

VOL. 2, No. 5

MAR. 5, 1916

DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE

Twice-a-Month
10 cts.

**ROGUE
FOR A
DAY**

BY
**JOHN
MACK
STONE**

STREET & SMITH
PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK



DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE

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MARCH 5, 1916.

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Rogue for a Day by John Mack Stone

CHAPTER I.

AN AIDED ESCAPE.

WINDS whistled up the river, and winds whistled down from the hills, and they met to swirl and gather fury and rattle the city's millions of window-panes. They carried a mixture of sleet and fine snow, the first herald of the winter to come. In the business district, they swung signs madly back and forth, and roared around the corners of high office buildings, and swept madly against struggling trolley cars. They poured through the man-made cañons; they dashed out the broad boulevards—and so they came to the attention of Mr. Roger Verbeck, at about the hour of midnight, as he turned over in his warm bed and debated whether to rise

and lower the window or take a chance with the rapidly lowering temperature.

"Beastly night!" Verbeck confided to himself; and put his head beneath the covers.

He slept—and suddenly he awakened. A moment before he had been in the midst of a pleasant dream; now every sense was alert, and his right hand, creeping softly under the covers, reached the side of the bed and grasped an automatic pistol that hung in a rack there.

From the adjoining room—his library—there came no flash of an electric torch, no footfall, no sound foreign to the apartment, nothing to indicate the presence of an intruder. Yet Verbeck sensed that an intruder was there.

He slipped quietly from the bed,

shivering a bit because of the cold wind, put his feet into slippers, and drew on a dressing gown over his pajamas. Then, his pistol held ready for use in case of emergency, he started across the bedroom, taking short steps and walking on his toes.

A reflection entered the room from the arc light on the nearest street corner. This uncertain light was shut off for an instant, and Verbeck whirled quickly, silently, to find another man slipping up beside him. It was Muggs—a little, wiry man of uncertain age, who had been in Verbeck's employ for several years, valet at times, comrade in arms at times, willing adventurer always. Muggs bent forward until his lips were close to Verbeck's ear.

"I heard it, too, boss," he said, "Somebody in the library!"

Verbeck nodded; they crept nearer the door. Inch by inch, Verbeck pulled aside one of the curtains, until they could peer into the other room. A gleam from the corner arc light penetrated the library, too. It revealed the interior of the room in a sort of semigloom, causing elusive shadows that flitted here and there in such fashion that they scarcely could be distinguished from substance. Also, it revealed an open window near the fire escape—and it showed the form of a man standing before Verbeck's antique desk in a corner.

Muggs bent beneath his master's arm to see better. He felt Verbeck grip his shoulder, and looked up to find him indicating the open window. Like a shadow, Muggs, who also held a weapon in his hand, slipped through the curtains, crept along the wall, and advanced toward that window to cut off the intruder's retreat.

An instant Verbeck waited; then he stepped into the room, found the electric switch, and snapped on the lights, and leveled his automatic.

The man before the desk whirled

with a snarl that showed two rows of jagged, uneven, yellow teeth. He took in the situation at a glance, saw Muggs at the window, and Verbeck at the door, and knew he had been caught in a trap. His eyes narrowed and flashed; he bent forward, giving the appearance of a rat at bay, and his hand dropped slowly toward his hip.

"Better not!" There was a certain quality in Verbeck's voice that told the burglar the man before him was neither nervous nor afraid, and would shoot if necessary. The thief's hands went above his head in token of surrender, and the belligerent light that had been in his eyes faded.

"It appears," said Verbeck, "that we have discovered you in a delicate position."

"Aw, don't try to be clever! I guess you've got me, all right!"

"Rather unceremonious, this call," Verbeck went on. "Why didn't you send up your card from the office?"

"Aw——"

"Be seated, please!"

Still holding his hands above his head, the burglar took the chair Verbeck indicated.

"Now, Muggs——" Verbeck said.

Muggs had been waiting for the word. He sprang away from the window and took the cords from the portières. Working swiftly, he bound the burglar's hands behind his back, then fastened them to the chair. Then he assumed the rôle of guard, and Verbeck lowered his pistol and walked toward the desk.

"I fancy you didn't find much, my man," he said. "This is a bachelor apartment, you know, and there is little of value in the library unless you seek books or pictures."

"Aw——"

"If you had entered the dressing room now—— But, of course, if you had done that, Muggs probably would have filled you full of lead first, and

made a complete investigation afterward. It is better for you that you didn't enter there. Why you should crawl into a bachelor's apartment, when there are so many pretentious residences where silver and plate are to be found, not to speak of women's jewels, is more than I can fathom. You must be an amateur at this sort of thing. Um! What is this?"

On the desk was a sealed letter addressed to Mr. Roger Verbeck, the address having been stamped with rubber type. In one corner of the envelope had been pasted a tiny black star. On the polished surface of the desk other little black stars had been pasted. There was one, also, on a vase. There was another on the glass door of a bookcase.

"The Black Star!" Verbeck exclaimed.

He turned swiftly to scrutinize his prisoner, but there was no expression on the man's face to denote that he showed interest, and he was looking at the floor. Muggs was watching the bound thief closely, but his dancing eyes and parted lips showed that Verbeck's words had interested him deeply.

"So! We are honored by a visit from the Black Star, Muggs!" Verbeck said. "Think of that! The cleverest crook the town ever had to worry over—the man who got the famous Smith diamonds, and cracked a safe across the street from police headquarters, who has lifted half the silver in town, and stripped society women of their jewels—and he has paid us a visit. We must be getting important, Muggs—eh?"

"Yes, sir," said Muggs.

"Well, well! The man every one is looking for and cannot find, who has been sending naughty notes to the police, telling them how dull they are. I understand he even tips off what he intends doing, and then does it under their very noses. Very clever chap—for a crook! Declares all the detectives

in the world can't catch him! Um! Suppose we see what is in this letter."

He grinned at the prisoner and ripped the envelope open. In it was a single sheet of paper. The letter, too, was printed, and its uneven lines showed that it had been stamped one letter at a time. It was similar in appearance to the letters the newspapers declared the police had received. Verbeck read it swiftly:

MR. ROGER VERBECK: Last night at a certain reception people were talking of the Black Star. You made the remark that the Black Star was not a crook, but a gang—that the police didn't catch him because they had so many cases on which to work that they couldn't give their undivided attention to any particular one. You declared that any clever man who applied himself to the task could capture the Black Star and break up his gang. You boasted that you could do it yourself, and easily.

To show you how useless it would be for you to pit your brains and skill against mine, I am putting this letter on your desk while you sleep in an adjoining room, and am leaving my sign on some of your belongings. I am even putting a Black Star on your bed within a foot of the spot where you rest your head while you are sleeping. After this exhibition, either admit that the Black Star is clever, or do as you boasted you could do—catch me.

"Read it, Muggs," said Verbeck, guarding the prisoner himself, as Muggs obeyed. "What do you think of that, eh? Intended us to wake up and find these things stuck all over the place! Trying to show us how very clever he is, this naughty Black Star, and we catch him at it. There'll be joy at police headquarters over this. Now you just keep your eyes on this gentleman, Muggs, while I get into my clothes, and then we'll continue the entertainment."

Verbeck hurried to the dressing room, leaving Muggs on guard, and dressed as swiftly as possible. He carried a topcoat and cap to a chair near the door of the bedroom, and then he hurried over to the bed.

The Black Star had done as he had said. On the head of the bed was one of the little signs, and whoever had placed it there had put his hand within six inches of Verbeck's head. The man in the other room, Verbeck decided, had done that first, then gone into the library to finish his work.

Verbeck hurried back and relieved Muggs.

"Go and get into your clothes," he ordered, "and then hurry back here. I'll try to entertain our guest while you are gone."

He drew up a chair and sat down, facing the prisoner, and less than six feet away. He was humming a tune, and there was a smile playing about his lips. Had the prisoner been well acquainted with Roger Verbeck, that smile would have put him on guard.

Verbeck already had formed a plan. He and Muggs understood each other well, thanks to sundry adventures in which they had participated in the four corners of the earth, and he knew that Muggs, even now, was reading the note he had scrawled hurriedly and left on the dressing table, and would act accordingly.

"The Black Star—well, well!" he exclaimed, grinning at his prisoner again. "And so you are the clever crook?"

"I'm not saying anything!"

"You decorated the head of my bed with that thing, I suppose?"

"You can suppose all you like."

"Thanks! Rather surly, aren't you?"

"You hand me over to the police, and you'll get yours!" said the prisoner.

"Are you, by any chance, trying to frighten me?"

"I'm giving you fair warning. You hand me over, and you won't live long to gloat about it!"

Roger Verbeck grinned again, and resumed his humming. His eyes never left the prisoner, but he was thinking deeply. In the first place, the letter

from the Black Star bothered him. The remarks that the Black Star accused him of making, he had made. But the puzzling part of it was that he had made them to half a dozen friends, when there was no stranger near. He had spoken them in a drawing-room, in the presence of Faustina Wendell, his fiancée; Howard Wendell, her brother, and some others concerning whose integrity there was no question. How, then, had the Black Star heard of them?

The Black Star had terrorized the city for the past four months. Whenever a master crime was committed, a tiny black star had been found pasted on something at the scene of operations. The police had been unable to get a clew. Each crime seemed bolder and more daring than the one before, and more highly successful. The Black Star sent taunting letters to the newspapers and police, and the public demanded his arrest and imprisonment with loud voice.

His crimes, too, showed a deep knowledge of private matters. It appeared that the Black Star knew the interior arrangements of residences he robbed. Sometimes he even knew the combinations of safes—for in two instances a safe had been opened and looted, and then properly closed again, but with a tiny black star inside it. He was aware when valuable jewels were taken from safe-deposit boxes to be worn at some affair; he knew when members of families were out of the city, or servants absent. He had shown in a thousand ways that he possessed knowledge of great value to a criminal.

Roger Verbeck's boast had not been an idle one. He believed sincerely that no crook could be so clever but what some honest man could match wits with him and win. He believed, too, that the Black Star did not work alone, but was the leader of a band. Not for an instant did Verbeck think the man he

had taken prisoner was the notorious Black Star, but it pleased him for the moment to let the prisoner believe he did.

His first impulse had been to call the police and hand the man over. But he guessed that such a course would not insure the capture of the master crook, and that the prisoner would refuse to talk, take a sentence for burglary, and thus allow the Black Star and the others to go free.

It would be clever, Verbeck decided, to allow this man to escape, to shadow him, and to learn more. Roger Verbeck had adventured with Muggs scores of times, and he yearned for an adventure now. Here was his chance. Besides, the Black Star had issued the challenge.

Muggs returned fully dressed. For an instant the eyes of master and man met, and there flashed between them an understanding.

"Better look at this chap's bonds, Muggs," Verbeck said. "We don't want him escaping before the police come."

Muggs bent behind the prisoner's chair and fumbled with the cord; and when he arose his eyes met those of Verbeck again, and Verbeck knew that Muggs had obeyed orders.

"Now go down and call the house manager," he directed, "and I'll telephone the police."

Muggs hurried out into the hall. Verbeck left his chair and stepped back to the door of the bedroom.

"I fancy you'll be secure for a moment or so," he told the prisoner. "You'll scarcely get away unless you carry that chair with you."

He backed through the curtains, grasped his topcoat and cap, and crossed the room on his toes and unlocked the hall door. To cover the sound of the key turning in the lock, he spoke as if calling a number on the telephone.

"Hello! Police headquarters?" he asked. "This is Roger Verbeck speaking. Hurry up here! I've just caught the Black Star trying to loot my rooms. My old address—yes!"

And while he spoke he opened the door, so that his voice would drown any squeak the hinges might give; and then he slipped into the hall and hurried to the front stairs. He dashed down the three flights four steps at a time.

The prisoner had tugged desperately at his bonds and had felt them give. With sudden hope, he had worked furiously to get free. He was through the window and descending the fire escape as Verbeck finished the imaginary telephone message to the police, exulting at what he fondly thought had been his close escape.

CHAPTER II.

THE BLACK STAR.

VERBECK found Muggs at the corner of the apartment house, standing in the shadows, and trying to shield himself from the stinging sleet and biting cold wind.

"He's just reaching the ground, boss," Muggs said. "See him?"

"I see him. Be careful now, Muggs; we don't want to lose him. Thanks for understanding and loosening his bonds. There he goes!"

The erstwhile prisoner had reached the ground and was darting through the shadows toward the alley. Down this he ran for half a block, then crept between two buildings, and so reached the boulevard near a corner, with Verbeck and Muggs a hundred feet behind him. It was difficult trailing the man through a storm of sleet and fine snow, but Verbeck and Muggs had trailed men before, sometimes for amusement, and at other times through necessity.

The man hesitated at the curb a moment, then struck across the driveway. Verbeck and Muggs followed. They

took opposite sides of the walk and slipped along over the frozen ground, darting from shadow to shadow, always watching the elusive shadow ahead. At the street crossings their quarry walked across boldly, and they could not follow instantly for fear of being detected, but they always picked up their man again, once they were across.

Thus they covered a dozen blocks, and it appeared that the midnight prowler considered himself safe now. He hurried down a cross street, his head bent forward against the cold wind that swept up the hill. Block after block, Muggs trailed him, while Verbeck shadowed from the other side of the street, dodging into dark doorways now and then when he expected his man to look behind.

The quarry stopped at a corner, lighted a cigar, and stood waiting. Muggs was concealed in a doorway fifty feet behind him; Verbeck was in another doorway across the street.

An owl car came along, and their quarry boarded it. But Verbeck had been expecting that, and for some time had been watching a taxicab standing before a drug store on the corner. As the owl car started up again, Verbeck dashed across the street; and he had the chauffeur out of the drug store and into the seat before Muggs reached the spot.

"Follow that owl car," Verbeck directed. "There's a man on it that we'd like to see when he gets off."

"I'm wise," the chauffeur cried. "Fly cops, eh? Get in!"

The cab lurched along the slippery street, keeping half a block behind the owl car. Whenever the car stopped, the cab drew up at the curb, and Verbeck put out his head to watch. But their quarry remained aboard.

"If this keeps up, we'll be clear out of town," said Muggs.

"Anxious for action?" Verbeck asked, laughing. "You may get plenty

of it before we are done. Have a bit of patience, Muggs."

"I've got patience all right, boss—and I've got a hunch, too."

"Let's have it!" At times, Verbeck had a great deal of respect for Muggs' hunches.

"I've got a hunch we'd have done better if we'd handed that gent over to the police."

"I gave you credit for understanding the situation, Muggs."

"Oh, I understand what you want to do, all right. It'd be great to clean up this Black Star and his gang single-handed, hog tie 'em all, then call in the cops and hand 'em over—especially since he sent you that sassy note—but I've got a hunch we're going up against a stiff game. This Black Star ain't no slouch!"

"Afraid?" snarled Verbeck.

That touched Muggs on a tender spot, and Verbeck knew it. Muggs turned deliberately and faced his employer.

"If that's the way you're looking at it, boss," he said, "trot right along and I'll be behind you. Go the limit, and I'm in the first seat on the right-hand side. But, all the same, I've got a hunch."

The taxicab stopped again. Verbeck put his head from the window and immediately opened the door. Their quarry had left the owl car and was starting down the dark cross street.

Giving a bill to the chauffeur and telling him he need not wait, Verbeck hurried to the corner, with Muggs at his heels. Shadowing here was difficult work, for there was unimproved property, and some old estates not well kept up, where sidewalks were bad and the footing uncertain, and where untrimmed trees and thick underbrush furnished multitudes of dark spots.

Uphill and downhill, always against the biting cold wind and sleet, their man led them. Finally he crossed a va-

cant lot and made directly for an old house far back from the street in the midst of a grove of trees that now were swaying and snapping in the storm.

"So that's where the Black Star lives!" Verbeck said.

He and Muggs had small difficulty following their man now, for there was a low hedge behind which, by stooping, they could make their way unseen. Their man reached the side of the house and went along it until he came to a door. Beside the door there was a box on the ground. As Verbeck and Muggs watched, the man they had been following raised the lid of the box and took something out.

"He's putting on clothes," Muggs whispered.

His actions could not be observed well, but it did appear that he was donning an overcoat or a robe of some sort.

"And he's putting on a mask," said Muggs. "What's coming off here?"

"I imagine we are in for an interesting time," answered Verbeck. "Watch him now!"

He had stepped up to the door, and they could see him put out his hand. Through a lull in the storm there came to Verbeck and Muggs the tinkling of a bell, then a sharp click, and the door flew open and their quarry disappeared inside, closing the door after him.

Verbeck and Muggs hurried around the end of the hedge and to the house. A few feet from the door was a window. Verbeck had no more than glanced at it before Muggs was at work. Verbeck never had inquired too closely into Muggs' past, but from what he had seen from time to time, he had reason to believe that Muggs knew a thing or two about crooks' methods, and now he had more evidence of it. In an instant, almost, Muggs was sliding that window up slowly, inch by inch, making no noise, and carefully pulling aside the curtains behind it.

Another moment, and Verbeck was standing inside the house, with Muggs beside him. They heard no voices. Step by step they made their way across the room to the opposite wall, searching for a door.

Then they saw a streak of light that penetrated from an adjoining room, where a door sagged in its casement, leaving a crack through which a man could see. Verbeck knew this house. For several years it had been deserted, not kept in repair, the grounds not kept up. It belonged to an estate in litigation, and could not be sold, and the heirs had refused to build a more substantial residence for the rental it might bring in. He was surprised to find it inhabited, and he imagined that the Black Star and his band were making use of it surreptitiously.

But when he applied his eye to the crack in the door, expecting to see a room almost barren, filled with dust and cobwebs, two or three boxes, some burning candles—a typical resort of thugs—he faced a surprise. He was looking into a room that had been newly decorated and was furnished lavishly. Expensive rugs were on the floor; pictures adorned the walls. There was a massive library table in the center of the room, an armchair beside it, books and papers and magazines on it.

On one wall of the room was a small blackboard, with chalk and an eraser in a box beneath it. Before this blackboard, standing erect, was their quarry—dressed in a long, black robe that covered every portion of his body, even his head being enveloped in a hood, and over his face a black mask.

There was no one else in the room. The man before the blackboard stood stiffly and silently, like a soldier at attention. Behind the door, Verbeck and Muggs waited, scarcely daring to breathe.

Then a door on the other side of the

lavishly furnished room was thrown open, and another man came into view. He, too, was dressed in a long, black robe, and had a black mask over his face. But he had a mark that distinguished him from the other, for on the front of his hood was a black star, formed of jet, that flashed in the light.

CHAPTER III. INTO THE PIT.

INSTINCT and experience told Verbeck that this sight might prove too much for Muggs, and he gripped the smaller man by the arm to indicate that he was to maintain quiet. It was well he did so, for subsequent proceedings were highly unusual and mysterious.

The Black Star nodded to the other man and stepped across the room, where there was another small blackboard attached to the wall. When he stood before it, he nodded again, and the other picked up the chalk and started to write, and thus they conversed, each writing on his blackboard and erasing after the other had read.

"Number Six," the man wrote.

"Countersign?"

"Florida."

"Report," wrote the Black Star.

"Carried out your instructions, but was caught by Verbeck and his valet. Escaped when they went to call police."

It seemed that the Black Star grew taller and straighter as he looked at the other man, and Verbeck and Muggs could see his eyes glittering through the black mask. They expected him to roar a rebuke, a denunciation, but he did not. He faced the blackboard again and wrote rapidly:

"You are a blunderer. We have no use for the man who fails."

"I did not fail," the other wrote on the board quickly. "I put a black star on his bed and scattered others in library. I was putting letter on desk when they caught me."

"Did you come straight here?"

"No. I shook them off first. I got away before they raised an uproar. Came on owl car, got off several blocks back, and cut down the hill."

The Black Star motioned for him to erase this last, and then walked slowly to the table. There was a pile of letters on one end of it, and the Black Star picked up one and read it, shook his head, and put the letter in the pocket of his robe. He pressed against the end of the table, and a drawer shot open. Verbeck and Muggs could see that the drawer was half filled with money and jewels.

The Black Star took out some money and threw it on the table. He closed the drawer and walked back to his blackboard, and picked up the chalk to write again:

"You will not be safe here for some time. Verbeck or his man might recognize you. Take that money and catch the first train for Chicago. Return and report one month from to-night at midnight."

The other man read and bowed his head. There was no hesitancy in his manner; he acted like a man who had received orders that he knew he had to carry out. He went forward and picked up the money, and, with it clutched in one hand, he backed to the door and lifted the other hand in salute to the Black Star. The Black Star nodded, and the other backed through the door and closed it.

Muggs hurried across the room to the window to watch, while Verbeck remained gazing through the crack in the door at the Black Star, who sat down in the armchair and began inspecting the letters on the table. The minutes passed. Muggs returned and reported that the other man had put the robe and mask in the box, and had slipped away through the trees. Still the Black Star sat at the table, and that for which Verbeck had been waiting did not come

to pass—the master criminal did not remove the mask from his face.

Another adventure appealed to Verbeck now. He decided to face the Black Star in his den. He confided his intention to Muggs in whispers and gave his orders, and, disregarding Muggs' mouthings concerning his "hunch," slipped across the room to the window and let himself out.

He found the robe in the box and quickly put it on, then adjusted the black mask. Beneath the robe, his hand clutched the butt of his automatic. Searching the edge of the casement, he found a push button and touched it with his finger. Inside, a bell tinkled.

A few seconds passed, and then there was a sharp click and the door flew open. Verbeck entered and closed the door after him. Before him was a long corridor, musty, the air in it rank, dust on walls and ceiling. It appeared that the entire house had not been renovated, only the one room.

Verbeck slipped along the corridor to where a streak of light entered it, indicating a door. Holding the pistol ready beneath his robe, he opened the door and stepped into the room and stood beside the blackboard as the other man had done. The Black Star was not there.

The seconds seemed hours as he waited, trying to keep his eyes away from the door behind which he knew Muggs was watching him, his ears strained to catch the first sound of the master criminal's approach. Then the other door opened, and the Black Star appeared and walked to his station on the other side of the room. He nodded his head, and Verbeck picked up chalk and eraser and turned to the blackboard.

He was playing a dangerous game, and did not know how soon he would be detected. He felt small fear, for Muggs was waiting to help him, and he had heard nothing, seen nothing to in-

dicating that the Black Star had allies in the house.

"Number Four," Verbeck wrote on the board.

"Countersign?"

"Florida," wrote Verbeck.

He turned to find the Black Star's eyes glittering straight into his. The flaming rubies on the hood seemed to be dancing in derision. Verbeck wondered whether he had made a mistake, and he soon found out, for the Black Star turned to the blackboard and wrote rapidly:

"Number Four is a woman, and Florida is not her countersign."

And then he faced Verbeck again.

The crisis had arrived sooner than Verbeck had expected. The Black Star knew him for an intruder, and knew, also, that he must have observed a great deal to be able to don robe and mask and start the blackboard conversation. The master criminal could be expected to act with dispatch.

Before the Black Star could make a move, Verbeck's robe parted and his left hand emerged, holding the pistol ready for instant action, with his other hand he waved toward the armchair, and then he spoke:

"Sit down! And put your hands flat on the table!"

His eyes still glittering into Verbeck's, the criminal obeyed. Standing at the end of the table, Verbeck confronted him, scarcely knowing what step to take next. The man before him did not speak, but those glittering eyes—burning, malevolent, ominous—seemed to cry out with surprise, hatred, and threats.

"So you are the Black Star?" Verbeck said. "Quite a comedy you play here, eh? Masks hide faces and blackboards take the place of spoken words. A very clever crook—you. But I said a clever man could find you, and I say it again. This is the best proof of it, isn't it? You challenged me—and I

have come. So your man thought he had escaped, did he? If ever you see him again, tell him that his bonds were left loose purposely, so that he'd escape and could be shadowed here. Allow me, sir—Mr. Roger Verbeck, at your service!"

Verbeck raised a hand and tore off his mask, and bowed low in irony, meanwhile watching his victim, for he did not make the mistake of underestimating the cleverness of the man before him, and he was alert for tricks. He saw the Black Star's hands contract and his arms stiffen, and imagined the master crook calling down curses on the head of the man who had led enemies to his stronghold.

Then the Black Star spoke—in a low, penetrating voice, almost a monotone, obviously disguising his real tones.

"I suppose you think you are very clever?" he said.

"I don't advertise my cleverness like some persons—and then fail to live up to my estimation of myself," Verbeck replied.

"You have done something no outsider has done before—you have seen the Black Star in his workshop. That is, indeed, a rare privilege. And, of course, you'll pay for it in the end."

"You think so?" Verbeck asked.

"I presume you started out with the intention of handing me over to your stupid police. The greatest and most difficult thing, you perhaps thought, would be to locate me. Well, you have located me—and your task is but begun."

"Indeed?"

"It takes evidence to convict."

"Naturally," said Verbeck. "Suppose I call the police now. How about the robe and mask you wear, that star, these blackboards, those printed letters identical with ones that have been received by the police and the newspapers? Evidence? This room is full of it!"

"But, when you get right down to the point," said the Black Star, "you'll want evidence of theft and burglary, you know."

"I never heard of a gang yet where some one wouldn't turn State's evidence."

The Black Star chuckled, and through the slits in his mask, his eyes seemed to be dancing with delight.

"That is just where my cleverness comes in," he said. "To show you how little I fear you, Roger Verbeck, I'll tell you things no man knows except myself. I can tell you, for instance—and it is the truth—that the Black Star does have a band working for him, but that not one of them ever saw his face or heard his voice."

"Nonsense!"

"Not nonsense, but the truth. So certain am I as to what is going to happen to you, Roger Verbeck, that I'll reveal secrets and show you how useless it would be to fight me, before you—er—cease to trouble me further. I say no member of my band ever saw my face or heard my voice, and it is the truth. I say, moreover, that I never saw the face of one of my band, or heard his voice, that I know nothing of their names or identities, and, whenever a crime is committed, I do not know which person or group does the work. Can you understand that? Turn State's evidence, Mr. Verbeck? Not a man of them knows a thing to tell, except against himself."

"Rot!"

"The truth," said the Black Star. "Attend me closely. I reveal my methods to you, because you'll never pass them on. I began my work years ago. I have a genuine partner, who is not in this city at the present time. When I decided to invade this town, he came here. He rented this old house and fixed up this one room in it. The furnishings were carted one at a time, and they were unloaded several blocks

from here and fetched here at night. When everything was ready, I came.

"My gang? This one man who knows me, got the gang together. Every one of them is an expert in his particular line. Each was eager to work under me, for I am in a position to insure success and big profits. My organization extends farther than you dream. Each man was fetched here and taught what to do. Here he comes to get orders and to report. There is no conversation except on the blackboard; and masks are always worn.

"At the first, these men drew numbers out of a box, and in addition I gave each a countersign. I issue orders by number, and they report by number. If I was on the witness stand at this moment and wanted to betray my men, I couldn't do it. I could only say that a certain crime was committed by Number One, for instance—but if all were lined up before me I couldn't swear they were members of my band, because I'd not know. Do you understand that, Mr. Roger Verbeck? Very clever, eh? We work together, yet were we to pass on the street we'd not dream we knew one another. Absolute protection—you see? Hand me over to the police this minute—if you can—and it will avail you nothing. No jury would convict on the evidence that could be presented. And my organization, in a hundred different ways, would come to my rescue."

"I thought none of them knew you," said Verbeck.

"That is the truth. You do not understand everything yet. I have a band of men who do the real work. And I have an organization that collects knowledge I must have. Every man and woman in that organization has a very good reason for being loyal to me——"

"Women?"

"Yes," said the Black Star. "Many women! People in every walk of life.

And, naturally, I have arranged it so that I could harm them, but they never could harm me. I heard of your foolish boast of last night, didn't I? How do you suppose I knew that? And I can tell you the combination of the safe in your dressing room, Mr. Verbeck, if you are skeptical, and tell you also that there is nothing in it at the present time that we desire. There is a bundle of stock certificates and deeds in the upper right-hand pigeonhole, and a score or more old coins in a drawer at the bottom——"

"How do you know that?" Verbeck demanded.

"I know a multitude of things, Mr. Verbeck. Get this idea in your head—I do not know the names or faces of my real workers, but I do know the identities of those who gather my information. I know them, and could punish them—but they do not know me. Tidy little arrangement? I fancy you'll not find a flaw in it."

"You have deluded yourself into thinking it is perfect," replied Verbeck. "Suppose one of your crooks is captured while committing a crime, and brings the police down on you to save himself?"

"He would not. If he kept his mouth closed, the organization would save him. If he played traitor, the organization would save me and see that he got the limit. I could convince you if I wished to talk more, but I do not; I must protect the organization as it protects me. You have pitted your cleverness against mine, Mr. Verbeck, and you have been successful in your first attempt—you have located me. And now what are you going to do about it?"

"Suppose I hand you over to the police?"

"Even if you could do that—and I am not admitting it—you'd be laughed at in the end, and I'd probably conclude by suing you for heavy damages.

Believe me when I say everything has been thought of, and for every attack there is a defense arranged. Also, to hand me over to the police would be to warn all the others, and you'd have a difficult time convicting me without their testimony. And there is another thing——"

The Black Star hesitated.

"Say it!" said Verbeck.

"I have said that my organization is far-reaching. If you meddled in my affairs, the chickens might come home to roost. You are up against something regarding the magnitude of which you know very little, Mr. Verbeck. I have only just begun my organization in this city, but already it is broad enough to cause you pain and chagrin, did I put it to work."

"I suppose," said Verbeck, "that you imagine you are going to frighten me by this lot of pointless talk."

"You may be a very clever man in some things, Mr. Verbeck, but in this you are no better than a babe. Did I take the fancy to do so, I could make you one of my organization, too. But you have gone too far for that—you have discovered too much."

"You'd make me join your band of crooks?" exclaimed Verbeck, laughing.

"I could force you to be a loyal and obedient member, believe me, if such was my desire. You do not realize, sir, the strength of the Black Star and his band. You do not realize how very little you know. You have heard my voice, that is true, and you have seen my workshop—but even you, Roger Verbeck, have not seen my face."

"And what is to prevent me taking a look at it now?"

"This," said the Black Star. "You are standing at the end of the table with a pistol in your hand. I am seated, and my hands are on the table before me, so that you could fill me full of lead before I could get a weapon from beneath my robe. But the toe of my

left shoe, Mr. Verbeck, is resting on a button in the floor—a button that works a trigger—and you are standing over a cement-lined pit twelve feet deep. Before you could shoot, my toe would press the button—so! And down you go, Mr. Verbeck, through the floor and into the pit, and the trapdoor comes up again—so!—and you are a prisoner in the darkness—you who tried to match wits with the Black Star!"

It all had happened in a second of time. A section of the floor had swung downward with a crash, and Roger Verbeck had been dashed to the bottom of the pit. The one shot he fired went wild, the bullet burying itself in the ceiling. The trapdoor closed again—and the Black Star, standing at the end of the table now, threw back his head and laughed uproariously.

And the laughter died in his throat as he sank suddenly to the floor! For Muggs was through the door as Verbeck shot downward, and the butt of his automatic had crashed against the Black Star's head just behind the left ear.

CHAPTER IV.

ROGUE PRO TEMPORE.

MUGGS was a product of the slums, and had known the inside of a prison. Five years before, Roger Verbeck had picked him up in Paris, at a time when Muggs was contemplating throwing himself into the Seine, for misery and crime and poor living had broken his spirit and made existence a nightmare. Verbeck had taught him that wits can be used for honest purposes, had given him a home, and in return Muggs, in his gratitude, gave Verbeck what services he could. He was of the type willing to die to save a benefactor pain.

Muggs had not struck the Black Star a light blow, and when the master crook fell, Muggs knew he would remain unconscious for some time to come. He

was sobbing, and calling to Verbeck in a low voice as he put his foot beneath the table and felt for the button. He could not find it at first, for in his eagerness he was not methodical. Then he quieted down, and, getting down on hands and knees, went over the floor, inch by inch, until he felt a little knob through the rug.

His hand went out; he pressed the knob. At the end of the table appeared a yawning chasm, as a section of the flooring fell back. Muggs was at its side in an instant.

"Boss! Boss!" he called.

"I'm all right, Muggs! Not even scratched, and not stunned. Hurry up and get me out of here. And watch that chap——"

Muggs was on his feet, looking wildly about the room. There was no ladder, no rope, nothing that could reach to the bottom of that twelve-foot pit. But there was a couch in the corner, and Muggs tore off the cover and carried it to the pit's edge.

"Grab it, while I brace myself, boss," he directed. "Then climb—I can hold you."

And so Verbeck emerged from the pit, bracing his feet against the wall of it and climbing hand over hand up the couch cover, while Muggs, above, braced his feet and bent back, gripping the other end of the cloth. Then the trapdoor was closed again.

"Have you killed him?" Verbeck cried, when he saw the form of the Black Star on the floor.

"I felt like it, but I thought you'd want him again, boss. I just gave him a smash behind the ear."

"Um!"

"Don't you think we'd better call the police now, boss? I got a hunch——"

"You heard what he said, didn't you, Muggs? If the police take him in, the others will discover it, and escape. And he said some other things that have me guessing. How did he know what I

said last night at a private reception in a private residence, eh? I know none of his crooks was close enough to overhear me. And how does he know what's in my safe? He says he even knows the combination of it, and I don't doubt him."

"Then what are we going to do, boss?"

Verbeck had slipped off his robe, and now handed it, together with the mask, to Muggs.

"Put these outside in the box, then hurry back," he directed.

As Muggs rushed away, Verbeck bent forward and took off the Black Star's mask. There was revealed the not unhandsome face of a man about forty-five. Verbeck contemplated this countenance as he started to remove the Black Star's robe. It was one he never had seen before. Despite the Black Star's words, Verbeck had been half of a mind that the master crook was some one known to the city in general as a respectable man, a sort of Jekyll and Hyde.

Muggs returned, and the Black Star was gagged and bound with a curtain that Muggs tore from one of the doorways and ripped into strips.

"And now——" Verbeck began.

He did not complete the sentence. On the wall above his head, a bell tinkled. Verbeck and Muggs looked at each other, the same idea in the mind of each.

"Another crook," Muggs whispered.

"No doubt."

"What'll we do?"

Verbeck hesitated a moment. "This is a great chance, Muggs," he said finally. "I'll play the Black Star's part. I'll be a crook pro tempore."

"What kind of a crook is that?"

"The kind I'm going to be, Muggs. Hurry! Get this chap in the other room and shut the door—and watch."

As Muggs obeyed, Verbeck put on the Black Star's robe and mask. The

little bell jangled again. On the wall below it was a button, and this button Verbeck pushed. He could hear the click as the door was unlocked, and he slipped through the door by which the Black Star had made his entrance, and found himself in another dusty, unfurnished room.

In a moment, he heard some one enter the other door. He waited for a time, as the Black Star had done, then opened the door and walked boldly into the room, nodding his head to the other man in robe and mask, and taking his position at the Black Star's blackboard.

"No. Eight," the other wrote.

"Countersign?"

"Harvard."

Verbeck did not know, of course, whether it was the proper countersign, but he had to take the chance.

"Report," he wrote.

"Have information you desired?"

The man stepped away from the blackboard, put one hand beneath his robe, and took out a letter, which he threw on the table. Then he went back to the blackboard and stood at attention.

Verbeck went to the table and picked up the letter. He ripped it open, watching the other meanwhile, then lowered his eyes to read. What was written there was startling and very much to the point:

Mrs. Greistman will wear diamonds and rope of pearls at Charity Ball. They will be taken from safe-deposit box during the afternoon. After the ball they will be kept in safe in Greistman library. Safe is old one. Library is on first floor; one door opens into hall; three windows, one opening on veranda and others on side of house and shaded from street lights by vines and trees. All servants sleep on second floor, in the rear. Mr. and Mrs. Greistman and daughter sleep on same floor, in front, latter on left side of hall, parents on right side as you face rear of house. Daughter subject to insomnia, especially after brilliant society events, and often takes sleeping draft.

There it was, full information that

indicated the Black Star contemplated getting the Greistman jewels, reported by means of the organization, no doubt. The note had been written on a typewriter, and there were no marks on the envelope. Any active crook might have been able to discover where the members of the Greistman family slept, and learn where the safe was kept, and how the doors and windows of the library were located, but only some one in close touch with the family could know when they anticipated taking the jewels from the safe-deposit box and where they would be kept the night after the ball.

Verbeck found himself wondering how this information had been obtained, and whether the man who now stood before him in robe and mask had obtained it or was merely a messenger to carry it to the Black Star. He stepped back to the blackboard and picked up the chalk again.

"Where did you get information?" he wrote.

"As you instructed," came the written answer.

Verbeck could ask no more without betraying himself. He had no idea regarding the identity of the man before him. It was possible, of course, for him to call Muggs from the other room and overpower the crook; but it was doubtful if the man would talk and reveal anything after he discovered he was not dealing with the Black Star, but with an outsider. And what Verbeck wanted was accurate knowledge; he would have to be careful not to arouse the man's suspicion.

"Good!" he wrote on the blackboard. Then he nodded to the man, as if in dismissal. But the other did not seem ready to go, and acted as if there was something wanting.

"Any orders?" he wrote finally.

Verbeck remembered the pile of letters on the end of the table, and now he went over and inspected them. They were orders for members of the band,

evidently, for on each envelope a number was stamped. He found the one marked "Eight," and took out the sheet of paper it contained. There were the orders the Black Star had prepared for this man:

At three o'clock in the afternoon there is a committee meeting of the Browning Club in a parlor of the second floor of the National Hotel, at which Miss Freda Brake-land will be present. Manage to be in the lobby of the hotel after the meeting, and meet Miss Brake-land as if by accident. Talk of the Charity Ball, and ascertain whether she is to wear the famous Brake-land jewels at that affair. Report in usual manner here at ten o'clock at night; and remember that no excuse can be accepted for failure.

Here was another glimpse of the Black Star's work. Verbeck, after a moment's thought, decided to give the man his orders and let him go. He would continue to play at being the Black Star, and discover all he could of the master crook's plans. Perhaps he would be able to prevent the wholesale theft of valuable jewels; for it appeared that the Black Star intended a series of crimes following the Charity Ball. This man before him had orders to report the following night, so there was no object in exciting his suspicions now.

Verbeck would have given a great deal at that moment to have been able to peer behind the other man's mask. Who was this man before him who could be expected to engage Miss Freda Brake-land in conversation without arousing suspicion? Somebody who belonged in the city, surely, somebody well known in society, for Freda Brake-land was one of the most exclusive and unapproachable women of the younger set.

Verbeck was annoyed by the Black Star's threat that the chickens might come home to roost. He was astounded at the lines of information gathered for the benefit of the master crook, and a multitude of questions rushed to his

mind, none of which he could answer. He decided to refrain from calling in the police at present, at least until he discovered more.

And now to Verbeck came another plan he decided to use. He placed the orders on the end of the table and motioned for the other man to pick them up; then he hurried to his blackboard and wrote supplementary orders there:

Pass the northwest corner of First Avenue and American Boulevard at exactly two o'clock in afternoon on your way to the hotel. Stop on corner, remove hat, and pretend to brush dust from it. If there is to be any change in your orders, an envelope will be slipped to you at that time; otherwise, go ahead as you have been directed.

It seemed to Verbeck that the other man expressed surprise in the way his shoulders straightened and his head lifted, and for an instant Verbeck feared he had attempted too much. But the other only nodded that he understood, then saluted and backed out of the door. Two minutes later, Muggs came in from the other room and reported that the crook had put robe and mask in the box outside, and had hurried away.

"I'll get him!" Verbeck said. "He'll stop on that corner and give the sign, and then I'll follow him. I'll learn who it is that's helping the Black Star gather valuable information. We've got to stick to the game now, Muggs, old man!"

"I'd call the police——"

"Not yet! I'm going to play this game myself until it gets too hot for me. The Black Star challenged me, didn't he? I'll have plenty of evidence before I call in the police."

"What about the chief crook in the other room? He's conscious again."

Verbeck paced the floor for a time, his head bowed, thinking.

"I have it!" he exclaimed at last. "You get out of here, Muggs, and hurry to the garage and get my car. Stop at

the rooms and get that bunch of keys in the right-hand drawer of my desk——”

“The keys to the old place?”

“Yes. We'll take the Black Star there, Muggs. Bring the car to the corner nearest this house, then hurry in and help me with him. We've got to have it done before dawn. Hurry! That's what we'll do, Muggs! We'll take the Black Star to the old house, and there you'll guard him, while I play master crook in his mask and robe.”

CHAPTER V.

MUGGS ON GUARD.

WHEN Muggs had departed, Verbeck got up and walked into the other room, where the Black Star was on the floor in an uncomfortable position. Muggs had left the window open, and the cold air swept in, bringing sleet and snow with it. It had been all one with Muggs whether the Black Star froze to death or not.

Verbeck closed the window. He didn't want to carry the man into the furnished room, for fear some other member of the gang might come to make a report, although now it was almost three o'clock in the morning. So he threw the door open wide, and rolled in the couch, and lifted the Black Star upon it, covering him with two heavy portières that hung before one of the doors. However, there was no expression of thanks in the Black Star's countenance.

Verbeck went back into the other room and closed the door behind him. He took a candle from a shelf in the corner and lighted it, then made an inspection of the house from bottom to top. No other room was furnished; there were no arrangements for cooking, no store of food. The Black Star, then, did not live here, only came here to receive the members of his gang. That would make it possible for Ver-

beck to remain away from the house except at night.

He went back to the furnished room and conducted an investigation there. First, he looked at the orders in the envelopes. Nine was the highest number there, but Verbeck did not know how many envelopes had been given out that night before his arrival. And the orders were astounding.

Only one had to do with gathering information; the others concerned projected crimes. Some of them, Verbeck could not understand, since they referred to orders given previously. But others indicated not only crimes, but the manner in which they were to be committed. They told what to steal and just where to steal it, where there was danger and where there was none. Verbeck began considering whether he should give these orders out if any more men called. Taking the place of the Black Star did not include aiding in crimes, he told himself. He would issue orders of his own, orders that would keep the members of the band from their nefarious business, but, at the same time, would keep them in touch until he could arrange a wholesale capture.

Verbeck fumbled around the end of the table for several minutes before he found the spring which released the drawer and caused it to open. As he and Muggs had seen earlier in the night, there was an abundance of money in the drawer. There were half a score of diamond rings, too, a pearl necklace, other gems. There was a box of little rubber type and an ink pad and a small memoranda book.

Verbeck opened the book. On the last written page of it he found something that interested him. At the top was a date—that very day—and below was a list of numbers, with hours set opposite. The book told when members of the band were expected to report. Verbeck found that the first was

No. 3, due at nine o'clock that night. And from then until two o'clock the next morning others were due at stated intervals. The entire band, it was evident, was to appear for orders within a few hours and comparison of the book with the printed orders gave Verbeck an inkling of the scheme.

