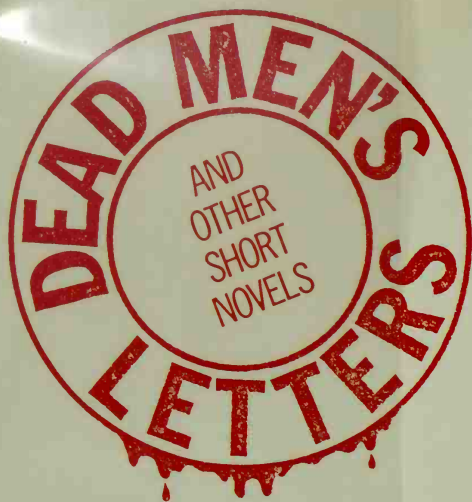


ERLE
STANLEY
GARDNER



Erle Stanley Gardner

Erle Stanley Gardner—creator of Perry Mason—was the bestselling author of detective fiction of all time. Many of his best early short novels originally appeared in the famous *Black Mask* magazine alongside Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler.

Gardner's most enduring hero was Ed Jenkins, also known as "the Phantom Crook." So enduring was he that when the author considered discontinuing the exploits of this intrepid man, his fans overwhelmingly succeeded in ensuring his longevity.

Working beyond the law, pursued by police *and* criminals, Jenkins' undesired notoriety made him a prize target for blackmail, coercion and imprisonment. But those who tried to force his hand never knew the man he could be when his back was to the wall, fighting.

This first ever collection of Ed Jenkins short novels represents the most thrilling adventures of Erle Stanley Gardner's contribution to the hard-boiled detective genre.

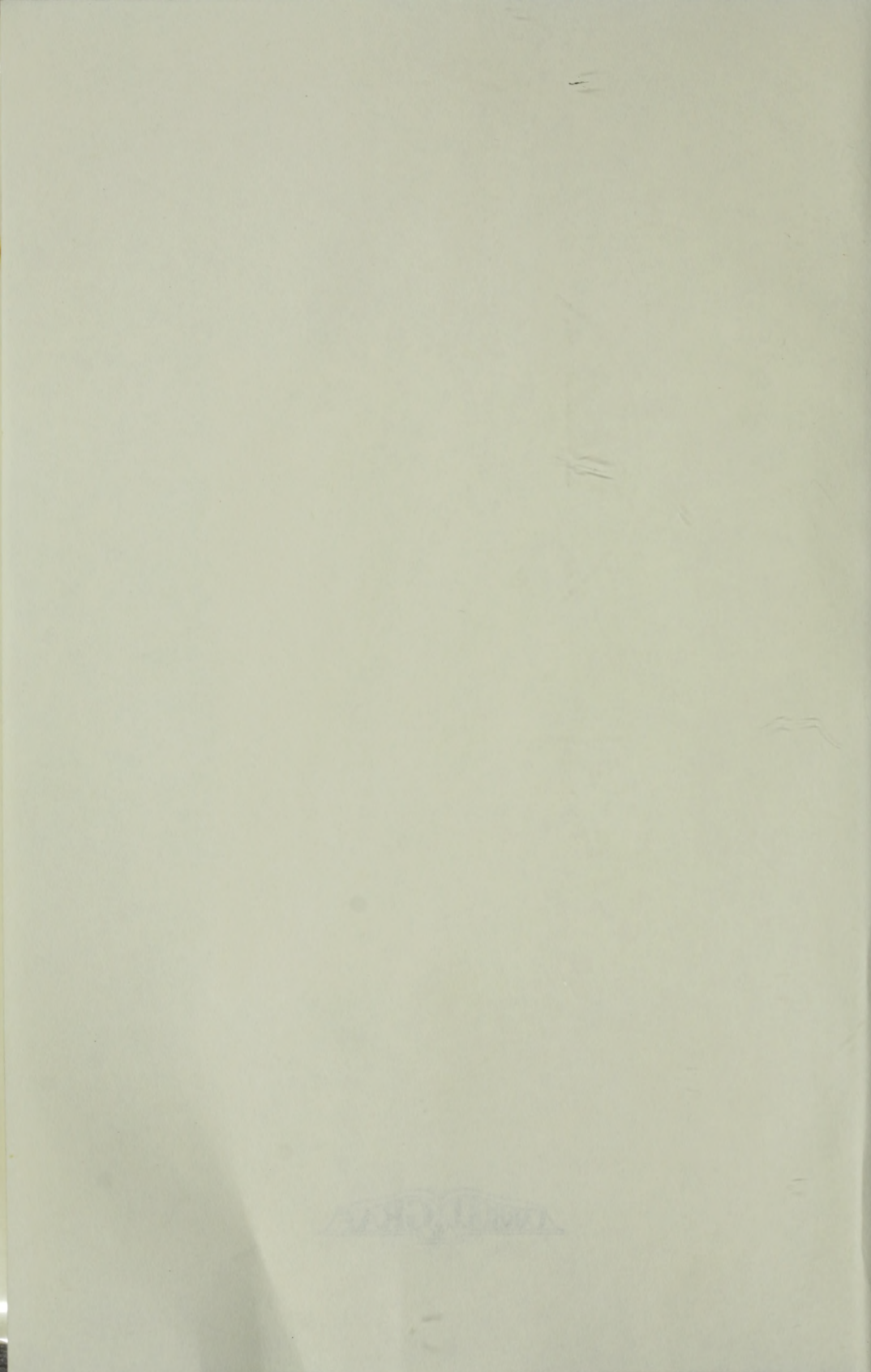
Erle Stanley Gardner (1889–1970) was the creator of the immensely popular Perry Mason whose cases were chronicled in over 80 novels, inspiring several movies and a radio and television series. Gardner's lifetime output was in excess of 150 books and hundreds of stories, most of which appeared in the magazines *Black Mask* and *Argosy*—the sources of some of the greatest mystery fiction written this century. A man of wide interests, Gardner was well read in such diverse fields as psychology, criminology, forensic medicine and penology. Erle Stanley Gardner was also a noted attorney who liked to take on underdog cases that no one else would handle. These assignments later lead to the creation of *The Court of Last Resort*.

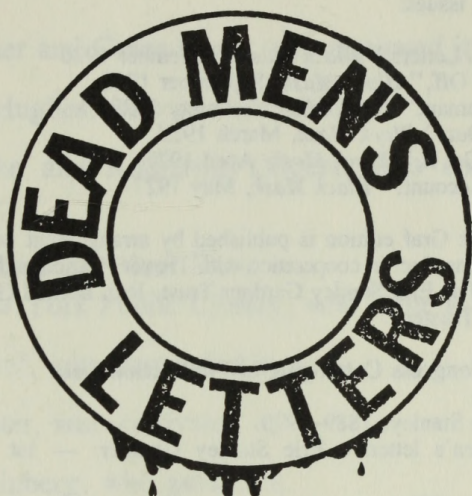
Jacket design © 1990 by Richard Rossiter



Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc.
260 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10001

Distributed by Publishers Group West





**ERLE
STANLEY
GARDNER**

Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc.
New York

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First Carroll & Graf edition 1990

The stories in this collection originally appeared in magazine form in the following issues:

"Dead Men's Letters," *Black Mask*, September 1926
"Laugh That Off," *Black Mask*, September 1926
"The Cat-Woman," *Black Mask*, February 1927
"This Way Out," *Black Mask*, March 1927
"Come and Get It," *Black Mask*, April 1927
"In Full of Account," *Black Mask*, May 1927

This Carroll & Graf edition is published by arrangement with Argosy Communications, Inc. in cooperation with Thayer Hobson and Company, representing The Erle Stanley Gardner Trust, Jean Bethell Gardner and Grace Naso, Trustees.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gardner, Erle Stanley, 1889-1970.

Dead men's letters / Erle Stanley Gardner. — 1st Carroll & Graf ed.

p. cm.

Contents: Dead men's letters — Laugh that off — The cat woman — This way out — Come and get it — In full of account

ISBN 0-88184-579-5 : \$18.95

1. Detectives and mystery stories, American. I. Title.

PS3513.A6322D38 1990

813'.52—dc20

89-20974
CIP

Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc
260 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10001

Text design: Terry McCabe

Manufactured in the United States of America

Argosy Communications wishes to extend its grateful appreciation to the following people who helped to make this volume possible:

Jean Gardner and Grace Naso, who approved it;

Lawrence Hughes, who sanctioned it;

Betty Burke and Katharine Odgers, who coordinated its manuscript;

Mary Bowling and Mark Dunn
of The New York Public Library, who came to its rescue;

Herman Graf, who demanded it;

James Mason, who cultivated it;

Robert Weinberg, who guided it;

and

Eva Zablodowsky, who inspired it.

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Dead Men's Letters

I've always been particularly sensitive to the eyes of others. I can tell whenever a person is looking at me, just by a peculiar, crawling sensation that comes along my spine.

Almost as soon as this flapper commenced to give me the twice over I knew what was going on, and I shifted around in my chair so I could see her out of the corner of my eye. On the surface she was just like all the rest of 'em,—boyish bob, long black eyelashes, vivid lips, low, short dress and rolled socks.

It was the man who was with her that drew my gaze. He was like a great octopus. His body seemed to sag beneath his evening clothes, just as though the flesh was too flabby to cling to the bones. It started at his forehead where his eyebrows seemed to fold down over his eyes, and his cheeks sagged down into his collar. His nose hung down and his head drooped; his chest was on top of his stomach and the rest of him was hidden by the edge of the table. But it was his arms and hands that were striking. His hands were great, red, hairy affairs with long, red fingers that kept twisting and twining about. His arms were restless as well, and they flung about over the table like two great serpents that were joined to the flabby body at the shoulders.

Also there was a reddish tinge to his eyes, and a beak-like nose that still further bore out the impression of an octopus I had received. There was a fascination about those long threshing, restless, nervous arms, a something that held one's eyes. He couldn't keep them still. The rest of his body was a limp mass of

hanging flesh, but his two arms, contrasting against the white of the table cloth, twined and twisted about, while the fingers wriggled and squirmed.

Particularly he couldn't seem to keep his hands off of the girl. Neither could he keep them on her. There was a temperamental inability to keep his hands still in any one place. He'd thresh his arms about over the table, finger a salt shaker, play with a knife, shift the sugar bowl, and then slide his red, hairy hand along the bare flesh of the girl's shoulder, down the smooth, gleaming skin of the arm, and back to the sugar bowl. All of this time neither his body nor his face moved a muscle.

I could almost see the girl wince under his touch, and yet she didn't give him a glance. Her eyes were on me, studying my face, boring into my back whenever I would avert my head. There was a steady, unwinking something about her gaze that spelled desperation, also a dazed something, like a dove that's held by the glittering eyes of a serpent. That girl had something on her mind beside the boyishly bobbed hair that was done in the latest style.

She was young and she was good looking. How young I couldn't tell, but young enough to look well in a boyish bob, young enough to have a thin figure without sag lines in the skin of her face, young enough to have eyes that gleamed with the sparkle and vitality of youth, for all of their dazed expression of incipient terror.

About us was the blare and jazz of the cabaret. Couples twisted about the narrow space of the floor, the odor of food, perspiration and coffee mingled with the composite smell of cloying sweetness which is the result of blended perfumery. Over all crashed the syncopated rhythm of jazz music, music that assailed the ears, insulted the mind, and yet appealed to some inner urge in a series of throbbing pulsations.

On the whole it was no place for me. I wasn't exactly hiding, but I wasn't courting attention from young flappers in a jazzy cabaret. Ever since some young and ambitious reporter had featured "Ed Jenkins, the Phantom Crook" in a Sunday magazine supplement, my life had been miserable. That article had been a wonder, and it would be years before it was forgotten. I was a marked man.

If that flapper didn't know who I was, it was because she didn't read the papers, or because she hadn't a good memory for faces.

From the look in her eyes I fancied she did know who I was. Of course I'd changed my apartment, had resorted to all of the petty, simple things to throw the public off of my trail, but I could only go so far. If I'd had to, I could have hidden myself pretty effectively, but I didn't exactly want to. In the first place there was no necessity for it, and, in the second place, it had got so it tickled my vanity to be pointed out as the man who was too slick for the police. However, I didn't like to advertise too much.

That flapper over there was looking at me with some fixed purpose, and it was just as well for me to get started for some other place. There were lots of cabarets to go to, and then there was a book I hadn't finished reading at my apartment. I stretched, yawned, and decided I'd go and slip on a dressing gown, read for a couple of hours and go to sleep. I'd had enough cabaretting for one night, anyway.

As I paid my check, the flapper got up, walked past me, and went to the ladies' dressing room. I sized her up and she sized me up. Her skirts were as short as the shortest ones I'd seen, but, aside from that, there was nothing about her I hadn't noticed when she was at the table. As soon as she was out of sight I left, called a taxi, and headed for home.

Halfway there and I knew I was being followed, and it was a slick job. The other machine wasn't tailing right along behind, but was working its way through traffic a block below, waiting for me at the intersections, swinging up and crossing ahead or behind the taxi, running circles around it, and always keeping the taxicab in sight. It was one of those low-hung roadsters that are as long as a battleship, have a pickup that nearly jerks the spare tires off, has four wheel brakes for emergencies, and a flexibility of performance that makes a taxicab look like an ice wagon. The bird that was handling that car could sure handle it, too. It was as though the traffic just wasn't there.

Somehow I got the idea of an aeroplane escorting a big dirigible, and that made me grin. Hang it! If anyone wanted to know where I was hanging out they were welcome to the information. If someone else was going to try and frame something on me and make me the fall guy for a gang of crooks they could hop right to it, but they'd better be sure their life insurance premiums were all paid up.

I drove right to the apartment house where I have my rooms, paid off the driver, and waited a second or two in the dark of the

doorway after the cab had driven off. There was the usual line of traffic whining by on the boulevard a block away, and one or two machines that came down my side street, but nothing suspicious. Five minutes passed, ten, and then the big roadster with the balloon tires slipped around the corner and the four-wheeled brakes ground it to a stop fifty feet away. The bird had been parked down the block somewhere, waiting for me to get all nicely settled. I could get a glimpse of him as he unwound from behind the steering wheel, a slim figure wrapped up in a coat, and then there was the sound of light steps on the pavement and a shadow slipped up into the doorway.

I reached out a firm hand.

"Come on, brother, we'll go up together."

As soon as I grabbed the arm and spilled the words I knew I had made a mistake. It wasn't "brother," it was "sister." I turned her around to the light and took a look at her face. It was the jane who had been sitting with the human octopus.

"Oh, won't that be lovely!" she said with a funny catch in her voice, and we started for the elevator.

Going up I could feel her big eyes on my face. I didn't look at her much because I'd given her the once over in the cabaret, and had seen all there was to see on the face. If anyone can tell anything about these flappers by looking at their maps they know more than I do. They all of 'em doll up with rouge, lipstick and powder, talk about things that'd make me blush, have codes of their own, and yet I've a hunch most of 'em are as straight as a string. Anyhow, if she wanted to look a hole in my face I'd let her. She was going to do some explaining when she got to the apartment, and in the meantime I'd let her look to her heart's content.

When I opened the door of my apartment Bobo, that's the dog, made one leap to welcome me, and then drew back and looked at the girl. Bobo wasn't used to seeing me come in with visitors, particularly with flappers.

"Hello, Bobo!" remarked the girl, snapping her fingers.

She knew his name. That meant she'd been reading that article in the paper all right. Bobo looked at her and then at me, sizing her up, and then he wiggled the extreme tip of his tail a bit, sort of dubiously. That was that. There was only one girl Bobo had ever taken to on sight, but the wiggle of the tip of the tail wasn't a bad

sign. Dogs have sensitive ears and sensitive noses, and a dog can read a hell of a lot more about a flapper than a man can by inspecting the color design of their exterior decorations.

"Spill it," I said, short and crispy.

She let her eyes lazily wander around over the apartment, easy, assured, self-possessed, mistress of the situation and apparently wanting me to realize it. That made me mad, something of her easy assurance, something of the pains she was taking to make me understand that she was the one who held all the cards, knowing all about me, while I knew nothing about her, got under my skin. I decided I'd fool her a bit and give her something to think about, so I ostentatiously went over to the door, turned the key in the lock and dropped the key in my pocket.

She laughed,

"Subtitle, 'I have you in my power,' hissed the villain. Not so good, Ed. You're just peeved and trying to get my goat. When a man's going to try rough stuff there's a different look in his eyes, sort of an animal gleam. You just look mad."

I sighed. Here was this little twenty-year-old flapper kidding me and getting away with it.

"All right, kid," I told her, "don't let me keep you up. Speak your little piece and be on your way."

"Don't call me kid, call me Lois," she purred, grinning a bit, her eyes all bright and starry, "Lois Lambert, that's my name, and I called to invite you to a dance at our house next Thursday. It's a dress up affair, but you'll have a good time just the same, and you'll get a chance to look over lots of good looking dames, and some good looking jewels."

I gulped. I'm used to most things, but this was something else again.

"Where's your house?" I asked innocentlike, but I knew the answer before she spilled it.

"Out on Shropshire Drive. I'm John Lambert's daughter, you know, an only child and spoiled, I guess. Promise me you'll come."

I was damned if I was going to let this little flapper see she had my goat, but she sure was ragging me to death. John Lambert was a sort of newcomer in recent years, but he had got there all right. He was reputed to be an engineer of ability and integrity. He had been fortunate in some real estate holdings he'd had when Califor-

nia started to become a tourist mecca, and the old boy was worth a wad of dough. That was all I had on him, but I knew he was in the social upper crust. Here was this moll, posing as his daughter, trying to get me out to his house for a dance on Thursday . . . Evidently the human octopus was a crook, the girl was his moll, and they were going to make a gem cleanup at the dance, and make sure that I'd be out there where the police would pick me up. That'd make it soft for them.

"Sure, I'll be there," I told her. "That is, if the date doesn't conflict with some of my other social engagements. I'll have to wait until my social secretary arrives in the morning. I never can remember my engagements. Let's see, though; there's the supper party at the Mayor's some time this week, and the president of the First National Bank wanted me to drop in for an informal family party either Thursday or Friday, I've forgotten which, and I promised the Chief of Police I'd sit in on a bridge party the latter part of the week. I'll look up the dates and let you know tomorrow."

"Then I can count on you being there?" she asked, her red lips smiling up at me with a daredevil expression. "You'd ditch any of those dates to come out to my party wouldn't you?"

I walked over, stood by the door and bowed.

"You can count on me accepting your invitation," I told her. "Don't give it another thought. Just tell the butler I'll be on the list of those invited so he won't throw me out because I haven't an engraved invitation."

She ducked her head in a grin.

"Oh, that's all right. There's just going to be a few intimate friends there, no mob, you know. I'll come right and get you as soon as you show up and see that you're properly introduced. Remember now, Thursday at eight-thirty."

I took her arm, and felt her wince as my hand grabbed the warm, bare flesh.

"Look here, kid. I've got nothing against you, but I'm getting tired of being a fall guy. Just get this settled in your think tank. I'm coming, and I'm going to be there with bells on."

She gave my cheek a swift pat as she twisted her arm free. "That's what I want you to do, silly. Now the key, please, because the folks will be worrying about me."

I unlocked the door and gave her a cold glance.

"How did you happen to get me on your invitation list?"

"Oh, I just wanted to pep things up, Ed," she said. "You'll be the life of the party."

I let her get into the elevator before I got busy. I won't say that I beat the elevator down, but I came pretty close to it. I was back in the hallway as she went through the door, got a glimpse of flashing skirts, neat ankles, and heard the whine of the starting motor. When the machine purred down the street I had the license number and three minutes later I had my own roadster under me.

John Lambert's house number I got from the telephone directory, and I was out there in as short a time as I dared to make it without running the risk of a long jail sentence. I waited in the darkness across the street, watching the black hulk of the gloomy house, the piled up shadows of solid respectability.

Thirty minutes after I started watching, the long roadster nosed around the corner, hesitated for a minute at the entrance to the driveway and then swung into the Lambert garage. The girl got out after she'd closed the garage doors, skipped up the front steps and let herself in with a latch key. She was alone.

I gumshoed over to the garage, took a look at the machine, saw that it had the same license number, looked at the registration card and saw that it was registered in the name of Lois Lambert. Then I beat it. I didn't want to be seen hanging around the house.

So this girl, whoever she was, actually lived in Lambert's house, and had enough pull with Lois Lambert to get the use of a damned expensive roadster . . . There was just the barest possible chance that the kid had told me the truth and that she really was Lois Lambert, but the chances were ten to one in favor of her being a social secretary to the Mrs. or a private stenographer to the head of the family.

Anyway, she and a flabby guy with feverish arms wanted me to be turned away at the door of the Lambert house at eight-thirty Thursday. They must have thought I had a solid vacuum above the ears. Ed Jenkins, international crook, presenting himself at the home of John Lambert, asking to come in and join the dance! It was a goofy scheme all right.

I went back to my apartment and thought the thing over and the more I thought about it the madder I got. Hang it! I was blamed near mad enough to go and walk into their trap and dish things up for them. I'd got to do something spectacular to let all the cheap crooks in the country know that they couldn't use Ed Jenkins as a

stalking horse. I started to ring up old man Lambert himself and tell him to be sure and keep a close watch on his jewels and those of his guests on Thursday, but something held me back. I wasn't sure I wasn't going to sit in on the game and draw cards myself.

It remained to find out who the human octopus was. There was a something about that man that also reminded me of a spider. His hands were like the tentacles of an octopus, but there was a something about the way he sat at a table that made me think of a great big spider waiting for his prey to come and walk into his web. Then I remembered that that was the way with an octopus. Those devil fish get down in the dark caves of the rocky ledges and wait for their prey to come swimming by, then there's the flash of a great, snake-like tentacle, and the victim vanishes within the dark cave where the inert, jelly-like mass of the octopus regards him through two great eyes, his horrid, parrot-like beak working up and down in anticipation of the bloody feast . . . Ugh! That man gave me the shivers, and I don't mean maybe. I'd take a stab at looking him up and see if I could locate him.

I went down to the cabaret and had a long talk with the head waiter, a talk that was sandwiched in between a couple of ten dollar bills, and when I left my head was ringing.

The guy with the feverish arms was named Sly, and he was evidently a sly bird. The head waiter didn't know much about him except that he was the king of blackmailers. He knew nothing about where Sly held out, or just what he was doing, but he did know enough to be afraid of the big man, and also to know about the blackmail business.

I did a little thinking after that. A blackmailer and a girl who was probably a social secretary to Mrs. John Lambert. They wanted to ring me in on the party for some reason. That reason wasn't exactly clear to me and it bothered me.

The next night when I was sitting in my deep leather chair, browsing through the paper and relaxing, taking life easy, with Bobo sitting nearby, his head on my knees, there came the sound of quick, light steps in the hall, and then a knock on the door. Bobo ducked in back of a screen, a favorite habit of his when he hears company coming, and I flung open the door. After that damned newspaper article I'd had so many visitors I was getting used to 'em.

It was the girl again.

"I just ran in to make sure you'd be at the party Thursday, Ed," she breezed, as though she'd known me for ten years. "You see it's mighty important to me to know whether or not you're coming."

"Come in and sit down," I said, and blamed if she didn't—just as easy like as though calling on crooks in their apartments was all in the day's work.

"You've got lots of confidence in your ability to take care of yourself," I told her, with a half-glowering look. It commenced to irritate me, the sublime self-assurance of the girl.

"You're mid-Victorian in lots of things, Ed," she rippled right back at me. "What's more you mustn't look at my knees when I cross 'em. That's old-fashioned—a sure sign of age. The young, up-to-the-minute fellows are too blasé to even notice 'em."

Hang the kid! There she was—no bigger than the second hand on a wrist watch, sitting there laughing at me, and stringing me along on some game I didn't understand. I made up my mind I'd call her bluff and call it cold.

"I'm coming to the dance all right, but I thought I'd better run out and meet your folks first. I was just going to run out for a chat with your father, but if you're here with your car you can run me out and perform the introductions."

She ducked her head so the brim of her hat shut off my view of her face, leaving only the tip of her chin peeping out, and I thought she was going to cave-in and spill it then, but I was fooled. When she looked up she was smiling.

"What's the matter, Ed? Afraid it's not nice to talk to me without asking permission from the folks? Come on."

I picked up my hat. Somewhere along the line she'd have to weaken, that is, unless the folks were out and she knew she could have the run of the house.

"Let's go," I told her.

She was a vivacious little thing, all thin legs, bobbed hair and smiles, but I began to see there was something to her after the way she handled the car in traffic. However, I sat alongside of her without a word, waiting for her quitting time to come.

She drove straight to the house, swung into the driveway, skipped out and stood waiting for me. "Come on," she said.

Doggedly, I got out of the car and walked up the steps.

There were lights in the house and I could hear the sound of voices. Somehow I commenced to have a funny feeling in the pit of my stomach.

She let herself in, took my hat and ushered me into a parlor.

"Well, Grouch-face, don't look so stiff," she said. "Unbend, both figuratively and literally. Turn up the corners of the lips, and then bend forward and park the hips on the family upholstery. You wanted to meet daddy. I'll go get him."

I sat there, feeling as cold and clammy as I've ever felt on a job. Ed Jenkins calling on John Staunton Lambert! That was a hot sketch all right. The girl was probably a social secretary and she'd introduce me as a friend of hers, and yet. . . . I commenced to have doubts and those doubts centered in a funny feeling in the pit of my stomach.

The door opened and a tired looking man with a gray mustache and keen eyes stood surveying me. The girl was beside him with her arm around him.

"Daddy, shake hands with Mr. Jenkins, Mr. Ed Jenkins. He's a friend of mine I haven't seen for some time and here I ran on to him in a cabaret the other day."

I found myself shaking hands and looking into the tired, gray eyes.

"My daughter says you're coming to the dance Thursday evening. That's fine. We'll be glad to have you. Do you live here in the city, Mr. Jenkins?"

She answered the question.

"He's here temporarily. He's got some sort of a funny business, transferring securities, isn't it, Ed?"

I nodded. That was as good a name for it as anything, and I didn't want to engage in conversation. I wanted to get out of there. There was some thinking I had to do.

