

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns in a dark green color, framing the central text.

# **The Gray Mask**

The Gray Mask

Wadsworth Camp

1915

# Chapter I

## GARTH IS SHOWN A GRAY MASK

GARTH, in response to the unforeseen summons, hurried along the hallway and opened the inspector's door. As he faced the rugged figure behind the desk, and gazed into those eyes whose somnolence concealed a perpetual vigil, his heart quickened.

He had been assigned to the detective bureau less than six months. That brief period, however, had revealed a thousand eccentricities of his chief. The pudgy hand beating a tattoo on the table desk, the lips working at each other thirstily, the doubt that slipped from behind the veil of the sleepy eyes, were all like largely printed letters to Garth—letters that spelled delicate work for him, possibly an exceptional danger.

“Where were you going, Garth?”

“Home. That is—”

Garth hesitated and cleared his throat.

“First—I thought I might drop in on Nora for a minute.”

With a quick gesture the inspector brushed the mention of his daughter aside. Abruptly he verified Garth's hazard.

“How much do you love your life?”

The inspector's voice possessed the growling quality of an animal. A warning rather than an aggressive roar, it issued from a throat remotely surviving behind great masses of flesh. Garth had rarely heard it raised, nor, for that matter, had it ever deceived him as to the other's amiability and gentleness of soul. Its present tone of apologetic regret startled him.

“On the whole I value my life rather highly just now,” he answered, trying to smile.

“Then turn this down and nothing said,” the inspector went on. “It’s volunteer’s work. No guilt-edged prophecies. It’s touch and go whether whoever tackles it eats bacon and eggs tomorrow morning.”

“What’s the job?” Garth asked.

The inspector glanced up.

“You’ve heard of that fellow without a face?”

Garth stared until he thought he understood.

“One of those Bellevue cases? Awful burns?”

The heavy head shook impatiently.

“No. This fellow Simmons in Chicago—several years ago now—experimenting with some new explosive in a laboratory. He got his arm up in time to save his eyes.”

“Seems to me I remember,” Garth began.

“Worn a gray mask ever since,” the inspector said.

He drew a telegram from a pile of papers at his elbow, spread it on the writing-pad, and tapped it with his thick forefinger. Garth wondered what was coming. A feeling of uneasiness compelled him to lower his eyes before the other’s steady gaze. There was something uncanny about this thought of a mask, worn always to hide a horror.

The inspector’s tapping quickened to an expression of anger. His voice exposed a cherished resentment.

“No doubt about your having heard of our friend Hennion?”

Garth started forward, resting his closed fists on the desk top. His face was excited, unbelieving.

“Mean to say there’s a chance—”

The inspector ceased his tapping. He looked up slyly.

“A real one at last. You know what that means. It’s the job. Take it or leave it. I won’t ask you to go where I mightn’t have cared to go myself at your age.”

Garth thought rapidly. His chief had been right. The man who tried to trip Hennion needn’t worry about tomorrow’s breakfast until his eyes greeted the sun in the east.

He, with the rest of the bureau, could point to half a dozen men as vassals of this almost mythical figure. He, like the rest, had frequently diagnosed obscure crimes as the workmanship of the Hennion group. But he knew also that nothing had ever been proved against this organization of criminals, which was unique, because, in addition to prosaic brutality, it appeared to be informed by brains of a brilliant and inscrutable character.

“How much of a chance?” Garth asked.

All the drowsiness left the inspector’s eyes.

“Maybe to sit in with them tonight. I’ve never had a ghost of a show with a stool before, and this is the night of all nights. One of these crooks has been boasting. He said—and I have it straight—‘Tonight we play our ace.’ Get that, Garth! What must an ace mean to that lot, eh? And the president’s here, but he’ll be well looked after. Still there are lots of big men in this town whose sudden death would make a noise more like a home-run than a funeral. Or, if it’s burglary, play it to scale. These fellows would unlock the gates of Hades while Satan slept in the vestibule. I’ve been saying to myself all day I’ve got to find out what that ace is and stack the cards, and at the same time I’ve been asking myself what the devil I was going to do about it. But the luck’s changed.”

Garth breathed hard.

“How do you expect to throw sand in the eyes of that outfit?”

“Give me,” the inspector answered slowly, his rumble approximating a whisper, “someone with no nerves to speak of and a build like this faceless man Simmons.”

He looked up. His eyes were very sleepy again.

“You have that build, Garth. All you need is a plain, dark brown suit.”

He raised the telegram.

“This is Simmons’ description as he left Chicago last evening. He expects to arrive on the Western express to night. He’s looking for someone to meet him and take him to the headquarters of the Hennion gang.”

Garth’s face lightened.

“Has he a record?”

“A suspect, chiefly because he’s tied up with that anarchist crowd out there—an analyst of explosives, a chemist, cursed by this hideous accident—dangerous as giant powder itself! That’s why his mail’s been watched, how they got onto this move. But they’ve no details for us. Maybe Simmons himself doesn’t know what he’s up against.”

With a secretive air he opened a drawer and lifted out a tightly-woven gray cloth. It was pierced by two holes above and a long, narrow opening below. From its edges four elastic straps dangled.

“I had it made,” he said, holding it out tentatively, “so that, perhaps, you might find out instead of Simmons.”

Garth took the cloth and fitted it over his face. It left visible a small scar on his neck. The inspector pointed at this with a pleased, wondering smile.

“That scar peeping will fetch them. Put on a brown suit and you’ll pass.”

“Where,” Garth asked, “does Simmons change cars?”

“I’ll have the express stopped at the end of the bridge above Garrison. Not much chance of spies there. A couple of my men will take him off and keep him out of mischief while you get on. Understand? You’ll go up on the West Shore and ferry over from West Point. You’re on?”

“Sure. You’d jump at the chance yourself, sir.”

He removed the mask. The inspector handed him a piece of frayed white paper.

“Did you notice me fingering this just now?” he asked anxiously.

Garth shook his head.

“Then take it, and, when the time comes, play with it that way yourself. Scratch your instructions on it with a match, a toothpick, anything handy. It will stay white, but I can make whatever you put on it as visible as headlines in a war extra. You’ll reach town after ten. I’ll hold back instructions until eleven in case these fellows have any spies in the department. But after that you can drop it near a uniformed policeman with a fair chance of its reaching me.”

“You’ll try to trail us, too?” Garth asked.

The inspector grinned sheepishly.

“Of course I’ll try. I’ll probably have to let it go at that.”

“Yes—slippery,” Garth answered.

Now that his offer was accepted, and his plan understood, the inspector gave way to a disquieting nervousness. He stood up and stepped around the desk, putting his hand on Garth’s shoulder.

“Watch out for yourself,” he faltered. “I don’t want another Kridel case on my conscience.”

The name dampened Garth’s enthusiasm. He had never known Joe Kridel who, a year ago, had been the ascending star of the bureau. But the manner of the young man’s death was depressingly familiar to him—found stabbed through the heart in a private house whose dwellers had heard no alarm. The key to that puzzle had never been discovered. Even the inspector had harbored the nature of Kridel’s assignment that night of his murder.

“I hate,” the inspector continued, that note of regret in his voice again, “to give a man I like such an ugly risk.”

This reached Garth as definite encouragement to words which he had restrained for some time with difficulty. To loose them, now, however, would be, in a way, unfair to his chief; would, in every sense, form no fitting prelude to his formidable and dangerous task. He contented himself, therefore, with an unsatisfactory compromise.

“If I’ve time I may drop in for a chat with Nora after all.”

“But you won’t alarm her with this?”

“Certainly not.”

The inspector was very friendly.

“You know I wouldn’t be surprised if Nora had taken kind of a fancy for you herself.”

Garth’s face reddened. He turned away.

The inspector sighed.

“Oh, well. There’s plenty of time to think of that when you bring yourself back—alive.”

Before making his arrangements Garth called at the inspector’s flat. This was, in fact, a preparation. Without seeing Nora he felt he would not be armed to enter these unfair lists with death.

He found her by the window in the sitting room. She looked, he thought, more Latin than usual, although the black clothes she habitually wore accentuated her dark hair and flashing eyes, the olive complexion and regular features she had inherited from her Italian mother.

She smiled up at Garth, and, as always in face of that smile, he recalled the unexplored neutral ground where their minds had never really met. This impression had unquestionably retarded the development of their relations. It had until now held their emotions in the leash of friendship. Garth had no idea of snapping that cord at his entrance, but Nora’s proximity and the suddenness of an unexpected gesture distilled logic and fairness for the moment’s irresistible intoxication.

Their hands, reaching for the book she had dropped, met. The quick contact was galvanic to Garth. An unconquerable impulse possessed him. If he was to risk death that night it was folly to shirk life to-day. So his hand closed over hers while he sought for words.

After a moment he became aware of the impassivity of her fingers within his violent grasp. He saw grave trouble and an unanswerable doubt extinguish the excitement in her eyes. A premonition reached him. He fought against it desperately. His voice swayed a little.

“Don’t look at me like that, Nora. You’re going to marry me.”

She shook her head. All at once there were tears in her eyes. Her hand lightly brushed her black skirt.

“Jim, you’ve often asked me why I wear these dark clothes. Now you make me tell you. I can trust you? Because no one knows unless my father guesses.”

He nodded. She spoke with an effort.

“For the man I was going to marry, Jim. You see he—he died.”

Garth arose and turned to the window. He leaned there, staring at the busy street, listening to its jarring discords. Among the children at play one boy, unkempt and filthy, stood braced against a railing, crying at the top of his lungs. In his abandonment to disappointment Garth accepted the picture as typical of his life—a crying out for the unattainable, a surrender to despair. The night’s work lost its terror. Its issue became a matter of callous indifference.

Then her hand, was on his arm, drawing him around so that he saw her face, which had lost its colour, and the growing doubt in her eyes.

“Try to understand, Jim. I think I scarcely do myself. I only know it hurts to see you unhappy. Six months ago when you first came I never dreamed a man could make even that much difference to me again.”

Without warning the colour rushed back to her face. She clenched her hands. The determination in her tone was overwhelming.

“Is that inconstancy to him? Don’t think that. I’m not inconstant. I wouldn’t be that.”

Garth waved his hand helplessly.

“What difference—Never mind, Nora. It’s finished.”

“But you—It’s so unfair. And I want you for my friend.”

She sat down, hiding her face.

“Later—I don’t know. How can I tell? How can anybody?”

Garth saw her shoulders commence to shake. This emotion fired a tiny hope, yet it angered him that she should suffer, too.

“Stop that,” he said roughly. “It isn’t worth it to you. I’m sorry I spoke. I ought to have had better sense, but I’m going out of town to-day on a job—”

He paused. He turned back to the window.

“That’s why I spoke, because—because I may be away a very long time.”

She controlled herself.

“How long, Jim?”

“God knows.”

“Where? West?”

He shook his head.

“Up the state. It’s just as well now. I’ve got to go. I ought to be getting ready.”

She arose. She spoke wistfully.

“Then good-by, Jim. And you’ll try to understand? Maybe you’ll come to see me just the same when you get back?”

He swallowed hard, forcing back his craving for abandonment, for revelation.

“When I get back,” he said.

## Chapter II

### It Opens Nora's Eyes

GARTH waited at the end of the bridge above Garrison. At eight o'clock it was dark, but the river, glass-like between the rugged hills, retained a pallid light. At a short distance two men smoked and chatted. They had withdrawn themselves in response to Garth's moodiness. He fancied they discussed him as one already dead.

A whistle shrieked. The hills rumbled. Flinging their cigars in the water, the men rejoined Garth. He slipped the mask from his pocket, and secreted his features behind its gray protection.

The train dashed across the bridge, sparks grinding from its wheels. When it stopped, panting sullenly, the two men sprang aboard.

Garth flattened himself against the side of the car and watched them reappear, leading a third who wore a grey mask above a plain brown suit. He heard a croaking, unnatural voice issue from behind the mask.

"Didn't look for you so soon, friends."

Excitement drove the melancholy from Garth's brain. The undertaking had begun reassuringly. Simmons had no suspicion that he was in the hands of the police. Garth noticed also as he entered the car that the passengers were not aware of the substitution. He resented the repugnance in the glances they turned on the mask. Simmons' attitude toward life became comprehensible. But, as the journey extended itself interminably, Garth grew restless. He realized he was in the position of a man entering a cavern without a light. He must feel his way step by step. He must walk blindly toward innumerable and fatal pitfalls.

At last the train paused for the change from locomotive to electric motor. Although he knew that normally no passengers would board it at this place, he gazed anxiously from the window. A man stood close to the track with the evident intention of entering the train. Garth saw him elude a brakeman, saw him grasp the railing and swing himself out of sight. A moment later the man walked into the car, stopped dead, and turned sharp, inquisitive eyes on the gray mask.

About the figure was a somber air, accentuated by a black felt hat, drawn low over the eyes. It let Garth see, however, a sharp and colorless face which conveyed an impression of uncommon forcefulness.

After a moment the slender man leaned over and spoke with a leer.

“You must be a star gambler, judging from your face.”

He continued to stare as though expectant of an answer. Perhaps some countersign was demanded. If that was so the whole enterprise swayed in the balance. Garth concentrated his thoughts with difficulty. One word had strayed circuitously from the gang to him. He used it at random, trying to approximate the voice he had heard at the bridge. “That depends on whether I hold the ace.” The slender man continued to stare. Garth’s heart sank, but at last the other straightened with a nod.

“Suppose you take a little stroll with me.” Garth arose and followed him down the aisle. He didn’t know whether to interpret that quick command as acceptance or condemnation. He might be going to the work for which he had been chosen, or—and he realized how likely that was—to an execution. Yet he had no alternative. He must follow the slender, sinister figure into dark places not knowing.

They paused on the platform. Garth thought it likely that one of the inspector’s men was in the car, but of course the fellow would not confess himself by stepping to the vestibule at their heels. It would be enough for him to know that they were on board and that the train was not scheduled to stop before reaching the Grand Central Station.

Garth knew that, too. Therefore he could not understand why his conductor stooped and with an air of confidence opened the vestibule door and raised the trap. Garth started, for, as if the engineer were an accomplice and had received some subtle signal, the brakes commenced to grind while the train lost its speed rapidly.

The slender man grasped Garth’s arm, and, as the train stopped, leapt with him to the right of way and hurried him into the shadows at the foot of the embankment. Any men the inspector might have had on the train had been outwitted.

He saw ahead the red and green lights of an open draw-bridge. He understood now, and marvelled at the simplicity of the trick. Certainly it would not have occurred to the inspector to post his men at the Harlem River where express trains were seldom detained at night. Yet it had been only necessary to send some small boat to loiter in the draw at the proper moment to assure the security of the conspirators.

Immediately Garth lost all sense of direction. The other led a stealthy, circular course through a lumber yard, across a fence, around darkened buildings, and finally onto a small wharf. A craft was moored there—a barge, Garth thought at first. It lay in darkness except for its navigating lights, and, as Garth looked, even these were extinguished.

The slender man glided across the wharf, and, Garth at his heels, stepped to the deck. There he reached over the railing, dropping something from his hand. Garth heard three splashes at regular intervals. A blade of light flashed sharply athwart the darkness and became an open doorway, framing a troubled face.

Garth, shoved from behind, stumbled over the sill into the presence of five men who circled about him, like cats, wary and suspicious. He would know now. One word from his conductor would deliver him to the inevitable judgment of that circle.

But the slender man slipped in after him, closing the door.

“The cops are drunk with sleep,” he said.

Garth breathed again. But into that moment’s respite crept the thought of Nora, suddenly become unobtainable. Resolutely he fought his depression back. At a gesture from the slender man he sat on a bench against the wall.

He saw now that the apparent barge was a rough houseboat, unpainted, unfinished, with windows closed and heavily barred. The only furniture was this bench and another opposite with a deal table between. Fumes of gasoline and cylinder oil came through an open doorway forward and mixed repellently with an atmosphere already poisoned by tobacco. For all five smoked, not with enjoyment, Garth noticed—rather in an abandonment to nerves. It impressed him that these men, who unquestionably were the cleverest and most indomitable of the Hennion group, should expose this restlessness, this apparent fear, on the threshold of the night’s work. His conductor, indeed, was the only one immune

to the contagion of suspense.

Garth glanced at these others with a sharp personal curiosity. They varied amazingly from his anticipation. One, a sallow youth with untidy yellow hair and large-rimmed eye-glasses, might have been a student of the most devoted species. Another cunningly resembled a well-to-do business man, while a third had the clothing and the air of a tramp. The fourth, with his dapper tailoring and ferret-like face, was more familiar to the expert in crime.

These, however, Garth passed over quickly for the fifth, perhaps because, with the detective's extra sense, he foresaw there a special and unintelligible menace.

This man brought his huge, handsome figure forward and leaned heavily on the table. His close-cropped hair, dampened by the heat, curled about a bronzed forehead from beneath which inquisitorial and threatening eyes challenged.

The slender man, who clearly was the leader, crossed the room.

"Seeing ghosts, George?" he asked. "Or maybe you're anxious for a glimpse of what Simmons hasn't got any more. Why not show him the big event, Simmons?"

His laugh, scarcely audible, was like the wrath of a gigantic sneer.

Garth's hand crept to his pocket and closed over his revolver. George drew back.

"Look yourself, Slim, and it ought to be done."

The other swung on him angrily.

"Do you think I'm bringing him here without checking him up. He doesn't have to take his mask off to show you a scar. The lot of you look like sudden wealth for a nerve specialist. Sit down. We'll get to business."

He swung on Simmons.

"I know how you feel about that. Now, listen. All you know is that we wanted a scientific fellow who doesn't use his profession exclusively for the benefit of humanity. Also one without any nerves. I've always heard that of you."

Garth nodded, smiling a little to himself. Lack of nerves had been the inspector's chief requisite. Now the criminals demanded the same quality. He stood, as it were, between two deadly fires. He wondered if murder was on the boards. He recalled the slip of white paper in his pocket, questioning if he would be able to finger it, to scratch upon it those vital invisible directions before these sharp and overcurious eyes.

The slender man hurried on, glancing at his watch.

"We're waiting for one more. At first all you have to do is to keep close to George. We're going to crack a safe."

His voice colored apologetically.

"No jewelry or bags of gold. George falls for that cheap stuff now and then, but you needn't be ashamed of this job, Simmons. By the way, I don't have to ask you if you duck your lid every time the band blats 'Oh, say, can you see!'"

Garth shook his head.

"Say, Simmons," George broke in, "you talk yourself to death. That explosion must have hurt your voice something fierce."

Again Garth tried to approximate the croaking tone he had heard at the bridge.

"Talk's as cheap and easy as cracking safes."

He risked it for its effect on the others. Moreover it was an antidote for his nervous strain to give that much rein to the antagonism he already experienced for the huge, dark fellow.

Secretive laughter greeted his daring. A gesture from the leader halted George's movement, almost instinctive, to resent the affront physically. Then three faint and regular splashes came from the water.

They all held their poses of the moment statuesquely until, at a nod from the leader, the intellectual-looking youth arose and moved towards the door.

During that moment of waiting Garth tried to fashion what he knew into a recognizable pattern, but the pieces were incomplete. He could only wonder why

they had sent to Chicago for an anarchistic chemist to connive with this expert at a task as simple as cracking a safe.

The youth turned the lock and opened the door a little. It was pushed boisterously against him, and, beyond his amazed back, Garth had a glimpse of a gaudily colored skirt. The others had risen. The leader, grasping the youth's elbow, shoved him to one side, and Garth, his view unobstructed now, gazed incredulously at Nora's blazing, painted face.

His first impulse was to cry out and warn the girl back from this ambush into which she had unaccountably strayed. He gripped the edge of the table. He half arose. For a moment the room went black. All at once he realized that her presence at this unique rendezvous must be without the slightest ambiguity. Perhaps it was an ill-advised attempt to rescue him from the net. He waited tensely for some word. His heart sank. She couldn't recognize him behind the mask.

He wouldn't lie to himself any longer. Nora, whom he had always seen in black, wore a flashy dress. She had given the conspirators their own signal. She received from them a welcome of anxiety.

The room darkened again. He sat in a frozen silence. He saw and heard as from a vast distance.

"Whole force at your heels, Nora?" the leader asked gently.

Closing the door, she faced them breathlessly. Her eyes flashed, but fear lurked there, too.

"No," she said, "but it might be tramping on the dock without your guessing it. Listen, Slim."

She raised her clenched fists.

"There's a bull here. There's a cop with his hand at your throat."

"Nora! You're having a nightmare."

"Hold on," George said. "Nora ought to know."

“Yes,” she gasped, “and it’s straight.”

Slim relaxed.

“From your father?”

She nodded.

“How in—”

“I don’t know,” she said, “but he was sure he’d have a stool with you tonight. He’s tried so long I know he wasn’t bragging. Slim! We can’t trip up now. I’ve worked too hard. You’ve told me what a mess you made last time, when that cop, Kridel, was croaked. Where will we be if anything like that’s pulled again?”

“Easy, Nora,” Slim said. “Maybe we wouldn’t be any worse off than we were then. Has anybody burned in the chair for that? Does anybody know who croaked Kridel? Well—the man who did it. Don’t lose your nerve. The cops would have a fine time getting a witness in a murder case out of this crowd. And, if what you say is so, maybe the same thing will happen tonight, only in a more convenient spot.”

“What are you going to do, Slim?” she asked. “Tie him up, but no more murder. I quit at that.”

“Leave it to me,” he muttered. “Show me the bull.”

Garth received the words as a condemned man probably hears the voice of a judge who wears the black cap.

The girl glanced rapidly around. Then, advancing steadily to the table, she raised her hand and pointed at Garth.

He stared fascinated at the finger which, a few hours ago, he had held violently in the rush of his passion. He was aware of the flashing eyes which that afternoon had been wet with tears. But his brain was dull. He waited patiently for the exposure which now appeared unavoidable because of the woman he loved.

She spoke evenly.

“Who could it be but this man that hides his face? There’s no doubt about the rest of you. You only have to see, Slim, whether this fellow, Simmons, has got a face.”

“He had the word,” the leader answered, “and look at that scar. But you’re right, Nora. If there’s a bull here he’s behind that mask.”

“Then make him take it off,” she said.

Garth raised his hands. His croaking voice was torn with dismay.

“No. I warn you. Spare me and yourselves that. It’s not pretty, what you’d see.”

“Take it off,” the girl repeated.

“I hide it,” Garth cried. “For years—Listen, you. If you don’t let me keep a little pride you can do your dirty work without me.”

The leader put his hand on Garth’s shoulder.

“Now, now,” he said soothingly. “Depend on it, Simmons, if you’re all right we don’t want to hurt your feelings.”

“All right!” Nora mocked. “And I tell you there’s a cop here. And you know as well as I he’s the only one. You’re crazy, Slim.”

“Good thing one of us is then,” the leader sneered. “If this isn’t Simmons we’re out of the running for tonight anyway. If it is, what do we gain by making a show of him? That’s what I was going to propose. Only one of us need look.”

“That’ll do,” Nora agreed. “Well! Who?”

“George here was anxious.”

“Look yourself,” George answered. “I’m no dime museum fiend.”

Suddenly Garth arose.

“Maybe the lady—” he croaked. “She’s so set on it. A pleasant sight for ladies.”

Nora flushed angrily.

“I’ll call that bluff.”

She waved the others back towards the end of the room.

“And be quick about it,” she said to Garth.

Garth caught the expressions of the others. He noticed their ready hands. While his fingers rose to the fastenings of the gray mask he turned slowly and faced Nora.

For a moment he hesitated. Even after all he had seen he shrank from forcing on the girl the responsibility of tossing him to those waiting hands. He was tempted to spare her that, to confess himself to the others. But the stamping of her foot, the tone of her voice, impatient, commanding, decided him.

“Hurry, I say! There’s no way out.”

So, holding her with his eyes, he slipped the gray mask aside.

He saw her stare while the angry color left her cheeks. But at first her expression did not alter. It seemed to him a long time before terror twisted her face, before she screamed. He watched her cower back, crossing her arms over her eyes; watched her fall against the wall, where she bent, trembling.

Garth replaced the mask, shrugging his shoulders, and turned to the others. The leader laughed lightly, with satisfaction.

“Never dreamed it was as bad as that, Simmons. You’re right. Don’t blame you, but you must see we had to be sure.”

Garth nodded. He sat down. Let the girl speak. Until then he would play his part.

“Looks as if the stool lost a leg somewhere,” he said.

He studied Nora. Her face hidden, she remained shrinking against the wall. Still she did not speak.

George stepped to her side and put his arm around her.

“Forget it, little girl. Wish I’d looked for you.”

She shook his arm off and pushed him away.

“Forget it yourself, George,” the leader warned. “You ought to have learned that won’t go with Nora.”

“She knows I’m no butterfly,” George answered sullenly.

His touch had aroused her. She straightened and turned wild eyes on the gray mask. Garth waited then for her to betray him, but she only stammered a little.

“He’s right. A pleasant sight for ladies! Boat—must have thrown them off the track.”

She laughed hysterically. She sank on the end of the bench.

Garth was surprised, now that the strain was broken, not to experience any exceptional relief. In spite of the game’s vital stakes it had interested him chiefly because of the various effects it might have had on Nora. Yet it had yielded him no key to her presence here, to her disgraceful marketing of her father’s confidence, to her assumption at home of black robes and grief, or, finally, to her apparent decision to let the night’s work continue in spite of his presence. Probably she hoped he could not get help until the job had been done. Or—and the thought struck him with the shameful tingling of a slap—perhaps she thought he would let the others go rather than capture and convict the woman he had craved in marriage.

He pressed his lips together. He beckoned to Slim. He took the whip in his own hands.

“Is the safe here? Are we going to spend the rest of the night on this boat? If the cops are awake it isn’t wise.”

“All right,” the leader said. “George, you and Nora and Simmons wait here. The rest of you start out.”

The studious-appearing youth, the tramp, the dandy, and the elderly man filed through the door and silently closed it. The leader spoke to Garth quickly.

“George will unlock the safe without any trouble. He’s the best in the business. Your job’s to open it and handle what you find without blowing the lot of us to

everlasting dirt.”

Garth stirred uneasily.

“Explosives!” he said. “I see why you wanted me.”

“The pay’s high,” Slim answered. “The fellows that are after this stuff don’t trust diplomatic talk. Everybody wants it if only to be sure that nobody else gets it, for they claim that the nation that has it, could make a league of all the rest look like Tod Sloan fighting Dempsey. The inventor thinks Uncle Sam ought to have it, if anybody, but he’s been holding off. It’s new, and he’s either afraid of it himself, or he thinks he can perfect it.”

“He’s afraid of it,” Nora breathed. “He told me it was a sin to invent it.”

“The point is, Simmons,” the leader said, “can you handle the stuff with a degree of safety after you have read the formula? A man of your experience—”

“I am not afraid to tackle it if I can see the formula,” Garth answered quietly.

“Say, Simmons,” George put in with a wry face, “if there’s anything phony about your education, drop off here.”

Garth fingered a frayed sheet of white paper.

“I am not afraid if I can see the formula,” he repeated.

The leader turned to Nora.

“You’re sure there’s some of the stuff in the safe with the formula? The foreigner wouldn’t dicker without a sample to analyze.”

“I saw the formula and the sacks put in the safe tonight,” she answered.

George shook his head.

“Nora, you’re a wonder.”

“No wonder,” she said contemptuously. “Nothing but hard work. An imbecile could have made friends with the housekeeper, but it took drudgery to get at the old man. I won’t waste that. If there’s any slip—”

The leader glanced at the gray mask.

“That’s up to Simmons now,” he said.

## Chapter III

### IN THE STEEL ROOM

GARTH'S fingers played with the piece of white paper. "You haven't told me where the house is," he said.

The moment the leader had answered Garth was standing on the bench. He waved his arm. Suddenly he blew out the lamp.

"On the dock!" he stammered to the darkness. "A noise!"

As the others crept to the door he scratched rapidly and silently with a match on the piece of paper the location of the house, the nature of the job, and an appeal for help. When he was through he heard the others coming back.

"If your nerves jump like that, Simmons, what a chance we'll have!" George said. "Not a sign. Light up."

Garth struck the match and relighted the lamp.

"I never take unnecessary risks," he said simply.

Nora, he knew, would guess that his excess of caution was a police trick. His eyes sought her anxiously as the lamp flamed, but she gave no sign. After a moment she whispered:

"Let's start. It—it frightens me here."

The leader opened the door.

"It's time," he said. "They're asleep in the house by now."

They followed him, threading obscure spaces and alleyways to the unlighted end of a street which deployed into a stone mason's yard, and always Garth asked:

"Will she whisper my life away to the others?"

A taxicab waited there. Garth manoeuvred so that he had a seat by the window.

He let his hand, which clenched the piece of paper, dangle through. Such policemen as he saw were indifferent until crossing One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street he noticed one who looked straight at the cab. He let the paper flutter from his fingers, but he did not dare glance back to see if the policeman had picked it up.

The cab halted in a dark side street off Lexington Avenue. A man stepped from the shadows and waved his hand. They alighted and walked with an unconcern that surprised Garth to the servants' entrance of a large house. This Nora unlocked. They entered and waited in the alley while one by one the four from the boat slipped through after them.

Garth understood what these numbers meant. In order that Nora, George, and he might accomplish their task undisturbed, these men would bear to each inmate of the house chloroform, or, under necessity, something more permanently silencing.

Walking heavy-hearted through the alley at Nora's heels, one last saving possibility occurred to Garth. Could this be another police trick? It was likely that the inspector had denied him his full confidence. Could Nora be on the same errand as himself, working for her father?

When she had unlocked the house door he found himself brushing against her in the hall. Impulsively he reached down and clasped her hand. But her hand was like ice. She snatched it away. In her action and the sharp intake of her breath he felt his doubts resolved.

Then he was flung into a stealthy, sure, and dreadful whirlpool of action. He heard feline movements on the stairs, a muffled thud in the darkness ahead, from the second floor a shrill cry, all at once strangled and beaten back into the heavy silence.

He waited, panting. Upstairs someone rapped sharply three times. A pocket lamp flashed ahead, throwing a white shaft against finely-grained mahogany.

A hand in the shaft signalled him, and he crept forward until he stumbled over a round, inert mass which lay just outside the room where the white light searched the mahogany.

The light, wavering around to greet him, disclosed the obstacle. It was a man,

deftly bound, and bandaged about the mouth, the ears, the eyes.

“Shut the door.”

Garth closed the door on this disturbing vision.

The mahogany formed the doors of a large and very wide cabinet. George knelt in front of this, inserting slender, gleaming tools in the lock with the adroitness of a watchmaker. To one side Nora crouched, playing the light on his illicit undertaking.

George opened the doors and nodded to Garth. The light glowed now on the sleek, steel belly of a safe; and, as Garth, a trifle confused, reached out a steadying hand, he realized that the walls of this room were of steel, too. The cold, uncompromising feel of the metal was another warning to him. His only chance was that the safe might balk George for some time.

The man’s first words, indeed, encouraged this hope.

“May take a little time,” he muttered. “Might’s well be comfortable, Simmons. Nora, toss us a couple of those sofa pillows.”

Nora reached to the divan behind her and passed the cushions to George. He arranged one to his satisfaction before raising his hand to the combination.

“Plenty of time, isn’t there?” Garth croaked anxiously.

“Ought to be,” George answered. “Everything’s covered now. Didn’t expect to find the watchman where we did though. If he hadn’t been half asleep—Nora, maybe you doped him at supper.”

The girl gave no sign. She remained crouched at the side. She was like an animal, ready to spring at the first alarm.

Garth was aware of an unusual tension himself. It was not quite the suspense he had forecasted. Perhaps this sharing of criminal labor for the first time accounted for its nature. He appreciated the amount of courage demanded. He received, as it were, George’s disturbing point of view of the moment.

Garth had caught a new stammering quality in the man’s voice. He wondered at

the perspiration which bathed his face in spite of the comfortable temperature of the room. He studied the shoulders, squared as for an attack, momentarily expected. Only the fingers at their facile work displayed no emotion.

Garth questioned if George always worked under this strain. Did any of the responsibility rest with this room? Since his first entrance over the prostrate form of the watchman, since his first touch of those unyielding walls, he had himself experienced a distaste for the apartment. This may have been accounted for in part by that single, brilliant shaft of light, which, illuminating the nest of this perilous booty, deepened the shadows elsewhere.

Garth could make out little. His eyes failed to explore the corners, succeeded only in reaching the divan and one or two easy chairs—furniture altogether incongruous in a chemist's laboratory.

Although the water streamed from George's face, he saw the man shiver. It started an expository train of thought. The last time this job had been attempted Kridel had been killed—in this house, almost certainly in this room. He recalled the superstitious fears of many criminals. Perhaps that accounted in a degree for the other's bared nerves.

"May take time," George jerked out again. "If I could only use a drill and a touch of nitro."

He whistled softly.

"None of that rough business here. Good Lord, Simmons, don't let that stuff go off."

Nora leaned forward.

"Scared, George?"

The question brought fire.

"Show me anybody else who'd do this stunt with more nerve."

"Slim must think a lot of you to put you at it twice."

"What do you mean by that?"

“Didn’t you fall down on it last time?”

“Ask Slim,” he said shortly. “This is the time I’m interested in, and if we pull it off—”

He reached over, tapping the mahogany with ritual precaution.

“If we pull it off, Nora, you’re going to quit fooling with me. I’ve dangled a long time, and we’ll have plenty of money then.”

Physical greed for a moment drove the uneasiness from his eyes.

“Maybe, when I get the door open, you’ll give me that kiss I’ve been waiting for.”

Garth felt shame that he had the impulse to risk his mission for this woman he should have loathed. He wanted to take the burly, glistening throat between his hands. He controlled himself with an effort. But he could not experience for the girl that just loathing.

She had altered subtly. At George’s question her form had lost its alertness and had assumed the unyielding lines of a somnambulist; and her voice had the colorless tone of one who speaks out of a dream.

“Maybe when you get it open, George. Time enough to think of that then. I’m not so sure you’ll open it. I’m not so sure of your nerve.”

“Wait and see,” he said. “You’re a pretty one to talk about nerve. You look as though you’d seen a ghost.”

She sank back in a heap. She screened her face with her hands. George stared.

“Now what—”

“Don’t say that, George,” she whispered. “Not here. Ever since I’ve been in this room—it—it doesn’t feel right.”

She trembled.

“Hurry! I’m afraid here.”

“Hold the light up,” he said roughly. “What’s the matter with you? This isn’t a graveyard.”

He resumed his manipulation of the knob. Garth noticed that from time to time he glanced quickly over his shoulder at the somber corners of the room.

Nora had, to a certain extent, startled Garth. Her barely audible words still breathed disquietingly in his ears. They had been like a bow drawn across a string too tightly stretched.

She kept her face hidden now while George worked. The only sound was the muffled clicking of the balls in the combination; the only light, the shaft from the lamp which she held unsteadily. The thought of the steel walls added to the oppression of the air. Garth breathed with difficulty. He fancied once that something moved behind the divan. George caught his start and demanded an explanation. He scolded querulously.

“Well,” Garth croaked, “I agree with the lady. I don’t like the room.”

“I looked around,” George said.

Nora lowered her arms.

“George,” she said, “sometimes you can’t see everything.”

She straightened. That disquieting, colorless whisper came again.

“I know what it is. That cop was killed here, wasn’t he?”

“What do I know about it?” he asked angrily.

She leaned closer and grasped his arm.

“Right here, George. And if he—It must have been just like this—this time of night—when he—George! Can’t we turn on the lights?”

He swallowed hard.

“Why not send out a call for the patrol? What do you mean, if he—”

She shivered.

“I don’t like places where people have died hard. That’s what I felt when I came in here. But you—you’re not afraid?”

He turned momentarily from his work. He tried with indifferent success to fill his voice with challenge. Afterwards he looked up expectantly as though he was far from certain the challenge might not be accepted.

“Afraid! A man with a red heart afraid of dead ones! They never come back.”

“Don’t say that. I know. My mother told me such things. She was Italian. She knew. She saw. George, don’t say that. It’s like cursing the dead. And he lay right there, didn’t he, George, between you and the safe? That’s why Slim stayed outside. Maybe Slim killed him. I want to go, too. Let Simmons hold the lamp.”

“No,” George said. “That thing he wears isn’t human company. You stay.”

Garth wondered that in that fantastic light the girl’s manner should set a cold anxiety rippling along his own nerves. He looked with an unnatural curiosity at the place which she had indicated.

Evidently she had yielded to an excess of terror. In spite of George’s command she was trying to pass the lamp to Garth. It slipped from her fingers, and the white shaft circled swiftly downwards. She caught the handle before it reached the floor, but now the only light in the room was a narrow circle which bored into the carpet and exposed a dark, irregular stain.

Nora cried chokingly.

“Blood! George! That’s his blood!”

Cursing, George reached forward, caught her arm, and swung the light away from this desolate reminder of tragedy.

“No wonder!” she whispered. “No wonder Slim didn’t have the nerve to come back and do those same things. He’d have seen the man he’d killed between him and his work.”

Garth could scarcely catch her voice.

“If I thought you had that much nerve, George, I might—I believe I might—”

She broke off abruptly. George stared at her, then turned back and fumbled for the knob.

“Try to keep the light steady, Nora.”

There was a beseeching, child-like quality in his tone. He worked with difficulty now. His hands were no longer perfect mechanical tools. They wavered about the knob. His lips twitched. Perspiration thickened on his face. Garth saw drops glitter and fall slowly to the stained carpet.

Garth caught himself paradoxically wishing George to hurry. For a moment he was relieved when a new sound came from the combination, and George with a sigh turned the handle.

“Ready to open,” he said.

He swung on Nora.

“Talk about Slim! Crying, Nora? Good Lord-”

“Don’t, George,” she said. “If I half close my eyes I can see him through my tears, lying here in the shadows. Can’t you?”

He clasped his arms about her. He hid his eyes in her hair.

“Hush,” he said hoarsely. “And, while Simmons does his work, give me that kiss.”

Garth’s fingers reached out, then he thought of the frayed piece of paper possibly in the inspector’s hands and already urging the night to a successful climax. This anguish, too, he must suffer. So he drew back profoundly shaken.

Nora, however, was protecting her lips.

“You promised—” George began.

“I said if you had that much nerve. But I know you haven’t. Even if you had croaked him you wouldn’t dare acknowledge it here. Why, George, you’re kneeling where he lay.”

He threw back his shoulders. He laughed demonstratively.

“What difference does that make? I’m kneeling to you. And let Slim rave. I’ll give you your price. You needn’t be ashamed to kiss me, Nora. It wasn’t Slim. I did it. The cop jumped me from behind that sofa, and I let him have the knife.”

He raised his lips expectantly.

Garth didn’t understand at first. He only realized with a savage joy that their lips did not touch. Yet he questioned why the big man, instead of answering the temptation of that mouth, half-open and inviting, drooped backwards until he lay stretched on the floor.