The Black Star had, indeed, planned a staggering blow to the city's pride; his band of crooks was to make a specialty of stealing jewels taken from safe-deposit boxes to be worn at the Charity Ball. For a few hours, these valuable jewels would be protected only by ordinary safes in residences, and, during those few hours, the members of the Black Star's band would strike.

Verbeck went in to see that the Black Star was as comfortable as he could be while bound and gagged, and then walked over to the window. The storm was dying down; the snow and sleet had almost ceased to fall, but the cold seemed to be increasing.

Returning to the furnished room, he sat down beside the table to wait. An hour from the time Muggs had departed, the bell tinkled. Verbeck adjusted his mask and touched the button that opened the door. In a moment, Muggs stood beside him.

"Here are the keys, boss," he said. "I've got the car near the mouth of the alley, and the lights are out. We can take him along the hedge——"

"Good!" Verbeck interrupted.

They went inside and lifted the Black Star and carried him out. Verbeck took off mask and robe and put them on the table, and one by one blew out the candles. Then he closed the door and helped Muggs carry the Black Star through the musty hall. Another moment, and they were outside.

It was not particularly a difficult task to carry their man along the hedge and to the car, and there Verbeck put him in the back and got in beside him, while Muggs took the wheel. They made

their way slowly up the hill and to a well-paved street, and there Muggs turned on the lights and the car rushed forward through the night.

The old Verbeck place was one of the city's landmarks. It was closed now, and had been closed for the greater part of the past five years. It had been bequeathed Verbeck, the last of his family, by his father, and the young man had had no desire to repair it and live in it alone, with a staff of servants. He preferred his apartment, and to live in it with no servant except Muggs.

But now, betrothed to wed Faustina Wendell, Verbeck was contemplating tearing down the old house and erecting a mansion in its place for his bride. The present house occupied the center of the block. It was surrounded by trees and tangled underbrush. The walks about it were in poor condition, and nobody ever approached it. It was to this place that he was taking the Black Star.

It was a long, cold ride. The Black Star groaned, and threw his head from side to side, indicating that he wanted the gag removed, but Verbeck declined to accommodate him. He was taking no chances with the Black Star.

The machine lurched and skidded along the streets, dashed along boulevards, swung around corners. Muggs was putting on all possible speed, for the dawn was not far away.

The machine was finally brought to a standstill before the double gates that opened into the driveway of the old Verbeck place. Verbeck got out and helped Muggs throw open the gates, and they drove in to the house.

There was fuel in the house, and after they had carried the Black Star in and made him comfortable on a couch, Verbeck built a fire in the large grate in the living room. Then he removed the man's gag, and all his bonds except those which held his hands fastened behind his back.

"There, Mr. Black Star!" he said. "It has been an exciting night. You sent a man to invade my apartment, and in turn I invaded your place of business—I suppose that is what you'd call it—and made you prisoner, with the aid of this very good friend of mine. And now you are here—and I'm quite sure you don't know just where. And here you'll remain for the time being, until I form some plans and put them in operation. You'll be kept warm, and you'll have food. Muggs will guard you. And you'll be unable to escape."

"All very clever," the Black Star retorted. "But you are playing with fire, Mr. Verbeck, and are liable to be badly scorched."

"I'll run the risk of that."

"Remember, I told you my organization has a long arm. I'm storing all this up against you."

"Very kind of you, I'm sure." He turned to Muggs. "How do you want to work this thing?" he asked.

"Just let him fuss around with his hands tied, boss," Muggs said. "I'll get a strap or some rope from the closet and tie 'em properly. And if he tries any funny tricks, I'll either shoot him or pound him on the head with the butt of the gun—'tis immaterial. You can leave it to me, boss."

And Verbeck knew, by the expression of Muggs' face, that he could.

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNPROFITABLE AFTERNOON.

VERBECK put his car in the garage, returned to his apartment, and slept. He awakened at eleven o'clock, rushed through bath and breakfast, got the car out again, purchased groceries, and whirled away toward the old house.

There he found Muggs pacing back and forth, with the pistol in his hand, reading the Black Star a lecture on the

evils of a nefarious existence. The Black Star looked disgusted.

"If you're going to keep me prisoner," he told Verbeck, "I'd be obliged if you'd give me another jailer."

"What's the matter with Muggs?"

"Barring the fact that he is insane, he may be all right. I don't want to be talked to death."

Verbeck gave him a grin, for answer, and unpacked the groceries. He had small time to spend here, and, taking Muggs into a corner, he bade him be sure to guard the prisoner carefully.

"You may not see me again until tomorrow morning, Muggs," he said. "I'll be busy this afternoon, and to-night I'm going to that house where the Black Star has his headquarters, and start some plans going."

"You'll be careful, boss?"

"I'll be careful, Muggs. When it comes time for sleep, what are you going to do here?"

"Stay awake, I guess."

"There is a vegetable pit in the basement, remember. Get plenty of blankets from the closet and put them there, and make him climb down and sleep on them. You can bolt the trapdoor and sleep in peace here before the fire. Careful, now. I'm off!"

At one o'clock he put the car in the garage again, for he had decided he'd not use it that afternoon. Precisely at ten minutes of two, he was standing at the corner on which he had directed the crook the night before to fumble with his hat and await orders.

It happened to be a pet day with shoppers. Traffic officers worked furiously to keep the crossings free of vehicles; uniformed footmen opened limousine doors and helped well-dressed women across the walks and into shops. Conversations seemed limited to dry goods and bargains.

Verbeck had not remembered how the corner would be thronged when he gave the Black Star's man his orders. The

corner now was a jam of human beings. Verbeck crossed the street and stood beside a stone pillar in front of a show window, from where he could watch easily.

The hour of two arrived, and Verbeck scrutinized every man who passed the corner. Five minutes passed, and no one had given him the signal. And then he saw Howard Wendell, the brother of his fiancée, walking slowly down the street close to the curbing.

Verbeck drew back quickly behind the pillar. If Howard Wendell saw him, he undoubtedly would stop to talk, and Verbeck did not want to hold a conversation just then.

Wendell passed, without seeing him. He stopped for an instant on the corner; he removed his hat, and he ran one hand around the brim of it, as if brushing away dust.

Verbeck's jaw dropped and his eyes bulged with amazement. The next instant he was chuckling at the coincidence of it. There was no possibility of Howard Wendell being a member of the Black Star's band, of course. The boy accidentally had done what Verbeck had ordered the crook to do, that was all—and, when he came to think of it, Verbeck realized it was a natural thing for any man to do, and wished he had told the crook to use some other sign.

Howard Wendell walked on up the street, and Verbeck continued his watch. The minutes slipped by, and no other man gave the sign. A doubt entered Verbeck's mind. That boast he had made at the reception—Howard Wendell had heard that, and the Black Star had known of it soon afterward. And Howard had given the correct sign.

"Bosh! Can't be!" Verbeck muttered to himself. "I'm a fool to think it for a minute. Why on earth would Howard be mixed up with a gang of crooks? Even if he wanted to be, how could he

get into a first-order gang like that of the Black Star? They'd not have him! I'm crazy to think of it!"

He looked at his watch; it was a quarter of three. He decided to go to the hotel where the unknown crook was to hold conversation with Miss Freda Brakeland. Perhaps he could decide the matter there, learn the crook's identity.

The lobby of the hotel was thronged when Verbeck entered. He met men and women he knew, but managed to keep free from lingering conversation. He wanted to be at liberty to make a complete investigation.

Then he met Faustina Wendell face to face.

"Why, Roger!" she gasped. "Fancy meeting you here! I've heard you say you hate hotel lobbies."

"I came in to take a peek so I'll hate them more," Verbeck replied. "And you?"

"Browning Club meeting, dear."

"It is over already?"

"A quarter of an hour ago. In fact, we met only to postpone it, for every one is talking of the Charity Ball tomorrow night."

"I see," said Verbeck. He did see—that he had missed his chance to learn the identity of the crook.

"I came down in the electric," Faustina continued. "Come along home with me, if you haven't an engagement."

He entered the electric and sat beside her as she piloted the car through the busy streets. She was giving all her attention to the driving, and he did not attempt conversation. And now that her face was in repose, it seemed to Verbeck that there was a peculiar expression on it, one that he was not used to seeing. He would have sworn that the girl beside him, who had promised to be his wife, was anxious, worried—and that was foreign to her nature.

The Wendells had been wealthy once, but were not now. Mr. Wendell had

died two years before, leaving an estate much smaller than was anticipated. His widow had built a modern apartment house, and from it derived an income, the Wendells living in one of the apartments on the first floor. Yet they had enough to maintain their position in society, and this was an important position, for the Wendells were an old pioneer family, noted for piety and pride.

"You are looking tired," Verbeck observed.

"You're not very complimentary, Roger. Perhaps I am a bit tired, though."

"Too much Charity Ball?" he asked.

"I am not worrying much about that. I intend going, of course."

"I should hope so," Verbeck said.

"Would it disappoint you very much if I said I'd rather not?"

"Nothing you can do will disappoint me," he said loyally; "but I cannot imagine a Charity Ball without you in attendance. Are you thinking of remaining away?"

She was looking ahead, and Verbeck imagined that her lips quivered for an instant.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked. "You don't seem to be yourself to-day."

"I—oh, it is nothing, Roger! Perhaps I am a bit nervous. Let us talk of something else. Here we are at home. You'll come in, of course?"

He followed her inside, and greeted her mother, who immediately left them alone.

"Now," Verbeck said, bending toward her, "tell me what is troubling you. I can see that there is something."

"Really, it is nothing, Roger. Perhaps I am a bit out of sorts. And—what I said about the ball—forget that, please."

"But, if you do not wish to go——" he said.

"Can't we decide it to-morrow after-

noon, dear? All right—let us leave it until then. Perhaps I'll be feeling better."

"And there is no trouble—nothing I can do to help?" he persisted.

"Foolish boy! I'm just—just tired."

"Then I'm going to run right away and let you rest. I'd ought to be downtown, anyway. I'll telephone the garage for my car."

He went to the telephone and sent in his call, then returned to sit beside her. She was trying hard to smile and act naturally, but Verbeck knew something was troubling her. But he imagined it might be something connected with the family finance, and so did not press her for an answer.

The car came from the garage, and Verbeck left, and drove through the streets in a way that defied all traffic ordinances. He had failed to identify the crook who had received orders to speak with Miss Freda Brakeland. And something was troubling his fiancée, and Faustina had refused to confide in him. It had been an unprofitable afternoon.

And there was a busy and dangerous night before him.

CHAPTER VII.

IDENTICAL ORDERS.

EIGHT o'clock that night found Roger Verbeck in the Black Star's headquarters, the room put in order, and the candles burning. He was sitting at the end of the long table, in robe and mask, and with the little rubber stamps he was busy writing out orders. All the orders were identical; the ones previously written by the Black Star had been destroyed.

Promptly at nine o'clock, the little bell on the wall tinkled, and Verbeck, shutting the drawer in the table and holding his automatic in readiness beneath his robe, went to the wall and pressed the button that opened the door. He hurried from the room, and waited.

Presently he entered again, to find a masked and robed figure standing before the blackboard. Number and countersign were given, and Verbeck handed the man his orders and a twenty-dollar bill taken from the drawer in the table. The man bowed, and went out.

Nine-thirty brought another man, and the same ceremony was observed. Ten o'clock brought the member of the band to whom Verbeck had given orders the night before. After he had written his number and countersign, Verbeck whirled to the blackboard.

"Report," he wrote.

"Browning Club meeting was postponed, and I missed the person you mentioned," the other scribbled on the board. "I followed her, and spoke with her later in a tea room. She will wear her jewels, including the famous ruby collar."

Verbeck nodded for the man to erase. Again he found himself wondering at the identity of this man who could talk so freely to Freda Brakeland. And now he wrote on the blackboard himself:

"Why did you not carry out orders?"

"Pardon, but I did."

"You appeared at the corner I mentioned?"

"Yes. Nobody approached me, so I went on as ordered."

Verbeck wondered whether the man was speaking the truth, whether he had appeared at the corner, as ordered, and Verbeck had missed him. It was possible, he knew, because of the throng of shoppers. And, again—The robe effectually disguised the man before him, but Verbeck imagined he was taller than Howard Wendell. He told himself again he was a fool to think that the man before him was his fiancée's brother. He had half a notion to order the man to remove his mask, but thought better of it. This man was a crook, could be nothing else. And Ver-

beck dared do nothing that would arouse suspicion and endanger the plan he had formed.

"Very well," he wrote on the board; then went to the table and tossed the proper envelope toward the other.

The man picked it up and read the orders. It seemed to Verbeck that he appeared startled. He went to the blackboard and wrote again:

"Are you sure, sir, that these are my orders?"

"Yes," Verbeck wrote.

"Must I carry them out?"

"They must be carried out—to the letter," wrote Verbeck.

The other hesitated a moment, then wrote rapidly on the board:

"You are unfair, but I am unable to help myself."

And then, as Verbeck started forward, the other saluted and darted out of the door, to hurry down the dusty hall. Roger returned to the table. He half wished he had forced the other man to remove his mask.

Ten-thirty o'clock brought a woman. Verbeck knew she was a woman because he could see her hands, the fingers covered with rings, and the bottom of her skirts showed beneath the robe. Her writing on the blackboard was unmistakably feminine, too. The Black Star had said that women belonged to his organization, but Verbeck had not anticipated meeting one in this house; he had believed they worked on orders transmitted by others.

"Everything arranged," the woman wrote on the board. "It will be easy. I'll get the necklace about three o'clock in the morning, and hide it where you ordered. It may be found there any time after four o'clock."

Here Verbeck found himself facing something of which he knew nothing, some crime already outlined by the Black Star.

"Disregard all previous orders," he wrote, "for the time being. I have new

orders for you, and you'll attend to them first. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she wrote.

He threw her envelope on the table, and she read the instructions it contained. She, too, scribbled a protest on the blackboard.

"Isn't it dangerous?" she wrote.

"Carry out your orders. You do not know all the scheme, remember."

"I understand. I'll obey."

Then she hurried out.

At eleven o'clock, the bell tinkled again, and Verbeck admitted another of the band. This one, too, was a woman. She appeared timid, whereas the first had given every indication of being used to this sort of thing. Her hand trembled as she wrote her number on the board. Then she gave her countersign, and waited.

Evidently she was not working on a case, but had reported to get orders. Verbeck had no orders ready for her, for her number had not been on the list he had found in the Black Star's book. Apparently this was her first visit, or else the Black Star had not contemplated making use of her at the present time.

He took orders he had printed for one of the others, and put them on the end of the table, motioning for her to pick them up and read. As she advanced toward the table, Verbeck found that her eyes were upon him, and she seemed afraid to touch the envelope. She opened it finally, read quickly, and Verbeck thought she gave a little cry. She staggered backward, but seemed to regain her composure as he started forward to aid her, and backed away from him. The sheet of paper fluttered from her hand to the floor.

Verbeck stooped and picked it up, and handed it to her. She did not seem to see it—she was looking down at Verbeck's hand. Like a wild thing, she whirled around and rushed back to the blackboard and seized the chalk.

"Where did you get that ring?" she wrote rapidly.

Verbeck answered on his board:

"Why? Do you fancy it?"

"Where did you get it?"

"That is my personal and private business," he wrote. The ring was a peculiar signet he had picked up abroad, and had worn for years.

The woman dropped the chalk to the floor. She raised one hand, as if to put it to her face; she dropped it again; her eyes burned into Verbeck's from behind her mask; then she gave a cry that expressed pain and despair, and hurried through the door and into the hall.

"Well, what do you think of that?" Verbeck mused. "Was she really frightened, or only playing a part? I wonder if the Black Star has been treating her badly, and has made her afraid of him? She seemed awfully interested in my ring—because she'd never noticed it on the Black Star's hand, I suppose. If she should be suspicious — But she couldn't do anything, if she was!"

The members of the band continued to arrive at intervals, but there were no more women. Verbeck received their numbers and countersigns, and gave out copies of the orders. At three o'clock in the morning, he decided there were no more to come. Two women and eight men had been received during the night—ten persons had walked into the trap he had constructed. Less than twenty-four hours, and the Black Star and his band would be in the hands of the police. Verbeck felt that he had planned well.

At half past three o'clock he left the house and walked five blocks to catch an owl car. Half an hour later, he was on the boulevard, approaching the building in which he had his rooms. As he reached the steps of the apartment house, he happened to turn and glance down the street. He saw a man dodge

behind a lamp-post a short distance away.

Verbeck stepped into the vestibule, waited a moment, then stepped out again quickly. Again he saw the man dodge behind the post.

Darting down the steps, Verbeck ran toward the man. A shadowy form rushed across the driveway and lost itself in the shadows of the underbrush. Verbeck stopped and retraced his steps. He doubted whether he could catch the man, and he wasn't inclined to pursue him at that hour of the morning. Perhaps it was not a man watching him, but a lurking thief, he thought; and, at the same time, he felt that he had been under surveillance.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE POLICE GET A TIP.

VERBECK arose at noon, to face the day that meant the culmination of his plans. As he bathed and shaved and dressed he kept thinking of the prowler he had seen a few hours before. Could it be possible, he asked himself, that some of the Black Star's band had grown suspicious, and would take an active part against him? Had the Black Star, a prisoner in the old Verbeck house, sent out some message from his prison calling for rescue? Verbeck was half afraid he had made some blunder, had overlooked something that would allow the master criminal to turn the tables and emerge victor from the duel of wits.

He telephoned the garage for his roadster, and hurried out to the old Verbeck place, taking with him a lineman from the telephone company's office. The lineman connected the telephone, which had been out of service.

"How is the prisoner?" Verbeck asked Muggs, after the lineman had departed.

"Down in the vegetable pit, thinking of his sins."

"Fetch him up," Verbeck directed, and began carrying in the food he had purchased before running out from town.

It was a surly Black Star who entered the living room, with Muggs at his heels urging him on. He no longer was handsome, because of a two days' growth of beard and dark circles under his eyes. He glared at Muggs malevolently as he crossed the room and sat down stiffly on a divan.

"How long," he demanded of Verbeck, "are you going to keep me prisoner, with a maniac for jailer?"

"Probably until a late hour to-night. But you need not be confined in the pit again. I'm going to have Muggs keep you in this room, where it is warm and comfortable. I want to give you a bit of liberty until to-night."

"And then?"

"Then I'll probably hand you over to the police, and you'll have mighty small freedom for years to come."

"Indeed?" the Black Star snarled. "You have arranged everything, have you? Planned a coup of some sort?"

"Time will tell," said Verbeck.

"And don't you ever stop to fear for yourself?"

"I haven't felt particularly afraid at any time."

"I have warned you that the arm of my organization——"

"Is a long one—I remember," said Verbeck. "The arm of the law also is long, Mr. Black Star, and a clever, honest man can outwit a clever crook any time, as I said once before. You called it a boast, I believe."

"You are not done yet."

"Certainly not—but I'll be done within a few hours."

Verbeck walked to a corner and beckoned Muggs to him.

"I'll return to-night, some time after nine o'clock," he said. "I want you to watch the Black Star well, Muggs. If he escapes now——"

"Why don't you call in the police, boss?"

"And spoil everything? I'm going through with this now—I'm going to nab the Black Star and his gang."

"Then there's something big coming off, and I'm not to be in on it?" Muggs demanded.

"Neither am I, Muggs—at the moment it comes off. But we'll both be in at the finish—and we'll be there strong. Just curb your curiosity, Muggs, until this evening. I'll explain everything then. Careful, now, and don't let the Black Star escape. I fancy you've been aggravating him."

"Aw, boss——"

"He looks it. Haven't you?"

"I was just reciting a list of his sins, boss."

"Well, Muggs, recite less and keep your eyes open more. Watch every move he makes. Don't you use that telephone, and don't let the Black Star get near it. I had it connected so we can use it to-night. Now, I'm off!"

He got in the roadster and started back downtown. He stopped before a suburban drug store and went into a telephone booth. He had not wanted to send this telephone message from his own apartment nor from the old Verbeck place, for it might be traced.

He called police headquarters, and asked to be connected with the chief. No, he said, the chief's secretary wouldn't do. It was something about the Black Star.

In a moment he heard the chief's gruff voice.

"Listen carefully," Verbeck told him, "for I am not going to repeat what I say or answer questions. This is very important, and if you disregard it you'll be sorry. Have your secretary get on the phone extension and take down in shorthand what I am going to say."

There was a short wait while the chief made the necessary arrangements,

then Verbeck heard himself commanded to speak.

"I have run down and caught the Black Star," he said. "I am holding him prisoner now. I cannot hand him over to you just yet, for, if I did, and the least news of it leaked out, you'd never catch one of his gang, and, without his gang, you never could convict him. Never mind how I know it—I am not talking nonsense. You've got that?"

An excited voice told him that the chief understood.

"Now, listen to this," Verbeck went on. "I have arranged for all the Black Star's band to be at a certain place at the same time, so you and your men can take them all. Keep quiet, chief, and don't ask questions. I want you to send men enough to arrest them—eight men and two women are in the crowd. They are to be arrested just when and where I say. If you let as much as one of them escape, all my work and yours probably will have been for nothing. When you get them, you'll find stolen property on every one. And as soon as I learn you have all of them under arrest, I'll turn over the Black Star to you, I'll tell you where and how he met the members of his gang and gave them orders, and I'll let you have the inside workings of one of the smoothest crooks' schemes ever devised. But, if you make one false move——"

A torrent of words over the wire stopped him for a moment.

"No questions, I said," he went on. "You have understood so far? Very well! No, I'll not tell you who I am or where I am! Very well, if you'll not listen! I'll call you up later, when you're in a better mood, and explain where you are to make the catch. Good-by!"

And an irate Roger Verbeck strode from the telephone booth, went out to the street, and sprang into his car, to

drive furiously down the thoroughfare. No excited chief of police could bully him with a lot of mandatory questions, he told himself. Let them fuss and fume for a time, then they'd listen when he telephoned.

His actions had the desired effect. At police headquarters, there was a spirited debate for five minutes between the chief and his secretary as to whether the telephone communication had come from some practical joker. The secretary was inclined to believe that it had. The chief insisted that some member of the Black Star's band had turned against him, and was engineering his downfall.

Verbeck drove on through the streets until he reached the Wendell apartment house. Faustina was waiting for him, and again Verbeck noticed that anxiety was stamped on her face, and now he thought there was a look of fear, also.

"Well, here we are," he said. "And what about the ball?"

"I—I have decided to go," she said, looking at him peculiarly.

"Brother Howard going, too?"

"Yes—he is going."

"With any particular young lady?"

"No—alone."

"Good! Will you be angry, Faustina, if I ask you to go to the ball with Howard? I cannot explain just now, but—well, I'll be there late, in time to have a couple of dances, and bring you home. I'm sorry that I cannot explain exactly—it is something important that will keep me away until late."

He looked up, to find her staring at him fixedly.

"Why—what is the matter?" he stammered.

"I—oh, Roger, it is nothing!"

He sat down beside her and started to take her in his arms, but she drew away from him.

"Why, Faustina—"

"I'm—oh, I'm just a bit nervous, Roger."

"There seemed to be something troubling you yesterday, and there certainly is to-day," he said. "Can't you confide in me, Faustina? Is there anything wrong—anything I can do to help?"

"Nothing you can do—to help," she said.

"Then there is something wrong?"

"Don't ask me, please, Roger. I'm nervous, worried. Just let me rest until to-night—I'll try to be all right then. Certainly I'll go to the ball with Howard—and expect you later. And now you'll go, won't you, Roger? I must lie down—and rest."

The puzzled Verbeck walked slowly to the door, Faustina following him. He took her in his arms and kissed her. She did not return the caress, and she seemed on the verge of tears.

"Don't worry," he said softly.

"You tell me not to worry?"

"Why, yes. Perhaps whatever is troubling you will cease to trouble. We'll talk of it to-night? You'll let me help you?"

"Yes," she said, "we'll talk of it to-night. We must talk of it to-night."

Verbeck hurried out, got into the car, and started for the business district. Faustina's actions and manner worried him, yet his mind was busy with the Black Star and his affair. Once the Black Star and his band of crooks were handed over to the police, he'd look into Faustina's trouble, he told himself. Perhaps Howard was running about too much. Perhaps there was financial trouble in the family. Whatever it was, he'd smooth things out, he promised. He couldn't have Faustina worrying.

He drove carefully, now, through the heavy traffic, and finally stopped before a hotel. There he entered a public telephone booth, and called police headquarters again. Once more he got the chief on the wire.

"Will you listen now, and ask no

questions?" he demanded. "This is no hoax, so you'd better act on my tip."

Then he told the chief where the members of the Black Star's band could be captured, and when, and how.

CHAPTER IX.

"CHICKENS COME HOME TO ROOST!"

THAT evening, there came the heavy winds again. They came as night descended, to howl about buildings and shriek through the streets, carrying the merest suggestion of snow. They swayed the arc lights, rattled signs, and shook skeletons of trees. And then they settled down to a steady blow from the north, and soft snow began to fall heavily. And through the steady sheet of snow gleamed thousands upon thousands of incandescent bulbs at the big hall where the Charity Ball was to be held.

That hall had been built to hold thousands, and its capacity would be tested this night. On the dancing floor would be women famous in society, stately matrons, pretty girls enjoying their first social season. Gowns to dazzle would be shown by hundreds, and jewels—precious and famous jewels—would flash reflection from myriads of electric lights—jewels taken from safe-deposit boxes to be worn at this affair, and then to be returned to their hiding places.

The galleries would be filled with spectators; a gigantic orchestra would please musical ears; in the streets outside, hundreds of limousines would be waiting for the end.

Verbeck was thinking of the scene at the big hall as he drove his roadster out to the old place again shortly after ten o'clock that night. He had intended going to the old house earlier, but had been delayed in carrying out his plans. And now everything was done—there was nothing more to do except await the appointed hour, call police head-

quarters, ascertain that the members of the Black Star's band were in jail, and then turn over the Black Star himself. He would have a good excuse to escape the plaudits of the police and reporters at headquarters—he would have to hurry to the big hall to dance with his fiancée and escort her to her home.

The gates were open, and Verbeck sent the car through and along the driveway, and brought it to a stop where it would be shielded by the corner of the house from the swirling snow.

When he entered the living room, the Black Star was sitting on the divan in the corner, and Muggs was pacing back and forth before him, still preaching on the merits of an honest existence as compared to a life of thievery.

"Everything is lovely, boss," he reported to Verbeck. "This gent has been getting restless, but he hasn't made a move he shouldn't. I've been hoping he would—I haven't taken a pot shot at a man in ages."

"We'll have no carnage, Muggs," said Verbeck, laughing. "We want to hand him over entire, not in pieces. Give me that pistol, and I'll watch the gentleman while you untie his hands and fasten them again in front instead of behind his back. I'm going to give him a cigar to smoke; he'll need it to quiet his nerves."

Muggs did as he was ordered, and the Black Star accepted the cigar with good grace, and puffed at it with evident enjoyment.

"Do we call the police now, boss?" Muggs asked.

"Not yet, Muggs."

"You and I have done a lot of things, boss, in all corners of the world," he said in a whisper, so the Black Star could not hear. "When you feel that you can't hold in any longer, you make me stop being a valet, and let me be a comrade, and we go out after adventure. It's always been all right. But,

about this thing— Boss, I told you I had a hunch."

"I'm afraid your hunch isn't working well this time, Muggs. The thing has been accomplished. I'm merely waiting here until the police make a move I requested them to make, and then we'll surrender the Black Star. It hasn't been so very much of an adventure, after all, has it, old man? There hasn't been much excitement—not what we call excitement."

"I'll not be satisfied until the police have their hands on him, boss."

"Neither shall I. But nothing is going to happen, Muggs, to bother us. Keep that hunch of yours until another time."

Muggs resumed his guard of the prisoner, and, though he asked Verbeck nothing concerning the plans he had made, there was a question in the expression of his face. Verbeck lighted a cigar for himself, and sat down not far from the Black Star. He looked at his watch.

"It is half after ten," he announced. "Mr. Black Star, in exactly an hour and a half the police will take into custody some of your people, eight men and two women, to be exact."

"Indeed?"

"Exactly," said Verbeck.

"Would you mind telling me how this is to be done? I am somewhat interested and wholly skeptical."

"Last night," said Verbeck, "I assumed your robe and mask, and played at being the Black Star. I destroyed the orders you had prepared, countermanded all of which I learned, and issued new orders of my own. There was no hitch in the arrangement. Not one of them became suspicious, as far as I could see."

"And the orders?" the Black Star asked, interest showing in his face.

"Were the same in each instance," said Verbeck. "The orders make it possible for the police to round up the en-

tire gang at one swoop. They'll be kept separate until I turn you over and tell all I know. With those facts upon which to work, the detectives will have no trouble getting confessions. As for you—Muggs and I can swear to enough to convict you, especially after the police have searched that house where you had your headquarters."

There was a look of apprehension in the Black Star's face now, but he did not pretend to Verbeck that he was alarmed.

"May I ask how you expect to catch these persons?" he asked.

"Yes—and I'll tell you. There was a flaw in your perfect arrangement, Mr. Black Star. You taught your crooks to work in the dark, and not ask questions. They have faith in you; and if you ordered one of them to enter the First National Bank at noon and hold up the first teller to the right, he'd perhaps do it, believing that his work was only a part of a big scheme, and that he'd escape consequences because of some plan of yours."

"True," said the Black Star. "I have issued orders that seemed dangerous, but were not so when a man knew all the different angles of my plan."

"Exactly. And so, when I gave orders that seemed dangerous, scarcely an objection was raised. You want to know how they are to be captured, eh? Here is a copy of the orders I gave each, Mr. Black Star. Listen to it!"

Verbeck pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket, and read:

You will dress as well as possible—evening clothes if you can—and attend the Charity Ball. I give you herewith money for ticket and other expenses. You will mingle with the crowd on the dance floor, and, working alone, lift all the jewels you can. Be careful of discovery, but do not fear the outcome. Between ten o'clock and midnight will be the best time for you to do your work.

Exactly at midnight you will be in the southwest corner of the lobby, where there is a drinking fountain. Before going there,

put a bit of red ribbon on the lapel of your coat. If you see others wearing this sign, do not speak to them or give them any attention. Follow these instructions to the letter, and our great plans will be consummated. It is to be a big clean-up, and all arrangements have been made.

Verbeck ceased reading, and looked across at the Black Star.

"You understand?" he asked. "Each one thinks he does not know all the plan, but will be safe if he carries out his instructions. I gave each a bill out of that drawer in the table, and I told the women to wear the red ribbon on their shoulders. A score or more of detectives will be in the neighborhood. At midnight, they will take in custody all who wear the red ribbon. A quick search will disclose stolen property in their possession. You see? I don't know whether I'm guilty of a felony or not, ordering them to steal like that, but I guess I'll be forgiven, since it is in such a good cause.

"So there goes your perfect arrangement, Mr. Black Star. Those crooks who have been trusting you will be cursing your name before long. And you're going to the penitentiary with them. You can't be crooked and get away with it always—no matter how clever you are. And all this, Mr. Black Star, because you overplayed your part by sending a man to put a letter on my desk. You needn't sneer—I'm not meaning to praise myself. There are a thousand men in town who could have overcome you, given the chance I had."

"I am not sneering at your egotism," said the Black Star, apparently without emotion. "I am sneering at the futility of your plans. I warned you, Roger Verbeck. I told you that chickens come home to roost. So you'll send my men and women to jail, will you? You'll break up my organization? You strike me a deathblow like that—and you'll strike yourself one at the same time."

"I've heard your pointless talk before," Verbeck said.

"But this is not pointless talk, Roger Verbeck. It is very much to the point. I told you that I had an organization that gathered information, didn't I? I said it was separate and distinct from the band that committed the crimes. You have made the grave mistake, I fear, of mixing the two bands together—and the consequences will not be to your liking."

"Indeed?"

"Yes—indeed! How do you suppose I heard of your boast at that reception a few nights ago? How do you suppose I know so much about people's private affairs? I'll tell you, Roger Verbeck—I know because men and women of your acquaintance belong to my organization. You don't believe that, eh? You will—soon."

"I scarcely can imagine any of my friends turning crook."

"Not voluntarily, perhaps. Not because they need money, either—not always."

"Explain," Verbeck said.

"I've told you I have a partner who knows me well—he and I work together. Some of the organization know him, but not one knows me, nor has seen my face or heard my voice. If you are skeptical, I'll outline the plan in a few words. In Chicago, for instance, we caught a certain youngster of this city when he was in trouble. He was extricated from his scrape, and the price of it was that he join my organization. We held something over his head. Deathly afraid, he carried out my orders; he feared to refuse. Through him, we brought into the organization the girl to whom he was betrothed—threatening to send her sweetheart to prison unless she joined the band. You see? A sort of endless-chain affair."

"I don't believe it!" Verbeck exclaimed.

"You want proof, eh? In ten minutes, Roger Verbeck, you'll be giving me

my liberty, and you'll be moving heaven and earth, with me beside you, trying to prevent the capture of those people at the Charity Ball. You know who told me of your boast at that reception? He told me because he admires your native cleverness—begged me to stop everything, and leave town, for—he said—if you started out to get me, you'd do it."

"He was a sensible man, and you should have taken his advice," said Verbeck.

"I am telling you the truth, Verbeck. The man who told me was Howard Wendell, the brother of the girl you expect to marry."

"You lie!" Verbeck cried, springing from his chair. Mugs snarled, and stepped forward, ready for a fray, but Verbeck motioned him back.

"I do not lie," said the Black Star. "I told you to beware, that the chickens might come home to roost. Two months ago, Howard Wendell was in Chicago on some business for his uncle. We knew him—we wanted him. A man already a member of the organization saw to it that Howard Wendell went the pace for a few days. He is but a boy, we'll say—he was easily led. He woke up one morning, to find that he had gambled away three thousand dollars of his uncle's money. He was almost insane because of what he had done. His friend took him to my partner; my partner gave him the money."

"But that——"

"Wait! In return, he gave my partner a check drawn on a bank in this city. Of course, it was a forged check. Oh, he did not intend it as deceit! He said the check was worthless. My partner laughed, and said he knew it, but that he would keep it until the boy could pay—if he never paid, it would be all right. My partner, you see, owned the gambling house where the money was lost. You begin to understand?"

Verbeck still stood before him, hands clenched.

"But the next day he was informed that the check would be presented, would be returned, and that he would be arrested for having written it—unless he did as he was ordered. That is how Howard Wendell became a member of our organization."

"You beat!" Verbeck cried.

"Don't beat me up yet—please," sneered the Black Star. "If you stop to do that, you'll suffer considerable anguish later. I am not done—there are more chickens coming home to roost. What numbers did the men have, those to whom you gave orders?"

Fearing, Verbeck told him.

"So? Howard Wendell is one of them, Verbeck. He is the one who brought you the letter that first night concerning the Greistman jewels—remember? He'll be one for the police to nab to-night. He must have been surprised to get orders like that—he understood he was to do nothing except gather information."

Verbeck felt that the Black Star was speaking the truth. Howard had objected to the orders—had said that they were unfair to him, but that he was unable to help himself. It had been possible for him to tell the Black Star of Verbeck's boast. He had given the sign that afternoon before seeking a talk with Freda Brakeland. And the police would capture Howard Wendell through Verbeck's planning, capture him with stolen jewels in his possession——

"And the women?" the Black Star asked. "Tell me quickly! What numbers did they have?"

Verbeck told him.

"The first is one of the cleverest in the organization," said the master crook. "She is an experienced thief. But the second—small wonder you did not find her number in the book! She is a new one. That was her first visit, and I

had ordered it some days before. She was brought into the organization through her love for another, a member of her family. So she'll be caught, too, eh? And do you know her identity, Roger Verbeck? Do you know the woman you are handing over to the police, through meddling with my affairs? I'll tell you—gladly: She is Miss Faustina Wendell—your fiancée!"

CHAPTER X.

CAUGHT IN A NET.

SILENCE followed the announcement of the Black Star—silence for a moment, during which Muggs watched his master, and waited for the sign that he was to choke the man on the divan into insensibility for daring to say such a thing. But the sign was not given.

Suddenly Roger Verbeck felt sick at heart. The Black Star's tone, his bearing, the expression in his face told that he spoke the truth. And Verbeck knew enough to confirm it. Faustina had been acting in a peculiar manner. And that second woman who had called on him in the Black Star's headquarters—how timid she had appeared, how afraid! She had reeled when she read her orders. She had demanded to know where Verbeck got the ring he was wearing. And that very afternoon, when he met her at her home—her words had been mysterious, her actions out of the ordinary.

"So you see how it is," the Black Star was saying. "Do you want to save her, save her brother, also? Then release me, and I'll help—for I must save those friends of mine. I'm as much in the dark regarding them as you, for I've never seen any of their faces, remember. You realize what will happen if they are caught, don't you? There could be no escape from the penitentiary for any of them. And there are things to be found in my headquarters—notes in Faustina Wendell's hand-

writing, for instance, notes giving information——"

He stopped, at the look that came into Verbeck's face.

"And you think I'll let you go now?" Verbeck demanded. "Why, I'll fight you more than ever now! You've made a cat's-paw of that boy; you've dragged the sweetest and most innocent girl in the world into your filthy scheme——"

"The prosecuting attorney won't consider her innocent when he reads those notes."

"You'd have me let you go—then you'd try to drag *me* into the mess to save my intended wife! And, through me, others—and so on! It's fight you and beat you now, else surrender to you like a coward, and let you go ahead with your nefarious plans. I'll take the chance, Mr. Black Star!"

Verbeck looked at his watch; it was a quarter of eleven. He whirled to face Muggs.

"Guard this crook!" he cried. "Guard him well? Shoot him if he tries to escape!"

"What are you going to do, boss?"

"I'm going to play the game out to the end. I'm going to the ball and save Faustina Wendell and her brother—and I'm going to see that the police get the others, and then this man here. That's all I have to do—get Faustina and Howard away in time. This crook's clever scheme has another angle—nobody can swear the Wendells are mixed up in this. That's what I have to do—separate the crooks from the innocent victims. Watch that man!"

Muggs screeched at him. The Black Star tried to tell him something. But Roger Verbeck had dashed from the house and toward his machine. He was almost sobbing, and fear gripped at his heart. The chickens had come home to roost! No wonder Faustina had acted so peculiarly, small wonder she had shown anxiety! And she was in danger. He had ordered her to steal—

perhaps her love and fear for her brother would lead her to do so. She might be caught in the act—Faustina Wendell, proud daughter of one of the pioneer families, caught stealing jewels!

And his ring—she had recognized that! Great Heaven! Did she think he was the Black Star? Did she imagine he had played on her love to make her a member of a band of thieves? What might she not suspect, when she had seen that ring?

She would remember that he had led a sort of wild life in the ends of the earth, never showing a tendency to settle down until he had fallen in love with her. She might pile up the little things until she had a mound of evidence—women do such things. She might doubt his manhood, really believe he was the master crook, brutal enough to endanger the girl he professed to love, and her brother. Had Howard Wendell noticed that ring, too? Had Howard been the midnight prowler waiting on the boulevard to see what time Verbeck reached home?

He was in the car, out of the yard, rushing like the wind down the street, not caring whether the machine skidded perilously through the snow. It was almost eleven o'clock; he had ample time, more than an hour. It would be a simple thing, after all, merely to get Faustina and Howard to one side and see that neither wore a red ribbon, let the police capture the others, and then explain.

Then another thought came to him—those notes the Black Star had said were in the house where he made his headquarters! The captured men would talk, mention that house, and the police would search. Faustina might be endangered in that way. He didn't dare take the chance of leaving those notes until after he went to the ball. He'd have to search for them, find, and destroy them.

There was more than an hour—he had ample time. He drove the machine at a furious pace, disregarding police, who shrieked at him, barely missing trolley cars, dodging pedestrians at crossings. Out along the long boulevard it was easier going, for there the wind had swept the pavement clear of snow, and there was not so much traffic. He left the paved street and cut down the hill toward the old house where the Black Star had established his headquarters. He did not have time to take precautions; he trusted to the good fortune that always had stood at his side in emergencies. He turned the machine to the curb a block away from the house, sprang out, and rushed across vacant lots toward his goal.

Through the dusty hall he rushed, reaching in his coat pocket for matches. He found a candle in the furnished room, and lighted it. Then breathlessly he began his search.

Nothing was in the drawer at the end of the table except what he had seen before. There was no furniture in the room in which letters might be concealed. He inspected the couch, but found nothing. He ripped the seat and back from the armchair, but his search was not rewarded. In the kitchen, he opened drawers and bins, but found nothing except dust and cobwebs. He rushed back to the Black Star's room again.

His foot found the trigger of the trapdoor, and he opened it, and crept to the edge of the pit to hold the candle and peer down. There was nothing but the smooth cement walls and flooring. He ripped away rugs, searched the floor, finally stood, panting, beside the table in despair.

"He lied!" he gasped. "He must have lied—and I have been losing time!"

He looked at his watch again—it was one minute after eleven o'clock. It would take him only fifteen minutes to

reach the big hall where the Charity Ball was being held, if he drove swiftly, and so he had time for further search, but it seemed of no use.

Staggering against the side of the table, he threw out his hand to grip the edge—and a drawer shot out!

He forgot the place and danger, and gave a cry of joy. Accident had accomplished what search had failed to reveal. The drawer was half filled with papers. He inspected them quickly—yes, there were several notes in Faustina's handwriting, and a forged check for three thousand dollars in the bolder scrawl that belonged to Howard Wendell. The Black Star evidently had had that check close at hand to show the boy now and then, in case he thought of quitting the organization.

There were other letters, too, the handwriting of which Verbeck seemed to recognize, but could not quite place—letters written by other victims of the Black Star, he supposed.

He carried them to the grate, set them afire, fed them to the flames one at a time. He ran back to table and pressed the edge of it all the way around, and found one other drawer. There was nothing in it, however, and he felt that he had secured and destroyed all the dangerous papers there. The fire in the grate died down. Verbeck stirred the ashes, to make certain nothing remained that would give a clue. Then he blew out the candle and started through the dusty hall to the door.

As he reached it, he stopped in alarm. Creeping toward the house from the hedge were two men. Far to the right were two more. To the left were two more. He heard a sibilant whisper from near the wall a short distance away. Light from the nearest street lamp flashed against a policeman's shield.

The police were surrounding the house!

CHAPTER XI.

CLOSE QUARTERS.

MUGGS stood in front of the door for a moment after Verbeck had dashed from the house, then turned to face the Black Star again. Muggs' lower jaw was shot out, his eyes were narrowed, and, but for Verbeck's orders, he probably would have launched himself at the Black Star and attempted the old-fashioned retaliation known as "beating up."

Muggs was small in size, but he had great strength in his arms and shoulders, and possessed knowledge of a multitude of tricks to aid him in the art of self-defense or aggression. He worshipped Roger Verbeck. He was ready at any time to fight for Verbeck, to defend his life and his happiness. The fact that the Black Star had caused his master misery was enough to make Muggs want to throttle the man. But Verbeck had decreed against that.