We chatted about the city, the weather and the League of Nations for a bit, and then the old bird with the tired eyes mentioned that he'd leave us young folks to our own devices, shook hands again and went out.

I turned loose on the girl.

"You little, irresponsible idiot!" I stormed. "Haven't you got enough respect for your father, for your own house, for your own self-esteem, not to go out bringing in crooks and introducing 'em to your dad? Don't you know it'd make him the laughing stock of

the town if it got out that he had received Ed Jenkins as a guest? Don't you know it'd be enough to ruin his career? That about half of the people would think I had him bribed to give me respectability? If you've got any proposition you want to make to me, get your cards on the table and spit it out, but at least have enough sense of decency to protect your home and your dad's good name."

She didn't turn a hair but stood on her tiptoes, her red lips within an inch or two of my face.

"My, but you look nice when you're mad, Ed! Sort of big and strong like, as though there was nothing you'd stop at. Now do you want to meet mother?"

I shook my head. "I'm on my way, and I won't be here Thursday," I said as I headed for the hall.

She got my hat, opened the door, and then came bounding down the steps like a rubber ball.

"Don't be so hasty, Ed. Remember I've got to drive you back. I took you out and I've got to get you home. I'll bet you didn't bring any mad money with you, either, and I haven't made a young man walk home for nearly six weeks now, so I don't want to break my good record."

I was mad and I'd have said more right then, but I caught a glimpse of someone hiding behind the shadow cast by a shade tree across the street. The street light was just bright enough to intensify the shadows and I couldn't get a good look at him, but, from the way he ducked back out of sight I was satisfied I was the bird he was looking at.

All of a sudden the solution of the whole thing flashed across my mind. The girl was one of these modern, heartless flappers, probably jazz mad and pinched for money. The old man had shut down on her allowance, and she'd made up her mind to throw in with a blackmailer, get something on him and split fifty-fifty with the blackmailer. If they could prove that Ed Jenkins, the international crook, was being entertained at the home of John Staunton Lambert, someone would have to come across to hush things up. It was a wild idea all right, but things like that are worked every once in a while by the kids of today, and if that was the scheme it wouldn't be the first time a kid had blackmailed the folks . . . and yet . . . somehow it didn't seem to fit the picture. Of course if the fool kid thought that the human octopus would split anything with

her she had two other guesses coming. He'd string her along for a good thing, and then tell her to go chase herself.

"Come, come, Ed. Why so thoughtful?"

There was a teasing note in her voice.

"You don't need to sit over there all huddled up against the door that way. For a man who posed as such a wicked betrayer of little girls, and took the apartment key and put it in his pocket with that 'I have you in my power' sort of look, you seem to be pretty distant when you're automobile riding."

She had me guessing. I looked into the dancing devils of those two sparkling eyes, saw the parted, crimson lips, the laughing mouth, and saw something else, saw that there was some hidden emotion lurking in the depth of those eyes. There was a great big, serious something down underneath. It wasn't fear, but it was worry, worry and something else, sort of a look of desperation such as I imagine a crook has when he's being taken out to the electric chair.

A machine swung in behind us and the lights shone through the window in the back of the roadster.

"What a nice little boy hims is," she taunted. "My great big lukewarm daddy."

At that I kissed her, and her kiss was a surprise, a long, trembling, clinging kiss of sheer youth, of abandon, and yet not of passion. It was more the kiss of a child who is afraid of being left alone in the dark, and yet there was the touch of a grown-up woman in it, too.

The roadster swung off toward the curb, and she twisted back the wheel with a quick turn of the wrist. The other car shot past us, and in the driver's seat I could get a glimpse of a big, sagging frame that seemed to slump down upon the seat, immobile and inert, while a pair of long, restless arms wrapped about the steering wheel. The human octopus was driving that car, although he did not turn his head.

"Hot siggety boom!" exclaimed the girl as she wiped her lips with the back of her hand. "My lukewarm daddy's come to life!"

And at that I laughed. Here was no innocent kid being made the victim of a conspiracy. Here was a modern flapper, alive, alert, possessing a knowledge of the world and its ways, starting deliberately to play with fire, to seek to trap Ed Jenkins into some situation which would prove his undoing. All right. Let her go to it.

She swung into the curb and parked.

"Ed, you may be a first class crook, but as a necker you're the bunk. What you don't know about necking would fill a book. Come over here and let mommer give you a lesson."

Five minutes later she started the car again.

"The original asbestos poppa!" she said half to herself, half to me.

Once more there was a purring hum and the big car with the human octopus at the wheel slid by. This time I was sure she saw him. Her mouth twitched, and, although her head did not turn, she kept her eyes on the other car.

We drove along in silence for a few minutes, the spell of the warm night, the proximity of the slender girl, the blazing stars, all conspiring to make me moody and reflective. I stole a glance at her face and, as I did so, she leaned forward to turn out the dash light. As her eyes came within the circle of the illumination just before she switched off the little globe, I saw the sparkle of moisture. There were tears in her eyes, tears running down her cheeks. She spun the wheel and managed to dash the back of her hand across her eyes, surreptitiously.

"Hot spit!" she exclaimed, apropos of nothing.

At the door of the apartment she insisted on one more, good-night kiss, and threw herself into my arms, a bundle of vibrant, quivering, clinging femininity, kissed me, opened the door of the roadster, patted my arm, and took a deep breath, a breath in which there could be no mistaking the quick catch of a sob.

Somehow I felt strangely old as I approached the door of my apartment. Being with such a hot bundle of emotion, such flaming youth, had only emphasized my own, staid, philosophical outlook on life. Here was a girl, young yet sophisticated, playing some deep game in which the stakes were more than any girl in her position had any business gambling for; at one moment seeking to draw me to her by hot kisses, and at the next weeping copiously if surreptitiously, and all the time being shadowed by the human octopus, the king of the blackmailers, while at home waited a tired-eyed, stooped parent. . . .

It was all too much for me. I had begun to drift into the quiet eddies of life, seeking to find some slow stream in which I could drift with the sluggish current. Being sucked back into the vortex of life, into the whirlpool of youthful emotions was too much for

my mental equilibrium. This California immunity was making me soft, making me seek the quiet safety of a law-abiding, well-ordered life. I made up my mind then and there that I'd not seek to keep my immunity. I'd go after things in my own way, fight my old duel with the law. Let them catch me if they could.

As soon as I opened the door I knew something was wrong. There was no sound of pattering feet as Bobo launched himself on me in a glad ecstasy. Instead there was a pitiful whine, and a slow, weak, thump, thump, thump on the floor.

Hastily, I switched on the light.

Bobo had been shot, shot with a revolver equipped with a silencer, probably, because there were no signs of commotion in the house. He was lying there on the floor, his eyes glazing, yet summoning his waning strength to wag a greeting with his tail, and he seemed trying to apologize for the loss of blood which prevented him from getting up and fawning upon me.

In a second I who had been contemplating the calm philosophy of life but a moment before, who had been speculating that the mad emotions of youth were gone never to again return, was seeing red with rage, a rage which had never before been equaled in my life.

I stopped the blood from the dog's wound as best I could, telephoned for a veterinary, and paced the floor, the blood pounding in my temples, my anger too great to enable me to think clearly. Had the girl deliberately held me with the wiles of a vampire in order to enable her confederate to sneak to the door of my apartment and shoot the dog? Had there been some plan underway by which the conspirators had sought to deprive me of my dog? Or had they tried to search the apartment and had Bobo attacked so vigorously and silently that they had been forced to shoot him?

I could not answer my own questions. I could not even hazard a guess at the answers. For once there was a blind rage in my mind which prevented clearness of thought. I only knew that someone would pay.

The veterinary arrived, made an examination, shook his head, and conveyed Bobo away in an ambulance. I rode with the dog, sat up with him during the long night, watched with him the next day until at last the veterinary nodded at me and told me the dog would pull through.

Then and not until then did I leave Bobo, but the mission on which I left was in his behalf. I was seeking revenge, and the rage which had mastered me, still held me in its grip. There remained an inability to think clearly. Whenever I turned my mind to the problem before me, all I could see was the pathetic look in the dog's eyes as he wagged his tail in greeting, welcoming the arrival of his master with the expenditure of his last, feeble strength, apologizing that the blood he had shed in defense of my possessions, had weakened him so that he could not come to me.

That day was Thursday. That night would be the dance at the home of John Staunton Lambert, and I determined that I would go to that dance. Fate had dealt the cards, and Ed Jenkins proposed to sit in the game.

I laid down and tried to sleep but could not. My eyes stared at the ceiling, wide awake.

I got up, took a shower, and made an examination of the apartment. It had been thoroughly and skillfully ransacked. Whether the search had been made after the shooting of the dog or before I had no way of telling. In one corner, though, I found a scrap of cloth, a cloth of a peculiar check, a check which was familiar, which brought up vague recollections.

I stood studying it for several minutes, puzzling my mind in an effort to recall when I had seen it before and where. My mind would not remain on the problem, but wandered off into a recollection of the events of the night before. "Hot Spit!" seemed to ring in my ears, and then I remembered.

The cloth was bloodstained, torn irregularly, jagged, as though wrenched by the teeth of a dog from a jacket or skirt. It was a part of the suit Lois Lambert had worn the night I first met her.

For a long moment I stood, looking at that fragment of cloth, and then I went to the wardrobe trunk in which I carried my clothes and took out my evening suit. I had decided. I would go to the dance.

Promptly at eight-thirty I drove up to the Lambert house, and I was a desperate man that night. There was a cold rage which had taken possession of me. I did not have sufficient facts at my disposal to strike, but I determined that I would get what facts I needed, and when I did get them I would act. As a criminal, the courts of justice are closed to me, have always been closed. I would be laughed out of court if I ever sought to protect my rights

by judicial process. As a result I was my own judge, my own jury, and, at times, my own executioner.

The dance was a simple affair. Not over ten couples were in the private ballroom. Mrs. Lambert was a woman with red hair and keen, blue eyes that seemed to see more than they disclosed. She sized me up carefully and thoughtfully when I was presented. Somehow I had an idea that she read the papers and knew who I was. And yet she did not seem to resent my presence.

Sly was there, and I was formally presented to him. Ogden Sly, his name was, and neither of us made any offer to shake hands. He barely bowed his great head upon his soft, flabby neck, his arms moving about from the shoulders like the great tentacles of an octopus. His reddish eyes gleamed into my own, and I saw his narrow mouth move beneath the beak of his nose. He was mouthing an acknowledgment of the introduction, but I did not hear the words.

Lois was radiant in one of those gowns that women wear to display their charms. There was an appeal about her which was emphasized by the sheer, shimmering silk of the garment, the clinging lines and the vital body beneath.

"Ed, you simply *must* quit looking at my legs," she said. "I don't want folks to think that you are hopelessly old-fashioned, or getting to be an old man. You're passé, out of date. Take a tumble to yourself, lower the eyebrows, elevate the eyes, and don't think knees are such a treat."

I did not respond to her banter. Always I was thinking of the faithful dog lying at the point of death. I was in this game solely to get cards, and I intended to get cards solely to win.

John Lambert gave a glimpse of his real character. Kindly and worried is the best way I can describe him. There was always the kindly care and consideration for his guests, that preoccupation which is the prerogative of men who have developed the power to think deeply, and, under all, was a haunting worry.

Sly seemed literally to force himself upon the girl. He danced with her, and, while he danced, his long, restless arms flitted over her figure, his hairy hands rubbed the bare flesh of her arms and shoulders, while his heavy body and expressionless face seemed merely a jellified mass of flesh. Only was there the reddish gleam of the eyes and the parrot-like appearance of his nose and narrow mouth.

It has been a long time since I have been in a ballroom. I am afraid I did not appear to great advantage, and I didn't give a damn.

At that, I was better than one of the young sheiks. Walter Carter was the name by which he was introduced, and he was acting as escort for a vivacious little blonde who was bubbling forth good nature and an incessant line of small talk. She ran more words to the inch than any girl I have ever seen, and she said less to the word. That girl could have written a complete set of fifty volumes on the weather and it would all have strung together in perfect continuity and then when a fellow had read everything that was in the fifty volumes he'd still have to stick his head out of the window to see whether it was raining. That's the sort of a baby she was, and Walter Carter had the facial expression of a man who has just eaten a soft-boiled rotten egg and can't get the taste out of his mouth.

All in all it was one hell of a party.

I was probably supposed to hang around the females and watch and listen. I looked 'em over all right—these party gowns have to show more than the street styles—but I didn't do very much dancing. In my opinion there's better ways of spending life than by walking around on tiptoe to music, carrying some saucy little baggage around with you. However that's just my opinion.

Along about ten o'clock I drifted around the house, taking advantage of my privileges as a guest to satisfy my curiosity as a crook.

John Lambert had a little study and library fixed up in one corner of the house, and I fancied he didn't care very much for the social life. He had a place that looked mighty cozy, all lined with leather bound books, containing a safe and easy-chair, a typewriter and long table. I've noticed that nearly all of the better class of professional men have sort of a home library and study, but whether it's because they like to work there or because they get so they prefer books to women is more than I know. Maybe it's a little of both.

I took a ramble out on the porch, into the little patio in the back, looked over the flowers in the moonlight, and then started back. There were voices in the study. A polite guest would have coughed. A gentleman would have backed out. Being a crook and proud of it, I tiptoed within and listened.

Sly, the human octopus, was talking to John Lambert.

"Of course, he's peculiar in his demands, but I've done everything I could. I'm free to admit that I want Lois, but, on the other hand, I've tried by every means in my power to protect you. You can see this letter for yourself. The man is desperate, and perhaps not all there, but he claims to have proofs, and I believe he will use them. You can follow your own judgment."

There was a silence for a few moments, and then the rustle of paper, the clang of the safe door, and something said in such low tones that I couldn't make it out. A chair scraped, and the two men left the room.

I waited a decent interval, and then came on back into the ballroom.

"Say, what's the matter with you men?" asked Lois. "Here everyone goes out and I almost miss a dance. Come on, let's pep it up. Have some punch, everybody. We just spilled a whole bottle of hair tonic in it by mistake . . ."

John Lambert held up his hand.

"Folks, the object of this little party is to announce to a select circle of our friends the engagement of Lois to Mr. Ogden Sly. Lois is our only daughter and Ogden is one of the city's most enterprising and successful young businessmen. Fill up your glasses with punch and drink to their health."

Mrs. Lambert's face paled at the words, and I saw her hand rub over her eyes. Lois stood upright, smiling, red lips parted, and she looked over and directly into my eyes at the words, and in her face was a challenge. Ogden Sly wiggled his arms around, patted his hair with a great, hairy hand, and twisted his narrow, parrot-like mouth. Walter Carter took a deep breath, and acted as though he were on the point of saying something, but breeding got the better of impulse, and he kept silent.

That is the worst of breeding.

I bowed, drank their health, took advantage of the opportunity to slip away, and went after the safe in the study. As a crook I wasn't hampered by etiquette, breeding or conventions.

The safe was duck soup. I've been in the game long enough to know more about combination locks than the man that invented 'em. When I get up against a regular safe I sometimes have to use some combination detectors of my own invention, but the ordinary

bread box opens with a little pocket stethoscope, and that's all there is to it.

John Lambert's safe didn't amount to much.

The letters I wanted to look over were tied with a string, and lying in plain sight. The handwriting was peculiar, one of those straight up and down affairs that has a tendency to a backhand slant.

The bird that had written those letters was named C. W. Kinsington and he didn't mince words. Apparently he didn't need to. He had been mixed up with John Lambert in some big paving contract litigation, and the engineer had taken a bribe for his work. It had been a long time ago, and young Lambert had apparently been green, ambitious and weak in those days. He seemed to have thought the writer of the letters was dead and the evidence had perished with him, and then the man had cropped up with a letter showing he was alive and demanding blackmail. He had selected Ogden Sly as his agent, and wrote that he didn't want to meet John Lambert personally as there was no need. Lambert would recognize his handwriting and the description of the evidence that the man had, etc., etc.

I took a hasty run through the letters, and then I made a copy of some portions of the handwriting. I didn't have any very substantial idea right then, but I wanted a specimen of the handwriting. I've specialized on three things in the criminal game, one of 'em is opening safes, another is forgeries, and the third is using my wits. There's damn few safes I can't open, and I've never seen the handwriting that's had me stumped. A little practice and I can dash it off before witnesses as rapidly as though it was my regular style, and I'll defy 'em to tell it from the genuine when I've finished.

Apparently the thing had been going on for about a year, and Ogden Sly, always as the agent of the other man, had been milking Lambert of all his surplus cash. There were letters, statements, accounts and what not. His last demand had been that Lois marry Ogden Sly. He gave no reasons, simply made the demand.

I skimmed through the papers, made my samples of handwriting on the off chance they might come in handy, and closed the safe. Then I turned, moved by some subtle sixth sense that told me I wasn't alone. There in the doorway stood Mrs. Lambert, red haired and keen eyed.

"Hell!" I exclaimed involuntarily. I had grown so accustomed to having Bobo with me to stand guard while I pulled jobs like the one I'd just finished, that I'd grown careless, and forgotten to watch my back trail.

"I beg your pardon?" she said.

I was mad. Mad at myself, at conventions, and at the silly custom of having a woman say she "begged pardon" when she heard a simple cuss word.

"I said 'hell,' " I told her, mad clear through, and determined to start the ball rolling right then and there.

"That's what I thought you said," she remarked dryly. "We are missing you in the ballroom. Lois said she would like very much to dance with you."

She spilled that and stood there. She must have seen me at the safe, certainly knew that I was fooling around in her husband's study with things that didn't concern me. Was she going to pass the occasion off without comment, and, if she was, was it because of her sense of her obligations as a hostess or because of some other reason? I didn't know, so I bowed and went in to dance with Lois.

It was some dance.

Lois laughed, breathed her fragrant, warm breath upon my cheek and taunted me with being a "lukewarm daddy." I could see that there was a game afoot, but I didn't know just what it was or where the cards were coming from, so I said but little.

"Come on, you lukewarm daddy," taunted the girl. "I'm not supposed to be dancing around supported by the atmospheric pressure. Snuggle up enough so I can feel that I've got a partner. You learned that clinch dancing the Virginia Reel back in the old days when Sunday School picnics represented the hectic height of entertainment. Liven up a little bit. What do you suppose they wrote all those jazzy bits in the music for? Swing around enough to let the folks feel my new friend isn't an animated manikin from the window of a clothing store. Come on, Ed, snap into it!"

"Where's the suit you wore the night you first met me?" I countered.

A frown came over her face.

"Girls don't wear tailored suits at a dance," she observed.

"Would you mind letting me see it?"

She looked thoughtful for a long moment.

"I can tell you what you want to know," she said at length. "Someone went into my closet and tore a piece out of the cloth on the arm. I couldn't figure out what it was all about."

I glanced at her bare arm on which there was no mark of fang, not even the suggestion of a bruise, and pondered upon her explanation. It would really have been impossible for her to have been in the room when Bobo was shot. She had been with me that evening. The music blared to a stop, the swaying couples parted, and the human octopus made his way forward.

"That's the last dance before the concluding number, and the supper dance is mine, Lois."

She nodded, still clinging to me as though loath to break away from the embrace of the dance, or as though clinging to me for support.

"Sorry, Jenkins," said the human octopus to me, "but it happens that in this little game I hold all the cards, and I know you'll be a good loser."

There was that in his voice and manner which made me more than mildly irritated.

"I haven't lost anything yet," I told him, "and don't be too sure about holding the cards. I have a hole card you haven't seen yet."

"What's a hole card?" asked Lois, her brow puckered, but a devil dancing in each eye.

"Usually a hidden ace, when the player is a good one," I answered quickly.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "then I may have a hole card, too. I know what you're talking about now. It's stud poker, and a good player not only has a hole card, but he had another one right next to it. How is it you say? Back to back! That's it."

"Enough of such nonsense!" said Sly impatiently as he grabbed her in his long, nervous arms and swept her away, his hairy hands sliding up and down her gleaming shoulder.

For several moments I watched them, and then I turned as the vivacious blonde laid down a barrage of small talk, the words running together in a stream. I didn't feel called upon exactly to start any campaign after Ogden Sly unless it should appear that he was the one who had shot my dog, in which event . . .

At length the evening was over. Why I had ever consented to attend such a function was more than I knew. I realized it was

merely the opening move in a campaign of some importance, and it was the fact that I could not penetrate the motives of the players as much as anything else which had caused me to become intrigued in the affair.

Lois was there when I took my leave, and suddenly, as she escorted me to the door, threw her arms around me and implanted a kiss full on my lips. It was a hard-lipped, hurried kiss, done more for ostentation than for any other purpose, and I looked hurriedly around, trying to see the one for whose benefit that move had been planned.

There were two spectators. Standing at the end of the hall, her eyes expressionless, face a calm mask, was Mrs. Lambert. She was in the shadows at the back part of the corridor, and I was not sure whether Lois knew she was there. At one of the windows which opened on to the porch I caught a hurried blur of motion as Ogden Sly drew back into the shadows. Did the girl know he was there? I had no way of telling.

Of one thing I was sure, that kiss had been for the benefit of either one or the other. I was satisfied that the girl knew of only one spectator. Either she knew her mother was watching, and took that opportunity to show her parent that she was not in love with Ogden Sly, or else, she did not know her mother was watching, but did know that Sly was posted at the window. If that were the case, I began to wonder just what was going to be the next move in the game.

I got into my roadster, with the girl's hard-lipped kiss still tingling my mouth, and shot down the street, turned a side street, doubled back, and then slid into the shadows of some trees away from the street lights, and waited to see if I had been followed. The street seemed deserted.

I drove down to the dog hospital going slowly, thinking, letting my subconscious mind take care of the operation of the automobile. I was more interested in Bobo than in anything right then, and yet I could almost feel in my mind the psychic sweep of forces which were hurling me into the vortex of an adventure concerning which I knew but little.

All about me was the play of conflicting emotions, emotions so strong as to affect the lives of the various parties, and yet which were masked under the atmosphere of respectability. It was a strange situation, and I found myself being drawn more and more

toward the girl, some impulse caused me to extend to her my liking and sympathy, and it is seldom that emotions enter into my mind when I am reasoning out a problem.

The dog was better, and for that I was thankful. His strength was coming back rapidly as his splendid system manufactured new blood to take the place of that he had lost. They told me that it would only be a few days until he would be with me once more. The news was welcome. I fancied that I would need my four-footed pal before many days had passed.

I returned to my apartment, placed the car in the garage, ascended the elevator, and fitted my latch key in the door. As I did so there sounded a heavy thud from within. The door flung open in my face and a dark figure scuttled down the corridor.

With that first sound I had thrown myself back and against the wall, prepared to resist an attack. As the door had flung open I was poised on the balls of my feet, ready for anything in the line of an unexpected offensive. What I was not prepared for, was this rushing figure which tore down the hall to the back stairway. He was fleeing, that was certain, and he had apparently foreseen my move in flattening against the wall away from the door, for he dashed madly away without even the backward look which one would give who expected to be stopped.

In one bound I jumped within the apartment. A man was on the floor, lying on his back, his eyes already glazing in death, and his hands clutching futilely at his breast, from which there protruded a hilt of a knife. In that moment I cursed myself for a fool. I should have been prepared. Ogden Sly was no man to stand idly back and allow his game to be interfered with. Seeing me at the Lambert house, he had reasoned that conflict was inevitable, that I could do him no good, and should be placed behind bars before I could do him any harm.

That is the penalty of being a crook, known to the police as such. The police wait, always ready, always anxious to hang some crime on the man who has a "record." It had only been necessary for Sly to arrange to have some man lured to my apartment, to have him stabbed, and then to wait and let the law take its course. As a crook, known in several nations, a dozen states, I could never convince any judge or jury in the land that it had not been my hand which had darted home that heavy dagger.

Already I was satisfied that the police had been notified by a mysterious voice purporting to come from some "tenant of the building," who desired his name withheld, that there had been the sounds of a struggle and of a man's scream from my apartment. Already the police would be on their way to the place in a fast automobile. I was there with the dying man, a well-dressed stranger.

His lips writhed and twisted as he attempted to say some word, to give me some message, and then, as I bent over to hear what he had to say, he died. From the street without there sounded the rapid explosions of an exhaust as a police car skidded around the corner and slid to a stop before the apartment house. The echo of a siren was caught by the buildings down the street and came in through the windows, a bare, ghostly wail of a sound.

The dead man on the floor I had never seen before. The man who had rushed so madly down the hall had also been a stranger. I had not seen his face, but there had been a queer, one-sided set to his shoulders as he ran which would have attracted my attention anywhere. Also I noticed that there was a bandage about his left arm. I wondered about that bandage. There was a chance that beneath that cloth were the fang marks of a dog. If that should be so . . .

I had no time for speculation. The police were at the door of the house, and would be at my apartment in a matter of seconds.

I looked out of the window. The yard, three floors below, grown up with ornamental shrubbery and flowers, loomed black and forbidding, shielded from the meagre lights at the street corners by the bulk of surrounding buildings.

There was a long coil of rope in one of the closets, and I took the man and also the rug upon which he had fallen, tied the rope about his shoulders in one of those knots which are known to sailors and which will hold as long as there is a tension upon it, yet break loose when the rope is slackened and given a shake or two. I rolled a bed against the window, giving me a section of the brass bedpost about which to make a turn of the line for a snubber, raised the body to the window, and lowered it into the yard.

As soon as the rope slackened I gave it a shake, slipped loose the knot and then drew back the rope. Sixty seconds later there was an authoritative rap at my door, and I opened it to confront a squad of uniformed men. I was in dressing robe and slippers.

"There's a rumor of a fight up here. What's the row?" asked the man who stood in the lead, his face tense and white. Quite evidently he had heard enough about Ed Jenkins to make him fear for his own safety. He had four men with him, and they were all rather subdued for policemen. Their attitude gave me my clue.

"You got my telephone message straight?" I asked.

"*Your* message?" asked the man in uniform.

I looked at him vacantly.

"Of course; who did you think did the telephoning?"

"The desk sergeant told me it was a man who declined to give his name who said he had an apartment here, and that there had been a commotion in the apartment above."

I nodded. The thing had worked out as I had anticipated.