George’s cry in his ears aroused him, and he saw in the reeling, drunken shaft of light that blood flowed and joined the ancient stain in the carpet.

He arose. He knew what that scream would unloose upon them.

Springing backward, he grasped the handle of the safe and opened the doors.

“Nora,” he whispered. “Come here.”

She obeyed him with mechanical precision,; but when he took the lamp from her listless hand, turning it upward to examine her face, he read in her eyes awakening realization and horror.

He snapped off the light. Still grasping her hand, he seated himself on the floor with his back to the open safe. He drew her down. For a moment he thought she would resist, then she yielded and sank passively to the cushion at his side.

“Why?” she asked.

“They will be here,” he said. “There is no way out except through that door which they will use. It is safer to wait here. Why don’t they come?”

“They are careful,” she whispered back. “They will come slowly. They will take no chances.”

He felt the quick shaking of her body.

“I know what I have done,” she said, “what I have done to you.”

He realized that his hand still grasped hers. He released it gently.

“I understand a little,” he answered, “but if you cared enough to accomplish this madness for him, you should have been even less kind to me than you were this afternoon.”

“Perhaps,” she answered. “Oh, I don’t know. I don’t know. I was so young. I loved him so much, and my father said his murderer would never be punished—justice must fail. Maybe it was my Italian blood, but I swore over his body the day they buried him that, if there was no other way, I would get justice for the poor boy. We were practically certain it was this gang. I said nothing to my father. Through a girl I had helped I met Slim. It pleased his vanity to have a spy at headquarters. I made him trust me. But I couldn’t find out who—Yet sooner or later I knew the time would come. That’s why I worked so hard for tonight, why I wouldn’t let anything interfere, because I thought in this room—Well! You see—Listen!”

She breathed hard for a moment.

“Since I’ve known you I’ve doubted, but I couldn’t turn back. You despise me, Jim, but in a way I have done good. I made them respect me. I have restrained them. I think, because I have been with them, I have saved lives. And always I had planned at the end to punish them as they deserved. But now—in a trap. We’re like mice in a trap, Jim. I’ve done that to you. They’ll find me out now, and what’s behind the mask, too. They’ll kill us both. They’ll have to. Listen!”

“We’ll make a fight of it, Nora,” he said grimly. “No matter what I do, trust me.”

“Hush!” she breathed. “I think the door is open.”

“I’m going to flash the light,” he answered.

“No. I know they are here. I know they are in the room. I hear—”

He snapped the button. The white shaft pierced the darkness. Nora had been right. Slim and three others with ready revolvers were half way across the room. Garth put his finger to his lips.

“Sh-h,” he said. “Wait! Don’t come any closer.”

“What’s wrong, Simmons?” Slim whipped out. “Who called? That’s George. What—”

“He got fresh with the girl,” Garth answered.

Slim waited, taking in the details of the tableau, weighing Garth’s words and manner, studying Nora’s collapsed figure and its proximity to Garth’s.

“You’re bluffing, Simmons,” he said at last. “I’m after facts now. Toss up your hands.”

He raised his revolver, aiming at Garth’s body. Nora gave a little cry. Garth laughed.

“You don’t quite understand,” he answered slowly, “and you’re usually so observant, Slim. Look around. The safe is open behind us. Your bullets would clip through Nora and me into those sacks of army destroyers. What then? So you won’t be surprised when I take my hands down.”

He lowered them. He took his own revolver from his pocket.

“But,” he went on, “there’s nothing behind you but a steel wall, and if one of you comes a step closer I’ll shoot.”

The four gathered together, whispering, inaudibly to Garth; but this tense grouping, this excited council warned him of their only possible answer.

“If you try to rush me,” he cried, “or if you try to get out of the room, I’ll turn the revolver on the safe and blow the whole lot of us to powder in this pleasant steel shell.”

Slim turned, white-faced.

“You wouldn’t have the nerve,” he said. “After all, you’re a bull.”

“Just to show you,” Garth answered quietly, “I’ll put the whole pack on the table. You’ve called the turn, Slim. I’m that.”

He snatched the mask from his face, and took a police whistle from his pocket. He raised it to his lips. He blew a call which he felt would penetrate beyond these steel walls. It was the first unrestrained sound the room had heard that night. It thrilled Garth. It was like a tonic. He laughed outright.

“No more fighting in the dark. Thank God!”

The four men stared with the helpless rage, the abandoned suffering of snared animals.

## Chapter IV

### GARTH BUYS A BOUTONNIERE

GARTH wondered if relief would ever come. He was afraid that the slip of frayed white paper must have gone astray. Otherwise, it seemed to him, it would have brought help even before he had sounded his shrill alarm.

He glanced at Nora. She had placed her hand on his arm. She gazed at the open door.

“I thought I heard—”

Then Garth heard, too—a tramping in the house, a struggle outside the door, a voice whose roar betrayed excitement and triumph.

“Where’s Garth?”

The door filled with men in uniform.

Nora covered her face with her hands and turned away. With a start Garth grasped the reason. Planning vaguely, he arose and leaned over the prostrate figure of George. The man breathed. The wound was in the shoulder and appeared of little real consequence. He straightened to find the inspector standing over him with a look of pleasure. It hurt Garth to think of that expression’s vanishing for one of unbelief and revolt.

“This fellow will stand his trial,” he said.

He added gently:

“For the murder of Joe Kridel. It was here, you know.”

The inspector puffed.

“Garth, I’m proud of you.”

His eye caught the figure of Nora, crouched against the safe. His voice grew hard and business-like.

“Bring that woman here.”

Slim, bound and at the door, laughed.

Garth grasped the inspector’s arm.

“Don’t,” he said. “Don’t bother about her. Let her go.”

But the inspector strode to the safe, raised Nora, and drew her hands from her face.

He gasped and leaned heavily against the divan. All at once he appeared old.

Garth sprang to his side. He knew the inspector must not speak now.

“I’ll tell you,” he cried. “You have to thank Nora as much as me.”

He glanced at the girl.

“That is, we put it over together. It was a winning combination, but we didn’t have the nerve to put you wise.”

The color rushed back to Nora’s cheeks, but the inspector’s face did not alter. He looked doubtfully from one to the other. At last he seemed to gather his emotions in a volley of wrath for Garth.

“You dragged a woman in this! You ought to be horsewhipped. Dragging my daughter into this hell!”

Garth took the girl’s hand.

“Cheer up, chief,” he said, “because if you and she would only let me I’d drag her into a lot worse than that.”

He turned to her anxiously. There were tears in her eyes. He questioned if they had sprung from pity for him. She touched his hand. He looked away, for the quick pressure expressed only thanks, and a friendship troubled by his persistence.

During the next few days Garth saw little of Nora, meeting her only once or twice by chance in her father’s office. He was not inclined, indeed, to urge a

more intimate opportunity. He had let her see rather too much of his heart, and he shrank from an appearance of seeking advantage from her gratitude.

That gratitude existed abundantly, and the inspector shared it. The affair of the gray mask had altered a good deal for Garth. It had placed him all at once apart from his fellows in the bureau. The newspaper publicity, which, unlike most of his kind, he would have preferred to avoid, had swept his reputation far beyond the boundaries of his own city. He acknowledged a benefit in that. Such notoriety might deter the desire for revenge of any of the friends of Slim and George who remained at large.

A very real danger for Nora and himself lay there. It created, too, a tie that the inspector visualized with an increasing friendliness and confidence.

“If Slim and George go to the chair,” the big man said on one of those mornings when Garth had stumbled into Nora in the office, “you two are probably safe enough. With those birds salted away the weaker brothers aren’t likely to take any wild chances, at least until the thing has been pretty well forgotten.”

Apprehension clouded his sleepy eyes.

“But, young people, if Slim and George escaped conviction or managed a getaway, I’d look for a new first-class detective, and—”

He took Nora’s hand and studied her face, whose dark beauty remained unafraid.

“I guess I’d need another daughter, which I couldn’t very well have.”

He laughed brusquely.

“Slim and George are tight enough now, so why borrow trouble.”

Garth saw the foreboding of his chief’s eyes turn to curiosity, a trifle groping.

“Wish you’d kept out of it, daughter.”

“Don’t scold,” she laughed. “You did enough of that the other night.”

“I’m not,” he grumbled, “I’m only wondering where you got the nerve, and the brains.”

“Some from you, father.”

“Not as much as all that. I guess your mother gave you a little that we hum-drum New Yorkers don’t quite understand.”

“If,” Garth said, “anything develops, you’ll have to send Nora away.”

“If there’s time,” the inspector agreed.

He turned back to his papers, shaking his head.

It is, perhaps, as well, when one fears, that the march of routine brings new and destructive demands. It was only a few days afterwards that Garth and Nora were involved in events that drove their minds for the time from the threat, which they should never have quite lost sight of. Yet the Elmford murder didn’t leave room in one’s mind for much else.

On the afternoon before that tragedy Garth, leaving headquarters, made an unaccustomed purchase. Not long ago such affectation would have appealed to his sturdy, straightforward mind of a detective as trivial, possibly unmasculine. He reddened as he handed his ten cents to the shapeless Italian woman whose fingers about his coat lapel were confusingly deft. He had no illusions as to the source of this foppish prompting. The inspector had called him in and told him that Nora would welcome him at the flat for dinner that evening. The event appeared a milestone on the amorous path he sought to explore hand in hand with the girl. He realized his desired destination was not yet in view, but such progress required a deviation from the familiar—some peculiar concession to its significance. So he turned away from the cheap sidewalk stand, wearing, for the first time in his life, a flower in his button hole—a rose of doubtful future and un-aristocratic lineage.

Before following Garth with his blushing decoration it is serviceable to know what happened at Elmford.

## Chapter V

### WHAT HAPPENED AT ELMFORD

THAT night on the edge of winter it was thoroughly dark when Dr. John Randall left New York for his Long Island home. Treving had unexpectedly detained him at the club. The interview had evidently projected more than the unforeseen, for Randall's habitual calm, which carried even to his hours of relaxation a perpetual flavor of the professional, was suddenly destroyed by the color and the lines of a passionate indecision. He crossed the Queensborough bridge and threaded the Long Island city streets with a reckless disregard of traffic which probably went undisciplined only because of the green cross on the radiator of his automobile.

His house, although just within the city limits, had an air, particularly under this wan starlight, remote and depressing. It stood in wide grounds not far from the water. Heavy trees, which clustered near, appeared to shroud it.

The doctor, scarcely slackening speed, swung his car through the gateway and glided up the drive. At the turn the house rose before him, square, frowning, black. It was only after a moment that a nebulous radiance from a curtained window upstairs defined itself as light. Usually there was much light and the companionable racket of a busy household.

Randall's hands trembled while he arranged the levers and shut off the engine. Yet the radiance, at last, was somewhat reassuring.

He sprang out, and nearly running, stumbling a little, climbed the steps, crossed the verandah, and pushed the electric button. From far away the response echoed as through an empty house. No sound of hurrying feet followed it. Randall, after waiting for a moment, took out his latch-key and entered.

Because of his impatience he didn't stop to fumble for the switch. Instead he flung his hat haphazard through the darkness, felt his way across the hall, and climbed the stairs.

"Bella!" he called.

Immediately the relieving answer came:

“Here—in my dressing-room, John. Why are you so late?”

He leant weakly against the wall.

“I was detained. What’s the matter?”

“Why don’t you come in?” she asked.

He straightened and opened the door. The light, shining upon his face, showed it still scarred by anger and indecision. The relief of finding his wife at home and safe was not, then, wholly curative.

He closed the door behind him and stared at her, lying in a reading-chair, a book open on her knees, her dark and lovely face upraised to him, expectant, questioning, a trifle startled.

“Where are all the servants?” he demanded.

She stirred. The youthful fluency of her body in the mauve dressing gown must have impressed itself upon the excited man by the door.

“I had to let myself in. I—Not a light. It frightened me.”

“You’ve forgotten,” she answered. “We talked it over a week or so ago, and I thought you had agreed. Ellen’s wedding. Naturally they all wanted to go. I had an early dinner and packed them off. But I counted on you. I was growing afraid, all alone in the house. What kept you?”

“Old Mrs. Hanson—at first. She’s very ill. I should really have stayed the night. I went to the club for a bite—”

He broke off. He walked closer, looking down into her eyes which did not quite meet his.

“At the club—I knew I must come home tonight. I—I sent your cousin, Tom Redding, to Mrs. Hanson.”

Her eyes wavered even more.

“Why? That isn’t like you to—to turn a critical case over to another man. I could

have managed. Anyway, you'd forgotten about my maid's wedding. So it wasn't that. What—what happened at the club?"

She shivered for a moment uncontrollably.

"John! What's the matter? Why do you glare at me like that? Why do you look so—so—"

She tried to laugh.

"So—murderous?"

His face worked.

"Bella," he said, "I've not been altogether blind about you and Treving."

She exclaimed impatiently, but her shiver was repeated, and the uncertainty of her voice lingered.

"You're not going to commence on that!"

He brushed her interruption aside.

"But Treving's seemed a decent enough sort in spite of the way he spends his money and his Broadway record, and, you see, Bella, I've always trusted you unquestioningly."

"And now? Tell me what you're driving at, John. I won't put up—"

She sprang to her feet, facing him, wide-eyed, furious, yet, one would have suspected, not completely free from apprehension.

Randall touched her arm.

"Don't work yourself up, Bella. You know. I've told you. It's bad for you."

"What do you expect, when you insinuate—"

"What have I insinuated, provided your conscience's clear?"

He urged her back to the chair.

“It’s just this: we must talk it out. I’ve a right to know how far this folly’s gone—what it portends, so that I can take measures of defence for myself and for my wife.”

She yielded and sat down, but now she bent forward, her hands clasped at her knees to prevent their trembling.

Randall clearly made an effort to speak normally. His tone had resumed its professional quality. It was, in a sense, soothing, but the power of the words themselves could not be diminished, and, as he went on, her emotions strayed farther and farther from the boundaries she had plainly tried to impose.

“I overheard,” he said. “It was Delafield and Ross. I went to Ross. I felt I knew him well enough. My dear! It’s common scandal—much worse, I’ll do you the credit of saying, than the facts. You’ve been seen with Treving in cafes of doubtful reputation, and out here on Long Island, at some of these unspeakable road houses—”

He turned away.

“People aren’t kind at construing those things. He was a damned scoundrel to take you to such places.”

“I’ll judge that,” she said. “If it’s all you have to charge me with!”

“Isn’t it enough? Good God! How indiscreet!”

“Then why not tell all this to Freddy Treving?” she asked.

The lines about his mouth tightened.

“Treving,” he said with an affectation of simplicity, “came into the club while I was talking with Ross. He had been drinking—a great deal. I didn’t realize it at first—it’s quite necessary you should hear this—so I took him out in the hall and tried to talk to him reasonably. I told him it must stop—any friendship between him and you.”

She glanced up tempestuously.

“I’ll not have my friendships questioned.”

“I’m sorry, Bella. You’ve placed this one beyond your own control. You made me speak to Treving. It was the only thing to do. And he was impertinent, defiant. As I told you, he had been drinking, but that didn’t explain his astounding assurance. I don’t want to do you an injustice, but I couldn’t help fearing his confidence was based on an understanding with you.”

“John! You’re mad!”

“No. I think it’s Treving who’s a little mad as well as drunk.”

He studied her face morosely.

“I told him, if I heard of his coming near you again or communicating with you in any way, I would thrash him within an inch of his life. Bella, he laughed at me.”

His eyes left hers. A look of utter discouragement entered them. He spoke slowly, with unnatural distinctness.

“Treving offered to lay me any stakes he’d spend this evening with you without my knowing.”

His eyes remained averted. Perhaps he didn’t dare risk the vital testimony hers might have yielded.

Her voice was sharp.

“Treving said that?”

He nodded.

“But I don’t think he’ll succeed. And I warned him as he deserved. You may as well make up your mind, Bella, that that incident is finished.”

“On the contrary,” she answered, “it’s only begun.”

He swung around and bent over her, grasping her shoulders, shaking her slightly.

“Unless, Bella—unless—”

His hands tightened until she cried out.

“That’s why, when I saw the house dark, I was afraid you’d gone. Did you and he know about old Mrs. Hanson? Have you any arrangement with him for tonight?”

She pressed her lips together. Blood congested her cheeks.

He shook her more determinedly.

“Answer. You have to answer that.”

Her lips parted.

“Take your hands away.”

“Bella! You can’t keep quiet. See how you’re racking me! Answer.”

Somewhere in the house a bell commenced to jangle, and continued, irritatingly, insistently.

She grasped his wrists and pushed his hands aside.

“You’ve gone rather too far,” she whispered.

“I’ve a right. Answer. Was there an arrangement? Did you expect him here tonight while I struggled in town?”

The discordant jangling appeared to enter his consciousness. He sprang back, listening.

“That might—By gad, if it were!”

“It’s the telephone,” she said, “in the library.”

“Why isn’t it answered? Oh, yes. You might have kept Thompson at least. Let it ring. I shan’t go down.”

“A doctor!” she said scornfully.

She arose with an effort. The lace of the mauve dressing-gown exaggerated the difficulty of her breathing. His glance, which took all this in, was not wholly without contrition.

“Answer it,” she said. “I shan’t fly from the house to any man’s arms while you are in the library.”

He half stretched out his hand to her, but the appealing motion resolved itself into a gesture of despair. He walked out and descended to the library.

After a moment the discordant bell was silent. The murmur of his voice, moment by moment interrupted, arose through the quiet house to this single lighted chamber.

She stood for a time by the door, listening. Once or twice she placed her hand above her heart. At last she turned back and gazed through the narrow door to the next room where a yellow ribbon of illumination from the reading light draped itself across her bed. Her face set in the cruel distortion that precedes tears, but at the sound of her husband’s returning footsteps it resumed a semblance of control. No tears fell.

“Well?” she asked.

His face was haggard, confessing greater suspense than before.

“The Hansons’ butler,” he said. “I—I’m afraid the old lady’s off this time. Redding had told him to get me. They sent the chauffeur some time ago with a fast car. Man said he ought to be here.”

He paused, searching her face in an agony of indecision.

“Well?” she repeated.

“Bella,” he went on. “Won’t you tell me? Won’t you promise? That old woman—for years she’s depended on me. I could do more for her than Redding. I might help her—a little—”

“Of course you’ll go,” she said.

He spread his arms.

“How can I go, knowing nothing, imagining everything. Tell me. Was there an arrangement with that beast? Bella, he’d been drinking. He’s unfit—”

She raised her hand.

“You only make matters worse. John, you’ve done your best to make me despise you, to urge me to Freddy Treving. For, understand, I do care for him—a great deal. There’s been nothing really wrong, but evidently you’re not content it should stop at friendship. We can settle what’s to be done tomorrow. Meantime—you’ve put me in such a position! What am I to say?”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“Go to your work, I’ve no arrangement with Freddy. I don’t expect him here. If he came I shouldn’t let him in. Your honor is safe enough in my hands for tonight. Does that satisfy you?”

Her tone had a merciless lashing quality. He bowed his head before it. His words stumbled.

“I trust you, Bella. I’m sorry.”

“Then go. In the morning—”

She waved her hand vaguely.

“We’ll arrange—something.”

His eyes begged, but she offered nothing more. So he went out, closing the door softly behind him.

Almost immediately he heard the sound of a motor. He couldn’t find his hat. The front door bell rang, and, snatching an ancient cap from the table, he opened the door. No one stood in the verandah, but the glare of powerful automobile headlights blinded him.

“You’re Mrs. Hanson’s chauffeur?” he called.

An indistinct voice came back affirmatively. Randall caught the word “hurry.” Therefore he ran down the steps, and, his eyes still blinded by the glare, stepped into a large runabout and settled himself by the driver.

They swung away at a breakneck speed which before long swept Randall’s cap

from his head and forced him to cling with both hands to the side of the car.

The landscape tore up through the glare and disappeared in a dense and terrifying confusion of darkness.

“Man!” he shouted. “This is dangerous. There’s no point in such haste.”

He managed to turn, but the other had protected himself against the cold by rolling his collar up about his face and drawing his slouch hat down to meet it.

“Slower!” Randall commanded.

The car swerved. The other cried hoarsely:

“Lookout! Hold tight!”

Randall clung, but the car kept the road. Its speed was all at once reduced. With a disconcerting jerk it came to a standstill. As Randall, trying to recover his balance, started to speak angrily, something soft and blinding struck his face and enveloped his head. His hands, raised purposelessly, were caught and pinioned. The cloth suddenly became moist and a familiar odor arose. The other laughed as he fastened a cord about the arms and body. Randall gasped. His bound limbs relaxed.

The driver turned the car, and, with one arm around the senseless doctor, drove in leisurely fashion back towards Elmford.

Hidden among the undergrowth at some distance from the house stood a small, partly ruined stone building, used once, from the water flowing nearby, as a spring house. The driver carried Randall to the interior of this building and placed him on the floor. Lighting a match, he glanced around.

The unfinished walls were mottled with the melancholy vegetation which takes hold in places where the sun is forbidden. Drops of water oozed from the stones. The earth yielded to the pressure of feet soggily.

The man raised his hat higher on his forehead and lowered his coat collar, exposing a face that was handsome in a weak and flippant way. He grinned rather foolishly now at his victim, outstretched on the damp floor. He swayed a trifle, steadied himself with an effort, then, as the glow of the match expired,

bent over and thrust his hand in Randall's pocket.

He drew out a key ring. He struck another match and ran quickly over the ring until he had found the key he desired. This he slipped from the ring into his own pocket and returned the rest to Randall's coat.

On the point of leaving, he hesitated, and with a resolute air stooped and removed the cloth from Randall's head and the cord from the body. Afterwards he took a small bottle from his pocket, forced the unconscious man's lips open and poured a quantity of the fluid down his throat. Evidently the doctor would sleep thoroughly and for a long time.

When he had gathered up the cloth, the rope, and the bottle, the man left the stone building, laughing with a satisfaction that was not wholly vicious. In spite of the anger his face had displayed the situation for him possessed at least a tiny element of humour.

He secreted the compromising bundle beneath a large stone in the bed of the stream.

"Put it over," he muttered. "People'll say the old boy was off his head or's a reason why we had to have prohibition."

His lurch was more pronounced as he walked to the car, and his manner less confident as he drove on to the house.

He alighted and, steadying himself against the mud-guard, gazed at the dark, forbidding facade in which that diffused and indeterminate radiance alone suggested habitation.

After a time he straightened, climbed the steps, and crossed the verandah. He felt in his pocket for the latch-key he had taken from Randall, inserted it in the lock, and noiselessly opened the door. He was very careful to see that the door did not latch behind him. He placed the key on the hall table. He folded his coat and laid it with his cap on a chair. Stealthily he advanced along the dark and silent hall to the stairway.

At the sound of his automobile Bella had half arisen. She waited attentively, but when for some time no sound followed, she walked to the window, raised it, and leaned out, striving unsuccessfully to penetrate the heavy night.

A board creaked in the corridor outside her door.

She swung around, her hand at her throat.

“John!”

Complete silence followed. Unless something out of all reckoning had occurred, her husband could not be back. None of the servants would have used an automobile. Then who prowled about the unlighted house and hesitated in the vicinity of her door?

“John!”

The formlessness of her cry unveiled her fear.

The knob moved. Inch by inch the door opened, and, inch by inch, as if impelled by a perfectly controlled impulse from the door widening on the intruder, she retreated until the wall held her.

“Freddy!” she gasped.

He stepped in and closed the door. It could scarcely have been apparent to her all at once how much he had been drinking, for, although his face was flushed, the event justified that, and he had evidently forced on himself for the moment a supreme control. Yet her relief was short-lived. To be sure she could leave the wall and advance to meet him, yet, as if the room possessed a phonographic quality, it was still loud with her husband’s anxiety and her own contemptuous promises.

“What are you doing here? How did you get in? Go before—This is out of the question.”

His hand left the knob.

“It’s all right, Bella. Needn’t be afraid. Randall’s out of the way. He won’t bother us tonight.”

“Then you know about Mrs. Hanson?” she asked.

He nodded sagely.

“I know a lot.”

“You can’t stay here,” she said. “Go.”

He stretched out his hands.

“Then you shall come with me. That’s the scheme. Been in the back of my head all along. We’ll show a clean pair of heels. Time something definite happened. Bella!—you know—how I love you.”

A slight impediment, unfamiliar to the startled woman, made itself noticeable in his voice. His control was limited. Already his true condition disclosed itself. Fear as powerful as that which had greeted his stealthy approach returned to her eyes.

“You know I won’t come with you, Freddy. Perhaps later things will be arranged. John and I had a talk tonight.”

His face worked evilly.

“He had a talk with me, too,” he said. “It’s come to a showdown. No use talking about waiting, Bella. It’s now or never. You’ve held me off too long. Got to choose. We love each other.”

He advanced. She stepped behind the table.

“Don’t come any nearer, Freddy. What’s the matter with you?”

He laughed.

“Just you.”

He tapped the side pocket of his coat.

“By gad! I’d have killed him tonight to get to you if it had been necessary. That’s what you’ve done to me, Bella.”

He reached across and grasped her arm. He held her tight while he glided around the table. A book fell to the floor, and another. A vase of roses toppled over and shattered musically. The flowers made brilliant patches on the dull carpet.

“Let me go. Listen, Freddy! We’ll talk it over tomorrow—all three. I promised John I wouldn’t see you tonight.”

“Tomorrow!” he laughed. “Too late. You don’t know all I’ve done for this—a real sportin’ proposition. I tell you it’s now or never, and I’m mad about you.”

He got his arm around her.

“You’ve got to let me keep my promise.”

Still laughing, he drew her closer. His flaming eyes were near. His breath was revolting on her cheeks.

She struggled, gasping for words.

“Let me go. You’ve been drinking. He said—”

“He said!” he cried furiously.

“What are you going to do?” she begged.

As he flung her back against the table the side pocket of his unbuttoned coat flapped against her hand.

“I’m not going to let you slip now, Bella.”

“Freddy! You’re killing me!”

She put her hand in his pocket and snatched out an unpolished, stubby, evil cylinder with a square grip which perfectly fitted her hand.

“Look out, Freddy! You hurt!”

He laughed again. His lips, repulsive and cruel, crushed hers. Her smothered crying was bitter.

An explosion, slightly muffled, crowded the room with sound. Another followed.

His lips, a moment ago masterful with unreasoning vitality, no longer troubled her.

“Freddy!” she sobbed. “I’m sorry—”

He crumpled at her feet.

Near the water, spilled from the vase of roses, a darker stain spread.

She screamed.

“What’s the matter? Freddy! I’m sorry—Say something—Pray!”

She stumbled to her knees by the dead man. Her desolate cries fled ceaselessly through the open window.

## Chapter VI

### A CRYING THROUGH THE SILENCE

GARTH the next day did not repeat his floral indiscretion. One experience had convinced him that practice is necessary to the successful threading of such by-ways. His rose, in fact, had disclosed its limitations even before he had reached the inspector's flat. On his entrance it had not adorned his coat.

He read the brief and scarcely illuminating account of the Elmford murder in the morning papers. Irritation at his own assignment—an unimportant case up-town—let it slip through his mind without arousing any exceptional interest.

When he returned to the central office in the afternoon the doorman beckoned to him.

“Inspector's been asking after you.”

Garth yawned.

“All right. Tell him I'm here, Ed.”

After a moment the doorman called:

“Inspector says, walk in.”

Garth went, and paused, ill-at-ease, just within the doorway.

The huge man lolled in his chair. His quiet eyes fixed Garth genially. For once he failed to fidget with his desk paraphernalia. His rumbling voice was abnormally mild.

Garth appreciated these portents. They connoted favoritism, but he traced that to the inspector's love for his daughter, because he was too modest to place in the scales his own conspicuous virtues.

“Come over here and sit down, Garth.”

Garth obeyed.

“Thanks, inspector.”

The inspector’s eyes twinkled.

“Boys tell me you’re a little sore on the jobs you’ve had since you smashed Slim and George and their favourites.”

Garth grew red.

“There are old women everywhere,” he said. “Nothing to do but talk.”

The inspector guffawed.

“Ain’t it so?”

“Incriminating question, chief.”

The other leaned forward.

“I can’t take chances with such a valuable man.”

He cleared his throat.

“Were you thinking of paying your party call tonight? Because I’ve got to disappoint you. But I don’t want to do that two ways. I can’t see anything particularly dangerous about this job, but I’d like you to look it over this afternoon. It’s the Elmford murder. Suppose you’ve read about it.”

“I glanced it over in the morning papers,” Garth answered. “They were short on details.”

“There doesn’t seem much to clear up,” the inspector said, “except Dr. Randall’s whereabouts. The men I sent out this morning haven’t got a trace. Nothing’s been heard from the ferries or the stations or out of town. Seems there ought to be some indication at the house for a sharp pair of eyes.”

“There’s no doubt then,” Garth asked, “that he killed Treving?”

The inspector ran his hand through his hair.

“Those must have been rotten papers you read,” he answered. “Ask me if Cain

killed Abel. Treving's goings-on with Randall's wife have been common gossip. The boys blushed about it in the clubs up town. Listen, Garth. I've found out things you won't get from any papers. Randall and Treving met at their club last night. Seems Randall had overheard some of this conversation. I've had a few of the high-hat crowd down here today, and one of the hall boys who heard what went on between Randall and Treving. Randall warned Treving away with threats. Treving lost his head and offered to bet he'd spend last evening with Mrs. Randall."

"Good Lord!" Garth exclaimed. "Was he drunk?"

"Can't tell," the inspector said. "The boy thought he had been drinking, but he didn't believe he was drunk. That don't mean much. Nothing like a college education to teach a man how to carry his liquor. Anyway, Randall came back with his own conviction. Swore he'd shoot Treving if such a thing came off. Well! Randall found Treving late last night in the lady's dressing-room."

"Pretty bad," Garth agreed, "but I've never thought threats were very satisfactory evidence."

"Plenty of other evidence," the inspector answered. "Randall had stayed late in town. He must have driven up and found Treving's car by the verandah. They're both there now. Easy to understand how that sight fixed his resolution to kill. And the signs of the struggle are all over the room. He left in a hurry after he had shot him. He lost his hat off, rushing down the stairs. It's lying by the newel post. Mark my words. When we find Randall he'll have a new hat or none at all. He had enough sense not to try to make his getaway in his own machine or Treving's. That's why I'm putting you on the case, Garth. You know what a pipe it is to round up these amateur criminals. I tell you this fellow's clever."

Garth considered.

"That's clear enough evidence," he said at last, "if the woman—But I suppose she refuses to open her mouth."

The inspector's rapid fingering of his paper-cutter confessed his annoyance. His small eyes narrowed.

"Wish I knew if she's acting. She's been practically off her head ever since that motor cop found her kneeling over the body, screaming fit to—to wake the dead.

Nothing but hysterics all night and day. Jones reports she's had some nervous trouble—something about the heart. Her cousin, another doctor, is with her. You know I hate to make a wife testify. Got to be done though when she comes around. That's about all, Garth. Run out there and see if you can hit Randall's trail."

Garth arose.

"Seems simple, chief. Any dope on the gun?"

The inspector shook his head.

"One of these deadly automatics it ought to be a felony to have around. Natural enough for a doctor to carry one."

He grinned.

"Got to kill their patients one way or another."

"Nothing been disturbed?" Garth asked.

"No. They've taken Treving away, but the room's just as it was when they were found."

Garth moved towards the door.

"I know you'll bring Randall in," the inspector called.

"I'll do my best," Garth answered.

He hurried through the outer office. Perhaps the inspector was right and the case promised no unusual excitement, but at least it possessed interest.

It was late in the afternoon when he reached the station near Elmford. He inquired the way from the agent.

"It's about ten minutes' walk," the man replied. "Maybe you're a reporter or a cop? Say, there's no mystery about that case. Any word of the doctor?"

Garth smiled discreetly. He disentangled himself from the agent's curiosity and set off along a road bordered by unlovely suburban dwellings.

These soon gave way to fields and hedges which in turn straggled into a miniature forest. Just beyond that the gateway opened to the left. Garth walked through and up to the secluded house. He glanced at the two automobiles, near each other in the drive.

A tired-looking man in plain clothes lounged in the verandah. Another with a languid air paced up and down at the side. They became animated and converged on Garth, anxious to know if the inspector had got any word of Randall.

While he was talking to them Garth first became aware of a mournful undertone, sometimes punctuated by a shrill, despairing note, now smothered in a heavy silence.

“What’s that?” he asked sharply.

The men moved restlessly.

“Been listening to that music all day,” one of them answered. “Lonely hole! Who’d want to live here?”

“I see. Mrs. Randall,” Garth said. “I’d hoped she’d be able to stand a little talk by this time.”

“Swell chance!” the man answered. “There’s a high and mighty sawbones with her who’d do murder himself before he’d let you get within a mile of her. I’m sick of the rotten case. Nothing to it anyway.”

“I’m going in, boys,” Garth said. “Inspector told me everything had been left.”

One of the detectives handed him a key.

“Room’s locked. This lets in from the corridor. Key to her bedroom door’s in the lock.”

Garth entered the hall. Randall’s hat lay as the inspector had described it. Its gilt initials stared up at Garth with an odd air of appeal. He saw Treving’s coat and hat—another tragic excitation for the doctor if he had chanced to notice them—on a chair by the table. A key, which Garth found fitted the front door, lay at the table’s edge. Garth replaced it there and continued up the stairs.

Mrs. Randall's cries were quieter. Garth, inured as he was to unbridled suffering, was grateful. He unlocked the door of the dressing-room and paused just across the sill while he made a quick survey of the scene of the murder. There was plenty of light and air here, for the curtains were thrown back and the window was open. Since the doctor had unquestionably left by the front door he could not understand why the window had been opened on such a chilly night. He mused. Before bothering with Randall's course from the verandah it would be useful to examine the source of everything.

The table cover was awry. One or two books lay on the floor beneath. Half a dozen long-stemmed, roses, faded as they were, still splashed color across the carpet of a neutral tint. As his eyes took them in Garth smiled, shame-facedly reminiscent.

He started. The formless, agonized cry of a woman arose and seemed to set in violent motion the atmosphere of this tragic chamber.

The cry was repeated. Garth shivered. He had a quick uncomfortable fancy that the woman was making horrid and superhuman efforts to overcome some obstacle to expression.

"I wish she'd keep quiet," he thought. "Confound it! There's no acting about that. She wants to talk and can't."

He returned to his scrutiny of the room. Its disordered condition suggested a struggle before Randall had fired the shots and dropped the revolver there at the end of the table.

A circle of no great radius would have enclosed the scattered and faded roses. No—not all. One bud lay farther off, nearer the bedroom door.

Garth tiptoed to it, stooped, and picked it up, examining it curiously while he tried to reconstruct from it an active picture of the tragedy. The stem had been broken away, indicating, since Treving or Randall had probably worn it, the close and desperate nature of their struggle. For it was not like the roses from the vase. They were of a larger variety and wider open, and this lay, he estimated, near the spot where Treving, conquered and killed, had fallen.

As he stooped there, reflecting, constantly troubled by the impotent sounds from the next room, a ray of late sunlight penetrated the foliage, entered the open

window, and gleamed upon a silvery thread apparently in the carpet. In his haste to reach this thread Garth stumbled noisily against a chair, and, as if in response, while he detached the thread from the carpet, a gentle knocking reached him from the bedroom door.

A little ashamed of his racket, he thrust the thread in his pocket, arose, and opened the door. A tall man with iron-gray hair entered, closing the door gently behind him. His tone was repressed, but Garth did not miss its annoyance.

“Do you want to kill that woman?”

“I see. The chair,” Garth said.

“Every sound from this room,” the man explained, “must be torture to her. I suppose you policemen think all this fuss and feathers necessary. You’d do better to get after Randall.”

Garth curbed his own irritation.

“When do you think we’ll be able to question her?”

“God knows! If this keeps up. She’s in a bad way. Do you suppose I’d waste my time here otherwise. I tell you quiet is essential.”

Garth rested his hands against the table. The knotted veins testified to his anxiety, but his tone was casual.

“By the way, doctor, since you’re Mrs. Randall’s cousin, you must have known the doctor pretty well.”

“Yes, yes, very well.”

“Did you ever notice—was he in the habit of wearing a flower in his buttonhole?”

The other glanced at him suspiciously.

“What are you driving at?”

“Answer me, please,” Garth insisted.

“I never saw him with one. He was a very masculine type—no affectations.”

Garth flushed.

“And Mr. Treving?” he asked. “You knew him, too?”

“Slightly.”

“Did he?”

“What? Wear a flower? I’m sure I don’t know. Never noticed. But I think it likely enough.”

Garth’s hands relaxed. He straightened.

“Thank you, doctor. There’ll be no more noise here tonight. I’m sorry about the chair. I’d rather you didn’t say anything about those questions.”

The doctor’s face, which had shown suffering all through, broke into a derisive smile.

“About the flowers! I understand. One must appear wise, even if there’s nothing to be wise about.”

“Quite so,” Garth said gravely.

The other returned to the bedroom and Garth went downstairs. He paused in the hall long enough to take the latch-key from the table and slip it in his pocket. Then he walked to the back of the house where the servants were collected in an uneasy group. There was a chauffeur, he found, a butler, a cook, and a maid. Another maid, they told him, was with Mrs. Randall.

Garth questioned them about last night’s wedding and the hour of their return, but they were an incoherent lot, all talking at once, and saying nothing useful. Therefore he returned to the verandah where he stood, trying to put himself in Randall’s place, casting about for his likely course when he had sensibly decided not to use his automobile.

The sun had set. The dusk had already rendered objects at a distance indistinct. A decided chill heralded the night. The two detectives sat disconsolately on the

steps. Mrs. Randall's voice continued its pitiful monotone, now and then torn by unavailing and demoralizing cries.

Garth started. He stared at a patch of shrubbery on the hillside to the right. Certainly something had moved there. It occurred to him that to a man in the shrubbery the three forms under the verandah roof would be in this light invisible. Again he was sure there was movement over there. If it were Randall, come back! His experience had taught him that such a return was psychologically conformable.

Without speaking to the others he walked to the end of the verandah and dropped over the rail. Aiding the friendly dusk by keeping behind trees and bushes as far as possible, he approached the patch of shrubbery. After a moment there was no question. The foliage did not wholly secrete the figure of a man. The man appeared to listen. Garth's hand tightened on his revolver. The description fitted, but that was scarcely necessary, for on this cold evening the man was hatless.

Garth appraised the fugitive's damp and stained clothing. He could picture him hiding all night and day—perhaps in that small, half-ruined stone building which showed dimly from here—until the necessities of hunger or the impulse to return to the scene of his crime and learn its denouement had driven him from cover. The haggard face seemed eloquent of guilt.

Garth sprang up and, his revolver ready, faced the man.

“Dr. Randall! I've plenty of help near.”

Randall stepped back.

“And what about Treving?” he asked in a husky voice.

Garth watched him warily.

“I'm sorry,” he answered, “but I've got to take you for his murder.”

