass of the parkway. Not another soul near. Officer Stone, on regular duty at the plaza, reported the matter. Friends from the theatre identified the couple. That's all, sir."

Durant spoke to the doctor. "Remove Mr. Oldham, Doctor," he instructed, "but do not let any unauthorized person talk with him when he regains consciousness. I will have a man there, and when he is able to talk I want that man to hear his first words.

"Have you determined whether or not there is anything to be feared from the scratches?"

"I applied an antiseptic, which is all I have had time to do I'll know more about it after I have him in the hospital."

Durant nodded. "I am going in to see Mrs. Oldham," he said. "Call me there if you learn anything later that I should know."

ACCOMPANIED by Sergeant Callan, the commissioner went along the walk to the veranda of the Oldham house, in front of which the strange attack had occurred. A butler opened the door.

"Mrs. Oldham is conscious, sir" he replied to a question. "Doctor Vance is with her."

Vance, a physician seldom seen outside the homes of wealthy patients, awaited the commissioner in Mrs. Oldham's boudoir. Tall, distinguished, middle-aged, his face wore a puzzled look.

"You may talk briefly with my patient, Commissioner," he said, "but first I want to caution you not to say anything to excite her. Come with me, please."

Mrs. Oldham, a lovely woman in her twenties, was in bed. She opened her large, violet eyes when the commissioner came softly to the bedside, fixed her gaze upon his face, and promptly dropped her lids again. A shudder ran through her body, and a slender, blue-veined hand went up to her cheek as though to cover something from sight.

Durant stared down at her face for a moment, then turned to Doctor Vance with a question. "Those three scratches on Mrs. Oldham's cheek, Doctor—have you accounted for them?"

Mrs. Oldham struggled up to a sitting posture, her violet eyes wide with horror. "He did it!" she cried agitatedly. "That terrible creature, like a huge, black cat, that—that killed my husband! He came from nowhere it seemed, Mr. Durant, and —and peered into my face. Then he brought a skinny, claw-like hand from beneath his long, black coat—" She broke off, convulsed with sobs, and dropped limply back on the pillows.

Durant shot a questioning glance at Vance, received a nod of reassurance from him, and asked quietly: "What did he do with his hand, Mrs. Oldham, that frightens you so to think of it even now?"

"He—he reached suddenly for my face, gave a horrible, chuckling laugh, and brought his nails like terrible claws down across my cheek! I felt them bite and sting, and I screamed. My husband leaped for him, grappled with him. I screamed again, and then looked down to see Mr. Oldham writhing on the walk. The creature in the black coat was leaping up the terrace of our lawn, more catlike in his movements than ever, I thought—and then I fainted."

Durant looked inquiringly at the doctor, and the latter smiled.

Mrs. Oldham's mind is clear, Commissioner," he assurred. "You may believe that she saw just what she has described. Besides, we have the corroborating scratches."

"Oh, I did see him! I did!" the distraught young woman cried hysterically. "He stepped out from the deep shadow of a tree in the parking. All in black! What appeared to be an old-fashioned raglan coat, long and shapeless, covered him. He had gray hair that looked like little twisted ropes, showing beneath the brim of a black slouch hat, and a dark beard covered his lower features. But the beard did not hide his enormous, blunt teeth. His eyes seemed to glitter in the reflected light from the corner electric. I can see him now—"

"Did he speak to you? Say anything at all?" Durant asked gently.

"Not a word!" She shivered. "Just that mocking whine of a laugh!"

DURANT turned again to Doctor Vance. "What do you think about it, Doctor? The scratches, I mean. Can they be—" His voice trailed off.

"Well, Commissioner," Vance said thoughtfully, "I think we have an insane person to deal with—man or woman. You see, we have nothing to indicate positively the sex of the scratcher, except that Mrs. Oldham's impression is that it was a man. I am not so sure it was a man, because I suspect that the scratches represent an attempt to mar the face of my patient. Just that, Commissioner. Had the marks gone deeper—well—" He broke off with a shrug. "They didn't, thank heaven, and there will be nothing to show for them within a few days."

"Sure of that?" Durant asked, studying the scars. "Fingernails, as you know, are apt to infect."

"I have taken care of that," Vance said stiffly.

"You would, of course. And you incline to the idea that the assailant is a woman who has, at some time or other, had her face marred possibly, and that she suffers from a sort of dementia which urges her to go forth and mar the faces of others?"

Vance nodded emphatically.

Durant grew thoughtful, making no reply. Then, "I have news for Mrs. Oldham," he said quietly, "which I hope will not excite her. Mr. Oldham was not killed. He was knocked unconscious, and is at Saint Lukes."

Mrs. Oldham cried out joyfully, and Doctor Vance bent over her, speaking gently and reassuringly. Durant went on speaking.

"If you wish, Mrs. Oldham," he offered, "I shall leave a man on guard here for the rest of the night. Perhaps you will feel safer so?"

"I shall indeed!" she cried thankfully.

"Nonsense, Mil—Mrs. Oldham!" Vance exclaimed. "The idea that the scratcher will return to do you further injury is preposterous. Besides, I shall remain until you are composed."

Mrs. Oldham raised her eyes to those of the doctor for a brief instant, then looked at Durant. "I daresay Doctor Vance is right. I shall be quite safe."

Durant shrugged. He had a curious feeling that he had just witnessed something significant in that exchange of glances.

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. The Oldham butler entered at Vance's summons, and back of him was Callan.

"What now?" the commissioner queried passing into the corridor and closing the door.

"A call to Number Thirty Twenty-five Elm," Callan reported, excitement keen-

ing his voice. "Howard Stoneman's home. It's just back of here—"

"What's wrong there?" Durant broke in quickly.

"A murder, it seems, sir," Callan answered. Then, after a deep breath, "And there are scratches on Mr. Stoneman's face, sir, just like those others!"

CHAPTER TWO

Like a Rabid Dog

THE butler at the Stoneman residence in the next street, an old man, trembling with fright, almost incoherent, admitted Durant and pointed up the stairs.

"In—in the room on the right, sir," he said, "just at the head of the steps! He's dead, sir—the master is dead!"

Durant was up the stairway in three bounds, and in the chamber of death in two more. On the floor near a small table lay the fully dressed form of a slender man in middle life. That he was dead was apparent, but of mortal wound there was no sign.

On the right cheek of the corpse, however, vivid as so many threads of scarlet silk, were three scratches with dried blood in them. Scratches exactly like those on the right cheeks of Mrs. Oldham and her husband.