"I didn't give my name because I was afraid of police skepticism. I am having an increasingly hard time trying to make you fellows believe that I am on the square. There was a racket in the apartment above, and I am sure I heard a man fall to the floor. After that there were running feet, and then silence. I telephoned to the desk sergeant at once."

The officer scratched his head.

"The man who telephoned said that the apartment above was occupied by Ed Jenkins, the famous Phantom Crook."

I laughed at that.

"That was all twisted up. The sergeant asked who to see if they needed more information and I finally told him to have his men come to the apartment of Ed Jenkins. That's how he got things balled up. I really wish you'd take a look upstairs at the apartment over mine, officer. You know with my record the fact that I've reformed doesn't protect me a bit. If anything should go wrong within a mile of me there'd always be those to say I was responsible. That's why I always notify the police."

He stood there, shifting from one foot to the other, his forehead puckered in what passes for thought with the average flatfoot.

"I'll go up there, all right," he said at length, "but before I do, I'm goin' through this here apartment, an' I'm going through it right now."

With that he lowered his head, dropped his right hand to his pocket, and came boring on into the apartment.

"Pray come in, gentlemen," I said. "I regret that a certain organized bloc of voters have made it impossible for me to provide

you with what was once considered the first essential in the way of hospitality, but a constitutional amendment is, of course, binding on crooks, if not on police officers and legislators. Pray, come in."

It took them a moment to figure out that speech, and when they did, they didn't know much more than they had before. They came in with a belligerent attitude, and they prowled around the apartment, looking things over.

"Of course you'll understand headquarters looks the place over every two or three weeks," I remarked smoothly. "If there's anything I can do, or any way I can be of assistance, just let me know."

The main squeeze disregarded the comment, and they all flatfooted around the apartment until they had convinced themselves there was nothing concealed within the walls of the small place, and then it occurred to the head of the gang that he'd better take a look at that upper apartment. I begged him not to do so.

"If I was mistaken you'll simply be unnecessarily arousing the people upstairs, and if I was right in my hunch and there has been any crime committed up there they'll now have had sufficient warning to have concealed all of the evidence. Pray let them alone."

The flatfoot looked at me moodily and then led his men up the stairs to the apartment above. There was a chorus of sleepy grunts, rather an explosion of verbal threats as the other sensed what the men were doing there, and then some angry words on both sides. I rather gathered that I would not be a welcome neighbor in that apartment, and that I had better plan on moving in the very near future.

The man above made the mistake of making too many threats, of telling what he would do in the line of gathering in the official scalps of the various members of the squad, and they searched his apartment. I could hear their heavy feet tramping through the place. They found some booze. How much I don't know, but enough to enable them to save their official faces, and they came down the elevator, bringing the man from the apartment above and several cases of "evidence." I hadn't known he was a bootlegger, and for once fortune was playing right square in my hands. Otherwise they'd have probably come back for another interview or argument with me.

As it was, I gave them a bare minute to get started, and then lowered myself out of the window, shook loose the rope, and found the still, black bundle of lifeless flesh below. It was an effort to get it into my roadster, and slip out of the garage into the still shadows of the noiseless street, but it was only a matter of minutes.

I had taken the precaution to ascertain where Ogden Sly lived, and when I parked my machine a block or two away in a dark alley and slipped into his garage and stole his machine, I took the trouble to make a scientific job of it. I opened the padlock carefully, taking the greatest care to leave no fingerprints, slipped the car in neutral and backed it by hand well out into the street. I short circuited the ignition wires back of the switch because I had no key that would fit the ignition lock, and then drove up to where I had left my car. I slipped the body over into Sly's car, got in, heaved a sigh of relief, and drove for the river road. Once there I removed the knife from the man's chest and threw it far out into the waters. The rug I concealed beneath some shrubbery where I would have a chance to bury it later. Then I sat the body in the seat, started the car toward one of the steep curves, threw on the gas, stood on the running board until it had plenty of momentum, and then slipped to the ground and watched the expensive machine hurtle into the air, waited until I heard the crash, and then started walking back.

At any rate Ogden Sly was out an expensive machine, and if he had been mixed up in the attempt to frame the murder on me, he would probably have some embarrassing explanations to make at a later date.

It was nearing day when I got my own machine back in my garage and rolled in for a few hours' sleep. I saw that my legal vacation was nearing an end. I'd have to start once more wearing disguises, keeping three and four apartments rented at a time, all in widely separated sections of the city, and take the trouble to build up a different character in each apartment. In my heart I cursed the man with the reddish eyes, the parrot mouth and the octopus arms. I could not help but feel that he was responsible for my present position.

The story broke that forenoon. Fortunately, the police had found and identified the wrecked car before Ogden Sly awoke to the fact that someone had borrowed his machine. After that the facts broke

rapidly. It seemed the body was that of Andrew Caruthers, known about the younger set as "Wild Andy." He was of good family, and had social standing. Recently he had been blackmailed steadily and consistently. Two or three of his more intimate friends knew of the payments he was being forced to make, and had also heard him threaten to resort to desperate measures unless the demands were lightened. No one heard or knew the name of the person who was making the demands, but it was known that they were heavy and regular.

Wild Andy had started out with some unknown companion that fatal night, and had not stated where he was going other than that he had telephoned the steward at his club and said that if anything happened to him to be sure and demand an explanation of a man with a bandaged arm, broken nose, cauliflower ear and three gold teeth, a man who went by the name of Bert Strong and who lived at a cheap hotel on First Street between Pine and Hemlock.

From this description the police were able to identify one Bill Peavey who had a criminal record as long as his bandaged arm. He was living at the place mentioned, and under the name of Bert Strong, but he had an ironclad alibi that could not be shaken. At that he was puzzled and frightened. Very apparently Wild Andy had not been as green as he looked and had managed to shadow the tool to whom he made his payments.

I could put two and two together. Bill Peavey was the tool of Ogden Sly. He was the man who made the collections, who pulled the rough stuff. Somehow Caruthers had found out more than he was supposed to know about where the blackmail was going, and who was getting it. He had learned that the man who made the collections was really a pawn in the game, and had started investigations.

From the standpoint of a source of income he had shrunk to zero in the eyes of Ogden Sly, the real man higher up. As a nuisance he was looming on the horizon as a factor to be dealt with. It had all been arranged that Peavey was to call on Caruthers, offer to confess and expose the real head of the criminal blackmailing ring, and lure the victim to my apartment, where Peavey would promise to side in with Caruthers and they would demand a showdown. As a crook, Peavey would pick the lock of the apartment and he and Caruthers could hide within, waiting my arrival. When my key sounded in the door, Peavey had simply stabbed Caruthers in the

dark, and dashed from the apartment, leaving me with the dying man. As soon as he could get to a telephone he had called headquarters, posed as the owner of one of the adjoining flats who didn't want his name used, and tipped off the police.

I was supposed to be caught just as I was attempting to dispose of the body of a murdered man, a man who had been paying tribute to a blackmailer for a long time, a man who had been getting desperate under the strain of the continued extortions. It had all been rather clever in a maudlin, mediocre sort of a way.

I had dished their plans, and then had put them in a box by seeing that the body was found in the wreckage of Ogden Sly's machine. I presumed he would have a pull with headquarters. A good blackmailer or confidence man usually has a friend in at the central office who can smooth things out for him, but murder is something else again.

Of course the police were not absolutely certain that a piece of glass from the broken windshield had not penetrated to Caruthers' heart, but it was funny that he should be driving Ogden Sly's machine at the time of his death, and that Ogden Sly should have no other explanation than that his car had been stolen. That was so old it was worn threadbare. Every crook who gets into trouble with his car and realizes that the registration numbers are going to be traced back to him always reports that his car has been stolen.

Then there was the Bill Peavey, alias Bert Strong angle of the case. I made up my mind that I'd give that a once over before so very long. They'd fixed up a good alibi for him in case the thing ever got hot around his head, but he was in the same fix I was. He had a police record, and that was a big factor. On the whole, I figured the bunch would be on the defensive for a little while. They hadn't counted on Andy Caruthers leaving that last message that he could be located through the man he had known as Bert Strong.

However, I'd sat in the game taking a look at cards without having any money in the center long enough. I decided I'd better see if I couldn't throw in a few chips and take a chance on winning something. I went to the telephone and called up John Lambert's residence. Lois herself answered the phone.

"I'll have a few words with you, young lady, at your convenience," I told her.

"That's jake with me, Ed," she purred over the wire. "Are you inviting me to dinner, or do you want to take a joy ride?"

"I'll meet you at the Rendezvous at eight," I shot back at her.

"Omygosh! Ed. You're crude. Your dinner maners are awful. When a gent invites his lady friend to dinner he's supposed to go get her and see that she doesn't get kidnapped by some taxicab driver."

I'd been kidded long enough. There was something about this thing I didn't like.

"You be there," I said, short and snappy.

"Oh, Ed, you're so good to me!" she cooed as I slammed the receiver back on the hook.

I was about half mad at that jane and yet I was grinning. I had a little job to do before I met her and I started out to do it. There are ways of getting information in the underworld, ways that are not always open to the cops. I thought that I could get a slant on the ways and methods of one Ogden Sly, a slant that might come in handy at some time in the very near future.

I'd have got the information all right, at that, by following ways of my own, but it was chance pure and simple that played into my hand and gave me the clue I needed. The way to the joint I was headed for lay past the steps of the courthouse, and I noticed a little crowd standing there at the foot of the steps with a man half-way up the flight holding out a bundle of letters.

I stopped long enough to hear what was going on, and got the idea he was auctioning off a pile of letters which "might contain anything or nothing." I was further enlightened by a loquacious bystander.

"That's the public administrator. Whenever a poor bloke passes in with a little bit of an estate he sells off the stuff at auction. They've found out that there's a certain demand for letters, and if a stiff passes in his checks and leaves a bunch of letters tied up with a pink ribbon, or a pile of old papers that have some love letters in 'em, they do 'em up into bundles and sell 'em off after they get enough of 'em. There are collectors that follow the game all the time, and it's got to be a regular fad. The administrator gets enough out of it to pay him for his trouble all right. There's one of the regular ones now, bidding in that bunch. I work here in the courthouse and get a chance to see all of the auctions, that bird's been a regular customer for years."

I glanced toward the man who was bidding in the bundle, and, as he mounted the steps with outstretched hands, I got a good look at him. He was my esteemed contemporary Ogden Sly, his fat, lifeless paunch protruding, his flabby face emotionless as his great, writhing arms stretched forth for the bundle of letters.

I ducked back out of sight and did some thinking. Here was Ogden Sly, mixed up in a mysterious death, very probably under request from the district attorney's office to hold himself in readiness to be examined further in the event the grand jury should want him, and yet he couldn't afford to miss one of these auctions of dead men's letters.

I wandered back round the block, into the other entrance of the courthouse and caught the stenographer in the administrator's office. Would she please look up the index of pauper estates and tell me if one C. W. Kinsington, deceased, had had his effects sold at auction. She looked at me in the aimless, inefficient way of all clerks who are in the employ of the taxpayers, yawned, left the room, and finally returned with a big book in which was entered the record of the estate of C. W. Kinsington, deceased. There had been no property beyond a pistol and cartridge belt, a watch, some clothes, a suitcase and a file of correspondence. All of these had been sold at auction, and the net amount of the returns were neatly entered.

I had seen all I wanted to. I ventured that I could tell right then why Ogden Sly was such a mystery, why he acted as he did, and why and how he managed to blackmail quietly and without undue notoriety. He'd pick up a bunch of letters, skim through them, look up the history of the man who had owned them, and then find the writers of those letters. It was a cinch.

The men whose letters were sold at auction were the ones who were failures, admitted failures, the letters they saved were the important letters that represented the most vital phases of their lives. All in all those letters were a mighty safe investment for a man who was making his living out of blackmail. Of course there'd be a lot of times when he'd draw a blank, and there'd be lots of times when it would be small stuff, such as getting a few dollars from some widow to hush up the pauper's fate of the son who was supposed by the neighbors to have been making such a success in the city, but every once in a while he'd be bound to stumble on something big, something like the letters of C. W.

Kinsington's, letters which had given him a lead on which he had hooked John Staunton Lambert, had hooked him so cleverly that the Lamberts looked on Ogden Sly as a friend, and had even insisted that Lois should allow her engagement to Sly to be announced.

All in all, I commenced to see a great light or thought I did.

I was thinking, all through that evening with the girl,—thinking hard, and as often as I had a chance. She kept up a running fire of conversation, did Lois; and it was so flippant that I had to laugh in spite of myself. She sure gave the world a life sized picture of a girl who hadn't a worry in the world, and didn't care who knew it.

I tried to lead her out about Ogden Sly, about her engagement.

"My, my!" she chided, "I believe my lukewarm daddy's getting jealous. Naughty, naughty! You'll actually be making love to me next, Ed Jenkins. . . . Come on, let's dance. I want to get whirled around the floor once more before I finish that filet mignon."

I tried a new tack.

"I'm leaving the city for three or four weeks," I remarked casually.

She missed a step, stumbled, and clung to me.

"Not . . . not honest?"

I laughed at that, noticing even as I laughed the sudden paling of her cheek.

"Of course honest. You wouldn't think I'd leave the city to do something dishonest would you?"

We danced in silence, and then she drew me from the floor.

"Come on, I'm tired. I want to get back to our meal and get another swallow of tea. You know, Ed, you're way behind the times. You haven't a flask and it's shocking poor form. You're supposed to order orange juice and keep it filled with just enough kick to make the girls tell their right names. Being sober is passé. It just isn't done any more."

We sat down at the table and she played around the edges of her food with listless knife and fork, eyes downcast and shoulders that suddenly seemed to grow limp. After a few minutes she excused herself long enough to go into the dressing-room, and when she returned her eyes were red in spite of the fact that her face had been freshly powdered. One thing was certain, I was a pretty

important pawn in the game that she was playing, or thought she was playing.

Then she reached some decision and cheered up. All of a sudden she was as blithe and carefree as any flapper just leaving for college. I glanced around, trying to find out if the cause of her change had been a signal she had received from any of the other diners. The place was crowded, and one guess was as good as another.

We ate and danced, and then stayed to throw a couple of more dances. The girl insisted that I should take her for a drive, and something in the very nature of her insistence aroused my suspicions. However, I went with her. At that stage of the affair I thought I knew what was in the wind, but I wanted to find out pretty well before I started playing my cards.

That ride was a petting party. I've heard of 'em before, and I've always had an abstract idea of how they were thrown, but I'd never been on a real one. I had been just a bit too mature to ever get mixed up in one of the things before, and I never had anything that made me feel so downright ancient. There was vibrant youth in the girl's kisses, a fire in her breath, a clinging, passionate something about her lips that made me realize times had changed, that social customs had changed, and that I was not as young as I used to be.

Also there was something on my mind, a something that kept taking my thought energies away from the present, away from the automobile and the girl, and into the interior of John Lambert's safe. Also I thought of the flabby flesh of Ogden Sly, the reddish eyes, and that curious parrot-like set to the mouth, and every time I thought of him I seemed to see a mental image of his writhing arms with their red, hairy hands sliding over the bare flesh of the girl's shoulder.

Again I tried to lead her to talk of her engagement, to find out her real emotions for Ogden Sly, and when I mentioned his name her emotions underwent a sudden and marked change. She shuddered as though the chill night air had penetrated to her warm blood, her kisses became forced, lifeless, strained, and then she abruptly started to cry, soul-racking sobs that wrenched her slender frame and made her quiver as she lay against me.

Then, as suddenly as a thunder shower it was over.

"I love you, Ed," she said thrusting her wet lips to mine, her tear-stained cheek lying damp against my own, her eyes gleaming

through the tears. "Oh, I love you so much! Somehow I can't see how things are coming out at present, but I just know they will."

I looked down at her, wondering.

"How's that for a good line?" she surprised me by asking. "Did I pull that like I meant it? You know how it is, Ed, you've got to be the regular little red-hot-mama to hold the boys in this day and age. If you don't make 'em think they're your Prince Charmings and that you've stocked up your hope chest for 'em they make you walk home. Yuh wouldn't make a regular guy like me walk, would you, Ed?"

I laughed at her. I thought I knew something of the game, but I sure got a kick out of the way this kid played her cards.

I took her back to the parking station where she'd left her car, and then went on to my apartment. I had something to work out, and I wanted to make a good job of it. The something was no less than a letter from C. W. Kinsington to Ogden Sly, and when I got it finished it was a masterpiece.

Ogden Sly had originally fished up the letters that connected John Lambert with the crooked play, and then he'd sent forged demands from Kinsington, or rather, purporting to come from Kinsington, the man who was dead. My letter was a forgery of Sly's forgeries, but I fancied it'd get by. In it I told the blackmailer that he had made a mistake in thinking that I was dead; that I had been away and that a friend of mine had taken my name and job and had also undertaken to care for my personal effects; that the friend had died and that I had not been notified, but that I had only been able to trace the letters after a great deal of trouble and that then I found that the purchaser of those private papers and letters had been using them for purposes of blackmail. I was demanding an accounting. Every penny that had been obtained by blackmail must be turned over to me or Ogden Sly would go to jail, and I didn't mean maybe.

I gave some considerable thought to the manner in which the money was to be paid, and then I hit on a scheme that sounded good to me. I instructed Sly to simply go to the Railroad Terminals National Bank and deposit the money to the credit of C. W. Kinsington.

Whether or not the letter would do the work I didn't know, but I did have some other means of bringing pressure to bear that would do the work if the letter failed. I could imagine Ogden Sly's frame

of mind. He would be worried about this other matter, know that his right hand man, Bill Peavey was in dutch and likely to turn state's evidence, would realize that he must be suspected by the police of carrying on a regular blackmail game, and then he would suddenly get mixed up in a charge made by some person who would have all the evidence necessary to back up his charges, a person who had nothing to lose, one who was not hounded by a guilty conscience. Coming on top of all of these other things it would spell ruin to Ogden Sly.

There was only one thing for him to do, and that was to stall me along until he could get a personal interview, and then see to it that I didn't come away alive from that personal interview.

I dropped a note to the Railroad Terminal's National Bank and explained to them that I was contemplating coming down to look after opening an account in a few days, but that in the meantime there was a possibility of a rather large deposit being made for me, in which event would they please hold it until such time as I was able to get down and have the account properly opened. I put an address in that letter, a post office box where I could get mail all right, but where the letter could never be traced into the hands of Ed Jenkins.

I took the letters to the main post office, dropped them in the mail chute and then went back and took a look at Bobo. The dog was ready to travel, but I held him there for another day or two. I didn't want him to open up that wound and there was going to be action ahead. Then I went back to the apartment, called it a day, and rolled in.

The next morning Mrs. Lambert telephoned and wanted me to take dinner with them that night, just an informal party, Lois and her fiancé, Mr. Lambert and herself in addition to myself. I wondered a lot about that invitation. The woman seemed to have an expressionless face yet her keen eyes didn't miss much that went on. She was following suit for every one of her daughter's leads. I accepted. I couldn't imagine any place I wanted to be at eight o'clock that night more than at John Lambert's.

My letter would reach Ogden Sly in the morning mail, and the same mail would carry the letter to the bank. I happened to know that the bank was the one where Ogden Sly carried his account. The orders in the letters of instructions which I had seen in John Lambert's safe had given me that information. I could imagine

Ogden Sly's first move as soon as he received that letter. He would hotfoot it down to the bank in search of information concerning the account of one C. W. Kinsington, and he wouldn't have much trouble in getting hold of that letter of mine to the bank. From that letter he'd get the address I had given, and I could expect to hear from him very soon thereafter.

I hadn't doped it out far wrong, either. By noon there was a letter delivered from the post office box. Ogden Sly was willing to talk with me concerning the matter I had mentioned, but he wanted to be sure the conversation was private. Would I please telephone him at a certain number, and would I be good enough to consider the matter confidential in the highest degree?

Very apparently Ogden Sly was worried. Not worried badly enough to actually part with any cash on a crude blackmail game, but worried enough to decide that he'd better get rid of me.

I went to a public telephone booth, and called him up, making my voice dry, husky, and a bit cracked, figuring that he hadn't any line on Kinsington any more than I had, but knowing that the thing of real importance was to keep him from having the faintest suspicion of any resemblance between the voice he heard over the telephone and the voice of that good friend of the Lambert family, Ed Jenkins.

In one way I felt like a philanthropic fool as I stood there carrying on the conversation, and yet in another I knew that I was doing the proper thing, both from a standpoint of business ethics as well as from the standpoint of the dog. Before I got done with things I'd have a nice piece of cash tucked away somewhere, and Bobo would have his revenge, but it was something that couldn't be hurried. As for Lois . . . well, damn those flappers, anyway! I couldn't be sure of her.

Right at the start of the conversation I could see that I had Sly sold. I knew too much about that deal with John Lambert not to be genuine. He figured that C. W. Kinsington himself was the only one who would have all that knowledge concerning the deal. Sly wanted to discuss matters with me, but I wanted a refund of all the blackmail money first. I was the one who pulled the righteous indignation stuff. I was going to get a refund of the money and take it to Lambert. I was going to have Sly arrested, was going to the police immediately.

Sly was all for temporizing. He wanted to see me before I did anything rash, told me I was mistaken about his ever having

exacted any money from anyone, that he could explain everything in a few minutes of personal conversation, and all the rest of the old stall.

After a bit I hesitated, and then gave him a street number. I would be there promptly at seven p.m. that evening and he could see me there on one condition, and on one condition alone, and that was that he have a certified check payable to bearer for the sum of ten thousand dollars. I told him I knew he had received a lot more money from John Lambert than that, but if he would hand me that certified check for ten thousand I'd consider it as a guarantee of good faith.

He went up in the air at that, but said he'd come to the place and talk with me, although he wouldn't have any certified check, or pay me "one damned cent."

I kept insisting, and finally he told me that he'd send a messenger with ten thousand in cash if that would suit me any better. I told him it would, and that I'd be in room number nineteen at the address I'd given him. Pretending to be green, but obstinate was my cue, and I played the part to the queen's taste.

The rooming house number I'd given him was a rooming house that was run by a Chink friend of mine, and of all friends a Chink friend is the most loyal and dependable.

I dropped down there that afternoon and had a talk with my friend Chink, and then I did a little more telephoning. By seven o'clock I was ready for the fireworks.

Ogden Sly's messenger was Bill Peavey, of course. He and Sly were in so deep on the thing that they had to see it through, and one murder more or less wasn't going to make so very much difference to them providing they could get away with it and get things hushed up. Events were marching along rapidly, and in the death of Wild Andy Caruthers in such a mysterious manner and in the sudden resurrection of C. W. Kinsington, Sly and his henchman could only see the hand of fate turning against them, a little bad break in the luck. They didn't know that monkeying with Ed Jenkins, and shooting his dog so they could frame a murder on the phantom crook was guaranteed to bring bad luck to any bunch of crooks.

At seven to the minute Bill Peavey presented himself at the entrance of the rooming house and told the Chink he wanted to see his friend in room nineteen. The Chink nodded, smiled and in-

formed Peavey that the "fliend" had left instructions to the effect that his visitor was to exhibit ten thousand dollars in cash before being admitted.

I was at a peep hole in the upper floor where I could look down on the whole affair. Peavey was mad but uncertain and started to argue with the Chink. The Chink shrugged his shoulders, did things to the switchboard and told the crook he could talk with his "fliend" on the telephone. That didn't suit Peavey either, but he had his murder to commit, and he wanted to get it over with early in the evening. He talked with me on the telephone, and I told him short and snappy that he had to pungle up the ten thousand dollars so I could see that he really had the goods or I wouldn't talk with him for a minute. Bill engaged in a lot more conversation, and finally exhibited ten one thousand dollar bills to the Chink. I'd sold Ogden Sly on the idea that I was an obstinate old coot all right, and he'd given his messenger the money to be used in case of emergency. That was all I wanted to know. After the Chink had been satisfied that Bill had the money, Bill not knowing that I was watching the show, I told Bill the Chink would show him up. Bill was suspicious by that time that the whole thing was a plant and he came up the stairs with his gun in his hand, ready for anything.

The Chink showed him into room nineteen and Bill sat down, uneasy, suspicious. He was the only one in the room. I was in an adjoining room, taking a peek at him through the little peep hole I'd had constructed there. Bill was good and nervous, and that was the way I wanted to get him. He was desperate, and he was pretty well suspected of one murder already. On the whole his nerves weren't in the best shape imaginable.

After I had him in the right frame of mind I suddenly threw open the door of the adjoining room.

"Now yuh can walk in here," I told him in the same cracked voice, an' be sure yuh have yore hands well away from yore gun when you come in."

Bill was in a quandary. They were desperate. C. W. Kinsington had to be killed, of course, but Bill wasn't such a fool as to have the murder pulled off in the house at which he had called to see said Kinsington. That was too raw. He had called with the ten thousand dollars to see what his victim looked like, to arrange for a murder that couldn't be traced. He didn't propose to pay over the ten thousand dollars unless he had to, because that would compli-

cate his problem, and he'd have to throw in a robbery as well. If he didn't have to pay over the money, Kinsington could be killed within a day or two. If he had to fork over that ten thousand bucks it was a cinch Kinsington couldn't be allowed to leave the house alive.

I was dolled up in a disguise that got by fine in the halflight of the dim globe in the hallway. A white beard hung down on my chest, a broad brimmed western sombrero was turned up over my eyes, riding boots and overalls completed the getup. On the whole I looked like a man who would be hard to monkey with but easy to outwit. I stood out there in the city like a sore thumb. There weren't half a dozen men in the whole place who looked anything like me.

I could see relief come over Bill Peavey's face when he saw how easy it was going to be to identify me. He could have even shot me from an aeroplane if he'd had to. There was no more chance of mistaking me in a city crowd than there would be of mistaking a butcher at a vegetarian cafeteria.

I handed it to him straight, toying with a big frontier model of a forty-five the while. I was Kinsington, supposed to be dead. Ogden Sly had got possession of my personal effects and had used the information therein contained to blackmail John Lambert. As far as I was personally concerned I resented it. I either wanted the money all given back and restored to Lambert or I wanted Ogden Sly arrested or both. I didn't know which. I might be willing to let the blackmailer off without reporting the matter to the police if a complete restitution were made, but I wasn't so blaméd certain about it.