Randall's face whitened. He held himself rigidly. After a time he relaxed and laughed. His words came with difficulty as if his mouth held no moisture.

“I'm wanted for Treving's murder!”

“You’ll come quietly?”

“Yes. What’s that noise? I thought I heard some one scream, a—a woman.”

“Dr. Randall,” Garth began steadily, “did you ever—”

“See here,” Randall interrupted, “I’ll answer no questions until I’ve seen my lawyer. Where’s my wife? What about my wife?”

Garth cleared his throat.

“She’s been hysterical—well—practically out of her head.”

Garth could not fathom Randall’s expression as he walked at his side towards the house.

“Of course,” he said, “she’ll be called as a witness against you—in fact the only human witness of the crime itself.”

The doctor smiled contentedly.

“Yes,” he said. “I should like to see her.”

“Dr. Redding’s with her,” Garth explained, “but if it’s in my presence I’ve no objection if he hasn’t.”

Garth waved the two excited detectives away. As he led Randall across the verandah he was provokingly conscious of something missing. When he had opened the door and taken his captive into the hall, he realized all at once what it was. Mrs. Randall’s pitiful and chaotic crying no longer disturbed the quiet house. He noticed, too, that Dr. Redding had descended the stairs and leant against the newel post.

“Who’s that?” Redding asked.

“Hello, Redding!” Randall said easily.

“Randall! They’ve got you!”

Randall’s contented smile persisted.

“Mrs. Randall?” Garth asked in a low tone. “She’s quieter now? Dr. Randall would like to see her.”

Redding stepped forward swiftly.

“He can see her,” he sneered, “if he’s got the courage. She’s dead.”

He swung in a fury on Randall.

“Two murders on your soul! That’s what it comes to. What were you thinking of, man? You’ll go to the chair for this.”

Randall staggered against the wall where he leant, covering his face with his hands.

“My only human witness!” he mumbled.

Garth knew it would be a kindness to get him out of this house, but first he did his duty with a strong distaste.

“You’d better tell us,” he said. “Say something. It might help you in the end.”

Randall lowered his hands. His face worked.

“I’ll say nothing—nothing,” he cried fiercely.

He stretched out his hands to Garth.

“No handcuffs,” Garth said gruffly. “We might go in one of those automobiles.”

Randall stumbled forward. He groped about the hat-rack.

“My hat! Where’s my hat? Do as you wish. But not Treving’s car. Good God! You wouldn’t take me to jail in Treving’s car!”

Garth was restless the next day. The public, in common with the police department and the district attorney’s office, looked upon the case against Randall as proved and to all purposes, disposed of. But Garth, walking along upper Fifth Avenue in the afternoon, could not resist stopping at an expensive florist’s and demanding a rose for his buttonhole. When it was brought he asked the price, and, a good deal disconcerted, handed over the money.

For some time he gazed at the colorful, fragrant flower which swayed on its graceful stem. Then, with an absent air, he placed it on the marble stand and moved towards the door.

The clerks glanced at each other, amused.

“You’ve forgotten your rose, sir,” one of them said.

“No matter,” Garth replied. “I’ve had my money’s worth.”

He called at the inspector’s flat after dinner. The inspector was still at the office, but Nora commented on his restlessness immediately.

“What are you working on, Jim? Of course you’re through with the Elmford case.”

“Not quite.”

He faced her, fighting back the quick emotions in which her proximity always involved him. He loved her too much to risk demanding at random a fixed understanding. Moreover, with this case on his mind, it was clearly not the hour.

“I’ve arranged for a number of subpoenas to be served in the morning,” he said. “The servants have left the house. Your father has arranged to call his men in. In an hour or so the house will be empty. Nora—I—can’t stay long this evening.”

“Jim! What’s on your mind? It’s a clear case.”

“Yes,” he answered. “That’s why Jones and the other flat-foot your father sent out yesterday didn’t search the neighborhood far enough to find the stone building where Randall hid. It’s why when I arrested him I didn’t look it over either. The arrest at the time seemed enough. But he didn’t act like a man caught with the goods. Your father says he’s clever. Maybe he is, but I wonder if he is to that extent. It’s been the trouble all along. It’s too clear a case. I talked to his lawyers this afternoon. He’s refused to put in any defence.”

“Isn’t that proof, Jim, that he knows he hasn’t a chance?”

He fumbled, almost unconsciously, with the buttonhole in the lapel of his coat.

“It might mean,” he answered, “that he was protecting somebody else, and that makes one wonder if there mightn’t be something in the house—letters, perhaps, in that bedroom I’ve never had a chance to explore—something he would like to have destroyed.”

“Trust your instinct, Jim.”

He arose smiling.

“That’s what I’ve arranged to do.”

“Then you’re going out there tonight?”

“Yes.”

He hesitated, but the temptation was too strong.

“How would you like a taxi-ride to Elmford?”

“Jim, you talk like a millionaire.”

“If anything comes of it,” he said, “the city will pay. If nothing does I’ll look an awful fool, so I’d rather you didn’t ask any questions now. But if you want to come—I know you’re game.”

She laughed and got her hat and coat.

So they drove to the lonely patch of woods near the Elmford gate where Garth instructed the driver to wait for them. He led Nora, warning her not to speak, through the obscurity to the entrance. There he paused, and, after a moment, whistled on a low, prolonged note.

Almost immediately the sound of voices came to them and the scraping of feet in the gravel. Two blacker patches scarcely outlined themselves against the black shrubbery.

“Jones!” Garth called softly.

The men approached.

“All right,” Garth said. “Go along home. When did they take Mrs. Randall

away?”

“Over an hour ago. Thought you were never coming. Spooky hole!”

“No alarms?” Garth asked.

“No,” Jones replied, “but I can hear that woman yelling yet.”

Garth laughed, uneasily.

“Well, good-night. There’s no secret about your leaving, but don’t mention at the station that I’m here.”

The men merged into the darkness by the gate.

Garth took Nora’s arm, and, circling the house at a distance, reached the stone building by the stream. He entered, sniffing suspiciously. When he had closed the door he took his flashlight from his pocket and pressed the control.

“Don’t move around, Nora.”

Quickly he examined the confusion of footprints. It impressed him at once as significant that none strayed far from the threshold. The damp floor farther in was disturbed only by a long, irregular depression modelled, he knew, by a body, lying prone.

“Think of lying there, Nora,” he said. “I’d have preferred standing indefinitely. And why didn’t he move around?”

Nora’s teeth chattered.

“It’s bitter cold in here.”

Garth’s face set.

“And a fastidious man like the doctor lies here all night and most of the day. Then let’s see.”

He went outside and ran his light over the lines of footprints which converged at the door. One set straggled unevenly up the stream. With an exclamation he followed it along the bank until it swung close to the water. He stooped. His

lamp moved searchingly about the bottom of the shallow creek. Nora bent over his shoulder.

“Jim! Do you see that stone? There. Hold your light steady. It’s been moved. Look at the dark stain on this side.”

Garth reached over, rolling the stone away. He drew from the water a stout, slender rope and a black cloth. As he raised the cloth a tiny bottle fell from its folds and splintered on the rock.

Nora’s eyes sparkled.

“Does it fit, Jim?”

“It suggests a lot,” he answered, “and it explains something, but it’s little use unless—”

He caught his breath.

“He might be that kind of a fool.”

He sprang upright.

“Come along. We’ve got to turn up something in the house that will make Randall talk. Nora! If there had been letters do you think she would have destroyed them one by one? You see there was no chance after the murder, and don’t women cling to such things?”

“She’d probably keep them,” Nora said.

They climbed the hill. The unlighted house, like a thing dead itself and surrendered to decay, arose before them forbiddingly.

“Jones was right,” Nora said. “It’s spooky.”

Garth crossed the verandah on tip-toe and silently opened the door.

“No lights,” he breathed.

Nora shivered.

“It’s as cold and damp here as the stone house. Can you find your way?”

“Yes. Sh-h.”

He led her across the hall, up the staircase, and down the corridor to the dressing-room. The window had been closed in there, and there was no escape for a humid and depressing chill which enveloped them with discomfort.

He found the easy chair and told Nora to sit down. He drew another one close.

“But why not lights, Jim?”

“It’s logic to wait awhile,” he said. “The letters, you know.”

She gasped.

“I begin to see.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have brought you,” he whispered.

“But who—”

“Sh-h!”

“Did you hear anything?” she asked.

“No. If Randall never wore a rose—”

“Jim! I’ve never—felt such darkness.”

“I must think,” he said.

But his brain refused to enter the new country of speculation whose gates the discovery in the stream had opened. The dank air of the room where Treving had been murdered was thick with imminence. A formless anticipation possessed Garth’s mind. He had a quick instinct to turn on the lights and proceed with his search, abandoning this course which logic had suggested, but which was fraught, he had no doubt, with positive apprehension to Nora. Why not, indeed, satisfy her curiosity now? But his pride denied the impulse. He wanted first something more tangible, something more provocative of her praise.

“It frightens me here,” Nora breathed. “I’ve the queerest desire to—to scream.”

Her laugh was scarcely audible.

Her words had set Garth’s memory to work. He knew again what he missed in this silent house—the amorphous screams of a woman in an agony powerless to express itself. How she must have wanted to speak! How horribly she had tried until the supreme, the enduring silence had clutched about her throat! The sullen and sepulchral air of the room seemed to vibrate with the wraiths of those efforts.

Was the door open to the next room where she had struggled and died?

Garth stirred uneasily.

Nora spoke.

“How long?”

“Not long,” Garth whispered, “or I’ll turn the lights on. I’ll look.”

His thoughts swung back to the next room and the despair it had harbored. Could such passionate resistance to circumstance perish utterly? Could the violent will behind it accept silence and pass with the body into nothingness?

What had she wanted to say?

A movement, scarcely audible, reached him from the next room.

Nora’s hand touched his arm. He was aware of the trembling of her fingers. He leant forward, listening. He scarcely caught Nora’s voice.

“You heard that?”

The movement was repeated—somebody—something stirred in the dark room where the woman had died.

Nora swayed against him. Her other hand touched his shoulder. His heart leapt, but he realized that this contact was only an impersonal appeal for protection. So he drew his arms back, but his brain was clearer. He no longer answered to the

fancy that the echoes of those screams tortured his ears.

“Stay here quietly,” he whispered.

“Don’t go in there, Jim.”

He pushed her hands gently away. His movements as he crossed the floor were stealthier than those which still persisted in the bedroom. He paused in the doorway. The darkness was complete, yet he could locate the movements now against the farther wall.

He drew out his revolver and his flashlight. He pressed the button. The glare splintered the blackness and centered on the figure of a man who bent over the open drawer of a desk.

“Throw your hands up!” Garth said.

In the dressing-room Nora cried out.

The man at the desk swung around, lifting his hands and exposing the white and contorted face of the butler, Thompson.

Garth laughed nervously.

“I’ve got him, Nora.”

“Wh—what do you mean?” the man asked. “I came back—Who are you? What do you want of me?”

Garth stepped forward aggressively. His conscience troubled him not at all.

“I want you for the murder of Frederick Treving—there in the next room.”

The fellow’s jaw dropped.

“No—no. I had nothing to do with it. I swear.”

Garth raised his hand to the lapel of the butler’s coat.

“I thought so,” he said. “No question about you, my man. You wore the rose I found where Treving’s body lay. Got it at the wedding, didn’t you?”

The man sank on the unmade bed.

“What are you talking about? I had nothing to do with it.”

“Tell that to the judge who’ll send you to the chair,” he said.

The butler shook. He raised his uncertain hands to his face. He shuddered.

“No, no. I tell you I had nothing to do with it. It was Mrs. Randall. He attacked her, and she shot him.”

Garth relaxed.

“You heard that, Nora?”

Nora came to the door.

“Yes.”

“Then,” Garth said, “I am about through with the case.”

He turned back to Thompson.

“But you’re not clear yet. How did you happen to be here? I know you went to the wedding with the rest.”

“Yes, but Mrs. Randall got me on the telephone—said the doctor had been called back to town and she was nervous and I’d have to come home. As I let myself in the back way I heard her scream. I ran up and through this room. I got to the door just in time to see her shoot him. But when I rushed in and tried to lift her up she screamed. I couldn’t do anything with her. And I got frightened. When I heard the motorcycle and guessed it was a policeman who had heard her screaming, I ran out the servants’ entrance and went back to the wedding and came home with the rest. I was afraid they would take me, and she couldn’t say anything to clear me. That’s the truth.”

Garth looked him over contemptuously.

“And, knowing the truth, you’d have let Dr. Randall go to trial.”

Thompson uncovered his face. Through his tears his eyes glowed with an

exceptional devotion.

“I worked for her, sir. I had been with her family ever since she was born. Besides, if he didn’t want to give her away, what business was it of mine? He sent for me to-day, and when I told him I had seen her shoot him, he made me promise to keep my mouth shut.”

“I know he sent for you,” Garth said. “That’s why I hoped to find you here tonight. He suspected you were a go-between and that there might be letters or something here to incriminate her with Treving.”

Thompson nodded.

“I told the doctor, a few letters and trinkets. He said I must get them as soon as the detectives had left and the house was clear. But I can say, sir, there was never anything really out of the way. She wasn’t quite happy with the doctor. It would be a kindness to the dead—”. Garth smiled, turning to Nora.

“You wouldn’t give me away, would you? All right, Thompson. Do what you came to do.”

Thompson shot him a grateful glance and returned to his obliterating task at the desk. Garth snapped on the light.

“But, Jim,” Nora asked, “how did you know that man had been a witness? Was it a guess?”

Garth shook his head.

“Simple enough,” he said.

He took a short, slender, silvery thread from his pocket. With a shame-faced look he handed it to Nora.

“You’d know more about such things than I. It’s a wire that made a broken, worn-out rose look a whole lot better than it was. I found it and the rose in the next room. I recognized it, because, Nora, when I came to dinner the other night I stopped at a sidewalk stand and bought a rose for my buttonhole. Silly, wasn’t it? But it was a good thing, because I got stung with one of those. That’s why I knew what the broken stem and the wire meant. I learned that Randall didn’t

wear flowers, and I made sure this afternoon what kind of a rose Treving would have worn. Therefore, somebody else had been in that room, wearing a cheap rose which he had almost certainly got at that cheap wedding. When I heard Randall had sent for this man I decided to hold over my subpoenas for the servants until tomorrow, and run out here myself as soon as the detectives were called in—maybe get my man when he wouldn't lie."

Her eyes sparkled.

"And you guessed Randall didn't know about the murder when you caught him?"

"After I had landed him in jail, his manner, taken with the rest of it, worried me. If he wasn't guilty, why had he hidden all night and day? What we found in the stone house answered that, and almost certainly put it up to Mrs. Randall. Of course he guessed she had done it, and that cleared her in his eyes. It's why he's been so sentimental about protecting her memory. He didn't want it stained with murder, and he's probably figured he could tell some story on the stand that would clear her of the scandal, provided Thompson gathered up these little souvenirs of her indiscretion."

"Jim, I'm proud of you," Nora said. "But will Dr. Randall thank you for interfering?"

"I think so, when he's got over this first mistaken idea of what he owes her for protecting his honor and her own even to the point of murder. He'll soon be clear-headed enough to weigh both sides. He'll appreciate then that there isn't much disgrace about such a crime for her, particularly since it's the strongest proof the world could have that Thompson's opinion is right."

He turned to the butler.

"Surely, Thompson, there isn't as much evidence as all that. Come. We ought to get back to town."

As they went down the stairs Garth wondered that his success borrowed its chief value from its effect on Nora. As large as the satisfaction of clearing an innocent and harassed man, loomed the fact that he had, indeed, provoked her praise.

At the turn their hands met in the darkness. He rejoiced that the warmth of her

fingers lingered momentarily in his.

## Chapter VII

### NORA FEARS FOR GARTH

FROM the moment of his solution of the Elmford affair Garth was recognized at headquarters as the man for the big jobs—the city’s most serviceable detective. For one who accepted his success so modestly it was difficult to breed jealous enemies. There was, to be sure, some speculation as to how long such a man would chain his abilities by the modest pay of the department, and a wish here and there that he would find it convenient to free himself for broader fields in the near future.

Garth realized that it was the inspector’s attitude that had determined his new standing. Under other circumstances things might have progressed more slowly. The tie formed the night of the arrest of Slim and George was still strong.

Garth arranged, when he went to bear the news of his discovery to Dr. Randall in the Tombs, to catch a glimpse of the two. Their greeting sufficiently defined the threat he had always known existed. In their faces he read an intention from which he shrank, more for Nora’s sake than for his own. He didn’t stay to argue. He walked on to Randall’s cell and told the stricken man that in a few minutes he would be free.

Garth had been a good prophet. Randall’s first resentment gave way to a gratitude, expressed with difficulty but genuine.

“It—it was exceptionally fine of you to let Thompson destroy those things.”

“I would want someone to do as much for me,” he answered, “that is, if I ever had the nerve to do what you did. That was the fine thing, doctor.”

And Garth went away, aware that he had made a staunch friend.

The inspector was troubled when he heard of Slim and George’s open hatred. He saw the district attorney, and others whose ears he had. On his return he sent for Garth.

“The district attorney tells me,” he said, “that there isn’t a loophole. They’ll be

convicted and go to the chair as certain as that when the moon shines lovers kiss. If they don't escape. Without suggesting that every crook doesn't get the same attention, I've seen to it that those chair warmers will be watched closer than Fido watches the butcher."

So again Garth put the matter out of his mind, and was aided by an unexpected threat, apparently just as serious, that faced him a very short time after.

On that fall morning he paused on the threshold of the inspector's office, and, surprised and curious, glanced quickly within. It was not so much that Nora sat by the window, clothed in her habitual black, nor was his interest quickened by the fact that she knitted deftly on some heavy, gray garment. Rather his concern centered on the inspector who had left his desk and whose corpulent, lethargic figure moved about the room with an exceptional and eccentric animation.

At Garth's step Nora glanced up, smiling. The inspector retarded his heated walk. To ease the perceptible strain Garth spoke to Nora.

"Seems to me you knit no matter where you are."

"When one knits for the hospitals," she answered, "any place will do. I had hoped my example might quiet father. I only dropped in for a chat, and look at him. What a welcome! I'm afraid, Jim, he has something disagreeable for you."

The inspector paused and sat on the edge of his desk.

"Maybe so. Maybe not," he rumbled. "I don't like working through the dark, so I don't like to ask anybody else to do it. I've got to, though. Cheer up, Garth. I'm asking you."

He raised his paper cutter and jabbed at the desk with a massive petulance.

"Ever since I got down this morning," he went on, "I've been hounded by telegrams and long-distance calls. Well? Do you want a holiday? It's apt to be a hell of a holiday. Excuse me, Nora."

"I see," Garth said. "Something out of town."

The inspector's manner warned him. After long experience he knew it veiled a grave distrust.

“Why,” Nora asked, “don’t you tell us what the case is?”

The inspector walked around the desk and with a sigh settled himself in his easy chair.

“That’s the rumpus,” he answered, and Garth saw that his eyes were not quite steady. “Don’t know anything about it myself unless they’d like Garth to chase a few spooks. Here’s the lay-out. It’s a man who’s done me a good many favors. There’s no secret—political ones. I’m in his debt, and he’s asked me for a good detective to go up to his place in New England—not as a detective, mind you, Garth. That’s the queer side, the side I don’t like. He insists on his man’s showing up as a guest, knowing no more than a random guest would know. Sounds like tommy-rot, but he isn’t sure himself there’s anything out of the way. He wants you, if you take it up, to live quietly in the house, keeping your eyes peeled. He expects you to put him wise to the trouble or to stake your reputation that there isn’t any trouble at all. Are you willing to jump into a chase blindly that way? He’d like the fellow that swung the Hennion job, but if you turned it down cold I couldn’t help it, could I?”

“Nonsense, chief,” Garth answered. “Never heard of such a thing, but it sounds interesting. I’ll take a shot at it.”

The inspector wrote hurriedly on a piece of paper.

“Here’s his name and address. Catch the ten o’clock from the Grand Central and you’ll get up there tonight.”

Garth took the slip. Before placing it in his pocket he glanced it over.

“Andrew Alden,” he saw. “Leave Boston from North Station on four o’clock train and get off at Deacon’s Bay.”

“I’ve heard of Mr.—” Garth began.

The inspector’s quick, angry shake of the head in Nora’s direction brought him to an abrupt pause. He walked to Nora and took her hand.

“Then I won’t see you until after my holiday,” he said with a smile.

Her eyes were vaguely uneasy.

“I agree with father,” she said. “It isn’t safe to walk through the dark. Won’t you tell me where you’re going?”

Garth’s laugh was uncomfortable. He didn’t pretend to understand, but his course had been clearly enough indicated.

“I’ll leave that for the inspector,” he answered. “I have to rush to pick up my things on the way to the train.”

The uneasiness in her eyes increased.

“You know, Jim, as father says, you can turn it down. It might be wiser.”

His heart responded to her anxiety. In view of her fear it was a trifle absurd that their farewell should project nothing more impulsive than a handclasp. Its only compensation, indeed, was the reluctance with which she let his fingers go.

When Garth had left, Nora arose and faced her father.

“What’s all this mystery?” she demanded. “It’s easy enough to guess there’s danger for Jim, and you know a lot more than you pretend.”

“See here, Nora,” the inspector grumbled, “I usually give the third degree myself in this place.”

She rested her hands on the desk, studying his uncertain eyes.

“Why,” she asked, “wouldn’t you let Jim tell me the man’s name?”

His bluster was too apparently simulated.

“What did you come down for this morning anyway? No sense in your getting upset. A detective bureau isn’t a nursery.”

She straightened slowly, her face recording an unwelcome assurance.

“Politics!” she cried. “And Jim’s leaving from the Grand Central. I know. He’s going to Mr. Alden’s at Deacon’s Bay. I see why you wouldn’t let him tell me.”

“Place is all right,” the inspector said stubbornly. “You’ve seen it. You were there with me two summers ago. What’s the matter with the place?”

“No use trying to pull the wool over my eyes,” Nora answered. “It’s the loneliest place I’ve ever seen, and you ought to know I’d remember Mr. Alden’s big furnaces and machine-shop. I read the papers, father. He’s staying up so late this year on account of the enormous war orders he’s taken. You know as well as I do that that may mean real danger for Jim. What did Mr. Alden tell you?”

The inspector spread his hands helplessly.

“I sometimes think, Nora, you’d make a better detective than any of us. Alden’s sick and nervous. I guess that’s all it amounts to. He’s probably scared some German sympathizer may take a pot shot at him for filling these contracts. And he’s worried about his wife. She won’t leave him there alone, and it seems all their servants, except old John, have cleared out.”

“You said something to Jim about spooks,” Nora prompted.

“Thought you’d come to that,” the inspector said. “You’re like your mother was, Nora—always on the look-out for the supernatural.”

“So, I gather, were the servants,” she answered drily.

“Silly talk, Alden says, about the woods back of his house. You remember. There was some kind of a fight there during the Revolution—a lot of men ambushed and massacred. I guess you saw the bayonets and gun-locks Alden had dug up. Servants got talking—said they saw things there on foggy nights.”

The inspector lowered his voice to a more serious key.

“The angle I don’t like is that Alden’s valet was found dead in those woods yesterday morning. Not a mark on him. Coroner, I believe, says apoplexy, but Alden’s nervous, and the rest of the help cleared out. I suppose they’ll get somebody else up as soon as they can. Meantime Alden and his wife are alone with old John. Confound it, Nora, I had to send him somebody.”

“But without a word of this!”

“I tell you I don’t like it. I didn’t want to do it. It was Alden’s idea—would have it that way. Frankly I don’t make it out, but maybe, being on the spot, he knows best.”

“There’s something here,” she said, “that we can’t understand—maybe something big. It isn’t fair to Jim.”

The inspector looked up slyly.

“Jim,” he said, “can take care of himself if anybody can. Seems to me you’re pretty anxious. Sure you haven’t anything to tell me about you and him? If you had, I might make a place for him watching these tencent lunch joints to see that customers didn’t carry away the hardware and crockery. Then all the danger you’d have to worry about would be that he might eat the food.”

But Nora failed to smile. She glanced away, shaking her head.

“I’ve nothing to tell you, father,” she answered. “Nothing now. I don’t know. Honestly I don’t know. I only know I’ve been through one such experience, and if anything happened to Jim that I could help, I’d never forgive myself.”

## Chapter VIII

### THROUGH THE DARK

THE night had gathered swiftly behind a curtain of rain. Garth, glancing out the window of the train, saw that darkness was already close upon a somber and resentful world. Pines, hemlocks, and birches stretched limitlessly. The rain clung to their drooping branches like tears, so that they expressed an attitude of mourning which their color clothed convincingly. The roaring of the train was subdued, as if it hesitated to disturb the oppressive silence through which it passed.

The car, nearly empty, was insufficiently lighted. Garth answered to the growing depression of his surroundings. His paper, already well-explored, no longer held him. He continued to gaze from the window, speculating on the goal towards which he was hurrying through this bleak desolation. The inspector's phrase was suddenly informed with meaning. He was, in every sense, advancing through the dark. The realization left him with a troublesome restlessness, a desire to be actively at work.

The last streak of gray had long faded when the train drew up at Deacon's Bay station—a small building with a shed like an exaggerated collar about its throat. At this hour there was no operator on duty. Only one or two oil lamps maintained an indifferent resistance to the mist. Garth saw a horse and carriage at the rear. He walked to it.

“Could you drive me to Mr. Andrew Alden's place?” he asked.

From the depths of the carriage a native's voice replied:

“Probably you're the party I'm looking for. If you're Mr. Garth from New York, step in.”

Garth obeyed, and they drove off along a road for the most part flanked by thick woods.

Without warning, through an open space, Garth saw a flame spring upward, tearing the mist and splashing the sky with wanton scarlet.

“What’s that?” he asked sharply.

The glare diminished and died. The native clucked to his horse.

“Mr. Alden’s furnaces,” he answered.

Garth stirred.

“I see. Iron. Steel. And now it works night and day?”

“On war orders,” the native answered. “Now you wouldn’t think we’d ever have got in the war, would you? There’s a whole town—board shacks—to take care of the men—more’n fifteen hundred of them.”

Garth nodded thoughtfully. Here at the start was a condition that might make the presence of a detective comforting to his host.

As they penetrated deeper into the woods the driver exhibited an increasing desire to talk, and from time to time, Garth remarked, he glanced over his shoulder.

“None of my business,” the man said, “but it’s funny Mr. Alden’s having company now.”

Garth smiled. He was certainly on the threshold of a case he had been asked to enter wholly unprepared.

“Maybe you’ll tell me why,” he encouraged.

“Because,” the driver answered, “although Mr. Alden stands to make a pile of money, he’s paying for it in some ways. You didn’t hear about his yacht?”

Garth shook his head.

“Maybe some of these rough workmen he’s got up from the city, or maybe somebody wanted to pay him out. Took it out of his boathouse a few nights ago, started on a joy-ride, I suppose, and ran it on the rocks.”

“Much loss?” Garth asked.

“Total, except for the furnishings.”

“Are you one of Mr. Alden’s servants?”

The driver’s laugh was uncomfortable.

“That’s what I meant about his having company. There aren’t any servants except the old butler. A woman from the village goes to get breakfast and lunch for them, but she won’t stay after dark.”

Garth grinned, recalling the inspector’s comment about spooks.

“Why did the servants quit?”

The driver glanced over his shoulder again. He hurried his horse.

“Laughing’s cheap,” he said, “but you can judge for yourself how lonely it is, and Mr. Alden’s right on the ocean—only house for two miles. You see, he owns a big piece of this coast—woods right down to the water. They’ve always told about a lot of soldiers being killed in those woods during the Revolution. All my life I’ve heard talk about seeing things there. Servants got talking a few days ago—said they saw shadows in grave clothes going through the woods. I laughed at that, too. But I didn’t laugh when they found Mr. Alden’s valet yesterday morning, dead as a door nail.”

Garth whistled.

“Violence?”

“Not a sign. Coroner says apoplexy, but that doesn’t convince anybody that doesn’t want to be.”

“Curious,” Garth mused.

For some time a confused murmuring had increased in his ears—the persistent fury of water turned back by a rocky coast.

They turned through a gateway, and, across a broad lawn, he caught a glimpse of lights, dim, unreal, as one might picture will-o-the-wisps. But the night and the mist could not hide from Garth the size of the house, significant of wealth and a habit of comfort. That such an establishment should be practically bereft of service was sufficient proof that there was, indeed, something here to combat.

Yet from the driver he could draw nothing more ponderable than the fancied return of the dead to their battlefield, and a distrust, natural enough in a native, of the horde of new men gathered for the furnaces.

When he had stepped from the carriage he saw that the lights were confined to the lower hall and one room to the left. The rest of the great house stretched away with an air of decay and abandonment.

In response to his ring he heard a step drag across the floor, but the door was not opened at once. Instead a quavering voice demanded his identity.

With some impatience Garth grasped the knob, and as he heard the carriage retreat towards the town, called out:

“My name is Garth. I’m expected.”

The door was swung back almost eagerly, and Garth stepped across the threshold of the lonely house.

An old man faced him, white-haired, bent at the shoulders, unkempt and so out of key with the neat hard-wood floor, the hangings, and the wainscot of the hall—a witness to an abrupt relaxation of discipline.

“Thank heavens you’ve come, sir,” the old man said.

“Then you know,” Garth answered. “What’s wrong here?”

But before the other could reply a man’s voice, uncertain, barely audible, came from the lighted room to the left.

“Who is that? If it is Mr. Garth bring him to me at once.”

Garth became aware of the rustling of skirts. He stepped into the room, and, scarcely within the doorway, met a young woman whose unquestionable beauty impressed him less than the trouble which, to an extent, distorted it. Her greeting, too, almost identical with the old servant’s, disturbed him more than his. It was reminiscent of the desolate landscape he had seen from the train, of the forest loneliness through which he had just driven, of the gaping scarlet that had torn across the cloud-filled sky.

“I’m glad you’ve come. I—I was afraid you mightn’t make it.”

Garth’s glance appraised the room. It was a huge apartment, running the width of the house. Casement windows rose from the floor to the ceiling. An oak door in the farther wall, towards the rear, was closed. There were many book-cases. A fire burned drowsily in a deep hearth. Before it stood a writing-table with an inefficient lamp, and at its side—the point where Garth’s eyes halted—a man sat—huddled.

The man wore a dressing gown and slippers. His hair was untidy. From his cadaverous face eyes gleamed as if with a newly-born hope. He put his hands on the chair arms and started to rise, then, with a sigh, he sank back again.

“You’ll excuse me,” he said. “I’ve not been myself lately. It is an effort for me to get up, but I am glad to see you, Mr. Garth—very glad.”

Garth understood now why the voice had barely carried to the hall. It lacked body. It left the throat reluctantly. It crowded the room with a scarcely vibrating atmosphere of dismay. Garth asked himself hotly if he had been summoned as an antidote to the airy delusions of an invalid.

A stifled sound behind him caused him to turn swiftly. He was in time to see the distortion of the woman’s features increase, to watch the resistless tears sparkle in her eyes and fall, to be shamed by the laborious sobs which, after she had covered her face, shook her in freeing themselves.

He advanced, at a loss, shocked by this unforeseen breakdown. He took Alden’s hand, but the other appeared to have forgotten his presence.

“Don’t, Cora,” he mumbled. “You mustn’t do that any more. We are no longer—alone.”

Garth glanced from one to the other, answering to the atmosphere of dismay, which moment by moment became more unavoidable. Yet what could there be here beyond loneliness, and, perhaps, threats from those against whose cherished principles Alden’s furnaces were busy night and day? The loneliness, Garth acknowledged even then, could account for a lot, but, he decided, a doctor was needed here as much as a detective.

At last Mrs. Alden resumed her control. She faced Garth apologetically.

“It’s because I can’t get him away,” she said wistfully. “And he’s sick. Anybody can see that.”

“A week or two more,” Alden said, “until the works are running right. Then we’ll go back to New York. I’ve had trouble replacing unsatisfactory workmen, and I can’t make the government wait.”

“New York!” the woman echoed.

“You’ve a doctor?” Garth asked.

“From the village,” Alden answered. “I’m afraid he doesn’t understand me.”

“Then,” Garth said firmly, “I should let the works go to blazes until I’d looked after myself.”

Alden moved his hand vaguely.

“It’s nothing—cold, maybe a touch of the gout. I sometimes suffer, and my nerves are a little under. Too much involved here, Mr. Garth. You couldn’t afford to take chances with that.”

Garth glanced at the room’s luxurious furnishing.

“I couldn’t,” he answered captiously. “I’m not so sure about you.”

It annoyed him that the lamp on the table failed to drive the shadows from the corners.

Mrs. Alden approached him timidly.

“You’ll forgive our welcome? You’ll try to understand? You may have noticed something about the fall in a remote place. It is very depressing here. If only you could persuade him to leave. You see we’ve no servants but old John. Shall I tell him to get you something—a whiskey and soda?”

Garth shook his head.

“I never drink when I’m at work.”

“But you are our guest,” she said.

“Our guest,” came in her husband’s difficult voice.

In neither of their faces could Garth read the reproof their tones had suggested. What point could there be in this abnormal masquerade?

He glanced at his watch. Mrs. Alden caught the gesture. She walked to a cabinet and measured her husband’s medicine.

“It’s time,” she said as she gave it to him, “that we all were in bed. Shall I ring for John?”

“I’ll ring,” Garth answered, “a little later. I should be glad of a word with your husband.”

When Mrs. Alden had gone he tried to talk sanely to the sick and melancholy man, urging him to seek more cheerful surroundings. Alden merely shook his head.

“See here,” Garth exploded at last. “There’s no point in your closing your confidence to me. It only makes matters a thousand times more difficult. You’re afraid. Of what?”

The other answered with a difficulty that was not wholly physical. He had hit upon this incomprehensible plan and he would carry it through

“Then it’s only fair to tell you,” Garth said, “that the man who drove me out talked a little. I’ve heard about your boat, of why your servants ran, of the strange men with whom you’ve crowded the village. Tell me one thing. Have you had threatening letters about your contracts?”

“Several.”

The deep lines in Alden’s face tightened.

“Don’t think,” he managed to get out, “that I’m a coward. I’ll stay. My contracts will be carried through.”

“No,” Garth answered, “you’re not that kind of a coward, but there’s something else. Don’t deny, Mr. Alden. You’re more than sick. You’re afraid. What is it?”

Alden shuddered.

“A—a coward.”

The words stumbled out of his mouth.

“But I don’t know what it is. You’re to tell me, Mr. Garth, if it’s anything.”

“This rot about the woods and the spirits of dead soldiers?” Garth asked.

Alden stirred. He nodded in the direction of the rear casement windows.

“Just across the lawn.”

“You haven’t seen?” Garth asked sharply.

“But,” Alden said, “the servants—”

This, then, Garth decided, must be the source of the fear the other’s appearance recorded.

“Nonsense, Mr. Alden. That’s one of the commonest superstitions the world over, that soldiers come back to the battlefields where they have died, and in time of war—”

“If there’s nothing in it,” Alden whispered, “why is it so common? Why did my servants swear they had seen? And the fog! We’ve had too much fog lately—every night for a week. My man died in the fog.”

Garth whistled.

“Could they have mistaken him for you?”

“There were no marks on the body.”

Alden looked up. His voice thickened.

“We are talking too much. I—I want you to stay and judge for yourself.”

Garth arose and walked to the rear window, but he could see nothing for the mist. He stood there, nevertheless, for some time, puzzled and half angry. The

mental and physical condition of his host, Mrs. Alden's shattered nerves, the extreme loneliness, impressed on him a sense of uncharted adventuring.

"Why," he asked himself, "won't these people talk? What do they expect me to find in this house?"

When he turned back he saw that Alden's eyes were closed. The regular rising and falling of his chest warned Garth to quietness. He would not disturb the worn-out man. So he pressed the electric bell and walked to the hall. He met John there.

"Please show me to my room," he said. "Mr. Alden's asleep. Perhaps you'd better speak to his wife before you disturb him."

John bowed and led him upstairs.

"Good-night, sir," he said, opening the door. "May you sleep well. It's a little hard here lately."

He hesitated. He cleared his throat.

"You couldn't persuade him to send his wife away?" he went on at last. "She's not strong, sir. It's pitiful."

"See here, John," Garth said impulsively. "I know it's against the rules, but tell me what's wrong here. What are you all afraid of?"

The old man's lips moved. His eyes sought Garth's urgently. With a visible effort he backed out of the room. His glance left Garth. When he opened his lips all he said was:

"Good-night, sir."

Garth closed the door, shrugging his shoulders. Of what a delicacy the threat must be to require such scrupulous handling! "If there is anything," Alden had said. Garth brought his hands together.

"There is something," he muttered, "something as dangerous as the death Alden is manufacturing back there."

He went to bed, but the restlessness of the train returned to him. Reviewing Alden's exhaustion and the old servant's significant comment, he wondered half seriously if sleep refused to enter this house. The place, even for his splendidly controlled emotions, possessed a character, depressive, unhealthy, calmly malevolent.

He had lost account of time. He had been, perhaps, on the frontier of sleep, for, as he sprang upright, he could not be all at once sure what had aroused him. A man's groan, he thought. Suddenly, tearing through the darkness, came the affirmation—a feminine scream, full of terror, abruptly ended.

He threw on his clothes, grasped his revolver, dashed down the stairs, and burst into the living-room. There was no light now beyond the wan glow of the fire, but it was still sufficient to show him Alden, huddled more than ever in the chair, and the terror that had quivered through the cry, persisted now in Alden's face.

His wife, in a dressing gown, knelt at his side, her arm around his knees. At Garth's entrance she sprang erect, facing him.

"It came," she gasped. "Oh, I knew it would. All along I've known."

"Tell me what's happened," Garth commanded.

The woman's voice was scarcely intelligible.

"I let him sleep here. Just now he groaned. I ran in. Somebody—something had attacked him. I ran in. I—I saw it."

"Where?"

She pointed to the rear window.

"I saw it going out there. It was foggy. It went in the fog. I couldn't—"

Garth sprang to the window. It was, in fact, half open. Before he could get through Mrs. Alden had caught his arm.

"Don't follow. It isn't safe out there."

"I want that man," he said.

She leaned weakly against the casement.

“But out there,” she whispered, “they are not men.”

Again she caught his arm.

“Don’t leave me alone now that they can come in.”

She pointed at her husband.

“Look at him. He saw it in the fog that came through the window. It is all fog out there. Don’t leave me alone.”

He thrust the revolver impatiently in her hand.

“Then take this. Not much use outside on such a night.”

He jumped to the lawn and started swiftly across. Since the intruder had fled this way he might hear him in the woods, might grapple with him. He regretted the loss of his revolver, although he realized it would be useless tonight except at close quarters, and for that he possessed a cleverly-devised reserve, which he had arranged on first joining the force—a folding knife, hidden in his belt, sharp, well-tested, deadly.