Durant looked long and silently at those scratches, then suddenly dropped to one knee, drew out a vest-pocket flash and played its rays upon the injury. It was then he made a startling discovery. Paralleling the vivid marks on Stoneman's right cheek, faint but yet discernable, were three more scratches. Scratches that must have been made at least a week before.

The first set of scratches had healed, leaving only faint lines to indicate where they had been. The second set had been made, Durant judged, perhaps two, or maybe three hours ago. The body was cold, and death had evidently been present for a considerable time.

Sergeant Callan and Hamp Conley had been making a search of the three rooms comprising the apartment Stoneman had used. No one was found in hiding, and no indication discovered that anybody but the owner had been in it recently.

"Shall we search the house, Commissioner?" Callan asked—then ceased speaking, eyes fixed intently upon what Durant was doing.

The commissioner had lifted Stoneman's left hand from the rug. The fingers were tightly clenched. He worked them open carefully—and a crumpled ball of paper dropped to the floor. He retrieved the wad and smoothed it out. On it were two or three lines of heavy blue-penciled writing.

To the police. Look for a bearded man in a long, black raglan. Shoot him as you would a rabid dog. Can not say any more. Am dying. . . .

The message broke off there, it being evident that Stoneman had been caught by death spasms at that point.

Durant made no comment. He turned to the door, motioned the others to remain where they were, and went down the stairs. Biddle, the butler, was in the lower hall, eyes turned fearfully toward the regions above. Durant, after considerable delay, got him to talk with coherence.

"Mr. Stoneman, sir, was a bachelor, an uncle of Mrs. Morgan Oldham," he informed the detective. "He did with me and a cook, not liking too many about him, sir. The cook lives out. It was a week ago that he got some marks on his cheek, and he was in a fury about the incident. He was walking home from the theatre, the one at Thirtieth and Park Drive, sir, when a man approached him and asked for a bit of money for food.

Mr. Stoneman reached for his change pocket—and then it happened, sir.

"'The scoundrel jerked his left hand from under what looked like an old-fashioned black raglan!' my master exclaimed wrathfully. 'With a horrible sort of whining laugh, he reached out his hand and clawed my cheek. Then, before I could do anything about it, he ran off down an alley. Blast him, what could have been his purpose in that?'

"When he discovered that his face was scarred, he was in a towering rage, sir. Talked of reporting the affair to the police, but did not. You probably are aware, sir, of the antipathy of proud men like Mr. Stoneman to anything like police publicity. But he was still very angry the next morning, and remained so all day. He kept to his rooms until the scratches healed, sir, and went out tonight for the first time since they were made."

"Do you know where he went tonight?"

"He said he was going to the theatre, the same one, sir."

"At what time did he return?"

"Something like two and a half hours ago, sir. He attended the first show, and came home directly it was over. He—he came home in a towering rage, sir—and no wonder he did! He had met the scratcher again!" Biddle exploded wrathfully. "His right cheek had been scratched again, and deeper this time, and blood was dripping from the wounds! 'I met that damned cat again, Biddle!' he exclaimed. 'He attacked me right in front of the house, and made his getaway as slick as a whistle! I'm going upstairs and think it over, Biddle, and then perhaps I shall call Doctor Vance, and the police. But not a word of this thing to anybody, mind you, until I give it out myself!'

"Mr. Stoneman fairly ran up the stairs to his rooms, sir. I waited, expecting to be called, but no word came from him. I got uneasy, but my master was an odd one, and disliked to have me disturb him. I continued to wait for him to summon me, and then, when I became too uneasy to bear the suspense longer, I went up and knocked. There was no answer, and presently I opened the door and went in. I found Mr. Stoneman just as he was when you came. That sir, is all I know about it."

Durant walked to a desk phone and called headquarters.

"Send out Captain Braden, and Detectives Hamby and Stokes," he instructed the desk. "Inform the coroner and Doctor Sneed that they are wanted too. Fingerprint and camera men will complete the detail for the present. Hustle them along, Sergeant, and keep your tongue still about this."

Durant hung up. It was at that instant, uneasiness concerning Mrs. Oldham struck him, and he turned to the stairway and called to Sergeant Callan.

"Going through the back way and across the alley to the Oldham house," he informed Callen when the sergeant appeared. "Back within ten or fifteen minutes. Captain Braden, the coroner and the medical examiner will be along soon, and you can admit them if I have not returned by then."

DURANT passed out through the kitchen, thence into the darkness of the rear yard, where a granatoid walk led toward the back fence and the alley. It had occurred to him that Howard Stoneman's death might have been caused by those scratches on his face; the ones received that evening. Considering that possibility, it was necessary that Mrs. Oldham be warned and that Vance be cautioned not to regard the scratches too lightly. It was the commissioner's purpose to warn them, and also to get in

touch with Doctor Lothan who had Morgan Oldham at St. Luke's.

Durant reached the rear fence, laid a hand on the gate latch—and, without the slightest sound to betray another presence in the yard, somebody leaped upon him from behind. A powerful arm encircled his neck, a knee pressed heavily against the small of his back, and he was borne to the ground.

Durant, himself a tall, athletic man, was powerless in the grip of his assailant. He felt hair as coarse as a horse's mane brush his face as he was borne backward—and remembered the black beard the "cat" was described as wearing. A thumb gouged at a spot at the back of his neck, and he went limp, paralyzed in every nerve of his body. He dropped in a sprawl, utterly helpless, on the walk.

The rays from a tiny flash covered his face abruptly, and there came a chuckle from the blackness back of the light.

"Take this for a warning, Mr. Commissioner!" came in a low, hissing voice.

Into the circle of light came a hand, the nails slightly curved, and Durant, watching with growing horror the nails gradually lower toward his right cheek, tried to shout for help—only to find that his voice would not obey his will.

Suddenly the three clawlike nails touched Durant's skin at the temple, dug in—and then he heard the flesh rip as the claws were raked downward across his cheek almost to the point of his chin. The wounds stung bitingly, and he felt blood rising to the surface.

"A second time means death!"

It came in a mere whisper from the darkness. The flashlight was abruptly snapped off, and Durant heard a rustle of footsteps. He knew that he was alone.

IT required fully ten minutes for the temporary paralysis to leave Durant sufficiently to allow him to stand. Just as he got to his feet, pulling himself up by gripping the pickets of the fence, two cars roared into Elm Street and stopped in front of the Stoneman residence. Durant staggered erratically around the house and met Captain Braden and the detail from headquarters at the front door.

"What the hell!" Braden exclaimed when he caught sight of the blood-stained face of his chief. "Has that damned cat been scratching you, too, Commissioner?"