There was a lot more that I rambled on about, not giving Peavey a chance to do much of the talking, but impressing on him that I was hard-boiled, obstinate, and didn't care who knew it. I was opposed to blackmailers and I was going to leave that very room and go directly to John Lambert and expose the whole affair, but first I wanted the ten thousand to return to him at the time of my talk.

After a while Bill Peavey got the idea. If he gave me the ten thousand would I wait until his principal, Mr. Sly, could call on me and "explain" the situation?

I nodded. With ten thousand paid as evidence of good faith I would.

Bill paid it over. He hated to do it, but he did.

"Now where can Sly see yuh for a friendly little chat?" he asked.

"How'd tomorrer mornin' do?"

Bill shook his head, and I could see him begin to sweat. He didn't want me running around with that ten thousand dollars. He wanted to get me to some nice, quiet place where he could pull off his robbery and murder.

All the time I was talking with Bill Peavey I was watching him, watching him as a cat watches a mouse. Bill Peavey was yellow, yellow through and through. If he was ever cornered he'd squeal.

"Nope, I won't meet him tomorrer mornin'," I said suddenly. "I'll meet him right here in an hour, but first I'm goin' down to a place I know where there's a nice safe, an' I'm goin' to put this here money where it'll be all right. I wouldn't want to carry this much of John Lambert's cash around loose in my pocket tonight. Tell him to be here in an hour and I'll see him."

Bill squirmed and pleaded. I was hampering his style to beat the band. He'd have to kill me before I left the house, and that left him a narrow margin of time for a limit. He'd have to find some way to get the ten thousand back . . . I could see his narrow, beady eyes gleam as he watched me, and knew that he was figuring over the chances of killing me right then and there and making his getaway. I fingered the heavy forty-five careless like, and that settled the matter. Peavey wasn't exactly a fool. He might have taken the chance if he'd have found me sitting down in room nineteen when he came in and before he'd paid over the money, but things were different now. I'd fooled him when I turned out to be a hard-boiled western prospector with a big forty-five and when I'd had him walk into the adjoining room at *my* convenience instead of his.

He sighed, agreed to the appointment and walked out.

After he'd gone I took out a wax dummy I'd had brought there for me and transferred my disguise to it, and it looked pretty lifelike with the white beard down on its chest and all. By the time I'd finished, the Chink reported on Bill Peavey. He was cruising around with a high-powered car, curtains closed tight. Evidently he was waiting for me to take that money to the "nice, safe place." If I was going to meet Sly in an hour I'd have to start on that trip to deposit the ten grand pretty soon, and that was going to be Bill's opportunity.

The stage was all set, and I rang up Police Headquarters and got on the line with Allison, the detective who had charge of the investigation of the Caruthers case.

"Look here, Allison," I said in a whiny, high-pitched voice, the sort of a voice that a stool pigeon usually uses, "do you want to get a straight tip on that Caruthers murder, one that'll lay you right on the inside?"

He was suspicious. "Who is this, where are yuh speakin' from, an' what do yuh want?" he asked.

"Never mind who I am," I told him, "I'm speakin' from the Far East Roomin' house an' hotel, an' I don't want nothin'. This is a straight tip to pay off a grudge."

"All right," he barked. "Who killed Caruthers?"

"I don't know," I came back, whining like a stool pigeon always whines when he can't deliver the goods, "but this much I do know. There's an old gent with white whiskers stayin' here at the place that does know, and the fellows that are on the inside are plannin' to bump him off. You send a bunch of plainclothesmen and a couple of motorcycle cops down here, and just wait for somethin' to happen."

I could feel him hesitate at the other end of the line.

"What are yuh tryin' to do? Make a monkey outa me?"

"You send the men down here quiet like," I came back. "Get a couple of plainclothesmen on each corner to stop any speedin' machine, and have the motorcycle cops come on down and stay where they can catch any car that gets away from the plainclothesmen, an' do it all silent like. I'm lettin' yuh in on the ground floor of a murder, an' if yuh don't grab this tip yuh'll get panned by every newspaper in the city, because it's straight."

With that I hung up, without giving him a chance to discuss things any further.

Then I took my dummy figure and went downstairs.

Ten minutes passed, and then a Chink came shuffling in the door, intoned a Cantonese greeting and gargled a bunch of the lingo.

I can speak the stuff when I have to but this wasn't one of those occasions when I had to, so I just looked blank and waited for Quon Jee to interpret.

"He say policeman come," said Quon Jee.

I peeked out of the door through the specially constructed peephole that the Chinks have in all their places. There across the

narrow street, motor running, was the car with curtains drawn, all ready.

I turned back to the boys and nodded.

We opened the door and shoved out the dummy, keeping well back in the shadows. For a second or two nothing happened, and I cursed softly beneath my breath. Not that it made any great difference. I didn't have anything to lose. If I didn't get them in this trap I'd get them in another. The reason I wanted this play to go through was because it would give things an artistic finish, and I like those artistic finishes.

Then, all of a sudden, things exploded.

There came the crash of a volley from the machine, and I could see the waxen figure spouting dust as I took a bamboo pole and pushed it out, face downward on the sidewalk. Bill Peavey jumped from the death car, a smoking gun in his hand and started on the run for the dummy, after that ten thousand. It was only a few feet from the machine, and he'd watched his chance and waited until the street was pretty well deserted. The Chinks were scurrying like rats for their holes, and he ordinarily would have had easy sailing.

Suddenly there was the sound of a police whistle, the bark of a gun, and Bill stopped in mid-stride, looked up the street, cursed, fired his revolver, dove into the black interior of the car and was whisked away, the wax figure lying face down on the sidewalk. Half a block away a plainclothesman was writhing and flopping around on the pavement. Bill was a good shot.

We dragged the wax figure back into the rooming house, and my friends the Chinks took charge of him. The machine speeded away and turned the corner with screeching wheels, and then there came the bark of a motorcycle, the wail of a siren, and a fusillade of shots.

Chuckling, I sneaked out of the back door and went to John Lambert's informal dinner.

I was a few minutes late in getting there, and I could see there had been a scene. Lois was red of face, but her crimson lips were set in a firm line. Lambert looked flushed and indignant. Mrs. Lambert was the same as ever. If there was anything going on behind those keen eyes I couldn't tell it. Ogden Sly had evidently been the center of the rumpus. His parrot mouth was working under his beak-like nose, and his great arms were writhing and twisting.

I gave my hat to the butler and stood in the doorway surveying them.

"A cheap crook," mouthed Ogden Sly, his hands working, arms twisting. "I said it behind his back and I'll say it to his face. Your daughter, sir, picked him up in a cabaret, and brought him home without knowing who he was. He has imposed upon you all. See, here I have his police record, his photographs. I challenge him to deny that he is the Ed Jenkins of newspaper notoriety, known to the police of the world as the phantom crook, a criminal of international reputation. I challenge him, I dare him to deny it."

One of his hairy hands writhed into his breast pocket and extracted a bunch of photographs.

Lois looked helplessly at me.

"Deny it," she said.

I grinned around at the circle of faces.

"Deny it nothing. It's true. I'm proud of it," I said. "When do we eat?"

John Lambert arose and pointed his finger at me.

"You don't eat again, you scoundrel! Not in this house. Get out!"

Ogden Sly's parrot mouth twisted into a grin.

"As the fiancé of the daughter of the house I felt that it was my right to speak. Jenkins, you should be ashamed of yourself. Get out!"

Mrs. Lambert looked at her daughter, and then spoke. Right then I knew what her red hair was for.

"Not at all. Mr. Jenkins, you will be welcome for dinner. Stay right here."

All of a sudden the expressionless look was gone from her face and she was standing there, chin up, head thrown back, looking over the crowd of us, queen of the situation.

"Mr. Jenkins is here as my guest," she finished, "and he is much better company than a blackmailer . . . no, John, don't deny that you have been the victim of a gang of blackmailers. Both Lois and I know it, and . . ."

She never finished. There came a rush of steps on the porch, a pounding at the door, and a squad of uniformed men flung into the room.

Ogden Sly sneered.

"Ah, Jenkins, I perceive that you have been pulling something else. Here are your friends. Perhaps if you would not accept my invitation to leave this house, you will accept theirs."

The grim-faced man in charge shook his head.

"I don't know this man, but I do know you, Ogden Sly. It's you we want."

Sly's face went white while his restless arms moved one of the hairy hands to his forehead.

"*Me?* You want me? Want me bad enough to come and interrupt me at a social evening in the house of my friend John Lambert! What should you want me for?"

"For the murder of Henry Roberts," said the grim-faced policeman.

"Henry Roberts?" repeated Sly, a look of relief coming over his face. "I never even heard of the man."

"He was a plainclothesman that your assistant Bill Peavey killed tonight in trying to murder C. W. Kinsington in accordance with your instructions, Sly. Also we want you for the murder of Wild Andy Caruthers. You see, Sly, Bill Peavey has made a complete statement. He's given us all the dope, also he's said something about a blackmailing scheme. Anything you say will be used against you at the trial. Come on!"

Dazed, protesting, frightened, they led him away, led him to confront Bill Peavey who had squealed to save his neck. It would be a great race between Sly and Peavey to see which one could implicate the other first and hardest.

When they had left, Mrs. Lambert turned to me and would have spoken, but I beat her to it.

"Mr. Lambert, go into your safe and get out the Kinsington letters and burn them before the police get here. They'll probably be around asking you questions, and when they do come, remember that you're a man of family with a daughter to think of, and lie like a gentleman."

He blinked his eyes. "The Kinsington letters?"

I nodded. "Don't play innocent. I've seen 'em. Ogden Sly forged all of those letters. The real Kinsington is dead, and your secret is reasonably safe. There may be some letters in Ogden Sly's possession, but my best bet is that they're hidden where the police will never get hold of them. What's more, if Ogden Sly ever admits any connection with Kinsington or you, he'll be

playing into Bill Peavey's hands and establishing a motive for the murder of the real Kinsington, and both Peavey and Sly think they murdered him. What they don't realize is that they shot up a wax dummy I planted for 'em to practice on.

"Now I guess that about covers everything. I made a slight fee for my services by using my brain, and I'm satisfied if everybody is. Lois, you used me for a tool or tried to, but I just want to let you know that I understand you were fighting for your father and that I haven't any hard feelings."

She gulped once and then spilled it.

"At fist that's the way I played it," she admitted. "I thought that I could make you crazy about me and that then Ogden Sly would interfere with you in some way and you'd kill him. I read about what a desperate criminal you were and I thought that you'd be sure to murder Sly."

I laughed at that.

"Oh gosh! You flappers," I said. "You have an idea that the world runs according to story books."

There was a moment's silence.

"Well, I'm sorry, folks, but I'm not remaining to dinner. Mr. Lambert, you've made one mistake. Don't make a lot more of them trying to cover up that one."

The old man's hand came, reaching out for mine, and there were tears in his eyes.

"I don't understand it all as yet, Jenkins. I had thought that my secret was safe from those I loved most and it was that feeling which made me such an easy victim."

"Don't try kiddin' the women folks," I told him as I made for the door. "I hate to be seeming to hurry, but there's a chance my name may come into this thing some way, and I'd just as soon be where the police can't locate me any too readily. They'll want to ask me some questions, and then the newspaper reporters will get my photograph in the papers all over again and I'll be besieged by flappers who want me to pull chestnuts out of the fire for them."

It was a mean crack that last one, but I couldn't but feel a bit peeved at the way the girl had thought she was vamping me.

"Remember if you ever get before any court in this state I'm going to see you get a square deal," shouted John Lambert as I went down the steps.

"Ed Jenkins," called Mrs. Lambert, "I don't like your use of profanity but you make a fine family friend. Please call again soon."

I waved my hand and climbed into my roadster. The door banged shut and I pressed on the starter. I'd go get Bobo and we'd lay low for a little bit, keeping quiet until after things had settled somewhat on this Sly-Peavey-Caruthers case.

Just as I leaned forward to throw in the gearshift there came a flash of white, an odor of perfume, and warm, slender arms fastened about my neck.

"Oh, Ed," said Lois, in soft tones, as her lips came to my cheek, "don't misunderstand me like this. I did get acquainted with you because I wanted to play you against Sly. I recognized you and thought that one or the other of you would start trouble, and, after what that newspaper said about you, I thought sure you'd murder Ogden Sly. I knew he was blackmailing dad, and that he was going to force me to marry him to keep him from exposing dad, and all the rest of it. I could have killed him myself, would have, if he'd ever actually succeeded in making my marry him."

I patted her shoulder.

"That's all right, kid. You played your cards as you had 'em to play. Of course, Ogden Sly got jealous first. He wanted to get me out of the way so they planned to get into my apartment, and kill off the dog so they could take Caruthers there and kill him. I blocked that little game for them, and then I had to avenge the dog and make a little expense money. I know that you're really in love with Walter Carter, and that you'll marry him as soon as you've got this mess straightened out."

She looked up at me, her white face showing as a blur in the dim starlight.

"Stupid!" she said. "I started in to vamp you all right, but I never did like Walter Carter. He's crazy about that blonde that was with him, anyway. I told you the other night that after I got to know you I like you. Come and see me some time after things blow over. I've seen so many lounge lizards that I like to see a real man, and then you're so old fashioned I get a kick out of you. I like the way you stare at my knees."

With that she scampered into the house, and left me sitting there, hand on the gearshift, mouth open. And then, because

she'd been such a square little shooter, and because her dad had acted white, and because there was a little soft spot in my heart for the whole blamed outfit, I did something I shouldn't have done. I beat the police to Ogden Sly's apartment and made the sort of a search that only a crook could have made, a search that found the original letters of C. W. Kinsington, the ones that had made all the trouble for John Lambert.

I was taking chances and I knew it, and I got out of the place only a few minutes before the police got in, but I made it, all right, and in my hand I had the parcel of dead men's letters that Ogden Sly had been using as the basis of his blackmailing schemes.

Then with a smile on my face, and with Lois Lambert's kiss tingling my cheek, I went down and picked up Bobo. We were going to take a little vacation, Bobo and I.

Laugh That Off

All of my life I've been in one scrape after another, and it doesn't feel natural to settle down to a safe existence. As a crook that's known to three nations, wanted in six states, but enjoying immunity from extradition from the State of California because of a technicality, I can't call on the law for protection. The hand of the law is against me. It can't take me out of the state of California because I'm not a "fugitive from justice" within the meaning of the law, but every crook in the state feels licensed to pick on me, and the cops are just waiting to get a chance to hang something on me.

That's where I stand. I get no protection—and I don't want any. I have to be a law unto myself and I'm glad of it. God knows I'd hate to be one of the machine-like wage slaves that put in their lives earning tax money for the politicians to spend. City taxes for the city politicians, county taxes for the county politicians, State taxes for the ones a little higher up, and then, if they save anything out of all that smear, the government levies a tax on their income for the national politicians to spend. In addition to all of that they get hit all along the line with sales taxes, license taxes, automobile and luxury taxes, gasoline and mileage taxes, poll taxes, school taxes, tariffs, street assessments, taxes on perfumes, taxes on drugs, taxes on moving picture shows, and I hear they're figuring on putting a tax on near beer to make the expense of prohibition enforcement.

Well, I should worry. The law doesn't protect me. I'm outside of the machinery of man-made government and I have to be my

own law, my own tax collector. The crooks all try to frame me or double-cross me and the cops sit back and watch 'em with a smile. Let one crook kill another off.

From my last two scrapes I'd picked up a dog that's part police dog, part hound of some sort or other, and part something else. He's a big brute, and he'd been raised the same way I had—watching every man, living on and by his wits. Also I'd acquired some twenty thousand dollars from a couple of San Diego crooks who tried to bunko me; and I figured it wouldn't be long before they'd get on my trail and try to get back that twenty thousand bucks or take it out of my hide.

Taken all in all I wasn't advertising where I was living in the want-ad column of the Sunday newspaper. I didn't want any visitors, and that meant everybody.

I'd been taking a stroll out through Golden Gate park, and came back feeling braced and refreshed, the fog rolling in from the ocean, the air crisp and bracing with that life-giving thrill which is all San Francisco's own. Bobo, that's the dog, had gone racing on ahead of me up the stairs while I came sauntering on behind.

When I got to the door of the apartment I knew there was something wrong, some strange odor or other that the dog could detect. He was standing before the door, his nose down to the crack at the bottom, and his feet spread wide apart, tail straight out behind, hair bristling.

That would probably mean someone in the apartment, and I stood still for a minute thinking things over. The California police didn't have anything on me. Not that I hadn't pulled anything, but the stuff I'd pulled had all been cases of where some crook was trying to trim me and I'd simply beat him to it. I figured the crooks couldn't squeal. They'd lay for me and try to get vengeance all right but they wouldn't squeal to the law. Their hands were tied by the same rope that tied mine.

I walked forward, inserted my key, opened the door a crack, and looked at Bobo.

"Go on in, boy," I said, then closed the door as the huge, tawny dog slipped eagerly within. I waited outside, smiling. If there was anyone in that apartment he was due for a little real excitement. Bobo was a crook's dog and proud of it. I'd spent a little time and a lot of patience training him, and he knew his onions, that dog.

I'd even trained him so that he knew if anyone was trying to follow me. I'd spent a month at Del Monte getting small boys to follow us around. I'd show Bobo I was trying to keep out of sight, and he spotted the idea almost from the start. After that I'd trained him so no one could follow him when he was coming to me. He was some dog and he knew what I wanted and did it. He'd watch my face and sometimes I'm satisfied could read my mind. Just the flicker of an eyelash was all he needed. You see he'd been a social outcast himself, and he'd learned in the school of experience. That was why he recognized a kindred spirit in me, and why he knew instinctively what to do.

There was a scratching and pawing in the apartment, but no sounds of a merry-go-round, so I opened the door and walked in. There on the carpet was an envelope and the dog was scratching at it with his paw, sniffing of it, and then scratching again. Evidently some messenger had picked the lock and placed the envelope on the floor where I'd be sure and see it.

Oh well, it's all in a lifetime.

"Bring it here, Bobo," I said, and he got an edge of it in his mouth and brought it over.

The note within was typewritten, and there wasn't very much to it.

"GO SEE DON G. HERMAN AT ONCE," it said and the message was unsigned.

I sighed. Lord! How many times I'd had things put up to me in just that way. Some politician wanted a crook to do a piece of dirty work, some local king of the underworld wanted to get in touch with me, usually on some double-crossing scheme or other. They didn't want to be connected up with me later, so they'd choose some dramatic stunt like this to get in touch with me. At that, though, this one worried me a little, because I didn't figure anyone knew where I was holding out.

I'd heard of Don G. Herman, a big time political crook. He was rumored to have blackmailed a dozen of the prominent men in San Francisco at different times and to have a world of political power obtained from the same source. I didn't owe Don G. Herman anything and I didn't intend to, but I did figure I'd find out who his messenger was.

I called the dog over and let him smell good and long at the envelope and sheet of paper within.

"Just remember that smell, old boy," I told him.

He looked up inquiringly, ears thrust forward, head on one side, tail wagging slowly from side to side.

I shook my head. "No. Not to follow. Just to remember."

I don't know whether he got me or not, but there was no harm in trying. I got up and put on my hat, beckoned to the dog and we went back out. In the outer doorway I turned to Bobo.

"Wait there a minute.—Down."

He crouched and waited, watching me as I stepped out onto the sidewalk.

Dusk was falling and there was a thick fog rolling in and settling down. Occasionally a machine would slip past with the lights on, a pedestrian or two walked on up or down the hill. There was a skinny runt standing with his coat collar turned up leaning against the mailbox in the middle of the block, and I'd have spotted him as the messenger, always supposing the messenger was sticking around.

As far as that was concerned, I'd have bet ten to one the man that delivered that message was where he could see me, right then. In the first place a man who delivers one of those mysterious messages likes to stick around and see how the other fellow takes it, and, in the second place, Don G. Herman was probably wondering whether I was going to call me a taxi and start for his house.

After a minute or two I called out the dog, speaking in a low voice: "Go hunt 'em out, Bobo."

I spoke over my shoulder, not looking at the dog. I'd trained him not to stand near me or act as though he knew me at all unless I looked at him, and when he came out and saw me standing erect, looking out over the traffic on Bush Street, he just stuck his tail up in the air and went pattering around the street like a stray dog looking for garbage cans.

He swung over toward the figure at the mailbox the first thing, barely brushed against him, then ran off down the street, stopped at the corner, looked back, saw that I was still standing straight and erect, and ran across the street, nosing around automobiles and doorways.

I wondered whether I'd made a poor guess on the bird at the mailbox or whether Bobo didn't understand what I wanted. I was watching the dog out of the corner of my eye, musing, speculat-

ing, when, suddenly, his tail stiffened and his head lowered. He was in front of a little cigar stand at the corner, and there was a well-dressed, heavyset bird standing at the counter, talking with the boss. He had all the earmarks of a man who had just picked out his favorite brand of cigar and was chinning the boss while he lit it.

Bobo walked stiff legged up to this bird, took a wiff at his leg, then half-turned to me and whined. I walked casually down the street and whistled to Bobo when I was well around the corner. For once I was fooled. That bird at the cigar stand looked like a bank president. I couldn't imagine a guy like that playing messenger boy.

I walked around the block, and ducked into a drug store where I got a private detective agency on the telephone. Believe me, one of the nicest things a crook can have is a private detective agency. I patronized this one as a Mr. Green, and that was all the name they knew me under. They'd seen my checks, but they'd never seen my face, and I didn't intend that they should. They got all instructions over the telephone, a check on the first of the month and it worked satisfactorily all around. They figured I was a lawyer somewhere, and I let 'em figure.

"Shoot a man out to corner of Bush and Polk streets," I barked into the telephone, "and do it right now. There's a heavyset bird in a light colored hat, brown suit, pearl gray tie and tan shoes. He's about forty-five years old, has a double chin, gray eyes. He's at the cigar stand on the corner, and if he's still there when your man gets there, follow him and find out who he really is. Then let me know where he goes and what he does. If your man gets out there after he's gone, forget it. This is Harry Green talking, and you can charge me."

I hung up the telephone right afterwards. That was the order, and they could take it or leave it.

I walked back to the corner. Yep, the guy was still at the cigar stand. He wasn't following me on any casual strolls, but was sticking around and watching the apartment. That was something funny in itself. Maybe he'd figured I was just walking around the block, and then again maybe he was watching for something else. One thing was certain, I'd trust Bobo's nose and that was the bird that had either written or delivered that message.

I loafed around for ten minutes, and then a small coupe slid around the corner and parked. A kid got out, took a rubber around,

spotted the bird at the cigar stand and then climbed back in the coupe.

I stuck around, the man at the cigar stand stuck around, and the kid from the detective agency stuck around. There was another ten minutes of it while the light faded, and then a rough looking figure came driving up in an old, rusty car and the heavysset bird bowed to the man at the cigar counter and got in the machine. They drove up to Van Ness and turned the corner with the little coupe slipping through traffic right behind.

I didn't expect the kid would get any too much dope on that bird, but I figured I'd shaken my own shadow for a while, anyway. I was just a little nervous. Bobo was a great pal, a big help, but a big dog is something of a tag for a man, and I saw I was going to be labelled if I wasn't careful. I had no doubt they'd located me through the dog. Well, there was one thing, Bobo was trained to keep clear if I got in any real jam, and they could follow him until the cows came home for all the good it'd do them. I went upstairs, kicked off my shoes, read for a while, and went to sleep. Bobo slept at the foot of the bed and never stirred, which was a good sign.

The next morning I rang up the detective agency and found that the party they'd shadowed for me was a man named E. C. Simpson, and he lived in an apartment out in the panhandle district.

I laughed at the dick that made the report.

"That's the name he's going under," I told him. "I want to know who he really is."

The voice at the other end of the line was courteous. "You think he's going under an assumed name, Mr. Green?"

I snorted. "Hell's bells, get wise. Plant a machine in front of his apartment with a good photographer in it and get some pictures that'll show his face. Get his description and photo and then take it up into the rogues' gallery. If that bird ain't a crook I'll eat my hat. I'll call you up again this afternoon. Get busy."

I chuckled a bit as I hung up the telephone. I was playing a hunch, but that name Simpson didn't seem to fit that bird. Also he'd picked the lock of my apartment like an expert. I went out to the beach, laid in the sand, watched the breakers roll in, and did a little thinking. I wanted rest, and I didn't propose to let any political crook get me all stirred up.

That afternoon I came in, took a shower, shaved, changed my clothes, and read a little bit, then started out for dinner. Before I left I called up the detective agency. The manager himself came to the phone and he was all excited.

"I've located him" he said. "We have all the dope on him right here in the office. He's Jim Gilvray, better known as Big Front Gilvray, and he's one of the best in the country on jewels. They say he works on assignments and never monkeys with commercial stuff, but always goes after nationally known gems on orders from big fences. As a result he's never been convicted, because the stuff he takes never gets on the market. He lifts some famous gem for a customer, gets his pay in cash, and keeps his own counsel. He's reported to work in with some big fence somewhere, but the police have never been able to find out who or where. He's a suspicious bird, and I think he spotted our shadow this afternoon. He slipped out somewhere in a car and the shadow lost him. I'm having them keep watch of the apartment house, though."

I laughed.

"You needn't. He won't be back, not if he's the kind of a bird you've described."

There was a moment's hesitation over the telephone while the manager thought that over.

"What do you want us to do?" he asked.

"Send in your bill to the same address as before," I shot back and hung up.

So I'd had a visit from Big Front Gilvray had I? He'd delivered that note in person, and the only reason he'd done that was because he and Don G. Herman were playing a game so blamed deep they wouldn't even trust a messenger. It was going to be good this time. I made up my mind I'd accept the invitation and call on Don G. Herman. Either that bird was going to come clean, or he was going to be inconvenienced.

Naturally, I didn't send in my card when I called on Don G. Herman. Being I was what I was, and knowing what I knew, I took a little advantage of him.

His house was set back in a big yard, a sign of the affluence of its former owners, before the fire, and the desire of the present owner for privacy. All right. He was no more set on privacy than I was. Almost anything might transpire at our little interview, and I didn't want to have any advance publicity cramp my style.

