

The PHANTOM DETECTIVE

10¢

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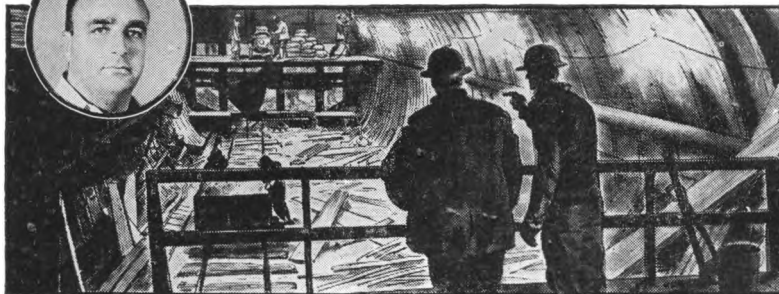
**RACE HORSES
OF DEATH**

**A BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL FEATURING
THE WORLD'S GREATEST SLEUTH**

**A THRILLING
PUBLICATION**

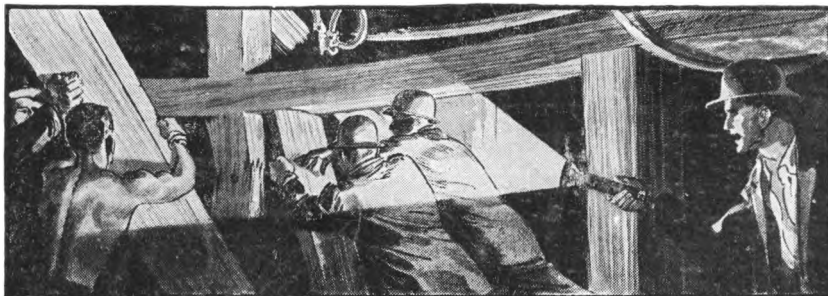
"DEATH STALKED US UNDER MOBILE BAY!"

A true experience of EARLE P. JOHNSON, Arlington, Va.



"TWENTY FEET BELOW the muck of Mobile Bay," writes Mr. Johnson, "I was supervising a crew of sand hogs in the building of a new tunnel. Suddenly, to my horror, the lights went out. In the utter blackness I heard an ominous rumble.

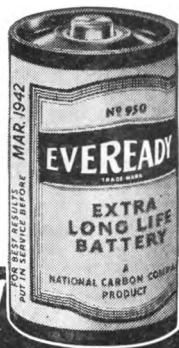
"FEAR GRIPPED MY HEART as I snapped on the flashlight I always carry. By its beam, I saw that an entire brace of timbers was giving way! The kind of death that haunts sand hogs' sleep was facing us.



"THEN, WORKING LIKE MADMEN in the steady beam of the flashlight, the crew braced the timbers. Thanks to dependable 'Eveready' fresh DATED batteries, we won a reprieve from death.

(Signed) *Earle P. Johnson*

The word "Eveready" is a registered trade-mark of National Carbon Company, Inc.



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For those who have no typewriter stand or handy place to use a typewriter, I make this special offer. This attractive stand that ordinarily sells for \$4.85 can be yours with L. C. Smith for only \$3.00 extra—payable 25c a month. *Quality built. Just note all its convenient features.* (See coupon.)

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Vol. XXXVII, No. 1

OCTOBER, 1941

Price 10c

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Taken from the Case-book of Richard Curtis Van Loan

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AND

THE PHANTOM SPEAKS A Department 10
Join FRIENDS OF THE PHANTOM! Coupon on Page 12

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Chief Operator Broadcasting Station
Before I completed your lessons, I obtained my Radio Broadcast Operator's license and immediately joined Station WMPG, where I am now Chief Operator.
HOLLIS J. HAYES,
327 Madison St.,
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Service Manager for Four Stores
I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N. R. I. I am now Radio Service Manager for the M. Furniture Co., for their four stores.

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I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME in your spare time for a GOOD JOB IN RADIO

Here is a quick way to more pay. Radio offers the chance to make \$5, \$10 a week extra in spare time a few months from now. There is an increasing demand for full time Radio Technicians and Radio Operators, too. Many make \$30, \$40, \$50 a week. On top of record business, the Radio Industry is getting millions and millions of dollars in Defense Orders. Clip the coupon below and mail it. Find out how I train you for these opportunities.

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Nearly every neighborhood offers opportunities for a good part-time Radio Technician to make extra money fixing Radio sets. I give you special training to show you how to start cashing in on these opportunities early. You get Radio parts and instructions for building test equipment, for conducting experiments that give you valuable practical experience. You also get a modern Professional Radio Servicing Instrument. My fifty-fifty method—half working with Radio parts, half studying my lesson texts—makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, practical.



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Find Out How I Train You for Good Pay in Radio

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You learn by a remarkable short-cut method! A modern, simplified method that skips all the tedious, old-fashioned study and practice. A method that has literally swept the world, enrolling over 700,000 pupils. It's actually FUN to learn music this easy way.

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See for yourself how easy it is to learn your favorite musical instrument this modern, short-cut way. And how inexpensive. Mail the coupon below, checking the instrument in which you are interested. Do it now. Instruments supplied when needed, cash or credit. U. S. School of Music, 29410 Brunswick Bldg., New York City. Forty-third year. (Est. 1898)

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Name

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

Check here if under 16 years of age.

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I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps — yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

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I know, myself, what it means to have the kind of body that people pity! Of course, you wouldn't know it to look at me now, but I was once a skinny weakling who weighed only 97 lbs. I was ashamed to strip for sports or undress for a swim. I was such a poor specimen of physical development that I was constantly self-conscious and embarrassed. And I felt only HALF-ALIVE.

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When I say I can make you over into a man of giant power and energy, I know what I'm talking about. I've seen my new system, "Dynamic Tension," transform hundreds of weak, puny men into Atlas Champions.

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Do you want big, broad shoulders — a fine, powerful chest — biceps like steel — arms and legs rippling with muscular strength — a stomach ridged with bands of sinewy muscle — and a build you can be proud of? Then just give me the opportunity to prove that "Dynamic Tension" is what you need.

No "ifs," "ands," or "maybes." Just tell me where you want handsome, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are you short-winded, pepless? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc.? Then write for details about "Dynamic Tension" and learn how I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE-MAN.

"Dynamic Tension" is an entirely NATURAL method. Only 15 minutes of your spare time daily is enough to show amazing results — and it's actually fun! "Dynamic Tension" does the work.



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Holder of title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

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Mail the coupon right now for full details and I'll send you my illustrated book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." Tells all about my "Dynamic Tension" method. Shows actual photos of men I've made into Atlas Champions. It's a valuable book! And it's FREE. Send for your copy today. Mail the coupon to me personally. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 77K, 115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y.



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I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make a New Man of me — give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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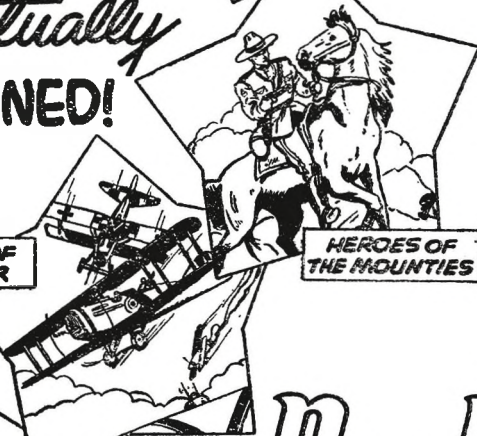
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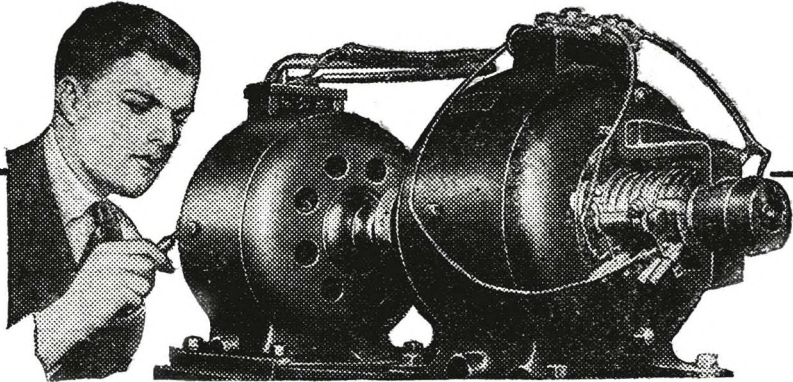


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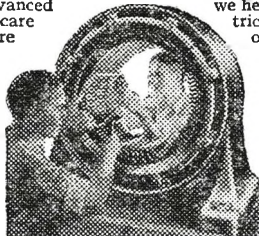
Lack of experience—age, or advanced education bars no one. I don't care if you don't know an armature from an air brake—I don't expect you to! It makes no difference! Don't let lack of money stop you. Most of the men at Coyne have no more money than you have. That's why I have worked out my astonishing offers.

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THE PHANTOM SPEAKS

A Department for Readers

WE ALL know just how important the crude oil industry is to our normal, everyday life and to our national defense. That is why I've told Mr. Wallace that in my opinion the case of THE BLACK GOLD KILLERS is one particularly interesting to the average detective story reader at the present time.

The sudden discovery of oil is fraught with grim peril in THE BLACK GOLD KILLERS. But the Empire State Building in New York is hardly the place where you would expect something of this kind to come to its gruesome conclusion!

Cowboys are bound to attract attention when they go about a city like New York in their plains regalia. Most people will feel that the rodeo is in town at Madison Square Garden. But the ringmaster of the grim rodeo that claimed the lives of the first two cowboys in THE BLACK GOLD KILLERS was the fellow with the long scythe.

A Secret of Violent Death

A wealthy ranch owner proves to be the next victim, and his daughter calls upon me to help her uncover the secret behind this series of violent deaths. The chase takes me from New York to the Mexican border at El Paso, Texas, and

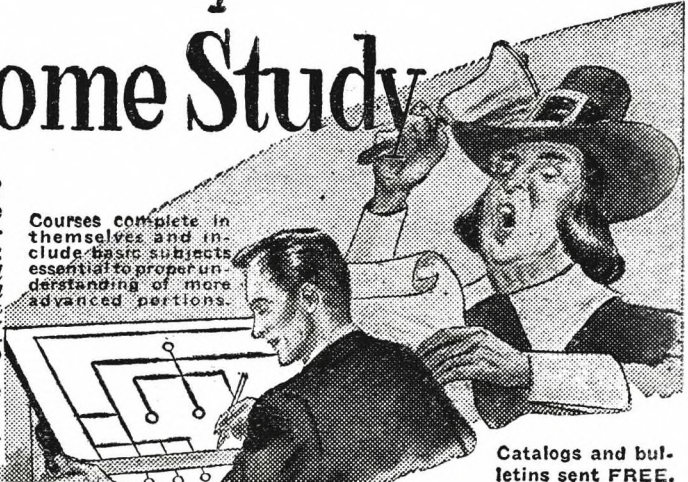
(Continued on Page 12)

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So you dropped out of school too soon? Well, *cheer up!* Ask any representative group of Executives, Engineers or Educators and most of them will tell you: "You CAN make good through specialized home study... IF you will make the effort and STICK to your course." In fact, you'll find that a number of important men in nearly every locality are former home study students themselves. They KNOW and have PROVED that home study pays.

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Courses complete in themselves and include basic subjects essential to proper understanding of more advanced portions.



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COMMERCE and Industry are tough taskmasters today—but they are just. The penalties of failure may be heavy—but the rewards of success are rich. If you persist in doing work that anyone else can do—if you carelessly leave yourself open to competition with Machinery that sooner or later may do all the "unthinking" jobs . . . the repetitive tasks—you are slated for final disappointment and bitterness.

To win out, today, you must THINK. You must think ON the job and AWAY from it and, most important, you must think AHEAD of it. And that takes study.

Join this "Promotion Parade" of Progress-Minded Men and Women

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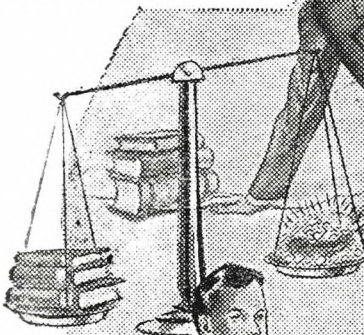
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THE PHANTOM SPEAKS (Continued from Page 10)

from there over into the ranch country in the mountainous districts about fifty-odd miles to the north and west.

What is to be found there is something that will thrill and excite you. The manner in which men accustomed to fighting against nature in her wildest moods and facing the trampling hooves of stampeding cows as well as the six-guns of renegade border jumpers, react to a threat of murder and pillage, makes exciting reading.

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THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE

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From the Mailbag

My mail basket is filling up, folks, and I'm sure glad to hear from you. Here are just a few excerpts from the letters on top:

Dear Phantom:

I have been reading your magazine for several years, but this is the first time I've ever wrote to you regarding it. I have just finished reading "Grim Shadow of Hate," and regardless of what I did, I could not put down the magazine until I completed the novel. . . . The average citizen does not realize the value of your magazine. Average citizens who pick up THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, and read it, are surely benefited by it. Here's looking for more and better Phantom Detective stories in the future.

Donald E. Brown,

38 West 9th St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Dear Phantom:

I have read your latest novel, "The Sabotage Murders," and in my personal opinion, it is something that ranks with any story on the bookshelves. I think Steve Huston should be continued in all of the stories. I have read quite a few other issues in which Steve has played a part, and he makes a very good aide for you.

Sheldon Hertz,

4078 W. 29th St., Los Angeles, Calif.

Dear Phantom:

I've found the "Sabotage Murders" one of the most interesting stories I have read. I, like you, have been fighting against crime for the past ten years, and without pay. I'm satisfied to feel that I'm doing my bit to help my country. I love the United States, and a good many of my countrymen also love it. For myself I would like to be able to get back to the States, but that does not mean that while I am here I will not be true to the American flag.

Wishing the best of luck to you and all my love to your country and the Stars and Stripes, I am,
Stella Carranza.

Tampico, Mexico.

Nice letters, those three, and Miss Carranza's particularly stirs a soft spot in our hearts. Keep those letters coming in to me. They'll help to determine our selections as far as future case histories are concerned. Send your letters and postcards to the Editor, THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. Thank you! So long for now. See you next issue.

—THE PHANTOM.

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CHAPTER I

SEANCE OF MURDER

SIMM ARCHER, first grade detective of the San Diego County Squad, tried to put himself in a mood to meet the spirits. He was too hardboiled, too healthy and too skeptical. He did not believe any departed soul had ever directly or indirectly communicated by voice or sign with this too realistic world.

Least of all, Simm Archer never would have believed that within the hour he himself would become an inhabitant of that vast, shadowy sphere from which none has ever returned. He was too self-confident to have nervous forebodings. Nor had he any premonition that he would be dead.

He gave a keen, scrutinizing eye to Senora Leona, the seeress. She was a wisp of a woman, with sharp,



Van Loan . . . two

birdlike black eyes. Her voice was low, but controlled and incisive.

Simm Archer guessed that if Senora Leona really wanted a spirit to

The Phantom Hurtles Down the Stretch

OF DEATH *A Complete Novel*



masked men were holding Chip (CHAPTER X)

appear and talk, the ghost would do it, or else. The senora had that air about her.

This was some A-I set-up she had

here for suckers, too, the way Simm Archer sized it up. Purple lighting gave the room the proper weird effect. Heavy, velvety drapes seemed

When Masked Killers Nose Out the Law!

Follow Van Loan as He Fights to Keep

to ripple constantly although the air was dead in the windowless place.

Simm Archer swore silently, trying to keep from sneezing. Incense always affected him that way. And the room was filled with perfumed, bluish vapor. This might prepare others for a spectral visitation, but it only tickled Simm Archer's olfactories.

He scuffed his feet silently on the cold, hard floor under the immense hand-carved table. The floor felt as if it were metal to his feet that were bare and had just been bathed.

All of which was a part of the silly business, after handing over a ten-spot to Senora Leona's complacent Chinese assistant. The clever little senora was not communing with the spirits for chicken feed.

"It will be twenty-five more if Senora Leona establishes communication with the spirit you have come to seek," the Chinese aide had told Simm Archer without once blinking his slanted eyes.

"And if the spirit of my great uncle happens to have a hot tip for me, how much would it be?" had been Simm Archer's sarcastic reply.

THE Chinese had remained unblinkingly silent. It had seemed that Senora Leona's seances were not to be treated lightly.

So, by request, Simm Archer had removed his shoes, bathed his feet, and donned a long, green robe. And he had pulled on a skinlike rubber face mask. Then he had glanced into a mirror.

That was the screwiest part of the whole set-up. For Simm Archer had seen that in his mask he bore a striking resemblance to a well-known movie comedian.

"Everyone wears these masks?" he had questioned the Chinese.

"It is the rule," the imperturbable Oriental had replied. "Each seeker

comes alone to the house of Senora Leona. Each must appear to all others in another identity. It is written that two may keep a secret only when one is dead."

"It's nuts," Simm Archer had said. "But it makes sense."

He was hoping some other angles of his visit here might make sense, that he might find some connection with mysterious deaths, strange reversals of form among favorite horses, and other inexplicable happenings of the past days at the Los Sandra race-track. All he had to go on was an anonymous report that the supposed spirits invoked by Senora Leona had been supplying hot tips on recent Los Sandra races. Word of it had got about among a chosen few of the horse players.

It might or it might not link up with what had been keeping Simm Archer awake at nights.

The end wall of the room, behind Senora Leona's massive chair, was painted purple to conform with the draperies. A dozen or more women and men were seated about the long table.

Simm Archer wished he could identify those behind the lifelike masks. But each was but a replica of some famous movie star, exquisitely done.

Archer was aware that probably every masked client here was a horse player. Perhaps these people believed in the spirits. For there were no more credulous or superstitious persons than the boys and girls who shoved their dough into the totalizers.

But just as none of the other guests were supposed to recognize him, the detective had no means of identifying any of them. He decided when the seance broke up he would make an effort outside to see who came from the stucco bungalow up here on the San Diego mesa.

Crime from Taking First, Place or Show!

So Simm Archer's belief in the occult powers of Senora Leona was much less than his hunch that here was a new kind of illegal bookie racket. If the spirits could pass out hot tips, it smelled to the detective like some brand of horse fixing.

The purple light dimmed until the green-robed figures were eerie shadows with strangely glowing eyes. The

had been having trouble with her stable. A trainer had dropped dead, perhaps of a heart ailment. Her best horses had been losing races consistently, always through trivial interference, which seemed a shame to Simm Archer, who liked the young woman—and was not the only man who did.

Suddenly there was a whispering



THE PHANTOM

perfumed blue haze from the bowls that swung by golden chains seemed to clog Simm Archer's senses.

Senora Leona's face was a vague blur, but Simm Archer could see the bright, bird-like, black eyes. Then he caught a glimpse of the bright yellow hair of one woman showing at the side of her mask. He wondered if it could be the golden hair of one Sela Kane, most prominent of the women owning horses now at Los Sandra?

Sela Kane was one of the reasons Simm Archer was here. She

breeze, but while its ghostly implication made his bare feet cold, otherwise it left him unimpressed. There was the business now of Senora Leona going into a trance. Her voice took on the hollow tone of the professional seeress.

The masked figures joined hands around the table. A slight electrical shock flowed through Simm Archer's arms.

"The old hokum," he thought. "If real race tips are being handed out, all this is a cover-up."

"I get the initials 'M K,'" droned Senora Leona.

It seemed some wandering spirit was seeking M K. A misty figure of white appeared to float from the blank, purple wall. More of the old hocus pocus, thought Simm Archer.

A disembodied voice spoke. The faint words hit Simm Archer suddenly. This was undoubtedly a direct message. It was a tip. It had to do with a filly known as War Baby. Suddenly the message was cut off.

"There is some disturbing element here," Senora Leona said.

Simm Archer saw the robed woman with the yellow hair half rise, then sink back. He was almost certain then that she was Sela Kane. The filly War Baby was one of her Los Sandra string.

The interruption broke the circle of hands. A quick idea came to Simm Archer that was more spine-chilling than the supposed presence of conjured spirits.

His hands moved quickly under the table. He wrote something on the leaf of a notebook, then tore it out. He secreted the written message swiftly, but apparently he had been too slow, for he was sure a bulky masked man across from him signaled to Senora Leona. The senora stood erect and spoke low, but sharply.

"A disbeliever has broken the chain! The seance is ended! All will depart individually as you arrived! Your fees will be refunded! Go quickly!"

Simm Archer held his place until the others arose. The figures in the green robes moved uncertainly in the semi-darkness. He saw the tiny, white feet of the woman with the yellow hair. Sela Kane had dainty

feet, he recalled. But he did not venture to speak, deciding he would see her outside.

A few of the robed guests were passing behind Simm Archer as he started to arise. Then the other world came abruptly closer than Senora Leona could have summoned it.

Simm Archer's body jerked once convulsively. He fell forward, his chin striking the polished table. His head rolled on a limp neck. He was dead.

A masked woman screamed aloud. Senora Leona was quickly at her side.

"Some are overcome by their emotions," she said.

THE imperturbable Chinese was there. He guided the frightened clients from the room. Then only one masked figure remained with Senora Leona and the Chinaman.

Senora Leona's bright little eyes clashed with the glittering orbs behind the mask of the green-robed figure.

"I must be protected in this!" she cried. "The Masker is a fool to risk having my place involved! The police must not know!"

The green rober spoke with quick emphasis.

"You will not be involved, Senora. This one was getting too close. You are making immense profits, and you must share the risk. Then there is a greater profit if we find what we seek for you. Two others here tonight must be removed, but only temporarily."

"Sela Kane and Doc Craig?" exclaimed Senora Leona.

"I have not said, and you will keep a still tongue," replied the masked



one. "To gain much, all of us must risk much."

Senora Leona bowed agreement. It seemed that her moral scruples were closely bound up with their value in dollars and cents.

The man in the green robe removed two bright wires that had made contact with the back of Simm Archer's chair. He looked carefully at the soles of the dead man's feet before the bland Chinese replaced hose and shoes.

"Perfect, Ling Su," he said. "There are no marks. Take away the metal plates where the feet rested."

Within a few minutes the last of Senora Leona's guests had departed singly from the low white bungalow. Two of the last to leave met in the black shadows of a pepper tree. One was a willowy, regal girl with golden hair under a ridiculous little hat. The other was a stubble-faced, hunched little man who weaved as if he were intoxicated.

"Miss Kane," the man said, "someone knew you were there. That supposed spirit message was about War Baby, and she's starting in the Hermosa stake tomorrow."

"Yes, Doc Craig, I know," the tall girl said huskily. "We will have War Baby scratched and kept out until we know more."

"Miss Kane," said the man, "do you think Simm Archer was there tonight? He said he might be."

"We'll wait and see if he comes out, and—"

"You'll not wait!" cut in a hard voice. "Both of you will walk along and get into that car at the top of the hill! Make a wrong move, and it'll be permanent!"

It seemed as if two of the green-

robed figures from the seance had retained their robes and masks. Perhaps they were other masks, though, but the features were hidden.

But the snouts of the guns they pushed forward enforced the sinister command. The haunched little man called Doc Craig made a quick move, started a swinging blow.

The snout of a gun cracked him above one ear and he fell.

"Please don't hit him again!" pleaded Sela Kane. "I'll go with you."

A minute later a closed car shot away, moving across the Kensington Heights mesa of San Diego, high above the famous Mission Valley. . . .

* * * * *

MORNING sun flooded Coronado Beach. The Pacific was a mirroring blue, with barely a ripple against the smooth, yellow sand where it slanted away to the Mexican quarter of South San Diego.

Training planes from North Island droned overhead.

A queer collection of figures molded of sand, the faces and clothing mysteriously colored, lay beyond a low rail below the boardwalk. A woman tourist was peering through sun glasses at these sculptured figures. A man stood beside her.

There were a dozen figures. Abraham Lincoln, President Roosevelt and others. But a figure sitting upright at the end of the group started the woman tourist screaming.

She collapsed in a faint. A crippled soldier, responsible for the sculptured figures, was just arriving. He had one look, then shouted.

Five minutes later, a Coronado beach patrolman uttered hard oaths. He had identified Simm Archer, San Diego County detective.



Within half an hour a police medical examiner was swearing softly to himself.

"There isn't a mark, nor a symptom of any poisoning," he announced. "If Simm Archer hadn't been found like this, I would say he died of a heart attack."

"There isn't a scrap of anything on him to show where he was before he was brought to the beach," a San Diego police captain said. "An autopsy may give us the cause of death."

Until late in the afternoon, that was the sum total of the findings regarding the mysterious death and appearance upon the beach of Simm Archer, county detective.

CHAPTER II

DEATH IN THE SADDLE



BUDDY" DURKIN, premier little English jockey, was having trouble with War Baby. The filly surged out of the barrier stall half a dozen times. That drew a reprimand from the stater.

"Hold War Baby back, Durkin! One more break and they'll go without you! Now steady! Hey you there, on Outsider! Keep that colt quiet!"

It was the sixth race. Today it was the big event, the Hermosa Handicap, with a five-thousand-dollar purse added for two-year-olds.

War Baby, of the Sela Kane stable, had easily been the favorite an hour before the totalizers fixed the final odds. But something had happened in the final few minutes of betting before the mutuels closed. Some heavy dough, perhaps wise or perhaps foolish, had been shoved through on Outsider, a black newcomer, and on Romper, another filly.

The odds on War Baby had been lengthened. Sela Kane's unruly sorrel filly was no longer the favorite.

And it seemed as if this inexplicable switch in the last-minute money had been communicated to War Baby and Jockey Durkin who had been booting winners home consistently.

With his first mount in the green and gold silks of Sela Kane, Durkin discovered he had taken on a handful of meanness. War Baby had started cutting up in the paddock.

Durkin was smart in other ways besides being a nervy finish rider. He had that rare sense which understood horse temperament. And he knew that War Baby was edgy for a good reason. "Banty" Doyle, another little rider who had never worn other than the Sela Kane green and gold silks, had told him about it. Banty was out of the race because of badly swollen hands.

"War Baby's never run before without old Doc Craig to talk to her before the start," said Banty, worry on his monkeylike face. "Doc Craig raised her by hand from a colt. She misses him. An' I'm wishin' I knew what's become of Doc an' Miss Kane."

War Baby had started her nervous tantrum in the paddock before going to the barrier. Durkin knew it might be true about her missing Doc Craig. He also suspected that his being new in her saddle was adding to War Baby's nervousness.

Durkin had managed to soothe the filly and got her to the barrier stalls. Now he was still having trouble, and had drawn the starter's final warning that the field would be sent away without War Baby.

Durkin coaxed the filly back into place. He tried to keep War Baby's nervousness from being communicated to his own hands. The filly's head kept turning and her eyes rolled.

Durkin guessed War Baby was waiting for Doc Craig to appear. He wondered what had happened? And why had Sela Kane failed to show up? And he had become suspicious when word had filtered through of that sudden switch in the wise money,

Durkin had been on too many tracks to miss what that might mean.

"Someone behind that smart money is in on the know about War Baby and her attachment to Doc Craig," he thought. "It has been figured fine. Whoever is responsible for the final betting must have reason to know that Doc Craig won't be here."

DURKIN didn't like it. His business was bringing them in first under the wire. War Baby's cutting up and his own suspicion wouldn't help him.

The little jockey held the filly this time. He caught a mean side grin from the rider up on the black colt, Outsider. It struck Durkin that Outsider's jockey also was in on the know.

This was going to be a ride for both money and blood.

The barrier dropped. Durkin got War Baby away on the outside. Even then, his glance shot over to the box usually occupied by Sela Kane. The tall, golden-haired girl who was a marked figure at the track, was still absent, but Durkin had a swift glimpse of two people seated in the box—a middle-aged man and a boy.

That was all Durkin saw in his split second glance, for War Baby was giving his hands and eyes all they could do. The wise little jockey settled down to make a ride of it.

He was holding outside, trailing Outsider, Romper and two other horses as he went into the initial turn of the big oval. And tightly gripped in one hand that held the reins was an old and worn rabbit's foot.

There never was a jockey so smart or so good that he didn't make his prayer to Lady Luck. And how greatly he needed that bit of Lady Luck now was unknown to Jockey Durkin. . . .

Up in the judges' booth an attendant answered a phone. He turned to one of the judges quickly, handing him the instrument. A sharp oath

came from the judge's lips as he listened.

"San Diego Police Department! Pull War Baby in the sixth! It may be life or death! And have someone take this message for a man sitting in Sela Kane's reservation! He is a big man in a checked suit!"

The judge turned helplessly to his companions. The attendant was scratching down the police message.

"It's too late!" groaned the judge. "Have the emergency car ready! It's the police! There's some trouble about Sela Kane's War Baby!"

The attendant showed his scribbled message from the police. The judges were grimly silent. Then one said:

"Get it to the man as directed!"

The field of nine fighting horses was rounding the first turn of the long oval into the back stretch. The judges' glasses showed the sorrel War Baby settled down to some real running. The filly had passed two horses and was closing in on Romper's flank. The black colt, Outsider, was still leading by two lengths and holding the rail.

It was a tightly matched field. From the stands the nine contenders looked well bunched, a surging cyclone of hammering speed whirling around the brightly flowered green of one of the Coast's most famous racing plants.

Beyond the driving horses, the bay stretched away into the sun over the Pacific. To the southward lay the barren, burned brown hills of old-Mexico, for the Los Sandra track was less than a mile north of the United States border.

In the box reserved for Sela Kane, the very popular young horsewoman, sat the two who had been briefly glimpsed by Jockey Durkin. And the tense, fighting rider up on War Baby would have been even more tightly strung if he had known the identity of those two.

For the man who appeared to be a middle-aged race track follower,



CHIP DORLAN

wearing a loudly checked suit, a man who seemed to be florid of face, with his fat hands holding the inevitable field glasses of a possible tourist sportsman, was none other than the world famous Phantom Detective.

Widely noted as the man who was truly of a thousand faces, the Phantom had chosen the disguise he now wore as less likely than any other to attract attention. He was here to meet Sela Kane, and he had waited through the first five races with some impatience, because her absence had kept him inactive.

Sitting beside the Phantom was Chip Dorlan. Thin-faced, youthful and alert, Chip was a slight figure indeed to have become the reliable first assistant to the amazing Phantom.

Having been the Phantom's protégé for some two years now, Chip Dorlan was alive to many of the Phantom's moods and his incredibly effective methods of hunting down crookedness. Though how and why the Phantom had been summoned to this trackside to meet Sela

Kane had not yet been divulged to Chip.

As yet, the Phantom himself was still much in the dark as to the underlying reasons for the services being required. He had been given but a brief summary of the sinister events that had brought the nationally famous Los Sandra racing plant to police attention, and was aware that the reasons appeared to center about Sela Kane, and her racing string.

But since this morning, when the Phantom had come abruptly onto the scene and had contacted friends in the San Diego Police Department, he had been informed of the weird discovery of Simm Archer's body. When he had reached Los Sandra track about the time of the second race of the afternoon, the police were still baffled by Simm Archer's death, and its probable cause.

Immediately the Phantom, whose keen observation missed nothing of importance, had noted the abrupt reversal of favor toward War Baby, the Sela Kane entry in the Hermosa Handicap.

The Phantom remarked on this to Chip Dorlan.

"Miss Kane's unexplained absence is bad news to some of the track followers," he said. "If there were a direct plan to fix this race, the switch in the betting would more likely be on the outside among the bookmakers, and not here on the mutuels."

"You think, Phantom, from the way bets have shifted from War Baby, that the players are afraid something might happen?" asked Chip.

"It would seem that way," said the Phantom. "As if something had happened here at the track before the totalizers closed, instead of there being advance information that would have been used among the bookies."

"Miss Kane's disappearance may have some connection with the death of Simm Archer, Chip," he observed. "Some of his recent reports men-

tioned that he had been working on the sudden death of her trainer, a man named Farrell. He died apparently of a heart ailment a week ago. We can only wait for Miss Kane to explain how far Archer had progressed on the case."

WHEN the horses were finally away the Phantom's keen eyes did not miss Jockey Durkin's worried side glance at Sela Kane's place in the boxes as the field swept past. In moments more the Phantom's glasses were upon the thundering horses in the back stretch. Then it was that a white-faced attendant touched his arm and thrust a folded paper into his hand.

The Phantom read the penciled words at a glance:

Simm Archer murdered. Doctor says electrocution. Found warning in cuff of trousers. Must stop War Baby from running in sixth. Sela Kane knows. We tried, but missed stopping War Baby.

McDermott.

McDermott, a police captain, was one of the friends the Phantom had contacted that morning.

The Phantom gripped Chip Dorlan's shoulder as his glance shot upward to the judge's booth. One of the officials raised his hand, as evidence he had seen the note the Phantom had just read. Though naturally there was no way the judges could know that the man to whom the message had been delivered was the noted Phantom.

"Get to the Sela Kane stable, Chip," said the Phantom tersely. "Stick there and find out what you can. See Banty Doyle, a regular jockey for Miss Kane. Perhaps he will know something. I'll join you as soon as this race is finished. I hope it ends without trouble."