"Just that," Durant assured him. "Hamby, you and Stokes," he went on, addressing the two detectives with the detail, "get after this face-scratcher pronto. He went out through the gate in the back fence, and has perhaps ten minutes start on you. Not much chance to get him now, but you can try. The description turned in at headquarters is all you will have to go on. Report to headquarters."

Hamby and Stokes disappeared around a corner of the house, and Doctor Sneed, the medical examiner, hustled Durant inside.

"Better not take any chances, Durant," he advised, opening his satchel and taking out a bit of gauze and a bottle of liquid. "Antiseptic now, and a closer examination later."

Braden and the others were already on their way up the stairs. Sneed applied the antiseptic, then he and the commissioner followed the others into the death room. Durant called Sergeant Callan aside and gave him instructions.

"Drive around to the Oldham house," he bade the sergeant, "and if Doctor Vance is still there, inform him of the death of Stoneman, and give him the particulars. Tell him to give plenty of attention to those scratches on Mrs. Oldham's face, as they may carry deadly danger. I do not think they do, but there can be no certainty now about it. If Vance is not there, then you in person advise Mrs. Oldham to call him at once, or some

other physician if he is not available, and keep him beside her until it is certain she is to suffer no more harm. Come back when you have done that."

Callan departed, and Doctor Sneed arose from where he had been kneeling beside the body of Stoneman. His face had a puzzled look.

"It is hardly probable," he said, "that Stoneman's scratches had anything to do with his death. Possible, though, of course. I know that his heart had been acting up on him for some time past, and I believe that he died because of that trouble—superinduced by anger and excitement. However, Commissioner, I want to perform an autopsy."

"By all means," Durant assented.

"I'll get at it first thing in the morning, and have a report in your hands by ten o'clock. That satisfactory?"

Durant nodded, and, after the coroner had viewed the body and made notes on the case, the corpse was removed to Bencamp's Funeral Parlors, Bencamp being the mortician favored by the wealthy in Kaw City.

The coroner and Sneed departed.

CAPTAIN Braden, night chief of the detective bureau, had been quietly studying the fragmentary note left behind by the dead man. Presently he passed it back to Durant, and said: "I don't agree with Doc Sneed."

"About heart trouble being the cause of death?"

"Exactly. Stoneman came up here, according to the butler, to think the thing over and decide whether or not to let the police in on it. While he was still debating the matter in his mind, he suddenly knew that death was upon him. He grabbed a sheet of paper and a pencil and tried to tip us off, but he hadn't time. Now, Durant, had that been a heart attack, wouldn't Stoneman have recognized its character?"

"Unquestionably. He had experienced them before."

"Sure he had. Then granting he recognized it as a heart attack, wouldn't he have been more concerned about calling a doctor than in writing a note to the cops?"

"I think that's good reasoning, Braden. Another thing—Stoneman had been scratched before. And the man who clawed my face for me told me that a second time meant death. I believe, and will unless Sneed's autopsy proves otherwise, that Stoneman's death was due directly to those marks on his cheek."

"Pardon me, Commissioner," came in Doctor Vance's quiet, well-modulated voice from the doorway, "but I, as a medical man, most positively disagree with you."

"Ah, Doctor," Durant said, turning to the physician, "I see Sergeant Callan must have found you still with your patient—"

"Yes. I was preparing to leave. Came over immediately Callan told me what had occurred here. Stoneman, as you may know, had long been my patient. His heart was badly affected—and I think it very likely indeed that it got him tonight."

Durant broke in pleasantly with: "How is Mrs. Oldham?"

"Resting like a baby," was the reply.

The telephone rang, and Durant lifted the receiver. "Yes, this is Durant talking. All right, Doctor—shoot."

He listened for a moment, face expressionless, then asked: "You feel sure?"

Another pause. Then, "All right, Lothan. Captain Braden will be out."

He hung up, turned gravely to those in the room who had been listening so intently, and announced: "Morgan Oldham died about fifteen minutes ago, without regaining consciousness. Lothan says

says that he died from heart disease, aggravated by the excitement of the attack tonight and shock from the blow on his head."

A sarcastic grunt came from the pursed lips of Captain Braden, and his words following the grunt popped like firecrackers. "Heart disease hell—"

"Morgan Oldham was a patient of mine," Vance broke in, cold eyes boring into the hot ones of the detective captain. "I agree with Lothan. Heart trouble."

"That cat is responsible for both these deaths even if both men did die from something they had before they were scratched!" Braden declared. "And I'm hoping Commissioner Durant orders me to go after the damned scoundrel—with instructions to bring him in, dead or alive!"

"That is exactly what I am going to do, Captain," Durant said quietly.

Braden gave the commissioner a grin of approval, saluted, and started from the room. As he went through the doorway he all but collided with someone about to enter.

"Pardon me, Captain!" the man just coming in apologized. "Entirely my fault, I'm sure!" The speaker's voice was pleasantly deep, cultured, assured.

"No harm done, Mr. Harper," Braden told him. "Excuse me, but I'm in a hurry!" The captain continued on down the stairs.

CHAPTER THREE

No Autopsy

THE man who had so nearly crashed into the burly detective captain, and who now stood on the door sill, was tall, slender, almost effeminate in build. He was dressed in gray tweeds of the finest weave and latest cut, a light tweed topcoat draped over one arm. A pair of dark-brown eyes kept shooting glances around the room, finally rested upon the face of the commissioner.

"By Gad, Durant," the newcomer exclaimed, concern in his voice, "has somebody been trying to do you in?"

Vincent Harper, clubman, polo player, able director of Kaw City's Little Theatre, added to his other abilities those of a clever amateur detective. On more than one occasion he had aided the police in breaking a tough case, and, strange to say, he had the respect and liking of the whole force. His real passion, however, was the race track, and his own string of horses numbered some of the best in the country.

"Just a few scratches on the face, Harper," Durant said in answer to the other's surprised query. "Where did you pop up from?"

Harper nodded a greeting to Doctor Vance before replying. Then, "Just drove in from my stock-farm at Lexington," he answered. "The fall meet is one week off, as you know, and I've been seeing after the final conditioning of my string." His face then became grave, his eyes taking on a somber light. "If what Biddle has just told me is true, Durant, then it is mighty bad news for me."

"If you refer to Howard Stoneman," Durant said, "it is true. Stoneman died tonight under circumstances that are mysterious, to say the least. How came you to be here, Harper, if you don't mind?"

Harper gave the commissioner a look of slight surprise, then an understanding smile followed. "Of course you wouldn't know about it," he said, "but ever since I've been spending so large a part of the time on my farm, Howard Stoneman has given me the use of an apartment in his house when I'm in the city. I phoned Howard from Lexington, about two o'clock this afternoon, that I would be along some time tonight. Now tell me all about this business—if you don't mind?"