I slipped over the fence about nine o'clock, and Bobo was right behind me, walking slow and stiff-legged, knowing as well as I did that we were trespassing on another man's property, and likely to run into trouble almost any time. We got into the grounds without any trouble, and walking around a bit and watching Bobo, convinced me that they didn't have any outside guards.

I made the round of the house and paused before a window that had a patch of light behind it, shining through a drawn shade. That was the only place on the ground floor where there was any light except the front hall. I couldn't figure the place out exactly, but I had plenty of time.

While I was waiting outside this window I heard the jangle of a bell at the front of the house, and a chair scraped back in the room above me, while steps hurried to the front of the house.

I figured that there was only one person on the ground floor, that I hadn't heard any talking, so that he or she had been alone in that lighted room, and that, having gone to answer the door, the coast was clear, so I slipped out a little jimmy, pried open the window, and took a look inside.

Luck was playing with me, and it was as well it was, for I wasn't feeling any too gentle toward politicians just then, and if I'd poked my nose into a room where Don G. Herman was holding forth there might have been trouble.

The room was like an office, sort of a combination den and office. I'd heard he had one in his house, and that he did a good part of his work there. I'd also heard that there were lots of secret comings and goings, and that the servants were put in the back of the house every night, within call of a buzzer that was on the desk if Herman needed 'em, but well out of the way if he didn't. So I hadn't been taking any very great chances after all.

I turned to Bobo.

"Wait there and stand guard.—Watch," I said, and climbed through the window. I knew Bobo would stand guard down there, and if need be he'd come through that window, glass and all, like it wasn't there.

There was a big rolltop desk in the corner, and I made for that. How I do love rolltop desks in corners. The place back of them is just made for hiding in an emergency, and if anything happens you can always reach down and jerk the man that's sitting at 'em out of his chair onto the floor.

About the time I got parked I heard voices coming my way.

"It was very nice of you to call, Miss Chadwick. I appreciate the courtesy of giving me your first evening on your return from college."

The voice was oily and smooth, too damned smooth. I didn't like it, and I placed it, as being the personal property of Don G. Herman, right at the start.

The girl's voice had the ripple of youth in it, but there was something strained about it, a subtle something, fear or anxiety, I couldn't tell which.

"Your note said it was something about father?"

They were in the office now, and Oily Voice dodged the question for a moment.

"Please be seated, Miss Chadwick. You cannot imagine my grief at learning of the death of your father. I sent my condolences and flowers, but I hesitated to intrude any business matters upon you or your mother until you had recovered from the shock. It's been three months now, and you have graduated from college. I feel that you will understand the urgency which requires me to take the matter up at this time, just as you will appreciate the delicacy of my feelings in waiting this long."

Wow! That was some speech. He talked as though he'd learned it by heart. I risked discovery by taking a peek out between a couple of books that stood on the top of the desk.

Herman was a big man, bigger than I'd expected. He sat at the rolltop desk, his thick, strong fingers drumming on the top while he watched the girl. He had a face that seemed to be crisscrossed with ten million wrinkles, a skin that was parchment-like in texture, a smile that caused wrinkles to ripple and twist clear back to his collar button, and his head was so bald it reminded me of the dome on the State Capitol building. There was just a fringe of hair above his ears, and the ears started close to his head at the bottom, but flared way out at the top. His lips were thick and spongy, he had a double chin, and was a huge figure of a man. For all his fat, the wrinkles on his face gave him the appearance of having lost flesh.

His eyes were the most striking feature about him. They were big and wide, and he seemed to hold them wide open by a conscious muscular effort. He gave the impression of having schooled the muscles of his eyes to register childlike innocence and candor.

The girl was flapper, all flapper. She'd come out here into the house of this thick lipped politician without so much as a second thought, and she sat back in her chair, her short skirt disclosing a couple of fancy garters, a little bare knee, and a pair of legs that would have won a beauty prize anywhere. Her waist was cut low, and her hat was stuck on at a saucy angle while her eyes played hide and seek around the brim. With it all, she was as cool as a cucumber, and gave the impression of being a girl who could take care of herself any time or any place.

"I believe it was some business transaction you had with father?" she asked, and this time there was just a little note of panic in her voice. I caught it and I'm satisfied Herman caught it. Sitting there with her waist low in front, her dress short all around, her lips rouged and mouth rasped, she was deadly afraid of something.

Don Herman fairly dripped oily suavity.

"Perhaps you won't mind if I ask you a few questions before I break into the business, Miss Chadwick. . . . I believe you knew your father's habits very well. Did you ever know of any particular habit of his in giving promissory notes?"

She nodded, plainly puzzled.

"Why yes. I think lots of persons knew of that habit of his. He had a big book of printed forms, and he always filled out the notes from that book. Even when he was borrowing from a bank he'd never use one of the bank forms, but he'd take his book up there and make out the note. Father was very peculiar in many ways and he'd read of persons who had note forms that could be manipulated around so the amounts could be increased, and then discounted. But more than any other reason for it, he liked to be different."

Herman beamed.

"Exactly, exactly, and now, if you will pardon me for a moment."

He stepped over to the corner, and I watched him like a hawk. I notice that as he got to the corner he stooped down as though to pick up something from the floor, then he threw a picture to one side and disclosed the dials of a heavy safe. Lord there was enough nickel on there to dazzle the eyes. It seemed to be a regular bank vault.

A minute later and he had flung the door to one side, and reached within. He took out some papers and came over to the girl.

"Do you recognize this?"

She looked at the paper, then stifled an exclamation.

"Why, yes. It's a note, one of father's notes, payable to you, and it's for ten thousand dollars."

Don G. Herman held his eyes wide open by an effort, but his spongy lips came together as his thick tongue darted out with a licking motion, and wetted them.

"Would you say that was his handwriting?"

She was a little thoroughbred, and she nodded her head. "That's his handwriting all right."

Herman came to the desk and settled back in his chair. Satisfaction seeming to ooze out all over him. I got a good close look at that note.

"Now have you any idea of the consideration for that note?"

I could see he was getting ready to spring something, and the girl must have known it, too. Her face was white, but she wasn't going to let any damn crook get anything on her or see that she was worried. She opened one of those square vanity boxes and started in sticking some more raspberry lipstick on her mouth.

"Why, no," she said, watching her reflection in the mirror.

"It was political graft," said Herman.

She took her little finger and smeared the red around into a cupid's bow.

"I don't believe it, but it doesn't make any difference. That note'll be paid from the estate. I'd rather mother didn't know. I tell you what I'll do. If you'll hold that note and don't present it in court when the estate's being closed, I'll give you my note for eleven thousand and take up my note as soon as the estate's closed."

"You don't want it to appear that your father had any business dealings with me?" Herman asked in his oily tones.

She laid down the mirror, looked at him straight, and handed it to him straight.

"My father lived a square life. He was honest and square. If you got a note from him it was probably blackmail. You know it, and I know it, and there's no use fooling around pretending to be polite. The world would think my father was mixed up in some sort of graft if you ever presented that note in the estate. It would kill my mother. You know all that, and that's why you got me to come here. Now what is it you want?"

With that she snapped her vanity box shut, recrossed her legs so the other knee got the glare of the electric light, and smiled as sweet as a little angel.

I could see that she had taken Herman a little off his feet, but he came back quick.

"You are right, Miss Chadwick. I want something. I'm coming to it in a minute. Perhaps I might as well be frank with you. That note did represent a sort of blackmail, a little business arrangement between your father and myself. He always fought me in politics, you know, and used to denounce me in speeches. The fact that I hold his genuine note would come as a blow to some of your highbrow society friends, wouldn't it?"

She didn't answer the question directly because it was apparent. From what Herman had said, I could get the picture.—A prominent man, standing for all that was straight in politics and civic government, part of the inner circle of exclusive society, he dies and his estate has a genuine note presented by a political crook and blackmailer, a schemer of schemes, a collector of graft. . . . It was all too plain. What was bothering me was the point the girl was evidently thinking over, for she shot it at him in her next question.

"What I can't understand was why father ever gave you the note. Why didn't he pay you in cash if he owed you any money, or if he wanted to pay you for anything?"

He walked over toward her with his thick, spongy lips twisted in a smile, his bald head glistening in the electric light, and let her have it, straight from the shoulder.

"Because, Miss Chadwick, this note was only one of a series. There were nine others all for the same amounts, due at varying dates, and they represented a grand total of one hundred thousand dollars!"

That was that.

She got slowly to her feet at that shot, her hand creeping up to her throat. Short skirts, low waist and all, she looked more than ever like a kid.

"Pardon," he said. "I think I hear the telephone in the hallway," and with that he glided out of the room.

Why he left I couldn't figure, unless he was going into another room from which he had a secret peephole into his little office. Probably he wanted to spy on the kid when she thought herself alone.

She stood there for a second after he left, then she slowly crumpled in the chair. After a little bit she raised her eyes and spoke as naturally as though she were speaking to me: "Father, what's it all about, and what do you want me to do? It'll kill mother, and ruin your good name, blot your memory. Also it'll take nearly all of the estate. Help me, dad, and I'll try to see it through."

There were tears glistening in each eye, but she didn't let her mouth quiver any. There came the sound of steps, and Herman was back. He looked at her narrowly, but she'd blinked the tears back, and was fixing up a corner of her mouth with that little finger again.

"I always get my mouth lopsided," she grinned up at him over the top of the mirror.

She was so cool she made a cucumber look like a tamale.

He was puzzled.

"As I said. There's something I want."

She stuck a dab of powder on her cheek.

"Yeah?"

He licked his thick lips.

"Yes. Something I want you to do for me."

"Well, shoot. Spill it. Get it off your chest and see if you breathe any lighter."

He hesitated, caught his breath, started to speak, drummed on the desk, then got up and bowed.

"Not tonight. Some time soon I will call you again. I'll think it over in the meantime. Now if you'll leave me, I've got another appointment in a few minutes."

She got up and let her eyes wander around under her hat brim.

"You aren't going to present those notes just yet, that is, present 'em to the administrator?"

He shook his glistening head.

"Not until I ask you to do something for me."

She nodded, brightly.

"That's the spirit. You know I might happen to do it."

With that she threw him a glance back over her shoulder and tripped down the hall. He tagged along after her, and I beat it back out of the window. Somehow, I didn't want him to know I'd overheard that conversation.

I picked up Bobo and slipped around through the shadows. At the front door she called "Good night" in that little flapper tone of hers, and skipped on down the steps and out into the darkness.

He stood outlined against the lighted hallway for a second, then closed the door. As he did so, she leaned back against one of the iron posts in the fence, and sobbed her heart out. I stood there, motioning to Bobo to keep quiet, listening to the sound of those heartbreaking sobs, waiting for her to get her cry out and beat it.

After five or ten minutes she straightened, gulped, and went off down the street.

I walked up the steps to the front door and rang the bell.

There were steps in the hall, a light flashed over my head, and a cautious voice inquired through a little sort of a peephole:

"Who is it?"

"Ed Jenkins."

Silence for a moment.

"What Jenkins?"

"The Phantom Crook," I told him, spitting the words out. I'd strained a point calling on the big cheese in the first place, and I didn't propose to stand out there in the night swapping courtesies.

I'd parked Bobo around the corner of the steps where he could be called, but where he was out of sight. I might need the dog before the interview was over. What Herman wanted was more than I knew, but I gathered he didn't have these private interviews at night to give out charity—not after what I'd heard.

The door swung open.

"Come in, Mr. Jenkins."

He didn't make any attempt to hand me any salve, or do any greeting. He simply asked me in, slammed the door behind me and led the way into his study. So much, at least, was in his favor.

I sat down in the chair the girl had occupied, looked at the room from the other angle than when I'd been behind the desk, saw that he'd closed the safe and moved back the picture, crossed my legs and leaned back.

He looked at me for a long minute, then grunted:

"You're the Phantom Crook?"

I nodded.

"Ed Jenkins, himself?"

I nodded again and let it go at that.

He sighed. "You don't look like it. You look almost like a kid. Your record shows that you've been up a couple of times, are wanted in half a dozen states, and tricked 'em into dragging you into California so you could keep 'em from dragging you out again."

I made no move, not even a nod. I just looked at him, expectantly.

"You earned your title because of the uncanny ability you showed at slipping through their fingers," he went on. "Also it's said of you that you can open any safe and not leave a mark on it. You've got something on the ball the others haven't got, some method of getting the combination, of manipulating the tumblers."

There was a question in his voice when he stopped this time, but that was all the good it did him.

"You're the one that asked this interview," I told him, shortly. "I came to listen."

He moistened his lips again, reached for a cigar, and wrapped the spongy softness of his mouth around it, struck a match, exhaled a smoke cloud, inspected the end of the cigar, squirmed a bit, then got down to business.

"Know who I am?"

"A little."

"Know enough to know that I can get what I want in politics?"

"You always have, according to reports."

"All right, Jenkins, how'd you like to have complete pardons from every state where there's a warrant for your arrest?"

I had to grip the sides of the chair to keep my face from showing my emotion. God! How would it feel to be able to wander free, to live as any other citizen, to call a cop when someone got rough, not to be always on the hide? I was afraid to dwell on the idea. I'd been a social outcast since I could remember. The world had always been against me, and I'd fought back, for Ed Jenkins is the sort that fights back. . . .

"It can't be done," I said shortly.

He nodded his ponderous head, his lips twisted into a thick smile.

"Sure it can. Easiest thing in the world. I'll prove it to yuh when the time comes."

I sat back listening.

"It's like this," he went on when he saw I wasn't going to make any great contribution to the evening's conversation. "There

is a man who is going to get in his possession a paper of which I want a copy made. I don't care about having the original, but I do want an exact copy. I want to know what's in that paper."

He waited, and I waited.

"The name of the man is—Loring Kemper."

He leaned forward as he shot that at me, waiting to see if I'd give him any clue to my thoughts by my facial expression.

It took him nearly ten seconds to decide he'd drawn a blank, and, when he was convinced of that, I noticed an expression of satisfaction creep into his eyes.

"Here's the situation, Jenkins. I'm educated, polished after a fashion. I use better English than most of the society leaders, but I don't get by with them. They can't see me at all. I'm an outcast. Money I have, position I have, prestige I have, power I have, but I can't get in with a certain social set. All of my life I've got what I wanted. Now it suits me to have the social recognition that's been denied me. The contents of this paper are important. The man who knows the contents of that paper can make society here in San Francisco recognize him."

I thought that over, turning it over and over in my mind in the silence which followed. I'd heard of stunts like that, but I didn't believe in 'em. Still there was that interview with Helen Chadwick. . . . At any rate all of this was nothing in my young life. I looked up.

"Well?"

"Well," he replied, and his wide open pussyfooting eyes bored into mine. "You're going to the house of Loring Kemper as a guest, and you're going to get the paper I want out of his safe, make a photographic copy and return the original. When you get that photographic copy you can turn it over to me when, and only when I give you complete pardons from every state that has a warrant out for you."

I looked him over again to make sure he wasn't crazy.

"Why me?" I asked, casually, making conversation, leading him on.

"Because," he shot back, "you are educated. When occasion requires you can pass yourself off as a social gentleman, you won't pull a boner in the house of this multimillionaire social leader; and again because you can open the safe where that paper'll be kept, make a photograph and get the paper back without anyone ever knowing the safe has been sprung."

I laughed at that, laughed long and loud. He tickled me, this Don G. Herman.

"That's fine," I said. "It sure sounds like the original fairy tale of Cinderella and the slipper. You're some little fairy godmother, all right, but, if you're the social outcast you claim, if you can't get in with society, how are you going to get *me*, Ed Jenkins, known from one end of the country to the other as 'The Phantom Crook,' how are you going to get *me* an invitation to spend a few days as the house guest of Loring Kemper, the leader of the ultra select of the ultra select?"

I grinned up at him as I handed him that little poser.

He leaned forward.

"You will be received in that house as the man you will be, not as the man you have been. You will be received by Mr. Loring Kemper, and by his wife, Edith Jewett Kemper, not as Ed Jenkins, but as Edward Gordon Jenkins, the husband of Helen Chadwick, daughter of H. Bolton Chadwick, deceased, and of Elsie Chadwick, his widow. Now then, damn you, LAUGH THAT OFF!"

Once in a while I've misjudged a man. I don't do it very often. In my line of work a man can't make very many mistakes, either in observation or in character reading. This was one of my mistakes. I'd sized up Don G. Herman as an ordinary crooked, politician, a high-grade blackmailer, a pussyyfooter.

He was all of those things all right. But he was more. The man was a power and he was a devil. As he shot that last at me his mask slipped off and his eyes squinted into two narrow slits. For a long moment I saw him as he was. The rest of his face was the same, flabby cheeks, spongy lips, thick formless mouth, coarse nose, and all; but those eyes. . . . If ever there were twin devils that peered out from a recess of hell, from a throne of power, they peered out then from those eyes.

A moment and it was gone. He had caught himself, and his muscles forced his eyes wide open, giving them his ordinary credulous, wide-eyed innocent expression of cherubic fatuity.

I got to my feet and gave him look for look.

"Like hell I will," I said, and then I added as I started for the door, "Laugh that off."

He kept his expression of beaming frankness.

"Oh yes you will," he replied. "I've just made the proposition.

I haven't used any of the various means I have of making you accept it yet."

I paused at the door.

"Listen, Herman, let me warn you. Don't try to force me, and don't try to double-cross me. People who pull those stunts have a habit of getting in bad somewhere along the line."

He laughed, a warped twisting of his flabby lips.

"You think I'm that crude? Do you think I was so foolish as to tell you all of this, to ask you to do this unless I had with me the means of enforcing my requests?"

I wanted to see what he had up his sleeve, and stopped.

"Yes?" I said, inquiringly.

He arose and bowed me to the door, along the hall, and out into the night.

"Yes," he said as the door slammed, and there was something of mockery in his voice.

I didn't like my first interview with Don G. Herman, San Francisco millionaire, politician, blackmailer, king of the underworld. I walked half a block before I whistled to Bobo so that he could shortcut across the yard and jump the fence to me. I didn't care about any watching eyes seeing the dog that had been guarding the front steps during the interview.

I went back to my apartment and thought things over—thought over the whole proposition, the series of ten notes, thought over the look I had seen come over Herman's face. The more I thought of the thing the less I liked it. I came to the conclusion that I would hear more of Don G. Herman, and I also came to the conclusion that unless he looked sharp and watched his step he would see and hear more of Ed Jenkins, the phantom crook. I don't like to have people try to slip anything over on me.

The next afternoon I took a walk. At first I'd thought of giving 'em all the slip,—simply vanishing into thin air, and then I decided against it. After all, even with my criminal record and all, I wasn't going to be stampeded by no damned politician. I'd hold my ground—until the going got rough, anyway. I wouldn't pull any of my phantom tricks until the necessity arose, and when I did, someone would pay for my time and trouble.

I got back into the apartment about dusk, and knew there was something wrong as soon as I got in the door. Bobo bristled up,

braced his feet, growled slightly and looked up at me, his lips working back from his teeth.

I knew what he had on his mind. Someone had been in the apartment and his scent still clung to things. Probably it was the heavysset bird that posed for the time being as E. C. Simpson, more generally known as Big Front Gilvray.

I took a good look around and things seemed to be in order, all apple pie like. That didn't sound so good to me, somehow. I commenced to think I knew the answer.

I called Bobo to me and went over everything in the apartment, letting him smell of everything I could pick up. He didn't seem to get the idea at first. He acted as though I wanted to play with him, and he'd try and grab the things I held up. After a bit he saw I was in deadly earnest, and then he commenced to look puzzled, wondering what I was holding the things up in front of his nose for. He smelled 'em, though. He couldn't help himself, not with the nose that dog's got.

It took me an hour and a half patiently running through everything I could think of. I had him smell everything moveable in the blamed apartment. Finally I got a hunch I should have had earlier in the evening. I got an extra pair of heavy walking shoes and held them to his nose. They were blamed near the only things that he hadn't sniffed at that.

Right then and there I got action. The dog was looking puzzled, almost bored, trying to figure out what it was all about. The left shoe went past his nose leaving him bored as ever. When the right shoe got within a couple of inches of his face he seemed to get the idea all at once, and jumped to his feet, his lips curling back over his teeth, and he growled.

I looked at the shoe. That was what the visitor had been after. I wondered if he had taken it and left a footprint somewhere, a footprint that would be used to send me to the gallows if I didn't knuckle under to Herman.

The dog grabbed the shoe in his teeth and began to paw at it. I took it away from him and carefully looked it over once more, looking for any signs of fresh earth on it, any bloodstains. When a man is in my profession—if you choose to call it that—the price of safety, of freedom, of life itself, is eternal vigilance, and the ability to concentrate on the problem in hand without overlooking any bets.

It was the dog that gave the solution I'd eventually have arrived at, anyhow. He grabbed the shoe again, held it firmly and determinedly with his paws as though it had been a big bone, twisted his great jaws around until he had his powerful back teeth fastened in it, gave a wrench, and pulled off the outer layer of leather. The heel beneath had been skilfully hollowed out, filled with cotton, and, in the cotton, reposed three diamonds. They weren't particularly large, but they were big enough to be worth a pretty penny, and an examination showed me that they were perfectly matched. Evidently they were a part of some finely selected necklace, or rather had been a part of it. The necklace had been lifted and the stones pried from their settings. Those three, so perfectly matched for size, color and fire would serve as a positive identification.

I sat there with the stones in my hand, looking at the coruscations that emanated from them, and thinking of just where I'd have been if the police had raided my apartment and found those things concealed in the heel of that shoe.

Bobo lay on the floor, the dismantled shoe between his paws, looking as proud of himself as a turkey the day before Thanksgiving, and slowly wagging his tail. I could hear it thump, thump on the floor, slowly, rhythmically.

I guess it was that which finally aroused me to action. It sounded like a step on the stairs. Right then I was facing a term in prison, stolen gems in my hand and a criminal record that stretched across the entire span of the United States behind me.

I got up and took down one of the curtains, unrolled it, took the spring out of the roller, dropped the gems within the cavity, crowded back the spring with a little more tension on it and readjusted the curtain. Then I took three buttons, put them in with the cotton, stuffed the whole back in the heel, and nailed the patch on again. At any rate whoever planted that little surprise for Ed Jenkins was going to be out the price of three dandy diamonds.

I hadn't much more than put the diamonds where I felt they would be safe and planted the buttons in the shoe, than there came a knock on the door. I wondered if it was the police coming to make a search in response to an anonymous tip. I didn't think it would be, not just then, but figured Herman would hold that plant as a last resort. Probably he'd try several other methods first, then he'd get me pinched for having pulled the job of lifting the necklace those three stones came from, and then pull some politi-

cal wires to get me out when I agreed to his terms. There was just one flaw in his plans. I didn't propose to be taken in in the first place.

I flung open the door, holding Bobo back, and found there was a uniformed chauffeur with a note. The note was typewritten and signed.

"Jenkins: Please come with the bearer to the place where you had the conference last night. You won't regret it."

"Go on back to the car. I'll be down in a minute," I told the chauffeur. After all, I might as well give this crook all the rope he wanted. After finding those three diamonds I began to feel that he was going to bring some trouble on himself. I don't care how much of a devil he is, or how ruthless, the man that tries to hang a crime on Ed Jenkins wants to watch his step.

I parked Bobo in back of the door where I knew he'd make things hot for anyone who tried to enter the apartment, and put on my overcoat. I hardly ever carry a gun. I can do more with my wits than I can with a gun, and a cop can pinch you for carrying a gun. He can't pinch you for having your wits about you.

The chauffeur had a good car, and knew his business.

We slipped through traffic in short order, bowled through the streamers of thick fog, and drew up before Don G. Herman's great, dark yard with the black outline of the house looming above, broken only by a yellow square of light where the hall window gave forth the gleam within.

I went up the steps as though I was a regular caller and before I could ring the bell the door was thrown open and Herman, himself stood bowing upon the threshold.

"Come in, Mr. Jenkins. Come in. It is indeed a pleasure to have you accept my invitation so promptly and willingly."

His spongy lips were twisted all over his face, and I let him do the talking. He seemed to like it.

"Jenkins, I think you went off at half cock last night. You didn't hear all of my proposition, and you seemed to think I might be trying to double-cross you."

I thought of the diamonds in my shoe heel, but said nothing. He had something to spill, and I wasn't going to take part in the social preliminaries.

"Now look here, Jenkins," He leaned forward, putting one of his chubby fingers on my knee, "I'm on the square with you. The putting through of this enterprise is going to cost me a lot of money. It will mean more in the way of a money sacrifice than you can ever imagine."

I thought of the ten promissory notes for ten thousand each, and took it out in thinking. If he played square with that Jane, and the notes weren't clever forgeries it was a cinch it was going to cost him something.

"Now you've got an idea that the paper isn't worth all of this trouble, that maybe I'm using you as a cat's paw because of your criminal record. That isn't so. I'm willing to give you any guarantee of my good faith you may need.

"All I want you to do is to be within that house on a certain date—the date that Kemper receives the paper in question, and to make a photographic copy of it. I'll arrange to have you provided with all the necessary equipment, and I'll see that you get in the house on the proper footing to have the general run of the premises and no questions asked. Of course, the marriage will be a little sudden, and the social circles will be stirred up a bit. You two will have to stage an elopement and throw in a lot of romance. Perhaps the Kemper's are the only ones who would invite you unsight unseen, but it happens that both Kemper and his wife are nuts over Helen Chadwick, and anything she does is all right with them. I'll arrange the invitation all right.

"Here's something else. I'm going to put myself absolutely in your hands. Here's a statement all in my handwriting and signed by me to the effect that you are entering my employ and that I have commissioned you to enter Kemper's house in accordance with the plan I have outlined and go through his safe—that in all of this you are my agent. Now I wouldn't be willing to play into your hands with a statement like that unless I was on the square with you would I?"

I shook my head. "No, you wouldn't," I said aloud, and to myself I multiplied it by one hundred. If he'd give me a statement like that in his own handwriting he'd be eighteen kinds of a damn fool, to say nothing of having given me the whip hand and all the rest of it.

He nodded, a nod of satisfaction.

"That's the satisfactory part of playing the game with a man who has brains, Jenkins. You can see just where I'd be with a statement like that in your hands. I'd have to play square. All right. Here you are. Read it at your leisure, and then tell me if you don't feel I'm on the square.