Chip never questioned the Phantom's command. As much as he wanted to see the finish of the race, he headed for the Sela Kane stable and Banty Doyle.

The Phantom's glasses went back to the oval. He saw the white emergency ambulance moving from the buildings in the middle field of the track toward the fence of the finishing stretch. The judges anticipated some accident.

The bunched horses were still thundering along in smooth rhythm. The sunlight was reflected from gleaming glass roofs of the middle track buildings. Myriad-colored flowers were banked in the plots about them, an unique feature of the Los Sandra track. The beautiful Hialeah racing plant in Florida had its ponds and its flamingos. Los Sandra featured the flowers of California, with spraying fountains playing among them.

"Zing" Dover, the principal owner of the racing plant, was said to be responsible for the beautiful floral effects and the track's hothouses with their glittering glass.

Even as he watched the running field of horses, the bright, bobbing silks of fighting jockeys, tensely expectant, yet hoping that the police warning of trouble might not be borne out, the multi-faceted brain of the Phantom took in the whole track.

Now more than twenty thousand fans were roaring in the wide, double-decked steel grandstand. Around the oval turn came three battling horses, the rest of the field strung out behind them.

Through his glasses, the Phantom saw that the black colt, Outsider, was on the rail. Romper thundered along beside him, only half a length between their noses.

THERE were the shining green and gold silks of Sela Kane on Jockey Durkin. War Baby was close on the two leaders. It seemed to the Phantom that the game little Durkin was seeking to wedge War Baby between Outsider and Romper.

They straightened into the stretch. The crowd roar became a bedlam

of ear-splitting sound. Apparently Jockey Durkin was pulling over, as if he intended to try pushing War Baby down the outside, away from the rail.

Then the crowd roar died as if it had been cut with a knife. War Baby broke stride to rear straight up. The filly was falling sideward, crashing toward the rail.

In that dreadful moment, not one of all the thousands seemed to breathe. War Baby smashed down upon and over the rail to the inside green.

Tight up against the rail, his green and gold silks now a bright spot in the dust, Jockey Durkin sprawled without movement. And the Phantom knew that death had closed its inexorable fingers upon the little English rider.

CHAPTER III

FATAL RABBIT'S FOOT



OUTSIDER, the black colt, thundered across the finish line a winner. Romper was second, with less than a length between them.

Track policemen attempted to restrain the crowd from pouring out onto the track. They might as well have tried to hold back a flooding river. But the policemen did form a cordon about Buddy Durkin, lying near to the rail, with War Baby quiet where she had fallen.

The Phantom Detective delayed a moment before joining the policemen on the track. A tall man remained in the neighboring box. The Phantom consulted his program, then spoke to his neighbor.

"I see that a Thomas Chester owns that winning horse, Outsider," he said. "Has he a string here at Los Sandra?"

"You're a stranger, or you would know." The tall man smiled. "Thomas Chester is the famous mask and figure maker for the Hollywood movie studios. He is also a minority stockholder and one of the trustees of Los Sandra track. This is the first time I ever knew one of his ponies to win. He had luck because of that tragedy. He owns but three horses, all youngsters."

"Thanks." The Phantom nodded, glancing back through the turmoil of the grandstand.

A pretty, dark-haired girl came hurrying toward the Sela Kane box and the Phantom. She halted uncertainly as she saw the florid-faced man in the checked suit.

Then the Phantom raised his left hand and tugged gently at the lobe of his ear. The girl smiled with relief, but quickly anxiety returned to her lovely face.

"Phantom?" she said, entering the box.

"Mr. Merkle, a friend of Sela Kane," said the Phantom quickly, and she understood. "You have not found Miss Kane?"

"No," said the girl tensely. "And she was not at her hotel last night."

"Okay, Muriel," said the Phantom. "No matter what happens in the near future, remember I am Mr. Merkle."

The girl was Muriel Havens. She nodded, though she never fully understood the amazing Phantom, even though, next to the only man in the world who knew the Phantom's real identity, she was closest to him and his remarkable career as a Nemesis of crooks.

For Muriel Havens was the daughter of Frank Havens, publisher of the New York *Clarion* and other nationwide newspapers. Frank Havens and Muriel were responsible for the Phantom being at the Los Sandra track.

Indeed, Frank Havens was responsible for the personage so widely famed as the Phantom. And Havens alone knew that the Phantom was,



MURIEL HAVENS

in private life, Richard Curtis Van Loan, known in Manhattan and other spots, where the socially elite made their residence winter and summer, only as a playboy and spender.

Dick Van Loan was the son of one of Frank Havens' oldest friends. When young Van Loan's father had died, Havens had seen that the young man was becoming bored and cynical, fed up with a life that consisted mostly of spending his father's fortune.

Havens had interested the young man in a difficult murder mystery. And so interested had Dick Van Loan been that the solving of that mystery had been the beginning of his career as a solver of crimes, and Nemesis of the underworld. Once he had made his decision to make this his life work, he had progressed rapidly. He was incredibly thorough in everything he undertook.

TODAY, the Phantom had several years of successful crime detection behind him. He had trained himself physically and mentally to cope with

the world's cleverest and most dangerous criminals.

It was because of his unequalled skill at disguise, his ability to assume any character in appearance and manner—and voice—that Van Loan, the Phantom, had come to be widely known as the man of a thousand faces.

He was skilled in every art of physical encounter, from the use of his fists to ju-jitsu and other Oriental methods of fighting. As a ventriloquist he could have made a reputation before the public. He had studied hypnotism, and all of the magic of many strange peoples, which often came in handy when a case seemed impossible of solution.

The Phantom's laboratory was equipped with all of the latest devices in crime detection. His criminal library was a compendium of the knowledge assembled by the world's leading writers on the subject, with many contributions of his own in books published under an obscure pen name.

Scores of the world's worst killers had ceased to exist because of the Phantom. He had truly earned his title as Nemesis of the cleverest crooks, this cynical, spendthrift playboy, who was still known to all but Frank Havens as Richard Curtis Van Loan.

Muriel Havens had often worked with the Phantom. The lovely, intelligent girl was keen for adventure. But though she was eager to work with the Phantom, she did not share her father's knowledge of his true identity. She knew the Phantom only in his various disguises.

Muriel Havens knew Richard Curtis Van Loan, since they moved in the same social circles, but she had never associated Dick Van Loan, the playboy she knew and liked, with the Phantom, whose cleverness she highly respected.

It was because Muriel was a friend of Sela Kane's, and had been distressed over the increasingly grave situation at the noted Los Sandra track that seemed to involve her friend, that the Phantom had been summoned.

"So Miss Kane was absent from her hotel last night," the Phantom said musingly. "And today the odds switch on her entry, War Baby, in the few minutes before the machines close."

"It's harder to understand, Phantom," said Muriel, "because Sela promised to meet me for shopping this morning. I had told her that my father had sent for you. I intended to have her meet you this afternoon."

"If she should appear by any chance, Muriel, don't divulge my identity for the time," the Phantom directed. He glanced up the aisle. "There are some friends of yours who appear to be coming this way," he remarked.

Three men who apparently had seen Muriel Havens join the Phantom were approaching from another trackside box. She smiled as she

greeted them, and introduced them to "Mr. Merkle."

One man who owned the quaint name of Luke Owler was pink-faced, partly bald and his cynical lips seemed to imply that he found the world consistently amusing.

"You'll have to be careful of what you say, Mr. Merkle," Muriel warned the Phantom lightly, as she introduced the man. "Mr. Owler writes the famous newspaper column known as 'The Owl Blinks.' Mostly about the private lives of movie people and the races."

DICK VAN LOAN saw Luke Owler studying him. Evidently Owler judged this Mr. Merkle not sufficiently notable for his writing wit.

A tall, dark man with intense black eyes and a thin face, was introduced as Arthur Conroy.

"And if you want a little game outside of playing the horses, Mr. Merkle," Muriel said, smiling, "Mr. Conroy might invite you out to his yacht, the *Sea Queen*. I believe he keeps it anchored most of the time near Los Sandra track, but down below the Mexican line."

Arthur Conroy's dark face was serious, even when he smiled.

"If you are a friend of Sela Kane's and Miss Havens', Mr. Merkle," he said, "you will be welcome on my yacht at any time." Then Arthur Conroy's face clouded and he spoke gravely.

"I noticed you were occupying the Kane box, Mr. Merkle," he said. "Have you seen Sela—er—Miss Kane, today?"

Van shook his head. "I arrived in San Diego only this morning," he said. "I was a friend of Miss Kane's father. I knew she had horses at the track, and came out here to look her up."

Van noticed that in Arthur Conroy's deep black eyes was more concern than would have been expected of a casual friend.

Muriel was introducing the third man.

"Senor Ruiz, Mr. Merkle," she said. Van gripped a strong, slender hand. Senor Ruiz was a small, dark man, clearly of the purest Spanish type. His hair was black, but he took in the Phantom with boring blue eyes that seemed to miss no detail.

"I am glad to meet any friend of Miss Kane's," murmured the senior. "I am thinking, Mr. Merkle, that she is just now sorely in need of good friends."

Luke Owler, the columnist, nodded his big head.

"Senor Ruiz is correct, Mr. Merkle," he said. "Miss Kane has been having a great deal of trouble. This collapse of War Baby is only one of many things that have happened."

"Yes," Arthur Conroy spoke up quickly, "Miss Kane needs someone to whom she can go for advice. Unfortunately many of us who are her friends are not in her confidence. Her absence today is unlucky, considering what has happened. I called her hotel, but got no response."

"She was not there last night," said Muriel Havens.

"Not at her hotel last night?" said Arthur Conroy, and the Phantom could detect more than the interest of a mere friend. "I saw her after the races yesterday. She said she intended going to some kind of a spiritualist seance conducted by a Senora Leona in San Diego. Perhaps she stayed in town, and something happened to prevent her going to her hotel."

A note of anxiety was in Conroy's voice. Plainly this owner of the gambling yacht *Sea Queen* was deeply concerned about Sela Kane.

Senor Ruiz rubbed his thin hands together nervously.

"She was with that Doc Craig when she left the track yesterday," he said. "I don't like to suggest it, but as a trustee of the Los Sandra, I sometimes think we should bar Doc

Craig from the stables. I know Miss Kane trusts the old fellow, but Doc Craig is queer, beside drinking too much."

"Doc Craig is all right," defended Arthur Conroy. "The old man does drink, but he was a good horseman in his day, and Sela — Miss Kane swears by him."

BELOW, the curious crowd was being pushed back by augmented track policemen as a regular police ambulance came onto the track.

"I want to have a closer look at all this," announced Luke Owler. "How about it, Senor Ruiz? You can get us in."

The Phantom welcomed this opportunity to get into the track crowd without having to reveal his identity. He gestured to Muriel Havens to stay back, but she only smiled and accompanied the men onto the track.

The police made way for Senor Ruiz, recognizing him as one of the track trustees. Even before they came close to the scene of the tragedy Van was watching a police doctor as he arose from examining the pathetically small body of Buddy Durkin, the dead jockey. The doctor seemed puzzled, shaking his head.

"He hasn't any marks that would indicate fatal injury, nor even a concussion," the medico said. "But there's something queer. His eyes look as if he might have been poisoned by some powerful narcotic."

The Phantom asked a quick question.

"How about the horse? Has it been examined?"

"I'm no vet!" snapped the doctor. "But anyone can see the filly broke her neck when she pitched over the rail! Perhaps the jockey only had a heart attack, but there have been too many heart ailments around Los Sandra lately!"

One glance showed Van that War Baby had indeed broken her neck going over the rail. There might have

been something else, but Van did not take time to go into it then, for his attention was suddenly attracted elsewhere.

As the others crowded around the ambulance while the dead jockey was being lifted into the stretcher, Van had placed his foot on a small object in the track dust. He had seen what appeared to be bright, sparkling bits of glass, in spite of all the trampling feet.

Seconds later, without anyone having observed his lightning movement, Van had removed a tiny object from the dust. It was a trampled and worn old rabbit's foot—the kind of a rabbit's foot a jockey might carry for luck.

Van handled the bit of bone and fur with extreme care. The presence of the rabbit's foot on the track indicated it must have been gripped in the jockey's hand when he died. If it had been secreted in his clothing, it would not have fallen.

Van was turning back to the others when there was a cry.

CHAPTER IV

ONE IS SILENCED



THE cry had come from a rather ratty appearing little man. The Phantom had a glimpse of him trying to push through the crowd, and being restrained by the policemen.

One glance at the little man's face indicated he was a track hustler. One of those smart, seedy tipsters who eked out a living giving strangers "inside dope" on the horses, when the track police did not catch up with them.

But this little hustler had something more than tips on his mind. And tears were streaming down his dirty cheeks.

"Buddy Durkin!" he cried out. "I had a hunch you wouldn't finish that race! And I know why! I can tell what killed Buddy! I saw the man who gave him the rabbit's foot! I—"

The Phantom saw the quick swirling of the crowd around the little track hustler. In their eagerness to see the man who had arrived with what promised to be startling news, men and some women, too, pushed toward him.

For a few seconds, the little hustler, with the something he wanted to divulge concerning a rabbit's foot was lost to sight. And at this instant, the Phantom acted.

No doubt his recently introduced companions were amazed at the strength of this "Mr. Merkle" who wedged his way into the crowd surrounding the track hustler. Van swept men aside as if they had no weight.

But just as he saw the little hustler again, the man let out a gurgling scream that silenced all of those around him. Van saw the little hustler fall, and everyone near him surged back.

Then the hustler was lying on his back, his arms spread out. And the only sign of injury was a single drop of blood that hung from the hustler's upper lip. Both lips had been marked as if by a light blow, not sufficient to have knocked the small man from his feet. But his staring eyes told that he was dead.

All eyes were upon the dead hustler. Half of the crowd was leaving in a panic, this sudden strike of death having more than sated the morbid curiosity that had drawn them onto the track.

Van's keen eyes took in all of those nearest the dead man, but which of them had been closest to the hustler when he had fallen to the ground was impossible to determine.

Van bent quickly, scooping up a queer object near the now fallen hustler. It was merely a buttonhole

gardenia, enclosed in a small sprig of green, something like a fern.

Again Van's movement had been almost faster than the human eye could have followed. The gardenia, its green sprig and the bit of wire wrapped around the stems joined the worn old rabbit's foot in Van's pocket.

"What the devil is all this?" exclaimed Luke Owler, the columnist, puffing at Van's elbow. "And what did that fellow yell out about a rabbit's foot? Don't tell me this is another case of a heart attack?"

The slight figure of Senor Ruiz pushed alongside Van.

"He's Jimson, a hustler we've had kicked off the track a dozen times," said Ruiz, rubbing his hands nervously. "He was always getting a hand-out from Durkin, the jockey, because he was English, I guess. *Sacre diablo!* But all this will ruin Los Sandra! Zing Dover's got more than he can handle now."

VAN was watching Senor Ruiz and Arthur Conroy, the dark-eyed gambling yacht owner. Conroy's lips were tightly compressed and he was looking directly at Senor Ruiz as if there might be some understanding between them.

Again the police doctor made a quick examination, and this time the track police and others swept all of the crowd clear of the track, except Senor Ruiz and his party, which included the Phantom.

The police doctor bit off an oath, after he had touched the bruised lips of the dead tipster.

"Did anyone see this man hit across the mouth?" he demanded.

No one had, apparently. The doctor's gray eyes were deeply puzzled. He spoke to Senor Ruiz as the only one present connected with the track.

"I can't say what this is until I've performed an autopsy. Just as in the case of the jockey, this seems to be a case of heart failure, but it's the kind of heart ailment that might be induced by poison. I would recognize some of the quick acting poisons, but this is something new."

The stands were being emptied. Because of the swift strike of tragedy the seventh race had been called off. The judges were now in the track, coming to join the others near the ambulance.

The Phantom might have enlightened the police doctor concerning the possible means by which both the dead jockey, Buddy Durkin, and the track hustler had been poisoned, but he preferred to wait. He wished his own identity kept secret for the time, and the rabbit's foot and the button-hole gardenia with its green sprig could be produced just as well after an autopsy had been performed. And Van believed he might gain a long lead on some of the other mysteries of the track by learning more of the rabbit's foot and the death bouquet by his own means.

[Turn Page]



Pepsi-Cola is made only by Pepsi-Cola Company, Long Island City, N. Y. Bottled locally by authorized bottlers.

Muriel Havens had all of a woman's aversion to close contact with death. She was keeping in the background as the two bodies were being put into the ambulance.

The Phantom had been studying the three men to whom Muriel had introduced him. Since Senor Ruiz was a trustee of the Los Sandra track, his nervousness over the sudden tragedies was excusable. Already the Phantom had decided that Arthur Conroy, owner of a sea-going gambling yacht on which his friends might find opportunity for a few games, had a deep personal interest in what affected Sela Kane. And in the eyes of Luke Owler, the columnist, who had been jotting down something in a notebook, was a lazy look of cynical amusement, as if both tragedy and comedy were all meat for his writing.

The ambulance bearing the bodies was just starting to move away, when Muriel Havens cried out:

"Look! Sela! Sela Kane!"

Quickly they all turned. Van saw a tall, almost regal girl whose yellow hair, streaming over her shoulders, shone brightly in the sun.

"Sela! Sela! What in the world?" shouted Arthur Conroy, as he vaulted over the inside rail of the track, for Sela Kane was coming across the middle field, half running, sometimes stumbling.

TRAILING the girl, making every effort to keep pace with her, was the staggering figure of a man whose shoulders were hunched.

"It's Doc Craig!" exclaimed Luke Owler, the columnist. "And both of them look like they had just come out of the sea!"

This was true. Sela Kane's dress and light coat were torn and clung to her. Her dress was sodden and salt had dried upon it.

Doc Craig was clothed in a shoddy, ragged suit and one arm had been almost stripped of a torn sleeve. The

man's face was gray with a stubbly beard. He was hatless and gray hair straggled almost to his shoulders.

Arthur Conroy was the first to reach Sela Kane. Van was close beside him.

"Sela?" exclaimed Conroy, catching the girl in his arms. "What happened?"

Sela Kane yielded to Conroy's embrace for but a second or two, then she abruptly freed herself. She had heard Doc Craig's sobbing curse as he saw the lifeless body of War Baby, the racing filly, still lying inside the fence. He seemed to forget his fatigue, or realize that others were present.

"War Baby!"

The name was half sobbed, as if Doc Craig's throat were choked. Then he was on his knees beside the dead filly, lifting the beast's head and pillowing it as if the animal had been human.

"Oh, why didn't they keep War Baby out of the race when Doc Craig wasn't here?" Sela Kane's cry, and her voice were anguished, as she paid no attention to the question as to what had happened to herself.

Then Arthur Conroy was telling her about the tragedy, talking low, but Van marked that the stricken girl looked away from Conroy as if she wished he were not here. And he saw the quick, deep lines of worry on Conroy's features. It seemed plain that the owner of the gambling yacht cared more for Sela Kane than she cared for him.

Then Senor Ruiz put in a question.

"Where were you, Miss Kane? We didn't know you wouldn't be here, or that Doc Craig would be absent, or War Baby might have been scratched. I would have ordered it myself, if I hadn't expected that you and Doc Craig would get here at the last minute. We should have known that War Baby wouldn't run with Doc Craig away."

Van watched the liquid brown eyes

of the girl as she looked at Senor Ruiz. Her features were as clearly cut as a cameo, having a lovely strength that went well with her tall, exquisitely proportioned figure.

"Doc Craig and I went sailing in a small, rented sloop early this morning," she said. "We were caught in a bad tide rip and grounded on a little island. We had to wait for the tide, then the rush of the tide capsized the boat. We landed only half a mile from the track, and came across the fields."

Muriel Havens was beside her friend now, with an arm around her. And then Van knew that Sela Kane was lying.

"Oh, Muriel, I'm so sorry to have disappointed you," said Sela. "I should have left word at the hotel desk when I went out this morning, but I expected to be back in a couple of hours."

Muriel glanced at the Phantom.

"I'm only glad you're here now, Sela," she said. "I have my car outside, and I'll drive you in."

VAN knew that Muriel was thinking of Sela Kane not having been at her hotel all night. And from the puzzled look on Arthur Conroy's face, Conroy also was doubting Sela. For Conroy had said that Sela expected to attend a spiritualist seance in San Diego the night before, and he had also called up her hotel, and she had not been there.

Then Van was watching Doc Craig. He saw the hunched man lift tired, blue eyes to Sela and the others. Van could read what was in those eyes.

"Doc Craig is hoping Sela Kane's story is being believed," was Van's instant thought. "Perhaps they were prisoners, held until too late to stop this race. Then they were released. They have been in the sea—possibly had to swim for it when they were freed. Sela Kane was away all night, not just today."

The Phantom's quick, deductive

brain was turning toward another angle of the swiftly cumulative tragedies of the past few hours. And particularly to the murder of Simm Archer, county detective, whose death had been reported only within the past half hour as an electrocution!

Doc Craig arose to his feet, a pitifully unkempt figure. And suddenly he was cursing fervently.

"I'll get 'em!" he shouted. "They can put me away again, but I'll send 'em to the devil first! I'll—"

Sela Kane shook off Muriel Havens' arm and ran to Doc Craig. She put an arm about him, speaking low. Luke Owler strode over.

"I guess this is what Doc needs most," he said, proffering a liquor flask.

Doc Craig seized the proffered flask, turning it up, and permitting a long drink to gurgle slowly down his throat.

Then it seemed that Arthur Conroy could keep silent no longer. He was beside Sela Kane.

"Sela, forgive me, but there's something I must know," he said grimly. "You told me you intended being present at a fool seance conducted by this Senora Leona. Were you there last night?"

"No! No! Certainly not! I retired early, because I had promised to go sailing this morning with Doc Craig! Anyway, why should you have to know?"

"I'm sorry, Sela," said Arthur Conroy. "I shouldn't have asked."

"As a friend," the Phantom interposed, "I believe Miss Kane should not be troubled further. Miss Havens will drive her to her hotel."

Sela Kane was staring at him.

"Harden Merkle, Miss Kane," he said quietly. "You've probably heard your father speak of me. You were quite a little girl when I saw you last."

"Yes, why yes, Mr. Merkle," said Sela, though the Phantom was positive that she could not recognize any

"Mr. Merkle" as a friend of her father's.

He was convinced that Sela Kane had been lying about everything. He was sure she had attended a seance conducted by Senora Leona, and knew she was not telling the truth about having been at her hotel the past night.

This presented two diverse theories. Had Sela Kane and Doc Craig been deliberately absent from Los Sandra track until after the sixth race? Could they have known of the tragedy in advance? Of the sudden shifting in betting?

Or had they been abducted, and then set free?

If it was the latter, then whoever had kept Sela Kane and Doc Craig must have a direct reason for giving them their liberty and not removing them permanently. And that must in some way tie up with all of the series of mishaps at Los Sandra.

The Phantom decided swiftly to go much deeper into that story of the supposed wreck of a sailing sloop. He must discover what mysterious link was between the beautiful owner of horses and the down-at-the-heels Doc Craig!

CHAPTER V

SELA KANE



THE principal owner of beautiful Los Sandra race-track, "Zing" Dover, looked at the Phantom across the polished desk in his office. Sela Kane had left with Muriel Havens for the hotel in San Diego nineteen miles from the Los Sandra track.

Luke Owler and Senor Ruiz must have been amazed when the Phantom had faded from their company. One moment Mr. Merkle had been with them, watching Sela Kane leave with

Muriel Havens, and the next minute Mr. Merkle was missing.

The reason was simple enough. The Phantom had decided to meet the famous Zing Dover, whose genius had been responsible for the Los Sandra racing plant. He had learned that Zing Dover had arrived shortly after the double tragedy, at the finish of the sixth race.

And at about the time the Phantom was giving Luke Owler and Senor Ruiz the quiet slip, he noticed that Arthur Conroy was in his own car. Conroy was bent on trailing Sela Kane to San Diego. The Phantom smiled.

"There is one young man who is over his head in love, and isn't going to let anything stand in his way," mused the Phantom. "He knows Sela Kane hasn't been telling the truth, but that makes no difference. And that's the way it should be."

One of the underlying qualities that made the Phantom the greatest of all detectives was his deep sympathy and his understanding. He judged now that Conroy, gambling man or not, was the type who would stick to a friend when the going got rough.

"So you're the Phantom?" said Zing Dover when Van was seated. "Well, I don't believe there's much that can be done by anyone to offset what's already happened to Los Sandra. Leading owners are planning to pull their strings. For some unaccountable reason it would seem the heat is on this race-track."

Zing Dover had the kind of spirit that could smile through trouble. He smiled now, even though his gray eyes were troubled, and his strong fingers kept running through his thick blond hair.

"It wouldn't be that all of this is simply some criminal set-up to make a killing on the races, would it, Dover?" asked Van. "That sixth race today for example. A bunch of last-minute money was shoved through the totalizers on Outsider, and

Romper, and War Baby dropped suddenly from favorite position. Somebody must have known that War Baby would not finish that race."

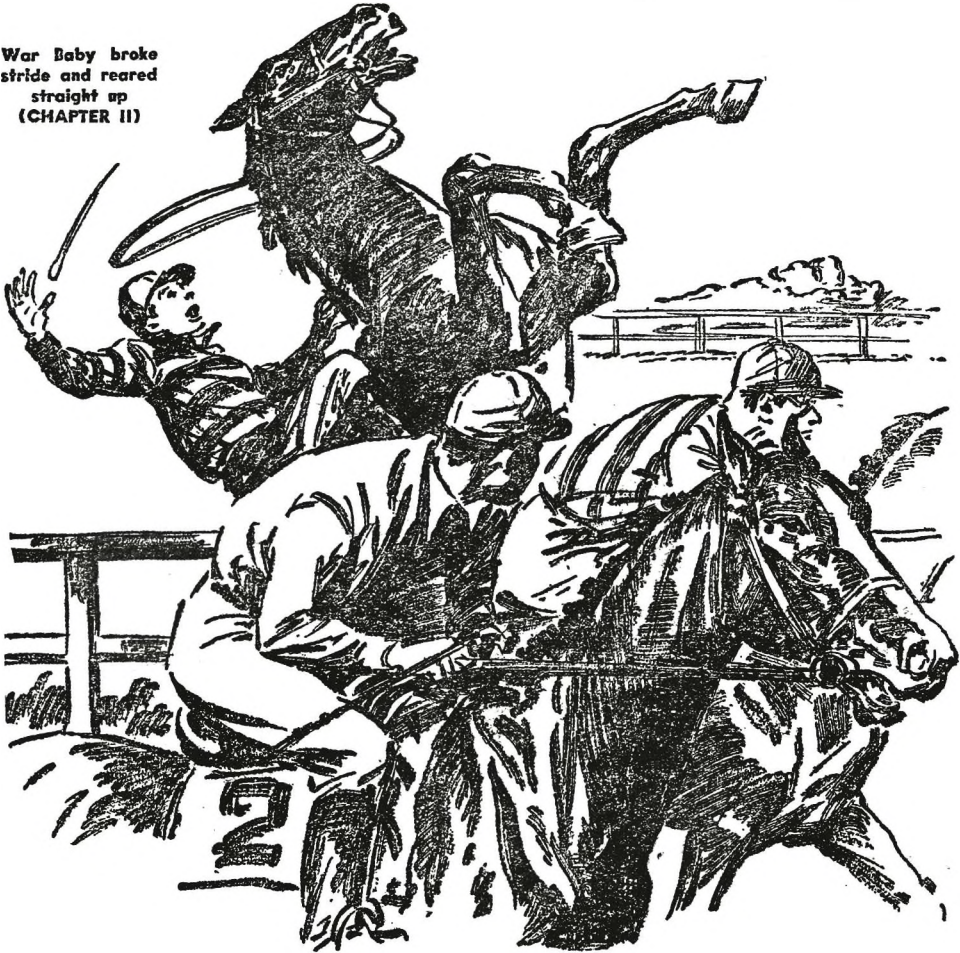
Zing Dover nodded. "Yes, that's true, and I've checked on the pay-off," he said. "But the heavy dough laid down was too well scattered among

be financially able to open next year, besides having to offset the hex put upon the track by all of these tragedies."

"How about the trustees?" inquired Van. "Would they be agreeable to closing the track?"

"No, they are all against it, includ-

War Baby broke stride and reared straight up (CHAPTER II)



well known horse players to put a finger on any person or group. No, Phantom, I'll lay my cards on the table. The whole set-up of accidents to horses and to men about the stables seems directed at closing down Los Sandra. I suppose I would be smart to get the trustees together and shut down the track until next season. Only"—and Zing Dover smiled ruefully—"if I do that, I doubt if I would

ing Senor Ruiz. There are only two others. They are Thomas Chester, who incidentally owns Outsider, the winner today in the sixth, and is the best known mask and dummy maker in Hollywood. He likes the track open, so he can amuse himself with the three ponies he calls his stable. Then there is Joel Seward, the famous movie actor. He has a chunk of dough in the track and likes it open so he

can bring his Hollywood friends here and pose as one of the owners. But I still happen to have controlling stock, Phantom."

"Would you know, Dover, if there has been any hint of horses being doped or poisoned?" asked Van suddenly.

"I've heard all kinds of reports, including that," said Zing Dover. "Yes, I've learned that Jockey Durkin and that track hustler are believed to have been poisoned. It is all fantastic, but we have had police help and have gotten nowhere."

"Including Detective Simm Archer?" said Van.

DOVER scowled heavily.

"Yes, Simm Archer," he admitted. "I hear he is believed to have been killed by electricity. I talked with him yesterday and he admitted he hadn't a line on anything specific. He said the only questionable thing he had come upon was the apparent rooking of horse players by some Spanish medium calling herself Senora Leona.

"He told me he might look into that, as having a possible connection with some races being fixed. But up until today, there hasn't been anything like fixed races as far as I can learn. Just queer accidents, sick horses, and the jinx being on some of the best men around the stables."

The Phantom was on his feet.

"Thanks, Dover," he said. "You'll hear from me."

But as he left he was thinking:

"So Simm Archer might have attended a seance conducted by a Senora Leona last night. And Sela Kane had announced she intended being at a similar seance, but now denies having been there. And she isn't telling the truth. . . ."

The Phantom met Muriel Havens in the hotel at San Diego. Muriel looked anything but happy.

"Sela will see you," she said. "I told her the Mr. Merkle she met at the

track was the Phantom. I'm worried, Phantom. I've known Sela Kane a long time. She has had some money since her parents died, and she's had the race horses. She has always seemed to enjoy life. I don't know what it is now, but something has happened to her."

"You think the trouble at the track has affected her?" said Van.

"It's more than that. Only yesterday she was enthusiastic about having you take over the Los Sandra case, but now—"

Van smiled a little.

"But now she has changed her mind," he said.

A voice spoke directly behind him in the small reception room.

"Yes, I've changed my mind."

"Sela!" exclaimed Muriel. "You've been listening?"

"I've been listening," said Sela Kane, her tone harsh and decisive. "I'm sorry the Phantom appeared at the track today. What happened was an accident and it could not be avoided. I see no reason for any further interference."

The Phantom studied the girl's wide, brown eyes. They were hard and stared straight ahead.

"Would it change anything if you knew that the jockey riding your horse in the sixth today was poisoned?" he said. "And that another man was killed when he tried to tell something about how the jockey might have been poisoned?"

"I have already heard that," Sela said quietly. "But I do not wish to have the police or even the great Phantom investigating any of my affairs."

"Sela!" cried Muriel. "What *has* happened to you? Surely when you know murder has been committed you must realize the position you're in! Do you mean you're quitting—taking your horses away?"

"I'm not quitting," said Sela. "I intend to keep on racing my horses. But what I do is my own business. If

the police interfere, it will only bring more trouble. Please—that is all.”

THE Phantom could see that Sela Kane was desperately trying to maintain her icy demeanor. He could read some deep-rooted fear beneath her outward calm. He ventured a long shot.

“Detective Simm Archer was helping you, wasn’t he, Miss Kane? Is it because of what happened to him that you are afraid?”

“No! No! Please don’t ask any more questions! I will not answer them! I’m sorry, Muriel!”

The Phantom smiled grimly.

“If that’s the way you want it, Miss Kane, I’m sure you know your own business,” he said.

He could see that Sela’s hands were clenched as she turned and left them.

“So I’ve asked you into something where you’re not wanted and where you can’t help, Phantom,” said Muriel.

“On the contrary,” Van said cheerfully. “I am wanted, greatly wanted, and I can help. Sela Kane doesn’t know it, but I’ll probably be employed by her directly, beginning tomorrow. I’m only waiting to hear from Chip Dorlan.”

“But what can it be, Phantom?” asked Muriel.

“That I cannot tell,” said Van. “But I believe that Sela Kane is suffering the greatest fear that can come to anyone. Because she is afraid for someone other than herself.”

Street lights were twinkling when a little later, Muriel Havens came from the hotel with the Phantom. Evening coolness bathed the San Diego Plaza. Newsboys were crying race murder extras.

The Los Sandra story related that a final report upon the deaths of Buddy Durkin, jockey, and Jimson, the little track hustler, awaited an autopsy. It was believed both had been poisoned.