"I'll be getting along," Doctor Vance said at that moment. "If I'm wanted for anything before morning, you can get me at my residence."

When Vance had gone, Durant rapidly sketched the events of the night, while Harper listened. When Durant finished Harper was silent for a moment, then raised serious eyes to those of the commissioner, speaking in a grim, metallic voice. "Damn it, Durant, with or without your consent, I'm going to take a hand in this thing!"

Durant was preparing to leave the house. "On the usual condition, Harper," the commissioner said quietly but pointedly. "You are to keep from me nothing you learn in your prowling."

"O. K., Durant," Harper agreed. "I'll see you at headquarters before noon. Good night. I'll stay here and try to console poor Biddle. You're leaving a man in the house?"

"Yes. Good night."

DURANT, with Conley and Sergeant Callan, drove rapidly toward the main section of the city, and the car was within half a dozen blocks of headquarters when Conley, in response to a sharp order, came to a quick stop.

"Extry! Get an extry! All about the big murders! Read about the Scratcher! Extry! Extry!"

"Here, boy!" Durant called, and seized the paper, a Clarion extra, the newsboy passed up to him. He unfolded it, glanced at the headlines, and swore at a four-inch streamer-head on the front page.

BEWARE THE CLAWS OF THE CAT!

The sub-heads, also in heavy black type, were even more exasperating.

DEATH IN SCRATCHER'S WAKE TAKES TOLL OF TWO
CLARION UNCOVERS VALUABLE CLUE AHEAD OF POLICE

The opening paragraph was not in the nature of news, but a flowery tribute to the diligence of the staff of The Clarion.

Followed a pithy summation of the activities of the "cat," in which it was stated positively that the deaths of Oldham and Stoneman had been due directly to the claws of the scratcher, and stating further that Mrs. Morgan Oldham was at that moment at the point of death from a like cause.

Then came two paragraphs of particular interest to the commissioner.

> The clue in question has appeared for the past week in the personal columns of The Clarion. It was carried as late as the afternoon edition today. It is a single line, meaningless then to The Clarion's staff, as it must have been to its thousands of readers.
>
> BEWARE THE CLAWS OF THE CAT!
>
> Copy for the personal reached this office one week ago today, together with three one-dollar bills in payment. The copy caused no speculation on the part of anybody in this office, since many odd personals are received by The Clarion every week of the year. In the light of the happenings of the evening, it has assumed a dire and important significance.

There was more of it, but Durant did not read further.

"Clarion office," he snapped to Conley.

SAM LAKE, the Clarion's managing editor, a big, gray-haired man with deeply set blue eyes, glanced up when Durant entered unceremoniously. He smiled—a dry, chuckle coming from his thick throat. "Didn't expect you quite so soon, Commissioner," he commented, shoving aside a sheaf of galley proofs.

"I came for the copy of that cat personal, just as you expected me to do. Get it, Lake."

Lake unhurriedly opened a drawer of his desk and took out a long envelope. "I had it ready for you," he said laconically. "Always ready to oblige you, Commissioner."

Durant took a folded sheet, letter-head size, from the envelope, and read the following typed communication.

Editor Clarion:

Please run the following copy in your personal columns for one week, beginning with your next issue. Inclosed is three dollars in payment for same.

Then appeared the copy.

BEWARE THE CLAWS OF THE CAT!

That was all. No signature or date-line. The envelope bore the cancellation stamp of the general post office in Kaw City.

"Lake," Durant said quietly, as he placed the copy in a pocket, "you are on thin ice. This is not the first time you have, for sake of advertising for your paper, withheld clues from the police. Watch out!"

Without another word, Durant turned and left the office.

IT was seven o'clock in the morning when Commissioner Durant entered his office at City Hall, which building also housed police headquarters. Braden joined him five minutes after his arrival.

"I've got every available man out, Commissioner," the captain informed Durant, sitting down across the desk from his chief. "Six men are in the neighborhood of Park Drive, and others are gathering in the stoolies and such crooks as may have knowledge of this business. Nothing has turned up so far."

"What did you learn at Saint Luke's?"

"Nothing more than Lothan told you over the phone."

Detective Chief Dugan and Chief of Police Wallace entered at that moment.

"Well, what do you think of things this morning, Durant?" Dugan queried, as he lowered his powerful body into a chair.

"For one thing," Durant replied crisply, "this scratcher is a man thoroughly at home in the Park Drive neighborhood. A servant—former servant, possibly—even, a man identified socially with the Park Drive crowd. It's no ordinary underworld stunt. Hair, beard, teeth are false. Shapeless black coat to cover his real build. Also, such a disguise would be easy to slip out of and conceal, leaving the cat in his proper person—a person nobody would think of suspecting. Anything to offer against that?"

"Jibes with my line of reasoning," Chief Wallace said quietly.

Braden nodded agreement. So did Dugan, who asked: "What do you make of that Clarion personal, Commissioner?"

"It was planted there for the smart minds on The Clarion's staff to find," Durant answered promptly. "The scratcher, for some reason or other, wanted publicity for his stunt, and Lake played his game for him without knowing it. Incidentally, there's a leak in the department, else The Clarion wouldn't have had the dope to publish. Watch for it."

"And treat the Clarion boys rough, eh, until Lake sees a great, shining light?"

"Exactly. Put a tail on Vance and on Lothan. Vance could have been in Stoneman's back-yard last night, although supposed to be in the Oldham house across the alley. Lothan, I have learned, turned Oldham over to an interne at the hospital, saying he had a patient he must see. He was absent nearly an hour—and the time of his absence corresponds with the time of the attack on me. I want to know all about Mrs. Mildred Oldham's movements, when she goes out again. That's all, I guess, for the present."

"The Oldham woman will inherit a bunch of jack from her uncle, Howard Stoneman, and she'll get Oldham's million or so," Dugan offered. "Have you considered that angle? Maybe there's a lover in this thing."

"And that bird, Harper," Braden put in. "Want a tail on him, Commissioner?"

"Harper is shinnying on our side," Durant told him. "He won't require watching."

A sharp rapping on the door of the office interrupted, and Braden, at a nod from Durant, arose and opened it. An officer in uniform stood in the passage, and with him a small, nervous, white-faced man in dead black. It was Bencamp, the mortician.

"He said he had to see you in person, Commissioner—" the officer began, just as Bencamp shot across the threshold.