At the edge of the woods he paused, straining his ears, trying to get his bearings, for he was on unfamiliar ground and the fog was very dense here. It lowered a white, translucent shroud over the nocturnal landscape. Beneath its folds he could make out only one or two tree trunks and a few drooping branches. These, as he stared, gave him the illusion of moving surreptitiously.

The moon, he knew, was at the full, but its golden rotundity was heavily veiled tonight, so that it had the forlorn, the sorrowful appearance of a lamp, once brilliant, whose flame has gradually diminished and is about to expire.

Garth could hear nothing, but he waited breathlessly, still straining his ears. This, he mused, was the place where many soldiers had died in battle, the setting for ghostly legends, the spot where the servants had fancied a terrifying and bodiless re-animation, the death-bed of Alden’s valet.

Now that he had time to weigh it, Mrs. Alden’s manner puzzled him. She had

said *it* had been in the house, that now *they* could come in, and that out here *they* were not men. Had the loneliness imposed upon her intelligence such a repulsive credulity?

He had to admit that imagination in such a medium could precipitate shameful and deceptive fancies.

Then, without realizing at first why, Garth knew he had been unjust. He found his eyes striving to penetrate the night to the left. Surely it was not the old illusion of moving trees and branches that had set the fog in lazy motion over there. He stepped cautiously behind a pine tree. The chill increased. A charnal atmosphere had crept into the woods. As he shivered he realized that this sepulchral place had filled with plausible inhabitants—shapes as restless and unsubstantial as if sprung solely from a morbid somnambulism.

## Chapter IX

### THE PHANTOM ARMY

SHADOWS advanced through the shadowy fog, and Garth could define them as no more than shadows. In one place the mist thinned momentarily, and he glimpsed, apparently floating forward, the trunk of a man's figure. Pallid tatters, such as might survive in a mortuary, flapped about bare shoulders, and from a little distance beyond came a sickly gleam—the doubtful response uncertain moonlight might draw from a bayonet or a musket barrel.

The fog closed in. There were no more shadows. Garth, eager to follow, forced himself to wait. He told himself that the march of phantoms possessed a meaning which would give direction to his task. The unveiling of its impulse, he was confident, would unveil the mystery at the house. Against so many only caution was useful at present.

He was glad Nora was not with him. He knew how profoundly she would have been stirred, how ready she would have been to discard a rational explanation for the occult. He could smile a little. In this one respect of vulnerability to superstition he felt himself immeasurably her superior. He was glad she had not involved herself in such a case.

Finally, phantom-like himself, he proceeded through the fog in the direction the silent shadows had taken. He walked for some distance.

Without warning he stumbled and pitched forward to his knees. Reaching out to save himself, his fingers touched something wet, cold, and possessed of a revealing quality which in one breathless moment drove into his brain the excuse for those at the house, and focussed for him their terror of the unexplored world of whose adjacence their solitude must have convinced them.

He snatched his hand back, rendered for the moment without purpose by this silent and singular tryst to which chance had led him in the evil forest. It was necessary, however, to strip the mask of night from the face of the one who lay, defeated and beyond resistance, in the path of the shadowy army.

He took his pocket lamp from his coat and pressed the control. The light fought

through the fog to the face of the old servant who a few hours ago had begged him to get Mrs. Alden away, whose lips had been incomprehensibly sealed.

Quickly he searched for the manner of death, for there could be no coincidence about two such catastrophes in the same spot. In spite of the coroner's verdict, murder was the only sensible deduction. Yet he found no slightest souvenir of violence. The face alone held a record of an attack—the features were twisted as if from its vehemence, and the eyes appeared to secrete some shocking vision.

Garth sprang to his feet. Alden's sick fear and his wife's hysterical misgivings were placed on a basis far sounder than imagination. A danger, un-conformable, but none the less real, skirted their isolated house, had at last, according to the woman, forced an entrance.

Garth knew his limitations. He must have help, and now Alden must be made to talk.

He ran back to the house and stepped through the window. The lamp had been lighted. It shone on Mrs. Alden who bent over the writing-table, her gaze directed hypnotically towards the huddled man in the chair. Garth, since he came from the rear, could not see Alden's face at first.

"Mrs. Alden," he said, "I found your man, out there—"

Her hands left the table. She straightened. With a perceptible effort she raised her eyes from the chair to meet Garth's.

"Not de—"

She put her hand to her mouth and crushed back the word.

Garth nodded.

"I must have help. Where's the telephone?" he asked.

He started for the hall.

"Lock that window," he said. "I've left it open."

Suddenly he paused and turned. A sound, scarcely human, had come from the

chair—a hollow, a meaningless vocal attempt, as though there were no palate behind it, no tongue to shape its intention.

From where he stood Garth could see Alden distinctly enough. His head was sunk forward on his chest. His fingers clutched powerlessly at the chair arms. His eyes appeared to have hoarded and just now released all the strength of which his meager body had been stripped. They flashed with a passionate purpose which drew Garth magnetically until he was close and had stooped and was staring into them with a curiosity almost as pronounced as their eagerness.

“What is it, Mr. Alden?” he asked.

The other’s fingers continued to stray about the chair arms.

“You’ve got to tell me what you know—all you suspect,” Garth urged “We’ve murder on our hands. What do you know?”

Alden’s head rose and fell affirmatively.

“Out with it.”

But Alden did not answer, although his eyes burned brighter; and Garth guessed.

“Speak, Mr. Alden,” he begged.

Alden’s lips moved. His throat worked. His face set in a grotesque grimace.

“There’s danger for all of us,” Garth cried. “The time for silence has passed.”

Then Alden answered, but it was only with that helpless, futile sound—such a whimper as escapes unintelligibly from the fancied fatality of a nightmare.

Garth drew back. Now when it was too late Alden wanted to talk. Now when he had been robbed of the power he craved the abandonment of words.

“Mrs. Alden,” Garth whispered. “You know your husband can’t speak! Look at him!”

About her advance there was that hypnotic quality Garth had noticed before. He read in her face, moreover, a sympathy and a love that made it as difficult of

unmoved contemplation as the helpless suffering in Alden's.

Alden smiled sorrowfully as his wife came close and stooped to him. His hands ceased their straying about the chair arms. They rose with a quick motion, an unsuspected strength, and closed about her white and beautiful throat.

She did not cry out. Perhaps there was no time. Her eyes closed. Her lips were wistful.

Garth tore at the man's fingers. It took all his force to break their hold. And as he fought the answer to a great deal came to him. Alden was clearly insane, and his wife's fear and John's doubt of her safety were accounted for. Yet it didn't answer all. What was the share of the shrouded army in the forest? What was the connection of the death that had struck there twice?

Alden's vise-like grip was broken. Mrs. Alden swayed against the writing-table, gasping. Alden's whimpering had recommenced.

Garth looked from one to the other.

"Good God!" he said.

She turned on him.

"Why did you come? It is your fault."

Garth pointed at the cabinet where the medicine was kept. The nightmare whimpering did not cease.

"Get him something," Garth directed. "The doctor must have left you a narcotic."

She walked with a pronounced lurch to the cabinet where Garth heard her fumbling among the bottles, but he did not turn away from Alden. The imbecile sounds stopped, but the lips worked ineffectively again. One of the hands moved slowly with an apparent sanity of purpose. Garth realized that it was motioning him back. Alden started to rise. Garth saw his veins swell and the emaciated muscles strain as he literally dragged himself out of the chair and braced his elbows against the writing-table. He grasped a pencil and wrote rapidly on a piece of paper. Garth understood, and he reached out for the sheet on which

Alden had written the words—perhaps a warning, perhaps the truth — which his tongue had been unable to form.

“Don’t touch that paper.”

There was a new quality about the voice Garth could not deny. There was no more tinkling of glass at the cabinet. He found it difficult to credit Mrs. Alden with that clear, authoritative command. He turned warily and looked into the muzzle of his own revolver. Mrs. Alden’s outstretched hand, he noticed, did not waver.

“What does this mean?” he cried.

“It means,” she answered in a tired voice, “that if you read what is on that paper you’ll leave me no choice. I shall have to shoot.”

Alden whimpered again. The paper fluttered to the floor and rested, white and uncommunicative, beneath the table. His face set. He pointed accusingly towards the rear window.

The gesture was clear to Garth. He knew what it meant before his eyes followed its direction. Before he had seen, he appreciated almost palpably the new presence in the room. At the moment it seemed inevitable to him that the tense group should be joined by a stronger force, the inspiration, probably, of the mysteries that had posed it, and that worked ahead, he could not doubt, to a graver issue for Alden and himself

The newcomer glided from the shadows by the window and moved to Mrs. Alden’s side—huge, powerful. The cap, drawn low over his eyes, and the thick growth about the mouth, robbed his face of expression and gave to his actions a mechanical precision not lightly to be disturbed. He took the revolver from the woman.

“I couldn’t,” she said. “He hasn’t read. It won’t be necessary?”

“Necessary,” the man answered, “but you were right. Not in that way. It leaves too much evidence. As the others went.”

“No more death,” she cried. “There has been too much death.”

“These days the world is full of death,” he answered. “What are one or two here?”

The voice carried as little expression as the face or the figure, but an accent, which Garth knew hindered its flow, and defined the situation with a brutal clearness.

He turned at a slipping behind him, a heavy fall. Alden lay on the floor, his hand stretched towards the futile spot of white beneath the table. His wife stumbled across and knelt beside him, restlessly fingering his shoulders.

“Andrew!” she cried. “You don’t understand. Look at me. You have to understand. I love you. Nothing changes that.”

The newcomer moved to her, and, without relaxing his vigilance, grasped her arm.

“There’s too much to be done tonight for tears. Keep your watch.”

He indicated Garth.

“I’ll come back and attend to him later.”

She continued to stare at her husband’s closed eyes.

“He knows now, but you shan’t kill him. I tell you you shan’t kill him.”

“When the occasion arises you will follow your duty,” he said.

He turned to Garth, pointing to the oak door in the rear corner.

“You will go in there.”

A flashing recollection of Nora decided Garth. Resistance now, he knew, as he studied the great figure, would mean the end, whereas, if he waited and obeyed, the knife, secreted in his felt, offered a possible escape.

“Wait!” the man snapped.

He thrust the revolver in Mrs. Alden’s hand while he ran quickly over Garth’s clothing. The thickness of the belt escaped him. He found only the pocket lamp.

“The telephone is disconnected,” he said, evidently to reassure the woman. “Your husband is too weak to leave the house, and no one will come near it until daylight. We won’t cross that bridge before we reach it.”

She shuddered.

The other opened the oak door and motioned Garth to enter. He went through, simulating a profound dejection, but actually reaching out again to confidence. For the man would come back to visit him with the silent, undemonstrative violence that had done for the two men in the woods, but Garth would be waiting for him, behind the door, with his knife. Therefore, when the door was locked, he commenced hopefully to examine his prison.

The night, he found after a moment, was not complete in here. It possessed a quality, milky but lustreless, reminiscent of the shroud through which the shadowy figures had paraded. It retained, however, the obscurity of thorough darkness. He had a feeling, indeed, of standing in a darkness that was white.

There must be windows over there, many windows. He felt his way across. The wall, as well as the interior face of the door, was lined with sheet tin, suggesting immediately the nature of his prison—a dismantled conservatory. The glazed end was of small panes, heavily leaded. The frames in themselves offered a resistance to escape as efficacious as prison bars.

The arrangement, nevertheless, gave him one advantage. A single door to guard removed the threat of a surprise.

In the centre of the floor he found a considerable heap of wood, probably the fittings of the place. He scarcely dared pause to examine it. He hurried back to his post at the doorway, removed the knife from his belt, jointed it, and tested the point against his finger. He didn’t know how long his respite would last. He couldn’t hazard a guess as to the nature of the big man’s occupation. He could only estimate its importance by the fact that it had prevented the other’s dealing summarily with him.

He had entered the case with too little light. Nora had been right. One can not follow a straight course through the dark. Only a few dim outlines offered themselves for his appraisal. Mrs. Alden had made her choice between an evident, an exceptional affection for her husband and an enterprise directed by the sinister figure who had stepped from the shadows. Of what a vast importance

that enterprise must be since it had prodded her to such a decision, since it had made her acquiesce, however unwillingly, in murder to safeguard its progress! She faced even the death of her own husband because he had learned too much of its intention. And she had no slightest amorous tendency—of that Garth was sure—towards the bearded giant to whose will she bent her own with a pitiable humility. The lack of that world-wide, easily comprehensible motive to wrong, taken with the leader's German accent, directed Garth's logic to the furnaces, which night after night stained the sky with a scarlet, significant of their feverish industry. Yet the shadowy figures of the woods were still elusive, unless the place was used as a rendezvous and the affair tonight approached a crisis. Could he escape? Would he be in time to prevent a crime of such proportions, of such disquieting possibilities?

He stiffened at a stealthy movement of the key in the lock. The answer lay just ahead. Garth could not doubt that the German was about to enter, to annihilate in his subtle manner an enemy he believed unarmed.

With his left hand he braced himself against the door-frame for the stroke, while with his right hand he lifted the knife. The necessity of striking without warning sickened him. He had no choice. There was too much eager help within ear-shot of an alarm. The stakes loomed too commandingly to tolerate a sentimental hesitation. It was not only his own life in the scales. The lives of those who toiled at the furnaces swayed with his. But it was from the recollection of Nora that he drew the most strength, from the desire to see her again; to watch her quiet figure—a little inscrutable, unconsciously provocative; to hover again on the edge of an avowal, alert for his favorable moment.

The door hinges responded to a pressure. The lamp had evidently been extinguished again, for he saw in the uncertain radiance of the embers a thing, scarcely definable as human, prone beyond the threshold.

The empty doorway, the inert object on the floor, the darkness, accented rather than diminished by the embers, blurred his calculations. Where was the one who had opened and for whom his knife was eager?

Unexpectedly a brilliant light flashed in his eyes and went out. Half-blinded, he sensed the presence of something on the sill, and he struck downward with all his force. He reached only emptiness. The one on the sill had sprung through. From somewhere in the house Garth heard the patter of hastening feet.

He fought away the effects of the flash, striving to locate the one who had entered. There beside the heap of rubbish knelt a form darker than the white darkness.

He moved noiselessly over. He reached down and grasped the bent shoulder, and, as the shoulder recoiled from his touch, so he recoiled from its quality that revealed the presence in his prison of a woman.

Through his amazement he heard the door close, but he felt sure of himself now. Mrs. Alden was his prisoner—a hostage, if he chose, for his own escape, unless, indeed, she had finally revolted and come to his aid.

“Get up,” he said roughly.

The woman’s sigh conveyed relief. Something scraped beneath her hand. A tiny flame was born and entered into the base of the rubbish.

Then the woman turned slowly, and, in the light of the’ flame, Garth looked into Nora’s excited eyes and smiling face.

Incredulous, he grasped her arms, lifted her to her feet, and stared. The growing flame struck a flash from his knife, drove into his brain a full realization of the monstrous misunderstanding which had nearly involved them in unspeakable disaster.

“Good God, Nora! I nearly—I tried to-”

Her smile grew.

“I didn’t know what I should find in here. I couldn’t afford to take chances.”

“But I left you in New York,” he went on uncertainly. “How did you come? Why are you here?”

“No time for explanations now,” she answered quickly. “We must get out of here.”

He recalled the patter of hastening feet, the soft closing of the door. In the growing light he saw its tin-sheeted face flush with the wall.

“The door has been shut,” he said. “I’m afraid—locked. Why did you light that fire?”

She ran across, grasped the knob, then commenced to beat with her fists at the tin. Suddenly she stopped. Her shoulders drooped.

“No use,” she whispered. “She must have come in. She won’t open now.”

Garth hurried to her side.

“I don’t understand,” he said, “but it’s evident we are caught here, and that fire has been fixed—a signal?”

She nodded.

“Why did you light it?”

“Because,” she answered dully, “it had to burn tonight.”

The crisis they faced was clear to him.

“Nora! In a minute this room will be a furnace.”

He imagined from the excitement still flashing in her eyes that she did not quite realize, but she spoke without regret, and her words carried the shocking fatality of the German’s.

“I’m sorry, Jim, but if I had known we would be caught I would have lighted it just the same. After all, a small price in the long run—only the two of us.”

He brushed the rapid perspiration from his face. The fire had reached the heart of the pile. The air thickened with a reddish, pungent smoke. He choked.

“I’m sorry, Jim. I came only to help you, but I found—”

The vapour cut her voice.

The sentimental possibilities of their predicament came with a gentle wonder to Garth. They over-weighed the danger, robbed him for the moment of full comprehension. This clearly was his moment, and whatever the next might bring seemed a fair exchange for her probable response. He reached blindly towards

her through the smoke.

“Nora!”

His heart leapt as she swayed a little. Then he heard the grating of the key in the lock. It impressed him as curious that the saving sound carried to him a sense of disappointment, the emptiness of a destiny unfulfilled.

Nora turned the knob. He pushed against the door. They stumbled into the next room, breathing deeply the fresh, clean air.

Alden’s prostrate form lay just within. His wife stood across the room by the hall door, the revolver held listlessly in her hand. Her hair, more than ever disordered, fell about her weary eyes, and gave her face an air of ironical witchery.

Garth caught the meaning of the tableau. He glanced with admiration at the sick man, appreciating the bitter obstacle he had overcome, the abhorrent chance he had taken after conquering his physical incapacity and reaching the door. The result, Garth noticed, had carried to Alden a vast relief, a shadow of content. The light from the conservatory flickered about his face, exposing an expression of pride. The silent lips moved as if to frame a boast.

“So, Mrs. Alden,” Garth said, “you left him again. To warn the others?”

She did not answer. He shrugged his shoulders.

“Anyway,” he went on, “when you came back and found him at the key you didn’t have time to get to him, and you weren’t quite as bad as you should have been. You let him unlock the door. You didn’t have the nerve to shoot—your husband.”

“Don’t, Jim,” Nora waited. “You don’t understand.”

Frankly he didn’t, but he knew that Mrs. Alden, in a sense, still controlled the situation. Her revolver could compel their movements. Its explosion would doubtless bring help swarming to her side.

“And you see,” Nora went on, speaking to her gently, “what a useless sacrifice it would have been. Everything was finished for you the moment I lighted the

beacon.”

Mrs. Alden nodded.

Garth grinned as the protective feminine instinct expressed itself through this woman in her most intricate hour.

“It was all arranged,” she said. “If you will close that door the house will be safe enough from the fire.”

She indicated her husband. There were tears in her eyes again.

“You will take care of him?”

“Yes,” Nora said.

She turned and closed the door. Through the sudden darkness Garth heard Mrs. Alden run into the hall. He sprang after her, but Nora’s voice, sharp and commanding, halted him.

“Let her go, Jim. I’ll explain. Light the lamp now.”

“You’ve earned the right to give the orders,” he said.

He felt his way to the writing-table and lighted the lamp.

“You know,” he said, “that there are many men near here—that they can trap us in this house?”

“I don’t think,” she answered, “that they will come to this house again.”

He turned to her.

“Nora! What is it? Even after all I’ve seen I can’t be sure. The furnaces? They are two miles away.”

She shook her head.

“Not the furnaces, Jim. Come with me and I will show you.”

She led him to an unlighted room across the hall and flung back the curtains.

The glare of a conflagration, far vaster than that which had threatened them in the conservatory, flashed in their eyes and lighted the neighborhood with a brilliancy fiercer than noonday.

For the first time Garth could see that the house stood on a high, wooded plateau. The trees had been cleared away between it and the water, and a slope, bordered with hedges, had been blasted to a beach, small and crescent-shaped. The fire blazed with a destructive violence in a structure on this beach. He recalled the driver's gossip about Alden's yacht. He saw a small launch, heavily-laden, making for the open sea.

"The boat house," he said.

"Yes," Nora answered. "Look."

She drew a little back. An explosion tore at their ears. Somewhere upstairs a window broke. The tinkling of glass was like an absurdly attenuated echo. But Garth's attention was fixed on the boathouse. The building appeared to disintegrate. Out of its ruins rose a colossal column of muddy smoke. From its summit streaming banners of purple and violet flame unfurled. They waved their frantic message to Garth. He turned, gaping, to Nora.

"That building!" he gasped. "It's crowded with gasoline—oil!"

"You didn't guess, Jim? You see now I couldn't take chances. I had to light the signal that made them fire this."

"And you were right," he agreed. "Only the two of us—"

He gazed at her wonderingly. There was only pride in his voice.

"How many lives! How many millions of dollars ! You've spared them, Nora."

Garth had lifted Alden to the sofa and had left Nora hovering over the man who, they knew now, had been systematically drugged for days. After reconnecting the telephone and notifying the federal authorities he had returned to the living-room. Nora arose, and, with her finger at her lips, joined him by the fireplace.

"He's asleep," she said. "You know, Jim, there wasn't much point in your telephoning. They've destroyed the evidence. They've gone."

She sat down. Garth drew a chair close to her. Their voices were low in order that Alden might not be disturbed.

“Was it near?” he asked. “The fact that they took the launch—yet they might put in at some lonely cove and scatter.”

“It must have been expected soon,” she answered. “They were working desperately. They were very anxious tonight.”

“You must have guessed, Nora, as soon as I left New York. How?”

“By giving father a scolding,” she answered with a smile. “I knew that Mrs. Alden had been born in Berlin, and that her family was still prominent there where Mr. Alden had married her. Even since her marriage she’s spent much time abroad. I wondered what these shadowy figures were doing in the woods on foggy nights unless they were transporting something or working about some building. But Mr. Alden would know if it had anything to do with the house or the stable. Since he was sick, the boathouse might be their objective without his knowing it. I suspected the truth then. Such an opportunity! No one would doubt the property of a man who manufactured ammunition for the government. The natural thought was that any attempts by Germans here would be directed against the furnaces or Alden personally. It was ideal. All that was necessary was to scare the servants away and keep Alden in the house while his wife and the rest made ready for it.”

“Still those men in the woods?” Garth asked.

“They were probably working at the furnaces. When you saw them they were on their way to the boathouse to make the necessary alterations. And, of course, they carried all the supplies there. You see, I went to the freight agent of the only railroad that runs to Deacon’s Bay. He helped me a lot. We found that a large number of heavy cases had been sent here and to nearby stations, falsely invoiced and labelled to be called for. He had suspected gasoline in one of them and was about to hold up further shipments. That settled it for me. I knew you were going blindly, so I took the next train.”

“How did you learn about the signal?” he asked.

“I came very quietly,” she answered, “a little like a sneak-thief, I’m afraid. That front window is a little open. I overheard Mrs. Alden and a huge man. Of course

she was only to light that signal if the game was wholly up. It meant to them that there was a party big enough to handle the lot of them. So I made up my mind I must slip in and burn it tonight, in case it was near by. I knew then they would burn the evidence, escape themselves, while the submarine would turn back, believing that the game was up.”

“What a base!” he muttered. “With the transatlantic lanes at its mercy. All those transports and freighters marked for destruction! Alden saved the fat.”

“Yes,” Nora answered, “I gathered from what they said that he made sure tonight somehow and faced her with it. That was when she screamed and tried to send you out. Then her courage failed her and she called you back. She wasn’t strong enough for murder. And from her point of view what she did was pure patriotism.”

“It was because he suspected his wife, poor devil,” Garth answered, “that he’d tell me nothing. I guess he hoped I’d convince him he was wrong.”

He had been staring at the fire. He looked up now to find that Nora was knitting complacently on something heavy and comfortable and grey. Her eyes were thoughtful.

“Wife against husband,” she mused. “Such tragedies are common in war. And she loved him. Have you noticed the conservatory door?”

It stood open. Through the glass Garth could see the far sea, still ruddy from the fire, and there entered again into his consciousness the restless clamor of water.

“He made me open it,” Nora went on. “He looked out there until he went to sleep—a sort of farewell, a welcome if she should come back. Perhaps she will some day.”

Such devotion stirred anew in Garth the sensations he had experienced in the conservatory. He watched Nora as her fingers moved with their accustomed deftness about her knitting. She made the old picture, lovable and tempting, of quiet, housewifely efficiency.

“You always knit,” he said in an uncertain voice.

“Another winter is very close,” she answered gravely, “and if the peace should

be delayed there would be so much suffering—”

He stretched out his hand.

“Nora,” he said huskily, “you’ve saved my life tonight. It’s yours. What will you do with it?”

She glanced up. She smiled a little.

“You very nearly took mine, Jim, so aren’t we quits?”

## Chapter X

### THE COINS AND THE CHINAMAN

ON their way to the station, and during their long journey to New York, Nora drew back from any attempt of Garth's in the direction of sentiment. Frequently he stared at her with a whimsical despair. It was clear enough that he was not distasteful to her. He fancied, moreover, that he had through his very persistence softened perceptibly the girl's regret for Kridel; had remodeled to an extent her earlier attitude of a widow. Would he, however, he asked himself, be able to go the whole way?

Now she wished to talk of trivial things, to make a lark of their luncheon in Boston, to get as far away as she could from the dangerous and uncertain profession which had taken Kridel from her, and which might, even before she could resolve her own feelings, involve Garth in some fatal accident. Once he recurred to the gray mask, and spoke of Slim and George, whose trial would soon begin. She trembled slightly, he thought. She wouldn't let him go on. Her fear, he was certain, was not for herself. That much encouraged. Yet this rivalry with one who had been for some time dead t\* often brought him a sensation of complete helplessness; for Nora was not one to pose. She was honest with herself, with Garth, with the dead man. Perhaps some grave sacrifice would resolve her doubts. He felt himself capable of that. He fell into her mood at last, and found the journey home too short. In retrospect it assumed an increased value. During a long period he saw practically nothing of Nora.

For a month or more he found no comfort in his work. Headquarters, he remarked many times, was a rest cure for anybody who wanted one.

All at once that altered, as such things happen, without warning. He had spent an hour or so on an unimpressive case, and it was nearly midnight when he turned south from the frontier of Harlem.

From time to time a light snow fell, and always there was a vaporous quality about the cold night air which added to the waywardness of his unexpected experience.

He walked for a long time, scarcely aware of the landmarks of the

neighbourhood, rehearsing thoughts which, these last few weeks, had grown familiar and unpalatable. Now, as always, they failed to guide him to any explanation of Nora's abrupt abandonment of her routine. His recent visits at the flat had thrown him into the hospitable hands of the inspector, who, however, had maintained an incomprehensible silence as to his daughter's whereabouts. Garth could read in this attitude no antagonism to his own ambitions. He was confident that the result of his campaign for Nora's heart depended wholly on the girl herself.

He realized it was growing late. Absent-mindedly he turned into a side street, intending to reach Third Avenue and climb the steps of the nearest elevated station.

It was the discreet murmuring of a motor that routed finally his preoccupation. A limousine of an extravagant type had halted close to the curb at the end of the block. It pointed a contrast which stirred the detective's curiosity. The street, he noticed now, in common with many this far up-town, was inadequately lighted, but, in spite of the veils placed by the snow and the haze over the few gas lamps, a glance informed him that fashion had not invaded this far. The buildings, with high stoops and sunken areaways, were of a depressing, tasteless similarity—doubtless cheap boarding-houses or dreary converted apartments. He wondered what such an automobile did here, unless, perhaps, the chauffeur, alone, had some object. But he saw that, while the chauffeur retained his seat, the door was opened from the inside and a tall man, in a high hat and a fur coat, which exposed an evening shirt, stepped with nervous haste to the sidewalk.

Garth slackened his pace. He kept to the shadows near the house line. He watched with increasing interest while the man crossed the pavement, and, instead of climbing the steps, stooped to place an object on the ground. He saw him rise then and take something from his pocket which he tossed in the air. He was not surprised when the man failed to catch it. He heard it, whatever it was, strike the sidewalk, clicking metallicly.

The man dropped to his knees and with wide gestures searched the flagging and the gutter. After a moment the chauffeur exclaimed—angrily, Garth fancied—then descended from his seat and joined the hunt.

Garth, speculating on this unconventional performance, stepped casually into an areaway, as if, indeed, it was his destination. From this shelter he observed the

outcome.

The chauffeur picked up something which he thrust into the other's hand. After glancing quickly around he sprang to his seat while the man in evening clothes straightened, returned to the limousine, and closed the door. The car rolled almost silently up the street.

What, Garth questioned, had been left with such care on the sidewalk in front of the corner house? What object, probably similar, had occasioned the search?

When the car was nearly opposite him the man inside tapped on the pane. On a subdued note the chauffeur exclaimed again, then pulled the car to the curb and stopped it.

Once more the well-dressed man left the limousine and crossed the sidewalk. For the second time he bent and placed something carefully on the ground. It lay within Garth's reach, but just outside his line of vision. In fact, Garth could have grasped the other, so close was he; and he could see, in spite of the inefficient light, that he was young and probably good-looking. His inspection, however, was limited, for the other arose, breathing harshly, as if he were labouring under an unfamiliar excitement, and returned to the car.

As the driver set his gears and let the clutch in Garth reached through the areaway railing and fumbled about the sidewalk for the object. His fingers found it—round, flat, hard—not at all puzzling in itself, yet completely unintelligible as a clue to the young man's motive in placing it there. It was a piece of money.

Garth slipped from the areaway. He held his find up to the nearest lamp. The piece of money was a five dollar gold piece. He glanced along the street. The automobile had just swung from sight. He started quickly after it, because it had occurred to him that if such a performance were repeated in Park Avenue, his curiosity would make him stop the machine, would suggest a number of questions to the young man in the fur coat, would seek an explanation of the chauffeur's furtive impatience.

When he turned the corner he was not surprised to find the limousine halted again, to see the young man returning from a third excursion to the house line where, doubtless, he had with an extreme anxiety placed another piece of money.

Garth broke into a run. The chauffeur glanced over his shoulder and muttered

quickly to the man, who sprang in. As soon as the door was closed the car started with a speed almost affirmative of flight.

Garth held up his hand with the gold piece and shouted. The car went faster. He hastened to read the license number on its rear. As he wrote it in his pocket book he watched the red of the tail light diminish and disappear.

He walked over and picked up a twenty-five cent piece. Why then had the young man left five dollars around the corner? He stared at the two coins, his bewilderment growing. What could be the explanation of this trail of money, left with a scrupulous care on New York pavements? Of what abnormal diligence could such an eccentricity be an echo? How pronounced was its significance?

Almost certainly another coin lay close to Lexington Avenue where the car had first stopped. It was not probable that a third exhibit would reflect any light on the affair, still he wanted to learn the denomination of that coin, and evidently it was the final goal of his curiosity tonight.

As soon as he turned the corner he saw that he would be too late. The discovery heightened his interest. Breathlessly, he slipped into an areaway and watched.

A singularly small figure of a man shuffled across Lexington Avenue and, as if with an assured purpose, made for the corner stoop. The arc light down there, while it emphasized few details, sharpened 'Garth's wonder at the size and shape of the newcomer. He was inclined to explain him as a smallboy, masquerading in mature clothing. Yet there was about the shoulders a thickness and a curve which did not belong to youth. The face was concealed by the turned-up collar of a diminutive overcoat and by a felt hat, drawn low over the eyes. Even at a distance the figure projected an air of the lawless and sinister.

The man bent and picked up the coin. Afterwards he continued towards Garth, not, however, in a straight line. He shuffled stealthily, his feet scarcely leaving the ground, in a series of zig-zags across the sidewalk. And always his shoulders remained bowed, the eyes lowered, as if he examined with a vital solicitude every inch of his path.

It was obvious to Garth that there was some connection between the young man in the limousine and this stunted, clandestine figure who followed his trail with such anxious vigilance. Therefore he felt justified in setting a small trap. If its issue involved him in a mistake a laugh would extricate him. But he foresaw no

mistake. The deformed thing approaching was not to be explained as a peaceful, if tipsy, citizen, bound for home. So he placed the five dollar gold piece just outside the railing. He removed his gloves. He took his pocket lamp from his coat and held it ready. If the other saw the money and tried to pick it up he would be quite at the mercy of Garth's lamp and hands.

That would happen, for the man had evidently caught the pallid gleaming of the gold. Without increasing his pace he shuffled across and stooped, stretching out his hand. Up to this point the other's activity had worn an established air. Garth proceeded to rout its complacency. He reached through the railing, and as the hand was about to close over the money grasped it with all his strength.

He had been prepared for fright, for a struggle, but scarcely for the shrill, animal cry that greeted his surprise, nor for the violent and unnatural strength that quivered through the little body as it tried to break away.

And at first Garth combatted a quick impulse to let go. The quality of the bare hand in his own revolted him. The fingers were long, slender, and hard. The skin was dry. It gave him an impression that there was no flesh between it and the bones it covered.

"Steady, my friend," he muttered. "That's my money in your claw. Let's have a look at you."

The other's squirming increased. The scream was not repeated. Only a difficult, sobbing sound came recurrently from the man's throat.

At last Garth managed to twist the small wrist so that practically he controlled the fellow's movements. Then he pressed the button of his lamp. The light shone mercilessly upon an abhorrent face.

The skin was yellow, and tight, like parchment, across the high cheek bones. The tiny eyes lay far back in rounded sockets. In the lamplight they were deceptively reminiscent of the eyes of a cat. But it was on the head, from which the hat had fallen, that Garth's glance lingered with the most distaste. A queue was curled about it. It gave the last touch to the fantasy of the snow, the mist, the deserted street of old houses—a fitting setting for the night's vagaries.

For him the coil of hair gleamed like a serpent, carefully poised and awaiting the most favorable moment for its stroke. As the yellow head moved spasmodically

the coil appeared to writhe. It provoked Garth's imagination. With quiet eloquence it symbolized a vicious conservatism, publicly dead. It suggested secret ceremonials in forbidden shrines. In a broader sense it was the outward survival, properly snake-like, of unconquerable and scarcely apprehended customs.

Garth shuddered. He found it more difficult than before to cling to that bony hand. He arose, snapped off the light, and grasped the Oriental by the shoulder.

"How did you know you'd find this money on the sidewalk?" he asked.

The other shivered, as if for the first time the cold had reached him.

"Talk up," Garth ordered. "Who's the fashion-plate that left it?"

The Chinaman made a last effort to escape. Garth subdued him.

"No talk-ee, eh? All right, little one. Then you'll have a nice free ride downtown—just as a suspicious character."

For a possibility had occurred to him from which he shrank. Still, since it existed, it dictated a clear enough duty. He stepped from the areaway.

"Hustle along, sonny."

The other exploded into a torrent of Chinese. 'Garth understood not a word, yet the shrill voice, rising and falling, cried to him a fear and a despair that were tragic.

"Bluff away," he muttered, "though I don't see what good it will do you. Plenty of interpreters at headquarters. Point is, are you coming peaceably, or will I have to wake up a patrolman to get a wagon?"

The Chinaman was on the point of collapse. Garth practically carried him to the corner. He experienced a feeling of remorse, which, however, vanished before the recollection of the queue, glistening, serpent-like.

He was relieved to turn his man over at headquarters. He saw him placed in an empty detention cell.

“Sleep tight,” he called as the key turned. “Maybe you’ll learn English by morning.”

His own sleep was untroubled, save by his persistent uneasiness about Nora.

As soon as he was up the next morning he telephoned the Bureau of Licenses and apparently ran his one clue into a dead wall. The limousine, he found, belonged to Thomas Black, a young man of more than ordinary wealth and position. Garth flushed uncomfortably. He began to suspect that he had been guilty of an indiscretion, for Black, some years ago, had married the sister of Rufus Manford, whose recent selection as head of the Society for Social Justice had set in motion a cumbersome amount of self-satisfied and unusually ill-designed activity against crime. Still Garth knew that Manford was working with the inspector now on some urgent cases about which little was said at headquarters. It was possible, then, that the trail of coins had been arranged by Manford in the society’s office for a purpose which his interference might have destroyed.

But the growing day diminished the importance of the whole adventure. That returned to it only when the telephone summoned him as he was about to leave his rooms.

“Hello!” he called.

The voice that answered was gruff, disapproving, almost reproachful, he would have said.

“It’s Ed, at headquarters. Say, you’ve got me in bad. Hustle on down. Inspector’s on his ear and wants you.”

“What’s up, Ed?”

“That pigtail of yours. Can’t make out the chief. Might be a member of his own family.”

“What are you driving at, Ed? What’s the matter with the pigtail?”

“Dead—that’s all.”

“Dead!” Garth echoed.

“Yup. Must have done it right after you left. Choked himself to heaven with his bloomin’ queue. Now if he’d had it cut off proper—”

## Chapter XI

### NORA DISAPPEARS IN AN EMPTY HOUSE

FOR the first time Garth entered the inspector's office with the discomfort of a culprit. Yet he could not accuse himself justly of blundering. Nevertheless the brief telephone conversation with the doorman had informed him that the inspector attached an uncommon importance to the chance capture of the Chinaman. Because of it he would place the blame for the suicide where it fell most conveniently.

When he opened the door he appreciated that there was more than that out of the way at headquarters this morning. A woman bent, ancient, poor, sat in a chair to the right of the inspector's desk. He could hazard no more concerning her, because of an intricately-patterned shawl which was draped over her head and nearly covered her face. Her presence was less astonishing than her bearing in this room, terrible alike to wrong-doers and to the reluctant witnesses of crime. Her attitude, indeed, was expectant. Her lack of distrust impressed him as aggressive. Moreover, its customary rumble had left the inspector's voice which had flowed, Garth had remarked, with a conciliatory blandness.

It paused shortly as Garth entered. The huge man turned slowly in his chair. His eyes, somnolent as a rule, fixed Garth with a lively reproach.

"Shut the door," he grumbled.

Garth obeyed.

"Here's a pretty mess! Why did you bring him in at all?"

"The chink?" Garth asked mildly.

"No," the inspector roared. "Queen Lilliokulani! Who do you suppose I mean? How many mugs have you brought in since I saw you last? Maybe you thought the big Chinese population was unhealthy."

"I never dreamed he'd do that," Garth protected himself.

“Why didn’t you warn the boys to keep an eye on him?” the inspector demanded.

Garth threw up his hands.

“How could I tell? I only brought him in on a chance. I knew you were after the funny medicine crowd. He was up to some queer business last night, and I thought he looked the type.”

“Yes,” the inspector agreed drily, “he certainly looked the type, so much so that I’d gamble that wizzened brain of his held all I want to know.”

He seized a paper weight and commenced to toss it ponderously from fist to fist.

“That’s what you’ve let get away from you. Maybe you’ll be accommodating enough to tell me how you happened to pick him up.”

Garth glanced questioningly at the woman.

“Don’t fret,” the inspector said scornfully. “She won’t give you away even if you have made an ass of yourself.”

Garth reddened. Impulsively he turned on his heel. Later he would be ashamed, since he understood the inspector thoroughly. But for the moment he surrendered himself to pride. The sound of the chair shoved back by the inspector was not unexpected, nor did he fail to catch the note of apology, the appeal for terms in the gruff voice.

“Come back here. Where are you going?”