The Phantom glanced at a boxed

item in one corner of the racing extra. It was under the heading of “The Owl Blinks,” by Luke Owler. The Phantom read:

An unexplained rift has come between the certain lovely lady who owned War Baby, the center of today’s tragedy at Los Sandra and a well known yachtsman and gambler of the high and low seas. Yesterday it might have been suspected wedding bells would soon ring for them. Today the lovely lady publicly refused the sympathetic arms of her yachtsman.

Funny new money switched at the last minute today from War Baby, the favorite, whose jockey died mysteriously. The lovely lady told a quaint story of having been shipwrecked on a sloop and kept away from the track. Many horse players find the games on the yachtsman’s *Sea Queen* a pleasant diversion.

“What a rotten thing to do!” Muriel exclaimed furiously when she, too, had read the item. “But they say Luke Owler makes his column popular by stabbing his friends in the back! I think I’ll go back to the hotel and try to talk with Sela again!”

The Phantom nodded. “Just be friendly, Muriel, and don’t suggest again that I help her. You might mention that I am thinking of returning East. I have a call or two to make, and I’ll meet you here in the Plaza in an hour.”

CHAPTER VI

MYSTERIOUS POISON



VAN headed for Police Headquarters when Muriel Havens returned to the hotel.

At the end of the Plaza a number of dark-skinned Mexican boys were howling and diving recklessly into the street. The screaming urchins were after pennies that were being tossed over the curb. Van saw a lazy-appearing, smiling man sending the pennies skipping across the sidewalk.

The penny tosser who showed even,

white teeth under a clipped black mustache, seemed to be enjoying himself immensely. Drivers of cars cursed and slammed on their brakes as the little Mexicans snatched at pennies almost under their wheels. Traffic was becoming snarled up.

Van was angered at the smiling penny tosser's disregard for the boys' safety. The fender of a car struck a small Mexican and rolled him into the gutter. The boy scrambled up with his nose bleeding.

The man with the pennies laughed loudly. Onlookers swore and several women became indignant. Van might have interfered, but the smiling penny tosser jammed his hands in his pockets and started away, just as a perspiring policeman clumped across the Plaza.

"I'm warnin' you, Smiles, to cut that out!" the officer roared.

The penny tosser showed his white teeth in a mocking grin.

"There isn't any law sayin' I can't have some fun with the kids," he said tauntingly.

"If I ran you in for it, you'd only walk out like the last time!" growled the policeman. "But you try any more fun like that with them kids, an' I'll have some fun with a club!"

The smiling penny tosser shrugged his big shoulders and walked on. The policeman looked as if he would have liked to roll him in the dirty street and mess up the slacks and white linen coat he wore.

"Who is he?" Van asked the policeman. "That man you called Smiles."

"He's a rat, that's what he is," snapped the policeman. "He's Smiles Downer, a gambler. We haven't anything on him, except blocking traffic with his pennies. When he's taken in, he just calls Silas Rudd, like all the other gamblers, and walks out again. Besides being a rat, I guess he's nuts."

"Silas Rudd—who is he?" said the Phantom.

"The mouthpiece for most of the

gamblers," said the policeman. "Silas Rudd's a good guy himself, but he sure takes on some funny business looking after the gambling racket and trying to keep it halfway straight.

The Phantom might have dismissed the incident, but he saw Smiles Downer again. The smiling gambler had resumed tossing pennies to small boys.

This time they were scrambling for the pennies in a vacant lot. And it was directly across the street from Police Headquarters!

Van entered the station. Smiles Downer's teeth showed, as he watched Van. And it came to the Phantom then that the penny tosser's presence in the Plaza and here might be more than a coincidence. If this Smiles Downer *was* keeping an eye upon him, then it must be known that he was the Phantom. That meant that Van's appearance with Muriel Havens at Los Sandra, and here in San Diego, had been taken as identification.

FRANK HAVENS, the publisher, and his daughter were widely known, and were equally well known to be associated with the Phantom. So after the events of the afternoon, it was quite likely that "Mr. Merkle" had been identified as the Phantom.

Luke Owler, the smart and apparently unprincipled columnist, might also have guessed his identity. But for what he had in mind as his next business, Van decided this would not matter. For within the next few hours he would become an altogether different character. He intended to adopt a rôle whereby he could not only get at the truth about Sela Kane's troubles, but would also be directly in her employ.

Captain McDermott, Van's police detective friend, greeted the Phantom soberly.

"The deaths at Los Sandra are outside city jurisdiction, Phantom," the captain said. "But our medical ex-

aminer and the laboratory are working with the sheriff's office. Autopsies have shown that Buddy Durkin and that track hustler died of some new type of poison that stops the heart. Our chemist hasn't determined what the poison is, but he says it is from some kind of a vegetable, instead of a mineral."

"Yet it was effective as quickly as cyanide or some metallic acid," Van observed. "I would like to use your laboratory a little while, although I have my own set-up with me."

McDermott nodded quick agreement. The police were always more than willing to cooperate with the famous Phantom.

Before long, Van had applied certain chemicals to a worn rabbit's foot, and to a buttonhole gardenia with a fern-like green sprig bound with wire.

McDermott was watching with interest. Van finally handed the rabbit's foot and the gardenia over to him.

"It might be advisable to keep these exhibits and what I am about to tell you a secret for the present," he said. "The rabbit's foot was undoubtedly carried by Jockey Durkin. The buttonhole flower probably was slapped across the dead hustler's mouth. The poison they carried was almost instantly fatal."

"That's what the medico said," agreed McDermott. "He said the hearts had been stopped instantly as if they had been given sudden heavy injections of something like digitalis."

"Something like that." Van nodded. "But not digitalis. I have found a strange and unbelievable combination that might be the result of combining the juices of certain poison plants, like wolfbane, *kalmia augustifolia*, *veratrum veride* and death camass. And it would seem that the natural deadly poison of these plants has been made more fatal by the addition of *colchocine*, itself a poison that in-



FRANK HAVENS

creases the virulence of vegetable growth."

"Phew!" grunted McDermott. "Imagine that! I'll bet we haven't a man on the force who can even pronounce the names!"

"I have one more item of business, Captain," said Van. "I would like to examine the body of Simm Archer. And has anything been found to indicate that Archer might have attended a seance conducted by a Senora Leona?"

McDermott swore sharply. "Nothing direct, Phantom. But we know that Archer was keeping an eye on that slippery Spanish medium. She's smooth. No one of her clients knows who goes and comes at her place. All visitors are forced to wear skin masks and they say the masks are made to resemble prominent Hollywood stars, and other notable persons."

THREE minutes later Van straightened from an examination of the cold, still face of Simm Archer. He had applied a tubular glass, his own device. It was a pocket microscope of high power, brought about by the use of rumbatrons, giving him an instrument in miniature very similar to the powerful electronoscope, cap-

ble of magnifying many hundreds of times.

McDermott looked at the Phantom expectantly.

"Simm Archer wore a mask composed of a rubberlike plastic not many hours before his death," announced Van. "Minute particles of the plastic still adhere to the skin. That probably points to Senora Leona's seance, but it doesn't make it positive that was where Simm Archer was killed."

"We'll bring that faker in!" exploded Captain McDermott. "I'll personally give her the works!"

Van smiled a little. "No, Captain McDermott," he advised. "Even if Simm Archer attended a seance, that is not positive evidence. Besides, I have excellent reasons for not arousing the suspicion of this Senora Leona. I will look in upon her personally."

McDermott agreed reluctantly. Van did not explain further, but two queer angles of the mystery seemed to him to be linking together. If Sela Kane had attended a seance, had she been present at the same time as Simm Archer? And if so, would the strange and lovely girl have known of the murder?

When the Phantom left Police Headquarters, he was still the florid-faced Mr. Merkle. With a purpose. And his idea worked.

Smiles Downer, the penny tosser, was on a corner near Police Headquarters. His white linen coat was easy to spot a short distance behind as Van made his way back to the Plaza where he had asked Muriel Havens to meet him.

Near the lighted Plaza, the Phantom crossed the street, surveying the city square of Royal palm trees closely. He saw Muriel come from the entrance of the nearby hotel.

Smiles Downer had halted at a corner of the Plaza. He was tossing pennies again. Mexican urchins scrambled for them. But this time Smiles Downer was throwing the

coins on the ground under a big pepper tree.

The Phantom had been shadowed many times. He had been trailed by criminal experts. But seldom had a shadower made himself so conspicuous. It struck the Phantom that Smiles Downer was deliberately making himself obvious. A hunch warned Van of danger. Smiles was here for a purpose. But what? Van could see no other person in or around the Plaza who aroused his suspicions. Why should Smiles be trying to divert his attention?

Slim, graceful Muriel Havens was on the broad steps of the hotel. She was looking out along the Plaza, evidently seeking the Phantom.

A bright, red automobile slid along the street, with the driver hidden from view under a canvas sport top. The car drew up in front of the hotel.

Van started across the street, for he saw Muriel wave her hand and start across the sidewalk toward the car. Muriel nodded, walked around the car and got in. Van reached the middle of the Plaza just as the red car started to move, with Muriel Havens in it.

CHAPTER VII

FACE UNDER A MASK



KNOWING that Muriel had expected to meet him in the Plaza, Van wondered why she had gotten into the car. He was moving quickly toward the car, when abruptly a woman screamed shrilly.

Car brakes squealed and horns set up an infernal racket. That turned Van's eyes toward the end of the Plaza. He saw that Smiles Downer must have tossed a handful of pennies out into the street. Shrieking Mexican urchins were tumbling over

each other in the pathway of the red sports car. One small boy seemed to have been hit, for he lay in the gutter, his hands moving feebly.

Men cursed and more women were screaming as Van gained the Plaza sidewalk. He was just in time to see the red sport car carrying Muriel Havens shoot ahead at high speed in second gear.

The Plaza became a bedlam of shouting voices, of cursing men and hysterical women. It would have seemed to anyone that the abrupt stoppage of street traffic had put the driver of the red sport car on a spot, for it appeared to be blocked. Then its driver, instead of clamping on the brakes, headed it directly upon the Plaza sidewalk. Van did not have to be told that the car was aimed purposely at him.

He moved swiftly, and would have easily evaded the oncoming machine, but a deep voice shouted:

"Look out! It'll hit you!"

Anyone witnessing that quick accident would probably have sworn that a burly man in a white linen coat had hurled himself forward to save another man who was about to be struck down. The apparent rescuer was Smiles Downer.

Van saw him coming in time to dodge the direct impact of his body, but Smiles Downer's reaching hands hit him. The sudden surprise knocked Van from his feet. He heard Muriel Havens scream now.

Smiles Downer had timed his phony rescue act to the second. The oncoming hood and bumper of the sport car rushed upon the Phantom. Smiles was apparently trying to snatch Van from danger, but instead Smiles went to his knees and rolled neatly out of the way of the car.

Van had no time to escape. Out of all control, as the crowd saw it, the sport car was upon him with all of its weight.

Perhaps not one person there could have told in detail what happened

then. Certainly no man less trained than the Phantom could have done what he did. At the instant the car's gleaming bumper was driving into him, Van's powerful hands shot out. And few circus acrobats could have performed the double back somersault and turn in front of the crushing weight of the car that he did then. He went over twice, and in that his accurate timing and tremendous strength made use of the car's speed.

He was whirled to one side. Luckily the fender that hit his shoulder was smooth. But the jolting blow turned him over for the third time. He landed heavily, his back striking the smooth bole of a Royal palm.

Then, amid the screams of women, the yells of men, the red sport car slewed off the Plaza, ran along the sidewalk, and shot back into the street. It narrowly cleared the other blocked cars and then turned the nearest corner.

SEEING through a haze of pain caused by the severe concussion, the Phantom still was able to get one glimpse of the driver at the wheel of the sport car. As in the flash of a movie film, he saw the pink face and partly bald head of Luke Owler, the columnist. The bulky shoulders were the same as those of Owler.

But as Van got groggily to his feet, another impression remained fixed. He had seen Muriel Havens held rigidly in the front seat of the car by the hands of someone who was invisible in the rear seat of the car.

Van looked for Smiles Downer. He pushed away several men who were sympathetically trying to help him. But Smiles Downer was not to be seen.

"That man in the white coat?" Van said quickly. "The one who tried to save me from being hit? Where did he go?"

No one could tell him. But Van had an idea that Smiles Downer had become another occupant of the sports

car that had undoubtedly been meant to be a murder machine.

"That driver was crazy!" cried a bystander. "An' he beat it! Anyway, I got his number!"

"Thanks," said Van. "Give me the number. I'll take care of it."

Brushing aside further offers of help, Van reached the hotel and a phone. He got Captain McDermott. McDermott was talking excitedly.

"That car belongs to Joel Seward, the movie actor!" McDermott cried excitedly when the Phantom had crisply given the details. "And it was reported stolen from the waterfront by Seward himself not ten minutes ago. A radio alarm is out for it. It can't get far. Did you see the driver to identify him?"

"I saw the driver, Captain," replied Van dryly. "He was all too easy to identify. But we'll let that pass now. I have my own idea about that driver. The first thing to do is to round up the car. It will probably be found abandoned. I'll call you back in a few minutes. It goes without saying that Muriel Havens is in grave danger, but the police will have to move cautiously to prevent her from being harmed to keep her silent.

McDermott agreed, with a hard oath.

The Phantom debated seeing Sela Kane. He decided against it. He went to the room he had engaged when he had arrived in San Diego.

"The whole business now takes on a few cross angles that are intended to be confusing," he decided as he seated himself before the mirror, with his make-up case spread open. "I wasn't intended to survive, but it was obviously meant that if I did, or if others had a look at the sports car driver, he would be identified as Luke Owler."

Van had good reason for believing the driver was not Owler. Expert at make-up as he was, he had been fully aware from that brief, passing glimpse that the driver of the sports

car was wearing a skin-tight mask—a mask resembling Luke Owler, the columnist.

And it had been so planned that only the briefest glimpse of the driver could have been had by any witness.

VAN seethed with impatience and apprehension. Muriel was in danger. He could now understand her entering the car, seeing the driver and believing him to be Luke Owler. For she was bitterly angry over the item that had appeared in Luke Owler's column concerning Sela Kane and Arthur Conroy, and like the spirited girl she was, would seize the first opportunity to express her mind. Moreover, she never hesitated when any chance came to help the Phantom. So Van was convinced her quick friendliness and her entering what she believed to be Luke Owler's car had been with the intention of finding out more about the columnist and what he might know.

For the moment Van did not alter his Mr. Merkle identity. He was convinced that, having failed to erase him with the sports car, the mysterious killers of Los Sandra would attempt to strike again.

"And it might be the quickest way to discover Muriel's whereabouts," he thought grimly. "There is considerably more to these mysterious poison murders than the mere fixing of races—something important enough to want the Phantom removed permanently. These poisoners or maskers, or whatever they are shall have that chance."

So Van remained Mr. Merkle, merely making a quick change into an evening suit. He called McDermott. It chilled and sickened him when he was informed that the red sports car had not been located.

He paced the room, every nerve tense. He feared now that every passing minute lessened the chances of Muriel being found. Yet he was



The horse screamed as the tiger snarled and sprang (CHAPTER X)

compelled to await some report on the missing car from the police.

He juggled the odd angles of the Los Sandra killings.

The stolen sports car belonged to Joel Seward. And Joel Seward was a Hollywood actor and one of the trustees of Los Sandra.

The car's driver had worn a mask that resembled the face of Luke Owler. And Thomas Chester, another trustee of Los Sandra, and owner of the winning Outsider in the afternoon's tragic race, was a well known maker of masks and dummies for Hollywood actors.

The Phantom had not yet met either Joel Seward or Thomas Chester, but he did know the third trustee of Los Sandra, Senor Ruiz, the little Spaniard, and Zing Dover, the majority owner of Los Sandra stock.

Zing Dover had voiced the opinion that the mysterious crimes and "accidents" at the race track were intended to do much more than merely fix races for the benefit of crooked horse players.

That brought the Phantom to Arthur Conroy, yachtsman and owner of a new kind of gambling ship that ran its games strictly for Conroy's friends, south of the Border near Los Sandra track. Conroy had left the track in his car, trailing Sela Kane to the hotel in the afternoon. Conroy knew that Muriel was with Sela Kane and perhaps he had guessed that Mr. Merkle was the Phantom.

Van thought of the down-at-the-heels, furtive Doc Craig. Sela Kane had said she had been wrecked with Doc Craig in a sailing sloop and she and Doc Craig had come from the sea.

"Yet Conroy believed Sela attended Senora Leona's seance, where Simm Archer may have been murdered," was Van's deep thought. "Or did he believe that? Sela Kane wished to avoid him. Could she and Doc Craig have come from Conroy's gambling yacht?"

He recalled Zing Dover saying

that many horse owners were being terrorized into a desire to remove their strings from Los Sandra. And, he pondered upon the queer poisons that had been used.

"Which means a clever, scientific criminal must be engineering everything," he had to conclude. "And that might be any one of those I have encountered or who has been named. But it is certain that the brains of all of this has knowledge of and access to humanlike masks, and has developed unusual and deadly poisons from common plants."

Van's analysis of the queer angles upon which he had come was interrupted by his phone. As he quickly answered he expected to hear McDermott's voice, but instead it was the quick, thin voice of Chip Dorlan.

"PHANTOM?" exclaimed Chip. "I'm glad I got you! I'm at a phone outside Los Sandra. I've only a few minutes. I slipped away to reach you, so I would not be discovered."

"Yes, Chip. What is it? Be quick. I am awaiting another call."

"It's another one of Sela Kane's horses — Red Star, the best of the string, they say. I'm in with Banty Doyle. His hands and face are badly poisoned, and Red Star is sick. A colored stable boy had his hands poisoned. He gave Red Star a feed of oats and his hands swelled up. They are keeping it from Miss Kane, and a queer old man called Doc Craig is trying to save the horse. And, Phantom—I think I know where Banty Doyle got poisoned."

"You know, Chip?"

"Yes, Banty has been picking flowers for Miss Kane every day from the race track hothouses. Banty's kind of nuts over Miss Kane, because he never rode for anyone else. What will I do, Phantom?"

"Stick there, Chip, until you hear from me," said Van. "I'll join you as quickly as I can."

Van had no time to juggle with this

new angle. The desk had another call waiting for Mr. Merkle's phone.

"This is McDermott," came the message. "We've found Joel Seward's car. It was wrecked over a hill above the outdoor zoo. We have no trace of Miss Havens or the men who were in the car. Joel Seward is here to claim his car. Can we do anything more now? What about raiding Senora Leona's bungalow?"

"Not yet, Captain," said Van. "Wait until I call you."

As McDermott closed the line, the hotel switchboard girl cut in.

"Mr. Merkle," she said. "There's a messenger here with a special delivery letter. Shall I send him up?"

When the letter was delivered, the Phantom saw, as he tore it open that it had been postmarked "only twenty minutes before at the main San Diego office. The envelope was addressed on a typewriter and the brief message inside was also typewritten.

The few words had the same devastating impact as if they had been shouted.

PHANTOM—You have but one chance to save Muriel Havens. You will come at once, and alone, to the southeast corner of the old exposition park on the hill. Walk into the little road leading off the highway in Oak Glen where high park fence ends. If you are not there within half an hour after receiving this, Muriel Havens will die. If the police are summoned or others try to accompany you, the girl will be left with the mad tiger. You can save her and yourself only by obeying.

THE MASKER.

The Phantom was swiftly ready to start. Within three minutes he was crossing the hotel lobby.

As he reached the outside entrance, his trained instinct told him that sharp eyes were watching. But he did not hesitate or turn back because of what he saw happening.

Arthur Conroy, raging, had just whipped out a long arm and knocked another man to the floor.

The other man was Luke Owler, the columnist.

CHAPTER VIII

STRANGE DOC CRAIG



LITTLE monkey-like Banty Doyle sat hunched on his heels under the light in one of the Los Sandra box stalls. His face was screwed up as if he were in agony. Each time the sleek sides of the horse lying on

the straw-covered floor heaved with the animal's labored breathing, it was as if the horse's breathing were communicated to Banty's nerves.

Banty had been scrooched down like that for hours. He moved only to rub a heavily bandaged hand across his eyes where tears kept sliding into the wrinkles of his cheeks and down his face.

"Will he pull through, Doc? Please, Doc, can't you give him something so it won't hurt like that?"

The hoarse pleas came through Banty's clenched teeth. Chip Dorlan, thin-faced and scarcely larger than the little jockey who had never worn any but the Sela Kane silks, had his hand upon Banty's arm.

"Take it easy, Banty," whispered Chip. "I called the Phantom an' he'll be here soon. He'll get them. Maybe Red Star will come out all right, too."

The queerly hunched Doc Craig, stripped to the waist, was using a sponge, dipping cold water from a bucket and bathing the head of the sick horse as tenderly as if he had been attending a human. Sweat stood out upon Doc Craig's misshapen shoulders. His sunken blue eyes were as wistfully watchful as if he, like Banty, were suffering with the stricken race animal.

Occasionally, he took a bottle from his hip and swallowed a bit of its fiery contents. Not much though, as Banty Doyle could have informed Chip Dorlan. Not like Doc Craig usually drank

--in deep, long gulps until he became stupefied.

The doors of the Sela Kane stable were closed and barred. A shuffling colored boy, called "Slipper," moved constantly from one door to another, watching and listening. He carried a short-handled pitchfork gripped in his right hand as if it were a weapon.

Once in awhile Slipper uttered words that were almost a moan.

"Nossah, Doc, Ah'd ruther et them oats mahself if Ah'd only knowed they was poison."

Each time, old Doc Craig would say, wearily:

"Sure you would, Slipper. Sure you would. Keep watchin' and don't let anyone inside."

And each time Doc Craig spoke, the sick Red Star seemed to try to lift his head. The horse's eyes rolled. Chip Dorlan had never learned much about horses, but he was sure this one understood all that was being said and knew Doc Craig was trying to save his life.

For hours it had been like that. When Chip had first gone to the stable at the Phantom's direction, he had come upon little Banty Doyle and Slipper, the stable boy, bending over a horse.

Red Star, one of the best of Sela Kane's string of a dozen fine animals, had just fallen in his stall. It had happened almost at the moment of the sixth race, which was why Banty Doyle had not seen that race, and had not seen Buddy Durkin and War Baby die on the track.

CHIP DORLAN, knowing little of horses, was nevertheless quick about most things, and had been well trained by the Phantom. He swiftly saw that Banty Doyle and Slipper were in a panic over Red Star's sudden illness and collapse.

"Why don't you call a doctor?" Chip Dorlan had asked.

"Who are you?" had been Banty Doyle's snapped words then. "Get

out! We don't want strangers around here! We've had too much trouble, with me all poisoned up, an' Doc Craig not here, an' Slipper feedin' Red Star a mess of poison! Get out!"

It was to the Phantom's fame then that Chip owed his being permitted to remain in the stable.

"Maybe you've heard of the Phantom," he had said to Banty. "I'm Chip Dorlan, an' I work with him. He's here to help Miss Kane, your boss, an' he sent me here to the stables."

Banty Doyle had heard of the Phantom, as had every other boy of his age. He might not have believed Chip so quickly had he not been in trouble, but Banty Doyle was in trouble—big trouble.

"All right, if the Phantom's come to help Miss Kane, then you can stay," Banty had given in. "But what are we going to do? With all the trouble we've had, an' now Red Star's been poisoned. But we've got to wait for Doc Craig. Miss Kane won't have any other vet near our horses."

Banty had been practically raised with horses. He was doing all he could for the sick animal, including trying to keep the colored boy, Slipper, quiet. Slipper's eyes had rolled when he discovered Chip's identity.

"But don't yo' go tellin' Doc Craig who yo' is," Slipper warned. "Ol' Doc ain't wantin' no Phantom or no other 'tective foolin' 'round. Yo' jest make believe yo' is on the bum an' lookin' fo' a place to sleep."

So they had come to that understanding when Doc Craig had arrived. The hunched old man had appeared ready to collapse with weariness when he had entered the stable.

But when he had discovered the plight of the horse, Chip Dorlan had never seen a man recover his strength so quickly.

"Where'd you get the oats from, Slipper?" he had demanded.

The scared colored boy said he had given Red Star a feed that was al-

ready portioned out in the box. Doc Craig had inspected the feed box quickly. He had mumbled strange oaths when he found that all of the oats had been licked clean by the horse.

"It's poison, that's what it is, but I don't know what kind," had been Doc Craig's verdict. "Banty, see that no one comes into the stable. Slipper, you watch the doors. And not one word of this is to get to Miss Kane until we know where we stand one way or the other."

Chip had watched and listened. He had caught snatches of the old man's jumbled, maddened speech and had wished mightily that the Phantom were there. For Doc Craig was muttering: "I swore I'd never lay hands on another man. But if I find out who did this, I'll kill him with my bare hands. Like I did that—"

It was right there that Doc Craig must have realized he was talking out loud. He snapped at Chip and Banty. He kept them hopping around, bringing cold water, finding clean straw and making sure that the feed boxes of the other horses in the stable were empty.

"THEY'LL have to go hungry until we make out what this may be," Doc Craig had decreed. "Banty, all I'm askin' is that you slip out an' bring me a pint of whiskey. I'm promisin' I'm not takin' much. Only I've got to have a little."

Chip Dorlan had been brought up the hard way in the slums of San Francisco, so he had known exactly what Doc Craig meant.

When darkness had fallen, Chip had managed to slip out for a few minutes. That was when he had called the Phantom. By that time he had learned that Banty Doyle had poisoned his hands and face while picking flowers from the hothouses in the middle field of the big race track to put in Sela Kane's box in the stands.

"Do you remember where you got the flowers when they poisoned you?" asked Chip.

"Sure," Banty had told him. "I saw some nice ones in one of the glass houses that's always kept locked. I pried open a window and went in. I saw a lot of funny flowers there, but I was after some roses, and I got 'em. My hands swelled up that night, an' Miss Kane had to hire Buddy Durkin to ride for me today."

It was shortly after this confession from Banty, that Slipper, the colored boy, had begun complaining.

Doc Craig had managed to bring the stricken horse around to breathing easier by this time.

"Doc, Ah's feelin' all itchy," the colored boy had moaned. "Mah ahms an' hands is hotter'n fiah."

Doc Craig had made a quick examination. He had rubbed some sort of lotion on the boy's hands, but Slipper's fingers and arms were badly swollen now.

Over and over again now, after those tense hours had passed, Banty begged Doc Craig to give Red Star something that would end his pain. Each time, Chip kept telling Banty, so Doc Craig could not hear, that the Phantom would be along soon.

Once Chip ventured to inquire, thinking of what the Phantom would want to know:

"Who made up the oats to feed Red Star?"

"I 'portioned it out," had been Doc Craig's reply. "An' I told Banty not to leave the stable for one minute."

At that, Banty Doyle burst into sobs.

"I was only out a couple of minutes, Doc," he pleaded. "I wanted to see Buddy Durkin get War Baby to the paddock all right. War Baby was missin' you, Doc."

Doc Craig had not mentioned War Baby, but now Chip heard him swear deeply.

"It's okay, Banty, okay," said Doc. "I should have been here. Miss Kane

and I were caught by the tide while we were fishing."

It was close to midnight now, and Chip Dorlan was bursting with impatience. He could not understand what had delayed the Phantom.

Suddenly the stricken Red Star lifted his head and made his first valiant effort to get his forefeet under him. Doc Craig caught the horse's nose, talking into his ear, uttering soothing words as he might have talked to a child.

Chip could hear Banty Doyle's teeth grinding together. Doc Craig seemed to be almost lifting the sleekly groomed horse to his feet, stroking the smooth neck and whispering, as if Red Star could understand what he was saying.

RED STAR'S shoulders lifted. His forefeet found a hold. His sides heaved with one, deep breath. Then the steel shoes slid out into the yellow straw.

Red Star fell heavily, his nose outstretched, his eyes rolling as if trying to tell Doc Craig and Banty Doyle that he had done all that a horse could do. The sleek sides became quiet.

Old Doc Craig stood there as stiffly as if his own life had gone out with Red Star's last breath. Banty Doyle cried out and buried his monkey face in his bandaged arms.

Red Star had lost his last race. Death had overtaken him in the stretch.

Chip was trying to comfort Banty. Slipper slumped to the stable floor and the pitchfork fell from his hands. Old Doc Craig held his pint bottle to his lips until every drop had drained out of it. Then he turned, looking at Banty and Chip.

"Don't tell Miss Kane until tomorrow, Banty," he said thickly. "Don't tell anyone. And that goes for you, too, kid, whoever you are."

Then Doc Craig weaved toward the main door and unbarred it. He turned back to Banty.

"You tell Miss Kane she won't see me again, Banty," he said. "I'll find the devil who has been doing this, and when I do he'll never need a judge or jury. You tell Miss Kane I said that, Banty, and she'll understand."

Chip Dorlan knew exactly what would happen. Doc Craig had been at the point of exhaustion hours before. He had drawn upon every ounce of reserve in his vain fight to save the poisoned Red Star.

A good half pint of fiery liquor was just now hitting his brain with the effect of so much dynamite. Chip caught Doc Craig as he fell.

He laid the stupefied man on a bed of straw. Then Chip barred the door again and sat down to wait for the coming of the Phantom.

CHAPTER IX

DEVIL TIGER CLAWS



QUITE aware that he was being trailed, the Phantom could almost feel cold, sinister eyes watching him. He passed the Plaza near the hotel. Fronds of the Royal palms rubbed with a dry rasping in the night trade

breeze from San Diego Bay.

The whispering sound seemed to convey an eerie warning, a threat of deadly danger which the Phantom dared not heed. For he was convinced that Muriel Havens' life at this moment depended upon him risking his own, in obeying with exact detail all of the strange instructions he had been given.

He was aware that Arthur Conroy, the gambling yacht owner and persistent admirer of Sela Kane, had seen him in the hotel lobby, although Conroy had been engaged in a violent encounter with Luke Owler. The tall, dark yachtsman was in the hotel entrance when Van reached the Plaza,

then Van saw him thread his way through traffic to the opposite side of the street. Conroy was shadowing him.

It was possible that the yachtsman might know of the others in the street whom Van was convinced had him spotted. Van considered this, but dismissed it. Something about Conroy's devotion to the beautiful, unpredictable Sela Kane made the Phantom like him, in spite of Conroy's dubious profession.

Van decided that Conroy wanted to know what the Phantom might be doing which would affect Sela Kane. Van attempted to pick out other shadowers.

He became sure of at least two figures across the street, not far from Conroy. And his quick eye saw a black sedan come slowly along as he reached the Plaza corner. But he did not see the white linen coat that might mark Smiles Downer, the laughing penny tosser.

"Smiles probably will not appear openly again, after his murder car failure," mused Van. "But I've got to see this through alone, whoever is after me. That mad tiger threat seems too fantastic to be real, but in every crime this mysterious Los Sandra murder group has been too ruthless and brutal for me to overlook anything now."

He might have contacted McDermott and the police before leaving the hotel, but the killers would know if the police made a move. They would have spotters watching the police as well as himself.

He reached a car he had rented when he had arrived in San Diego, an old but powerful coupé. As he slid under the wheel, he again saw the black sedan easing along. Then two men moved quickly from the sidewalk and got into the sedan.

From past visits, the Phantom was well informed concerning San Diego's famous hillside zoo. Next to the movie animal farm near Hollywood, this

outdoor zoo was probably the most extensive in America.

The vast hillside animal farm was a survival of the world exposition conducted by San Diego before the First World War. Many of the original buildings remained and now the spacious, forested grounds on the hillside overlooking the city and the bay had been converted into the animal farm. Jungle beasts of nearly every variety roamed over acres of rocky ground, restrained only by the high, tight wire fences.

VAN recalled Oak Glen Drive, a lonely road shaded by huge pepper trees, on the hill above the farm. At night there would be little traffic there. It was conceivable that brutal killers, headed by the one who had signed himself "The Masker," had gained secret access to the rocky den of the tigers. How Muriel Havens could be a prisoner in such a place, under the menace of death from a mad tiger, as the note to Van had indicated, must be discovered.

Van headed his coupé directly for the old exposition grounds. The black sedan held within a block of his car. He saw two other cars turn into the street behind him, pass the sedan and come on, to speed past Van. Plainly, the Masker was taking no chances. As other traffic thinned out, Van was aware that he was completely hedged in. And the Phantom could arrive at but one answer for his being baited into a trap through his apprehension for Muriel Havens' safety.

"They have little reason to spare Muriel or myself," he thought grimly. "Whatever the motive for all the ruthless killing, my coming into the case is regarded as a menace, and my removal is desired. There is no apparent logical reason for keeping me alive."

There was nothing he possessed that the killers might want. That note he had received had been a direct challenge to meet the Masker and his

mob alone, on the faint promise that Muriel Havens would be saved from a dreadful fate.

He was sure that the Masker knew of the murder evidence he had already obtained and passed along to Captain McDermott. So it would be simple—and safer—to remove him permanently than to try bargaining for his promise to forget the Los Sandra crimes.

As Van drove into a long, poorly lighted block no other cars were in sight except the black sedan that was trailing him, and the two cars ahead that he was sure carried other death shadowers.

The two cars ahead suddenly slowed. The black sedan speeded up. Van could see the outlines of buildings in the old exposition park. Pepper and palm trees shut in the street, and the widely spaced lights left the long block in darkness.