"I—this—this is so important, Commissioner," he spluttered, "that maybe you alone should hear it. Something has got to be done about it—"

"Close the door, Braden," Durant cut in. Then, nodding toward Bencamp, "Now, Mr. Bencamp, come down to earth. Tell us what ails you."

"It—it's this!" Bencamp wailed. "I received Mr. Stoneman's body last night at my undertaking rooms, and placed it in the morgue in readiness for the autopsy this morning. Then I went upstairs to my rooms to bed. This morning, Commissioner—this morning—"

Bencamp gulped himself into complete silence. Durant waited a moment for the little man to recover, then asked: "Well, Bencamp, what about this morning?"

"What about it? What about this morning, you ask?" shrieked Bencamp. "This about it! When I entered the morgue this morning—the body of Howard Stoneman was gone! It is nowhere on the premises!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Scratch Racket

THE startling disclosure was received in complete silence. Dugan looked stunned. Chief Wallace stared, while Braden, his eyes searching the face of the mortician, nodded his head slowly up and down as though he had gotten light on the matter not yet perceptible to his companions.

"How did the snatcher get in?" Durant asked.

"Through a back window on the alley. Jimmied it up, Commissioner. Took the body out the rear door, which is always bolted on the inside and made off with it! Something has to be done about—"

"Had the body been disrobed?" Durant cut in.

"Yes. Covered with the customary sheet."

"Sheet gone, too?"

"It is!"

"Markings on the sheet?"

"Yes. Bencamp's Mortuary, in black ink in a corner."

Rapping on the door again interrupted, and when Braden opened it, at a nod from Durant, a medium-tall, slender man, well dressed and wearing a closely clipped Vandyke, entered the room without waiting for an invitation.

"Good morning, Doctor Lothan," Durant greeted the newcomer. "Make yourself quite at home."

If there was a bit of irony in the commissioner's greeting, it failed to register with the doctor, who was obviously fussed about something.

"It's about the autopsy on Howard Stoneman's body, Commissioner," Lothan stated, irritation scarcely concealed in his voice. "Sneed agreed last night, or rather, early this morning, that I might assist. Naturally, Commissioner, I am greatly concerned about those scratches and what the autopsy will establish. When I appeared at the mortuary a short time ago, I was refused admittance—"

"My orders!" Bencamp broke in. "No one to enter, not even Doctor Sneed, until I had seen you, Commissioner!"

"What's this all about?" snapped Lothan, his black eyes fiery.

"There will be no autopsy today, Lothan," Durant told him quietly.

"And why not, may I ask?"

"For the very good reason that there is no body upon which to operate. It was stolen this morning."

Lothan gasped. "That beats me!" he managed finally.

"Beats all of us!" Dugan grunted.

"Speak for yourself, Dugan!" Braden snapped. "It doesn't beat me. Stealing the body is an open confession that an autopsy would disclose poison, and the scratcher doesn't want that known for sure just yet."

Durant nodded agreement, and Lothan arose to go.

"I'll believe that there is poison in these cases, gentlemen," he gave them at parting, "when a competent analyst establishes it as a fact—and not before. Good morning!"

"Kind of waspish, ain't he?" Braden commented, as the door slammed.

Durant turned to Bencamp. "You may go, Bencamp," he said. "Captain Braden will go with you, and have a look around. Doubtless the body will be recovered in due time."

BENCAMP departed with Braden, and the telephone rang before the discussion could be renewed. Durant lifted the receiver to his ear.

"Commissioner Durant speaking."

"I have just read The Clarion's account of the Cat," came to Durant in a clear, musical voice. The voice of a woman. "Old stuff, Commissioner! Really, it is!"

"Yes? And may I know who it is telling me so?"

"Not now—or ever!" was the firm reply. "But I can tip you off to something that may startle you, Commissioner. Want me to?"

"Suit yourself. I'll listen, of course."

"Very much unconcerned, are you?" A musical laugh followed the sarcasm. "Well here's something that will jolt you! The Cat—such a foolish fancy—did not begin his scratching last night, Commissioner. He was at it a week ago, and I can give you the names of two persons, a man and a woman, whose right cheeks were ripped by his claws. Do I score a hole-in-one with that, Commissioner?"

"Perhaps," Durant told her.

"O. K.! Take this—and like it! One week ago last night," the pleasingly pert voice went on, "Major Ronald Ball, who lives six doors below the Oldham place, met the Cat in his front yard. He came in scratched up, and mad as a setting-hen. While he was discussing the matter with his wife, he got a call on the phone. Then he sobered up—and kept quiet.

"On that same night, Miss Elizabeth Young, daughter of Arthur Young, living in the next block south of Ball's on Park, was scratched on her right cheek while she lay asleep on a ground-floor sleeping porch. Somebody called the place on the phone half an hour later, talked with Mr. Young and the thing was promptly hushed up. You can check on those bits of information, Commissioner, and learn whether I'm a liar or not."

"Surely. But why not come through, miss, and spill it all? If you are not criminally guilty, along with the Cat—"

"No, thanks! I've said all I mean to."

She hung up. Durant jiggled his receiver, got the switchboard operator downstairs, and asked: "Did you get all that, Malloy?"

"Yes, sir. And we checked on the call while she was talking. A drug-store booth across the square from the Park Theatre. Young woman. The druggist does not know her name, but thinks she is a sort of social secretary in the Ball family."

"Thanks." Durant hung up.

"The Scratcher was not making his debut on the crime scene when he pulled his stunts last night," he said to Dugan. "We suspected as much on account of those faint scratches on Stoneman's cheek. Major Ball and Miss Young, both of the Park Drive neighborhood, met him sometime back. Ball's secretary, for some reason best known to herself, just tipped me off."

Dugan whistled in surprise. "Want me to put somebody on her?" he asked.

"Not necessary. We'll know where to find her if we should want her."

"Anything else in mind for today?"

Durant got up and reached for his hat. "I'm going out on the Ball and Young leads," he said. "You can hold things down here, Dugan."

AS Durant walked along the pavement in front of City Hall, to where his car was parked, he saw Vincent Harper, handsome, debonair, immaculate in a morning suit, hurrying toward him. He waited until the young sportsman came up.

"Just on my way to talk things over with you, Commissioner," Harper said, shaking hands. "Have you learned anything new?"

"Just about to chase down a lead, Harper. See you later—"

"Anything against my going along?" Harper broke in eagerly.

"No. But you will have to remain in the car while I make a couple of calls. Come on."

As Durant drove toward Park Drive he acquainted Harper with the latest real development— the theft of Stoneman's body. The news left the young man dumb for a full minute, then his comment was a long-drawn whistle.

"Looks bad, doesn't it?" Durant queried.

"Very much like poor Howard was really poisoned!" Harper exclaimed.