Muggs wished he was at his master's side, helping him in the fight. He imagined Verbeck driving the roadster at top speed through the streets to the big hall; he fancied him entering upon the brilliant scene there, as he had intended doing at a later hour, getting Faustina Wendell and her brother to places of safety, then witnessing the capture of the Black Star's band. He anticipated a telephone call from Verbeck telling of success.

Meanwhile he walked back and forth before his prisoner, the pistol held in his hand, and raged at the man on the divan.

"A cur like you causing a man like Mr. Verbeck pain!" he exclaimed. "Killing's too good for you! I hope you get a life sentence. But he's got you, Mr. Black Star! My boss has you! Have your little signs pasted on his bed and all over his library, will you? Leave sassy letters for him, eh? I reckon you're sorry for it now!"

The Black Star still was smoking the cigar Verbeck had given him. He blinked at Muggs, and puffed at the cigar furiously, then suddenly bent forward and bowed his head on his hands.

"That's right!" Muggs went on. "Think of your sins! Do a little wailing yourself. Cause my boss trouble, will you? You'd better put your head in your hands and wish you'd played straight! Small good it will do you to repent now, you scum!"

The Black Star's head bent lower; he was a picture of misery. Muggs looked at him with scorn, and turned to walk the length of the room. He stopped his tirade long enough to pick up a sandwich from the table and begin eating it. He imagined the Black Star about to weep because disaster had overtaken him—and Muggs always felt disgusted when he saw a man weep.

But the Black Star was not weeping—he was endeavoring a subterfuge. When he bowed his head, the burning end of his cigar rested against the rope that bound his wrists together. Now and then he puffed again, until the rope was scorched. Strand after strand was burned through as Muggs talked.

"Getting your dirty hands on your betters and making them join your gang!" Muggs said, walking back toward him. "You got your hands on one too many, I guess. And I'll be a witness at your trial, too! I'll help send you over the road——"

He had passed the Black Star and was about to turn. And at that instant the Black Star sprang. Muggs was taken unawares. A fist dealt him a blow on the back of the head. As he staggered forward, trying to turn, the pistol was wrenched from his hand and the butt of it crashed against his temple. The Black Star struck him even as Muggs had struck the Black Star in his headquarters room, when Roger Verbeck was shot into the pit.

"Take that, you whelp!" the Black Star cried. "Try conclusions with me, will you—you and your precious master? You haven't whipped me yet! There's something in that old house I want—money, and those letters—money to get me away to Chicago, and the letters to send to the prosecuting attorney with a sarcastic little note. I'll fix your precious master and his girl. And while he's trying to save her, I'll be taking a train out of town. As for my crooks—bah! I never saw their faces—they are no friends of mine. Let 'em go to prison—there are plenty more crooks to be had!"

He kicked the prostrate Muggs and hurried from the house. He did not know exactly in what part of the city he found himself, but he made for a crossing where he had seen a trolley car flash past, where he could make a start downtown.

And Muggs, groaning in pain, remained on the floor, but he was not fully unconscious. He had heard every word uttered by the Black Star—they seemed to ring in his brain. He kept telling himself he wanted to get up, he wanted to do something—but he could not. He struggled mentally to rise, and finally his will was communicated to his muscles. He rolled over, sat up on the floor.

Dizziness overcame him, but he closed his eyes and bit his lower lip and tried to master it. And in time he did, and staggered to the divan and fell upon it.

What was it the Black Star had said? That he was going to his headquarters to get money and letters, that he was going to leave the members of his band to their fate, and make his escape. He must stop the Black Star! Verbeck's plans would be shattered unless he did. And the Black Star would be a living menace to Verbeck unless he was stopped, and, perhaps, would build up another organization in some other city.

Even in this moment of pain, Muggs, though claiming no superior power of reasoning, could not help but think what a fool the Black Star had been to tell Verbeck his schemes. That was the man's weakness—he had to boast. It was boasting that had brought him to the close attention of Roger Verbeck, and caused all the trouble.

"My hunch—was right," Muggs muttered. "I told the boss—that I had a hunch!"

He sat up again; the dizziness had passed, but his head still pained. He must act quickly, he kept telling himself over and over. Then the plan for which he had been groping flashed into his brain.

Muggs sprang to the telephone and called police headquarters. He got the chief on the wire.

"The Black Star has escaped!" he cried. "You'll get his gang down at the dance, but you'll not get him unless you hurry. He knocked me down and escaped. I know where you can catch him—if you're quick!"

Shouted queries and commands came to him from the frenzied chief.

"A house—in the south end of town!" Muggs gasped. "A deserted house—he has his headquarters there! He's gone there to get money, then he'll get out of town. You can catch him! . . . What's that? Oh, yes—I didn't give you the address!"

Muggs swayed from the telephone, but in a moment had gathered his strength and was talking again. He gave the location of the house, and the chief said that he understood.

"And I'll be there—I'll start right now," Muggs added. "I'll be there to identify him—"

Sudden decision had come to Muggs, and he stumbled away from the instrument without further words, not even stopping to hang up the receiver. He hurried across to the door and threw it open and went out. The stinging

cold air refreshed him. He started along the driveway.

By the time he reached the boulevard, Muggs was himself again, except that the pain pounded in his head because of the blows the Black Star had given him. He hurried along the street, half running. On the first corner he waited for a car.

An automobile came along, bound for town, and Muggs hailed the driver. He was a private chauffeur going to the big hall to fetch home from the ball some of the women of the family for which he worked. Muggs told him it was a matter of life and death, and the chauffeur allowed him to crawl up beside him, and put on speed. Five minutes later, well down in town, Muggs got off and hailed the first taxicab he saw, offering double pay if good time was made, and the cab soon was rushing toward its destination.

The police had acted promptly on Muggs' information, and as the taxicab whirled around a corner half a dozen blocks from the goal, Muggs could hear, in the distance, the shrieking of a siren on a police automobile. He urged his chauffeur to greater speed. At a corner he stopped the cab, paid the driver, and the next moment was running down the dark side street toward the deserted house.

He slipped along the hedge and crept near the wall, making his way toward the door. It was closed, and Muggs did not try to open it, but went on to a window. He raised it as he had that first night when Verbeck had been with him. Muggs wanted to get inside and catch the Black Star at work. He wanted just one blow at the Black Star before the police arrived, for the blow that had been given him, and for the misery Verbeck had been caused. Then he'd gladly hand the Black Star over to the authorities.

He slipped through the window. As he did so, the police automobile stopped

on the nearest corner, and men piled out of it and ran forward to surround the house. Muggs gave them one glance, then left the window and stepped softly across the room. Light was coming through that crack in the door—the Black Star was there!

Muggs put his eye to the crack. He did not see the Black Star—he saw Roger Verbeck just blowing out the candle and starting to enter the dusty hall!

The meaning of the situation flashed over Muggs in an instant. The Black Star had not arrived yet. Verbeck had come here to get those letters before going to the big hall. And he—Muggs—had brought the police! They would capture Roger Verbeck—and there was nothing to prove that Roger Verbeck was not the Black Star!

CHAPTER XII.

AT THE CHARITY BALL.

MUGGS jerked open the door, rushed through the furnished room, and entered the hall.

"Boss! Boss!" he hissed.

Verbeck was just recoiling from the outer door. He closed it as noiselessly as he could and hurried back.

"Boss!"

"That you, Muggs?"

"Yes. That devil worked a trick on me—he got away. He intended to come here and get money, then hurry out of town. I—I telephoned the police, boss, to come here, and I came myself to identify him. I didn't know that——"

"All right, Muggs. I understand. You did right."

"But I let him trick me—and the cops are here. If they catch you, they'll think you're the Black Star."

Verbeck realized that even better than Muggs. If the capture was made at the big hall, and the prisoners questioned—as they would be, and merci-

lessly—Faustina Wendell and her brother, under the strain, might give evidence that would convict him.

"We've got to get away, boss!"

She had recognized the ring, Verbeck was thinking. Perhaps it was Howard Wendell who had watched as he went home that night. Yes—he'd have to escape.

"Oh, boss! I said I had a hunch!"

"Quick!" Verbeck whispered. "And be quiet! My roadster is at the curb a block away. We must get out and reach it. How many policemen?"

"A dozen at least, boss—and there may be another auto full of 'em coming."

"Hush! Some one is trying that door now. Into the kitchen with you!"

Muggs hurried through the kitchen door. Verbeck pushed him into a closet and bade him remain there until he returned. Then he went from the kitchen to the dining room, and there he lifted his pistol and sent three shots ringing into the ceiling.

Another instant and he was back in the kitchen, in the closet with Muggs.

"Perhaps they'll think the Black Star has committed suicide when they hear those shots and find there isn't a light," he whispered. "There is a window behind you, Muggs. Can you open it quietly and without attracting attention, while those police are wondering about the shots?"

Muggs went to work, making no noise. The window was raised a fraction of an inch at a time. Verbeck turned the key in the closet door, for things might come to a pass where seconds of delay would mean everything.

Finally the window was open. Muggs, putting out his head cautiously, looked around.

"Only one man on this side, boss," he reported. "The others have gone around to the door."

"They're in the house," Verbeck replied. "They're flashing their torches—"

I can see them in the hall through the keyhole."

"This side of the house is dark, boss, shaded by trees. And there is a drift of snow against it. We might get out without being heard or seen."

"Try it!" ordered Verbeck grimly.

Muggs went first, like a shadow, and soon was standing beneath the window in the deep darkness close to the wall. Verbeck followed, almost afraid to breathe, expecting every second to hear the challenge of a policeman, and to be taken. But finally he, too, stood in the shadows against the side of the house.

"One man," Muggs whispered. "See him? We've got to hurry—those cops in the house will be through searching soon. You wait here, boss."

Muggs slipped away beneath the trees; Verbeck could scarcely see him. Nearer and nearer he got to the unsuspecting policeman, who was watching the group in front of the door. Then Muggs sprang, and the policeman went down. It had been done without noise, with a single blow, but not effectually enough to render the officer unconscious for long.

Verbeck hurried across and joined Muggs; each took a deep breath, and then, just as the man on the ground raised a cry, they darted out into the open, racing for the hedge.

Behind them was a chorus of cries, a fusillade of shots. They got to the other side of the hedge and ran wildly for the street. Behind them came the determined pursuit, a captain shouting orders. As they ran, Verbeck found himself wondering at the queerness of it—that he and Muggs had been forced to attack a guardian of the law in the interests of justice. Verbeck promised himself to make that policeman a handsome present when things were straightened out.

More shots whistled near them—the police were through the hedge now. On and on they ran, Verbeck slightly in the

lead. They saw a police auto standing in the street near them, another at the other end of the block. And Verbeck's roadster was a block away!

They were in the street now, running at their utmost speed. Behind them came the pursuing policemen, while others rushed toward the automobiles, intending to take up the pursuit in that manner if the quarry got away. Nearer and nearer they came to the roadster. When they reached it, Muggs sprang to the wheel. Verbeck threw himself in beside Muggs.

"Shoot at 'em a couple of times, boss, and slow 'em up," Muggs said.

"That's going too far. Get up on the boulevard!"

The car started. Another fusillade of shots came, none taking effect. The machine skidded around the corner and dashed at the hill. It lurched and swayed over the soft, snow-covered ground. Behind came the two police automobiles, their sirens shrieking.

Muggs reached the boulevard, and opened her up. He had no idea except to shake off pursuit. Verbeck glanced at his watch as they passed beneath a light—it was twenty minutes after eleven. Events had been occurring rapidly in the last half hour. And he was working under a close time limit, too. He had to escape the pursuit, and he had to reach the big hall before midnight to save Faustina Wendell and her brother.

Verbeck looked back continually—they did not seem to be gaining. The streets flashed by. Muggs narrowly evaded collision a score of times, for he was taking desperate chances. To escape, and to save Faustina, and all in forty minutes of time—that was task enough. Added to the mental strain of this was the fact that the Black Star had escaped, and that Verbeck's case would fall down in part because of it. Yet some of the work would be good, for the band would be broken up par-

tially, at least, if the officers at the big hall caught the thieves with stolen goods in their possession.

They did not seem to be able to gain on their pursuers, and the precious minutes were flying. They took corners at a reckless pace, zigzagging through the city in a vain attempt to outwit those who followed. Now and then Verbeck waved his hand to indicate a turn, and Muggs obeyed.

They skirted the retail district, and got to the wholesale district, where there was scant traffic at this hour of the night, but always behind them came the two police automobiles, sirens shrieking, officers screeching.

"We can't dodge 'em, boss!" Muggs yelled.

Verbeck looked at his watch again. He had only thirty minutes! But an automobile going at racing pace can cover a lot of ground in thirty minutes, even through the streets of a city. On they dashed, twisting and turning, never gaining, just holding their own.

Down another hill they raced, and now they were near the stockyards. Here there was no pavement; here the mud and slush and slime splashed over the machine and around them, and the auto lurched and skidded dangerously.

"Slow down at the next turn," Verbeck ordered. "I'll drop off, and you keep on. Get away if you can—work back into town and give them the dodge. I can't waste another minute—I've got to get to the big hall. And I can't do it in the machine, for we can't shake them off."

"I can take you back nearer the hall, boss."

"I'd not dare try to drop off there—they might see me. But here, where it is so dark— At the next turning, Muggs!"

"Boss—"

"Here we are! Get away if you can, and if you do, come to the big hall later. I'll be all right!"

They made the turning, and Verbeck dropped off; and then Muggs opened her up again and dashed on along the muddy street, and behind him rushed the determined police in their two automobiles. They passed within forty feet of Roger Verbeck, who was inside a stockade, in close proximity to a hundred startled Texas steers.

Less than thirty minutes—and he was at the stockyards. There was not a second to waste. He could not glance at his watch to get the exact time without striking a match, and he did not dare do that because some watchman might see and apprehend him. He got out of the cattle pen and started running along the street in the dark, toward the nearest car line. Slush and mud splashed over his trousers, and he realized that he would not be the usual well-groomed Roger Verbeck society knew when he invaded the big hall.

He boarded a car, drew his overcoat close around him, and crouched in a corner. It seemed that the car stopped at every street, that it made wretched time. The blocks never before had seemed so long. Verbeck looked at his watch again, fearing he would be too late. He felt on the verge of screeching to the motorman to give the car greater speed.

Finally it was up in town, and Verbeck got off and rushed for the nearest taxicab stand. In an instant he was inside a machine, and a chauffeur was taking chances to earn the extra pay promised him if he reached the big hall before midnight.

Verbeck took out a handkerchief and wiped off his pumps, and brushed mud and slush from the bottoms of his trousers as well as he could. He smoothed down his hair, and tried to regain his composure so that he would appear outwardly calm at least. He would have to enter the big hall in a matter-of-fact way. An excited entrance would attract attention.

The cab stopped before one of the entrances of the big hall. Verbeck glanced at his watch again—it was five minutes of twelve. As he sprang out, he tossed the chauffeur a bill. He took a deep breath, threw back his shoulders, handed his ticket to the man at the door, and stepped into the lobby of the hall with a smile on his face.

Three men were loitering in the southwest corner by the drinking fountain. Two more were approaching, and a woman was walking toward the fountain from the opposite direction. All the men wore bits of red ribbon on their coat lapels—the woman on her right shoulder.

And Verbeck saw something else, too—men who were scattered about in couples, each couple pretending to carry on an animated conversation, but watching the corner. They were detectives, several of whom Verbeck recognized.

He walked past the fountain swiftly and turned the corner. Faustina Wendell and her brother were approaching him side by side, each decorated with the red ribbon. In a moment they would be out where the detectives would see, if they had not been observed already. Verbeck had removed his hat and coat, and as he turned the corner he tossed them to a check boy. He almost ran forward to meet Faustina and Howard. He knew it lacked but a few seconds to midnight.

"Quick!" he whispered, as he met them. "Don't ask questions, but, for Heaven's sake, do as I say! Take off that red ribbon—quick! Howard! Get back on the floor—anywhere to get out of sight. Faustina—come!"

Verbeck himself tore the ribbon from her shoulder as Howard removed his own. He pushed Howard ahead of him until he was on the dancing floor. He grasped Faustina about the waist—he waltzed her out into the crowd!

The hands of the clock pointed to

midnight—and from the southwest corner of the lobby came sounds of a commotion as the detectives, obeying their orders, closed in on the Black Star's crooks!

CHAPTER XIII.

MUGGS—GREAT LITTLE MAN!

VERBECK felt Faustina grow limp in his arms, and he waltzed her to a position near the wall and the door. Howard stepped over to them.

"You—you——" Faustina was trying to speak.

"Don't say a word," Verbeck whispered. "I understand everything. There is no danger for you. I have destroyed all the notes you wrote, and the check Howard gave."

"But——"

"Thank Heaven I was in time! I almost failed to save you!"

"To save me——"

"Careful—whisper! Step closer, Howard. I, too, was almost caught in the Black Star's trap. I discovered his hiding place and took him prisoner. I knew his gang would have to be caught if ever he was to be convicted, and so I tried to play a lone hand against him. Muggs warned me—he had a hunch, he said. While the Black Star was kept prisoner, I played his part, issued orders, got all of the gang to be here to-night, then informed the police to take them in."

"You——" Howard began.

"Careful—act naturally! I gave you and Faustina orders, too, not knowing. Then the Black Star told me what I had done, tried to get me to let him go free. And I rushed to that house where he had his headquarters, and destroyed the letters and Howard's check. Nobody knows you were involved except the Black Star and myself, and the Black Star cannot prove anything. And that Chicago partner of his, you may be sure, will remain away. You'll never

be bothered. I've saved you—but I had a narrow escape."

"Oh, Roger!" Faustina whispered. "And—almost—I thought that you were the Black Star. I recognized the ring, and your hand—and Howard watched that night and saw you go home at four o'clock in the mor——"

"I was afraid of that," Verbeck said.

"I didn't—really—mistrust you," she said. "But it—it looked so peculiar. And so we came here to-night—but we talked it over first, and decided we'd not steal. I couldn't do it, dear, and neither could Howard. And you must not blame Howard too much about that check. He was young, thoughtless—it has been a great lesson to him. They really stole the money from him, and he got it back from them. We intended going to the corner—at midnight—no matter what happened. We expected the worst—but we couldn't steal."

"My girl!" Verbeck breathed.

There was more commotion in the lobby. Some of the dancers were walking in that direction, and Verbeck led Faustina there, with Howard on her other side, in a manner as natural as possible.

The Black Star's men and the woman wore handcuffs. Detectives were taking jewels from them, gems they had stolen in the last hour or so. One of the men already was cursing the Black Star aloud, swearing that the Black Star had betrayed them, and declaring he would tell everything he knew. Verbeck was thankful he had gone to the house and destroyed the letters.

"There were to be eight men and two women," he heard a captain say. "We're one man and one woman shy."

"I saw another woman with the red ribbon on," spoke up one of the detectives. "Maybe I'd recognize her if I saw her again."

"We'll have all the exits guarded, and you can look——"

Verbeck whirled to Faustina.

"We've got to get out of this quick!" he said. "That man may have seen you, may recognize you. If we get out now, we are safe, for if he saw you on the street, afterward, in different clothes, he'd never recognize you. And nobody would suspect Faustina Wendell. But right now it would be dangerous for him to see you."

"What can we do?" Howard asked, in sudden alarm.

"Quiet! Act naturally, for Heaven's sake. Come with me to the door. You came in the electric?"

"Yes," Faustina said.

"Get all our things in the check room, Howard—as naturally as possible, remember—and meet us at the door——"

Already he was leading Faustina toward the nearest entrance. The captain of detectives was rushing there to go on guard immediately. Howard came from the check room, and Verbeck put Faustina's wrap over her shoulders.

"Wait a minute there!" It was the captain of detectives who called to them. "I want to see you before you go—— Oh, 'tis you, Mr. Verbeck? You and your young lady and her brother? Go right along, sir. We're trying to catch a crook or two—we want to watch all who leave. Sorry to have bothered you, sir——"

"That's all right, captain," Verbeck said. "I hope you catch your crooks." He lifted his hat and led Faustina out into the corridor, Howard following. They went out into the softly falling snow and the soft blur of thousands of electric lights to safety.

They started toward the corner where the electric had been left. But, before they reached it, Verbeck halted in surprise, and with an exclamation of unbelief on his lips. Muggs was running toward him.

"May I speak to you a minute—boss?" he asked.

Wondering, Verbeck excused himself and stepped to one side.

"I've got the Black Star in the car across the street, where it's dark," Muggs said. "I gave him a crack on the head and threw him on the floor of the car and put a robe over him—but he's liable to come to, any time."

"How——"

"For the love of Mike, boss, hand the devil over to the police and get rid of him. I've still got that hunch!"

Verbeck hurried back to the others.

"Get in the electric and wait for me at the corner," he directed. "I'll be only a minute or so."

As they started on, Verbeck followed Muggs across the street. He knew exactly what he intended doing; there would not be any waste of time.

"We'll act on that hunch of yours right now, Muggs," he said. "Drive to the entrance of the hall."

In a moment they were there. Verbeck went inside and called the captain of detectives to him.

"Bring a couple of your men and come out here," he said. "I've got the Black Star for you. Yes—come along! I'm the man who caught him, captain, and did the telephoning to the chief."

The captain and two others followed Verbeck to the curb. The Black Star was groaning, but not yet conscious.

"Take him away," Verbeck directed. "I've got to escort my fiancée home, and she's waiting in a car at the corner. This is Muggs, my man. He'll follow out to my fiancée's home with the car, and I'll drive right back in it to headquarters and tell you the story. Watch that man, captain—he's a smooth customer. Muggs—you understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Muggs.

Muggs understood—he knew the adventure was over. He was comrade in arms no longer; he was Verbeck's servant again now. And he made the change without the least effort, as he often had done before.

He stepped aside with Verbeck, as the officers carried the Black Star around the corner to a patrol wagon—the Black Star was wearing handcuffs.

"The police followed me back up in town," Muggs explained. "I couldn't get away by running, so I tricked 'em. I went to the union depot—time for a bunch of trains to be due, you see, and a big crowd there. I got a lead on 'em and whirled around the corner and stopped my car among a bunch of others—got out and was standing on the walk looking innocent and picking my teeth when the cops rushed by. They went on past the depot—supposed I had gone that way. Easy! Then I started up again to get back near the hall. Remember that dark space near the middle of the viaduct, where so many hold-ups come off? Just as I got there, I saw Mr. Black Star sneaking along with a suit case in one hand. Stopped the car and smashed him on the head with a wrench before he knew it! Threw him in the car and covered him up—see? Easy!"

Verbeck's hand gripped that of Muggs for an instant, and then he hurried to join Faustina and Howard.

"We've got the Black Star, too," was all he said. "I'll have to run back to police headquarters after I go home with you, and tell them all about it. And I'll explain the entire thing to both of you to-morrow morning. I suppose you'll kiss me now, Faustina, even if Howard is looking? You wouldn't, you know, when you suspected me of being the Black Star."

Although she was driving the car, Faustina ran the risk of collision by taking her eyes off the street long enough to do as Verbeck wished.

Then, satisfied, he settled back in the seat beside Howard.

"One thing," he said, "I shall do. After this, I'll pay more attention to any hunch Muggs may get. Great little man—Muggs!"

The Crime Destroyer

by Frank Conly

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

A NEW YORK physician, Doctor Thomas Bernard, is examining the body of a wealthy patient, John Brittain, who has just been found dead, when he strangely encounters Humphrey Steene, a detective. At Steene's request, Bernard goes the same afternoon to the detective's offices, and learns that Steene is at the head of a body of detectives who are operating against a secret organization thriving on graft and crime, headed by Ivan Ivanovitch. The organization is called the Loyal Order of the White Bear, consisting of Cubs, or probationers, who support the society financially; members of the Intermediate Degree, who are the men who commit the deeds of the order as laid out by a large group known as the Inner Shrine, the third and highest division. Doctor Bernard tells the detective that John Brittain was murdered. At Steene's offices, from which Ivan Ivanovitch's rooms can be watched, they learn that Bernard is considered a marked man by the order. The doctor consents to join Steene and aid him to the end. A plan is formed whereby attention can be turned from the doctor. Upon arriving home, Bernard learns that Mildred Brittain—in whom the doctor has a personal interest—who is the recipient of her father's wealth, has been kidnaped, and that Bob Brittain, her cousin, is a Cub.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FINGER OF SUSPICION.

JUDGE of my feelings, at seeing worn by my best friend and the cousin of the girl I loved, the insignia of the Order of the White Bear, which that day I had learned to hate and to fear.

Humphrey Steene's questions had brought it to my mind that, John Brittain being dead, only Mildred stood between Bob Brittain and an enormous fortune. Would it have been surprising if I had for a moment suspected that the young man before me was acting a part?

Let me mention in detail a few of the points against him that forced themselves into my thoughts in a single flash. Unless he had been mentioned in his uncle's will, not yet read, Bob Brittain was a poor man. His father had been a clergyman, with less world-

liness than most. Financially, he had never been a success. Bob owed his education to his uncle, from whom, in addition, he had received a fair allowance. As his chum, I knew him to be deep in debt. For a time he had studied medicine, though he had abandoned all idea of practicing long before. The death of John Brittain had been accomplished by a means that could only have occurred to some one possessed of considerable knowledge of the human anatomy. He was no bungler who had crept up behind the millionaire—absorbed in his affairs—and instantly put him to death. Till he abandoned the medical course, Bob Brittain had shown promise of becoming a skillful surgeon.

Add to these the points already made clear: that the death of his uncle left only Mildred between Bob Brittain and a great inheritance, and that Mildred had disappeared. Then try to answer the above pertinent question.

But let me say that, despite these considerations, I could not believe him guilty. Humphrey Steene had suggested a connection between these dramatic happenings and the fact that Bob Brittain was his cousin's heir. I wished now that I had forced him to be explicit. He had bidden me to learn if Bob Brittain was connected with the Order of the White Bear. Here he was, wearing an insignia that proclaimed him at least a "Cub." I was tempted there and then to question him regarding the order, but refrained.

Instead, I feigned astonishment, and allowed him to see something of my very real anxiety.

"Sit down, Bob," I invited. "I'll mix you something, for you surely need a bracer."

He sank limply into a chair.

"All right, Tom; but tell me what to do. I can scarcely think."

I handed him a stiff brandy and soda.

"Drink that," I said, and he obeyed.

"Now tell me, what have you done?" I asked.

"I've been to the police, and they promised to send out a confidential alarm if——"

"If what?"

"They seemed to think I was crazy. Wanted to know how I knew if my cousin had been kidnaped. She might have gone to friends, and more than likely I'd hear from her in a day or two."

"Might they not be right?"

He stared at me blankly; then his face cleared slightly.

"I forgot. I thought I had given you—this."

He pulled a soiled envelope from his pocket and handed it to me. I saw at a glance that it had been addressed in pencil by Mildred Brittain.

"A man brought it—an Italian, I think. He left it at the club. Said he'd picked it up in West Fourth Street.

I didn't show it to the police. You'll see why if you'll read it."

I took a note from the envelope and read:

Oh, Bob, I am in terrible trouble. Had a raging headache and went walking in the park. I was about to cross the driveway when an automobile drew up suddenly in front of me, and before I could cry out, I was hustled into it by two men who stepped out from some bushes. I don't know where they are going to take me, but I am terribly frightened. From what I have overheard, it will be useless to go to the police. Take this to Doctor Tom and get his advice. I shall try to throw it into the street, in the hope that it may reach you. Good-by. MILLY.

Bob Brittain's handsome face was turned eagerly to mine. I recalled that even as a boy, selfish and headstrong, he had always looked to me for help and advice, when he found himself in deep water. But this time I felt almost as helpless as he.

Instead of running directly across the city from the vicinity of the East River to the Hudson, as most of the numbered streets do, West Fourth Street has a way of popping up suddenly at unexpected corners. You find one end of it as far uptown as West Thirteenth—or almost. The letter might have been picked up anywhere along its tortuous length; and we had small chance of tracing the man—probably "an Italian"—who had brought it to the club and left it with a clerk.

The very trust Mildred had seemed to place in me, in bidding her cousin come to me, wrung my heart. I knew not what to do—unless it was to trust to the vague promise of Humphrey Steene, who had confessed that, in pursuit of the great task he had undertaken, he was liable to lose sight of the individual.

But I had promised to work with him, and I would do nothing likely to endanger his plans. It was useless to go to him now, for already he knew almost as much as I did—if not more.

I tried to decide what I would have advised if I had known nothing of the Order of the White Bear, and had never seen Humphrey Steene. Taking this note to headquarters would have been the first step. That could be dispensed with, inasmuch as Steene would certainly consult with the commissioner himself, if he considered it advisable.

I might advise Bob Brittain to secure the services of the clerk who had received the note. In West Fourth Street, or its immediate vicinity, they might come upon the man who had brought it to the club. I could see nothing against this plan, so I suggested it. He clutched at it eagerly, only asking that I should go also.

In ordinary circumstances, I would have gone—nothing could have restrained me from going, I would have thought. But the knowledge that I was a marked man restrained me. If I was to be of any use to Humphrey Steene, I must allay the suspicions of the order regarding what I knew.

"I could do no possible good, Bob," I told him. "If you find your man, and the locality where the note was picked up, telephone me and I shall come."

He jumped up, anxious not to lose a moment unnecessarily.

"I'll be round at the house on Fifth Avenue in the morning, to see the family lawyer and the undertaker and fix up the final arrangements for Uncle John's funeral. Won't you come, too, as a sort of moral backer?"

I smiled inwardly at Bob Brittain's peculiar weakness. He would go through fire and water, so long as he felt that he had some one he believed in at his back; without support, he was as helpless as a lost puppy. It was when I considered how easily he might be led for evil by the secret agents of the White Bear that my heart turned to lead.

"I'll be there, Bob," I promised.

CHAPTER X.

A MYSTERIOUS ACCIDENT.

AT eleven next morning, the butler answered my ring and admitted me to the Brittain residence on Fifth Avenue.

"Mister Robert is in the library, sir. He expects you," said Fielding.

There was something fascinating about Fielding; he was so stolid. He was English, and his late employer had considered him a treasure. Certainly he had the business of being a butler reduced to a fine art, but he was altogether too smooth for my liking. I found myself recalling my suspicions, aroused by Humphrey Steene's avoidance of the man. But if he knew anything, it was hidden behind an inscrutable mask of punctilious dignity—the mask of the perfect English manservant.

Bob Brittain was unfeignedly glad to see me, but he looked a wreck.

"Any results?" I asked, though I knew already what the answer would be. He shook his head despondently.

"Nothing. We kept up the search so long as there were a dozen people to be found on West Fourth Street, but saw nothing of the Italian. We're going down there again this afternoon, as soon as Tomkins, the clerk at the club, is off duty."

I raised no objection, having nothing better to suggest till I should have seen Humphrey Steene.

Mr. Whiting will be here any minute; and Felix, the undertaker, promised to be here at half past eleven."

"He'll be on time," I put in, conscious that the grim jest was out of place.

"I want you to hang around and help me with advice when you think it necessary."

"All right, Bob, I'll do what I can."

We lapsed into silence, oppressed by the associations of that room. It was

there John Brittain had been found dead, only the day before. My companion's next speech came as a distinct shock:

"Tom—don't tell me I'm getting nutty—do you think it possible that my uncle met with foul play?"

Strange how little control we have over our own thoughts. Here was I, prepared with my last breath to defend my old chum against the suggestion from any one else that he might be an accomplice of his uncle's murderer. Yet, at these few words, innocently uttered, I caught myself wondering if he could be playing a part. Why had he asked that question? What had suggested "foul play" to his mind—unless he knew, and desired to know whether I suspected?

His next words relieved me, revealing, as they did, the perfectly logical working of his thoughts.

"I can't help thinking that he must have had some secret enemy. Why has Mildred been kidnaped? Where has she been taken? Who is responsible?"

"And if we could answer these questions, might we not find that Uncle John was murdered—by the use of some subtle poison of which medical science knows nothing?"

"There is something in what you say, Bob—at least there would be if I didn't happen to know exactly what caused your uncle's death."

There was a crash outside the door. Without a moment's loss of time, I flung it open. A jardinière which had stood in the hall, close to the door, on the side from which it opened, had fallen from an Oriental stool on which it had rested, and lay shattered at our feet. A big rubber plant it had contained lay among the débris, the damp soil staining the valuable Persian rug.

There was no one in sight, and while I looked into Bob Brittain's pallid face—he had closely followed me into the hall—the front-door bell rang.

In a few moments, Fielding appeared from the servants' staircase. His eyebrows went up slightly in astonishment.

"This thing fell over of its own accord. I think I must have brushed against the plant on entering the room, and perhaps moved the whole thing rather near the edge."

"It was a trifle large for the pot, sir," said the butler. "With your permission, gentlemen, I shall open the door. I believe it is Mr. Whiting. I shall have the wreckage cleaned up immediately, sir."

Obedying his gentle hint, we returned to the library, and waited for him to announce the lawyer. I thought I had been most convincing in my pretense at believing myself responsible for the accident; but I would have staked a thousand dollars that that most estimable butler had had his ear glued to the keyhole while we were talking. Something he heard had startled him so violently that he had forgotten all about the plant in the jardinière, and, stepping back suddenly, had knocked it over. Was it the sound of footsteps on the steps outside; or had my words appeared ominous to a guilty conscience, I wondered.

"Confounded funny business, that thing going over like that!"

Bob Brittain's nerves were still shaky. I was saved the necessity of replying by the entrance of the butler.

"Mr. Whiting," he announced, and the lawyer came briskly into the library.

"How do, Brittain? Hello, doc!"

Grave of face, as befitted the occasion, he could not altogether suppress his usual buoyant spirits. We shook hands.

"How is Miss Brittain this morning? Better composed than when I saw her yesterday, I hope?"

Our manner told him there was something wrong.

"What is it? Nothing serious, I

trust? Not another patient on your hands, doctor?"

"Kidnaped! Pre-posterous!" he ejaculated, almost angrily.

Bob Brittain put Mildred's note into his hand.

His jovial countenance assumed a worried expression.

"Pre-posterous!" he ejaculated once more.

He was examining the note and the envelope that had contained it.

"You are sure this is Miss Brittain's writing?"

"Positive!" Both of us answered together.

"What have you done? What are you doing here, idle, with danger hanging over that child?"

"I've been to the police," Bob Brittain told him. "I didn't show them the note, so they were inclined to believe Mildred had gone to friends on her own accord, and would communicate in a day or so."

He proceeded to recount the circumstances under which he had received the note, and his search the night before.

Mr. Whiting screwed up his face till it looked positively comical in its seriousness.

"This is a case for a private-detective organization; I know the very man."

"Who?" Bob Brittain leaned toward him eagerly; but at that moment I was paying attention to neither of them. My eyes were riveted on a face that had appeared among the lilac bushes beyond the balcony rail, attempting to read the signals its owner was making with two fingers of one hand. He held them up, pointed to the lawyer and to me, and then indicated a single-story annex that ran out at the

back of the house, which I knew to be the billiard room.

Before Mr. Whiting could reply to Bob Brittain's question, I interrupted them:

"If you will excuse us, Bob, I wish to consult with Mr. Whiting a few moments. We'll go to the billiard room—if you have no objection."

He stared at me, surprised and hurt, but quickly recovered his equilibrium.

"Certainly, Tom, go right ahead."

He drew out a gold-mounted cigarette case, and lighted a cigarette—possibly to steady his impatience—and wonderingly the lawyer followed me from the room.

CHAPTER XI.

A JOLT FROM THE LAWYER.

WHAT next, doc?"

Mr. Whiting was almost as impatient as Bob Brittain himself. He shot out the question before I had closed the door of the billiard room behind us—and locked it.

Instead of answering, I crossed the length of the room and opened one of the rear windows. It was fully eight feet above the ground, but with that agility he had already shown me on the occasion of our journey over roofs and fences in West Sixteenth Street, Humphrey Steene swung himself up and over the sill.

"Think of the devil——" the little lawyer exclaimed. His eyes were round with astonishment.

"'Lo, Whiting! D'ye mean you wanted to consult me?"

Contrasted with his melodramatic predilection for back yards, gardens, and roof tops, Steene's matter-of-factness was always a trifle disconcerting.

Mr. Whiting chuckled ruefully.

"You'd be the death of me, Humphrey, if my heart weren't as sound as a bell."

He had Mildred's note still in his

hand, and he thrust it into that of the crime destroyer.

"What's this? Oh, yes—Miss Brittain left town last night. Doctor Bernard could have told you that. For the present, she is safe."

He was giving me credit for more knowledge than I possessed, but I said nothing. Thinking of the matter afterward, I decided that I might have arrived at the conclusion he suggested. The message Humphrey Steene had read from the roof had said she was on the way to a safe place. That must have been two hours, at least, after Mildred Brittain had thrown the note from a window in West Fourth Street—perhaps much more. If it had been planned to remove her to some other part of New York, the agents of the order responsible would have done so before reporting to Ivan Ivanovitch. The only inference to be drawn, therefore, was that she was being taken somewhere a considerable distance out of town, and, as the message had said, was "on the way."

Leaving the lawyer to digest the situation as well as he might be able, Steene fired a question at me:

"What have you learned, doctor?"

A barely perceptible motion of the head indicated the general direction of the library, where Bob Brittain waited.

"A Cub," I responded crisply.

"I thought so. Look out for talk of promotion."

He switched abruptly to another subject:

"When do you go on your vacation?"

"I sent a night letter to Bloom; probably his reply is at my house now."

"Good! I shall expect you to make the *Eutopia* unless I hear from you to the contrary."

He turned to the lawyer:

"John Brittain was murdered, Whiting; hence what may have appealed to you as peculiar conduct on our part."

The little lawyer sat down suddenly, bereft of speech. Fortunately there was a chair just back of him at the time, or I am convinced he would have reached the floor.

"I am telling you, because I want you to use precaution and reticence."

Mr. Whiting's lips had gone blue.

"Is it the O——"

Humphrey Steene stopped the question with a warning motion of his hand, but nodded grimly. Then he walked to the window and peered out cautiously. With one foot over the sill, he spoke to me, with a surprising softening in his tone:

"For the present, Miss Brittain is safe, doctor. She is protected. This time I am not forgetting—the individual."

He hoisted himself over the window ledge, and was gone.

I turned to Whiting and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Pull yourself together," I recommended; "we are all in safe hands."

"I hope so, doc, I hope so," he answered, all the usual buoyancy gone from him. "Does Bob Brittain know?"

"No; and we won't tell him—yet."

We had been no more than seven minutes out of the library, when we returned and found Bob Brittain lighting a third cigarette. He threw it down when we entered, and regarded us expectantly.

"On the whole, we think it best that you should continue the search in person for the present, but keep in touch with Mr. Whiting," I hastened to say.

Apart from the idea of wishing to account for our conference in private, I saw that it was better to give him something to do, though I well knew the work would be barren of result.

His face lighted with eagerness.

"It's almost noon now; I must get off as soon as possible."

Then he entered into a discussion with the lawyer regarding arrange-

ments for his uncle's funeral, et cetera, and when I saw that he was handling matters in a businesslike way, I pleaded "my patients," and left them together.

I did have some calls to make, and kept my appointments before returning to Park Avenue. There I found a telegram from Bloom—he could come a week earlier than we had at first arranged—and a uniformed messenger awaiting me.

"From Mr. Bernstein," he said, as he handed me a sealed envelope. "He told me to hand it to you, sir, and no one else."

I gave him a dollar bill. I was thinking of a man I had seen on the sidewalk outside my house. He had moved off, while the car was still two blocks away, but I recognized him—having seen him acting the part of sleuth the night before.

"Of course, if you are asked any questions, you will answer——"

The lad winked profoundly.

"I never do, doctor," he said: "leastwise, not when Mr. Bernstein sends me out."

He touched his cap and withdrew. His answer had given me a complete sense of security, as I reflected that there seemed to be no branch of public service wherein Humphrey Steene lacked picked agents that were absolutely to be trusted.

Nevertheless, Humphrey Steene's message was startling, to say the least. As I read it, the icy hand of fear clutched at my heart once more. The message was this:

You are now 1004, minus. Be wary. After Thursday you should be safe.

After Thursday! As yet it was only Friday. That left six and a half days in which I was to be exposed to the danger of sudden death. Hundreds of agents of the Order of the White Bear might be waiting a favorable opportunity to strike—or perhaps only one specially chosen for the task.

I had been considered a neutral—one to be watched constantly. Why was my sign now a minus—signifying death?

Then I recalled the incident of the fallen jardinière, and the words I had uttered immediately before it crashed to the floor:

"If I didn't happen to know exactly what caused your uncle's death."

I felt that I needed a bracer just then—and I took it.

CHAPTER XII.

A MIDNIGHT TRANSFER.

IT was a nightmare week I passed before the sailing of the *Eutopia*. I went about my business as a physician to the last, but I took certain obvious precautions. For instance, I slept—for the first time in my life—with door locked and windows fastened, and kept a loaded revolver under my pillow.

Three times I received calls in the night from people unknown to me, and, while I consider it the first duty of a physician to answer the call of humanity, in each case I advised the caller to get another doctor, as I could not come. Doctors are plentiful enough in New York, and I would take no chances till I was assured of the permanent safety of Mildred Brittain.

Knowing what I do now of the methods of the Order of the White Bear and the bold determination of its members of the Intermediate Degree, I am inclined to believe that it was the fact that I reserved a stateroom on the *Eutopia* the same day I received Humphrey Steene's warning that saved me. My simple precautions could not have frustrated their plans, but they were not given to committing crimes that promised neither advantage nor profit, and I think my apparent purpose to leave America for a time led them to give me the benefit of the doubt.

Doctor Bloom arrived the day before

the steamer was due to sail, and I took him around to present him to as many of my patients as possible in the time at my disposal.

The same evening, I had a second message from Humphrey Steene, which brought me considerable ease of mind. It suggested the points mentioned above, reading:

Temporarily reprieved. *Bon voyage!*

Apparently, if I could now convince the spies of the order that I really was going to Europe, my name might be struck even from their "neutral" list.

Some of my more intimate friends saw me off; but Bob Brittain was only among them. He had been keenly disappointed to learn of my proposed trip, seeming to think I was deserting him—and Mildred—in the hour of greatest need. I could not blame him; yet, neither could I explain.

Doubtless I was shadowed right to the gangway. Doubtless a watch was kept till the mooring cables were cast and the vessel backed into the Hudson. As I waved a last farewell to my friends, I fancied I recognized the shoulders of a man who was elbowing his way out of the crowd. I thought it might be the same fellow I had twice seen in Park Avenue, loitering before my residence, but I could not be sure. On the whole, I am inclined to think I was mistaken, for, with so many to call upon, the Order of the White Bear was hardly likely to run the risk of discovery by using the same man to spy on the same individual more than twice.

The *Eutopia* was due to pass the Nantucket Light about midnight. I had made a point of retiring to my stateroom soon after ten, and I had avoided making any acquaintances among my fellow passengers. They might have missed me next day.

None of the ship's officers had paid any special attention to me, which surprised me a little, till I reflected that

Humphrey Steene had in all probability carefully coached them. Anything that might have attracted notice from other passengers was to be avoided as possibly risky and certainly unnecessary.