Van was sure now it was not intended for him to reach the rendezvous. That would have been better for him, for he would have been afoot in the dark lane that had been indicated. But he only shrugged his big shoulders and stepped resignedly on the brake as one of the cars ahead cut across his path and stopped.

There were few times that the Phantom was unprepared for an open fight, no matter what the odds, but now he could not fight. His only chance of reaching Muriel was to submit. He stopped his coupé and kept his hands upon the wheel.

Four men reached his car, two on each side. Apparently Van was looking into strange faces, but he knew these men were masked cleverly. For he identified two faces that might have belonged to well known movie actors. Thoughts of Thomas Chester, the noted mask maker, and a trustee of Los Sandra track shot into his mind. Skin masks such as these could have come only from an expert.

Then a fifth figure came up quickly before a word had been spoken.

Van saw the flashing white teeth and the broad face of Smiles Downer. Smiles was wearing a dark coat now.

"Okay, Phantom," Smiles said pleasantly. "You're being smart. The Masker never misses in his judgment of men. He was sure you would come along to meet the mad tiger."

THE Phantom did not speak. The three cars contained at least a dozen potential killers. Only Smiles Downer was without a mask. He had an air of mocking confidence, the same as he had shown when tempting Mexican kids to risk their lives for pennies. His smile was that of a sadistic torturer who thoroughly enjoyed being cruel.

"Leave your car here, Phantom," said Smiles. "You can get into the black sedan. You wouldn't believe it, with all of the coppers turning the town over to find her, but your friend Muriel Havens is in that car."

As Van got out of his car two masked men ran their hands quickly over his clothes. They took the heavy automatic from under his arm, and another one from his waistband. Then dipping into his pockets they found three small objects.

"The old tear gas," said Smiles. "Too bad you're not going into the tiger den. So you won't have any chance to cause trouble."

"I hadn't expected to see the tiger den," Van said calmly. "I take it I am to be conducted to the Masker?"

Smiles Downer laughed harshly. "Take it any way you want, Phantom, but the Masker himself will decide that. You're smart, but not smart enough."

It was as Smiles had said. When Van entered the closed sedan in which four masked men sat, he saw Muriel Havens seated on the floor. Her white face lifted, and her eyes glowed, but her mouth was tightly taped. Her arms were held stiffly to her sides. Even so, Muriel was trying to smile at the Phantom.

"Hello, Muriel," Van said. "Keep your chin up."

Smiles Downer pushed in beside him. Another man whose mask made him look like a famous screen villain laid a gloved hand on Van's shoulder. He was holding a small green branch.

"You've been smart so far, Phantom," Smiles growled, "so you'll know enough to keep quiet. That isn't an olive branch on your shoulder. If it happens to be brushed across your lips, you will be at the end of the ride. You found out enough today to know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," agreed the Phantom. "It isn't the first time I've come in contact with death camass."

Smiles grinned broadly. "It's too bad the Masker couldn't have your brains on his side. So I suppose you think there isn't a mad tiger?"

"I believe what I see," replied Van.

"You'll see quick enough," said Smiles. "Okay, boys! Let's go!"

Muriel's soft shoulder was against Van's knee. He knew she had tried to be brave for his sake, but he could feel the shiver that ran through her body.

The Phantom held himself rigid. The green branch in the masked man's gloved hand was almost brushing his cheek, but he was not forgetting the little track hustler who had died so quickly at Los Sandra. And he knew that small green branch was deadly.

The other two cars had dropped back. The sedan went through South San Diego, and was outside the city limits when a clumsy appearing trailer truck mounted on rubber tired wire wheels came from a side road. The driver of the truck stuck out a white hand.

SMILES DOWNER put out his hand in an answering signal. The truck moved on ahead of the sedan.

"You would think we were bringing



Van saw the girl silhouetted in the surface light
(CHAPTER XV)

a new nag to the track," said Smiles. "But you'd be wrong, Phantom. You don't believe in the mad tiger, huh? Well, there's one of the maddest tigers you ever saw riding up ahead. Perhaps you'll have a talk with the Masker before you meet that devil baby, and perhaps you won't even see the Masker."

The Phantom's nerves became as tense as strung wires.

So there really was a tiger! And the truck in which it rode, and the sedan carrying its intended victims, now were booming along the Pacific Highway headed for Los Sandra.

This was fantastic madness. However clever the mysterious one called the Masker might be, there was a strong hint of insanity in all of this.

Smiles confirmed Van's unspoken thought.

"The Masker likes his fun," he said. "He likes to put on the fancy trimmings when he takes a friend for a ride. And won't the special coppers watching Los Sandra be surprised when they look into one of the horse stalls in the morning."

Muriel made a moaning sound under the tape over her mouth. Her eyes glowed with a terror she was trying to control.

Smiles Downer laughed mockingly.

"Your girl friend isn't enjoying the ride, Phantom," he said. "She's seen the devil tiger's claws, and she's scared plenty, but she wouldn't be reasonable. If she had, Sela Kane might be taking this little ride. But the Masker was sure you would be glad to take Sela Kane's place."

"Your Masker had Sela Kane last night, didn't he?" Van shot at Smiles. "Why did he release her and Doc Craig, if he wanted them out of the way?"

Smiles cursed and slapped his knuckles across Van's mouth.

"You think too much for your own good!" he snarled.

Van knew then that his surmise had struck home.

The race-horse track turned off the main highway. It took a back road that skirted around the back of the Los Sandra stables. Van could feel the gloved hand still touching his shoulder. He stared straight ahead as the truck was passed by a pair of special guards.

CHAPTER X

DERBY HORSE MURDER



ROUSED by the tragedies of the day before, special deputies from the sheriff's office should be stationed in the darkness about the Los Sandra track. The Phantom took some faint hope from this, but his

optimism was very brief.

Two more guards back of the racing stables undoubtedly were tools of the Masker mob. The horse truck passed through. The sedan followed.

Van saw a huddled form lying near one of the stable walls. He made a quick guess that this might be one of the regular track policemen or a deputy sheriff, for it now seemed certain that the killers had moved into this blacked-out section of the track, and it was after midnight.

One of the masked men asked a question, and Smiles Downer answered.

"Jack Armstrong will pull out fast enough when he loses Faraway. And when Armstrong sees the company his stake horse will have, the Masker can just about call his shots from there on."

Van swiftly debated his chance to put up a fight now. But that gloved hand holding the death camass had never left his shoulder. He had one small weapon, the sleeve automatic that the search had failed to discover. Had it not been for that green branch he might have jammed the gun into

Smiles Downer and tried for a break. But even so, there would have been too many of the masked killers. And if he acted too quickly now, it would be almost certain death for Muriel Havens.

The horse truck was being turned. Its rear end was backed up to the narrower door of a stable stall. Two men got out of the seat. One carried a long, steel-pointed pole.

"Here's where we walk, Phantom," said Smiles. "Okay, boys, when we get out, take the sedan away. We'll scam by the usual route."

Muriel Havens' legs were free. She walked stiffly, staggering. Smiles Downer held her arm. Beside the Phantom, the masked man with the death camass kept his place. The touch of the leafy branch on Van's cheek chilled him.

He saw three or four other masked men moving back into the shadows. He tried to imagine what Smiles Downer had meant by "scramming by the usual route?"

He wondered how many phony guards and deputies were stationed around the race-track stables here, and thought of the stable help that should be with the horse Smiles had called Faraway.

"Faraway?" thought Van. "Jack Armstrong? That's the stake horse that's walking off with everything on the Coast. The horse is expected to make the Kentucky Derby. He's a hundred-thousand-dollar horse. If Faraway is to be killed, then the Masker is playing for the biggest kind of stakes."

They were close to a small door to the stable. It was near the backed-up horse truck. The two men from the truck were waiting. One man spoke.

"Are we waiting for the Masker, Smiles?"

"Now the Phantom has been hoping for that," said Smiles. "But the Masker decided it might be well to be other places tonight—where he's expected to be seen."

As Van walked on, his left arm twitched. He could feel the small automatic pressing his flesh. That gun could be snapped into his hand in the twinkling of an eye.

VAN groaned inwardly and waited. There was not one chance in a thousand of making a lonehanded fight now.

A masked man opened a small door in the stable wall. A horse whinnied inside. Then Van heard the throaty snarling inside the horse truck. The tiger! Hard claws rasped the wall of the truck.

"The devil baby's waking up," said Smiles Downer. "Okay, boys! You know the orders! Scatter and meet in the tunnel!"

Sheer desperation came to the Phantom then. Everything that had seemed fantastic, incredibly horrible, struck into his brain as the truth. It was the choice between death now or later. Van jerked his head to one side, away from the death camass. He snapped his left arm and the small automatic should have jumped into his hand.

Instead, it seemed as if the wall of the stable had fallen on the top of his skull. The blow came from the gloved hand that held the death camass. Undoubtedly the man had been ready for this moment.

Hard metal knuckles were in that glove. Their impact sent Van to his knees. The brass knuckles caught him again, this time at the butt of the ear. Even then, Van kept his senses, shooting out one foot that hooked the man's ankle.

It was a ju-jutsu blow, paralyzing in its effect. The man with the gloved hand jumped into the air and fell on his back. The automatic was still stuck in Van's sleeve.

Then the man by the truck with the steel-pointed pole swung it around with a blasting blow that impacted across Van's forehead. As he fell, Van had the sensation of pitching

into a black hole. It was the small doorway of the horse stall. . . .

After a time, dizzying pain swept across the Phantom's eyes. He opened them to see only a tiny electric bulb in the ceiling, but even that dim light seemed blinding for the moment.

A muffled groan turned his head. He saw Muriel Havens lying close to him. They were on a hard floor covered with a thin layer of straw. Something pounded the planks and shot a greater ache through Van's brain. It bounced him upright, to realize then that the pounding had been made by the shod hoofs of a big bay horse. The animal's head was lifted. He was pulling hard against a rope halter.

"Faraway!" breathed Van hoarsely, trying to bring himself to keener consciousness, though even subconsciously. Van knew this was the stake horse of the Jack Armstrong stable, the one slated for the Kentucky Derby.

Van's arms seemed numb, but he was able to move them slowly. Then his senses flashed back as swift memory acted like a hypodermic injection, and he came to life all over.

He saw a colored stableman lying on the floor of the stall. From the way the man was crumpled, Van knew he was dead.

Muriel's mouth was still tightly taped and her arms taped tight to her sides. But her eyes were closed, as if she were mercifully unconscious.

It all came to Van then, just as Faraway reared and snorted wildly. For then Van saw the tiger. The long, tawny form was moving just inside a doorway at the far side of the box stall. Beyond the doorway, Van could see the inside of a horse truck.

"Muriel!"

HE CALLED her name in desperation, for the yellow beast at the doorway was crouched, moving, and in that instant Van saw that there was no means of exit from this stall

except through the doorway that was blocked by the tiger, and a smaller doorway close beside it — the one through which Van and Muriel had been tossed into this death trap.

Muriel did not answer. Her face was like chalk. Van uttered a bitter imprecation as he saw a blue bruise over one eye.

"Smiles D o w n e r deliberately knocked her out," he gritted. "And by this time, he and the other killers are out of the way."

That was only a flash of thought, for the tiger was snarling, creeping, the great muscles of its yellow shoulders working. Faraway, driven by terror, squealed, lunged backward and snapped the halter rope. Van rolled just in time to miss the horse's pounding hoofs.

He threw his body across Muriel, trying to protect her. The panicked horse came between him and the crawling tiger. And in that split second, the mad tiger emitted a killer snarl and sprang. The race-horse screamed, a terrible, high-pitched sound of agony and fright.

Curved white claws shot into view. The awful, white fangs and the head of the beast appeared above Faraway's neck as the tiger struck. Van felt Muriel trying to move, but his eyes were fixed upon the frightful scene before him.

As claws and teeth crunched into the horse's flesh and bone, Faraway surged forward, to his knees. Once more the horse screamed, then he was down.

The Phantom had lived through many moments when death had been close. But never had there been a more terrible interval of time than these few seconds when jungle teeth cracked the race-horse's spine, and the Kentucky Derby candidate stiffened and kicked out feebly.

The electric light caught the rolling, yellow eyes of the mad tiger. With the blood of the kill bathing its ferocious jaws, there was a mixture

of white froth dripping. Van felt paralyzed, frozen, as if nerves and muscles could not respond to the command of his throbbing brain.

For the mad tiger dropped down. His yellow skin rippled over his shoulders and the threat of further death tore from his red throat. The beast's glowing eyes now were fixed upon Van and the girl.

In that split second, even as the tiger dropped into a new crouch, ready for another killing spring, it was amazing what flashed through the Phantom's mind.

Mad tiger? That froth on his gaping jaws? Yes, the beast was mad, more than merely infuriated and aroused by the taste of blood for a new kill. That tiger was drugged. He was a wild jungle beast, as berserk as a crazy native of some untamed jungle.

What fiendishly clever brain was behind this? The brain that would add to the normal killing instinct of a beast by use of a human murder drug? For Van was sure the mad tiger had been fed on meat doped with *cannibis indica*, a distillation of the murder drug *marihuana*. That tiger would keep on killing as long as any living thing moved before him!

CHAPTER XI

NEW HORSE TRAINER



WITH his thinking, the real greatness of the Phantom triumphed. That cold nerve, the instinct and training that had long made him invincible in the face of death now steadied him. He knew that only the bullet of a high-powered rifle had the force to stop the beast. Yet somehow, the small automatic from his sleeve was now in his hand, and it must not fail.

Badly aimed, the barest miss, and the bullets of the little gun could be as ineffective as peas blown from a child's toy.

The Phantom's hand whipped up, steadied. Muriel Havens moved and her muffled moaning turned Van's veins to channels of ice. If he missed . . .

The tiger's frightful snarl warned him. The mad beast's body seemed to shrink, then straightened for his killing leap. Van squeezed the small automatic trigger and held it.

Perhaps the first shot missed, for the tiger was in the air. The glowing eyes were moving targets. The curved claws that could rend flesh and bone like driving knives appeared to be descending upon Van.

Perhaps it was the second or third bullet that went to the mark. The only possible spot that was vulnerable. One of the murderous beast's glowing eyes went out.

Van whirled over, carrying Muriel's still form with him. The weight of the tiger struck his legs, and claws ripped away the cloth and skin underneath.

Then the mad tiger rolled over and lay quivering. The Phantom's cold nerve and his unerring aim had sent a death bullet into the tiger's brain through one glowing eye.

Van had Muriel Havens in his arms in one breath of time. He passed the slain horse and the tiger, and went through the small door of the stall into the reviving air of the night.

He heard men running, shouting. Drawn by the horse's screams and the shots, deputies and guards were converging upon the Armstrong stable. They were about to discover what would be heralded as the greatest of the disastrous tragedies of the Los Sandra track. Faraway, the stake horse pride of the well known Armstrong stable, was dead. The murder of that horse, grimly enough, would be considered a greater tragedy than the murders of humans who

had recently died in the series of Los Sandra crimes.

The Phantom carried Muriel into a shadowed corner. Van called to a running deputy sheriff who stopped short. Before the deputy could question him, Van was holding a platinum badge in the shape of a domino mask in his hand. It was set with tiny diamonds.

"The Phantom!" exclaimed the deputy instantly.

Few men who wore the shields of the law were unacquainted with that badge and what it stood for. When a lawman saw it, he knew he was face to face with the world's greatest detective.

Any request that came from the Phantom was heeded whenever and wherever it best served the law's purpose. And it best served the quick-thinking Phantom now to ask a favor.

"Sure, Phantom," said the deputy sheriff. "I'll get you and the young lady out in my car. I'll see that the proper kind of a report is made from the sheriff's office as soon as possible."

In the morning papers, the scare-head stories of the mad tiger killing of Faraway, the Armstrong stake horse, also informed the public that the noted Phantom and Muriel Havens, daughter of Frank Havens, the famous publisher, were in a private hospital. The stories expressed doubt that either victim could recover from the injuries inflicted by the same mad tiger that had killed the Armstrong stake horse.

* * * * *

"THE Armstrong horses are being pulled out," said Zing Dover, rumpling his shock of blond hair. "Half of the other owners are ready to quit. Fifty percent of the entries in today's cards have been scratched. It looks like the finish, but I'll hang on, even against my own better judgment."

The tall, bony-faced man facing

him in his office nodded. He was a dark-featured man whose blue eyes seemed as hard as agate. His clothes were rough, loosely worn, and had the mark of the stable about them.

"There is a public outcry against keeping the track open," said this man. "But from the crowds now in the stands, I judge that the remaining horses will draw the greatest gates ever seen on this Coast. As long as you can fight it through, I'll be with you."

Dover looked hard at the bony-faced man.

"It seems hopeless," he said. "Besides Faraway being killed, there was Red Star, the Sela Kane horse. I wanted Sela Kane to quit, but she refused. She's a fighter, that girl, and as long as she sticks, I'll fight it out. You want to meet the others now—Jim Saunders?"

He smiled a little as he said "Jim Saunders," for it was with that name that the Phantom had come back to Los Sandra during the afternoon of the day following the mad tiger tragedy.

"Right," said the bony-faced man. "And on your recommendation I'm taking over the trainer's job with Sela Kane. Who I really am is strictly between you and me, and those of the law who know about it. I want a free hand, that's all."

"You can have everything, Phantom, including my shirt, if I have a shirt left in the next few days," said Zing Dover. "If Los Sandra is closed, I lose everything I've worked for."

The Phantom nodded grimly, for he realized himself that he was something more now than the Phantom bent upon solving mysterious murder crimes. This was more deeply personal than any case on which he had ever worked.

Dick Van Loan, the Phantom, never would forget the minutes of frightfulness when he had faced the mad tiger. The minutes when his brain had been tortured with envisioning

what seemed about to happen to Muriel Havens.

Only his cold nerve, his steady hand and his fighting heart had prevented that. Now he was carrying out the plan he had formed the night before when he had left the scene of tragedy.

He was about to enter the employ of the inexplicable, beautiful Sela Kane. But first, he must meet those who were most closely associated with Zing Dover in Los Sandra.

The Phantom was introduced simply as a new trainer who was about to replace Farrell, the Sela Kane trainer, who had been among the first to succumb to a fatal heart attack.

Van studied Thomas Chester, meeting the noted mask maker of Hollywood for the first time. Chester was a dumpy little man, whose shrewd eyes were hidden in a mass of wrinkles. His hands were oddly at variance with his bodily structure, for they were long-fingered, marking him as the artist he was. And he was the owner of Outsider, the horse that had won when War Baby was killed.

"I'M THINKING, Zing, we're getting in too deep," said Chester, as the small track board assembled. "I've had an interest in the track because I like to see a couple of my own ponies run. But I never want to win another race after yesterday, with the things people are saying. But blast it, I happened to have a bet laid on War Baby against my own horse, believe it or not."

Chester glanced at the others, as if he were afraid he might not be believed. He appeared to direct his words more to Joel Seward, the movie actor trustee, than to the others.

Joel Seward obviously was no great credit to Hollywood, as a movie star. He had matinee idol and dissipated playboy written plainly in his features. Van had an idea that Joel Seward's make-up man probably was be-

ginning to have trouble with the face that was notable for the women's interest he had always attracted.

Van noticed, too, that Joel Seward's rather effeminate hands were nervous. The man looked as if he could use a stiff drink, and had taken several in the past few hours.

"I believe you, Chester," Seward said, with a laugh. "You've lost all your business profits on your own horses in the past two years. It would be like you to bet on the wrong horse the day one of your own came in a winner."

"How do you feel about going ahead with Los Sandra, Joel?" asked Zing Dover.

"Going ahead?" exclaimed Seward. "Certainly. Where would I entertain my friends if the track shuts down? It's the only way I can pay off some of my debts, having box reservations. The way Arthur Conroy's dealers have been taking me lately, I need some of the dough we're starting to pile up on this publicity."

Van could see that the actor was a vain man. He would stick to anything that would keep him in the public eye, even if it included crime publicity.

Zing Dover glanced at the dark-featured Senor Ruiz, the only one of the trustees Van had preciously met.

"I'd like to see Los Sandra stay open," said Senor Ruiz, with some hesitation. "But I don't want the kind of money coming through the gates today. It's blood money."

"If the track closes, Senor Ruiz," said Joel Seward, "what about your experiments? It would scarcely pay to keep up expensive hothouses. I thought you spent most of your time there."

The Spaniard's dark eyes clouded a little, but he laughed shortly.

"I would keep on with my experiments if the track closes," he said. "I can afford to keep one or two of the hothouses going. I'm using only one for my special plants, anyway."

Zing Dover nodded, his eyes on the Phantom.

"We'll try it awhile longer," he said. "I don't like this kind of money myself — but listen to that crowd. There isn't standing room. The mutuels are working overtime. And with all the scratches, there isn't a good race in the program. There are more than thirty thousand fans out there paying out good money with the morbid hope that they will see something happen that isn't in the cards."

THE Phantom's interest was directed at Senor Ruiz and Thomas Chester. As a horse trainer, he had taken no part in the conversation.

"I've heard talk down below the Border that some of the horse players here go in for ghost tips," he said now, hesitantly. "I was told there is a Senora Leona who produces spirits that put players wise to some hot ones."

He did not miss the quick, scrutinizing glances cast his way by two of the men. Senor Ruiz' dark eyes flashed as if Senora Leona might have been a personal friend. Thomas Chester turned all the way around to look at him more closely.

"It's that sort of rumor that gives the track a bad name!" Senor Ruiz declared angrily. "And when it comes along with all the unspeakable things that have been happening, it's a black eye for the whole racing game. If I thought there was anything to this Senora Leona stuff, I'd quit the board here and now."

Thomas Chester's eyes narrowed.

"Blast it all!" he exclaimed. "There might be something to it. This Senora Leona is a clever woman. Race tips or not, she can put on a real show in that ghost hangout of hers. Enough anyway to pay plenty for the best masks I can make to disguise her clients when she gives a seance."

"I thought the masks in her place had your mark on them, Chester," drawled Joel Seward. "I've had

friends up there myself, and I'm blessed if I didn't see a mask of myself on another fellow."

The Phantom arose. "Sorry I brought up the Senora Leona business," he said. "I just happened to have heard it."

Never had he been presented with stranger or more sudden cross angles than had come out of this little meeting of the trustees of Los Sandra.

First, he had learned that Joel Seward, the slipping movie star, had been losing heavy money with Arthur Conroy on his gambling yacht. He freely admitted he was willing to hang onto his small share in Los Sandra for the money to be had out of recent publicity.

Then Senor Ruiz was experimenting with flower culture in the race-track hothouses. He evidently intended to continue this, even if the track closed. And he had been quickly angered by reference to Senora Leona's supposed tips on the races.

And Thomas Chester frankly admitted making masks for Senora Leona and being well paid. Could it be possible that he had been as well, or better, paid for other masks—those worn by the mysterious killers?

Or could the masks the Phantom had seen on the killers have been the same as were worn by Senora Leona's clients?

The time had come, the Phantom decided, for him to look in on one of Senora Leona's seances. Somehow he would have to gain admission.

"Well, if that's all," Joel Seward said. "I think I'll run out to Conroy's yacht for the rest of the afternoon. And I'm passing up the games for fishing. Chester, you and Ruiz said you would like to have a crack at the shark fishing off the yacht. How about coming along?"

"Not a bad idea, Seward," said Chester. "Too many are asking me questions around here."

From the way Senor Ruiz looked from Seward to Chester it seemed

to Van that Senor Ruiz had an idea the actor and the mask maker might be thinking of something more than a go at the sharks which abounded along the coast.

"If you're sure it's to be fishing, I'll go along," said the senor.

It struck the Phantom that Zing Dover's three trustees were as odd a trio as he had ever encountered. He made up his own mind quickly. He had wanted to pay a visit to Conroy's yacht. Here might be his chance, and it might serve a double purpose.

"I've always wanted a chance at shark fishing," he said. "Mind if I invite myself?"

"Glad to have you," said Chester. "If you can handle one of the tigers we hook here, I might let you have a try at my horses."

Ten minutes later the Phantom contacted Chip Dorlan.

"Stay on the job, Chip," he instructed. "Tonight we're having a look at some of the Los Sandra hot-houses."

CHAPTER XII

THE SEA QUEEN



IN THE evening dusk the sea was smooth, with the darkening color of bluish-black crystal. But sharp lines of yellow phosphorescence ran through it like cutting knives. These were the pointed, triangular back fins of hungry young sharks.

Arthur Conroy's yacht, the *Sea Queen*, lay in the calm water just below the invisible line marking the Mexican Border. From its deck could be seen the bright lights blooming in the early night in the stables and buildings of the tragic Los Sandra race-track.

The Phantom, in his rôle of Jim Saunders, horse trainer, stood by the

rail of the long, luxurious white yacht. He could see through the doorway of a cabin where women and men laughed and chattered and jested.

There would come brief hushes. In these the metallic clicking of the ball in the roulette wheel could be heard. Ivory cubes rolled across the green baize dice table.

The "friends" of Arthur Conroy, fresh from winnings at the Los Sandra track, were here early because it was convenient to come out in launches from the track, instead of returning to San Diego, or running down to Tia Juana for dinner.

Meals were being served in the yacht saloon. A bar was busy.

The Phantom could see the end of the bar. He was especially watching Thomas Chester, rotund and sharp-eyed maker of masks, and Joel Seward, the dissipated movie actor. Chester and Seward, standing apart from others at the bar, were deep in conversation.

Senor Ruiz was somewhere on the foredeck of the yacht, supposedly still fishing for the small, fierce sharks that offered thrilling sport on light hand lines. The hungry tigers of these upper Mexican waters were thick about the white yacht, drawn by the bits of raw meat cast out as chumming bait.

Seward and Chester had quit fishing some time before and adjourned to the bar. The Phantom had caught a few small sharks himself, but now he had an idle line overside, because its big hook was without bait. Van in fact, was angling for other sharks—the human brand of killers that he felt were not far away.

He glanced along the side deck. Near the after rail, he saw the tall figure of Arthur Conroy. And beside Conroy was the regally beautiful Sela Kane.

The Phantom had met Sela Kane again within the past hour. He smiled grimly, recalling their brief conver-

sation. For Sela Kane had come out to the Conroy yacht because Zing Dover had told her that he had found a horse trainer to take over her stable, and that he was fishing on the yacht.

"You're Jim Saunders?" the girl had said. "Mr. Dover recommended you as a trainer."

"Yes, Miss Kane," had been Van's reply. "I came up from Agua Caliente, and learned that you had lost a trainer, and that you had been having some trouble."

"I wouldn't employ a new man now, unless he understood there might be more difficulty," Sela Kane said then. "I've lost a trainer, and two of my best horses have been killed, one poisoned last night. Do you still want to take on the job? Mr. Dover says you know your business."

"If the pay is right, I'll take the job," was Van's reply. "I'll get to the stable tonight and take charge, if you want it that way."

"I'll pay two hundred a week, and I would like you to take charge at once," Sela had said promptly. "My horses are in good shape now. I am not entering any of them for a few days, but they have been kept right. Doc Craig, who was once a leading veterinarian, is with me. Unfortunately he left the stable some time today, and I don't know that he will be back. I will drop by and talk with you some time tomorrow."

DOC CRAIG must have disappeared after he had talked to Chip Dorlan, Van thought. Chip had told him of Doc Craig's queer actions and his threat of the night before when Red Star had died.

So Sela Kane had left her new trainer, and she had been talking with Arthur Conroy ever since. From their gestures their conversation must be heated, something of an argument.

Conroy was holding an evening edition of a San Diego newspaper. The Phantom could guess what was being discussed, for he had seen that paper

and had read Luke Owler's column. One item in it, brief and punchy, was of the sort to make a man like Arthur Conroy see red.

The paragraph went like this:

The horse owner lovely whose troubles have become first-page news at Los Sandra no longer seems interested in a certain well known owner of a gambling yacht. She was seen today with the owner of Los Sandra track. Perhaps there are more golden returns from the five-million-dollar oval than from the gambler's white yacht. Anyway she is keeping her horses at Los Sandra in spite of the tragedies that have visited her stable. It is reported that the yachtsman is some burned up about it all.

"If Muriel sees that little piece of poison by Luke Owler, she will be breaking out of the hospital," Van thought wryly.

The newspapers had been right about Muriel. She was in the hospital—at least in a private sanitarium. Her condition was not critical, in the least, however, but she was recuperating from the shock of her encounter with the mad tiger.

"Owler is probably trying to get even with Conroy for that punch he got in San Diego," Van thought grimly. "Undoubtedly Zing Dover was with Sela Kane today, for he told her I was here on the yacht."

Van had an idea that Luke Owler would not be showing up where Conroy could get at him, for Conroy probably could be plenty tough.

Van's eyes went back to Joel Seward and Thomas Chester. The actor and the mask maker had withdrawn to a table, and they were facing Van. He could not hear what they were saying, but with his expertness at lip reading, every word they spoke was clear to him.

Chester was speaking of Senor Ruiz.

"Something has to be done about Ruiz," Van read on Chester's lips.

Seward nodded. He was watching the open doorway, as if fearing that Senor Ruiz might suddenly appear.

"There's more to that hothouse than just flower culture," said Seward. "And Senora Leona knows what it is. Ruiz spends most of his time in that hothouse. I've known him to be there at night, with no lights turned on."

"Senora Leona has been going too far," Chester said. "If she's mixed up with Ruiz, she isn't to be trusted. I understand that Silas Rudd has been trying to keep her from trouble with the police, along with some of the gamblers he fronts for. Between the track gamblers, the boys on this yacht and Senora Leona, Silas Rudd has a nice rake-off. . . . Umm, there he is now."

"Yeah." Seward scowled heavily.

"You think Zing Dover is about to break and quit?" asked Seward. "That would be awkward for both of us now."

"Dover has to keep going if we have to use persuasion," Chester said, with determination.

At this moment, big Silas Rudd stopped beside the table. Van slipped his audiphones into his ears. Their sensitive microphones could pick up a whisper at some distance. He edged nearer to the door.

"Hello, boys," he heard Silas Rudd say. "May I see you a minute, Seward?"

Joel Seward moved aside with Silas Rudd.

"Did you bring them?" Van heard

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"But Rudd's a good guy. He's helped me over some rough spots when I was in too deep. But he charges plenty when he puts out dough."

THIS was the second time the Phantom had heard of Silas Rudd. The San Diego policeman had mentioned Rudd as a mouthpiece for gamblers, and he had also said that Rudd was "a good guy."

Following the direction in which Seward was looking, Van saw a big man, with a good-natured, rugged face. Silas Rudd was talking to the croupier at the roulette wheel. Then Van saw Rudd move about, stopping to speak briefly with other gamblers.

Van's gaze went back to Joel Seward and Thomas Chester.

Rudd say. "I can't go deeper until you put them up, and I want them signed over."

Seward glanced around hastily. He slipped a small packet of papers from an inner pocket and gave it to Silas Rudd.

No one else save the Phantom may have seen that, but Van's quick, keen eyes saw that the outside paper of the packet had the green and gold coloring of some kind of bond.

"I'll send you the money in the morning, Seward," said Rudd. "It's a good business for me, but I wish you would quit it. A little more of this and you'll be finished."

Seward grunted, and went back to his table as Silas Rudd moved away among the players.

It was clear that Joel Seward must be deeply in debt at gambling. Silas Rudd must be doing the financing. Which gave Van one more angle to the puzzling Los Sandra case.

Thomas Chester was watching the deck doorway when Senor Ruiz appeared on deck, carrying a small shark hooked to his line. He laid shark and line on the deck and moved toward the cabin doorway.

Van appeared to be interested in something on deck, but he kept an eye on Seward and Chester. When they saw Ruiz, the actor and the mask maker arose and disappeared. Senor Ruiz turned and went back toward the foredeck.

A shore launch was coming alongside. To Van's amazement, Luke Owler was with a dozen men and women who were boarding the yacht from the launch.

As the pink-faced, baldish purveyor of movie and race-track gossip prepared to leave the launch, Van whipped his eyes toward Sela Kane and Arthur Conroy. Abruptly Conroy left Sela, with a quick word. She nodded and remained by the yacht rail.

Van was tense as Conroy came down the deck. He was not certain that Conroy had seen Luke Owler, but if he had there would be a clash. Conroy was still holding the newspaper that contained Luke Owler's slimy innuendo concerning Sela Kane and Zing Dover.

But apparently the dark-eyed Conroy had not seen the columnist, and was bent on some other business, for he turned and entered the cabin.

Often, the Phantom's keen intuition had warned him when events promised to reach a menacing climax. He felt that warning now as he saw Luke Owler, who had just stepped on deck, glance about furtively, as if he wished to avoid meeting Conroy. Van wondered at the man's temerity in boarding the yacht, but sensed that some-

thing of vital importance must have brought the columnist here.

Van recalled the masked face that had looked like Luke Owler in the car that had nearly cost him his life, and in which Muriel Havens had been taken away. Muriel had been unable to tell Van much about that. For she had said the driver of the car, who had looked like Luke Owler, had got out and left her with Smiles Downer and another man.

Since the episode of the mad tiger, when Smiles Downer had directed the masked mobsters, Smiles had vanished. Van had contacted Captain McDermott, and a watch had been kept for Smiles, but without result.