"I'm going to tell you one thing more. That girl Helen Chadwick's one peachy looking girl. She's about twenty-two, a regular flapper, bright as a dollar, smart as a whip, and she'll make you a good wife, Jenkins. I'll see to that. She'll make you a good wife. There's many a man would go through hell's fire for the chance . . ."

His spongy lips were twisting and working, but he broke off when he saw my eyes.

"No offense, of course, Jenkins. No offense. After all, I'm speaking of your future wife. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

I looked him in the eyes.

"Herman, I've warned you once, and now I'm going to warn you twice. Don't try to double-cross me. I'm not looking for trouble, but I don't want to have anyone try to slip anything over on me. I've got a brittle disposition."

He looked at me with his wide-eyed, innocent attitude.

"Why, Jenkins, I'm one of the best friends you've ever had. Think of it. Just for a few minutes nice, clean work and I'm going to see that you get pardoned. I'm going to see that you marry into one of the most prominent and exclusive of families, that you have a beautiful young girl as your own . . . of course the marriage will be annulled afterward, or there'll be a divorce granted, but you'd ought to get something out of that, and you'll have the honeymoon, you know. . . ."

I held up my hand.

"You've had my warning, never mind the rambling around, and I'm going to tell you one thing more. I'm not sensitive, and I'm a crook, but I am a gentleman, and don't want you mentioning anything more about that marriage. Now I'm going and you can think that over. You've had your second warning, and it's the last."

He didn't like the tone of my voice and he almost blew up at that last. I could see the muscles around his eyes quiver as he started to lose his temper, and show me the devil that was in him again, but he managed to keep them wide open.

"All right. Now I'm going to say something, Jenkins. I've been square with you. You won't realize how square until you read that paper. All I've got from you in return is a lot of wisecracks and threats. Now let me say something. If you do as I say, well and good. You'll find I'm a square shooter, and the best man to work with you ever had, also the most grateful.

"BUT, you turn me down on this, or you make any more of those wisecracks, and see what happens to you. Now laugh that off."

For a few minutes we stood there eye to eye. He was mad clear through, holding his eyes wide and innocent looking by an effort. I was just beginning to get that cold rage that comes up within me at intervals when someone is trying a dirty double cross. For two pins he'd have been my meat right then. Not murder, for I don't care for murder, but I'd match wits with him, outguess him at the finish and leave him in the toils of the law, fast in the trap he'd laid for me. . . . But I shook off the feeling. After all he'd been warned. I'd handed it to him straight and I was going to turn him down cold on his proposition. After that it was up to him. If anything should happen and a squad of detectives came to look through my apartment, and chanced to look in the heel of that shoe. . . . Oh well, then Don G. Herman was going to find that he'd stirred up a rattlesnake.

He recovered himself first.

"Now Jenkins, you think this over. My chauffeur will drive you back and then you can read over that statement. Take tomorrow and think it over, and come tomorrow night at nine and give me your answer, your *final* answer. If you're not here at nine sharp I'll know that you have turned me down and that'll be final. Understand, that'll be final."

I nodded curtly, said goodnight and left.

He'd overlooked one thing and that was that if I wasn't going to throw in with him in his scheme he'd left a signed statement in my hands that would enable me to substantiate my story if I should tell all that had transpired. I knew he wasn't that foolish. There were two answers to that. One of them was that he intended to have me murdered before I could use the statement, the other was. . . . Oh well, there was no use crossing my bridges before I came to them. Because of the trap of the three diamonds I felt that it wasn't murder that he had in mind. I'd look into the other when I had the time.

The chauffeur deposited me at the corner next to my apartment, but didn't drive up to the door. I grinned at that. At the start Herman had been so afraid of having any contact with me that he'd used a clever, high-up crook to do a simple little thing like delivering a message to me. Something had brought about a change in him. He even sent his chauffeur for me. I wondered if it was the planting of those three diamonds.

I let myself in, accepted the eager caresses of Bobo, put on my slippers and stretched out on the couch. Leisurely I unfolded the statement he had given me. It was loaded with dynamite all right.

"TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: I HAVE EMPLOYED ED JENKINS KNOWN FROM COAST TO COAST AS THE PHANTOM CROOK, TO GO TO THE RESIDENCE OF LORING KEMPER, ENTER THE SAFE, AND THEN FOLLOW CERTAIN INSTRUCTIONS I HAVE GIVEN HIM. (Signed) DON G. HERMAN."

It was written in a strong, bold handwriting in purple ink, and the signature wound up with a flourish. It had been handed to me by Don G. Herman himself, and—I smiled, got up, slipped into my pajamas, took a novel, and read myself to sleep.

Shortly after ten the next morning I appeared at the office of the City and County Clerk, and asked for the records of the great register. I wanted to look up the registration card of a party who lived in a certain block in a certain precinct.

After a little delay I got what I wanted. When they left me alone I ran through the cards until I came to that of Don G. Herman. He gave his age as forty-eight, his party affiliation as Republican, and he signed his name, a flowing signature with a flourish at the end.

I took the statement from my pocket and compared the signature and handwriting. I was right. The handwriting on that statement wasn't that of Don G. Herman. It didn't even look anything like Herman's handwriting.

Oh, well, that was just what I expected. It had to either be that way or that he intended to have me murdered before I could ever use that statement. Of course, he figured that I'd fall for the thing being in his handwriting because he gave it to me himself. That's almost the same as seeing a man write a thing.

I figured I knew about all there was to know to the plot right there, but I was wondering whether I'd better go hand that bird a jolt or pretend to fall into his trap and then find some way of either stealing the bait or of letting Herman get his fingers caught when the trap was sprung.

I went back to the apartment to think things over a bit while I browsed through the morning paper. It was little things like this that showed me I was getting tired of chasing around the country with the hand of every man against me, having to be constantly on my guard. There was a time when I wouldn't have cared, when I would have gone and sat on a bench in the park all by myself and made up my mind in ten minutes. Now I wanted to have a little apartment where I could call myself at home, have a dog at my feet, a newspaper and leisure to think things out carefully.

It was a sure sign I was commencing to slow down in one way, but I made up for it by doing more accurate thinking. I could look back over a lot of hotheaded mistakes I'd made in the last few years, mistakes that the Ed Jenkins of today would never repeat. I could remember a lot of situations I'd had a hard time working my way out of that would have been easy pickings now.

I was disturbed in my meditations by a gentle knock on the door. Bobo stiffened, took a long sniff, looked up at me inquiringly, but didn't show his teeth.

I hurried over and opened the door.

There was a girl standing there in the hallway, a little flapper with one of the low, narrow-brimmed hats that sets down on the forehead with just a few curls or bangs peeping out at the sides, and her eyes were playing hide-and-go-seek with me all around the brim of that hat.

I bowed.

"Come, in, madame. What can I do for you?"

It was Helen Chadwick, but it wouldn't do for me to let her think I recognized her.

She walked right in, and, while I was turning to close the door, stepped over to Bobo and thrust out her dainty hand so the tips of her fingers were right in front of his nose.

She'd done it before I could do anything more than gasp, then, while I was getting my breath to warn her away, she gave a little ripple of her shoulder and her hand dropped on the top of the dog's head. If there was ever a one-man dog in the world it was this

same Bobo, and I held my breath waiting for the fireworks, and wondering if I had bandages and iodine handy.

I got fooled. Bobo stiffened for a minute, then slowly relaxed and looked inquiringly up at me, standing perfectly still under the girl's hand. She knew dogs, that girl.

She saw the expression on my face.

"Oh, don't be worried, Mr. Jenkins. I'm all right. You can make friends with almost any dog if you let him smell the tips of your fingers before you try to pet him. Dogs go by scent, and they don't like to have strangers thrust on them any more than people do. After they become convinced you're a friend it's different, and a dog can tell almost what you're thinking about by smelling your hand, can't you, doggie?"

In indicated a chair.

"What's his name?"

"Bobo."

She laughed, a low, rippling laugh.

"That's a nice name. You're a good dog, Bobo."

With that she gave him one final pat on his head, and blamed if he didn't wag his tail a bit. She took the chair and Bobo came over and sat by me, looking at the girl.

She heaved a sigh, settled back, crossed her legs and gave me a peep of a fancy garter, ducked her head so her hat brim was just cutting the tops of her eyes, hesitated a bit, then: "I'm Helen Chadwick."

I arose and bowed.

"You seem to already have my name, Miss Chadwick. I am Ed Jenkins, at your service, and pleased to meet you. What can I do for you?"

She watched me for a minute, then smiled.

"You can marry me this afternoon," she said, "that is, if you really want to do something for me."

Damn these flappers, anyway. For once in my life I'd had one slipped over the plate and a strike called before I even had the bat in my hand. I'd expected a lot of tears, maybe a few hysterics, a lot of protestations that she could never, *never* yield to Herman's demands and would I please advise her what to do, and couldn't I prevail upon Mr. Herman to do different, and all of the rest of the old line of chatter, and here the kid sits down, and I say formally "what can I do for you," expecting that this will be the opening

gun in the campaign that'll wind up by having her throwing hysterics all over the apartment and talking about the power of love, the sanctity of the marriage vows, the blackmailing Herman, and all the rest of it, and she comes back with a casual statement that I can marry her that afternoon.

She had me off first base all right, but I don't think she knew it. Maybe I blinked my eyes a bit, maybe not. I know my self-possession turned a flip-flop. But it landed on its feet in time for me to say, quite casually.

"At about what time this afternoon, Miss Chadwick?"

She looked at her wrist watch.

"Oh, suppose we go get the license about four o'clock, get married at five, say, and go see Herman after we've had dinner."

I thought that over.

"Herman, of course, has told you to call on me?"

She shook her head.

"Nope. I'm doing this on my own. Of course, Herman has insisted on the marriage as you probably know, but that's neither here nor there. He has me in a position where I just about have to do what he wants—not for my own sake, but for that of my mother—and he's demanded that we get married.

"He told me this morning that he was afraid you were going to balk on the proposition, and that there was no alternative as far as I was concerned. Either I had to marry you or I could take the consequences, or rather mother could. Naturally, I ran out here to see you, and make sure you didn't act up at the last minute. Herman gave me the address when I asked for it, and I suppose he knew what I wanted it for, but he didn't suggest in any way that I come."

Herman was a foxy bird, all right. He'd taken the precaution of telling this Jane that I was not going to play the game, and putting her salvation right straight up to her. I determined to break through that damned air of casual flippancy the Jane had. I didn't believe she looked on the marriage with quite that saucy indifference, particularly after what I'd seen of her when Herman left the room that night at the study.

"So you really want this marriage to take place?"

She grinned, a frank, almost boyish grin. "Good gosh! Have I got to do the proposing and everything? What do you suppose I came around here for? I've often thought of my marriage, you

know, girls dream a bit about those things, and I've always thought of a big church wedding" (her tone grew a bit wistful here) "but I never anticipated having any trouble with a bridegroom who was going to act stubborn. That's why I dropped around here, to see that you didn't get rusty at the last minute."

She beat me. I leaned forward.

"Look here, Miss Chadwick . . ."

She held up her hand.

"Oh, call me Helen, Ed. Seeing we'll be man and wife by night, you sound too blamed formal."

"All right then, Helen; why are you so keen about this marriage?"

She stared straight at me.

"Oh, a variety of reasons. Some of 'em are private and you wouldn't be interested in them. The rest of them are the usual ones, love at first sight, and all that; and then, I like your dog. A man who picks a dog like that must have something pretty much to him. You see I can read dogs. Can't I, Bobo? Come over here, boy."

Damned if he didn't go to her. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it.

She bent over him, patting his head, while I looked at the top of her hat, the long, tapering hand, and the garter that always managed to be just barely visible. She was a flapper with a vengeance. And then I saw something else. There was a gleam of light as the reflection of the windows caught on a big, glistening tear that dropped below that hat and stuck on the dog's head. She patted him casually, putting her hand over the tear, and if I hadn't been watching sharply I wouldn't have seen it.

"Helen, do you know what this marriage is going to lead to? Do you know that this man Herman is a crook, a crook of the worst type? Do you know that he'd get you in the devil of a mess without a qualm? Why, girl, after you'd married me your life will be ruined. You can get a divorce, have it annulled or anything you like, but your whole life will be ruined."

She kept her head down, patting the dog.

"Oh, it's not that bad. Divorces are fashionable these days. I'm young, and I'm fancy-free, as the old saying has it. How does it go—'footloose and fancy-free'—and there's mother. Mother isn't strong and . . . and . . . well, I can't explain it, only to say that I'm in a position where I'd do nothing, *anything*, to keep this man,

Herman, from doing what he might do. He could kill my mother, kill her of heartbreak. He could ruin the memory of my father, when Dad isn't here to defend himself."

I thought things over for a minute. Of course, I knew that Herman wouldn't hesitate a minute to use those notes, nor would he hesitate to ruin the memory of H. Bolton Chadwick, or bring about the death of the widow. There was a fixity of purpose, a ruthlessness of power in those eyes of his when he had dropped the mask for that brief second. The man would stop at nothing.

I tried to get a fatherly attitude with the girl, to make my tone kindly.

"Listen, Helen, I'm not going to marry you, or rather, I'm not going to allow you to marry me. I suggest you go to some competent lawyer and tell him all of the circumstances; tell him just what it is that Herman is holding over you, tell him the whole story, and then see what he advises."

She looked up at that, and she had managed to get her tears back. Her eyes looked at little swimmy, but they were clear and bright.

"Thanks for that, Ed," she said simply. "I've been to father's lawyer, and I find that he has known of the particular club that Herman is holding over my head. He has known of it and feared it. If father'd lived he'd have straightened the thing out all right, but he had to die just when his affairs were all tangled up. . . . I'm sorry, Ed, but there's nothing more that can be done. I've got to go through with it."

She looked at me dreamily for a second or two and then went on, casually, impersonally: "I'd come prepared to hate you, and to go through with it, anyhow. You'd never even have known I hated you; I'd have been that good a sport, because it wasn't you that made the proposition. Thank God, I can get along without that hate in my heart. You're clean, Ed, and you're a gentleman, regardless of what else you may be. I can tell a man from his dog, as well as his manner."

I fought back a desire to put my hand on her shoulder. The blamed little kid was such a dead game sport, such a regular little fellow, that I found myself getting sympathetic in spite of myself. The only time she'd lost control of herself and dropped a tear or two she'd taken good care that I hadn't seen her, or thought she had. I'd been expecting the jane would pass the buck up to me to

get her out of her difficulty, would cry, and mumble things about death being preferable to dishonor, and what should she do, Oh, my God, what should she do, and all the rest of it. Here came this quiet little sport, put the cards down on the table, and even ducked her head when she felt the weeps coming.

"Well," I said finally, "I'm not going to let you marry me, but I'll see what can be done about helping you out."

She shook her head, quickly, fiercely.

"Ed, please, please, don't make it harder. You can't understand what it's all about, and there's nothing you can do. Ed, I've been square. I've seen a lot of life, but I've played on the square. I've been saving myself for the man I was to love, and you don't know, you can't know what it means, but there's no other way out. There's nothing you or anyone else can do. I've got to go ahead with it. Please, please don't make it any harder. I'm old enough to know my own mind. I know what I'm up against. You're just going to add more to my burden than I can stand if I have to beg or plead with you."

"Suppose you tell me about the hold this man, Herman, has on you?" I suggested.

Again she shook her head.

"There's nothing you can do. If you want to work for my own best interests you'll go ahead with the thing."

I sat silent for a moment, thinking what it meant to the kid, thinking what a dirty dog Herman was to have got her in such a trap. I couldn't offer to help her with those notes unless she told me about 'em, though. She misunderstood my silence.

"Come on, Ed," she said with a smile, "I'll make you a good wife, won't burn the toast, bring your coffee in bed and all that."

There was just a touch of ironic mockery in her tone.

I let her have it in bunches.

"Helen, I'm a crook, known from one end of the country to the other, wanted in several states. I know why you're doing this thing, in part, anyway. It won't add to the standing of your family if you marry a crook."

She considered the toe of her shoe for a second or two, then looked up.

"I know all about that, Ed. One thing you want to remember is that you're a gentleman. Being a gentleman is something that's inside of one. It's different from polish, manners or environment.

It's sort of an instinct. It's being a good sportsman, a thoroughbred. I don't think anyone will ever know about your criminal record, and I'm relying on you to save me all of that you can."

The conversation was getting too squishy for me.

"Look here," I told her. "I'm a man, a man who's batted around from hell to Halifax and back again. You've kept referring to the fact that I'm a gentleman. The whole damned conversation is getting too highbrow to suit me. Why I should be running around trying to save girls from their own folly is more than I know. I'm a crook, and I'm not working for Don G. Herman, or anybody else, neither am I running any institution for brokenhearted flappers. You've got your chance to spill the beans and give me the lowdown on the thing. Otherwise, if you want to keep the lead it's your move."

She got up, smiling brightly.

"Then that's settled. You'll marry me this afternoon."

Take it from me, the bird that said you can't argue with a woman knew 'em like a book.

"You come back at eight o'clock tonight," I told her.

"Maybe you'd better take me to dinner," she said. "Now that we're engaged I don't feel backward about asking."

"You go to thunder," was my gentlemanly retort. "I'll meet you here at eight o'clock, and I'm going to be busy between now and then."

"Be sure and have the license," she called back from the doorway. "Bye bye . . . be a good doggie, Bobo."

Cheerily, lightly her voice rang back from the hall and she was gone. Bobo looked up at me his tail wagging slowly from side to side. I guess he'd caught the ring of decision in my voice, and knew there was action ahead. Me, I was mad. Don G. Herman had taken up too damned much of my time. I'd warned the man twice, and he'd kept on trying to double-cross me. Now he could take the consequences.

I clamped on my hat, took up my walking stick that had a regular burglar's kit concealed in it, to say nothing of a small, finely tempered blade, and went down into the wholesale jewelry district.

Big Front Gilvray was in on the thing, and that meant one thing and one thing alone—jewels, big jewels, probably one or more jewels of rare value.

Down there in the district where crooks are not supposed to be welcome there is a big wholesaler who knows Ed Jenkins, and his reasons to remember the Phantom Crook. I'd had some professional dealings with him, dealings that were on the square, also I'd given him a few tips. He was a big man, and he'd do a great deal for me. It isn't often that I ask favors, but when I do I ask 'em right.

I went into his office, and, after one glance at my face he dismissed his secretary and turned around to me.

His name doesn't make any difference. He was and is a big man, one who stands high in the business world of San Francisco, a man whose name is one to juggle with in the jewelry game.

"I want to know the lowdown on Loring Kemper," I told him.

He looked up thoughtfully. "Why, he's a mighty fine fellow, one of the leaders of the social element here, one might say the head of the four hundred, he and his wife. They have lots of money, and he's a square shooter."

"I waved my hand."

"Nix on that stuff. I've had that drummed into me so much lately that I know it by heart. What I want to know is what jewels he's got, rather what particular jewel he's got that's worth a small fortune."

The man seated at the desk before me jumped a bit and surveyed me through the tops of his glasses. For a long minute he studied my face. If he saw anything there he was welcome to it.

"Loring Kemper's a client of mine, Jenkins," he said at length. "I know you for a crook, a master crook. I am under some personal obligations to you, but my professional duty comes first and foremost. However, I know you are a man of honor, strange and inconsistent as it may seem when I say that I know you for a master criminal. Now tell me, on your word of honor, would I be violating the spirit of my professional ethics if I answered that question?"

I got mad.

"Listen, I've heard more highbrow talk in the last two days than I've ever heard in my life before, and I've had more people tell me what a highly moral, gentlemanly crook I was. For God's sake quit using this highbrow language and cuss a little bit, and then answer my question. I'll promise you that I won't abuse the confidence to the detriment of your client."

He still hesitated a minute, then relaxed.

"Well, Jenkins, the truth of the matter is that we recently purchased a very valuable jewel for Mr. Kemper. The thing was stolen some time ago from one of the collections of royal gems. You can guess the name of the nation. Further than this I can't make any disclosures. The whole thing is very much of a secret, and I can't tell you more without violating a very sacred confidence. However, you can see my position, also that of my client. Right at present it mustn't be known that Mr. Kemper is the owner of the jewel in question, or rather that he has it in his possession. Right now it's stolen property. Of course, it's a case where possession is nine points of the law. Within a short time there should be an opportunity to purchase the legal title for a nominal consideration. The man who has actual possession of the gem can probably secure a confirmation of title for a fraction of its value. Until then it is, one might say, anybody's property."

I shook my head.

"That isn't what I want to know. I want to know what sort of a gem this is, and what it looks like, and where it's kept. Can you give me that information?"

"No, Jenkins, absolutely not," his tone was firm and final. Knowing my man as I knew him, I knew that he meant it.

"Not even if I should tell you that it was imperative that you give me the information in the best interests of your client?"

He drummed for a moment on the desk, then again shook his head.

"I'm sorry, but it can't be done. I must hold inviolate the confidences of my client."

I gave him a once over, cold, calm, careful.

"If I became a client of yours would you protect my confidences to the same extent?"

"Why certainly."

"Even if the information I should disclose became of the greatest value to one of your other clients?"

He thought for a moment, then nodded.

"I should protect the confidences of one of my clients, regardless of who might benefit by the information."

I got up and extended my hand.

"All right. Since you won't give me the information I want I'll have to go to the trouble of getting it myself."

He laughed.

"There are some things even you can't get, Jenkins, and this is one of them."

"Maybe," I said as I walked out. I was mad. I'd never been so fed up on this damned talk of ethics, of honor, virtue and all of the highbrow stuff in all my life. I wanted to go down in the underworld for a while just to get the sound of the highbrow talk out of my ears. I was getting as bad as the rest of 'em. Bah!

Three years ago and I'd have never given the thing a thought besides trying to figure some way to make mine out of it. Now the blamed flapper worried me. I went home and tried to sleep and didn't make a very good job of it. I had need for all the sleep I could get.

Promptly at eight o'clock I heard steps in the hallway, saw Bobo's tail give a wag or two, and then there came a gentle knock on the door.

I opened it to see Helen Chadwick standing there with a suitcase in her hand.

"Hello, Ed. Did you get the license all right? This has to be an elopement, you know. I told mother I was spending the night with some girlfriends, so I brought my baggage along."

I didn't answer the question directly.

"Put your grip in here, and we'll go take a ride," was all the answer I gave her.

She nodded, handed me the grip, and looked at the dog. "Hello, Bobo. Come on over here, boy."

He trotted over to her and stood there, wagging his tail while she patted his head. I had a machine waiting downstairs, and I took the girl to it, stepped on the starter and headed into the traffic of Van Ness.

I'll say one thing for that flapper. She knew when to talk and when to keep quiet. She saw after one glance at my face, that I had my mind made up and, after that, she didn't say a word, just cuddled down there in the seat, looking tiny and helpless, her little face stuck up in the face of Fate, her hand resting on the dog's head, and her eyes straight ahead.

I commenced to realize that she derived a lot of comfort from the dog. She was going through hell, and she was too game to say much. She wouldn't even let me guess what was going on in her

mind, but she let down the bars with the dog, and clung to him for sympathy. Bobo understood, and perhaps it was that which had impressed him from the first. The man who says a dog hasn't some psychic sense which enables him to understand the emotional states of the person he comes in contact with, is a man who doesn't know dogs.

Herman, himself, welcomed us at the door. I'd given him a ring earlier in the afternoon and told him we'd be out. I hadn't told him anything else, and I could see that he was curious.

We went back into the little study, and I did the talking.

"I'll take this thing on one condition," I told him, "and that is that I don't marry the girl. She can get me invited to the Kemper's for a weekend as a very dear friend; perhaps she may have to let on that we're engaged; but I won't go through with the thing as her husband, and that's final."

He looked me over, his big, full-moon eyes, speculating a bit, turning things over in his mind. The girl had given one little gasp, and was sitting forward on the edge of the chair.

"Jenkins, you puzzle me," said Herman at length. "Your record doesn't show that you're a bit mushy or soft-boiled. Frankly, it doesn't make much difference to me, only I thought the idea would appeal to you more if there was to be a marriage. You have a taste for the bizarre, the unusual, and I felt that I'd got to dress up something out of the way to interest you in it at all. It suits me all right if you go out there in any capacity, provided only that you can spend several days and nights in the house, and have the run of the place as a guest.

"In other words, if it ever comes out that there was anything unusual happened there (and Miss Chadwick doesn't know what I have in mind for you to do), I don't want it to also happen that you will immediately be suspected. You are to be there as a guest, and an honored guest, one who has the entire place at his disposal.

"Miss Chadwick, do you think that you can arrange to have an invitation to the Kempers' with Mr. Jenkins as a very dear friend?"

She nodded, her eyes fastened on my face instead of his.

"If we were engaged I could," she said quietly, almost softly.

He waved his hand.

"That's a detail for you folks to settle. Here are your instructions. Today is Friday. You are to arrange things so that you enter the Kemper home on Saturday afternoon and stay there over

Saturday, Sunday and Monday. On Sunday night between eleven and twelve Mr. Jenkins is to have Mr. Kemper engaged in conversation. On Monday night he is to do the work I have assigned to him, picking his own time.

"Miss Chadwick, by the time you have been there up to midnight on Sunday I'll know that you have gone through with your part of the bargain, and if you'll come out here any time after that I'll make an . . . er . . . adjustment with you of the matters which are between us. In fact, you can come between one and two in the morning if you wish.

"That's all there is to it, except you people are not to compare notes in any way. Those are your instructions. You both are to profit if you carry them out, and you both are liable to a penalty if you fail me or try to double-cross me."

I thought the situation over for a minute.

"Of course you're on the square with us?"

He twisted his thick lip into a leer.

"Certainly."

"All right," I said as I rose and gave my arm to the girl. "We understand each other perfectly, then."

He bowed us out into the night, and I could see he was thinking. Somehow, somewhere I had given him an inkling that I was working on a definite plan, and it made him uneasy. I could see him standing there in the door long after we had closed the gate. He was there when I started the car and drove away.

"You'll have to take me out to the house now, Ed," said the girl. "It's going to be sudden enough as it is, but I don't want to shock my circle too much. I wonder if you'd mind meeting mother tonight, and posing as a friend who met me while I was in college?"

I sighed. I was in for it and I knew it.

