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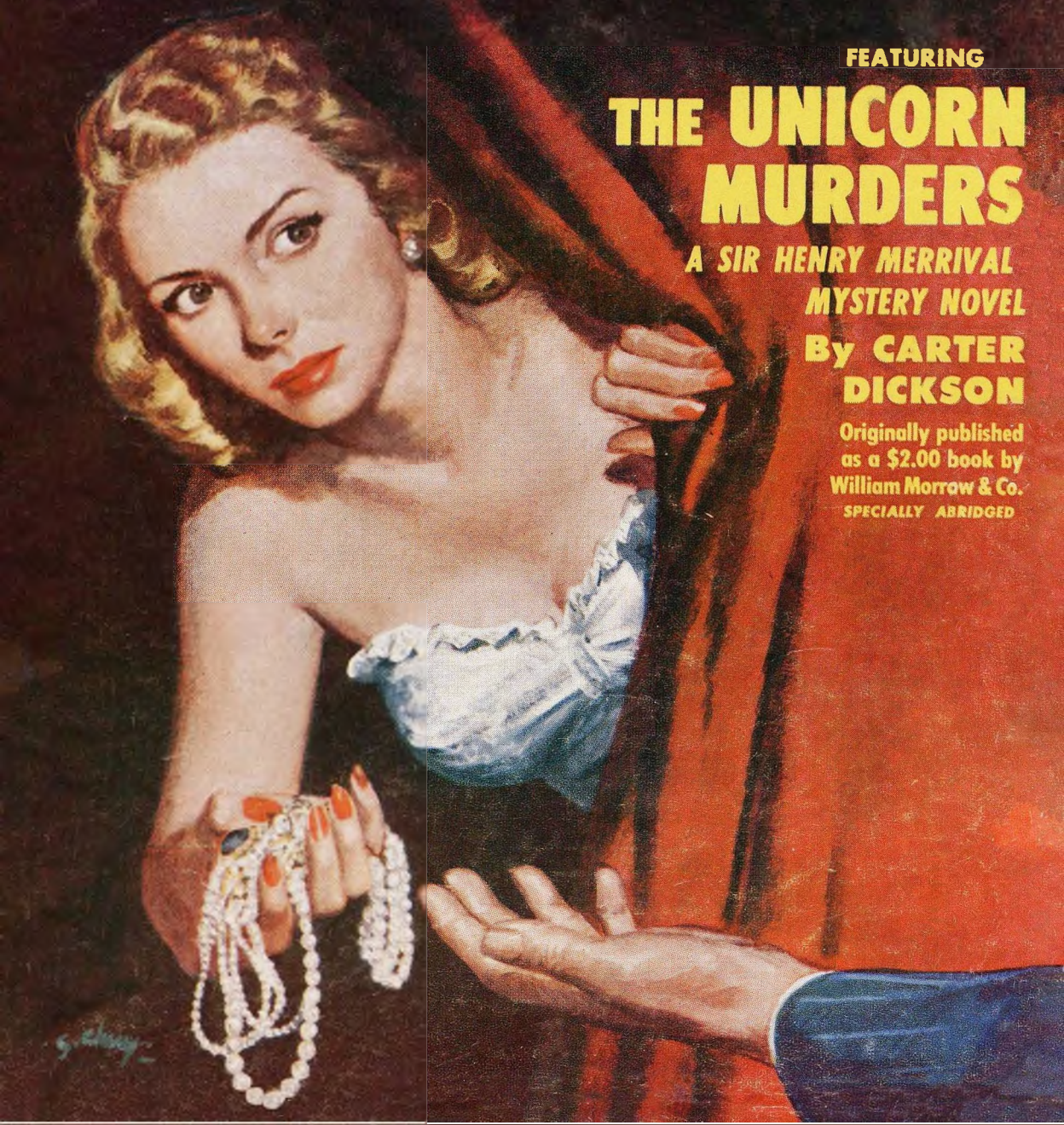
THRILLING DETECTIVE

A THRILLING PUBLICATION



FEATURING

THE UNICORN MURDERS

A SIR HENRY MERRIVAL MYSTERY NOVEL

By CARTER DICKSON

Originally published as a $2.00 book by William Morrow & Co.

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LEOPARD SEAT COVERS

SWEEP TO SENSATIONAL NATIONAL POPULARITY

Salesmen jamming pockets with $10.00 bills!

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LOOK AT THESE FEATURES

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- Every Car Owner A Prospect

FOR ALL CARS— ALL YEARS— ALL MAKES AND MODELS

The "Leopard"

The selling sensation of the year! Satin-like, its iridescent sheen delights the eye. Beautiful "Leopard" cloth trim assures the ultimate in sheer luxury.

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Genuine fibre seat covers, plastic coated, to wash easily. Will not stain. Sheds dirt and dust like a duck sheds water. Beautiful Plaid design blends with any car interior.

The "Streamliner"

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BIG SEASON NOW STARTING

You've heard of the tremendous demand for Leopard auto seat covers that built up overnight from one end of the country to the other. Car owners are paying $50.00, $60.00 and $70.00 and more for car seat covers with Leopard design. Now you can serve that eager demand at a fraction of the cost your customers would expect to pay! No wonder salesmen are making money hand over fist with this sensational new Key Seat Cover line!

Make big money daily. Take orders from car owners everywhere. Permanent year around income. Meet and beat all competition with covers cut to accurate patterns like the finest suit of clothes. Slick, wrinkle-free fit adds an accent of elegance to any car . . . just like an original upholstery job!

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Nothing at all to buy. Complete sales kit including actual samples of materials used trim, Leopard cloth, plastic, leatherette, etc. Beautiful illustrations. Big supply of C.O.D. order taking forms. Everything you need to start cashing in immediately. Get in on this lucrative business. Write for selling kit, including Bonus Offer of FREE Seat Covers for your own car.

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GIVE MAKE, YEAR AND MODEL OF YOUR CAR

Anyone working full or spare time can realize big money. No need to search for prospects. Every car owner is one. Make year around STEADY PROFITS. Get free selling kit at once. ACTUAL SEAT COVERS GIVEN FREE TO PRODUCERS FOR OWN USE! Write for full details — or mail coupon below — TODAY!

KEY PRODUCTS CORP.
800 N. Clark St., Dept. 34-S, Chicago 10, Ill.

KEY PRODUCTS CORP., DEPT. 34-S
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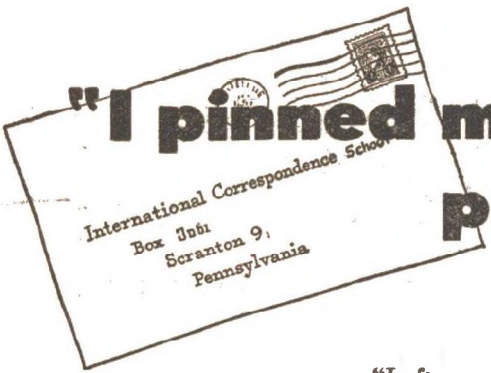
Rush me Free Sample Outfit at once so that I can start making real money with Key Products. (If you own a car include the following information):

MAKE OF CAR ..... YEAR .....
MODEL ..... ☐ 2-Door ☐ 4-Door
NAME .....
ADDRESS .....
CITY ..... STATE .....



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"I often wonder what sort of job I'd have now if it were not for a penny postal and the International Correspondence Schools.

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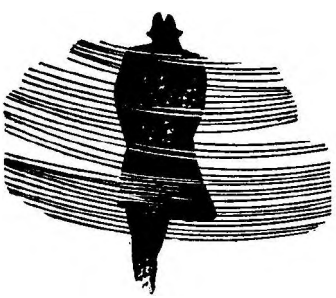
THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. LXVIII, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION October, 1951

Featured Mystery Novel Classic



THE UNICORN MURDERS

By CARTER DICKSON

The terrible-tempered Henry Merrivale met his match when he took the baffling trail of Flamande, the criminal strategist de luxe! **12**

Short Stories

Features

Alexander Samalman, Editor

THRILLING DETECTIVE. Published every other month by Standard Magazines, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Copyright, 1951, by Standard Magazines, Inc. Subscription (12 issues), $2.40; single copies, $.20. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Re-entered as second-class matter, July 27, 1945, at the Post Office at New York, under Act of March 3, 1879. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. In corresponding with this publication, please include your postal zone number, if any. October, 1951, issue. PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

You Practice COMMUNICATIONS

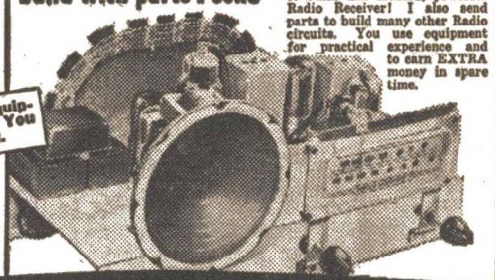
I send you parts to build this transmitter

As part of my Communications Course you build this low power broadcasting transmitter, learn how to put a station "on the air," perform procedures demanded of Broadcast Station operators, make many tests.

This is just part of the equipment my students build. You keep all parts I send.

You Practice Radio SERVICING

on this modern radio you build with parts I send



As part of my Servicing Course, I send you the speaker, tubes, chassis, transformer, loop antenna, EVERYTHING you need to build this modern, powerful Radio Receiver! I also send parts to build many other Radio circuits. You use equipment for practical experience and to earn EXTRA money in spare time.

BE A RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIAN

NOW! Advanced Television Practice

Now, special TV kits furnished to build high-definition SCOPE . . . RF OSCILLATOR with flyback power supply . . . complete TV set . . . many other units. You see pulse, trapezoidal, saw-tooth wave forms. Get valuable PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE locating and correcting TV troubles. Mail coupon for facts, pictures and prices!

Learn Servicing or Communications Practice at Home in Spare Time

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute

Do you want good pay, a job with a bright future and security? Would you like to have a profitable shop or store of your own? If so, find out how you can realize your ambition in the fast growing, prosperous RADIO-TELEVISION industry. Even without Television, the industry is bigger than ever before. 90 million home and auto Radios, 3100 Broadcasting Stations, expanding use of Aviation and Police Radio, Micro-wave Relay, Two-way Radio for buses, taxis, etc., are making opportunities for Servicing and Communications Technicians and FCC-Licensed Operators.

Television is TODAY'S Good Job Maker

In 1950, over 5,000,000 TV sets sold. By 1954, 25,000,000 TV sets estimated. Over 100 TV Stations now operating. Authorities predict 1,000 TV Stations. This means more jobs, good pay for qualified men all over the United States and Canada.

Many Make $10 Extra a Week in Spare Time

Keep your job while training. Hundreds of successful RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIANS I trained had no previous experience, some only a grammar school education. Learn Radio-Television principles from illustrated lessons. Get PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE—build valuable multitester—experiment with circuits common to Radio and Television. Keep all equipment. Many students make $5, $10 extra a week fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time. SPECIAL BOOKLETS start teaching you the day you enroll.

Send Now For 2 Books FREE—Mail Coupon

Send now for my FREE DOUBLE OFFER. You get actual Servicing lesson to show you how you learn at home. Also my 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in Radio-Television." Read what my graduates are doing; earning; see equipment you practice with at home. Send coupon in envelope or paste on postal. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 1KQ, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C. Our 38th Year.

I TRAINED THESE MEN

"I have been operating my own Servicing business. In two years I did $14,000 worth of business; net profit $6,850. Have one full time employee, an NRI student."—PHILLIP G. BROGAN, Louisville, Ky.

"Four years ago, I was a bookkeeper, with a hand-to-mouth salary. Now I am a Radio Engineer with a key station of the American Broadcasting Company network."—NORMAN R. WARD, Ridgefield Park, New Jersey.

"When halfway through the NRI course, I made $5 to $8 a week fixing sets in my spare time. Am now selling and installing Television sets and antennas."—E. J. STREITENBERGER, New Boston, O.

"My first job was operator with KDLR, obtained for me by your Graduate Service Dept. I am now Chief Engineer of Police Radio Station WQOX. I never hesitate to endorse NRI."—T. S. NORTON, Hamilton, Ohio.

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Knowing Radio, TV, Electronics can help you get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duty at pay up to several times a private's base pay. You are also prepared for good Radio-TV jobs upon leaving service. Mail Coupon TODAY.

Have Your Own Business

Many N.R.I. trained men start their own Radio-Television sales and service business without capital. Let me show you how you, too, can be your own boss, have a good income from your own shop. Send coupon for FREE book now!

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Mail me Sample Lesson and 64-page Book about How to Win Success in Radio-Television. Both FREE. (No Salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Name..... Age.....

Address.....

City..... Zone..... State.....

☐ Check if Veteran Approved for training under G. I. Bill

DESMOND Shannon was the kind of detective who never took anything for granted. When all New York believed that Gerelli, leader of a syndicate which reached into every variety of vice, was on the way to the chair for a cop killing, Shannon held out. He didn't think Gerelli would go to the hot seat—because he thought Gerelli was innocent, and meant to prove it.

"Touch this case and you're through in New York!" Commissioner Marshall barked at Shannon angrily. Marshall was a good police commissioner, incorruptible, and according to his lights, just. He was also quick-tempered.

The object of his wrath was negligently propped against a file cabinet. Six foot three, Desmond's form suggested latent power, ready for action. His eyes were hard but his voice was quite even as he answered:

"It won't be the first time I've taken a case after appeal has been denied."

"Gerelli's guilty and you know it."

"I haven't investigated yet."

"He killed a cop. And you know damn well he's behind the killing of a dozen other men...."

Behind the Frame

Why was Desmond Shannon interested in clearing Gerelli, a top gangster—after the police had been trying to land something on him for years? Surely, Shannon had no brief for a character like Gerelli—and perhaps he shouldn't have bothered. But—there were some peculiar aspects to this case, and Shannon wanted to get to the bottom of them.

First of all, Shannon had an objective view of justice—and he felt that if Gerelli were innocent of this particular killing, he should be allowed to go free despite his unsavory reputation. Gerelli had to be tried for this crime alone—if it were being used only as a pretext to punish him for other, unprovable, misdeeds, the end did not justify the means.

Secondly, why was everyone so fiercely determined that Gerelli be named as the killer of the cop named Ryan? Was someone being protected? Were the big rackets involved? Who was being bribed—and by whom? Shannon knew that if he solved this case he might get a lead to the entire picture of organized corruption in the nation's biggest and most complex city.

Yes, Shannon knew the Gerelli case was dynamite—and he was willing to light the fuse!

Fast Action—and Plenty of It

It wasn't long before Shannon found himself dodging bluster and bullets as he wound up in the middle of Gerelli's underlings, a rival gang, the police, and interested political powers.

He met toughness with toughness and tried to see that a peculiarly appropriate justice was meted out to all concerned. For that was the way of the detective named Desmond Shannon—starring next issue in a top-flight detective novel named EXIT THIS WAY and written by M. V. Heberden, famous author of many popular, hard-hitting whodunits.

Originally published as a Crime Club book at $2.50 per copy, EXIT THIS WAY will appear in our next issue, especially abridged for faster, crisper reading. It's one of the finest yarns Heberden has written to date—and it's of special interest now in view of the amazing revelations of recent crime investigation committees.

Everyone who followed the Kefauver hearings and was fascinated by the strange intrigues and complicated convolutions of the criminal mind brought out in the testimony, will be equally absorbed in the astonishing exposures made in EXIT THIS WAY. It's fiction, fast, exciting fiction all the way through—but it has an overtone of fact that makes it especially lively reading at this time.

Next issue will also bring you a number of welcome surprises in the form of new stories and features by some of America's favorite detective writers. Cover to cover, you're in for a fine reading feast.

Let us know what you think of this issue—and every issue—of THRILLING DETECTIVE. We welcome criticism, ideas, suggestions, opinions—so please drop a line to The Editor, THRILLING DETECTIVE, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. We'll be pleased to hear from you. So long, everybody, and thanks for your attention.

—THE EDITOR.

What Strange Powers Did The Ancients Possess?

EVERY important discovery relating to mind power, sound thinking and cause and effect, as applied to self-advancement, was known centuries ago, before the masses could read and write.

Much has been written about the wise men of old. A popular fallacy has it that their secrets of personal power and successful living were lost to the world. Knowledge of nature's laws, accumulated through the ages, is never lost. At times the great truths possessed by the sages were hidden from unscrupulous men in high places, but never destroyed.

Why Were Their Secrets Closely Guarded?

Only recently, as time is measured; not more than twenty generations ago, less than 1/100th of 1% of the earth's people were thought capable of receiving basic knowledge about the laws of life, for it is an elementary truism that knowledge is power and that power cannot be entrusted to the ignorant and the unworthy. Wisdom is not readily attainable by the general public; nor recognized when right within reach. The average person absorbs a multitude of details about things, but goes through life without ever knowing where and how to acquire mastery of the fundamentals of the inner mind—that mysterious silent something which "whispers" to you from within.

Fundamental Laws of Nature

Your habits, accomplishments and weaknesses are the effects of causes. Your thoughts and actions are governed by fundamental laws. Example: The law of compensation is as fundamental as the laws of breathing, eating and sleeping. All fixed laws of nature are as fascinating to study as they are vital to understand for success in life.

You can learn to find and follow every basic law of life. You can begin at any time to discover a whole new world of interesting truths. You can start at once to awaken your inner powers of self-understanding and self-advancement. You can learn from one of the world's oldest institutions, first known in America in 1694. Enjoying the high regard of hundreds of leaders, thinkers and teachers, the order is known as the Rosicrucian Brotherhood. Its complete name is the "Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis," abbreviated by the initials "AMORC." The teachings of the Order are not sold, for it is not a commercial organization, nor is it a religious sect. It is a nonprofit fraternity, a brotherhood in the true sense.

Not For General Distribution

Sincere men and women, in search of the truth —those who wish to fit in with the ways of the world—are invited to write for a complimentary copy of the sealed booklet, "The Mastery of Life." It tells how to contact the librarian of the archives of AMORC for this rare knowledge. This booklet is not intended for general distribution; nor is it sent without request. It is therefore suggested that you write for your copy to Scribe A.H.B.

The ROSICRUCIANS
[AMORC]
San Jose California

Jails and Money

By Bess Ritter

SINCE it costs money to keep a man behind prison bars, some criminal institutions turn to the inmates themselves to help pay the bills. The Mississippi state penitentiary, for example, is completely self-supporting because the prisoners raise cotton on the 28,000 acres of land which surround the place. They earn enough in this fashion not only to cover the $350,000 which is needed annually for expenses, but make $80,000 clear profit in addition.

Michigan has also tried, by a law passed in 1935, to get the prisoners in its various local jails to help them meet their own financial burdens. This provides that all inmates who have the cash pay for their maintenance, which amounts to about a dollar a day. The plan hasn't been very successful, however, since only two persons out of the 20,000 who were in and out of Michigan jails that year paid up.

On the Caspian island of Baku, on the other hand, a far more successful scheme was devised during the first World War. The money-making plan consisted of what they called a "Grand Hotel" and a "Hotel Metropole." The former was a section of the building in which the prisoners who had enough cash to pay for the privilege could live if they wished. It had light, airy, and well heated rooms. They could buy furniture of their own choosing and arrange it as they pleased. They could have any kind of food they wanted, also, and invite whomever they wished to visit.

The "Hotel Metropole" was a far more desirable scheme, as far as the inmates were concerned. It enabled any prisoner who could pay enough for the privilege to live comfortably in his own home instead of the jail. The only connection he had with it thenceforward was that a guard called twice daily to check his name off on his attendance sheet until the full prison term had expired.

BUILD A FINE BUSINESS
FULL OR SPARE
TIME!

Easy to Sell...

AIR-COOLED... AIR-CUSHIONED...

MAKE MONEY FROM THE FIRST HOUR!

FREE SELLING OUTFIT

Call on folks all around you—show and sell amazing NEW KIND OF SHOE! Hidden elastic in front makes it easy to SLIP ON OR OFF . . . no more broken laces or wrinkled tongues! And Built-in EXCLUSIVE Velvet-eez Air Cushioned Insole from heel to toe gives buoyant arch support on resilient, soothing-soft foam rubber!

SLIP ON . . .
SLIP OFF!

★ Guaranteed by Good Housekeeping

BETTER THAN A RETAIL SHOE STORE OF YOUR OWN!

You can please almost everyone with our more than 150 styles of dress, sport, work shoes for men and women! Fit them CORRECTLY with easy, accurate methods. Draw on stock far bigger than customers could find in MANY stores combined. WE SHOW YOU HOW to fit, sell, build your business!

NATIONALLY ADVERTISED

Big, powerful ads in Good Housekeeping, scores of other national magazines PAVE YOUR WAY! We tell MILLIONS about your Personal Fitting Service. Tie up NOW with the 47-year-old Leader in this big field!

GOOD HOUSEKEEPING SEAL HELPS OPEN DOORS . . . CLINCH SALES!

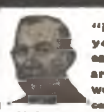
Women everywhere know and trust the Good Housekeeping Seal on Velvet-eez shoes. Neither you nor your customers can lose — and you have everything to gain.

DOUBLE YOUR PROFITS WITH GREAT WOMEN'S LINE!

CASH IN on fast-sellers like this Velvet-eez Air Cushion Insole Casual — worn and wanted by women from 16 to 60! Sizes 4 to 10, widths AA to EEE. Brings restful RELIEF from "Housework Feet!" Write for FREE Selling Outfit Today.

FOLLOW THESE MEN TO EXCEPTIONAL EARNINGS!

"I have been a salesman for thirty years, but I never thought selling could be so easy and pleasant. I HAVE A PAYDAY EVERY DAY I WORK. All I do is hand a new customer a sample and ask if he ever wore Velvet-eez Air Cushion shoes. I never forget to mention the way to give correct fit."
—W. M. Evans, Louisiana.



"For the past four years my average earnings have been around $80.00 per week part time! I couldn't have done it if it hadn't been for the liberal commissions paid by the Company on this wonderful line of shoes and garments that really is above and beyond competition."
—Charles Tuttle.

Velvet-eez AIR CUSHION SELLS SHOES FAST!

You just say: "Feel that Cushion!" When they do — THEY WANT, THEY BUY! Everybody wants COMFORT—RUSH YOUR NAME for FREE Selling Outfit Today!

RUSH COUPON NOW!

MASON SHOE MFG. CO., Dept. M-793
Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin

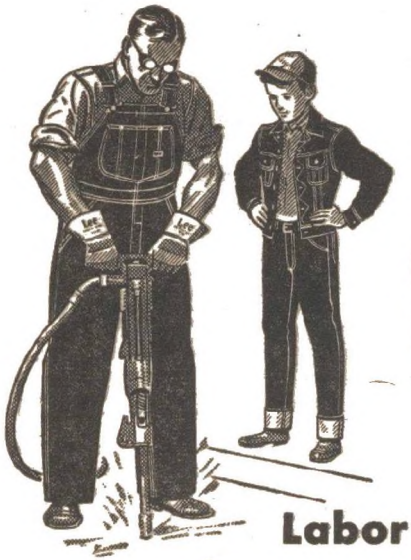
RUSH Free Selling Outfit including easy-to-sell Air Cushioned SLIP-ON, SLIP-OFF shoe, Velvet-eez Ten Second Demonstrator, fast selling Women's styles. Show me how to Build a Fine Business, starting in Spare-Time. Send everything FREE and PREPAID. My own shoe size is (.....)

Name .....

Address .....

Town and State .....

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-793, Chippewa Falls, Wis.



Labor Day or Any Day

Lee WORK CLOTHES

ARE PREFERRED FOR LONG WEAR, COMPLETE COMFORT AND SMART APPEARANCE...

BUY LEE WORK CLOTHES for the *greatest satisfaction* you've ever experienced. They're TOUGH; built to stand the *hardest wear in any job* and give you satisfying comfort and smart appearance even after repeated launderings.

Satisfaction Guaranteed or Your Money Back

Union-Made Sanforized

Sold By Leading Retail Stores Coast-to-Coast.

UNION MADE Lee Highest Quality WORK CLOTHES

THE H. D. LEE COMPANY, Inc.

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WORLD'S LARGEST MANUFACTURER OF UNION-MADE WORK CLOTHES

CRIME CAPERS

LAWBREAKERS' MINDS are capable of many vagaries, some of which provide a chuckle for the busy sleuth. Here we've rounded up a few of the more colorful items that have spiced the current police and crime news.

IN NEW DELHI, INDIA, a swindler procured a judge's robe and wig while an accomplice delayed the real judge. The phony justice then went to the courtroom and "heard" a number of cases, passing rapid judgment and ordering heavy fines, which he insisted be paid immediately. When a considerable sum had been gathered, he adjourned court, pocketed the money and strolled out.

THE NORFOLK, VA., city jail discovered that hacksaw blades used in the escape of six prisoners were smuggled to the inmates in a tube of shaving cream.

IN WOODRUFF, S. C., a thief consumed the contents of a bottle of liquor that was in the barred window of a liquor store—without ever getting his hands on the bottle. What he did was insert a wire through a two-inch hole in the window. The bottle of Scotch was drawn gently toward the window and there relieved of its cork. A rubber hose siphoned out the stuff.

REVELERS usually try to climb lamp posts in London's Piccadilly Circus. But during a recent celebration they had no luck. Police had greased the lamp posts.

POSING AS A fraternity man, an ex-convict with great camaraderie made the rounds of the Eastern colleges buying his "brothers" drinks—then stealing their watches, pins and money.

CANADIAN COMMUNISTS, it has been discovered, have been luring women to their meetings by promising them, if they come to listen to the party's propaganda line, to get furniture, clothes, canned goods and other merchandise for them wholesale.

A MAN WALKED into a St. Louis filling station and cheerfully asked the attendant: "How's business?" The filling station man replied, "Fine, fine." The man said, "Good—that's just what I wanted to hear." He pulled out a gun and relieved the attendant of $30.

THE AKRON, O., police department has printed a map of the city, with markers to show the points of interest—on the back of its parking tickets.

OMAHA POLICE came upon two burglars who were having no trouble making off with a grocery store's safe—they were pushing it in one of the cash-and-carry grocery carts.

THIEVES BROKE A WINDOW to enter the home of Mrs. Petrenella Van Dyke in Boston and make off with $2,500 in cash, furs and jewelry. Nobody paid any attention to the sound of the cracking glass, though—the gale winds of the worst storm in twelve years drowned it out.

OFFICERS WALKED through an Omaha establishment, looked around, found no gambling in progress and walked out—but a bevy of gamblers were arrested anyway. One detective slipped into a dark hall and watched as the boys started making bets and spinning wheels again.

—Harold Helfer

The UNICORN

MURDERS

A Novel by CARTER DICKSON

The terrible-tempered Henry Merrivale met his match when he took the trail of Flamande, crime strategist de luxe!

CHAPTER I

The Lion and the Unicorn

LET ME state a case, and ask what you would do under the circumstances.

You are in Paris in the spring utterly at peace with the world. One evening you are on the terrace at Lemoine's in the Rue Royale, having an *apéritif* when a girl you have known in England walks up to your table and gravely repeats a nursery rhyme. She then sits down and tells you the most bewildering gibberish.

Well? I humored her. But I was interested in Evelyn Cheyne. And Paris in springtime—

My passport says: name, Kenwood Blake. Age, thirty-eight. Address, Edwardian House, Bury Street, St. James's. Occupation, none to speak of. I was intended for Diplomacy, but contrived to wangle a commission in the Seagrave Highlanders. I didn't do so badly until I walked into a four-

point-two at Arras. When I was convalescent, they shot me out as unfit for active service.

Then, one raw day in London when I was feeling pretty disconsolate, I ran into H. M. stumping down Whitehall, his unwieldy top-hat stuck on the back of his head, his glasses down on his nose, his overcoat with the moth-eaten fur collar flying out behind. He was lumbering along, shaking his fist and cursing certain government officials with fluency. He dragged me up into his lair overlooking the Embankment—and I went into the Service, having no particular aptitude for it, H. M. said, except a lack of guile.

A lack of guile, H. M. said, was invaluable to a Secret Service man. The clever ones wound up before firing-squads or with knives in their backs. He gave me the usual lecture that he could give me no help whatever if I got into difficulties. This is a lie. I have known H.M. to commandeer the whole resources of the Foreign Office in order to protect the lowest hired agent in his employ. They were his bunch, he said, and the old man was a-going to stand behind 'em; and if any so-and-so's didn't like it, they could go and do so-and-so.

I went from Counter Espionage to Intelligence, foreign work, and it lasted until the end of the war. I was thinking back to those days as I sat sipping a Dubonnet.

IT WAS blowing up with a summer rain squall. Whirls of dust blew newspapers. For two weeks I had not looked at a newspaper. One scuttled past me and I put my foot on it. I glanced at headlines. The biggest splash was about two people named Flamande and Gasquet.

I was curious to know who or what were Flamande and Gasquet. Everybody in Paris seemed to be talking about them. I had got the idea, somehow, that they were rival boxers; or possibly rival cabinet ministers. Anyway, one had sent a sinister challenge to the other.

A waiter came hurrying over after the lost paper. Some spur urged me to ask:

"Are you," I said, "a friend of Flamande or of Gasquet?"

A passing *agent de police* stopped suddenly, and craned his neck to look at me with suspicion. Then he walked straight through the entrance to the hedge.

"Your passport, monsieur," he said curtly.

The waiter made rumbling noises of deprecation.

"English," said the policeman, examining my passport. "You have used, monsieur, words which might or might not be intended as a signal. I do not wish to interfere with a harmless traveler, but—"

The law was speaking gruffly, but I couldn't imagine what I had said. If this were a political business, I might be walking dangerously.

"It is probably my ignorance of your language, monsieur," I said. "I have no wish to disparage your boxers or your cabinet ministers. I have been given to understand that these gentlemen were one or the other."

The law suddenly guffawed and kicked at the pavement.

"Now, that," he said, beaming, "is good, eh? Excuse me for troubling you. *A'voir*, monsieur."

"But look here," I said, "exactly who is this Flamande?"

Swinging around to go, he looked back.

"He is a murderer, monsieur."

He swung away through the hedge as though he had delivered a curtain line. It was several seconds before I suddenly realized he had walked away with my passport.

I was not going to cut up a row, because he would discover my passport in his hand and return it. So I was just sitting down to recover a ruffled temper when I saw Evelyn Cheyne.

I got a kind of start. It may have been the way she was dressed. I could not be quite sure it was Evelyn. I had met her just four times before.

Evelyn had dark hair and hazel eyes, and is the sort the battalion thinks about after three weeks of fire. But she wished to be valued for her brain, and was taking up pol-

itics. She might in time become as notorious as Lady Castor.

Evelyn blasphemed nature by wearing tailored suits and a little pince-nez with a chain. But that evening at Lemoine's I saw Evelyn as she always ought to have been. She wore white, with a white sport coat, and one of those tilted white hats. Her hazel eyes were

SIR HENRY MERRIVALE

fixed on me, and she was nervously opening and shutting the catch of her handbag. Then she came across to my table, and I jumped up.

"Hullo, Ken," she said coolly.

"Hullo, Evelyn."

Then, just as gravely, she spoke:

The lion and the unicorn were fighting for crown.
The lion beat the unicorn all around the town.

"Let's see," I considered. "How does the rest of it go?"

Some gave them white bread, some gave them brown;
Some gave them plumcake and drummed them out of town.

She drew a breath of relief and sat down. "Order me a drink, will you, Ken?" she said. "I'm terribly glad it turned out to be you. Now perhaps we can get a number of things straightened out."

EVELYN grinned; not a smile, but an honest grin which lit up her eyes wickedly and reflected Paris. She looked vibrant, golden-skinned, and full of the devil.

"If only you had given me some *hint*, Ken!" she declared. "If only you had told me you were still in the Service when last we met. I even asked H.M. whether you were. But I got no satisfaction. All he would do was say I ought to be married, and grouse. Now I've got to tell you—"

Her face grew grave. She looked round quickly, and said, rather bewilderingly:

"Sir George Ramsden is bringing the unicorn to London. We are to go to The Blind Man tonight, but I don't know why."

"H'm," I said.

She delved in her handbag. "Sir George will travel by the regular airlines, will reach Le Bourget tonight. The last instructions I had were that you and I should drive to The Blind Man—an inn on the other side of Orléans—and be there by eleven o'clock. The signal to make yourself known, of course, is reciting the lion-and-unicorn verses complete. But that's all I know. What were you told?"

I should have told Evelyn straight out I wasn't the man she had apparently been scheduled to meet. But the cussedness of the human soul does not run in sane grooves. I thought I could put up as good a show as the probably unsalted agent they had sent out.

"And you don't know," I suggested, "what the unicorn is?"

"No! I want you to tell me."

"Well, I don't know myself."

She stared. "But surely— Where do you get your instructions?"

"From H.M. himself." It wasn't fair. But I consoled myself I could tell her the truth presently. "Is there anything else you know—anything at all?"

"Nothing except what's in the papers—that Flamande says he is going to be aboard

that plane."

"Flamande!" I said, and burned my fingers with a match.

"Yes. Ken, that's what makes it so horribly dangerous. I'll admit *I'm* frightened." She smiled, though her eyes were wandering uneasily. "Oh, I know he's theatrical. But he always does what he says he will. They say Gasquet will nab him this time. I doubt it."

"Look here," I said, "who are Flamande and Gasquet? Word of honor they weren't mentioned in any instructions I ever got."

She made a wry face. "You ought at least to read the papers. Flamande, Ken, is the most picturesque criminal France has sported for years. This duel is being discussed like a football game—"

"Duel?"

"Between Flamande, the super-knave, and Gasquet, the Chief Inspector of the Sûreté. It's fantastic, but it's true. Nobody knows what Flamande looks like. But then, with the exception of a few intimates, nobody knows what Gasquet looks like, either. Each speaks three languages perfectly—French, English and German. Either might pose as an American or an Englishman. Either can play any part he likes. I don't mean with false whiskers or wigs. But since nobody has ever seen Flamande to remember his face, what's to prevent him being a doctor or a lawyer—"

"Or an archbishop or a ballet girl."

She looked at me steadily. "Ken, when you've read his record you won't joke." She opened her handbag and took out a notebook. "Just glance over this."

"Listen, Evelyn. These artists at disguise can never fool anybody who's had any experience. The man's a murderer. . . ."

She swung around. "I didn't say that, Ken. But you believe so, too? Then you did see that piece in the paper this morning, about the murder at Marseilles? Flamande did that, and he'll write to claim the credit presently. I *know* Flamande did that killing, although there's nothing to connect him with it. And it's the first time he's been forced to kill. He—" Her excitement dwindled as she stared at me. "Ken, why did you say 'murderer?' Flamande hadn't killed anybody until yesterday. And nobody connects that with him yet. Who told you he was a murderer?"

"A policeman," I said, and stopped.

Where was that policeman with my passport?

CHAPTER II

The Red Car

IT WAS probably a coincidence, but it made me look up and down the Rue Royale with refreshed interest.

I said: "Gossip, that's all. I suppose they're willing to credit him with anything, including murder."

Evelyn pointed to the notebook, where a newspaper clipping was stuck between the leaves.

"I cut it out of *Paris-Midi*. There's not much to connect it with Flamande, but something to connect it with our job. It's—well, Ken, I don't want to believe we've got into a world of horrors and fabulous animals. Read that."

The story ran:

A mysterious tragedy was discovered last night in the park off the Promenade du Prado, Marseilles. An agent of police saw a man sitting at the foot of the Hoche fountain. The agent found that he was near death from a terrible wound between the eyes.

The victim was taken to the Hospital of Our Lady, and died in the ambulance. He spoke only one word, in English. This word was "unicorn."

The surprising discovery was made that the hole in the victim's head had not been made by a bullet. It was a clean puncture, penetrating into the brain to a depth of four inches.

Dr. C. S. Melisse, in charge, declares that no human strength would be sufficient to drive any spike at such a depth into the head, and pull it out again. He also knows of no firearm which would make such a wound.

The only thing which could have caused that frightful wound would be the long sharp horn of an animal.

The dead man has been identified as M. Gilbert Drummond, a solicitor, of London. M. Drummond's brother has been notified.

I looked up at Evelyn, who gazed back like a frightened child.

"Unicorns!" I growled. "Look here, Eve-

lyn, the unicorn is a fabulous animal, but not so fabulous as this. Had this poor devil, Drummond, any connection with our job?"

"Not so far as I know."

"And Flamande?"

"Flamande dropped his familiar note to *Le Journal* last night, and the evening papers have a note from Gasquet. Flamande's note said: *'I'm interested in strange animals. Tomorrow I shall be among the passengers of the Marseilles-Paris airliner.'* "

"What about Gasquet, the detective?"

She smiled. "He has his own sense of the dramatic. His note was just a line! *'So shall I.'* "

"Sent from Marseilles, too?"

"I don't know. He could have telegraphed. And that horrible story about Drummond—"

"You don't seriously think, do you, that Sir George Ramsden is running about with some kind of animal which got loose and gored the fellow?"

"No, but Flamande is behind that murder! Oh, don't ask me what evidence I have! I *know* he did! But why should he want the 'unicorn,' anyway?"

I pointed out that Flamande hadn't said he did. He had only said he would be on that plane.

Evelyn said: "We're due at that inn at eleven. It's a seventy-five-mile drive. We'd better be starting. My car's outside. Have you got a bag packed?"

I was stopping at The Crillon just around the corner, and that could be arranged in a moment. But it put the lid on any chase for that damned passport tonight. I took the waiter aside and gave him a hundred-franc note, promising him another when he got the passport from the policeman and it was delivered at my hotel.

I was committed to the adventure now. That was clear when I got into Evelyn's low, powerful car and we threaded through the hooting traffic. Obviously something had gone wrong with her original instructions. Where was the man she was really supposed to meet at Lemoine's? I was willing to swear none of the people there was British. Well, I had stepped into the breach and I would have to see the thing through now to its finish.

I HAD glanced through Flamande's dossier while I was packing my bag. Although no murder had hitherto been put down against Flamande, twice he had nearly beaten a victim to death. He meant business. That man had the nerve of hell, a satiric sense of humor, and a brain whose brilliance lay in the unexpected simplicity of its strokes. No safe could keep him out, yet a child could have operated his cracksman's method—if any child had thought of it. He would pay two visits to the safe he meant to rob. On the first night he would merely remove the front of the dial on the combination lock; behind this he would place a circle of thin white paper, then replace the dial. The safe would be opened at least once or twice next day.

That night he would visit it again, remove the paper, and study the ridges and indentations made in it. This would give him the combination, and he could open the safe without the least trace.

By this apparent magic he whisked two hundred thousand francs from the burglar-proof safe of the Lille Crédit Lyonnais, of which only the manager knew the combination. He raided the offices of the biggest firm of safe-and-vault manufacturers in Paris, who boasted that their wares were impregnable, and opened every safe in their showrooms before he rifled the president's vault of a million in bonds.

It was Flamande who first used thermit to open a safe—a chemical preparation of powdered aluminum, ferrous oxide, and powdered magnesium which, when placed on top of a safe and a match applied, generated a temperature of two thousand degrees and melted any metal. It was Flamande who first used a microphone to listen to the fall of the tumblers. It was Flamande who stole De Ruyter's emeralds in Antwerp and smuggled them out, concealed under the fur of a Newfoundland dog in the suite of the King of Belgium.

Out of Evelyn's notes emerged a figure who loved audacity and spectacular devilment for its own sake, but who was hard-headed, slippery, and cruel as Satan. For instance, a police *commissaire* fulminated against the stupidity of his colleagues for

not catching Flamande. Well, while he was raving, a 'workman' entered the police-station to get some furniture for repairs, and walked out with the *commissaire's* favorite armchair under the eyes of a dozen constables. In the same way, Flamande pinched the clock out of the courtroom while that *commissaire* was giving evidence during a trial. But, all the same, he half killed a watchman in Monte Carlo when he was interrupted during a raid.

The more I read, the more I became furiously convinced that it had been Flamande who had pinched my passport. Gasquet might be all very well, but I should like to see a duel between Flamande and Sir Henry Merrivale.

THE storm had broken, and Paris had lost its night-shimmer under a deluge of water. And we had seventy-five miles to go.

I drove. We were both silent, listening to the steady tick of the windshield wiper. Evelyn spoke at last.

"You read about Flamande?"

"Yes."

"What do you think?"

"He's strong poison. What bothers me is whether this Gasquet is any match for him."

She laughed. "I thought so. If you had heard about Gasquet, you'd be ready to put your money on him. He's the sort who collars a murderer with an epigram and bows politely before he fires. He's as flamboyant as the other. It ought to be a battle of the giants. You know, Ken—"

"Well?"

"Well, here we go, nobody knows where or why. Neither you nor I have any idea what we're to do, and it's the first time I've known even H.M. to go so far as that. Why is Sir George Ramsden in on it? He's rather a swell in the Foreign Office. Do you know him?"

I did know him quite well. He was conspicuous as a sporting baronet, but few knew how closely he was associated with the Foreign Office. Ramsden was a good man, one of those under-cover diplomats who do more good than any fanfare.

Ramsden was short, fat, and peppery. He had the mannerisms of a comic-paper colonel. But he could be British with the British, Moslem with the Moslems, and, for all I know, Zulu with the Zulus. He always got the business quietly done. If Sir George had been entrusted to bring the unicorn to London, then the unicorn was devilish important.

As we bumped through cobbled villages, the storm grew more lurid and thunder-split. When we reached the Palace at Versailles, we stepped up to fifty on a good road that was nevertheless being flooded out. Nothing was on the road except a red Voisin which rocketed by us just outside of Rambouillet.

At Chartres, where the medieval houses leaned their gray gables, as twisted as a Doré engraving, beyond the miry windshield, I could see an open bistro and headed for it after a hot drink.

"We've still got twenty miles to go," said Evelyn, "before reaching Orléans. And we've still got to find an inn on the other side."

Inside the hot bistro the proprietor, as he pushed two steaming glasses of coffee and rum to us, sketched out a short route for me on the bar. He also talked of floods, floods, and the rising Eure.

Evelyn and I gulped our drinks, and bumped down again from the old town. We flashed through woodland and increased the pace. We were on a long slope with thick banks on either side and toward our right a steep gully, around a bend a red shape flashed out.