Luke Owler passed on around the yacht, moving toward the forward part of the vessel. There he disappeared. Of all those the Phantom had been observing, trying to obtain some hint of their possible connection with the Los Sandra crimes, only Sela Kane now remained in view.

CHAPTER XIII

DEATH SWIMS THE SEA



S ELA KANE stood beside the yacht rail, looking out at the sea. The Phantom wished he could know all that the tall, lovely girl had in her unpredictable mind at this moment. He would have liked to question her, but had to depend on other methods to learn why she and Doc Craig had apparently lied about having been wrecked in a sailing sloop. In the rôle he had assumed, Van was counting on possibly getting his information from Doc Craig.

What was most important now was to get a definite line on the leader of the Los Sandra killers, the man known as the Masker. And Van had a distinct impression that the Masker

was now aboard the *Sea Queen*, wearing the lifelike mask of Luke Owler.

In all his adventurous career, the Phantom had never been confronted by a greater number of confusing angles. Any one of several persons could be involved; any one of them might be the Masker himself. In his keen mind the Phantom methodically tabulated the possibilities, as clearly as though his findings on each man, so far, was jotted down on paper.

Thomas Chester made masks, and at least some of those masks were in doubtful use.

Joel Seward, the actor, was deeply in debt. He had an interest in big crowds being attracted to Los Sandra by any means, as long as owners would keep horses there to run.

Senor Ruiz was experimenting in one of the hothouses. And Banty Doyle had been poisoned while collecting flowers there. Added to this, Senor Ruiz was being suspected, by Chester and Seward, of collusion with Senora Leona, an interest which in some manner seemed to be interfering with plans of their own.

Zing Dover was the owner of a race-track estimated to be worth five millions, which might cease to be worth a dollar if the masked mobsters were crooking races, and making a drive on wealthy horse owners. But not much more could happen at the Los Sandra track before the racing commission would be cracking down on the plant, no matter what the Masker's purpose might be. And Van suspected that even more than that was troubling Zing Dover. No man could possess a more risky five millions in property than Los Sandra represented in the present circumstances.

All of it added up to a weird and confusing pattern of crime. And the Phantom had come a long way, had faced a double attempt on his own life, and yet had not made anything like direct contact with the Masker. The closest he had been was when

he had been taken prisoner by Smiles Downer and others of the masked mob.

Van saw that Sela Kane had not moved, but instead of approaching her he decided to walk around the deck. It might be well to see what "Luke Owler" was doing, and what had become of Senor Ruiz, Joel Seward and Thomas Chester.

Van rolled in his shark line and turned toward the foredeck, his back to Sela Kane. He had taken but a few steps when a shrill scream stopped him cold.

The scream was followed by a loud splash in the quiet sea. Whirling about, Van saw Sela's bright garments in the water. The girl disappeared in the smooth sea as Van started running. And though his eyes were on the water Van had a glimpse of the pink face and the baldish head of Luke Owler as the man disappeared through a cabin doorway not far from the spot at the rail where Sela Kane had gone into the sea.

IN THAT flashing instant Van's keen eyes told him again that what he had seen was a lifelike mask of Luke Owler's pink face. But he had no time for that now, as he reached the rail, ripping off his coat.

He was poised, ready to dive, when another figure raced up the deck and made a flying dive over. Van did not see the man clearly, but he was sure it was Arthur Conroy when he heard the man shout as he dived.

Ready to jump, watching for Sela to appear, Van was suddenly chilled. For he saw a vivid phosphorescent line streaking toward the spot where Conroy had just hit the water. The evening's fishing had attracted many hungry young sharks, but that zip-ping line of yellow fire along the water was made by a bigger and more ferocious tiger of the sea streaking for the kill toward Arthur Conroy. Van saw Conroy go under, seeking the girl he loved.

The phosphorescent streak was directly over where Conroy had disappeared. Players were rushing from the cabin, drawn by Sela Kane's scream.

The Phantom whipped a heavy automatic from under his arm in a lightninglike movement as Conroy bobbed up empty-handed. There seemed but inches between the attacking shark and the yachtsman's flailing arms.

That wild beating of Conroy's hands informed Van that the man could not swim. But he had unhesitatingly jumped to the rescue of Sela Kane. Now he was helpless before the attacking tiger shark, the most ferocious and deadly of all the monsters of the Mexican coastal waters.

The Phantom saw only the glowing streak made by the shark's dorsal fin. He could but guess the length and the position of the tigerish head and jaws. But he was faced with a double duty. Two must now be rescued.

Conroy was going under again when Van jumped. At the same instant, head downward, flying through space, he triggered his automatic. His timing and his aim were perfect, the result of years of constant training of physical powers and vision.

As he hit the water, he saw a sickly whitish body rise from the water, and a mighty tail threshing out with blows that could break an arm, a leg or a man's neck.

Conroy's head and shoulders came into range of the striking tail just as Van hit the water. Van went under and flashed to the surface with a shallow dive. Few swimmers in the world could beat the Phantom or had greater endurance, and that stood him in good stead now.

Van heard Conroy cry out in pain. He saw then that at least one bullet had wounded the shark vitally, for the big man-eating monster was on its back, floating. It was at least ten to twelve feet in length.

Van's supporting hand went under

one of Conroy's arms. Conroy was holding the other arm crookedly. It had been snapped by the shark's tail. Yet Conroy swore bitterly and pushed hard at Van's face.

"Let me go!" grated Conroy. "Save Sela! I'll be all right!"

"Easy," panted Van. "Quit fighting. Lie still and you won't sink. I'll get Sela."

CONROY quieted. Van's eyes roved over the calm water. He did not see the girl. Fear came that the monster shark had not been alone. The girl had not come to the surface.

Van dived, going deeply, eyes wide open. He was in some ten fathoms of water as he drove himself downward. That brought the sea's calm surface between him and the lights of the yacht.

Only in that way could he find Sela Kane. In the watery darkness, he *had* to get her silhouetted in the surface light. Then he saw her. She was struggling, her arms were entangled in a mass of floating kelp. She was near the surface, but the weeds had hidden her.

As Van drove toward her with sweeping strokes, he saw the shape of a narrow speedboat appear around the stern of the yacht. Its hull cut the water, driving toward the kelp.

The stream of the whirling propeller drove foaming water into Van's face. He was forced to dive again, swimming to one side to avoid the boat. The propeller foam blinded him for a moment, and all he could do was come to the surface.

Conroy was clinging to a life preserver that had been tossed overboard. Van heard the speedboat stop then start again. He expected it to turn back toward the yacht. But its motor roared and it was rapidly going away.

Van swam quickly to the floating weeds but saw at once that Sela Kane had been picked up. He could see the speedboat only vaguely now, but

could make out several figures in its cockpit, crouched shadows.

The Phantom helped Conroy reach the side of the yacht and the gangway.

"What became of Sela?" demanded Conroy.

But Van, moving up the steps of the landing way, did not have time to reply. Dripping from the sea, he wedged aside men and women who were crowding the deck as others now assisted Conroy.

One of Conroy's arms hung limp, broken.

Van believed it might be of little use, but he glided along the yacht deck, reaching the doorway where he had seen the face of Luke Owler disappear, the face that he was sure was a mask.

Everyone aboard the yacht seemed to have converged upon the gangway where Arthur Conroy was cursing bitterly and shouting for a launch to go after Sela Kane.

The afterdeck, beyond the cabin housing, was shrouded in semi-darkness. There were lounging chairs there, and it was a favorite spot for youthful visitors.

Van caught a glimpse of a quick-moving, furtive figure up near the afterdeck capstan. He darted toward the spot, but the man was already passing around a life-boat and doubling back to the starboard deck, now deserted. For a moment or two Van was uncertain just where the man disappeared. Then something delayed him another ten seconds or more—a white object that evidently had been hurriedly pushed under the canvas over the life-boat.

PULLING it out, Van saw that it was a rubbery, skin mask—the pinkish-colored, baldish-topped mask of Luke Owler's face. Thrusting it into his shirt front, Van listened for possible movement of the man who had disappeared. But Arthur Conroy's shouting, the creaking of a boat

being lowered, and the excited voices drowned out other sound.

As the Phantom glided around the corner of the side deck housing his foot struck something slippery that sent him to one knee. It was the body of a small dead shark. And then Van looked in amazement at the upturned face of a man sprawled upon the planks near the yacht rail.

The man was Joel Seward, the noted actor. His mouth gaped open and his eyes stared at nothing.

Joel Seward was dead. Apparently he had just fallen and had died almost instantly. There was a bloody spot on the back of Joel Seward's hand.

Van looked from that deep, punctured wound back to the body of the dead shark. The sharp spine of the shark's dorsal fin was reddened. There was no doubt but that it had pierced Joel Seward's hand. It had gone all the way through. And when Seward's body was found it would seem that the actor had fallen upon the shark's body, striking his hand on the fin spike.

"A shark's fin is poisonous, but not that deadly," Van thought grimly. "Seward could have had a bad heart, and the shock might have killed him, but that isn't likely."

He heard some of the yacht's visitors coming along the deck and acted swiftly. Using the knife with which he had been cutting shark bait earlier, Van sliced the bloodied fin from the shark's body.

He thrust the fin with the mask inside his shirt. Then he heaved the small shark's body over the rail. When he moved quickly and silently away, entering the first door leading into the gambling cabin, he believed he had been unobserved. Which was what he wished, as he meant to keep it secret, for the present, that he was the Phantom.

Behind him, Van heard women screaming and men swearing. They had come upon Joel Seward's body.

He was thinking fast. It appeared obvious that Joel Seward must have been using the Luke Owler mask. Undoubtedly he had been trying to hide the mask when Van had startled him into putting it into the life-boat and hurrying away.

On the surface it looked as if Joel Seward had fallen upon the body of the shark, sustaining his death wound. But the Phantom was convinced that Seward had died of quick acting poison, just as others had died. The poison had been on the shark's fin. He would soon make sure of that.

CHAPTER XIV

MYSTERIOUS SENOR RUIZ



ENTERING the long, luxuriously fitted gambling cabin, the first persons Van saw were Senor Ruiz and Thomas Chester. The two trustees of the Los Sandra track were separated by a dice table. But it struck

the Phantom they were eyeing each other as if either or both might be possessed of guilty fear.

Van's eyes dropped to the hands of the two men. Both Ruiz and Chester still showed unmistakable evidence of having been fishing for sharks. Both had washed their hands, of course, but the dried, white slime from the sharks they had handled was still evident to the keen senses of the Phantom.

This might have meant nothing, for both men had been fishing, but Van recalled Senor Ruiz carrying a shark on his line. And Joel Seward had died from deadly poison placed upon a shark's fin!

Van glanced up, to see Silas Rudd talking with a well dressed gambler. And Van read Rudd's lips.

"I will see you then at Senora Le-

ona's for the seance after midnight?" was what Rudd was saying.

The gambler nodded.

"It may have to be her final scene," Rudd's lips shaped, "if I am to keep her out of serious trouble."

Van filed that information away for his future action. His thoughts came back to the murder of Joel Seward. It seemed certain that Joel Seward was cleared of suspicion of having been the Masker. And he had been cleared of his own murder.

"He could have come upon the man with the Luke Owler mask who pushed Sela Kane into the sea," Van thought. "Seward might have seen that man hide the mask, and taken it. When he was alarmed, he feared being caught with it in his possession, so put it in the life-boat. But the man who had attempted to kill Sela Kane followed, believed he had been identified, and for that reason he killed Seward."

That, concluded Van, was the probable pattern.

The gambling saloon was filling. Arthur Conroy came in, still raging, his dark face contorted with the agony of his cracked arm.

It was at this moment that Luke Owler himself stepped into the cabin. The pink-faced columnist wore a sardonic smile as he looked at Arthur Conroy. Perhaps he considered he was safe enough, now that Conroy had a broken arm.

But he was mistaken. Oaths dripped from Conroy's lips. He thrust other men aside, jumping toward a table at the side of the cabin. He had a drawer opened and had whirled with a mean-looking automatic in his good hand before anyone could interfere.

The Phantom never acted more swiftly. He made a long running tackle, striking Conroy at the knees with his shoulder and knocking him down as the gun, leveled at Luke Owler, exploded.

The bullet went wild and Van

twisted the weapon from Conroy's hand.

"Dont' be a fool, Conroy!" he commanded. "Listen to me! I tried to rescue Sela Kane and helped save your life. I don't want to see you throw it away by becoming a murderer."

Owler had dropped flat on the floor. All of the pink had faded from his round face. There was no longer a mocking smile on his lips.

Van meant exactly what he said. He had acted to save Conroy from becoming a murderer, more than to save Luke Owler. He did not, of course, want to see Owler killed, but after the insults to Sela Kane he had read in "The Owl Blinks" column, he would not have interfered if Owler had faced only a beating.

OWLER'S self-confidence came back quickly, when he saw that Conroy was restrained.

"I expected some courtesy on your yacht, Conroy," he said. "Especially when I came to warn you that I had heard you might be the next victim of the Los Sandra killers. I was called on the phone by an unknown tipster who said he had attended an afternoon seance conducted by Senora Leona, and that there was a tip-off that your yacht is to be attacked by the mob headed by a man who calls himself the Masker. It may be that what has just happened could be the attack that was meant."

"The devil with you, Owler!" Conroy exploded. "I don't want any warning from you! Perhaps you heard it as you say you did, but perhaps you know more about it from some other source! I've heard *you* have been seen with masked men!"

"That's gratitude, Conroy," the columnist snapped. "I've also heard about this leader of the killers who has been wearing a mask resembling me. That's another reason I'm here." He turned toward Thomas Chester. "Possibly you would know about the

mask, Chester?" he said. "You told me you had made masks of my ugly pan as a favor to some friends who wanted to run a gag on me by wearing them at night clubs where I make the rounds."

"That's correct," assented Thomas Chester. "I made four masks of you, Owler—for a gag, as you say. But I don't know what became of them."

How much farther the controversy would have gone could not have been told, but a sudden stop was put to it when a young physician came in with a grave face.

"Joel Seward is dead outside, of a heart ailment," he said. "He had a fall on the deck and died."

That was what Van had expected. In the hubbub that was aroused by the blunt announcement, a launch returned to the yacht after a wide search for Sela Kane. The speed-boat which must have picked up Sela had disappeared.

The Phantom decided then that Sela Kane had not been pushed overboard to die. Some urgent reason had arisen for the abduction of the girl horse owner, and this dramatic means of kidnaping had been planned, so that if Sela failed to return, it might be thought that she had died in the sea.

During the excitement the Phantom faded from Arthur Conroy's yacht at the first opportunity. He wished to avoid contact now with law officers who would be flocking to the vicinity of the yacht, for not even to them did he want to reveal his Phantom identity—yet.

There was considerable complication to lawful inquiry into the death of Joel Seward and the disappearance of Sela Kane. The American county sheriff's office was without jurisdiction below the Mexican border, and the Mexican policemen from Tia Juana were about the only available law officers legally responsible. And the Phantom was quite well aware that it would require some effort to in-

terest Tia Juana officials in the affairs of the American yacht. Tia Juana had too many gambling troubles of its own, and murders in the red-hot Border town were everyday stuff.

IN FACT, the Phantom realized that almost full responsibility for the solution of the Joel Seward murder and the rescue of Sela Kane—if she were still alive—rested upon his own shoulders. The FBI might step in, on the theory that Sela Kane might have been abducted and brought back into California. But it would be some time before the FBI could act.

It was only a short time before the Phantom knew that Joel Seward *had* been murdered. For after leaving the yacht he quickly went to work with the laboratory material he set up in a corner of the Sela Kane stable.

Chip Dorlan was with him, and little Banty Doyle was screwing his

the hothouse in the middle that is always locked and has a sign to keep out."

"Would that be the same hothouse in which Senor Ruiz conducts experiments with plants, Banty?" asked Van.

"Yeah," said Banty. "He chased me away from it twice. . . . Say, maybe Doc Craig is hiding out there! He was always slipping away at night and going some place with Senor Ruiz. He would be away all night sometimes."

"You have seen him go to the hothouses at night, Banty?"

"Yeah. And he'd always come back looking like he'd been digging a ditch or something."

Van sent Chip Dorlan and Banty outside while he conducted another little test. He produced one of his high-powered microscopes from his body-fitting make-up case.

Next Month: **THE PHANTOM** in

monkey face into knots trying to understand what the Phantom was doing.

"Poison was on that shark spine which pierced Joel Seward's hand, Chip," said the Phantom. "It is of the same virulent vegetable type used in the killing of that track hustler. It is a strange and powerful combination, and is new. Chip, we are about to pay a visit to one of the hothouses. Perhaps Banty Doyle knows where he had his hands poisoned."

Banty Doyle, with furrowed tear marks in the dirt on his cheeks looked much like some little monkey that had lost its way on a busy city street. Sela Kane, whom he adored, was missing. Two of his beloved horses were dead. And Doc Craig had also disappeared after sleeping off the stupor that followed the poison death of Red Star.

"Sure," said Banty. "I went into

Placing the lifelike skin mask of Luke Owler's face under it, Van examined it minutely inside and out. Suddenly he peered more closely at an inside corner of the mask near the holes that fitted over the eyes. Then he carefully removed two small particles. These he placed securely in a bit of gauze paper, putting the paper inside his make-up case.

The Phantom closed his laboratory equipment thoughtfully. He stood with his eyes closed, as if envisioning something that was imprinted upon his brain. And he was doing just that—recalling faces. They were the faces of persons he had recently encountered. One name after another was whispered by his grim lips, beginning with that of Sela Kane and ending with that of Arthur Conroy.

"It seems incredible," he finally muttered. "But that one face could be none other than that of the Masker.

It's clever, it's ruthless and it calls for the cold-blooded nerve of a killer."

A few minutes later, Van directed Banty Doyle to get some sleep.

"And if Doc Craig should return, say nothing about Sela Kane having a new trainer," Van admonished the little jockey.

With Chip beside him then, he set out for his dangerous exploration across the darkened racetrack.

The Phantom was adept at walking in the shadows. His gliding gray figure blended with the white dust of the Los Sandra track as he crossed to the inner rail.

Chip Dorlan, who accompanied him had become almost as expert at moving silently and unseen.

Soon they had reached the middle field, and were crossing the grass toward the plots of flowers that were a feature of the big racing oval. Ahead of them, the low glass roofs of

The two men were speaking in low, guarded tones. Van took from his pocket his two small audiphones that would bring whispers from a considerable distance, and slipped them into his ears.

AT ONCE he heard one softly modulated voice say:

"We've got to work fast. The way things are breaking, we must get to the stuff quickly, or the law will shut us out."

Van's senses responded to that voice. Senor Ruiz was speaking.

"Right," said another voice that the Phantom identified as the voice of Doc Craig, though he had heard it but once. "But now I've only one object in view. I'm old and done, but I can do Sela this one great service. When you have once killed, Senor, another death doesn't matter. I had hoped I might live out my life in peace, but

THE BLACK GOLD KILLERS

the hothouses gave back a dark, gleaming reflection of the sky.

The row of hothouses was built like sunken gardens. The glass roofs were only a few feet above the ground. This had been planned to prevent the buildings obstructing the spectators' view of the back stretch during the races.

The hothouses were only black shapes as Van and Chip pushed through fragrant flower plots. They were close to the middle house when Van caught Chip's shoulder and pressed him quickly to the ground.

"Quiet," he whispered. "Watch. I hope we were not seen as we crossed the field."

Apparently they had not been seen by the two shadowy men who had suddenly appeared. These men had approached from the opposite side of the race-track, that nearest to the shore of the bay,

that is not for one with blood upon his hands."

There was the rasping of a lock, then a flashlight showed briefly. Its circle of light caught the gray-stubbed face and the gray hair of old Doc Craig. The door of a hothouse opened, then the face was gone.

Strangely, no light appeared inside the hothouse. The smallest illumination could not have been missed by the Phantom, waiting, with Chip crouched beside him. For the roof and the sides of the low structure were of glass.

With infinite caution Van led the way to the hothouse door. A sign read, "Keep Out—Danger." The door was unyielding. The matter of a lock however was a minor difficulty to the Phantom's skilled fingers.

He opened the door slowly, cautiously, listening. There was no sound. Long tables contained rows of

boxed and growing plants. A warm, earthy odor filled the place.

"Under no circumstances touch any plant, Chip," he whispered. "Stay down between the tables. We are surrounded by death, that may require no more than a touch."

VAN could hear Chip's breath pulled in as the slight youth crept along behind him.

In the middle of the hothouse, which was no more than forty feet long by fifteen wide, Van paused, listening with the delicately tuned audiophones. There was no sound, no hint of any other human presence.

Van came to his feet slowly, alert, his eyes searching all of the shadows. A mouse could not have moved in that confined space without him hearing it. The door was the one through which they had entered.

At last the Phantom produced his pencil flashlight. And as its slender beam probed all of the corners, Van was set for instant action.

In less than one minute he knew that neither Doc Craig nor Senor Ruiz were in the hothouse. They could not have passed out through the door and every window was intact.

Van's light flicked over the various boxed and potted plants. It picked out a number of metal containers.

"The deadly poisons employed by the masked killers are being produced right here in the middle of the Los Sandra race track," he told Chip in a low voice. "There is the common poison ivy, but the strength of its poison has been increased many times by the use of *colchicine*, itself a poison, even if it is employed to grow bigger and better vegetables."

"Then Banty Doyle must have run onto the poison ivy?" whispered Chip.

"Or that Christmas rose there, or the delphinium, or the *hydrastis canadensis*," said Van, running an eye over the plants. "There are bloodroot, *veratrum veride*, red baneberry and

a dozen other poisonous plants. It would seem that Senor Ruiz has adopted means of administering death as his hobby."

Never before had the Phantom encountered such an array of natural poisons. That these should be here at Los Sandra was the most astounding part of it.

"But where could Doc Craig and Senor Ruiz have gone?" questioned Chip.

Van was flicking the light over the foundations of the several tables containing poison boxes. There seemed to be no break anywhere. Suddenly Chip gave a hoarse, choked cry.

"Phantom! Phantom!"

Van whirled, his flashlight slicing around.

"So the great Phantom isn't dying in a hospital," said a heavy, mocking voice. "Thanks, kid, for the information. It seemed strange, too, that Sela Kane had hired a new trainer."

Smiles Downer stood there. His hands moved and made a jingling sound. He was idly running pennies from one hand to the other.

Van may have felt dismayed at the unveiling of his Phantom identity, but Chip Dorlan's slip could be excused. For two masked men were holding Chip. Their faces were those of a pair of the best known movie stars.

As quick as the Phantom was, his lightning hands could have whipped his guns into action. But any quick movement might mean Chip's death, for one of the masked men held a knife with its point almost touching Chip's throat.

"Walk this way, Phantom," advised Smiles softly. "The kid will die quickly of the poison on that knife, if you resist. Just a touch through the skin, not enough to show, and he's out of circulation. I thought the stories about you were hooey, and after what happened on Conroy's yacht tonight, I was sure you were there."

The Phantom judged the knife at Chip's throat probably was poisoned, from any one of Senor Ruiz' deadly plants, made more quickly fatal by the addition of the poisonous *colchicine* during growth.

Van looked at a long table that had swung back. A yawning hole appeared where the table had stood. He realized how Senor Ruiz and Doc Craig had disappeared.

"Be careful of that death knife," he said quietly. "I will not resist."

Smiles laughed mirthlessly.

"Drop your hidden guns, Phantom," he directed. "We have been keeping an eye on this kid, Chip Dorlan, sure he would lead us to you."

As the Phantom reached the open hole and saw rough steps leading downward, he knew then what had been meant by "the tunnel" he had heard mentioned the night before as a means of escape for the masked men.

CHAPTER XV

STUBBORN AS DEATH



HARMING, beautiful Sela Kane was an essentially modern young woman. She was, however of the strong-willed type. She was unpredictable, as the Phantom had discovered in his brief acquaintance with her.

Sela Kane was as courageous, too, as she was lovely. Pain and the threat of death were alike wasted upon her. Both were being wasted now.

A small circle of masked men stood around her. She was firmly restrained by ropes lashed about an upright, worm-eaten wooden column that might once have been the mast of a ship. A swinging gasoline lamp lighted an arched, tunneled space that appeared to have been worn through solid black rock by the wash

of sea water, or by some hidden spring that kept the curving wall slimy and damp.

One of the masked men spoke in a muffled tone. He wore a mask that was a perfect duplication of Luke Owler's pink face and baldish head. He alone of all the maskers was cloaked in a black robe that fell over his shoulders.

But that robe did not quite conceal the fact that one arm was supported in a sling.

Sela Kane's eyes were unfathomable as she stared at this masked man. Her golden hair was damp, framing her clear-cut, lovely face like a shining halo.

"You refuse then to leave Los Sandra, and to sign over the papers as requested? You insist you will not drop all other business than your horses that have kept you here?"

The muffled voice of the robed figure was demanding. But there was scorn in Sela's face. Scorn, and defiance; contempt for this masker who would employ such force against a defenseless woman.

Her only reply was the derisive curling of her lips. The muffled voice spoke again with quick anger.

"So you do not believe what will happen? Let her have an example. Just across those round, white arms."

One masked figure, with gloved hands, stepped forward. He slapped what appeared to be a long branch of a small tree across Sela Kane's rounded arms, bound stiffly by the rope.

She made no outcry, but the instinctive shudder that went through her was indication that the contact with the branch must have been like the application of a red-hot iron. Ugly red welts instantly appeared on her white arms.

The plant might have been stinging nettle, for Sela Kane's arms immediately began swelling. It was as if she had been stung by bees.

"And that," said the masked man

who looked like Luke Owler, "is only a sample. You have one more chance. The next treatment will be a branch that will poison you and leave permanent scars. Do you still refuse to sign as we direct, and then leave Los Sandra? Will you or will you not inform us where all of the papers are being held? And will you use your influence to compel Arthur Conroy also to sign?"

"I refuse everything," Sela said calmly, although the words slipped through clenched teeth. "I will die before I accede to cowardly force. If I sign, it would appear that the papers were exchanged in payment for gambling debts."

"Exactly," said the Masker. "That is what it will be, the payment of legitimate debts. No one could ever prove otherwise."

"You cannot trick me," defied Sela. "Probably you intend to kill me, anyway."

"It will not be as easy as that. You will not die. We will make sure of that. Also we will make sure that any attempt to prove you signed papers under coercion will be publicly laughed at because of other complications. . . . Boys, that other plant."

A BRANCH with darker leaves brushed across the rounded, white arms. The girl strained against the binding ropes as the slow angry welts that marred her beautiful skin produced almost instant blisters.

"Even a mob rat wouldn't do this," she said scornfully. "But I will not sign over to anyone. You can't gain what you are seeking. You had me completely fooled until now, but if I live I will make known what you tried to compel me to do. I will find out who you are, for undoubtedly you are wanting me to give up the papers to some innocent party, then you would take over in your own way."

The voice from behind the Luke Owler mask was deadly.

"One more chance only," it said.

"Then the next kiss of the poison will be across that face which has made you glamorous. It will leave it forever shriveled and scarred, and when it strikes the lids of your eyes, you will no longer have sight. That is the way we will free you."

Sela Kane's firm chest heaved with her indrawn breath. But her red lips remained tightly together.

That seemed to drive the Masker to fury. "Let her have it!"

Sela's head was thrown back. She was looking squarely at the waving branch of blighting poison when, from the darkness beyond the circle of light given by the swinging gaso-line lamp, came a heavy, quick voice of intervention.

"Wait, Masker! Look who we have here! Sela Kane has been smarter than we thought! She put a new trainer in her stable! And who should he turn out to be but the Phantom!"

As the Phantom saw Sela Kane then, never in all of his career had he experienced a deeper, a more bitter anger. He took in at a glance the manner of torture that was being inflicted upon the girl.

He had heard the Masker's final threat to mar Sela's face for life. And now he spoke quickly, as he saw the poison branch held by the torturer who obeyed the ruthless Masker.

"That poison will do exactly what he says it will, Sela," said the Phantom. "So if what is wanted is worth less to you than your beauty and your sight you will have to obey."

"So you are the Phantom," said Sela Kane, seeing the man she had hired as Jim Saunders. "If I had been smart, I might have known it. They can kill me, but I cannot be compelled to obey a yellow coward who hides behind the face mask of another man."

Van was pushed forward. He saw the Masker then, in the lifelike face of Luke Owler. He saw the shape of the broken arm under the draped black robe. And Arthur Conroy had

suffered a broken arm in his encounter with the tiger shark.

The Masker gestured Smiles Downer to one side. Their voices mumbled. Van could not catch the words, even with his audiphones, which were still in his ears.

Chip Dorlan was beside Van, and both were pushed into a niche in the curved, black wall. One gloved masker still held the menacing poison knife close to Chip's throat.

The Masker and Smiles Downer turned to them.

"Well, this changes the set-up some," said the muffled voice of the Masker. "You are clever, Phantom. Even on the yacht, when I was close to you, I did not suspect you were other than a horseman, even after you had risked your life to try and save Sela Kane from the sharks."

Van spoke quietly, studying the Masker's figure.

"You are a clever man yourself, Masker," he said. "You might even win what you have set out to achieve."

The Phantom was shooting in the dark, for he was still uncertain what the real goal of the masked killers might be. He knew now, however, that it directly concerned Sela Kane, and that she must hold the key to the mystery.

So it had to be something more

than the mere fixing of races at Los Sandra. Perhaps it might involve blackmail extortion, but even that did not quite appear vast enough for the ruthless murders, the cleverly concocted plot that threatened at any time to close the racing oval.

"You are smart, Phantom, but you have no clue to what our purpose may be," the Masker said, no doubt in his voice. "So your little trick of speech is wasted. We will proceed with Sela Kane. For once you are helpless, Phantom. Any move you might make will only mean the death of Chip Dorlan, and the permanent disfigurement of Sela Kane. So we will—"

Once more Smiles Downer interrupted.

"Here he is, Masker," he said. "If I know Sela Kane, she will agree with our plans quickly now. I sent the men to bring him."

Firmly held by a masked man, little Banty Doyle was pushed into the light. The ugly Banty cried out when he saw Sela.

"Miss Kane! I don't care what happens to me now, Miss Kane! I thought you were dead!"

A brutal hand slapped Banty so hard he fell. A trickle of blood ran from a cut on his forehead, but his

[Turn Page]

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ugly little face was lifted, and his eyes were still fixed upon Sela Kane with worshipping wistfulness.

"You brutal, filthy dogs!" Sela Kane cried out, her steel will yielding at last to this thing that was beyond any agony or punishment she herself must endure. "Let Banty go!"

Smiles Downer clinked a little stream of pennies from one palm to the other. His big shoulders shrugged and a smile of intense enjoyment was upon his broad face.

"At last we have an answer," said the Masker. "All right, Sela Kane, you are about to see this ugly monkey of a Banty Doyle made even uglier. But it will be worse than that. Once his face and eyes have been treated, Banty Doyle will never ride again. For he will be blind and helpless. Bring over the plant."

"No—not that!" Sela cried again, as the gloved torturer moved toward Banty Doyle.

The Phantom knew then that whatever was being demanded of the lovely Sela Kane she would do. And once more she cried out.

"Yes, I will go away! I will sign the papers! Only spare Banty! I'll take him with me! I'll never speak!"

In his surroundings the Phantom fully realized the hopelessness of his position. Already he had seen that this tunnel into which Senor Ruiz and Doc Craig had come looked to be impregnable. Also he had observed that only part of the tunnel through the rock was created by Nature. He had seen walled spaces immediately under the Los Sandra hothouses, and those walls of stone had been built long ago. They had the appearance of having been the deeply sunken foundation for some sort of building.

Van's quick idea was that the walls must once have supported a Spanish *hacienda*. For the stones had been plastered together with 'dobe mud. So the foundation must

have been laid before the use of cement in America.

That had brought him to Senor Ruiz. The Spaniard who had been experimenting with the world's most poisonous plants, adding to their toxic potency. Senor Ruiz who had wanted to keep this hothouse even if Los Sandra race track were abandoned.

And this was the tunnel used by the mysterious masked killers. A cool, salty breeze was touching Van's face, which gave him the idea that the rocky tunnel must run to the sea, nearly a mile away.

That brought other conjectures to him. The tunnel might reach the sea below the Mexican border, or above it. But no more ideal entrance could have been devised for smuggling.

THERE was Arthur Conroy's yacht lying off the shore. It was supposed to be there for gambling profit, but could it be there for other reasons? Again Van glanced at the broken arm under the Masker's robe.

But as his thoughts juggled with crime motives as a matter of habit that could not be broken under the direst circumstances he was tense. For he was sure that death soon would be meted out to himself and the other prisoners.

No amount of yielding by Sela Kane, or promises by the Masker could make it safe for them to be freed. Yes, in the face of death for Chip Dorlan first, then for the others, Van was confronted with the necessity for sudden, driving action. Some one of them might be saved. The chance must be taken. But since his weapons had been taken, even his sleeve gun, he could not see where he would have one chance in a thousand.

Again Sela Kane was crying out, pleading. Then Banty Doyle uttered a scream of pain. Van saw a poison branch whipped across the little jockey's face. And, like an echo to that scream, Van knew that Doc

Craig was not one of the maskers, though so far his closest scrutiny of all the masked men had failed to reveal to him that Senor Ruiz and Doc Craig were among the torturers.