"Exactly."

Durant parked in front of Major Ball's residence. "Wait here," he instructed Harper.

Durant walked up to the door and rang the bell. Major Ball and Mrs. Ball had left town in a motor car at an early hour that morning, a solemn-faced butler told the commissioner. Major Ball had not announced his destination, or the time of his return. Had the major received a caller or a telephone message that morning? The major had received a lengthy telephone message at about seven o'clock that morning—and had then announced his intention of leaving town.

Durant drove then to the Young home in the next block. He had bad luck there. Mr. Young and his daughter had driven out of town early that morning, going the butler did not know where. Yes, Mr. Young had had a telephone call at about six-thirty that morning, and had then decided hurriedly to leave the city for a while.

Durant went back to his car, evaded Harper's eager questions and drove rapidly to the Oldham house. When he drove up and parked, a plainclothesman popped up at his elbow. He was the man assigned to watch the place.

"Mrs. Oldham has not been out, sir," he reported.

"Has anybody at all gone out?"

"Yes, sir. About an hour and a half ago, a well-dressed young chap, close-cropped black hair, clean-shaved, drove out of the garage in a roadster. Looked like a kid, say about nineteen—"

"Hell!" Durant exclaimed, and went inside.

The Oldham butler could give Durant no information, other than that his mis-

tress had received a telephone call at an early hour that morning. She left the house, shortly afterward, dressed as a boy—and had not said where she was going.

"Well, what do you make of all this business, anyhow, Commissioner?" Harper asked quizzically.

"Just this," Durant replied. "Certain smart crooks have learned a fact vital to their business. They have learned that ninety-five percent of the wealthy people in this country are just sheep for their shearing. All they need do is throw a scare into them—and they'll pay until long after it hurts! And now, let's burn rubber back to town."

AT two o'clock that afternoon Chief Dugan lumbered into Durant's office, lowered his ponderous body into a chair, and remarked: "Masters, down at the First National, is a hard nut to crack, Commissioner!"

"Did you crack him?"

"Partly. Got him to admit that shortly after the bank opened this morning, he had two heavy withdrawals. Fifty grand each. From two different accounts. Unexpected, too. The birds drawing the jack wouldn't allow time for making a list of the numbers, either. There Masters clammed up. Couldn't get the names."

"Anything more?"

"Yeah. Meyers, at the Merchants Trust, wasn't so hard. Right after the bank opened this morning, Mrs. Oldham presented a check for a hundred grand, to Meyers in person. A whale of an amount of cash, even for the Merchants, without prior notice. But Mrs. Oldham carries a large account there in her own name, so he obliged her. She wouldn't stop for number-checking, either—but we've got her there. Meyers took the jack from a safe where they keep bills that have already had their numbers listed. It was so large an amount, he said, he felt bound to take precautions. This looks like an extortion game, eh?"

"Possibly. On the other hand, Ball and his wife, Young and Miss Young, and Mrs. Oldham may have decided to run far and long. They got telephone calls early this morning that scared them witless, and they may have run for it. Hence the big withdrawals."

"Ought not to be hard to locate 'em," Dugan commented.

"Unless they're on the run," Durant said. "Get things going, Dugan. Send out descriptions, and have them picked up wherever found. We'll hold them for conspiring to obstruct justice, or as material witnesses to the case. It's time such people were learning a few things, as well as Editor Lake."

NOTHING important happened during the rest of the day. Something broke, however, directly after Durant had returned to his office after supper.

Dugan arrived—with Mrs. Morgan Oldham in charge.

"Located her at a cottage camp, Commissioner, fifty miles away. Signed up as Ethel Steele. She kicked—but decided to come in and spill. That right, Mrs. Oldham?"

"Yes!" she cried, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. "Early this morning, Commissioner, my maid brought me a copy of The Clarion, and I learned of Uncle Howard's death. Learned that he had been poisoned by those scratches. At six o'clock, I got a telephone call. It was a man speaking, a voice I didn't recognize. He told me that Uncle Howard had received scratches on his cheek a week before, and that his obstinacy had made a second time necessary. And the second time kills! That is what he told me. He said that he was a person known to me, that he had often been near me, and that

he would be near me again. The first scratches were merely to show me how easy it was for him to reach me."

"Then," Mrs. Oldham continued, "he told me to draw out one hundred thousand dollars, go to a certain cottage camp and await further orders. I was to slip out of the house, which would be watched, without telling anybody where I was going, then follow his instructions to the letter—else I would surely die as Uncle Howard had died. I was not to allow the numbers of the bills to be listed, and if I made any attempt at all to get him in bad, he would kill me before the week was out.

"I did as I was instructed. Last night, out at the cottage, a note was shoved under my door. It instructed me to drive to a certain cross-roads, taking the money with me, and wait for a man to appear and ask for it. I did just that—and—and that horrible Cat came! I—I threw the package of bills at him, and hurried back to the camp at top speed. I was to wait at the camp for two days and nights, the note informed me, then I would be free to return to the city. And that, Commissioner, is absolutely all I have to tell you. All I know!"

"You have had a trying experience, are out about one hundred thousand dollars, and have courted unpleasant notoriety, Mrs. Oldham, all because you lost your head and forgot that you have a police department to protect you," Durant told her quietly. "Furthermore, you will be detained in the matron's care for the present—"

"No, no! I must go home—"

"Sorry, but your detention is necessary, both for your own protection and for the plans of the department. You will be comfortable and well treated, I assure you. That will be all, Chief."

Dugan let the tearful woman away.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Scratcher

THE night passed without bringing further alarms because of the Scratcher, and nothing of importance was turned up by the police. During the following day, Major Ball and his wife, and Arthur Young and daughter, were picked up. The former were staying at a hotel in a small town not far from the camp where Mrs. Oldham had been found. Young and his daughter at a hotel in another small town not far distant. They were brought back shortly after nightfall. Their experience with the Cat was exactly the same as Mrs. Oldham's had been except that each had been nicked only for fifty grand. They were detained at headquarters, despite tears, rage and threats.

At nine o'clock came another break—and it was a puzzler.

"We've found the typewriter the personal to The Clarion was written on," Detective Stokes reported. "Never would have thought to look for it there, sir, if we hadn't learned in our check-up that Howard Stoneman bought a portable machine at a downtown agency about three months ago. We found it in his rooms. Yes, sir, Commissioner—that personal seems to have been written on Stoneman's machine by Stoneman himself!"

Durant's brows contracted. The report had the effect of knocking askew a theory just rounding out in his mind.

"Absolutely sure, Stokes?"