When I made my way on deck again, I was wearing a light overcoat with a wide collar, which I raised to cover the lower part of my features. The brim of a panama obscured the rest.

The passengers had been requested to leave the decks at ten, which is the usual rule on shipboard, and there was no one in sight. Voices aft, however, warned me that the smoking room was still occupied by the inveterate poker and bridge fiends.

I had scarcely left the companion when a tall, middle-aged man of striking appearance loomed up beside me with an abruptness that was, in the circumstances, startling. His highly ornate uniform reassured me.

"That you, doctor? I am Captain Matthews."

We shook hands, and I answered, in a low tone, to match his:

"Yes—I was beginning to wonder whether——"

"I don't understand all this business, but I have my orders, and I'll see it through," he broke in.

I think the skipper was inclined to be mistrustful of my adventure.

"What about these fellows back there? They'll wonder why the ship is stopping out here."

"They'll think we're dropping the pilot, quite likely. They'd be too busy making themselves at home below to notice that we stopped for that off Sandy Hook. As for the old stagers, they won't let anything less than a fire call, or a bump from an iceberg, interrupt their game. But I'll post a couple of stewards at each entrance to see that no rubber-necked curiosity monger comes on deck. Yonder's your friends, I guess."

The sky was overcast, so that neither

moon nor stars showed. Here and there the lights of vessels were in view. He pointed in the direction of the Massachusetts shore, where a rocket had gone skyward. Then there came a hail from over the starboard bow, answered from the bridge by the officer of the watch. The engines ceased their throbbing, and the giant liner slowed down.

"Come along, doctor."

I followed the captain to the boat deck, and to the starboard rail.

"Over with you, doctor! Good-by, and good luck!"

I looked over the side, and perceived a shadowy object that might have been a boat riding alongside. My groping hands found the upper end of a rope ladder, and, taking my courage between my teeth, I climbed over the rail. With a muttered "Good night, captain, and thanks!" I cautiously descended.

Presently a strong hand grasped my arm and steadied me while I found a footing in the crazily bobbing boat.

"Ye'll find a seat in the stern," a gruff voice told me, and by good luck I chose the right direction first off.

There were more mumbled good nights from the rail, now far above me. The man who had helped me aboard pushed off, and shipped the single pair of oars. Already the ship's engines had renewed their throbbing as the vessel proceeded on its way, leaving me in a dancing craft that seemed to me perilously small for the sort of work required of it.

In about fifteen minutes, we were on board the vessel that had sent up the rocket. This proved to be a government cutter, as I had been led to expect, and she promptly turned about and raced for land.

The officers were silent to the point of taciturnity, and I found my welcome rather chilly. One of the men, however, motioned me to follow him, and led me into a small but comfortable sa-

loon. A strongly built man rose from the table to greet me:

"Well, here you are, doctor! How did you like your night's adventure?"

Coming from the darkness into brilliant electric light, I had not immediately recognized him; but there was no mistaking his voice. With the feeling that an immense load of responsibility had been lifted from my shoulders, I grasped the outstretched hand of Humphrey Steene.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NEW ALIAS.

"I SUPPOSE you feel you have earned the right to turn in and go to sleep, doctor," said Steene. "You have; but I must get back to New York in the morning, so we must discuss your plans."

"I think you should be fairly comfortable on board here."

My eyebrows went up in questioning surprise.

"There's no part of these United States where you are safe from the spies of the White Bear," he explained. "While you have been reprieved, because your departure for Europe seemed to suggest that, after all, you do not suspect that John Brittain was murdered, if you should be recognized anywhere on this side, your life wouldn't be worth three cents. Remember that sketch. It is crude work, I admit, but far more reliable than an actual photograph for identification purposes. Two photographs of the same individual may appear so different as to be unrecognizable; but a sketch executed by a clever character artist brings out the salient features of a face so distinctly as to be unmistakable.

"For that reason, you will be safer on board this cutter, for a couple of weeks or so. You are to consider it as a private yacht. The captain's room is at your disposal, and you will find there

everything you are likely to require. As you have generally favored dark suits, I have supplied you with light grays and greens. I advise you to let your hair grow a trifle long, and to cultivate a beard and mustache. Your hair is almost black, so a little peroxide treatment will change it to a brilliant Titian. Don't forget that it will keep on growing, and neglect to treat it near the roots every two or three days. Your eyebrows you can leave as they are, while a beard of mixed shades will appear most natural.

"Three weeks' cruising will give you a healthy tan quite in keeping with a recent ocean voyage. When your beard is presentable, you can go ashore for a time till you hear from me."

"But why the ocean voyage?"

"When you return to New York, having lost your own identity, you must already have provided yourself with another to take its place. Have you any friends abroad that are also friends of Bob Brittain?"

I thought a moment.

"There's Jean de Frenex. He was a classmate of ours at Harvard. Now he is in partnership with his father, the well-known art dealer."

"The very thing!"

Humphrey Steene's satisfaction was evident.

"You will let me have a letter to him. Ask him to forward you a letter of introduction to Bob Brittain, say, as George Sanders, an English artist living in Paris, who has been ordered to take a complete rest from his labors. He is taking the opportunity to visit America. Your make-up will fit the part perfectly—see that you sport low collars and flowing neckties. I'll see that a berth is reserved on one of the big transatlantic liners—for George Sanders. You can board her at sea."

I was quite willing to fall in with his plans. My only objection was that they necessitated my staying away from

New York so long. It was no easy thing for me to remain inactive for three weeks, or perhaps a month, while the girl I loved remained in the hands of enemies whose intentions I could only guess at. Only my growing faith in Humphrey Steene rendered the course feasible. Without his advice and help, I should probably have dashed in blindly, risking my own life, and probably increasing the danger to her.

The cutter ran close in to the Massachusetts shore, and Humphrey Steene was landed by one of her boats. Then we put to sea again.

Steene had introduced me to the captain and mate—excellent fellows, both, once you had pierced the outer crust of reserve—and they contrived to make me feel that the vessel was altogether at my service. Here, again, was an amazing revelation of Steene's standing with the various governing bodies of the country, not excluding the federal authorities. It increased my confidence in him, and in the ultimate safety of Mildred Brittain, even while it bore witness to the importance of his work and the tremendous power of the Order of the White Bear.

Nevertheless, I found the next three weeks a terrible strain on my patience. Back and forth along the coast we cruised, only putting into port when it was necessary to obtain fresh provisions or coal. On these occasions, I was constrained to remain secluded in the stateroom that had been put at my disposal.

I glory in the sea, and with deck quoits for exercise, chess and cards for recreation, and strong, healthy-minded men for companions, I cannot imagine a more enjoyable vacation under ordinary circumstances. But, hearing no word from Humphrey Steene, and lacking any other source of information regarding the matters about which I was most anxious, I grew fearful despite my reliance on his word and power.

My hair is fast growing, and at the end of three weeks I considered my beard and mustache sufficiently developed to pass for a long-established adornment. I decided to get my feet firmly planted on dry land once more, and told the captain of my decision.

He informed me that he had been instructed to put me ashore at a certain small village, which, for obvious reasons, I shall give the fictitious title of Bender. The second night after our conversation, the cutter ran into a tiny cove under cover of darkness.

"Here you are, Mr. Small," said the captain.

I realized that a second alias would be essential, since neither Sanders nor my own name would be safe to use.

One of the crew carried a bag ashore for me, and we proceeded to the sole hotel in the place.

"You'll be Mr. Small, I guess," said the landlord, eying me shrewdly.

I hesitated a moment, somewhat taken aback by this further evidence of Humphrey Steene's thoroughness.

"Yes," I admitted at length.

"Yer room's ready for ye. It's the first on the right at the top of the stairs. There's a letter."

He handed me an envelope, and a glance told me it was from Steene. Printed in the upper left-hand corner appeared:

J. Bernstein & Co.,
New York City, N. Y.
OVERCOATS.

Divining that probably it contained instructions for the near future, I bade the man from the cutter wait while I read its contents. The message was as follows:

DEAR MR. SMALL: We beg to notify you that the activities of our rivals compel us to request your early return to New York. We regret to ask you to cut short a well-earned vacation, and can only hope you have enjoyed yourself in the past three weeks. We shall expect you by Wednesday, at latest. Faithfully yours,
J. BERNSTEIN & Co.

For a space of seconds, the note puzzled me, but a New York paper that had been carelessly thrown on a table in the window provided—in the shipping column—this clew:

Due Wednesday,
La Parisienne Havre July 10

La Parisienne was the only vessel due to arrive from beyond the Atlantic on the day indicated for my return. My message to the cutter captain was brief:

"Monday, at midnight."

I sent it by word of mouth; then retired to my room.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TRAMP INTERVENES.

WHILE I did not know exactly when *La Parisienne* would pass Nantucket I was sure I had left a safe margin. I would board the cutter a full thirty-six hours before the vessel was due to reach quarantine. That would give me two days on shore, and, while my stay on the tug had been made very pleasant for me, I was nevertheless glad of a chance to stretch my legs on land again.

In the morning I discovered that my window provided a delightful view of the cove. The cutter that had brought me there was no longer in sight. A road curved round the bay, and I had also the greater part of Bender in sight. It was no more than a pleasantly situated fishing village, most of the houses being small, though neat appearing.

But on the other side of the bay, on a cliff overlooking the ocean, there was a large building which I took for a hotel of some pretensions. It struck me that I would have been much more comfortable there than in the house that had been chosen for me; but decided that Humphrey Steene had probably his reasons for the choice he had made. I dismissed the matter from my mind till next day, when a desire to enjoy the

view led me to the vicinity of the house on the hill.

My first day in Bender I spent mostly indoors, on account of a terrific rain-storm. There were a few visitors from New York and Boston living at the hotel, and from them I learned that there were more popular resorts a few miles on either side of us. They—the visitors—were of those who prefer the quieter byways, and preferred Bender on account of the excellent fishing.

I chatted with them with apparent frankness; told them that I had been out with some fishermen farther up the coast—my well-tanned appearance rendered some such explanation necessary—and had hoped to spend a week or two there. Alas for my plans, I had received on my arrival a letter from my firm recalling me to New York.

Their commiseration was so genuine that I was ashamed of the rôle I was forced to play. There was a party going out fishing next day, if it was not too stormy, and they invited me to join them, but I excused myself on the ground that I expected some important letters in the morning mail which would preclude an early start.

Monday the sun shone gloriously, and after breakfast I started out alone, intent on a long walk. I passed along the road skirting the bay, and started up the hill leading to the cliff on which I had noted the only house of any considerable dimensions in the vicinity. The hill was steep, and the road had been cut through solid rock. After the recent rain the atmosphere was surcharged with humidity, and I found myself inclined to grumble at whoever was responsible for constructing the road there instead of carrying it round the face of the cliff. However, I consoled myself with the thought that when I reached the top of the hill the view would amply repay me.

To my chagrin, I found that quite a considerable area of the cliff-top had

been fenced in. Numerous signs warned the wayfarer that the inclosure was private property and that trespassers would be rigorously prosecuted; so I was forced to go on still farther.

Presently I came to a large gateway and a lodge for its custodian; while a large sign, with gilt letters on a black background, told me that the building I had seen was no hotel. The sign read:

SANITARIUM.

G. J. Feldspar, M. D.

I had heard of Doctor Feldspar, and if some of the rumors current in the medical profession were true, he was not a man whose acquaintance I desired to make. He conducted a private institution for mental patients, and it was said that some of the inmates were there merely at the will of relatives who desired to control their property.

I had stopped to look along the drive, wondering if some of the stories I had heard of the place could have any foundation in fact, when a tramp, whom I had noted some fifty yards ahead along the road, sitting on a rock—probably because the grass was still damp—suddenly appeared beside me.

He was a disreputable object, his clothes a bundle of rags held together by sundry patches that no tailor had applied, and looking as if they had been thoroughly soaked the day before and had been allowed to dry on the wearer. As I looked him over severely, he grinned, showing teeth badly discolored, and asked in a bold tone:

"Got a match, mister?"

Probably with the idea of getting rid of him as quickly as possible, I handed him a box. With all the effrontery in the world, he produced a broken-off clay pipe, so black as to be almost a curiosity.

"Got a bit o' bacca?" he demanded.

"No," I answered shortly, and walked on briskly.

He made no attempt to detain me, but when, a couple of hours later, I returned the same way, he was seated on another bowlder between me and the gate of Doctor Feldspar's sanitarium.

Perhaps the view I had had from the cliff had softened me. At any rate, as I passed him I threw him my tobacco tin, with what was left of its contents. It fell just beyond his reach. He stretched out a foot, and after much effort contrived to draw the tin near enough to pick it up without changing his position. I had intended to exchange a few words with him, but this exhibition of laziness disgusted me, and I strode on.

I was once again opposite the gate to the sanitarium when the honk of an automobile horn caused me to look round sharply. The vehicle was coming at a rapid pace and took the turn in at the gate almost recklessly. But what caused my heart to leap and almost stand still was not that the car had missed me by inches, but that of its occupants one was a hard-featured woman dressed as a nurse, and the other was a beautiful young girl—I could not be mistaken—Mildred Brittain.

She had looked me straight in the eyes, but had given no sign of recognition. That hurt me, till I recalled that with Titian hair and a reddish Vandyke beard, I must have looked a very different individual from Tom Bernard, M. D. But what was she doing in that car? Why should she be an inmate of that house? All the doubtful rumors I had heard regarding the place came back to me with a rush. Here, I decided, was one of the strongholds of the Order of the White Bear. Well, whatever the consequences, I would see to it that Mildred Brittain did not remain within its portals an hour longer.

I braced my shoulders, and made a step toward the gate, determined that

if its custodian tried to stop me it would go hardly with him.

But it was not the gatekeeper that stopped me. Before I had reached that white portal that guarded so much of black villainy, I found myself faced by my friend, the tramp.

"I wouldn't go in there if I was you, mister," he said, and he grinned in my face.

"What the devil——"

In my frenzy, I had raised my hand to strike him, when he added:

"I don't reckon it's what Mr. Bernstein would advise."

Just then the gatekeeper appeared at the door of his lodge. The tramp had the tobacco tin in his hand. He held it in front of him in plain view of the lodge keeper, but without apparent ostentation.

"Thank ye kindly, mister; ye're a gent," he said; then went shuffling along the road in the direction from which I had just come.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MAN FROM PARIS.

THE incident of the tramp, who was patently one of Humphrey Steene's operatives, served to reassure me, at least to a certain extent, and I went on down the hill to Bender. I was satisfied that Steene was keeping his promise to guard Mildred Brittain from harm. Doubtless he had agents in the house itself, besides the man who, in various guises, had been posted outside to keep as close a guard as he might without arousing suspicion.

Nevertheless, I was glad I was to leave the village that night, for there was no doubt I would have tried to see Mildred, and perhaps to communicate with her, and might have endangered the success of the crime destroyer's plans.

So far as any of the visitors at the hotel knew, I was to take a train for

New York that passed through Bender at midnight. And not a light showed in the village when the landlord himself shouldered my bag and led the way to the dock. A boat from the cutter awaited me, and in ten minutes I was once again on board.

It is needless to detail the incidents that intervened before I was quietly smuggled onto the *La Parisienne*. Sufficient to say that it was accomplished without a hitch. As George Sanders, I was already on the ship's list of passengers. I had nothing to do but take possession of the stateroom that had been reserved for me, and, while the steward was curious, even he asked no questions.

The outfit Humphrey Steene had provided went on board with me, so that I was ready when the vessel docked in the Hudson at three o'clock on Wednesday afternoon, to assume a new individuality—that of George Sanders, English artist, lately resident in Paris, come to New York for rest. As I had always been a dub at drawing, I made up my mind that my "rest" would be complete.

I put up at the Giltmere Hotel, and waited till next day before calling on Bob Brittain with the letter of introduction from Jean de Frenez, which had been handed to me by the captain before I left *La Parisienne*. Bob had rooms in an apartment hotel in Washington Square, and thither I went in a taxi, arriving at eleven o'clock in the morning.

Bob Brittain had changed greatly in the few weeks I had been away. He looked worn, and had lost flesh. The sight of him banished any lingering suspicion I might have had that he was concerned in the murder of his uncle or the disappearance of his cousin. I think if I had been a real Mr. Sanders I would have perceived that my throwing myself on his hospitality was inopportune, but he did his best to make

me feel welcome. He asked me to stay to lunch, and promised to introduce me at his club—which was also my own—that evening.

After that first meeting, I think he took a genuine liking to Mr. Sanders. So far as the search for Mildred went, he had come to the end of his resources, and without results. I think he welcomed having me to entertain. It made him forget his troubles, or helped to do so.

My first idea had been to take Bob Brittain into my confidence, but I found to my surprise that Fielding had left the Brittain residence in Fifth Avenue and entered my chum's service. The first time I went to Bob's apartment, I thought the butler regarded me suspiciously, as some one whom he surely had seen before, but could not quite place. But when I saw that my disguise, coupled with my English accent—American vaudeville version—deceived the man who had been an intimate for years, I thought I could keep Fielding guessing for a time.

For three days I allowed myself to idle, and every day I gained new confidence in my disguise and histrionic abilities. I permitted Bob Brittain to introduce me among his social friends, many of whom were actually my own patients. Not once was I suspected of being anything but what I represented myself to be. Men were relieved to find me a "likable sort of fellow for an Englishman, and handy with racket or cue." With women, I talked insipid twaddle about cubism and what not, and consequently was considered "intellectual."

More than once fair patients—of Doctor Bernard—told me, with charmingly puckered brows, that I reminded them "so much" of some one, but they couldn't say just whom—for which I was duly thankful.

When I had been four days in New York, I decided that I must see Hum-

phrey Steene. I called up the number that Starkey, the chauffeur, had given me, and asked for R. S., as he had instructed.

He was in the garage, for which I was glad, and soon I recognized his voice at the other end of the wire.

"I want you to come at once to the Giltmere," I told him.

He hesitated, but presently answered:

"All right, sir. What name?"

"Small."

"Right ye are, sir," he responded, with alacrity.

In ten minutes he drove up to the curb, and, as I had been on the lookout for him, I lost no time in getting into the taxi.

"Drive right on," I instructed him.

When the vehicle had covered a block or two, I took up the speaking tube.

"You know me, Starkey?" I queried.

"Yep; but I wouldn't have, if I hadn't bin put hep."

"I want you to take me to Mr. Bernstein. Can you do it?"

"Surest thing."

Well satisfied, I settled back comfortably, leaving myself entirely in Starkey's hands.

Soon it became evident that I was being taken neither to the West Seventeenth Street address nor to the Hotel Forshay, where, ostensibly, Mr. Bernstein resided. The taxi had turned up Fifth Avenue and was speeding uptown. At Fifty-ninth Street we entered the park, and passed through it at something well above the legal speed limit. We made our exit into One Hundred and Tenth Street, and sped on up Eighth Avenue till we reached Manhattan Street, where we switched to Amsterdam Avenue. At One Hundred and Fifty-third Street, we turned west, but Starkey applied his brakes before we reached Broadway, turned about, and drew up at the curb on the south side of the street.

"Here ye are, sir. Ring Ralston's bell and go right up to the top floor. I'll wait."

It was a modest apartment house before which we had stopped, and I was more than a little surprised at the idea that Humphrey Steene might live there. However, I followed the chauffeur's suggestion by ringing the bell under which, on a soiled piece of cardboard, appeared the name of Ralston. The latch clicked energetically, and the door yielded to the pressure I put on it, giving access to a narrow hallway, both dingy and dark. I climbed five tedious flights of stairs, mentally classifying the odors that assailed me, ranging all the way from boiling cabbage to fried chicken.

On the top floor—as on all the rest—there were four doors. One of them opened as I reached the landing, and a neatly clad woman of middle age—the housekeeper—asked me my business.

"I want to see Mr. Ralston—my name is Small."

She stood aside for me to enter.

"Mr. Ralston isn't home yet, but he said for you to wait."

I hesitated at the threshold.

"I have a taxi; perhaps I'd better let him go."

"I have a message for Starkey, sir. I'll see him, if you don't mind."

At the woman's direction, I entered a small sitting room that had two windows at the rear of the building. The room was simply furnished, but with an eye to comfort. There were two excellent morris chairs upholstered in leather. A smoker's table held several boxes of cigars of choice brands, cigarettes, and a large humidor containing pipe tobacco. I made a few investigations, and discovered that while the cigars had scarcely been touched, the humidor was half empty, and a dozen pipes—meerschaum, French brier, churchwarden, and common

clay—eloquently revealed Humphrey Steene's besetting vice.

A large bookcase well filled with technical books told me I had been right in my first estimate of Steene as an engineer, at least in so far as they indicated that his tastes lay in that direction. Some of the books treated of such subjects as the Panama Canal and Conservation, in popular style; but the majority were far too abstruse for my comprehension. Strangely enough, I missed the most characteristic collection of objects in the place till I had been in that room almost fifteen minutes. Then they forced themselves on my attention. A clock in the center of the mantel chimed the quarter hours in tones superbly beautiful. I gave it my whole attention, waiting for it to strike the hour. I was not disappointed, for its strokes were richly resonant. Hardly had it finished, however, when another clock, equally perfect in tone, started chiming behind me. I located it on a shelf above the door. Just as it started striking, a second clock on the mantel struck, and it was a close race between them. Next one struck from a whatnot in the corner by the window; then two simultaneously from the top of the bookcase.

I kept turning my head as each accessible article of furniture yielded its music. I was trying to count them when a familiar voice addressed me from the door.

"That one will go off next, doctor," it said, and I wheeled to meet the man whose business was the destruction of crime, whose principal vice was an excessive indulgence in the fragrant weed, and whose chief hobby evidently was clocks.

He was pointing to a clock of Swiss manufacture on the wall, and I saw clearly that he was not to be interrupted.

"Now this one is going to chime in."

He indicated a third clock on the mantel.

For fully five minutes in all, clocks chimed or struck; or did both, all about us. There was not a jarring note, for they had been set so that none struck a note discordant with another performing at the same time, and through it all, Humphrey Steene maintained a beatific expression of countenance that brooked no interruption.

CHAPTER XVI.

MAINLY ABOUT CLOCKS!

"HAVE a cigar," Humphrey Steene invited, as soon as the clocks—there were nine of them in all—had lapsed into silence.

"Say, that disguise of yours is almost perfect. I doubt if your own mother would know you."

He waved me to one of the morris chairs, and himself took the other.

"You seem to be fond of clocks," I remarked, as I lighted up.

He was carefully filling a meerschauim with an extraordinarily large bowl.

"Yes—they represent so much," he responded reflectively.

"For instance?"

"Well, they were one of the earliest manifestations of the development of man's mechanical genius.

"But I think my weakness for them is because they typify organization. The pull of the mainspring sets going a mechanism—simple or intricate, as the case may be—and the ultimate result is definite and exact. The clock does not *deduce* the hour, the minute, the second. Yet, if the mechanism be perfect, it shows all these unerringly. Two of my clocks keep track of the days, the months, and the years, as well as these. They even give February its twenty-ninth day in leap years. Yet there is no process of reason involved.

"Granted, the phenomenon is to be

credited to man. But how seldom do we find the same precision applied to the problems that face us every day? As near as possible, I am applying it to the science of crime detection. I do not jump to conclusions, and call it deduction. I build up from the known, and reach the unknown, not by a process of logic, which depends on premises as uncertain as the results attained, but by putting every wheel and cog in place, then reading the figures on the dial to which the hands unerringly point."

But I was becoming impatient.

"Where do we stand now in regard to the problem that faces us?" I asked. "To use your own metaphor, what o'clock is it?"

He smiled.

"My clock is not yet completed. But we are nearing a crisis. I had Ivan Ivanovitch traced to a house not far from here, so I moved uptown. I took this place because it is near the roof and provides an excellent view. We will go up there presently—after sunset.

"Mildred Brittain is still safe. The Order does not commit murder unnecessarily. Bob Brittain is the one to watch. You must gain his entire confidence. I think you had better induce him to introduce you into membership of the White Bear."

I shrank from the suggestion, but he went on to explain:

"Very soon he will be asked to take the Intermediate Degree. If you can be sufficiently convincing as an advocate of anarchy, you may succeed in attaining a like honor. Then you will be in the camp of the enemy, and in a position to supply some of the cogs I need to make my clock perfect."

"But that would be to forswear myself, to take oaths I have no intention of fulfilling; to act the part of a spy," I protested, for I must confess the idea was repugnant to me.

"Yes, and the penalty of discovery is certain death," he grimly rejoined.

"Is there no other way?"

"Listen; the day Bob Brittain becomes a member of the Intermediate Degree of the Order of the White Bear, the danger to Mildred Brittain will begin."

I felt my cheeks blanch as I got to my feet, but I answered sternly and without hesitation:

"I will join the order. You hint at things I dare not even think, but I shall join. I myself will take a hand in a murder, if it is necessary to save her. But the hounds responsible for her father's death and the outrage to which she has been subjected will be my victims. Bob Brittain has been my best friend, but if I find he has had a hand in these crimes, I'll—I'll——"

"Easy, easy, doctor; there is no evidence against him," he interrupted me. "Indeed, I will vouch for his innocence—up to the present."

"To the present! What do you mean?"

"I thought you had grasped the situation long ago; let me make it clear. Young Brittain has been foolish. He is in debt—heavily in debt. He is a member of the Order of the White Bear; but he is only a Cub. Hundreds of young men in this city are Cubs—thousands of them. They are as ignorant of the real purposes of the organization as you were six weeks ago. They are fortunate. All they are asked to do is provide funds for the schemes of Ivan Ivanovitch and the enrichment of his bolder lieutenants, in the form of 'annual dues,' and 'special assessments.'"

"But take Brittain's case. He is in line for a huge fortune. Only two stood between him and riches beyond his powers to squander in a lifetime. One of these has already been removed. Despite his evident affection for his cousin, he cannot be oblivious to the fact that if she is never seen again—"

if her body should be found—or if she should ultimately be legally presumed to be dead, all his embarrassments will vanish and he will enter into control of one of the greatest corporations in America."

"You don't know Bob Brittain," I said, weakly trying to support my friend against Steene's ruthless logic—the sort of logic he affected to despise.

"I do know that it is to give time for these thoughts, to form and grow that the order has delayed action in the case of Mildred Brittain. They hope your friend will prove pliable. They will lead him a step at a time into the maze of secrecy that surrounds each degree attainable. They will test him in a hundred different ways before each succeeding revelation. Crime will be made to appear like justice in his eyes; failing that, it will be shown as at least advantageous.

"If he should yield his manhood and his will, the fate of his cousin is sealed—unless you and I can intervene. When they control him, they will control the fortune that comes to him. And, when all is said and done, greed is the mainspring of the Order of the White Bear. Those of the Inner Shrine who prate of the equality of man, the brotherhood of man, and the rights of man are but hypocrites gulling their credulous followers for profit. Ivan Ivanovitch is a monster with a heart of stone."

I was trembling with excitement and horror when Humphrey Steene finished this explanation. Truly, I now saw the scheme to ensnare Bob Brittain in all its hideousness.

"I am ready for anything now," I told him. "I shall join the order and penetrate to the Inner Shrine itself, if necessary."

"Meantime, let us fortify the inner man," he suggested practically, and conducted me to a small dining room,

where the housekeeper had served a substantial cold supper.

During the meal we talked of other things, and afterward we returned to the sitting room and discussed almost every subject under the sun, except the Order of the White Bear. But when it had become almost dark, he opened a drawer in his writing table and took out a pair of powerful binoculars.

"Time to go on the roof," he announced, and led the way onto the fire escape.

CHAPTER XVII.

ANOTHER ROOF EXCURSION.

TILL Humphrey Steene pointed it out to me, I had not supposed that the Alter Tower, one of the tallest in New York, was visible from so far uptown.

"The order chose the Alter as a sort of central exchange, because its upper windows are visible for considerable distances in every direction, over the intervening buildings," he told me. "That much my investigations since last I saw you have established. Messages can be sent at night to any quarter of the city, for in the guise of a successful advertising concern they occupy an entire floor, with windows facing each of the cardinal points of the compass. The house in Fourth Street—where Miss Brittain was first taken—is commanded from at least two of these windows, so far as the roof is concerned. But nothing can be heliographed in this direction. Only night messages can be sent."

"Why, then, should Ivanovitch choose to reside in this neighborhood?" I asked.

"He can flash his orders by day, and does so every morning. He only receives reports in the office he occupies in West Sixteenth Street. He also receives reports and gives orders at night, after he returns to the small flat he occupies back of us there."

He indicated a point roughly to the north of us, then trained the glasses on the Alter Tower.

"They are on the spot down there even on Sundays," he remarked. "Ah, here comes a message. They are not likely to stay long, so we don't want to miss anything. Take it down as I read."

I already had my notebook and pen ready, and I wrote to his dictation:

No. 814—Report: No. 51 reports No. 3, 049 C. ready for preliminary steps. Shall proceed at Tuesday's meeting.

Humphrey Steene turned, and, following his gaze, I perceived that the phenomenon of the alternately darkened and exposed light was being repeated within an upper room of an apartment house perhaps three blocks farther uptown—a house that stood all of four stories above the level of the roof where we were standing. This time he read without the use of glasses:

First sound out Sanders. He is much with him. I am suspicious.

Then from the tower:

Already investigated—No. 583, neut.—O. K. Arrived from France on *La Parisienne*, Wednesday. Letter of intro. from a former classmate of No. 3, 049 C. Thus No. 75 reports.

And finally from Ivan Ivanovitch:

Go ahead, then; but with caution.

We waited for further messages, but none came. After some fifteen minutes, we descended to Humphrey Steene's sitting room. He took my notebook from my hand and studied the record I had made there.

"No. 814 I have placed," he said. "Your disguise has stood the first test, doctor, for you have been given a new number, and a neutral. You are in luck. Young Brittain is evidently No. 3,049 C. The C stands for Cub. No. 51 is a sort of proselytizer of the Intermediate Degree. No. 75 I don't know."

"Who but our old acquaintance Fielding? He used to be butler at the Brittain mansion. Why should he now be acting as valet to a young man who is broke, and, worse than that, heavily in debt?"

"You've hit it, doctor. I wondered what had become of that fellow. That links him up definitely with the order and puts another cog into place. Now I'm going to bed. I've had no sleep for thirty-eight hours."

Thus dismissed with scant ceremony, I took the subway at One Hundred and Forty-fifth Street and returned to the Giltmere.

"Hello, Sanders! I wondered what had become of you, so thought I'd look you up."

Bob Brittain had been on the point of leaving the hotel, and he was the one man I most wanted to see.

"Come up to my rooms," I invited heartily. "I thought I'd been taxing your hospitality rather severely, so decided to see a bit of your city on my own account."

"Not another word on that tack. I'd be only too glad to entertain a friend of an old classmate in any case, and, as it happens, I've taken a liking to you personally."

In my own rooms, I lost no time in offering cocktails and cigars. He accepted of the former, but resolutely stuck to his own cigarettes. With the idea of heading off any questions that I might have to avoid answering frankly, I seized the first opportunity that presented itself to broach the subject uppermost in my mind. He was in evening dress, and as he changed his position in the easy-chair he had taken, the charm dangling from his watch fob showed up in sharp relief against the background immediately below the line of his white waistcoat.

"You'll pardon me if I seem inquisitive, Brittain," I began, "but that's a

mighty curious little ornament you sport there. What does it represent?"

He smiled and good-naturedly took out his watch, handing it to me to let me examine the thing at the end of a short length of braided silk.

"Why, it's a white bear cub!" I exclaimed.

"Represents my principles," he responded casually. "It means I'm a democrat—not in the political sense; just a believer in the equality of man, and all that sort of thing, you know. I'm a Cub, you see."

"A cub!"

I pretended not to understand.

"Member of a fraternal order, don't you know—the Order of the White Bear. I don't know much about the inner circles of the organization. Most of the members are just Cubs. It's no end of an honor to be asked to take the higher degrees.

"But the Cubs are interesting. You've no idea how entertaining your tailor, for instance, can be if you'll meet him on an equal footing. All sorts belong, and there are no social distinctions inside the lodge room."

I became enthusiastic.

"Why, that's just fine!" I exclaimed. "My own views run along those same

lines, and all this affected superiority of one class over another disgusts me. I believe in equal opportunity for all and—well, I wouldn't want to bore you with all my revolutionary principles. Can a foreigner join this order you speak of?"

"Surest thing—if a member in good standing vouches for him. Most of the members are of foreign origin, so far as that goes. It's only recently the regular fellows have been taking it up. Sort of fad, you know. Doesn't have to be taken too seriously."

The Order of the White Bear was to be taken a good deal more seriously than Bob Brittain then realized.

"By the way," he continued, "that reminds me, there's a meeting Tuesday night. Some fellow from the Intermediate Degree is to be there to install newly elected officers. Part of the ceremony is open to friends of members, so you can come along. Afterward I'll propose you, if you want me to, and you can become the possessor of one of these little trinkets yourself for the small sum of fifty dollars—and fifty dollars annual dues, not to mention an occasional assessment."

"Good! I'm with you," I agreed, and we shook hands on the bargain.

To be concluded in the next issue of DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE,
out March 20th.

FAILURE TO AVOID SENTENCE

MAYOR, I can hypnotize you in the very chair in which you are seated," said Arthur Ryan, aged twenty-eight, a mind reader and fortune teller, who attempted to ply his trade in Alexandria, Indiana, without a license. Mayor Wales told him he had the privilege of sending him—the mayor—into a trance.

"If you hypnotize me, there will be no police court," said the mayor, "and, on the other hand, if you fail, we will have court."

The hypnotic agent went through numerous gestures, waving his hands and rolling his eyes.

His honor the mayor stood pat. "That's enough of that stuff," he finally said. "You violated a city ordinance, and, besides, you are charged with drunkenness and malicious destruction of property. Your fine will be six dollars and costs and six months at the State Penal Farm."

Death in Life

From the Archives of Nicholas Carter

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

ON a street in New York's lower East Side, Wilbur Leigh, a man of dual personality, known as a playwright and author of stories dealing with crooks and crime, is overtaken by two men of criminal bearing, Gus Hoch and Whitey Ward, and is offered valuable material for his work if he will accompany them to the bedside of a dying companion. The writer consents to go, and, blindfolded, he is put into a taxicab with the two men. Leigh succeeds in learning where he is being taken. He is brought to the room of a crook calling himself William Silk Walker, whom Leigh recognizes as Walter Lispernard Whitehead, a former schoolmate, and receives a package of notes. Silk is a consumptive, and is suffering from a bullet wound in the shoulder. In order to try out the schemes he invents for his stories, and to get thrills which he may depict with his pen, Leigh, unknown to any one, has turned crook. He is to attend a lawn party to be given by Mrs. Winifred Fuller Templeton, a society leader, for the relief of sufferers in Belgium, and decides to attempt to steal the jewelry and whatever else may be contributed.

Leigh visits Whitehead, whose bullet wound has greatly improved, and succeeds in getting him to consent to take a hand in the robbery. While plans are being arranged, Gus Hoch enters, and is disabled by a drug administered by Leigh. Nick Carter, Chick, Ida Jones, and Jack Wise accept Mrs. Templeton's invitation, and attend the lawn party. During the course of the affair, Mrs. Templeton recognizes Silk Whitehead, the crook, who was a former sweetheart. The contributions to the relief fund are deposited in a miniature ambulance, drawn about by four girls. Intending to examine the valuables contributed, Fuller Templeton finds the ambulance empty. Nick is called, and, with his assistants, except Chick, who cannot be found, makes an investigation. It is learned from Ruth Vance, one of the girls drawing the ambulance, that a man, offering to aid with the load, took the little wagon around a clump of shrubbery near a discarded back-alley doorway. From three sets of footprints found in the bordering turf, the detective concludes he has hit upon the course taken by the thieves who got away with the loot.

CHAPTER XIX.

OVERHEARD IN THE THRONG.

NICK CARTER, the young millionaire Fuller Templeton, and the rest of the party turned and made their way back along the path toward the tent, leaving for later settlement the questions raised by the three sets of prints.

The meaning of the third set had not yet occurred to Nick. If it had, he might have felt very differently about the matter.

Ida Jones and Jack Wise were sent for and given new instructions based upon the latest findings. When they had left to see if they could pick up the trail, Nick turned his attention to the loosened top of the ambulance. He was eager to busy himself with some-

thing more important than explanations, but it seemed advisable to satisfy his influential companions so far as he could. The trail was already growing cold, and a little more delay could hardly make much difference.

"This gave me the first hint that the affair was a case of duplication," he began, pointing to the slit about which the paint was smooth and unmarred. "It stood to reason that the edges would be more or less scratched after so much jewelry had been dropped in. Moreover, there ought to have been plenty of finger marks. As a matter of fact, however, I had something more than theory to work on. The ambulance had passed close to me more than once during its rounds, and I'd noticed that there were both scratches and finger marks around the opening; natu-

rally, therefore, when I examined this slit and found neither, there was only one thing to assume."

It seemed easy enough now that it was explained, the loose top being handed around from man to man meanwhile.

Nick then leaned over the empty receptacle. Holding down the rear axle with one hand, he gave a sharp tug at the body of the ambulance with the other. The body came away in his left hand.

It was clear that the vehicle consisted of three separate pieces, generally speaking—the wheels and axles with their skeleton framework, the closed body of the wagon, and the slotted top or cover.

The former had been removed by the committee before Nick's arrival, and now the detective had proved that the rest of the box which made up the body was similarly removable.

"That points the way, I think," Carter remarked. "It leaves much to be cleared up, but there can be no doubt that somebody had an exact duplicate of this body. The confederate—the second man of whom we have as yet no description—must have obtained access to the grounds in some secret way and was in hiding in the bushes armed with this unused body when the chap who Miss Vance has described came along trundling the loaded ambulance. The box of jewelry, cover and all, was yanked from the wheels and delivered over to the second man, the latter's empty box being substituted for it. The whole thing could have been accomplished in half a minute if the rascals knew their business, as they certainly appear to have done."

A blank look passed round the group of perturbed gentlemen, for the neatness and cunning of the clever ruse hinted that it was more than the work of an ordinary brain.

"By Jove, Carter, I'm afraid they've

fairly done us this time," ejaculated Fuller Templeton; "and they must have made something of a haul, too."

They closed around the detective, eying him anxiously.

"Do you think there's any possible chance of catching the brutes?" some one asked.

"There are always as many chances as a man is able to make," was Nick's reply. "Generally, however, we find a certain number of openings ready made, and at least one or two such openings appear to be present in this case."

"The deuce you say! What are they?" Templeton demanded eagerly.

Nick smiled.

"We had better make haste slowly," he said, with a smile. "There's no particular reason why I couldn't share everything with you, but I have a general rule against it, and I'm afraid I shall have to adhere to that. Deeds are better than words, anyway, and you'll know as soon as I've really done anything worth mentioning."

His hearers were disappointed, but not greatly surprised. All of them had heard of the detective's reticence, and really admired him for his attitude.

"That's all right, old man," Templeton hastened to say. "You'll do it in your own way, of course, as is quite right. This is an awful mess, though. I don't care so much for my own sake, but this will be a great shock to my wife. I don't know how I'm going to tell——"

He never completed his remark, for suddenly the entrance of the tent was darkened, and Winifred Templeton, with Ruth Vance behind her, hurried in.

"Oh, Fuller!" the older woman cried. "I've heard all about it. What shall we do—what shall we do?"

She seemed to be in a state of feverish excitement—an excitement greater than the incident appeared to warrant.

Her face was almost ghastly in its pallor.

Her husband and the rest of the men tried to soothe her, and at length she began, to all appearances, to respond.

It was decided that the facts should be kept away from the guests, if possible; for there seemed to be no good reason for spreading the news broadcast, and many objections to such a course, especially as the program had continued and the gathering would soon break up.

In fact, when Nick reached the lawn once more, he noticed that many of the guests were already taking their departure. The detective was quite ready to go, but as he approached the front gate which opened on Fifth Avenue, he halted for a few minutes, in order to allow the crowd about the exit to thin out somewhat.

In doing so, he found himself close to a large group of statuary, from the other side of which came a familiar voice. The tones were low and guarded, and although unseen to the speaker, Nick was near enough to hear every word distinctly.

"I assure you," the voice said, "that it could not have been he, Ruth. Promise me that you'll not say a word about it to any one, and that you'll do all you can to quiet any possible suspicion on the part of the other girls."

It was Mrs. Templeton herself who was speaking beyond a doubt, and there was a tenseness about her voice that would have arrested the detective's attention irrespective of the words. He accidentally had heard what was said without meaning to listen, but now duty compelled him, however disagreeable it seemed, to remain in the hope of hearing something more.

"I'm quite willing to take your word for it, Mrs. Templeton," Ruth Vance replied. "I'll not say another word about it if I can help it, and I don't believe the others noticed the resem-

blance. At least, I haven't heard any of them say anything about it as yet."

Nick was carried on in spite of himself then; and in a few moments he found himself on the sidewalk in front of the Templetons' place. He had been looking for Chick, but had seen nothing of him. Now, after a final glance about, the detective dismissed his car which drew up to the curb in its turn. He had no use for motors just then, for he wished to see if he could locate Ida Jones or Jack Wise. If he could not, he meant to begin inquiries himself.

Evidently the trail had led through the alley, and there the search must begin.

CHAPTER XX.

THE TRAIL OF THE PUSHCART.

CHICK'S disappearance was much more significant than his chief at first dreamed of.

The first link in the chain of circumstances which were to bring such strange consequences was forged in a wholly accidental manner, the young detective's absent-mindedness being responsible for it.

Chick had become greatly interested in golf, and happened to run across a young man who had been an amateur champion a year or two before. They forgot their surroundings in discussing their favorite game, and, as a result, neither of them noticed the ambulance making its tour of the grounds.

It was only when the little vehicle was turning into the shrub-bordered path under its escort of nurses that Chick happened to look up and catch sight of it.

"Great grief!" he cried. "I forgot all about that thing. I've resigned myself to parting with a new black pearl scarfpin, and I might as well get it over with."

As he spoke, he started in the direction of the shrubbery with a hurried

nod to the ex-champion. He, however, called Chick back, and intrusted his own contribution to him, with the excuse that he had just seen somebody in the crowd to whom he must speak.

Nick's assistant accepted the commission, and took to his heels in pursuit of the now vanished ambulance. Luck was against him, however; otherwise he would doubtless have arrived in time to see the rascals at work.

Another acquaintance hailed him, a man whose age and prominence made it necessary for Chick to stop, much against his will. He excused himself after a minute or two, but a branch pathway confused him when he reached it, and he saw nothing of the ambulance or of the girls who had been drawing it.

But what he did see caused him to forget the rest for the time being. By that time "the man who had been sent to help" had parted from the girls, after turning the substitute ambulance over to them, and was beating a hasty retreat just as Chick happened along.

The fugitive did not pass the detective. On the contrary, Chick was only treated to a sight of his back, and even that was a considerable distance off. Nevertheless, a certain furtiveness about the individual's haste riveted Chick's attention, as such signs always did.