Now, from off to one side, where the curved, black rock verged into darkness, came a high-pitched, infuriated voice—Doc Craig's voice.

"Stop that, or I'll blow you all over the place!"

CHAPTER XVI

UNDERGROUND TREASURE



DICK VAN LOAN saw Doc Craig then. He appeared to be standing in a side entrance to a smaller tunnel. The light barely showed his stubbled face, his long hair, and his weaving figure.

But the same light revealed the bound, yellow bundle held high above Doc Craig's head. No need to say that was a package of death, tied sticks of dynamite.

Van realized instantly that Doc Craig, unless he had reached the point of madness, would not hurl that bundle of destruction. For while it would blow the masked killers to bits, Sela Kane and the others in that narrow tunnel could not escape the blast.

Perhaps the maskers, nearly a score of them, were a bit slower than the quick-thinking Phantom. Possibly in their yellow souls they were not capable of fast reasoning, and thought only of the danger to themselves. For already half of them, after one glimpse of Doc Craig, standing there like inexorable vengeance were attempting to flee.

The Phantom sprang. His driving fist first took the masker who had been menacing Chip Dorlan with the death knife. The masker went down.

"Follow me, close, Chip!" Van gritted,

He hurled himself forward and upward. His swinging fist struck the gasoline lamp, smashing it, tearing it free from its swinging chains. The lamp exploded mushily, its yellow-white flame shooting out and seeming to cover the Phantom's leaping figure.

Disregarding the leaping flame searing his face and hands, the Phantom lunged between the two nearest masked men. The driving power of his fists had terrific results. If the neck of one masker was not snapped by the iron knuckles of the Phantom, his skull was surely cracked as his head crunched upon the floor.

The flaming gasoline gave almost no light. Van pivoted, seeking the Masker himself. Smiles Downer crashed one of Van's own guns upon his head, driving him to his knees.

But in that position, the desperately fighting Phantom performed a miracle of attack. He came up, carrying Smiles Downer backward, battering the ironic features with flailing fists. Then he was locked in Smiles Downer's arms, as the sadistic penny tosser sought to save himself by falling into a clinch.

Van heard Chip's thin voice shouting jubilantly. Light as he was, Chip had learned many of the Phantom's fighting tricks. His small fists worked like a ripping buzz-saw. They removed one rubbery mask from a killer, and flattened his nose.

Van had not seen it, but Chip had quickly caught up the poisoned death knife. As the masker hooked one beefy arm around Chip's neck, choking him, Chip ripped the knife across the fellow's arm, cutting through cloth and skin.

That poison must have been potent. For instantly the masker released his hold, groaned, and flattened at Chip's feet.

Too busy even to see that, the Phantom used a toe on Smiles Downer's ankles, and the locking arms loosened from their clinching hold. All of the cruelty that was in Smiles Downer

himself was put into the Phantom's upswinging knuckles.

The gas lamp flame had been snuffed out, and the darkness was Stygian. There was a sharp, crackling sound. Smiles Downer went down like an empty sack, his spine snapped at the base of his brain.

VAN heard Chip call out sharply in pain, then there was a split second's silence. But instantly a bedlam of curses and shouting madmen broke loose.

The Phantom dived toward where he believed the bulk of the milling maskers to be. He brought up against one curved, black wall with such force as to knock him backward.

He whirled, and his hands contacted rough cloth. He shot out gripping fingers and heard a gulping cry. It was then that Doc Craig must have thrown his bundle of dynamite.

The blast came from back up the tunnel, toward the hothouse entrance. The exploding vacuum of whirlwind air lifted Van and tore him loose from the man he had just gripped. He fell and it seemed as if the roof of the world were falling upon him.

As his senses faded, the Phantom had a vague sense of believing that Chip Dorlan, Sela Kane and Banty Doyle had been killed by the terrific explosion. . . .

The Phantom awoke with the beam of a flashlight upon his face. He was looking into the gray-stubbed face and the tired blue eyes of old Doc Craig. Doc was massaging the back of Van's neck with the expert touch of a physician who must know much more than how to treat sick horses.

"Thank the Lord!" exclaimed Doc Craig as Van's eyes opened. "I thought you was a goner. Are you all right? I can't find any busted bones. But one of my own legs is broken."

Van sat up, rubbing the haze from his eyes. By the dim light of the flash it appeared as if all of the tunnel had caved. Then the Phantom felt a slight

breeze upon his face, and the tang of the salt sea was in his nostrils.

"What became of the others, Doc?" he said quickly.

Doc Craig muttered an oath. "All except five of the masked devils got away. I threw that dynamite far back purposely, thinking it might help, but I made a mistake. Sela, Banty Doyle and that other youngster were taken away."

The Phantom reeled to his feet.

"Quick! I'll get after them!"

"It's no use, Phantom," said Doc Craig. "You were out for ten minutes or more. I stayed quiet, and they thought that both of us were gone, I guess. Or maybe they were too anxious to get away to stop and look for us. Anyway, I heard enough to know they took Sela and the others with them. I couldn't do anything, with this cracked leg."

"But I can reach the sea, if they went that way!" cried Van.

"It's no use. They are away in their boat by this time. And the explosion will be bringing all the special deputies and guards out into the track. There's only one possible way that Sela Kane and the others can be saved."

The impatient Phantom forced himself to listen.

"One person will know the Masker's hiding place and possibly his next move, which will have to be fast, now that everything is breaking around their ears, blast 'em!" Doc Craig hurried on. "The Masker is in constant touch with Senora Leona. And I know that Senora Leona will be joining him as soon as he can get word to her."

"So Senor Ruiz is in on this?" Van said bitterly.

"Yes, Senor Ruiz is in on it, but perhaps far differently than you think," said Doc Craig. "Phantom, you and I are blocked from getting out through the hothouse, and there is but one other way. If all of the deputies and police are aroused, the

Masker will finish off Sela. You may be able to prevent that."

DOC CRAIG, reasoning so lucidly now, seemed like a man who had awakened from a long sleep.

"You'll have to help me," he went on. "I'll show you the way out, and something else. You will see Senor Ruiz. He has apparently lost everything that he had been fighting for. It was because of that I chanced blowing down the tunnel to prevent the thieving killers from returning and killing the Senor Ruiz, for now they think he is dead. I can walk, if you will help me."

Senor Ruiz, the Phantom was hurriedly remembering, had concocted deadly poisons from experimental hothouse plants. Senor Ruiz had resented any intimation that Senora Leona's seances might be race fixing affairs. Senor Ruiz had been working with Doc Craig in this mysterious tunnel under Los Sandra track.

"Tell me, Doc," said Van, "what is Senor Ruiz' part in all of this? And why have you yourself been so mysterious?"

Doc Craig was dragging himself along, with Van carrying nearly all of his weight. They were in the little side tunnel where Doc had entered.

"I can tell you about myself, Phantom," said Doc Craig. "Nothing matters now but the quickest way to find Sela, and prevent the Masker carrying out his final purpose. What happens to me doesn't matter any more. I killed a man once, years ago, Phantom. I was sent up, and I escaped. I have been a derelict ever since, hiding out. Sela Kane knows all of that. I have been with her horses for several years now, having been with her father before he died. If my real name were made known, I would go back to prison for the rest of my life, although, as I saw it, the murder I committed was justified."

They were coming into a rounded space at the end of the little side

tunnel, a place much like a vaulted room.

"And that is why you and Sela Kane told that story of being wrecked in a sailboat?" Van said. "Both of you attended a seance that night at Senora Leona's. Isn't that true?"

"You're as clever as I've heard you were, Phantom," said Doc Craig. "Yes, we attended that seance."

"And because Simm Archer was murdered in that house, Sela Kane lied to keep police attention from you?"

"Right as rain, Phantom, but don't think I was too selfish in accepting that sacrifice. Another person was involved, one who does not know me, but one whom Sela Kane and myself both love and always will."

"But having you and Sela Kane prisoners, Doc Craig, why did the kidnapers let you go?"

"I cannot divulge all of that, Phantom, but they wanted Sela free for a while to carry on with something she had undertaken. Unless she did that, the cursed Masker could not be sure of her gaining possession of something he wants."

"And that is?"

"A matter of strictest confidence between Sela Kane and another person, which I cannot betray, Phantom."

BUT already the Phantom was thinking it out. His memory whipped back to a scene on the yacht between Joel Seward, before he was murdered, and Silas Rudd, the legal front for gamblers and their evident financial godfather. But that would keep. For with Doc Craig's words another thought had come to him, and never was the Phantom's keen intuition better demonstrated than now.

"That other person, Doc Craig, would be Arthur Conroy," he said quietly. "If I were to guess, I would say that Conroy is your son."

Doc Craig's eyes were beseeching, and his voice broke.

"Phantom, you'll never divulge that, never?" he pleaded. "He is my son. The man I killed stole his mother from me. He was too young then to know. He must never know. Only Sela knows, for her father told her before he died. I have been a broken wreck of a man. That is over now. I want to live—but only to kill one other man."

"The Masker?"

"The Masker," assented Doc Craig. "Tonight I saw him for the first time. Tonight Senor Ruiz and I discovered that he and his masked mobsters had reached a great treasure ahead of Senor Ruiz and had stolen the greater part of it."

"And the treasure was here?"

Van was looking around the vaulted space. It was lighted by an oil lamp. This lamp swung on gold chains. It was itself of gold and jewels, worked into ancient design, and undoubtedly had been the possession of some old Spanish family.

All around were scattered chests, broken open. Van saw a few glittering coins, old Spanish doubloons, and discarded piles of silver money. The chest must have contained family jewels and other treasure that could have run to hundreds of thousands.

The vaulted space, which had only recently been broken open, was built into the foundation of what had been an old Spanish *hacienda*.

"And Senora Leona is Spanish," mused Van. "Perhaps she knew of this treasure. And she must be directly in league with the Masker. Yes, that would fit. And he probably knows much of the Spanish history of Southern California himself."

Here had been treasure which might be used to pay and hold the masked mob of killers together, with a much greater object in view—one at which Doc Craig had hinted.

But he had no time for that now. Doc Craig was pointing at the floor on one side of the space. Van caught sight of Senor Ruiz.

The little Spaniard was lying upon the rocky floor, with his coat rolled as a pillow. His eyes were closed and his dark face looked almost like that of a mummy in the dim lamplight.

"I thought they had finished him when they took the stuff," Doc Craig said. "But I believe he will live. He was knocked out, and they thought he was dead. The maskers did not find me, and I had to wait. When they left here I found Senor Ruiz suffering from a serious concussion. . . . But you have no more time for this, Phantom. I will stay here with Senor Ruiz. You must reach Senora Leona before she receives word from the Masker."

"You will be safe here?" asked Van.

"The Masker's killers will not come back," said Doc Craig. "They will fear that the police will have been aroused in force by the powder blast."

"Then Senor Ruiz does not know of their greater purpose? Not even when it has been the deadly poisons from his experiments they have been using?"

"Senor Ruiz does not know," said Doc Craig. "And he was about to destroy all of the poison plants after he discovered they had possibly been used for killing. He wanted to keep that hothouse only until he had reached the treasure he had been seeking for years—a treasure of which only two persons living knew. Senor Ruiz and Senora Leona."

"Stay here, Doc Craig," the Phantom said. "You say there is a way out of this place?"

"THE senor and I came upon it tonight, Phantom. Go up the steps behind that rotted door in the wall, and you will find yourself outside the Los Sandra track."

"I'll return as soon as possible, Doc. And remember this—there are secrets, even of murder, that are sometimes better left untold."

Doc Craig bowed his head, but smiled when he looked up.

"Whatever happens, I will be waiting," he said.

CHAPTER XVII SINISTER SEANCE



MCDERMOTT, Captain of Detectives of the San Diego police force, had kept his word to the Phantom. The hillside bungalow of Senora Leona had not been raided. But police were spotted here and there in the

blocks surrounding the odd little house nestling below the mesa above Mission Valley.

The Phantom knew they were there though they did not see the Phantom. He moved with characteristic silence through the shrubbery that closed in the curved driveway.

Crouched in the bushes, Van saw that visitors used different entrances. Their cars were parked at odd spots outside the driveway, and Senora Leona's clients arrived in her grounds on foot.

They came singly, these seekers after messages from the invisible world of the spirits. And they approached the bungalow in darkness.

Van had not expected to come upon a seance. His only thought had been to get to Senora Leona herself. He had expected then to chart his actions by the circumstances.

On one thing he was determined. Senora Leona must be made to divulge all that she knew about the mysterious Masker, and the place where Sela Kane, Chip Dorian and Banty Doyle had been taken, if she knew.

"She has not been informed of what has happened, or this seance would have been called off," Van thought. "But she may hear at any

time, and I've an idea the Masker will deliver his own message."

It was well after midnight. Van noticed the watchful policemen moving here and there, keeping an eye upon Senora Leona's arriving visitors. But they did not come into the grounds or create any suspicion.

One after another, Van watched the clients who entered the bungalow by different doors. In this he had an object.

Van was waiting for the possible appearance of one man he hoped would be here. That man was Silas Rudd. For Van was convinced that Silas Rudd might possess the vital key to all of the mysterious Los Sandra murders.

At last a big man came up the driveway alone. Van's judgment was confirmed. The man was Silas Rudd.

Rudd was close when Van sprang from the bushes. He probably did not know what happened. Van's hands shot out and his fingers closed in a vise-like grip. One tap on the head and Rudd was unconscious, as Van eased him to the ground.

Concealed from the bungalow and the streets, Van produced his body-fitting make-up case. The tiny light revealed the rugged features of the sleeping Silas Rudd.

Van had never made a quicker change of clothes with another man. He smiled a little as he found several packages of papers in Silas Rudd's pockets. He was quick to take these.

One quick glance at them, and he was convinced he now knew the real goal of the Masker. He placed the papers securely under a flat rock some distance from Silas Rudd. Then he came back and set to work with expert hands.

Making use of the mirror of his make-up case, deftly he changed his facial contours with wax moulages and touching pencils. The sleeping man had brown eyes, so when Van's amazing replica of the man's face was complete, Van had but to remove

the blue eye-shells he had employed as Jim Saunders, the horse trainer. The brown eyes of Dick Van Loan served him quite well.

PERHAPS no more than five minutes had elapsed when a big man again walked up the bungalow driveway. He was the counterpart of the man who originally had come from Silas Rudd's car.

Van was selecting a door, when one was opened. A bland yellow face appeared.

"You have come late, Mr. Rudd," a Chinese said. "The senora is impatient. The others are waiting."

Van nodded. He could chance Rudd's voice, if necessary, but keep silent if possible.

The silently moving Chinese produced a facial mask. And the Phantom had never been more startled. For the Oriental was presenting him with a mask that had the pink features and the baldish top of Luke Owler.

The subtle, cloying perfume of burning incense filtered into the small room in which he stood. The Chinese brought out a green robe and Van had just slipped into it when he saw a wisp of a woman standing in the inner doorway, looking at him with intensely black, bright, birdlike eyes. She seemed to have the wisdom of all the ages in her dark, wrinkled face.

"Hasten, Ling Su," she said, and her voice appeared to float from a distance. "I had about given you up, Mr. Rudd."

There was a dangerous moment. Van caught the swift glance at Senora Leona, and the sudden scrutiny in Ling Su's eyes. He sensed that he had made some error, but it was impossible to determine what it might be.

He was alert in every sense as he stepped through the doorway into a long room where purple draperies swayed at the sides. Senora Leona, who moved ahead, made a gestured signal. A masked figure in a green

robe changed his seat at a long table. The vacated chair was next to Senora Leona's own ornate, thronelike seat.

The senora indicated the Phantom should take this seat. And then Van was instantly on guard, alert for more danger than he had before anticipated. For the man who had left the chair next to Senora Leona padded to another place on his bare feet.

Van saw then that others along the table wore no shoes. That had been his mistake, probably the error that had aroused the suspicion of Ling Su, the bland Chinese. Silas Rudd, a frequent visitor, naturally would have removed his shoes.

Van could not correct his oversight. He slipped into his chair. Bright eyes gleamed at him through the holes in face masks. He counted fourteen clients at the table.

Senora Leona's bright, little eyes darted, but her dark, wrinkled face was inscrutable.

"We will join hands," she said. "The moment is most propitious for the spirits to reveal more than might have been expected."

Van knew that everyone present had seen his shod feet, so Senora Leona's words had significant meaning. More than that, through the haze of incense vapor floating in the purple light, Van became aware that Ling Su was standing near a heavy drapery directly behind him. He counted four masked visitors watching him.

"And here's where I shall suddenly have to take this seance into my own hands," was the Phantom's thought. "There are members of the masked mob now at this table. Perhaps they were with the Masker in the Los Sandra tunnel tonight. And if race tips are to be handed out by the ghosts this night they will mean nothing, for this is the cleanup, and Senora Leona knows it."

For Van was convinced that if some of these clients were only

gullible suckers, paying high for supposed race information, Senora Leona intended to take their fees, as usual, but this could only be the last seance at this place. It was fairly certain there would be no races tomorrow at Los Sandra. Perhaps no races for many days to come.

"That explosion tonight, and the Masker's evident move to wind up his campaign of crime by attaining the real objective of his poison murders and terrorism can only mean that he is sure of reaching his goal," was Van's thought. "The torturing of Sela Kane now will be carried out through having Banty Doyle a prisoner with her. And there is every indication that with the Masker's success, Sela Kane, Banty Doyle and Chip never will be seen again."

The Phantom felt the keen bitterness of being so near failure through his unavoidable mistake of failing to remove his shoes. His own only chance to survive, with or without accomplishing his purpose, lay now solely through the use of his own quick wit, or some possible favoring circumstances.

Then he saw a faint possibility that Fate might play into his hands. For, as Senora Leona gave the order to join hands, Van noticed a telephone instrument inside the arm of her huge chair. Van's hands moved with lightning speed. His invisible audiphones went into his ears, even as he was giving one hand to the senora, and the other to the woman seated at his right. With those audiphones, he could hear any message that Senora Leona might receive over that phone.

A slight electrical shock went through Van's arms. He decided that was merely a piece of the ghosting business. But it made him think of how Simm Archer had died, probably in one of these same chairs.

"And perhaps others here may know too much for the safety of the Masker after he has accomplished his purpose," was Van's quick thought.

"I get the initials S R."

The words seemed to be disembodied, to be floating from the purple wall a few feet behind Senora Leona, rather than from her motionless lips. Her bright, birdlike eyes were closed, as she appeared to go into a trance.

It came to Van then that the initials "S R" probably meant Silas Rudd. The clawlike fingers of the senora tightened upon his own. The senora's hand seemed icy cold.

"Who would S R be expecting to speak from the unknown?"

Senora Leona's eyes seemed closed, but Van was sure she was watching him through knifelike slits.

Van played out his hand.

"Possibly my late uncle would be wishing to bring me a message," he said.

There was a static moment. Van grew tense. Although he did not appear to be watching, he noted that Ling Su moved a foot or so nearer. He was sure that Ling Su must have a dagger concealed in one hand, for his arms were folded.

Senora Leona started to become rigid, as if her communication with the spirit seeking "S R" might be the real thing. It was the customary business.

The spirit message never came. Instead, at a low, insistent buzzing, Senora Leona appeared to be aroused from her trance. Van caught her whisper of a Spanish oath.

"An earthly matter intervenes," she intoned. "S R must be patient for the moment."

SHE placed the buzzing telephone to her ear and said, "*Si.*"

The voice into the phone was low. Van knew it was impossible for any other person at the table to hear it. He himself caught it but faintly. The speech was in Spanish which Van understood, as he did many other languages and dialects.

"This is Senor Ruiz, Leona."

Van had never been more amazed.

For the voice was that of the little Spaniard he had left unconscious with Doc Craig. He had expected another voice, had been sure he would hear it.

"Si," said Leona.

"Dismiss all, at once," said the voice in Spanish. "Be in Tia Juana in an hour. Use the passage. The Phantom may still be alive. Everything is completed. You will be paid as soon as you arrive. A light you may see in the sky over Los Sandra will be the stable. The book will be closed, and all danger removed."

"Si," replied Senora Leona, then she said, "Wait. Ling Su wishes a word with you. It's important."

Senora Leona was clever, but her tone betrayed her. She wished Ling Su to inform whoever was at the other end of the suspicion of Silas Rudd. She was too close to Van to do so herself.

CHAPTER XVIII

DESTROY PHANTOM



LING SU PRIMLY the Phantom listened as, more than ever now, the audiphones served him while Ling Su moved back with the phone on its long cord. Ling Su was speaking in Chinese, but that was no bar to the

Phantom's understanding.

"Another has come in the place of Silas Rudd," said Ling Su. "He is a great actor, and has taken Silas Rudd's appearance."

"The Phantom!" whispered the voice at the other end of the wire. "Ling Su! Destroy him! Give the word to the others! None must leave that house alive! Senora Leona must not know until it is too late! Use the table as planned!"

The Phantom tensed, waiting. Then Ling Su let the phone fall to the

floor. He rapped out words in English.

"Crater! Hobart! The word has come!"

The Phantom already was moving, acting on remarkable intuition. "Use the table?" And Simm Archer had been electrocuted. The table was wired for the seances, so it must be carrying a heavy current. And the clients were barefooted, all but the Phantom.

The Phantom's sweeping arm hurled the woman seated at his right hand away from the table. She screamed as her chair went over. Her bare, white feet made an arc under her green robe.

Van sensed Ling Su descending upon him, and he appeared to become an elastic whip, with his hands snapped far back of his own head. He jerked his body to one side as his hands gripped Ling Su.

It seemed as if Van's powerful fingers had closed upon the treacherous Oriental's small ears. A gleaming, curved dagger that had been meant for Van's heart, through the back, grazed his neck, jamming into the carved top of the long table. The Chinese uttered no sound. Perhaps he knew that deadly ju-jutsu hold; perhaps he did not. He would never learn it now. For he performed a parabola above the Phantom's head, diving upon the table.

The breaking crunch of skull bone upon the hard wood had all the weight of Ling Su's body behind it. He lay there quivering some, but not much.

Oaths broke from four surprised masked men who were out of their chairs. These four whom Van had spotted as possibly of the masked killer mob, had started to their feet as Ling Su had made his attack, but that extraordinary sense of the Phantom had enabled him to strike perhaps the fifth of a second before the maskers could.

Lightning calculation alone had

connected the strange murder of Simm Archer with what the Phantom believed was about to happen. For that reason he had thrown the woman beside him from her chair.

But the necessary removal of Ling Su gave one of the masked killers an opportunity, before the other seated clients under the table top could move. Van was sure that many persons were about to die. And it had been his own error that had brought about his own betrayal and the imminent death of others!

Masked women screamed and men cursed. None seemed to understand what was happening.

Two masked killers were driving upon the Phantom as he acted. He crouched, shot forward, and his powerful shoulder hooked under the edge of the carved table that was long and heavy, probably weighing five or six hundred pounds, but the trained strength of the Phantom was applied to only one side.

EVEN as the weight of one masker struck him, Van heaved the table edge upward. There was a blinding blue flash, as heavily charged electrical wires were ripped loose from their connections.

That table had been wired for death—death to all who sat there with their bare feet over concealed plates on the floor, their hands resting on the table itself.

One woman screamed terribly, and Van sickened as he knew he had failed to save her.

Now there was utter, Stygian darkness. Fuses had blown out when the table wires had broken. Women and men, hampered by their long, green robes, were crying out, cursing, attempting to get away.

Rendered powerless as a death instrument, the table went back into place as Van staggered to one side, dizzy from a blow on his skull. But a door was opening and a little light came through it.

Senora Leona's terrified clients were jamming through it. Impelled by the apparent death of one woman, and the sudden action of one masked killer in starting to shoot into the men and women massed in the doorway of escape, the Phantom dodged in the darkness—then he struck.

Not often did the Phantom employ the full force of his amazingly trained strength. But rarely before in his career had such a compelling motive for exacting full justice come upon him. His action therefore, became impelled by cold fury. Even as the electrical murder table blew out fuses and plunged the long room of purple death into Stygian darkness, Van literally smashed the life from a masked killer he had lunged into.

He came up then, his automatic snapping into his hand. A heavy weapon struck for his head in the blackness, and hit one shoulder with a force that jolted him to his heels.

The wielder of that intended murder weapon made the mistake of cursing as he struck. Van's automatic exploded with its muzzle jammed into a soft body. The man yelled and fell.

That left two of the four killers, and they were smart enough to keep quiet. A gun flamed, aimed at the flash of Van's weapon before he could leap aside. The slug scored his arm and his hand became nerveless, but he was able to shift his automatic to the other hand.

Except for the sounds made by the fleeing clients Van had saved, the room became appallingly silent. Van judged the two living killers were moving on bare feet across the thick rug, seeking to trap him.

Van dropped and rolled under the now harmless table. He came up on the other side.

Then he heard Senora Leona's voice, sharp and brittle.

"Get out, you fools! Down through the passage! The police will be upon us!"

Van whipped toward the end of the

table and Senora Leona. He intended to leave this bungalow himself. Captain McDermott's planted men would be converging upon the place, alarmed by the shooting, and the Phantom must not be delayed now. He was remembering the words that had come over the telephone to Senora Leona: "A light in the sky over Los Sandra will be the stable. The book will be closed, and all danger removed."

THOSE words could have but one meaning. Others were to die tonight, and Van could think of but three persons in the hands of the Masker whose removal would close the book of danger for the mob of killers.

Sela Kane, Banty Doyle and Chip Dorlan! Possibly Doc Craig, now that it had seemed to be Senor Ruiz who had given the message to Senora Leona!

The Phantom knew the meaning of those words. A stable at Los Sandra was to be burned, and the Masker's prisoners were to die in that stable—undoubtedly the Sela Kane stable, for if the three were found dead there it would be considered only logical that they had had a reason for being there when the fire started.

Van lunged for Senora Leona's chair. But as quickly as he acted, the other men were quicker.

"Don't!" he heard Senora Leona cry. "What do you mean?"

These were the last words she uttered. A crunching blow of metal on bone was awful in the darkness. A man cursed.

"You fool! You thought the Masker would share that Spanish treasure with you! Because he made love to you, you imagined he was going to marry you! Now he has it, and you're through!"

Senora Leona's voice floated. She was still alive.

"He loved me—he was the only one—"

Another blow crunched. Van was sick all over. He pounded slugs at the sound of the man's voice. But the masked murderer who had broken Senora Leona's skull must have ducked to the floor as he spoke.

An exploding rod replied to the blue flame of the Phantom's gun. A slug furrowed the table. It glanced off, and whirred viciously into Van's face.

It was like a red-hot finger along Van's scalp. The darkness became a velvet cushion, it seemed to Van, as he fell. But that softness may have been only the costly rug.

Vaguely he could hear clubs and gun butts hammering at the bungalow doors. McDermott's policemen were breaking in. Van exerted all of his will, attempting to move his gun hand, but the shock of the lead along his skull had been too much.

"He's done for!" he heard one of the two maskers growl. "Fire the place! We'll hit the passage to the truck!"

"Wait!" insisted the other. "It'll mean an extra split if we deliver the Phantom to the Masker! Light the stuff—I'll get him!"

An almost instant flare of fire enveloped one of the swaying draperies. Van's eyes closed. His only hope was that the killers would not take time to finish him.

They seized him, lifting him between them, cursing at his weight. Though helpless, Van could feel warm blood running into his eyes and over his face.

"He's done for!" grunted one of the men. "But the Phantom's worth as much dead as alive."

As flames billowed through the long room, Van could dimly see that Senora Leona's big chair had been moved aside, and a cool breeze blew up from a flight of stone steps. As he was carried toward the steps he noticed the woman whose life he had saved by sweeping her from her chair sitting up, moving. He did not dare

call out, for he knew his captors would instantly have sent a death bullet into her. He could only hope that she would be saved by the police.

Once in the stone stairway, the big chair of Senora Leona slipped back in place above the Phantom and his captors. One of the masked men fumbled a flashlight from his clothes, then it seemed to the Phantom that in that dim light he was being carried a long way through a passage under the San Diego hillside before they finally emerged into the open.

A light truck was parked in a street that must have been two blocks from the murder bungalow. As Van was lifted into the back, and rolled onto the floor, he could see the red glare of the fire on the hill above.

Soon, was his bitter thought, there would be another red glare in the sky, if it were not there already. A reflection that would be from a stable burning at the Los Sandra track!

CHAPTER XIX FIRE IN THE SKY



JOLTED and jounced about on the floor of the light truck, a station wagon, the Phantom could still watch his two captors on the front seat.

That rough ride away from the scene of the bungalow

fire and murder carnage brought myriad pains darting through Van's bruised and battered body. But it was having the right effect. He felt his shocked and numbed muscles beginning to respond. Yet when one of the maskers glanced back, he still appeared as lifeless as an empty sack.

"We rate high in the pay-off, if this fighting guy does turn out to be the Phantom as somebody was yelling he was," he heard one man say.

The other masker laughed harshly.

"Say, Croker!" he exclaimed. "If this is the Phantom, and he's alive, maybe we could make a deal with him for bigger dough than the Masker will put up. We could buy that hot spot at Monterey, and be set for life."

"Cut that line, Bales!" snarled the other man. "You know the Masker well enough to know that no mug ever crossed him and lived!"

Van was trying to puzzle out one thing that stuck. Was it the voice of Senor Ruiz he had heard on the phone at the seance?

Senor Ruiz had appeared to be unconscious when Van had left him with Doc Craig. Doc had expressed the utmost confidence in Senor Ruiz, telling how he had been robbed of his treasure by the Masker.

Yet it seemed certain that Senor Ruiz had called Senora Leona. But the Phantom had been firmly convinced that another man was the Masker.

Van knew when the speeding station wagon entered the Pacific Highway southward. So these maskers were on their way to a refuge of Old Mexico, where Senora Leona had expected to go—to Tia Juana to be paid off.

Others of the masked mob might be preparing to hide below the Border. Knowing the lawlessness of Baja California, and its many hide-outs, Van realized that the killers headed by the Masker would be fairly safe over the line. And Arthur Conroy had dodged the American gambling laws by having his yacht anchored over the Border!

Van's strength was ebbing back. He flexed his arms and legs.

"There it is!" he heard one of the men exclaim. "See that fire against the clouds! That's the yacht! That was to go first, then the stable! We'll be hitting the Border about the same time as the others!"

The Phantom stayed motionless with an effort. He had been calculating their speed, and knew that an-

other five minutes must elapse before they would be close to the Los Sandra track. He was watching the sky, and he could see the glow out over the sea.

"That's what I had expected," was his thought. "With Conroy's yacht burned, there goes the evidence of part of the Masker's final cleanup. What's more, the yacht fire will draw most of the law officers and race-track guards to the shore."

VAN had no weapon now. He waited, lying sprawled, until one of the maskers looked at him again.

"Guess we can't hope to deliver the guy alive," the masker said, turning his eyes to the front. "Hey!" he exclaimed. "There's the race-track turnoff, Croker! And there's two pair of headlights! I'll bet that's the other boys! If it is, the incendiary bombs will let go any minute in the Sela Kane stable! And I'll bet the Masker will be smart enough to stay right there and give the alarm himself when it's too late to save that girl and the others!"

"Nobody was ever as smart as the Masker!" boasted the other killer. "Smart enough for none of us to know who he is! I guess only Senora Leona was wise. That's why he gave the order for her to be bumped off!"

So none of his masked mob knew the Masker's identity. That fitted in with what Van himself knew of the super-killer. It went back to the supposed fixing of races, like the open switching of the odds on War Baby when Sela Kane's filly and Jockey Durkin were killed.

That open betting on the totalizers and changing the odds was in itself a stroke of genius. If it had been merely race fixing, the big bets would have been rolled up among the bookies where the totalizer odds would not have been affected at the last minute.

No, the purpose had been to kill, to discredit the Los Sandra track.

The station wagon was doing an easy fifty.

"Yeah, that's the other boys!" exclaimed the driver. "We'll just pass the road and show 'em the way to Tia Juana. It's about time we ditched these bloomin' masks."

One man started pulling roughly at the skin mask over his head. The driver used one hand to loosen his own disguise. That was the Phantom's moment.

He bounded from the car's floor. Forgotten was the dizzying wound on his head and the flesh wound from a bullet in his arm. All of his terrible anger over the murder he had seen these men attempt flowed like a pulsing stream of vengeance into his arms and his bent fingers.

It was doubtful if the driver ever knew what happened. Van's thumbs were snapped against his spine, and the fingers jerked upward under the killer's chin. A dry stick could not have snapped more easily.

The other masker cried out, trying to get his hands down, as the speeding truck swerved from the highway and went roaring over the road's shoulder. Van's driven fist slammed his head all the way forward into the windshield where it stuck in the broken glass.

Van swept the driver to one side, rolling over him and slamming the side door open. The station wagon was bucking like some war tank jumping ditches. Van sent the dead driver all the way out, then he was twisting the wheel.

As he held the vehicle upright, he saw the race track turnoff only a few yards ahead. And perhaps a hundred yards away were two sedans, speeding for the highway.