I saw a red Voisin pulled up not thirty feet ahead, and acted even before I glimpsed the flashlight that somebody was waving like a lantern. Brake and clutch bumped the floor, and I yanked the hand-brake down hard. We felt the helpless swing of a skid, a bright flash of rain like the glimpse of a wreck; whirled right, left, right again, and slid like a man on skiis. Something jolted. The car rocked up on two wheels, and came down safe with its back wheels against the right-hand bank. Neither of us moved during a silence, a kind of quivering blankness while the rain drummed on the roof. I turned to look at Evelyn, who was white. The engine had stalled. There was no noise but our hard breathing, and the rain.

I missed a clean tackle in the slipperiness of the mud

"One moment, please," said a voice like that of a polite secretary.

A hand turned the handle of the door.

CHAPTER III

Battle and High Jinks

BEFORE I could move the door opened. Against the rain and and the black woods, I could see only the blur of a face.

But I *thought* I recognized that voice, though the rain muffled it.

"What the hell do you mean by this?" I shouted in English.

"English," said the voice in what might or might not have been relief. "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

That voice spoke remarkable English. I was looking at the red touring-car in the road ahead. It was not quite drawn across. You might get past on the left.

"The question is, who are *you*, and why do you try to wreck people's cars?"

"Whoever I am," said the man, "I hold authority from the French police. There are two *agents* in that car ahead." He spoke so calmly I almost believed him. "Get out of that car. I want to see your passport."

"You got one passport off me this evening. Isn't that enough?"

"Get out of that car. Now."

He moved closer, to show the gleam of black metal in his hand. But he should have remained at a distance because his weapon had a tinny look. It occurred to me that we were being threatened with a harmless pistol shaped cigarette-case. And before me was Flamande!

I am far from being courageous, but with a dummy pistol sternly pointed at my chest, I could tell even Flamande to go soak his head in the Loire.

Evelyn was giving an excellent impersonation of an outraged tourist.

"Really, my good man," she said, "this is the worst insult I shall have to report yet to the British consul. My cousin and I were going to Orléans."

"You get out, too," interposed the other, in that colorless voice. "Stand beside him. I want to see whether you're in this with him. Keep in the light, both of you. *You*," he looked at me, "put your hands up."

My temper went to the boil. But up went my hands. The rain was whipping through those trees, and sluicing straight down into our faces. Also, he had switched on his flashlight again, putting the beam in our eyes. But he was now talking as though there were something in his mouth to impede speech.

"Who are you?"

"Kenwood Blake. London. I'm a tea importer." What the devil put that into my head?

"Do you pose as a member of Department C Five of the British Intelligence Service?"

"No."

"What were you doing at Lemoine's this evening?"

"Having a drink."

"You," he spoke at Evelyn, "feel in his pocket and get me his passport. If he hasn't any, we'll take him to Orléans and have him locked up."

"How do I know where he keeps his passport?" asked Evelyn.

Momentarily his light snapped toward her.

"Shut up, you damned traitor," he said, and I went for him with a Rugby tackle.

The man must have thought I had gone out of my head. For the thing wasn't a dummy pistol. I discovered that when the dummy exploded about two inches above my ear.

THE bullet hit the side of our car, with a noise exactly like the *klunk* when you drive the edge of a can-opener through the top of a can of beans. I missed a clean tackle in the slipperiness of the mud, and it may have saved my life. He had instinctively jumped backward toward the bank, and we sailed on, locked together. He couldn't have known we were so close to the bank. The beam from his flashlight showed something that gleamed like silver in his mouth, and which he almost swallowed. It was a police whistle.

It gave a kind of agonized twitter. Then something banged me on the head as we cleared the edge of the bank. We must have

fallen only a few feet—he was on the bottom when we struck. The breath went out of him like a bellows. Something caught me above the ear before we brought up against a log. I struggled up to my knees. But through my singing head hammered one terrible thought:

Crooks don't carry police whistles. And where are the police?

The flashlight lay in an angle of the log, sending a valiant beam. My adversary was spread-eagled, his mouth open, his bowler hat crushed.

But there was nothing to fear. He was not dead; he was not even hurt, except for a bump on the head which had knocked him out. Who the devil was he? His ruddy face, smeared with mud as though from a paint-brush, was being washed by the rain which still seethed and roared through the silver birches of this hollow. The face looked English. It was large, square, unprepossessing: with a brown toothbrush mustache. Why had he said, "You damned traitor?"

Then I saw, under his open waterproof, what had tumbled out of his inside pocket—a small, square, grayish roll fastened under the clip of a fountain-pen. That clip bears the white cross on blue, your number and your chief's, the F.O.'s seal superimposed. It is impossible to forge these things, because a member of the service knows this slip by its texture as a bank clerk knows a good note. This man was a member of the British Intelligence Department!

He was the man Evelyn had intended to meet at Lemoine's! Holy gray angels! What he must have thought when he saw me go away with her—

Even in a brief breathing space, I had to take action again. I heard voices far at the top of the bank. Two bull's-eye lanterns flashed white beams over my head. Up there were the headlights of our car, and past them ran a figure in the flat-topped cap and short waterproof of a policeman. There *had* been two policemen waiting at that red car, and now they were after me. The trouble seemed to be that they could not spot where we had gone pinwheeling over into the gully. And, since it looked like a black ravine, probably they were not anxious to make a leap over.

EVELYN had to be spirited out of this while I drew off the pursuers. But where was Evelyn?

"You're not hurt, are you?" cried a voice at my elbow. "Sh-h! I slid down the bank, or they'd have had me."

She gripped my arm.

"Turn off that light," she whispered. "Ken, we seem to have made some kind of awful mistake. We—look out! They've caught the light."

"Hang on to my arm and we may both get out of this. No, wait! Stay here. I'll draw 'em away with the light. When they come after me, scramble up that bank and run for the car. Don't argue, damn it. If I can, I'll pinch their car and follow you."

I stampeded through a whipping film of silver birches, yells and lights following me. Around my head I swung the beam of my own torch.

"Whoo!" I roared. *"Suivez-moi,* you blighters! *La barbe! Vive le crime! A bas la police!"*

By their answering howl it was obvious that they risked their luck and jumped from the edge. One came a cropper, but the other plunged like a landslide. I propped my light in the crook of a tree, doubled back and tried a ventriloquial yell:

"Halte là ou je tire!"

Those lads didn't care whether I fulfilled my threat to fire. I hoped they would smash the light before they discovered that I was not behind it. One of them did shoot, and whacked off a branch.

Evelyn had not gone. She was sitting at the wheel of her car, its engine running when I tumbled in beside her and slammed the door. We tore off with a screeching of gears down the road.

I tried to speak between gasps.

"Why didn't you go on, wench? Why didn't—"

"I like that! How would you have followed me? Not in that red Voisin."

"Why not?"

"Well, that devil you knocked out still had his gun in his hand. So I pinched it and put a bullet through each of their tires. The gun's on the seat behind you."

"You shot—*oi!*"

"Why? I know we made a mistake, and apparently you pasted one of their police officers or something. But we haven't done any damage, and they'll never be able to catch us." Her voice rose. "Ken, it was grand! The way you ran through those bushes yelling, *'Vive le crime!'* They probably think you're Flamande."

Now, this was a cheerful thought. I turned to look at Evelyn. She lifted a muddy hand to push the wet hair out of her eyes, which were glowing with a swashbuckling pleasure. But I had to tell her the cursed truth.

"Listen," I said, "there's something I've got to tell you. You know the identification cards of the Service?"

She pointed at me triumphantly. "I know what you're going to say, and you can thank me for saving your bacon. You're going to say that in the fight your identification card fell out of your pocket and you thought it got lost? Well, darling, it didn't. It fell beside the old devil. I saw it lying there when you had your light on him. So I picked it up when you left. And"—Evelyn produced the real agent's fountain-pen with the gray slip still wound under the catch—"here it is!" She flourished it triumphantly.

"You grabbed it, eh," I said, when I could find coherent words. "*He* didn't see you pick it up, did he?"

"Yes, he was coming to. I was afraid he would grab me or go after you. So I landed him one on the head with the butt of that gun."

There was nothing to say. I tried to determine where we stood. We had been lured into a set of hair-raising errors. I had assaulted a member of the Intelligence Department. Evelyn had pinched his identification card, and had dotted him one with his own gun. The tires of a French police car had been riddled with bullets, leaving three frantic men stranded in the worst cloudburst of the year.

If they believed I was Flamande, we should shortly be the object of one of the biggest police hunts since Landru. I was in so deep I had to play the hand. The only course was to accept that identification card, and *be* the Intelligence agent until the "unicorn" mission was over.

CONSIDERING that I didn't like either the manners or the look of the sullen dog who had come a cropper back there, this had personal sympathy behind it. Also, the deception could be managed with that credential. Those identification cards bear no name, photograph, or description. Even in the event that we met some departmental chief there the imposture would not be spotted unless I met the head who had directly commissioned this fellow.

"They'll have to walk, of course," Evelyn was saying. "And we've got enough of a start before they can turn in an alarm. We must be nearly to our own tavern."

"It isn't likely our inn will have a telephone," I said, "but it is likely they'll drop in to find out. Unless we can bribe somebody to say we're not there."

The fat was flaring and sizzling in the fire now. Not only were we headed for that inn, but so was the real Intelligence man! He, like Evelyn, would have had his instructions to go there. We were bound to meet. And if I tried to swear he was an impostor, he had the police to corroborate him. But we had to get to our rendezvous.

"Ken!" Evelyn was crying out, and we were skidding dangerously. "You've got to take this wheel. I can't hold the road. We're getting into water or something."

There was no room to change over in that dancing sway down a hill. "Don't try to shift gears," I said. "Let her coast till we get to the bottom."

"But don't you *hear* anything?"

"It sounds like pretty swift water. You said we were near the river."

"No, no! Behind us. It's like a motor. Don't you hear it? Suppose they've been picked up by a car?"

I opened the door to peer out. For a moment the sharp rain struck me blind. We were coming down through what seemed to be low, rolling meadows to the river, for you could hear its sullen, tumultuous rushing. Some distance to the right, I thought I could discern lights among trees. They came from a big building on an island in a backwater. The château Evelyn had mentioned, of course. Faint and far away up the river was a pale twinkling. That was Orléans.

His hands went up to his forehead and he let out a hellish screech

I could hear the "motor" now. It was no car. That noise beat with such sudden loudness over our heads, and seemed so close, that I involuntarily ducked. It fizzled away, pounded with increased loudness, and swept away to return.

It was a passenger plane, and in trouble. I could pick out the red port wing-light. Then it disappeared into a black circling shape and a sickly flutter of a cough.

Evelyn spoke calmly.

"Hang on," she said. "I hope we can stop without turning over."

The swollen river had flooded out its banks. The Loire had turned into a mill-race.

The car sent up two waves like a torpedo just before the wheels sank in mud and churned to a stop. We could see the steel cables of a ferry, but no barge. A big notice-board made defiant announcement that never would this ferry march after nineteen o'clock.

There was no other road except backward where the pursuers lay. And it would need another car and a rope to yank us out of this mire. The lads from the red car had us in a blind alley.

Evelyn began to laugh. "I really don't see what we can do," she declared. "Can you swim?"

"Yes. But take a look at that current."

"Well, *I* can't; not a stroke. And, any-

way, that's carrying heroism too far. No, let's face it. We're not going to make that appointment at the inn now. What I want is a hot bath."

"Listen, wench. We're not going to be beaten at the present time. There's a château over there. Then, if they do get on our tracks—"

"Yes," agreed Evelyn. "And here they come!"

I KICKED open the door and stepped out into water that was well over our running-board. A car on the road behind came bucketing down toward us.

"What are we going to do?" demanded Evelyn, cool again. "We've got a gun, of course. But, dash it all, I don't see that murdering a couple of policemen is going to help our case. I say, wait! I've got it!" She slid out beside me. "They may not know there's no bridge. They simply see us here. If we stand out and wave to them, they may shoot past us into the river; or at least they'll get stuck in the mud like us, and we'll be on an even footing again."

Personally, I did not see the nice ethical distinction between shooting policemen and drowning them. But there was no time to make a distinction. There was time for nothing but to act instinctively on the suggestion. I craned round from inside the car, shouting and beckoning—and the enemy came on in blissful ignorance of impending doom.

My gestures had just the opposite effect. The driver of that car must have interrupted them as a warning, or else he saw the open gap just in time. I don't know precisely what happened, for the headlights were blinding. There was a grind and slam and a tidal wave swept in on us.

The morass bogged that car only a few feet from the edge.

"What the goddamholyblazes do you think you're doin'?" roared a familiar voice in English.

A heavy fist was shaken at us. Blinking at us behind spectacles down on its nose, with an ancient top-hat knocked to one side, there peered at us the furious face of Sir Henry Merrivale.

CHAPTER IV

An Old Friend Enters Abruptly

H. M. HAD escaped drowning by so narrow a margin that Evelyn and I should have felt some qualms of conscience. But my chief feeling was relief. We had somehow blundered into the one person to unmask me. And still I felt relieved. I was in for a blistering time, but H.M.'s most terrible threats always ended in a growl that this was what he would do, burn him, if you ever let it happen again.

"Who's there?" he bellowed. "It is you, ain't it? Evelyn Cheyne? I ain't followed the wrong person all the way from Paris, have I?"

"Hullo, H.M.," said Evelyn meekly.

"Cheer-ho, Mycroft," said I.

He suddenly cocked his head. "Who was that? *Hey?* Who? Ken *Blake?* What're *you* doin' here?"

"Special service, H.M.," I told him. "I'm taking somebody's place. But what are you doing here?"

There was an interruption, in hoarse and anguished tones, from the taxi-driver.

"Blast your beautiful taxi!" roared H.M. "If there's any damage done, Marcel, I'll buy it from you. You know, *achèter—l'argent* —the whole goddam cab!"

"Ah, *ça!*" Marcel sat back comfortably and lit a cigarette while Evelyn appealed:

"Now that you're here, will you please, please tell us what we're expected to do and what this is all about? We've got into the most horrible messes. Exactly what are we to do, anyhow?"

H.M. took a sour survey of the mud. "That's what I want to know myself. That's one of the reasons I followed you."

"What *you* want to know?" I repeated. "But, good Lord, doesn't the head of the whole department know—"

He howled me down with some obscure remarks about ingratitude from the so-and-so's, and went on:

"Humph. The only thing those swine at the Home Office would tell me is that whatever you were intended to do, it's been can-

celed. It's a mix-up exactly like the Home Office would make, when they took it out of my hands—and I came over to Paris just to *fix* 'em. At your hotel they said you'd just gone. Looky here. That earwig of a car you got is gettin' flooded out. Come on over here with me, and we'll see if we can't work out a plan to fry them Home Office bunglers in their own grease. I got some whisky here," he added helpfully.

I lifted Evelyn out and splashed across to the other car, where Marcel was spinning the engine, in a forlorn hope of extricating the taxi, but he got not a cough. H.M. sat in one corner, his unwieldy tall hat stuck on one side of his head, his big coat open, disclosing the fact that he had again forgotten his necktie. In one hand he held a bottle of whisky.

H.M. opened his eyes wide when he got a good look at us.

"Oh, love-a-*duck!* Look here, you two been in an accident or something?"

"Yes. In a way."

"And something else I want to know," he growled, pointing the bottle, "is how you figure in this, Ken? Unless the Home Office got hold of you behind my back—and oh, Archons of Athens, what I'm a-going to do to them! Burn me, they're going to wish they'd consulted the old man. I'm offended. I'm hurt. But as much as they condescended to tell me, the people they'd chosen for this job were the Cheyne gal here and Harvey Drummond."

"Who's Harvey Drummond?"

"Officially, feller owns race-horses. Won the Oaks last year, and the St. Leger the year before. Bah! *I* wouldn't back any of his nags. Feller gives me a pain in the neck. *H'mf.* Also, he's the ex-Cambridge boxer who brags he can put to sleep anybody his own weight in less'n three rounds. Nasty customer. He—"

"I mean, what does he look like?"

H.M. sniffed. "Heavy-set feller. Thick jowls. Brown toothbrush mustache. Reddish complexion."

EVELYN and I looked at each other, and I saw horrified understanding in her eyes. I turned quickly to H.M.

"By the way, didn't you meet anybody on the road?"

"Aha, and that's another thing!" H.M. ghoulishly embarked on more grievances. "Fellers tried to hold me up not two miles back. They was walking along nice and unsuspicious, stranded travelers, but I could spot their car just the same. When we wouldn't stop, one biggish feller tried to jump on the running-board."

"What did you do?"

H.M. blinked with sour pleasure. "Me? Oh, I just leaned out and gave him a push in the face. I shouldn't be surprised if he went clear over the bank."

"Un coup extraordinaire," agreed Marcel, amiably.

"That's the second time he's sailed over that bank tonight," I said, "and his temper must be ripe. Before we go on, H.M., I want you to listen to the story of my derelictions. Since you say the mission's been canceled, it doesn't matter now anyway."

I made a full, if brief, confession, while H.M. shut the panel against a hurt Marcel. The rain quickened, thunder began to mutter once more, and there was lightning. Although I had expected some outburst from H.M., he sat silent, fishlike eyes fixed on me. Evelyn was not outraged; she was almost jubilant.

It was when I came to the affair of the red car that H.M. exploded. "Oh, Gawd lummy!" he breathed. "You mean it was Drummond you—uh-huh. And so did I. You've picked one of the worst people in England to make an enemy of. Ken, he's poison."

I was uneasily conscious of this. "All the same, we shall have to go back there and pick 'em up now."

"Ain't you satisfied yet?" asked H.M. "What do you want to do—shove him over the bank again? Besides, our cars are as dead as his." There fluttered up across his sour face the ghost of a grin. "Y'know, if you'd pulled that trick on me, nefarious impersonation of a government officer, and—uh-huh. But you only flummoxed the Home Office, and I'm after their hides myself. We're all outlaws together. Do you know why I came chargin' over to France to begin with?"

"Well?"

"To get Flamande," said H. M. somberly.

"Flamande? But why? It isn't your pigeon, is it?"

"Oh, yes it is, son. Because the Home Office said I couldn't. Because they thought this fancy joker would be too smart for the old man."

I whistled. H.M. grunted. "Here's how the situation stands. Last Wednesday old Sq—well, we'll mention no names; somebody from the Home Office, anyhow—rang me up and said, 'Merrivale, I'm instructed to give you some orders.' 'Oho,' I said, 'and since when have you been giving me orders?' 'Our office happens to be the head of the police,' he says, 'and we want to borrow two of your agents. With all due respect to you, Merrivale, this is a diplomatic mission and your talents don't run to diplomacy. The French wouldn't understand 'em. We feel that the police side of the matter might be slightly better managed by other hands than yours. We should like to borrow Miss Cheyne and Mr. Drummond.' "

H.M., who had been imitating an ultra-refined sing-song, stopped and scowled malignantly.

"Haah! Y'know, children, I hadn't even time to get mad. I said, 'Is that so, now? What mission, and who's managing it?' He said, 'We are not permitted to disclose that yet.' Well, now you don't mooch about as much as I do without gettin' a trickle of information as to what's goin' on, and I'd have to be as fat-headed as old Squiffy himself not to put two and two together. So I said, 'No? Well, then, shall I tell *you?* George Ramsden's been sent on a mission, and he's just comin' back. Ramsden absolutely refuses ever to travel with any guard. So you want to put two people close to him, unbeknownst, to watch. You want a good-lookin' gal, because Ramsden is an awful old rip; and you want the toughest egg on two legs who's what you call a gentleman, in case there's trouble. But,' I said, 'why do you want 'em for France? I'll tell you that, too. Because maybe the French government thinks Flamande is going to take an interest in Ramsden, and workin' together can protect Ramsden and nail Flamande for Gasquet, then there's goin' to be considerable bay-leaves crownin' both countries.' Hey?"

"I see," said Evelyn.

H.M. grunted. "Whereupon he says, just as cool as cool, 'You may be right, Merrivale. Will you send instructions to those two, without delay, to communicate with Colonel Taylor?' And rang off. Wild? Burn me, I was so wild I couldn't even talk!"

"But what about the unicorn, and the mission to this 'Blind Man' inn?" asked Evelyn.

H.M. grunted again.

"I don't know, but I can give a thunderin' good guess. Well, I stewed and I chewed, and I sat and I thought, and the more I thought the madder I got. The mercury bubbled out the top today. I got a phone call from the same feller. Says he: 'Ah, Merrivale! We shall not need your agents after all. Unfortunately, they seem to have started. Will you get in touch with them and tell 'em the mission has been canceled?'

" 'No, I won't,' says I, 'but I'm hoppin' over to Paris this afternoon, and I'm goin' to offer you Flamande on toast within forty-eight hours.' I was so mad that the old man's caution had gone up the spout, but I had the satisfaction of hearin' him give an awful yelp. He says, 'You've absolutely no authority, and you'll get none.' 'Squiffy,' I says, 'you can take your goddam authority—' and I hung up while he was still bleatin'."

"Did they try to stop you?" Evelyn asked.

SIR HENRY gave vent to a low chuckle before answering.

"Sure, and I may be asked to resign if they can pull enough wires," said H.M., with a gleeful leer, "but here I am. My first move was to try to get in touch with you, gal, to find out your instructions—that's why I came achasin' after you when they said at the hotel you were goin' to Orléans. And now, after bein' nearly murdered for my pains, I find you didn't have any instructions. Burn me, what the devil do we do now?"

"Did you know," I asked, "that Ramsden was coming to Paris by the evening plane from Marseilles? And that Flamande had threatened to be aboard?"

H.M. did not even roar.

"No," he answered. "D'ye think I'd have

come chasing down into the wild if I'd known that plane was to reach Paris not long after I left it?"

"So," Evelyn mused, "that plane must have reached Paris some time ago. And here we are, stuck in the mud miles from—what's that?"

It was the plane motor again, lower now. With a muttered exclamation, H.M. switched out the roof light and peered against the window.

At first we could see nothing. The noise had abruptly stopped; the engine was switched off. Then two shafts of light slanted down from either side of the liner's cabin. She was circling down to a forced landing.

"Y'know," said H.M., "I thought Flamande might be going to see to it that that plane never got to Paris."

"You mean—" Evelyn muttered.

"Uh-huh. I'll be much surprised if that ain't the Marseilles-Paris bus. With George Ramsden aboard. With Gasquet aboard—and Flamande." H.M. snapped his fingers. "Burn me, I'm goin' to play poker, son. With both Gasquet and Flamande, and never know which is which. I hope that plane don't crash."

It did not crash. We saw the landing lights dip below the trees, and joggle to a long run. Then the cabin windows glowed out yellow in a meadow.

"Done it," breathed H. M. with ghoulish jocularity. "Shall we join 'em? I got a fancy to see what innocent travelers are on that bus."

"Look here, H.M.," I objected, "you surely don't think Flamande staged a hold-up in the air and brought the plane down?"

H.M. blinked. "Well, I s'pose you better take along that gun you pinched. But Flamande doesn't pluck the chicken like that. 'Mf, no. More likely there's been engine trouble. Come on, both of you. I don't mind a little water in a good cause."

Down he lumbered into the flood. He refused to wear his hat. He said it was a royal present, and he would not get it damp. So spreading a handkerchief over his head he waddled ahead as the most curious figure of British respectability to be seen on a French road.

We slogged across a nearly flat meadow where along the river bank ran a grove of beeches. Beyond them we could see lights.

The door of the stranded plane had opened. A violent argument seemed in progress among a group gathered about it. Four people moved off—three men and a woman. There were three more men passengers, two men wearing the uniform of the airline, and one in the white coat of a steward. H.M. lifted his great voice through the rain.

"Hallo!" he bellowed in French. "That the Marseilles-Paris plane?"

I was touched by their intangible terror as we joined the group. Every person spun round; the voices ceased. The hand of one of the men in uniform whipped to his pocket.

"It is!" he roared back. "Who goes there?"

"Friends, friends! English. Travelers. We had an accident."

A stocky short man with his neck thrust out, took a few steps forward.

"English, eh?" he demanded. "Who the devil are you, then? Don't try any games."

H.M. chuckled. "Ho, *ho!*" he said. "Howdy, Ramsden. This ain't Flamande;

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it's Merrivale—Henry Merrivale. I got a couple of friends, with me.'

"Hold hard, everybody!" shouted Sir George. "This fellow's all right."

"Are you sure you know him?" asked a tall man, with genial mockery. "Flamande is notorious for his mimicry, you know. But if Flamande won't reveal himself, it's about time Gasquet did. Won't he speak up?"

"Don't talk damn nonsense, son," growled an American voice. "Somebody's been kidding you."

WITH one exception the passengers were English or American. The exception was a gentleman who had the stiff bearing of a French professional man. Ramsden's voice bleated on:

"—down miles from anywhere. A blasted nuisance. I don't give *that*"—he snapped his fingers—"for this Edgar Wallace crook and his threats. I do want to be comfortable." He pointed toward some lights on the left. "The pilot says that's some big pot's château, and he'll probably give us shelter until we can start again."

The tall Englishman, struggling to light a cigarette, said to Ramsden:

"You people carry on to the château, sir. We'll follow if they seem hospitably inclined."

As we all trudged away, Ramsden's jovial spirits warmed even that bleak place. Only a portly man whom Ramsden addressed as Hayward had a tendency to stumble and swear.

When the grove of beeches opened out and gave place to a screen of willows, the Château de l'Ile did not seem so much on an island as built straight out of the water. A graveled drive terminated in a high stone causeway. The overflowing river frothed white around that island. The château's towers loomed gigantic in the rain. Its windows made remote the lights. As we struggled across the causeway, leaves blew wild and the wind whooped down on us.

"I hope he opens the door," said Ramsden chokily. "The pilot says he's a queer fish. A recluse."

A low flight of steps led up to a big door. An arch of light appeared as the door opened.

"Please come in, messieurs," intoned a courteous voice. "The Comte d'Andrieu has been expecting you."

CHAPTER V

The Host of Castle Queer

JOLTINGLY the big door thudded shut against the wind. We were in a high stone hallway with a fretted roof; so arched and bare, with a row of stone pillars down each side, that it looked like the nave of a small cathedral.

"He expects us?" Ramsden's startled voice was repeating. "Oh! You mean you saw us come down?"

"No, monsieur," the man replied blandly. He was a big man with a large mustache and an air of tolerant composure. "I mean that monseigneur has been expecting you since yesterday."

"You will perhaps," a new voice interposed in English, "permit me to explain?"

Our host was advancing, giving us a polite welcome.

We saw a lean man of probably sixty-odd, whose eyes had a bright, humorous twinkle. His hair and clipped military beard were dark gray, but the mustache under a bony nose was still blackish. He wore a black skull-cap and a dressing gown over white tie.

Said he: "Have no apprehension, my friends. I am not Flamande. My name is d'Andrieu. All I know of this situation is contained in the letter I had from M. Flamande himself. Er—which of you is Sir George Ramsden?"

"Hoomf!" Ramsden said. "Excuse me, sir, but dammit, man, how do you know all that?"

"This letter will explain. Will you translate it aloud?"

Ramsden took the notepaper, glanced at it, and his sandy eyebrows went up.

"Of all the infernal impudence! *Listen!*"

The letter read:

The name of M. le Comte d'Andrieu has always been known as that of a man who enjoyed the stalking of wild games. I can offer M. le Comte a unicorn hunt.

This evening I have learned that a place has been taken on tomorrow night's Marseilles-Paris plane for Sir George Ramsden, an Englishman whose good heart I esteem, but at mention of whose intelligence I do not always spontaneously rise to cheer—

"The letter, you see," our host put in rather hurriedly, "was posted last night at Marseilles."

" 'Rise to cheer—' " prompted H.M. "Uh-huh. Go on, Ramsden."

The letter continued:

I am interested in Sir George and what he brings with him. Therefore I have taken a place on the same plane.

I have chosen as its real stopping place the isolated region near your château. I shall ensure a forced landing. We shall probably call on you. May I ask you to have a light meal in readiness for the travelers. A generous cold buffet would be suitable.

One thing, monsieur, I deeply regret. Among the passengers there is likely to be one of such conspicuous dullness that I should not inflict him on you if I had not half a mind to kill him. I am not able to inform you what clumsy disguise this Gasquet person is likely to adopt. But you will easily recognize him, monsieur, by the revolting size of his ears, and by a nose which is at twenty paces almost indistinguishable from a tomato—

The young American to whose arm the woman passenger was clinging began to laugh.

"I'd like to see a reply written by Gasquet," he said.

Our host's eyes continued to twinkle. "And so you shall, sir, if you wish it."

"You got a letter from Gasquet, too?"

"This afternoon. I find them an amusing pair of—of"—he snapped his fingers—(micawbers. Also, I forget my manners. I seldom entertain, but you will find M. Flamande's 'light repast' laid out for you. If you care for a bath and change, my servants can bring your luggage."

RAMSDEN stared. "You mean to say you followed that fellow's request?"

"Of course. He promised me good sport."

"And you didn't even communicate with the police?"

D'Andrieu frowned. "Certainly not. Except as far as he directs in the last paragraphs. You have not finished it? Permit me."

He took the letter from Ramsden. The final paragraphs read:

Although I should prefer that you did not communicate with the police, my acquaintance with their intelligence is such that I do not anticipate any grave difficulties. However, I have no objection to your communicating with the person, Gasquet. Tonight I write to the newspapers, saying that I shall be aboard that plane tomorrow. But for his private information you may tell him all I have told you.

Say to him, "Tomorrow the great Flamande will ride with Sir George Ramsden. He will wreck the night airliner by the Château de l'Ile outside Orléans, he will steal the unicorn and vanish as he has always done. You know when he will strike and where. Now stop him—if you can.

Flamande

"What's the unicorn?" asked the young American.

"He's a conceited villain," Evelyn said meditatively.

Hayward intervened pontifically:

"That lad has got his nerve, but even Flamande can't work witchcraft. How can anybody tell where a plane is going to go bust and come down? Unless—" Hayward ran his hand through his brush of white hair. "Of course! He bribed the pilot. Hell! That's not cleverness. It's plain dirty work."

"And yet," said H.M., "I doubt it. The co-pilot and probably the steward would've had to be in on the game. And has Flamande, the lone wolf, ever worked like that? Too bloomin' risky by half, I'd say, by the look of those fellers."

"You and your friends, sir," asked d'Andrieu, looking at Evelyn and me, "were not aboard the plane, then?"

"No. We had a bit of a motor-accident. H'mf. Second place, I do a good deal of moochin' about. I happen to remember the crew of that plane; I've traveled with 'em. Burn me, that pilot, Jean Morel, is pretty near above suspicion."

"I know that," said Ramsden. "But Hayward's right. How in Satan's name can anybody force a plane down exactly where he wants it to go? How could Flamande, a passenger, do that?"

"How," asked d'Andrieu suavely, "did he steal the Rembrandt out of Grossenmart's strong-room in Berlin? Or Madame de Montfort's sapphires at the President's Ball?"

Ramsden showed that side of his nature which explained his popularity in other countries. Suddenly he slapped his hat

against his leg and chortled.

"Sir, we shall be pleased to accept your hospitality. Let Flamande do his cussedest. There happens to be somebody here who will queer his pitch quicker than Gasquet ever can. I mean—that 'un." He pointed at H. M. "I don't know how he got here, but that's Sir Henry Merrivale. And—ah, the ladies! This is Miss Cheyne. This is Miss—Mrs.—"

"Mrs. Middleton," supplied the man beside her, with pride. "My wife, Elsa."

She was beautiful, and obviously Viennese, with her dark hair, intense blue eyes, and dark red lips.

Ramsden hauled the stout man forward. "This is Mr. Ernest Hayward. He was in Washington when I was there years ago." He looked at me. "This is Mr. Blake, a friend of mine, who looks as though he could do with a wash."

D'Andrieu bowed. "Are there no more passengers?"

"Three more to come. Now, sir, if you'll ask your men to bring up some of our luggage—"

The word luggage brought to me the realization that Drummond and his two avengers must have come up to our bogged cars. What they would be saying to Marcel I could imagine. Also, it was clear that their next move would be to come straight here. Unless measures of some sort were taken, all three of us outlaws would be snaffled—H.M. included. For, as had been pointed out to him at Whitehall, he had no authority whatever. Whitehall might take a malicious pleasure in seeing him in trouble.

THE realization sent my heart into my boots. But, before H.M. could speak, I threw the dice.

"M. d'Andrieu," I said, "our cars are down by the landing-stage at the river. But, before you take us in, it's only fair to warn you that we are being pursued by the police."

There was a silence.

"What have you been up to, young man?" growled Hayward.

"Assaulting policemen. We thought they were hold-up men when they tried to stop our car. Then along came Sir Henry and assaulted their leader again."

D'Andrieu clucked his tongue sympathetically. "What would you like me to do, Mr. Blake?"

"Of course, sir," I pursued, "it might interfere with the sport to have the police on the premises. Flamande enjoins against it. So, if you told them you had not seen us—"

"Auguste!" called our host. Up stepped the big major-domo, with a military salute. "You hear, Auguste?"

"Perfectly, my colonel."

"If this felow comes here, you know nothing. If he persists, it will probably be best to throw him into the river."

"You are the perfect host, M. d'Andrieu," I said. "But it need not be necessary to go quite so far as that. Besides, I must warn you that this man is a very tough proposition."

"When, many years ago," said the little man in the skull-cap, dreamily cocking an eye at a corner of the roof, "I had the honor to serve the Republic as a Colonel of Spahis, I encountered many examples of what you call 'tough propositions.' The modern sort do not impress me. Nowadays we have a tendency to believe that 'toughness' consists merely in bad manners. That is, I think, an error; and I am not convinced that the poorer a man's grammar is, the stronger are his guts. As for Auguste, do not worry. Before he became my orderly and later my servant, he was the heavyweight boxing champion of the French Foreign Legion . . . You have your instructions, Auguste?"

"*Oui, mon colonel,*" said Auguste happily.

"Then, my friends, if you will come to the fire in the library."

A sharp rat-tat-tat sounded on the big knocker of the front door. Auguste went to answer it. Inside stalked the prim, straight-backed Frenchman whom I had judged to be a professional man of some sort. He had a sharp, clean-shaven face, with a heavy jaw and small eyeglasses through which he regarded us sharply from under the brim of his black slouch hat. Under one arm he pressed a brief-case, and was tapping it impatiently with his other hand. Addressing Ramsden, he said:

"This, monsieur, is an outrage. I am assured by the pilot that our plane is so damaged we shall be unable to proceed tonight."

Imperturbable during a babble of talk, our host led us into a big room where a huge log fire was burning. It was a drawing room, furnished in the white and gilt of the Empire. But it was ill-kempt in the damp of a place that looked as though it had been shut up for years.

Auguste took our sodden wraps; all but those of the latest arrival, who remained stiff by the fire.

"I thank monsieur for his courtesy," he said to our host, "but the situation is impossible. The pilot says that we cannot move until tomorrow."

H.M. intervened. "But the radio-telephone? He will already have told Paris what has happened. They could have a car sent for you, hey?"

"Yes, yes. He could, monsieur, if some scoundrel had not smashed the t.s.f."

D'Andrieu's eye twinkled again. "Surely that is not too bad? I shall be very much insulted, my friends, if you refuse to spend the night under my roof."

THE man with the eyeglasses turned. "Again I thank monsieur. But it is imperative that I be in Paris early tomorrow morning. Allow me: I am Dr. Hèbert, police surgeon for the Department of Bouche du Rhône, at Marseilles. I go to Paris on official business. You have a telephone?"

"Unfortunately, no. I neither like nor need telephones."

"But surely you have an automobile?"

"No, but I have some good saddle horses. I should prefer not to let Thunder or Queen of Clubs go out in such weather, but if you insist—"

"I do not ride," said Hébert. He turned to the rest of us and broke out in English: "I appeal to you gentlemen. Surely somebody can ride to the nearest town for a car."

"I can ride," admitted Middleton, "but damned if I will. Honestly, Doctor, is there any real reason for this Paul Revere stuff? We have the perfect host, the perfect quar-

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ters—everything. Besides, I want to see what happens."

Even Hayward agreed. Comfortably rolling a ripe cigar in his fingers, he declared:

"I no more expect to meet this crook than I expect to meet—a unicorn. But, as Mr. Middleton says, we have an admirable host, cheerful company. *I'm* satisfied. Why, Dr. Hébert, are you so anxious to go?"

"I might inquire," said Hébert, "why you are so anxious to stay. But let's talk sense, yes? Do you know that a notorious criminal has threatened to be with us?"

"We know more than that," grunted Ramsden. "Let him see the letter, M. d'Andrieu."

The doctor read it, and his face went sallow.

"Well, well?" he cried. "And you have not called the police?"

Hayward shifted. "Listen, let's not go over that again, Doctor. If any police show up, the butler has instructions to fire 'em out on the seat of the pants. Is everybody happy?"

"Just to start the ball rolling," young Middleton volunteered, "I'll make a guess. I'll say that Mr. Hayward is Gasquet."

"Eh?" exclaimed Ramsden. "Why?"

"Because I write detective stories," said Middleton, with candor. "They're not very good. But I'd say he ought to be Gasquet."

Hayward chuckled. "I might be, at that," he agreed comfortably. "Though there was a queer-looking bird in the plane I had my eye on—he hasn't shown up yet. Go on, son."

"We're playing not only the game of 'Find the criminal,'" said Middleton, excitedly, "but also the game of 'Find the Detective.' Mr. Hayward couldn't possibly be Flamande—"

"I'd like to know why not," said Hayward with some asperity.

"Because he would be too easy. People would be suspicious of his type right away as the criminal. See what I mean!"

Two footmen, under the direction of Auguste, were bringing luggage into the hall. Elsa and Evelyn went off to change. It was just as well they did, for Hébert spoke then.

"You think, I suppose," he said quietly, "this is a joke. I can laugh as well as anybody. But not at this. I know something which you cannot know."

"Go on," prompted d'Andrieu.

"Flamande is a murderer," replied the doctor. "It is why I go to Paris. He murdered a man last night in Marseilles."

"And why," said d'Andrieu quietly, "should you go to Paris because a man was murdered in Marseilles?"

"Because of the way that this murder was done. I tell you frankly I do not see how the hole in that person's head could have been made by any living man. It could have been made, so far as I know, only by the long, sharp horn of an animal."

"By a unicorn, doubtless?" Ramsden asked.

"No, I do not think so," the doctor answered.

A LOW sigh came from d'Andrieu's lips. "At last we come to the unicorn," he murmured. "That puzzles me most. I do not ask the obvious question as to what the unicorn is—"

"No," said Ramsden. "Let Flamande find that out for himself." With great deliberation he took from a hip-pocket holster a revolver, spun the cartridge-drum and deliberately replaced it. He added: "I begin to wonder whether my sporting instincts have got me into a trap. Well! I am ready."

D'Andrieu went on:

"But we have interrupted you, Dr. Hébert. Shall we go back to the man who was murdered in Marseilles? I am especially interested in that because of a legend."

"Legend?" said Ramsden.

"I should have said superstition. I have traveled. I know where one unpleasant superstition is strong. This is that to be gored through the head by a unicorn is always the fate of a traitor."

Abruptly Ramsden set down his glass. "You'd better take charge, Merrivale," he said.

"Uh-huh. Y'know, son, I was beginnin' to think it was about time I did." Dully H.M. pointed at Hébert with his pipe-stem. "It's struck me you've come to a very rum-

my Q.E.D., Doc. 'Flamande is a murderer,' you say. 'Why?' we say. 'Because,' you say, 'here's a man dead of a wound that couldn't have been made by a living man, but only the horn of an animal.' Why tack it on Flamande, then?"

The doctor hesitated. "It is not a secret. It was in the newspapers. The dead man was an Englishman."

And now the name in that newspaper paragraph flashed back on me. "M. Gilbert Drummond, a solicitor, of London. Mr. Drummond's brother has been notified."

"His name, H.M.," I interposed, "was Gilbert Drummond. Would he be any relation to—"

"Only his brother," said H.M. "Oh, love-a-*duck!* Ken, I don't wonder a certain person we know is pretty upset. Well, Doctor, why do you say Flamande must have committed that murder?"

Hébert folded his arms. "Because there was one detail, my friend, not given to the press. The report stated that the victim, before he died, said only the word, 'unicorn.' That is not true. He spoke a name. They asked him who had attacked him, and he answered in the distinct hearing of two people, 'Flamande.' "

The doctor went on in curt words to describe the murder—in substance the same as the newspaper report.

"I examined the body," declared Hébert. "The orifice was much bigger than that made by any largest caliber of firearm. I found no bullet in the wound, but evidence that something had been *pulled out* of the wound. Some clean spike had penetrated exactly six inches. Because there is the establishment of a butcher at the other side of the park, Dr. Melisse says: 'Might have been done with a pole-ax.' "

"I think he meant a battle-ax," said d'Andrieu thoughtfully. "On the opposite side of the head of the ax there was, I believe, an iron spike for close fighting. But *tenez!* Can you picture Flamande walking about in search of victims with a battle-ax over his shoulder?"

"Now, now," rumbled H.M., "we can take it as established, then, that all this was not done with any form of ax at all."

A voice from the doorway said: "We can, Sir Henry. I saw the body myself."

H. M. ROARED querulously as the tall, thin man who had remained behind with the plane advanced. He had wiry black hair, a long face with a hooked nose, and intelligent dark eyes. His accent was broad Cambridge when he said:

"Sorry to jump in like this, sir. I've heard a bit of what you were saying. You see, I wondered what brought the great H.M. down here."

He spoke so respectfully that, though H.M. snorted, he looked mollified. The young man turned just as respectfully to d'Andrieu. "Devilish good of you to take us in, M. le Comte, and what a reward for a newspaperman! Flamande! My name is Fowler, sir; Kirby Fowler. I represent the *Record* in France."

Fowler had an engaging grin which had its effect on everybody.

"You are welcome, Mr. Fowler," said d'Andrieu. "We have just been attempting to discover Flamande. Or Gasquet. Er —do you happen to be either?"

"Sorry, no."

"What the devil were you doing on that plane?" demanded Ramsden.

"Following you, sir."

"Following me? Why?"