But it was another voice that swung him sharply.

“Jim! Don’t lose your temper.”

The inspector’s fist scattered the papers on his desk top.

“Who’s running this office?”

Garth scarcely heard. He strode to the woman. He snatched the intricately-patterned shawl from her head. The face beneath was old, stained, and wrinkled;

but there was no disguising the dark, young eyes which smiled up at him.

“So that’s why?” he gasped. “You’ve done it well, Nora. Now maybe I can know something about it.”

She laughed.

“Not if you resign. So much dignity!”

He laughed back.

“Nor if I’m fired.”

The inspector grinned.

“I’m glad you let me in this on some basis.”

The disclosure of the girl’s personality had scattered Garth’s revolt, and her eyes, now that they were no longer concealed, seemed to have rebuked the inspector to a milder humour.

“Understand,” he said, “Nora doesn’t tell me any too much how she’s working, and she’s been at this off and on for a long time. It’s only the last two weeks that it’s gotten serious. She had to see me to-day. That’s why I’m on my ear about the Chinaman. He might have saved her a good deal. You see, she’s working on that case.”

Garth’s heart sank.

“Dope!” he cried. “It isn’t safe. I tell you she’s fighting desperate people, inspector. Look at that Chinaman, whether he’s mixed up with the traffic or not, if a brute like him suspected her!”

The inspector returned to his chair. He waved his hands helplessly.

“Talk to Nora. I’ve told her all that. Once or twice I’ve wanted her to use her brain in cases where there wasn’t any risk. Nothing doing. When this rotten business came up she would go into it on her own hook. I guess that’s because she knows Manford and his high-brow, meddling society have got the district attorney behind them, and they’ve put it up to me hard.”

Nora shook her head, smiling a trifle wistfully.

“No, father, I did it to save souls and bodies. You see, Jim, they can handle the little fellows under the new laws, but everybody knows there’s this one place uptown, marvelously hidden and guarded—a distributing COTter, the heart of the whole surviving drug traffic. When I found out from father that everybody else had failed I just had to try. My conscience kept at me. Success would turn so much misery into happiness, so much sickness into health, so much crime into usefulness. And tonight, I believe, if we’re lucky—Jim! I want you to be there.”

“She thinks she’s spotted the house,” the inspector said softly. “That’s what she had to see me about. She wants a raid arranged for tonight.”

Garth’s voice was anxious.

“How are you working, Nora? I don’t like it I wish you were out of it.”

But Nora would tell him nothing, and he realized; instinctively that in her crusade she had taken desperate chances and would face more, probably the worst, tonight.

“You must tell us,” she said, “how you found the Chinaman. I’ve no doubt he was one of them. In itself his death was a confession—a pitifully silent one.”

Garth told his story of the man in the limousine, of the trailing Oriental, of what he had learned at the Bureau of Licenses. Nora offered no interpretation, but she smiled sympathetically at the inspector’s rage. He saw in the affair more than Garth. To him it meant an underhanded attempt on the part of the society to trap a material witness.

“They put it up to me,” he grumbled, “then they want to put it over me. Manford gets a line of his own and keeps it to himself. Out for a little glory and advertising! What happens every time I work with these silk-stockinged, fur-coated societies that think they know more about vice than the police. And to think, Garth, you snitched him away from them, then let him croak!”

Nora arose.

“No use crying over spilt milk, father.”

She prepared to leave. Garth followed her to the hallway. He urged her to let him share her plans, to give him a more pronounced part in the risks. She shook her head.

“It’s best to let me work this alone until the last minute, Jim.”

His one grain of comfort was her insistence that he should be in the van of the raiding party. So he watched her leave, her grace and beauty transformed by an inspired ingenuity into the bent lines and the haggard distortion of a crone.

The day lingered interminably. Whatever Nora had told her father he guarded with an unqualified stubbornness. Aside from the fact that he was to join the inspector in an up-town precinct house at ten o’clock, Garth walked into the affair wholly ignorant of plans or probabilities.

When finally the hour struck and he kept the appointment, he found Manford, in evening clothes, leaning against the desk while he tested the inspector’s temper with a smiling face and an insinuating conversation.

Garth had never before seen this amateur in social justice. His first glance furnished him a share in the inspector’s resentment, for clearly Manford’s illusions as to his importance were all of a happy character. His moustache, arranged with a studied precision, his ruddy complexion, his eyes, noticeably sarcastic, testified to measureless pride in a success which, Garth knew, had arisen almost of its own power from his inheritance. It was not to be doubted that his selection as its head had given the society in his eyes a majestic and peculiar value.

The fact that the inspector failed to counter impressed Garth. Probably it would be a sufficient revenge for him to accomplish the raid and smash the gang with Manford as a witness, yet without his active assistance.

A number of detectives and some men in uniform were grouped about the two. The inspector’s commands were brief and delivered with an excited anticipation which he could not conceal. At last he announced the number of the house. It was in the centre of the block east of that in which Garth had captured the Chinaman. Some of the men were to reach the back yard. Others were to guard the roof. The remainder would form the attacking party at the front.

“When these people find they can’t get through,” the inspector warned, “it’s a

good bet they'll show fight. So look out for yourselves, and impress on them that your guns aren't watch charms."

Garth, Manford, and the inspector led the way. Garth's misgivings were far more profound than if the chief risk had been his own. Where was Noranow? What would such conscienceless men do to her if they found at the last moment she was responsible for their hopeless predicament?

They walked slowly to give the others time to reach their posts. At last the inspector glanced at his watch, snapped it shut, and quickened his pace.

"Come on, boys," he muttered. "The season's open."

The house presented an uncommunicative front. They climbed the steps. No lights showed in the hall. The windows appeared to be shuttered. The inspector pulled the old-fashioned bell handle. After an undisturbed wait he tried again.

"Guess we haven't got the combination, Chief," Garth whispered.

"No time for experiments," the inspector said. He put his shoulder to the door.

"Give a hand here, boys. Bring that ax."

The lock snapped under their assault. They stumbled through into the vestibule. Garth choked. He was aware of fine particles of dust in his nose and his throat. The inspector had been similarly affected.

"Filthy lot!" he sneered. "One more door."

They attacked the inner door. They burst through into a black hallway. The dust rose in clouds. The inspector snapped his flashlight and fell back with an exclamation, disappointed and surprised.

The light shone on bare floors and walls. Its power was radically diminished by the long accumulated dust their entrance had disturbed. As far as the first floor was concerned they stood in an empty house.

Manford sneered.

"A fine plant of yours, inspector!"

The inspector glared his dislike.

“I’m beginning to think you were jealous a minute ago, young man.”

“Then you’ve quite disarmed my unworthy emotion,” Manford laughed.

Garth had read more than dislike in the inspector’s manner. It had veiled, he was sure, a positive, an increasing fear; and the scorn of his voice had not thoroughly cloaked its uncertainty.

“Get up stairs,” he snarled to his men. “Scour every inch of this place.”

He turned back to Manford.

“I’ll swear they were here this afternoon. This house was used as a dive no later than this after noon.”

Manford chuckled, indicating the dust which still whirled in the rays of the flash light.

The plain-clothes men returned almost at once. There was not a person in the house—not a piece of furniture. The grime on the walls, the thick dust testified to its long disuse.

Manford’s superior wisdom appeared justified. The intolerance of a position and a success, both inherited, shone in his eyes, expressed itself in his voice. He drew his coat closer about him. He touched his hat. It assumed a jauntier air.

“Good night, inspector,” he drawled. “I cut the opera to take in this example of police efficiency. I hope my society, on its own initiative, will be able to make more progress with the case. Maybe I’ll find some amusement chatting with the lieutenant at the station house. At least I can learn from the police what sins to omit.”

The inspector strangely, did not answer. Manford lighted a cigarette, grinning, and strolled down the steps.

Garth marvelled at the inspector’s lack of belligerency. He looked at him more closely. The big man’s jaw had fallen. He stared without purpose at the blank walls. The picture made Garth afraid. He grasped the inspector’s arm. He drew

him to one side.

“How were you so sure?” he asked under his breath. “Because Nora gave you this number?”

The inspector shook his head. His great shoulders trembled.

“No. She had no number to give me. But this afternoon I saw her enter this house. I watched the door close behind her, and, Garth—she has never come out.”

Garth with frantic haste explored the place himself from roof to cellar. There was no question. It had remained uninhabited for many months, perhaps years. Yet Nora had told her father that, while its location had been kept from her, she had arranged a certain entry to the evil house that afternoon. She had told him to follow her. He had seen the door close behind her.

Garth scarcely dared open his mind to full comprehension. If Nora had been directed to this deserted building and admitted, it was clear that her connection with the police had been discovered. It was logically certain that she had walked into an elaborately plotted ambush.

He hurried to the sidewalk where he found the inspector braced heavily against the rail.

“What can I do, Garth?” the big man asked hoarsely.

What to do, indeed! Garth thrust his hands in his pockets. He stared helplessly up the street. His glance rested on the corner house of the next block where last night the man in the fur coat had left the first coin. Suddenly his breath sharpened. His mind, planning blindly, paused, drew back, dared again to face the single chance that had risen from the shadows of the corner house.

He wet his lips. He touched the inspector’s shoulder. He understood that on a bare possibility he would place his entire career in the scales. Since, however, it balanced Nora’s rescue from such unspeakable hands, he did not hesitate.

“Chief,” he whispered, “take your men back to the station house and keep them ready. I’ll telephone you there in a few minutes, fifteen or twenty at the outside.”

“What are you going to do, Garth?”

“Take one chance to get Nora back,” he answered quickly, “probably say good-bye to New York. It was something I thought of last night. It seemed common sense to forget it this morning. Now I’m going to make sure. No time to talk.”

## Chapter XII

### THE HIDDEN DOOR

HE ran swiftly west, past the house on the corner, past the areaway where he had secreted himself last night, into Park Avenue, always on the course taken by the limousine. And, when he came to Black's number, he saw the limousine drawn up, waiting. In the upper story of the small but expensive house lights burned. He pressed the electric button, sighing his relief. He was grimly determined to see the thing through. His resolution was stimulated by his memory of the queue, coiled like a serpent, watching to strike with fangs bearing the poison of degradation and death. Nora stood within reach of that, perhaps, was already its victim. So when the door was opened by a sleek serving-man, he did not hesitate.

"I must see Mr. Black."

The servant displayed a mild astonishment at his tone.

"I'm sorry, sir. Mr. Black is not at home."

The lights he had noticed upstairs and the limousine gave Garth confidence.

"Mr. Black," he said, "is the brother-in-law of the president of the Society for Social Justice."

The servant nodded.

"Then he will see me."

The other was shocked.

"Really, sir—"

Garth gave him a glimpse of his badge, pushed past, and entered the reception hall. The servant turned, staring at him with insolent eyes.

"You'll have to get out of here Mr. Black has no official connection with the

society. What do you mean by forcing—”

Garth called:

“Mr. Black! Mr. Black!”

The servant tried to catch his arm.

“This is outrageous.”

“Mr. Black!” Garth called again.

And the response he had prayed for, the response he had made up his mind to force at all hazards, came quavering from the upper floor.

“Who is that? What’s all this row, Arnold?”

Garth sprang up the stairs, eager and relieved at the quality of the voice. The young man of the limousine stood at the head, bending anxiously over, backed against the railing, as if to repel an assault.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Black,” Garth said hurriedly. “I have to speak to you about something too important for delay.”

He paused, embarrassed, reluctant to go on, for in the brightly lighted doorway of the living-room a woman had appeared, small, with an extraordinary grace of figure, and a face which, in a trivial, light-hearted way, impressed him as rarely beautiful. She wore evening dress. A wrap was draped across her arm. Her resemblance to Manford established her identity beyond debate. She glanced at Garth with an amused curiosity quite at variance with her husband’s emotion. She smiled tolerantly.

“Quite like a bearer of evil tidings in a play, but even they don’t come upstairs, unannounced.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Black,” Garth said apologetically. “Your man drew the long bow. I couldn’t be put off.”

But the smiling, graceful figure was a defence, almost incontestable. Nothing short of Nora’s danger could have armed him to overcome it. He would,

however, spare Black's wife as far as possible.

"I wanted to speak to you, Mr. Black, privately."

He turned back to the woman.

"You see I come from your brother, the head of the Society for Social Justice."

"What can he want at this time of night?" she said.

She advanced to the head of the staircase.

"It makes no difference, John. You weren't coming anyway. I'll tell Aunt Sarah why—business!"

She laughed lightly and passed on down the stairs.

Garth breathed more freely. He waited until the front door had slammed, until he had heard the motor whir, until he was sure she was started for her reception or dance, unsuspecting the desolation he had brought into her home. Then he swung on Black.

"Come in here."

He indicated the living-room.

Black followed with uncertain steps. The light shone on his sallow face out of which heavy eyes looked distrustfully.

"What do you want?" he asked. "What does Manford want?"

"Don't trouble to sit down, Mr. Black," Garth directed. "I've little time—just enough to tell you that I'm on to you."

Black with an odd, halting motion reached the centre table. His fingers shaking, he lifted a cigarette from a silver box and essayed to strike a match. The wood splintered. He fumbled aimlessly about the table. He took the unlighted cigarette from his mouth. He stammered.

"Wh—what the devil do you mean?"

“No use bluffing,” Garth said. “You give yourself away. But don’t get too scared. I’m the only one who knows.”

The other’s voice was scarcely audible.

“Who are you?”

Garth threw back his coat lapel, displaying momentarily his badge.

Black’s voice rose on a shrill note.

“It’s a lie! It’s a lie!”

Garth shook his head.

“I watched you last night,” he said, “planting money here and there—a pretty, generous fancy, just to give people the joy of finding it. Men don’t do such things in their right senses. I’ve heard of it, but the fact that you were the brother-in-law of the head of an organization that was after these cases offered a more likely explanation. Put me off the track. Thought you were working for him. Now that I’ve had a good look at you, there’s no question.”

Black made a last pitiful effort

“This is blackmail.”

“I have my price,” Garth admitted.

Black sat on the table edge.

“I’ll put them on to you down town—through Manford.”

Garth laughed outright.

“You! You’d never have the nerve Give a police surgeon one good look at you!”

Black fumbled in one of the drawers. He lifted out a cheque book.

“How much?” he asked with dry lips.

“Not money,” Garth said.

He felt every nerve in his body tighten.

“When I saw you making a fool of yourself last night,” he went on, “you had come straight from a house you are going to get me in tonight.”

The cheque book fluttered to the floor.

“Wh-whatfor?”

“To save a woman,” Garth answered. “It’s enough for you to know that they’ve trapped her there, and that she means too much to me—”

Black turned on him with a snarl.

“You mean you love her. Then maybe you can understand. What about my wife?”

“Black,” Garth said quietly, “you stand a better chance of sparing your wife if you meet my price. I promise to do all I can to keep you out of the scandal. I’ll get you away clean if it can be done. All I ask is, that for your wife’s sake, you’ll try to be a man. But now you listen. By gad, if you refuse to do this thing, I’ll raise a scandal that will finish you once for all I’ll shout the thing from the housetops. I’ll take you to a cell within the next ten minutes. What about your wife then? Look at me. I’m not bluffing. I hate it, but I’ve no choice. It’s life and death to me, and, since it’s all I’ve got, I’m going to use your reputation to make it life.”

Black sank into a chair, covering his face.

“You do mean it. I can’t do it. I tell you I can’t do it.”

Garth stood over the man. As he fought, there came back to him with an advocacy not to be denied, the memory of Nora’s altered face, out of which, however, her eyes, unalterable, had glanced at him with a definite appeal

“Yes you can,” he said savagely. “They’ll let you vouch for a—friend. And if you don’t, you’ll give the game away to a jury and a crowded court room.”

Black’s hands dropped. He stared straight ahead. He did not answer.

Garth reached out and grasped the telephone. Black stumbled to his feet and tore at Garth's arm.

"What are you going to do?"

"Call for a patrol wagon to drive up to your exalted home."

"No, no.no!"

"Then you agree?"

"You'll come with me alone?"

"Yes."

"Then I agree."

The gleam in Black's eye was revealing. It retarded Garth's relief. It warned him that, entering the place alone, he could be handled, as, perhaps, Nora had been handled.

"I'll get my hat and coat," Black said.

"No," Garth answered. "From now on you'll stick to me like a brother."

He took the receiver from the telephone and got the inspector at the station house. While Black protested, he instructed the inspector to have a man follow Black and himself, and, no matter what house they entered, to surround that entire block and to keep a watch on every house front. If he could communicate in no other way, Garth promised to fire his revolver twice, if possible, from a front window.

Black shrank back.

"But you said—alone."

"Alone," Garth answered, "but that's what's going to happen once I'm in. I'm not throwing my life away. Are you ready, or do you prefer the cell and your picture in the morning papers?"

Black led the way without further protests down the staircase. At the foot he

broke down again. Garth warned him and helped him on with his overcoat.

“You leave me no choice,” Black whimpered. “No choice.”

Garth drew him to the sidewalk.

“If you waste time steering me wrong,” he said, “I’m through. And don’t forget I have a gun. Try to throw me down once we’re in, I’ll use it.”

Black made an effort to square his shoulders. He crossed the avenue with a lurching gait. Garth glanced back. A dark figure skulked after them. So that was all right. The inspector would know their destination immediately.

“One thing,” Garth asked. “How did you have the nerve to drive your limousine to the place last night?”

“I didn’t,” Black answered. “I picked it up in Third Avenue.”

He did not speak again, and Garth no longer urged him. He walked straight for the block in which he had been at his folly last night. But he did not pause there. He continued across Lexington Avenue and made confidently for the deserted, dust-filled house which just now had mocked the police. Garth, amazed, followed him to the basement door.

Black took a key from his pocket, and with the ease of long habit inserted it through the obscurity in the lock. The door opened and Garth walked into the blackness with a quickening suspense. His apprehension was for Nora rather than himself. What had happened to her when she had stepped into the dusty hall? Her only chance was that he would not be caught in this somber pit as she had probably been. He put his hand on his revolver.

“Go first,” he whispered.

The darkness was so complete that Garth had to keep his fingers on the other’s arm to avoid stumbling against the walls. Yet his guide went with a quick assurance to the rear door which he opened with another key. They stepped beneath a rough shelter of corrugated iron such as is hastily thrown up for the protection in summer of washboards, or, in winter, for the storing of wood. Black proceeded beneath this shelter along the fence to the corner. Garth noticed a large accumulation of rubbish in the yard, souvenirs, doubtless, of indolent and

utilitarian neighbors.

Black stooped. Evidently he had given a signal which Garth had not seen or heard, for straightway he arose and leant against the fence, waiting.

“What now?” Garth asked.

Black raised his finger to his lips.

Garth looked down at a rustling among the rubbish. A thin piece of flagging had opened at his feet as if hinged like a trap-door, leaving visible the top of a flight of rough wooden steps.

Black stepped down and Garth followed. The steps led diagonally under the angle of the fence. Others rose into the corner of the adjacent yard. If this was their destination it was neither to one side nor directly behind the empty house used as an entrance. Garth marvelled at the simplicity of the contrivance. Two men in half a day could have accomplished the entire excavation and arranged the steps. Moreover, without a definite clue the police would never suspect such an entrance.

While Black carefully lowered the flag on the other side Garth glanced around. They stood in the kitchen shed of a house which, of course, faced the next street. Garth had no doubt that the place was masked with a physician’s office, or, perhaps, an appeal for boarders, who, nevertheless, would always fail to find rooms available at the hour of their application. He saw nothing of the man who had admitted them by raising the flag. He was more disturbed than before, since he could picture the inspector’s bewilderment on learning that he had entered the house which had been so recently raided and combed.

Garth had small time for speculation. He saw Black press an electric button. Faintly he heard the response from a muffled bell—two rings short, and one long. Almost at once the door opened a crack, but no gleam of light came through. Black muttered something unintelligible to Garth, and led him into a darkness as complete as that which had oppressed him in the empty house. Yet in spite of it he was sure it was a woman who had admitted them.

“This way,” Black said.

Garth followed, scarcely breathing. Where would he find Nora? How would he

find her?

A door opened ahead, and at last there was alight—a subdued, brown light, unhealthy, suggestive of a melancholy repose.

Black went first, then Garth, into an inner hallway, which was saturated with this aberrant radiance.

Garth turned sharply to inspect the woman who had followed them in. He drew back. He controlled his gasp of relief and gratitude, for it was Nora herself who had opened the door for them and who stood now on the threshold of the hall. Yet he saw that his presence, instead of bringing to them a grateful welcome, had drawn into her eyes a fear which quickly approached despair.

She wore the apron and the cap of a housemaid, transparent hints as to how she had found an entrance and remained here, unmolested. Her features, in addition, were subtly changed, so that one, less acquainted with them than Garth, might have passed her unrecognizing.

His astonishment had held him longer than was discreet. He turned at a sound to find his conductor gone. He knew what that portended. He cursed his carelessness.

Nora took his arm.

“What are you doing here?” she whispered tensely. “Go before it’s too late. I knew they suspected trouble tonight, but I never dreamed of your getting in here alone. Go—the way you came.”

“To be caught in the yard?” he scoffed. “That fellow’s given me away by this time. They’ll watch that exit first.”

He ran along the hallway. The strange brown light appeared to have given the air a substantial resistance. He breathed it with distaste. It choked him. At the foot of the stairs Nora caught his arm again.

“Where are you going?”

“Up there,” he answered. “I haven’t the ghost of a show in this suffocating basement. They’ll look for me here first.”

He climbed the stairs. She followed him.

“Jim,” she breathed, “it’s hopeless. They’ll never let you out.”

He turned at the head of the stairs. The same dim, unreal light was repugnant in his lungs here. A repellent odor, not to be classified, crept into his nostrils, made him want to cough. Heavy purple hangings were draped across two doorways.

“Tell me the lay-out,” he whispered. “Quick! The yard isn’t the only getaway?”

“Except the roof and the front,” she whispered back, “and they’re locked. The head one keeps the keys. For God’s sake, Jim, try to get out of this house before it’s too late.”

He pointed to one of the draped doorways. It was at the end of the hall, but the hall appeared to him too short.

“Is that the front door?”

She shook her head.

“Only leads to the front of the house. That’s splanted, of course—a boarding house. I tell you that door’s locked.”

“Then how can I get to a front window?”

“You can’t, Jim.”

He tried to plan.

“Then how am I—”

A heavy step seemed to set the thick, brown air in lazy motion. It came from a nearby room. It approached. Garth glanced at the purple hangings, expecting them to part on one who would discipline without mercy his presumption.

“Jim! They’ve got you, and if they see me with you—”

She spread her arms.

“They know you’re a detective. Your only hope is that they shouldn’t suspect

me. And I can't lose all I've done. Hit me, Jim."

"Nora!"

"Trust me," she begged, "and we've a chance. They mustn't doubt me. Hit me, Jim. Take hold of me. Clap your hand over my mouth. Quick!"

He drew back. He knew she was right, but he couldn't, all at once, bring himself to obey.

"I've my gun," he muttered.

"It's worthless."

The footsteps were nearer. They had persisted with a measured, an unhurried purpose. Garth drew his revolver. The curtains waved.

Suddenly Nora screamed. She flung herself upon him tigerishly.

"Jim!" she whispered. "Now!"

The contact swept him with a bitter, distorted content. He had to force himself to grasp her shoulders, and to bend them back. Her hand rose. Scarcely understanding her intention, he saw her strike herself sharply across the face. An ugly, reddish mark survived. There was a suggestion of tears in her voice.

"You coward, Jim!"

The curtains were wider, but always, as he forced her back, he combatted the desire to draw her closer instead, to heal with his lips the scar with which his precipitancy had marked her.

She cried out again. He glanced at the curtains. He let her go, staring with a sense of loathing at a yellow, wrinkled face, which protruded from the purple, and permitted him to see, glistening above it, a braid of hair, serpent-like and perilous.

The leering face was withdrawn. Garth heard a low whistle modulated on an unfamiliar, minor interval.

“Don’t resist them, Jim,” Nora whispered. “I’ll do what I can.”

Then she turned and ran, screaming, through the curtains.

Garth dashed for the hidden door which led to the front of the house. If only he could break through there, reach a window, and signal the inspector, but when he tore the curtains back he faced panels of an exceptional stoutness, unquestionably built to deaden sound as well as to form a competent barricade. He surrendered to the realization that he was caught in the heart of this evil house. He wondered if Nora’s strategy retarded his captors.

A stealthy shuffling turned him from the door so that he faced the hall. He had heard that same sound last night when the diminutive Chinaman had approached him. Now he saw three of the same mold whose queues appeared to writhe in the brown and stifling light as they glided along the hall, their talon-like hands outstretched.

He guessed that the picture was intended to terrify, to impress upon him the futility of resistance, yet while he had his revolver the success of such an attack was remote.

“Stay where you are,” he said, puzzled, trying to understand. “Come any closer and I’ll shoot.”

The yellow mouths grinned. Then, when it was too late, Garth understood the trick. A rush of colder air on his back informed him that the heavy door was open. He stood between two fires. In fact, before he could turn, his wrists were grasped. Two leering faces were close to him, but as the revolver was wrenched from his hand, he pulled the trigger twice. With the great door open those explosions might penetrate beyond the house wall, might carry even to the inspector’s men on the sidewalk.

They had at least aroused in the thick brown twilight of the house a restless, incoherent stirring. . Voices muttered. Steps pattered here and there. A muffled bell commenced to complain. Through the curtains from the inner room stepped a man—a white man with cruelly intelligent features. Garth realized that he probably faced the head of this organization which for so long had outwitted the police.

Garth laughed with an effort at bravado.

“That was a signal,” he said. “Block’s surrounded. They’ll be in here before you can light a joss stick. Call these things off, or you’re as good as in the chair.”

Upstairs the stirrings increased. Someone shrieked.

Nora appeared at the man’s elbow. Her face was twisted with an abandoned terror.

“Men in the yard!” she gasped.

Garth guessed that it was a part of her scheme to turn the hunt from him, to give him that one moment he needed. And it worked. He felt his hands released. The Chinamen crouched along the wall, as if trying to conceal themselves, whining pitifully.

Garth jumped through the front hall. The vestibule door was locked and the key was missing. There was no time to conquer locks His opportunity was limited. So he ran into the front room. The window catch baffled him. He didn’t dare wait to fumble with it. He raised his fists and crashed them through the glass. His hands, scratched and bleeding a little, waved a frantic appeal. He shouted. And he heard answering voices and the pounding of feet. He saw figures glide into view and spring up the steps. The battering of shoulders filled the house with a turmoil that drowned its own increasing agitation.

He went back to the inner hall.

“Nora! “he called.

He pushed through the curtains into a room fantastic with Oriental furnishings. Black, in a panic, had Nora in his grasp. The girl struggled mutely.

“Drop her, Black!”

Black turned.

“That ends our bargain,” Garth said harshly.

“She tried to stop me,” Black quavered.

“He’s the brother-in-law,” Garth said scornfully, “of the very man who’s been

trying in his useless way to smash this gang. What do you think of that?”

Nora came forward. She was shocked, but it was clear she failed to share his scorn. As the front door yielded she put her hand on his arm.

“Have you ever seen his wife, Jim?” she asked simply.

He nodded.

“So have I,” she went on. “She’s the one I’m thinking of. She’s too young, too happy, to have her whole life stained by this thing.”

But Garth’s anger persisted. Black, however, in response to Nora’s nod, slipped behind the window curtains. The inspector, Manford, and a number of detectives rushed in.

“Get your men through the house,” Nora advised.

The inspector motioned the men to go. He lumbered over to Nora. He put his arms around her. An excessive gratitude moistened his eyes and thickened his voice.

“Thank the Lord!”

“Thank Jim,” she said, “although he risked everything by appearing here.”

“If you’d told us more of your plans,” Garth said, “we would have worked better together.”

“I didn’t dare,” she answered. “I knew so little myself. So much depended on success.”

Manford’s fragile fingers pulled at his moustache. The humor in his eyes did not quite veil a real admiration.

“Well!” he said gaily. “Let me congratulate you, inspector. The police *have* put something worth while over—through a woman.”

Garth, whose eagerness had carried him closer to the girl, noticed for the first time on her neck a bruise left by Black’s urgent fingers. A sudden, unreasoning

temper swept him with the necessity for atonement. Impulsively he burst out:

“Inspector, one of the beasts you want is behind those curtains.

Nora cried out.

“Jim! You might have let me have that. His wife I”

The inspector glanced from one to the other.

“What’s on your mind, Nora?”

Manford laughed easily.

“No sentiment in this game, young woman. If we thought of the wives there’d be few arrests.”

With an air of satisfaction, as if the climactic feature of the raid had been reserved for his importance, he snatched the curtains open. Black cowered in the embrasure of the boarded window, glaring out at his brother-in-law. He moistened his lips.

“Don’t let them tell Anna, Billy.”

Manford’s satisfaction, founded on a self-imposed superiority, suddenly expired. He became rather pitifully human. His cheeks darkened. His insinuating antagonism for the inspector dwindled and faltered, finally, into a passionate mendicancy. He would meet any terms to spare his sister’s entanglement in the destroying scandal.

“I’m afraid you might think the police didn’t do its duty,” the inspector said softly. “I just heard your own motto—no sentiment for the wives.”

Garth had not shifted his glance from Nora. Her disapproval more and more impressed him, yet, with the bruise still eloquent on her white neck, he forced himself only with distaste to bargain.

“He’s my prisoner, Manford. If the inspector says the word we’ll tamper with the law and get him away and home. There’s one condition. He does as I say for the next couple of years—takes any treatment I suggest.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll see to that,” Manford said. “It’s good of you, Garth.”

He turned to his brother-in-law.

“Are you willing, John?”

Black stumbled from the embrasure. He reached out his hands appealingly.

“Yes, yes. I want to—with all my heart.”

“Then, inspector-” Manford began.

The inspector winked good-humouredly.

“Since we’re all such old friends I agree. I’ve never had a come-back yet from reading a little humanity and mercy into the law. You’ve a good deal to learn about police work, young man. Let’s start your education now. We’ll see what the boys have bagged.”

## Chapter XIII

### ALSOP'S INCREDIBLE VISITOR

WHEN the crowded police van had left, Nora, Garth, and the inspector stepped into the crisp night air.

“Garth,” the inspector said, “you and Nora ought to have medals or something. That paleface at the head of the gang is Jerry Smith. He must have been sent on from San Francisco. If there’s a country-wide syndicate of crime he’s on the board of directors along with your old friend Slim.”

“Some day,” Garth said, “that syndicate will be tapped properly.”

Nora, after her experience in the heavy, repellent atmosphere of the house, was anxious to remain in the air. She proposed that they walk down town.

Garth, aware of her displeasure, scarcely dared suggest an answer to his curiosity, but the inspector, in a happier mood, did not hesitate.

“Maybe, Nora, you’ll tell us how you got in that dive as a first class housemaid.”

“There was only one way I could think of,” she answered. “The place was bound to make cases for Bellevue, so I went to the head nurse and took her into my confidence. She kept me posted. At every chance I went there and was apparently ill myself of the same dreadful illness as the patient in the next cot. About two weeks ago the head nurse telephoned me a case had come in which looked promising. I’ve been there since. I’ll confess, the best I hoped for was the number of the house, but this girl grew confidential finally. She had actually worked there. When she found she couldn’t go back for a long time, and learned that I was about to be discharged as cured, she whispered a telephone number and a name. She said they would want somebody and it was hard to get just the right kind. I called up last night and told them about her and my anxiety for the place. A meeting was arranged with Smith in a cafe. He wouldn’t give me the address, but he agreed to take me there this afternoon. You see he wouldn’t have let me out again until he was sure of me—no afternoons off there.”

“Clever, Nora,” the inspector muttered.

She shook her head.

“Only choosing the best chance. I knew I couldn’t trace them in any obvious fashion. They were too careful. Few customers had the run of the place. The stuff was taken to the rest. The way they had Black followed last night to make sure he left no trail shows how they accounted for everything. He had evidently been seen answering to that generous symptom of his before.”

Garth noticed that she did not speak to him directly, but her resentment could not completely veil her relief at his safety, her appreciation of the courage that had urged him to her rescue, her gratitude that his daring had brought about the end she had so ardently desired. He hoped, moreover, that there was, about her quiet manner, something to be followed to that necessary but impulsive moment in the brown radiance of the evil house.

Yet that illusion she did not permit him to hold for long. He left the inspector and her at the flat with an uncomfortable feeling of having failed to measure up to the idea of him she had developed. She did not mention Black again, but her restraint persisted. Sooner or later, he tried to tell himself, something would destroy that—probably another case that would throw them together, that would make them depend one upon the other.

At headquarters one day the doorman told him that the inspector had been taken ill. The detective satisfied himself that nothing serious was to be feared, so he smiled, thinking the situation might offer something useful for himself.

It was really the trivial fact of the inspector’s cold that involved Nora and Garth in the troubles of Addington Alsop. Those gathered into one of the most daring and dangerous cases headquarters had had since the commencement of the period of reconstruction.

To begin with, the inspector’s indisposition confined him to his flat. It held Nora there in the part of a nurse. It drew Garth, who would have braved the most virulent contagion to be near her. Most important of all, it allowed the mighty Alsop to apply for police help without fear of detection by the reporters and agents constantly swarming at headquarters.

When Garth entered the flat that afternoon, he was, unknowingly, already on the threshold of the strange case; for he had read in the noon editions the brief paragraph which recited an accident to all appearances common enough. A man

had been picked up unconscious in the middle of a quiet street. Evidently he had been struck by an automobile. Two details, however, arrested Garth's attention. The victim, Ralph Brown, he knew as a successful private detective. Moreover, the outrage had occurred during the slack hours before the dawn. Apparently no clue as to its perpetrators remained. Garth spoke of that casually to the inspector. The huge, suffering man was scarcely intrigued. Wrapped in an ancient dressing-gown, his throat smothered beneath flannel, he sat in an easy chair, facing the fire, whose coals he perpetually reproved with a frown. He groaned. There was utter despair in the rumbling, animal-like note. Nora laughed.

"Laugh away," the inspector roared, "but make Garth forget he's a detective if he can't do better than hound a sick man with a cheap automobile case."

From her dark and striking face Nora's quiet eyes smiled sympathetically at Garth.

"These unimportant things, father, are sometimes the most important of all," she said. "Jim's right. It's odd no witnesses can be found."

As if there had been something prophetic in her words and her attitude, a muffled knock came from the outer door.

"Why doesn't he ring?" the inspector growled. "You haven't had the bell disconnected, Nora? Good Lord! Am I as sick as that?"

Nora, a trifle bewildered, moved towards the door. "Queer! And I think there are two in the hall."

Garth, as he always did, marveled at her acute perception. For, although he had heard no footsteps, no voices, two men followed Nora into the living room. The one in advance was young, with a frightened and apprehensive face. His companion was older and portlier, with narrow eyes and full-blooded cheeks. And those eyes were uneasy. For Garth they did not quite veil a sense of sheer terror. With a growing discomfort he guessed the cause of this visit.

Nora's voice betrayed none of the amazement Garth knew she felt.

"It's Mr. Alsop, father," she said—"Mr. Addington Alsop."

The inspector had already struggled to rise. He conceded the importance of this

unexpected call. He apologized for his failure.

“Nora’s got me wound up like a mummy-”

Alsop broke in rapidly.

“No politeness, inspector. I must speak to you. I’m up against it. They’re after me.”

He sat down heavily. The young man, whom he introduced as his secretary, Arthur Marvin, lighted a cigarette with trembling fingers. Garth watched them both while the inspector explained that they might speak freely before him and Nora. Alsop, he knew, because of his genius for organizing money and industry, and his utter ruthlessness in dealing with those whom necessity had thrown within his power, had made dangerous and active enemies. Garth was aware, moreover, that recently Alsop had publicly defied certain organizations which had asked what he believed to be too much. The detective could understand the financier’s position. His death might be a cheap risk for outside fanatics to take to destroy his leadership against the forces of radicalism, for there were few men strong enough to replace him. Alsop had a newspaper in his hand now, and was holding it out to the inspector, while with his forefinger he tapped the paragraph which told of Brown’s accident.

“No accident,” he muttered. “That man worked for me—a precaution any fool would take. Well, he must have found out what he was after last night, and they got him, and thought they had killed him. They tell me at the hospital he’s still unconscious.”

Nora smiled at her father.

“A cheap automobile case!” she reminded him softly.

Alsop handed Garth a crumpled, torn, and soiled post-card.

“That came in the noon mail. Must have been picked up by somebody and dropped in a post box. I figure Brown, before they got him, threw it out of a window, or some such thing. Anyway that settled it. It brought me here for a quiet talk.”

Garth read the card. A single line, almost undecipherable, sprawled across the

back:

“Danger tomorrow night. Brown.”

“That means tonight,” Garth said. “Had you planned anything important for tonight?”

Marvin laughed a little. Alsop spread his hands.

“The conference with capitalists and politicians at which we settle on certain legislation that will put some of these foreign anarchists on the skids, snatch American labor beyond their influence, and give the honest business man a chance to make a fair profit by driving his men as he should. See here, inspector. I’m not afraid of good Americans. They may put me out of business, but if they do, I’ll know I’ve been beaten in a fair fight. It’s these damned foreign anarchists and some sore central Europeans I’m afraid of. I expect some important men from Wall Street and Washington tonight. I can’t let them walk into a bomb, and I don’t want any high explosives myself.”

The inspector grunted.

“Nasty situation. I’m no politician. Fight crime. We’ll see what we can do. It’s a good thing you found Garth here.”

Garth, who had not ceased to study Alsop’s face, realized that the man had more to report—something which he shrank, however, from mentioning.

“What is it, Mr. Alsop?” he asked. “You’ve something else to tell us.”

Nora, who had clearly noticed the same symptoms, nodded approvingly. Alsop flushed and glanced at Marvin. The secretary knocked the ashes from his cigarette. The trembling of his fingers was more apparent.

“You should tell that by all means, Mr. Alsop,” he said in a low voice. “That’s what I want to find out. If I don’t get some explanation of that I’ll doubt my sanity.”

Alsop cleared his throat.

“A ghost story,” he said with an attempt at a laugh. “Fact is, Marvin and I and

some of the servants are haunted by a veiled woman.”

Nora came closer. The inspector turned back to the fire a little contemptuously. But Garth had no doubt that this hard-headed business man was serious.

“Go on,” he said softly. “You think this ghost is connected with a dangerous conspiracy against you?”

“I can only tell you facts and let you judge,” Alsop answered. “I daresay you know about my house on the river near the city line. It is lonely for that neighbourhood, and very old. I’ve always heard stories about a ghost, a veiled woman on the upper floor—some connection with the suicide of a beautiful girl long ago. You know the sort of thing. It’s always told about old houses. The point is, I saw that veiled woman last night, and she gave me rather too much evidence of spirituality.”

“Why do you connect a ghost with anarchists?” the inspector demanded.

“Because,” Alsop answered, perfectly seriously, “I believe the thing was after my papers.”