The lights of the leading car flashed into Van's eyes. He jerked the station wagon's hand throttle all the way open. Then, snatching a .45 automatic from the pocket of the masker whose head was stuck in the windshield, as he moved, he jumped, hitting the road shoulder and rolling like some wind-driven tumbleweed for a

dozen yards. Before he had stopped rolling, and scrambled to his feet, there was a rending crash.

THE first crash was so quickly followed by another that they seemed to come together. The station wagon had hit the first maskers' car head-on. The second fugitive car had rammed into the rear of the first one.

One man screamed with pain. Van saw two strike the hard ground and lie still. Then others were jumping, for the gas tank of the first wrecked car let go with a lurid flame.

The brilliant fire showed the queer skin masks the men were wearing. There was no doubt of their being the masked gang.

A squashy explosion sounded over toward Los Sandra track, less than a quarter of a mile away. A blaze shot high into the sky. Half a dozen of the killers were running from the flaming smashup as Van dropped on one knee and lifted the .45 automatic.

Three men slid on their faces, almost before the others realized they were being attacked.

"It's the cops!" one masker shouted hoarsely. "The Masker run us right into this!"

As two men got rods into action, Van cut down the squawker. Slugs burned the ground about him, but the Phantom's luck held better than it had in Senora Leona's bungalow.

Throwing the hot and empty automatic to one side, he darted toward the second of the wrecked cars. He did not glance at the huddled figures on the ground as he climbed behind the wheel of the stalled car and got its hood out of the gasoline fire in reverse gear.

The blaze had caught the oil around the big motor, but the engine was still running perfectly. Van gave no time to the flames that licked back to the windshield as he turned, though the heat seared his face. In the midst of flame he was roaring toward the Los Sandra race-track.

CHAPTER XX

FACE IN THE FLAMES



FIRE apparatus kept at the Los Sandra track was racing to the scene of the explosion in the Sela Kane stables. The track firemen and guards on two chemical trucks and one hose wagon saw another car, a car that was itself flaming, racing toward the blaze that was rapidly consuming one side of the big white quadrangle in which Sela Kane's horses were stabled.

The Phantom was leaning far out, his windshield being obscured by the billowing fire and smoke. He sent the heavy sedan into the side road that ran around the rear of the stables.

He was thankful that he had once before come along this road, although that other time he had been accompanied by Muriel Havens, Smiles Downer and a mad tiger.

Smiles Downer and the mad tiger now were dead.

The leading chemical truck of the track apparatus gave Van the siren, trying to cross the road ahead of him. He sent the sedan rocking ahead and beat the truck, though he was so close to it that he could see the faces of the driver and the man on the seat beside him. What one of the now dead maskers had said leaped into his mind: "The Masker will probably turn in the fire alarm himself."

And now Van saw Senor Ruiz riding on the chemical truck alongside the driver!

There was another squashy explosion. Fire shot up from the second side of the quadrangle that formed the white stables. Van heard the high scream of a terrified horse.

No one was near the stables, except for the men on the fire trucks. That confirmed another statement of the

maskers that the fire out on the sea, presumably the Arthur Conroy yacht, would draw attention from the racing stables.

Van was on the point of abandoning the sedan. The oil fire had died down, but thick smoke was blinding him. One low white wall of the four-sided stables was directly in front of him.

The fire was running along this wall from both ends, the red tongues beginning to meet in the middle of the wall. Horses were screaming shrilly. Van was sickened.

His pity for the trapped animals was keen, but another thought gripped his heart as he held his breath. If Sela Kane, Banty Doyle and Chip Dorlan were in the stables, then they were either bound or knocked out. Or perhaps they were already dead! The Masker would make sure that they could not escape.

Van's eyes ran along the upper half-story of the white wall. Here and there were small window spaces which gave light and some air to the feed lofts, where hay and grain was stored.

A bitter imprecation burst from Van's parched lips. It seemed that no man could enter any of the doors even in time to so much as save some of the horses. As for having time to seek for Sela Kane and the others, that appeared altogether hopeless. Dry as powder, filled with inflammable hay and grain, the stables were swiftly being converted into writhing shapes of flame.

THEN Van saw the face. It was framed in one of the small windows of a feed loft. The fire was so close on both sides that Sela Kane's golden hair took on the hue of the blaze. Only her face and shoulders appeared in the window—and for no more than two seconds.

The Phantom knew the girl must be tightly bound, but she had probably fought her way to the window.

But having no use of her hands she had dropped back.

The fire trucks had halted behind him, the firemen already running toward the fire with chemical extinguishers which would serve little purpose now. Then Van saw fire burst from the door directly below the loft window where Sela Kane had appeared. He headed the heavy sedan for the light door and wall of the stable and jammed the accelerator to the floor.

Vaguely, he heard shouts from men about the fire trucks. The sedan hit the stable wall with a terrific crash, carrying the side of the lightly built structure before it.

Blazing planks and uprights smashed down upon the sedan. Van was thrown heavily to one side, but clung to the wheel. A horse screamed, and Van saw a beautiful animal rear up and break its halter rope.

It is a common belief that a horse must be blinded to bring it through fire and smoke. Perhaps this racing thoroughbred had not heard of this habit of other horses. Anyway, he sprang ahead, and Van was forced to duck close to the car as the horse went out through the hole smashed in the wall.

Van's eyes were smarting and the smoke was blinding. He groped along the side of a box stall until he came to a ladder just as fire reached the tank of the sedan behind him.

Van was halfway up the ladder when the gas tank let go. Fire billowed and eddied throughout the lower stall floor. It seemed to destroy the Phantom's only hope of saving Sela Kane and the others, if they were with her.

Yet it was that tank explosion which drew two streams of a fire apparatus pumper that had just been hooked up.

As Van made it into the small space of the loft, light from the fire outside the window showed the girl's shining golden hair. It showed three

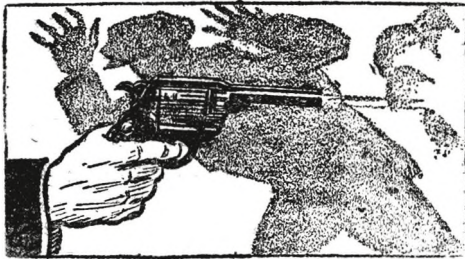
other figures on the floor, so bound they appeared to be mummified.

With the knife from his clothes, Van quickly cut away Chip's tape.

"Free Sela, Chip!" he directed.

Water was smashing at the tank fire underneath. But smoke and fire were seeping upward. Still Van could see the terribly battered face of little Banty Doyle. The small, ugly jockey had been game to the limit, and beyond it.

He was sure that the torture of Banty Doyle had been effective. Sela had been compelled to sign papers.



He believed that Arthur Conroy had possessed similar papers which, in the Phantom's judgment, were stock certificates of the Los Sandra race-track.

For these were the kind of papers the Phantom had taken from the clothes of Silas Rudd—Los Sandra stock assigned to several other persons by Sela Kane, Arthur Conroy and Joel Seward.

This also had to do with the burning of the Conroy yacht, he was sure.

THE fourth bound prisoner was Arthur Conroy. Conroy's broken arm was dreadfully bent. That, too, must have been a point of torture to sway Sela.

The heat grew more intense. Van fought his way to the window. He smashed out the glass. His voice rang out resonantly.

"Hit the window! Pour it on! Keep the water on this spot!"

As the deluge beat into the loft, drenching Van and the rescued prisoners, he smashed with his fists

through the thin boarding at the back of the loft. Then one by one, he got Sela Kane and the others through, dropping them to the open quadrangle enclosed by the burning stables.

Sela Kane cuddled the terribly beaten Banty Doyle close to her heart. She kissed his battered, swollen face. Banty forced his eyes open long enough to try to smile. It was an awful, monkeylike grimace but Sela smiled back through streaming tears, as if Banty were a child who had won a prize photo contest and she were a proud mother.

The streams of water rained down. The fire was being beaten out.

"There are some things I must know," Van said to Arthur Conroy. "First, you and Sela Kane have been helping Zing Dover with loans, probably large loans. That much I have guessed. He put up stock in the Los Sandra race-track. Go on from there."

"Yes, Dover put up stock, some two millions of it to cover loans of a fourth that amount," said Conroy. "You are one hundred percent correct with your guess, if it is a guess. The stock was in the safe on my yacht."

As the way was cleared for firemen and guards to burst through to the quadrangle, Arthur Conroy told the Phantom more. Before he had himself been taken prisoner, some of his men on the yacht had been killed by the maskers, and some had escaped. None of the killers had been identified, but the yacht safe had been blown open.

"Joel Seward, the actor, owed you money," said the Phantom. "He had put up some of his minority stock in the track?"

"None of his stock was placed with me," said Conroy.

Van nodded. His well formed theory had been slowly materializing.

"Thomas Chester, the mask maker, lost a lot of money fooling with a few horses at Los Sandra," he said. "And he was deeply in debt."

Conroy stared.

"You haven't overlooked anything,

have you, Phantom?" he said. "Yet the identity of the man who calls himself the Masker is as mysterious as ever."

"Possibly," said Van laconically.

Willing hands helped the rescued prisoners through the burned stable where the Phantom's timely crashing in with the sedan had saved them.

A crowd was milling around the fire, which was now slowly being brought under control. Zing Dover appeared, his fingers rumpling his thick blond hair.

"I wouldn't have had all this happen for a dozen Los Sandras," he said to Sela Kane. "If I had even guessed, I would have closed the track days ago."

"Which was exactly what was wanted," stated the Phantom. "Let us get to your office, Dover. I want to use a telephone for a few minutes."

HE WAS in a private room using the phone for many minutes. He made several calls. One gained him a strange reply. He was given the name of a California university.

Van routed out the dean of the university. He talked but a few minutes. Then he called the San Diego police, asking for Captain McDermott.

"There's been the devil to pay, Phantom," said Captain McDermott. "Senora Leona and another woman were murdered at that faker's bungalow. Two masked men are also dead, unidentified. We picked up Silas Rudd, the gamblers' mouthpiece, unconscious outside the bungalow."

"Bring Silas Rudd to Los Sandra," directed Van. "Also, under a flat rock near where you found him are some papers. Have them brought along."

"Okay, Phantom. And I've a big surprise for you when I arrive. I have a pretty girl with me, who says you saved her life. But I'll tell you later. I'm on my way."

"A pretty girl!" mused Van. "It couldn't be—"

CHAPTER XXI CRIME'S HOME STRETCH



IT SEEMED no time until a police siren screamed outside Zing Dover's office. But in that time, Van had called a newspaper in San Diego. He wanted only information. He gave several names.

"Sure we know them," was the reply. "All are fairly well known gamblers and outside bookmakers. Yes, they regard Silas Rudd as their front with the police and in the courts."

In a short time after he had left the inner office, the Phantom smiled grimly as he surveyed those in the main office. He had reached the end of the puzzling trail.

Thomas Chester, the mask maker, was there. His serge suit was streaked with salt from dried sea water. Captain McDermott had Silas Rudd with him. Also, Muriel Havens was beside him. Van stared at her.

"Miss Havens talked me into getting her into Senora Leona's seance tonight, Phantom," said Captain McDermott.

Muriel tightened her lips and said nothing then.

Thomas Chester stared at the Phantom and at Silas Rudd. They were alike as identical twins. Chester seemed anxious to provide an alibi for himself.

"I was in a boat not far away, and I saw Conroy's yacht burn," he said.

Dark-faced Senor Ruiz was there, fiddling with his hands that had been so competent in growing deadly poisons.

The Phantom studied Senor Ruiz' hawklike nose, his birdlike eyes. There was a startling resemblance there to Senora Leona, and it came to

him that this resemblance of itself might answer several questions.

Half a dozen reporters were present, Luke Owler among them, asking questions of the guards and making notes. Van saw Arthur Conroy's mouth become a grim line. He knew that Conroy never would forget or forgive the paragraphs in Luke Owler's column that had been almost open insults to Sela Kane.

"Phantom," Captain McDermott said, "you might have left one or two killers for the law. Is it always your habit to obliterate whole gangs of killers? Even one man would mean something to the Department, but it seems you were yourself a one-man judge, jury and executioner."

The Phantom smiled grimly.

"The circumstances were inescapable, McDermott," he said quietly. "The provocation was enormous. It was pure chance that gave me enough of a winning hand to deal the final cards to the maskers."

"Hah!" ejaculated McDermott. "Chance? I'd like to have one man, just one man on my force that makes that kind of a chance. And you didn't leave one killer alive."

"There is one, just one," said Van. "You may deal with him, Captain McDermott. He is here, in this office."

There was awed silence. Eyes turned in furtive scrutiny. They came back to the Phantom. He was looking at Senor Ruiz. Senor Ruiz twisted

his hands, as if trying to break free from manacles on his wrists.

"Tell us about your sister, Senor Ruiz," requested Van calmly. "Or was Senora Leona some more distant kin? She resembled you greatly, senor."

"You know that?" blurted Senor Ruiz, taking a long, deep breath.

"Yes," said Van. "I judged there might be something like that when her name was first mentioned as a suspect in the fixing of murder races, and you defended her so hotly."

SEÑOR RUIZ bowed his head. Captain McDermott swore and moved closer to the senor. The captain had seen men like that use sudden poison.

"Senora Leona was my sister," Senor Ruiz said simply. "I knew she was dealing with race fixers, selling tips on horses through her phony spirit reading. I tried to induce her to give it up, but — she was extremely greedy."

Van nodded. "I believe you," he said. "And perhaps Senora Leona knew of thousands in buried treasure, left by your family under the old Ruiz family *hacienda* that once stood where now is the middle field of Los Sandra."

"Yes, she knew," said Senor Ruiz. "I intended to share equally with her, after giving old Doc Craig a split for the great help he gave me."

"Doc Craig?" cried Sela Kane.

[Turn Page]



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"Where is he? Is he alive? I have been afraid to ask!"

"Doc Craig is at my own house," said Senor Ruiz. "He has a fractured leg. He will be all right. Especially when he learns you have been saved, Miss Kane. I sent a man to tell him as soon as I heard it."

Captain McDermott scowled.

"What is this, Phantom?" he grunted. "A killer doesn't have that kind of mind."

"Correct," said Van. "He doesn't. Senor Ruiz, did you phone Senora Leona tonight and tell her to go to Tia Juana and meet you there for a pay-off?"

"I don't know what you mean, Phantom."

"I was fairly sure you wouldn't, Senor" said Van in a kindly tone. "Another question, senor. Did you know how your deadly poisons were being used?"

"Yes," said Senor Ruiz. "But only in the past forty-eight hours. Then I knew the masked mobsters had been employing some of my experiments for their own vile purpose. They were using the old smuggling tunnel that runs to the sea. So they found the Ruiz family treasure."

"And that treasure presumably was being used to pay the killers?" said Van.

"I think that may be true," said Senor Ruiz.

McDermott and the others were staring at the Phantom. He turned slowly upon Thomas Chester, the mask maker.

"Perhaps you will tell us that your fine masks were also being used for murder without your knowledge?" Van said harshly.

Chester's round face puckered. He looked almost as if he might be going to cry.

"Yes—yes—I knew," he stammered. "But only after Joel Seward was killed on the yacht. I knew then that the Masker who was hiding behind one of the faces of Luke Owler

must have killed Seward. But I could do nothing about it, I swear it."

"Joel Seward probably ran onto the Masker just after the killer pushed Sela Kane overboard," said Van. "He saw the Masker hide the Luke Owler mask, took it, and tried to hide it another place. No doubt he identified the real leader of the killers, so he was murdered by poison placed on a shark's spiked fin."

"Incredible!" exclaimed Zing Dover.

"Quite simple," said Van, turning to Dover. "You owed Sela Kane and Arthur Conroy a huge sum, secured by Los Sandra stock. With the recent trouble, you were about to close the race-track, knowing you would not have the funds to pay off or to open again next season."

ZING DOVER rumped his thick hair with a nervous hand, and nodded.

"But the track closes officially in a few days," he said. "I'm finished, anyway. It will never reopen."

Luke Owler shook his head sadly.

"This is the greatest newspaper story I've ever covered," he said. "The Phantom is a magician."

"Not a magician, Owler," Van said quickly. "By the way, I have noticed you occasionally write paragraphs in Spanish. Perhaps you also understand the Chinese language?"

Luke Owler hesitated, then smiled.

"It goes with the business down here," he said.

The Phantom was standing close to him. One hand moved so fast it could not be followed. His fingers snapped across the columnist's eyes.

"A fellow called Smiles Downer said the Masker wouldn't be at a mad tiger party because he was being seen around where he was supposed to be seen," he said. "A columnist is supposed to be seen about night clubs, isn't he, Owler?"

Luke Owler scowled. "What is all this?"

"Take him, Captain McDermott!" snapped Van. "Don't give him the slightest break! He knows too much about poisons. He specialized in them at his university, I learned tonight from the dean. He also is fluent in both Spanish and Chinese."

"Have you gone nuts, Phantom?" Luke Owler raged as McDermott pinned his wrists.

Van smiled a little as he took two tiny objects from inside a wrapped wax paper. These lay on his palm. He placed two other tiny objects beside them. They were hairs, so small, and so whitish that they were almost invisible.

He put the four hairs on a piece of black cloth he took from a pocket. In his hand then was a tubular microscope, the powerful rumbrascope. He peered closely at the four tiny hairs, then straightened.

"That does it, Owler," he said. "You lose one of the cleverest murder masquerades I have ever encountered by an eyelash. Or shall we say two eyelashes?"

Van was placing a skin mask beside the four hairs.

"And there, Captain McDermott," he stated, "is the evidence that Luke Owler murdered Joel Seward, the actor. This is the mask that Joel Seward was hiding, the one worn by the Masker when he tried to kill Sela Kane on the yacht. I found eyelashes stuck to the plastic inside of the mask. There are others there, but I took these two. I recalled that of all the persons I knew, Luke Owler alone had white eyebrows and lashes that went with his pink face and his bald head.

"Yes, Luke Owler pulled the smart trick of masking himself in replicas of his own face, then publicly resenting suspicion being directed toward him. It was good, that trick, only not good enough.

"He used Senor Ruiz' poisons, putting suspicion upon him. He talked with Thomas Chester about his own

face masks and put suspicion upon him, too. He spoke in Spanish to Senora Leona tonight, imitating Senor Ruiz as a cover-up if someone happened to be listening. He understood Ling Su's speech in Chinese. And he was about to put over the slickest steal of a five-million-dollar race-track that could be imagined."

"That's all a lie—a cooked up theory!" shouted Luke Owler. "Why, I was in San Diego when the stable was fired tonight! And when Conroy's yacht was burned. So I couldn't possibly have blown his safe!"

THE Phantom's mouth was a hard, straight line.

"Who informed you that Conroy's safe was blown?" he said. "It hasn't been mentioned since you arrived. The police did not know of it. Conroy told me of it, and that was all."

There was ruthless murder now in Luke Owler's eyes, and utter desperation.

"You wanted Sela Kane and Zing Dover out of the way after you had forced them to assign a huge block of Los Sandra stock to various gamblers," Van went on inexorably. "Some fourteen of them, whose names I have, and whose stock I also have, taken from Silas Rudd."

"I'll swear I didn't know half of what was going on, Phantom," big Silas Rudd broke in, his rugged face hard and hopeless. "You're right. Luke Owler had me handling stock that was assigned to different gamblers. They were merely to hold the assigned stock in their names until some time next year. I was to do the same with stock I had from Joel Seward and Thomas Chester, for money loaned to them. As a columnist, Luke Owler has had it on these gamblers, but I'll swear they didn't know what was happening. They knew only that Luke Owler's column could ruin them at any time."

"And could probably ruin you, too, Silas Rudd, for some of the covering

up of crooked games," said Van. "Is that it?"

"Yeah, that's it, Phantom." Silas Rudd nodded. "But I'll take the rap for my part in this. I didn't know it was to include murder."

"Luke Owler was only waiting for Zing Dover to quit, broke," said Van. "That meant Los Sandra would be closed in a few days, with little prospect of opening next year. Horse owners were terrified. But a famous columnist, a sports writer named Luke Owler was ready to come forward with a surprise. Probably he would have told how fourteen gamblers had been assigned Los Sandra stock for bad debts owed by Sela Kane, Arthur Conroy, Joel Seward and Thomas Chester. It was controlling stock.

"Sela Kane and Arthur Conroy would have been dead. Joel Seward was already dead. Thomas Chester and others knew of Joel Seward's debts.

"The public would readily believe that Sela Kane, a horse owner, and Conroy, yacht gambler, owed gambling debts. Zing Dover alone might have suspected the truth, but he never could have proved it.

"Luke Owler probably would have become rather a hero in coming forward to reopen Los Sandra next season, with assurance that under new management this year's jinx would be ended. The gamblers would have been glad to be in the clear. No one could really prove just how and why that track stock had been assigned by Sela Kane, Conroy, Seward and Chester."

VAN turned upon the white-faced Luke Owler.

"You were, and you are the Masker, the most ruthless killer I have ever known," he said. "You made love to Senora Leona and stole the Ruiz treasure, then had her murdered. Senor Ruiz probably will recover much of the treasure, for a

great deal of it was in those mob cars that were wrecked tonight."

Sela Kane was sobbing on Conroy's shoulder.

Van did not now speak nor did he ever intend to speak of Doc Craig's secret.

Doc Craig, he felt, had earned his last years of peace and happiness.

THE Phantom turned to Muriel Havens.

She dropped her eyes as he looked at her searchingly.

"You were instructed to remain in a sanitarium, Muriel," he said. "It was well I did not know it was you attending Senora Leona's seance. If I had guessed it, I am afraid your presence would have held me there too long."

Muriel smiled sweetly.

"The next time you save a lady, Phantom, you don't have to almost break her neck throwing her across a room," she said.

"If I have my way about it, there will not be any next time," said the Phantom.

But he knew when he said it that there probably would be a next time. Muriel Havens was a determined young woman.

He knew, too, that it probably would not be long before he would see Muriel again, after he left her here. But she would have no idea she was seeing, talking to the Phantom, when Richard Curtis Van Loan held her in his arms in a dance, back in the Eastern home city, or when her eyes sparkled at him over the rim of her glass when they drank some bantering toast like "Success to crime!"

Muriel would believe she held it a secret in her heart that she was allowed to work with the famous Phantom.

Richard Curtis Van Loan would know, because he *was* the Phantom.

Wearied now, and sickened by this crime chase, he longed for such a change back into the care-free days

of playboy and social life. He felt that he had earned surcease from the everlasting battle with brutal killers. Back home, he would enjoy Dick Van Loan's life to the full.

But not for long. Some day, some hour—he could never tell when—a

call would ring out for the Phantom. It would be a clarion call, whether issued from Frank Havens' *Clarion* or not.

And the Phantom would answer. As he always answered the cry from the suffering and oppressed.



THE PHANTOM TACKLES A TRAIL OF RUTHLESS MURDER AND GAMBLING INTRIGUE WHEN A MYSTERIOUS CRIME WAVE SUMMONS HIM TO NEW MEXICO'S OIL FIELDS IN

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Double Trickery

By

LEMUEL
DE BRA

Author of
"Skeleton Gulch," etc.



Fear was in their eyes as they started to their feet

Playing Two Ways From the Middle Looks Good to Battler Martine — But He Forget_s to Look Out for Backfire!

“**N**OBODY,” rumbled “Battler” Martine, “would ever think of lookin’ for a trick inside a trick!”

“Anybody,” retorted his wife, Selma, smiling, “who knew you, would expect just that—double trickery!”

Bat Martine’s deep-chested laughter filled the richly furnished living room in their swank apartment atop San Francisco’s fashionable Nob Hill.

Selma looked at her big, darkly handsome husband in his evening kit—they were going to a night spot later—and for an instant a fond light glowed in her deep violet eyes. It died quickly.

"Bat," she said in a tone of quiet resignation, "when I married you—only a few years ago—you were a rising young boxer with a splendid future. But you—"

"I still got a good future!" chuckled Bat. "But it's all behind me!"

"But you couldn't—or wouldn't—keep straight," Selma went on as if Bat had not spoken. "First you pulled a trick that got you thrown out of the boxing game. Since then you've drifted from one sort of crookedness to another. I—I think, sometimes, that you love the crooked game more than you love me."

"Mebbe I do, Toots!" rumbled Bat, indifferently. "I know that I'd rather work hard all day to trick some sucker out of a dollar than sit at a desk ten minutes for ten honest bucks. I'm all bad, Selma. An' you're all good. You'd better gather up your toys an'—an' scram!"

Selma made no response to that. She was gazing at her husband as if she were really seeing him for the first time. Sudden tears glistened in her eyes. She turned her head quickly. Bat hated tears.

"What is this new trick?" she asked. "And just where do I come in?"

For a moment there was a quick gleam of admiration in Battler Martine's dark eyes as he studied his wife's trim figure sheathed in a low-cut green silk gown. Then he heaved to his feet, stepped to the wall by the built-in bookcase and touched a certain spot on the wainscoting. Slowly a section rose, disclosing six small shelves. Each shelf was packed with five-tael opium cans.

"No one," rumbled Bat, "would ever guess that all this was hid behind that wall. You're lookin' at sixty cans of first-grade Macao opium, worth over four thousand iron men. An' now for the trick inside a trick!"

Bat took a thick wallet from his pocket, extracted a crisp hundred-dollar bill and tucked it between two of the opium cans.

"The century is yours, Toots," he said, "if you can see how this is done."

He touched the secret spring again and the wainscoting closed.

"I don't see anything much to that," said Selma. "You had something like that in our old apartment when you were bootlegging for—"

SHE broke off abruptly. Bat had touched the secret spring again. The shelving was in full view; so were the opium cans. But the hundred-dollar bill had vanished!

"This," rumbled Bat, "is the trick inside a trick. You're now looking at sixty nice opium cans filled with black-strap molasses, worth about sixty cents. With them I'm goin' to swindle four grand out of Fang Choy!"

"Fang Choy!" The name burst in a terrified whisper from Selma's lips. "Fang Choy! No, Bat, no! He—"

"Aw, don't give me any o' that nonsense about how clever the Chinese are, and how terrible they are when they're riled. I'm smarter than any Chinese that ever pushed a slipper across Grant Avenue. An' I ain't afraid of any of them!"

"But Fang Choy!" Selma's violet eyes were wide, staring at some horrible picture conjured by her memory. "Have you forgotten what happened to Charlie Garlan? He tricked some Chinese that way. They say it was Fang Choy. Anyway, Charlie's wife came home one afternoon to their five-room cottage. Charlie was there, all right—a piece of him in each room. Oh!" Selma covered her eyes and shuddered.

"Cut it!" snarled Bat. "An' listen close! We're goin' to work this on Fang Choy! An' notice I said *we!* You hear?"

Selma looked up. "Yes, Bat," she said, barely above a whisper.

"Fang Choy will sit at that table," Bat rumbled on. "I'll tell you to open this secret closet. You'll do it. The

Chinese will pick out a couple cans, open 'em an' test 'em. He'll find the stuff okay. See?"

Selma nodded.

"We'll haggle over the price. I'll make out like I'm gettin' mad. I'll order you to put the stuff back on the shelf and close the closet. You'll do it. An', with your back to Fang, you'll press this other secret spring. See here!"

As Bat talked, he had closed the wainscoting. Now he showed Selma another inconspicuous spot on the molding. He pressed this, stepped back, then again touched the first spring. The wainscoting opened. And there, right where Bat had put it, was the hundred-dollar bill.

"Of course," said Bat, "there are two sets of shelving exactly alike. An' on each set I've put sixty opium cans exactly alike—except that the cans on these shelves have opium in 'em, and those on the other shelves got only molasses. Now when I make out I've got mad, you close the wainscotin'. Then as I said, with your back to Fang Choy, you press this other spring. That takes away the opium an' brings up the shelves full of the phonies. Then all at once I'll suddenly get over bein' mad an' will agree to Fang's terms. You open the wainscotin' again, an' Fang will leave with a suitcase full of something that he—"

"Won't forget—ever!" broke in Selma. "Oh, Bat, I wish—"

"I wish you'd shut up your fool whinin'! Think you understand the trick now? Better be sure 'cause Fang is due here any minute."

Selma started. "You mean, he's coming tonight?"

Bat chuckled. "Sure! I wasn't goin' to give you any time to preach to me any more of that 'it pays-to-be-honest' stuff. You're so . . . S-sh! That's Fang now!"

The door bell was ringing—two shorts, a long, two quick shorts.

Bat snatched the bill from between

the opium cans, quickly closed the wainscoting.

"Remember, the opium's right here now!" he cautioned. "When I act like I'm mad, press that other spring and switch over the phonies. Understan'?"

"Yes, Bat." Selma turned and moved gracefully down the hall to open the door.

No one spoke until all three were by the big center table. Then Fang Choy's soft, purring voice broke the silence. It was a voice that contrasted strangely with his big frame, and round moon face with its deep-set obsidian eyes.

"Good evenin', Mist' Martine! Good evenin', Mis' Martine! You sent me word you are ready to talk business, Mist' Martine. Thass good!"

"Sure!" rumbled Bat. "Sit down, Fang! Selma, bring Fang Choy a drink. What'll you have, Fang?"

"A drink?" Fang's heavy lips drew back in a smile. "Thass good! But I not drink much. Mebbe you got little wine. Huh?"

SELMA brought a decanter of port and glasses.

"Fang," rumbled Battler Martine, setting down his glass, "I'm givin' you a swell chance to clean up. Reason is that I'm quittin'. A man like me don't do so good handlin' this black stuff. If I do anything from here on out, I'll stick to the white goods."

"More better," agreed Fang, nodding his head. "Yes, thass good. How much black goods you hab got?"

"Hab got sixty cans," answered Bat, smiling. "Finest grade Number One, Macao. Selma, show Fang what we have!"

The two men watched as Selma crossed to the wall, touched the secret spring and disclosed shelving filled with opium cans.

"Thass good!" applauded Fang. "Yes, ver' clever. I like see!"

The Chinaman heaved from his

chair and waddled over to the secret closet. After looking over several cans, he selected two and returned to the table. He opened the cans, looked at the contents closely, then smelled them.

"Look good, smell good," he purred, as if to himself. "We see now!"

He got out a small gold-handled penknife, thrust the blade into one of the cans and dipped up a small quantity of the black, gummy stuff. Lighting a match with his thumbnail, he held the flame beneath the blade, then took a deep inhalation of the heated opium.

"Thass good," Fang's sibilant whisper seemed to fill the room. "Not first grade, but ver' good. How much you want?"

He replaced the covers on the two cans, cleaned his knife and put it away.

"Well, Fang," rumbled Bat, "as I said, I'm goin' out o' the black goods business, so I'm glad to sell at a sacrifice. But you know the Narcotic Squad has been raisin' the devil lately. Opium is hard to get. In fact, there's a real opium famine on. I ought to ask a hundred bucks a can for that."

"Thass good!" purred the Chinaman. "You ask it—then you try to get it!"

"Oh, I'm willing to come down. I want you to make a nice profit on this deal for takin' all this stuff off my hands. How about seventy-five a can? I don't—"

"How about fifty dolla' a can? Huh?"

"What!" Battler Martine glared at the Chinaman. "You offer fifty bucks for this first-grade opium! An' I thought you came here on business, not to insult me! Selma, put this stuff away!"

Selma picked up the two cans of opium, crossed to the secret closet and replaced them from where Fang had taken them. She touched the spring; the wainscoting closed.

Bat ceased glaring at Fang long

enough to look around at Selma. She was standing with her back to the wainscoting, her hands behind her. She met her husband's look with an almost imperceptible nod of assurance.

"Fang," rumbled Battler Martine, suddenly friendly again, "I'm a little nervous tonight. Let's talk business. Forget what I said, an' I'll forget what you said. You know you are gettin' a bargain at seventy-five a can. Take the stuff at seventy dollars."

Fang Choy appeared to consider that carefully.

"Thass lots money," he purred finally. "But time worth money, too. Mebbe you take sixty-five dolla'. Huh?"

"Not a cent less than seventy!"

Fang nodded slowly. "Thass good! Can do!" He took a thick bill fold from his pocket, began counting out the money.

"Okay, Selma," rumbled Bat. "Put the stuff in that suitcase I got ready for Fang!"

The Chinese glanced up from his counting long enough to see the wainscoting glide up, disclosing shelving filled with opium cans—apparently just as it had been but a moment before.

"Sixty cans," spoke up the Chinese, "at seventy dolla' a can is four thousand two hundred dolla'. You take this? Huh? Thass good!"

HE SHOVED a stack of bills across the table. Bat quickly riffled through the money.

"You're gypin' me out of two hundred!" he accused, smiling. "I'll get even with you some day!"

He opened the table drawer, dropped in the four thousand dollars and closed the drawer again. Selma was packing the last of the tins in the suitcase.

"Mebbe, Mist' Martine," purred Fang Choy, "more better I test opium again. Lots tricks. Huh?"

"Suit yourself, Fang!" Bat invited.

"An' mebbe more better I examine them bills more carefully."

"Oh, money all right!" Fang assured him quickly. "An' I trust Mis' Martine, so I know opium all right. Yes, thass good!" He picked up the packed suitcase. "Good business 'tween good friends! Huh? Good night, Mist' Martine! Good night, Mis' Martine!"