Fowler hesitated. "Well, rumors had been going about, you see. . . ." He turned a blank face. "By the way, sir, how is the Nizam?"

"So?" said Ramsden. His eyes were hard, but he barked out a chuckle. "Now, that's supposed to be a casual question, is it, which will get an answer? Bah, you young pups!" He shook himself. "Carry on, Merrivale. I'll be quiet."

"I don't see any use in goin' on with it, at all," grumbled H.M., "unless we know how many villains we got to pick and choose from. Is this the lot? Have we got everybody in the circle here now?"

"There's one more," Fowler answered. "He's coming with the pilot. Ah, here he is now! Come in, Mr.—"

"Drummond," a rather familiar voice said. "Harvey Drummond."

CHAPTER VI

A Mask Is Removed

THERE he was in the doorway, Nemesis and checkmate. There was the surly eye, the neck thrust forward, the brown tooth-brush mustache. His hands were jammed into his pockets as he stared.

"Well, we seem to have picked a decent shakedown," he said.

My brain turned topsy-turvy. He had glanced at me with blank non-recognition.

"Drummond," H.M. said heavily, "do you mind tellin' me exactly where *you* came from?"

"What the devil do you mean? I came from the plane. Didn't you see me?"

"You traveled in it from Marseilles?"

Drummond stared at him in growing anger.

"Certainly. Any law against that?"

"Now, now, son, don't get your back up. But there's an awful piece of cussedness that we've got to straighten out. Look at that feller there." H.M. waved a big flipper toward me. "Ever see him before?"

"No. Why?"

"Look here," I said. "You weren't driving a red Voisin along the road about an hour or so ago? I—borrowed your fountain pen."

Drummond looked back at H.M. "Merrivale, is this fellow raving mad, or what sort of blasted nonsense is this? Are you trying to tell me I didn't make that trip? Ask anybody here!"

"Well, he certainly sat opposite me all the way," volunteered Hayward.

Fowler's quizzical dark eyes were studying H.M. "Mr. Drummond, sir, has been talking to me ever since the plane hit ground."

"I have no wish, sir," d'Andrieu observed to me, "to doubt your word or the good faith of Sir Henry Merrivale, but you seem to have had extraordinary experiences."

I was not listening. Because, after even a brief study of the man who called himself Harvey Drummond, I saw he was not the man who had stopped us on that road.

The man before us now was a good copy, but the whole make-up had a subtle wrongness. The surliness, the rasp and swagger were assumed. Which was the real Harvey Drummond? I believed *this* claimant was playing a part.

I said: "Mr. Drummond, will you let me offer you sincere apologies? It was the surprise. I met on the road a man who looked so like you that—"

"I'm glad you're beginnin' to realize that, son," H.M. growled. "Sure this is Drummond. I ought to know, oughtn't I?"

Drummond was staring at me curiously. His eyes seemed to weigh something.

"That's all right," he said, and made a curt gesture. "We'll forget it. Still, I'd like to have a bit of a talk with you this evening. . . . You say somebody back there pretended to be me?"

"No, not exactly. He didn't give his name."

"Where is he now?" the other asked sharply; just a little too sharply.

H.M. intervened with a sort of wooden chuckle. "That's part of the little mix-up, you see, son. We got every reason to believe he'll be makin' straight for this place to make trouble. D'Andrieu here gave orders to have him chucked out. But, under the circumstances, don't you think those orders ought to be altered, hey?"

"I do," d'Andrieu agreed with grave thoughtfulness. "They shall be altered. You have no objection to meeting this other man, Mr. Drummond?"

"Certainly not."

Our host's tone was still silky: "And you are prepared to prove your own identity? I really think you had better do so."

H.M.'s mouth moved as though he were about to swear. D'Andrieu was smiling, staring straight at Drummond.

H.M. pointed at d'Andrieu with his pipe stem.

"There's goin' to be trouble with you," he said. "I can see that comin'. Burn me, you want the old man to unlimber his heavy artillery at the start? Or just what do you want?"

"Sport," said d'Andrieu.

"Well, *something's* damned funny!" roared Sir George Ramsden. "I don't know that chap by sight"—he nodded at Drummond—"but I've heard about him and Henry says he's all right. I do know Ken Blake, and *I* can tell you he's all right. What's all this foolery about policemen and fountain pens?"

D'Andrieu turned to me. "Of course you have a passport, Mr. Blake?"

"Not," I said, "at the moment. A policeman stole it from me. In Paris this evening."

"You were twice set on by policemen, if I understand correctly. You then borrowed

HALLOWE'EN

By Ruth Jameson

It is no wonder that a ghost
Loudly wails and groans.
He must be chilled with nothing else
Beneath those sheets but bones!

a fountain pen from one of these villains, and—may we see the fountain pen, by the way?"

UNEASILY anticipating that, I had been working loose that gray slip from the pen in my pocket. I gravely handed out the pen. The paper had concealed the name "Harvey Drummond."

"Yours, sir?" asked d'Andrieu, politely handing it over.

"No," the man who called himself Drummond answered gruffly. "I never saw it before."

"This," Ramsden snorted, "puts a different look on the whole mess. Suppose we stop all this infernal politeness and get down to cases? You're an impostor, or you're not. We're going to find out which."

The business was unnerving. In that group, each concealing his secret with amazing coolness, were both Flamande and Gasquet. Which was which?

Into the pause struck H.M.'s sane, heavy, querulous voice.

"Now if all the sixteen cooks have stopped war-dancin' around the broth, maybe we can get down to business." He blinked at Drummond. "So, just to put everything in order, I'd like to see your identification papers, son." I don't mean your 'Harvey Drummond' passport, if you got one. I mean your real identification papers. You're Gasquet, ain't you?"

That came like a blow in the face.

"I apologize for bein' premature," pursued H.M., "but dammit, man, I had to! Our bumpin' into Drummond on the road, Ken's givin' you the most remarkable imitation of a loony ever seen on any stage, has got things snarled up. I think you better own up. It'll be the easiest means of doin' what you want to do."

For a moment "Drummond" stood motionless. When he spoke there was no alteration in the voice except a deepening and mocking note. But it changed the man completely.

"Yes, I am Gasquet," he said. "If Drummond had followed my orders, and kept out of sight the whole thing would have been accomplished without M. Flamande knowing who I was until the end."

"As it is?" prompted d'Andrieu.

"He knows me. But then I know him. That damned murdering mountebank has made a fool of Gasquet for the last time." He was so excited that his gestures increased. When he borrowed matches from H.M. to relight his pipe, they were sulphur and made him cough; but still he did not look absurd. "The chase is nearly over. I can tell you a little. Shall we say when we have washed and made ourselves comfortable, and I have procured certain papers from my bag?"

"But Flamande!" cried Fowler. "You mean he's here, after all?"

"Flamande, my friend," Gasquet said, "shall stew in his own juice for a time. My men will be here presently. We shall have a prisoner for them to take back to Paris. Meantime," and his grin broadened, "I trust the interval will be a pleasant time of wait-

ing for you, M. Flamande."

"There is just one little thing, M. Gasquet," said d'Andrieu, frowning, "which remains—your credentials."

"Certainly. But at the moment I have no intention of satisfying everybody's curiosity: only that of the two gentlemen most concerned." He looked at Ramsden and H.M. and smiled grimly. "I have something to tell them. I will satisfy them of my identity, and I will do more. If you, gentlemen, will meet me in this room in fifteen minutes, I will confide in you the name M. Flamande is using tonight."

It was twenty-five minutes past twelve, and the fireworks had been going since eight-thirty. I was confused by them. Further, I was hungry. D'Andrieu was in no hurry to produce that meal, though he had conducted proceedings with an outlandish formality. We had separate rooms, all tricked out with fresh linen.

Only two of the Château de l'Ile's three floors were in use, and the doors to the towers were locked. Built in the middle Sixteenth Century, the place had been rescued and renovated by the first d'Andrieu, who got his title from Napoleon I.

The staircase affected me unpleasantly. On the wall of a landing was a great tapestry, with queer flashes of color, of a wild boar hunt. It gave me an ugly sensation of shock.

I WAS installed in a room overlooking the causeway; a room frowsty with thick greenish hangings. A smoky fire burned in a marble fireplace over which was a bronze bust of the First Consul. But I found a fairly modern bathroom, and dry clothes changed the whole outlook.

By now Gasquet would be closeted with Ramsden and H.M. Presumably Gasquet knew his business, but it occurred to me that he had better do something before Flamande prepared a counter-blast.

Would H.M. growl and retire beaten when Gasquet snaffled Flamande first? Or suppose Flamande decided to cut and run? Gasquet was smilingly giving him the freedom of the house. But Gasquet could afford to taste triumph now that the river had bitten off our only means of communication. He had the gentleman.

It was odd that Gasquet, delayed, had been the last man to cross that causeway and the causeway was down at well past the middle.

Yet why would he cut his own line of communication?

There was a knock at the door. It was Evelyn, resplendent in a white dinner gown. She gravely curtsied.

"*Meinherr*," she said, "belieff me, I would not haf dress up like a plush horse if it had not been for my friendt Elsa. 'M, yes. She began solemnly to climb into a number guaranteed to make all masculine eyes pop, so I had to do something. She has been telling me she rather likes the idea of staying here. She's horribly afraid of her husband."

"Afraid of Middleton? Why?"

"No, no. Not Middleton. He's not her husband, yet. She afraid of her present official husband—the third—who she thinks is going to come after them mit a saber."

"Don't you approve of such—"

"Of course, if I do 'em myself," said Evelyn. "They're going to Paris to get her a divorce. Her third husband is a c-cad and a b-bounder who was dissipating the family fortunes. She ran away to Marseilles and met Middleton, who was on his way back from a trip to India. She's only know him a week. They decided to fly to Paris and get her a divorce."

"Look here," I said, "this isn't altogether gossip. What's on your mind? You don't think Middleton is Flamande, do you? Or that she is?"

Evelyn frowned. "I think it's unlikely. But one thing I should like to know. Why should Elsa almost faint at the sight of a copy of Balzac's *'Contes Drolatiques'?*"

I led Evelyn over to the fire, pushed her into a chair, and lit a cigarette for her. She was genuinely disturbed and restless.

"No, I'm not joking," she told me, "and I'm not being silly."

"Steady," I said. "Now what's this about Elsa's fainting at the sight of a book?"

"Not quite so bad as that. It was like this. Elsa had been prowling about their room, and picked up one of the books our friend d'Andrieu had placed on the night-

table. Then all of a sudden she let out a skelloch that scared me half to death. She sat down on the bed as pale as that mantlepiece. I picked up the book, but there was nothing hidden or written or anything. But she took the book out of my hands, and said she had to be alone. Ken, what does it mean?"

"It doesn't do your nerves any good," I said. "Let's go downstairs."

Outside in the gallery, somebody screamed. We heard a crash as of some heavy body pitched forward; a rolling and bumping noise, a heavy jar. Then silence.

I threw open the door and ran toward the staircase. Doors were being opened in a confusion of people, but the gallery was now dark. Light came in a dull glow from the hall below.

At the top of the stairs stood Elsa Middleton, her head down, holding with both hands to the newel-post. Fowler stood staring down.

At the foot of the staircase a man in a dark suit lay on his face, shapeless as a laundry bag. The lately revealed Gasquet. Over him bent H.M. and Dr. Hébert's thin, shrill syllables rose with terrible distinctness.

"Another hole in the head," he said, "between the eyes!"

CHAPTER VII

The Invisible Weapon

QUIETLY Fowler turned to Elsa Middleton.

"You'd better get to your room," he said.

I thought she was going to pitch across the banister, and I caught her.

Evelyn said with amazing coolness: "Fainted. I'll take care of her."

I plunged down the stairs, with Fowler, Hayward, d'Andrieu, and the big majordomo, Auguste, clattering down behind me.

They had turned Gasquet over now, and he was dead. The wound, a little above the eyes, was a clean round hole. And the expression of the face? Horror, but above all a blasting surprise.

Hébert still was kneeling with H.M. beside the body. On the stairs, d'Andrieu in skull-cap and dressing gown, stood out against the carven gargoyle.

"So I was wrong, then," he said, as he came down. "I thought he was Flamande pretending to be Gasquet."

H.M.'s big voice seemed to quiet incipient panic. "Take it easy, boys. We've had enough thinkin' in this business, and he's flummoxed us. We're goin' to act quickly, and you're all goin' to help. Before you've had time to forget—who saw what happened up there?"

"I saw it," Fowler answered. "That is, I was there. Mrs. Middleton was, too. But I can't swear exactly what happened." He passed a hand over his wiry black hair. "It was like this. I was standing in my door waiting for him to come out of his room—"

"Why?" H.M.'s usual sleepy and half-disinterested growl had gone. "Why waitin'?"

"To—well, to ask him questions when he came downstairs to talk to you and Sir George."

"Uh-huh. How long had you been waitin' there?"

"Well, with the exception of a couple of minutes, ever since everybody went to their rooms. About five minutes ago, every light in the hall went out. Not in the rooms, because they've got only oil lamps."

D'Andrieu's cool voice struck in. "Sir Henry, the only electricity on that floor is in the gallery, the bathroom, and my three rooms at the rear."

"Go on," said H.M., blinking at Fowler. "What did you do when the lights went out?"

"I opened the door wide and looked out. I couldn't see anything except a kind of glow down here in the lower hall. Just then I heard the bathroom door open, and heard Middleton say, 'What's the matter? Somebody blow the fuses?' "

"That's right," said Middleton eagerly. "The bathroom light went out."

"I saw him pass the staircase, and open the door of his room, at just about the same time Gasquet opened *his* door."

H.M.'s eyes narrowed. "You get a good

view of him, hey?"

"Yes. When he bent down to blow out his lamp. He had in his hand one of those long brownish envelopes with pockets like lawyers use. He went straight for the stairs —"

"Dammit, don't hesitate! What then, hey?"

"I don't know. My eye was distracted for an instant as the Middletons' door opened, and Mrs. Middleton came out. I was just going to sing out to him when—well the best description I can give is that something or somebody seemed to grab Gasquet in the dark."

Sir George Ramsden exploded. "What the devil do you mean," he rasped. "You either saw somebody attack him, or you didn't. Well?"

Fowler had been unable to wrench away his eyes from H.M.'s disconcerting stare. He went on: "All right! All right! But I can't swear I saw anybody. All I can say is that something seemed to reach out and get him. He jerked, then let out that hellish screech as his hands went up to his forehead. He bounced off the wall of the landing like a blasted sack, and flapped down the rest of the stairs to that place right at your feet, Sir Henry. I thought he was going to yank down the tapestry."

I LOOKED up toward the great tapestry with its ugly brownish figures that might have respresented a boar-hunt, or the hunt of a monster with one horn. Fowler caught my eye and whipped round.

"Now, now," said H.M., "you let the fabulous monsters alone for a minute. What you're sayin' is that you didn't see any fight or struggle, such as might happen if he'd been attacked with a sharp marlin-spike?"

"Yes," Fowler admitted.

"Well, did any attacker duck past you in the gallery?"

"I didn't see anybody, but it was dark."

D'Andrieu's bright little eyes under their pouched lids had a momentary film.

"Er—may I ask a question? Let us suppose that, while he stands on the stairs a bullet from a silenced gun is fired either from the hall below or from the other end of the gallery. Wouldn't that produce exactly the result we have seen?"

Dr. Hébert got up and dusted his knees.

"Bullets!" he cried. "Oh, zut! I ask you, M. le Comte, if you have ever seen a bullet-wound like that? It would have taken out the back of his head. Also, there are signs of a weapon withdrawn. What caused it?"

"That's what we're goin' to find out," said H.M. woodenly. "It's time to begin movin' the troops. Auguste, carry this poor feller to the back library for the doc to make an examination. And take him easy, son. I'm beginnin' to think he was a better man than we ever suspected. I don't mean as a detective; I mean a man. Doc, you might see whether he's got in his pockets that miniature letter-file Fowler was talking about, but I'll lay you a fiver to a cold kipper it's vanished."

Auguste gravely and without difficulty hoisted up that heavy sack, and when the major domo's footfalls had died away, H.M. fished out his pipe from a baggy coat pocket.

"H'm. We'll have a bit of reconstruction, hey?" he continued, wheezing. "How many people are in the house at this minute? What about those three airmen?"

D'Andrieu frowned. "That, my friend," he said, "is something I genuinely regret. When the water washed out our causeway, they were cut off—" He made an expressive gesture. "You had not heard of that, gentlemen?"

Evidently Hayward, Fowler, and Middleton had not heard that the causeway was down. They said so with some violence.

"Auguste had just come to tell me when this unpleasant business occurred." d'Andrieu said smoothly. "I am desolated, but I am sure we can make you comfortable until the difficulty is adjusted. The airmen also should be comfortable in the plane. As to the others in this house, there are my servants. Auguste, and Jean Baptiste, the cook. Joseph and Louis are masquerading as footmen, although they are my groom and handyman. That is all."

"Excuse me, monsieur," interposed Auguste, returning. "There is one other now. A taxi-driver who calls himself Marcel Celestin. He is very drunk."

H.M. looked us over.

"At one time or another," he went on, "you've probably all played the little parlor game called Murder. We've got the same kind of situation here. I want everybody to stand exactly where he was when he heard the poor feller yell. Ramsden, Hébert, and I were down here. I was standin' just where I am now. Where were you, Ramsden?"

"Outside the front door, trying to see how much of the causeway was down," growled Ramsden.

H.M. blinked. "Hébert and I can corroborate each other. We were in each other's sight. Now, let's go upstairs and settle positions there. And keep an eye out for that cardboard file."

HE STUMPED up the stairs. On the landing he stopped and looked at the tapestry. Swinging it to one side, he revealed a window in a deep embrasure.

"So-ho. This window's unlocked." He peered at d'Andrieu. "Do you usually keep it unlocked?"

"It is never left open."

"What's outside? Straight drop to the river?"

"No," said d'Andrieu. "A flat roof with a railing."

"If you got out on there from here, is there any way back into the house without usin' this window again?"

D'Andrieu's eyes narrowed. "There is a low buttress, leading past a bedroom window on either side. They are the rooms now occupied by Mr. Hayward and Mr. Fowler."

"It's pretty dark up here, and that's a fact. I suppose a fuse was blown? Ken, go get that flashlight you borrowed from the taxi-driver."

When I hurried back with the flashlight d'Andrieu and H. M. were inside a door opposite the head of the stairs—a linen-closet. D'Andrieu spoke.

"Ah! There is nothing wrong with the fuses. The switch was merely thrown—"

"Stand still, everybody!" roared H. M. "Somebody just dropped something. Lights, now!"

[*Turn page*]

The gallery sprang into light. We all saw what lay on the dark-carpeted floor. On the white envelope was typed: *For M. le Comte d'Andrieu.*

H. M. shook his fist.

"I've had about enough of this!" he declared. "More confidential communications, hey? More leers? You'd better read this." He handed it to d'Andrieu. "Burn me, the fellow's crazy! If it's from—"

"Yes," d'Andrieu said quietly. "It is from Flamande. And he does not make jokes now." It was the first time I had seen d'Andrieu serious. "Shall I read it to you, gentlemen?"

The letter began:

Monsieur:

I write this because a misunderstanding must be cleared up now. I have borrowed someone's portable typewriter, which may be found now in the linen closet.

By the time you receive this, I shall have dealt with a fool who got in my way. I do not believe in murder unless it is absolutely necessary. This was. The fool would—

H. M. peered around. "Who's got a portable typewriter?"

"I have," replied Fowler. "In the linen closet?" He strode over and from under a shelf drew out a worn Remington. "This is it."

"Now attend, gentlemen!" said our host. He read on:

Now the important thing. Yesterday you received a letter which purported to come from Flamande. I never wrote that letter. I did not wreck the plane. I had my whole campaign planned on different lines which somebody has *almost* spoiled.

I have a suspicion who did write it. I have a score to settle before I take the unicorn from Sir George Ramsden. That should be sufficient warning from

Flamande

CHAPTER VIII

Liar's Letters

UNEASILY Middleton looked around.

"Wow!" he said. "That thing sounds like business. But why *should* anybody fake a letter from a criminal?"

"Now there's a point," said H. M. to nobody in particular, "you fervid amateurs might scrutinize. Suppose—"

He paused as Elsa and Evelyn came slowly toward our group. Elsa's face was pale, but she was composed. Like Evelyn, she wore white—a low-cut gown gleaming with sequins. She hesitated, then appealed to d'Andrieu.

"Please," she said, "I am sorry I haf go bong like that. I am upset. I—I—"

H. M. addressed her in German, and she turned to him eagerly. Evelyn and Middleton alternately translated like court interpreters.

She confirmed Fowler's story in its essentials. She had stepped out into the gallery just in time to see Gasquet go toward the stairs. She had not seen Fowler at that moment.

Then came the crucial points.

H.M.: Did you see anybody attack him?

Elsa: No. Nobody came near him.

H.M.: What did happen?

Elsa: I do not know. It was as though he had run into something, like a man walking against a wall. He put his hands up to his head. Something knocked him a little to one side, and he began to scream. Then he fell straight down the stairs.

H.M.: Could you see the tapestry from where you were standing?

Elsa: I could see the upper half of it, that is all.

H.M.: Did you see the tapestry move, as though there were somebody behind it?

Elsa: No, I saw nothing like that.

H.M. stumped around, his little eye measuring distances.

"Henry my lad," Ramsden declared, "there was nobody with him. Nobody attacked him. He was by himself when some-

thing cracked him. Well, say somebody was behind that tapestry. He fired. After that, he climbed out of the window behind the tapestry, got into the house again, and mixed with the rest."

Hayward, who claimed to be a lawyer, seized the chance to make a parliamentary point.

"Won't do at all! It couldn't have been a bullet, for there was no bullet in the wound. We could all see that something had been pulled *out* of that wound, and you can't yank a thing out of a wound unless you're there to do it. Finally, there's that doctor. He says there's no gun of a caliber big enough to have made that hole, without blowing off the fellow's head."

D'Andrieu raised one eyebrow.

"I fear he is right. *Eh bien*, there remains the question of which of two impossibilities we prefer. He could not have been shot, because that is impossible. The weapon could not have been used like a dagger or thrown like a spear, since the murderer was invisible. That is impossible, too."

"But look at it in another way!" exclaimed Middleton. "Can I have the floor for just a minute?"

H.M. waved his hand with sleepy affability. "Carry on, son. The more theories, the greater the confusion, but I like 'em. When a person spins out a theory, it only means how *he* would have done the business. But it's mighty revealing."

"Well," said Middleton, "it was dark up here, and there's the victim at the top of the stairs. The murderer is behind that tapestry. He comes out, but he's crouched so low down that Elsa doesn't see him."

"No!" said Ramsden with some violence. He strode along beside the rail, squinting. "I know she's small, but the murderer would've had to be crawling on the landing. But go on."

"All right! The murderer has some heavy steel thing like a dagger. He throws it. The victim collapses, and goes down the stairs. Fowler says it was a second or two before he ran up and looked down the stairs. As the victim hits the landing in the center of the stairs, the murderer reaches out, pulls the weapon loose, takes that cardboard letter-file from the fellow's pocket, and ducks back behind the tapestry just as Fowler looks down."

H. M. WAS grinning. "Anybody got anything to say to that, hey?" he prodded.

Fowler was staring at Middleton. "Now, look here, old man," he said, "that's wilder than any impossibility we've heard yet. Nobody alive could throw a dagger hard enough to go six inches into a man's skull. I'd have seen anything that was thrown, and when I looked down the stairs Gasquet was still rolling. In that little space of time, the murderer would have had to pull out the weapon—also a job for a strong man—pick his pocket, and go behind the tapestry. I'll take my oath there was nobody on those stairs. It's absolutely impossible." He turned to H.M. "You agree with that, sir?"

"Uh-huh. The damage was done before then."

"Then suppose you tell us how it was done?" suggested Ramsden. "If he was killed at the top of the stairs, he was either stabbed by an invisible man or shot with a bullet which pulls itself out of the wound and flies away. Left Wing says he was shot. Right Wing says he was stabbed or struck. Left Wing says it was done from a distance. Right Wing says it was done from close at hand. What's your vote?"

H.M. surveyed us. "Gents," he said, "you're both right. And you're both wrong."

"Are you serious?" asked Ramsden.

"Me? Oh, absolutely."

"But, damn it all, a man is either shot or stabbed, isn't he? It's got to be one thing or the other!"

"Not necessarily, y'see."

"I know," said Middleton glumly. "He was really strangled, and the hole in the head was done with mirrors."

"Now, now!" answered H.M. "You haven't thought of the one weapon in the whole wide green world that could have done it, and also the circumstances of this murder. Before you have my blood, let's get to business. Take up your places exactly where you were when you heard the poor feller yell. Ramsden will take Gasquet's place—"

And then Hayward voiced a thought which must have been nagging at the back of all our minds.

"Listen, old man," he said sharply, "I've got as much nerve as anybody, but if we go through this monkey business, then we do it with the lights on. Can't you get it through your head that this man's *here?* He's dropping his billy-doos, he's doing just exactly what he wants to do in spite of you, and he's an ice-water killer if there ever was one. No, sir! You keep those lights on!"

"Nobody has anything to fear except the man who forged that note," Fowler said rather curtly. "Or Sir George, who was being trailed in the first place. If Flamande wants to find anybody, he'll find him whether the lights are off or on."

He was looking at Elsa. Tears suddenly brimmed over her eyes, and he was shaking with a quiet hysteria.

Middleton cursed.

"There's no objection, so far as I'm concerned to going through this business," Middleton cut him off. "But Elsa's not going to. Anybody who tries to force her into it is going to get into a hell of a lot of trouble."

H.M. nodded. "You're quite right, son," he agreed. "It can't be a nice business for the gals. You and Hayward take them downstairs, ask d'Andrieu if he'll introduce you to that buffet supper we've heard about. Ramsden and Fowler and Ken and I will do a bit of pokin' about before we join you."

"The suggestion is an excellent one." Our host beamed. "Remain here, if you please, Auguste."

AS THEY went downstairs, H.M. stroked his plowshare chin.

"Are you likely," said Ramsden, with heavy sarcasm, "to be any more communicative now? Would you mind telling us what's on your mind?"

"Everything. Uh-huh, everything. Gents, I've known cases in which two or three points seemed to be wrong, but I never yet met one where every single blasted detail was wrong. 'Oh, what a tangled web we weave, When our commonsense we can't believe.' And my common sense doth shrink affrighted, if you follow me, from every speech, detail, and gyration that's gone on. We seem at first glance a fairly solid and sane group of people—but, oh, my hat, look at us! I feel like somebody with the D.T.'s seeing 'Peer Gynt' played backwards. Why is it all so wrong?"

"I don't follow this mysticism," I said with mounting irritation.

"You ought to," grunted H.M., "because to judge by your actions tonight, you're the looniest of all. For instance, you know what this house reminds me of? I had a friend once, who had lots of money and an awful primitive sense of humor. He had one room fixed up in his house for a side-splittin' joke. There was a carpet on the ceiling; chairs and tables were bolted to it upside down. The floor was papered over, and out of it stuck the spike and globes of a chandelier. The windows were nearly to the ceiling, and the door was a good way up—in short, it was an upside-down room. Well, he'd take a friend of his on a guzzlin' party. When the feller had slid under the table, he was carried to this room while he was asleep. The idea was to watch him next morning, when he woke up on the floor and had a good look around before the booze had evaporated. This humorous friend of mine said the drunk's first gesture would always be the same. He'd give an awful yell and make a grab for the chandelier. Y'see, he was afraid he would fall up to the ceiling. . . . Gents, I'm that poor souse. I'm momentarily afraid of falling up to the ceiling in this place. That's the way it affects me. If we see another bit of lunacy—" H.M. wheezed. "Open Gasquet's door, son, and light the lamp."

Fowler pushed open the door. On the right-hand wall was a big red velvet curtain, and in the wall facing us two tall windows. I was looking at a Meissonnier over the fireplace, so that I did not at first understand H.M.'s muttered profanity.

"You see anything funny about this?" he was asking. "There's his hat and coat, but where's his luggage? Didn't he have any?"

"Ah, yes, he did have some baggage, monsieur."

"Well, what's happened to it, then?"

"He threw it out of the window, monsieur," said Auguste agreeably.

CHAPTER IX

Adventures of a Portable

PUZZLED, I could only stare, wondering—not for the first time that day—whether I had understood aright or whether this might not be some obscure Gallic metaphor.

H.M. folded his arms.

"Very, very extraordinary, *mon gars,*" he observed, as he eyed the majordomo. "He threw his baggage out of the window, did he? Did M. Gasquet go mad, also?"

Auguste reflected heavily.

"Yes, monsieur, it did seem an imbecile thing to do, and not practical. When I brought him up here, where I myself had put his two valises he cried to me, 'My God, that is not all! There is an attaché-case of brown leather, with a lock. Where is it? It must be found!' I went downstairs and looked, but did not find it. When I went upstairs I found M. Gasquet just coming out of the room of—of—"

"Whom?" asked H.M. sharply.

"I do not know his name, monsieur. The tall and stout American with the red face."

"Hayward?"

Auguste nodded. "I said to M. Gasquet, 'Have you found it, monsieur?' He looked at me queerly. 'Er—no,' he said. 'Look in the other rooms, and if you find it bring it to me immediately!' Then he slammed the door. He looked very angry. I went downstairs, and then I discovered that the causeway had been washed out. I thought, *'Tiens,* I had better tell the colonel of this at once.'"

"What did he say when you told him?"

Auguste opened his eyes wide. "Why, monsieur, he said it was unfortunate, but that we could arrange matters in the morning."

"Continue."

"Then I had occasion to go into my own room, and all of a sudden the lights went out. When I glanced out of the window, because of the darkness I could see M. Gasquet leaning out of this window here. I saw him hurl out a valise. Then out went the other

[*Turn page*]

valise, and M. Gasquet slammed the window shut. 'Will you go, Auguste,' called the colonel, 'and see what is the matter with the lights?' As I opened my door I heard M. Gasquet scream and saw him fall—"

"You saw it, too?" Fowler asked sharply.

"Ah, but so little, monsieur, I could not swear to anything. An impression! A flash! A scream and a fall. I turned around. There was the colonel at my elbow. 'The commencement of Grand Guignol, eh, Auguste?' he said."

H.M. seemed distrait. He lumbered about the room at his near-sighted waddle, then turned on Auguste, and spoke in English.

"Son," he said, "you've reported conversations pretty well, but there's one thing I'm curious about. From what you've told us, you've understood all along when we were speaking English, haven't you? In fact, you speak English pretty well, hey?"

"Yes, I speak a little." Auguste seemed wary. "The colonel has many English friends."

H.M. regarded him musingly.

"All the time Gasquet talked to us tonight," he went on, "he spoke English. Even after he'd revealed himself." He pointed. "I'm goin' to venture a guess that he spoke to you in English all the time. Did he?"

Auguste bowed. There was a quick light knock at the door. D'Andrieu doddered in. He had changed into full evening-dress. He looked like a grayish and amiable Mephistopheles while his quick eyes took in the situation. Then he grew grave.

"Auguste, I fancy, has been telling you of the antics of our late friend," he stated. "Our friends downstairs are now eating, and I trust we shall shortly join them. But first—"

"Something on your mind?" inquired H.M., with a kind of leer.

"There are two things on my mind. One involves a personal question, and is not likely to be answered." He looked straight at Ramsden. "I should like to know why, whenever the word 'unicorn' is mentioned, Sir George smiles. He is not a fool, contrary to what Flamande apparently thinks."

"Thanks," said Ramsden. " 'Fraid I can't answer that question, though."

D'ANDRIEU'S face tightened. "The second is this. Flamande's first letter to me, gentlemen, was genuine. I happen to have proof of that. Then why should Flamande steal Mr. Fowler's typewriter, write a second note denying the genuineness of the first and drop it in the gallery?"

H.M. blinked satirically.

"Well, boys," he said in an offhand manner, "as young Middleton remarked, hang on to your seats. Here we go into the Crazy House again. So you got proof. What proof?"

D'Andrieu sat down and produced a cigar-case. He offered it around.

"I am not a detective, gentlemen, but certain things seem obvious. When I received that first letter from Flamande, I did as I was instructed and forwarded it to Gasquet. The one I showed you tonight was a copy I made myself. But I was not so foolish as to send a copy to Gasquet. He might not believe me if he did not see the original.

"Gasquet, who should know Flamande's signature, wrote me that he did believe it! Yet Flamande now denies he wrote the first letter. Why? Isn't it reasonable to believe that the first letter was genuine, and that the denial is either some trick or else was not actually written by Flamande?"

"And yet," said H.M. slowly, "I think you got a deeper purpose in bringing this up now. Just what's on your mind?"

D'Andrieu said calmly: "I should like to know certain things about Mr. Kirby Fowler."

Fowler jumped up.

D'Andrieu held up his hand sharply. "When I opened my house to guests tonight, I did not bargain on murder. I am not aiding Flamande now. I am going to do my poor best to send him to the guillotine. Very well. On whose typewriter was the note written, it being carefully pointed out the machine was stolen? Mr. Fowler's. But how could that typewriter have been stolen? All the luggage was placed in the rooms, but Mr. Fowler was the first to go upstairs, since he wished to watch M. Gasquet's door.

"Shortly before the murder, the lights

were switched off from inside the linen closet, and the typewriter placed there. Mr. Fowler, by his own testimony, was watching the gallery all the time. His room is directly across from the linen closet. He could not conceivably have failed to see anyone who went into the linen closet, carrying the typewriter, to turn off the lights. Well, did anyone go in there? He has made no mention of that. I suggest that at least it calls for some litle explanation."

Fowler, who had been standing with his fingers tapping softly on the foot of the bed, straightened up. He was nervous. But it seemed rather the nervousness of the superior debater who finds himself unexpectedly pinned in a corner. His eyes shone. He was almost smiling.

"Indeed?" he said with a sort of polite contempt. "*Vive la logique.* All right. I'd like to try a little logic myself. I'm glad you brought up that business about the typewriter and the linen closet, and my door being opposite. I was going to bring it up myself.

"You say that our luggage, including my typewriter, was put in our rooms. You *say* it was. When we hear about Gasquet's attaché-case, we should do a bit of wondering about *that.* Still, the important thing is that I was watching from my room. I had the door open only an inch or so, so that I could look up diagonally toward the door of this room. I could see everybody who passed back and forth in that direction. The only ones who did were Mr. Blake, who went to the bath, and came back before the lights went out, and Middleton who was in the bathroom when the lights went out."

His voice quiet, he went on in rising triumph.

"With the door of my room open only a couple of inches in that diagonal direction, I couldn't see the door of the linen closet. Make the experiment, if you like. I didn't even know the light switch was there. But I do know this: Anybody who came from the gallery toward my left, where most of the rooms are located, and went into the linen closet, would have passed across my line of vision. I couldn't have failed to see. But nobody did. Therefore the person must have come from my right, from the part I couldn't see, and slipped into the linen closet. It's dashed queer, but the only rooms in that gallery on my right were your rooms, M. d'Andrieu."

RAMSDEN spoke querulously: "I say, who started this new trouble, anyhow? I don't know what you mean by all this fuss, but if Fowler's right about that linen closet—What do you say, Merrivale?"

H.M. was abstracted.

"Violent squall in a tea-cup, though there's one interesting point. *'Quocumque adspicio, nihil est pontus et aer'.* And funny-looking clouds it's got, too. The puzzling part is why d'Andrieu brought it up at all. But I'd like to see that letter from Gasquet."

There was something like rage in d'Andrieu's face. From his inside pocket he drew an envelope, which he flung on the table.

"Postmarked Marseilles," he said. "And hand-written. But perhaps you are acquainted with Gasquet's handwriting?"

"I am," said H.M. "And this is it."

He drew out a sheet of official notepaper and I looked over his shoulder while he read:

Monsieur:

I thank you very much. I think that in a brief time we shall put this mountebank where he belongs. If you are really serious about entertaining our company in case he should fulfill his threat, perhaps it would be just as well. I shall have him where I want him.

I cannot tell you how many people will travel by the plane, but I am informed that the passengers will be nearly all English or American. So far these include the names of Sir G. Ramsden, MM. Drummond, M. Ernest Hayward, M. Kirby Fowler, and Dr. Edouard Hébert. There will probably be more. I can as yet give you no hint as to which of these personalities will conceal Flamande.

At the moment I am not permitted to divulge anything concerning the unicorn you mention, except that it is of great importance to Britain, and that the Home Office at London are anxiously awaiting it.

Yours,
Gaston Gasquet

H.M. looked up. "You hear what he says

about the unicorn, Ramsden. Got any comments?"

"Not now," said Sir George, and smiled again. "The thing is, is that a genuine letter?"

"Quite genuine, son."

"Then," said Ramsden, "just where does it leave us?"

"Holdin' a big slice of the truth, I think. What makes you so infernally cocky, Ramsden?" Screwing up his face, H.M. craned around and asked d'Andrieu one of those weird questions of his whose import I never saw. "D'Andrieu have you got a big library?"

D'Andrieu had the air of one who can play an urbane game just so far, but begins to crumple once he has been bewildered by wicked bowling.

"A fairly large one. Does it interest you? I thought you were intent on a reconstruction of the crime."

"Oh, that!" said H.M., and waved a big flipper. "That's ancient history. I know how it was worked now. Flamande made one awful slip and bloomer, and a clue bumped down on my head as big as—as big as a typewriter. We don't need to reconstruct. What I need is grub. Comin', anybody?"

CHAPTER X

The Second Impostor

DESPITE his announcement, H. M. insisted on reconstructing the murder just the same. And, as we acted out our show, I found that it was not possible for that man to have been murdered; and yet he had been.

Since H.M. insisted that in the reconstruction the victim should really fall down the stairs, Ramsden declined the part; and, of course, I was substituted. The purpose was to determine whether the crime could have been committed by a murderer on the landing, who projected some missile then drew it out—as well as stealing the letter-file—while the victim fell.

It was definitely established that, under exactly the same conditions of light as during the time of the murder, nobody could have approached the victim in the gallery without being seen. D'Andrieu, then Auguste, and finally H.M. tried to creep up near; each was as big and obvious as an elephant to both Fowler and Ramsden who took Elsa's part.

It was also established that if the murderer had been behind the tapestry, and had so much as poked his nose out, he would have been seen either by Elsa in the gallery above, or by H.M. and Hébert in the hall below—unless, of course, he had been lying almost flat on his face on the landing. But, the thing was still impossible. He could not have crawled up and struck without being seen. Nor could he have thrown some missile, then drawn it out as the victim tumbled past him, in the two or three seconds before Fowler had a clear view of the landing.

So we were left with a flat impossibility, but H.M. was in a good humor, and in a better after he had something to eat.

The buffet supper was a lavish business, at which in any other circumstances I could have grinned. There were *hors d'oeuvres*, there was cold chicken, cold lobster with that sauce which Larue's know best how to prepare, and a finery of other indigestibles, champagne and sauterne. It was laid out under the candles in a somber dining room, and we wandered about helping ourselves. D'Andrieu saw to it that Joseph and Louis kept our glasses filled. On H.M., who is a whisky-drinker and regards all epicureanism with contempt, the sauterne nevertheless worked its subtle magic.

It was something to watch the effect of comfort and warmed innards on the sodden group we had been. Sodden and fearful. Flamande would have had easy pickings on poor nerves. There was still nervousness, but you could face it now. Ramsden opened like a brickdust-tanned flower, and chuckled. Elsa and Middleton grew steadily more affectionate. D'Andrieu and Fowler lost their hostility. They talked with great amiability, but I thought that for some reason both of them looked puzzled. Hayward grew almost jovial, and told several stories whose chief feature was the expression on his face while he told them. Hébert alone remained rigid

and silent.

So a mist of tobacco smoke began to rise, and I sat on the ledge in a window embrasure with a bright-eyed Evelyn. We clinked glasses.

"Ken," she said, and wrinkled one eyebrow, "I know it's been awful, and—and all, but still I wouldn't have missed it for anything. Would you? But there's one thing—We've got to be careful about what we *say*."

"Say?"

She peered around. "Haven't we seen it working all the time? In this business, all you've got to do is to say something ridiculous, and laugh ha-ha, and say it couldn't possibly happen. And before the words are out of your mouth, it does happen. We saw it in Paris, and on the road, and here."

"Drink up!" I said. "Don't think of that. You were telling me you had a theory of some kind about the unicorn. What theory?"

"I don't suppose you've discovered anything from Ramsden?"

"No."

"Do you remember any legends about the unicorn except the old wives' tale that says a unicorn can make itself invisible at will?"

"H'm," I said. "There's a tradition—no, I'm not joking—there's a tradition in Scotland that the unicorn can be captured only with the aid of a virgin."

EVELYN opened her eyes. "What does she have to do?" she inquired, with interest.

"I don't know. But that," I pointed out, warm with inspiration, "is not important. Look at the moral to be drawn from it. An earnest student might triumphantly cry that at last here had been found some good reason for virginity. But is it a valid reason? That is, it must be small consolation for a girl to think that after all she could always rush out and help lasso unicorns. The desire to capture unicorns is comparatively infrequent, whereas—"

Evelyn agreed, and seemed to remember something. "What I'm thinking," she added abruptly, "couldn't happen. It couldn't possibly happen! It couldn't—"

"What couldn't happen?" asked that fool Middleton, and broke into the talk with Elsa just as I was going to make an appropriate remark. Evelyn went on innocently:

"—just at this particular time, anyhow. We were talking about unicorns, in a way." She looked at Elsa. "Feeling better now?"

"I am absolute okay, donk you," said Elsa, flushed and smiling. "I wass chust a glass of champagne needing." She beamed on Middleton. "But Owen hass been talking nonsense."

"Not a bit of it!" said Middleton. Hauling out a chair in a conspiratorial fashion, he sat down and, with Elsa contentedly sitting on his knee like a doll, he bent forward to impart confidences. "Look here, Blake, they were talking about conducting investigations, and I made a suggestion to Sir Henry Merrivale. Here we are, cut off in this place beyond any kind of communication. Each person claims he's such-and-such—and there's no means of checking up on him, no possibility of routine police work. If anybody's to be tripped up, he's got to be tripped up by

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straight questioning. Now, how is that to be done?"