"Absolutely. Two experts have checked the machine against the copy for the personal that you got from Lake."

Ten o'clock, and nothing new came in. Durant went down to the street, collecting Night Chief Braden and Detective Hammond on the way.

"We'll take a ride," he informed them, as all three got into his car. "Out in the

Park Drive section. A chance we'll run onto something."

The drive out Central, and west over Blue Hills Boulevard to Park Drive, was made quickly. It was at the intersection of Park Drive and Thirty-third Street that Durant's car came near colliding with a shabby touring job of ancient vintage. Only quick braking on Durant's part saved the situation. The driver of the touring did not stop. He put his accelerator hard down instead.

"You ought to run him down, Commissioner!" Hammond growled from the back seat.

Durant did not answer. He turned his car, however, and set out after the touring—but he did not make the slightest effort to come up with it.

"Did you get a good look at the driver of that car?" he asked Braden, after they had gone a few blocks.

"I did! It was Doctor Willard Vance or I'm a Hottentot!"

"Correct. Dressed in a suit of rough-and-ready clothes, a slouch hat pulled well down, horn-rim glasses over his eyes, driving an old wreck of a car—but the fastidious Doctor Vance, nevertheless!"

A traffic light stopped the shabby car ahead, along with several others, and Durant did something that utterly astonished Braden. He opened the door, slid from under the wheel, and said: "Hole him up, Braden. When you've got him, send Hammond to a phone and have him give headquarters the location. I'll get in touch there. I've just thought of something I want to do."

And Durant slipped away into the shadows lining the parking.

THE commissioner entered a telephone booth in a cigar store and gave the number of the Stoneman phone. Biddle, the butler, answered.

"Is Mr. Harper there?" Durant inquired.

"No, sir," was the reply. "He drove off shortly after dinner tonight, sir, and did not say where he was going. Will you leave a message, sir?"

"Ask him to call Commissioner Durant, at his office, when he returns," Durant requested. He hung up, then called headquarters, gave a few terse orders, and left the booth.

With an elbow leaning on a showcase just outside the booth, an amused smile on his lips, stood Vincent Harper.

"Surprised, eh, Durant?" he queried, the smile becoming a chuckle.

"I just tried to get in touch with you," the commissioner told him. "I believe the big break has come, and meant to let you in on the finish. Let's go."

Harper accompanied him to where a speedy-looking coupe was parked, and presently, driving skillfully as Durant directed, he chuckled again.

"Here's how I picked you up in the cigar store," he said. "When you came so near running into Vance at the intersection, I was trailing the doctor about a block behind. You turned and took up the trail, and I tailed you."

"How came you to be trailing Vance?"

"That involves a confession that I have held out something on you," Harper replied frankly. "I did so because I did not want to let a friend in for trouble, when he might be, and probably was, guilty of nothing the police should interest themselves in. But here's the dope.

"About three months ago, I had a flat when driving into town from my Lexington farm. It happened on the Kaw Creek road, and directly in front of a rather large cottage sitting back a hundred yards among trees. It was night, and I did not want to change the tire myself, so I went up to the house to phone for help. Before I reached the veranda, however, the front door opened and a man appeared outlined against the light. A woman called

to him from somewhere inside, and he turned so I got a look at his profile. The man was Willard Vance, disguised as you saw him tonight. I slipped away in the shadows, changed my tire and beat it. The fastidious society doctor, Willard Vance, had a little love nest all his own, was my thought. Well, why not? He was a bachelor. No wife to deceive.

"But since the Cat got busy, I've been keeping tabs on Vance. When I followed him tonight to a small garage on a vacant lot not far from his residence, saw him drive a flivver out of it, noted that he had assumed his love nest disguise, I followed. Later, I meant to phone you. You know all that I know, now, Commissioner."

"Thanks awfully," Durant said drily. "You are a bit tardy with the information, but you amateur sleuths must work in your own way, I suppose. You still think the love-nest construction will hold?"

"Afraid not," Harper confessed gravely. "It may be, Durant, where—"

"The Cat hangs out," Durant finished for him. "No need for me to call in to headquarters, since you know the location, but I'll do it anyhow. He may have learned Braden was after him, and gone somewhere else. Park at the next drug-store, and wait for me."

Durant called headquarters, but no word had come in from Braden. He returned to the car.

"Drive out to this place of Vance's," he told Harper. "But take your time. We don't want to get there too soon."

TWENTY minutes later Harper parked his car beside a dark road, pointed ahead and off to the left where a single light showed in a window, and said: "That's it. Vance, or somebody, is there."

"Come with me," Durant bade him, getting out of the car.

They had not progressed more than two hundred feet along the road when a flashlight abruptly picked them out. Then the light was just as abruptly shut off.

"All right, Commissioner," came in low tones from Braden. "I just sent Hammond off to call headquarters. How did you happen to—"

"Harper was on the same trail," Durant interrupted. "We got together. Vance is inside, eh?"

"Yes. We holed him up without any trouble at all. What next, Commissioner?"

"We'll wait for Hammond, then call in a body on the doctor. Two at the rear door, and two at the front. Know the place, Braden?"

"Yes. Used by the Bannerman gang for a hide-out once. A couple of years ago. I was on the raiding squad, and we found plenty."

Hammond came up at that moment, but Durant did not go at once to make his call. It was not till about fifteen minutes had elapsed that he gave the word.

"You and Hammond take the back door," he ordered Braden. "Harper and I will take the front. Wait until we have entered, then come in."

Very quietly, Durant and Harper approached the front door of the cottage, and then the commissioner rapped on it. There was no response. He rapped again —and the light in the sitting room went out. Silence. Then, "I've got him, Durant!" Braden called loudly from the back of the house. "Trying to slip out on us! Sorry, Doctor, but we can't have anything like that!"

An angry protest came from the doctor. A moment later Hammond opened the front door and Durant and Harper stepped inside.

"What does this intrusion mean, Durant?" Vance, hatless and coatless, demanded, almost speechless with rage.

"Keep your shirt on, Vance," Durant advised. "We're about to wash up the Cat matter—and I'm sure you will be interested."

"I'll have you kicked out of your job for this!" Vance snarled. "Your actions are unwarranted—"

"Stick by the doctor, Hammond," Durant cut in. "Come with me, Braden, and you, Harper. We'll see what we can see."

The cottage was handsomely furnished, and everywhere were indications of a woman's occupancy. Beautiful articles of feminine apparel were found in one of the bedrooms.

They searched the basement, but failed to find anything of moment—until Captain Braden began moving a small heap of rubbish from a spot back of the furnace. When the rubbish had been moved, a trapdoor was revealed. Braden seized a ring in the door, gave it a steady pull, and it rose easily.