The door closed behind Fang Choy. Selma turned a white, tense face to her husband.

Bat chuckled.

"Don't look so sick, old girl! That's the last you'll ever see of the big Chinee! Don't you know by this time that I'm full o' tricks? You just drift along an' never think of anything but the straight an' narrow. Remember Slim Gearing?"

"That—scum!"

"Right fond of my pals, ain't you? Well, Slim has a good racket. An' just to relieve your precious mind of any fears of Fang Choy, I'll tell you now that I hired Slim to pull his special trick. Want a drink? I notice you wouldn't drink with Fang."

"No," breathed Selma, still gazing at Bat with fear-filled eyes. "Thanks."

Bat poured a generous glass of the wine, sipped it luxuriously.

"Slim will tail the Chinee from the door of our apartment house to within a block or so of Fang's place of business," Bat went on. "Then he'll stop Fang Choy. He'll say, 'Federal,' an' he'll flash a phony buzzer. He'll pretend to search Fang for a gun or something. Then he'll ask what's in the suit-case. You don't understand all that, of course. But that hooley is just to keep the Chinee from smellin' a rat."

Bat took another sip of port, then went on:

"Fang, of course, will say there's just old clothes, or something like that, in the suit-case. But by that time he'll be scared good and plenty. And when Slim bends over to open the kister, the Chinee will take it on

the lam. Then"—Bat grinned—"Slim will bring the suit-case of phony dope right back to papa. That's why—"

"Oh, Bat!" cried Selma eagerly. "Do you think it will work? I'd be so glad if—"

"My tricks," rumbled Battler Martine, "always work. But you—"

Bat choked off as the doorbell broke in with its clangor—two short rings, one long, two quick shorts.

"The devil! That's Slim already! He musta stopped the Chinee just down the street!" For an instant fear was in the eyes of both as they started to their feet. Then Bat snapped: "Well, why don't you answer it?"

Selma walked hesitantly to the door opened it. In stumbled a slim, pinch-faced individual with watery eyes. He carried a suit-case.

And close behind "Slim" Gearing came Fang Choy, herded along by two men whom Bat instantly recognized—Frank Draper, chief of the Federal Narcotic Squad, and his assistant, Agent Alan.

"Sit down!" ordered Draper, as Bat started to rise. "Don't take your hands off that table! Mrs. Martine, sit down over there by your husband! Alan, slip a cuff on Fang Choy and this phony detective."

Like a sleepwalker, Selma moved to a chair by the table and sank into it. Draper crossed quickly to where Bat was sitting, searched him and tossed an automatic to Agent Alan.

"Bat," said Draper, "we've had our eyes on you for a long time. And now we've got you right! Eh?"

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," rumbled Bat with cool assurance. "Snow a little so I can get the drift!"

"The drift is going to bury you, for at least five years," Draper told him grimly. "We were tailing that phony detective tonight, saw him stop Fang Choy and pull his old trick. When we closed in, Fang claimed he didn't know what was in the suit-case. They

when we found it full of opium, he claimed that a white man had given it to him to check at the ferry building. It didn't take long to scare that worm, Slim Gearing, into telling us that the white man was you. You beginning to get the drift?"

WITH steady hand, Battler Martine picked up the glass and tossed off the rest of his wine.

"Draper," he said, with cocky familiarity, "this is one of them jokes that has turned out to be not so funny. But you still haven't anything on me. As for that bird you call Slim Gearing, I don't even know him. I—"

"He's a liar!" Slim contradicted angrily, moving closer to Agent Alan. "He hired me to hijack the Chinese. I was to pull the trick near Fang's joint, but I got nervous an'—"

The steady glare in Battler Martine's black eyes silenced the little crook.

Suddenly Draper jerked open the table drawer.

"Oh, ho!" he exclaimed. "This looks interesting! Fang Choy, you ever see this before?" He tossed the stack of bills onto the table.

"I nebba!" denied Fang emphatically. "That man—"

"Now *he's* lyin'!" charged Bat. "Mr. Draper, will you let me clear up this matter?"

"Shoot"! Draper invited. "The rest of you keep quiet!"

Selma's white hands fluttered for an instant to her cheeks, dropped back again to her lap. Bat lighted a cigarette, took a deep inhalation.

"Fang Choy," he rumbled, smoke oozing from his mouth and nostrils, "is known to be the biggest opium dealer on the Coast. Somehow he got the crazy idea that I was runnin' junk up from the Border an' he—"

"That wasn't such a crazy idea, was it?" queried Draper, smiling.

Bat ignored the thrust. "He pestered the life out of me beggin' me to get stuff for him. Finally"—Bat flung

a malicious glance at his wife—"Mrs. Martine suggested a way to get rid of him. You wouldn't suspect it, Mr. Draper, but my wife is as full of tricks as—"

"Don't try to pin any of your dirty work on your wife!" growled Draper. "Anything wrong that she's done, you made her do. Now go on, but stick to the truth!"

Bat looked uneasy for a moment, then managed a shrug.

"Well, through a friend, I got what I needed. I sent word to Fang that I was ready to deal with him. He came here tonight and paid me them four thousand iron men. I left the money right there because I knew he'd discover the trick and come back. Mr. Draper, them cans in that suitcase ain't got nothin' in 'em but black-strap molasses!"

"Oh, ho!" exclaimed the Federal man.

He started toward the suitcase Slim had set down, but Fang Choy spoke up calmly.

"Thass lie!" He pointed an accusing finger at Bat. "He sell me good opium. I see, I smell, I—"

"Wait a minute, Fang!" interrupted Draper. "Are you telling me that you really tested some stuff and found it good opium?"

"Yes, Mist' Draper," purred Fang. "Thass what I tell you." He pointed now to the wall that concealed the secret shelving. "Mis' Martine take opium from there. I see, I smell. No can trick me on opium!"

"Then there is—"

"Mr. Draper," Bat quickly intervened, "I tell you that the stuff Fang Choy tested is right in that suitcase an' that it's nothin' but molasses. He probably smelled a bit of opium that I had smeared on the top of the molasses. As for where I kept the stuff—Selma, show Mr. Draper that old secret closet!"

Selma went to the wall, touched the hidden spring. The wainscoting rose, disclosing empty shelves.

There was a long silence.

"An' now!" rumbled Bat triumphantly, "if you'll just test that stuff in the keister, we'll wind up this foolishness right off."

"Fang," said Draper, "you must have made a mistake. We all do sometimes. Yeah, even I do! Alan, go ahead!"

Agent Alan set the suit-case on the table, took out several cans and removed the lids.

"It looks like opium," he said. "It smells like opium." He touched a match flame to the open cans and breathed of the warm vapor. "And by the seven-faced god, *it is opium!*"

"Thass good," purred Fang Choy.

SLOWLY Chief Draper turned to the ex-pugilist. He started to speak but, instead, looked quickly at Mrs. Martine. White-faced, she was shrinking from the piercing accusation in her husband's eyes.

"You fool!" Bat's rumbling snarl fairly throbbed in the room. "You blundered!"

With a desperate effort Selma got control of herself.

"No, Bat," she denied. "I didn't blunder—not like you think. I was so terrified at the thought of what Fang Choy would do to you when he

learned how you had tricked him that I didn't change the shelving. I knew I'd have to face your terrible anger when you learned how I had tricked you, but I'd a thousand times rather do that than have you face Fang Choy's revenge."

She turned quickly and pressed the springs that changed the shelving.

"There, Mr. Draper," she said, pointing, "are the sixty cans of molasses with which my husband intended to swindle Fang Choy. In that suit-case are the sixty cans of good opium. I tried to save him from Fang, but—"

Her voice broke, she slowly bowed her head.

Out of a brittle silence, Draper said:

"A neat case of double trickery! But, Bat, the joke is on you!" He slapped a handcuff on Bat's wrist, linked him to the Chinese.

Battler Martine stared down at the glittering steel, then looked up at the Federal agent.

"Yeah, an' what a joke!" his deep rumble filled the room. "My wife was so afraid I'd die some day from the dagger of a Chineese that she pulls a fast one that sends me where each dawn I'll die a thousand deaths!"

"Thass good," purred Fang Choy.

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Priestley ran toward them

The Killer Held a Loaded Gun—and a Powerful Secret— But Dave Brill Was Too Smart for Him!

AT four o'clock in the morning, Dave Brill parked his light roadster under the porte-cochère, got out and locked the back compartment. There were several sticks of dynamite remaining in the case on the floor in the compartment of the car, and some blasting caps

and fuse. He was not leery of the stuff himself but he usually locked the car as a precaution.

He'd been on the go since early the preceding morning and he was ready for bed. During most of the day as an agent of the U. S. Alcohol Tax Unit he'd been flying in the Coast

Guard plane. This was a new stunt and Brill was still excited over the results.

Specially equipped for low-speed reconnaissance work, the plane crew, with Brill directing them, spotted moonshine plants in the woods and over a two-way radio telephone directed ground crews to the stills. A few of those spotted he'd thought best to leave undisturbed until the 'shiners could be nabbed, and since nightfall he had been visiting likely places looking for lawbreakers.

"Hi, Blue, old boy."

Pocketing his keys with one hand, he reached down with the other to scratch the head of the big shepherd who had come with a tail-wag greeting. On the porch, opening the unlocked house door—nobody in the region ever locked a house—he waited to see if the dog wanted in. Blue yawned and then stretched out with his hoary head on his forelegs, so Brill went in alone, through the darkened living room and into his bedroom before switching on a light.

He was tall, supple, and his face was strong and weather-dark. His gray eyes were set wide apart, and though he was very tired now, they still held good nature and a quiet reserve. He unstrapped his gun belt and without removing the automatic from its flap holster, placed it in the top drawer of a bureau.

"Dis a terrible time fer you to be gittin' in, Mistuh Dave."

JUNIUS stood in the doorway, wearing a ridiculous, painfully white old-fashioned nightgown and a stormily censorious scowl. Brill had not heard him approach from his room adjoining the back porch; the servant was barefooted.

"Go to bed, Junius," said Dave, not unkindly.

"When you goin' give up dis crazy revenoo'n and jus' farm like real folks?" Junius demanded for perhaps the hundredth time. He'd been look-

ing after Brills for most of his life, and he did not approve of the last of them engaging in a profession in any way not genteel.

Dave Brill smiled. "It's a good job, and often it's a job that needs a good man. And I'm not much of a farmer."

"What Miss Elton think about it? Even if she don't let on, I bet she doan' like de notion ob her husband doin' such work."

"Let her worry about that. Wake me up about ten, Junius."

The darky departed, shaking his head. Dave, in pajamas, forgot the aging dignities of Blue and Junius, who were so much alike, and glanced affectionately at the picture of Sybil on his dresser. She was a girl in a million. As neat and eye-catching as a golden pin.

Since being adopted at the age of three by Andy Elton, the mail carrier who was something of a local institution, most folks had forgotten that her real father had deserted her mother shortly after she was born. Her mother died in poverty. The child needed someone to look after her, and not a soul in the county could offer valid objection when Andy adopted her. Andy was a widower. His son Ralph was five then, and Andy had argued that it would be better for Sybil and Ralph too if they grew up together.

Ralph was now a reporter on the *Atlanta Clarion*. Andy imagined he could spot the stories in the *Clarion* which Ralph had written, though his son seldom got a by-line, and sometimes on the mail route in the mornings when Andy caught Dave Brill in, he'd stop and discuss the news with Dave, who understood about newspaper work, having been a cub reporter once himself.

And Sybil, despite her deceptively childish air and two battle-axe matrons on the board of trustees, had recently become the town librarian.

Before Brill fell asleep, he heard the Seaboard freight train hooting

with the mournfulness of distance in the valley. But the sound reached only the thin surface of his consciousness. Whatever else he might be, Dave Brill was a healthy animal. He certainly had no premonition of a killer on the loose scarcely two miles away.

RAFE LARROW had been wading upstream for hours. His feet were numb with cold. He paused under the ghostly tentacles of a willow, listening intently. There was no sound other than the gurgling of the creek about his calves, the swishing of branches above his head in the chill breeze. No angry shouts of men, no yapping of bloodhounds.

He grinned sardonically in his pool of darkness. They had expected him to go downstream, toward the trackless swamps, like any other stupid con—not to head back toward town and sure trouble. They didn't know about his ace in the hole.

Ducking under the overhang, he saw that the stream widened here onto a shallow shelf of pebbles like a bed of gems in the wan moon-glow. Cow tracks were thick on the gentle slope of the far bank. He grinned again. This might well be on Dave Brill's own property. The path of exit could not have been placed to better advantage. His scent would be confused, if the hounds got this far, with that of cattle.

He followed the trail carefully, stepping in tracks or on dry ground. Upward, between walls of thick brier and wild plum, he went until he was in a clearing, with the stately columns of pines rearing before him. Unhesitatingly he crossed.

The cringing moon seemed reluctant to touch his bent gnome-like figure, for there was a calculating evil with the weight of years upon Rafe Larrow. Scurrying toward the shelter of the pines, his sharp face turned once briefly over his shoulder. Under his straggly gray hair and brows his predatory eyes gleamed. The lines on

his cheeks were like scratches on steel but they only formed a shriveling plate for the livid scar which ran in one slash from under his left eye, across his nose to the knob of his jaw.

This scar branded him, made palpable his urgency. Off in the valley the highballing Seaboard freight blew for a crossing, and the melancholy bleats warned him of approaching dawn.

It would not do for him to be seen even by a field-bound darky.

Circulation was returning to his feet. He left the cow trail, which led he knew not where, and reached a sagging rail fence, climbed it to drop lightly into frost-yellow broomstraw and then made his way to the protection of a giant mistletoe-burdened oak.

Dave Brill's trim white cottage with its unused barn, barely a hundred yards from the county road, lay before him in the rising mists. A rooster was crowing.

All this, Rafe Larrow told himself, was going to be a lead-pipe cinch. No man could foresee the chain of circumstance in his deliverance, strongly forged as the links were. No man but himself, and he was still amazed by his perception.

At sunrise he was safely burrowed into the redolent warmth of a forgotten mound of hay in the barn's loft. He had perfect vantage—there was a crack in the barn wall through which he could watch the back door of the house and a good portion of the yard, and he was close enough to the edge of the loft to command nearly all the floor space beneath.

He waited. The hard bulk of the .38 S. & W. Special was under his belt, and in his hand was the tabak knife with blade ground to stiletto-like deadliness. Idly he pricked a finger with its point, and saw that there remained at the blade's shoulder a sticky smear of blood. He wiped it on a sleeve, remembering, and flames leaped in his bloodshot eyes.

His only worry was of a dog. But if there was one, his stealth had succeeded until now, and with luck—

Abruptly the kitchen door of the cottage opened. An aged Negro came out upon the screened porch, yawning, opened the screen door and descended to the sunlit yard. Junius might have been any age between sixty and a hundred, he himself did not know, but he walked straight, with his white-haired head high, his pitch black countenance untouched by fear.

He walked toward the barn. Rafe Larrow tensed.

A hen began to cackle uproariously. Junius entered the barn door, squinting into the shadows. He took five steps—and scrawny Rafe Larrow rose, poised like a hungry hawk, and plummeted.

The barking of Blue disturbed Dave Brill. It was a strange bark, at times verging on a howl, so that at first he was not sure it *was* Blue; then as he became more fully awake the noise abruptly stopped. Queer. Maybe, he thought, I was dreaming.

He lay comfortably under the patchwork quilts, with an ear cocked toward the kitchen. No sound of Junius. Company, perhaps — and Junius had gone out to meet them. The busybody clock on the dresser, beside the picture of Sybil, said eight-twenty. So that was why no aroma of coffee and bacon came to him—too early. Might as well get some more sleep. Junius would wake him if there were important visitors. Probably just a farmer peddling produce.

But an apprehension nagged at the back of his mind like a will-o'-the-wisp. Sleep kept just beyond his grasp. And he needed sleep. His eyes were focussed on a thin line of sunlight on the floor which came from the drawn window-shade. As he watched, the line faded. He turned onto his back, then onto his left side, facing the blank wall. In a minute or two, still half awake, he heard tendrils of rain

brushing the house, and he thought surely they would bring him sleep, but this did not happen, and, annoyed, he turned over again.

"Take it easy," warned Rafe Larrow.

Brill stared a moment: "Who are you?" he asked finally.

Rafe Larrow leaned negligently against the doorjamb. He had washed up and changed. Because Brill's suits were too large, he wore Junius' best, the Sunday-go-to-meeting blue serge, which fitted him fairly well, and a white shirt of Brill's which left too much of his skinny neck exposed over the knot of one of Brill's ties, and on his feet were a pair of Brill's socks. He held the .38 S. & W. in his veined right fist, contemptuously business-like.

Aside from the clothes, which he spotted at once, Brill would have known that this was no disgruntled moonshiner. A lot of them were always making threats, but none had ever had the nerve to carry them out. Besides, there was something about this coldly gloating devil— He was no ordinary stick-up hoodlum, either. His manner was as deadly and implacable as time.

"The name wouldn't mean anything to you, handsome," said the intruder. "Anyway, I've used too many of 'em in my time. You just stay there and I'll explain why you're gonna do exactly what I tell you, and nothing else."

Dave Brill was up on his elbows. He was under no delusion that this was a dream. His gray eyes were glinting, but otherwise his tanned face held no expression. He didn't say anything.

HOOKING the big toe of his right foot under the rung of a straight-backed chair, Rafe Larrow pulled it over to him and carefully sat down. He grinned. As though in protest, there was a flurry of rain against the house and some of it wet the shade,

blew in on the floor through the open window.

"Mind if I close the window?" Dave Brill asked quietly.

"I'll do it." Rafe Larrow rose, hefting the revolver without looking at it, and walked catlike to the foot of the bed. He stopped and grinned again at Dave, the grin twisted the tail of his scar horribly. Not particularly furtive, but careful not to be seen from outside the house, he ran a hand under the shade, caught the window and pulled it down.

He returned to his chair and, as he reseated himself, reached behind him on the floor, behind the corner of the doorway, and pulled out a pair of Dave's shoes. He put the Scotch-grain brogues on his feet with his left hand, keeping the gun ready in his right. The shoes were too big for him. He pulled the laces tight but did not knot them—he tucked in the ends.

"Talk!" Brill said. "It looks like that's what you're here for."

He was getting angry and he took no pains to conceal how he felt. His lips grew pale.

"How long your folks been dead, Brill?"

The question was the last Dave Brill expected. "What's that got to do with you?" he asked.

"Don't even like to hear me mention 'em, eh? Well, I knew 'em," said Rafe Larrow. "They were old line Southerners. Aristocrats living on recollections and field peas. I figure you're a lot like 'em at heart—no matter what your job is now. And you're in love with a girl that goes by the name of Sybil Elton. Right?"

"You seem to know the answers. Tell me some more."

"Okay. See if you can take 'em. I was raised around here myself. Lived here till I was about twenty-four. Pulled out kind of sudden. Over twenty years I been away. A good part of that time I spent in various

[Turn page]

SPARE TIME TRAINING for YOUR Part in NATIONAL DEFENSE and... the AFTER YEARS!

OUR first job is to aid our nation in this world crisis—to serve her most effectively. Our second task is to prepare for the adjustment years that will follow.

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stirs — and they wasn't bum raps."

He paused, and when he went on his voice was harsher.

"This scar I got in a joint called Primrose Katie's in San Pedro, California, about eight years ago. A couple of years later I caught up with the lug who gave it to me. I cut his heart out. That was one they never pinned on me."

"Why tell me about it?" Dave Brill started to put his feet out of bed.

"Keep still, blast you, till I finish my spiel!" Rafe Larrow said.

Brill leaned back on his elbows. He wondered if his belt and gun were still in the bureau drawer. He didn't look that way.

"Don't get me wrong," the scar-faced man told him. "I'm not shooting off my mouth for nothing— Well, a few months back I got a screwy idea. Old and childish, maybe. Anyway, I want to come back and look over the place where I grew up. And I do. Of course nobody recognizes me, and for a day or two everything is jake. You know where the Three Pines Tourist Camp is, on Route One?"

"Yes," said Brill. It wasn't strictly a tourist camp.

"That's where I run into trouble. Maybe you remember it."

"A darky got knifed out there a few weeks ago. Some hobo did it. The darky didn't die, but the hobo got a stretch on the chain-gang. You?"

Rafe Larrow nodded. His small, close-set eyes were slyly spiteful.

"But I still didn't chirp to nobody. What questions I ask, I'm plenty careful. Not that I need to be so much — not with this stripe across my puss. Some of the old cons in the stockade pass out some interesting information. Some of those guys done time in this county before I got my first pair of shoes. Well, I begin to fit things together. At first it's hard to believe. It's too good to be true."

"What's too good to be true?"

"The reason you're gonna keep on

being a Brill and drive me to Charleston. And cover up for me afterward any way you can. That doll you're gonna marry — you know who she is?" The grin turned up the edge of his scar. "She's my daughter."

OUTSIDE, the rain came down with a sullen steadiness, as if taking revenge against the sunlit first hours of the day. Inside, by the time Brill had started to dress, he was no longer doubting the fantastic truth.

He had often wondered about Sybil's father, but only in a careless, mild way, for she was accepted as Andy's daughter now and the venerable mail carrier's attitude and philosophy had banished from the minds of most people in this section any question, any stirring of ghosts. But this devil standing vigil had names. He had dates. Doubtless he could produce oldsters, black and white, who, if their memories were unmercifully prodded, could circumstantially substantiate his claims, however unwillingly.

If Dave Brill called his bluff, the man would be jailed on a charge of murder, probably would be sentenced to the chair. But what would happen to Sybil? The disgrace, the sensation, rearing from the pride of the community, would blight her whole life here.

As a murderer's daughter she might refuse to marry him if only for his sake.

Rafe Larrow had correctly appraised his man, and through knowledge of family only. The South had not changed much, after all. Blood would tell.

"You'd try to protect her if you knew I'd put a shiv to every chain-gang guard in the state," Rafe Larrow told him. "As for that one last night, he was asking for it. Every con in the camp knew he was on the make."

"You led him to believe you had money hidden outside?" Dave Brill

guessed, pulling pants on his long legs.

"It wasn't hard. After the tough stirs I been in, a backwoods stockade was a breeze. All I had to do was act up, get put in solitary, and wait for him to come around. I left him lying in my bunk—a dummy. They've probably found him by now, and there's a wanted out for me. But you're my ticket to freedom, see?"

Through the black mist of anger it was hard for Brill to think clearly. There were too many angles. Junius was dead, and old Blue. Junius who had looked after him from childhood. But this fiend kept rubbing in every ugly and inescapable fact that followed. Junius and Blue couldn't be helped now. Sybil could be. That was the monstrous, incredible reasoning on which the fugitive's ironic confidence of escape was based. And it was irrefutable.

"Your only chance," the man with the gun summed it up neatly, "is to knock me off. That'd keep me from talking. But just try it, buddy."

"After I get you to Charleston, you'll be no better off," Brill told him. "You'll be picked up on sight. That scar."

"Let me worry about that."

There were make-up materials which could disguise the scar well enough, Brill supposed—and the marked man knew where to obtain them. A couple of hundred miles away, he might get by. Strangers would not be subjected to such close scrutiny.

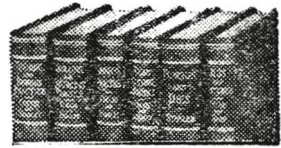
"Okay, go on and get a shirt out of that drawer. And you don't have to look in the one your rod was in, if that's what you got on your mind. I been a cat-burglar in my time, too. Sure, I got the gun while you was sleeping. Hurry up. Let's get going."

The rain was lessening. Rafe Larrow didn't like that.

They were in the hall putting on overcoats—both Brills—when they heard a car turn in from the

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county road, and roll up the gravel drive. Larrow froze.

"Who's that?"

Brill looked at him a moment, then went to the door and inched aside a portiere to peer out the narrow panes bordering the frame.

"The mail carrier," he said.

"The girl's guardian—the crackpot Andy Elton?"

"Yes."

Larrow swore. "It would be." He looked over Dave's shoulder, keeping the gun prodded into Brill's back. "What's he coming to the house for? There's a box down at the turn."

"Sometimes my mail is registered. Even when it isn't, Andy often stops in. Likes to talk over the news."

The small sedan stopped in front of the house. Its door opened. Andy Elton put a foot on the running board and his face came into view through the drizzle.

"He hasn't seen us yet. Back up—quick!" ordered Rafe Larrow, and the hammer of the revolver made a quiet, ominous click in the dimness of the hallway.

Strictly speaking, Andy's habit of dropping in like this was against the rules, but he never had been much of a hand for rules and he was getting too set in his ways to try. On a Star Route hardly anybody knew the rules, anyway, and in all Andy's long career he'd never lost or misplaced a letter. The mails were sacred.

He considered himself the local personification of the United States Post Office—the politically appointed postmaster to the contrary notwithstanding—and as such above reproach.

If Dave wasn't in, he figured on accepting Junius' surely-forthcoming offer to fix him up a cup of coffee.

With Dave's mail in his hand, he reached the door, opened it and then stepped into the hall. He took off his hat and raincoat and deposited them on the hall-tree.

"Anybody home?" he called.

For nearly a minute there was no

answer. Andy took little notice of the delay. He was about to call out again when he heard Dave's voice.

"In here, Andy!" Brill called.

The living room door was half a dozen feet away. Andy palmed the knob, turned it and opened the door. Brill was seated at a table across the room, filling out Treasury Department reports. The furnishings, in the years since his mother's death, had become almost completely utilitarian and masculine. He turned now, pen in hand, smiling. Andy felt a surge of pride—this was his future son-in-law.

"Pretty busy, Dave?"

"The last few days—yes. If they send the plane back a few more times, there won't be any stills left for awhile. Hope I don't get transferred. Want coffee, Andy?"

"It'd hit the spot." Andy handed him the *Clarion* and several letters.

"Junius is out somewhere. Mind making it yourself? I—you see, there are so many reports that have to be—"

"Well, sure, Dave."

ANDY left the large room by another door. Brill heard him in the kitchen, and the pretended relaxation left him, tension crawled fanwise up the flat muscles of his back. He turned his head. The muzzle of the revolver, barely visible in the crack of the closet door by the bookcase, shifted a little, appearing to wink.

"Okay," came Rafe Larrow's hoarse whisper. "So far so good. Now open your mail. If he suspects anything, his number's up."

With wooden fingers Brill slit the envelopes with the letter-opener on the table. He did not doubt that Larrow would kill Andy as readily as he might slap at a mosquito in front of his face. But paramount still in Dave Brill's mind was to keep this horror from Sybil.

Presently Andy returned, steaming cup and saucer in hand and sucking

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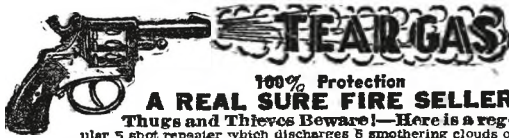
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his mustache. He sat down at the end of the table and regarded Brill comfortably. Brill, knowing what was expected of him, had the newspaper spread out, and was leaning on his elbows. They talked war and politics. Brill turned the pages slowly. The scene and the conversation were so casual that for a moment he could almost forget the killer in the closet. He woke himself rudely.

"What's this about a break at Priestley's camp, Andy? My Lord, a guard was killed." Dave stared at the page.

"Gee m'netty. Plumb forgot to tell you about that. Didn't know it was in the paper, though. Where?"

Andy rose to squint down Brill's pointing finger.

"The *Clarion's* getting pretty fast on these things," said Brill. "Only happened last night. Well, the fellow probably won't get away. Has a deep scar across his nose. He's probably hiding in the woods somewhere hereabouts."

After a silence, his gaze still on the newspaper Andy spoke.

"Yeah. Reckon so," he said. "Well, I better be getting along, Dave."

He tamped tobacco into his pipe with a crooked forefinger, lit it, and puffed a dense cloud of smoke over the table. Brill did not rise as he left the room.

The front door opened and closed. The car's starter ground, the motor caught, and in the quiet living room Brill and Rafe Larrow, who now had the closet door open, heard Andy drive off.

Urgency again was upon the fugitive. The net was closing, and knowledge of the swiftly passing period of grace was in his pale eyes.

"On your feet, Brill. You got guts—I'll hand you that. Just keep on having 'em."

The electric air of hurry followed them as they once more found overcoats and hats and went out of the house by the side door and got in the

car under the porte-cochère. The rain had thickened again. Larrow sat beside Brill, overcoat collar turned up and turned-down hatbrim almost touching it. He'd made Brill remove the dynamite and caps.

Brill fought a rising panic. Larrow's arms were crossed; the revolver in his right fist, tucked under the sleeve of his left arm, prodded Dave Brill's ribs. As they swerved past the R.F.D. box, lightning lashed at them from the lowering skies and lifted the short hairs on Brill's neck.

It was six miles to the Charleston highway. They did not have to go through the village. From the cutoff fork to the paved road was a couple of miles through dense woods, sharply curving, and Brill told himself that if he was to manage any kind of break, here would be best, but the pressure of the gun muzzle on his side was relentless, and Larrow was alert as a coiled rattler.

WITHIN a quarter mile of the highway, they rounded a curve and saw the yellow coupé coming. It came very slowly to meet them. It had started raining again.

"Captain Priestley's car — damn him!" Larrow grated, his gun gouging. He knelt quickly on the floor of the car, getting his head below the dash. The gun pointed up at Brill. "We get past okay, buddy, or you get a bullet in the face. There's something fishy here."

"Don't get nervous," Brill said, his own voice coming to him from far away. "I know what I'm doing." But his heart was leaping in his throat.

The road was narrow, rutted, so that at least one of the cars would have to change gears to pass.

"Keep going!" Larrow hissed.

"Can't," Bill clipped, and shoved in the clutch.

"Hey, Brill!" called Priestley.

The yellow coupé stopped beside them, almost blocking Brill from passing. Larrow, on the floor, couldn't

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see the situation but he could sense it, too well, Brill knew.

This was it. And it wasn't going to work. Well, better rush the end than wait for it. In one smoothly flowing motion he twisted the door handle and was falling out of the car, and from under Larrow's shining feline eyes the .38 roared, blasting at him. He felt a bite like a sting in his left side, no more than that in the desperate blur of movement.

He got around the back of the car almost without being conscious of what he was doing. Priestley was shouting. Brill's car was jerking forward, in gear, choking down. Brill drew a long bladed jackknife out of his pocket and snapped it open. The door on the right side came open as Brill catapulted himself toward it, and Larrow writhed loose.

The gun went off in Brill's face, deafening him, but in the same instant he got Larrow's wrist, and the bullet went skyward. They were threshing on the back of the car. Priestley was running toward them, coat collar turned up, and his gun spoke now, futilely. Brill and Larrow were too tangled.

Larrow's gun was between them, and saliva sprayed from the killer's mouth. His knee caught Dave Brill in the stomach; that was the fatal mistake. Brill raised the knife in his hand. The revolver's final explosion was muffled by their bodies.

"Argh—" The ghastly sound issued from Larrow's straining mouth, his head flung back. And his life hissed out in the breath.

Priestley was still shouting something as Brill rose. Brill didn't know what it was. He began to tremble from head to foot.

In half an hour a crowd was there. A doctor stopped the bleeding from the bullet hole in Brill's side, banded the wound.

"Better come by my office later, Brill," he said. "You'll need an anti-tetanus shot."

Andy Elton drove up with Sybil. She jumped from the car and ran to Brill, where he sat on a running board. She was fighting mad, an amber fury.

"Dave Brill!" she said. "You idiot! Why can't you be more careful?" She started to cry.

Brill laughed weakly. He bent down to laugh. It hurt, just as it hurt to know that Junius and old Blue were dead.

"And I was in town," big Captain Priestley was saying, "when Andy phoned that this convict was holed up at Dave's, and might try to force Dave to help him escape. Confound it, I mighta figured the play out here if he'd just give me time. But no, he has to go draw the devil's fire before I get a chance to be foxy."

"How'd I know?" Andy told a bystander proudly. "Well, I stopped in to give Dave his mail, and he starts showin' me this piece in the paper that ain't there at all. I didn't know how he could've heard about this convict escapin' and killin' the guard, but he knows about it anyway, and points to this place in the paper and starts readin' what ain't there! And what he points at," said Andy triumphantly, "was a picture of a gangster holdin' up a G-man on the comic page."

"How come the feller picked on you in the first place?" Priestley asked.

"I don't know," Brill said. "Must have been crazy. Guess he thought since I was an officer I could get him out of the county."

Sybil was still standing frozen, staring at him, with tears rolling down her cheeks. He smiled. She'd never know, now. Not even though they would spend their lives together.

"Be John-dogged!" said Andy. "You just gonna stand there, honey?" He shook his head. "Gee m'netty. Young folks do beat all nowadays. Why, when I was a young man—"

Brill got the idea without even hearing him. Sybil was in his arms.

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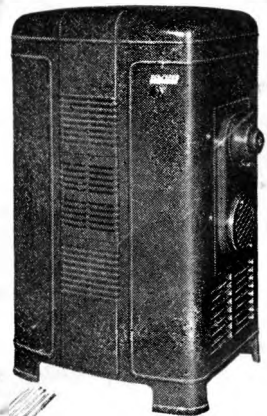
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