"All right," I came back listlessly. My mind was far away.

She put her hand on mine.

"And, Ed, I want you to know that I think that was the whitest, squarest thing that you did tonight. I can't begin to thank you. You are . . . well, Ed, you're just a thoroughbred, and that's all there is to it."

I kept my eyes on the road ahead. If my ears were any judge, the kid was nearer a breakdown than she'd ever been when she was with me before, and I didn't want any sobbing female woman on my shoulder.

She gave me the directions and I drove her out to her house.

Her mother was a stately dowager with kindly eyes, a face that was calm with stern pride and lined with grief. A look at the color of her skin showed that she wouldn't stand very much in the line of a shock.

The kid pulled it off in nice shape. She'd been out to see her friends and had just happened to run into me on the street in front of my hotel. I'd just got in and insisted on paying a more formal call, but she'd kidnapped me and taken me out for her mother to meet.

Mother was curious, but she held it back nicely, acting the stately hostess. I sat there and swapped small talk with a chocolate cup between thumb and forefinger, little finger sticking straight out and a postage stamp napkin stuck on my knee. I felt like hell.

The girl shot me a glance once, a glance filled with amusement. I guess she could read my thoughts after a fashion. It sure was a devil of a note for Ed Jenkins, the Phantom Crook, to be sitting there in the drawing-room of the Chadwick home, sipping chocolate and acting as though I liked it. If that kid thought she could read my mind, though, she was as crazy as a bald-headed Esquimo. I knew what was ahead of me from midnight on. No one else did.

At length the evening drew to a close. Mother excused herself after a while and left us alone. Bobo made himself at home in front of the fire and the girl and I swapped a little talk in a low tone. I got up to go and she came to the door with me.

In the hall I felt her warm bare arms go around my neck.

"Thanks, Ed," she said, and kissed me on the cheek.

It had been one hell of a while since any jane that amounted to anything had done that. I thrilled at the strangeness of it. She was one game little scout.

Hang these flappers, anyway. They're always doing things contrary to schedule. You think they're all froth, daring clothes, modern slush and selfishness, and all of a sudden they show some depth of feeling that makes a man feel as though he's in the presence of something sacred.

I shook of the mushy feeling as I stepped on the throttle and roared into the fog. I had work ahead. A lot was going to depend on Ed Jenkins, and I didn't propose to fall down on the job. For once I was going to cut loose, throw my immunity to the winds and smash the California Penal Code all to hell.

I drove to a storage plant and got out a light trunk that had been accumulating dust for a spell. I had some new dry batteries in my car.

From the storage place I went out to Loring Kemper's and left the car parked in a dark side street. The registration of that car, by the way, had been handled by an expert. Anyone who could have deduced anything from it was welcome.

I strapped a bulky object on my back and started in, slipping through the shadows, Bobo at my heels, his ears shot forward, tail erect and rigid, every sense alert, guarding me against surprises with his keen senses, ten times better than a bodyguard of five scouts could have done.

The Kemper house was dark, the grounds covered with deep gloom and silence. I knew there was a watchman from the way Bobo acted. Spotting him before he spotted me was my job. Finally it was a pipe that did it. I can smell a pipe for a mile, and when he lit up, I didn't have much difficulty in locating him.

He was one of the sort who are faithful plodders and considered his job more or less one of routine detail.

After he got planted for a quiet smoke I managed to handle a back window so that no one was the wiser. I picked a low one because I wanted Bobo in with me, and I went about it carefully because I suspected a burglar alarm of some sort. There wasn't any. Apparently Kemper trusted to his honest watchman.

Once within the huge house I had to go easy. The gleam of a flashlight on one of the windows would show to the watchman outside. A single stumble would prove my undoing. I worked cautiously in rubber-soled shoes, giving an occasional flash from my shielded light in a doubtful place. I worked for an hour and a half before I found the safe. When I located the combined study and den I figured I was close to it, but I had to go over every inch of the walls before I found it.

I guess I was about the first to work out a radio amplifying apparatus for opening safes. The construction of it is nobody's business, but it works. When I connect up that box and get the tubes in my ears the whirring of the lock mechanism as I twirl the combination sounds like a packet of firecrackers. The click of a tumbler sounds like the explosion of a cannon.

As I'd come to the proper point by sound alone, I'd put the flashlight on long enough to get the number on the combination.

When I got through I had the combination of one of the finest private safes I've seen in a long while.

The inner, steel door I had to pick, but I can do anything with a lock anybody else in the business can, and that's saying a lot.

The private papers and all that I passed up without even a look. There were some gem cases in there that looked like miscellaneous odds and ends, and I let them go. It was the big, worn jewel case that interested me. I opened it, turned the beam of the light on what lay within, and then gasped. I'm used to jewels, particularly other people's, but I had to catch my breath at what was in that case. There was a sparkle of fire that flared up into my face and seemed to even sear my brain. The light from the flash was magnified a thousand percent, split up into a million rays that flashed and glittered, and from deep within seemed to be a great pool of limpid, liquid fire. I didn't know the name of the gem, but it sure was one of those that had a name, a name and a history.

I stuck it in my pocket, closed the safe, and cautiously worked my way out of the house. Getting out of the grounds without being detected was more simple, but a trifle tedious. The cool of the night that comes just before dawn was making the watchman uneasy and cold, and he was tramping about, taking deep breaths, keeping his spirits up and peering sharply about. However, we made it all right.

I sent the dog ahead to scout around the car, and he reported the coast clear by returning with wagging tail. He seemed to know that we'd pulled a coup. I drove home, concealed the apparatus where it would be safe for the time being, shaved, bathed, and went out for breakfast.

At nine o'clock I walked in on my jeweler friend.

"Hello, Jenkins. Are you back for some more information?" he grinned. "Because you're out of luck. I came to the conclusion I'd talked too blamed much the other time. Don't know what possessed me to spread out and give you so much information."

I sat down.

"I don't want any information. I want service. I want a fair imitation made of a gem, and I want it quick."

He looked at me speculatively.

"A large gem?"

I nodded.

"A particularly large gem?"

Again I nodded.

He sighed. "Jenkins, you have a diabolically clever method of getting information. I've told you too much now. I'll make you an imitation of the gem *provided you have the gem to copy from*, and not otherwise. In other words I won't make you a copy of any gem that is described in catalogues of collections, but only of some particular gem that you have in your possession."

"That's fair," I told him; "and I can get men started on it right away?"

"Provided you have the gem," he said with a smile.

I flipped the gem case on the table.

"All right, then. Make me a copy of the gem that's in there, and I don't care if it's a rough job. I must have it quick."

He gasped when he saw the case, opened it, and his jaw began to sag. The breath went out of him like a punctured tire.

"Ed, for God's sake, man, do you know what you have . . . Why . . . why . . . that's the one we sold Kemper. That's the . . . My God, man, there'll be a commotion over this."

I shook my head.

"There won't be if your men get busy and rush me a copy."

He got a little of his composure back and studied his finger-nails intently for a few seconds.

"Look here, Ed. Are you stealing that?"

I got sore at all the conversation.

"Stealing is the present participle," I came back. "If there was anything wrong about the method by which it came into my possession you'd better use the verb 'have stole.' Now can this damned highbrow chatter and get me started with a little service or there's likely to be some fireworks that I don't want to go off just yet."

He sighed, rang for his secretary, asked her to have a certain man step in, and then sat waiting, drumming on his desk.

The man who came in with an apron over his clothes, a skull cap and piercing gray eyes was a German, and he knew the gems. The boss slipped over the jewel case.

"Rush out an imitation of that and make the best job you can, and do it quick. We want case and all copied."

The man knew the gem in a second. But he didn't betray his knowledge by the quiver of a muscle. He took the case, nodded and vanished through the glass door.

"Come back this afternoon," said my friend, wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

"I'll be back at noon," I told him. "You can have it ready by that time."

He fidgeted.

"It'd relieve my mind a lot if you'd tell me what's the inside of all this, Ed. As it is, we're virtually receivers for stolen property."

I grinned.

"Well, you told me it was stolen property in the first place, and that it's the second time you've handled it. Also, as I remember it, you said the person having possession of the gem could probably get title confirmed a little later for a nominal sum."

With that I got up and left him.

At my apartment I got a message from Helen to call her on the telephone. When I got her she told me she was coming right down. I gathered that meant something important. I hadn't been able to get much sleep, but then, that was the fortune of war.

Helen looked as chic and happy as though a big load had been lifted from her mind.

"I broke the news to mother," she told me, "and I rang up Mrs. Kemper. You know the Kempers have always been sort of foster parents of mine, and right away Mrs. Kemper became wild to give you the once over. She insisted, simply insisted, on our coming out there for the weekend. I told her we would."

Her eyes danced up into mine.

"You're some little manipulator," I told her, seeing that was the obvious comment.

"Of course, it's a secret," she went on, babbling like a brook. "I've made 'em promise they won't tell a soul. The Kempers invited mother, too, but mother can't come. She's keeping pretty quiet yet. I told her I accepted you last night, so you've got to run out to the house and explain to mother. I think she'll give you her blessing . . ."

The kid's voice trailed off into silence.

For a long time she looked down at the floor, then shrugged her shoulders. "I hate to think of putting one over on mumsy like this, but it's all in a lifetime," she said, and almost immediately went back to her happy, carefree attitude.

That call to receive "mumsy's" blessing was one of the worst half-hours that have ever been my lot to spend. I've done lots of

funny things in my life, and I've had some moments when there's been mighty gloomy prospects ahead, but . . . Oh, well, it finally ended. All things of that sort have to end.

I broke away from Helen and went back to the jeweler's. The original and copy were ready for me. The copy wasn't so much, but it was pretty fair. It would fool a man in a half-light, and it might fool a casual observer, but it wouldn't bother a collector very long. I halfway suspected my jeweler friend with some of his fine ethical sense had made me an inferior copy on purpose, but I didn't have either the time or the inclination to argue. He watched me out of the door with a worried look on his face. I hoped his fine sense of ethics hadn't prompted him to ring up Loring Kemper and ask any questions about the jewel. There was one danger right then, and that was that they might discover the loss. If they did I'd have to change my plans. However, it was a good even-money bet that no one would notice it.

Helen and I arrived at the house about two, and I got a real welcome. Mrs. Kemper was one of the sort that can understand human nature. Like all of that type, she realized that wings didn't grow on mortals. She studied me for a long and rather uncomfortable minute. What she saw in my face she kept to herself.

Loring Kemper was a man of sincerity, hobbies, and individuality. He was about fifty and his face was tanned a deep brown from outdoor life. He was fond of golf, crazy about surf bathing, a collector of jewels, a lover of horses and dogs, and he cared nothing whatever for cards, social pastimes or chatter. He was a man of strange moods, deep silences and outspoken ideas.

He, too, looked me over, shook hands, and didn't say much.

Half an hour after I was settled in my room I got the chance I wanted, tiptoed to the study, twirled the knobs on the safe and put back the original gem. The copy I retained.

As an engaged man, I was a good crook. I tried to mix in things, to keep away from the situations a young, engaged couple would ordinarily be expected to get into. That little vixen of a girl didn't see things that way.

"We've got to act natural, the way engaged couples are supposed to act," she whispered, as she slipped up close to me, took the back of my hand and rubbed it against her cheek. From the porch I saw the keen eyes of Mrs. Kemper watching us. While there were lots of servants and social secretaries, we were the only

house guests, and the hostess had ample opportunity to observe us. Right at the start I saw she was going to take good care to exercise her opportunities.

Bobo made a hit.

On company behaviour, he sensed that he shouldn't eat up everyone that came close to him, but he had a dignified way of showing that he wasn't going to be pawed over, at that. When someone would come close to him with those cooing noises that women make over strange dogs and cats, Bobo would stand with legs braced, eyes straight ahead, and neck rigid. He didn't growl, but no one laid a hand on him. No one, that is except Helen. He seemed to have adopted her. He'd come to her call and seemed to be happy when he was near her.

Kemper looked the dog over, made no effort to touch him as his wife and her social secretary had done, then commented drily: "He's a queer mixture. He's a cur and a gentleman, a mixed breed of a thoroughbred. There's something that dog's learned in the hard school of knocks that has stayed with him. He wants his freedom, that boy, and he's not overly fond of humans. Am I right, Bobo?"

The dog looked up at the sound of his name and for a long minute his eyes looked into those of Loring Kemper's, then his tail wagged, just a little, and just once or twice, then he lowered his eyes and remained as immovable as a statue.

Kemper chuckled.

"A thoroughbred has pride, sort of a family heritage, but it takes a cur to learn. That dog's had a past, and he has some responsibilities with his new master that are on his mind all the time. You'll pardon me, Jenkins, but he acts as though he was trying to protect you against the world for some reason or other."

The man's shrewd, twinkling eyes suddenly darted up under his bushy brows and bored into mine.

He may have seen something in my face. He was a wonder if he did. I returned his glance with a bored air of courtesy. "I like him, but I don't know much about dogs," I said idly. "He's a good pal, but I don't think he's overly intelligent."

Kemper's shoulders heaved, and he chuckled broadly, then changed the subject. I'll say one thing for Loring Kemper. He sure knew how to read a dog's character.

On Sunday morning a message was left for me by a man who simply left the note and a package. The note was unsigned. The package contained a specially built camera. I read the note.

“The paper is a letter signed by George Smith, and will be in the safe. Insert it in the paper holder in the camera, screw the connection into a light socket, leave for fifteen seconds, then unscrew and return the letter to its place. The camera will be called for later.”

I chuckled at that. The situation was so obvious that it was absurd. Here was I, Ed Jenkins, nationally, yes, internationally known as a crook, staying as a guest at a house which contained one of the most valuable gems which had ever come to America. It was a gem that only collectors could aim at or afford, a gem the possession of which was taboo until certain governmental changes had become established. It was too important and incriminating to be even left in a safe deposit box. The only safety in its possession lay in the secrecy surrounding that possession.

If anything should happen to that gem while I was there at the house. . . . Oh well, it was so simple there was no need to follow it out. When a nationally known crook visits a house and a valuable gem disappears from that house, anyone can add the two and the two and make four. It was so apparent that the letter was a myth, and that the reason given me for being there by Herman was a fake that they hadn't even bothered to make their instructions about the letter sound reasonable. No instructions for photographing both sides of the sheet, no description as to the nature or length of the letter, and not even a plausible sounding name for the signer of it. I wouldn't have been surprised if the camera was even without a lens. Bah, this Don G. Herman made me sick. I'd have laughed myself to death over him if it hadn't been for that glimpse I had of his eyes when the mask slipped from his face, and he showed in his true colors. The man was a devil.

On Sunday night from eleven to twelve I was supposed to detain Kemper in conversation. I knew what that meant. Bah, a ten-year-old kid would have known what that meant.

At ten-thirty Sunday night I slipped up to the study, spun the tumblers of the safe and took out the gem. I slipped the copy back in place of the original and went down to hunt Kemper. I wanted to give myself plenty of margin.

I talked dogs with him from eleven to twelve.

Helen had retired about ten-thirty.

Kemper was hard to talk to that night. He kept his eyes on mine and listened. Damn the man! He would do nothing except listen. I talked dog psychology to him until I thought I should go crazy. The clock boomed out midnight, and I excused myself, asked him if he were turning in, and tried to keep the note of interest from my voice.

He looked out at the night, stretched his great arms above his shoulders and said he guessed he'd take a turn through the garden first.

I breathed a prayer of relief and skipped upstairs, dashed into that study, twirled the knobs of the safe and flung open the door. The gem case was gone.

I pulled the original out of my pocket, stuck it back in its place and went down stairs again. I found Kemper out near the fence.

"Say by the way, you'll pardon my asking it, but is there anything of value in the house tonight?"

He turned and looked me over.

"Why yes," he drawled, paused a maddening interval and added, "Helen is here, you know."

I didn't know whether I was supposed to laugh or look serious. Damn this high society stuff, anyway.

"I saw a man slinking along the fence as I looked out of my bedroom window," I exclaimed, "and if there's anything of value in the house I'd suggest you take especial steps to keep it safe tonight."

In the starlight I could see his rugged face twist into a smile. "You saw the watchman," he said shortly.

I still hesitated.

"Good-night, Jenkins."

"Good-night," I said and turned.

I walked in the front door, through the long hall and out the back door. It was a good thing the garage was a ways from the house and facing a down grade. I slid my car out, coasted down the incline, kicked in the clutch near the foot and purred away into the darkness. I'd noticed that there was dark space where one of the other cars should have been, but I couldn't be bothered. I had Bobo sticking with me, parked down close to the floor, whining from time to time with sheer excitement. The dog read my moods better than a mind reader. I guess animals pick up thoughts from

scent, from the sound of the voice. There must be something to this psychic wave stuff, after all.

I hoped I'd reach Herman's in time, but I couldn't be sure. I had to take my chance. I drove like the devil himself, skidded around the corner three blocks below the great, gloomy grounds, kicked out the clutch, shut off the motor, coasted as far as I dared, and then slipped out from behind the wheel, snapped my fingers to the dog, and we went over the fence together.

Bobo scouted on ahead, swiftly gliding through the shadows like an owl, sniffing the ground and the air. In a few minutes he returned, tail up, head cocked on one side, a sure sign that the coast was clear. I made for the window I'd jumped a few nights ago.

There was a light in Herman's study, and before I'd been under the window ten seconds he heard something that sent him down the hall with quick steps.

I slipped in the window and behind the desk, waiting.

I heard the slam of the front door, the sound of steps, and then Herman's voice, and in the voice was a note of disappointment.

"Well, young lady, you certainly don't believe in waiting. I have some other people I'm waiting for, so you'll have to be brief."

It was Helen, a Helen that was strangely beautiful. Her lips were parted, her eyes shining, her hair streaming out from under her hat.

"Mr. Herman, I've lived up to my part of the bargain. The rest is between you and Jenkins. I want the notes."

He nodded.

His thick lips twisted a bit, and then he walked over to the safe. Once more I noticed him stoop and saw his hand dart down. Then he swung back the picture and spun the dials on the safe.

He came back with a paper.

"Here you are, my dear."

The girl reached eagerly up, then suddenly stiffened.

"There's only one note there. You have ten."

He bowed, silently acquiescing.

"But you were to give me all," she said, and for the first time since I had known her there was a note of near hysteria in her voice.

He smiled, a thick flabby leer, and shook his head.

"Oh, no. I said I'd give you the *note*. You may have understood that I'd give them all to you, but you misunderstood me. I couldn't give them all up. No, young lady, you have earned one, and one alone. There are nine others. From time to time I shall ask you to do other things for me. You will not refuse. Here, take this note and run along."

She jumped to her feet, eyes blazing.

"You crook! You dirty, cheap, double-crossing crook!"

His eyes slipped again, closed until they were mere slits from which peered forth the devil of his nature.

"Take that note and beat it before I count three or you won't get it at all. You're in my power and you'll do just as I say, and do it for nine times more. Any of those notes would kill your mother, ruin your father's memory. Let's have it understood here and now. You're going to do as I say. You're mine, body and soul, and I dispose of either as I wish."

With that she struck him, a blow that sounded like a pistol shot.

Staggered, he stepped back, and she struck him again, not the blows of a child, not the slaps of a woman, but the double-fisted punches of a fighter. Then she turned to the safe.

Herman staggered back into the chair and wiped the blood from his mouth, and then he laughed. The safe was closed.

"I took the precaution of only seeming to open it, Cutie," he taunted. "I had the note in my pocket. The others are in there safe and sound, and you'll pay for this. Think it over. You've taken the first step. After tonight I've got another hold on you. Ed Jenkins is stealing Kemper's collection of gems. Even now there's a squad of police at the house. You're an accomplice, an accessory if I breathe one word. I have political power, my dear. Jenkins is going to jail. Your name's going through the mud if it ever gets out that you announced your engagement to a crook, even if you did try to keep it a secret. Also one word from me, and you'll be thrown into a cell as an accomplice. Your explanation of where and how you met Jenkins will be interesting."

She looked at him, white to the lips.

"You did this . . . you did this to . . . to Ed!" she breathed, then turned and ran down the hall. From without came the sound of a racing motor, the clash of gears, and the sound of a machine speeding through the night.

At his desk Don G. Herman sat leering in thick lipped triumph, holding the note.

There followed a silence, a silence broken only by the clacking of the office clock as it measured the seconds of eternity. Out in the night a girl was racing to save me from a frame-up, beneath the window without there crouched a dog, ears cocked forward, teeth bared, waiting for a signal from his master to sink those teeth in the throat of the crook at the desk.

By an effort I controlled myself and waited while the minutes passed. Herman returned the note to the safe, chuckling the while.

There came once more the sound of a car. Don G. Herman arose to his feet and hurried to the outer door. There was a greeting, the triumphant laugh of the politician, and Big Front Gilvray swaggered into the office, followed by the political crook.

"Took it hook, line and sinker," gloated Gilvray. The big sap was holding Kemper in conversation while I slipped in, used the combination we'd picked up from the secretary, opened the safe and pulled out the jewel."

Herman clapped his hand on his leg, laughing silently, his thick, spongy lips drawn clean back from his yellow fangs.

"And he's supposed to be the master crook of them all. The sucker. The poor, doddering sucker. You've arranged to have the police tipped off?"

Gilvray nodded. "Sure. Let's let him get it all in one jolt."

"Let's take a look at that sparkler. I've always wanted to see one of those famous boys."

Gilvray took off his coat. Beneath his arm was a leather sack, and from this sack he produced a jewel case and opened it. There came the gleam of reflected light.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Herman, "look at the size of it!"

He reached for the case, took it in his hand, peered at the gem with greed stamped all over his features. His moon eyes closed once more and his face set in an expression of cunning avarice.

"Say, couldn't we make more by holding this ourselves?"

Gilvray smiled. "I'd thought of that but it can't be done. It's no good right now to anyone but a collector, and our best bet is to turn it into cash. Remember that it was my er . . . er . . . customer that tipped me off to where it was. He'd know we were holding out on him if. . . . SAY, FOR GOD'S SAKE LET ME SEE THAT GEM!"

The trained eye of the gem man had noticed something in the appearance of the jewel, even at that distance, in that uncertain light. He snatched it.

For along moment he said nothing. He didn't need to. His jaw sagged, and the breath wheezed out of his lungs in one deep, despairing gasp.

Herman leaned forward, watching alternately the jewel and Gilvray's face.

"Framed, by God!" exclaimed Gilvray after a minute.

Herman recovered his presence of mind first.

"Find Jenkins," he said shortly. "Let's hope he hasn't been arrested yet. He's probably in his apartment. If he stayed at the Kemper house he'd be pinched, and he may be wise enough to start to duck. It's a long shot, but let's go."

Together they raced from the room.

I walked out from behind the desk and pulled a pad of blank promissory notes from my pocket. They were forms such as are sold in stationery stores in book form, the same sort as the note Herman had shown to the girl the night I first hid behind the desk. I'd managed to get a fair look at that note after he showed it to her.

I had a small, pocket edition of my safe opener with me. I hoped I wouldn't have to waste time by going after the big one. With all the care of a physician listening to the heart of a wealthy patient I listened to the inner workings of that safe. First, however, I solved the mystery of the little switch near the floor. The safe was insulated, and I don't know how many volts were running through it. There was a copper plate set in the floor in front of the safe and I figured an ordinary crook would be pretty well toasted after touching the metal knob of the safe.

Herman was a fairly slick crook. He was half-smart.

The safe opened after fifteen minutes, and I located the Chadwick notes ten seconds later. Coolly, calmly, I took them over to Herman's desk. Carefully, I traced each one of them. The signatures I traced from one particular note. Handwriting experts can tell a traced signature because the signatures of any man are never exactly identical. When two signatures compare absolutely they are tracings. In order to make a real amateurish job of it I used a fine pencil to make the first tracing, and then went over it with ink. I can do nearly anything with a pen, and I let my hand jiggle

just enough so that the pencil mark underneath would show under a good microscope. To the naked eye on casual inspection the notes looked good.

When I had finished I put the copies in the safe, closed the door and took the originals with me. I went out of the window and felt Bobo jumping on me in an ecstasy of joy. He'd been pretty nervous with all that scuffling and running of feet in the room above.

We went across to the car, climbed behind the wheel and headed back for Kempers. Helen Chadwick was waiting for me at the garage. When I switched out the lights she ran forward. The first intimation I had of her presence was when Bobo's tail began to go slap, slap against my leg. A moment later I saw her standing white against the shadow of a hedge.

"Ed, oh, Ed," she whispered.

I got out of the car and went to her.

"Oh, Ed I'm so sorry. I'm afraid I'm partly responsible. They've double-crossed you some way, and the police are coming. Herman . . . Herman said that he was sending you to jail."

I reached out with my arm and she snuggled up against it, her face upturned. "Run, Ed. Run away and beat them to it. I came to warn you."

I laughed a bit, and I could feel a catch in my throat with that laugh.

"Forget it, Helen. Let's go to the house."

Bobo whined uneasily, running to and fro in front of me. I knew his danger sign and dropped my arm from the girl's shoulders. Somewhere down the road a siren whined, and then from the darkness behind there came a beam of light sharply outlining me.

"One move, Jenkins, and we shoot."

I elevated my hands casually. After all they were going to go some if they got anything on me.

"Come on into the house, men," said someone from the dark yard, and Loring Kemper walked out into the circle of light as casually as though he always sat up all night.

We trooped into the house, and from the way the cops surrounded and watched me I could tell that the Chief didn't propose to have Ed Jenkins slip through his fingers. The phantom crook had acquired too great a reputation. The men had been ordered to shoot to kill at the first move, and they were itching for a chance.

There where they were safe because of their numbers, each and every man of them wanted to be the first, wanted to be able to strut around as the man who had killed the famous Ed Jenkins. We walked into the library.

"Look at your safe, Mr. Kemper," said the officer in charge, his voice deep, impressive and important.

Kemper led the procession upstairs. We watched him while he opened the safe and examined the contents.

"Everything's in order," he said simply as he straightened and turned to the officers.

A bomb dropped in their midst would not have caused greater consternation. At length one of them found his voice.

"Do you know that this man who has been imposing on your hospitality is the greatest crook in the United States?"

It was a woman's voice who answered him. We all turned to see Mrs. Edith Kemper standing there, fully gowned, calm, cool, collected.