"A sub-basement, sir," he explained. "It was down there that we found the Bannerman gang's loot. Shall I go down?"

"By all means," Durant answered.

Braden disappeared down a short flight of steps—and when he thrust his head back through the trap three minutes later, his eyes were round with excitement. He tossed a black bundle out onto the basement floor.

"The body is down here, Commissioner," he reported, his voice edged with the exhuberance of victory. "The body of Howard Stoneman—still wrapped in the sheet!"

"Come up!" Durant snapped. "Harper, you and Braden go back to the sitting room, and take that bundle of clothing with you!"

WHEN they had gone, Durant descended into the sub-basement, remained there for perhaps two or three minutes, then came up and hurried back upstairs. When he entered the sitting room the bundle lay unwrapped on the floor. It contained a long black raglan, a slouch hat, a gray wig, a set of dark whiskers, and false teeth of leather, enameled white. Also, there was a rubber glove such as surgeons use—and three steel ferrules with pointed bobs. A small tin box contained a thick, quick-drying paste.

"Aconite," Durant said, after sniffing the paste. "One of the deadliest poisons known. What the Cat used on his claws when he scratched Stoneman."

The face of Doctor Vance was dead-white, his breath labored. Finally, with Durant's eyes boring him, he gasped: "I know nothing about this! Here is the explanation of my presence here—of my keeping up this place. Three years ago I met and fell in love with a young woman. We were married. It happened, Commissioner, that my wife had been raised by a poor family in the backwoods. She had a natural refinement, but lacked polish. Even lacked education. I loved her, regardless of that—but I could not introduce her as my wife to the snobbish women among whom my practise was. They would have snubbed her, and I should have lost them as patients. So we settled the thing as you see. Mrs. Vance has been away for the past month, but I expect her to return early tomorrow morning. That is why I am here. Believe me, please, Commissioner—for what I speak is the truth!"

"And the corpse of my old friend, Howard Stoneman?" Harper asked icily. "Can you account for its presence in your sub-basement—and for the presence there of the scratcher's outfit?"

"God—I didn't even know there was a sub-basement!" Vance denied.

At that instant the telephone rang. "Probably my wife, Durant!" the doctor exclaimed. "I'll answer—"

"No." Durant waved him back. "I'll take the call."

He lifted the receiver, gave his name,

then listened to a rather lengthy report. When he turned from the phone he had a pair of handcuffs in one hand.

"Well, Doctor, what you say is interesting," he commented, "but it shall not cheat us of our catch. We came for the Cat--and we're going to take him."

He walked toward Vance, leaped—

And the steel handcuffs were snapped, not around the wrists of Doctor Vance, but those of Vincent Harper.

"You're under arrest, Harper!" Durant said. "Under arrest for the murder of Howard Stoneman and Morgan Oldham. Also, for stealing a corpse, and for extorting two hundred thousand dollars from Major Ball, Arthur Young, and Mildred Oldham."

Harper, his eyes glued to the steel encircling his wrists, backed slowly against the wall. Then his head snapped erect. "What in the Devil's name, Durant! Are you playing some kind of trick?"

"Not at all. You see, Harper, the hand that scratched me the other night struck me as being a slender, though powerful one. Not much like Vance's broad hands with their spatulate fingers. That stuck in my mind, but did not let the doctor out by any means. The hand of the Scratcher was more like Lothan's, mine, yours.

"Today it was learned that The Clarion personal had been written on a typewriter belonging to Howard Stoneman. I knew that Stoneman certainly had not typed it. Who else had the run of the house? You, Harper. For the first time my mind turned to you as a possibility. Tonight, after making certain you were not there, I ordered a careful search made of the Stoneman house, grounds and garage. It was made—as I have just learned over the phone.

"You did not make any demands on Stoneman, Harper, after you scratched him first. His astonishment over the second time proved that. You wanted a body, cheek scratched with poison claws, to plant here on Doctor Vance, and for the demoralizing effect it would have on your other victims. You chose Stoneman. Do you deny it?"

"Absolutely!"

"In the Stoneman garage," Durant continued, "my men examined your sport sedan. They found a bit of white cloth caught in a crack of one of the tonneau doors, just under a hinge. It was a piece of sheeting—and the sheet in which Stoneman's body is now wrapped is torn at a corner."

"A frame-up, pure and simple!"

"Between the parts of a cleverly constructed false bottom in one of your trunks at the Stoneman house," Durant went on inexorably, "was found quite a lot of money. Two hundred thousand dollars, in short—"

"You had no right to—"

"In one package containing a hundred thousand," Durant broke in, "and which Mrs. Oldham gave the Cat, was found many banknotes that have been identified. You see, Harper, Meyers, of the Merchants Trust, gave Mrs. Oldham bills that had already been listed."

Harper's glance wavered at that, dropped, and he reached swiftly for a pocket of his vest. Handcuffed though he was, he managed to thrust three fingers into the pocket and fish up a small capsule. He turned from Durant, raised the capsule swiftly toward his lips—

Durant fired instantly, and the bullet from a small-caliber automatic he had palmed, crashed through the hand holding the poison. The capsule did not reach Harper's mouth.

"Sorry, Harper," Commissioner Durant said quietly, as he set a foot upon the capsule and destroyed it. "But I have to save you for the chair."

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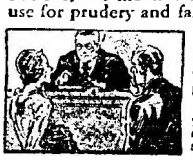

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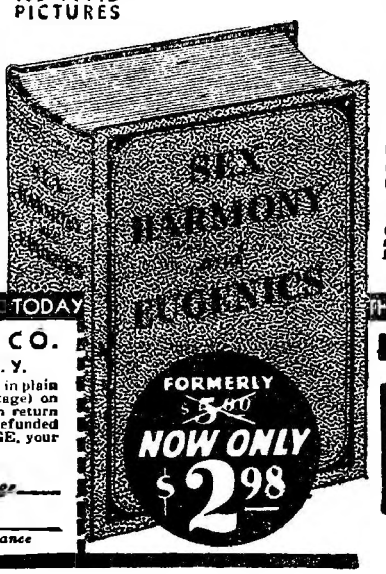

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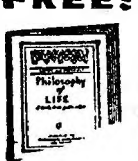

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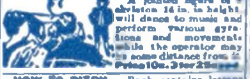

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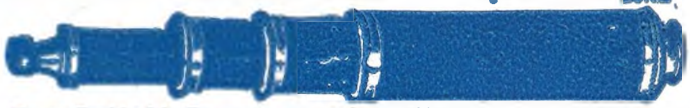

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