Garth laughed outright.

“Then why suspect your visitor of being a ghost?”

“Because,” Alsop said patiently, “this visitor had every appearance of walking through a locked door.”

Nora alone was thoroughly impressed.

“Tell us,” she urged.

“I’ve a safe in my room,” Alsop said, “and as an extra precaution, when I’ve had important papers at the house, I’ve locked my door. I went upstairs late last night. There was no light in the upper hall, but a glow came from the lamps downstairs. In this sort of radiance I saw the figure of a woman, clothed in white, her face hidden behind a white veil, come apparently from my room, cross the hall, and disappear. I cried out. I sprang for the door. It was locked. Marvin and I searched the house. My daughters are in Florida. The only women in the place were servants. There seemed no way in or out of the house without the collusion

of one of these. And I've had them a long time. It's hard to suspect them. Besides, Marvin has had much the same experience. Tell them, Arthur."

"As a motive," Marvin said slowly, "I might mention the fact that I often take my work upstairs—letters of Mr. Alsop's to answer, statements to make out. The first time the thing happened was Thursday night. It must have been after midnight. I was in bed. I awakened with that uncomfortable feeling of being no longer alone. At first I saw nothing. The only light in the room came from a dying moon. I had been nervous for several nights, fearing an attempt on Mr. Alsop. I never could get him to take that very seriously until to-day. At any rate, after a long time, I saw this figure that Mr. Alsop describes. It did not seem to come from anywhere."

He commenced to pace up and down the room. There was about the sudden gesture of his hand a despairing belief that shocked Garth.

"The thing—white veil and all—seemed to materialize out of nothing^ It moved softly about the room as if searching—searching. I thought of the letters on my desk. I called out instinctively, ' Who's there? ' There was no reply. The figure did not hurry. It stepped behind a screen by the fireplace. I sprang up and went there. I couldn't believe the evidence of my eyes. There was no one—nothing behind the screen. I examined the door. It was locked as I had left it, with the key on the inside. There was no way in or out of that room. Yet the veiled woman had been there, and had gone, leaving no trace."

"The windows," Garth said, "or the fireplace?"

Marvin shook his head.

"The windows were scarcely open, and a fire burned in the fireplace. And, mind you, this was before Mr. Alsop had seen the woman. I mean, he had not suggested the vision to me. The same thing happened last night. That figure came searching and disappeared in the same impossible way. I knew I was n't dreaming then. I spoke of it to Mr. Alsop. It frightens me. I want an explanation of that."

"Catch your enemies and you'll catch your ghost," Garth said drily. "I'd like a shot at both."

"What you want," the inspector said to Alsop and Marvin, "is protection for

yourselves and your distinguished guests. What the police want is to catch these fellows red-handed. We'll try to fit the two things. Don't lose your nerve. Go ahead with your conference, and trust Garth to find out how your veiled woman gets in and out of the house and through locked doors. I should say if we find her we should have the brains of the conspiracy. There may be no danger for you tonight. We've only Brown's post card to go on. That looks serious, and I'll do my best to protect you. But you must give me every chance to nab these birds. This sort of thing's getting too bold. There's too much foreign propaganda in this country. It would please me to throw the fear of Uncle Sam into such people."

And when Nora had gone to the door with Alsop and Marvin, he called Garth over, and hurriedly whispered:

"It's a big chance, Garth, but dangerous as dynamite. These fellows won't hesitate to blow that house up if they can't block Alsop's dirty politics any other way. And remember, you're fighting a woman who behaves like a ghost. Take it from me, she's the one you've got to be afraid of. She has the brains."

"If I could get something out of Brown," Garth mused.

"Maybe he's conscious now," the inspector said. "Run up to the hospital, then look over the neighborhood where he was found. Come back here by five, and we'll lay our plans."

Nora stopped Garth in the hall.

"Jim," she breathed, "you're going to take this case?"

"Surely. I've only to lay a ghost. That ought to be simple."

She hesitated.

"I've been thinking," she said, "and I wish you wouldn't go, because it will be hard, terribly hard—with death always in the way."

## Chapter XIV

### THE LEVANTINE WHO GUARDED A CURTAIN

GARTH, in spite of Nora's fears, went confidently enough to the hospital. If he could learn all Brown knew the case should be easy sailing.

In Brown's room the blinds were down. The greenish light scarcely found the upturned face. It sought rather the bandage, ghastly and white, wound thickly about the head. From time to time Brown's lips moved with a pitiful futility. Garth, while the nurse cautioned him to silence, bent closer, so that at last he could define the pallid face and the closed eyelids that trembled. Suddenly the eyes opened. From them into Garth's brain sprang an impression of immeasurable terror as if they still secreted the outline of some monstrous vision.

Garth started back as the injured man, apparently spurred by that recollection, struggled to rise, sat bolt upright, his head swaying drunkenly, while from his wide throat vibrated an accusing and despairing cry:

"The veiled woman! Oh, my God! The veiled woman!"

Garth's nerves tightened. Again that incredible feature of the case startled him. Here was proof he needed. The figure that had frightened Alsop and Marvin was probably involved in the attack on Brown. The inspector was right. She was the brains of the affair. Brown must tell him all he knew. He urged the man desperately.

"Take hold of yourself! You've seen this woman! You've got to talk to me!"

But Brown screamed incoherently with a diminishing power. The nurse had run into the hall. Through the open doorway her voice tore anxiously, summoning a house physician.

Garth's feeling of a desperate helplessness increased. Before him was the knowledge that would safeguard Alsop and his friends, that would insure Garth's own life, that would destroy, perhaps, a dangerous foreign influence, and the man couldn't speak.

At last the nurse's calls seemed to seep through the bandage into that tortured brain, suggesting the necessity for caution. In a whisper coherent words came again from the trembling lips.

"For God's sake, don't look behind the white veil! No! No! I have. That's madness I"

The doctor slipped in and hurried to the bedside. In response to his touch Brown lay down.

"Don't dope him," Garth begged. "That man knows things on which many lives depend. He must tell them to me before night. When will he be able to talk straight?"

The doctor smiled tolerantly.

"You don't seem to understand. A frightful fracture at the base of the brain. He seems inclined to be quiet enough now."

The doctor turned away. Garth followed him to the door, urging him to use his skill to make Brown talk. The nurse had remained by the bed. Garth heard her sharp cry through his own pleading. The sound puzzled him because it was a trifle strangled. The doctor, however, turned like a flash and hurried back to the bed. Garth looked. The nurse bent over the bandaged head. The doctor fumbled quickly beneath the bed clothes. He arose, glanced at Garth, and spread his hands. Garth picked at his hat, unwilling to believe.

"You mean," he whispered, "that he's—gone?"

The doctor nodded. The nurse sobbed once. Garth had not noticed how young her face was.

The block where the murdered man had been found was flanked by long rows of similar houses. Its cobblestones, unfriendly to traffic, made it an ideal place for the brutal deception which had been attempted.

Opposite the spot where Brown had been picked up Garth paused and looked curiously across the street. The dreary house line was broken there by a number of basement and first-story shops. His eyes, alert for the unusual, had found it. A basement window displayed intricately patterned rugs, lamps of the Orient,

unfamiliar and barbaric jewelry. The fact that he had not noticed the window sooner testified to a significant discretion in its arrangement. It was, he fancied, designed less to attract curiosity than to satisfy it once it was aroused. Probably it was that idea that suggested a fantastic connection between what he had heard at the flat and the hospital and what he saw now. Half derisively he recalled that Oriental women went veiled—customarily secreted their faces behind white veils.

He had intended entering all these shops and houses in search of a witness of the attack on Brown. He determined now to proceed rather more warily. Suppose Brown spying, or about to spy, had been assaulted in one of these basements—for instance, in the Oriental shop which had straightway aroused his interest?

He crossed the street and darted quickly down the steps from one side, so that he was sure he had taken by surprise whoever was in the place. What he saw was sufficient proof of his success, and his special detective sense was immediately impressed by much that was ominous in the shadowed room. The echoes of such an attack as Brown had suffered could have been easily smothered here.

Rugs were draped against the walls or flung at haphazard on the floor. Carved tables supported lacquer work. From a glass case jewelry gleamed with a dull beauty. But it was on the rear of the shop that Garth's eyes rested, while a cold fear grasped him.

A long, low divan sprawled there against a tapestry hanging of a colorful and grotesque design. On this divan, seated cross-legged, was the figure of a man, at first quite motionless, like an image in a somber and guarded temple. He wore a fez, set formally on his head. One hand clasped the sinuous stem of a water pipe.

The round, flaccid, repulsive face defied classification. Garth could not be sure whether it was Egyptian, Turkish, Arabian, or Semitic. He only knew that it was evil and accustomed to perfect control, for he suspected that his rapid entrance had made the concealment of the fez and the alteration of that ritual attitude impossible. In a matter-of-fact tone Garth spoke of examining the rugs and antiques.

The figure did not stir. The sallow face remained as if carved. The only motion in the room was a lazy curling from the water pipe of white smoke which faded in the darkened, perfumed air. Then the curtain moved stealthily at one end,

disclosing a dark face of a Levantine cast. This man came through, carefully replacing the curtain behind him, stroked his bony hands, and demanded Garth's desires. The immobility of the cross-legged creature ceased. The stem of the water pipe as he raised it to his mouth writhed in sinuous curves. He commenced to puff. The water bubbled unevenly.

Garth examined the rugs with growing excitement. He was prepared to believe that he had stumbled on a meeting place. And after all wasn't this an ideal rendezvous? The shop had probably been here for years. The town was full of such stores. At any rate his impression of a calculated evil increased. He felt himself the object of suspicion. It was conceivable to him that he might suffer a fate similar to Brown's—perhaps behind that hideous curtain which the Levantine and the cross-legged figure seemed to guard.

Garth started. The unequal bubbling of the pipe had accompanied all his thoughts. Constantly it would pause, then recommence. The idea which had been struggling unconsciously in the detective's brain took shape. That uneven bubbling possessed a significance beyond the pleasures of nicotine. It suggested a means of communication, a code.

While he bargained with the Levantine his confidence in this eccentric explanation increased. It condemned the occupants of the shop. Whether or not the men were connected with the plot Brown had feared against Alsop, they were decidedly objects of interest to the police. Still, if Brown had spied here, the danger was obvious. The Levantine and the man in the fez were sinister opponents. Yet Garth wanted to see behind that grotesque curtain.

For a time, listening to the bubbling, he wondered if they would let him leave the shop at all. He was in no hurry to go until he had made sure of one or two things. While fingering a rug he managed stealthily to examine the wall. It was about what he had hoped, what he had expected. The house was very old. It was one of a row built simultaneously before the fire laws had amounted to much. He was sure that the dividing walls between these basements were not fireproof. As nearly as he could tell from the surface he examined, they would probably be lath-and-plaster, with, perhaps, rubble in the space between. His next step was to measure as accurately as he could with his eye the distance between the entrance and the curtain, which was like a ceremonial background for the man in the fez. Stooping to inspect one of the rugs, he struck the flooring with his fist, as if by accident. He was satisfied. There was no cellar beneath this basement. He dared

hope that he would see what lay behind the curtain.

Approximating as nearly as he could the subtleties of a buyer, he promised to make up his mind and return with his decision the next morning. He knew that sharp and angry eyes followed him from the shop.

He had a feeling that the darkened place had become active as soon as he had turned his back.

He walked slowly to the corner, studying the houses on either side of the shop. The one to the right was a cheap boarding house. The one on the other side was evidently a private dwelling.

At the nearest hardware store he bought an auger and a screwdriver. Then he entered the alley that bisected the block, and, counting the houses, knocked at the kitchen door of the one to the right of the Oriental shop. The servant who admitted him verified his hazard. At this hour the occupants were at work. She was, for the present, alone in the house.

Garth showed her his badge, warned her to make no noise, and to stay close to him. The girl, frightened and unable to comprehend, followed him into the basement. He paced from the front of the house along the wall to a point which, according to his calculations, was opposite the hidden portion of the shop. He glanced up then with satisfaction. Against a thin and antiquated partition was suspended one of those heavy and unwieldy gas meters which are found only in very old buildings.

Garth drew up a table, climbed upon it, and examined the thick screws which held the contrivance in place. With his screwdriver he commenced noiselessly to remove one of these. He thought it likely that the screw hole would go all the way through. If it did not, his auger would complete the journey. He instructed the girl to draw the blinds and close the door so that the room would be darker. He pulled the screw from the rotten wall. The aperture was sufficiently large. It admitted the repellent odor he had noticed in the shop; so he put his eye to the hole and waited for his brain to accustom itself to these new conditions.

The drone of voices reached him, but at first he could see very little—shadowy outlines circling a dull, glowing thing close to the floor—a brazier, he decided, about which men sat. Then he started, for he thought he saw something long and white, like a woman. But the smoke from the aperture hurt his eye. He had to

close it. When he opened it again there was nothing white, but out of the droning voices came words in English with a foreign accent, and he crouched against the wall, listening.

He marveled that he should hear just these words at this particular moment.

“The police are suspicious,” he heard, “so it’s been put ahead. At nine o’clock tonight. Two raps on the west door at Alsop’s. The veiled woman will open the door and take the bomb, and then, by God, we’ll show them!”

A sibilant demand for caution reached Garth. The droning recommenced. Garth fancied that it continued in the guttural accents of some eastern dialect.

He replaced the screw. He got down from the table, able to plan definitely. Against her protests, he took the girl to headquarters and warned the matron to let her communicate with no one before nine-thirty. He hurried to the flat then, and told the inspector and Nora of Brown’s death and of his experience at the shop.

“That’s where Brown was struck,” he ended> “and Brown was right. They are after Alsop and his crowd tonight with dynamite, and the veiled woman’s the figure of chief danger. Do you know, chief, I’m going to let them hand her that bomb, then I’ll try to handle her.”

The inspector shook his head.

“It’s taking too big chances to let them get as far as the house with the thing.”

“It’s the veiled woman I’m thinking of,” Garth answered. “Grab these people before her share commences, and you’ll probably never see her. She’ll bob up here and there, causing infinite trouble, because everything she does has the marks of a fiendish cleverness. Let me take the risk and land her.”

“It’s utter madness your way,” Nora said quietly. “How could you control her with a thing like that in her hands?”

“I think I can take care of her and the bomb, too,” Garth said quietly.

The inspector thought for a long time. It was clear the idea tempted him. If Garth could ambush the mysterious creature at the proper moment, her capture would

be certain. His own share in the night's work was simple. He had arranged to surround the Alsop place quietly with his best detectives. They would keep themselves hidden. They would permit the conspirators to enter the grounds. Garth, at the house, would use his own judgment. When he blew his whistle this small army would close in and make the arrests. Meantime the Oriental shop would be raided. The dictaphone, which undoubtedly carried the signaling of the pipe, would probably lead the police to another rendezvous.

"It looks like a big haul," the inspector said. "We can't let Alsop's ghost slip us."

With a grumbled oath the inspector tossed his blankets aside and lumbered to his feet. He stood for a moment swaying against the chair. His pudgy fingers tore at the bandage about his throat. Nora ran to him and grasped his arm.

"What are you doing, father?"

"Haven't you any eyes?" he r-oared. "Getting well. I'm tired being sick. I want to get on this job. Working, I can cough my head off as comfortably as I can sitting here."

Nora spread her hands.

"You are both mad," she said. "You both want to take too great risks—impossible risks."

Garth was warmed by her concern for him. For the first time since their quarrel in the house with the hidden door the barrier of reserve which had risen between them lost a little its solidity.

The inspector had gone into his bedroom. From the sounds there Garth gathered that the huge man fought his way into his clothing. Nora stared helplessly .from the door to Garth and back again. Then he saw resolution tighten the lines of her face. Her eyes flashed.' She laughed. Without shaking hands she turned and walked to the door of the inspector's room.

"Good-by, Jim," she called. "I suppose I'll have to look after this reckless one first."

Garth went. Nora's words and manner had made him a trifle uneasy. Little time, however, remained for speculation. It was seven o'clock when he had completed

his arrangements. He took the subway to Harlem and continued in a taxicab.

Alsop's great wealth permitted him a rural loneliness even in this expensive neighborhood. Garth dismissed the cab at the edge of a wide property along the river, made sure he had not been followed, then climbed the fence, and entered a thick piece of woods.

Certainly nature favored the police as thoroughly as it did the conspirators. There was no moon, and sullen clouds hid the stars.

Suddenly in the dense obscurity of the woods he experienced that sensation Marvin had described of no longer being alone. He paused and waited, scarcely breathing, aware of the dangers, perhaps fatal, that might lurk for him here. And, as he stood, not knowing what to expect, he wondered if the veiled woman was abroad in the woods. He became filled with a passionate desire to learn her identity. The somber, perfumed atmosphere of the shop came back to him. There were odd things in the Orient—happenings, apparently occult, for which no explanation had ever been offered. Marvin was young and imaginative, but Alsop was not the type to be frightened by fancies, yet both of these men believed that the woman could pass through locked doors, that she could appear and disappear as she wished. And Brown had said that to look behind the veil was madness. Was she abroad in these woods? He had waited for some time. There was nothing. He stepped forward.

Immediately he knew there was someone. He sprang aside, whipping out his revolver, crouching against an expected attack; for a figure blacker than the night had glided in his path from behind a tree trunk, and the hands carried something round, black -

“Put that thing down,” Garth whispered, “then up with your hands!”

Her laugh barely reached him.

“I thought it was you, Jim.”

He dropped his revolver in his pocket and strode forward, angry and anxious.

“What are you doing here, Nora?”

He laughed uncomfortably.

“For a minute I looked for the veiled woman.”

“I’ve come,” she said confidently, “for her, and to see that you don’t throw your life away, because you won’t admit the possibility of incomprehensible forces.”

“You must go back, he said. “What’s in that bundle you’re carrying?”

She held the bundle up, and Garth touched it. It was a soft substance wrapped in a black shawl.

“What is it?” he repeated.

“A white gown,” she answered simply, “and a white veil, so that I may take the bomb after I have trapped this queer creature; so that I may talk to these men and learn how wide the organization is.”

She argued logically enough that there was less risk this way than the other. Once she had the bomb in her hands the great danger would be over. Try as he might, Garth could not move her. She walked on towards the house.

They paused at the edge of the woods. The dark, vague mass of the building frowned at them. The windows, Garth gathered, were heavily curtained, for no gleam of light escaped.

“I am going in with you, Jim, to see it through,” Nora whispered. “Don’t be disapproving. I only want to help.”

Impulsively he grasped her hand. For a moment he forgot the restraint she had forced upon him. ,

“Nora,” he said hoarsely, “since I lost my temper with Black, you’ve not been kind. You know I want you with all my heart—”

Through the darkness her voice was filled with wistful regret and sympathy. It reminded him again that her tragic love affair, preceding their capture of Slim and George, still touched her with fingers of sorrow; had not yet given her time to adjust herself to this new ardor.

“Hush! You were not to speak of that.”

But he would not let her hand go.

“And you—will you ever speak?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she answered dully.

She snatched her hand away. Her voice rose.

“Don’t you see? It’s because I don’t know that I can’t let you take such chances with death. That’s why I’m here, Jim.”

## Chapter XV

### THE VEILED WOMAN

INSIDE the house th'e atmosphere of danger reached Garth more positively than it had done even through Brown's unreasoning terror. Alsop and Marvin met them in the hall. Both were white-faced and nervous. Through the open door of a library Garth saw five men in evening clothes gathered about a table which was littered with papers. Alsop closed the door.

"I hope you and the inspector are satisfied," he jeered. "We're properly trapped."

"The house is surrounded by detectives," Garth said. "We've arranged to take care of the one with the bomb. For there is a bomb, Mr. Alsop. There's no point lying about that."

Alsop scarcely made an effort to hide his fear.

"How are your detectives outside going to help us in here?"

He pointed to the closed door of the library.

"All my figures, all of my plans that I've ever put on paper I've brought out here for the first time tonight for this conference. Don't you suppose those devils know? And that thing—you can laugh at me if you like—I tell you that thing in white is after them. When I went upstairs justnow to bring them from the safe I felt it. I saw something white, and I ran down. Ask Marvin. I'm afraid. I acknowledge it. Stay in this house with that—that influence, then if you'll tell me I'm a coward I'll believe it."

"I'm not sneering," Garth said grimly. "As a matter of fact we know your veiled woman is actually to be in this house at nine o'clock. It's likely enough she's upstairs now in some hidden corner after failing to steal your papers. I'll search every rat hole, because you can take it for granted her apparent magic is pure trickery, and if she isn't to be found upstairs we've a net arranged down here for her a little later."

He explained briefly the arrangement that Nora's presence and her disguise had

made possible. Alsop and Marvin were not impressed.

“Better find out what you can now,” Alsop advised.

He nodded at Marvin. Garth and Nora followed the secretary towards the stairs. Suddenly, with a sharp intake of breath, Garth turned, grasped Nora’s arm, and drew her back.

“Alsop,” he whispered excitedly, “I don’t give a hang how long you’ve had your servants, or how much you trust them. The thing’s obvious anyway. Nora! You saw that?”

Nora nodded. Her eyes were wide.

“What do you mean?” Alsop gasped.

Without answering Garth ran down the hallway and flung the curtain at the end to one side. Across a wide dining-room he saw a woman, slender and middle-aged. Her attitude was of flight. Her hand rested on the knob of the farther door. As Garth called sharply for Alsop she opened the door and went through. Alsop had only a glimpse.

“It’s my housekeeper,” he said. “She’s worked here for twenty years. Certainly there’s nothing wrong there.”

“I wonder.” Nora spoke softly. “Such people are clever enough to involve one’s own family against one. She can’t leave the house anyway. Suppose, Jim, we look upstairs.”

While Alsop, angry and at a loss, went back to the library, Garth and Nora climbed to the upper hall. Garth supposed that Marvin would have made a light for them, but of all the doors that opened from the stair landing one alone was wide, and no light gleamed through that.

“Marvin!” he called, and again: “Marvin! Marvin!”

He was aware of Nora’s shivering. He glanced at her. The color had left her cheeks.

“Something’s wrong up here, Jim,” she said. “I know it. I feel it. Don’t you feel

anything strange? You heard him come up, and after what Mr. Alsop said—where is he? Why doesn't he answer?"

Garth stepped forward. Nora reached out and grasped his arms. The quality of her voice startled him.

"Don't go in there without a light, Jim."

He shook off her hands. He entered the dark room, and immediately he knew she had been right, that he had advanced too precipitately. He stumbled against something soft and yielding, and went down, stretching out his hand to save himself. He knew what his fingers had found. He snatched them away with a little cry:

"Get back to the hall, Nora!"

But he heard no movement from her, so, since he didn't dare wait, he took his flashlight from his pocket, pressed the control, and turned the ray on the features his hand had touched in the dark. Marvin was stretched, face downward on the floor near the head of the bed. His arm lay beyond his head, pitiful evidence that he had reached for the electric light switch which had been just beyond his grasp.

Nora with a reluctant air had come closer. Crying out her horror, she indicated the collar, at the back of Marvin's neck.

"Blood!"

Garth nodded.

"Like Brown. The same place as Brown's wound."

Nora covered her face with her hands.

Garth sprang up, unconsciously quoting Brown's words:

"That's madness!"

He ran to the bathroom and brought water with which he bathed Marvin's face and head. He looked up after a moment with a sigh of relief.

“It was only a glancing blow,” he said. “He’ll come around.”

Marvin, indeed, before long stirred, and tried to struggle to a sitting posture as Brown had done. He cried out, as Brown had cried:

“The veiled woman!”

“You see,” Nora breathed.

Garth lifted the secretary to the bed, but when, to an extent, the man had recovered consciousness he had nothing reasonable to tell.

He had started, he said, up the stairs, thinking Garth at his heels. He had been about to press the switch.

“I knew she was there,” he sobbed. “I saw her—all white, and with a veil over her face. Then I don’t know. I don’t remember being struck. Everything went black.”

Garth with a gesture of determination turned and commenced examining the room. Nora, crouched against the wall, watched him with the assurance of one who sees an evil prophecy fulfilled. After a quarter of an hour he gave it up. There was no one concealed in the room. Nor, he would have sworn, was there any reasonable hiding place. From behind the screen where the veiled woman had evidently disappeared twice there was no possible escape.

“Before long, Marvin,” he muttered, “I’ll be as bad as you and old Alsop. If you believe in ghosts, Nora, this certainly looks like one.”

He glanced at his watch.

“Are you still anxious to try that plan of yours after what you’ve seen?”

She nodded She went uncertainly from the room. Marvin stumbled after them. They helped him down the stairs and to a sofa in the lower hall. Garth led Nora to the west door.

“We’ve less than ten minutes,” he said, “and I don’t understand. I’d rather you kept out of it.”

In silence and with determination she slipped on the white gown she had brought and draped the white veil over her face. Garth, shaking his head, arranged a screen just within the doorway. He turned out the electric lamp, lighted a single candle, and placed it on a stand at some distance.

“Wait behind the screen,” he said. “Actually, Nora, unless we are dealing with something beyond the human, the result is certain. I shall be at the other end of the hall just within the library door. Anybody coming from the interior of the house must pass me. I’ll grab the woman. I’ll see she makes no outcry. I’ll keep her out of the way for she must be human to that extent. When you hear the two raps open the door and take the bomb. According to Alsop’s description you won’t be suspected in this light. A little over five minutes! I’ll get Alsop and his crew out of the library and where their precious skins will be safe.”

He touched her hand in farewell. Her fingers were very cold. She shivered and slipped behind the screen. He went to the library, knocked, entered, and closed the door. The faces that greeted him were restless with misgiving.

“I want you all out of this room now, please,” Garth said. “I’ve delayed moving you as long as I dared, so, if anything goes wrong, those outside won’t know you have left. Take them to the back part of the house, Mr. Alsop. Into the cellar, if you like. It’s safest. In fifteen or twenty minutes I hope you will be able to resume your conference in perfect security.”

Without words the men gathered up their papers and filed out.

Garth, left alone in the room, turned out the light, went to the window, slipped behind the curtain, opened the casement, and peered through.

The darkness was still unrelieved. Through that darkness, he knew, men crept on an errand of fanaticism and death. Through that silence he was momentarily expectant of the audible evidence of their approach. But he could hear nothing, see nothing. He couldn’t wait. It was necessary for him to go to the door from behind which he was to ambush the veiled woman in order that Nora might take her place.

As he thrust the curtain aside a thin, tinkling sound stole from the silence of the room. He felt his way to the telephone and lifted the receiver.

“Hello!” he whispered. “Hello!”

The inspector's hoarse voice came to him, lowered to a note of caution.

"You, Garth? I'm in the gardener's cottage. Tell me Alsop and his people are safe."

"Yes," Garth said. "Hurry! Hurry! What's up?"

"For Heaven's sake, be careful," the inspector answered, "because, Garth, all your dope was right. There are four of them in the grounds now, and one carries a thing that looks like a bomb. Are you going to get away with it? The veiled woman—"

"She's in the house," Garth murmured. "I'm waiting. I must go. Hush! I hear—"

He broke off. Through the appalling quietness of the house he had heard distinctly from the direction of the west door two sharp raps. He flashed his light at the clock over the mantel. Its hands pointed exactly to nine o'clock. Yet he had seen no one pass the dim frame of the library doorway—nothing white.

He ran through. In the wan candle light he could see the slender figure in the white gown and the flowing veil slip from behind the screen and open the door. Then Nora would get the bomb, but where was the real veiled woman? What unaccountable intuition had warned her away?

Garth slipped along the hall, clinging to the shadow of a tapestry. He knew from the black patch at the end of the corridor that the door was wide. In that dark patch he suddenly saw the silhouette of a man. The hands were stretched out as if to meet the hands which Nora appeared to offer for the bomb. But the man carried no bomb. In the dim light Garth thought at first that he carried nothing. Then he understood his mistake, and he cried out, drawing his own revolver, darting forward :

"Nora! Lookout!"

He had seen that the man's fingers fondled an automatic, raised it, aimed it at the confident, expectant figure.

"For police spies!" the man called.

Before Garth could reach the door the harsh, tearing report of the automatic

came, and was repeated twice. There was no question. At that short range each sound from the stubby cylinder was the voice of death. Garth saw the form that he loved sway, clutch at nothing, without a cry crumple and lie motionless across the threshold.

Before the other could turn his gun on him the detective had grappled with the murderer. He bore him to the porch floor and struck him across the temple with the butt of his revolver. Garth arose then, and, scarcely aware of what he did, placed his police whistle at his lips, and blew shrilly through the night.

While he waited for the help that he knew would be too late for Nora or for him, he gazed at the silent, slender form. The veil alone moved, trembling from time to time in the wind which came gently from the woods. That reached the candle also, which flickered, making the light ghastly, unbearable.

Garth shook. He covered his face with his hands, for the dim, unreal illumination had shown him that the figure was no longer completely white. The reason for its stillness exposed a scarlet testimony.

That which Garth had feared but had forgotten in the rush of his more personal terror rent the silence with a chaotic turmoil. A terrific detonation was followed by the shattering of glass. Shouts and curses arose from the house. Someone hurried across the drive and up the steps. Garth was aware of a heavy hand on his shoulder. He glanced up at the inspector's startled face. Suddenly the detective realized that the old man had no misgivings for Nora. At this moment, with the white form at his feet, he must picture her quietly, safely at home. Garth moved away, but the inspector grasped him again.

"What's the matter with you? You've let them use their infernal bomb. You're responsible for Alsop and his people."

"They're safe," Garth answered.

The candle still burned. In its wan and flickering light he indicated the still, white figure.

"The veiled woman!" the inspector said. "Dead!"

He stooped swiftly.

“You’ve done well here anyway, Garth. Let’s have a look.”

Frantically Garth snatched at his arm and tried to pull him away.

“Don’t look! Not you!”

The inspector glanced up amazed. Garth knelt with a gesture of despair.

“What’s that?” the inspector whispered, and his voice was suddenly afraid. Garth followed his glance. From the black shadows of the woods a white figure glided. Its face was hidden beneath a white cloth.

Garth’s shaking fingers reached out and lifted the stained veil from the silent form. He drew back. His cry was like a sob. For a long time the inspector and Garth stared at the features, apprehensive even in death, of the secretary, Marvin.

Nora, who ran up the steps crying out her fear for those in the house, gave Garth no opportunity for questions or for the expression of that relief which shook him with a power nearly physical. Even the inspector, after his first shock of surprise, had no time to demand the particulars of her share in the night’s work.

The four prisoners were brought to the hall. They knew they must stand trial for Brown’s death as well as for this attempt. The one who had shot Marvin and who had gone down before Garth’s attack was still dazed. Garth identified him as the man who had disguised himself as an Oriental in the shop. The sharp face of the Levantine twitched with hatred and fright. The other two, although he knew the type, the detective had never seen before. They boasted openly that the shop had been only an outpost for this affair. Through a dictaphone and the telegraphy of the pipe, instructions had been sent to and from their headquarters. Tonight, they declared, the shop had ceased to be useful. No trail would lead from it to the central force that worked in New York.

As they drove home in a taxicab the inspector bitterly lamented the fact to Garth and Nora.

“We’ll get to it later,” Garth said.

“If only things hadn’t gone wrong at the last minute!” Nora cried. “If only I might have taken the bomb and talked to the man who brought it! Even with the others! For it’s clear those fellows will give nothing away now. We can blame

poor Marvin that I never had a chance.”

“What do you mean?” Garth asked. “You haven’t told us what happened when I left you by the west door.”

“You remember we had got Marvin on a sofa in the hall,” Nora answered. “He must have seen you close the door when you went in the library to warn Alsop and the others, because from my hiding place I saw him get up, and, with no appearance of an injured man, sneak along the wall to the stairs. I followed him up, and, Jim, I found him on the floor in his room again, but this time he didn’t hear me, and he was talking. Then I saw his whole game. There was a dictaphone hidden beneath the bed with which he had probably communicated with those outside the house for days. We had stopped him the first time when he had just learned of my intended masquerade. Don’t you see? He had to tell them that. We caught him, and he scratched himself to throw us off the track with the details of another case like Brown’s. Now I heard him tell everything—just what I was to do, and that Alsop and the others were in the library. I ran downstairs, but when I reached the lower hall I saw him coming after me. So I said I had changed my mind, that I was afraid, that I wanted only to leave the house. I went to the kitchen and slipped out, intending to get to you, Jim, with my information. But I knew these men were in the grounds, and I had to go carefully. When I crept up to the library window I thought I saw you. Then the telephone bell rang, and I couldn’t make you hear.”

“Of course,” Garth said, “Marvin, coming down, had seen that the library, door was open, and that there was no longer a light there. It was too late to use the dictaphone again, but he knew he must change his instructions and tell them not to waste the bomb in the library. So he threw on his disguise and rushed to the west door as he had originally planned, in too much of a hurry to dream such a mistake could happen. I suppose he got past while I was at the window.”

“Marvin,” the inspector mused, “was just the man for them. Probably full of wild-eyed ideas, and feeling a divine call to help smash Alsop. I hold no brief for that millionaire. I understand he had to work, like most everybody else, for what he’s got, and maybe that’s the reason he can’t understand these new social notions. And far be it from me to say anything about Marvin’s grand thoughts, although it may be his share in this affair was made worth his while. My part in life is to see that the law’s kept, and I guess without the law there wouldn’t be anything much worth while for anybody to fight over. These rough boys had

certainly fixed Marvin to help them break the law into little bits of pieces. So maybe he deserves just what he got. Alsop tells me he didn't trust any of his employes with his schemes for putting a stop to socialistic movements in his concerns, and that's where the big hitch came. Marvin, whenever he knew there were private papers in the house, was always searching. He had a key to Alsop's door. He used that old ghost story, and dressed himself up in case any of the servants should see him. Their fright would give him time to cover himself. When Alsop did catch him he came across with the terrible experiences he had had himself with the veiled woman. Ought to have got on to him before."

"It wasn't easy to suspect him," Nora said, "particularly after we had seen the housekeeper's curiosity, and had found him, apparently unconscious, in his room. He was really too frightened at the flat, and we might have suspected when Jim heard those directions at the shop. Such luck as that doesn't often happen. It's easily explained now. The time it took you, Jim, to go to the hospital and to visit the shop was just the time he needed to return to Wall Street with Mr. Alsop, make some excuse, and get into the shop by a back way to receive his new orders. It was simple enough."

The inspector grunted.

"If we saw all the simple things there'd be no need for detectives."

He commenced to cough with a persistent vehemence.

"Take me home, Nora," he groaned. "Back to the fireplace and the flannel for the old man. You're always right, Nora. Isn't she always right, Garth?"

But Garth, recalling that moment before Nora and he had entered the Alsop house, shook his head. Nora must have seen and understood, for she laughed lightly.

"Maybe she is," Garth said thoughtfully, "but sometimes I wonder."

## A NOTE FROM THE DEAD

ALSOP was around the next day, loud with generosity, and anxious to give Garth the only form of reward he could understand—large sums of money. Garth, however, didn't care for the man. He preferred to keep their relations on a purely business basis.

“I only did my duty, Mr. Alsop,” he said. “Some day I may break away from here and start an office of my own. In that case, if you cared to mention me to your friends I would feel I had been well repaid.”

“Maybe you were a little too proud, Garth,” the inspector grunted afterwards.

Nora, however, when she heard of it, said simply

“Jim, you did perfectly right. If you had taken money from that man he'd have believed he owned you body and soul.”

“When you two combine against me I've nothing more to say,” the inspector grinned.

Garth knew that the old man watched, with something like anxiety himself, the progress of his and Nora's friendship. The detective had long since made up his mind not to speak to the inspector on that subject until he had received some definite encouragement from the girl. The inspector himself brought up the matter about this time. Probably the impulse came from the trial of Slim and George which began and threatened, in spite of its clear evidence, to drag through several weeks.

It would be necessary, of course, for both Garth and Nora to testify sooner or later. So they rehearsed all the incidents of that night when Garth had worn the grey mask. After this exercise one evening the inspector followed Garth to the hall.

“I don't want my girl to become morbid, Jim.”

Garth nodded.

“You mean Kridel?”

“You’ve said it,” the big man answered with an attempt at a whisper. “I’ve thought that maybe you and Nora—See here, Jim, I wouldn’t mind a bit. You see Nora’s mother was Italian. I don’t altogether understand her, but I know it isn’t natural for her to mourn for this fellow forever, and I mean, if you and she ever hit it off, I won’t forbid the banns. Only maybe you’ll let me live with you now and then. You don’t know what that girl means to me, Jim; but I want to make her happy, and I believe you’re the one, for a blind, deaf, and dumb man could see you are in love with her.”

Garth laughed, not altogether comfortably.

“It’s up to Nora, chief, but I don’t see how I can ever get along without her.”

It wasn’t often that the inspector had used Garth’s first name. It seemed to bring the detective closer to his goal. During the daytime at headquarters, however, their relations were scarcely altered. Garth often suffered from lack of work there, probably because the inspector didn’t care to send him out on unimportant matters that the least imaginative of his men could handle. When he had to assign him to an unpromising task, either to spare him too prolonged idleness, or because no other detective was available, the big man always assumed an apologetic air. It was so when he started him on the mystifying Taylor case.

“Nothing doing these days,” he grumbled. “City must be turning pure, Garth. Anyway I got to give it something for its money. Run up and take a look at this suicide. Seems Taylor was a recluse. Alone with his mother-in-law and the servants. Wife’s in California. Suppose you had other plans, but I don’t see why the city should pay you to talk moonshine to Nora.”

He grinned understandingly, encouragingly.

So the detective nodded, strolled up town, and with a bored air stepped into that curious house.

Garth for a long time stared at the pallid features of the dead man. Abruptly his interest quickened. Between the thumb and forefinger of the clenched left hand, which drooped from the side of the bed, a speck of white protruded. The detective stooped swiftly. The hand, he saw, secreted a rough sheet of paper. He drew it free, smoothed the crumpled surface, and with a vast incredulity read the

line scrawled across it in pencil.

“Don’t think it’s suicide. I’ve been killed—”

There was no more. Until that moment Garth had conceived no doubt of the man’s self-destruction. The bullet had entered the left side of the breast. The revolver lay on the counterpane within an inch of the right hand whose fingers remained crooked. The position of the body did not suggest the reception or the resistance of an attack. In the room no souvenir of struggle survived.

Here was this amazing message from the dead man. Its wording, indeed, offered the irrational impression of having been written after death.

Garth thought rapidly. Granted its accusation, the note must have been scrawled between the firing of the shot and the moment of Taylor’s death. But a murderer, arranging this appearance of suicide, would have given Taylor no opportunity. On the other hand, the theory that Taylor had written the note before killing himself, perhaps to direct suspicion to some innocent person, broke down before the brief wording, its patent incompleteness. One possibility remained. Garth could imagine no motive, but another person might have prepared the strange message.