"Well?"

Middleton got out an envelope and a pencil. He began to write down names.

"We're a pretty mixed bag of nationalities, admitted. The only thing is for us to cross-question each other. Now, suppose somebody's playing a part. It's always struck me, from what I've read, that when they catch hold of somebody in a Secret Service story they want to prove is a fake, they always go about the questioning in the wrong way. The spy always dresses up as a Polish traveling salesman from Lisbon who is an agent for scented soap, or an Arab chieftain, or some damn fool thing. By the way, it's remarkable the number of native Arab dialects those fellows can speak perfectly. I have a hard enough time managing to get out, 'Où est la Madeleine?' But as I was saying—"

"True enough," I admitted. "Still, in real life we so-called spies always used to be Americans. We spoke like no Americans in heaven or earth, but unless we'd worn straw hats and called ourselves Silas K. Entwhistle, nobody would have believed us, and we'd have wound up before a firing-party."

Middleton looked thoughtful.

"So that's the reason for it, eh?" he said. "I suppose it goes along with our fixed idea that every Englishman says, 'Top-hole, old dear!' or 'Gad, sir, the old school tie; eh, what, damme?' It's odd about that. The comic Englishman was invented in England, for your own people to laugh at, and he's still considered outlandish. The comic American was invented in America. But both have been turned into national types, and it'll take a lot of spade-work to root the idea out. Anyhow, take the example of somebody playing a part here.

"In questioning, the idea usually seems to be to ask the man all about himself, his business and family connections, what city he's come from and what city he's going to. All the things, in short, that any clever liar would have had pat and unshakable beforehand. Agreed?"

"To a certain extent. But what sort of questions would you ask?"

"About the little things. The unimportant things that the person *must* know if he's what he pretends to be. I've been talking to Hayward. He comes from Ardmore—on the main line just outside Philadelphia. You want to ask him something like: What's the train fare from Broad Street Station to Ardmore, and is it before or after the first express stop? If somebody bungles a thing like that, he's a liar. I don't say Hayward is, naturally. Take myself. I live in Montague Terrace on Brooklyn Heights. Well, what's the nearest subway station? If you're crossing Brooklyn Bridge in a car, where do you turn to get to Columbia Heights? Understand the idea?"

I UNDERSTOOD all right, but could see an objection.

"It would be all right," I admitted, "provided you had enough information to check up on the answers."

"Anyhow, it's the only possible way. Damn it, otherwise we'll all look like a gang of crooks, and our stories won't hang together. Take Elsa, for instance! And myself—"

Elsa looked around in alarm. She said she was not a crook.

"No, no! I don't mean anything like that. I was only thinking of one instance. Believe it or not, I don't even know her husband's name. Suppose they asked me that, and I couldn't answer?" He frowned. "Incidentally, Elsa, what *is* your husband's name. I mean the last one, that you were married to for three months?"

Elsa seemed to have grown terrified.

"You should not think of such things!" she cried. "And anyway they always laugh at me when I pronounce it. It hass the hardest sounds in that language, they tell me. You think it iss needed? I could write it, yes?"

"All right, write it," said Middleton, and handed over pencil and envelope. "Of course," he appealed to me, "it's not important, but you see what I'm getting at? It would look like a slip, and we'd both be in trouble. Then—"

He broke off. He had given a casual glance at the names she had written, then he stared, starkly incredulous. He looked back at Elsa, who nodded, then he got slowly

to his feet.

"Oh, my God," said Middleton.

"What's the matter?"

"Get your H.M.," he said in a low voice. "We've found an impostor right enough."

Before I could see the envelope we were going quickly but without fuss over to where H.M. and Hébert were talking beside the fireplace.

"I don't want you to think I'm crazy, sir," Middleton said, "but let's find a place where we can talk. I've got the goods on somebody, and I can prove it."

H.M. knew when to ask no questions. He only nodded sleepily at the cigar in his hand, and followed us out into the hall. We went down to the drawing room, where Middleton outlined what I already knew.

"Elsa's husband," he went on, "is now in Monte Carlo. It's not possible for there to be a coincidence in names. Somebody has borrowed his name—but someone so unlike him that she never connected the two, and she doesn't know enough French to catch the right pronunciation of the name when it was given tonight. Once tonight she tried to ask him his name, because she'd had a shock, but he didn't answer. The name she wrote on this envelope," said Middleton, holding it out, "is Raoul Cérannes, Comte d'Andrieu."

We heard the fire crackling in the long silence. Under the windows there was still a sullen rushing. But the rain had died away, and the quiet of that damp, ruined room made you want to look over your shoulder.

"Well?" said Middleton hoarsely.

H.M. nodded, staring at the tip of the cigar.

"Uh-huh," he said, "I thought so."

"You knew about it, and yet—"

"Keep your voice down! Easy; now!" Still with a wooden face, H.M. blew a smoke-ring and watched it curl up. He seemed to watch it for a hint as to what he ought to say. "H'mf, yes. Maybe it's best to straighten a few things out. I knew he was a fake three minutes after we were inside this place. That's what's so wrong with the house; why it has no reality, no personality, d'ye see, no air of being lived in. It's only a shell, or maybe I ought to say theatre for a whole elaborate, rummy, crazy-fool comedy put on by one man's desire for the spectacular. Only we can't give d'Andrieu away."

"Can't give him away? Why?"

"Because he's the real Gaston Gasquet," said H.M., nodding as he blew another ring. "And it's his show."

MIDDLETON groped behind him for a chair. I also found one; we both needed them. H.M. remained hunched up and bent forward toward the fire. The light shone on his bald head, and on the satirical little eye he swung around towards us.

"Is it your turn to go crazy?" I asked, after an interval. "Gasquet? You yourself said that the poor devil who was murdered—"

H.M. nodded.

"Uh-huh. Point is, though, he was no more Gasquet than I am. Ken, I've got to ask you to trust me even though I seem bogged and sunk in foolishness, though you think I ought to be put under restraint. Oh, I got reasons! I'll ask you to believe that I said to him, 'You're Gasquet, ain't you?' knowing quite well he wasn't, but prayin' he'd have the intelligence to see what I was drivin' at and say he was. He did. He was a clever feller. It was the only chance to preserve what I thought—and now know—he was tryin' to do. So help me, it was! But *Flamande!* Well, boys, I don't understand Flamande now."

"You," I said, "let him get himself killed."

H.M. whipped up his head.

"Let him get himself killed?" he roared. "Yes, yes, I know. It hurts. Will you believe me if I say there wasn't one millionth chance that he'd get hurt, and that it was much safer for him to pretend to be Gasquet? I was tryin' to help him along. *Everything* was in order. The case might have been over by now. But Flamande, burn his soul!" He knocked his fists against his temples. "The plain truth is that Flamande was too smart for both of us."

"But who the devil was the fellow, if he wasn't Gasquet? And who—You say d'Andrieu is really Gasquet?"

"Yes. And this whole business was planned for our benefit. Now listen, and I'll

try to tear some layers of wrappin' off. We need sanity! We need to straighten it out."

He was silent for a moment, shifting and muttering. Then he continued:

"Start with the time we all arrived at this place, after that very convenient floppin' down of the plane in the next meadow. You and Evelyn Cheyne and I went in with the rest of the crowd. Down comes our bowin' and smilin' host, playing the part of the far-too-good-to-be-true perfect French host, who has had a letter from Flamande and is out to see sport. It didn't ring true. The whole business was too red-plush and Académie Française, as if it came straight out of a farce or a dream. Still, I might have accepted it. After all, it would be characteristic of Flamande to write a letter like that, and there might be a real character alive who would act as d'Andrieu did. But no sooner had d'Andrieu spoken to us, than something gave the show away with an awful bang.

"Think back, now. We all walked in there. We said nothing at all; we didn't have the chance. We were all muddy, we were all obviously a part of the same party, and the plane had been wrecked a good quarter of a mile away from this house. In fact, when we started discussin' the accident, I accidentally talked in such a way about the pilot and crew of that plane that it must have been taken for granted that you and Evelyn and I had traveled on it. Yet, with not a word said to the contrary, d'Andrieu turns around to me and says, 'You and your friends were not aboard the plane, then?'

"Lads, that was an awful slip of the tongue. How in the name of sanity did he know we hadn't been aboard? Everything, even my own talk, indicated that we had been aboard, hey? At a distance of a quarter of a mile beyond those trees, with not a thing visible from here, how could he know who had come down in it? And the answer was that he did know *exactly* who would be aboard that plane—to the last passenger.

"That presented in itself the only possible explanation of the wrecked plane. Hayward, d'ye see, was right. That plane couldn't have been brought down as it was without the connivance of the pilot or the whole crew. Yet that seems impossible—because the pilot is the crack man of the air line, and because Flamande always works alone. But assuming the pilot brought that plane down because he had orders *from the police*, acting in co-operation with the company he worked for?

"You'd be surprised what a flood o' light that brought in! This pasteboard house, with its queer owner and unused rooms, begins to look very much like an elaborate trap. But it's worth all the trimmings if they can snaffle Flamande.

"Well, how are they goin' to do this? We come into the place, and what happens? Just as soon as we're all inside, tricked and timed with beautiful smoothness, down goes the bridge. It's too much to assume that causeway acted for itself. If somebody cut its pins, who was the somebody? Would you take one look at that wood-and-stone affair, and imagine that one of our crowd could have given it a kick and sent it to blazes? The thing was as carefully timed as a bomb. And that could've been done only by people in this château. D'Andrieu, Auguste, Joseph, Louis—the brains and brawn of the Sûreté, so many eyes to watch for Flamande once they're sure they've got him shut up inside.

"Flamande has sworn he'll be aboard that plane. Flamande keeps his word. They're not sure what guise he'll take. They're only sure he'll be there, to rob Ramsden of—"

"What?" I demanded.

"Ask him," suggested H.M., chuckling. He nodded toward the door as it opened.

CHAPTER XI

GASQUET IS PERTURBED

RAMSDEN hurried in.

"What's up?" he demanded rather querulously. "Confound it, you all look guilty. Merrivale, d'Andrieu is looking for you. He's anxious to show you that letter he got was really written by Flamande."

"I bet he is," agreed H.M., and turned down the corners of his mouth. "Look here, son; you've got to hear this. Then maybe you'll understand why he wants us to believe that first letter was genuine. If once we got

to doubtin' it too seriously, it might blow the gaff."

"If blowing the gaff," Ramsden said, "means what I think it does, it strikes me that it's blown. And by you." He grinned. "For all you know, *I* might be Flamande. If I am, you're just tipping me off."

"Well, son, if you're Flamande," said H. M. imperturbably, "you don't need to be tipped off. You know already, because Flamande does. That's why he dropped that genuine note in the gallery upstairs. And it's got Gasquet worried as hell. Flamande knows him, but he hasn't got the groggiest notion where to look for the slippery one. Gasquet's masquerade has gone bust. Besides, I don't see any real reason why Ramsden should be used as a stalkin'-horse by the French government."

Ramsden stared at him. "I've waited a long time," he said, with tense and sinister calmness, "to hear some sense in this affair. Will you, at long last, condescend to tell—"

H.M. did, silencing the protesting yelps.

"You're saying," insisted Ramsden, when he got his breath, "that Gasquet himself—or d'Andrieu—wrote that first Flamande letter, saying Flamande was going to wreck the plane?"

"Typewrote it, yes," said H. M. "He only had to provide a signature, and the police would have a genuine signature.

"When we first came in tonight d'Andrieu presented it as the original letter. When its genuineness was challenged, he made a very thin story of saying he had sent the original to Gasquet. Then he produced the letter from Gasquet—handwritten, because he wrote it himself."

Ramsdon shook his head. "But wasn't it a damn silly thing to do in the first place? He expected Flamande to turn up, in whatever guise. Flamande appears. He's faced with a forged letter purporting to come from himself. He's made suspicious—"

"Ho-ho-ho!" laughed H.M., his face split with a fantastic jollity. "Is Flamande going to sing out, 'I never wrote that letter,' to d'Andrieu's face? It'll make him suspicious, of course, but will it make him suspicious of d'Andrieu? Did it make *you* suspicious of d'Andrieu? The very straightforwardness would divert suspicion, especially as Flamande will be looking for Gasquet aboard the plane."

"Yet you claim," said Middleton thoughtfully, "that it did make Flamande suspicious, and he knows the truth."

"Uh-huh. Sure. Flamande is a devilish sight shrewder than Gasquet, in his pleasant but tolerably full-blown conceit, ever thought to be. I'm givin' it to you as d'Andrieu thought." He pointed out. "Now take the advantages of such a forged letter. They're double-barreled. First, Flamande, immediately after an inexplicable plane crash, has that inexplicable letter flung in his face. Gasquet reasons that Flamande will need nerves of steel not to make any slip of speech, not to be put out of countenance or make any betraying sign. D'Andrieu insisted on having that letter read aloud, so that he could study faces. The only person to whom he gave the letter to read privately was Hébert, whom he probably knew to be a genuine police surgeon."

[*Turn page*]

"Which lets Hébert out?" asked Ramsden quickly.

"Presumably. Because, d'ye see, Hébert has a first-rate alibi for the time of the murder." H.M. scowled. "Anyhow, when Flamande suddenly finds that somehow he must have walked into a trap, he'll need all his wits to keep from making *any* slip."

"Which he didn't?"

H. M. shook his head in a disgruntled way. "Which he didn't, curse him! Humph. Second advantage: the effect on Flamande's vanity. It's pretty well swollen to bursting. He hounded a poor tuppenny *commissaire* who sneered at him. So is he going to let this pass? D'Andrieu correctly reasons that he won't. The question is, will his vanity let him take the credit for that first letter and what it threatens? A strong temptation, d'ye see, because it practically amounts to miracles and conjurin'. Or will Flamande get mad and repudiate the business? In either case, with his particular twist of mind, it's likely he'll write some jeer and fling it at us. If he's lured into that, d'Andrieu reasons he's done for. Every servant in this house is a Sûreté man. Let Flamande try to slip across any note, and they've got him. It was' good reasonin', except that Flamande chose the one moment when everybody was off guard—just after he'd committed an impossible murder.

"I think d'Andrieu took it as almost a certainty that Flamande would write, claiming the credit for havin' wrecked the plane. And there' my lads, is where he didn't follow Flamande's ugly kink. Flamande poses and struts, but he wants to call the tune. If any man ever made a fool of him, I think he'd crawl out of his grave to go after 'im. That trick would make him go berserk. So he dropped a note which said, 'I know who put up this game on me. Now, friend Gasquet, look to yourself!' "

Outside a log bumped against the bank, and I jumped a little.

"Well, the Chief Inspector of the Sûreté ought to be able to take care of himself," I said. "But let's start from the beginning. D'Andrieu—let's call him that, to keep our names straight—has borrowed the name and the château of the real d'Andrieu, who lives in Monte Carlo and never uses this place—"

"Wait!" cried Middleton, and snapped his fingers. "I'm beginning to get this now! That business about the book."

"Book?" said H.M. "What book? Are you stealin' my thunder, curse you?"

"No, it's about Elsa. She got a terrific scare tonight, and wouldn't tell me what it was. When I came back from the bathroom just before *it* happened tonight, she was looking at a book—white as a ghost. She shut it and rushed out without saying anything. That was why she was in the gallery in time to see the murder. I looked at the book. The only thing I noticed was d'Andrieu's name on the flyleaf."

H.M. seemed in a better temper.

"Uh-huh!" Again he pointed with his cigar. "She'd been married to the real d'Andrieu only for three months, and didn't even know he had this place here. Comin' on that name would give her qualms." He blinked as Middleton, face flushed, glared at him. "Now, now, take it easy! Nobody here has moralist tendencies, and she's a nice-lookin' nymph, burn me but she is! By the way, those books in the rooms should have told you something."

"What, for instance?"

"That he wasn't what he pretended to be. Now here's a feller so fastidious, and with such an eye for fancy detail, that he even puts out bedside books and makes sure of satiric titles. He knows that nearly all his guests will be either English or American. He speaks remarkable English—in fact, when he gets excited and forgets his rôle he speaks perfect English. Now a man like that is bound to have at least a few English books in his library. If you're goin' to be fastidious, it'd be natural to put out English books for us, wouldn't it? Since he didn't give us one book in English in the whole lot, it's reasonable to think he didn't have 'em. And if he didn't have 'em, in a big library, it means the library ain't his, and that he's posing as the sportin' gambler and ex-Colonel of Spahis who is actually whoopin' it up at Monte Carlo.

"But you asked about the beginning of the whole scheme, and you're not yet at the

beginning. Let's see if we can puzzle it out. *You* were the beginning, Ramsden. You were to be the stalking-horse."

RAMSDEN dug his hands into the pockets of his baggy coat as though he were defying attack. He looked at the fire, looked back at H.M., and gave an indeterminate nod.

"Was I?" he said.

"Oh, we're just sittin' and thinkin', you understand. Let's say you were traveling home through France; let's say the French police and also the Quai d'Orsay were given a quiet request to look after you, because you had something valuable on your person, and you're one of these independent beggars who won't hear of any guard. . . "

"That's always admitting," interposed Ramsden, "I carried something of value."

"Uh-huh. Sure. The narks get wind that Flamande is fully acquainted with what you're doing. Flamande is apt to be prowling your way. Wow!" H. M. pointed his cigar with such fervor that the ashes flew wide. "That's an international matter. Flamande's already a government matter, and if Flamande pulls off anything like this, there's some little discomfort goin' to be due in several circles. There's one way out. They can set a trap for Flamande, deep enough to hold him *if* he falls into it. Then everybody's happy. But they've got to have the consent of Whitehall, which might be difficult, and they've got to have the British police workin' with 'em, to make the whole thing official. In fact, I fail to see how they could have got along without your own consent."

He paused, opening his eyes. Ramsden seemed to study this.

"You intimate," said Ramsden, "that I knew what was going to happen tonight, eh?" He considered again. "Well, there's one thing I'll be prodded into saying. Word of honor, the things that have been going on in this place are as much of a surprise to me as to any of us. But you interest me. Go on."

"My guess," continued H.M., "is that two members of our own Intelligence Department were asked for. They were asked to act on blind orders, so that they didn't know —and at first Whitehall itself didn't know— what they were supposed to do, except that it was in the laudable intent of guardin' Sir G. Ramsden. They got orders to go to an inn on the other side of Orléans. My guess is that originally that inn was to be used as this château was used tonight. It wouldn't be so fancy, but a plane would be wrecked near an inn in the wilds. Of course, when the two British agents arrived, Gasquet would take them into his confidence.

"But in the meantime Whitehall learned what Gasquet's scheme was, and exploded. Now you just wait and see what I'm goin' to do to the Home Office, but even old Squiffy isn't entirely daft. The agents would be goin' to protect Ramsden—after he had been deliberately run into a trap, while on a government mission, to catch a criminal whose doings were none of our business. I ask you, now! Would even Squiffy stand for a thing like that? The Foreign Office would absolutely refuse to touch or sanction it. The agents would be recalled. Only, d'ye see, they'd already started on their blind orders and nobody knew where to reach 'em.

"What does Gasquet do? Right, says he! We'll omit the British agents, but we'll go through with the scheme just the same. And to make the plan more fancy by using this château. I dunno how he came to decide this." H.M. closed one eye. "Maybe in Marseilles Gasquet ran into his friend, the real d'Andrieu, who was there chasin' his wife, and borrowed this place from him. Maybe—"

"Won't do," said Ramsden.

SLOWLY Ramsden folded his arms and struck a judicial attitude. "The analysis, if you can call it that, is sound enough except that, if our people at home had refused to sanction this trap with me as the tethered kid, would Gasquet and his backers ever have dared go through with it?" He jeered. "You can bet a tenner they wouldn't! Even the goat has some say in a matter like that. What about me?"

"Yes, I was comin' to that," muttered H.M.

Laboriously he hoisted himself up out of his chair, the dead cigar waggling between his teeth. He took a few paces back and forth before the fire.

"There are two points," he continued, "that give us the key. One is the unknown feller, the man who was murdered after he had lied in announcin' he was Gasquet. Who was he and why did he lie?"

"You mean," said Ramsden maliciously, "why did you persuade him to lie? Tethered kids! You don't need to be so rough on hunters who set out tethered kids to be slaughtered. You did it yourself."

H.M. became very quiet.

"Do you honest-blimey think that?" he asked in a curious voice. "*Humph,* yes. I dare say you got reason to. Burn me, why can't you see a little further into this?"

"If it comes to that," snapped Ramsden, "why can't you see a little less? If it means getting a man murdered, I can't say I care to have good eyesight."

H.M. remained staring at the fire. "I see I've got to unwind the whole business," he said. "I've hesitated, because it's Gasquet's show and I can't bust it up. Particularly as *you're* the one who's most concerned. Since I think you've given your consent—"

"To Gasquet's show?"

"To Gasquet's show. Y'see, that's my second point in the key to the whole affair. You said yourself that, without some hint or tip-off to you, Gasquet's backers would never have dared let him have that plane and drop you down here. You're no fool, though you've tried to act like one tonight. I don't think you knew who 'Gasquet' was going to turn out to be. I don't think you knew that the forcin' down of the plane would be Gasquet's work. But I do think there'd been a little whisper of some kind in your ear. Then why did you risk lettin' yourself in for it? Look here—you were entrusted to bring the unicorn to London, hey? You've acknowledged that?"

"Quite."

"Uh-huh. And what would you estimate as bein' the worth of that rare animal?"

Ramsden hesitated. Then he chuckled.

"Right you are," he said in a different voice. "I've had enough of my own private mystification, eh? The whole confounded business will be in the newspapers tomorrow. You want to know about its value? In importance, that animal is worth literally a kingdom. In mere monetary value—well, possibly only a million pounds."

Ramsden looked right and left. He was enjoying himself.

"I think I'd better get out of here," said Middleton, uneasily. "It strikes me I've heard more than is exactly healthy." He added in a hollow voice: "Only a million pounds! And you weren't afraid to walk into a thieves' kitchen with Flamande?"

"Not in the least," said Ramsden. "Because, you see, I haven't got it."

"Uh-huh," said H.M. woodenly, while Middleton whistled and I swore.

"Glad to say," pursued Ramsden, "that it's now stabled and on its way to London in the middle of a squadron of Royal Air Force planes. It should be there by now. If Flamande was meant to attack me, the plan's gone bust. I haven't got it."

"*God in heaven,*" said a voice across the room, "must you tell it to everybody?"

The door was slammed shut, and we were looking at the cool, cynical, but no longer amiable face of the detective, Gasquet, who called himself d'Andrieu.

H.M. gave a gusty sigh. "That's torn it," he admitted. "Sorry, son. I'm afraid we forgot ourselves and talked with considerable frankness."

IN D'ANDRIEU'S appearance there was no change, except that he had lost his doddering gait and his slow speech. He was as immaculate, as Mephistophelian as ever, but not so unruffled. When he strode over to face us, he kept snapping his fingers in time to his speech. You felt the tricky, wiry strength of the man's intellect. He looked from one to the other of us, sardonically.

"You call it frankness?" he said. "In case you don't know it, you were shouting like a Chamber of Deputies. Anybody in the hall could have heard you. *I* heard you." His eyes narrowed. "Well, gentlemen, it would seem that nearly every card has been put on the table. It may interest you to know

that between the two of you, you have succeeded in wrecking the whole plan. Exactly what chance have you given me to capture Flamande in the act?"

"In the act of what?" said Ramsden. "If you mean in the act of murdering me—no, thanks. Bit too much to expect, don't you think? What chance have you given me to escape him?"

"You agreed to cooperate," insisted d'Andrieu.

Ramsden grunted. "In what? Mysterious chap from the Quai d'Orsay asks would I mind taking part in a little police trap to catch Flamande, of which I don't hear any details? He warns me, all fair and square, that Whitehall may not like it. He relies on my sense of cussedness, and"—Ramsden spoke with candor—"my instinct for a bloody good row. I said I didn't mind. And here I am. But as for the unicorn—"

H.M. scowled. "Yes, it's a wicked maze we're treadin'. Still and all, I don't think you ought to feel so upset, d'Andrieu. You've got Flamande cornered even if you don't know who he is. He's here, shut up on this island, with no way out. And he's got to be one of us. If necessary, you can always shove the whole lot of us into clink. I was goin' to suggest—"

"It will not be necessary," said d'Andrieu.

A gleam of amusement, of an exhaustless fervor and energy that was always alive to savor drama, showed in his face. Gaston Gasquet, or d'Andrieu, was one of those people who might be called eager cynics. I had an uneasy suspicion that he had some new nothing-up-my-sleeve trick waiting for us. He selected a chair, sat down with conscious effect, and studied H.M.

"Let us consider," he said, "Sir Henry Merrivale." He waved his hand. "The masks are off now. You know who I am, and I can tell you what I think. Frankly, I wondered for some time. I wondered whether you were deliberately misleading me, or whether it was due only to your own muddle-headedness. On that matter of the man who called himself Gasquet, I know now that it was only muddle-headedness."

"Take it easy, Merrivale," urged Ramsden. "Dammit, don't you see he's only trying to make you fly off the handle? You'll have apoplexy in a minute."

CHAPTER XII

The Horn of the Unicorn

SO SHARPLY did d'Andrieu speak his voice made me even more uneasy.

"On the contrary," he declared firmly, "I am telling the truth. In this case, it happens to be vitally important. Yes, yes, I know Merrivale stumbled on my identity. By accident, d'Andrieu's wife turned up." He snapped his fingers. "The point is that in the matter of the Gasquet impostor he is responsible for a man's death. It is not likely that I can now consider any of his suggestions as carrying much weight. And it is only fair to tell you, Sir Henry, that one of your colleagues recently described you as a well-meaning old lunatic. No offense? Good! Then we can go on to business. In one thing, however, I have succeeded. I know who Flamande is."

"Do you mean that," said H.M., "or do you just mean that you've been writin' more letters to yourself?"

D'Andrieu smiled. "I mean that I have found the horn of the unicorn. I have found the weapon with which the murder was done, and know exactly how it was done."

"And you know who used it?" asked Ramsden, in the silence that settled down.

"I know who used it. I found it in the possession of a guest in this house. Did you say I had failed?" He rapped his knuckles on the arm of the chair. "Well, I have caught Flamande. Listen. A wool-gathering guess made by a certain man to keep up his reputation for shrewdness suggested something practical to me." His eyes were glittering. He was a mountebank, but there was an uncanny power about him. "I freely admit that Merrivale's chance remark gave me the hint—what weapon is not a pistol and not a dagger, yet is both? Can you read that riddle for me, gentleman? I purpose to show all of you. Auguste!"

Auguste opened the door. I noticed that in his inside breast pocket there was a long bulge. D'Andrieu resumed his amiable air.

"Will you ask all my guests," he said, "whether they will have the goodness to come in here?"

It was like a whip-crack. He was cool, he was assured, and something deadly had begun to gather in that room where the little grayish Mephistopheles sat smiling by the fire. I am not likely to forget any of it: the white-and-gilt room with its blackened cornices, the crystal pendants of the wall-brackets glittering and tinkling to the rush outside, and D'Andrieu as he smiled.

"Full-dress performance," muttered Ramsden.

H.M. seemed groping to find the right words.

"Listen, son," he said at length, and in a low, heavy voice. "I may be a wool-gatherin' ass, or a drunk oracle that don't know what messages he's burblin', and anything else you say. The point is that, aside from bein' full of clotted nonsense, you're not a bad feller, and I'm on your side. That's why I warn you—*for God's sake, be careful!* If you let your instinct for the dramatic carry you too far, there'll be a blinkin' awful mess. I know you're smartin' under what this chap's got away with. So am I. But take it easy, or matters will be much worse. I mean it."

D'Andrieu smiled. "So do I. You realize that I have found the weapon?"

"Oh, yes."

"And I can offer a logical explanation of how the crime was committed?"

"Well—" H.M. seemed disturbed. "Logical, yes. I was afraid you were goin' to say that. Believe me, I've seen a heap of logical explanations in my time; I know a feller who can give logical explanations enough to freeze your reason, and the only trouble with 'em is that they're usually wrong."

"We come again," d'Anrieu said, nodding, "to the difference between Latin and Anglo-Saxon. You deplore logic, because it requires intensity and concentration of thought. What is your method?"

"Method? Oh, I dunno. I just sit and think."

"Exactly," said d'Andrieu. "And do you really think that any progress can be attained by a man who puts as much emphasis on the sittin' as on the thinkin'?"

"Steady!" interposed Ramsden. "I want to know whether this is supposed to be just an example of quick repartee, or whether either of you is trying to prove something?"

"I *can* prove something, as you will see," d'Andrieu said.

HE TURNED toward the door, toward the five people who completed our group. They must have felt the stir in the air. D'Andrieu's sharp and ominous self-confidence had given a different atmosphere to the place. Elsa hung back, but Middleton whispered to her reassuringly. Evelyn was staring at me. Hayward, Hébert, and Fowler followed them in.

"It's more trouble," said Hayward suddenly. He was red-faced and truculent. "I can smell it. I told you that, Fowler. All right; what is it?"

Fowler tried to speak in a casual tone. "Found the murderer?"

"I have," replied d'Andrieu. "He is in this room now."

He had risen, and was brushing his hands together softly. As though automatically, he was moving and bowing in a queer, tense way, so that I thought less of an actor than a tumbler bracing himself for a spectacular stunt. He went on, with a kind of pounce:

"A great deal has happened in the last half-hour. Positions have changed, values have altered, and I have found the horn of the unicorn."

"What the hell's all this?" demanded Hayward, and jerked up his head.

The hooked nose, the bright pouched eyes, the broadening grin turned round. "I am Gasquet, sir, and very much at Flamande's service. Do you understand that? The man who was killed does not much matter, except that he was not Gasquet, and that Flamande killed him. I should have preferred to capture Flamande in the act of stealing what he came to steal. Unfortunately, someone has blurted out a truth which makes that impossible. Flamande will not make the attempt. Nevertheless, I know him."

For several seconds nobody spoke. But everybody moved back a little. I saw faces as though slightly out of focus. The man's damned presence had a spell of its own, and I saw what he might be in questioning a suspect.

Fowler took out a cigarette, walked straight over to the fireplace, and bent down past d'Andrieu to light a twist of paper.

"Sorry, sir," he said perfunctorily. "You were saying?"

"I was saying that I have taken over the investigation in order to avoid more unfortunate mistakes by—our English friend Merrivale." He paused. "Let us look at the murder.

"We have, to all accounts, an absolutely impossible crime. It is not impossible; we saw it happen; and the application of logic will enable us to see how. There is this benefit to us, there is even this advantage in an impossible crime that, once you have achieved an explanation, it is the only possible explanation. It would be a fallacy to say that there could be *two* explanations to the impossible."

"Oh, love-a-duck," breathed H.M. "No, no—carry on. I didn't say anything."

D'Andrieu bowed. "But if we examine it without loose thinking, is it actually true that we have an impossible situation? The victim was seen to put up his hands to his face just before he stepped down. He fell from the top of the stairs to the landing, and from the landing to the foot of the stairs. Where, then, could the blow have been struck? It could not have been struck at the top of the stairs, since the victim was in full view of two witnesses. It could not have been struck on the first flight of steps down, since Mrs. Middleton had some slight, though interrupted, view of those steps. It could not have been struck on the lower flight of stairs, since they were in full view of Sir Henry and Dr. Hebert.

"There remains the landing, and the landing alone. Objection is raised to this. First: that, though Mr. Fowler delayed several seconds before he ran forward to look, there would not have been time for a murderer hidden behind the tapestry to have plucked out a weapon wedged in a man's skull and rifled the body. Second: that Mrs. Middleton had a good view of the whole landing with the exception of a few feet up from the floor, and would have seen any murderer who ventured out.

"And that very word 'exception' shows there was *only* one place that was not in view —the extreme lower part of the landing. Therefore, we are reduced to the logical certainty that the murderer must have been there."

FOWLER stirred in some impatience.

"I say, must we go over all that again? That was Middleton's idea. And we proved that no weapon could have been thrown from there, and then pulled out as—"

"Let me show you," said d'Andrieu, "the weapon that was really used. Auguste!" The big major-domo stepped inside the door, and d'Andrieu went on: "The suggestion presented to me was a riddle. What weapon is neither a pistol nor a dagger, and yet at the same time is both? Then there came back to me the statement Dr. Hébert had made earlier in the evening, that not far from where the man was murdered in Marseilles there was a butcher's shop. Let me have the little toy, Auguste."

From under his coat Auguste took as weird and deadly-looking a mechanism as I have ever seen. It was not unlike an automatic pistol but it was larger, heavier, and more solid than the highest calibered gun. It was about eleven inches long, made of solid steel except for the wooden grip, and must have weighed four pounds. But no bullet or missile could be fired from it. The muzzle was flanged, and in the opening of the barrel we could see a sharp circle which looked like the end of a rod measuring about six-sixteenths of an inch in diameter. D'Andrieu, with a quick wrench, broke the barrel open near the breech. Inside there was what looked like a chamber to contain one cartridge, set against a powerful spring mechanism in the barrel.

"This," said d'Andrieu, "is the butcher's 'humane killer' of what is called the captive-bolt variety. By law, the slaughtering of animals must be done painlessly, instantaneously. The best theoretical means would be

a bullet, but there must be no bullet in the carcass to be cut out. Hence this variation of the bullet-principle—a sort of pole-ax spike attached as a part of the gun, but propelled by the explosion of a cartridge against a spring mechanism. The rod is more powerful than any bullet. It makes so quick and sharp a puncture that it can be pulled out immediately, and the gun is re-set easily by pushing the bolt back into the barrel with the palm of your hand. Let me show you how it operates."

He turned to Auguste, who handed him a small cardboard box. It contained what resembled light blank cartridges, one of which he slipped into the breech, snapped the pistol shut, and pulled out a safety-catch at the rear.

"The 'K' cartridges," he said. "They are used for the hardest skulls, like those of bullocks. It is the spring mechanism, of course, which does the work. So—"

"Don't!" cried Elsa, hiding her head against Middleton and almost screaming. She put her hands over her ears. "I will not stay! You should not say such things! You—"

"It makes very little noise, madame," said d'Andrieu, with satirical kindliness. "However, if you wish it—" He opened the pistol, shook out the cartridge, and handed both to Auguste, while a kind of paralysis held the rest of us. "We need not demonstrate. But you see now what the 'horn of the unicorn' actually was."

Middleton spoke shakily. "Yes, I think we can do without a demonstration. It's having you give all the gory technicalities that makes the whole business so horrible. 'Humane-killer!' What a word! Do you mean a human being was killed with that thing?"

"Yes. You agree, Dr. Hébert?"

"C'est absolument vrai—" murmured Hébert, as though in awe. He struck his forehead. *"Ah, mon Dieu, que je suis bête! Moi-même, je suis bête comme un boeuf! Permettez-moi, monsieur!"* He came bustling forward to inspect it.

"This," said Hayward, whose face stood out pallid and red-mottled, "looks like business. Where'd you get the thing? Where'd you find it? Whose is it?"

D'ANDRIEU paid no attention. I glanced at Fowler, who stood with his shoulders humped and a bright blind glitter in his eyes, drawing in quick puffs at his cigarette without taking it from his mouth. Then I looked at H.M. So did d'Andrieu.

"And you agree, my friend?" d'Andrieu asked him.

"Uh-huh. Oh, yes." H.M. shook his head dully. "I mean, that was the weapon right enough. Point is, how do you think it was used? That gun has to be held directly against the victim's forehead, y'know. How do you think it was used against the feller who was killed, when nobody was seen near him?"

"That is what I purpose to explain," said d'Andrieu. "Certain things must be made clear before I turn over a prisoner"—he nodded towards Auguste—"to Detective-sergeant Allain.

"This pistol, certainly, could only have been used by being held directly against the victim's head. Very well. I have already told you my logical reasons for believing that the murder could have been committed only on the landing. Since only this pistol could have been used—by the way, if you will examine the bolt itself, you will see adhering to it certain evidence proving it was used—and since nobody could have approached the victim in the gallery above, it follows that at the time he put his hands before his face, screamed, and tumbled forward, *he was not yet touched.*

"Consider. Can any witness here actually swear that he or she saw a wound in that man's face before he tumbled down? No. What was seen? A person who instinctively put his hands before his face, screamed, and missed his footing. He stumbled. Why? Obviously because of something he saw on the landing. Put his hands before his face and screamed. Why? Obviously because he saw his enemy. And in his enemy's hand was what he thought to be an ordinary heavy automatic, being aimed at him then.

"What happened is tolerably clear. Flamande was behind that tapestry, waiting for his quarry to come down. He stepped out a little too soon, just as the victim appeared at the head of the stairs, Flamande

also saw Mrs. Middleton appear beyond the balustrade in the gallery. Flamande instinctively dodged down toward the floor of the landing, to those few feet which Mrs. Middleton could not see. But the victim at the head of the stairs saw him, aiming a pistol. The victim threw up his hands just as he was about to step down, screamed as he missed his footing, and plunged. Flamande acted before the man could betray him. Flamande was crouched so low that he could not be seen either from above or below. As the victim struck the landing in a stunned condition, Flamande put the muzzle of his 'humane-killer' to his forehead, pulled the trigger, and instantly drew out the bolt.

"On the landing lay the letter-file which the victim had dropped. Flamande swept it up as he gave the body a push. The killer dodged behind the tapestry. All, considering the rapidity with which an actual pistol could have been used, the work of not more than three seconds. In the third second, Mr. Fowler had run to the head of the stairs, and by his own testimony what did he see? He saw the tapestry agitated as the dead man rolled past, which he attributed to the dead man's having seized it. But it was actually the movement made by Flamande in dodging inside."

THE thing was brilliant, and it was possible, and I believed it. But the explanation was broken short as Fowler jumped forward.

"If you believe that," he said, "if you believe I told the truth, then you don't really believe I'm guilty after all?"

"I never did believe it, my friend," replied d'Andrieu. "Shall I go on? I have almost finished." He went on imperturbably: "Flamande then works instantly. Before the dead man has rolled to the foot of the stairs, Flamande is out of the window behind the tapestry—which I beg of you to recall we found unlocked afterwards—and out upon the flat roof. In the next moment he is up the low buttress, and through the window of Mr. Hayward's room—on whose sill Auguste found not half an hour ago some significant mud-stains—and out into the gallery about twenty seconds after he has fired his bolt."

D'Andrieu suddenly rapped his hand on the flat top of the mantelpiece.

"There is no use in going on. I have the man. That gun and the box of cartridges were found, a short time ago, in the false bottom of his own valise, where he hid them. He is Flamande, and he will go to the guillotine. You wish to know who he is and what he calls himself? With pleasure. He stands —there!"

And then this brilliant fool, with a gesture straight out of the Grand Guignol, turned round and bowed towards me!

CHAPTER XIII

The Man Suspected

FOR a second or two this was beyond comprehension, like the first shock of a motor-smash. D'Andrieu's hooked nose, the clipped beard, the gleam of triumph, all wavered like images in water. In a way it was like being hailed in the street by a complete stranger—you look over your shoulder to see whether there is anybody behind you, as I did then. There was nobody. At the unexpectedness of the accusation I, completely innocent, must have presented as convincing a picture of guilt as could be found at the Old Bailey.

D'Andrieu seemed to have had a pointing finger stretched out for a long time.

"Are you crazy?" I said. "Everybody hereabouts has had one turn at going mad tonight. Is this yours? Flamande!"

D'Andrieu was enjoying himself. "Well, let us argue the matter a little. You see, I have not only this evidence; I can prove that you were the only person in this house tonight who could possibly have committed the crime."

Wow! I heard H.M. groan. H.M. looked as though he were not sure whether he ought to grin or swear.

"I been afraid of this," he said. "Burn me, I been afraid of this ever since G. Gasquet walked into this room and all the time so carefully *refrained* from ever lookin' at you or castin' one word in your direction,

Ken! He wanted his dramatic effect not to be spoiled. Look here, Gasquet—d'Andrieu—I got a suspicion you accidentally found that gun planted in Ken's room, and then you worked backwards to all these logical deductions and convinced yourself you'd reasoned it all out in advance. Oh, love-a-duck! Then, when you flung the accusation into Ken's guilty schnozzle—"

"There's nothing guilty about my schnozzle," I said. "Let's straighten this out. What the devil do you mean, the only person in this house who could have committed the crime?"

"Exactly what I say. Don't lose your temper, and I will demonstrate it to you. The gun again, Auguste!"

It was not the wicked grin on Auguste's face, but something like admiration in his eyes which made me fully realize that these people honestly did believe I was Flamande.

"You see," pursued d'Andrieu, "it was Sir Henry Merrivale, in what it would grieve me to call his senile dotage, who gave you the opportunity to do what nobody else could have done. He has been most helpful to you all evening. Now look at this gun. It weighs four pounds, and it is of enormous size. A person, at a time of excitement when nobody looked at him with any care, might have concealed it under his coat for a few moments. Not longer. It would have to be got rid of as soon as could be managed without attracting attention.

"During every moment of the time after we discovered that body, every one of you has been under observation *for every second*, either by me, or by Auguste, or by my other three men. From that time until this, not one of you had any opportunity to go to Mr. Blake's room—except Mr. Blake himself.

"Immediately after the murder, you recall, we all crowded upstairs in a body. A few seconds more, and the gun might have been revealed, for we were going to turn on the lights. Nobody left our group—except Mr. Blake. Sir Henry Merrivale very kindly sent him down to his own room to find a flashlight. He was gone for some moments."

"I suppose you don't believe," I said, "that I was trying to find the flashlight?"

D'Andrieu was polite. "I am afraid I don't, my friend. This gave him the opportunity to do two things. First he concealed the pistol. Then he put a portable typewriter under his coat; and, since it was not distinguishable in the darknes, he hurried down the gallery and entered the linen closet, you recall, where Merrivale and I were standing. We three were the only ones inside that linen closet. When the typewriter was put down, he was able to drop his note—where? Just outside the door."

EVEN H.M. blinked a little at this. I glanced at Ramsden. He was regarding me curiously, as though something were dawning in his mind and he could not be quite sure.

"Then," resumed d'Andrieu, with a slight shrug and a turning up of one finger, pleasantly, "there is the question of shoes."