He saw the man dart across the turf between a clump of bushes to the alley wall, noted the quick glance to right and left which the fellow gave upon reaching the door, and witnessed his speedy exit.

The way in which the man made off was sufficient to tell Chick that something out of the ordinary had happened. It might be of importance, or, on the other hand, it might be as trivial as could be; but the young detective was determined to know more about it if he possibly could before dismissing it from his mind.

His offering and that of his friend

could be added to the other contributions later on, but here was something that could not wait.

Paralleling at some distance the route taken by the man who had absented himself so unceremoniously, Chick approached the rear wall and made his way along in its shadow toward the door. The latter gave readily when reached, and, with a cautious movement, Chick thrust his head out.

He was just in time to see a roughly dressed man wheeling a small pushcart out of the alley at the next corner, and as the cart turned into the side street, it was possible to see that it contained a squarish object about a foot and a half or two feet in length, covered with burlap.

About halfway between the man with the cart and Chick, and headed toward the pushcart, paced the tall, immaculately garbed, silk-hatted individual who had just sneaked out of the grounds.

There was nothing to warrant Chick's belief that the two men, so dissimilar in appearance, had anything in common. For all the detective's assistant knew, the man with the pushcart might merely have been passing through the alley on some errand of his own; nevertheless, the belief amounted almost to conviction.

"Those two are pals, and if they're not up to something queer, I'm a plain dub at this game!" Chick told himself. "The chap in the stovepipe must have had an invite, or posed as a guest, at any rate. I wonder what the dickens it means."

The only way to find that out was by following, and this Chick did unhesitatingly.

He soon found plenty of reason for his suspicion that the two men were in league. To be sure, they did not join forces. In fact, the well-dressed man made no attempt to gain upon his coarsely garbed accomplice. Nevertheless, whichever way the man with the

cart turned, his follower went after him, and after more or less doubling and twisting, that fact became full of meaning for the third actor in the shifting scene.

It soon became apparent that the chase was to prove a long one, and any hopes Chick might have had of returning before the lawn party broke up were necessarily dismissed.

The man with the pushcart struck eastward for two or three blocks, then turned to the south, continued for nearly a mile, and then once more headed for the East River. His pace was steady and dogged, and there was plenty of evidence that the man in the high hat found it difficult to keep the pace. In fact, there was more than a suggestion of weakness about his performance.

At length, the three came to an ugly, down-at-the-heel neighborhood close to the river, and the pushcart vanished from Chick's view down a quiet street.

The young detective quickened his pace and reached the corner just in time to see the cart swallowed up in a dingy alley. Chick waited where he was until the second man likewise passed from sight, and then pressed forward.

"It looks as if I'd come to the end of it at last," he decided.

Shortly he reached the mouth of the alley and peered in. He caught sight of a number of sheds evidently used as storehouses. Outside one of them the pushcart was standing, but its load and the men were lost to view. That was of no consequence, however, for an open door opposite the men indicated to Chick where they had gone.

Should he continue to follow? That was out of the question. Thus far he believed he had escaped notice, but he did not dare to tempt fate to such an extent. Accordingly, he took a careful mental note of the position of the

shed before sauntering on past the entrance of the alley.

There might be another opening to the place, but Chick was not going to risk a search just then.

He reached the other end of the block, and came to a halt. He was in something of a quandary, but while his mind was still wrestling with the problem, it was solved for him by the reappearance of the two men whom he had followed.

They came out of the alley and turned up the street in the opposite direction.

Chick made himself as inconspicuous as possible on short notice, but neither of the men seemed to be afraid of being seen.

Here was a new question to be answered. Should he continue to trail the pair or turn his attention to the shed which they had visited and where they seemed to have left whatever had been carried away in the pushcart?

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SECRET OF THE BURLAP.

NICK'S assistant longed for the ability to divide himself up and send one part in pursuit of the two men, while the other investigated the premises they had just left. That being out of the question, he decided to confine himself to the latter course.

Curiosity partly accounted for that determination. He was anxious to see what the pushcart had contained, and inclined to believe that it was waiting for him in the shed, for the apparent bulk of the burlap-covered bundle seemed to indicate that its contents had not been carried away from the alley on the person of either of the pair.

It was by no means curiosity alone, however, which prompted him to take this course, for Chick reasoned that the recovery of the booty—if such it were

—was more important than the apprehension of the thieves.

Moreover, if they had left anything of value behind, they would be certain to return for it sooner or later, and might then be taken into camp.

So the young detective waited until the two figures had vanished in the distance, then he retraced his steps and turned into the alley. The pushcart had also disappeared, but Chick's memory was a good one. As a matter of fact, it was not necessary to rely upon it altogether, for there was a certain amount of soil between the cobblestones of the alley, and he was able to trace the narrow wheel tracks to the shed he had identified.

"They've put the pushcart in here as well," he decided, approaching the wide double door. "I must certainly have a look inside."

The doors were fastened by a hasp and padlock, which was a modern, well-constructed affair.

"Precious little chance of picking it with a bent nail," Nick's assistant thought, as he examined it. "And unfortunately I didn't start out this afternoon with the anticipation of any such job as this. Consequently, my pocket kit of tools is where it oughtn't to be—at home."

Above the wide door was a square opening leading evidently into the loft, and above this in turn extended a stout beam, at the end of which hung a rusted block.

It was plain that the arrangement had been made for the purpose of hoisting heavy or bulky objects, such as bales of hay, into the loft.

"I might be able to get in there if I could find a rope," Chick told himself, glancing around him.

It seemed too much to expect, but he went on down the alley, and presently, through a cobwebbed window, one pane of which had been broken

out, he espied a coil of frayed rope hanging on the wall of another shed.

It was within his reach, and Chick did not hesitate to put his arm through the hole and quietly possess himself of it.

It was more than long enough for his purpose, and when he had tested its strength, he hastened back to the shed which housed the mystery.

All this had taken some time, and dusk was beginning to manifest itself when he set to work.

It was the work of only a few seconds to throw one end of the rope over the horizontal projecting beam, after which a loop was made and pulled tight.

A further test of the rope's strength followed, and then Chick began to climb.

He clambered up hand over hand, with his feet hanging limply beneath him and his eyes peeled for the first signs of a possible interruption.

In a few minutes he was within reach of the beam, and in a position to swing himself into the square opening. Before entering, however, he thought it best to loosen the rope, work it off the beam, and throw it into the loft. He did not care to leave it dangling there to attract attention, and possibly to reveal his presence to some friend or accomplice of the two men.

The alley was dark, and the loft in which he found himself was considerably darker. He moved very cautiously, therefore, as he made his way across to where a black square in the floor indicated the presence of an opening.

This was close to the farther wall of the shed, and beneath it and against the wall itself a wooden ladder had been attached as a means of access to the floor below.

Chick lowered himself through the opening, feeling for the rungs of the ladder with his feet. He was reasonably certain that he had the place to

himself for the time being, and, therefore, no great amount of caution was required, except to keep from falling and injuring himself in that unfamiliar place.

It was almost wholly dark below, and the young detective was obliged to light a match in order to see what there was to see. Unfortunately, his pocket flash light had also been left at home.

The flaring light revealed the fact that the pushcart stood close inside the double doors, while on the left there ran a long bench.

On this bench, some six or eight feet away from Chick, stood the package which he had seen in the cart, but it was still wrapped in burlap, and revealed nothing more of its nature.

Beneath the bench stood several square red-painted cans of various sizes, which Chick recognized at once as those which contain gasoline.

In addition, there was a slight odor of the volatile stuff in the air. In fact, Chick had hesitated to light a match for that reason, but had finally decided to risk it.

It was evident that the shed was, or had been used as, a garage, or something of the sort. It certainly looked innocent enough, but in spite of that, Chick was not ready to believe that he had come all that distance on a wild-goose chase.

"There's something rotten about this business," he assured himself, "and here's the boy who's going to find out what it is."

There was nothing else to interest him, and, without more ado, he stepped over to the bench and laid hands on the burlap-covered package.

He had assumed that the coarse brown covering had been loosely thrown over the package, whatever it was, but now he found that the burlap was in the form of a large bag, into which the square-shaped object had been dropped.

The bag was not fastened in any way, however, and, lighting another match, Chick found the opening and peeped inside.

The surprise that followed wrenched an audible exclamation from his lips.

"Good heavens!" he broke out. "It's the body of the ambulance!"

CHAPTER XXII.

LEIGH STINGS ANOTHER VICTIM.

CHICK was all interest now, as may well be imagined. The astounding discovery he had stumbled upon told him that a sensational crime had been committed, and his first thought was one of regret that he had not followed the rascals when he had the chance.

He quickly put that from him, however, for as he touched the odd-shaped box, upon the sides of which gleamed the familiar emblem of the Red Cross, he felt its weight, and heard the rattle of its shifting contents.

The match burned down until it scorched his heedless fingers and was dropped, after which another was lighted and held close to the slot at the top. There could be no doubt of the nature of that glittering mass within.

"By George! What luck!" the young detective ejaculated under his breath. "I didn't know what I was butting in on, but, thank fortune, I had sense enough to keep after those crooks. The nerve of them! How the deuce did they manage it, I wonder?"

So interested was he in his amazing find that for a time he forgot his surroundings. He had watched the two men as far as he could see, and it did not occur to him in his preoccupation that he might be in danger from any other quarter.

Suddenly, however, a faint creak came to his ears, and he whirled about with his heart in his mouth.

He had been half facing in the direction of the double doors leading to the alley, and thus his back was turned to the opposite wall down which ran the ladder he had used in descending from the loft. Now as he whipped about, he found that near the ladder a door which he had not noticed before had opened.

Framed in it was a well-dressed, compact, athletic figure.

The newcomer must have caught sight of Chick simultaneously, for Nick's assistant heard a quick, angry exclamation, and the next moment was facing a furious advance.

One usually does not go armed to a fashionable lawn party. Chick was weaponless, therefore, and as he had dropped the match when he turned about, it was hopeless for him to fumble about in the darkness for a make-shift.

Instead, he quietly stepped aside, and crouched in readiness to take a hand when his antagonist should come within reach. Apparently, however, the newcomer could see in the dark, or else his hearing was unusually keen. In any event, he swerved almost as soon as Nick's assistant did, and Chick, in spite of his precaution, found himself seized.

It was an unpleasant experience to be caught napping, but there seemed to be little to worry about. It was one to one, and the new arrival, though somewhat heavier than Chick, and thoroughly trained, did not give evidence of being particularly dangerous in any way.

"If I can't handle this fellow before I get through, I ought to join the infant class," was Chick's way of putting the situation to himself.

He made a slight miscalculation, however, because in his ignorance he assumed that it was to be a purely physical encounter, or that if his an-

tagonist used any weapons at all, they would be of the ordinary sort.

He was not prepared, therefore, for the little sting of pain which he quickly felt in his right arm close to the shoulder. Another might have thought nothing of it, but Chick knew better than to make that mistake. He was sure it was not as innocent as it seemed. Therefore, he was not greatly surprised when he felt a cold and numb sensation beginning to creep over him like an icy tide.

To tell the truth, it was something more harrowing than surprise which he experienced. The fact that he had been discovered—evidently by one of the gang—while tampering with the stolen ambulance, did not seem to warrant a murderous attack, but Chick's sensations were alarming enough to make him fear that the end was near.

What else could it mean—that creeping paralysis that was conquering his limbs?

With a last mad effort, he succeeded in tearing himself from the other's grasp, probably because his conqueror allowed him to do so. He groped for support against the long bench, but although he managed to put out his hand, there was no sensation in it, and it seemed to be devoid of strength.

"What have you done to me?" he demanded, only to find that he could not add a word to that frantic question, for his tongue and lips in turn refused to do his will.

"Plenty," was the triumphant answer.

Chick's senses were leaving him, and life itself seemed to be going with them, but even in that extremity the young detective's professional instincts were still uppermost.

Despite the fact that the door was open now, the shed was in semidarkness and the newcomer's back was turned to what light there was. Nevertheless, with his failing sight, Nick's

assistant sought to penetrate the gloom, and if possible to fix the identity of his assailant, who had now backed away from him.

It was in vain. He could only make out that the man was conspicuously well dressed, and, indeed, might well from his appearance have been another of those present at the lawn party. Chick did not believe it was any one he knew, however, for the fellow's voice was unfamiliar.

Meanwhile, the young detective reeled, endeavored unsuccessfully to support himself against the bench, and fell to the floor.

The bitterness of failure, as well as death—or so it seemed—was in his heart. He had seldom given such a poor account of himself, for not often had such means been employed against him.

The victor smiled grimly as he saw Chick topple over, then turned his head and called guardedly through the doorway:

"Oliver! Quick!"

A sound of hurrying feet followed, and then through the open doorway darted the stocky figure of the man who had trundled the pushcart. It was Wilbur Leigh's chauffeur, as a matter of fact, and the first arrival was Leigh himself.

As the chauffeur's eyes lighted on the prostrate figure at his employer's feet, a gasp of surprise broke from his lips.

"You blundering idiot!" the dramatist broke out. "Is this the way you do your work? By heavens, it's lucky for me that I insisted on coming here at once!"

"But, Mr. Leigh——"

"What's the use of 'buts'?" Leigh shouted. "They will not explain the presence of this fellow. I arrived just at the nick of time. He was bending over the loot, as it was, with a lighted

match. This is what comes of hiring fools."

His anger was not pleasant to witness, and the man addressed as Oliver cowered away from the impassioned face and flaming eyes. In a moment, however, Leigh seemed to master his passion. Stooping over, he caught at Chick's shoulder, and, with a quick pull, turned the young detective's numb body over. At the same time, the chauffeur threw the rays of the flash light he carried on the victim.

Chick's white, stark face stared up at them, and Oliver saw his employer start and peer closer for a moment, as if in recognition.

"Chick Carter, by all that's infernal!" Leigh ejaculated hoarsely. "This is the limit! What in thunder is he doing here? If it's bad luck, it's the worst the fiends could devise! And if accident has anything to do with it, so much the worse! That means that Nick Carter himself is already at work—he may even have had advance notice of what we were about to do! And Carter is the very last man in the world I'd care to see after me!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CONSUMPTIVE'S WARNING.

WILBUR LEIGH straightened up suddenly and glanced about him with more than a hint of fear.

"The loft!" he said in an explosive whisper. "Quick, Oliver—see if any one is there!"

It was not an enviable task that had been assigned to the chauffeur. To be sure, it did not seem likely that any friend of Chick's was concealed there; for, in that case, help should have reached the detective before it was too late. Nevertheless, there was no telling, and Oliver did not relish the duty thrust upon him. He hesitated, picturing to himself how it would feel to receive

a crack on the head as he mounted the ladder.

Seeing this hesitation, and guessing the cause of it, Leigh clenched his fists and started for the chauffeur, his body bent forward suggestively.

"Go, I tell you!" he said, as if he snarled the words.

That was enough for Oliver. There was a certainty of punishment if he remained below, and only a chance of it if he obeyed orders. Accordingly, he reached the foot of the ladder with a bound, and shinned up it until his head was above the level of the loft floor.

"There's no one here," he said, after flashing his light about.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir."

At that moment a peculiar knock sounded on one of the double doors of the shed, which were still fastened. The sound brought Leigh round like a flash.

"That ought to be Whitehead," he mumbled; "but I must make sure."

He crept forward and applied his eyes to the narrow crack between the door.

"All right, Whitehead," he said presently, with a breath of relief. "Come in. Why in thunder didn't you do it, anyway? The door is locked on your side, isn't it?"

The key grated in the padlock, and soon the double doors swung outward to admit Walter Whitehead.

"Yes," he answered; "but I heard voices, and thought I'd find out whether you were here or somebody else. I suppose that sounds cowardly, but I don't care. I'm not as strong as I used to be. In fact, I'm about all in as a result of this experience, and I didn't care to blunder into an ambush if I could help it."

There was a sneer on Wilbur Leigh's face.

"So you were prepared to save your

own skin, were you, even if somebody walked off with the proceeds of this venture?"

"That's the size of it," Whitehead admitted. "I didn't exactly go into this thing of my own choice, remember, and I've already done far more this afternoon than I could reasonably be expected to do. That lets me——"

He had stepped into the shed and closed the door behind him. Now, as the chauffeur's flash played over the form on the floor, the latest arrival saw it for the first time.

"Good heavens!" he gasped. "Who's that?"

Leigh's face was a study of remorseless anger.

"That is some one who'll have to pay dearly for his temerity. I've never had any dealings with him or his chief before, but that doesn't matter. Once is enough—too much, in fact. There must be no second time."

After that he did not need to give his enforced accomplice the name of the victim, for Nick's assistant was known by sight to the consumptive, and the latter recognized him as soon as a second glance was taken.

"This is—serious," Whitehead said gravely, as he looked up.

"You may well call it so," was the answer.

In a few curt words, the dramatist described the discovery he had made, and meanwhile the chauffeur returned to the loft. As Leigh concluded his explanation, Oliver descended the ladder with a length of rope over his shoulder.

"I caught a glimpse of this when I was up there before," the chauffeur said, "but I was interrupted before I could get it."

He then proceeded to tell where he had found the rope, and what it seemed to imply.

"Yes, that's probably it," his em-

ployer agreed. "He must have got in by way of the loft, for the doors down here haven't been tampered with. But how the mischief were his suspicions roused?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," Whitehead replied, glancing down again at Chick's pallid face. "I know him by sight, of course, but I never ran up against him like this before, and I'm pretty certain he doesn't know me. It looks, though, as if he must have witnessed something queer back there on the avenue and trailed us here."

"It certainly does, curse you!" the playwright retorted hotly. "A man is an ass to intrust any part of such a job to another. You and Oliver have bungled this thing, and I do wish I'd never——"

"So do I, with all my heart," Whitehead put in. "Storm away if it will do any good, Wilbur. I'm not afraid of you, and I don't much care what happens. I weakly allowed myself to be drawn into this affair, and I've done my best. Everything seemed to go off without a hitch—much easier than I had expected, in fact. If the beans are spilled in spite of that, it can't be helped, and I don't see how it could have been avoided. As for the rest, I'll soon be out of their reach, anyway; and if it's different with you, that's your own lookout, and your own fault."

Leigh blustered for a while longer, but soon quieted down. His conceit assured him that had he been in his accomplice's place, Chick would never have followed the trail of the stolen ambulance; but he realized that the arrangement had been his and was quite willing to believe that Whitehead had, indeed, done the best he could.

While the dramatist's anger was expending itself, Whitehead made sure that Chick was not yet dead.

"What are you going to do with him?" he asked at length.

"I haven't fully determined yet,"

was the reply, "but he's quite safe, and will remain so until I find a means of disposing of him."

"It's safer to handle dynamite, you know," the consumptive reminded him, "than it is to meddle with any of Nick Carter's assistants."

CHAPTER XXIV.

CHICK IS SENTENCED.

WILBUR LEIGH would have done well to heed Whitehead's warning, but he was not in a mood to give it any consideration. On the contrary, it caused his rage to flare up anew.

"Nonsense!" he cried. "You're welcome to your sickly fears, but don't try to infect me with them. I wouldn't deliberately have crossed Nick Carter's trail or that of any of his bunch, but I'm not afraid of them in the least. They're clever, of course, and there's no doubt about their obstinate courage, but if they force me to it, I think I can teach them a trick or two. I accept this as a challenge, and I'm not going to make the mistake of resorting to half measures."

"I'm afraid you're the one who's playing the fool this time," Whitehead replied. "If anything happens to Chick Carter——"

"If nothing happens to him, where will we be? Just tell me that," Leigh broke in. "I tell you, you can't afford to have scruples where those fellows are concerned. If you give them an inch, they'll take a mile every time. This chap is in my power, and I'm not going to risk my liberty by letting him go again. Everything depends on that, and there's only one thing to do with him, I'm afraid. I'd do it now, if I didn't want to find out whether he's alone in this, or was sent out by Carter himself. That might make a difference, and for that reason I'm going to delay matters temporarily."

The consumptive's keen eyes were

fixed upon the speaker, and his shrunken form leaned tensely forward.

"Look here!" he said harshly. "I warn you not to go too far. I took a hand in this dirty scheme of yours on the assurance that there would be no blood spilled."

The sunken face twitched.

"I've fallen low enough, Heaven knows," Whitehead went on in a tense, bitter tone. "Even to the extent of stealing from the woman I once loved. I've never been guilty of murder, however, and have never been associated with one guilty of it—to the best of my knowledge, at least."

He paused for a moment.

"The only being I've ever killed is—Walter Lispenard Whitehead, and that isn't murder, but suicide."

He took a step or two forward, and there could be no doubt of his earnestness, although his emaciated form did not inspire much physical respect.

"I serve notice on you, therefore," he finished, "that there's to be nothing of that sort, no matter what the consequences are to us, and if you fail to take the warning to heart, or I have reason to suspect that you've gone counter to my wishes, I'll tell the whole thing—spread it broadcast. There's not much in my power, but that is, and it means everything to you. Your position, your whole enviable future, depends upon the world's ignorance of what you really are, and don't doubt for a moment that I'll turn that ignorance into knowledge unless you listen to me in this."

Wilbur Leigh seized him by the shoulders and shook him as a cat shakes a mouse.

"You wouldn't dare!" he cried. "That would mean your own exposure—just the thing you've been fighting against."

Suddenly he seemed to feel a sense of shame for having laid hands on a man so near death. At any rate, he let go of Whitehead, and the latter stag-

gered back against the bench. A paroxysm of coughing racked the consumptive; but when he could speak again, it was evident that his determination was as strong as ever.

"Don't—don't count on that!" he stammered. "It's my only weapon against you, and I'll use it if you force me to, no matter what it costs me."

Leigh shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, very well," he said, with an air of mock resignation. "I promise you that the fellow there on the floor has nothing to fear from me personally, or from any of the others. I give you my word of honor on it. Does that satisfy you?"

Whitehead hesitated while he searched the other's face, and seemed to be weighing his words. Finally he nodded.

"Yes," he said, "that seems to be enough. If you keep that promise, I shall be content; and if there's anything I can do to help you guard against the possible consequences of such leniency, I'll willingly do it."

At a sign from his employer, Oliver shouldered the strange receptacle which held the stolen valuables, and started toward the doorway.

"Come on, then," the playwright said to Whitehead. "We've already wasted too much time here, and it might be interesting to see how much of a haul we've made."

He gave a last, careless glance in Chick's direction, and passed on.

"Are you going to leave him like this?" demanded the consumptive.

"Why not? He's hardly in a condition to know the difference between down pillows and the floor he's on."

"Perhaps not," admitted Whitehead, "but I can't bear to leave a fellow being in such a plight."

Leigh turned back impatiently, then shrugged his shoulders, and leaned against the doorway with a jeering smile on his lips.

A heap of old sacking occupied one corner of the shed, and Whitehead drew on this to supply materials for a primitive bed, which he made close beside where Chick lay.

After heaping more of the sacks to form a pillow, he began laboriously rolling the victim's body over. Chick was not a lightweight at any time, and now he was a dead weight, which taxed the consumptive's small store of strength to the utmost.

Whitehead did not ask for assistance, however, and Wilbur Leigh did not choose to offer, but stood idly by during the whole proceeding.

"Very touching!" he commented, as his former friend rose unsteadily to his feet. "Can you be persuaded to tear yourself away now?"

Whitehead did not reply, but followed him out.

As the shed was left behind, the consumptive once more recalled the words of Leigh's promise in regard to Chick. He had an uncomfortable feeling that he ought not to have accepted it, and he was right. It had been too glibly given, and too cleverly worded to be relied upon, but unfortunately Whitehead could find no definite flaw in it.

As a matter of fact, in his heart of hearts, Wilbur Leigh had already sentenced Chick, and was only awaiting further developments before carrying out the sentence.

And the sentence was death.

CHAPTER XXV.

A WOMAN'S HAND.

AT ten o'clock, on the morning following Mrs. Fuller Templeton's unique but ill-starred lawn party, Nick Carter was seated in the consulting room of his home on Madison Avenue.

There was a characteristically thoughtful expression on the clean-shaven face, and the keen eyes were more than a little troubled.

Thus far, things had not gone well with the famous detective. Neither he nor his assistants who were available had been able to pick up the trail which good luck had enabled the missing Chick to follow. Repeated inquiries of the most thoroughgoing sort had resulted in nothing worth mentioning, and, worse than that, Chick himself was still among the missing.

Nick had long since come to the conclusion that his best-known assistant had stumbled upon something of professional interest, and had left the scene of the affair to make an investigation. The chances were, of course, that his absence was in connection with the disappearance of the ambulance and its precious contents, and that in itself offered some encouragement.

On the other hand, Chick's failure to reappear was decidedly otherwise. To be sure, there was a possibility that the trail he had followed had been a long one, which had led him out of the city, and perhaps into some other State, but that gave Nick little comfort.

He knew the explanation was an improbable one, for, however hurried his assistant's journey might have been, Chick ought to have found some means of communication long before that.

No, it looked very much as if the young detective had fallen into the hands of those who were responsible for the unusually daring crime, and, although similar conditions had prevailed many times before, they were always full of the gravest possibilities.

A knock at the door of the consulting room roused Nick from his unpleasant musings. It was Joseph, his butler, who entered, with a card on his tray.

"The gentleman says he has an appointment, Mr. Carter," he said, presenting the tray.

The card was that of Fuller Templeton, and Nick directed that the millionaire be shown up.

Templeton's round, usually ruddy

face was a trifle pale, and there was a certain nervous excitement about his appearance.

"I—I suppose you haven't found out anything, Mr. Carter?" was his first query.

"Nothing of any importance, I'm sorry to say," was the answer. "We're handicapped, you see, by your desire for secrecy. Your guests in general were told nothing of what happened yesterday, and thus far we've been able to keep the matter out of the newspapers. I doubt very much, though, if that state of affairs can continue much longer. Too many people know of it to make the keeping of the secret an easy matter."

"It must be kept," Templeton declared tensely.

Nick looked thoughtful.

"I tell you I don't believe it can be," he said. "Besides, I'm beginning to doubt if it should be. We're losing a lot of precious time, and the situation might change greatly if you would consent to seek the aid of publicity. If all the obtainable facts were made known, some of those who were present might be able to give us valuable clues. Besides, there's the matter of identifying the stolen jewelry.

"At present we have no means of knowing what was in that ambulance, except what we gave ourselves. Therefore, there's nothing to prevent the stuff being disposed of—scattered here, there, and everywhere.

"If you could obtain a description of the various articles, however—or as many of the most valuable ones as possible—lists could be furnished to the pawnbrokers, and arrests made if any of the pieces were offered."

Templeton flung up his carefully tended hands in a gesture of protest.

"But, my dear Carter, that would be a terribly long job. As a matter of fact, we couldn't get anything like a complete list, and imagine the mess it would

make to try. In a great many instances, people brought friends with them whom neither Winifred nor I know."

"But you know those who in all probability gave most generously," Nick pointed out.

"Oh, I suppose so," the millionaire conceded. "Think what it would mean, though, to confess to them that their self-sacrifice had gone for naught, and that we had let a pack of rascals walk away with everything, under our very noses! No, thanks, old man, none of that for me! I'd rather do almost anything than that, and I feel the same way about giving a tip to the newspapers. Of course, we couldn't be reasonably blamed, but it's too humiliating."

He hesitated, then went on, in a rather embarrassed fashion:

"As a matter of fact, Carter, Mrs. Templeton and I have been talking it over this morning, and we'd much prefer to turn over to the Belgian Relief Fund a sum equal to the probable value of the contributions made yesterday. It wouldn't exactly beggar us, I imagine, and it ought to put a stop to this whole business."

Nick looked up swiftly.

"But that's altogether too much of a sacrifice, Templeton," he objected. "I don't think anybody could expect you to do that."

The millionaire shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, it wouldn't amount to anything," he said. "As a matter of fact, it was really Mrs. Templeton's idea. I don't know that I've ever seen her so disturbed over anything, and she offered to stand the whole loss herself. Actually she almost begged me to allow her to do it; but, of course, I wouldn't listen to that."

The detective was silent for a few moments. The information he had just heard caused him to ask a question which he had put to himself more than

once before. Why was Mrs. Templeton apparently so anxious to shield the rascals who had played the trick?

"I'm afraid that would not be wise. It is unnecessary, for one thing, and it also practically amounts to compounding a felony, you know. We must not forget that these men are scoundrels, and that they have been guilty of a crime."

"That's exactly what I said to my wife," Templeton replied. "But you can't imagine how she feels, Carter. The whole idea, in the main, was hers, and she naturally looks upon herself as responsible for the way in which it was carried out. The publicity, you——"

Carter leaned forward.

"I seldom attempt to advise a husband where his wife is concerned," he said slowly; "but in this case, I can't help feeling that such a course would be very unfortunate in more ways than one."

The caller gave a short laugh.

"Of course, I don't want to throw away any such sum of money," he admitted. "And I hope you'll do your best to find the thieves. The only thing I really set my foot down on is the proposal to turn the matter over to the police and the reporters. That's very objectionable, and, besides, I feel that you can do more than anybody else. I haven't ceased to congratulate myself on your presence there yesterday."

He slipped his hand into his pocket and brought out a little memorandum book, which he opened, turning the pages swiftly.

"By the way," he said, "I've brought you the information you asked for."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE BLIND SIGNATURE.

I WAS just going to ask you about that," Nick said. "The fact that I haven't had any light on two or three points has delayed me."

Fuller Templeton excused himself on the score of excitement.

"Everything has been topsy-turvy," he said. "I forgot about it for a time, and then my wife seemed too much disturbed to put her mind to it. I can tell you now, though, that the firm which supplied us with the little ambulance is that of Ambridge & Schilling, cabinetmakers on Fourth Avenue, near Twenty-sixth Street. It's only a small concern."

"You haven't communicated with them in any way, I hope, since the robbery?"

"Oh, no! As a matter of fact, I didn't even know who they were until I asked my wife this morning."

"I see."

Templeton glanced at the list again.

"You also asked me to find out who did the covering. It was Luigi's."

The detective did not feel it necessary to jot down the names, and a few moments later, the millionaire rose to his feet.

A few minutes after Templeton had left the house, Nick also emerged and turned in the direction of Fourth Avenue. It was only a short distance he had to go, and consequently he did not order the car.

He found the obscure firm of cabinetmakers without difficulty, and, after he had stated his business to the clerk, a stout, well-fed-looking man in his shirt sleeves came out of the workshop and approached him.

"Here's Mr. Schilling now," the clerk announced.

"Vot can I do for you, sir?" came the question.

"I've called in connection with a certain order that you executed for Mrs. Fuller Templeton, of Fifth Avenue," Carter explained. "It was a miniature Red Cross ambulance."

The German looked surprised.

"Dot ambulance again" he ejaculated.

"You're the second person who has asked me about it to-day."

"Indeed! Who was the other?"

The round face lost a little of its joviality.

"Dot's more than I can tell you, Mr.—"

"My name is Carter," said the detective—"Nick Carter. I've been employed by Mr. Fuller Templeton to make certain inquiries."

"You mean you are a detective?"

Nick bowed.

"That's about the size of it," he admitted.

The stout man took a step nearer.

"Vot's it all about?" he asked, with concern.

"I'm afraid I can't explain that to you just now, Mr. Schilling," Nick returned quietly. "You can help me very much, though, if you will tell me just exactly what happened in connection with that ambulance."

Schilling remained silent for half a minute.

"Vell, I don't mind doing dot," he said at length. "It has noding to do vith me. Ve got the order, and ve dit the vork. They'll have to pay us, and ven they do, that's all so far as ve are concerned."

"Oh, I don't think you need worry about the pay," Nick said, with a smile.

"Is that so? Vell, I'm not so sure about dot. I'll get it for the first ambulance, all right, but they don't seem to want to acknowledge the receipt of the second body vot ve supplied."

Nick's eyes lighted up.

"The second body, eh?" he asked.

"Ah, that's the trouble, is it?"

"There ain't any trouble down here," Schilling declared. "Our clerk can swear dot he got a telephone message ordering the duplicate body on the same day the first one vos delivered, and ven the man came for the second body, ve made him sign for it."

Nick was on the scent now, and he

questioned the cabinetmaker more closely.

"When was the original ambulance delivered?" he asked.

"Monday. Mrs. Templeton asked us to send it up to her house. She vouted to show it to the committee, I think."

"And the second order—when did you receive that?"

"About two hours after the first one vas delivered. My clerk took the order and wrote it down on the pad. If you vill come into the office, I vill show you the exact vords."

He hustled into the little office with Nick at his heels, and removed from a file a half sheet of yellow paper which had evidently been torn from the pad which hung against the wall.

It was dated the preceding Monday afternoon, the exact time being given, and read as follows:

Mrs. Templeton wants exact duplicate made of the body only of the ambulance supplied to her to-day. It must be ready by Friday morning. She will send man for it.

"Dot's plain enough, ain't it?" the cabinetmaker inquired triumphantly.

Nick nodded.

"It seems to be," he returned. "And you say that the messenger called on Friday?"

"Yes, and signed for the second body before he took it away vith him."

There was a receipt book lying on the desk, such as delivery men carry about with them, and Schilling's fat thumb turned the pages.

"Dere it is," he said, indicating a line.

Carter glanced eagerly at the signature, but was disappointed—though not greatly surprised—to find that he could make neither head nor tail of it. It had been written purposely in a cramped, indistinct scrawl that was nearly, if not quite, meaningless.

"Your side of it seems to be fairly plain, Mr. Schilling," Nick assured him. "There's no doubt that you did make two bodies."

He paused, and a rather grim smile played about his lips.

"We've had ample proof of that," he added.

"Den vy should Mrs. Templeton —" Schilling began, then stopped abruptly with a confused look.

"Mrs. Templeton?" Nick echoed. "Does she know that you supplied two bodies?"

The German hesitated.

"She ought to," he said presently. "It vos at her orders."

Carter saw that Schilling was trying to cover his slip, and it did not seem to be worth while to attempt to corner the man just then. The detective had learned quite enough for his present purpose, and there would be little trouble in pinning Schilling down later on, if necessary.

"Mrs. Templeton has either been there, or has communicated with Schilling," Carter told himself, after he had left the place.

There was a suggestion of a frown on the detective's face, for Mrs. Templeton's movements were causing him more and more concern.

"It certainly looks as if she were trying to shield some one," ran Nick's thoughts. "There's little or no doubt that her intentions are good, but it doesn't help matters very much. It only makes the situation ten times more difficult."

He hurried back to Madison Avenue, found there was no news of Chick, and then set out again immediately. He had decided to call on Mrs. Templeton, and see if he could learn anything more from her behavior.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CROSS PURPOSES.

WHEN Nick Carter was ushered into the morning room, he found Mrs. Templeton and Ruth Vance already there.

The detective glanced keenly at his hostess as he approached, and, in spite of his suspicions, was shocked to see the change in her. That, and the dejected manner in which she greeted him, indicated that she was afraid of something, and it seemed to Carter as though her fear had chiefly to do with him.

The younger woman also seemed to share her friend's agitation in a minor degree, and Nick felt the quick restraint that fell on the two at his advent.

"We were talking about that unfortunate affair as you came in, Mr. Carter," Mrs. Templeton said, in a hurried tone. "I suppose my husband called on you this morning?"

Her eyes were bright and feverish as they looked up at the detective, and he heard her catch her breath as she waited for his reply.

"Yes, he dropped in."

"And—and did he tell you what we've decided to do?"

"He suggested something, but I didn't understand that you had come to any fixed decision."

"Oh, yes, we had," Mrs. Templeton said positively. "We—we didn't want the publicity, Mr. Carter, and Fuller and I have agreed to donate thirty thousand dollars to the relief fund. We think that will easily cover the loss."

"I haven't a doubt of it," Nick remarked meaningly. "But it would also cover something else—too much else."

For a moment the beautiful woman looked positively ghastly.

"What—what do you mean?"

Nick was sorry he had put it in just that way.

"Simply that it would leave the whole thing in the air, Mrs. Templeton," he explained. "And would really be an encouragement to crime. Templeton told me about it, but I think I've persuaded him not to go on with it."

Fear gave place to something like anger in Winifred Templeton's hazel eyes.

"You persuaded him not to go on

with it?" she echoed. "But I—I intend to go on with it. I won't have this whole humiliating thing dragged into view, and I'll send a check myself this afternoon."

The detective's face wore a strange expression. He had been sorry for the woman—was still, for that matter—but he realized that he would have to adopt a stronger attitude than he had intended.

"You'll be very foolish if you do that, Mrs. Templeton," he said gravely. "It would not only be an incentive to crime, but something very like crime itself. It would necessarily mean that my investigation would stop, for there would be no point in hushing the thing up otherwise. In other words, it would be shielding the criminals, and in a sense sharing their guilt."

"But if I make the loss mine, isn't it my privilege to bear without complaint, especially when any other action will be very obnoxious to me in every way?" Mrs. Templeton demanded.

Nick shook his head.

"It sounds as if it ought to be your own affair," he answered; "but it isn't. You mustn't forget your duty to society, my dear lady. In the face of that, your own personal convenience—the convenience of any of us—becomes of minor importance. I feel that I've made progress to-day, and naturally I don't care to give up when I'm sure we shall be able to find the thieves sooner or later."

He eyed her fixedly as he spoke.

"You—you have made progress, you say?" Mrs. Templeton asked, in a choked voice.

As a matter of fact, the detective had only verified his previous conclusions as a result of his visit to the cabinetmaker's, but he chose to give it more importance.

"Yes, I've just called on Ambridge & Schilling——"

"Ah!"

Mrs. Templeton's slender fingers tightened over her handkerchief.

"And Schilling has told me all about the duplicate body," Nick went on. "He didn't do it very willingly, but I managed to pump him in spite of his reluctance. Doubtless you know that I explained to your husband yesterday the part which such a body must have played. Of course, you didn't order it; therefore it proves that whoever sent the telephone message must have known in advance about your plan, and the place where the work was to be done. In fact, it seems clear that this unknown must have examined the ambulance after its delivery to you, otherwise he couldn't be sure that the body was detachable, and that another could be substituted for it in a very short time if the dimensions were exactly the same."

His words had a peculiar effect, and the changing expression of Mrs. Templeton's face indicated the different states of mind which resulted.

At first she seemed merely bewildered and astounded; then a hint of relief came into her eyes and gradually deepened. It was apparent that she was catching at a new hope.

Nick, who seldom said anything without previously estimating its effect, did not miss any of these changes. In fact, he was more or less prepared for them all.

He believed that Mrs. Templeton had been attempting to shield some one, either because she feared his guilt or because she feared he would be accused. That was what was troubling her so, and had made her willing to do almost anything to hush up the affair. Nick had long since made a guess at the identity of this individual, however, and had reason to believe that the man he suspected had not been a member of the committee which had assisted Mrs. Templeton. Accordingly it occurred to

him that by bringing home that aspect of the matter to her he might throw her off the track.

In that he seemed about to be successful, for it was obvious that she was beginning to think her fears had been groundless, and might be expected, therefore, to take a somewhat different attitude toward the investigation. She desired further enlightenment, however.

"I'm afraid I'm very dense, Mr. Carter," she said, after a marked pause, while her eyes devoured his facial expression. "I don't quite understand. What is it you really mean?"

"I mean that on Monday, when the ambulance was inspected by you and the committee, you must have shown them the method by which the body of the little vehicle was held in its place. Is that so?"

"Yes, I did do that. As a matter of fact, though, it was one of them who at first suggested that the body be made detachable."

That was even more than Nick had hoped for, and the information brought a curious glint into his eyes.

"Indeed?" he asked, with assumed carelessness. "Do you happen to remember who it was?"

Mrs. Templeton wrinkled her brows for a moment, then she shook her head apologetically.

"I can't seem to think now," she said. "I—I've had so much to bother me that my brain seems to be in a whirl. Perhaps I'll remember later on."

"Let us hope so," Nick remarked. "Doubtless it will come to you sooner or later. In the meantime, though, you might tell me who was on the committee."

To be continued in the next issue of **DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE**,
out March 20th.

EFFECTIVE POLICE-WHISTLE IMITATION

S. MAGARI'S ability to give a correct imitation of a police whistle on his fingers saved the day's receipts of his restaurant, in Seattle, Washington, when a lone robber entered recently and drove him out the back door.

Magari dropped the paring knife and ran for the rear exit. As he passed through the door the robber fired a shot at him. The bullet embedded itself in the door casing. On reaching the open, Magari, with his fingers to his lips, cut loose with a shrill whistle, so nearly like the metal whistles used by policemen, that the robber ran out of the place at top speed.

PROVING MAN DEAD

FOR the first time in the history of the Denver, Colorado, county court the will of a man of whose death there is no record has been lodged with the clerk of the court. It may become necessary to have the maker—George T. Sheets—declared legally dead before the instrument is offered for probate.

Sheets, a contractor, made the will in 1893. He was then seventy-two years old. A year later he disappeared. The family did not know of the existence of the will until a few days ago, when Attorney Edwin Parke discovered the document in his safe. Parke turned it over to the clerk of the court.

The Red Raven Stories

VIII.

A Chance Clew by Scott Campbell

THE girl halted, as if suddenly turned to stone. Her color faded as quickly as if all the blood in her veins had surged to her heart. Through the meshes of her gray veil, her dilating eyes were fixed with startled, staring scrutiny upon the man's motionless hand—and its one adornment.

She lingered only for a moment, unheard, unnoticed, and then she went to sit at a desk in one corner, still furtively watching the man, but with her fair face partly averted. She had just entered the Stability Trust Company, a New York banking institution, and approached one of the wall desks to write a deposit slip. Incidentally, when nearly behind a fashionably clad man, who was writing a check, she noticed his left hand, on the check book.

At the receiving teller's window, a little later, while passing in her deposit, she inquired carelessly:

"Did you see the tall gentleman, Mr. Raymond, who cashed a check and went out a few moments ago?"

Mr. Raymond smiled at her through the lattice, and bowed.

"I did," he replied. "He is a personal friend of mine. His name is Hamilton Fisk."

"Thank you. He reminded me of a friend who lives in Denver."

"Mr. Fisk lives at the Waldron. He is one of our depositors."

"I was merely impressed with the resemblance mentioned—nothing more. The last was added with noticeable indifference.

Nevertheless, upon entering a handsome Fifth Avenue residence, half an hour later, this same young lady hastened to call up the police headquarters and ask for Detective Glidden.

"I am Violet van Hook," she informed him. "You remember me, no doubt, in connection with the robbery in our Riverdale home two years ago."

"Yes, indeed!" Glidden pricked up his ears. "Very well, Miss van Hook, I assure you. Not been robbed again, have you?"

"No, I am thankful to say! But I have information for you, very valuable information. Will you call at my Fifth Avenue home as soon as possible?"

"Within half an hour."

"Thank you. By the way——"

"Well?"

"I think you had better wear a disguise."

"Very good. I will do so."

Miss van Hook received him in the library, half an hour later.