A number of books littered the reading table at the side of the bed. Garth examined them eagerly. He found a blank page torn from one—the sheet which Taylor had clenched in his fingers. In another was Taylor’s signature. When Garth had compared it with the message on the crumpled paper no doubt remained. Taylor himself had written those obscure and provocative words.

Garth found the pencil on the floor beneath the bed, as if it had rolled there when Taylor had dropped it. The place at the moment had nothing else to offer him beyond an abnormally large array in the bath room of bottles containing for the most part stimulants and sedatives. They merely strengthened, by suggesting that Taylor was an invalid, his appearance of suicide.

The coroner and Taylor’s doctor, who came together, only added to the puzzle. The coroner declared unreservedly for suicide, and, in reply to Garth’s anxious question, swore that no measurable time could have elapsed between the firing of the shot, which had pierced the heart, and Taylor’s death. The physician was satisfied even after Garth confidentially had shown him the note.

“Mr. Taylor,” he said then, “understood he had an incurable trouble. Every one knows that his wife, whom he worshipped, had practically left him by going to California for so long. It may have appealed to a grim sense of humour, not unusual with chronic invalids, to puzzle us with that absurdly worded note. I might tell you, too, that Mr. Taylor for some time had had a fear that he might go out of his head. Perpetually he questioned me about insanity, and wanted to know what treatment I would give him if his mind went.”

Garth, however, when they had left, went to the library on the lower floor and telephoned headquarters. The inspector agreed that the case held a mystery which must be solved.

Garth walked to the embrasure of a high colonial window. The early winter night was already thick above the world. The huge room was too dark. There was a morbid feeling about the house. He had noticed that coming in, for the place had offered him one of those contrasts familiar to New York, where some antique street cars still rattle over sonorous subways. The Taylor home was a large, colonial frame farmhouse which had eventually been crowded by the modern and extravagant dwellings of a fashionable uptown district. In spite of its generous furnishings it projected even to this successful and materialistic detective a heavy air of the past, melancholy and disturbing.

Garth sighed. He had made up his mind. The best way to get at the truth was to accept for the present the dead man’s message at its face value. He turned on the single light above the desk in the center of the room. He arranged a chair so that the glare would search its occupant. He sat opposite in the shadow and pressed a button. Almost at once he heard dragging footsteps in the hall, then a timid rapping at the door. The door opened slowly. A bent old man in livery shuffled across the threshold. It was the servant who had admitted Garth on his arrival a few minutes earlier. The detective indicated the chair on which the light fell.

“Sit down there, please.”

As the old man obeyed his limbs shook with a sort of palsy. From his sallow and sunken face, restless, bloodshot eyes gleamed.

“I understand from the doctor,” Garth began, “that you are McDonald, Mr. Taylor’s trusted servant. The coroner says death occurred last night or early this morning. Tell me why you didn’t find the body until nearly four o’clock this

afternoon.”

The old servant bent forward, placing the palm of his hand against his ear.

“Eh? Eh?”

On a higher key Garth repeated his question. McDonald answered in tremulous tones, clearing his throat from time to time as he explained that because of his master’s bad health his orders had been never to disturb him except in cases of emergency. He drew a telegram from his pocket, passing it across to Garth.

“Mrs. Taylor is on her way home from California. I don’t think Mr. Taylor knew just what connection she would make at Chicago, but he expected her tomorrow. That telegram sent from the train at Albany says she will be in this afternoon on the Western express. I thought it my duty to disturb him and get him up to welcome her, for he was very fond of her, sir. It will be cruel hard for her to find such a welcome as this.”

“Then,” Garth said, “you heard no shot?”

McDonald indicated his ears. Garth tugged at his watch chain.

“I must know,” he said, “more about the conditions in this house last night.”

He had spoken softly, musingly, yet the man, who had displayed the symptoms of a radical deafness, glanced up, asking without hesitation:

“You don’t suspect anything out of the way, sir?”

Garth studied him narrowly.

“I want to know why the shot wasn’t heard. You were here and Mr. Taylor’s mother-in-law. Who else?”

The bony hand snapped to McDonald’s ear again.

“Eh? Eh?”

“Speak up,” Garth said impatiently. “Who was in the house besides yourself and Mrs. Taylor’s mother?”

“The cook, Clara, sir—only the cook, Clara.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely, sir. Who else should there be? We’ve been short of servants lately.”

Garth dismissed him, instructing him to send Mrs. Taylor’s mother. While he waited he stared from the window again, jerking savagely at his watch ribbon. From McDonald he had received a sharp impression of secretiveness. He hadn’t cared to arouse the servant’s suspicions. Through strategy he might more surely learn whatever the old man had held back.

Garth swung around with a quick intake of breath. He had heard no one enter. Through the obscurity, accented rather than diminished by the circular patch of light around the chair, he could see no one. Yet almost with a sense of vibration there had reached him through the heavy atmosphere of the old house an assurance that he was watched from the shadows. Impulsively he called out:

“Who’s that?”

He stepped to the desk so that he could see the portion of the room beyond the light. It was empty. Garth, as such things go, had no nerves, but through his bewilderment a vague uneasiness crept.

He sprang back, turning. A clear, girlish laugh had rippled through the dusk. A high, girlish voice had challenged him.

“Here I am! Hide and seek with the policeman!”

He saw, half hidden in the folds of the curtain at the side of the embrasure in which he had stood, a figure, indistinct, clothed evidently in black. He took it for granted McDonald had sent the girl, Clara, first.

“I wanted Mr. Taylor’s mother-in-law,” he said. “No matter. Come here, and let me remind you that humor is out of place in a house of death.”

Nevertheless the pleasant laugh rippled again. Slowly the dark figure detached itself from the shadows and settled in the chair while Garth watched, his uneasiness drifting into a blank unbelief. He couldn’t accept the girlish laughter, the high, coquettish voice as having come from the grey, witch-like hag whom

the light now exposed mercilessly.

“I am Mr. Taylor’s mother-in-law,” she said laughingly. “Everybody’s surprised because I’m so youthful. My daughter’s coming home this afternoon. That’s why I’m so happy. They wouldn’t let me go west with her, but when one’s as advanced as I young people don’t bother much.”

Garth experienced a quick sympathy, yet behind the mental deterioration of extreme old age something useful might lurk.

“You slept in the front part of the house last night,” he tried. “You probably heard the shot.”

She shook her head. Her sunken mouth twitched in a smile a trifle sly.

“Once I drop off it would take a cannonade to wake me up.”

For no apparent reason her youthful and atrocious laugh rippled again.

“Please,” Garth said gently. “Mr. Taylor-”

“At my age,” she broke in, “you say when a younger person dies: ‘ Ha, ha! I stole a march on that one.’”

She arose and with a curious absence of sound moved towards the door.

“I must go now. I am knitting a sweater. It was for my son-in-law. Now that he’s put himself out of the way it might fit you.”

The door closed behind her slender figure, and Garth tugged at his watch ribbon, wondering. Her actions had been too determined, her last words too studied. They had seemed to hold a threat. Was she as senile as she appeared, or had she tried to throw sand in his eyes?

He rang and sent for the cook Clara, unaware that a new and significant surprise awaited him in this dreary room. The girl, when she came, was young, and, in a coarse mold, pretty. When she sat down the light disclosed a tremulousness as pronounced as McDonald’s. Before Garth could question her she burst out hysterically:

“I am going to leave this house. I was going to leave today, anyway.”

Garth pitched his voice on a cold, even note.

“For the present you’ll stay. Mr. Taylor didn’t kill himself. He was murdered.”

She covered her face with her hands, shivering.

“I didn’t kill him. I didn’t-”

“But,” Garth snapped, “you know who did.”

She shook her head with stubborn vehemence.

“I don’t know anything,” she answered, “except that I must leave this house.”

“Why? Because you think the old lady’s crazy, and she frightens you? I want to know about that.”

As Clara lowered her hands she increased fear, rather than the tears in her eyes, held Garth. She shook her head again.

“I’ve only been here a week. I haven’t seen much of her. She’s only been to meals once or twice, and then she’s scarcely said a word.”

She glanced about the room with its small paned windows, its deep embrasures, its shallow ceiling.

“It isn’t that,” she whispered. “It’s because the house is full of queer things. The servants all felt it. They talked about spirits and left. Five have come and gone in the week I’ve been here. But I’ve never been superstitious, and I didn’t hear anything until last night.”

Garth stirred.

“What did you hear? When was it?”

“About midnight,” she answered tensely. “I had had company in the kitchen until then, so I was alone downstairs. McDonald had told me before he went to bed to make sure the last thing that the library fire was all right. I had looked at it and had put the fender up and was just leaving the room when I heard this sound—

like moans, sir. I—I've never heard such suffering."

She shuddered.

"It was like a voice from the grave—like somebody trying to get out of the grave."

"But you heard no shot?"

"No, sir."

Garth spoke tolerantly.

"These sounds must have come from up stairs. You've forgotten that Mr. Taylor was an invalid."

She cried out angrily.

"It wasn't like a man's or a woman's voice, and I can't tell where it came from. I tell you it was like a—a dead voice."

"You failed to trace it, of course," Garth said. "Describe to me what you did."

"I ran to the kitchen," she answered, "but, as I told you, there was no one there. McDonald had gone to bed, and so had his daughter."

Garth stooped swiftly forward and grasped her arm.

"What's that you're saying? His daughter! You mean to tell me McDonald has a daughter, and she was in the house last night?"

She shrank from his excited gesture.

"Yes. He asked me not to tell you, but I'm frightened. I don't want to get in trouble. She's the housekeeper. She engages all the servants and runs the house."

"Then where is she now?"

"She must have gone out early this morning, sir, for I haven't seen her all day. I wanted to be fair. I've only been waiting for her to come back so I could tell her I was leaving."

“Send McDonald back to me,” Garth said, “unless he’s left the house, too.”

The butler had deliberately lied to shield his daughter, and had asked secrecy of this girl. And all this talk of spirits and of cries! It was turning out an interesting case after all—possibly an abnormal one. Moreover, he was getting somewhere with it.

McDonald slipped in. He was more agitated than before. His face was distorted. His tongue moistened his lips thirstily. Against his will Garth applied the method he knew would bring the quickest result with such a man. He grasped the stooped shoulders. He shouted:

“Why did you lie when I asked you who was in the house at the time of the murder?”

“Eh? Eh?” the old man quavered. “You’re not as deaf as that. Where’s your daughter now?”

“My ears!” the old servant whined. “I can’t hear, sir.”

“All right,” Garth shouted. “If you want to go to the lockup and your daughter too, stay as deaf as you please.”

He wasn’t prepared for the revolting success that came to him. McDonald clutched at one of the window curtains and hid his twitching face in its folds, while sobs, difficult and sickening, tore from his throat, shaking his bent shoulders.

“God knows! I haven’t seen her since I went to bed last night. I thought she’d gone out.” He glanced up, his face grimacing. “Don’t you think she did it. Don’t you think -” “First of all,” Garth said, “I want her picture.” “I haven’t any,” McDonald cried. But Garth hadn’t missed the man’s instinctive gesture towards his watch pocket. Then, whether he actually knew anything or not, he suspected his daughter and sought to protect her. Against his protests Garth took the watch and, as he had foreseen, found a photograph in the case. The picture was not of a young woman, but the face was still attractive in an uncompromising fashion. It was this hardness, this determination about the picture that made Garth decide that the original, under sufficient provocation, would be capable of killing. “For her sake and yours, McDonald,” Garth said, “answer one thing truthfully. Did she fancy herself any more than a superior servant? Had she formed for Mr. Taylor

any silly attachment?”

McDonald’s reply was quick and assured.

“To Mr. Taylor she was only a trusted servant, sir, and she knew her place.”

The whirring of a motor suggested that an automobile had drawn up before the house. Garth slipped the photograph in his pocket.

“If that is Mrs. Taylor arriving,” he said with an uncomfortable desire to shirk the next few minutes, “the news of her husband’s death might come easier from you.”

“I telephoned Mr. Reed,” McDonald said. “He’s an old friend of Mr. and Mrs. Taylor’s. I told him about the telegram, and he’s probably met her and brought her home.”

“I will be here,” Garth said, “if she wishes to speak to me.”

## Chapter XVII

### THE KNIFE BY THE LIFELESS HAND

HE heard McDonald open and close the front door. Then the widow entered, followed by a young man with an abundance of dark hair curling over a low forehead and shading eyes a trifle too deep set. But at first Garth saw only the widow, and he marveled that one so young and lovely in an ethereal sense should have been mated with the elderly invalid upstairs. As he looked it suddenly occurred to him that Reed, since he had lost Taylor as a friend, might crave more than, friendship from the widow.

She sank on a divan. Even in the shadows her heavy black hair and the dark grey traveling dress she wore heightened the weary pallor of her face. Had her eyes held tears they would have been easier to meet, for the shock was there, dry and unrelieved.

“It is dreadful to come home this way,” she said, “dreadful! I had never dreamed of his doing such a thing.”

“It is by no means certain,” Garth said gently, “that he killed himself. There is a curious situation in this house. McDonald’s daughter, the housekeeper, for instance, has not been seen since a short time before the crime.”

Her lips twitched a little. He fancied hope in her eyes.

“If I could only cry!” she said. “At any rate that would be better for his memory, wouldn’t it? You suspect this woman?”

“If you are able,” Garth said, “I would like you to tell me something about her.”

“I have never seen her,” she answered. “She came after I went west. McDonald had a good deal of influence over Mr. Taylor, and I never quite trusted him. There’s no use. You might as well know the truth about Mr. Taylor and me. You’ve probably heard. We were never quite happy. He was so much older. We never quite belonged to each other. But that is all. It isn’t true all this gossip that I went west for a divorce, and I don’t believe he was the man to kill himself. If there has been a crime against him I want the world to know it. I want his

memory clean.”

Quickly the man Reed touched her shoulder. For the first time since entering the room he spoke. His voice possessed a peculiar, aggressive resonance.

“Helen, you shouldn’t take this man’s suspicion that he was murdered too seriously.”

Garth motioned him to silence.

“At such a time,” he said to Mrs. Taylor, “I dislike to bother you, but I’d like to ask one or two questions. Your mother? Her mind?”

He caught a flash of pain across her white face.

“She has always been peculiar,” she answered, “but she isn’t out of her head, if that’s what you mean. I’ve always thought it’s a habit of hers to hide her real thoughts behind apparent absurdities.”

“I had wondered about that,” Garth said with satisfaction. “One more thing. There has been talk among the servants of spirits, of moans.”

She shivered.

“I know nothing about that,” she said, “except that the house is unbearable. That is one reason I decided on this long visit, why I shrank from coming home.”

“Unbearable?” Garth helped her out.

“Old, moldy, and depressing. My husband, I think, believed in it a little. I’ve heard him and my mother talk about a figure who sometimes walked. I laughed at that, and I laughed when they heard moans. You see the wind often cries in the narrow space between us and the high wall of the next house. I’ve never liked it here. It depresses me too much. That’s all.”

“Thanks,” Garth said. “You will want time to accustom yourself. Rest assured I will do everything I can to get the truth.”

“You must,” she said tensely, “and don’t hesitate to disturb me if I can be of any use.”

As they went out the resonance of Reed's undertone reached Garth.

"Helen. You are giving this man's suspicion too much weight. He seems to have no evidence."

After the door had closed Garth telephoned the inspector, suggesting that the house be guarded in order that he might have McDonald, Clara, and the old lady at hand.

"I'll give instructions," the throaty rumble of the inspector came back, "to arrest any one who tries to make a getaway."

Garth hurried to the kitchen. The night was nearly complete there, but, as he entered, he caught a swift, silent movement from the servants' stairs. He walked to the entrance.

"I thought so."

The girl Clara shrank from him in the shadows. She wore a hat and cloak. She carried a hand bag.

"If you don't want yourself locked up, charged with murder, take those things off," Garth said. "From this moment the house is watched, and any one attempting to leave will be arrested."

The girl commenced to cry again.

"I am afraid," she sobbed. "Afraid."

Garth turned on the light.

"Take me," he directed her, "to the room occupied by the housekeeper."

Shaken and uncertain, Clara led him to a room at the head of the stairs, which, Garth found, had a second door opening into the upper hall of the front portion of the house. The room displayed a taste seldom found among servants. His examination of it from the first spurred Garth's curiosity. The bed had been occupied last night, but to all appearances for only a brief period, since the blankets and sheets were little disturbed. Some clothing and a pair of shoes lay at one side, and clothing, shoes, and hats were neatly arranged in the closet, but

nowhere could he find a dressing gown or a pair of bedroom slippers. Clara, moreover, could not recall having seen the housekeeper wear any hat or clothes other than those in the closet. If McDonald's daughter had fled from the house in slippers and dressing gown it was strange she hadn't been heard of long ago. It became increasingly clear to him that the woman remained hidden in the house. It should be easy enough to find her. He would search every corner for the one whose brain, he was now convinced, held the solution of the mystery. But on the lower floor he found no trace. He paused in the lower hall, intending to ring for McDonald to guide him through the rest of his task.

All at once his hand which he had raised to the bell hesitated. He braced himself against the wall. Through the heavy atmosphere a stifled groan had reached him, followed by a difficult dragging sound. But as he sprang up the stairs he knew he hadn't heard the cause of Clara's fright, for the groan had sufficiently defined itself as having come from a man.

In the upper hall there was no light beyond the glow sifting through the stair well. It was enough to show Garth a dark form huddled at the foot of the stairs leading to the third story. He ran over and stooped.

"McDonald! What's the matter? Are you hurt?"

The silence of the house was heavier, more secretive than before.

At last, in response to Garth's efforts, a whimpering came from McDonald's throat. The heap against the wall struggled impotently to rise. Garth recalled the medicines in Taylor's bath room and started down the hall. The unintelligible whimpering increased. Garth went on, aware that the black, huddled figure crawled after him with the sublime and unreasonable courage of a wounded animal.

He snapped on the light and ran to Taylor's bath room where he poured a stimulant into a glass. As he stepped back to the bedroom he faced Taylor's body on which the light shone with peculiar reflections. They gave to the pallid face the quality of a sneer. But it was only in connection with another radical difference at the bed that that illusion arrested Garth and sent a chill racing along his nerves. For on the counterpane, as near the crooked fingers as the revolver lay, now rested a long and ugly kitchen knife.

With a graver fear the detective glanced at the door of the hall. McDonald had

dragged himself that far. He raised his trembling hand, stretching it towards the bed in a gesture, it seemed to Garth, of impossible accusation. Then the crouched figure toppled and fell across the threshold while from somewhere beyond the door a high girlish laugh rippled.

Garth sprang forward and knelt by the old man, reluctant to search for what he expected to find. There it was at the back of the coat, a jagged tear whose edges were stained, showing where the knife had penetrated the shoulder. The wound didn't look deep or dangerous, and in his unconsciousness McDonald breathed regularly. So Garth hurried back to the bed and examined the knife. There was no ambiguity about the red stains on the blade. The knife, resting close to the dead hand, had wounded McDonald who had seemed to accuse the still form whose note projected the impression of having been written after death.

Garth smothered his morbid thoughts. McDonald's daughter was the living force, probably at large in this house, that he wanted to chain. If she were guilty of the earlier crime she had sufficient motive for this attempt to keep the old man silent. She could have got such a knife from the kitchen. So, for that matter, could Clara. But the eccentric had laughed. Was that merely coincidence? Garth ran across the hall and listened at her door with an increasing excitement. He heard the running of water, regularly interrupted, as if by hands being cleansed under an open faucet. He tried the door and found it unlocked. He entered, staring at the daring indifference of the old woman who stepped from the bathroom, calmly drying her hands on a towel.

"Come in, policeman," she said in her high girlish voice. "Don't suffer in the black hall."

"Let me have that towel" he cried.

Without hesitation she offered him the piece of linen. It showed no stains, nor were there stains to be found about the wash basin, but the slab of marble in which it was set was damp as if it had just now been carefully cleansed. She watched, her wrinkled face set in an expression of contempt.

"What are you up to? Think if I wanted to do anything wrong I'd let you find me out?"

"Then you know," he said, "what happened out there in the hall. I heard you laugh."

She started. Her voice was lower. At last it was as old as herself.

“Things always happen out there. It is crowded with the people who have lived in this house before us—unhappy and angry people. Often I have seen and heard the black thing out there. I would never laugh at her.”

Again the doubt of her senility attacked him.

“You can’t impress me with that,” he said harshly. “I am talking about McDonald. He was stabbed out there a few minutes ago.”

She laughed foolishly.

“Horrid old man! But why should I want to see him stabbed?”

He watched her closely.

“I saw you strike him. You didn’t have enough strength to send the blow home.”

The assurance of her voice increased his doubt. Whatever her mental state she was at least purposeful.

“You need glasses, policeman. Don’t neglect your eyes. You have only one pair.”

He felt himself against a blank wall, and there was McDonald to think of. He asked one more question.

“When did you last see McDonald’s daughter?”

“Maybe at dinner last night,” she said. “Nice girl, in spite of her father. I must go back to my knitting, policeman.”

Garth left her, hurrying down stairs to the front door. He called the policeman from the shadows of the portico, instructing him to go to the large apartment house on the corner where he would almost certainly find a physician.

As he gave his directions he saw Nora’s slender figure cross the street and come up the steps, and, as he looked at the pretty Latin face, expressive of an exceptional intelligence, his morose and puzzled mind brightened. He was surprised to see her now, and a little worried, for a grave menace existed for

every one in this house. Moreover, the case mystified him to the point where he felt he must find the solution himself. He didn't care to place himself again under obligations to her. Rather he was ambitious to impress her, perhaps to the removal of her reserve.

"Father's told me about the case," she said. "I couldn't keep away, because you're so hard-headed, Jim."

Smiling whimsically, she glanced at his frayed watch ribbon.

"I see you haven't found the answer yet. Tell me everything you have learned while you have been torturing that poor ribbon."

"Ghosts or not, Nora," he answered, "the house isn't healthy, and I'd rather you didn't stay."

She laughed and walked in. Shrugging his shoulders, he followed her, closed the door, and told her what had happened since he had telephoned the inspector. Her face, he noticed, had grown pale, and a troubled look had entered her eyes. She shivered.

"What an uncomfortable place! I can guess what Clara meant. Don't you get an impression of great suffering, Jim?"

He was familiar with her superstitious sensibility which at times seemed nearly psychic. It irritated him that to his own matter-of-fact mind the house had from the first conveyed a sense of unhealth. As he started to laugh at her, Nora with a quick movement shrank against the wall.

"What's that?" she whispered.

Garth strained forward, listening, too. He had heard what Clara had described, a crying, smothered and scarcely audible, and he knew what the girl had meant when she had spoken of a voice from the grave—a dead voice.

Across the moaning cut a shrill feminine scream.

"Stay here," Garth called to Nora as he started up the stairs.

He heard her voice, like an echo behind him, as full of misgivings as Clara's had

been.

“I am afraid.”

At the foot of the attic stairs he saw the white figure of Mrs. Taylor, staring upward, trembling, hysterical, a violent fear in her eyes.

“You heard it, too,” she breathed. “It wasn’t the wind.”

With a shuddering gesture she indicated McDonald’s still form.

“He isn’t dead,” Garth said.

While she relaxed a little the fear in her eyes didn’t diminish.

“I—I heard her moan,” she said. “I opened my door, and there she was—a black thing—bending over him like—like a vampire. I couldn’t seem to see her face. She ran up these stairs, and I could see through the banisters that she went in the big attic room—the room they always talked about where the woman—”

She broke off, screaming sharply again.

“Look out! Back of you! There’s something black creeping up the stairs—”

## Chapter XVIII

### THE STAINED ROBE

GARTH had been aware of Nora's slow ascent. As he turned she reached the upper floor and the light from the well caught her face.

"A friend who has just come," Garth explained to Mrs. Taylor. "There is nothing to frighten you. The woman you saw is McDonald's daughter. I had satisfied myself she was in the house. We are pretty near our goal now."

"But why," Nora asked, "should McDonald's daughter cry through the house in this fashion? Why didn't Mrs. Taylor see her face?"

But Garth had started up the stairs. The two women followed, as if each was unwilling to be left alone. Garth snapped on his pocket lamp. The light shone on the only two doors on the attic floor. From behind the first keened once more that ghastly and smothered escape of suffering, scarcely audible. As Garth stepped towards the door Mrs. Taylor cried out again:

"Is it safe?"

"Don't go in there unprepared," Nora warned him.

"I want the woman in that room," Garth muttered. "I've heard her and I know she's there. The case is finished with her arrest."

He took out his revolver, flung open the door, and flashed his light about the interior of the room. He lowered his hand with the revolver. The lamp shook a little. There was no one in the room.

"You heard her, too," he said. "Look here."

The others followed him in. The light played on the usual attic chamber, common to old houses. The plaster was stained and cracked. The single window at the end was boarded over. An iron bed rested against the wall, and the customary conglomeration of old furniture cluttered the floor. But there was no possible hiding place or means of escape except a door in the side wall, and

Garth found that locked, and when he had entered the other attic room to which it led he found that empty too except for dust and lumber. Yet, as he searched, that stifled and unearthly moaning reached him again.

Feeling himself caught in the sway of incomprehensible forces that mocked him, he sounded the walls and measured until he was convinced the two rooms could hold no secret place. Meantime the women watched with a deepening fear.

“Just the same, she’s in this house,” Garth said. “By every rule of logic she’s in this attic. But I’ll go through every nook and cranny. Nora, you and Mrs. Taylor take the bedrooms. I’ll go through the cellar and try the lower floor again.”

On his way down he saw the doctor, whom the policeman had brought, bending over McDonald.

“The wound is nothing,” the doctor said in answer to his question, “but he’s had a slight paralytic stroke from the shock.”

“When,” Garth asked eagerly, “will he be able to talk?”

“Certainly not for several days,” the doctor answered. “I’ll carry him to his room and make him as comfortable as possible.”

As Garth went on down, helpless and bewildered, he heard again the old woman’s jibing laugh. It assumed the quality of a threat as he searched unsuccessfully the cellar and the back part of the house. He met Nora in the library. Mrs. Taylor and she had found no more than Garth. As they talked, Reed’s tall figure appeared in the doorway. Garth had supposed the man had gone home immediately after bringing Mrs. Taylor from the station.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded.

Reed yawned.

“Mrs. Taylor and this young lady woke me up searching through the spare bedroom in which I was resting. They were after a woman in black. That sounds rather silly, doesn’t it? I’ve heard Taylor drool about his pet guest—lady in black, strangled in attic by jealous husband. I see you’re surprised to find me still here. I thought it was understood I should stay and be of what help I could to Mrs. Taylor and her mother.”

“Then I’m afraid you’ll have to stay for some time,” Garth answered dryly. “The house is guarded. No one will be permitted to leave until I have found or accounted for McDonald’s daughter.”

“Clever girl that!” Reed said indifferently. “Never heard her open her mouth.”

He took a book from a shelf and seated himself in a comfortable chair by the lamp.

“If I can be of any use you’ll find me here or in my room.”

“I’m wondering,” Garth answered, “if Clara knows anything about McDonald’s daughter. For tonight the back part of the house interests me.”

At his nod Nora followed him into the hall.

“Apparently Reed knows nothing,” Nora said. “But the old woman—”

“I’m thinking about the room where Taylor’s body lies,” Garth replied. “From the first an attempt seems to have been made to color the case with the supernatural. The wording of Taylor’s note, for instance. An illusion is furnished us that it was written after the man’s death. That is followed by another illusion that his cold hand wounded McDonald with the knife. And this crying! The complete disappearance of the black figure almost under our eyes! I grant you it’s a moldy, unhealthy house, but it can’t shelter such miracles. These phases are clearly manifestations of some abnormal criminality. I have to work on physical lines. The black figure proves that the woman is actually hidden here. The knife on Taylor’s bed means that the murderer was in the room this evening. McDonald’s gesture, instead of accusing, probably tried to tell me that; tried to warn me, perhaps, that the murderer would return again to the body. I didn’t tell Reed the truth. I am going to that room about which nearly everything centers. Before the night is over it may tell me what McDonald tried to say. There at any rate my mind should be more receptive to that flash of intuition I need to make some theory fit this mystery. Since the house is clearly dangerous, Nora, I want you to go home.”

Her laugh was uncomfortable, but Garth recognized its determined quality.

“I’ll see it through, thanks,” she said. “I want this sense of suffering destroyed. I want—you don’t know how anxious I am—to see the case put on a physical

basis. So I'll watch with you."

Since he failed to alter her determination. He sent her upstairs to make sure no one was spying, for he wanted their entrance of the room of death to remain a secret. She beckoned him from the head of the stairs, and he went up, and they entered the black room.

Garth closed the door and snapped his light on. Immediately strange reflections played again over the face of the dead man. Its sneering expression seemed to follow Garth as he moved about, searching in the closets and the bath room, looking behind each piece of furniture. Meantime Nora waited, for the moment stripped of her familiar confidence. She watched the dead man rather than Garth. The knife and the revolver, close to the cold and motionless hand, appeared to fascinate her.

"No one," Garth whispered. "No evidence, beyond the knife, that any one has been here unlawfully."

He removed the cushions from a lounge and arranged them in a window recess. He seated himself with Nora there. He drew the curtains so that they would be thoroughly concealed from any one entering the room. Then he snapped off the light.

The vigil, Garth realized nearly at once, would not be comfortable. Nora's obvious tenseness encouraged him to morbid fancies, to formidable premonitions. The heavy black silence of the decaying house became more oppressive. The near presence of the soulless thing on the bed, which had yielded to him the puzzling note, seemed through the night capable of a malicious and unique activity. Garth, in spite of himself, became expectant of some abnormal and impossible movement in the room. Nora, he knew, listened with him. Once she whispered:

"Haven't you a feeling there is some one here -who laughs at us?"

The old woman's atrocious mirth came back to him.

"Hush. It is better even not to whisper."

The minutes loitered. The silence grew thicker, the presence of Taylor's body more oppressive. Then suddenly through the night Garth became finally aware of

a movement in the room, and at first it seemed to be in keeping with the supernatural fears Nora had imposed on him.

He aroused himself. He commenced to reason. He had not heard the door open or close, but the intruder must have entered that way. Again his ears caught a sly scraping sound as of one walking stealthily, and the sound was nearer the bed—between the window recess and the bed. Garth thrust his revolver and his lamp through the narrow opening between the curtains and pressed the control. There was no more shuffling. Nora swayed closer. The light revealed all of Garth's doubts. He became efficient again. For, while there was a ghoul-like quality about the picture his lamp had suddenly illuminated, the figure bending over the body was sufficiently human. In this position, however, because of the dressing gown and the slippers, its sex remained undefined, but Garth, remembering his examination of the housekeeper's room, thought he knew. Yet he couldn't understand what the creature was doing. One hand had partly drawn from beneath the mattress what appeared to be a long and wide piece of jet black cloth.

"Game's up!" Garth said. "I've got you. Turn around and let me have a look at your pretty face."

The bent shoulders twitched.

"Come!" Garth said harshly. "You're no ghost. You can't evaporate before our eyes again."

Then with a gesture of repulsion the hand let the

>. piece of black cloth fall. It trailed across the floor, one end still caught beneath the mattress. Slowly the figure turned until a profile cut against the shaft of light Nora cried out her surprise. Garth sprang erect, covering with his revolver, not McDonald's daughter, but the friend of Taylor and his wife, the man Reed.

The shock of discovery stripped Reed of his control. He glanced once at the dead man, then sank in a chair by the bed.

"Don't send me to the death house," he groaned. "I couldn't stand that. I won't stand that."

“You killed Taylor so you might marry his wife?” Garth shot at him.

The head jerked back and forth.

“Fortunately you did a rotten job with McDonald,” Garth said. “Where’s his daughter? I don’t get that.”

Reed shrank farther into the chair.

“I won’t answer. You can’t make me say any more.”

Garth stooped, lifted the black cloth, and drew it clear of the bed beneath the mattress of which it had patently been hidden. As he held it up it fell in folds to the floor, and he saw it had sleeves and was a long garment without shape. But it recalled the black figure that had vanished from the attic. He ran his lamp over the gown. In spite of the coarse, tough material it was torn here and there, and on the right hand sleeve there were blood stains. That was why the gown had been hidden in the easiest place, the first place at hand. That undoubtedly explained Reed’s daring intention to get the gown and destroy it before the body should be moved and the evidence discovered. Garth glanced at the man, who still shook, a picture of broken nerves, at the side of the bed. And Garth’s hand, holding the tell-tale gown, commenced to tremble too, for it had offered him a solution of everything. He had no time for analysis. Already there were stirrings outside. Their voices and Nora’s cry had aroused the others in the house.

“Don’t you see it, Nora?” he cried, “and it wasn’t intuition. The truth has stared at us from the first, but we wouldn’t open our eyes.”

“I see nothing,” Nora said, “except that his motive was common enough, cheap enough.”

“You don’t understand,” Garth smiled.

He stepped to the hall where he met Mrs. Taylor coming from her room.

“What is it?” she asked.

Garth shrank from telling her the truth.

“I know who murdered your husband,” he answered gently.

◆ Who—”

But the opening of her mother’s door interrupted her. The old woman appeared, her eyes wild, her hands shaking.

“What’s the matter out here? Helen! What’s happened?”

“I want to examine your room a little closer,” he said. “I wondered at the start that there was so much furniture in it, and I’ll wager there are things hidden beneath the bed and back of that large screen. I know now, too, that it wasn’t you who washed your hands this afternoon. I know that you fooled me with a clean towel while the person who had tried to kill McDonald slipped through the communicating door from your bathroom—”

She screamed to stop him. She placed her slender body against the panels of the door. She stretched her arms to either side, forming a barrier he didn’t care to pass. She commenced to laugh again, but there were tears in her eyes, and he saw that all along her laughter had been grief. Still without time to analyze, he received from the old lady a perfect corroboration. He whispered to Nora, instructing her to bring the policeman from the front door.

“We may have difficult violence on our hands,” he warned her.

Without waiting to argue, Nora ran down the stairs. Mrs. Taylor came closer, asking the question her mother had interrupted.

“Who is it? Why do you speak to my mother like this? Not she—”

“He caught me, Helen,” Reed said with dry lips.

She flung up her hands.

“What do you mean? Oh, my God! What do you mean?”

The policeman came briskly up. Nora followed him, her eyes wide and uncertain.

“Everything is accounted for,” Garth said to the policeman. “Make your arrest.”

Reed stepped forward, offering himself.

“I admire you, Reed,” Garth said, “but your devotion can’t do any more for her. Mrs. Taylor! I don’t want you to get excited. This man must take you—just a form, you know—for the murder of your husband and for the attack on McDonald.”

The violent rage Garth had feared flamed in her eyes.

“I did kill him. He kept me locked up for more than two months, because I didn’t love him.”

She commenced to struggle in the grasp of the policeman. Abruptly she went limp and her efforts ceased. Garth nodded with satisfaction.

“That’s better. She’s fainted. Carry her to her room. We’ll have a doctor right away to go down town with her.”

Reed touched his arm timidly. His husky voice was scarcely audible.

“I understand now. Once or twice this afternoon I’ve wondered, but she told me that Taylor had lied, that she had never been to California, that he had kept her a prisoner here because in his sick, morbid way he was jealous of me. In any case I would have done anything to help her over the next day or two, for you must understand I’ve loved her very deeply and for a long time—”

Garth turned away, because he didn’t care to see the man’s tears.

Later the humility of Nora’s interest amused Garth. He told her frankly how the pivotal pieces of the puzzle had been within reach long before Reed had tried in Mrs. Taylor’s service to recover X and destroy the tell-tale black gown.

“Those sedatives in Taylor’s bathroom,” he said. “The man’s perpetual questioning of his doctor about the symptoms and the treatment of insanity, the moans which frightened the other servants without affecting McDonald or his daughter, the old lady’s exaggeration of her eccentricities to draw my attention from Mrs. Taylor—any of these clues ought to have reminded us, Nora, of the hundreds of similar cases in New York of fond relatives who, through a mistaken pride, hide and treat in their own homes such cases of mental disorder.”

He scarcely needed to outline for her the picture, filled in by the old lady, of that black hour last night in the melancholy house, when Mrs. Taylor had tricked

McDonald's daughter—a competent trained nurse—had escaped from the attic sickroom, and had got the revolver. Garth saw that Nora, too, could fancy Taylor's panic and self-reproach as he lay sick and helpless in bed, knowing >; his wife was free, foreseeing inevitably much the sort of thing that had happened, trying when it was too late to confess his mistake, to warn the authorities that his wife was at large and, possibly, dangerous.

“But she didn't give him time to write enough,” nilufrj

Garth said. “She followed too quickly her impulse to punish the man she blamed for her tragice situation. Moreover, the realization of what she\ [ had done, as is common in such cases, returned her to approximate sanity, suggested, even without hei mother's prompting, Taylor's California blind as a road from her dreadful dilemma. And McDonald's daughter, through her fright and a promise of money, could be persuaded to avoid arousing her father or Clara, to throw on one of Mrs. Taylor's dresses, to hurry with her to Albany. Evidently the girl lost her nerve, for she was to have come back as if nothing had happened. She was to have taken care of Mrs. Taylor. Eventually she was to have placed her in a sanitarium, explaining her breakdown, as well as any present peculiarities, naturally enough through the shock of her husband's, suicide. It was McDonald's demands to know what had happened to his daughter that made Mrs. Taylor turn on him finally. If he had been able to speak then I think he would have broken faith with his dead master and told us the truth about her condition.”

“Is there any hope for her?” Nora asked.

“I've asked the doctor,” Garth answered. “He says that the studied manner in which she threw us off the track when we caught her crying over McDonald, and her failure to lose complete control of herself when she was arrested indicate that her trouble is curable. It seems to have been brought on by her intolerable life in this gloomy house withan invalid whom she didn't love, while her affection for Reed increased hopelessly. Her illness was broken by such periods of apparent sanity as she had last night and to-day. I rather think Reed and she may be happy yet.”

Nora smiled wistfully.

“Then,” she said slowly, “I almost wish we had kept Taylor's secret better than he did him' self.”

## Chapter XIX

### PAYMENT IS DEMANDED FOR THE GRAY MASK

THE approach of the moment when she must testify against Slim and George; must tell in public the details of that tragedy which had played such havoc with her, drove Nora into a morbid humor which neither Garth nor the inspector could alter. She followed Garth on the stand. She was dressed in black. The appeal of her personality was irresistible. It was clear that if the two criminals had ever had a chance Nora would destroy it.

Slim and George sat by their counsel. George could not quite hide the animal character of his face, but he had managed to soften it somewhat. Evidently he endeavoured to impress the jurors with the idea that he was a good-natured fellow who had been involved in the case through some curious mischance. At Nora's appearance, Garth noticed, there came into his eyes a survival of the passion he had so recklessly declared in the steel-lined room.

Slim, on the other hand, let slip nothing of the criminal. His quiet clothing gave him an air almost clerical. His sharp features expressed a polite interest. He could not, a casual spectator would have said, be capable of the evil with which he was charged.