They must all be looking at my feet now. So was I, guiltily. My shoes were not in the best condition after their mud-slogging that night, but they gave me an unpleasant suggestion. I sent a snaky and felonlike eye down round the circle of shoes. H.M.'s, Ramsden's, and Hebert's were muddy—but then none of them had gone upstairs to change, and all had perfect alibis. There were Hayward's sport shoes in brown leather and white buckskin. There were Fowler's neat black ones, long, narrow, and polished. There were Middleton's brown ones, scuffed and disreputable, but not muddy. There were Evelyn's and Elsa's white high-heels.

"Your error will already have occurred to you," said d'Andrieu. "You will be thinking of those mud stains on the window-sill where you climbed back into the house. Everyone upstairs changed shoes before the murder, since nobody has had an opportunity to do so since. Everybody has clean shoes—except, of course, yourself. You did not change."

"I only brought an overnight bag," I said, "and didn't have an extra pair with me. Otherwise—"

"Otherwise you would have changed when you were sent down to your room after the flashlight? Come, I am glad to hear that! My old friend, my long unseen friend, I am glad that you supply the gaps in our knowledge and accept it in that spirit of sports-

manship which. . . . Ah, you smile!"

"Ha, ha, ha," I said bitterly.

If I had done a fool thing that night, I was getting paid for it. How this wild collection of circumstances had gathered together I did not know. Still, it had to be faced somehow. For the first time I turned to the rest of the group.

"Well, what's the verdict? Do even *you* believe it, Ramsden?"

I saw a gleam on the staring eyeglasses of Hébert. He was not hostile at all. He was only excited, and rapt with interest as he moved his head back and forth to contemplate me.

"What triumph!" he breathed in his own language. "M. Gasquet, I salute you. Yes, faith, it is a true criminal type." He hopped. "M. Gasquet, regard the shape of his ears and the distinct malformation of the skull, in which—"

"Look here" I said. "Damn it all, that's going too far! Believe it or not, I am *not* Flamande. There is *not* a false bottom in my valise, nor are there any rabbits in my hat. I ask you again, do *you* believe it, Ramsden?"

Hayward's querulous voice rose with a kind of yelp. "Well, what are you all going to do about it?" he demanded. "You're not just going to let him stand there talking, are you? This is the battiest bunch I ever got into! Suppose he makes a break for it? Aren't you going to put the cuffs on him?"

"Do *you* believe it, Ramsden?"

"Oh, shut up," Middleton said to Hayward. "Blake, my lad, you're in a jam and there's no denying it. But I still don't think you're Flamande. There's something fishy. My room is the next one to Hayward's, where you were supposed to have come. I'd have seen you if you had come out. My impression is that you ran past me from the other end of the gallery."

"Exactly," said Evelyn. She marched out with her face flaming, and stared at d'Andrieu. "You old fool!" she said.

"Mademoiselle?"

"Mademoiselle, bah! Listen to me!"

"Take it easy, wench," I said, for a woman with her temper beginning to flare will say things that raise the hair of a conservative male. But she went to the other extreme, and I thought she was going to cry.

"I've got just this to say for your nonsense," she told him. "Nobody seems to have asked where he was all this time he was supposed to be crawling in and out of windows. I'll tell you. He was with me. He was with me, do you understand? That's what's known as an alibi. And if you believe all you say, it would have to mean I was an accomplice, wouldn't it?"

D'ANDRIEU looked at her not unkindly. "You force me to bring it up, Miss Cheyne. The fact is, I do regard you as an accomplice, and I have regarded you as an accomplice all evening."

"Oh, my eye," groaned H.M. "So she's Flamande's beautiful, slant-eyed mistress, hey, who pinches the plans from cabinet ministers? Burn me, son, accordin' to you *I* have been guilty of some rummy behavior tonight! Why don't you shove us all in clink?"

"Perhaps I will," said d'Andrieu, wheeling round. He had begun to lose his suavity a little. "If I were you, I should not presume too much on your real—or fancied—position in the British government. I am in charge here, and I can give such orders as I please. Frankly, I do not care to hear any more of your suggestions. They have already cost one man his life, and served nearly to ruin my entire investigation. You have done your persistent best to shield a man who has fooled your poor old fuddled wits into believing that his name is Kenwood Blake. Therefore—"

"Will you listen to me, you overgrown gnome?" suddenly yelled H.M., and brought down a blow on the arm of the chair that cracked the wood across. "Damn my scarlet socks and breeches, but I've had about enough of havin' that thrown in my teeth! Will you listen to me while I tell you one single, small, solitary thing? I'm tellin' you *I know which one of these fellers Flamande really is!* If you'll let me tell you what to do—"

"Sergeant Allain," said d'Andrieu, and drew himself up curtly.

"Monsieur?" said Auguste.

"If Sir Henry Merrivale," d'Andrieu told him with cool politeness, "should feel it incumbent on himself to interfere any further, or suggest courses for us, you are to place him under arrest. Is that clear?"

"No, I'm damned if I'll stand for that!" bawled Ramsden, as H.M. uprose like a volcano to suggest a real course. "Sit down, Merrivale! As for you, Gasquet, that's carrying things too far! If—"

I felt that somebody ought to call for order. Lung-power was of little avail, but the cocktail-glasses still on their tabouret gave me an idea. I picked up one and fired it down on the hearth. Its crash stilled the babble instantly. Whether or not it would be taken as a call for order, rather than the outbreak of an attack, seemed for a second doubtful.

"Excuse me," I said, "but there has been so chronic and general a losing of tempers in the last few minutes that maybe you'll now be willing to listen to a word from the crafty villain."

"Well done," said Fowler, with a sort of harsh approval. "You're Flamande, right enough, but you're keeping your nerve. I dare say you're keeping it just because you are Flamande. Why did you kill that chap, and who was he?"

D'Andrieu also had himself well in hand.

"I have been looking forward so long to this meeting," he remarked, "that I shall take pleasure in a talk. What do you wish to say?"

"I want a chance to clear myself, that's all."

"You deny it? You are challenging me? Very well. Sir George Ramsden, you told us earlier that you could testify to the identity of this man. Are you sure you can testify to it now?"

"No, I'm not," replied Ramsden, and the ground went from under my feet.

He stood straddle-legged before his fire, his head down. On his face there was only bewilderment. He spoke gruffly.

"I think—no, blast it, I don't know! I never knew Blake well." He faced me. "Sorry if I'm doing you an injustice, but this is too serious a matter for me to make any rash statements. You could deceive me, you know."

"Oh, that's all right. But do you think I could deceive H.M., too, or do you agree with d'Andrieu that he has become feeble-minded?"

Ramsden's jaw jutted out. "Think that's the right tone to take for a man arrested for murder? You may be Ken Blake. You may not be. I don't make a decision. What I do say is that, whether you're Blake or not, you did commit this murder. Can you deny the evidence? If H.M. says you're Ken Blake, I'll agree with it. But what about plain evidence?"

UNFORTUNATELY, I could see that coming. If I brought everybody in St. James's to swear to my identity, there was still a small matter of a murder charge. I glanced at H.M., who had sat down again, and was as wooden as though he heard nothing. But there was a faint twitch about his eyelid which I could not interpret.

"Your defense, M. Fl—Mr. Blake?" prompted d'Andrieu, in a tone that stung like the devil.

"Right!" I said. "This foolishness is all based on the assumption that I hid behind the tapestry, climbed out of the window, and climbed back in again through Mr. Hayward's window. If Mr. Hayward was in his room, as he says he was, he must have seen me. Have you asked him whether he can swear he saw me?"

It was a long and wobbly shot. Hayward might be apt to rap out that he had. I glanced over, to be both startled and reassured. Hayward was sitting back on the sofa, one arm along the back of it, studying me through half-shut eyes while he chewed at a cigar. Queerly enough, he seemed almost friendly.

"I asked you fellows a while ago," he said slowly, "why you didn't let a lawyer, who's used to this kind of thing, ask a couple of questions. I'll do that now. But I'll tell you something. If this man's guilty, he doesn't act like any guilty man I've ever seen." He cleared his throat a couple of times, and settled his head forward like one getting down to business. "About what you asked me. No, I didn't see you come through the room,

but if they put me under oath, I couldn't swear whether you did or you didn't. Understand, I'd turned out my lamp just about a second before I heard that dreadful scream."

"Turned out your lamp?"

"Nothing funny about that. I was going down to the bathroom, and then I was going on downstairs. Just after I turned it out, I heard that yell. I stood there in the dark wondering what to do—and not feeling any too good, I can tell you. I started to light the lamp again, and couldn't find any matches. So I ran and opened the door."

Out of the corner of my eye I was watching d'Andrieu, who seemed pleased.

"What did you do then?" I asked.

"Waited there until I saw a gang of 'em gather up at the head of the stairs. You were among 'em. When you all started down, I ran up and joined the crowd. Now come on, sonny! Ask what you want."

"I will! You waited there in the doorway, then, and so you know that nobody could have come from the room behind you and slipped out past you into the gallery?"

"Whoa there!" said Hayward, and grinned sleepily. "That's what you call leading the witness. No, I didn't stay in the door. I moved out in the hall, about four or five feet away from the door, so I could see better."

"I like these references to courts of law," remarked our host. "It will serve us admirably at the Palais de Justice when he is tried. Then you can't swear that nobody came out of the room behind you, and ran toward the stairs as though he were coming from his own room?"

"I have an impression that nobody did," insisted Hayward, raising one finger.

"Your impression, Mr. Hayward, will suit the law."

"Yet," I said, "wouldn't you have heard somebody, even if you didn't see him? Footsteps? Somebody opening the window, crossing the room, and coming out somewhere behind you?"

"N-no, not necessarily. The storm was making a good deal of a racket, and the carpets are soft, and I was all eyes and ears for what was going on up in the gallery."

THE puzzling part of it was that, all the time he was battering down my last tangible proof, the man had an eager and chuckling air as though he were trying to help me. He had the expression of one who is trying to give broad hints in a guessing game. I could have sworn I saw his lips framing a furtive word, and still he grinned.

"There is no use going on with this," said d'Andrieu. "In fact, Mr. Blake's questioning has been good enough to supply me with the last point I needed to be certain of his guilt. . . . So Mr. Hayward turned out the lamp just before the scream? Excellent! I wondered why Flamande had dared to come in by the window and risk finding the occupant there. From below he saw that the light was out. He naturally assumed that the occupant had gone. Hence he climbed up without hesitation. I don't want to hurry you, M. Flamande, but we can't go into any more of this now. On the road to Paris, perhaps. You see, I have plans for you. You will be in Paris by daylight. So will your charming colleague, Miss Cheyne."

H.M., who had been very quiet, stirred. I saw that whatever plan he had been turning over had been wrecked by this announcement, and it struck my own incoherent schemes with an ugly shock of despair.

"I might have known!" boomed H.M.

"You might have known, of course," agreed d'Andrieu, who was affable again, "that we should never have thought of arranging this little trip without a way out of it. We even have a car. Shortly I can promise Miss Cheyne and M. Flamande lodgings of a rather more austere kind than these, in the questioning cages on the Quai des Orfevres."

Hayward sat up.

"Wa-ait a minute!" he urged. "Isn't this fellow going to ask me any more questions?"

"I don't think we've got time for it," I said. "But suppose we strike a bargain. If you agree not to connect Miss Cheyne with this business in any way—"

"Take it easy, you dummy!" breathed H.M. out of the corner of his mouth. "That's what he's tryin' to get you to say. Ask Hayward the question *he* wants answered."

"Just a quick one," Hayward was saying.

"Blake, you'd make a rotten lawyer. There's an old habit I have—never go into a strange house and leave the room without doing it—sort of habit of mine—lots of people have it—funny thing—"

"What," I said, "did you do just before you blew out the lamp, Mr. Hayward?"

Hayward sat back with an expiring sigh. "I locked the window," he said.

CHAPTER XIV

Liars Will Prosper

Y STOCK was rising. This last bit of evidence might weigh as heavily as that damning pistol, my absence from the group, and the muddy shoes. Sympathy seemed to be slowly turning in my direction.

"But that breaks down the whole case, doesn't it?" Evelyn crowed. "If the window was locked, then he couldn't have got through it! And all this business is based on his having done that." She looked at H.M. and spoke almost angrily. "Oh, dash it all, why don't you point out all the things in his favor? I never knew you to stay out of a scrum before. Are you really afraid of his threats about arresting you? Well, I'm not. Let's all go to clink together."

"Et tu, Calpurnia," said H. M., and shook his head. "You let Caeser alone. I got my reasons." He grew querulous. "Let him conduct his own defense—if he can. By the way, d'Andrieu, how were you intendin' to get out of this place?"

D'Andrieu stared hard at H.M.

"If I didn't suspect that the old fox might not have entirely lost his legs—" he said, and frowned. "You might be up to a trick or two. But I think that you are now amenable to good sense. Besides, I fail to see what you could do." He chuckled. "You ask how I plan to leave here with my prisoners? A collapsible bridge of army-engineering pattern. Joseph and Jean Baptiste will be at work on it shortly. In about half an hour the river will be running smoothly enough to risk laying it down."

"With your prisoners?" cried Hayward. "Hey! What about this business of the window? Everybody admits he was running from the other end of the gallery when he got to that staircase, so he couldn't have got through Fowler's window. Are you telling me I didn't lock that window?"

"No."

Hayward was so excited that he was growing truculent.

"Then just what do you think you are saying, governor? I'm willing to bet you can't burgle those windows. They haven't just got ordinary catches. They're built with a knob in the middle that runs a rod down into the sill when you turn the catch. You'd have to cut out a piece of glass or something—"

"You see," interposed d'Andrieu, "I don't think you noticed that the catch of the window was broken."

Hayward sat back.

"Come, come gentlemen!" urged d'Andrieu, with a slightly exasperated kindliness. "You don't give me credit for knowing my own business. Of course I thought of it. The closing rod does not fit into its groove in the sill. A slight push from outside, and the window opens. I have allowed this to go on because I wished to demolish it." He glanced at me, and rubbed his hands. "If my ears do not deceive me, I hear my friend humming. It seems to be an ancient tune entitled, 'Down Went McGinty To the Bottom of the Sea.' It is well chosen, M. Flamande." He burst out into genuine laughter. "Let us close the business—"

"By singing a hymn," said Middleton gloomily. "M. Gaston Gasquet, you sound exactly like a clergyman. And look here, my room is just beyond Hayward's. I jumped out not long after that scream, and if Blake had sneaked out of Hayward's room I'd have been certain to see him."

"Let us close the business by asking you about that," agreed d'Andrieu. "You are positive you would have seen him? The gallery was not too dark?"

"No. I came out to my door as soon as I heard the yell. I stood looking down the gallery right past Hayward's room until someone ran past me from behind—I know now it was Blake—then I ran to the stairs. All that

time I was looking down the gallery, and I didn't see anybody."

"Precisely so," purred d'Andrieu. "It was so dark that you could not even see Mr. Hayward a few feet from his own door."

"Friends all," I said, "the master criminal is damned grateful for your good wishes, but would you mind not trying to give me any more assistance? Every time somebody tries to give me a helping hand, back I go deeper into the soup."

MIDDLETON swore. "You're only twisting things, Gasquet! I didn't say that."

"You change your mind now, and announce that you did see Mr. Hayward?"

"Well, I suppose it must have been Hayward. There was somebody there —a kind of shadow."

"Which might just as well have been Mr. Blake as Mr. Hayward. Thank you. It is only fair to inform you that Louis, outside the door now, has been occupied for some time in taking shorthand notes of this entire conversation. My friend, the real d'Andrieu, informed me that this room is constructed on the principle of a whispering gallery, and the smallest sound can be heard at the door. To round matters out, we will identify a few things, Louis!"

The door opened. One of the footmen, a squat bruiser in buttons, stuffed a notebook into his pocket as he looked in.

"You have," d'Andrieu said in French, "the valise of M. Flamande, which he says does not have a false bottom?"

"Yes, monsieur."

D'Andrieu turned to me. "Merely to make sure there is no mistake, will you tell us what you had in your valise? Take the articles out as he names them, Louis. Pajamas. Dressing gown. Slippers. Socks. Shirt. Shaving tack."

"Those are my things," I said, "but it's not my bag. Mine was a black . . . well, some kind of leather. That's a brown pigskin. Ask—"

"Ask Miss Cheyne?" inquired d'Andrieu. "Thank you, no. Who else can identify it? You say it is not your bag. Now you say that someone not only 'planted' that humane-killer in your room, but also gave you a different bag in which all your clothing is mysteriously stored. When did anyone have an opportunity to do this? Did you open your bag when you went upstairs tonight before the murder?"

"Yes, and it was all right then! It was a black—oh, hell!"

Auguste, or Sergeant Allain, stepped forward. "I can assure you, M. Flamande," he told me, "that I myself took that brown bag from your car."

"You have been telling us about your possessions," said d'Andrieu. "Is there nothing else you have neglected to mention?"

"I don't know. Nothing important."

D'Andrieu put a finger before his face and wagged it slowly. "No? Not, for instance, an automatic with one cartridge exploded recently? When and why, I wonder, did you fire that shot?"

The blasted gun, of course, which Evelyn had pinched on the road, and which I had forgotten!

"And one other thing. A notebook in a lady's handwriting, which I dare say we could show to be Miss Cheyne's," continued our host, "carefully chronicling a full list of Flamande's exploits, with information as to his methods which could be known to Falmande alone."

That tore it. Around us now was a circle of stony faces, and it was obvious that with the exception of H.M. not one in the group believed us.

H.M. spoke up.

"Oh, I dunno," he protested, as mildly as a cooing dove. "The police know it, y'see. Look here, son, there's something you ought to know, and I've been wonderin' why she hasn't brought it up herself. I know it's forbidden except as a last resort, but this strikes me as a last resort for all your money. She's a member of the Intelligence Department. And even if you think I'm a senile bungler, you'll admit I'm not a liar?"

Evelyn drew a deep breath of relief. "At last!" she said. "The chief has spoken up. 'If you get into trouble, our officials can give you no help.' I jolly well know what that means now! Oh, let's get this nonsense over with. The question is whether he'll believe

me even when I prove to him who I really am."

D'ANDRIEU considered her, weighing something.

"True, Miss Cheyne. I might agree without hesitation that you are exactly what you claim, and still know that you were a colleague of Flamande." He snapped his fingers. "Nevertheless . . . international complications. . . . . difficult. . Yes, we must avoid scandal, yes, yes, yes! If you are what you say— Of course you have proof?"

While she removed her wrist-watch, and pried open a thin shell of gold at the back, I found a course. Evelyn could get out of it. I would tell the truth, that I had been an impostor convincing her that I was an Intelligence agent. I had hoaxed her all along, because I was Flamande. She had become involved innocently in the mess—which was true. When she was well out of it, I could fight my own battle to prove I wasn't guilty of murder. Obviously, the only course was to be Flamande now. What interested me was whether I ought to strike a flamboyant attitude like Flamande at bay, or whether—

"This seems in order, Miss Cheyne," declared d'Andrieu, examining the gray slip of paper she handed him. His eyes filmed over. "In fact, I happen to remember you were one of the two originally intended as a guard for—" He nodded toward Ramsden.

"Do you think Flamande didn't know that?" I said.

D'Andrieu whipped round.

"Then you admit—"

Everybody moved back a little. I wanted to toss off something flowery, something in the best Adelphi tradition. What I eventually managed to proclaim was:

"Flamande? Oh, absolutely. You've been trying to prove it all evening, haven't you?"

"He's a dreadful liar, you know," said Evelyn, and laughed in my face.

And such is the innate perverseness of all human affairs, such is the weird unreliability of the human mind that I saw in d'Andrieu's eyes a faint narrowing of wonder. It was not doubt. It was only wonder.

"Don't you believe me?" inquired Evelyn cheerfully. "He was the other agent sent with me. Shall I show you? Grab him, Auguste, and feel in his upper left-hand waistcoat pocket!"

This was evidently action to Auguste's taste. I was wrenched around before I could move, and the gray slip of paper was plucked out. D'Andrieu, stroking his mustache, received the paper.

"Where did you get this?" he asked sharply. And over that slip of paper which should have been the most overwhelming proof of my guilt, he frowned.

"I stole it."

"It's his own," said Evelyn. "Do you think everybody in the British Service is a crook and a murderer?"

"I don't know about that," put in Hayward in a wild voice, "but I'm beginning to think that everybody in the British Service is stark, raving crazy. Is this part of the fool business you were talking about early tonight, when you assaulted a lot of policemen who were trying to steal your passport? Listen, Gasquet, this fellow's either innocent or bughouse, but do you think if he's Flamande he would have had the nerve to tell us a story like that right at the beginning?"

I turned on him.

"It's absolutely true. I stole that paper from the real agent. That's his gun, by the way. I didn't have one. He'd seen me with Evelyn, and got suspicious. He—well, he and two policemen stopped the car. There was a bit of a dust-up, and I had to lay them out. What I'm trying to say is that Miss Cheyne knows absolutely nothing of this, except innocently. Good God, won't you even believe what I say when I admit I'm guilty?"

"I wonder what the game is," muttered Fowler, who was walking jerkily about the room. "M. Gasquet, this is a trick."

"If it's a trick," Hayward rasped, "then he ought to be doing it on the stage. You're asking us to believe that you, unarmed and single-handed, attacked three men and laid them out because you thought they had stolen your passport?"

"What a man!" exclaimed Hébert. "Ah, name of heaven, what a man!"

"Wait a minute, now," insisted Hayward. "Did you steal anything else?"

"Drummond's fountain pen. I told you about that."

"So you did! I thought you were a little bughouse then, and I'm just remembering a lot of things."

I said, "Oh, what's the use? I admit I'm Flamande. Isn't that enough? Suppose we start for Paris and get this over with. Bring out the handcuffs."

SLOWLY d'Andrieu walked forward.

"One moment," he interposed. "Just what does Miss Cheyne have to say to all these adventures?"

Evelyn was impatient. "According to him," she said, "I don't know anything about it because I wasn't there. Oh, don't you see it's all made up, because he's not guilty of anything at all and he's only trying to shield me? Would Flamande act like that; would a murderer act like that? Don't you see he's even gone so far as to deny that he's a member of the Intelligence?"

"Well," said Hayward critically, "I don't see how he could claim he was. Are you telling us that *nothing* happened back on that road?"

"Of course I am," returned Evelyn, with such fervor that my jaw dropped. "He was pulling your legs because that man"—she nodded towards d'Andrieu—"was acting so silky and foolish about the letters he said he received from Flamande. And now he's trying to put across his joke in earnest, because he wants to get me out of trouble. He's even denied he's in the Service. Well, there's Sir Henry Merrivale. Why don't you ask him whether he's a member or not?"

H.M. lifted a bland face.

"Aha!" he said, with some glee. "I've been waitin' all evening for somebody to bring up a point that would make our good Gasquet dubious—just a little dubious—only a faint cloud-shadow on the dial. And, burn me, if it had to be *this!* Oh, my eye. 'What is Truth?' asked jesting Pilate—"

"I am waiting for your answer," snapped d'Andrieu. "I do not say it alters matters. They will have to be taken to Paris under arrest. But is this man a genuine Secret Agent of—"

H.M. looked at him wearily. "Sure he is, son. I gave him that certificate myself only a day ago."

D'Andrieu controlled himself.

"And this matter of the fountain pen? With the name 'Harvey Drummond' on it."

"Oh, Lord, son, don't you understand it all yet?" growled H.M. with some plaintiveness. "Ken happened to have borrowed a fountain pen, days ago, from the real Harvey Drummond. Tonight in walks an impostor who says *he's* Harvey Drummond. Ken knew he wasn't. So he used that tale, with which he'd been pullin' your legs to see if he could confuse the impostor still more. You'll notice he did."

"So there was no trouble whatever on the road tonight?"

"There wasn't."

D'Andrieu stroked his mustache. There was a wary, sardonic gleam in his eyes, but I think this string of whoppers had really shaken his belief in my guilt.

"Do you admit this to be the truth?" he demanded, looking at me.

"I bow to the inevitable, M. Gasquet."

"Well, we shall see. If Sir Henry Merrivale has lied to me—Sergeant Allain!"

"Monsieur?"

"Miss Cheyne and Mr. Blake are to be placed under technical arrest. Take them upstairs to Mr. Blake's room and stand guard over them yourself. Search him. You will be armed, and you will shoot without question if he makes any attempt to escape—Louis!" He looked at his watch. "So! It is now past four o'clock. Louis, see whether the river has subsided enough to put up our bridge. Some of us will undoubtedly be going to Paris before long, but I shall insist that the rest remain. All right, Sergeant."

"He still thinks you're a murderer, son," murmured H.M., "but he's not so certain now. You and the wench go on up and play cards with good old Auguste. I'll carry on."

After I had been searched, Evelyn and I tried to make a dignified show of marching to the door under the perplexed guidance of Auguste. None of the rest said anything, but we heard a babble as the door closed behind us.

"You look a little dizzy," Evelyn whispered. "I say, I was thinking if the real

Harvey Drummond and his coppers were to show up now—"

"Shh!"

"Right you are. It's a beautiful night."

"No, it doesn't seem to be to anybody," I said irascibly. "Tonight should be a lesson to all of us. Even the quotation should be altered, and printed in gold letters across the front of every police station in the world:

"What is Truth?" asked jesting Pilate—and went out and hanged himself.

CHAPTER XV

A Black Bag

AUGUSTE pushed open the door of my bedroom, and with an agreeable gesture of the stolen pistol motioned us to enter. The fire was embers, but the white lamps were still burning brightly, and, despite the heavy greenish gloom, there might have been worse jails. Evelyn stretched herself in a chair, beaming at a quarter past four in the morning, and asked for a cigarette. Auguste sprang forward, whipping a packet from his hip pocket. He seemed to have conceived a great admiration for Evelyn.

"Thanks," she said. "And now that we're all in clink together, do you think we might have a drink?"

"Assuredly, mademoiselle!" he boomed. "All I ask of you both is not to try to escape. I would have to shoot, and I do not wish to. As for the drink, Joseph or Louis shall see to it immediately."

"Auguste," Evelyn said sternly, "unbend. You do not have to play the butler now. You are Detective-sergeant Allain, of the Sureté. Now tell me, with your hand on your heart: Do you really think that man there is Flamande?"

Auguste guffawed, and slapped his thigh, sighting along the point of his mustache as though along a rifle-barrel.

"Frankly, mademoiselle, I do not know. Sometimes I think so, and sometimes I think he is only a mad Englishman."

"Is this spy work, Auguste?" I asked. "Will anything we say be used against us?"

He reflected. "That depends, monsieur. I was instructed to watch you." He hesitated. "One thing I might suggest. If you are Flamande, you also might unbend. It is not necessary to pronounce your native language so badly, monsieur."

This was one in the eye. "Which brings up the question," said Evelyn musingly, "do you still pretend you're Flamande, Ken? With your accent, you'll never be able to do it convincingly."

"All right. Under the heaviest kind of pressure, I admit I'm not Flamande. So I'm going to ask Sergeant Allain some questions. Look here, old man. You will honestly swear you found that brown bag in this room?"

"Certainly! At the foot of the bed."

Where I had left the black one, incidentally.

"You got it out of Miss Cheyne's car, and brought it up here?"

"I got it from the car, but I did not bring it up here. Louis and Joseph distributed the baggage."

"Well, did you people find my fingerprints on the bag or on that humane-killer in the false bottom?"

Auguste laughed. "The chief, monsieur, says such trifles are outmoded, and psychologically unimportant. In any case, there *were* no fingerprints at all. Would you expect Flamande to leave any? He would have painted his fingers with liquid rubber."

"He would have painted his fingers with liquid rubber in order to take a toothbrush out of his own valise?"

Auguste grinned. "If you are not Flamande, you are very innocent. There is a transparent form of liquid rubber which can be put on the tips of the fingers without detection. Flamande would have worn it all the time, when engaged in an operation. He would have left no fingerprints at all." He frowned. "Excuse me, but I am not permitted to answer questions."

"Now, now, Auguste! Sit down. Smoke a cigarette, and join us in a drink. You might pull that bell-cord, and see if we can get one."

By his actions it was clear that Auguste was far from convinced of my guilt. After some hesitation he pulled the bell-cord, and

sat down with a gusty breath of relief.

"You will admit, then," I pursued, "that there might have been a mistake of some sort about the baggage?"

He shrugged. "Has there been any other mistake?"

"Oh, yes. Don't you remember that the attaché-case of the impostor, the man who said he was Gasquet, was mysteriously lost or mislaid? Has it been found?"

WHEN Auguste answered, his voice appeared to come from the cellar as he settled his neck meditatively into his collar. "No." he said. "But that will not make a brown valise turn into a black one, and then change back into a brown again. No, no, no, no!" He chuckled. "That false Gasquet gave us much to worry about, faith! Of course we thought he was Flamande. That was why I was watching his windows, and the chief was watching his door. We intended to see what he meant to do, and then —voilà!" Auguste closed his fingers. "When he was murdered, that upset the chief. It was necessary to look elsewhere for Flamande. So, while you were having supper, he ordered me to search the rooms; all except those of Dr. Hébert, whom he had seen before and knew, and of the two Englishmen called 'sir.' "

Evelyn sat up.

"D'Andrieu, or Gasquet, was really watching that man's door before the murder? From where?"

Auguste's eyes narrowed. "Why, I suppose from the middle door of his rooms at the end of the gallery, mademoiselle."

"And he had a clear view of all the gallery before the lights went off?"

"You understand, I am only a subordinate —" growled Auguste.

Evelyn turned excitedly to me. "Ken, there's at least one thing that's struck me all along as being dashed queer. When he was building up his case against you, Gasquet neglected to bring out at all the one big thing everybody had been harping on so much. Who turned off those lights, from the switch in the linen closet? If Gasquet thinks you were the murderer, he must believe you turned off those lights. Did you have an opportunity to do that? I know you didn't, because I was in this room with you —but is there any proof of it?"

"Yes. Fowler definitely stated that he would have seen anybody going to the linen closet if the person came from this end of the gallery. He said nobody did."

"Right. Now think back. This evening in walks an impostor who claims he is Gasquet when he's driven into a corner. The real Gasquet, or d'Andrieu, knows he isn't. Naturally, as we should have realized, he'll be watching the chap's door—just as Auguste watched the window. He had a clear view of the gallery. He must have seen who *did* sneak into the linen closet. Why didn't he say so?"

"He was reserving his bombshell, I should think. No, hold on there!" I felt the business spinning again. "That hour or half-hour after the murder was exactly the time when he was puzzled most!"

"Puzzled most?"

"Yes! He tried to make accusations against Fowler, and prove that Fowler was the only one who had an opportunity to sneak into the linen closet."

"You mean he must have seen Fowler do it?"

I was trying to fit together all the cloudy pieces. "That's one possible explanation, of course. But would he have flown off the handle like that, with only half a case to go on, and only a few witnesses to his dramatic coup? Wouldn't he have said, 'I *saw* you go in there!' instead of going on a comparatively mild logical spree?"

"He likes to prove he's a logician."

"Yes, but he likes to nail his quarry still more. Remember, this is the biggest case of his life, and he's no fool. H.M. says he accused only Fowler because he was firing shots at random. If he did think Fowler was guilty, he damned quickly shifted to accuse me. But if he didn't see Fowler sneak in there—and Lord knows he didn't see me. Then who in the name of sanity did he see?"

Auguste had a curious, startled expression in his eyes. But he puffed out his mustache when he saw me look at him, and became benevolently paternal.

"This," he said, "is interesting but it is

not practical. Perhaps an invisible man, *hein!* Ho-ho-ho!"

EVELYN fixed him with a chill eye of rebuke.

"Sergeant Allain, I am surprised at you. Think of your duty to France! Think of your duty to promotion! You are an old mustache of the detective police, are you not? You are a man of intelligence? Then you know that *you* could deal with this case if you were given the opportunity, could you not?"

"As for that," Auguste admitted cautiously, but with a sort of gloomy mysteriousness, "I may have my ideas, as mademoiselle says. But I am loyal to my chief, who is the greatest detective in the world—" His shoulders lifted.

I said: "It's not a question of that. You say he was at the door. Very well. Then who could he have seen go into the linen closet? Under the circumstances, we admit that he did not see Fowler. So Fowler is telling the truth. Fowler says he saw nobody come from the other end of the gallery. That excludes Miss Cheyne, Mrs. Middleton, Hayward, myself—in fact, everybody. We reach the conclusion, as Fowler said, Auguste, that the lights were turned off by your chief himself."

"Ah, *no!*" thundered Auguste, giving a jump in the chair. "That is ridiculous. Why should the chief have done such an imbecile thing? Ah, no! That is insulting. Besides I am here to watch you, not to talk."

Evelyn was brooding over her cigarette. She was tapping the air with the toe of one slipper, when she abruptly sat forward as thought she were going down a chute.

"Oh, my *hat!* We've been awful fools not to think of it! The chief wasn't the only one at the other end of that gallery, where he couldn't be seen. Owen Middleton was in the bathroom."

I refused to believe this, and said so; not only because Middleton was the last person I should have chosen as Flamande, but also because he had backed me up when I was in difficulties.

I said: "If he had cut the lights d'Andrieu would have seen him. You'll acknowledge that d'Andrieu has never had his eye on Middleton this evening?"

"Won't do, old boy. Because you'll admit that, up until the time he fired the accusation at you, he certainly didn't seem to have his eye on you. And besides, Middleton's just come from India!"

"Yes, and that's another thing. What the devil are all these hints about India, and what is the unicorn anyway? Everybody's talked about it. Ramsden says it's worth half a kingdom and a million pounds. But what is it? Now that the cat's out of the bag, I wish to God somebody would let the unicorn out, too. It's coming it strong when you're under arrest for being a master criminal, without any idea of what it is you're supposed to be trying to steal."

She pointed her cigarette. "Ken, it must be Middleton. Don't you see we've got only the alternatives of it's being d'Andrieu or Auguste's invisible man?"

Auguste raised his hand. He was staring at the bust of Bonaparte on the mantelpiece, like one of the old mustaches staring at the Emperor.

"Invisible, mademoiselle," he said gustily, "in one sense."

"Pardon?"

"That the great chief might not have been able to see him."

"Even though he walked into the linen closet with the lights on?"

"Even then, mademoiselle," agreed Auguste, with a heavy frown.

Evelyn folded her arms. "My sergeant," she told him sternly, "control yourself. Leave this effort at mystification to M. Gasquet, and say what you mean."

THE major domo eyed her in more admiration, evidently at the calmness with which five-feet-three spoke like a schoolmistress to six-feet-two.

"With your assistance, mademoiselle," he declared, "Auguste Allain may yet be an inspector, though I do not see what my discovery may mean even when I have discovered it myself." He frowned. "You understand, there was much work to be done in putting this château in order quickly. I had to get out the linen and fill the lamps

and—well, I was in and out of that linen closet a great deal, which my chief was not."

"And so?"

"And so I noticed the door there," he said, his excitement growing and rumbling. "It is a part of the paneling, on the left-hand side as you go in, but towards the rear. It leads—yes, of course! It communicates with the room used by the dead man, the impostor. That room is beside the linen closet. You recall, on the right-hand side of the impostor's room, a large curtain? The other side of the door must be there. Yes, faith! It must mean that the false Gasquet turned out the lights! And it was only a few seconds afterwards that I saw him throwing his valises out of the window. But why should he turn out the lights?"

I whistled.

"If he did," I said, "it would explain d'Andrieu's wild attitude, when he was looking straight down the gallery, and yet saw nobody go into the linen closet. It also means that everybody must go back under suspicion—everybody!"

Evelyn was frightened now. "This is awful, Ken. I'm willing to bet that was the one thing which stuck in the chief's crop all along, so that he was willing to give H.M. at least a hearing. If Gasquet hears of this now, all the rest of his evidence will fit beautifully, and you'll be in for it. Sergeant!"

She turned on the uncomfortable Auguste a face of such fervent and radiant appeal that Auguste almost mellowed. Evidently he sensed what was coming.

"Auguste, my old one, you do not intend to tell this to your chief, do you?"

Auguste whoomed, getting up out of his chair with indignant snortings and shakings of his head. He lifted his shoulders with an expression of agony.

"But, mademoiselle! I ask of you, you do not suggest—no, no, *no!* It is necessary to do my duty. Without doubt, M. Gasquet will be annoyed at my not telling him before, and, as it is, he will apply a stroke of the boot to my backside. No, no, *no!*"

"Let him tell it," I said out of the corner of my mouth. "It doesn't implicate you, and if at last I can persuade him to believe I'm guilty, then—"

"Then you've dished us both, don't you see?"

I tried another course. "Naturally you will have to tell him, Sergeant Allain. Hey! Sit down, blast it! By all means it will be necessary to tell the chief, but you cannot do it now. Your orders were to remain with us. Let us have a discussion of the matter, without prejudice to us."

"I am glad that is understood," rumbled Auguste, with dignity. He slapped at the shoulders of his coat, and then sat down gingerly. "Well, monsieur?"

"Let's suppose that you are Inspector Auguste Allain, Chief of the Sûreté as you may very well become, if you approach this matter with wise counsel. You are in charge of the investigation. Now, you don't believe that I am Flamande and that Miss Cheyne is my vampire of an accomplice. Then whom would you arrest? You must have some theory. A clever officer like yourself would be certain to have one. Who do you think is guilty?"

"Strictly between ourselves?"

"Understood!"

Auguste hesitated, and peered behind him. He spoke in a low voice.

"For myself, I am beginning to have no doubts. Between ourselves, you understand, I should have no hesitation in putting the chain on the wrists of M. Ernest Hayward."

AFTER a pause he went on, raising his eyebrows gleefully and making mysterious confidential gestures:

"That surprises you? Ah! I thought it would. But consider the matter from the position of one whom it pleases you to call an old mustache of the detective police. My chief, granted, is the greatest detective in the world. The difficulty is that sometimes he is too great a detective, and he detects something which does not exist. He must always look for subtlety. He is cuckoo on subtlety, that man! He goes home in the evening and sees groceries on his doorstep. Does he say to himself, *'Tiens,* the grocery-boy has been here; I wonder if they have overcharged me again?' No! He must always be figuring to himself ways in which

those groceries could have come there without being delivered by the kid on his bicycle. They were dropped from a plane. They are somebody else's groceries. There is a bomb in the butter. Ah, no, no, no!"

AUGUSTE shook his head violently, and -pointed.

"With me it is different. We find stains of mud on the sill of a window in a certain person's room, that of M. Hayward. To me it means that the person who most probably made those stains is M. Hayward himself. I should at least ask him about them, and not neglect it simply because it was the obvious thing to do. And what do we find? We find that"—Auguste raised a significant forefinger—"he admits turning out his lamp a few seconds before he hears a scream. But what does he do then? Does he run out, like the rest of you? No! He hesitates. He is the last to reach the stairs. And what is he doing? He says he is standing in the gallery, although M. Middleton, coming from a room beyond, does not see him there.

"I make no criticism of my chief. Only the greatest detective in the world could have invented an explanation so magnificent, so superb, as to *how* the murder was committed. But afterwards? No! I will tell you:

"You, monsieur, are accused. And what does one say you have done? One says that, after you have rushed out of M. Hayward's room, you immediately—with the gun under your coat—run down to throw a glance at the corpse. Only a few moments afterwards do you find an excuse to go to your room. Perhaps in this way you avoid suspicion. Perhaps, but I think it would be a silly-ass thing to do, and not natural. If you had done it, would you not have run immediately to your room to conceal the gun? For you would not have been seen in the dark, and *then* you could have joined the others at the staircase. Well! Who could have run down and concealed the gun in your room? M. Hayward. Who did hesitate before he joined the others? M. Hayward. Eh? Eh? But you, imbecile"—Auguste spoke violently, making a hideous face at me and spreading out his shoulders in an involved shrug—"you must cook your own goose by declaring you possess a black valise which has no false bottom. Ah, bah! You are mad!"

CHAPTER XVI

The Last Chance

EVELYN and I looked at each other. Her eyes were shining.

"It is still a black valise," I said to Auguste, with hearty and humble sincerity. "Otherwise, my friend, I raise my hat and salute you. You've beaten the great Gasquet at his own game. Dammit, why couldn't I have thought—"

Auguste puffed it away.

"Ah, well," he protested, and my liking and respect went up about fifty degrees. "I have given up playing chess, because everybody tells me what move I should have made." He was thoroughly enjoying himself now. "Ask yourselves about the impostor who called himself Gasquet and was killed. The chief himself saw, after reflection, that this man could not have had a bad purpose. Was he Flamande? No! Flamande would not have been so imbecile, when he was caught in one imposture, to have said instantly that he was Gasquet. The real Gasquet admitted that man, whoever he was, was here to betray the identity of Flamande. He did not lie.

"His attaché-case vanishes. And what happens? I search for it. He searches for it. I come upstairs, and I find him coming out of the room of M. Hayward. Why has he chosen that room first, and why does he show no more interest himself in searching rooms after he finds that the attaché-case is not there?"

He sat back, taking out another cigarette, and Evelyn struck a match for it.

"Eh, well! I have told you what I think." Auguste folded his arms gloomily. "I still have a formidable stroke of the boot if the chief learns I have been talking. I wished, however, to show mademoiselle I have a good heart. Now I ask—what is the truth about that damned valise? How could you have taken a toothbrush from a black valise, when I myself know it was brown?"

There was a knock at the door. Auguste checked himself, almost swallowing the cigarette. He sprang up. Covering us sternly with his pistol, he moved over and unlocked the door.

Joseph, tall and lean, in contrast to the stockiness of Louis, peered in suspiciously, and seemed relieved to see the weapon in Auguste's hand. He wiped his forehead with a muddy hand.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "Who rang the bell? I have no time to answer bells. We are putting up that portable bridge—"

"Shut that, Joseph!" I said, and got up. "You will render every courtesy to Flamande, or on the sacred word of Flamande, which is never broken, I will be out of jail in three days and cut your throat. Do you understand?" I checked myself with an effort from adding, 'Boo!' because he had fallen back with a jump.

There were advantages in being branded with that infamous name.

"You can do nothing now," he said, without particular conviction. "What do you want?"

"We want a bottle of whisky, at the expense of the Republic, and smartly. And now a question: You brought the baggage up to this room from the hall below? Did you, or was it Louis?"