She then looked more pale and seri-

ous, and, after a conventional greeting, she said gravely:

"My parents are in Washington, Mr. Glidden, or I would have conferred with them before sending for you. I have not forgotten that the robber who imposed upon us so outrageously as Lord Arkright, presenting forged letters bearing the names of my father's London bankers, returned to me a very valuable and dearly cherished necklace of sapphires and diamonds. In spite of my gratitude for that magnanimity and consideration, my conscience will not let me hide what I have learned."

"I see." Glidden gazed at her inquiringly. "What have you learned, may I ask?"

"I saw that man this morning."

"The robber?"

"Yes."

"How long ago, and where?"

"About an hour ago. I was making a deposit with the Stability Trust Company."

"Are you sure of his identity?"

"No, not positively sure," Violet admitted. "I would not have recognized him at all, Mr. Glidden, but for one fact: Lord Arkright, so called, wore a bloodstone ring, to one curious feature of which he once called my attention. The blood-red spots in the stone formed the outline of a bird. He told me he called it his—Red Raven."

"Red Raven—I guess that's right." Glidden's eyes were aglow with subdued elation. "That man, Miss van Hook, is the chief of the worst gang of crooks in this country. The Order of Red Ravens—that's what it's called. Did the man you saw this morning wear a ring like Lord Arkright's?"

"Exactly like it," said Violet. "I saw it plainly while he was writing a check. I instantly recalled it, and then I studied the man himself. In a general way, I mean his figure, and such features as cannot be disguised, he was precisely like Lord Arkright."

"Did he see you?"

"No, sir."

"Or know that you saw him?"

"He did not. He cashed his check, and then left the bank."

"He must be one of the depositors, then."

"I know that he is," said Violet. "I questioned the receiving teller, Mr. Raymond, who said that the man is a personal friend of his."

"Questioned him, eh? His personal friend, eh?" Glidden's grizzled brows fell perceptibly. "It may have been better if you had not questioned him. What did you ask the teller?"

"Only who the man was."

"Nothing more?"

"That was all. Mr. Raymond said that his name is Hamilton Fisk, and that he lives in the Hotel Waldron. That is all that was said about him. I decided that I had better not ask too many questions before stating the facts to you."

"I see." Glidden chuckled approvingly—a chuckle from Glidden was most extraordinary. "You did right, Miss van Hook, perfectly right. You are wiser than most women. Really, I am quite proud of you. Not another word about this, however, until after I have looked into it. Not one word, mind you!"

Miss van Hook assured him to that effect, and Detective Glidden thanked her, and departed. He looked more grim and threatening while he hastened down Fifth Avenue. His elation gave way to an ugly aggressiveness that few would have wished to arouse, much less oppose.

"Is she right? Is there anything in it?" he asked himself. "Have I finally got him, this thieving Red Raven chieftain, this slick and slippery rascal, who repeatedly has slipped through my fingers and given me the laugh? Have I finally got him? Hamilton Fisk, eh? It would be like him, by thunder, to be

dwelling with the select, and posing as a blueblood. I'll soon find out. I'll mighty soon find out."

Glidden did not, however, let his eagerness pitch him over the traces. He hastened in disguise to the Hotel Waldron, where he cornered the manager, with whom he was very well acquainted, in his private office.

"I want a little information, Sheldon," he said, after revealing his identity. "But mum's the word! Don't you by hint, look, or sign reveal what passes between us. You know what that means. You know what it means, Sheldon, coming from me."

Sheldon smiled and bowed.

"You have said enough, Glidden, along that line," he replied. "I'll forget that you have been here. What do you want to know?"

"All you can tell me about Hamilton Fisk."

"That will be all to the good," said Sheldon. "He has been one of my guests for three years. He is a thoroughbred gentleman, a bachelor, a man of means, and a mighty fine fellow."

"Any business?"

"None, beyond an occasional venture in stocks. Fisk don't need a business. He has money enough. He employs a valet, and lives like a gentleman. And that's what he is, too, Glidden, you can bank on that."

"Do you know where he came from, or any more about him?"

"Only along the same lines."

"Are his habits good?"

"Exemplary. For a man residing in New York, he really leads the simple life. I don't know why you ask these questions, nor care. Take it from me, however, you'll not get anything on Hamilton Fisk. He could have my bank roll for the asking."

"That's all, then." Glidden arose abruptly. "Forget it!"

"I have pledged myself to that effect."

It was not quite all, however, for Glidden lingered in the hotel office until he got a look at the suspected man. But he could detect no convincing resemblance to the crook he repeatedly had encountered, yet who had not looked twice alike; and he then left the Hotel Waldron, with his ardor somewhat chilled—while Mr. Richard Ravenswood, entirely unconscious of this ominous interest in him, was sauntering into the dining room to lunch.

Detective Glidden did not drop the matter. Not for a moment did he contemplate doing so. He returned to headquarters, where he cornered and confided in Jack Armstrong, his invariable choice as an assistant in serious cases.

"By Jove, the girl may be right!" said Armstrong hopefully. "She saw more of that rascal than we ever saw, all put together. Nevertheless, Joe, it seems too good to be true. How can we cinch it? Would a grilling—"

"Grilling be hanged!" Glidden blurted. "That gink, if he's the man, would end with grilling us. He's much too slick to have left himself open. What have we ever found that would serve to identify him? Never a finger print; never so much as a hair that we could prove came from his own head."

"There's no denying that, Joe."

"He's the limit, Armstrong," Glidden continued, snarling. "He can't be downed with a bluff. He has put it all over people at the Waldron, if this Fisk is the man, and he stands ace-high in all quarters. No crimes have been committed in the Waldron. He's too slick to have brought us buzzing so near his ears. He knows enough to have got in his work outside. No, no, Jack, there wouldn't be anything in a grilling. There's only one way to corner that rat and beat out his devilish brains."

"What way is that?"

"Watch him!" snapped Glidden. "Keep him in the dark, and watch him. Watch that infernal valet, too, who may be more a pal than a servant."

"As like as not, Joe."

"Here's another point," Glidden added. "It's several months since these red rascals got in their work. They have been fattening on birds and bottles, no doubt, from the fruits of that Newport job. But that must be nearly blown in by this time."

"Surely."

"It's money to marbles, then, that they have another job shaped up by this time. An espionage will not be of long duration. Now is the time to get them red-handed, Armstrong, if Violet van Hook is right. We then will have got them, by thunder, only with the help of a woman, a veritable fluke, as far as we are concerned."

Armstrong laughed, but Glidden was in no laughing mood. Repeated failures in his relentless pursuit of Ravenswood had nettled him to his depths.

"That's what we'll do," he said bluntly. "We'll begin a systematic espionage. You watch the valet. I'll look after the master, this Fisk, or whatever his name really is. I'll find out. You can bet that I'll find out, Armstrong, sooner or later! We'll begin our work at once."

All this occurred on a Thursday.

II.

Still oblivious to the threatening interest he had aroused, Mr. Richard Ravenswood entered the quarters of the Stability Trust Company at precisely noon the following Saturday, the hour for closing business for the week. He carried a strong leather satchel of medium size in one hand, and approached the window of the receiving teller.

A bearded man followed him in from the street, and from the corridor cau-

tiously watched him through the oval glass in one of the swinging doors—Detective Glidden.

"Ah, Fisk, how are you?" Raymond gazed out and greeted him cordially. "Glad to see you. You are some stranger."

"Ditto." Ravenswood laughed. It was their first meeting since Thursday. "You know where I hang out. Why haven't you called?"

"Very busy. I may drop round this evening."

"Do so. We'll knock out a few games of billiards. I enjoy playing with you, Raymond. I would be a greater stranger, however, bar calling to ask a favor of you."

"Consider it granted," Raymond said quickly. "What can I do for you?"

"I have just converted some securities into Pacific bonds." Ravenswood held up the satchel. "There was a delay in delivering them, and I have not time to go to the deposit vault to put them in my drawer before closing. Short day this, you know. I wish you would set the satchel in your vault over Sunday. It will be safer than at the Waldron."

"Why, certainly," Raymond exclaimed, opening his lattice window to receive it. "Very glad to do so for you. It is locked, of course?"

"Yes. If you wish to inspect its contents, however, I will——"

"Nonsense! Don't reach for the key. I will place it in our bond drawer. By the way, though, you cannot get it before ten o'clock Monday morning. Our vault will be closed in a few minutes, and the time lock is set for ten on Monday. The devil himself could not open it before then."

"That will suit me admirably." Ravenswood smiled and nodded. "I intend turning part of them into Steel, if the market opens weak on Monday. I will be here at ten o'clock."

"Good enough! That settles it."

Raymond hastened to place the satchel in the vault.

Glidden did not see the transaction. He was sauntering to and fro in the corridor. It was indiscreet to peer constantly through the swinging door.

Ravenswood lingered, saw the clerks and tellers hurriedly place their books and funds in the vault, saw the massive doors closed and locked, impregnably closed until Monday, and then he added to the conversation he had been carrying on with Raymond:

"How soon will you be at liberty? Will you go with me to lunch?"

"Delighted!" Raymond nodded. "I'll be through here in about five minutes."

"Capital! I'll wait for you."

"Oh, by the way!" Raymond, suddenly remembering, gazed out, laughing. "I think you might win out, Fisk, if so inclined; a very wealthy, attractive, and desirable young lady. A fine chance for matrimony, Fisk, on the level."

"Excuse me!" Ravenswood laughed, and shook his head. "One half of that word is enough for me. Money, not matrimony."

"You ought to be taxed, and may be, if the present administration is continued."

"Let it come. Bachelorhood is worth it."

"She's a beautiful girl, nevertheless. You must have made an impression on her, too, for she had enough interest in you to inquire about you."

"When, and of whom?"

"When you were here Thursday morning. She saw you write and cash a check. When handing me her deposit, after you went out, she asked me about you."

"Very nice of her, I'm sure." Ravenswood smiled. "I feel highly flattered. Who is the young lady?"

"Her name is Violet van Hook."

Ravenswood heard it, without a change of countenance. An involun-

tary chill ran down his spine, however, and his nerves began to tingle.

"Van Hook—I do not place her," he said calmly. "Nor can I conceive why she felt an interest in me."

"She said you reminded her of a friend who lives in Denver."

"H'm, is that so?" Ravenswood knew it to have been an equivocation, and that he must have been recognized. "Thursday morning, eh? Two days ago. You told Miss van Hook all about me, of course?"

"No, indeed!" Raymond shook his head. "She ended her inquiries very abruptly."

"Ah! Very abruptly, eh?" The significance of it was doubly convincing.

"I told her only your name and where you resided."

"That was quite enough to tell her." Ravenswood laughed lightly, but his voice was tinged with subtle irony. "All ready, Raymond, are you?"

"Yes. I'll be with you in half a minute."

Ravenswood sauntered toward the corridor door. He appeared as calm and complacent as when he entered. There was no sign of perturbation, no indication of threatening misgivings. He passed out with Raymond, and went with him to lunch in a popular restaurant, more genial and jovial than usual, if anything; and they parted after the meal.

Ravenswood sauntered up the street until he came to a drug store in which he saw a pay-station telephone booth, the door of which faced the street. He entered it and removed the receiver—but held down the bracket with his finger.

He then pretended to drop a coin in the slot and to communicate with some one—but all the while, with his back toward the street door and the store windows, he was gazing intently at the polished nickel ring around the mouth-piece.

Presently, replacing the receiver, he tore a leaf from his notebook and wrote on it with a lead pencil. He then folded the leaf and placed it, with obvious care, in the middle of the telephone book, leaving it there.

Glidden saw him do it, furtively watching him through one of the windows, but he quickly moved away when his quarry turned to leave the booth.

"He's up to something, the rat!" he snarled, under his breath. "Why did he telephone, and to whom? Has Raymond told him about the girl? That's not likely, or he would have betrayed it. What did he write and leave in that book? I have it, by thunder! He has planned with some one, probably one of his rascally red-bird confederates, to go there for written instructions, or a communication of some kind. I can nail it, by Jove! and pick him up again before he turns the corner."

Ravenswood then was sauntering slowly up the street.

Glidden entered the drug store, and hurried into the telephone booth. Seizing the exchange book, he rapidly turned the leaves, and found the folded scrap of paper. He opened it, and read a single mocking, staggering line:

Glidden, you're a chump!

The significance of it was unmistakable and irresistible. Glidden vented a fierce oath, then turned like an angry bull and rushed out to the street.

Ravenswood had disappeared.

It was eight o'clock that evening when Glidden and Armstrong met at headquarters and sat down to compare notes, the former immediately stating what had occurred.

"A ruse; one of his rat tricks to give me the slip and the laugh—that's what it was!" he snarled bitterly. "The teller told him about the girl. I didn't believe he would even remember it. But it put the rascal wise. He reasoned

that the girl would inform me, that she must already have done so, and the fact that I have not approached him and openly called him down led him to suspect that he was being shadowed. He clinched it in the telephone booth.

"I know, now, curse him! The nickel ring around the mouthpiece reflected the store door and windows. Though his back was turned that way, it enabled him to see me looking in, and my disguise did not fool him. He left that scurvy scrap of paper, knowing I would rush in to get it, enabling him to bolt and vanish. Vanish he hanged! I'll not sleep nights till I get him!"

"Have you been to the Waldron——"

"Waldron—why go there?" Glidden ground his teeth disgustedly. "He'll never set foot in the Waldron again. Let him alone to be too wise for that. But I'll find him, Armstrong, if he stays aboveground. I'll get him, and bury him, blast him! I'll can him for keeps! What about the valet, Nolan? We might nail him."

Armstrong shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"Too late!" he said tersely.

"What do you mean?" snapped Glidden.

"I'll tell you, Joe, when your jaw slows down. That's your only safety valve. You'd explode, bang! burst all to smithereens, if you didn't cut loose with your tongue and let off steam. Nolan left the Waldron at precisely noon. He appeared for the first time to have a definite mission. I shadowed him to Z—— Street, and there I lost him."

"Losing seems to be our long suit. How the devil did you lose him?"

"That's the strange part of it," Armstrong said more seriously. "He entered one of the low brick buildings in that section. It is rented by the agent of a New Orleans sugar and molasses firm, a man named Hawley. I'll swear

that Nolan went in there, and I entered scarce ten seconds after him, thinking I might overhear something, and would make a few inquiries to cover my intrusion."

"I see."

"There is a front office, a space partly filled with barrels and casks, and a back room, the door of which was open. But there is no rear door, nor any stairway to the second floor. That is reached by a door outside, and Hawley lives up there. He's the only tenant in the building."

"I get you," Glidden growled. "But what about Nolan?"

"Nolan wasn't there."

"Not there?"

"Not hide nor hair of him."

"Humph!" Glidden's furrowed brows contracted until they mingled.

"I wandered around and looked everywhere, while talking about the price of molasses with Hawley—but there was no Nolan."

"He may have gone down cellar."

"I could see no door leading to a cellar."

"He could not have evaporated!" snapped Glidden. "He must have been somewhere in the place. Where is this building? What part of Z—Street?"

"That section in which old buildings are rapidly being torn down for larger ones. This one, now that I think of it, is directly back of the Stability Trust Building. It is—What now?"

Glidden's grim face had changed like a flash, while his fist banged a table as if to splinter it.

"By Heaven, I have it!" he cried, eyes blazing. "There's a job on that bank. That's why he's a depositor. That's why he's friendly with Raymond. That's what became of the satchel. I wondered—but I don't wonder, now! It's in the bank vault, Armstrong, loaded with dynamite, or the devil knows what."

"You mean—"

"I mean that we've got them." Glidden rose up with a terrible laugh. "We have them nipped, Jack, every damned thieving Red Raven. I'll clip their wings this time, by thunder! Get a bunch of the boys together. Make it a score, with a gun in every pocket. We've got them. By Heaven, I'll not leave a live red bird among them!"

III.

They had gathered like blackbirds, singly and from divers directions, until the flock was complete. They had come at intervals during the day, from various quarters and with unostentatious stealth, seeking cover through different avenues, an alley and an outer bulkhead door, a trap in the back room, witness Nolan, and some like moles in the earth, through tunnels secretly constructed during months of labor, while the refuse of dirt and stones was removed in casks and barrels marked—molasses and sugar.

Ravenswood looked strangely serious while he viewed them at close upon nine o'clock that evening, his brood of Red Ravens, gathered in an underground room between the low brick building mentioned by Armstrong and the rear foundation wall of the Stability Trust.

Through a broad opening from this room, one of three leading in different directions, it could be seen that part of the wall was gone, that a circular chamber had been formed, that timbers and cement and steel had been broken from the ceiling, leaving only a comparatively thin and feeble partition between this circular chamber and—the interior of the bank vault.

Ravenswood gazed from one to another in the bright electric light—stolen by means of a concealed wire from the service in the trust building. He had entered only a few minutes before, and had found them all there, awaiting him,

intent upon the near culmination of the most elaborate and laborious crime they had ever undertaken.

Ravenswood checked their conversation, and addressed them more seriously than usual, and not without a tinge of affection in his low, sonorous voice.

"Attention, Red Ravens!" he began. "I have important disclosures to make, and little time in which to make them. It is twenty minutes to nine, when we shall learn with what success we have labored. We have met here many times in the past six months, and this is to be the last time here—and perhaps our last meeting as an organized band of underworld workers."

"Last meeting?" Nolan stared at him amazedly, while the jaws of others fell. "Our last meeting, Dickie?"

Ravenswood bowed.

"It's a long lane, lads, that has no turning," said he. "Sooner or later, despite the utmost precautions that can be taken, the pitcher that goes to the well may be broken. After to-night, Red Ravens, we shall disband temporarily, at least, and whether a subsequent reorganization will be feasible will depend upon many contingencies."

"Great guns!" This from Galen. "What's the trouble, Dickie?"

"Glidden is in a way to make good."

"Make good!" Nolan gasped. "What do you mean, Dickie?"

"He has identified me as Fisk, for three years a respected resident in the fashionable Waldron. But the Waldron, Paddy, will see no more of us."

"Thunderation!" Nolan scarce could believe his ears. "How did the infernal dick get wise?"

"Through my identification by a former victim—the Van Hook girl. Naturally, of course, she hastened to inform Glidden, who investigated the Van Hook robbery."

"But when did that come off?" Lacy

demanded apprehensively. "How long has Glidden known this?"

"Since Thursday morning."

"The devil you say!"

"Oh, don't be alarmed," Ravenswood said assuringly. "He has been looking me up and making inquiries, no doubt, but he has not approached me openly."

"You may have been shadowed."

"I know that I have been watched. Fortunately, however, this is my first visit here since Wednesday. I discovered this afternoon that Glidden was trailing me, but I shook him off by—well, I'll take time to tell you all about it."

"Thundering guns! This is awful, Dickie," Nolan said, with a groan, after Ravenswood had concluded. "If we could only silence the infernal——"

Ravenswood checked him with a gesture.

"It is too late for anything of that kind," he said more brusquely. "The milk is spilled and the pitcher broken. Our only wise course is to disband temporarily, as I have said, with a possibility of subsequent reorganization. I must have time in which to consider it, in which to plan to meet the new conditions, if it seems judicious."

"You may be right, Dickie," Nolan soberly admitted.

"I know I am right." Ravenswood spoke decidedly. "After to-night, therefore, it will be each man for himself, each still loyal to the ties that have joined us, to the pledges that so long have held us together. That is all I have to say, Brother Ravens, along those lines."

His ten confederates, including, with those mentioned, Finley and Blake, Drogan, Hawley, Midget Maloney, and two others, looked grave and regretful upon hearing these announcements; but none ventured to advise or oppose this man, who long had been their successful chief, guide, and director. Low

growls and threats against Glidden came from several, however, which Ravenswood immediately checked.

"There is nothing in that," he said curtly. "We have held the pole for a long time, and later may regain it. Let's take things as they come. Fortunately, these discoveries were not made until nearly the very moment when our biggest job was done. That now must engage us. That moment is close at hand. We have only six minutes to wait. Screen that opening under the vault, some of you, lest the débris is scattered by the explosion."

Three of the men sprang up and placed a broad wooden screen across the opening, bracing it in place with a strip of joist. All were alert, then, and eager for the end of their knavish undertaking.

"You got the satchel into the vault, all right, Dickie?" Nolan questioned.

"Easily," Ravenswood nodded. "Raymond complied without an objection."

"Good for Raymond!"

"It strikes me that we are lame in one way," Lacy ventured.

"In what way, Lacy?"

"In setting the machine that ignites the explosive so early as nine o'clock. Wouldn't midnight have been better?"

"Far from it!" Ravenswood quickly shook his head. "There is considerable noise in the streets at nine o'clock, while they are comparatively quiet at midnight. The explosion then would be more likely to be heard."

"There is no great danger of that at either time," put in Nolan. "It will be confined to the vault, bar what sound comes down here. We'll get that, all right, good and strong. Dynamite works downward, you know."

"I know that, of course," Lacy growled.

"It won't leave enough of the vault floor to swear by," Nolan added. "We

know that the time-lock doors cannot be opened, and even if the watchman in the building were to hear the muffled sound, before he can locate it and make an investigation, we'll have looted the vault and be making a get-away."

"That's how we've figured it, sure," Galen nodded.

"By the way, Dickie."

"Well, Paddy?"

"Is there any possibility that Glidden picked you up again and shadowed you here?"

"Not the slightest, Paddy," Ravenswood said confidently—but he overlooked that a spy might have been watching the movements of his supposed valet.

"There would be the devil to pay, Dickie, in that case," Nolan vouchsafed grimly.

"Very true—in that case," Ravenswood allowed, glancing at his watch.

He appeared perfectly calm and cool, but others were nervous and apprehensive, some crouching in the entrance to the tunnels and others against the rough walls, all awaiting the expected explosion.

It then lacked only two minutes to nine.

It was true, indeed, much more true than any Red Raven even remotely suspected. For Joe Glidden, not in the harness thirty years for nothing, had a happy faculty for putting two and two together, and he no sooner had heard Armstrong's story, combining his discoveries with his own, than this experienced, keen-sighted, persistent, and relentless Glidden hit upon—the truth.

One minute to nine.

Dark figures then had stolen into Z— Street, more than a score of them, all trained detectives from headquarters, each with guns, and ready to kill, if necessary—they were stealing in and around the low brick building, covering every discoverable avenue of

escape within half a block, while others were watching the bank in front and invading the building with a trusty janitor.

Nine o'clock.

Ravenswood had not stirred.

Ten seconds passed.

"Suppose the machine fails, Dickie?"

Nolan's eyes were bright and dilated, but he was very pale.

Ravenswood gazed at him a bit fondly.

"It will not fail, Paddy," he said calmly. "It will——"

No, it did not fail. The expected explosion drowned the words on the lips of the Red Raven chief.

The muffled thunder of it shook the earth and walls around them. The wooden screen was blown half across the underground room. Great slabs of stone and cement fell to the floor of the circular chamber. A vast volume of smoke poured downward, filling every opening and corner. Through the blackness of it, the lights glowed wan and yellow, and the moving figures of the excited men were like apparitions seen in a mist.

Mingled with the terrific noise, unheard because of it, came the crash of breaking doors, the smash of a bulkhead, the fall of a trap, the furious rush of heavy feet down stairway and steps.

Nolan was the first to see them, the inpouring intruders, white-faced and fierce-eyed, and with ready weapons. He uttered a yell that rose above every other sound, seizing Ravenswood by the arm and dragging him into the nearest tunnel.

"The dicks! They're on us!" Nolan shrieked. "Every man for himself!"

Glidden's roar was mingled with it:

"Hands up! We'll shoot to kill!"

It brought a defiant shot from Lacy,

sending a bullet through Glidden's arm, and then came the volley.

Lacy, Galen, and Midget Mahoney went down, all badly wounded. Hawley, Drogan, and Finley were beaten off their feet before they could draw a weapon. Overwhelming numbers were overcoming the Red Ravens.

The feet of two, however, were moving like those of frightened hares. They sped through the tunnel, emerged from the back door of a lodging house within thirty seconds, saw that the way around a stable was open—and then they were off and away through the misty night.

"Cripes!" gasped Nolan. "Our first slip-up, Dickie."

"Never mind the slip-up, Paddy." Ravenswood's voice was calm, but through the black smoke that seared his face his features were painfully drawn and ghastly white. "It's the boys—the boys, Paddy! Heaven help them! Some are down and out—down and out forever!"

"True, Dickie, too true! Glidden, curse the dick, has made good this time. What——"

"Come on, and don't question," Ravenswood interrupted. "We are down to doubles and cases, Paddy. We'll run double, Paddy, you and I, for the present—but Heaven knows where!"

"We'll get there, Dickie." Nolan's voice took on a more cheerful ring. "We'll get there, all right, dear old Dickie."

Ravenswood grasped his arm with a viselike grip.

"You bet we'll get there!" he cried, through his set teeth. "The end is not not yet, Paddy, not yet—not yet!"

Do not fail to read the stirring account of the encounter of Ravenswood with Glidden, the detective, appearing in the next issue.

The Sultana Crescent

By
William F. Vassall

THE final strains of the enchanting waltz died away, and Richard de Launcey led out upon the white deck of the liner his partner of the last dance.

"Isn't it lovely?" she asked, her entire soul bubbling over with the exhilaration of youth, of happiness, of life itself.

"Entrancing," he replied, with a broad *a*. "The music, the dancing, the night. It's worth living for."

She hardly heard him. Her eyes were lost, away in the dim distance, where the cold moonlight fell on the sparkling water, calm as a mill pond, save only where the sharp prow of the *Almirante* parted it as she drove steadily forward.

De Launcey's palm involuntarily pressed tighter upon the slender fingers of the girl.

"Will this ever happen again?" he asked soulfully. "Shall we ever meet again under these—aw—chawming conditions?"

The jarring cockneyism of the man abruptly awakened the girl out of her reverie. She gazed up into his face with her large, brown eyes, her lips parted, her breast heaving intoxicatingly, and her round, graceful throat fluttering above the costly clasp of scintillating gems that gathered together in one cluster the rich draperies that clothed her superb form.

For one instant, their eyes met; and it was not the girl's that wilted under the emotion of contact.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"It all comes like a great, grand dream," he said slowly. "It cannot last. I know I shall soon wake up."

"You needn't, if you don't want to," she replied. "The climate, they tell me, is the same all the year round; and the great ballroom at the Constant Spring rivals the Ritz or the Cecil."

"I know," he replied. "I have experienced the delights of both. But you—you will not always be there."

"Oh," she said coldly, "I did not understand."

A deep silence followed, and the water lapped the side of the ship as she slowed down, nearing shore. Dazzling for five seconds, then lost for five more, alluringly intermittent, the glowing tower of Plumb Point Lighthouse beckoned invitingly from the far northwest. The lights of Kingston were not yet visible, but along the distant horizon, clear cut by the light of the moon, shot through the limpid, translucent atmosphere, a few straggling lights flickered like stars lost in a wilderness.

De Launcey's eyes took in all this before they again rested on the girl at his side.

"Miss Ransome," he said, "there is so much I would like to tell you; yet I

feel that I ought not—at least, not now. It would not be fair to you, or—aw—to me. But there is one thing I should tell you about myself, and, by Jove, I will, though I had resolved to keep it a secret."

She stirred uneasily.

"Don't feel yourself constrained to do anything of the sort, Mr. de Launcey; I never try to learn my friends' secrets, and, what is more, I never promise to keep them."

"I shall not ask you to," De Launcey answered. "And it shan't be anything so very horrid, either; you needn't look quite so alarmed. I am not going to tell you that I am an escaped convict, or a bank robber, partly because you mightn't believe me, and—aw—partly because you might."

The girl laughed sweetly.

"Are you looking for some excuse, Mr. de Launcey, to tell me that you are a Russian grand duke or an Austrian count? I assure you, I shall not stand for it, unless it is some name that I can pronounce without sneezing."

It was his turn to laugh now.

"By Jove, you are not so far wrong, either," he said, "though the sneeze doesn't come into our family. But you have heard of the Marquis of Southshore, haven't you?"

"Indeed," she answered, "I have seen his lordship in the House, and I was introduced to Lady Southshore at Cannes last season."

"Then," said De Launcey, "perhaps you will excuse me, and not have to sneeze, if I introduce myself as Richard Atherton Fitzgerald de Launcey Eppsworth, Viscount Braley, son of the Marquis of Southshore."

"You all that?" said Miss Ransome, laughing as she clapped her hands delightedly. "Just fancy. And I never thought of seeing a real, live English lord outside of the covers of the *Illustrated London News*, nor hear one talk except in a phonograph. But how

churlish of me," she continued, with mock humility, yet with a winning humor that robbed her sarcasm of any bitterness. "I ought to have replied, 'Honored by your condescension, my lord; I am just plain Mabel Ransome, daughter of Thomas Ransome, of Cleveland, Ohio, tobacco merchant.' And then I should have curtsied, I suppose; though, somehow, my knees could never learn that supple bow of your English aristocracy."

De Launcey howled with laughter.

"I'll have to correct you on three points," he said. "The first is that queens don't have to bow to their subjects, and you look every inch a queen—or ought to be. The second—"

Mabel cut him off, and there was a mischievous twinkle in her eyes as she said:

"Your lordship is exceedingly kind. Couldn't you drop a hint to that effect the next time you and Georgie turn into that little saloon on the Strand for a mug of ale and a social chat? It might help me along."

Lord Braley—we will still call him De Launcey—was not offended. Who, indeed, could take offense at the innocuous chatter of lovely Mabel Ransome, or try to suppress her bubbling humor?

"Too late," he said, with a smile. "Still, I might be able to do something else; there are various grades a trifle lower that are not to be despised. But you interrupted my catalogue."

"A thousand pardons, my lord; but you know a poor girl cannot afford to let a single opportunity slip. Your second point was—"

"That you should not deprecate the tobacco industry. I have, myself, smoked hundreds of Ransome's cigars, and I never have smoked better. Any man ought to be proud of them. And my third point was that when you spoke of yourself as *plain* Mabel Ransome,

you were entirely unfair to your mirror."

"Your lordship," Mabel replied, "is either overkind or oversentimental. But why must I regard all this as a secret?"

"I am traveling incognito, you see. Viscount Braley is supposed to be in Egypt. Even for the few months I remained in England, I was unknown to any but my nearest friends. This kind of thing, don't yer know, gives a chap a chawnce to get a seat in the gallery and see the show, so to speak, instead of being always on the stage, where he can't see anything. And, in Jamaica especially, where one of my ancestors nearly three hundred years ago was governor, and where the family still owns large estates, I should be subjected to such a publicity that I should—aw—really try to hide myself, don't yer know."

Mabel nodded.

"I understand," she said simply, and glanced at her watch.

"I know it," said De Launcey hastily; I know that I have kept you out too late. But I had to tell you this, and tonight is my last chawnce. We shall be in the harbor before daylight, and after that——"

There was a question in his voice, but he did not finish the sentence.

Mabel remained silent for a moment, then she said, partly in answer:

"We shall be in the island for the winter. The doctor has advised mother to spend the season in some warm climate, and Jamaica has been so highly recommended that we decided to try it. We have already secured rooms at the Constant Spring Hotel, where we shall remain for the next few weeks. After that, we shall probably go to some place in the country; Mandeville and the Santa Cruz Mountains have already been recommended, but we shall be better able to decide when we are there."

"Then it is not improbable that we shall meet," De Launcey answered. "I shall be at the Myrtle Bank Hotel for a fortnight at least; that is only thirty minutes from you on the trolley car. Would it be asking too much—aw—for me to call and take you to see some of the sights and things, don't you know?"

"I shall be really delighted, Mr. de Launcey, that is, provided mother keeps well enough to travel. Did you bring your car?"

"I did not, Miss Ransome. But good automobiles and reliable chauffeurs can be hired here for little more than the cost of gasoline. If you need any assistance in that direction, I shall be—aw—chawmed to aid you, don't yer know."

"Then it is only au revoir," she said, and held out her hand to him. He took it, but before he released it at the door of her stateroom, he raised it gently to his lips. And Mabel Ransome only smiled.

II.

Kingston, Jamaica, at seven o'clock on a lovely morning in early November; quaintness, beauty, animation, vigor—that was what lay before Mabel Ransome, as, with her mother on one arm, and Richard de Launcey dancing an unencouraged, unrebuffed attendance at her other side, she stood on the deck of the *Almirante*.

At the same pier, a United Fruit Company's freighter was loading bananas. Near by, a big, black steamer was taking on coal, and at the different wharves, a dozen other boats were receiving or discharging cargo. In front, and on either side, stretched the city, flat and picturesque to one who had last seen the skyscrapers of New York, yet distinctly pretty.

From the contemplation of these, Mabel was called by her mother's voice. Then they went down the gang-plank, and faced the customs inspector.

A taxicab sent from the hotel was awaiting them, and De Launcey saw them into it.

"Nine o'clock to-morrow morning," he reminded them, shook hands, turned on his heels, and was away.

Next morning, the Englishman called up a well-known garage, and hired a touring car and chauffeur for the day, and, when he reached the Constant Spring, Mabel, dressed in summer muslins, her golden hair floating wavily in the soft morning air, stood waiting in the bright sunlight, at the end of a magnificent arbor of bouganvillæ, which stretched from the side entrance almost to the great door of the hotel itself.

After that, De Launcey was a regular visitor at the Constant Spring Hotel, and daily the little party went picnicking. One day, it was to the Cane River Falls, another day to the matchless Gardens at Castleton, or to the great dam and massive culverts at Bog Walk.

One day, they went slumming, and ended up with a visit to police headquarters, where they were shown most everything that could interest them, and obtained a lot of information.

In the rogues' gallery, De Launcey spent some time. He looked through the large number of photographs carefully, and, at length, selected one for closer study. It bore the name, "James O'Reary, alias Wooden-head Jimmy," with full description and address of that individual.

"Tough-looking customer of yours," said De Launcey to the detective who accompanied them. "Irish, too, I see."

"Yes, sir," answered the detective, "one of the thoroughly bad ones. Been in the pen eight times already, and we are expecting him back most any day. Jimmy don't need no introduction in this here hotel no more. He's only to tap light on the door, and it's wide open to him."

"Too bad," sighed De Launcey. "What's his failing? Rum?"

"Rum started him," replied the officer, "but now he doesn't stop at no-where. He's broke half a dozen heads in this here town in one night, but his own is never scratched. That's why his pals say he is wooden-headed. His last visit here was when he was suspected of burglary less than a month ago. He was held for a few days, but there was no evidence against him, and the judge discharged him. For my part, I say, lock him up, evidence or no evidence. If he was not guilty, it was through no fault of his. I wouldn't give him no chance."

"Don't you think his surroundings might have something to do with it?" said De Launcey, with a smile. "I see, he lives at 821 Rum Lane."

"That's nothing whatever to do with it, sir, nothing at all," answered the policeman warmly. "I've known some perfectly honest people to live on Rum Lane; some total abstainers even. And you don't expect a man to be the devil because he lives near Hell Gate, New York; or to be a thoroughly bad fish because his address is Rotten Row, London, do you? However, if Wooden-head Jimmy wishes to remove to Water Lane, which is only a couple of blocks off, or even to Church Street, nobody won't say nothing; but we'll keep an eye on him, all the same."

"The joke is on me," said De Launcey, with a laugh. "For a few years, I lived on Rotten Row. But I must thank you for showing us around so kindly. I didn't think you had such an efficient police system out here, but I see you are nowhere behind us. Good day."

The party emerged once more into Sutton Street, entered a taxicab, and was soon whisked away.

And then the ninth of November came, and the great annual holiday. De Launcey took the ladies to see the cricket match for the island champion-

ship, at Sabina Park, and though they did not understand the intricacies of the play, they, nevertheless, caught the enthusiasm of the crowd, so that when, with one run to tie, and three men to play, Barton had taken the ball and hammered down those three wickets without allowing his opponents that one run, they cheered themselves hoarse in the general uproar that followed. They did not know what had happened, but they knew that the great left-hander had achieved the improbable, and that was enough.

Then they drove back to their hotel to prepare for the great ball that was to follow.

Mabel's experiences that night were entirely new, and harsh with that pungency that intoxicates. Dressed in a light, clinging creation of sky-blue silk that threw out boldly the soft, creamy alabaster of her throat and shoulders, she wore on her breast a single crescent clasp, consisting of one large diamond, surrounded by an almost priceless cluster of the finest pearls. Yet these adornments were unnecessary, for the tender freshness of Mabel Ransome, the rosy lips, and ruddier cheeks, and the bewitching, artless smile in her big, brown eyes, drew gallants to her as moths are drawn to a candle.

But Mabel well knew the inconvenience of having her card filled too early. So she kept them off. She sat out the first march, and, when it was ended, had only three names on her card, and those were for the next three dances.

Then she waltzed round the room to a tripping, airy, fantastic melody on the arms of De Launcey, and followed up with a quadrille with the same partner, when their vis-à-vis was a young negro legislator, accompanied by Lady Berkshire, the governor's wife. After that, she *one-stepped* with a gentleman who had been a passenger on the *Almirante* with her. And then she let herself go.

Half a dozen other dances passed off

before De Launcey and Mabel found themselves together once more. This time, it was in a wild, maddening galop, that sent the blood in a rush to their heads and faces, and intoxicated them with their own delirious exhilaration. They could not speak, save only with their eyes; they could hardly breathe; yet the gentle touch of the man on the slender form of the girl he held, was the self-confident dominance of possession, and the sensitive intuition of the maiden telegraphed back a message of submission.

As the music ended, and De Launcey conducted her to her seat, he found time to whisper:

"Won't you be sitting out a single dance? I had so wanted to have you to myself for a little while."

"I am so happy, Mr. de Launcey," she pleaded, "and my program is quite full. I could reserve only the last dance for you. May I not—"

"I must leave Kingston to-morrow for Westmoreland, at the other end of the island," he replied. "I waited only for this."

"I will see you after the last dance," she said hurriedly, for her next partner was approaching. "Is it a bargain?"

"It's a favor," he answered, and yielded his place to the newcomer.

III.

The Constant Spring Hotel stands on acres and acres of its own ground, an open meadow, decked here and there by straggling palms, or clusters of lilies, or little groves of carefully cultivated "wild flowers" hidden in the most unexpected nooks, and insidiously encouraged to assume their most natural wildness.

As Richard de Launcey led his companion out of the rapidly emptying ball-room, he reached her a light wrap from the adjoining coat room, and led her

away out on the lawn, where a small rural seat, entwined with creepers, stood beside a towering black thatch. The crisp, dew-laden Bahama grass crunched musically beneath their feet, and the fragrance of jasmine filled the air they breathed, and added its intoxicating stimulus to their already overflowing hearts.

The most serious moments are the moments when men find it hardest to put their thoughts into words. And so it was that these two young lovers—lovers of nature, lovers of life, lovers of each other—with their bubbling hearts, had to fence for an opening.

"I hope you had a lovely time," was the inane remark he first made.

"Delightful," she replied. "Why, it is altogether different from the old ball days. Is it something in the climate or in the place, or the strangeness of it all, that makes the difference?"

"For you, it may be all that," he answered sentimentally, "but for me it is something in here"—he laid his hand upon his bosom—"that causes the change. Can you guess what it is?"

She looked up to him, and a fire of comprehension lighted her eyes.

"No, no," she cried, "do not tempt me; it is not fair!"

"Heaven forbid that I should take any unfair advantage of circumstances," he answered. "Is it dishonorable to tell you that you have bewitched me, that I see you in all my dreams, sleeping or waking, that I can think only of you? If I am cruel, I will un-say the words."

From behind the distant Long Mountains, rising like a verdant island from the rolling plain that surrounded it, a sweet breath of rich sea breeze kissed her rosy cheeks and left them tingling. From the cold moon that shone overhead in all her splendor, or from the thousand brilliant stars around, a shower, as if of powdered glory, fell upon her countenance, and left her a

radiant, enchanted being, as she turned the tender young face up to his, as she laid one arm on his shoulder, and whispered in the pure innocence of her noble young soul:

"No, it is not fair; it is not manly; because—because, you know, Richard, that I love you; because you know I have fought against this for all these days; because you saw that the music to-night maddened me, and I had to fill up my program, had to give myself up to the wild abandon of recklessness, in the hope of mastering myself. There," she added vehemently, "you have tempted me, and I have fallen. You have allowed me to say what no self-respecting woman should ever say; you have made me ashamed of myself. I wish I were dead."

De Launcey raised the delicate, shapely head that sobbed on his bosom, and kissed the drawn lips lightly.

"My darling," he said, "you have only said the words that any noble woman should say who desires to make a man happy."

"But I have said them before I am asked," she said, with a sigh.

"No, no," he hurried; "my heart asked yours long, long ago. And only now it has answered, when my lips, too, had asked."

For a long time, the two sat silent and dreamed on. Then, suddenly, De Launcey roused himself and spoke:

"Will you go up now, dear, or would you like to sit here longer? I admit the spot seems chawmed, and yet I feel that I must tear myself from you. But if you care to remain and drink in a little more of this sweet moonlight, to take in a few more mouthfuls of this invigorating sea breeze, to commune with nature and your own dear heart, I am sure there is no danger. The grounds are surrounded and watched, and the hotel is near. What will you do?"

"I will go up," she said simply.

"As you will, dearest. There is an old legend, that maidens love to dream by moonlight at the spot where first they gave their heart, and that it is lucky. Don't you believe it?"

"I never heard that before," she answered. "Do you believe in luck?"

"In the concrete," replied De Launcey enigmatically, "not in the abstract. Still, some remarkable things do happen. But I must get that next car."

"I will see you to the car," she murmured, "then I will go up."

A short turn through the fields brought them to the street, where the car stopped. De Launcey wrung her hand and approached the waiting car, then he stopped abruptly and turned to her.

"You left your shawl where you sat," he said. "Shall I run to get it for you, or will you go for it? Luck, it seems, has decreed that you should return to the happy spot."

The conductor watched the dialogue, then rang his bell. Trolley cars could not be kept waiting while young lovers made their lengthy adieus.

"Catch your car," Mabel answered. "I will get my shawl."

De Launcey sprang to the footboard of the slowly moving vehicle, and waved her a parting good-by. Then she turned back toward the little rustic seat that had such tender memories for her.

Mabel looked around where she had sat, but the wrap was nowhere to be seen. She stood dreamily eying the little bench, without, indeed, giving much thought to the lost article.

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, a cold, firm hand grasped her neck and held her rigid. She tried to scream, but the viselike grip tightened on her throat and prevented her uttering a sound. She fought and tore with the desperation of terror, but her frail strength was no match for the great Thing that held her fast. She never saw It, for It

held her face away. A great faintness overcame her, her struggles grew feebler, her eyes clouded, her senses grew confused, and she fell in a heap to the ground. And Mabel never knew more; never knew how, when all signs of life seemed gone, the cruel, steely grasp had passed from her throat, and lifted her delicate body for one great final heave to the earth, where it had fallen, disheveled and broken.

For Mabel Ransome was gone; gone from the happiness she had anticipated, gone from the life she had but begun, gone from the pleasure she enjoyed, gone from the mother she idolized, gone from the world that had been all sunshine to her—gone!

IV.

The excitement in Kingston was of the most intense kind when, next morning, the papers made the startling announcement that the body of lovely Mabel Ransome, a guest at the Constant Spring Hotel, had early that morning been discovered on the grounds by a watchman.