Garth watched the men perpetually. He saw the hatred slip through while he quietly told the story that would condemn them to death. During Nora's recital, too, both men exposed something of their powerful desire for revenge against these two who quietly droned away their lives.

Garth took Nora from the courtroom well aware that, given the opportunity, Slim and George would not let them move a foot without exacting full payment.

Garth respected Nora's mood. He put her in a cab and sent her home, then wandered restlessly about the down town streets.

Perhaps Nora's attitude was partly responsible for his feeling of oppression, of imminence. Nothing could happen, he told himself again. Slim and George would start for the death house tomorrow. They would have no chance. If they delegated such work to their subordinates still at large, Garth fancied that he

could take care of himself and Nora, too. It was the exceptional cunning of Slim and George that he shrank from, had feared ever since the night Nora and he had trapped them.

Angry with himself he went to headquarters. The inspector admitted that he, too, would breathe easier when the two were in the chair.

The next day Garth managed to dismiss his premonition. He chatted with two or three detectives in the outside office. The inspector sent for him

The moment he answered the summons he knew something disastrous had occurred. He felt that the exceptional, almost with the effect of a physical violence, had entered the room ahead of him.

The inspector held the telephone. The receiver was at his ear. His huge figure projected to Garth an uncontrolled fear. His voice, customarily rumbling and authoritative, was no more than a groping whisper.

“Why the devil doesn’t Nora answer? Do you know, Garth, that Slim and George are loose on the town?”

Garth started back. He would have responded just so to a blow in the face.

“They are on their way to the death house,” he countered.

“You mean they were,” the inspector said, “condemned by your testimony and Nora’s.”

His voice rose and thickened.

“I’ve just got the word. An explosion was planted in front of their van on the way to the Grand Central. There was a crowd of rats from the slums. Those birds were torn from the sheriff’s men, and their bracelets knocked off. They were spirited away. But don’t you suppose Slim and George would gamble I’ll never let them out of this town? Every exit’s barred now. They know their liberty’s only good to pay old debts. What’ll they do at the start?”

Garth braced himself against the desk.

“They’ll go for Nora first. Then they’ll get me. I’ve been afraid of it all along.”

“I’m trying to warn her,” the inspector raged. “She doesn’t answer.”

He shouted into the transmitter:

“Are you all dead out there? Get me that number, or by heaven—”

While the inspector stormed to be put in communication with his daughter Garth tried to plan. Could he devise any useful defence against Slim’s imagination, abnormally clever and inscrutable; or against such naked brutality as, George’s? And the malevolence of these two would be all the more certain in its action since no fear of punishment would restrain it. The murder, or worse, of Garth and Nora, which undoubtedly they intended, could earn for them only the death penalty to which they were already condemned.

“You’ve got to get Nora,” Garth urged the inspector. “The servant at least should be there.”

“Her afternoon out, and Nora said she would be home.”

“Then,” Garth cried, “they made for her like a shot.”

He turned and strode to the door.

“Where are you going, Jim?”

“Keep after that number,” Garth called back. “If you get Nora tell her I’m on the way, and to sit tight.”

The inspector tried to stop him.

“You’re out of your head. Your only chance is to keep under cover. They’ll give you a bullet in the back.”

“Somebody’s got to look after Nora,” Garth called, and caught up his coat and hat, and ran from the building.

He threaded a course through the homeward bound crowds, experiencing the sensations of a truant from an impending and destructive retribution, his eyes alert for a sudden movement, his ears constantly prepared for the sharp crack of a revolver.

As he ran he recalled that evening last summer when he had sidetracked Simmons and had taken his place behind a replica of the gray mask. He could see Nora in her cheap finery, and George, he remembered with a sense of sheer terror, had loved Nora in his way; had, in fact, through his brutal and amorous eagerness, delivered himself into her hands. He threw aside all caution. He ran faster. Somehow, no matter what the cost, he had to keep Nora out of the grasp of those men.

He reached the flat, breathless and wondering that he had not been disturbed. No one answered his ring. He questioned the hall-boy. The inspector's daughter had left fifteen minutes ago. She had said headquarters had telephoned her to go to her father without delay. The situation was clear. Garth grasped the hall-boy's arm.

“Didn't you follow her to the door? Didn't you see where she went?”

The boy shook his head, clearly alarmed before such vehemence.

“Then you must have heard. Did you hear anything?”

The boy tried to free his arm. He whimpered.

“No. Unless—maybe somebody screamed, but there are so many children in the street, playin' and hollerin'—”

Garth let him go and ran to the sidewalk. A man stood there. In spite of the sharp cold he wore no coat. Garth recognized him for a tailor who worked in a nearby shop. The tailor's excitement made him nearly incoherent, but Garth drew from him a description of Slim and George. As the inspector's daughter had stepped to the sidewalk, he said, the men had sprung upon her, stifled her one scream, and driven her off in an automobile.

“I saw it from my shop,” he spluttered. “I've been telephoning the inspector. I just got him, because his wire was busy.”

“Which direction did they take?”

The tailor pointed south. Garth hurried to the curb, stooped, and found fresh tire marks. He was aware of his helplessness unless Nora's ingenuity had hit upon some trick for his guidance. He searched with a greedy hope. While his eyes

roved about the frozen dust of the gutter he acknowledged that the inspector had appraised his men justly. Slim and George wouldn't even try to leave the city until the hue and cry had somewhat abated. Into the windings of the underworld they had carried Nora, and Garth knew how devious those windings were—what silent and invisible machinery would nourish and secrete and protect.

He lifted a tiny tuft of fur which had nestled, almost hidden, in the dust of the gutter. He examined it closely. Its colour and texture were reminiscent of the muff he had frequently seen Nora carry. It might be a souvenir of her struggle, or else -

He arose and walked down the street, searching every inch of the pavement. At the corner his breath quickened, for he knew the piece of fur had not rested in the gutter by accident. Two others were there, trampled, but suggestive of the direction taken by the automobile. He could picture Nora surreptitiously tearing the bits from her muff and dropping them from the window of the car.

He hastened on. As soon as he was confident the pieces constituted an intelligible trail he conquered his impatience long enough to enter a drug store and telephone his discovery to the inspector.

“I'm going on,” he explained. “The Lord knows what I'll find, so get after me right away.”

The voice that reached him could not conceal its suspense.

“Go fast, Garth, and I'll follow with every man I can raise. Pull Nora out of this and ask me for my badge.”

Garth went on, following the trail into the dark and intricate thoroughfares of the lower east side, knowing that each moment his pursuit might be abruptly and fatally ended by a flash of light from the obscurity ahead.

He emerged into a waterfront street which was nearly deserted at this hour. One or two street lamps of an antiquated pattern flickered ineffectually. The only sign of habitation was a glow, wan and unhealthy, which escaped from the broad windows of a saloon on the corner.

Garth knew the reputation of that dive, and its long resistance to a final closing of its shutters. More than once the yellow sawdust of its floor had reddened, while

men had fought towards its doors through a whirling, pungent fog of powder smoke. He remembered, too, that it was suspected of harboring the explanation of stealthier and more revolting crimes, the responsibility for which, however, had never been legally determined. He was glad when the automobile tracks swung beyond it, but they turned in at the next building, a warehouse with a crumbling, picturesque facade. He saw beneath the edge of a double cellar door a larger piece of fur, mute testimony that the place had recently been opened, that the condemned men had carried Nora to its abandoned vaults; but if Slim and George had trusted themselves there, the cellar obviously furnished other exits, perhaps underground to the river, almost certainly through the evil saloon next door. That, indeed, might offer him the chance he must have to come upon his men unexpectedly, from the rear.

He glanced around. There was no policeman in sight. He saw only half a dozen pedestrians—shambling creatures who appeared to seek the plentiful darkness. The neighboring warehouses, the pier opposite, frowned back at him. The lapping of the water was expectant. Yet high in the air two brilliant arches were suspended across a slight mist. They were restless with blurred movement. Constantly they lowered into this somber pit an incessant murmuring, like an echo, heard at a distance, from some complicated and turbulent industry.

These crowded bridges, his desolate surroundings, assumed a phantasmal quality for Garth. The only real world lay beyond those sloping, silent doors which had been swung back to admit Nora.

While he looked a figure detached itself from the shadows at the corner of the warehouse. It moved, lurching, in his direction. He could only see that the newcomer was in rags with unkempt hair, and features, sunken and haggard. He grasped his revolver, suspecting that this vagabond exterior disguised a member of the gang—an outpost. Yet there was a chance that the man was one of the neighborhood's multitude of derelicts—a purveyor, possibly, of valuable information.

“Come here, my friend,” he called. “How long have you been loafing in that corner?”

The other hesitated. When he answered his voice was without resonance—scarcely more than an exaggerated whisper.

“Who the devil are you?”

Garth held out some money. The claw-like hand extended itself, closing over the coins. In quick succession the man rang three of the pieces on the pavement. Garth’s watchfulness increased. Such routine suggested a signal, but the fellow picked up his money, grinning.

“Seems good,” he said in his difficult voice. “If you want to know that bad, maybe an hour; maybe more. Napping. Nothing better to do, but I’m honest, and I’d work if I got the chance.”

“An automobile drove up here,” Garth said rapidly.

“Why so it did. I seen it with these very peepers—not a quarter of an hour back.”

“How many got out of it? What did they do?”

“I seen two men and a woman,” the other answered. “They lifted that cellar door and went down. Now I wondered why they did that.”

“Did the woman make a fight?”

The other shook his head.

“Went like it was a candy store.”

Cutting across his throaty accents, a feminine cry shrilled. The heavy doors could not muffle its terror. It seemed like a response to the ringing of the coins. Suddenly it was hushed. Garth shoved the man to one side, urged by a temper that no longer permitted calculation. At any risk he must get to Nora and to those who were responsible for that unrestrained appeal. %

Beyond the doors of the saloon he faced the proprietor across unoccupied tables. He remembered the round, livid face beneath its crown of reddish hair. He had seen it more than once, sullen and unashamed, behind the bars at headquarters. He had often watched its wrinkles smooth into a bland hypocrisy before the frown of a magistrate. The man’s past history made a connection between him and Slim’s party nearly inevitable. But Garth had no choice. The proprietor, at his entrance, had braced his elbows against the bar.

“I ain’t done a thing, Mr. Garth. I call God to witness there ain’t anything to bring a bull here except near beer and tobaccy.”

“We’ll see, Papa Marlowe,” Garth said evenly. “I’m going into the cellar of the warehouse next door. Dollars to dimes there’s a way through your place. Will you give up the combination quietly?”

Marlowe’s misgivings resolved into a smile. Instead of protestations he offered only an oily surprise.

“Now who told you there was a door through my cellar?”

“Never mind,” Garth snapped. “I’ll take all the chances and use it, but at a sound from you—You understand? Come ahead then.”

Marlowe slouched down the stairs, muttering apologetically:

“Blest if I know what you want there. Old hole’s been closed six years. That was a growler door for the warehousemen. Hold up, Mr. Garth, and I’ll strike a match.”

Garth ordered him ahead while he pressed the control of his pocket lamp. They continued between grim walls, splashed with mold, beaded with moisture, offering the appearance and the odor of a neglected tomb. They paused before an oak door.

“Don’t open,” Garth whispered. “Let me get my fingers on the latch.”

“Maybe it’s locked on the other side,” Marlowe whispered back.

But when Garth tried the latch noiselessly he found that the door would open.

“I don’t trust you, Papa,” he said, “but if you want to make yourself solid at headquarters find a policeman and tell him what I’m up against.”

The round, white face leered.

“The cops and I seem hand and glove these days. What *are* you up against, Mr. Garth? What you want in that empty cellar?”

Garth waved him away; watched him retreat towards the stairs, squinting his beady eyes, mouthing unintelligibly.

The detective snapped off his light, aware that he faced the critical moment. He opened the door and stepped into the black pall of the warehouse cellar. His memory reinforced him. Other members of the bureau had taken equal risks, had followed into such places criminals as desperate as the ones who held Nora. Moreover, they had lacked the impulse of a vigorous personal motive. They had answered only to the stimulation of duty. Not frequently they had emerged successful, unharmed.

He held his revolver ready. He moved to one side and paused. For some moments the silence was broken only by the drumming of his pulse in his ears. He realized it was not unlikely that the cellar was empty save for himself. The men might have led Nora into it as a trick to confuse the police. Nora's cry might have marked their departure by some ingeniously contrived exit. As his own immediate danger appeared to diminish his disappointment and anxiety increased. He had been prepared to risk everything for Nora. As if it had actually been prolonged to this moment, her cry still vibrated in his brain. Inaction was no longer bearable. He must assure himself that the cellar was, indeed, empty. He must find that exit and continue his pursuit. He stepped forward.

Light flashed, and from the sudden, sparkling confusion a remembered laugh jeered at him.

## Chapter XX

### THE BLACK CAP

THE shadowy figures stood in front of him, holding flashlights. Behind the blinding barrier he could make out Nora, crouched against a stained and rugged wall. And the brute,

George, was at her side, his muscular hands on her arm. Slim stepped out of the obscurity, moving for Garth with a stealth and an evenness nearly cat-like.

Garth raised his revolver, strengthened by the knowledge that the inspector with many men would soon be tearing through the cellar doors. If only he could postpone the issue for himself—fight for time until that saving moment! There lay Nora's best chance, but her ignorance of such a possibility couldn't account for the horror in her customarily expressionless face.

"It's no use," she screamed. "Get back, Jim! Quick! Through the door!"

Slim was so close that Garth could see the automatic held at his hip.

"You'll stick here, Garth," came the smooth tones. "And you might's well drop your gun."

Garth saw George's hands tighten on Nora's arm. He understood then the real threat by which they would control him.

"Hands off the girl!" he said.

But George smiled, and pressed tighter until Nora cried out involuntarily.

"That means, drop your gun. For any little damage you do here Nora'll foot the bill."

She shook her head, but her face recorded an insufferable pain. Garth knew that the one shot for which he would have time would spare her nothing.

"I never expected to see the pride of your gang slinking behind a woman's

skirts,” he sneered. “I suppose those are four of the rats who helped put your breakaway over. Six against one, and a woman for a shield!”

It chilled him that the four strangers exposed their faces to his glance with a contemptuous indifference. He laughed, however, as Slim took his revolver.

“You giants must know that you haven’t the chance of a pretzel at a Dutch wedding.”

Slim affected not to have heard, but his gestures lacked smoothness.

“Let’s see how you enjoy your own jewelry, Garth.”

And he reached in Garth’s pocket and drew out the pair of handcuffs he had been certain to find there. He snapped them on the detective’s wrists. The four confederates lounged forward, produced stout cords, and bound them about Garth’s ankles. His momentary resistance was smothered by Nora’s sharp cry:

“Don’t fight, Jim!”

His sense of utter helplessness increased, while the men, in obedience to Slim’s gestures, stretched him on the floor. The surface was wet, as if the ooze of the river had penetrated this far. Slim stooped and glared at him, his eyes exposing a measureless resentment.

“Thanks for walking into our parlor, you fly cop. We heard how you and the skirt had fallen for each other. We guessed if we gave you a lead with some of her trinkets, you’d play the busy sleuth hound.”

Nora’s voice held the quality of a sob.

“Jim! Why did you come?”

He shrugged his shoulders. He forced on himself a semblance of confidence.

“Planted or not, the trail was my best chance.”

Slim beckoned to George.

“Straight you’ve come to the place where I’ve dreamed for months of getting

you.”

Garth managed a grin.

“Cut out the bum acting, Slim. Let’s hear what you’ve got on your mind.”

He shrank from a reply. More and more he was impressed by the indifference with which these confederates constantly revealed their faces. He knew, if the inspector did not arrive quickly, he must suffer an eccentric and barbarous punishment. He tried to forecast the penalty, but his imagination was insufficient and his appraisal of Slim’s cruelty too conservative. It wasn’t until George stepped forward and Nora screamed that he guessed why the others were unafraid of his identification, that he understood how his situation might involve more than life and death. And, perhaps, the shambling creature outside had put the inspector’s party on the wrong track.

George placed a pint bottle in Slim’s hand. A smoky liquid did not quite fill it. Slim turned to the others, assuming an attitude of mockery.

“This is the brave guy that sidetracked Simmons last summer and wore the gray mask just as if he had something, too, that would frighten women and children. He’s the bull that steered us against the black cap yesterday. Let’s see how he likes hearing the sentence read himself. Only he isn’t going to get anything as comfortable as the electric chair.”

A laugh sneered through the cellar.

“Better speed it up, Slim,” George advised.

Slim drew the cork from the bottle while his thin lips ceased to smile.

“Since you found a gray mask so becoming, Garth,” he snarled, “it’s only fair to give you honest cause to wear one. But you’ll go poor Simmons one better. *Your* mask won’t need any eye holes.”

Nora cried out again.

“You couldn’t do it,” Garth muttered.

Beneath his rage lurked a fear of which he had never dreamed himself capable.

To face death would have been so much simpler.

“What’s in that bottle, Slim?”

“A black cap for you, damn you! Pure vitriol!”

He bent closer.

“Squirm! Those ropes and your own handcuffs will hold you. You’ll beg me for a bullet before I’m through.”

George twisted the girl so she had to watch.

“Pipe your handsome beau, Nora! You’ll think I’m more your style in about ten seconds.”

She shuddered.

“You’re not bad enough to do that, Slim!”

“Watch me,” he answered.

A complete satisfaction blotted from his eyes the fear he had hitherto never quite concealed—the quiet fear of a strong man who acknowledges his own inevitable destiny. Garth reminded him of that. It was his last weapon.

“They’ll get you, Slim. They’re keeping the chair warm for you. Will this help then?”

Slim laughed.

“Will it hurt? I’ve waited for this moment ever since you and she sent me to rot in the Tombs. I’ll pay old scores while I can.”

With an extreme deliberation he commenced to tip the bottle. The fluid, almost imperceptibly approaching the mouth, exercised for Garth a dreadful fascination. It was easy to estimate its progress. George had been right. In about ten seconds! And he couldn’t get his chained hands to his eyes. He tried to tell himself it was impossible that that innocent-appearing fluid in the control of this criminal could condemn him to an unrelieved blackness through which, hideously scarred, he

must grope henceforth, a thing repellent and past use.

The lights were centred upon his face. It struck him as ironic that their glare should hurt his eyes.

Suddenly Nora sprang forward. She stretched her hand towards Slim, but she didn't touch the bottle or his wrist, for the fluid filled the neck; was so close to the edge that a quick contact might have spilled it. George looked on, his hands in his pockets, his attitude expressing satisfaction at a just and long-deferred punishment.

Slim smiled at Nora. He moved the bottle a little. A drop fell. Something tortured the skin of Garth's cheek. It was as if an iron at white heat had been applied against his flesh with a strong pressure. The stuff was real enough.

Again Slim moved the bottle sluggishly, so that the liquid, ready to trickle out, was directly above Garth's eyes. Nora reached and closed her hands about the mouth.

"Look out!" George warned. "You'll get burnt."

"You see, George won't stand for that," Slim said slyly.

"No, no, Slim!" Nora whispered. "I'll bargain."

"You're in a swell position to bargain," George scoffed.

The handcuffs cut into Garth's wrists.

"You don't think," he muttered, "that I was fool enough to follow that trail without covering myself?"

"That doesn't affect me," Slim grinned. "There's a getaway from this place no cop will ever find. Now, Nora! Hands off!"

But she resisted him.

"Slim," she said breathlessly. "You're not a fool. You must know that I can bargain. Suppose you got clear—across the border—into Canada? Couldn't you keep out of trouble once you were there?"

Slim ceased pulling at her hands. He stared at her, amazed, casting aside his last pretence.

“What you talking about, Nora? I know you’re clever, but there aren’t any more miracles. There’s no way out of this town for us.”

Her voice was barely audible.

“Unless my father unlocked the gates.”

Slim started. Garth, too, answered to a desire almost violent. Surely Slim would realize the hopelessness of securing the inspector’s complicity, or, failing that, would seek, as Garth did, for the stratagem behind her plan. Slim, nevertheless, continued to study her, and the narrow face no longer hid his greed for life.

“There’s no way under heaven to get the old man to stand for that.”

She took her hands from the bottle. Her eyes did not waver.

“No one else could do it, but you know how he loves me. I could make him do it as the price for myself and Jim.”

Slim laughed shortly.

“One thing’s certain,” he mused. “If you did get away with it, I could keep you and the inspector straight. I’d take Garth, bound tight, some guns, and the acid along as gilt-edge securities. Hadn’t thought of that, eh? Expected to trip me, didn’t you? Well, Nora, you have let yourself in for a dicker, and, by gad I’m inclined to think it over, because I’ve got you this far: the minute you played queer Garth would go blind and burnt.”

Nora conquered her disappointment.

“You’d swear to let Jim go at the border?”

“On my oath I’d let him go clean.”

“Not for a million,” George broke in angrily. “She gets herself away, then she throws Garth down to see us roast in the chair. You ought to know the skirt. She’d double cross the devil himself.”

Garth waited for Slim's answer, his gaze controlled again by the acid.

"George," Slim said slowly, "any chance is worth playing now, for we're as good as in the chair already. And I don't believe she'd throw Garth down. You know what she went through with for the sake of a dead lover."

"You've got to show me," George sneered, "that she's forgotten the dead one to take on Garth."

"We heard in the Tombs," Slim said drily, "that these pigeons wanted to roost on the same stool."

With a growing wonder Garth watched Nora fling aside her reserve. She turned on George, raising her hands in an attitude of fury, as if inspired by a passion beyond her control.

"And that's true. If you think I'd let him take that acid give the bottle to me, and I'll use it on myself instead."

She knelt at Garth's side, and for a moment the light in her eyes, her unrestraint, more than the result of her appeal, held him tense.

"Tell them, Jim," she cried. "If they made you that way I swear I'd kill myself."

She glanced up, tears in her eyes.

"I love him so much, Slim, that to save him I'd see my father dead."

A subdued murmur of voices sifted through from the street. They could hear the stealthy straining of hands at the cellar doors. Nora arose, and, hiding her face, stood trembling.

"The bulls!" George whispered. "Throw the stuff and let's make our getaway."

Slim shook his head.

"I tell you it's a chance. All of you vamoose except Geerge. We'll wait and see, and maybe we won't need you after this. Remember, Nora, there'll always be time for us to wash Garth's face and show our heels."

“Oh, I know it,” she breathed. “I know it.”

The lights snapped out. Garth was aware of clandestine stirrings. Then the silence of the cellar was broken only by the fumbling at the door.

“I’ll let you go, Nora,” Slim whispered. “Send the other cops back. If they try to rush us, by God we’ll do the trick on Garth and kill who we can besides, the inspector first of all. So play straight.”

Garth heard her retreating footsteps. After all he had accomplished his chief purpose. Through him Nora had found escape.

He heard a sharp splintering of wood, and a wan light, not much stronger than the glow of the city through the mist, diffused itself in the cellar. The inspector’s breathless voice reached them.

“Nora! Garth!”

Garth saw Nora’s shadowy figure advance into the well of the door. He heard her stifle her father’s relief and tell him to order his men beyond ear-shot. Her voice murmured. Garth guessed that it recited his abhorrent danger and the terms on which she had agreed to buy his release.

He strained his ears, understanding fully what depended on the answer, yet convinced that reasonably it could only be a refusal. In a way Nora had placed the responsibility for whatever might happen to him on the inspector’s shoulders, but the alternative was too distinct. As the price for his connivance the inspector must throw his position and his reputation to the winds, perhaps, face a trial, more than likely to jail sentence. It was conceivable that his love for Nora would dictate even that sacrifice, but she would have to force on him an illusion of a passion as unaccounting as that which had convinced Slim. Could she act to that extent with her father? In spite of his logical interpretation of it, t

Garth responded to the memory of her agitation. Had she, in fact, been acting in the cellar? Had his peril finally shown her heart the truth? The two most compelling issues of his own life, as well as the inspector’s career, depended on the reply, and he could hear nothing. Nora and her father must have moved to one side, for their voices entered the cellar in barely audible murmurs. Slim had handed the bottle to George, and he moved now into the door well where he could listen.

Garth's nerves tightened. Always George held the acid close to the detective's bound and helpless body. Of course the inspector couldn't do it.

Slim came slinking back. His whisper warmed the cold, damp air.

"I couldn't catch it all, but she's getting away with something."

The murmuring ceased, and through the wan light Nora glided, wraith-like, into the doorway, and called to them softly across the cellar:

"Slim! He hates me for making him, but he'll do what he can. He'll tell the Harlem police and the towns along the Hudson that he's got you. He'll try to cover himself with a planted getaway. You have an automobile. Take it and leave by the Broadway bridge. You'll catch the Montreal express at Tarrytown. You've plenty of time, and everything will be arranged; but he can't keep the wool over the district attorney's eyes forever. If you're not over the border tomorrow morning it's no good. So catch that train."

"Come here, Nora," Slim sighed, "and let me thank you properly."

Her laugh was hard, more suggestive of forbidden tears than mirth.

"One hostage is enough. And, Jim, there's a condition for you. Father won't budge unless you give him your word to go quietly. You have to promise on your sacred oath not to make any effort to escape or to throw Slim down."

"What's that for?" George asked suspiciously.

Her tone was contemptuous.

"Use your head, George. It would do father a lot of good to risk so much for Jim if he took matters into his own hands and got the acid just the same."

"Right!" Slim agreed. "You've plenty of common-sense, Nora, and it's going to give us a chance."

"You promise, Jim?"

He fancied an element of command in her voice.

“I’ll do what you wish, Nora,” he answered. “I promise.”

“Then good-by,” she called, and her voice no longer held any command, nor was it steady. “Good-by. If I only dared come over to you! God bring you back safe to me.”

Garth tried to fight back the response of his heart. He told himself that honorably he must accept all she had said that night as mimicry whose only intention was to save his life. She would expect him to take it at its real value, but he could not shake off the recollection of her emotion. With a great longing he watched her move into the shadows beyond the door.

## Chapter XXI

### THE ANTICS OF A TRAIN

AT a gesture from Slim, George cut the cords that bound Garth's ankles. The detective rose. With a nod Slim motioned George towards the oak door which opened on Marlowe's cellar.

"Get to the 'phone," he whispered. "Pass the fair word, and bring the wheels here on the minute."

He swung on the detective.

"If you see anybody upstairs, just keep your back turned so they won't notice your pretty bracelets."

Garth shivered, aware that a new and disquieting element had entered the situation.

Slim indicated the revolver, held ready in his coat pocket.

"After George, and in front of me. Always like that from now on."

He touched the bottle of acid which he had taken from George.

"Remember this will be behind you like my gun, but I don't want to shoot to kill with either. Just a little in the face is better if you try to cut up."

"You heard my promise," Garth said.

He followed George through the doorway, resisting continually the impulse to turn around, to assure himself of what he already knew, that Slim was actually alert each moment to discipline his slightest effort at escape.

They crossed the damp spaces of the cellar and climbed the stairs, pausing at the head until they could be certain Marlowe's evil figure still faced a bar-room, significantly empty.

George hurried to the telephone booth, fastening the door behind him so that

Garth could hear nothing. Marlowe wiped his hands on his apron. A sly smile twitched at the corners of his colorless lips.

“Well! Well! Who’s rented the warehouse? Who are your pals, Mr. Garth?”

Garth kept his back turned. The glasses tinkled musically under Marlowe’s nervous fingers.

“Maybe you’ll name your pleasure, gentlemen.”

“Nothing but a little quiet,” Slim grunted.

Marlowe flung up his hands, indicating a profound disapproval.

“Then what you mean coming through my cellar? That might get me in bad with the cops. Or maybe you’re detectives like Mr. Garth?”

Slim responded to the strain of this waiting. He turned angrily on the man.

“How often have I told you, Papa Marlowe, to keep your fat mouth shut?”

For Garth that outburst pitilessly defined the new element. Slim’s anger had let slip real evidence of the proprietor’s lawless connection with the gang; and Slim, Garth knew, was unlikely to make blunders he couldn’t retrieve. This one dovetailed into the fact that the detective could still identify the four confederates he had seen down stairs—that is, if he kept his eyes. Slim, then, had no intention of holding to his bargain with Nora. He would use Garth as far as the border, then he would protect his own through the unspeakable punishment his twisted soul craved. Nor could Garth see any way to save himself. Moreover, he knew Nora too well to cast lightly aside the promise she had drawn from him on a note of command.

George emerged from the booth. The four men stared at each other without words. Once or twice Marlowe started to speak, but at a frown from Slim he smothered the impulse in a busy attention to his bar cloth.

Faintly the whirring of a motor reached them. George sprang for the door. Slim motioned Garth ahead and followed him to the sidewalk where an automobile had drawn up. It exposed, in the vague light, an air of smug respectability in itself protective.

The driver wore a fur coat with a voluminous cape, of a common chauffeur pattern. Its collar was turned up so that it completely hid the lower part of the wearer's face. Garth didn't understand at first when Slim took a smaller coat from the car, stooped, and whispered in the driver's ear. The other stepped obediently to the sidewalk, removed his great coat, handed it to Slim, and slipped on the smaller one. Slim motioned George and Garth into the car, followed them, and, while he jerked out his instructions, drew down the side curtains. Garth was to sit on the back seat with George, who would keep one hand conveniently on his automatic. Slim would be opposite, his gun handy, and the bottle of acid ready at his side.

"And that isn't all," he leered. "You're too precious to take chances with. Here! Lean forward."

He flung the chauffeur's great coat across Garth's shoulders, and, over his chained wrists, buttoned it tight about him. He chuckled as the car started.

"The cape, George, makes it look as if our friend kept his hands out of sight for warmth. Let's hope the train'll be a little chilly, too. Your arms are going to sleep and get a nice rest, Garth."

He chuckled again. He took his own handkerchief and borrowed George's. With the two he improvised a gag which he fastened skillfully in the prisoner's mouth. Then he turned the great collar up so that the gag was hidden.

"You've a swell chance to make trouble now, Garth. That's how I check up on a bull's promises. If anybody tries to stop us or to snitch you free you'll get the acid in those shining peepers without being able to move. You'd better pray everybody keeps straight."

Enough light entered from the front to draw an ashen glow from the acid which he held at his side perpetually ready.

Beyond the driver's back Garth could follow their route among tortuous downtown thoroughfares into lower Broadway. They went then at a discreet pace straight through the heart of the city. He watched the lights flash by, the impatient traffic, the crowds, hurrying and voluble. Such things, taken with the grim man opposite and his unique threat, became like one of those dreams which project against a familiar background incredible and grotesque details.

The car at last drew a hollow response from the pavement of the Broadway bridge. Slim moved restlessly.

“The first toll-gate, Garth! Who pays the bill?”

And Garth struggled, and could not move his hands, for George cried out, and Slim started to raise the bottle as the horse of a mounted policeman halted across their path. The car stopped.

Swiftly the policeman bent down, shaking his fist at the driver.

“If you want to run me down,” he shouted, “why not give me a chance to make my will? You might be a good chauffeur for a baby carriage. Go ahead now, and keep to the right. I ought to run you in.”

Slim grinned and lowered the bottle. George sank back. The dryness of Garth’s gagged mouth choked him. How could he continue to face such moments?

During the remainder of that swift ride he sat voiceless and helplessly trussed. He smiled grimly, recalling the promise Nora had drawn from him not to resist. He was as little able to resist as he had been when bound on the floor of the warehouse cellar. Nora, he tried to tell himself, would not condemn him to the torture of that bottle opposite; nor would she, he was willing to swear, throw her father’s career and reputation to the winds. She would try some trick, not realizing how many precautions Slim had taken.

He struggled again futilely to free his hands, to loosen a little the coat, buttoned tight about his own overcoat, across his body and his legs. Nora, his logic told him, could have hit upon no plan dexterous enough to control these men before they could carry out their monstrous threat. Yet what difference did it make? If she didn’t intervene, Slim would let him have it at the border anyway.

The night was disturbed only by the sound of their passing, nor at the station was there any indication that an effort would be made to halt them. So tightly was Garth bound Slim had to help him from the automobile. He stood beside him while they watched through the station window George as he purchased three tickets from a sleepy-eyed agent. The gag was as tight as at first. Even if it had not been for the acid Garth was helpless.

A dull rumbling made itself audible far to the south, and increased until the rails

commenced to hum. The headlight gleamed—hastened closer. The locomotive grumbled by, drawing an interminable string of mail and express cars and Pullmans, shrouded for the night.

At the very end, far from the station lamps, were two lighted day coaches. Slim and George led Garth there, and helped him to the platform between. The rear car was a smoker, comfortably filled with sleepy men. Slim turned his back on it, urging Garth into the car ahead which housed scarcely more than a dozen passengers—men and women in various attitudes of somnolence. He nodded his satisfaction. It became clear that for him the gravest strain was at an end. And the car was chilly. The dozing passengers wore wraps and hats. The fact that Garth retained his great coat would pass unnoticed.

When they were settled as before with Slim opposite Garth and George, and the acid held ready in the corner of the seat, the detective ventured with one last hope to appraise his neighbors. A man opposite lounged on his cushion, his paper fallen to the floor, his eyes closed, his head swaying drunkenly in unison with the motion of the train. Farther back two women in deep mourning wept quietly from time to time, and a man and a woman across the aisle stared restlessly at them, speaking in low tones whose accents of pity alone reached Garth. The rest slept. The face of none was recognizable, nor did any suggest the slightest interest in the new arrivals. Garth resented their innocuous companionship. It was not to be believed that their ignorance should permit this flight, which, at its termination, threatened him with an unbearable punishment.

The drowsiness of the car increased. Only his captors and himself seemed immune to the contagion of sleep. The muttering of the pair behind had ceased. The women in mourning had controlled their grief. One of them had left her seat, and, carrying a tin cup, moved along the aisle towards the water tank. Garth saw Slim glance at his watch. He took in George's contented smile, evidently appreciative of the smoothness of their escape.

Without warning a dark and chaotic confusion descended upon and destroyed the smooth orderliness of their journey. With a sudden jar the brakes locked. The jolting of the wheels, as if they had left the rails, flung the passengers from their sluggish indifference. The lights expired, leaving a darkness almost palpable, through which one momentarily flinched from the splintering, destructive violence of a collision.

During that first instant Garth was lashed by misgivings for the time, as compelling as those which had been constantly inspired by the threat opposite; and in the last flash of light he had seen that the steady courage of his captors had furnished no antidote for this uncharted peril. As women screamed and men fought along the aisle towards the door he endeavored frantically and without success to free himself. The turmoil might involve Slim and George, might smash that atrocious weapon, but he could do nothing.

Then he felt George's arms about him. He heard Slim's oath. The jolting of the wheels was less difficult. The train resumed its smooth haste. The lights came on, and Garth stared at the inspector and other men he knew, holding leveled revolvers. Somebody cried out:

"Take care!"

Garth turned in time to see Slim whirling the bottle from which the cork had been drawn, and from whose neck the liquid was already spouting towards his face.

"Then shoot!" Slim shouted.

He heard Nora's voice, screaming:

"You won't, Slim!"

He moved his head. He saw the woman in mourning who had thrown back her veil, exposing Nora's face and Nora's eyes which reflected the unbelief and the horror of her voice. The future seemed to crush upon him, a sable weight, lowered by her as the result of a deliberate choice.

The liquid struck his forehead, filled his eyes. He wondered why the pain wasn't greater. He could not grasp the fact that he still read through a blur the tense unbelief of Nora's face, and saw vaguely the two condemned men struggling in the grasp of the detectives who fastened upon their unwilling wrists gleaming handcuffs. Then he understood, and laughing a little hysterically, shook the water from his eyes.

Shame of his doubt joined the relief that swept him with the urgency of a material suffering. He glanced at Nora. She had stooped and was raising from the floor behind Slim's seat a bottle precisely similar to that from which the water

had poured. She had not conquered her emotion.

“He ought to have it,” she whispered. “I didn’t believe he’d do that when he saw the game was up and there was no use. The chair is too kind.”

She opened the window and emptied the bottle. She flung it far to the right of way. The inspector freed Garth from the coat and the handcuffs. He grasped Garth’s hand.

“I know it hurt you, Garth, to promise to go along with these crooks quietly, but Nora made me ask it. She passed me the wink at the top of the cellar steps.”

“You mean,” Garth asked, “that Nora had all this planned from the very beginning?”

“Not then,” the inspector answered, “but she promised to get us both out, and I’ve had enough experience with that daughter of mine to believe her when she talks like that. She chased to the Grand Central while we watched Marlowe’s and saw you leave. Got the number of your car, of course, and had reports on you all the way to Tarrytown. A mounted cop on the bridge made sure you were all three inside, and the operator at Tarrytown was a local detective. Nora smiled at them in the railroad offices and fixed the rest.”

Garth beckoned Nora. She sat by a window. Her expression was nearly tranquil again. The only concession she made to the reaction was a quick tapping of her fingers on the window ledge.

“Better sit down, too, Garth,” the inspector advised. “Your legs ought to be shaky.”

Garth obeyed, laughing nervously.

“I’ve been trying to hide it.”

He turned to Nora.

“I’d like to know how you changed the bottles.”

“I only arranged the most likely opportunity,” she answered. “I knew something must happen to make Slim forget that acid for a moment. It had to be bigger,

more immediate than the fear of capture. Everybody has a dread of railroad accidents. Own up, Jim. You were scared yourself when the brakes set.”

He nodded.

“You sized us up right. For that minute I was about as afraid of the wreck as I was of the acid, and I was trussed like a fowl.”

“So,” she went on, “I persuaded them in New York to furnish an illusion of the beginnings of a wreck. It was simple. Slim would almost certainly take his hands from the bottle th’en. He wouldn’t risk having it broken over him in the smash. But if it hadn’t worked out right, Jim, you know I’d never have let the others come in. You see they were with father in the dark sleeping car ahead. Father watched from the vestibule. When I chose my moment—you remember, I was going along the aisle close to you—he gave the engineer and the brakeman the signals we had arranged in New York.”

The inspector’s wink was brazen.

“That’s a bright girl by you, Garth,” he grunted. “Guess it’s time I enjoyed a cigar again. So long, children.”

He drifted down the aisle.

Garth wanted to tell Nora of his gratitude, realizing how far beyond expression that lay. With a smile she stopped his awkward attempts.

“I think I know what you would say, Jim. It was nothing—only what I had to do.”

All at once he looked away. He had caught in her smile a new, untrammelled quality.

“Why do you look away, Jim?” she asked softly.

He turned back. He tried to meet her eyes.

“Things can’t be the same,” he said hoarsely. “I know I’m a beast to speak of it. I know you expect me to take what you did in the cellar as acting. But, Nora, lying there as I was, it made me happier than I ever have been in my life.”

He looked straight at her.

“Tell me how you managed such acting.”

Her lips trembled.

“I—I think nobody could act like that.”

He saw the tears in her eyes. She closed them.

“While I was doing it,” she went on, “it came to me that it wasn’t acting at all.”

There was no one to see the quick surrender of her hands.

THE END