"It was I. What about it?"

"And the other valise, the black?"

"*Tiens,* don't try to talk like an Englishman! You are caught. Yes, I brought up the other. What of that?"

Auguste swung toward him. "You say there were two valises? Two? A brown and a black? Speak up, Brigadier!"

"Look, Allain, don't let that gun fall!" cried Joseph. "What is all this? A criminal can have two valises, can't he? I didn't steal his camel of a valise. I brought it up here and put it by the bed, and may he stumble on it and break his neck that the guillotine will shave!"

Auguste roared. "You brought two valises. You mixed nothing up, eh? You are a detective of fine talent, eh, says you? Grimy swine, the chief will have something to say about this!"

JOSEPH was in a cold fury. "Sergeant or no," he yelled, "there does not exist the man who can call Joseph St. Sauver a grimy swine!"

"*Tiens, tiens, tiens,* now!" said Auguste, wagging his head coldly. "You will tell me next that you did not lose the attaché-case of the man who was killed?" His voice vibrated with hollow irony. "You did not do that, eh?"

"Ah, bah, a trifle!" snorted Joseph. "I am a detective, not a cursed valet! Besides, what does it matter now he is dead? He was a fraud anyhow. What is more, I found the attaché-case again. That is, I know where I put it. Monsieur, this matter of gr—"

"And where is it, Brigadier?" I asked softly.

"In the possession of Dr. Hébert," said Joseph.

"If you ever want to be an inspector, Auguste," I said, "haul him in here and shut the door! The biggest clue in the whole case has dropped straight on your head."

Coolly, Auguste laid hold of Joseph's collar. "M. Joseph," he observed with formal declaration, "I withdraw my remark, at least, until after I have questioned you. Come here, my child, and tell me of this latest piece of stupidity." He drew the man inside and locked the door. "Tell me exactly what happened to that attaché-case?"

"Why is there all this fuss?" Joseph demanded frigidly. "Is there any doubt that the monster Flamande stands *there?* If he did not admit," added Joseph with a sinister smile, "they are now proving it downstairs. They have already broken the thin lies of that woman and the fat old man with the bald head who said there was no trouble on the road. You recall the drunk taxi-driver we were instructed to let sleep in the kitchen? They are putting questions to him, and he says that the fat old man also attacked a police officer on the road. He says he heard, through the panel of his taxi, Flamande here admitting to having robbed and murdered an agent of the British Secret Service."

Down went our chances again, with a crash and clang. I looked at Evelyn, and for the first time I saw that her nerve was going. Both of us and, I judged, H.M. as

well, had forgotten that infernal taxi-driver, who would have been roused and, burning from the loss of his cab, was in a condition to testify to anything.

"It is plain," Joseph was rattling on, "that the three of them were in the plot together. Louis says that the Cheyne girl, the"—he caught my look, and gulped—"this lady is the daughter of the fat old man. Louis says it will cause a fine sensation when it is all in the newspapers."

Poor old H.M.! I could imagine his apoplectic state, but Evelyn and I were juggling with worse dynamite. I glanced at Auguste's face. We could not lose our last ally now.

"Ah, bah," concluded Joseph, with a snappish gesture, "and you talk to me of attaché-cases when we have captured the greatest criminal of the age, and you do not even take the trouble to guard him properly! The chief shall hear! What about—"

This was a mistake. A red bar showed across Auguste's forehead. He reached out a big hand and pinned Joseph by the shoulder against the door.

"All the same, my friend," he interposed with heavy softness, "we will talk of attaché-cases. I think this man is an Englishman, and we French are going to show an Englishman what fair play means." He spoke past the cigarette he still held in one corner of his mouth. "Now talk of attaché-cases, and tell me everything you know. You say it is in the possession of Dr. Hébert. How and why does it come to be there?"

Joseph swallowed.

"But it was entirely natural! Think, now, and remember! The baggage was all piled downstairs in the hall—true?"

"I know that. Continue."

"And, when that doctor entered at the first, do you remember that he was carrying a brown attaché-case?"

I VISUALIZED Hébert's entrance, with his gleaming eyeglasses and his brief-case gripped firmly under one arm. He had it with him in our first interview, but what had happened to it afterward I could not recall.

"And so?" prompted Auguste.

"And so all the baggage was piled in the hall and sorted. I saw a brown case, and naturally I thought, 'That belongs to the doctor,' so I took it up with his valise. Afterwards I did not connect it with any other case, when you questioned me about it. When the murder was done, I see Dr. Hébert still carrying his case, and I think, 'That's odd, because they all say he has never gone upstairs at all! How did he get his case?' And I know there must have been two cases. But what does it matter? The man is dead."

"You don't see the importance of two attaché-cases," I said, "any more than you saw the importance of two valises. It's difficult to say whether you are worse as a valet or as a detective. You mean, then, that the case is in Dr. Hébert's room now?"

"I suppose so."

I girded myself. "Listen, Auguste. It's just a little thing to do, and you've got to do it. Down there in Hébert's room is undoubtedly the evidence that will show us who Flamande is and send him to the guillotine. You have to go down there and get it. Lock us in here, and leave this fellow on guard with your gun. My God, don't you realize how important it is?"

I had spoken swiftly in English. But Joseph evidently caught my meaning, whether or not he understood the words.

"Sergeant Allain, are you mad?" he cried. "You were set to guard this man. It is a trick, I tell you. *I* will not be responsible for guarding him. He is Flamande! Do you think I am such a fool as to remain here in—"

"You've got to make a choice, Auguste," I said, and tried to drive the words in like nails. "You have a chance to prove your ability, to show your good sense that your superiors in the department now refuse to recognize. You have a chance to capture the real Flamande, unassisted, and get from the government of France anything in the broad world you care to ask for! We're not asking for favors. We're only asking a detective to investigate evidence. That's your job, and you have a chance to make it your master work. Do anything you like here. Tie me up, let Joseph sit on my stomach, put a bullet through my leg so I can't move. But in the name of your own self-respect take twen-

ty steps and find Flamande!"

Auguste drew a wheezing breath, and stepped back, handing Joseph the pistol.

"You will guard them," he said, "or I will smash your face. If you are afraid, stand outside the door. Here is the key. Lock the door on the outside. I have never yet disobeyed an order, but I will disobey one now."

He hauled Joseph outside. The door was shut and the key clicked. I felt my heart bumping my ribs. Joseph should have brought that whisky first.

"You think there's a chance?" said Evelyn.

"The question is—whether Flamande got there first."

"Ken, I didn't know you could be so eloquent."

"If that attaché-case," I said, staring at the door, "contains what I think it does—and I don't even know what that is—then you're well out of it, old girl. They—"

I broke off at a curious sound, almost a terrifying sound in that quiet room. She was crying. She sat huddled back in the chair, the fallen cigarette burning a hole in the carpet, and her hands pressed hard to her cheeks. She was shaking, with a quiver which struck me dumb and helpless with a tenderness such as I had never known before. The love I felt for that girl hurt with a physical pain that seemed to dissolve the world.

YET all I could do, raging against my own foolery that had got her into this, was simply to say, "Take it easy," or some such fool thing, to put my arm about her fiercely, and stare at the shadows for some enemy that could be tangibly fought.

"S-step on that cigarette, will you?" she said between her hands. "I—I'll be all right in a second. It isn't—what you think. It's just the horrible ludicrousness of it, don't you see? They've made such fools of all of us, even H.M. Oh, I know they can't prove—I don't think they can—but it's looking like such poor driveling fools. If we could only get out of here and *show* them. . . ."

I held her more tightly. It is that quiet trembling, which seems endless and terrible.

"Don't worry, old girl," I said. "If you want to get out of here, we will."

"I tell you I'll be all right in a second! Did you step on that cigarette? I just feel—"

"It's hotter than blazes in here. You need some air. Come over and we'll open a window."

It was not until the morning air blew on my eyelids that I realized a light-headed weariness. The sky was still black and vast and hushed, but a grayness had crept into it, and the warm wind was freshening. All rain had gone in the expectancy of summer dawn. Even the black river only sang and whimpered in muttering noises, trailing gray plumes of willows from the other bank. I listened for the birds to wake. A faint mist was rising.

We knelt on the window-seat, breathing the air deeply. We did not speak; there was no need. The mist and the expectancy veiled a flat land out of which I conjured all France. Why, when you try to think of a country, must there come thronging into your head only scraps of images like a whirling carrousel? Can you build a picture from colored awnings and the beat of a slow tango-tune, from a Punch-and-Judy show on the Champs Elysées, and firefly lights against a red sunset, from a rattle of hoofs in the street at morning, and a raucous voice crying, *'Haricots verts!'* when you are trying to sleep? From bright eyes in a window, and the apple-blossoms at Asnières?

Yes, but Evelyn was right. If somehow we could beat them—Lord knows who; maybe only the jeering fates—if we could nail this slippery and jeering Flamande— But Flamande was too much for H.M., and he would make a dozen of me. I had more than a personal grudge against the man who had planted that gun on me, and who had snared everybody into his trap. Evelyn, with her cheek against my shoulder, stirred and raised her head. She was trying to smile.

"I must have talked awful rot for a minute," she said. But she was still trembling. "If you could only understand what I mean—"

This was the part that was hurting like the devil. "Oh, I understand what you mean. There's never been anybody who's ever made such a blasted hash of anything as I have."

"You can't expect *me* to believe that, can you? Don't talk about it! Listen, Ken—what do we do now?"

"Wait, I suppose, to see what Auguste finds."

"Do you think he'll come back and tell us?"

"He should, if it's good news."

We both turned around. We could hear Joseph gabbling something outside the door, excitedly, but in a low-pitched voice. A voice seemed to be answering him from the gallery. Not a word was distinguishable. It was the very indefinite muttering of those excited voices which roused us to a wild excitement. Then footsteps indicated that Joseph was leaving the door.

I ran over and wrenched at the knob.

"Auguste!" I yelled. There was no answer. "Joseph! What is it? Did you find—"

"What do you think it is?" Evelyn whispered.

"God knows. It may be more trouble. If he found the right evidence, he might have given us a tip what to expect."

TEN full minutes ticked past by Evelyn's wrist-watch, and that can be a long time. We both lit three cigarettes during the time, and threw them away without finishing them. The château was absolutely still; it might have been deserted. One of our lamps was sputtering and burning low now.

"Ken?"

"Yes?"

"I've just thought of something. Gasquet said that downstairs room was like a whispering gallery, and you could hear anything from the outside. Suppose Flamande could hear up here somewhere in the same way? Suppose he was listening when you and Auguste and Joseph were talking, and he was waiting for Auguste down in Hébert's room? We don't know it was Auguste who called Joseph away from the door."

"Yes, I was thinking the same thing. We've got to get out of here. If Auguste is in trouble—listen!"

There were footsteps, lumbering but quick, coming along the gallery. Heavy hands fumbled at the key. And the person who opened the door a crack was H.M.

It was one of the few times in my life when I have seen H.M.'s wooden face wear a slight pallor. He was drawing sharp, wheezing breaths. There was sweat on his forehead, and he seemed to have difficulty in seeing through his glasses.

"What I'm goin' to say," he told us, peering back over his shoulder, "will have to be said quick. I want no objection, and I want you to do just exactly as I tell you or you'll ruin all of us. Never mind how I got here, or what I'm doin'. You two have had your goose cooked now—to a cinder. You've got to get out of here and cut for it, both of you."

"But what—"

"Listen to me! They're all at the back; never mind how or why. You just trust me. They've got that collapsible bridge laid down, and you can get across the river. Once you're over, there's a big square clump of willows about twenty feet on the right-hand side. In there you'll find a stable with a garage attachment at one side, and the door's open. You'll find a car all fueled and ready. Climb in that car, follow the main drive round to the outside road, and go like hell for Chartres."

"Yes, but what—"

"Listen! How many times have I got to tell you everything will be all right if you do as I say? Trust me, or we're all licked. Here's the key to that car. When you get to Chartres, find the British consulate and stay there till you get word from me. It won't be long. Don't argue, I tell you. Give me two minutes to get downstairs and out of sight, and then down you both go."

The gallery outside, I noticed, was now dark. H.M. gave us a wink and something that may have been intended for a grin of encouragement. Then the door closed.

"Get ready, wench," I said. "Two minutes does it. Whatever else he means, he means business."

Evelyn was pale, but she only nodded. "If H.M.—if we—can only fool 'em somehow!" she said with a kind of blaze, and clenched her hands. "We can rely on him. I don't know what he's doing, but I'll bet now he wins the last trick. They can't stop us now; they *can't!*"

"One more minute to go!"

CHAPTER XVII

Triple Impersonation

COMPOSEDLY Evelyn went about shutting the window and blowing out the lamps. I kissed her, we both grinned, and then we were out into the gallery.

There were lights in the lower hall. The most difficult part would be the stairs; they were uncarpeted. But they did not creak, and we could move quietly if we took care. I heard Evelyn's quick breathing as we came into the glow at the head of the stairs. There was nobody in the red-carpeted lower hall. If we could get down to those pillars, which were making zebra-bars of shadow toward the front door, we could reach the door without being caught.

The worst part was the moment just before we tested a new tread. It seemed to take a long time. Once Evelyn stumbled a little, and we stood still, ready to dodge down if we heard a noise. There was none. Then we were down the last flight, into the grateful shadow that masked that fretted place of pillars. Nearly out of it now! Ten steps more, and then the door. We were on the carpet now, moving more swiftly.

"We can run once we're out," breathed Evelyn. "We—"

Crashing and thunderous in that quiet, the iron knocker on the front door banged. We stood stock-still, as though the noise were the end of the world. Somebody called out angrily. Then the door was pushed open. And in the doorway, taking off his hat and slapping it against his waterproof, stood the real Harvey Drummond.

The man we had played hob with, the hard-boiled braggart, the one and original tough guy who was so free with his language and his manners. Across his pudgy, heavy-jowled face, with the little eyes gleaming now, spread a smile.

"So I've got you at last!" he whispered. His smile grew beautiful, but the little eyes did not change. "I've been waiting all night to come in and see you, Mr. Tea-Importer Flamande. We're going to have you in jail so quick that they won't see your dirty snout for dust. The coppers are here. But before I hand you over to them, I'm going to beat you to the worst pulp you ever saw outside rotten fruit. Do you understand that, Mr. Bloody Tea-Importer Flamande?"

It wasn't Drummond in himself; it was the last climax to a night of setbacks and misunderstandings and things snatched jeeringly out of reach at the last moment. That was what did it. All the jeers and humiliations for some reason seemed centered in him. There are times when a bomb explodes inside your head, and the universe splits in hate. I welcomed him like a brother, with a kind of gleeful whoop.

"Will you, now?" I said. "Come on let's see whether you're as good as you say."

Ordinarily I probably couldn't have stood up to him for two minutes. But the man was as crazy-mad as I was, and the fool came in wide open, trying to grab for my collar. And, as he plunged, I took a step backwards and gave it to him straight in the mouth.

It was like having your left fist bang into gritty mortar. But the mortar crushed and crumbled, and I saw the blood come from his smashed teeth just before he landed between my eye and cheek-bone. The lights and his face jumped out of focus. There were several of his faces weaving, although his red mouth seemed to shout.

Neither of us made any attempt to guard. Anyway, I had forgotten what I'd ever learned, and all I wanted to do was murder him. I saw his fist come in and banged back with right and then left again straight to that red mark. Something caught me in the pit of the stomach. We were twisting, as though both of us had risen in the air. Our legs got entangled, and I was punching at a sandbag which kept thumping into my face.

Then he was dancing in front of me, dancing or hopping, and the lights and pillars went around with him. I could hear him sputtering, but a red ruin was stretching above his nose. Then we must have gone in together like fowls across a cockpit, for he seemed to sail. His left went low into my stomach. But his leg must have buckled, for the right came up wild and deafened my ear.

I FIRED inside for his jaw, and we banged together at close grips against a pillar. How long it lasted, I am not sure. Was this the great Harvey Drummond, with round swings like a blind man, reeling and staggering? I was still battering a brick wall, but I was hitting it. I was doing the yelling now, even when pain exploded through my head. He lurched over my shoulder, with a face that seemed all eyes and blood. Then he landed one that sagged my knees, screamed triumphantly—and I got him.

Suddenly the hall seemed alive with people charging down on me. There was confused shouting. My arms were twisted behind me, I was yanked backward, and sat down flat. I saw Drummond take little uncertain steps like a drunken man, and go down on his knees. And out of the din rose Fowler's voice:

"Merrivale, you bloody fool, you've got the handcuffs on the wrong man!"

Drummond was on his knees as though he were praying. He had a witless look on his smashed face. He raised his hands and there was the gleam of a chain from the handcuffs at which he suddenly began to tear.

And H.M.'s heavy voice spoke. "Oh, no, son," he said. "I haven't got 'em on the wrong man. They're where they belong, as good old Gasquet will tell you—on the wrists of Flamande."

* * * * *

"Then you're telling us," I said, "that that little 'escape' of ours was planned between you and M. d'Andrieu—excuse me if I stick to the name—just in the belief that Drummond would try to cut us off?"

"Uh-huh."

"And even that fellow who stopped us on the road wasn't the real Harvey Drummond? He was Flamande all the time? I thought he wasn't quite such a wonder in a fight."

"Pray console yourself, Mr. Blake," said d'Andrieu cheerfully. "He may not have been so scientific as Harvey Drummond, but he was about ten times more dangerous. Our great fear was that he might be armed. The real Harvey Drummond is dead. But you can hear the details presently. For the moment—breakfast."

It was past seven o'clock of a clear morning when jovial sunlight was broadening in warmth across a drenched Orléannois, and sweeping the last dingy shadow from the Château de l'Ile. D'Andrieu had insisted on our breakfasting in state on the stone balcony at the rear, overlooking the river. The table had been set for eleven, since Evelyn demanded the presence of Auguste Allain.

Looking at these people in the morning sunlight, it was hard to imagine that we had been scheming and imputing murderous motives to each of them; especially to Hayward, who was resplendently shaved, beaming behind his glasses, and speaking oracularly. At the head of the table sat an urbane Gasquet, dandyish with a flower in his button-hole. At the foot sat Elsa. For, as Gasquet pointed out, "Madame is mistress of the house even if she did not know it when she arrived."

Middleton was excitedly working out theories to an excited Fowler, who had the story of his life. Ramsden, bluffly positive, was discussing matters amiably with Evelyn and me. Dr. Hébert, who had repaired some of the damage done to my face with much skill and even more moralizing, had a pale smile.

About the whole table was a spirit of festivity. Even H.M., who had neglected to shave or change his collar, and sat at d'Andrieu's elbow with a cigar in his mouth and a bottle of whisky beside him, looked like a Chinese image after a good dinner.

THE river glittered far below the balustrade. Under that splendor of sunlight, d'Andrieu at the head of the table glowed affability as he had done early last night.

"I think," he said, as we attacked the bacon and eggs, "that in the hearing of everybody various puzzles should be explained—in justice to Miss Cheyne and Mr. Blake, and to demonstrate that Gasquet is not so pig-headed as at times he seems. It was not, I freely confess, until after four o'clock this morning that I had any doubts. It was five before I was persuaded of the truth. My whole reconstruction of the murder appears to have been wrong, so I humbly retire. Since we have caught Flamande, who

is now under guard, I do not give one damn whether I was wrong or not. That is logic. The credit, I am willing publicly to admit, belongs to Merrivale—"

H.M. looked alarmed.

"No!" he roared. "If you're goin' to be self-sacrificin', then be self-sacrificin' enough to forget I ever had anything to do with this. Never mention my name in connection with it. You caught Flamande, and don't anybody ever forget it. Burn me, if it ever got known back home that I was within an ace of being sent to Paris in handcuffs as the father of a beautiful international spy"—he winked raffishly at Evelyn—"and the associate of Flamande, my life wouldn't be worth livin'. I wouldn't ever dare poke my nose inside the Diogenes again." He looked at Fowler. "This story you're preparing—"

"It is agreed," said Fowler, "that Flamande was captured by Gasquet and Sergeant Allain. That is, on condition you tell us exactly what did happen and how you knew it."

For once H.M. showed none of his elephantine coyness in being persuaded to give details. He puffed at the cigar for a long time, blinking out over the balustrade.

"Uh-huh. All right. It'll be an imperfect reconstruction until we can get in touch with Marseilles and verify a couple of things. Flamande ain't likely to talk. He announces as cool as cool that he'll be out of clink in two days. Burn me, I'm half afraid he will be! Anyhow, I'll fill in the gaps with guesswork that I'm willing to bet ain't far off the truth.

"Gents, this is the queerest case I ever handled. I don't mean the hardest or even the most intricate, but the queerest and the damnedest. You might call it the problem of the triple impersonation. You've heard of cases where two people were got up to look like each other. This is the only instance I know when *three* people were got up to look like each other. And, because of that, events got so snarled up that everybody concerned seemed to have bats whirlin' and squeakin' in his belfry.

"We'll begin, not at the actual beginning of the business—I'll return to that—but when I first got a dim inkling of what might be behind it. That was down in the drawing room last night, when in walked a man pretending to be Harvey Drummond who had traveled by plane.

"Knowing what Ken had told me, about what had happened on the road, that gave me an awful jolt. Two Drummonds within an hour! I had a reelin' sensation in the head. Well, I looked at this feller hard, and I could take my oath he wasn't Harvey Drummond. The swagger was wrong; the whole attitude and bluff was that of a highly intellectual feller aping Drummond's mannerisms—"

"I noticed it," I said.

"Uh-huh. Well, if he wasn't Drummond, who was he? The thing was to pretend to believe him and try to find out his game. Then I got the first nebulous hint. Ken was tellin' about meetin' this feller back on the road and this impostor took that queerly. He didn't show any of the emotions you'd expect even in a strong-bluffing actor who believes he can get away with his imposture. He was only excited and interested. He kept lookin' at Ken in a funny kind of eager way, and he said, 'I'd like to have a bit of a talk with you. You say somebody back there pretended to be me?' Ken answered, 'Not exactly. He didn't give his name.'

"Then this feller couldn't quite keep his excitement down. He asked, 'Where is he now?' a little too sharply. It didn't sound to me like a man who's afraid he'll be shown up. It sounded as though he were anxious to meet this other chap, but afraid he wouldn't. That intrigued the old man considerably. I broke in and made it plain that the other chap would be headin' straight for here to make trouble, and ought to be along soon. While I was still puzzlin' and studyin', in broke our good host with a request that the tangle should be straightened out. Ken was put into a corner by some quick questions, and asked to produce the fountain pen he'd borrowed from the supposedly real Drummond."

H.M. PAUSED for a moment, then took a deep breath, and went on:

"Ken handed the fountain pen to this chap. The minute he saw it, he went a funny

color. He'd been cool enough before, even when we palpably didn't believe him. It might have been guilt at the sight of that pen, but I've had occasion to point out that people don't go pale and scream when they're faced with damaging evidence. That's when they're fightin' hardest and coolest. When they do go pale is when they see something that confirms a fear they've had.

"The whole crux of the matter lay in this: Was his imposture a cloak for crooked work? Or was it done for a good purpose? I was just sittin' and thinkin', and it struck me that this looked like an innocent imposture. So far my guess wasn't logical, as Gasquet would say, and I hadda test it out. If it was innocent, back still came the question: Who the devil is this chap? Burn me, I thought, he looks enough like Harvey Drummond to be his broth—

"Brother! Wow! Gents, I got an awful turn just by thinkin' of that figure of speech. Was it possible in some wild way that the man there was *Gilbert* Drummond, who was supposed to have been murdered in Marseilles? I'd never met Gilbert Drummond. Was it possible that with the addition of a mustache—this feller's toothbrush was an obvious fake—that Gilbert could pass for Harvey? If so, where was Harvey? Also, who was the man believed to be Gilbert Drummond who had been murdered in Marseilles?

"Still we were on debatable, not to say mythical ground. The man before us might be Flamande. So I applied two tests. Test number one: I accused him of bein' Gasquet, and he admitted it."

"Thereby," Middleton said, "convincing all the suspicious-minded that he was really Flamande."

"On the contrary, son. It was the one thing which convinced me he couldn't possibly be Flamande, or any kind of crook. Now, Flamande knows Gasquet is goin' to be there. Maybe Flamande even has a ghost of an idea where to look for Gasquet. So if *he* sings out and pretends to be Gasquet, his goose is burnt to hell. The game's up in that second. You can take this much for granted. Any crook playing a part is goin' to stick to that part in spite of anything. He's not goin to change characters in mid-act. He's not goin' to admit bein' anybody else. Why does this man rap right out, with a queer kind of ironical grin on his face as though he's enjoyin' some kind of joke, 'I am Gasquet?' "

"Had you thought, sir," asked Fowler, "whether it might not be for the subtle and startling reason that he really was Gasquet?"

H.M. was imperturbable. "And I was sure he wasn't Gasquet, either, after my second test. It blew the gaff completely. I gave him a sulphur match."

"I don't get you," said Hayward.

"Of course not. Not too many Americans or English would. But any Frenchman in this broad green land would understand straight off. The sulphur match, gents, is a devilish institution peculiar to France. Here's one. To us it looks just like an ordinary big match. You strike it—many's the time I've done this—and naturally right away you put it to your cigar. Out spurts a large, bluish, gassy wave of sulphur which sails down your throat as you draw in, and nearly murders you. What you've got to do is hold it for a couple of seconds until the sulphur has burnt away, then light your cigar. Any Frenchman does that instinctively. It's as automatic as striking a match on a box would be with us. And if you see anybody who's handed one of them matches and gets a blast of sulphur down his throat, you can bet your shirt he's no Frenchman. Well, the feller in front of me admitted he was Gasquet. I gave him a sulphur match, and he choked on it. He wasn't Gasquet; he wasn't a Frenchman. My suspicions were being roused that he was an Englishman and might be Gilbert Drummond."

MERRIVALE'S eyes narrowed as he watched us shrewdly and asked:

"Why pretend to be Gasquet, when he could be unmasked if the real Gasquet showed up? And the answer that occurred to me was that he didn't mind bein' unmasked. It tickled some satiric nerve in him to say that—because he was on an avengin' errand, and he did know the identity of Flamande. You remember, that wasn't fakin'. He was devilish positive he knew Flamande. How'd he come to be so sure? Did he know

it all along, or was it just possible that some inkling had come to him when he heard Ken's story and saw that fountain pen? The incident of the pen was becoming suggestive, and what happened on top of it? We said to him, 'If you're Gasquet, show us Flamande.' And what swelled him out in a kind o' pleased fury was triumph. His answer was, 'Yes, I will show you Flamande presently, but not at this moment.' Why not then and there, if the cat was out of the bag? Why give the slippery Flamande any chance to escape? Another thing he said was also suggestive. 'My men will be here presently, and they will have a prisoner to take back to Paris.' All that seemed to depend on his men arriving; on somebody arriving there, anyway. Who? They weren't his men, he wasn't Gasquet, he had no authority.

"Was it possible that he was *waiting* for the other Drummond to show up at the château, as we said he would, before the trap could be sprung? 'Suppose,' I said to myself, 'just as a floating hypothesis, suppose this feller *is* Gilbert Drummond, and that it was Harvey who was murdered in Marseilles. Suppose Gilbert is takin' Harvey's place, to find and trap the murderer, since the murderer killed Harvey and stole his papers with the idea of playin' the part of the same man?'

"But so far it was guesswork, and I had to wait.

"Now you'll understand why I didn't think the feller was in any danger. I thought Flamande hadn't yet arrived. As a matter of fact, he'd been in this house secretly, all along, but we didn't know it. Gilbert—we'll call him that to keep the names straight—is waitin' for the other to arrive in his 'Drummond' role. Then, d'ye see, he's got upstairs the papers to prove who he is, that Harvey is dead, and that Flamande is guilty.

"But the big mistake was—Gilbert didn't know the causeway was down, and when Flamande had sneaked into the house, *he* hadn't known it was later to be knocked down!

CHAPTER XVIII

THE RECONSTRUCTION

WOODENLY. H.M. paused, apparently to take his time relighting his pipe. But in reality to give time for his first climax to soak into us.

"Still," he finally went on when he had the old pipe going, "this is gettin' ahead of my story. I don't know all this yet. I'm just sittin' and thinkin'. Shortly afterwards, we find the feller murdered, and right after that a neat little jeerin' letter is chucked at us in the dark. That turned my whole universe upside down! 'Son,' I thought, 'your guess had nothin' to support it. Nobody could get in here, because the causeway is busted.'

"I was so mad that I stumbled all over myself, mentally, until I could get a grip again.

"Then I started to shift and arrange the pieces again. The best way to do that is to get a time sequence of everything clear. What happened in the entire course of events immediately after the alleged Gasquet—whoever he was—went upstairs some minutes ahead of the rest of you? He walked out into the hall, spoke to Auguste—in English, as I found out—and Auguste took him up to his room. There he found that a briefcase was missin'. Well, he sent Auguste down a-flyin' to look for it. While Auguste is talkin' and lookin', nobody sees this feller. Then Auguste comes upstairs, and sees him comin' out of Hayward's room.

"Down goes Auguste again while this feller goes to his room, and the rest of you come upstairs. Auguste sees that Joseph and Louis have already dislodged the prepared causeway, and he goes to d'Andrieu's rooms and watches the back windows of the alleged Gasquet's room while d'Andrieu watches the door. Correct?"

"Correct," agreed d'Andrieu. "Where, I may mention, I saw nobody go into the linen closet and it upset matters a great deal."

"Sure. But to our evidence. You, Fowler, watching across the hall, *you* didn't see anybody sneak into the linen closet either. What

was seen by anybody? Auguste sees this Gasquet engaged in throwin' his luggage out of the window.

"Boys, shinin' through all the lunacy that's enshrouded this case, that little bit alone would have been enough to unhinge anybody's mind, if you conceived of an innocent man doin' such a thing. For a minute I was up in the air. He threw his luggage out of the window! Why? Maybe he's lost something or finds that the bags belong to somebody else. Still the idea of a man in such a temper over a loss that he up and fires all his clothes out of the window is beyond belief. Unless—

"But softly comes whispering the quiet fact: 'This feller who says he's Gasquet, and the man who held up Ken and Evelyn and me back on the road look almost exactly alike.'

" 'Burn me,' I thought, 'let's suppose that my first theory was correct after all. Let's suppose that the man back on the road was Flamande. Suppose he's followed Ken here, he's found out what's goin' on, he knows the false Gasquet is Gilbert Drummond come to expose him—well, let's just suppose he's in the house?

"Suppose that the person throwing valises out of the window is Flamande. Suppose he has taken the place of the other chap? *Then* the disposal of the bags becomes blazin'ly clear. No things labeled 'Gilbert Drummond' can be hanging about. So he fires them out into the river—"

H. M. paused allowing the full effect of his revelations to sink in.

"Is there any support for this hypothesis? And then it occurred to me—Fowler's portable typewriter. Now, there's been a great to-do and controversy about that typewriter. The trouble all revolved about the question of who had an opportunity to pinch it. You all began pitchin' into each other on mighty thin evidence. It never occurred to anybody to ask who, alone, in the whole group, had the only opportunity to pinch it unobserved? If you'll look at plain evidence, you will hear the shoutin' answer—the man who came upstairs ahead of all the rest of you, and was the only one to be upstairs alone with all the luggage."

D'ANDRIEU made comment. "Unfortunately true," he said. "Proceed."

"More and more it grew on me that a substitution had been effected. One man—the Gasquet we've determined to be an Englishman and who knows the identity of Flamande—goes upstairs. Fifteen minutes later he's another man. When was the substitution effected? Let's see now!

"He was alone upstairs while Auguste went down to look for his brief-case. We've got to assume that it was the original feller who sent Auguste after it, since Auguste had been with him ever since he left us in the drawing room. When Auguste comes upstairs again, he finds the feller just comin' out of Hayward's room.

"Hullo! This is one to puzzle about. Whether he's still the original feller or whether he's a substitute, what's he doin' in Hayward's room, hey? Why Hayward's room? There was nothin' there, we found later, except some mud stains on the window sill where somebody had climbed in.

"Mud stains on the window sill, eh? And *somebody* had climbed in!

"Suppose he had climbed in just then? Why? That would have meant he had been on the flat roof. Why? The cloud picture started to take form.

"Flamande is in this house. While the servants (excuse me! detectives) are at work cuttin' off that bridge, he's been outside the drawing room and he's overheard about the metamorphosis of 'Drummond' to 'Gasquet' by reason of the whisperin' gallery acoustics. He knows he's dished, without a chance to come to the house in the rôle of Harvey Drummond *as he had originally intended,* unless he can silence that feller before he can do any talkin'. As our party in the drawin' room breaks up, he sneaks up ahead. I suspect he was hidin' in the window-embrasure behind that tapestry when Auguste and the feller that was Nemesis went upstairs.

"Now, we'll have to supply a theory here. My own guess is this. Nemesis, having sent Auguste down after the brief-case, is horribly worried. All the evidence that will prove him to be Gilbert Drummond is in that mislaid brief-case. If he can't find the brief-case,

he's in a devil of a mess. He gets impatient to see what Auguste is doing. He starts downstairs. Auguste is at the back of the house, the rest of us are in the drawin' room. Either by accident or design. Flamande steps out from behind the tapestry and comes face to face with Gilbert Drummond.

"Flamande has to be fast and silent. I think he stunned his Nemesis with the butt of that humane-killer, dragged him behind the tapestry, put the captive-bolt to his head, and pulled the trigger.

"With his enemy disposed of, his coast is clear. He'll leave the body where it is, hidden behind the tapestry. He'll sneak up quickly, and destroy any damning evidence in Gilbert's room. If anybody sees him it won't matter a tinker's curse because it will naturally be thought he's the other feller, still alive. After he's destroyed any evidence, he'll sneak out of the house. After a while he'll appear roaring as the real Harvey Drummond! He'll be the victim of an attack and robbery on the road, and in the château, ready to rob Ramsden. Nobody will ever suspect him of any murder, because he isn't in the house.

"So he kills Gilbert behind the tapestry, and just then there are footsteps on the stairs. It's Auguste comin' up, and Flamande's got to work damn fast. Out he goes through the window, up the buttress, selects Hayward's room at random, and is through the window and out the door—in time to meet Auguste as he leaves the room."

Middleton spoke in a shocked voice.

"You're saying that all the time this Gilbert Drummond's body was lying behind the tapestry?"

"Uh-huh," said H.M. "And, if you'll use your brains a few seconds more, you'll see the proof of it.

"In order to understand the position he was in let's look at the case from the beginning and see just what Flamande had intended to do. There again we've got to work from hints. Flamande was at Marseilles. His first scheme was plain. He was really goin' to be aboard that plane and he was goin' to be Harvey Drummond. He had learned the identity of the two British agents, or say he didn't know Drummond was a secret agent but had seen him at a hotel in Marseilles, noted their resemblance, learned that Drummond had a seat in the plane on which Flamande intended to travel, and decided to kill him and impersonate him."

D'ANDRIEU held up his hand.

"We will take that explanation, if you please," said d'Andrieu firmly. "The papers in Gilbert Drummond's brief-case, and the statement he drew up in case anything should happen to him—"

"Uh-huh. There we're on facts. The statement we found this mornin', when we found the brief-case in Hébert's room, makes the murder at Marseilles clear.

"Harvey Drummond, like the Cheyne wench here, had got his instructions several days ago. The 'sealed orders' made him mad. He wanted to know what was goin' on. He was instructed to meet her at Lemoine's and proceed to this inn outside Orléans where the 'plant' was originally intended to take place. Correct?"

"Yes," said our host. "It was changed on my meeting d'Andrieu."

"Now then, accordin' to Gilbert's statement, Harvey couldn't rest without knowin' what was goin' on. He knew part of his business was to guard Ramsden, and he knew Ramsden was to be at Marseilles on the third and fourth of May. So Harvey gets the idea of sneakin' down to see what's goin' on in Marseilles.

"In Marseilles he runs into Gilbert, who's on a holiday. They've put up at different hotels, because neither knows the other is there. He tells Gilbert what's goin' on but, though he snoops about, he can't get wind of what's up—until somebody prints an indiscreet guess in one newspaper about the unicorn."

"Meaning me," said Fowler. "That's why I was in Marseilles at all, and why I was trailing you, Sir George. You see, I admitted it, so I wasn't under false colors."

"Meanin' you. We'll come to the unicorn in a minute. Well, Drummond begins to guess, and he's even more determined to stick close to Ramsden, unobserved, and act as a real guard. Hang the instructions, says the swaggerin' Harvey! Gilbert, who's goin' to

Paris, has already booked a seat on the evening plane. So Harvey does the same.

"Meantime, Flamande is ready to snaffle Harvey, kill him, and take his place. Only, d'ye see, Flamande knows nothin' about brother Gilbert!

"And then came the mix-up that threw the whole case out of gear when, as Gilbert's statement says, Harvey was attacked and murdered in that park. Harvey had come roaring down to Marseilles without any luggage to speak of. He had borrowed, and was wearin' a suit of Gilbert's clothes, with tailor's label and all inside.

"Flamande waylays him, and when Drummond shows fight, lets him have it with the humane-killer. Nice feller, Flamande. Spectacular and mean as hell. He strips the body of everything belongin' to Harvey. Nothing —he thinks—is there to identify the body. He finds Drummond's papers, identifications, service card, and even instructions. A grand haul, maybe an unexpected haul.

"Now, from what we know, try to reconstruct Flamande's thoughts. Here's a British agent with instructions to guard what Flamande is goin' after. But what the devil's this? Here are instructions tellin' Drummond to be in Paris; to meet the other agent, Evelyn Cheyne, on the terrace at Lemoine's at eight-thirty on Friday evening, to proceed thence to an inn, and so on—I don't need to repeat it—to which Sir George Ramsden will come. 'Burn me,' thinks Flamande, 'what's the game? Why is Ramsden supposed to go there when so far as I know he's goin' direct to Paris? Son, be careful!'

"And he must have got an even worse jolt when he opened his newspaper next morning and saw that the dead man had been identified, by marks in his clothing, as bein' *Gilbert* Drummond. Has he killed the wrong man? Who is Gilbert Drummond? Then he sees that Harvey is mentioned as his brother. Flamande knows it was Harvey he killed, from the identification papers he stole. It was Harvey in one of Gilbert's suits?

"A worse thought: Is it possible that Gilbert is travelin' to Paris on the plane Harvey was to have taken? If so, Flamande is sunk. He can't put across his imposture on the brother of the dead man. He learns at last by a phone call that both brothers booked seats on that plane. He can't travel by that plane, because he's got to be Harvey Drummond or nobody.

"Naturally, Gilbert will go immediately to the authorities and say, 'Here, I'm alive. It was my brother who was killed.' He might not even take the plane, yet still Flamande is sunk. The news that Harvey Drummond had been murdered would soon be common property, and if a dead man walks coolly on that plane his game will be queered even before the plane leaves Marseilles."

H. M. PAUSED for a moment, dramatically. Then he continued:

"Well, what's he goin' to do? He's still got one chance left. There's an earlier plane to Paris and, if he hops it, he can get to Paris by afternoon. He can still follow the instructions given to Harvey Drummond, and be at Lemoine's at eight-thirty to meet the other agent. Of course he's got to chance it that the two agents ain't well known to each other, but it's his only way out. He knows they're goin' to see Ramsden sooner or later. If not at this end, then the other end, and Flamande smells hanky-panky somewhere.

"Meantime, what's happened to Gilbert, the real Gilbert? We don't have to think that out; we know from the statement. He was pasted in the eye by the announcement that he was supposed to be dead but, since he's far from bein' the biggest fool in London, he realizes what must have happened. Harvey had been waylaid and killed by the man who threatened in the same issue of the paper to be aboard the plane. There's goin' to be trouble of some kind on the plane. Evidently the murderer knows nothin' about brother Gilbert at all. Well, what can Gilbert do? There are two courses. He can go to the police, set right the mistake, and announce who he is. But while he's bein' hung up in the investigation and before he can prove who he actually is, the plane will hop away without him, and the murderer's plan—whatever it is—will go through accordin' to schedule. Suppose he assumed the identity of Harvey, and gets a neat knockout punch at the murderer of his brother? He can't let

the police into his own scheme, or there'll be delay that may wreck the whole business, but a trick like that would have one great advantage.

"Suppose the murderer is goin' to assume the identity of Harvey Drummond? Two Harvey Drummonds turn up at the airport. 'Gentlemen, gentlemen, what's this?' say the officials. 'It's an imposture,' says Gilbert, 'and let's just stop here until we can prove it is, while you keep both of us under guard.' Anyhow, Gilbert did it. He cleaned out all his possessions except his own Gilbert-Drummond passport, which he left behind to make it seem that he was really dead, and which the hotel people found. And he goes.

H.M. grunted.

"By the way," he said, "you people should have spotted a bit of it. Didn't the letter from Gasquet to Gasquet, the one our friend here wrote to himself, give a list of passengers, and didn't it say that the 'MM,' or the Messieurs Drummond had booked seats in that plane? How'd it come that Harvey didn't know anything about his brother's death, or appear to know anything?

"But turn our camera round now, and look at what Flamande is doin'. So far he's been playin' in blinkin' awful luck; and more bad luck swings up and gets him. Flamande, playing Harvey Drummond, has boldly gone to a *commissariat* of police in Paris. He's presented his credentials, just to make sure of a line of defense, he's borrowed the uniform of an *agent,* and he's waitin' for what will happen at Lemoine's at eight-thirty. Well, up walks Evelyn at the appointed time. She goes over to Ken, makin' the original mistake—God help her if she'd chosen the other feller, though!—and repeats the signal verse about the lion and the unicorn. Then Flamande's hair blinkin' well does rise! What's this? A new scheme? New agents, with the plans all changed? He don't dare butt in right there, because he has to feel his way. What are they up to? Naturally he's got to assume the plan has been altered. Now he may be out of it.

"What's to be done? Well, he's got the cooperation of the police. Suppose he follows the two agents wherever they go. He stops 'em all nice and legal, finds out where they're goin', who they are, and what the game is. Then he launches a charge at them, and has them hauled off to clink *for the night* despite any protestations they make. He can sneak off and be at whatever rendezvous has been made, as the real secret agent, and he needs only a few hours to work before he vanishes."