Owing to its delightful climate, one of the chief assets of the island is its tourist trade, and from a business as well as a natural instinct Jamaica prides itself, and justly, on its unstinted hospitality to foreigners. This painful tragedy, therefore, stung the nerves of all classes, and police headquarters well knew the force behind them, should there be any delay in hounding down the culprit.

Inspector Cameron, with three of his best men, was himself on the job as soon as he received the first message of the murder.

Peter Roger, a watchman, employed by the hotel, had discovered the body of the murdered girl, while making his usual rounds at about three o'clock in the morning. The dance had ended at one-thirty. A porter had seen Miss

Ransome leave the building with De Launcey immediately after, but did not see them return.

De Launcey was found in his rooms at the Myrtle Bank. He was horror-stricken at the news. Yes, he had taken Miss Ransome for a moonlight ramble across the grounds after the ball, and had left her about two-twenty, when she had accompanied him to the car. He did not mention her sentimental reason for returning; he would spare that much of the memory of the girl he had loved.

Through the office of the traction company, Cameron was at length able to discover the car that had gone by the hotel at that time, and the conductor remembered and identified De Launcey and the little girl in blue that had accompanied him when he boarded the car.

The body of the dead girl was closely examined. It was bruised, and one arm was broken, but death had been caused, the doctors asserted, by strangulation. Her dress had been torn and soiled, and the jewel she had worn was gone. As this was roughly computed to be worth over fifty thousand dollars, it was fair to assume that robbery was the only motive of the crime.

The lawn of a much-frequented hotel was no place to look for footprints, and Cameron at once abandoned that idea; but he made a careful microscopic examination of the throat and dress of the dead girl for finger prints. In this, however, he was disappointed. The murderer had, apparently, worn a thick, coarse glove, which, though it bruised and blackened the tender skin, it left no distinctive mark that could be traced.

One only hope remained of finding the criminal. In a small place like Kingston, it would be difficult to dispose of a jewel of such value; and Cameron detailed a number of men to watch the jewelers, the pawnshops, and

other places, where such an article could be taken for dispossession.

Nothing, however, was discovered. The quest struck a snag, and was at a standstill. De Launcey postponed his Western trip, and, with several other indefatigable amateurs, was giving all his time to the solution of the mystery. Yet no solution seemed in sight. Three whole days had passed, and nothing had been achieved; and the public was clamoring for results.

In this dilemma, Cameron had to fall back upon his last resort. Detective Sutherland was the one big gun of the bureau. At the present time, he was engaged on an important case at Port Antonio, but his chief telegraphed him to drop everything else, and report at once at headquarters.

Before the great detective could arrive, however, a red-hot clew was in the hands of the detectives at Sutton Street.

V.

Walter Armstrong was a young policeman, placed on active duty a couple of weeks before. Armstrong did not look like a policeman; he looked like a tramp who had lost his way in a public museum. But he had a pair of eyes; a good pair, and eyes are useful, sometimes, even to a policeman.

Armstrong was on beat in lower King Street. He was standing in front of the Nova Scotia Bank, gazing dreamily at the small Municipal Park, as if trying to count how many flowers grew there, and entirely oblivious to the whirl of traffic that passed by. Suddenly, something flashed by his eye, as if out of the air. He woke up immediately, sprang to attention, and spun round on his heels, as the rule book said a good policeman should do.

In another moment, he had detected whence the flash came, and he darted after a small, plainly dressed negro girl, who was walking briskly up the street.

"Excuse me," he said, tapping her lightly on the arm, "you got to go with me up to Sutton Street."

"What for?" cried the girl, startled. "I haven't done nothing."

"No questions asked and none answered," replied the limb of the law promptly; then, remembering the rule book, added: "And I have to warn you that any statement you make will be used against you in evidence."

"Well, but what I got to go for?" asked the puzzled girl.

"'Cause I told you to," replied Armstrong, stretching out his great bulk, "and I'm an officer of the law. Will you go quietly now, or shall I arrest you?"

The girl considered the situation for a moment, and then moved on beside her burly escort.

"I will go," she sighed, "but I haven't done nothing."

And at her throat the while, there sparkled a great crescent clasp, consisting of a single large diamond, surrounded by a collection of the rarest, richest pearls.

At the station, Armstrong did not need to say a word. Half a dozen policemen sprang to welcome the pair, and led them up to the lieutenant's desk.

"What's your name?" asked that official.

"Mary Berger. But I haven't done nothing."

"Address," continued the lieutenant, writing.

She told him.

"Now, Mary," said the lieutenant, in a kindly, reassuring tone, "you will save yourself and us a lot of trouble if you answer frankly and truthfully a few questions I am going to ask you. Don't be afraid of anybody; we can protect you. Do you understand?"

The girl nodded.

"Tell me where you got that lovely brooch."

"This? Why, I bought it with my own money."

Armstrong, who was still standing beside the girl, tittered audibly.

"Thank you, Armstrong," said the lieutenant. "I forgot to thank and compliment you. You may return to your post. I will see that this thing gets into my report."

He turned again to the girl.

"Will you tell me how much you paid for it?" he asked.

"Five shillings," she replied proudly. "Why? Did he rob me?"

"From whom did you buy it?" the lieutenant asked.

"From a man I met in the street yesterday morning. He said he had picked it up, and when I paid him for it, he turned into the saloon at the corner of Charles and Duke Streets."

"Would you know that man if you saw him again? Can you describe him?"

"I sure would. I paid him five shillings. He was about as tall as—as that man over there, but not so stout. He had a red face, and a little mustache here, just a little. His face was wrinkled—oh, so wrinkled, and when he grinned, I noticed he had lost two teeth here."

"Your information is very complete, Miss Berger," the officer replied, "and I thank you. I am sorry to have to ask you to leave the clasp with me, and to wait for a few minutes, just to identify the man. After that, we shan't trouble you."

"And my five shillings?" asked the girl, surrendering the jewel. "I paid him five hard-cash shillings for it, and I haven't done nothing."

"We will see what can be done," he replied, and pressed a button. Then, to the man who answered, he simply said:

"Burke, we want Wooden-head Jimmy on a hurry call."

Exactly fifteen minutes later, the

habitual criminal was led into headquarters. Mary Berger identified him at once as the man who had sold her the clasp, and he did not deny it. Then the girl was allowed to go, and Inspector Cameron himself questioned the suspect.

Jimmy admitted he had sold the girl the jewel, but said he had picked it up. When pressure had been brought to bear upon him, however, he said that he had not picked it up, but that a messenger boy whom he did not know had brought it to him in a small box a few days before; he could not remember what day it was. It was addressed to him, and inside was a paper with the words: "From a pal." He did not know who had sent it.

And from this statement, no force could turn Jimmy.

But a man who has served eight different sentences in prison is hardly believed at police headquarters, even when his words seem true; and Jimmy's wild story could scarcely be believed if told by an honest man.

"Jimmy," said Inspector Cameron, with a sneer, "I wouldn't believe you if I knew you were telling me the truth." Then he turned to his attendants:

"Very well, boys," he said, "take him away. It is the last time you will be troubled with Wooden-head Jimmy. If he had a partner in this game, it won't be hard to find him. But to me it looks like a one-man job."

The inspector breathed easily. The great mystery had been solved. The reputation of the force had been sustained.

VI.

Half an hour later, Detective Sutherland arrived at Sutton Street.

"Well, old horse," the inspector greeted him; "for once you are too late. The mystery has been solved; and, believe me, boy, you have been beaten to

it by a mere greenhorn, who has been in the service three weeks, and who cannot find his way, unaided, through the streets of Kingston.

"Who's the new marvel?" asked Sutherland. Loaded with honors himself, he could afford to welcome a rising star.

"Young Armstrong. But there was no sleuthing; just plain luck."

"And the culprit?" Sutherland asked.

"Your old friend, Wooden-head Jimmy."

The detective rolled his eyes about the room, and finally fixed them on the inspector once more.

"Believe me, chief, I did not give Jimmy that much credit."

Then he continued:

"But since that is over, and I am not wanted, perhaps I could have the next few hours to do a little work on my own account."

The inspector knew his man, and knew the kind of work he would be likely to attend to.

"By all means, Sutherland, by all means," he replied. "Take all the time you want. You know how much time you can spare off that Port Antonio case. I won't interfere."

"Thanks, inspector," said Sutherland, and swung on his heels.

Early next morning, the detective was again with Cameron.

"Inspector," he said, "as I wasn't in on that Constant Spring scoop, and as I learn that you were aided by several distinguished amateurs, and especially by a member of the British peerage, who is in the island incognito, I propose to give a little luncheon to-day at the Myrtle Bank Hotel to those gentlemen who signally assisted. It will help to get my name in the papers, you know."

They both laughed; then Sutherland explained his plans more fully.

Next he drove to the hotel and made arrangements with the manager. After

that, he visited or telephoned his prospective guests, and everything was settled.

Anthony Sutherland deserves more than a passing mention. He was a great, big negro, with a visage so round and regular that it was hard to perceive where his forehead ended, and his short, close-cropped hair began.

His eyes were sleepy-looking, and his face wore an imbecile, idiotic expression. Looking at him, one wondered whether he could count ten.

Minus a neck, his head sat awkwardly on one edge of his great, circular body; at the opposite edge were two short, small legs that seemed wholly unequal to the sixteen stone of meat and fat which Sutherland took with him wherever he went. It did not seem as if he could walk five yards in an hour, though there were many who would swear that they had seen him do a quarter mile, flat, behind a fleeting burglar, in considerably less than two minutes. But, then, Sutherland was the kind of man of whom nothing should be expected, yet of whom anything might be expected. And, at Sutton Street, he was invaluable.

The luncheon at Myrtle Bank was a merry one. Inspector Cameron sat at the head of the table; at his right, De Launcey, and at his left, Sutherland, faced each other. Below were half a dozen other guests, who had interested themselves in the mystery.

Six bulky waiters, flat-footed and awkward, had served the different viands, cleared away the things, and just brought on the champagne—with large beer glasses.

"What is this new stunt you are trying to play on us, Crowley?" one of the guests asked of the manager at the farther end of the table. "I really didn't mind having to eat my ice with a butter knife, but I positively can't drink champagne from these mugs."

"It puzzled me too, at first," admitted the manager, "but now I seem to understand. Mr. Sutherland selected his own waiters, and I see the idea is to give us an extravagant burlesque, though he seems to be overdoing it."

"We excuse him," said Cameron, with a laugh. "Nobody could expect better of Sutherland, anyhow."

After the laugh had subsided, De Launcey raised his glass, and drank to the Jamaica police.

Cameron rose to reply, but Sutherland pulled him back by the tail of his coat, and rose in his stead.

"Gentlemen," he said; "Inspector Cameron has permitted me to reply for him to the toast just proposed; and I beg to thank our distinguished visitor for his appreciation, as well as for assistance he voluntarily offered, when we seemed confronted with a great mystery. I trust that before he leaves our shores, he may have further opportunity of seeing the ins and outs of our police system."

"Sit down now, Sutherland," said one of the guests, in a loud whisper. "You made a good start; if you go on, you will get your foot in your mouth."

"I arranged for this party," continued Sutherland, "because I wanted to tell you something about the gem that has just been lost and recovered; because, like other valuable stones, it, too, has a history.

"Several years ago, while I was in New York, the Jewelers' Association held an exposition at the Grand Central Palace. Among the gems there exhibited, was the great Sultana Crescent, kindly lent for the occasion by Colonel Ransome, of Cleveland, Ohio.

"It happened that I was at that time employed as a porter in the Grand Central Palace, and had a good opportunity of observing the Crescent, and of learning several interesting facts about it. Colonel Ransome himself did not know

the intrinsic worth of the jewel, but that he fully appreciated its value may be gathered from the fact that before he would let it leave his safe, he had it insured for seventy-five thousand dollars.

"Before the exposition had been half through, the insurance company wrote to cancel the policy, and the directors were in a quandary, for the colonel would not let it remain uninsured, and the directors knew that it was the central attraction of the show. At length, they struck upon the happy expedient of having it duplicated in paste. The job was done by a master of his profession, and none but an expert could tell the difference. I, however, as I say, had an opportunity of comparing the two, and of having the difference pointed out to me.

"For two days more, the crowds paid to see the imitation, not knowing that it was not the real Crescent. And then something happened.

"I was on watch that night, with a young fellow named Mike Swanley. We were in a distant part of the building, when we thought we heard some suspicious sounds, and cautiously approaching, we found that a couple of masked burglars had opened the great safe that held the Crescent and other jewels.

"We threw ourselves upon them, and the fight was fast and furious. I had torn the mask from the man I confronted, and had a good look at his face, before a ball in my neck sent me to the floor. As I fell, however, I struck against the other burglar, who had downed Mike. I was able to send a ball through his head, and to see Swanley rise from beneath him before I lost consciousness. Alas! When I recovered my senses, poor Mike was lying beside me, with a bullet through his heart, and a policeman was trying to shake life into me. One burglar was dead, but the other, the murderer of

Mike Swanley, had escaped with his booty—a jewel of paste, worth a few shillings!

"As I have said, I had a good peek at the rascal who escaped, and I had little difficulty in identifying him in the rogues' gallery, at police headquarters, New York. He was an old jailbird, originally from Atlanta, Georgia, and was registered as Billie Binks.

"The search for Binks throughout the United States was vigorous and persistent, but nothing more of him, nor of the paste crescent, was ever heard, and often since I have consoled myself with the belief that he might have retired to his hole, and died of some wound he received in that night's combat. And I was satisfied to think that the death of faithful Mike Swanley had been avenged, either by my hand or his own."

Sutherland paused, and, raising the glass to his lips, slowly sipped a mouthful of wine. The little audience breathed, and uttered a murmur of approval.

Sutherland raised his hand to stop them, then proceeded:

"In that, gentlemen, I was deceived. The duplicate paste crescent, lost that night in New York, turned up yesterday at the Sutton Street police station. It was found on a girl who bought it for five shillings—its actual worth—from James O'Reary, and unless I had intervened, O'Reary, a thoroughly bad one, would swing for it.

"That means, gentlemen, that Billy Binks has still been after the Sultana Crescent since he discovered that he had only obtained a paste imitation, and followed Miss Ransome to Jamaica. And I'll tell you another secret, gentlemen— Ah, must you go already, Lord Braley—I mean Mr. de Launcey? Just a little joke before you leave. See those waiters? I selected them myself. They all wear uniforms when they are at police headquarters. I gave them a

little signal a minute ago, and if you will look closely at them, you will see that four of them are covering you with pistols, though the weapons are covered with napkins. And they are good shots, Viscount Braley; remarkably good shots. Better not try it.

"Yes, Billy Binks," Sutherland ground out between his teeth, while fire flashed from his eyes, "we meet to-day under circumstances entirely different from those in New York that last time, when you murdered poor Mike Swanley, and nearly did for me. But when you distinctly drew attention to yourself and Miss Ransome before you entered the car that night, to get off at the next corner, then hurry back to murder her; when you sent the paste crescent by a hired boy to O'Reary, where you knew it would be traced, but whose explanations, as a habitual crim-

inal, you knew would not be accepted, you laughed up your sleeves at the island police. Yet, it was a defiance, Mr. Binks, that I, sworn to avenge Mike Swanley, could never pass.

"And, lastly, gentlemen," added Sutherland, pulling a package from his pocket, and turning again to his little audience, while two of the waiters safely manacled De Launcey, "take a look at the two Sultana Crescents, the genuine and the false. This is the duplicate. It was taken from Mary Berger, and is probably worth five shillings. And this is the genuine crescent. It was taken from Mr. de Launcey's rooms upstairs while we sat at luncheon here, and brought me by a waiter. Colonel Ransome valued it at seventy-five thousand dollars, and the best judges consider his estimate extremely conservative."

SHOT AT RAT—KILLS MAN

THE bullet which killed a rat the other day in the restaurant at 239 Cedar Avenue, Minneapolis, Minnesota, claimed its human victim when Daniel Golden died at the City Hospital.

Thomas Christo, employed in the restaurant, took a shot at a big gray rat. The bullet killed the rat, glanced, and struck Golden in the stomach.

STEAL SAFE AT NIGHT

MRS. BECKY SIMON and her family are puzzling over the fact that not a soul in the house heard the night thieves who broke into their home, 903 South Bodine Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and carried off a steel safe. The safe contained one hundred and forty dollars and jewelry valued at one hundred and fifty dollars.

The robbery was discovered when Mrs. Simon came down to prepare breakfast.

NUMBER OF CRIMINALS PARDONED

GOVERNOR JAMES B. McCREARY, of Kentucky, who recently retired from office, commuted to life imprisonment five death sentences, and issued pardons in five hundred and eleven cases in the last four years. His pardon record fell forty-nine under that of his predecessor.

Constantly besieged by friends and relatives of prisoners for clemency as his term neared its end, Governor McCreary acted in only a few instances.

May and December

by Frank Parks

AGNES MILLER'S good fortune was the talk of town and country when it was announced that she was to marry Norton Torrey. He was worth half a million dollars, which amounts to wealth, outside the big cities. He had lived for thirty years in Holliston, a pretty little town on the Delaware River, not far from the famous Water Gap, and always had enjoyed the distinction of being the richest man in the place.

At the time of his engagement to Miss Miller, he was fifty-four years old, and had been a widower for a decade. So far as was known to Holliston people, he had no near relatives except one son, from whom he was estranged. This son was engaged in a manufacturing business in Trenton, New Jersey, and was said to be almost as rich as his father.

Agnes Miller was an orphan when she was four years old. Her father—who survived her mother a little over a year—left a few thousand dollars for his child's support. This sum was not very well managed by her guardian, but he made up in generosity what he lacked in business ability; and gave the girl a home and an education.

When she was seventeen years old, she began to make a little money by writing stories, and thus ceased to be altogether a charge upon her guardian; but her literary ability was not of a high order, and it is doubtful whether she ever could have made a living with her pen.

This question ceased to be of interest,

however, when she attracted the attention of Norton Torrey. It was a foregone conclusion that she would accept him, for, aside from his money, he was a man to win a woman. He was admitted to be by all odds the handsomest man, young or old, who ever had stepped inside the limits of that township. Holliston had two principal "sights" with which to delight visitors. One of them was Mr. Torrey's house, and the other was Mr. Torrey. He had a commanding figure; he always dressed exceptionally well; his manner was affable, and his conversation was brilliant.

An ideal husband, truly; and yet there were rumors that the first Mrs. Torrey had not been happy, and even that her death had been hastened by a hidden sorrow.

With a proper regard for his ward's interests, the guardian of Miss Miller tried to get some light upon the basis of these stories, but he failed. The girl herself considered them the malicious whisperings of envy. Not even the most hardened gossip dared to hint to Agnes that there was peril in marriage with Norton Torrey. She paid no heed to idle stories; she cared nothing that her husband would be much more than twice her age; she went to her bridal with a light heart, and with the surest expectation of happiness.

Some months later, it was said of her, as of her predecessor in that household, that she was unhappy; but no one could say why. Two years went by; and then, of a sudden, Mr. Torrey's

health failed most alarmingly. No one had ever known him to be ill. "A constitution like Norton Torrey," had come to be an ordinary form of expression in the town.

He was a sad wreck when the iron strength that had sustained him through so many years failed at last. No one knew what was the matter with him. A distinguished expert in nervous diseases—summoned at great expense from Philadelphia—supplied the gossips with ponderous scientific names, which became even more incomprehensible after a few attempts at repetition.

The patient rallied, and soon was able to go out-of-doors; but it was evident to all who met him that he had failed in mind as well as in body, and that he never would be the same man again. He was eccentric and despondent, and as irritable as if he had been an invalid all his days.

Of course, the sad change in him excited no end of talk; but the gossips soon had a better subject in the wife, whose friendship with George Harley, a young lawyer, was said to have become closer than propriety permitted.

Harley was a fine-looking fellow, just out of a law school. He was the son of a well-to-do resident of Holliston, which accounts for his beginning practice in so small a field. For a year or more, he had a little legal work to do for Norton Torrey, but other clients came rarely to the door of his office.

Finally, Torrey heard the stories about his wife and the young lawyer; there was a violent interview between the two men; and the result was that Harley's law business lost its mainstay. When this became known, there was considerable interest in the question whether Harley would seek a fresh field, since Holliston, which had been worth little, was now worth nothing. But he lingered on, to the great satisfaction of the gossips.

It was an afternoon in May. Mrs

Torrey, rapidly crossing the hall in her magnificent home, met Doctor Frazer, the old village physician. He was surprised to see her—much more surprised than she, apparently.

"Where have you been?" he cried. "We have searched for you everywhere. We have been looking for you since one o'clock."

"Is it possible?" asked Mrs. Torrey calmly. "What is the matter?"

The physician did not mark, at the time, that she had not answered his question, but he remembered it afterward.

"Your husband is very ill," he said.

"Indeed?" replied the lady, without seeming to note the physician's excited, almost frightened, demeanor. "He seemed no worse than usual when I saw him this morning. I will go up to his room at once."

She ascended the stairs, and the old doctor followed her. His hand, upon the banister rail, trembled.

They found Norton Torrey in his bed. An elderly woman, Mrs. Eliza Ward, who had long been the principal servant in the house, was bending over him. It seemed that she was trying to make him swallow a potion, and that he was unable to do so. His teeth were clenched tightly; his face was pale, and showed the lines of recent and acute suffering. One hand was at his throat, as if he were choking.

At the sight of him, his wife's face became as pale as his. She stepped forward hastily.

Norton Torrey's eyes were upon her, and their look was repellent. He murmured something in a harsh tone, but the words were indistinguishable. One hand remained at his throat, but the other, with which he had been supporting himself in bed, was raised with a peculiar gesture, pointing at his wife.

Suddenly, with a deep groan, he fell back. A convulsive shudder shook his

frame. Then he turned his face to the wall.

The physician leaned far over him, his knee upon the bed. With a strong effort, he turned the patient upon his back, and gazed intently into his face. Then he got down from the bed, and stood beside it with uplifted hand.

"Dead!" screamed the wife, and she fell upon the floor, fainting.

When they raised her up, there seemed to be as little life in her as in the form upon the bed; but when they had carried her into another room, the physician restored her to consciousness without much trouble. She speedily recovered full control of her faculties, so that she was able to ask calmly enough for the details of the sudden illness which had terminated fatally in her presence.

"I was sent for about one o'clock," said the doctor. "Your husband was then very ill, and I soon became alarmed at his condition. Of course, we immediately endeavored to find you, but we could not. I suppose that you were at the house of some friend. We sent to several places—Mrs. Warner's and others. Unfortunately, we did not send to the right place, wherever that may have been."

The doctor paused, as if expecting some reply, but Mrs. Torrey did not open her lips.

"Your husband had not been well during the forenoon," the physician continued. "He had remained in his room."

"I was aware of that," said Mrs. Torrey.

"About noon, he sent to the kitchen for some beef broth, and it was made for him. Immediately after taking it, he became violently ill. It seems almost as if there must have been something wrong with the broth. I have taken what remained in the bowl, and I shall examine it."

Doctor Frazer was laboring under

great excitement. As he stood before the lady, who sat with her arms resting upon a small table, his fingers played nervously with a fold of the tablecloth.

Mrs. Torrey looked up at him with an intense expression, which deepened into horror. She rose slowly, and leaned over the table, so that her face was near his.

"Do you mean to tell me," she demanded in a whisper, "that my husband was poisoned?"

The physician was silent for a full minute, during which time he eyed the woman's face with professional attention. What he saw there seemed to embolden him.

"Mrs. Torrey," he said, with a sudden access of firmness, "it is my duty to tell you that your husband exhibited all the symptoms of poisoning with arsenic. Deeply as I regret the necessity of adding to your burden at this time, I must put the case into the hands of the authorities for a full investigation."

He was a man who had ever been faithful to the honorable rules of his profession, but the expression of his face had never been trained to keep a secret. It could be read at a glance.

"Wretch!" cried the widow of an hour. "Do you dare to accuse me?"

"It is impossible that I should do so," he replied gently. "There is absolutely no evidence. The case stands thus: This beef broth was prepared in the kitchen, by Mrs. Ward, a woman absolutely beyond suspicion, as I need not tell you. She put it into a bowl, and that into a plate, and carried it to the door of your husband's room.

"She knocked, and he came to the door, but did not open it. He told her to put the broth on that little stand which is near the door, and he would get it presently.

"Now, Mrs. Torrey, the critical point is this: No one knows how long the

broth remained there. Any one in the house might have gone to the spot, and poured the poison into the bowl."

"But you are not sure that the broth was poisoned," cried the woman. "My husband has been ill a long time. Natural causes might have——"

The physician checked her with a wave of the hand.

"In the bottom of the bowl," he said, "I found a white powder. Of course, I have had no time to analyze it chemically, even if I felt competent to undertake so serious an examination. Yet I have not a shadow of doubt that the powder is ordinary white arsenic."

The woman sank back into her chair.

"I am ill," she said, with a shudder. "Will you call my maid?"

The doctor touched a bell upon the table, and presently Mrs. Ward opened the door between the widow's room and that in which the master of the house lay dead.

"Mrs. Torrey wants her maid," said the doctor.

"Alice has gone," replied the housekeeper. "She left, this morning, for good. Didn't you know it, Mrs. Torrey?"

"I knew nothing of it," was the answer. "Why did she go?"

The housekeeper could give no information upon that point. Having said so, she left the room, and closed the door behind her.

"Let me urge upon you, Mrs. Torrey," said the physician, "the importance of answering the question now: Where have you been since twelve o'clock; when, so far as I know, you were last seen by anybody in this house, previous to my meeting you in the hall?"

"I must decline to tell you," she replied.

The old physician, who had known her from her infancy, and had, with daily pleasure, seen her grow to beautiful womanhood, pleaded with her to

shun the error of concealment in that hour of peril; but she would not heed his words. With a heart that was heavy with black doubts and fears, he left her to herself.

II.

"Mr. Sharpe," said George Harley, "I have sought your assistance in this case from peculiar motives. In the first place, let me say that I have unlimited faith in your power. I believe that you can establish Mrs. Torrey's innocence, no matter what may be the evidence against her."

The great detective was standing by the window of the young lawyer's office, looking out upon the familiar beauties of the Delaware.

"Do you mean," he said, "that you think I can establish her innocence, even if she is guilty? Do not harbor such a thought. You are her legal counsel. It is your duty—or, at least, it is your privilege—to free her by any legal means in your power. My case is different. I shall regard only the facts; and, by the way, the sooner I learn whatever may be known to you the better."

"Then let us see how the case stands," said Harley. "In the first place, let me say, that the very devil himself has been in it. The evidence which the prosecution will bring is absolutely conclusive. I know exactly what the case against my client will be, and it is strong enough to convict a saint."

"To begin with, Torrey's whole life will be raked over. That will be done to show the motive, or, rather, to strengthen the force of it."

"Do you know what that man was? Of course not; you have had no chance to find out. Well, that cultured and dignified gentleman, that walking model of all the virtues; that paragon, whose physical beauty was a perpetual lecture to young men on the rewards of a cor-

rect life, is now known to have been that most deplorable of wretches—a secret tippler, a home drunkard.

"Incredible, isn't it? Yet it is true. That was what broke his first wife's heart. That was the horror which Agnes discovered within a month after she married that man.

"Almost every evening, in the seclusion of his room, whose privacy no servant dared to violate, Norton Torrey drugged himself with liquor. His indulgence was such that it would have sent almost any other man to the grave. Yet so miraculous was the strength of his constitution, that he would awake, after a secret debauch, with scarcely a trace of it about him. A half hour's vigorous exercise, a plunge into cold water, a careful toilet—and the beast of a few hours before would be transformed into the gentleman that poor Agnes Miller had loved.

"And this wretched farce had been going on for years and years. Talk about the secrets of a great city! Go to the country, if you want to probe the miserable deceptions of human life.

"The first Mrs. Torrey had suffered in silence. Her son had left his father's house in disgust, but had breathed no word of reproach that the world could hear. I don't know how much Mrs. Ward knew, but she did not open her lips. Agnes followed their example as best she could.

"It couldn't last forever. Torrey's health endured beyond the bonds of all human experience, but it had to give way some time. And when it failed, the ruin of body and mind was awful. Oh, he was a nice man to live with, was Norton Torrey! First a drunkard, and then a maniac!"

"And a rich man all the time," said Sharpe. "I think you have established the motive. Mrs. Torrey would have been more than human if she had not longed to be a widow."

"The prosecution will say as much,"

rejoined Harley; "and they will also make some references to myself, if they dare; but I warn them that the man who ventures to intimate that my relations with Agnes were more than friendly, may expect to join the saints in paradise or the fiends in perdition, according to his deserts, and that speedily."

He spoke with the tone of a man who meant what he said. The detective regarded him curiously, remembering that he, also, had a motive for desiring Norton Torrey's death.

"They will prove," continued Harley, "that Torrey died of arsenical poisoning. I shall not be able to contest that. Chemical analysis has shown the presence of arsenic in the body.

"A part of the powder found in the bowl from which Torrey had taken the beef broth has been analyzed. It is white arsenic.

"Albert Dunning, a young druggist, who recently opened a first-rate store on the corner below here, will testify that Alice Holden, Mrs. Torrey's maid, bought white arsenic powder at his store on the evening before the day of Torrey's death.

"It was hard work getting that evidence, for it will hurt Dunning in this town, and he knows it well. If it hadn't been that one of his clerks saw the sale made, I think the fact might never have come out. You see, Dunning was in a fair way to run old Doctor Seabrook, the other druggist, out of the business, and this will turn the tables.

"It is rough on Dunning, for, by all accounts, he didn't want to make the sale. But the Holden girl told him that Mrs. Torrey wanted the stuff to poison rats—the house was overrun with them. It's the old story, of course. Dunning was afraid of disobliging so influential a woman as Agnes, and so he finally sold the stuff.

"About half of it was found wrapped in paper in a little drawer in a table in

Mrs. Torrey's room. She doesn't know how it came there, and I don't pretend to understand that feature of the case."

"Where is Alice Holden?" asked Sharpe.

"She has not been found," was the reply. "Of course, it is natural to suspect her, but that theory will not work. It is positively proved that she left this town early in the morning. She has been traced to New York. It is utterly impossible that she could have put the poison into that broth, for she was a hundred miles away when it was done.

"To proceed, every servant in the house has been examined, and every one can clear himself or herself, as the case may be. There is no doubt whatever that the poison was put into the broth while it was on the little stand outside the door of Torrey's room. During that time, not one of the servants was alone. In short, though I naturally want to take a contrary view, I am forced to admit that they are all innocent."

"How about Mrs. Ward, the house-keeper?" asked Sharpe. "I understand that she made the broth and carried it upstairs."

"She had no motive," was the reply; "and her character will clear her. She is one of the best of women, and everybody in this town knows it. I haven't the faintest suspicion that she did the deed; and, in any case, as a lawyer, I know that it will be perfectly useless to try to throw suspicion upon her."

"You are perfectly right in that view," said Sharpe. "Such an attempt would only injure your client. Now, let us return to Mrs. Torrey. Where was she at the critical moment?"

Harley twisted about in his seat, and seemed afraid to answer, though it was evident that he had made up his mind beforehand to do so.

"She was in the house," said he at last.

"How did it happen that she was not

summoned when her husband was taken ill?" demanded the detective.

"The servants did not find her," replied Harley. "She was in an unused room, which is always locked. No one thought of going there."

"Was she alone?"

Again Harley hesitated.

"No," he said finally; "I was with her."

"Then, why do you not come forward and clear her?"

"For several reasons," was the answer. "First, it would damage her reputation."

"Scarcely so much as an accusation of murder," suggested Sharpe.

"A woman has strange preferences," said Harley. "Agnes commands me to be silent. As a matter of fact, I ought not to have been there, but the case was getting to be desperate. Life in that house was becoming unbearable for her. We were discussing the means of ending her captivity."

"An elopement?" suggested Sharpe.

"Heaven knows!" cried Harley. "It might have come to that. I urged it, for I was mad with love for her. She refused, though she admitted her love for me. Ah, her behavior was noble! Her words might be shouted in the street, and they would do good to all who heard them. Only the secrecy of our meeting was wrong; but in a little town like this, what can one do? She couldn't come to my office for legal advice. All the gossips were watching."

"Were you with her all the time?" asked Sharpe.

"All but a moment," replied the young man.

"She left you in that room?"

"No; I left her there."

"Why?"

"I went to get a document which was in a writing table in the library."

"What was that document?"

"A deed of some property, executed by Torrey in favor of his wife."

"Why did not Mrs. Torrey get it?"

"Because she did not know exactly where it was."

"Did you not take a risk in passing through the halls at that time?" asked Sharpe. "You did not wish any one to know that you were in the house."

"That was not important," answered Harley. "If I had been seen, I should simply have gone to Torrey's door and rapped. We quarreled once, you know, but of late our relations had been more cordial. I had to take care when it came to the matter of a long, private conversation with Agnes."

"What time was it when you left that room?"

"About half past twelve."

"Do you suppose that broth was standing outside Torrey's door at that time?"

"I know it was," said Harley, "for I saw it."

"Well, upon my word," said Sharpe, "this is one of the most peculiar situations that I ever saw. You can clear your client if you go upon the stand as a witness, but in so doing you will cast the gravest suspicion upon yourself."

"That is the point that I've been working up to," said Harley calmly. "Who poisoned Norton Torrey, I don't know; but one thing is sure: Sooner than see Agnes bear the blame, I will go on the stand, whether she is willing or not. And, if the worst comes, and she is sure to be convicted, I will not only tell the truth, I will go farther; I will lie upon my oath, and say that I put that poison into the broth myself!"

"Let us hope it will not come to that," said Sharpe.

"My only hope is in you," replied Harley.

"One more question, and I am done: Could Mrs. Torrey have left that room and you not know it?"

"Impossible! She must have passed me in the halls or on the stairs. While I was getting that paper, the library

door was open, and I could see the bowl of broth standing outside the door."

This concluded Sharpe's talk with Harley. From his office, the detective went to the drug store of Doctor Seabrook. The old druggist had assisted in some of the analyses that had been made, and had seen all the chemists' reports, so that Sharpe expected to get accurate data from him. In this he was not disappointed. Doctor Seabrook made it clear to the detective that the case was a genuine one of arsenical poisoning, and that it must be futile to attempt to shake the chemical expert testimony.

The veteran druggist was very bitter against his young rival in business for having sold poison so recklessly. As to the actual crime, he stoutly defended Mrs. Torrey, and asserted his belief that the case was one of accident, or that the missing maid had done the deed.

As to this missing woman, Sharpe was much perplexed. It was impossible that she should have done the deed; yet it was admitted that she had bought the poison, and her flight was highly suspicious. She had had a quarrel with her mistress a few days before, but it had not been serious enough to warrant a desperate revenge, or even a sudden quitting of the house.

The detective had very little time in which to work, for he was very desirous of clearing Mrs. Torrey—if, indeed, she was innocent—at the inquest, which was called for the day after that on which Sharpe reached Holliston. It is, however, no new thing for the detective to be in a hurry; and he used his scanty time to so good advantage that when he appeared at the inquest the next morning he felt in the highest degree satisfied with the status of the case.

It will not be necessary to enter upon any detailed account of that somewhat remarkable inquiry. The climax came

when the representative of the district attorney produced two samples of poison, one of which had been obtained by drying the powder found in the bowl which had held the beef broth, while the other was taken from the little package found in Mrs. Torrey's room.

"These two are identical," he said. "They are both white arsenic, a well-known deadly poison, unfortunately too common, and too easily obtained."

At this point, Carson Sharpe, who occupied a seat beside the coroner on the bench, desired to know whether the package found in Mrs. Torrey's room could be proven to be that which the maid had bought. He was informed that the wrapper bore the druggist's stamp. Druggist Dunning, crestfallen, nodded despondently on the witness' bench. Druggist Seabrook scowled triumphantly.

"Will you permit me to make a brief experiment?" asked Sharpe; and nobody objected, for they all stood in considerable awe of the detective.

Thereupon, Sharpe took the two packages of poison and poured a small quantity of powder from one of them into a glass tube, and an equal amount from the other package into another tube. Then, producing a small vial of colorless liquid, he poured some of it into the tube which held the powder taken from Mrs. Torrey's room.

There was no visible result, and coroner, jury, lawyers, and spectators looked very much disappointed. Then Sharpe poured some of the same liquid into the other tube which contained the powder taken from the broth.

Instantly there was a lively effervescence. The tube was as full of bubbles as a glass of soda water. The jurymen opened their eyes, the spectators rose to their feet and craned their necks to see.

"Mr. Sharpe," said the coroner, "I do not quite understand the meaning of the experiment you have performed,

but I perceive that it is important. It seems to show that the poison found in the broth is not the same as that found in Mrs. Torrey's room."

"On the contrary," said Sharpe, "the poison is exactly the same. Yet I tell you that I have proved that the drug bought by Mrs. Torrey's maid was not used to poison Mr. Torrey.

"Let me explain: White arsenic, in the form of powder, as it is sold in drug stores, is rarely pure. It is adulterated with various cheap substances similar in appearance.

"As I have said, the poison which the maid bought is the same as that found in the broth, but the substance used in adulterating the two was not the same.

"That bought by the maid was adulterated with sulphate of calcium; that which killed Mr. Torrey was mixed with carbonate of calcium—in other words, with chalk dust.

"I prove this by adding acid to both powders. It produces no effect upon the sulphate of calcium, but it breaks up the chalk, setting free carbonic acid gas—the ordinary soda-water gas.

"The chemists who have analyzed these two samples, paid no attention to the adulterant. They took it for granted. If the same chemist had prepared both analyses, he would have noticed the difference; but the two reports mention only the white arsenic, since the other substances were harmless.

"Now, what does this prove? Why, it proves that the fatal dose was not bought at Dunning's store. He gets his white arsenic of Abel, Hanniford & Co., of New York, who use sulphate of calcium as an adulterant.

"On the other hand, Doctor Seabrook buys his white arsenic of Seamen, Wilbur & Co., of Baltimore, and they use powdered chalk. I learned these facts yesterday afternoon.

"Mr. Coroner, if you will permit me to do so, I will suggest that you call Doctor Seabrook to the stand."

The druggist came up, flushed and trembling.

"Question him, Mr. Sharpe," said the coroner, and the district attorney acquiesced.

Little questioning was necessary. The old druggist saw himself detected, and he confessed. He had sold the white arsenic which had proved fatal in this case, and the person who had bought it was Norton Torrey!

The druggist had known how criminal an act it was to sell poison to such a half-mad creature, but he had not dared to offend Torrey, who for many years had secretly bought his liquors through Doctor Seabrook. Not daring to disclose his error, the druggist had taken the risk of sending Mrs. Torrey to the scaffold by his silence.

It became evident that the case was one of suicide, and when that view was presented, no one was surprised. Torrey's suicide had been predicted since his mental failing had been noticed.

After Seabrook had left the stand, Sharpe explained the purchase of the poison by the maid, and the fact that a considerable portion of it was missing from the package found in Mrs. Torrey's room.

The detective, after becoming con-

vinced that the maid had not contributed in any way to the death of Torrey, had sought for a motive for buying the poison.

Searching the house and surroundings, he had come upon the dead body of a pet dog that had been owned by Mrs. Torrey. The dog had died of arsenic. In the excitement of the tragedy in the house, the loss of the dog had not been noticed.

It was evident that the maid had poisoned the dog in revenge for the quarrel she had had with the mistress, who had prized the animal highly. Having done this cruel and brutal act, the maid had fled.

This discovery cleared the case up thoroughly. It had ended in a manner most satisfactory to Harley and Mrs. Torrey, for Sharpe's disclosure had come in time to shield them.

It was the detective's opinion that the wife's conduct had not been so blamable as it had at first appeared, so far as Harley was concerned. He was not sorry that she would inherit the fortune of the man who had clouded her young life by his intemperance; and he viewed with equanimity the practical certainty that Harley would eventually share the money.

SHOT BY PLAYFUL DOG

WILBUR KENTFIELD may die as the result of a strange hunting accident near Oskaloosa, Iowa. He was shot by his dog.

Kentfield was leaning with crossed hands on the muzzle of his shotgun, which was cocked. His dog jumped at him for a caress, and his paw struck the trigger, discharging the gun. The charge tore off Kentfield's right hand and badly mutilated the left. Part of the charge entered his neck.

REMOVE LEGACY FROM CORPSE

BEFORE the estate of Albert Halien, eighty-five years old, of Portland, Oregon, could be settled, a post-mortem operation was necessary to remove from his stomach a ten-dollar gold piece which Halien had included in his will, bequeathing two hundred and fifty dollars. Investigation showed the sum bequeathed was ten dollars short of the sum on hand. The coin had been swallowed by Halien several days before he died, apparently through excitement in making his will.

Practical Theory

by Keene Thompson

CERTAINLY, I mean it!" Chadwick Wade smiled with his customary good nature round the table at his three friends. "What you declare to be next door to impossible—is really the easiest thing in the world!"

"Oh, come now!" protested Percy van Druyp.

"You're talking through your hat, old fellow—absolutely!" earnestly interjected Algernon de Wetter, third.

"Of courth, he is!" chimed in Bertie Cole. "He knoths it, too. Chaddie's only stringing uth; 'fess up now, deah old boy, ithn't that tho?"

Chadwick Wade, who was the eldest, by a half dozen years, of the quartet seated round the table, continued to smile. To all outward appearances, he was the same "silly-ass" sort of a young man as his fellows. He, too, wore a wrist watch. He carried his handkerchief up his sleeve, and his glossy, black hair was plastered down on his head without a part, as was theirs. And yet there was a difference in his aspect. Some hint of hidden strength of character, indefinable though it was, set him apart from the others.

It had been a bit irregular, the manner in which Chadwick Wade had turned up in the exclusive Crop and Stirrup Club. Exclusive, did we say? Oh, my word, the Crop and Stirrup was more than that! Who belonged to it, but such present-day Midases as J. D. Murchison, "the czar of Wall Street;" Campbell, the steel king;

Stoneyman, the noted collector of facsimile engravings of the Presidents of the United States on five, ten, and twenty-dollar bills, and their ilk? Percy van Druyp, Algernon de Wetter, third, and Bertie Cole, were youthful interlopers, put up with merely out of regard for their sires, who had willed them, in accordance with the by-laws of the club, a life membership in that oldest and most ultra-exclusive of the city's social institutions.

Chadwick Wade had entered the Crop and Stirrup's sacrosanct precincts with a two weeks' guest card, signed by James D. Donaldson, the railroad president, on the day after Mr. Donaldson had left for a protracted trip through the West.

It was conceded, at the outset, to be a shame that Mr. Donaldson was not there to take care of his guest. Afterward, when the members of the Crop and Stirrup Club, both young and old, had become better acquainted with Chadwick Wade, it amounted to little less than a club scandal that a young man of his attainments should have been left by the man who had put him up there to get along the best way he could. In addition to the fact that he told a story well, and played an excellent game of billiards and bridge, the unvarying good humor already referred to which he displayed toward all with whom he came in contact, had soon made young Wade the most popular frequenter of the club.