CHAPTER XIX

The Truth

NOT a sound did any of us make when H.M. stopped again, frowning, as if to coordinate his thoughts. But each of us realized that his reconstruction was clear as crystal.

Abruptly he went on.

"You know what did happen," he said. "Flamande was done in the eye, and the birds flew away. He was wild. But he wasn't goin' to be beaten. They'd pinched the certificate which he had pinched to begin with. And he was goin' after 'em if he had to walk. I think he sent the two coppers in the other direction, and started out, carrying his brown bag with the useful humane-killer in the false bottom. But he got over the rise of a hill, and what did he see, hey? A plane comin' down, and lots of rummy things that suddenly tied together in his mind.

"It was a plant. He knew that now. He was goin' to get into that house.

"Was Gilbert Drummond aboard that plane? If he was—well, Flamande would have to get into the house secretly. On the road he almost runs into two bogged cars, both of which he's seen before. The people have left 'em. Of course they're with the others. Flamande shoves his brown bag into the rear of one of the cars, to get rid of it, while he creeps up and has a look.

"Now think back. Three people stayed behind monkeyin' with the plane—Hébert, Fowler and Gilbert Drummond. Flamande undoubtedly hears Drummond. Not only that, but the plane was lit up. Flamande must have had his stomach turn upside down to see a man who looked almost like himself.

"He's sure Harvey is dead. What's the infernal trick? But *now* he can walk boldly into the house and hide himself until the proper time, because he looks exactly like the other chap. If anybody sees him, it won't matter so long as they're not seen together. He walks in and gets himself hid. Downstairs, he had any of those unoccupied rooms to conceal himself in until he had a chance to strike.

"You know what did happen. Gilbert Drummond was caught in a lie, and pretended he was Gasquet. Flamande must have sung for joy. If he can kill Gilbert—well, his identity has been established as that of Harvey Drummond. He can walk into the house openly, pretendin' he's just arrived, and do as he likes.

"He killed Gilbert and left the body behind the tapestry. All he has to do now is destroy any evidence Gilbert may have, get out of the house, and reappear."

"Lord, I see it!" said Hayward. "Just as he's preparing to fire the suitcases out of the window—"

"Uh-huh. You got it. He hears shouts that the causeway is down. He's trapped in the house."

There was a pause. H.M. nodded, staring at his fingers.

"D'ye wonder he was wild, hey?" he inquired rather admiringly. "What in the name of sanity is he goin' to do now? The whole scheme was based on his gettin' out of the house and comin' back in again.

"Worse! There's that body behind the tapestry. Any minute they'll likely discover it. Any minute somebody is likely to come up and inquire why he doesn't come down to put his evidence before Ramsden and me. He can't delay. And he can't try to brazen it out because, while he was a passable imitation from a distance of the chap we saw downstairs, he can't carry it off all evening, especially in front of Evelyn and Ken who'd had such a good and close look at him.

"Only one thing to do—hide. Hide, before somebody finds both him in this room and the body behind the tapestry. If he can hide until he finds a way to get off the island, they'll think the murder was done by some person in the house.

"He's already typed his note which he was going to leave in some conspicuous place to help the illusion. Is there a way out of his room, not along the gallery? He goes a-scoutin', and finds a little door leadin' into the linen closet. He shoves the typewriter in there, and looks around. Light-switch! If he can put out the lights, and creep down to one of those downstairs rooms—good!"

MERRIVALE held up one finger in emphasis, then went on:

"First get rid of all evidence. He glances out the window, and sees electric lights shinin' from Auguste's window. In he goes to the linen closet, cuts the switch, and hurries to chuck out the luggage. If he's seen he's afraid that, when they find the body downstairs, they'll realize there was a double—the murderer—in the house after the man was dead.

"It was Flamande's tightest corner. He has held out an imposin'-lookin' letter-file, without anything important inside it but givin' a businesslike look if he's seen. He takes his nerve in both hands, opens the door to the gallery, and looks out. The downstairs lights are still on. How the devil can he get downstairs without bein' seen. Somebody—me—is comin' across the lower hall. He suddenly realizes that a door is open just across from him. Fowler has seen him. Good God, there's somebody else coming too! It's Madame Elsa. Now he's trapped, with people on every side.

"But in that extremity, friends, he acted like Flamande. He did the only thing he could have done to get out of the scrape. He could make the murder take place then and there!

"You know what he did, almost under the eyes of witnesses. He went to the head of the stairs. He knew exactly where the body was lying, just inside the tapestry. It would be touch-and-go but he had a chance. He screamed, clapped his hands to his head, and threw himself down. He'd seen before that the floor of the landing is invisible from above, except to anybody looking straight down. He chucked himself down, the letter-file in his pocket. Didn't it occur to you it must have been, since he put both hands

to his face? He rolled across under the tapestry, and at the same time rolled the dead body out with his shoulder, and sent it toppling down the stairs.

"Got it? One man tumbled down the first flight. Another, a dead man, completed the descent. Gasquet, my lad, that reconstruction of yours was smart enough; ingenious, and rather too easy. But it would've needed too much time. For a murderer to have come out from behind that tapestry, shot the chap with the humane-killer, pulled out the captive-bolt, and rolled him on, would've required more than those couple of seconds before Fowler looked down on the landing. This merely meant a man, himself, lyin' on the floor, rollin' out another body while he crawled behind the tapestry.

"Once behind the tapestry, he went out, and up through Hayward's window. Next question—where to hide up here?"

"Stop a bit!" interposed Ramsden. "You were talking about this humane-killer. The last time we heard of it, it was in the false bottom of a brown bag which he had put out of sight in the rear of a car out in the road."

"Sure. And which was brought in by Auguste with the rest of the baggage, and taken upstairs by Joseph. They supposed it belonged to Ken. Well, it was in the lower hall. Flamande, I think, took the gun out of it as soon as he came into the house. Because of those pillars out there, a man could hide in that hallway even when there were other people in it. Well, he got the gun, but he couldn't walk about with the bag. So he had to leave it there and notice to which room it was taken.

"It was taken to Ken's, and that gave Flamande his idea—though he couldn't put it into operation yet. When he'd finished his murder, and when Auguste went downstairs just before you people came up, he pinched Fowler's typewriter. Also, he went into Ken's room, put the humane-killer back into the false bottom of the bag, and hid the bag there, probably behind one of those thick hangings. Ken didn't know anything about it.

"Flamande's original plan, I'll lay you a tenner, was to let somebody find the bag hidden there. He could be pretty sure there'd be a search. There was nothing in it to incriminate him, and everybody thought it belonged to Ken. Oh, the whole thing was devilish logical. He hated Ken worse than poison for makin' a fool of him back on the road. Ken was goin' to smart for this; Ken was goin' to be accused, coolly and carefully. For, when Flamande turned up here as the outraged and robbed Harvey Drummond, *he* was goin' to find the humane-killer in the false bottom if nobody else did. He was goin' to have Ken on toast. I think I once remarked that, if anybody ever made a fool of Flamande, he'd crawl out of his grave to get even."

H. M.'S EXPRESSION had become very grim.

"Well, after tossin' the corpse downstairs, and crawlin' back up into the house again, where can he hide? Only one place, until he can get downstairs—in his own room, or rather, the room the man now dead had occupied. Does that sound mad? No, because it had a door communicatin' with the linen closet. If we come into his room, he slips into the linen closet. If we come into the linen closet, back he goes to the hangings in his own room. Good thing, those hangings in the bedrooms! This house may not have secret passages, but it's admirable for hidin' nearly anywhere. Besides, we couldn't surprise him because there are only oil lamps in the rooms, and he can be out of sight before a light is struck.

"We came upstairs to reconstruct the crime, and again my small wager is laid that he was in the linen closet, with the door to his room open, at the very time Gasquet and Ken and I were in there gropin' after the light switch. Flamande left his note when, in the faint glow outside, he could see Ken silhouetted as he came in, and heard him speak to me. If he left the note there, there'd be apparently only three people who could have dropped it. But he *threw* the note, or I wouldn't have seen the white flicker. That flicker proved it came from the back of the linen closet, where there couldn't have been anybody unless it was someone concealed.

"And so, friends, Gasquet was quite right

in sayin' that Ken must have been the one who concealed the pistol and made the mud marks on the window sill, because nobody else in our group was either absent from it for a second or had muddy shoes. But I believed Ken, so there was only one it could have been.

"Of course you can guess about the brown valise now. Flamande had plenty of time to improve his scheme when we were downstairs just before supper. He was goin' to truss Ken up in such circumstantial rope he couldn't move. So down he goes to Ken's room, empties Ken's black bag of belongings, and does his trick of gettin' rid of it through the window. He fills the brown bag with Ken's stuff, leaves the gun in the false bottom and, since Auguste will swear to findin' the bag in Ken's car, who's to prove it doesn't belong to Ken?

"The plot succeeded pretty well. Flamande was listenin' and gloatin'. He saw every move we made, burn him! And there I was, feelin' sure he was in the house, yet I was helpless because friend Gasquet was grimly set on opposin' anything I suggested. I made him doubtful only when Evelyn and I lied up-hill-down-dale about that attack in the road."

"We need not, I think, go into that," observed d'Andrieu amiably.

"But my spirits hit bottom when I heard you people had a bridge ready to throw across the yawnin' chasm, and were goin' to whisk away Evelyn and Ken while Flamande rubbed his hands. It was Flamande's cue to walk out of the house, especially since he'd heard that Ramsden wasn't carryin' the unicorn. Well, after those two had been put upstairs in clink, I took friend Gasquet aside for a talk. It was gettin' desperate for me, too, because good old Marcel Celestin, the cab driver, had given us all some nasty knocks. But I'm happy to say that Gasquet's native good sense—"

D'Andrieu coughed. "What he means, my friends," he said, "is at the crucial point who should enter but Sergeant Allain with the brief-case which had been lying *perdu* in Dr. Hébert's room. It contained proof—"

Auguste was scowling heavily.

"If you will excuse me for I speak now," he interposed, "but what of that case? Did Flamande know of it, or did he overlook it?"

"I don't think he knew about it," said H.M. "He couldn't have overheard the talk that took place between Auguste and Drummond in Drummond's room. He knew there was somethin' missing, because Auguste had been sent to look for it; but he didn't know what and he didn't dare ask. When he found a few papers in Drummond's suitcases, he hoped he'd got the lot.

"Finally, when friend Gasquet and I were sure, and Gasquet had agreed with me that Flamande was loose in the house, it was almost too late. If we banged out with a search through the house, sendin' beaters through the brush and showing we had tumbled to the whole scheme, it's about an even chance he'd have slipped us. The bridge was down, the river was peaceful enough to swim, and we didn't like the risk of his wrigglin' through. As it was, he firmly believed he could walk into the house any time he liked in the rôle of Harvey Drummond.

"But we did feel sure that, if I cooked up a plan for Ken and the gal to escape, he couldn't resist stoppin' 'em and walkin' straight into our hands. It was a gamble on Flamande's character. He could have got out if he hadn't been so vindictive-set on sendin' those people to Paris in handcuffs. Nice feller, Flamande. Thoroughly pleasant."

There was a long silence.

"Just one little thing," I said. "You might explain about the unicorn. I've been asked what I know about unicorns, and how they are connected with India, but nobody has yet explained."

Ramsden chuckled.

"You got a hint about India, did you?" He glanced at Fowler. "By the way, you young pup, in your desire for casual and shattering remarks, I thought you were going to blow the gaff when you first came in last night and asked after the health of the Nizam."

"But what is it?" I demanded. "I've mulled over every legend. That the unicorn's horn is a charm against poison. That it can become invisible. That it can be captured

only with the aid of a virgin—"

For some reason this seemed to amuse Ramsden inordinately.

"No harm in speaking, I suppose, since we've caught Flamande," he grunted. "Know anything else about the unicorn? It goes farther back than nursery tales. Fact is, the first description we get of one is from—"

"Aristotle," growled H.M. "This is my province, son. Bah! You know the only animals old Aristotle describes as havin' one horn? They're the 'Oryx and the Indian ass,' and somebody's made an awful Indian ass of you in this business. Aristotle was taken pretty much as a god o' science, and his authority was *the* authority for a long time. It's claimed that later accounts of the Indian unicorn were influenced by the rhinoceros, but India was taken as its native haunt. Even a whoppin' lot of years later a certain mine at Partial was known as the Unicorn mine."

EVELYN uttered a cry of delight. Her face became triumphant.

"I thought so," cried Evelyn. "It's near Golconda, isn't it?"

"Golconda!" I yelped. "You don't mean the diamond mines? Hang it, they've been deserted and out of operation for so many years that—"

"Easy, now," said H.M. soothingly. "Besides, Golconda was the place where the stones were cut and polished. Think again. What's the only independent native state in India where the ruler is known as the Nizam?"

"Hyderabad," said Evelyn, and made a triumphant face at me. "Golconda is only seven miles away."

"I suppose, if you glanced at a newspaper, you saw an account of trouble in India?"

"It was the first thing I did notice in this confounded business," I said, "just before I read about Flamande and Gasquet. But I only looked at the headlines. What's it about?"

Ramsden hesitated. "No need to prattle about politics," he growled. "Briefly, there's a new diamond-field that's been turned up at Partial; the old Unicorn filed, that was supposed to be played out. It'll turn out to be rather richer than anything Rhodes found in South Africa. It's so big that . . . well, it could have caused a devil of a lot of trouble. Hyderabad is Hindu, but it's governing class is nearly all Mohammedan. There was a local governor of the city who was out for trouble. With the possibilities unfolded by that discovery, it might have been touch-and-go with the people if it didn't happen that the Nizam is the strongest and best man in the country, and his government advisers back him up. His answer to the trouble was a little present for the King of England. Inside this particular gift there was a small inscription to the effect that the new wealth of India would not be used to fight the friends of India. As a small token His Highness would like His Majesty to accept this small gift—the flat figure of a unicorn some ten inches long, and made entirely from the finest diamonds taken from the new field. And it went to London yesterday. I had to sneak in and out to Hyderabad to make sure all went well. I even had to go to Athens to lay a false trail."

He chuckled again, shrugged his shoulders, and got up.

"The plane, I hear, is ready to take us to Paris," he said. "Shall we go on? I think a place could be found for you, Merrivale, if you'd like to send the taxi back?" He looked at d'Andrieu, who beamingly nodded. "What about you two?"

I looked at Evelyn, and we grinned at each other.

"Not this trip," I said firmly. "We've decided to see a little of southern France."

"Naturally!" roared H.M., and over his face stole an expression of profound glee. "That was always my advice, wasn't it? And if you must go by the legends, now that the unicorn's captured there's no goddam use for a—"

"For a charm against poison, of course!" said Evelyn, and winked. "La, sir, how you do go on!"

●

MURDER C.O.D.

Trust can sometimes be a deadly weapon when it is properly applied

by
ROBERT TURNER

THE little furnished room was stinking hot and stuffy, but Janisek didn't seem to mind it. He sprawled back on the old creaky iron-runged bed, blowing lazy smoke rings toward the fly-specked ceiling. He grinned, his sharp, dark, good looking features twisting crookedly as he thought about old man Gramercy.

It was really ironic, he thought. Right now, he and Gramercy were both doing the same thing. They were both hanging around in a sweat of happy expectation,

waiting for the mail man to come. Waiting for the mail man to bring them fifty thousand dollars in cash, in nice crisp hundred dollar bills. The only thing was, poor old Gramercy was going to be disappointed.

Janisek could almost see the old man's wrinkled, pleasant looking face when he finally found out that he wasn't getting any mail this morning. When he realized that something had gone wrong. Veins stood out in Gramercy's temples and in his loose-folded throat when he got angry and he dropped his pose of being a dignified, kindly old man of means. He swore with the complete and long-winded vocabulary of a sewer worker. It was something to watch and listen to Gramercy when he was mad. Janisek was sorry that he had to miss it.

The part that Janisek liked especially was that the old guy was supposed to be teaching *him* the tricks of the crime trade. Over a year now they'd been working together, and Gramercy had taught him a lot. It had been a good life, with plenty of money for them both, for as Gramercy had foreseen at the start, they'd made a good combination.

But it was beginning to pall on Janisek. The old guy and his cut and dried confidence games were starting to bore him. Janisek had been about ready to pull out, anyhow. Then this beautiful break had come up and made everything perfect, fixed it so that he would be able to leave Gramercy with something more to show than a nice wardrobe of clothes and a lot of experience.

He remembered the day he'd first met Gramercy. Janisek had been just an ignorant young punk then. He'd tried to hold up the old guy. Gramercy had told him: "Sure I'll give you my dough, son. I won't give you any trouble. But I hate to see a kid like you taking chances like this for a few lousy bucks. With your youth and good looks, you should be in the big time, playing the game the smart way, the safe way, for big stakes. If you'll put that gun away, I'll take you some place and buy you a drink and we'll talk it over. What do you say?"

Gramercy was handsomely dressed, obviously reeking of money. He looked smart, and Janisek knew there was a lot of sense in the things the old guy had said. Something in his tone of voice, in Gramercy's friendly, easy grin, made Janisek decide to take him up on the proposition.

OVER the drinks, Gramercy had told him: "Kid, I'm getting old, and I'm getting lonesome, tired of working alone. I don't know, maybe it's the old paternal instincts in me, breaking out. Call it what you want. Anyhow, here's the pitch. I've got some ideas for a father-son con game that are dillies. I'll stake you to some good clothes, teach you how to talk and act around places and people where the big money is. We'll work as a team. Your youth and good looks will dazzle the old dames so that it will be easier for me to take them over."

Janisek kept listening, and the more the old boy talked, outlining his plans, the better it sounded to Janisek. He didn't see what he had to lose. That was over a year ago, now, and it had worked out nicely for both of them. Up to now. Today it was going to work out nicely—for Janisek only.

Several days ago, Gramercy had come back to their apartment and his old blue eyes were abnormally bright, his cheeks feverish with excitement. He slapped Janisek on the back, told him: "I ran into something big, today, boy. The break that comes once in a lifetime. A fifty grand deal that was just as easy as picking berries off a bush."

He told Janisek all about it. It seemed that some years ago, Gramercy had been married to a girl much younger than himself. They had been caught on an oil stock deal and both of them had served time on it. Gramercy never saw the girl again after that. He never heard from her, even, hadn't known whether she was alive or dead, hadn't cared much, for that matter.

"But today I bumped into her," he went on. "She's changed—a little heavier, older, of course. But I recognized her right away. She knew me, too. I wish you could have seen her face when I approached her. And guess who she is today, boy? Guess what's happened since we split up?"

"Come on, Dan," Janisek said impatiently.. "Get to the payoff part and stop playing games." This was one of the things

about the old gent that was beginning to annoy him. Dan Gramercy was beginning to show his age; he talked too much, got almost childish at times.

"All right, all right," Gramercy said. "It's like this. My old wife, Kathy, got a Mexican divorce some years ago. She's remarried. She's now a very highly respected married matron and nobody in the swank set she moves in even suspects that she was once a con gal, that she even served time. Not the wife of Charles E. Pennifield, the big chain store magnate who's running for governor this term. You begin to get it, boy?"

"Sure," Janisek said. "I get it. What do you think I am, stupid? Blackmail. You put the squeeze on her to stay quiet, to stay in the background and not louse up her setup and her husband's chances for the election. But for how much?"

"Fifty thousand. She squawked and balked like a mule for a long time. She wept and threatened and tried everything to throw me off. She said she couldn't get any cash without her husband getting wise. But we finally worked it out that she would sell her jewels and some property he'd given her."

Janisek felt sick to his stomach at the idea of the old man getting all that cash. He couldn't help showing his resentment. He said: "I'm supposed to get all excited about this? Where do I come in? It's your gimmick. Don't tell me you're going to split with me for that kind of dough, just out of the goodness of your kind old heart!"

Gramercy raised his silky white brows, looked a little hurt. "Well, not exactly, kid," he said. "But you're in on it. Fifty grand isn't so much. You think I'm going to retire just because of a stake like that? Not on your life. That's just going to be working capital. That's just going to set us up to operate on the real top level, where we'll be able to shoot for millions. Do you understand, kid, millions?"

Janisek stared at him unbelievingly, thinking about it. Finally, slowly, he said: "Yeah, yeah! I see what you mean."

A little later Gramercy had let slip some of the details of the payoff deal with his ex-wife. She had insisted that if she paid him the money, she didn't ever want to set eyes on him again. Not even for the payoff. She insisted that she would package the money and send it to him through the mail. When he heard that, Janisek immediately started to cook up some way in which he could get that big hunk of cash all to himself. The more he thought about it the less he thought of the idea of using all that moola for working capital to set them up for bigger deals. Janisek had a philosophy that life was short and life was sweet and money was meant to be spent as fast and pleasurably as possible, on the theory that tomorrow you might be dead or in jail and it wouldn't do you any good.

Finally the gimmick, the way to get that money away from the old man came to Janisek. It was so simple that it was almost silly. There was nothing to it, nothing to go wrong. There couldn't possibly be any slip-ups.

He had rented this furnished room. Then he had gone to the post office and filled out a change-of-address form in Dan Gramercy's name, giving this as the forwarding address. Since the room was rented in Gramercy's name and Janisek had established his identity with the landlady as Gramercy, everything was all set. All he had to do was wait for the package of currency to arrive. It had been mailed from Long Island two days ago, Gramercy had told him, so it was sure to arrive today.

Janisek lay there in the suffocating closeness of the furnished room, going back over all this in his mind, telling himself how smart he was, how simple it was to fool even a smart old cookie like Gramercy. Once he laughed right out loud, remembering that one of the first rules the old man had taught him was never to trust anybody, not anybody at all. He thought how lucky it was for him that Gramercy didn't practice what he preached.

LOOKING at his watch, Janisek saw that it was a quarter past ten. The mail man would arrive in approximately fifteen minutes. He got up and went over to the cheap porcelein washbowl and bathed his face and shaved. He got dressed and was all ready to go out when the knock sounded on the door and the landlady's rasping voice said: "It's me, Mr. Gramercy. I brought up some mail for you."

His heart beginning to pound, sweat clammy in the palms of his hands now that the big moment had arrived, Janisek strode toward the door, swung it open. The landlady held several letters and a small package about the size of a cigarbox in her scrawny hands. She said: "I brought it up to you since there was this here package. I don't like to leave packages lying around on the table down in the hall with the rest of the mail for the roomers. Sometimes they contain something valuable."

They do, they certainly do, Janisek told himself. "Not in this case," he said, aloud. "Just a box of cigars I ordered from a mail order house. But thanks for bringing it up anyhow."

He almost slammed the door in the old crone's face he was in such a hurry to get the package open, to get his hands on that great wad of cash. Fifty thousand dollars! Maybe that didn't seem like much money to old Gramercy but it was plenty to last Janisek for awhile. He wasn't a hog. He didn't want all the money in the world. This would do him fine for a while.

Before he could get the package completely unwrapped, Janisek heard the door open behind him again. He wheeled about im-

[*Turn page*]

patiently, thinking that it was the landlady come back for something, or maybe to spy on him. But it wasn't. It was a man. He stepped silently into the room and eased the door shut behind him, leaned against it. He was a big, portly man with snow white hair and brows and a wrinkled, kindly face. The eyes were hard now, flecked with steely glints.

"Hello, kid," Dan Gramercy said. "What do you have there? A little gift, maybe? Somebody sent you a present?"

Janisek felt his chin hitting his chest. He stared with horror at the automatic that the old man was pointing at his stomach. "Dan," he said. "I—well—I—" No excuse would come, no explanation. He could not seem to find the right words.

Gramercy grinned. It was not his usually pleasant, benign expression that always softened up the old ladies he conned. This grin was more like a mask, a frozen mask. He said: "Don't bother explaining, kid. I know all about it. You remember I told you once, never to trust anybody, no matter who they were? Well, that's one of my favorite rules. It's gotten me out of many a jam. This time it's saved me fifty grand, hasn't it, son?"

Janisek's voice broke slightly as he croaked:

"How—how did you find out?"

Slowly the masklike smile slipped from Dan Gramercy's face and he looked very old, very tired. He sighed deeply. "You must think me pretty stupid, boy. To set myself up for a double-cross like this. I did it on purpose. It was to test you out. I wanted to make sure that you weren't a double dealer before I let you in on the big takes this fifty grand would have enabled us to make. But you didn't come through. That's too bad, kid. I really liked you. You've become fairly clever, too. That change of address gadget was neatly worked. Only you weren't quite clever enough. You didn't realize that I've been following you everywhere you went the past couple of days."

Everything inside Janisek seemed to be swirling like butter in a churn. He felt the weight of the package in his hand. He thought about all that money, right here in his hands—and now it was about to slip through his fingers. Anger seemed to make his head swell. Damn the old guy, anyhow! He wasn't going to let him get away with this, no matter what.

"All right, kid," Gramercy said. "Toss that package of money here."

Janisek stared at the automatic in Gramercy's hand. Finally, he said: "Okay, Dan. I guess you win."

HE MOVED as though to make an easy underhand toss but at the last moment he flung the heavy package with every ounce of his strength, straight at the old man's face. Dan Gramercy's reflexes had been slowed by age. He didn't get his free hand up in time. The package struck him in the face, tumbled to the floor. Before he could squeeze the trigger of the gun, Janisek was upon him, wrenching and twisting his frail old wrist until he was forced to let go of the gun.

Then, together, they bent and both snatched at the package on the floor at the same time. The moves were simultaneous and their heads cracked together, staggering them both backwards a little. Each had hooked his fingers through the last strand of string that held the package together and it was pulled apart and broken, allowing the cover of the box to pop up.

The flash of flame seemed to fill the whole room. The explosion buckled the walls. It splintered the furniture. The sound of it was heard for blocks around when the homemade bomb inside the package went off.

Neither Dan Gramercy nor Janisek ever knew what had happened to them. There was no time for either to realize they had broken Gramercy's cardinal rule. They had trusted the woman Gramercy was blackmailing. They should have remembered not to trust anybody.

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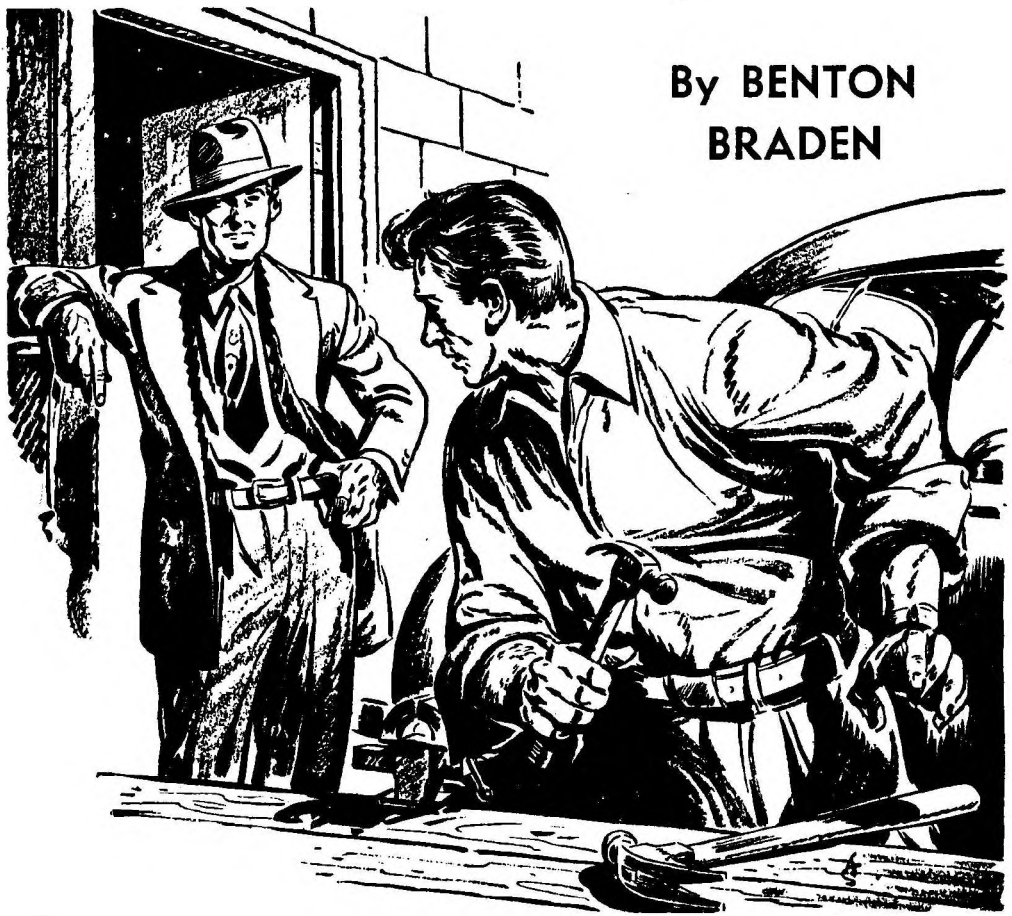
The Illusory Accomplice

By BENTON BRADEN



Every shred of evidence points to Joe Ford as the killer of his wealthy aunt, but—

JOE FORD was a methodical young man. He liked to have a time for everything and to do everything on time. Now it was seven-thirty in the evening and according to his almost invariable practise he was turning in at the short walk that led up to the house of Aunt Sarah Palter. Sarah Palter wasn't really his aunt but she had been a lifetime friend and neighbor of Joe's mother and since his mother's death Joe had rarely failed to visit her at this hour and chat with her before she went to bed.

Joe Ford sensed that something was wrong when he stepped up on Aunt Sarah's porch. He realized, after a second's hesitation, what it was. A faint light should have showed from the sitting-room where Aunt Sarah would be waiting for him. Ordinarily he would have seen that faint light as soon as he looked through the glass pane in the door.

But there was no light tonight. The whole house was shrouded in blackness.

Aunt Sarah never expected him to knock. He always opened the door and called out her name as he went in. Now he opened the front door and called, "Aunt Sarah!" a bit more loudly than usual. There was no answer. He reached for the light switch in the hall, found it, flipped it. He stared as light flooded the hall, then called out again. There was no answer.

He walked down the hall to the door of the sitting-room. It was open. He could see only vague shapes in the darkened room but there was something about those shadowy objects that disturbed him and made his face suddenly grim. Joe Ford could feel, at that instant, that he was in the presence of death. He reached inside for the switch, turned on the lights.

He gasped and his eyes went wide in horror. For fifteen seconds he stood almost motionlessly, hardly believing that what he saw could possibly be real. But it was real. Aunt Sarah Palter lay on the floor by the side of the great wicker rocking chair in which she always sat. She was not only dead; she had been murdered. There was a bloody wound in her head.

THE sitting-room was in disorder. A chair was overturned, the drawers of a desk had been pulled out and the contents scattered over the floor. Joe's first impression was that she had been murdered by a chance prowler. Joe knew, as almost everyone in the neighborhood knew, that Aunt Sarah had never kept anything of value in her house. Not that she was poor. Actually she had something like a hundred thousand in stocks and bonds that provided her with a comfortable income.

Aside from the shock of discovering this tragedy, Joe had a feeling of uneasiness. There was something wrong about the manner in which things had been thrown about the room. This apparent search had been overdone. This impression was confirmed when Joe went on to the end of the sitting-room into the small first floor bedroom that Aunt Sarah used and turned on the light there. The bedroom looked like it had been hit by a small tornado. Overdone! The killer had sought to cover up his real motive by simulating a search of the rooms.

Joe realized that if his inexperienced eyes informed him that the search was a phoney one the police, when they came, would be quick to perceive it. Joe swallowed hard as he realized the implications.

The police would immediately seek the real motive, ask who it was that would profit most by the death of Aunt Sarah Palter. Joe knew that it was unfortunate for him that he had been the one to first stumble upon this scene, the one who would have to first report it to the police. For outside of a small bequest to a nephew, Aunt Sarah's will left everything she possessed to Joe Ford. There was no secret about that. Aunt Sarah had told many persons that Joe had been like a son to her and that she was leaving everything she had to him.

He went back into the sitting-room and looked more closely. The wound on Aunt Sarah's head was a fresh one. She could hardly have been dead more than fifteen minutes before he had entered the room. And everyone who knew him and Aunt Sarah knew that he made this visit to her every night. They also knew how punctual Joe was—so punctual that he could be counted on to step up on Aunt Sarah's porch at seven-thirty, almost to the minute. Had that been part of the killer's plan?

Joe knew that he had no right to waste time in conjecture and deliberation now, that it was his duty to report the murder to the police without delay. He went back into the hall and picked up the phone, held it for a few seconds before he realized that it was dead. He looked down, saw that the wires had been cut. The scissors the killer had used lay on the floor.

Joe ran out of the house and on to his own home next door, the house where he had lived alone since the death of his mother. There, on his own phone, he called police headquarters and reported the tragedy. He went back over to Sarah Palter's house and stood on the front porch, waited there until two police cars roared up and slid to a stop with screeching brakes. Several officers piled out and ran up the walk. The stocky man

in the lead slowed, looked questioningly at Joe as he reached the porch.

"My name is Joe Ford," Joe informed him. "I live next door. I always drop in to visit with Mrs. Palter at this time of the evening. Tonight I found the house dark. I went on in, found her—"

"I'm Max Sawyer, Sergeant of Detectives," the stocky man said crisply. "Let's go on in and have a look."

Joe led them through the hall, stood aside and pointed when he reached the door of the sitting-room. The sergeant and one of his men went in first and made a brief examination alone.

"This is staged!" the man with the sergeant said sharply after they had looked in the bedroom. "The guy that did this wasn't looking for anything. He was just trying to see how much of a mess he could make in a few minutes, trying to make it look like a burglary. Covering up his real motive for the kill."

"Right," Sergeant Sawyer grunted. "We won't waste any time looking for a phantom burglar. You can see what happened. The killer worked fast. He came right in to this room and killed the old lady. Hit her on the head with something like a hammer. No more than an hour ago if that long. Look at that fresh wound. Then the killer spent maybe five minutes in messing up the place.

"Some of the obvious places that a real burglar would search first haven't been touched," Sawyer went on. "But the chairs are the real tip-off. One chair in the sitting-room and two in the bedroom turned upside down. No real burglar would have touched those chairs. The killer must have thought we'd be saps to fall for a set-up like this."

QUICKLY, the sergeant and his detective came back into the hall. He motioned toward the sitting-room and said, "Okay" to the other men. They went in with their equipment and went to work. One man was obviously a doctor. He made a close examination of the body on the floor. Once he turned and spoke over his shoulder to the sergeant who stood in the doorway. "Almost certainly a hammer," he said. "Two hard blows. Either one would have been fatal."

The sergeant turned to Joe Ford. "You say you called on her every night at this time?"

"Yes," Joe replied. "I've lived next door all my life. Mrs. Palter and my mother were lifetime friends. My mother died a year ago and I stayed on in the house alone."

"Then you were pretty close to the old lady," the sergeant observed.

"She was like an aunt to me and I guess she thought of me like a son," Joe said sadly. "I always called her Aunt Sarah."

"You must have helped her with a lot of things then. Maybe about her business?"

"Yes, I did a lot of little things for her—like paying her taxes and insurance, cashing small checks for her at the bank."

"Then you probably know how she left things, who gets her estate now that she's dead," the sergeant said in a tone that was a question.

"She showed me her will once," Joe said steadily. "Her will left one thousand dollars to a nephew and—"

"What's his name? Where does he live?" Sergeant Sawyer interrupted.

"His name is George Keplin and he lives in San Francisco now."

"Who else shares in the estate?" the sergeant demanded.

"I do." Joe spoke slowly. "Aunt Sarah's will left everything else she had to me."

"How much? You knew so much about her business you must know how much she was worth. What about will the estate run to?"

"About a hundred thousand dollars," Joe answered.

"A hundred thousand!" The sergeant seemed a bit surprised. "That's a lot of dough. Considering this little house and everything I wouldn't have guessed it. Well—this case is going to take some looking into."

"I know that, Sergeant," Joe said earnestly. "And I heard what your man said about the disordered condition of the sitting-room and bedroom. About it being done to cover up. I knew it myself when I looked at the rooms—when I first found her at seven-thirty. Knew that the search had been overdone. I also know that since the burglar

theory is discarded that I, as the principal beneficiary of Aunt Sarah, stand out as a number one suspect."

"You know of anyone else who might have had a motive to kill her—for some other reason than money?" the sergeant asked a bit grimly.

Joe shook his head. "No, I don't," he admitted.

"Then you've stated the case against yourself pretty well, Ford," the sergeant said with a hard frown. "I could add a few details. You got here tonight at seven instead of your usual seven-thirty. Dark then so no one would have seen you entering the house if you were careful about it. You were shooting for the hundred thousand. You wanted to make it look like a burglar had killed her. You say you realized that part of it had been overdone. But maybe you didn't realize it until you heard Everson make the crack about the chairs being overturned for no particular reason. So with that out you have to change your tune. Your cue is to beat us to it, sit back and play it smooth, figuring we'll never get enough evidence to be able to prove that you actually did the killing. It could be that way."

"Then—" Joe took a deep breath, "you think I killed her."

"I don't think anything!" the sergeant snapped. "Not at this stage of the game. I've only got some of the facts now. What I want is all of them, all of them that we can possibly find after we've made a complete and thorough investigation. I'm not putting you under arrest right now—if that's what you mean. But I will later—if you killed her. Now you go over to your house and stay there. After we finish checking here I may want to come over and ask you some questions."

OBEYING willingly, Joe went back to his own home. He knew that Sergeant Sawyer was hoping to uncover some telltale bit of evidence in the Palter house and didn't want Joe on hand when it was found. Later Sawyer would try to trap him by questioning him about all the details.

Who had killed Aunt Sarah Palter? Joe sat down in a chair in his living-room and did some hard thinking. There was only one answer. George Keplin! Aunt Sarah's nephew. George Keplin had managed to get in a lot of trouble as a youngster. Joe recalled that George had once stolen a car and Aunt Sarah had paid full value for the car in order to keep George from being prosecuted.

George had left Mound City about four years before and finally located in San Francisco. George had only been back to Mound City once and that was about six months ago. He had stayed only three or four days. Had George made that visit for the express purpose of planning the murder of his aunt?

George had undoubtedly heard about Aunt Sarah's will in which he was cut off with a thousand dollars. But George would know that if Aunt Sarah was murdered and the crime pinned on Joe, that Joe Ford would be barred from law from inheriting so much as a dime from her. In such a situation George Keplin, as Aunt Sarah's only living relative, would take the whole estate.

George Keplin was pretty smart. He would have planned the crime very carefully and he would be sure to have a good alibi for himself. That meant that he would have to have an accomplice. If George had hired a vicious killer in San Francisco to slip into Mound City and commit the murder, that killer might be very hard to find, unless he had left a trail in Mound City. But that killer would have had to spend two or three days in Mound City to look over the situation and make the final plans.

Joe Ford knew that his life was going to depend on his finding and identifying that accomplice. Joe knew that sooner or later Sergeant Sawyer was going to find more evidence, some bit of devastating evidence that the killer had planted. That evidence would be strong enough to send Joe Ford to the chair.

Beads of sweat appeared on Joe's forehead as he realized the full extent of his own ticklish situation. Already he was beginning to feel like a hunted man. Minute by minute they were closing in on him and he couldn't think of a thing that he could do about it until he found out what the planted evidence against him would be.

More than an hour had passed and Sarah Palter's house was still ablaze with lights. Sawyer and his men were going over that house inch by inch. Joe paced up and down his living room, expecting to hear Sergeant Sawyer's heavy steps on his porch at any moment, expecting Sawyer to confront him with some deadly bit of evidence that he would not be able to explain.

But Sergeant Sawyer didn't come. And after more than two hours when Joe looked over at the Palter house he saw that the lights had been turned off and the house was in darkness. Did that mean that they had failed to find any clues? Maybe it meant that Sawyer had found something that would have to be taken to the police laboratory for examination.

Sergeant Sawyer, apparently wasn't going to make the mistake of grilling Joe, until Sawyer was sure he had enough evidence to force a confession. In all reason Joe couldn't blame Sawyer for assuming that he had committed the murder for that hundred thousand he would inherit. Aunt Sarah was old but Sawyer would find out that she was in good health and might have lived on for many years.

Joe knew that he wouldn't be able to sleep if he went to bed. He continued to pace the floor. His mind went to the murder weapon. Something like a hammer had been used, they had said. The doctor had been sure of it. Would that be the final bit of evidence, a hammer? Joe had a fine little workshop in his garage. Among his neat array of tools hung three hammers. Had the killer managed to get into his garage, get one of those hammers, plant it—?

GOING to the rear of his house, Joe opened the door, stepped out on to the narrow porch there. He stood there for a moment in the darkness, then went on out to his garage, took out his keys, and unlocked the door. He turned on the light as he stepped inside, moved over to his workbench. He looked over his tools. Nothing seemed to have been disturbed. His three hammers were hanging in their accustomed place. He reached up and took down the largest hammer, turned it over in his hands. After a minute he replaced it and reached for his medium-sized hammer.

"Working a bit late tonight, aren't you, Ford?"

The voice surprised Joe so much that he jumped backward and he had no doubt that Sergeant Sawyer, who stood in the doorway, would find guilt in his startled expression. Joe gulped, couldn't find words for a reply.

"You've got a nice little workshop here," the sergeant said in even tones. "Mind if I take a look at some of your tools?"

"No." Joe said. "Go ahead and look at them."

He stepped aside and backed to a position near the door and the sergeant moved to the workbench. The sergeant's eyes came to rest on the three hammers. Like Joe, he took down the largest one first, turned it over in his hands, and examined it very carefully. Then he replaced it and reached for the medium-sized hammer. He turned it over in his hands.

Then Joe saw Sergeant Sawyer's head jerk. Sawyer brought the hammer closer to his eyes and stared. He had found something. There was something on that hammer that would make the last and fatal link in the chain of evidence against Joe Ford. No doubt a bit of blood, that the murderer in his haste, had failed to wash off the tool.

Joe didn't think. He acted in panic. As Sawyer stared at the hammer Joe backed out of the garage into the darkness without making a sound and vanished. He heard Sawyer call out a few seconds later but by that time he was sprinting at full speed over familiar ground that offered no hazard to him in the darkness. He had covered several blocks and was out of breath when the panic began to leave him. Joe stopped in a dark alley, leaned against a brick wall. Reason returned to him.

He knew that he hadn't been too smart in running for it like that. His flight would remove the last doubt in Sergeant Sawyer's mind as to his guilt. He wouldn't have a chance to get away.

In a few minutes Sawyer would have every cop in the city looking for him. It would be almost impossible to find a hiding place in this city of forty thousand where he

was known by so many people. He had only a few dollars in his pocket. Joe Ford was in an almost hopeless position.

Yet he knew that it was George Keplin who was responsible for the murder of Sarah Palter. Keplin was safe in San Francisco, no doubt with a very good alibi. And his hired killer was, by this time, on a train or bus and miles away from Mound City. But that killer had been in Mound City for two or three days, looking over the situation, making fool-proof plans for the murder.

Joe Ford would have given every dime he possessed for a few hours of freedom, even six hours to check and try to find a trace of that killer. That accomplice must have stayed at one of the hotels. He might have left a clue that would connect him with San Francisco, California at least. But if Joe Ford tried to go to a hotel, question clerks or bellhops, he'd be arrested in a matter of minutes.

He had just one chance. If he could find a friend he could rely on, before the cops nabbed him, such a friend might go ahead and try to locate that hidden accomplice. A real friend would believe his story and try to help him. But Joe Ford was a young man who didn't have a really close pal. Who could he approach at a desperate time like this?

There was Harry Proctor. Harry Proctor had seemed to like him. Harry had dropped by to see him several times in the last few months and they had gone out together several times. But in a situation like this—?

Joe Ford stood in that dark alley for another five minutes before he moved.

LESS THAN twenty minutes later, Ford had climbed two flights of stairs and was knocking on the door of an apartment. The door opened and Harry Proctor stood there. The expression on Harry's face made it obvious that he had already heard about the murder. His radio was on and no doubt there had been special announcements about the murder.

Joe pushed into the small apartment and quickly closed the door behind him.

"I'm in trouble, Harry," Joe said feverishly. "In terrible trouble. I've got to have help. Aunt Sarah Palter was murdered tonight. Murdered so that it would look like I had done it. I'm being framed. The police are after me right now. I had to have help. Someone to check things for me if I am arrested and jailed. You're about the closest friend I have. And I wondered—"

"Of course, I'll try to help you," Harry Proctor said warmly. "I heard about it over the radio. But they didn't say anything about you being accused of it."

"They will, Harry. The cops have found evidence that was planted against me. Right now every cop in town will be looking for me. They'll be sure I did it."

"They'll have to prove it in black and white to make me believe you did it, knowing you as I do, Joe," Harry said. Harry was tall, broad-shouldered, sandy-haired. "Sit down, Joe, and tell me about it—and what you want me to do."

Joe quickly went over the facts. "I want you to do some checking for me, Harry," he concluded. "I want you to go to hotels and try to locate a man from California who has been in Mound City for two or three days. Because I know who committed the murder. It was George Keplin, Aunt Sarah's nephew. If I am convicted of the murder I can't inherit under her will and George Keplin will step in and take everything."

"But George Keplin couldn't possibly have been here," Harry said, "because the radio said that the police had talked to George in San Francisco. They announced that about half an hour ago. It said George was coming here by plane right away. But it will take him eight hours to get here that way."

"I know he wasn't here at the time of the murder," Joe admitted. "But George must have planned the murder because he is the only one beside myself who would have a motive for the killing. He hired somebody to do the killing for him. He got some San Francisco thug to come here and do the actual job.

"That thug is the one we want to find. He was probably at a hotel here for a few days, looking over the situation and making his final plans. I'm sure that thug can be

located by quizzing hotel clerks and bellhops. The police won't bother to do that because they're sure I did it. That's why I came here to ask you if—if—"

"Of course, I'll do it," Harry said quickly. "I'll check every hotel in town. Clerks, bellhops, maids, porters, taxis. If that thug left a trail I'll find it."

"There's another thing I want you to do, Harry," Joe told him. "You said George Keplin is flying here. He'll probably go right to a hotel when he arrives. I want you to go see him the minute he gets here. Greet him like an old friend. I guess you knew him about as well as I did. Stick with him, talk to him all you can. He won't suspect that you're working for me. He might drop something that would give us a clue, particularly if you can get a line on his hired killer. That's my only chance, Harry. To find clues that the police can follow and prove that George Keplin is the real guilty man."

"I'll do everything I can," Harry Proctor promised. "I'll see George Keplin when he gets here. I remember him pretty well so he won't suspect I'm up to anything. In the meantime you'd better try to hide out. Maybe you could slip out of town. You need dough. I've got about twenty-five bucks in my pocket you're welcome to. Here, take it. You go down to one of those rooming houses on River Street and get you a room. Then mail me a card with your room number on it so I can get in touch with you when I find out something."

IT WAS late the next afternoon. Sergeant Sawyer was sitting in his office at headquarters. In a chair at the side of the desk sat a sharp-faced, flashily dressed young man. His name was George Keplin.

"We've got Joe Ford," Sergeant Sawyer said. "Picked him up an hour ago down on River Street. They'll bring him in in a few minutes. We've got an airtight case against him. I wanted you here for the showdown as you are Sarah Palter's only relative."

"I'd rather not see the dirty killer," George Keplin said with a frown.

"I want you here for the psychological effect," Sawyer said. "Facing you, the only relative of the murdered woman, will help unnerve him. We want to break him quickly and get a written confession."

The door opened and two detectives came in with Joe Ford between them. "Sit down, Ford." Sawyer pointed to a chair on the right side of his desk. Joe sat down.

"You've reached the end of your rope, Ford," Sergeant Sawyer said harshly. "You killed Sarah Palter with one of your own hammers. But you had to work fast after the murder. You cut the wires in her house so you would have an excuse to go home before you phoned us. You had to clean that hammer and replace it quickly. You left a couple of spots of blood on it. You got to worrying about it later and went out to your garage to make sure it was clean. It was a shock to you when I walked in on you. When you saw I had spotted blood on that medium-sized hammer you ran for it. That's enough evidence for any jury. You ready to sign a written confession?"

"No," Joe Ford replied. "But I'm ready to sign a complaint charging George Keplin with the murder."

"Me?" George Keplin shrugged. "You must be nuts. I was in San Francisco when the murder was committed. I flew here as fast as I could. Didn't get here till this morning. You can't crawl out of it by accusing me, Ford."

The door opened again and a detective came in with Harry Proctor. Harry's face was red with anger. "What's the idea of arresting me?" he demanded.

"It's against the law to help a killer hide out," Sawyer said. "You got a card from Joe Ford this morning. The card had Ford's room number scrawled on it. You didn't report it to the police. So you were assisting a fugitive from the law."

"I was only trying to help a friend," Harry Proctor protested. "Ford came to my apartment last night, claimed he was innocent, asked me to help try to prove his innocence. I didn't see any harm in what he asked me to do."

"What did he ask you to do, Proctor?" the sergeant questioned.

"He asked me to check the hotels and

look for a California man that he said George Keplin could have hired to commit the murder. Then he asked me to see George and talk to him, try to get him to make a slip, see if I couldn't get a clue to work on. I know now that I was wasting my time. I saw George as I had promised Joe. But after I had talked to George awhile I knew he was innocent and that Joe was the killer."

"You checked the hotels too? Looked for this California killer?"

"I checked some," Proctor answered.

"You're lying, Proctor!" Sergeant Sawyer said grimly. "You were tailed and you never went near a hotel until George Keplin arrived. You went right up and talked to him a few minutes after he registered at the Colonial Hotel."

"Sure I did, Sergeant. That's what Joe Ford asked me to do."

"And that's where you made a big mistake, Proctor. That's where you stepped into Joe Ford's trap. I know that Joe Ford asked you to investigate for him. But when he got to thinking about you as his friend he recalled some things. That you had been a pretty close friend of George Keplin's several years ago. That once you and George Keplin had got in trouble together over a stolen car. That you had only been friendly with Joe during the past few months. That once you had borrowed his car for an afternoon and could easily have got an impression of his garage key that was in the same holder.

"In short, it dawned on Joe that instead of importing a killer from California to do this job that George Keplin might have made a deal with local talent when he made a short visit here six months ago. That you, Proctor, might well be that local talent."

"Ford's just trying to crawl out of it, Sergeant," Proctor said hotly. "He killed Mrs. Palter. You haven't got a bit of evidence to connect me or George Keplin with the murder."

"Your error, Proctor," the sergeant retorted. "Joe Ford phoned me after he talked to you, told me what he suspected, made some suggestions. One suggestion was that we should set a little trap for you two. We briefed the room clerks at the hotels. So when George Keplin arrived and went to the Colonial Hotel it wasn't any accident that he was assigned Room 518.

"You see, we already had that room wired. You, Proctor, got up to see George in a hurry. Ford had given you just the excuse you wanted. You told Keplin that you had got away with a perfect job, that Joe Ford was a sap, that Ford was as good as in the hot seat right now. Keplin was happy about it, promised to split the hundred grand with you as soon as he got his hands on it. I'll play the record of that little conversation back to you if you'd like to hear it."

Harry Proctor and George Keplin looked at each other. Their shoulders sagged and they seemed to wilt. "Take 'em away," Sergeant Sawyer ordered.

"I was afraid when I called you that you wouldn't take me seriously," Joe Ford said after he and the sergeant were alone in the office. "I was afraid you were convinced I was guilty and wouldn't be interested in checking further."

Sergeant Sawyer grinned a little. "Cops aren't always dumb, Ford," he said. "Now after I had checked a little I knew that either you or Keplin was responsible for the murder. But you had a clean record and Keplin had been in trouble before. But still you might be the guilty one. So I pretended we had all pulled out from the Palter house, then watched to see if you would make a move.

"I saw you go out to the garage. When I saw you examining that big hammer I thought you were guilty. But then you reached for the medium-sized hammer. When, a minute later, I found blood on the medium-sized hammer I knew you were innocent. Because if you had been guilty you would have known the hammer that you had used. You wouldn't have wasted any time on that big hammer, but grabbed the medium one and looked it over without bothering about the other ones."

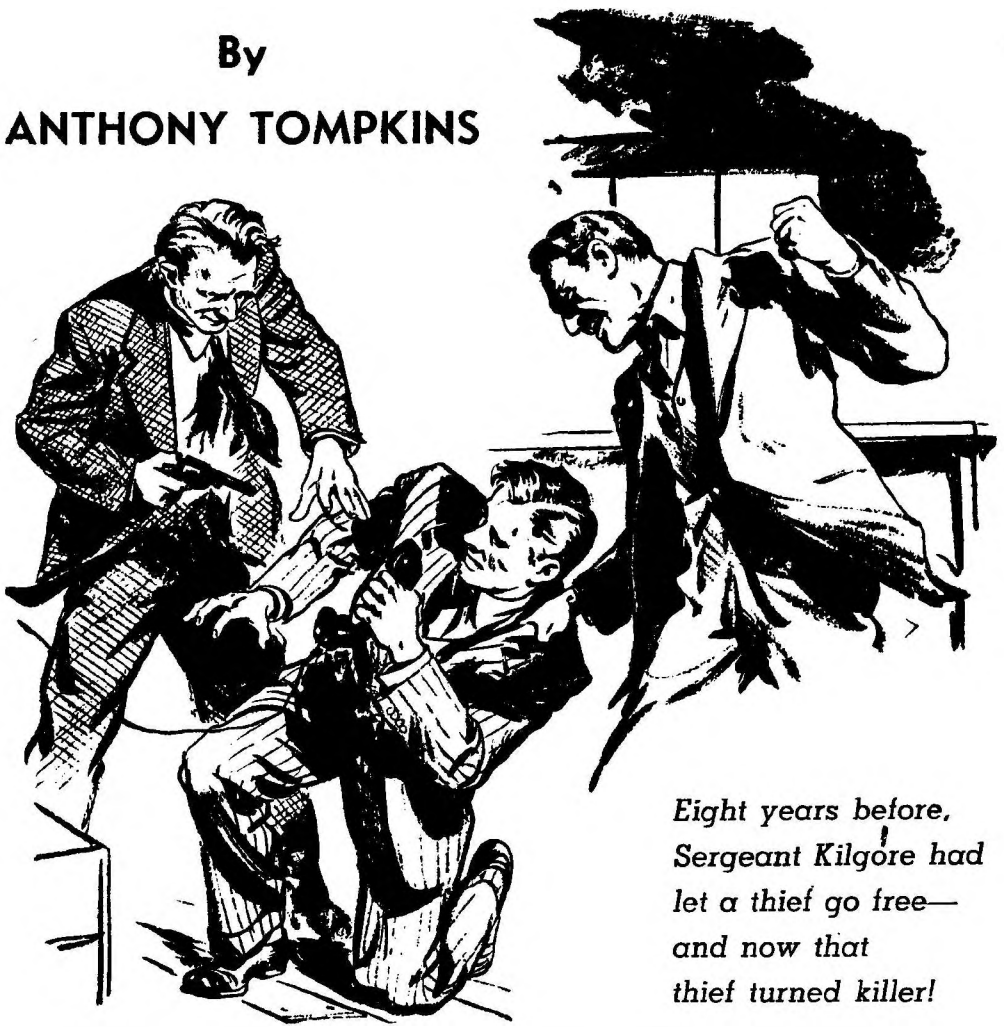
"But I ran for it too," Joe frowned. "I thought I was sunk and ran in blind panic."

"An innocent man can become panic-stricken just the same as a guilty one," Sergeant Sawyer observed. "If I had been framed like you had been, I might have lost my head and been running yet."

No Second Chance

By

ANTHONY TOMPKINS



Eight years before, Sergeant Kilgore had let a thief go free— and now that thief turned killer!

IT WAS one of those quiet midweek nights when even a police booking sergeant has little to do. Daniel Kilgore, as erect and slim as when he'd been twenty-one, posted the previous day's arrests on the permanent file and kept himself fairly busy with such routine work.

He was all cop—always had been since he was a kid. Now, with the gray creeping higher at his temples, he never forgot that he was paid a decent week's salary to do his part in keeping order in this big city. Once, not so long ago, he'd been more active about his job and he'd worn a detective captain's shield, but he didn't like to think about that much.

A drunk came in on a stretcher and Seregant Kilgore watched while they searched the man and established his identity. He wrote the facts down on the ar-

rest record and went back to his posting.

It was only ten-thirty when he heard the scuffle of feet down the corridor to his office. That meant a prisoner who wasn't taking kindly to being arrested. It was nothing especially new in Sergeant Kilgore's life. But when he looked up as the door opened, he suddenly found himself transported back eight years.

Detective Lieutenant Jerry Durant had a tall, slim young man of about twenty-six, handcuffed and somewhat roughed up. He pushed the prisoner before Kilgore's desk and there was a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"Well, Danny," he said, "here's your old pal Roy Fenton. Remember him?"

Kilgore nodded. "Yes, Jerry, I remember."

Durant snorted. "When you bossed me, as a captain, I addressed you as Captain. I think you ought to return the favor. I'm a lieutenant and I rank you, Danny."

"I'm not returning any favors, Lieutenant," Kilgore said mildly. "There were some who worked better when they respected their—well, let it go. What's the charge?"

But Durant wasn't letting his moment of triumph lapse this easily. He shoved his prisoner closer to the desk. "Eight years ago you met this character, Danny, and you made a mistake. A bad mistake. You had him cold on a burglary rap and you let him go. Admit it."

"It's in the record," Kilgore said quietly.

"At the time," Durant went on, "you were told by a lot of people, including me, that you had given a potential killer a chance to get in his dirty work. Well—when you let this rat go that night eight years ago, you killed a man, Danny."

Kilgore's eyes went cold. "Maybe you ought to explain that," he said.

DURANT did so, enthusiastically. "This punk would have been dealt a nice long rap if you'd brought him in eight years ago—as you should have done. He wouldn't have pushed himself up in gangland the way he did, and he wouldn't have stuck up a store last night and shot the owner down in cold blood."

Kilgore picked up his pen. "Roy Fenton," he read as he wrote it down. "Murder—First Degree. No bail. Arresting Officer, Lieutenant Jerry Durant, Homicide Division."

He rang for a turnkey. "Jack—murder rap," he said. "Take his belt, tie and shoelaces. Put a suicide watch on his cell. One phone call allowed. That's all."

The turnkey removed the handcuffs, searched Fenton very carefully and as each item from his pockets was placed on the desk, Kilgore listed them on a form. Durant watched all this with an interested grin. When Fenton was led away, without uttering a single word, Durant leaned against the desk.

"There's nothing personal in this, Danny," he said. "But I prophesied what would happen to Roy Fenton eight years ago and it worked exactly as I thought it would. But, Danny—I'd still like to know what made you give him that break."

Kilgore sighed. "Lieutenant, every man makes a mistake, but a cop isn't entitled to any. I'd rather not talk about it."

Durant shrugged and walked away. Kilgore went on with his routine work, trying not to think of what was going to happen. He'd be blamed for this just as much as Roy Fenton, and the worst of it was—he'd probably been wrong.

His mind reluctantly went back to that blustery night eight years ago when he had Roy Fenton dead to rights—and deliberately let him go. It had grown to seem like a dream. Eight years can deaden almost anything, but now the specter had risen up once more. This time it was more terrifying than ever.

At ten o'clock, Kilgore was entitled to a thirty minute lunch period and another sergeant came in to take over the desk. From the way he acted, it was clear that Lieutenant Durant was doing a lot of talking. Kilgore made no comments. He picked up his uniform cap, slipped his service pistol into its holster, according to regulations, and walked out.

He was heading for the main office and the restaurant a block away when he came to a stop. It occurred to him that he was accepting everything at face value, not

fighting back—and when this was all over, it might even mean the loss of his pension. He wheeled and strode rapidly toward the big steel door to the cellroom.

The turnkey on guard there let him in. Kilgore asked, "Where's Fenton?"

The turnkey hesitated. "Well, Danny, I ain't so sure under the circumstances if I oughta let you talk to that guy. Durant says—"

Kilgore cut in fast. "Look, Jack. This badge I'm wearing is gold. Yours happens to be chrome plated. I rank you, and I'm going to see Fenton."

The turnkey shrugged. "You put it that way, Sergeant, go right ahead."

Kilgore walked up to the cell. A guard posted there wandered away when Kilgore waved him off. Kilgore grasped the bars and peered into the dimly lighted cell. Fenton was lying on the cot, his head propped up against one arm.

"Fenton," Kilgore said, "get up."

Fenton arose slowly. He came closer to the door. "Hello, Danny," he said. "Looks like this time you can't give me a break."

"What happened?" Kilgore asked.

"It was," Fenton grinned crookedly, "a nice night."

"Okay," Kilgore growled. "What do they say you've done?"

Fenton exhaled slowly. "It seems there was a storekeeper named Philip Tully. It seems somebody put a gun under his nose and cleaned out the register. It seems Tully got sore and chased the holdup man and, as this bandit was driving off, Tully got himself a basketful of slugs. Then it seems like I was found driving the car this bandit got clear in, and the murder gun was on the floor of the car."

"Go on, keep talking," Kilgore urged.

"Well, Danny, you get a few items like that, add 'em up, and it can make an awful lot of trouble for a man."

"Did you stick up that store and cut down Tully?" Kilgore demanded.

"It'll still be a nice night, all night long, if it don't rain," Fenton smiled.

Kilgore sighed. "Okay, Roy. You're now showing off that cockeyed underworld code which says a right guy can't talk. Not even if his lack of speech ships him straight to the chair. He'll die a big hero—but in whose eyes? Decent people's? What do they care—and for what do your kind count? You can trust me. You know that."

Fenton went back and sat on the edge of the cot. "Tomorrow night will also be nice," he said slowly.

Kilgore muttered a curse and turned away. Before he'd taken half a dozen steps, he was pretty sure he heard a choked sob come from inside the cell. He didn't turn back, but signaled the suicide guard to resume his post.

KILGORE had to eat fast, but he was at his desk on time. At midnight he went off duty. He removed his uniform jacket and hung it in the steel locker. He put his cap on the little shelf and slipped the service pistol into a hip pocket holster of his civilian pants.

He drove his own car over to the neighborhood of Philip Tully's store. It was a good section. Tully had been a dry goods merchant with a big place, well decorated, and a heavy stock could be seen through the windows. There wasn't much Kilgore could do here, but he had consulted the homicide reports on the affair and he knew about as much as anyone about what had happened.

There'd been a witness, a man named Max Cogan, who'd seen the whole thing. Kilgore had his address and drove there. It turned out to be an apartment house of average type and Cogan lived on the fifth floor, alone. Kilgore rang the bell after he saw a gleam of light from beneath the door.

Cogan let him in and gave an impatient shrug of his shoulders at the sight of the badge which Kilgore showed him. Cogan was a big man, thick necked. He wore patent leather slippers and a rather gaudy lounging robe.

"Look," he said, "I've told my story half a dozen times. What more do you fellows want?"

Kilgore sat down. "Just a rehash. We don't think Fenton was alone on the job and, if he wasn't, we want the mugs who were with him."

"Look," Cogan said with a show of impatience, "I went into that store to buy me some nylon shirts. I paid for six of them, and Tully was wrapping them up when this Fenton walks in. He pulled a gun, shoved me into the back room, and rifled the cash register. Tully was in the back room with me and he nearly went nuts. Finally he just blew out of there and went after Fenton."

"He chased a holdup who had a gun?" Kilgore asked mildly.

"Sure he did. I followed, but plenty to the rear. It wasn't my party. Well, Tully gets out on the sidewalk and sees this car pulling away. He starts yelling and waving his arms. The car slowed, the window rolled down, and I saw a gun poke out. It threw a few slugs, and that's about the time I dived behind a counter. When I came up for air, Tully was stretched across the sidewalk, and I saw that he'd been drilled four times."

"Did you identify Fenton?" Kilgore asked.

"Not yet. I looked at his picture and it sure looks like the fellow who did the job."

Kilgore nodded and rose. "Thanks, Mr. Cogan. That's all, I guess."

Cogan led the way to the door. "I'll be glad when it's all over," he said.

"I see your point," Kilgore admitted. "But it could be this won't be finished quite as easily as you think, Mr. Cogan. You see—Fenton's claiming an alibi."

Cogan's eyebrows shot upwards. "Alibi! But he was there, I tell you."

"People make mistakes," Kilgore said. "Well, good night, Mr. Cogan."

"Just a minute, Sergeant. This alibi stuff makes me out a liar. I want to know more."

"That's all I can tell you at the moment," Kilgore said. "I'm going to check his alibi now. If you like, I'll drop in later and give you the lowdown."

"I wish you would," Cogan said. "I'm apparently the only witness, and I want to know where I stand."

Kilgore nodded. "See you in a couple of hours—that is, if you're still up. It's after midnight."

"Never mind that. I'll be here," Cogan said.

Kilgore walked out, down the corridor, and punched the self-service elevator button while he wondered why Cogan had kept one hand in his lounging robe pocket every second of the interview.

IN THE lobby, he moved fast toward the desk which a night clerk was using for the switchboard. Kilgore saw that he was plugged in to Cogan's phone. Kilgore started around the desk in a hurry, but as he rounded the corner, the clerk pulled the plug.

"Who'd he call?" Kilgore said.

"I beg your pardon," the clerk objected.

Kilgore showed his badge. "That call was from Cogan's room. You keep a record of the numbers that are called. I want the one you connected Cogan with."

The clerk shrugged. "Okay—I made out a regular ticket. It's in this drawer . . . Yep—this is the one. What's wrong, Sergeant?"

"Nothing—yet." Kilgore memorized the number written on the slip. "But there will be if Cogan finds out I'm checking on him. Get that?"

The clerk swallowed hard and nodded mutely. Kilgore walked out, found an all night drug store and entered a phone booth. He called the phone supervisor, identified himself, and found out the number which Cogan had called was a delicatessen just down the street from the apartment where he lived.

Kilgore bought himself a soda at the fountain and drank it slowly. He was a fool. Imagining things. The fact that a man kept his hand in a lounging robe pocket all the time didn't prove he was clutching a gun. Cogan told a good story. He'd convict Fenton with it. That's all there was to the whole thing. A holdup murder done by a crook from which this sort of thing was fully expected. By everyone who knew him—except Sergeant Danny Kilgore.

But, Kilgore told himself, there wasn't anything else he could do. He was in a bad enough spot already. When Cogan told Lieutenant Durant that a man with

a sergeant's badge had been asking additional questions, it wouldn't take Durant long to find out who owned that badge. Homicide detectives are fussy about who checks their cases and a desk sergeant is supposed to stick to his particular job. Durant wasn't going to like this at all.

Kilgore walked out of the drug store, ambled to where his car was parked and started driving east. He had no destination in mind and he was thinking that he ought to give it all up. So he'd made a mistake in letting Fenton go and a murder had resulted. Fenton was going to pay for it the hard way. It was no concern of a desk sergeant even if he had a personal interest in the man charged with the crime.

Then Kilgore's hands tightened on the wheel. That's what was wrong with him. He was thinking like a desk sergeant—and this kind of work demanded the thinking of a detective. He'd been a good one. The captain's badge he'd once rated was proof of that. And there was something wrong—somewhere, somehow.

He didn't have an angle, only suspicions, but they were enough. He turned the next corner sharply. It was a narrow, deserted street, and when the headlights of the car behind him also turned the same corner, Kilgore's eyes narrowed. On the avenue he hadn't noticed that he was being followed, but now it seemed clear that he was. Somebody appeared interested in knowing where he was going. Any desire to trail him must have stemmed from Cogan. He'd seen no one else, and Cogan thought Kilgore was on his way to interview the mythical alibi witnesses the police officer had cooked up on the spur of the moment.

Kilgore smiled a little and felt better. Much better. He gave no indication that he was aware of the tail, just kept on driving until he spotted an apartment building without a doorman in attendance. He pulled up, got out of his car and took an old envelope from his pocket. He pretended to study this before he walked into the lobby and consulted the banks of mail boxes.

If he was being watched, he didn't know it, for he didn't dare show even the slightest suspicion. He was still scrutinizing the name cards on the mail boxes when a man sauntered past him. Kilgore fingered the bell of someone named Osterman, but he didn't actually ring it. He stood there, as if waiting for a reply through the house phone and, when none came, he shrugged and walked away.

He got back into his car, pulled away fast and, after turning the next corner, drove into an alley, shut off the lights and sat there a moment. Then he made his way back to the apartment house.

The car which had been following him was parked in front now.

He made sure nobody was at the wheel, hurried into the lobby and saw that the self-service elevator was at the floor corresponding to that on which Osterman lived. Kilgore didn't go up. He doubted that the gentleman named Osterman was in any trouble. He'd probably be so outraged and puzzled that there could be no mistaking his honesty. Kilgore pulled back the gate of one of the regular elevators which was parked on the lobby floor. He stepped inside and retreated to the darkest corner. He couldn't be seen from there.

AFTER a few moments he heard the self-operated job coming down. Two men stepped out. Kilgore had never seen them before, but he studied their features carefully and he'd know them again. Neither one spoke a word. They simply walked fast to where their car was parked and drove off. Kilgore raced to where he'd left his car, backed out of the driveway and did his best to pick up their trail. He drove around for twenty minutes before he gave it up as an impossible job.

Now he had something more than just a vague hunch to go on, but the fact that Cogan had probably been carrying a gun and that he had put a pair of hoodlums on his trail, wasn't exactly evidence. Suddenly Kilgore found himself thinking the way he used to when he'd been a detective captain. It was a good, satisfying feeling.

Cogan must have lied. But why? He

had no apparent connection with Tully, the man who'd been murdered, nor with Roy Fenton. The whole set-up was that of a plain holdup murder, but Cogan showed more than the interest of an eyewitness. He had to have a reason for that.

Kilgore consulted a few notes he'd taken from Fenton's record and drove around to a tenement section of town. This time he made sure he wasn't being followed.

He had to wake up Roy Fenton's married sister. But once she recognized Kilgore, any resentment she had, vanished.

"Why, Sergeant Kilgore," she said, "come in. I half wanted to phone you about Roy, but I—I didn't dare, after what happened those years ago."

"It's because of the break I gave Roy that I'm here now," Kilgore said. "Frankly, I don't think he killed that man."

She was older than Fenton, dubious about things in general and her brother in particular.

"I don't know, Sergeant," she said. "I've done everything I could to straighten him out, but he ran with the same old crowd. The only difference is, it paid off better lately."

"So?" Kilgore frowned. "How much better?"

"Well, I can't hurt him any by talking," she said. "He lives here, with me and my husband, and for months he didn't pay a dime. Then he gave me three thousand dollars within six months."

"Uh-huh." Kilgore nodded. "Anything else?"

"He needed clothes, and he got them—more clothes than any one man needs. Gave my husband a lot, too. Only the best. Nylon stuff—and he got this even before he began turning in money."

"Good," Kilgore said. "I hoped I'd learn something like this."

"Like what?" she asked. "All he proved was that he was a crook."

"He's all of that." Kilgore arose. "But he's not a killer. That much I know—but because he won't talk, I have to prove it without his help. He won't say a word."

"I know, Sergeant. Roy's a mass of conflicting ideas. He'd rather steal than earn an honest dollar, but he wouldn't double-cross a friend."

"Maybe this'll cure him," Kilgore growled. "Though I wouldn't look forward to that happening. I'll see you later—and keep your hopes up. I think I've got something."

Kilgore left the tenement house carefully, making sure he wasn't being followed, and drove back to Tully's store where the murder had taken place. He checked the neighborhood, especially for signs of the patrolman. What Kilgore intended to do wasn't exactly on the books of good police procedure, but he figured that if he didn't prove Roy Fenton's innocence, he was going to be fired anyway.

He went around to the back of the store and discovered that it was provided with a stout door, and that the small window in it was well barred. But he kept looking. From experience he knew that merchants had a habit of sealing up the obvious ways of entering their places of business—and leaving the less noticeable spots wide open.

Tully's store had its weak spot. A big cellar window through which stock apparently was lowered. Kilgore sprayed the ground with his flash and saw that Tully must have received a great many deliveries lately. There were plenty of fairly fresh tire tracks.

KILGORE'S method of gaining entry was primitive, but effective. He merely pulled back his foot and kicked out the pane of glass. In a few moments he was inside the basement and closing the shattered window after him. The beat patrolman might not notice the broken glass, but he'd have been bound to spot the open window.

Tully had received a large stock all right. The basement was stacked with cases of dry goods. Kilgore studied a few of these and saw that the usual stenciled address of the distributor had been carefully planed off. Not just crossed out, or obliterated, but deliberately planed away. It was all beginning to make sense.

Upstairs, in the store proper, Kilgore

checked the contents of a desk in the back room. He found nothing there but a large safe which intrigued him. He tested the handle just for luck. The safe was locked and he knew better than to waste time trying to open it.

He went back in front of the store, behind the counters, and began checking over the stock. He reached the cash register, bent his knees and looked at the small shelf which storekeepers invariably keep beneath the register. There was a soft wad of dirty cloth there and when he removed this he saw a .45 automatic. Kilgore whistled softly as he picked up the gun. He ejected the magazine and saw that the weapon was fully loaded and ready for fast action.

He grinned a little at the thought of Tully, so hopping mad at a stickup man that he actually chased him to the street *without stopping to grab his gun!* Kilgore was certain now that Roy Fenton was innocent. There was one more item to be checked. He looked up the number of the phone in the name of Fenton's sister.

She answered at once. Kilgore said, "I'm going places. Right now I want you to take a good look at Roy's new clothes—and at the stuff he gave your husband. Read me the trademark labels or the manufacturers' labels. Hurry it up."

It didn't take her very long. Kilgore noted down the names and trademarks she read off. He hung up and turned to the well stocked shelves. Tully handled this same type of merchandise.

Kilgore thought it was about time to get out of there He headed for the back door and almost reached it when he heard a key rattle in the lock Before he could duck out of sight, the door opened, and a narrow faced man stepped inside. He saw Kilgore and gave a yelp of alarm.

Kilgore sprang toward him, but the man was small, slim and very fast on his feet. He wheeled and darted through the door, pulling it shut behind him. Outside, Kilgore heard a rush of feet. He drew his service pistol, put his back against the wall beside the door and waited. The

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door was barren of any bolts and he had no way of blocking it. He didn't dare leave to go to the phone.

Then he remembered the basement window. Maybe he could get out through that, if it hadn't been spotted. He began moving silently away. Someone rattled the doorknob and suddenly the door was kicked wide open. Kilgore dodged behind a stack of cases.

Nobody tried to enter, but he knew there'd be at least one man outside, waiting for him to try and rush the door. But Kilgore was so occupied in trying to scheme a way out, he never gave the front door a thought. He didn't hear it open, and had no idea he was being stalked from the rear until the backroom lights were suddenly turned on.

Two men stood there, covering him. One of them called out and the skinny man entered through the rear door. All three of them moved toward Kilgore. There wasn't the slightest chance of shooting it out. He might kill one—maybe even two of them, but he was bound to go down under the hail of fire from their three guns. Kilgore dropped his service pistol and kicked it in their direction.

They came closer and Kilgore nodded. "Hello, Cogan," he said. "I figured you might be here."

Cogan, the eyewitness, grabbed Kilgore's arm, spun him around and rapidly searched him. Then he shoved the sergeant against the wall.

"You're a pretty smart article," he said softly. "Plenty smarter than that homicide detective who handled this job at the beginning. You made me think Fenton had an alibi so I'd be forced to show my hand. You knew I had to find any alibi witness and that I'd have you tailed."

"Okay," Kilgore admitted. "But you've got to admit it worked."

"Sure it did. I had to make a move. But you were bluffing. You led my boys to some phony who didn't even know Tully had been knocked off. Listen, Sergeant—there never was an alibi witness, was there?"

Kilgore didn't reply. He wanted to find out how far these men would go—and he did. Cogan promptly pistol-whipped him twice. Kilgore wiped away the blood oozing out of a temple gash.

"You win," he said. "There was no alibi witness."

Cogan nodded. "Sure, I knew Roy wouldn't talk. We're his pals. He's no rat."

"Maybe—but you are," Kilgore growled. "You're going to let him burn for a job he didn't do."

COGAN was eying Kilgore closer. He cocked his head to one side. "Wait a minute," he said. "You're Kilgore, the big sap who let Fenton go a few years back."

The skinny gunman was getting impatient. "Look, Cogan. Let's plug this copper, get what we came after, and blow."

"Don't be impatient, Nolan," Cogan said. "If this cop is found here dead, the other cops will figure maybe the stickup I described wasn't exactly on the level. We got to get rid of this character, but now that I know who he is, that'll be easy."

The skinny gunman wasn't convinced. "I say lemme fix him now. We'll dump him some place—"

"No, we won't," Cogan said. "This cop is going to be found dead in his own car, shot with his own gun. You know what they're saying about him right now? That when he gave Roy a break those years ago, he let a man go who'd some day commit a murder. Well, he did—didn't he? And this cop feels bad about it. Bad enough to blow his brains out."

Even the skinny gunman recognized the perfection of that scheme. Cogan gave a few orders. The third man went up to the safe, twirled the dial and had it open in a few seconds. He knew the combination from memory. He extracted several ledgers, glanced through them. Then he appropriated a tin box which he forced open by smashing the lock with the butt of his gun.

The tin box was tightly crammed with currency.

The third man grunted. "Hey, Cogan, Tully was holding out more than we thought. He sure deserved what he got."

"Okay," Cogan said. "Let's get this cop outa here. Lock the safe, make sure every-Nolan, you beat it out and bring the car to the front door. When you're sure nobody's watching, snap a small stone or something against one of the windows."

The skinny crook promptly vanished. Kilgore kept his hands raised shoulder high and, at Cogan's orders, walked out of the back room and behind the long counter in the front of the store.

Suddenly he turned on one heel. He brought down a clubbed fist and hit Cogan alongside the head, sending the man reeling back. Kilgore made a wild dive for the telephone beside the cash register. He had the receiver off the hook and was trying to dial when Cogan and the third man landed on him.

Kilgore went down on one knee under the onslaught. The phone was ripped out of his hand. He fell heavily in a heap, and Cogan kicked him hard.

"Get up," Cogan snarled. "You're just making what I have to do a pleasant job. On your feet."

Kilgore clawed at the edge of the counter, started to pull himself up, and his hand slipped. He fell again. But this time, as the pair stepped back with leveled guns, he thrust one hand behind that wad of cloth and seized the big automatic which Tully had kept there.

It was under him when he fell flat. He was kicked again. As he slowly got to his feet, he shoved the gun down under his belt and made sure his coat was buttoned over it.

They seized his arms then and propelled him toward the front door. Nobody spoke now. In a few moments a car pulled up. Something hit one of the store windows. Cogan opened the door.

"Okay, Kilgore," he said. "Start moving toward the car. Nolan will have you covered from the front and we'll be right here to blast if you try to run for it. Get in the back seat."

Kilgore figured his chances and decided they were mighty slim. But it seemed they were letting him go first, so that if anyone happened to be watching, they would

[*Turn page*]

not see two men forcing a third into the car. Kilgore drew himself up, walked slowly toward the car and pulled the rear door open. As he bent to climb in, he lifted the heavy automatic from under his belt. He straightened, as if to sit down. Nolan, behind the wheel, was getting set to pull away fast.

Kilgore smacked Nolan's head with his left hand, knocking off the skinny man's hat. Before Nolan could bring up his gun, Kilgore smashed the heavy automatic down hard. As Nolan slid down, partly off the seat, Kilgore leaped out.

He darted toward the rear of the car. Cogan was already sprinting back toward the store. The other man had stopped, gun level, while he tried to see where Kilgore has gone. The sergeant shot him low in the right shoulder. The man dropped, screaming in pain.

Kilgore didn't wait for help to arrive, even though he knew that shot would create an alarm. He sidestepped to the door beside the driver's seat, opened it and reached in to yank the key out of the ignition. Then he quietly closed the door again and threw the key away.

SUDDENLY he sprinted around the front of the car, raced for the alley beside the store, and was safely down it before Cogan could start shooting. Kilgore made a lot of noise running along the alley. Cogan, he hoped, would think he was heading for the rear door and if he did assume this, Cogan would be bound to make a play for the getaway car. He couldn't know there was no longer a key in the switch.

Kilgore turned around, made his way stealthily back to the mouth of the alley and waited. In about fifteen seconds he heard the door open. Then Cogan came out of the store, gave a nervous glance over his shoulder and started running.

Kilgore put the first slug just to the left of Cogan's head. The man grabbed wildly for the car door handle. Kilgore's next slug hit the car an inch from Cogan.

The man gave a yell of terror, threw his gun away and raised his hands so high and fast the muscles would be sore for a week. The radio patrol cars found that tableau unchanged when they arrived.

Back at Headquarters, Kilgore had Roy Fenton brought out of his cell and into Lieutenant Durant's office.

"Here's what it was all about," he told Fenton and Durant. "You, Roy, were mixed up with hijackers who specialized in stealing men's clothing. Shirts, ties, that kind of stuff. It was turned over to Tully who sold it retail, making the profits a little slow but plenty high. Tully held out. The gang got wise and decided to knock him off. How am I doing, Roy?"

Fenton didn't reply, but it was clear that Kilgore's story was registering. Kilgore went on. "So they decided to stage it like a stickup and get a fall guy to take the rap. A man named Cogan was behind the racket. He went to Tully, got him out on the street and shot him down. Then he swore a stickup man entered the store and Tully got it when he was chasing the guy. But it didn't check. Tully wasn't that much of a fool. Besides, he kept a gun under his cash register and he'd have picked that up. Now, Roy, how did you happen to be driving that car Cogan says the bandit used in getting away?"

Fenton shook his head stubbornly. Kilgore sighed. "Okay, then I'll tell it. A skinny gunslick named Nolan told you to take the car and ditch it, said it was hot—and you did. The gun Cogan used on Tully was in the car, so when you were picked up, the job would be pinned on you."

"It was a frame," Fenton yelled.

"Now he wakes up," Kilgore shrugged. "In about two minutes, Roy, you're going to make a statement about this whole thing. You're going to realize you've been a fall guy and acting like an underworld hero was only going to get you the chair."

"I'll talk," Fenton said grimly. "Just prove it was a frame and I'll talk. The way I figured, I was innocent, and no innocent man is convicted of murder, so I'd get out of this without tipping my hand to the racket. But they were going to let me take the ride. Will I talk!"

"Okay," Kilgore told him. "After that, it's back into a cell for you. This time I'm

not giving you a break—because we've been even for a good many years now. No second chance for the likes of you."

Kilgore left the rest of it to Lieutenant Durant, and went to the booking sergeant's desk. Lieutenant Durant came in after a few minutes and leaned against the desk. "It's all fixed," he said. "But, Danny, tell me this. You said you and Fenton had been even a good many years. What did you mean by that?"

"I don't mind telling now," Kilgore said. "Eight years ago, I led a squad which had Fenton surrounded in a store he'd broken into. I guarded the back door and he came out. I don't know what happened—but he got the drop on me."

"He got the drop on you?" Durant gasped. "But I thought—"

"Sure," Kilgore nodded. "You thought I had him—and I let him go out of the goodness of my heart. It was the opposite. To get away, Fenton would have had to kill me, and he knew it. Instead, he handed me his gun, butt first, and said he couldn't possibly kill anybody."

"Well, why didn't you tell this before?"

Kilgore shrugged and grinned crookedly. "Tell it? Admit a kid mug like Roy got the best of me? I'd have been fired. It was better to handle it the way I did. I wanted to anyhow. Fenton gave me a break—he rated one. But when you brought him in for murder, I knew you were wrong. Fenton wasn't a killer, no matter what. So I figured that if there was an eyewitness, that guy lied. I went to see Cogan, threw a scare into him and made him show his hand."

Durant just nodded. After a moment he said, "I'd have sent an innocent man to the chair except for you, Danny. You know this could get you back your old badge."

Kilgore shook his head. "I like it here, Lieutenant. Just as it is now."

"The name is Jerry," Durant said. "Remember that. And thanks."

Durant turned and walked to the door. There he stopped short, wheeled, and brought up his hand in a smart salute.

"You rate that," he said. "I guess you always did and you always will."

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