Nobody had objected, when the fortnight specified on his guest card was

up, to his continuing to receive the hospitality of the Crop and Stirrip—least of all, J. D. Murchison, the club's governor, himself.

Chadwick Wade, by correcting a fault of "englishing" his ball on the wrong side, which the great man possessed, to the detriment of his billiard game by at least twenty points in a hundred, had made the grizzled head of the banking trust his staunch friend. He had ingratiated himself with others among the older members of the club, in various ways. But it was with the "younger set," as represented by Percy van Druyp, et al., that the cheery Wade had scored his most emphatic hit.

He was a "live wire," as Algernon de Wetter, third, horsily put it, who had seemingly been sent to them from heaven in answer to their prayer for something or some one to shatter the boredom which the aristocratic, and, hence, dully quiet, Crop and Stirrip Club held for them.

Wade had certainly waked up the three idle-rich young men by the statement he had made to them in the smoking room this evening, that, in his opinion, the majority of the modern buccaneers of Wall Street were easy marks.

"It's a fact," he had said. "If I were a crook, and needed to shake down some one for the price of a trip to Palm Beach, or anything of the sort, I wouldn't lose a minute deciding who it would be. I'd hunt up one of these captains of finance, one reads of in the daily papers, and victimize him to the tune of whatever I needed, as easily as turning over my hand. They're mostly all crooks, on a large scale, themselves; and, from time immemorial, the easiest kind of prey for one crook has always been another."

Asked, incredulously, if he meant what he said, Chadwick Wade had smilingly replied in the affirmative, as

the reader knows. Whereat, the storm of protest against the truth of the theory he advanced had arisen from the three other young gentlemen seated with him at the table.

"No, I'm not 'stringin' you, as you put it," Wade turned to answer Bertie Cole's question. "And I mean exactly what I say. Men who make their living by outwitting other people, as our Murchisons and our Campbells and Stoneymans do, are the easiest kind of picking for other confidence men's skin games. The records all go to prove it. How many gamblers did you ever hear of dying rich? All the recognized games of chance are in their favor. Yet, nearly all of them wind up broke. Where does the money they make go to, then? I'll tell you. The faro dealer gives it to the owner of the roulette wheel. He passes it over to the bookmaker at the race track. And he in turn loses it at stud poker. It's the same way with professional crooks. They all die poor. The money they make by one swindle, or series of swindles, they allow themselves to be duped out of—in some fake mining scheme, or by going up against the expert thimbleiggers on the stock market."

"But how about the Murchisons and the Campbells and the Stoneymans, that you're likening to these rotters?" Percy van Druyp pointedly interjected. "They don't die poor."

Chadwick Wade's smile broadened.

"That's because most of their lesser fellow confidence men are afraid to go after them," said he; "because of the false reputation they've built up for shrewdness in money matters. But that doesn't prove," he went on, in the same smiling but positive tone, "that they wouldn't make the biggest babies on earth, if a clever crook who understood his business once started to whipsaw one of them."

"By Jove, you'd have a hard time proving that anything of the sort could

be worked," murmured Algernon de Wetter, third, eagerly, "with *that* one!"

They all looked, Chadwick Wade included, across the smoking room, at the stern figure in its doorway upon which young De Wetter's eyes were fixed. It was J. D. Murchison, himself. Stepping, with the firm tread of the conqueror which he was, into the room, the man whose word was law to all who dwelt from nine to four each day in Wall Street and its immediate environs, selected one of the deep leather armchairs in which to deposit his commanding bulk, next a cigar from the case in his pocket, and then spread open his evening newspaper to give his attention to the stock columns.

"I'd like to see the man who could thwinkle him!" breathed Bertie Cole, in awed agreement with the other's statement concerning the master financier's invulnerability to the attack of any get-rich-quick schemer whatsoever. "It's just one of those things that can't be done!"

"A crook might as well try to break into the subtreasury with a toothpick," grimly commented Percy van Druyp, "as to get into Murchison's pocketbook with any sort of a skin game under the sun!"

"Let me see," said Chadwick Wade musingly. "I've heard, somewhere, that J. D. Murchison first broke into the king row among the millionaires by cheating the widow of his partner out of her interest in the up-State bank he held fifty per cent of the stock in. Is that true? And that, practically, every million he's added to his pile since, he got by some sort of sharp practice at the expense of his fellow men. Are those tales they tell of him also true? All right, then. That proves him to be a crook; and, according to my theory, credulous where the 'con' game of another is concerned. As I can demonstrate."

"As you can do *what*?" blurted out Algernon de Wetter, third.

"Now, look here, old man. You've gone crumbly on the tea bun."

"You're talking abtholute rot, you know——"

"Listen!" Wade, no longer smiling, held up one hand for silence. "Just for the fun of the thing, I'll tell you fellows what I'll do. I'll make a test, to show you that what I say is true. I'll wager that I, myself, can shake down Murchison for any amount in reason. Say, twenty-five thousand dollars."

"You couldn't do that in a million years!" stated Percy van Druyp positively.

"I can do it," contradicted Chadwick Wade, with equal positiveness, "inside of twenty-four hours. I'll not only take that amount of money away from him in that short space of time; but, to show you how easy I think it is, I'll further agree to do it by the oldest game you can think of. What do you say that is?"

"The gold-brick thwinkle!" exclaimed Bertie Cole, his eyes shining with excitement over the prospect of a battle of wits between his new friend across the table from him, and the acknowledged leader of the crafty wolf pack in Wall Street, which the former had suggested. "Thee if you can thell Murchison a gold brick, will you, Chaddie?"

"There's an older game than that." Chadwick Wade, who was smiling again, shook his head. "It's positively primitive in its directness—and I'll try that, if you like. I mean a hold-up. I'll go to J. D. Murchison's office tomorrow afternoon, and hold him up for twenty-five thousand dollars. And I'll get away with it, too."

"You mean," suggested Percy van Druyp, with his brows drawn together in a frown over the unpleasant recollection he bore of the same thing's having happened to him in the past, "that

you'll hold him up with a plea to contribute that much to some charity you're interested in?"

"No," the other, still smiling, continued to shake his head. "I mean that I'll walk in and literally hold him up. At the point of a gun, with which I'll threaten to blow his head off if he doesn't come across with the sum I demand. That kind of a hold-up, my children!"

In silence, the three young men, whose inherited wealth totaled between twenty and thirty millions, sat staring at him for a full minute.

"You *have* gone crazy!" declared Percy van Druyp, with simple conviction, at length.

"I mean it!" insisted Wade, leaning forward and smiling round at them. "If you chaps will agree to help me, I'll show you that I intend to try the thing out by going over and arranging with Murchison for an interview to-morrow at his office—now."

Before they could rouse from the stunned amazement into which the daring of his contemplated project had thrown them, and so spring up to stop him, the trio of young clubmen saw Chadwick Wade rise from the table to cross the smoking room and address the great financier, who had just discarded his newspaper at the conclusion of the perusal of its financial page.

"Mr. Murchison," Wade was saying to the head of the banking trust, "I'd like to consult you about a small business matter. Could I drop into your office—say, to-morrow? Some time before three o'clock would suit me best."

Murchison, whose face had lighted up with pleasure at sight of the young man whose advice in regard to his billiard stroke had enabled him within the past week to defeat no less than three of his friends, who had formerly been trouncing him with aggravating regularity, frowned as he heard his request for an interview at his office.

"I'm a blunt man, Mr. Wade," the capitalist snapped, "and so I'll tell you plainly that, if you're counting on the personal acquaintance you've scraped with me in this club to get you an inside tip on the stock market, or a fancy-salaried position in some one of the banks I control, you're going to be disappointed, for I can do nothing for you."

"It hasn't anything to do with either of those things," Wade announced, his manner quite unruffled by the other's self-confessed bluntness of speech. "You can take my word for that. But I prefer not to tell you beforehand what I want to come to see you about. You'll be pleasantly surprised when you find out—I can promise you that, also. How would two o'clock to-morrow afternoon do? I won't detain you more than five minutes, at the most."

Murchison silently regarded him from under his shaggy, iron-gray brows, that were still skeptically lowered.

"All right," he growled at length, taking a morocco-bound engagement book from his vest pocket, and jotting down a line in it with his fountain pen. "I'll see you then."

Chadwick Wade returned to his former companions at the table, beckoning to one of the club's faultless servants as he reseated himself.

"I'm to see him in his office at two o'clock to-morrow afternoon," he informed the three round-eyed and open-mouthed young men. "We'll drink to the taking of the first step toward your education in the truth of my theory. By two-ten to-morrow afternoon you'll have finally graduated—all of you will be ready to admit that I knew what I was talking about!"

"But, dash it all, look here!" expostulated Percy van Druyp. "You *can't* mean to attempt to carry out anything so wild, so harebrained, so—so utterly preposterous, if you know what

I mean! And if you do intend to go ahead with it, why, you can count me out, that's all! I'm not lunatic enough to be a party to an attempted hold-up, carried out in broad daylight, and against one of the richest men in the country——"

"Right-o!" broke in Algernon de Wetter, third. "I, too, refuse to have anything to do with it. That is—if you really mean to do what you've threatened, Wade. But you don't, of course. You've too much horse sense to attempt anything of the sort——"

"I'm going to prove my theory to you," Chadwick Wade slowly and emphatically interrupted, still smiling his quiet, confident smile, "by holding up J. D. Murchison in his own office tomorrow afternoon for twenty-five thousand dollars—and I expect to get away with it, too, as I remarked before. That is, with your help."

It was Bertie Cole who spoke up, his eyes glowing with the fervor of a true sportsman.

"I'll help you, Chaddie, old topper!" he announced. "I want to prove to you that you're wrong—juth as you thay you want to prove the contrary to uth. You've offered to make the testh with Murchison, by holding him up. I won't let you back out now, before you've proved to yourself that it can't be done. And tho I'm willing to help you in any way you thay!"

"Bertie, have you gone crazy, too?"

"Do you want to disgrace yourself by getting arrested on a charge of attempted highway robbery, you idiot?"

So, in shocked chorus, Percy van Druyp and Algernon de Wetter, third, cried out restrainingly to their friend, the rabbitlike formation of whose two large and prominently displayed front teeth was responsible for the impediment in his speech.

"He'll run no danger," Chadwick Wade reassured them gently. "Any

more than either of you will in helping me. I promise you——"

"But we're not going to help you!" broke in Van Druyp decisively.

"We certainly are *not*!" no less firmly echoed the third of the line of De Wetters to bear the name of Algernon.

"Lithen, you chaps!" urged Bertie Cole. "You know he can't get away with thith, as he thays. Why don't you thee it the way I do, then? That it'th up to uth to show him how bally wrong hith thilly old theory ith, by agreeing to help him. Ath long ath we don't run any danger ourthelves——"

"You don't!" Wade picked up the thread of his argument. "I can assure you of that, to your own satisfaction, by telling you exactly how far away you'll be from the actual scene of the crime when it's carried out. You all know where Murchison's office is. On the eighteenth floor of the Murchison Building, at the corner of Wall and Broad Streets. Well, all you three have got to do is to stand on the sidewalk below. If I don't get away with my end of it in Murchison's office, you fellows should worry! I'll be the only one taken by the police. Nobody can possibly connect you with the affair, eighteen stories away from it at the time the game was sprung——"

"But how do we help you, then?" put in Percy van Druyp, with pardonable curiosity.

"By simply doing one thing, precisely at the moment I tell you to," Chadwick Wade promptly answered. "If what I've told you about how far removed you'll be from the scene of the crime is the truth, and if what I ask you to do isn't in any respect criminal—will you agree to do it?"

Percy van Druyp looked inquiringly at Algernon de Wetter, third.

"Shall we do as Bertie, here, suggests," he asked, "and help him, in order to show him that he hasn't a chance

in the wide, wide world of carrying this thing out?"

"It's his funeral," Algernon agreed, with a shrug, after a moment's thought. "If he wants to get himself arrested, and sent away to the observation ward of some hospital, as the very mildest thing that will happen to him as a result of trying on anything so wild as this, we should fret, as he suggests! As long as we don't run any risk ourselves of being connected in any way with the crazy stunt, that is." He turned to Chadwick Wade. "Tell us what it is you want us to do."

Whereupon he told them.

Slowly the expression of commiseration over the sudden fit of lunacy that had attacked him with which Percy van Druyp and Algernon de Wetter, third, if not Bertie Cole, had been regarding him, was replaced on their faces by a look of grudging admiration.

It was ridiculously simple, the thing he had asked them to do. And yet, its very simplicity, at first glance, made it appear that he might be able to carry out his project, after all. For that reason, two of the young men at least who sat with him at that table in the club's smoking room were on the point of disowning their promise to help him. They weren't actually going to join in a plan to rob one of their own set of twenty-five thousand dollars.

But, then, there came reassuringly to their minds the thought of the innumerable stumbling blocks that would still beset the path of the clever deviser of this scheme, even if it succeeded, to the accomplishment of the purpose he had boastfully set himself.

Why, no one could really hold up a man like Murchison, in the middle of the day in his office in the heart of the financial section, and walk off untouched with the money he had threatened out of him at the revolver's point. It was absurd!

And so, gayly assuring him that they would follow the instructions he had given them to the letter on the morrow, but that he was going to fail, nevertheless, Percy van Druyp, Algernon de Wetter, third, and Bertie Cole, the three youngest members of the exclusive Crop and Stirrup Club, took their leave of Chadwick Wade.

"Mr. Murchison, I want twenty-five thousand dollars!"

Wade, the customary smile of good nature gone from his lips, which were pressed together in a firm line, sat beside J. D. Murchison's desk, in the latter's private office, at three minutes past two on the next afternoon.

In one hand, he held the back of the banker's chair, as he leaned earnestly toward him, while in the other was an automatic revolver of the latest make, the short, dull-black muzzle of which was pressed between the third and fourth buttons of Murchison's vest.

"At this moment, you are as far from being able to summon human help to get you out of the corner I've backed you into, as you would be if you were alone with me on a desert island," the young man went on, in the same level, brisk undertone. "Your private secretary, and the clerks in the office outside this door, might as well be a hundred miles away, instead of less than thirty feet, so far as any assistance they can be to you is concerned. If you lift your voice to summon them, I will kill you instantly. If you make a move toward one of the push buttons there under the edge of your desk, or that telephone, I'll shoot you before you can reach it—and, at this distance, I shall shoot straight. I mean exactly what I say."

The capitalist's face, which had been crossed by the impatient expression of one who believes he is listening to a lunatic at his caller's first words, was now ashen—with sheer panic fear—as

he continued to look into the cold gray eyes of Chadwick Wade, which held his own as in a vise.

"I am a desperate man, Mr. Murchison," the young man went on. "The statement which I have just made of my intention of killing you if you attempt to call for help, is no idle threat. I mean to shoot you dead, if you do not yield to my demand. Look at the matter from my standpoint—which, I am sure, would be yours, if our positions were reversed—and you will see that that must be so: If I fail to carry out this daylight robbery of you which I have attempted, you are powerful enough to have me sentenced to the State's penitentiary for twenty years. And probably sent back for twenty more on one trumped-up charge or another, out of sheer spite against me, after that. I have no desire to spend the rest of my life rotting in a prison cell. I'd prefer to go to the electric chair and have it over with quickly, by killing you—if my plan falls through. But I know you're going to be sensible, and not let it. Hand over the twenty-five thousand."

The financier moistened his dry lips.

"But—but why do you make this demand of me?" he stammered out. "I have done nothing to deserve that you should come here to hold me up for such a sum in this way, have I?"

Chadwick Wade smiled once more—a mocking smile, about which Murchison, searching his face with his wide, fear-filled eyes, could detect nothing of the young man's former good humor.

"You have, sir!" he replied, with grim alacrity. "This, let us say, comes under the head of just retribution. The biter bitten! How many of your fellow men have you held up, at the point of the weapon which your wealth and power has placed in your hands; in many cases, demanding all that they had, instead of this trivial fraction of your fortune, which I am asking of

you? Don't go over the list—I haven't time to listen to the lengthy confession that would make. Come, Murchison! Don't play the injured-innocence rôle with me. You're getting no more than what's coming to you—exactly what you've given to others—as everybody will say. If they don't, they ought to. You're a crook, caught by another's game. Don't do what the meanest trickster is above when he's been taken in by a fellow artist, which is to squeal—but pay up!"

Wade pressed the pistol more firmly against the banker's vest.

"Give me twenty-five thousand dollars before I count five," he presented his ultimatum, "or you're a dead man."

"I—I haven't got it!" gasped Murchison. "That amount upon me in cash, I mean. You—you know that must be the truth. No man carries such a sum——"

"You've got a check book, though, haven't you?" sharply put in Chadwick Wade.

The financier stifled a gasp. He regarded the other with incredulity struggling against dawning hope in his eyes.

"Will you take a check?" he asked quickly.

"Make it out to Chadwick Wade," the latter nodded, as Murchison, eagerly pulling out the drawer of the desk before him, produced his check book and hurriedly opened it. "You're drawing it against your personal account in the bank downstairs, aren't you? That's right. Don't forget that the amount is twenty-five thousand."

Taking the check which the banker handed him across the room to the window, as though to assure himself in the stronger light there that it had been filled out and signed properly, Wade, with a nod of satisfaction, folded the pink slip of paper and placed it in his pocket—keeping the capitalist covered with the gun in his other hand meanwhile.

Drawing out his handkerchief, Chadwick Wade airily flirled it open and touched it to his brow.

Then, coming back from the window, he stood looking down at the financier beside his desk, with the pistol in his half-lowered hand trained unwaveringly upon the middle button of his vest.

"Now, I am about to leave you," the young man lightly informed him. "Swing round in your chair to face the door. That's it. Now, as I back out, I can keep the most vulnerable part of your body directly under the muzzle of this gun, you see. I'll fire at the first move you make toward those push buttons before I've passed through the door. After that, you may ring for your secretary whenever you please. Before he can cross the outer office to come in here, I'll have crossed it to the elevators in the hall—and be mingling with the crowd in the street below before you can start any one after me. Remember what I've told you about playing your ball low and on the inside when you want to make a one-cushion draw shot, Mr. Murchison. If you *must* enter this in your personal-account book somehow, just set the twenty-five thousand dollars down to instruction in billiards. And now, good-by, sir!"

The door toward which he had been slowly backing across the room, while he talked, swiftly opened and closed. Chadwick Wade was gone.

Spinning round in his chair, with a crafty chuckle, J. D. Murchison pushed one of the buttons under the edge of his desk to which the young man had referred, and reached for the telephone at the same time.

As he closed the door of the financier's outer office behind him, to find that he stood alone for the moment in the elevator hall of the skyscraper's eighteenth floor, Chadwick Wade became galvanized into life.

He peeled off his overcoat, turning it inside out, and getting into it again, its fur lining making it look like an automobile coat of that sort. As he ran toward the stairway, he removed his derby. He dropped it down the stair well. A motorist's cap, with goggles attached, which he pulled out of his pocket and clapped on his head, finished the complete alteration in his outward appearance, which he had made in the few seconds that had elapsed since he had stepped out of the capitalist's suite of offices.

"Down, seventeen!" he called, reaching the floor below just in time to see the red light above one of the elevator doors which indicated the approach of a descending car.

One minute and thirty seconds afterward, as though he had just stepped out of his motor car at the curb, Chadwick Wade was approaching the paying teller's window in the bank on the ground floor of the building, where J. D. Murchison kept his personal account—and where, for the purpose of being identified by its teller, the young man himself had opened a modest account of two hundred dollars three weeks earlier.

And forty-five seconds later, with twenty-five thousand dollars in crisp, new bills of large denomination salted down in his pocket, he was walking away from the window—toward the open street door.

Meanwhile, in his private office, eighteen floors above, an elderly man, with a face turned apoplectic in hue by the rage that consumed him, was alternately rattling the receiver of the telephone before him up and down, and bellowing into the mouthpiece.

"Give me that number, I say! Quick! Quick! This is J. D. Murchison talking. I'll have you discharged, girl, if you don't give me that number at once! Every second's delay brings me nearer to losing twenty-five thousand dollars!

90400 Broad! Get me that number, quick!"

At ten o'clock that evening, a servant in the Crop and Stirrup Club informed Percy van Druyp that some one in Baltimore wished to talk with him over the long-distance phone. Excusing himself to his two companions, Algernon de Wetter, third, and Bertie Cole, in the smoking room, Van Druyp departed in the servant's wake.

"Good evening, Percy, old dear!" a faint voice came to his ear over the wire. "Do you know who this is speaking? None other than your old chum, Chadwick Wade!"

"Oh, hello!" exclaimed the heir to the Van Druyp millions, in a tone in which relief and anxiety were mingled in equal parts. "We've been worrying all the afternoon, and most of this evening, over you. The thought never occurred to any of us before—but what are you going to do with Murchison's twenty-five thousand, now that you have succeeded in getting it?"

"I'm going to Palm Beach with it," came back Chadwick Wade's response. "I'm on my way there now. I'll tell you something else that you and Algy and Bertie, your cute little playmates, never thought of, either. That 'Chadwick Wade' might only have been one of the aliases of a clever crook. That happens to be the case, Percy. You ask James J. Donaldson when he comes back from his trip out West, and he'll tell you that the two weeks' guest card I presented at your club is a forgery. Hello—you're still there, aren't you?"

That's all right, then. I didn't know but what the shock might have knocked the pins from under you. Yes, Percy, you and Algy and Bertie have been running about with a bold, bad thief, all this fortnight past. You've been his accomplices in a crime, too—but don't let your consciences bother you about that. Murchison deserved to be shaken down. And, thanks to the three of you, I've been able to do it quite satisfactorily—for enough to pay all my expenses for some time.

"You don't need to send detectives out to hunt for me," the speaker added, in conclusion. "They'd never recognize me from any description you could give them. For I don't really look a bit like the young man you've known as 'Chadwick Wade' for the past two weeks. How's that? Yes, I was in one of my many disguises. Now, I'm going to say 'nighty-night' to you, Percy—first thanking you and Algy and Bertie again for calling up the bank and keeping all three of the lines there busy, so that Murchison couldn't phone them to stop payment on the check, as soon as you saw me, through your opera glasses from the sidewalk below, wave my handkerchief in front of the window of his office. I hope, however, that the experience you've gained will have repaid you for your trouble. That I was right—one crook, no matter how big he may be, can always be made a 'fall guy' when another goes after him. Ta-ta!"

"Central" informed Percy van Druyp, in response to his frantic inquiry, that the party had rung off.

THIEF'S COMMENT ON BUSINESS

HOLDUP business in Minneapolis, Minnesota, is rotten, two gentlemen of the stick-up fraternity recently told C. E. Carlton as they pocketed his watch and his one cent.

"Our last three jobs haven't netted more than ten bucks," one of them explained to Carlton.

"And a lot of bum watches," put in the other.

The Parthian by Shot Robert Peel Noble

THE last note of the baritone's impassioned song had died away. Almost before Mrs. Reynolds had finished the closing bars of the accompaniment, she turned from the piano to the singer.

"You are in fine voice to-night, Charles," she said, "but something has given me a headache this evening, and it has been steadily getting worse. You will excuse me, I know," she continued, as she arose. "A night's rest will make me all right."

"I'm so sorry. Certainly I'll excuse you. Why didn't you tell me sooner?" said Charles Harding, as they walked to the door. "I'll just have a smoke-chat with John before I go, and perhaps he will forgive me for my vocal disturbance. Too bad he doesn't enjoy music," he added, as they went up the stairs.

"Yes, isn't it," she replied. "He's like a blind man walking over diamonds. The beauty of music does not exist for him."

She paused before the door of her husband's den.

"Good night," she said, as she moved away.

"Good night. I hope that you will feel better in the morning," said Charles, turning to enter John's room.

Mrs. Reynolds was keenly conscious of her headache as she closed the bedroom door behind her, but she was suffering even more from the memory

of that which had caused it. She and Charles were to appear on the program of a musicale on the following Friday evening, and had been having frequent rehearsals. This, it seemed at dinner that evening, was the cause of her husband's recent fits of sulkiness and of ill humor. Not that he had been a cheerful companion at any time during the past year, but, of late, he was even worse, and this evening—why, it was absurd! Her husband was apparently almost ready to forbid Charles the house. The man was jealous—her husband actually jealous! She could laugh even now but for the memory of his stormy words and self-incited anger. What if she and Charles had been engaged at one time? The quarrel—over nothing, it is true—and her subsequent marriage to John, had ended all that; and John should realize it, and be more sensible. If John could only enjoy music, and would be a little more companionable—

How long she had been asleep, she did not know, but she awoke in terror. Could it have been the noise of a bursting automobile tire which had so alarmed her that she found herself sitting up in bed before she was fully awake

With a fast-beating heart, and with trembling hands, she slipped out of bed and opened the door.

"John!" she called. Then, again,

more loudly, "John, oh, John!" and ended with a sob.

"What if—my God, what if he did!" she moaned, and ran to the open doorway of her husband's den.

A piteous, heart-invading scream came from her lips. Not Charles, but John, lay sprawled upon the floor, now stained with blood.

Staggering, and clutching the banisters, she half ran, half fell, down the stairway and out through the door to the sidewalk.

"Help, oh, help!" she screamed. "Won't some one help?" she moaned.

"What's the matter?" came from the corner across the street, as the speaker started toward her.

"My husband—oh, help me!" she continued to moan.

The man who had responded to her call had almost to carry her, half fainting as she was, as he accompanied her back into the house. There he managed to get her up the stairs and to the bed which she had left in so great alarm.

"Where's the telephone?" The words were quick, almost curt. Passing the open door of Mr. Reynolds' room, he had seen what lay upon the floor.

"Hall—downstairs," came from the lips whose trembling could not be controlled. "Get a doctor, get a doctor."

Feeling that she was in greater need of medical aid than was her husband, he ran down the stairs, hurriedly called the nearest physician, and obtained his promise to come at once. He then called another number.

"Police station? This is Wynn. Send some one here at once—No. 734 Walnut Street. Man killed, I think. Looks like murder. I'll wait here."

Running up the stairs again, he found Mrs. Reynolds in the hall, weakly struggling into her kimono, and walking with uncertain steps toward the doorway of her husband's room.

"I must go to him," she cried.

"Wait," he said kindly. "If there is anything you can do, I will tell you."

But, unheeding, she followed him into the room, and stood, pale and open-mouthed, wringing her hands and staring at the form upon the floor over which Wynn was now stooping.

"We must wait for the doctor," he said gently. "He will be here soon."

As he finished speaking, Doctor Morris entered.

"Do something, doctor, quick!" cried the frantic woman to the physician, already making his examination deftly and silently.

After a brief interval, Doctor Morris arose slowly.

"He is past my help, Mrs. Reynolds," he said. "You must lie down and let me do something for you."

Two men, one a policeman, who had come up the stairs while Doctor Morris was helping Mrs. Reynolds to her room, entered the room of tragedy, exchanged words of recognition with Wynn, and listened to the latter's account of what had followed his chance appearance upon the scene.

"Bullet wound," murmured the second man, who was evidently a city detective, and who was inspecting the body and its surroundings. "Clothes mussed. Windows locked. Don't find any gun. Guess it's murder, sure enough. Were the outside doors locked when Mrs. Reynolds ran out? Any one else in the house?"

"I don't know, Johnson," said Wynn. "You'll have to ask Mrs. Reynolds."

Johnson turned to Doctor Morris, who, after administering a sedative to Mrs. Reynolds, had left her in the care of the maid, and was now reëntering the room.

"What do you make of it, doctor?" asked Johnson.

"The bullet, as it seems to be, has entered at a point a little higher than

the heart, and, judging by the distance to which the blood has spurted, has severed an artery—probably the aorta. The autopsy will determine the matter. One of you had better notify the coroner at once."

"You do that, Dan," requested Johnson, turning to the policeman; then he again bent over the body.

"H'm!" came from him, in thoughtful surprise, as he picked up a half-smoked and broken cigar which had been lying under the edge of the dead man's coat.

"Portina," he said, reading the name of the brand upon the cigar band. "I just wonder——"

Stepping over to a rather large humidifier at one side of the room, and opening it, he examined the contents.

"Three different brands, but no Portinas," he informed Wynn. "I must question Mrs. Reynolds."

"She is very nervous," objected Doctor Morris. "Is it necessary to talk to her now?"

"Just two questions," said Johnson, as he went across the hall to the room which he had seen Mrs. Reynolds enter.

"Mrs. Reynolds, did you find the front door locked as you ran out of the house this evening?" he asked.

"Yes—no, I just turned the knob," she replied.

"Who was with your husband this evening, Mrs. Reynolds?" was the next question.

A look of horror swept over her face.

"He didn't do it—Charles wouldn't hurt any one," she protested.

"Charles who?" continued the questioner.

"Charles Harding. But I know he didn't do it, I know he didn't," brokenly asserted Mrs. Reynolds.

"That remains to be seen. I won't trouble you any more now, though," he said, and returned to the room where the body lay.

The doctor had gone. Johnson, having completed his inspection, asked the policeman to await the coroner, and went to headquarters.

Wynn remained and made an examination on his own account. He inspected all parts of the room, peering into places which seemed very unpromising. From under the couch, he picked up a small brass plumb bob attached to a string, regarded it thoughtfully, and put it into his pocket. Quietly, he left the house.

The next morning, as he was about to leave his apartments, Wynn received a call from his friend, Charles Harding.

"Have you seen the morning papers?" the latter asked excitedly.

"No, why?" was the reply.

"Mr. Reynolds has been murdered, and—and I was with him last night!" exclaimed Harding. "I'm sure I was followed on my way over here. What shall I do?"

"What kind of cigar do you smoke, Charley?"

"Portinas," said the other, staring. "But why do you——"

"Never mind. You go about your business, just as if you were not being followed. You may be arrested, but don't let that worry you too much. I'm going to get busy right away—if that's any comfort to you."

Harding shook him by the hand.

"Thanks, old fellow. I'm glad I've got you to count on."

"I'll have to go now," said Wynn. "The sooner I find out about this—if I can—the better it will be for your peace of mind."

While Harding was on his way to his office, nervously aware that he still was being shadowed, Wynn was directing his steps up Walnut Street, absorbed in thought, and unconscious of passing acquaintances. At the home of Mrs. Reynolds, he rang the bell.

"Tell Mrs. Reynolds," he said to the

maid, as he presented his card, "that it is absolutely necessary for me to see her for a few moments."

As Mrs. Reynolds entered, pale and grief-stricken, Wynn arose.

"I am very sorry to disturb you just at this time, Mrs. Reynolds, but, in the interest of our common friend, Charley Harding, it is necessary for me to learn everything I can from you which may have a bearing upon your husband's death."

"Charles couldn't have done such a thing, Mr. Wynn. He is incapable of it."

"I agree with you," said Wynn, "but if I am to clear him before others, I must learn all the facts possible, even those which look damaging. Had you been asleep just before you ran out of the house last night?"

"Yes, I had gone to bed with a headache, after rehearsing some music with Charles, and he had gone to John's room."

"You heard no quarreling or noise of a struggle?"

"No, except the noise that awakened me—the shot, I suppose," she added, with a shudder.

"Was there any reason why your husband and Charley Harding should have quarreled?"

Mrs. Reynolds hesitated, then spoke quickly:

"There was no reason, Mr. Wynn, unless you would call John's unreasoning jealousy a reason. Charles and I had to practice together a good deal lately, and John didn't like it."

"Who was in the house last evening, besides you and Mr. Reynolds and Charley?"

"Only the maid. The other servant, the man, doesn't sleep in the house."

"Had Mr. Reynolds any enemies that you know of—had he had any trouble with any one?"

"Not that I—why, yes, he had. He had to discharge our former man-

servant for drunkenness. The man became very angry and abusive when he left."

"What was his name?"

"Carl Hansen."

"Do you know his address?"

"No, Mr. Reynolds secured him through an employment agency."

"Is anything missing—money—jewelry?"

"I don't think so."

"Did you find the front door locked when you started out for help last night?"

"Not with the key or with the bolt. I turned only the knob to open the door. The inside knob works the spring lock; so the door must have been locked."

"And the outside knob?"

"It takes a key to open the door from the outside."

"Then, how could any one have gained entrance last night, Mrs. Reynolds? The other outside doors and the windows downstairs were all locked."

Mrs. Reynolds became even more pale.

"Did Carl Hansen have a key to the house?" Wynn asked.

"He did have," said Mrs. Reynolds, breathing more easily, "but returned it. Couldn't he have had a duplicate made, though?"

"Yes. Now, Mrs. Reynolds, I won't keep you any longer, but I will ask permission to inspect your husband's room again—and, perhaps, some other parts of the house."

Mrs. Reynolds having acquiesced, Wynn first verified her statements as to the locks on the front door, and then revisited her husband's room.

It was nearly noon before he left the house, walking briskly, and with no trace of the absorbed manner which he had brought with him.

Late in the afternoon, he learned that the autopsy performed upon Mr. Reynolds confirmed the opinion of

Doctor Morris, and that the bullet had been found—one of thirty-two caliber. He was also informed that his presence as a witness would be required at the coroner's investigation the next morning.

At this investigation, the testimony brought out the fact that Mr. Reynolds had died from the effects of a bullet wound; that the condition of his clothes indicated a struggle with some one; that no weapon had been found; that the windows of Mr. Reynolds' room were found to be locked when examined by the officers; that all windows downstairs, and the outside doors, except the front door opened by Mrs. Reynolds, were found to be locked when examined immediately after the tragedy; that this front door was also locked against any outsider just before it was opened by Mrs. Reynolds; that the stub of a cigar, of the kind smoked by Mr. Harding, had been found broken and under Mr. Reynolds' body; that this brand of cigar was not to be found in Mr. Reynolds' stock of cigars, and, in fact, seemed not to be on sale at any of the cigar stores of the city; that Mr. Harding was the last person known to have been with Mr. Reynolds before the latter's death; and that Mr. Reynolds had objected to the frequency of Mr. Harding's calls upon Mrs. Reynolds, and had entertained an unfriendly feeling toward Mr. Harding on that account.

To Harding, who, with pale face, had sat listening intently, the presentation of these facts had been anything but reassuring. His only comfort had been the expression of assurance upon the face of Wynn, who now addressed the coroner.

"I should like to introduce further evidence."

"Proceed," was the reply.

"After the officers, who had been sent to the Reynolds house, had completed their examination," said Wynn,

"I made a further inspection of the room where the body was found.

"Under the couch, I found this," he continued, holding up the object. "It is, as you see, a small plumb bob, such as is used by masons and carpenters. What, in particular, aroused my interest, however, was the fact that the stout cord attached to the bob had a short piece of thread tied to it at the loose end, and the fact that the plumb bob was found under the davenport, and on a floor which, the maid informed me, had been swept on the day that Mr. Reynolds met his death. The maid further informed me that she was positive that the plumb bob was not on the floor at the time when the floor was swept, and that she had never seen it before.

"Although I was unable to see any connection between this plumb bob and the death of Mr. Reynolds, I had the feeling that there was a connection, and returned to the Reynolds house the next morning with the hope of being able to find it.

"From what," I asked myself, "had the plumb bob been suspended? Why had it been fastened, as, apparently, it had been, by a thread tied to the cord, instead of being fastened directly by the cord itself? And, why was it thrown or left on the floor of a room used by a man as orderly as Mr. Reynolds was known to be?"

"These questions, I succeeded in answering.

"I found a short piece of thread tied to the lower end of the vertical tube of the electric-light chandelier, which is in the center of Mr. Reynolds' room. I also found that the plumb bob, if it had been attached at this point, would have cleared the floor by about a foot.

"Just over the chandelier, in the attic above this room, there was a short section of flooring which apparently had been removed—and then replaced

—some time after the flooring had been laid. This I removed, and, under it, I saw the end of a rifle which had been thrust down into the tube of the chandelier below."

Harding sank back into his chair and relaxed with a sigh of relief, but the coroner and the others present continued in their positions of rigid attention.

"The stock of the rifle," continued Wynn, "had been cut off in order to make concealment under the floor possible. The trigger was connected to an electromagnetic device, also concealed under the floor. In the floor of Mr. Reynolds' room is a push button, supposed to be no longer in use, but that it is connected with the electromagnet above, I proved when, by pressing this push button, I was able to release the previously raised gun hammer.

"Gentlemen, in that rifle I found this," said Wynn impressively, as he held up another small object. "It is the empty shell of a thirty-two-caliber cartridge.

"Your imagination can tell you the rest. Shortly after Charles Harding had left the house, Mr. Reynolds attached the plumb bob to the chandelier and lay upon the floor, so that his heart would be just under the plumb bob, and, therefore, directly in the line of fire. He pulled the cord, breaking the thread close to the chandelier, of course, concealed the bob and cord by throwing them under the couch, and, with but the slightest change of his

position on the floor, pressed the push button with an outstretched arm.

"That any living man is responsible for his death, I cannot believe, nor can you, I think, in the face of these facts.

"It may be more charitable for us to believe that Mr. Reynolds, mentally unbalanced by worry over his impending financial difficulties, known to a few of his friends, sought nothing but relief in death while trying, at the same time, to avoid the stigma of the suicide; but it is difficult not to entertain the idea that Mr. Reynolds, actuated by jealousy, purposely removed Charles Harding's cigar stub from the ash tray to the floor, purposely disarranged his own clothing, and purposely chose that time for pressing the push button, when the bullet which was discharged into his own body should also serve as a Parthian shot at the man who had been in his room but a few minutes before."

Wynn's evidence led to an immediate verdict of suicide, and every one hastened to shake Harding's hand.

Although Harding held no one's hand in as long a grasp as he held Wynn's, his eyes rested often upon the black-gowned figure of Mrs. Reynolds, whose face expressed relief as well as grief. Was not something else fleetingly expressed there, too? Gladness? Joy?

Harding started toward her as she was about to leave the room, then checked himself abruptly.

"Better wait," he thought, and turned again to Wynn.

CHARGE BOY WITH FORGERY

CLAUDE RAWLINS, eleven years old, is in the county jail at Van Buren, Arkansas, under indictment as a forger. Claude was arrested at Dyer after he had successfully passed checks on the Crawford County Bank at Van Buren.

When Claude was arrested in a store at Dyer, he cried a little, and said a man gave him the checks. His father was arrested near Oklahoma City. He entered a plea of guilty, and is under sentence of two years in prison. The father says the boy wrote the checks.

Grilled

By Burns Patterson

YOU lie!" The words were snapped out like the spiteful crack of a revolver by Captain McCarthy, whose great hulking form towered over the cowering figure of Wellington van Sandt.

"You murdered your father!" shouted McCarthy, as his eyes, with a baleful glare, held the red-rimmed orbs of the younger man.

Aside from a white shaft of light that played on the features of the youth thus accused of murder, the room was in semidarkness. McCarthy was resorting to that timeworn instrument of torture of the police, known as "the third degree."

"You murdered your father, I tell you!" yelled McCarthy.

"I didn't," replied young Van Sandt. His eyes were bloodshot, and in them there was the hunted look of a creature in fear of death.

"You lie; you did! Here's the gun with which you finished the old man!" And McCarthy shoved the revolver, with which he declared the crime had been committed, before Van Sandt's eyes. "Your finger prints are on its wooden butt. It has been identified as your gun."

A shudder of agony convulsed the figure of the young man. His weak chin trembled, and his lips sagged at the corners. The muscles of his face twisted and contorted into a grimace of abject fear. Tears welled up in his eyes. Would this torture never end?

"I didn't murder my father," whined Van Sandt. "The gun was stolen from my room by the murderer. I hadn't—"

There was a resounding crack, of the

impact of flesh against flesh, as the heavy open hand of McCarthy fell full on the white cheek of the alleged murderer. Van Sandt's head went back with a jolt.

"You've told me that before. You know you are lying. You've done nothing but lie ever since you have been in this room. You're guilty of the murder of your father!"

"Oh, Lord, stop it, will you?" pleaded Van Sandt, with tears in his eyes. "Stop it! I tell you I didn't kill my father. The gun was stolen from my room by the man who murdered dad, I tell you."

Grasping the young man by either shoulder, McCarthy jerked him to his feet. Then, much like a terrier shakes a rat, he shook his prisoner.

For a moment he gazed into the eyes of Van Sandt. Many criminals had quailed before that terrible glint which now shone in the eyes of the policeman. No one had ever been able to withstand those cold, cruel, steel-gray eyes, which looked through, rather than at, the person upon whom they were fixed.

With a final shake, McCarthy threw the accused man in his chair, and followed with a blow in the face.

McCarthy straightened up, a grim smile of conquest playing about the corners of his cruel mouth, for his prisoner was thoroughly cowed and would tell all.

"Cut!" shouted the director, and the camera man at the Great Western Studio ceased to turn the crank.

"That was great, boys," said the director jubilantly. "It ought to get over big on the screen."

Headquarters Chat

PERHAPS the cases that are handled by the missing-persons departments at the police headquarters throughout the country interest the news-reading public most, and hold their attention the longest.

A person of regular habits—be it man, woman, or child—who lives a well ordered life, abruptly drops out of sight, vanishing as completely as a drop of water on a stone will evaporate in the summer sun.

At first the family of the missing one searches frantically; and then, in a panic over their failure, if they have ample means, private detectives are called in, and, if they fail, the police, who soon get the ready aid of the newspapers.

For a while the case is in the thoughts and on the tongues of every one. Reasons are advanced, clues suggested, and, simultaneously, from a dozen different sections of the country come reports that the missing one has been found. And then more often than not the search ends successfully with the finding of the person—or the body.

But in many, many instances the mystery is never solved, and the case fades into oblivion, save for those vitally concerned, and the dusty records at police headquarters.

Sidney Lang leaves his friend, Burr Esmond, waiting at the corner of a busy thoroughfare, and steps into a theater to get two tickets for the evening performance. He does not come back within a reasonable period, and Esmond investigates, to find that Lang had bought the tickets some little time before. That night two men fill the seats for which Lang's tickets call, but neither of them is Lang.

So opens the best novelette that Arnold Duncan has written. It is entitled

A WHISTLER CONSPIRACY

and it mingles, in a finely woven plot, mystery, intrigue, romance, and adventure so deftly that we feel confident that you will agree with us in our estimation of the story.

William Wallace Cook, widely known as a fiction writer of rare ability, contributes the first of a series of detective stories in the next issue, "THE BOX OF THE SEVEN GODS," in which a wily Oriental plays an important rôle in assisting to unravel the mystery surrounding a theft of radium.

"PEARLS VS. DIAMONDS," by Louise R. Rhodes, deals with the strange disappearance of some valuable jewels from a place of supposed safety in a Newport villa. The last of the present series of RED RAVEN STORIES, by Scott Campbell, which has proved to be so popular, will be told in the next issue. Do not miss it, for the story is the best one that Scott Campbell has written so far. Among the other stories are "WILLING A NAME," by William F. Vassall, and "THE THREE-TOED CLAW," by Wilder Anthony.

I N T H E N E X T I S S U E

A NOVELETTE

A Whistler Conspiracy

BY

ARNOLD DUNCAN

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