"We certainly do not know it," she said. "Mr. Jenkins has been suspected of crime, has been framed up a number of times, but is absolutely square and honest. He is innocent of all the charges which have been made against him, and he is not wanted for any crime in California. My attorney is on his way out here and will appear for Mr. Jenkins if you care to make any charge. I will go his bond in any amount."

The officer looked at her, his eyes sticking out of his head until they seemed to catch the reflection of the light from all four sides.

"You . . . you know who he is, and yet he is here in *this* house!"

"Why certainly. Mr. Jenkins is a friend of the family, and I admire and respect him greatly. We have constantly been after him to pay us a visit and are proud and honored that he has done so."

The woman was magnificent as she stood there, a calm smile of amusement flickering about her lips, good humored tolerance for official stupidity in her drawling voice. At her side stood Helen, her arm about the older woman's waist. Bobo was crouching, tense in the background, listening with anxious ears, ready to fight or run as his master should indicate.

Loring Kemper stifled a yawn.

"Really, gentlemen. It is late, and if you have nothing further. . . ."

The telephone rang, a harsh, imperative ring.

Kemper answered it, then motioned to the officer in charge. That bewildered individual placed the receiver to his ear, listened intently for a moment, then snorted.

"Three buttons in the heel of a shoe!" he exclaimed, "oh go on home. We're all being framed by someone who is trying to make a goat of the department or else we're goin' dippy. Buttons, eh? That's a hell of a place to keep buttons, but we ain't had no report of a big button robbery lately. Go on home. Forget it."

He hung up, turned, looked me over, shook his head dubiously, then motioned to the men. "Come on, boys."

They turned and trooped out, their heavy footfalls clattering and clumping down the stairs and into the night.

I turned to Mrs. Kemper. She was smiling graciously.

"Oh you children," she said, and shook her head. "Of course I have a very abnormal memory for faces. I study features. I recognized Mr. Jenkins as soon as I saw him, as the man who had been featured in one of the Sunday Supplements some time ago as the famous Phantom Crook. Nothing would be more natural than that I should watch the safe. You see there is a place back of the bookcase where one can stand and, by moving one of the books, see through the glass door. When Mr. Jenkins was by himself I always managed to be behind that case.

"I saw Mr. Jenkins substitute the imitation gem tonight and was about to make some complaint to the police when I determined to await developments. At least there was no need for alarm until he tried to leave the house. Then I saw another man enter the house and steal the imitation. I commenced to get a glimmering of an idea, and when Mr. Jenkins returned and replaced the original I felt that he was a gentleman who appreciated the obligations of a guest.

Shortly afterward the police telephoned that they had a tip there was something wrong in the house and were coming out. I welcomed the suggestion. I thought perhaps they had captured the man who stole the imitation."

Kemper, himself, smiled.

"You know, Jenkins, for a man who was supposed to know nothing of a dog's psychology, you talked quite fluently on

the subject while holding my attention between eleven and twelve."

The girl watched them narrowly, looking from one to the other, apparently in a daze. I bowed and smiled.

"In that case I need not detain you any longer. Explanations are cumbersome and embarrassing. I think, though, I'd leave that gem in the private safe of your jeweler for the next few weeks. I am familiar with that safe. It is a good one."

Kemper grinned. "High recommendation," he said briefly.

"As for you, Helen. Please trust me to this extent. Go tomorrow with the administrator of your father's estate, the best handwriting expert in the city, your lawyer and a notary public, also have a special representative from the district attorney's office. Go to Don G. Herman, ask him if he has any claim against your father's estate. If he has, demand that he produce the evidence thereof and swear to the claim then and there. Have the handwriting expert make an examination of those notes."

She watched me, white, wide-eyed.

"Ed, how in the world did you ever know of those notes? It can't be done, Ed. They are genuine. I *know* I found a confidential letter from my father. It was worrying over them that hastened his death." I frowned at her.

"Helen, please promise me that you will do as I say."

Mrs. Kemper studied my face.

"She will do just as you have suggested, Ed," she said, and there was something of respect, almost of awe in her voice. Again I bowed.

"Under those circumstances I'll be going. I am glad to have been of some slight service, and, the same time, to have protected myself against the machinations of a couple of crooks."

Kemper extended his hand.

"You know, Jenkins, you've done a lot for me. I'm not good at words. Can there be any question of compensation, a check for a few thousand?"

I had no need to answer the question. His wife flashed him one look, and answered for me.

"You forget, Loring, that Mr. Jenkins is a gentleman, a gentleman who has been our guest. I can only suggest this, Mr. Jenkins . . . oh, I'm going to call you Ed, and be done with it . . . if you

ever are hard pressed for a hotel, or if you can ever spare us the time, we shall be only too glad to have you run out here any time and stay as long as you can. I feel quite sure you will be safe from any petty annoyances here."

Damn it, she meant it! I smiled at the thought, and I've chuckled over it since, Ed Jenkins, wanted by the police, dodging justice, and actually being the house guest of Mr. and Mrs. Loring Kemper, the most select of the ultra select of San Francisco society.

"We really want you, Ed," she said.

I grinned as I started for the stairs.

"You haven't said good bye to your sweetheart, Ed," came the flapper tones of Helen Chadwick, and the next minute she was in my arms, a bundle of flying little femininity.

"Please don't go. Stay with us here for a few days." The words came in a whisper. I gently unlocked her arms.

"Folks, I appreciate your hospitality, but, after all I am a crook, and known as such. I'd suggest you fire your secretary, and now, good-night."

I walked down the stairs, keeping my head well to the front. From behind me came a quick sob. Bobo stayed behind for a minute, whining, trying to attract my attention, but I walked on out into the night. A good kid has no business getting mixed up with a crook. After a minute the dog came on the run. From behind me came Mrs. Kemper's voice.

"Ed, I want you to visit us again—"

I closed the door and noticed the first streaks of dawn coming in the east. I'd send over for my baggage. Right then I wanted to get away. Being a free-lance crook has its advantages, but my chest felt a trifle heavy as I swung in behind the steering wheel.

I laid low until the evening papers came out, then I read the headlines—.

"PROMINENT POLITICIAN ARRESTED FOR FORGERY AND PERJURY . . . NOTES DECLARED PALPABLE FORGERIES BY HANDWRITING EXPERTS . . . SOCIETY LEADER SIGNS COMPLAINT . . . LORING KEMPER SWEARS TO WARRANT FOR ARREST OF DON G. HERMAN AND PROMISES TO ASSIST PROSECUTION IN EVERY WAY . . . PROMINENT FAMILY BLACKMAILED BY FORGERIES."

I read the article that followed with some considerable satisfaction, then I sent Don G. Herman a wire care of the county jail. It was brief and to the point, and it was sent collect.

"LAUGH THAT OFF," it said, and I didn't sign it. I didn't need to.

The Cat-Woman

Big Bill Ryan slid his huge bulk into the vacant chair opposite my own and began toying with the heavy watch chain which stretched across the broad expanse of his vest.

“Well,” I asked, showing only mild annoyance, for Big Ryan had the reputation of never wasting time, his own or anyone else’s.

“Ed, I hear you’ve gone broke. I’ve got a job for you.”

He spoke in his habitual, thin, reedy voice. In spite of his bulk his mouth was narrow and his tone shrill. However, I fancied I could detect a quiver of excitement underlying his words, and I became cold. News travels fast in the underworld. He knew of my financial setback as soon as I did, almost. My brokers had learned my identity—that I was a crook, and they had merely appropriated my funds. They were reputable business men. I was a crook. If I made complaint the courts would laugh at me. I’ve had similar experiences before. No matter how honest a man may appear he’ll always steal from a crook—not from any ethical reasons, but because he feels he can get away with it.

“What’s on your mind?” I asked Ryan, not affirming or denying the rumor concerning my financial affairs.

His pudgy fingers seemed to be fairly alive as he twisted and untwisted the massive gold chain.

“It’s just a message,” he said, at length, and handed me a folded slip of paper.

I looked it over. It was a high class of stationery, delicately perfumed, bearing a few words in feminine handwriting which was as perfect and characterless as copper plate.

“Two hours after you get this message meet me at Apartment 624, Reedar Arms Apartments. The door will be open.

H. M. H.”

I scowled over at Ryan and shook my head. “I’ve walked into all the traps I intend to, Ryan.”

His little, pig eyes blinked rapidly and his fingers jammed his watch chain into a hard knot.

“The message is on the square, Ed. I can vouch for that. What the job will be that opens up I can’t tell. You’ll have to take the responsibility of that; but there won’t be any police trap in that apartment.”

I looked at the note again. The ink was dark. Evidently the words had been written some little time ago. The message did not purport to be to anyone in particular. Big Ryan was a notorious fence, a go-between of crooks. Apparently he had been given the note with the understanding that he was to pick out the one to whom it was to be delivered. The note would clear his skirts, yet he must be in on the game. He’d have to get in touch with the writer after he made a delivery of the note so that the time of the appointment would be known.

I reached a decision on impulse, and determined to put Ryan to the test. “All right, I’ll be there.”

I could see a look of intense relief come over his fat face. He couldn’t keep back the words. “Bully for you, Ed Jenkins!” he shrilled. “After I heard you were broke I thought I might get you. You’re the one man who could do it. Remember, two hours from now,” and, with the words, he pulled out his turnip watch and carefully checked the time. Then he heaved up from the chair and waddled toward the back of the restaurant.

I smiled to myself. He was going to telephone “H. M. H.” and I filed that fact away for future reference.

Two hours later I stepped from the elevator on the sixth floor of the Reedar Arms Apartments, took my bearings and walked directly to the door of 624. I didn’t pause to knock but threw the door open. However, I didn’t walk right in, but stepped back into the hallway.

"Come in, Mr. Jenkins," said a woman's voice.

The odor of incense swirled out into the hall, and I could see the apartment was in half-light, a pink light which came through a rose-colored shade. Ordinarily I trust the word of no man, but I was in desperate need of cash, and Big Bill Ryan had a reputation of being one who could be trusted. I took a deep breath and walked into the apartment, closing the door after me.

She was sitting back in an armchair beneath a rose-shaded reading lamp, her bare arm stretched out with the elbow resting on a dark table, the delicate, tapering fingers holding a long, ivory cigarette holder in which burned a half-consumed cigarette. Her slippered feet were placed on a stool and the light glinted from a well-proportioned stretch of silk stocking. It was an artistic job, and the effect was pleasing. I have an eye for such things, and I stood there for a moment taking in the scene, appreciating it. And then I caught the gaze of her eyes.

Cat eyes she had; eyes that seemed to dilate and contract, green eyes that were almost luminous there in the half-light.

I glanced around the apartment, those luminous, green eyes studying me as I studied the surroundings. There was nothing at all in the apartment to suggest the personality of such a woman. Everything about the place was suggestive merely of an average furnished apartment. At the end of the room, near the door of a closet, I saw a suitcase. It merely confirmed my previous suspicion. The woman had only been in that apartment for a few minutes. She rented the place merely as a meeting ground for the crook she had selected to do her bidding. When Big Bill Ryan had picked a man for her, he had telephoned her and she had packed her negligee in the suitcase and rushed to the apartment.

She gave a little start and followed my gaze, then her skin crinkled as her lips smiled. That smile told me much. The skin seemed hard as parchment. She was no spring chicken, as I had suspected from the first.

The cat-woman shrugged her shoulders, reached in a little hand-bag and took out a blue-steel automatic which she placed on the table. Then she hesitated, took another great drag at the cigarette and narrowed her eyes at me.

"It is no matter, Mr. Jenkins. I assure you that my desire to conceal my identity, to make it appear that this was my real address, was to protect myself only in case I did not come to terms

with the man Ryan sent. We had hardly expected to be able to interest a man of your ability in the affair, and, now that you are here, I shan't let you go, so there won't be any further need of the deception. I will even tell you who I am and where I really live—in a moment."

I said nothing, but watched the automatic. Was it possible she knew so little about me that she fancied I could be forced to do something at the point of a pistol?

As though she again read my mind, she reached into the handbag and began taking out crisp bank notes. They were of five-hundred-dollar denomination, and there were twenty of them. These she placed on the table beside the gun.

"The gun is merely to safeguard the money," she explained with another crinkling smile. "I wouldn't want you to take the cash without accepting my proposition."

I nodded. As far as possible I would let her do the talking.

"Mr. Jenkins, or Ed, as I shall call you now that we're acquainted, you have the reputation of being the smoothest worker in the criminal game. You are known to the police as The Phantom Crook, and they hate, respect and fear you. Ordinarily you are a lone wolf, but because you are pressed for ready cash, I think I can interest you in something I have in mind."

She paused and sized me up with her cat-green eyes. If she could read anything on my face she could have read the thoughts of a wooden Indian.

"There are ten thousand dollars," she said, and there was a subtle, purring something about her voice. "That money will be yours when you leave this room if you agree to do something for me. Because I can trust you, I will pay you in advance."

Again she stopped, and again I sat in immobile silence.

"I want you to break into a house—my own house—and steal a very valuable necklace. Will you do it?"

She waited for a reply.

"That is all you wish?" I asked, killing time, waiting.

She wrinkled her cheeks again.

"Oh yes, now that you speak of it, there is one other thing. I want you to kidnap my niece. I would prefer that you handle the entire matter in your own way, but I will give you certain suggestions, some few instructions."

She paused waiting for a reply, and I let my eyes wander to the cash piled on the table. Very evidently she had intended that the actual cash should be a strong point in her argument and it would disappoint her if I didn't look hungrily at it.

"How long shall I hold your niece captive?"

She watched me narrowly, her eyes suddenly grown hard.

"Ed Jenkins, once you have my niece you can do anything with her or about her that you want. You must keep her for two days. After that you may let her go or you may keep her."

"That is all?" I asked.

"That is all," she said, and I knew she lied, as she spoke.

I arose. "I am not interested, but it has been a pleasure to have met you. I appreciate artistry."

Her face darkened, and the corners of her upper lip drew back, the feline snarl of a cat about to spring. I fancied her hand drifted toward the automatic.

"Wait," she spat, "you don't know all."

I turned at that, and, by an effort, she controlled herself. Once more the purring note came into her voice.

"The necklace you will steal is my own. I am the legal guardian of my niece and I will give you my permission to kidnap her. What is more, I will allow you to see her first, to get her own permission. You will not be guilty of any crime whatever."

I came back and sat down in the chair.

"I have the necklace and it is insured for fifty thousand dollars," she said in a burst of candor. "I must have the money, simply must. To sell the necklace would be to cause comment of a nature I cannot explain. If I secrete the necklace I will be detected by the insurance company. If the notorious Ed Jenkins breaks into my house, steals my necklace, kidnaps my niece, the insurance company will never question but what the theft was genuine. You will, of course, not actually take the necklace. You will take a paste copy. The insurance company will pay me fifty thousand dollars, and, when occasion warrants, I can again produce the necklace."

I nodded. "You intend then that I shall be identified as the thief, that the police shall set up a hue and cry for me?"

She smiled brightly. "Certainly. That's why I want you to kidnap my niece. However, that should mean nothing to you. You have a reputation of being able to slip through the fingers of the police any time you wish."

I sighed. I had enjoyed immunity from arrest in California because of a legal technicality; but I was broke and in need of cash. All honest channels of employment were closed to me, and, after all, the woman was right. I had been able to laugh at the police.

I reached forward and took the money, folded the crisp bills and put them in my pocket.

"All right. I will accept. Remember one thing, however, if you attempt to double-cross me, to play me false in any way, I will keep the money and also get revenge. Whatever your game is you must keep all the cards on the table as far as my own connection with it is concerned. Otherwise . . .?"

I paused significantly.

"Otherwise?" she echoed, and there was a taunt in her voice.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Otherwise you will be sorry. Others have thought they could use Ed Jenkins for a cat's-paw, could double-cross him. They never got away with it."

She smiled brightly. "I would hardly give you ten thousand dollars in cash unless I trusted you, Ed. Now that we've got the preliminaries over with we may as well get to work and remove the stage setting."

With that she arose, stretched with one of those toe stretching extensions of muscles which reminded me of a cat arising from a warm sofa, slipped out of the negligee and approached the suitcase. From the suitcase she took a tailored suit and slipped into it in the twinkling of an eye. She threw the negligee into the suitcase, took a hat from the closet, reached up and switched out the light.

"All right, Ed. We're ready to go."

She had her own machine in a nearby garage, a long, low roadster of the type which is purchased by those who demand performance and care nothing for expense of operation. I slipped into the seat and watched her dart through the traffic. She had skill, this cat-woman, but there was a ruthlessness about her driving. Twice, pedestrians barely managed to elude the nicked bumpers. On neither occasion did she so much as glance backward to make sure she had not given them a glancing blow in passing.

At length we slowed up before an impressive house in the exclusive residential district west of Lakeside. With a quick wriggle she slipped out from behind the steering wheel, vaulted lightly

to the pavement and extended her long, tapering fingers to me. "Come on, Ed. Here's where we get out."

I grinned as she held the door open. Whatever her age she was in perfect condition, splendidly formed, quick as a flash of light, and she almost gave the impression of assisting me from the car.

I was shown into a drawing-room and told to wait.

While the cat-woman was gone I looked about me, got the lay of the land, and noticed the unique furnishings of the room. Everywhere were evidences of the striking personality of the woman. A tiger rug was on the floor, a leopard skin on the davenport. A huge painted picture hung over the fireplace, a picture of a cat's head, the eyes seeming to have just a touch of luminous paint in them. In the semi-darkness of the nook the cat's eyes blazed forth and dominated the entire room. It was impossible to keep the eyes away from that weird picture; those steady, staring eyes drew my gaze time after time.

At length there was the rustle of skirts and I rose.

The cat-woman stood in the doorway. On her arm was a blonde girl attired in flapper style, painted and powdered, and, seemingly, a trifle dazed.

"My niece, Jean Ellery, Ed. Jean, may I present Mr. Ed Jenkins. You folks are destined to see a good deal of each other so you'd better get acquainted."

I bowed and advanced. The girl extended her hand, a limp, moist morsel of flesh. I took it and darted a glance at the cat-woman. She was standing tense, poised, her lips slightly parted, her eyes fixed upon the girl, watching her every move.

"Hullo, Ed, Mr. Jenkins. I understand you're goin' to kidnap me. Are you a cave-man or do you kidnap 'em gently?"

There was a singsong expression about her voice, the tone a child uses in reciting a piece of poetry the import of which has never penetrated to the brain.

"So you want to be kidnapped, do you, Jean?"

"Uh, huh."

"Aren't you afraid you may never get back?"

"I don't care if I never come back. Life here is the bunk. I want to get out where there's somethin' doin', some place where I can see life. Action, that's what I'm lookin' for."

With the words she turned her head and let her vacant, blue eyes wander to the cat-woman. Having spoken her little piece, she

wanted to see what mark the teacher gave her. The cat-woman flashed a glance of approval, and the doll-faced blonde smiled up at me.

"All right, Jean," she said. "You run along. Mr. Jenkins and I have some things to discuss."

The blonde turned and walked from the room, flashing me what was meant to be a roguish glance from over her shoulder. The cat-woman curled up in a chair, rested her head on her cupped hands, and looked at me. There in the half-light her eyes seemed as luminous as those of the cat in the painting over the fireplace.

"Tomorrow at ten will be about right, Ed. Now, here are some of the things you must know. This house really belongs to Arthur C. Holton, the big oil man, you know. I have been with him for several years as private secretary and general house manager. Tomorrow night our engagement is to be announced and he is going to present me with the famous tear-drop necklace as an engagement present. I will manage everything so that the presentation takes place at about nine-thirty. Just before ten I will place the necklace on my niece to let her wear the diamonds for a few minutes, and she will leave the room for a moment, still wearing the diamonds.

"Really, I'll slip the genuine necklace in my dress and put an imitation around my niece's neck. She will leave the room and an assistant will bind and gag her and place her in a speedy roadster which I have purchased for you and is to be waiting outside. Then you must show your face. It won't look like a kidnapping and a theft unless I have some well-known crook show himself for a moment at the door.

"You can pretend that you have been double-crossed in some business deal by Mr. Holton. You suddenly jump in the doorway and level a gun at the guests. Then you can tell them that this is merely the first move in your revenge, that you will make Mr. Holton regret the time he double-crossed you. Make a short speech and then run for the machine. I have a little cottage rented down on the seashore, and I have had Jean spend several days there already, under another name, of course, and you can go there as Jean's husband, one who has just returned from a trip East. You will be perfectly safe from detection because all the neighbors know Jean as Mrs. Compton. You will pose as Mr. Compton and adopt any disguise you wish. But, remember; you

must not stop and open the luggage compartment until you reach the cottage.

She spilled all that and then suddenly contracted her eyes until the pupils seemed mere slits.

"That may sound unimportant to you, Ed, but you've got to play your part letter perfect. There is a lot that depends on your following instructions to the letter. In the meantime I will give you plenty of assurance that I will shoot square with you."

I sat there, looking at this cat-woman curled up in the chair before the crackling fire, and had all I could do to keep from bursting out laughing right in her face. I've seen some wild, farfetched plots, but this had anything cheated I had ever heard of.

"Think how it will add to your reputation," she went on, the singing, purring note in her soothing tone.

I yawned. "And you can double-cross me and have me arrested ten minutes later, or tip the police off to this little cottage you have reserved for me, and I'll spend many, many years in jail while you laugh up your sleeve."

She shook her head. "What earthly reason would I have for wanting to have you arrested? No, Ed, I've anticipated that. Tomorrow we go to a notary public and I'll execute a written confession of my part in the affair. This confession will be placed in safekeeping where it will be delivered to the police in the event you are caught. *That* will show you how my interests are the same as your own, how I cannot afford to have you captured. This paper will contain my signed statement that I have authorized you to steal the jewels, and my niece will also execute a document stating the kidnapping is with her consent. Think it over, Ed. You will be protected, but I must have that insurance money, and have it in such a way that no one will suspect me."

I sat with bowed head, thinking over the plan. I had already digested everything she had told me. What I was worrying about was what she hadn't told me.

I arose and bowed.

"I'll see you tomorrow then?"

She nodded, her green eyes never leaving my face.

"Meet me at the office of Harry Atmore, the lawyer at eleven and ask for Hattie M. Hare. He will see that you are protected in every way. I guarantee that you won't have any cause for alarm about my double-crossing you."

Apparently there was nothing more to be gained by talking with this woman and I left her.

I had ten thousand dollars in my pocket, a cold suspicion in my mind and a determination to find out just what the real game was. I didn't know just how deep Big Ryan was mixed in this affair—not yet I didn't, but I proposed to find out. In the meantime I wasn't taking any chances, and I slipped into my apartment without any brass band to announce my presence.

At first I thought everything was in proper order, and then I noticed something was missing. It was a jade handled, Chinese dagger, one that I had purchased at a curio store not more than a month ago. What was more, the Chinaman who sold it to me had known who I was. That dagger could be identified by the police as readily as my signature or my fingerprints.

I sat down by the window in my easy chair and thought over the events of the evening. I couldn't see the solution, not entirely, but I was willing to bet the cat-woman wouldn't have slept easily if she had known how much I was able to put together. Right then I could have dropped the whole thing and been ten thousand dollars ahead; but there was big money in this game that was being played. I couldn't forget how Big Bill Ryan had twisted and fumbled at his watch chain when he had delivered that note to me. He was a smooth fence, was Big Ryan, and he wouldn't have let his fat fingers get so excited over a mere thirty or forty thousand dollar job. There was a million in this thing or I missed my guess.

At last I figured I'd checked things out as far as I could with the information I had, and rolled in.

At eleven on the dot I presented myself at the office of Harry Atmore. Atmore was a shyster criminal lawyer who charged big fees, knew when and where to bribe, and got results for his clients. I gave the stenographer my name, told her that I had an appointment, and was shown into the private office of Henry Atmore, attorney-at-law.

Atmore sat at a desk, and his face was a study. He was trying to control his expression, but his face simply would twitch in spite of himself. He held forth a flabby hand, and I noticed that his palm was moist and that his hand trembled. To one side of the table sat the cat-woman and the blonde. Both of them smiled sweetly as I bowed.

Atmore got down to business at once. He passed over two documents for my inspection. One was a simple statement from

Hattie M. Hare to the effect that I had been employed by her to steal the Holton, "tear-drop" necklace, and that we were jointly guilty of an attempt to defraud the insurance company. The other was a statement signed by Jean Ellery to the effect that I had arranged with her to kidnap her, but that she gave her consent to the kidnapping, and that it was being done at her request.

I noticed that the Hare statement said nothing about the kidnapping, and the other said nothing about the necklace. I filed those facts away for future reference.

"Now here's what we'll do, Jenkins," Atmore said, his moist hand playing with the corners of some papers which lay on his desk, "we'll have both of these statements placed in an envelope and deposited with a trust company to be held indefinitely, not to be opened, and not to be withdrawn. That will prevent any of the parties from withdrawing them, but if you should ever be arrested the district attorney, or the grand jury could, of course, subpoena the manager of the trust company and see what is in the envelope. The idea of these statements is not to give you immunity from prosecution, but to show you that Miss Hare is as deep in the mud as you are in the mire. She can't afford to have you arrested or to even let you get caught. Of course, if you *should* get arrested on some other matter we're relying on you to play the game. You've never been a squealer, and I feel my clients can trust you."

I nodded casually. It was plain he was merely speaking a part. His plan had already been worked out.

"I have one suggestion," I said.

He inclined his head. "Name it."

"That you call in a notary public and have them acknowledge the confessions."

The lawyer looked at his client. He was a beady-eyed, sallow-faced rat of a man. His great nose seemed to have drawn his entire face to a point, and his mouth and eyes were pinched accordingly. Also his lip had a tendency to draw back and show discolored, long teeth, protruding in front. He was like a rat, a hungry, cunning rat.

The cat-woman placed her ivory cigarette holder to her vivid lips, inhaled a great drag and then expelled two streams of white smoke from her dilated nostrils. She nodded at the lawyer, and, as she nodded, there was a hard gleam about her eyes.

"Very well," was all she said, but the purring note had gone from her voice.

Atmore wiped the back of his hand across his perspiring forehead, called in a notary, and, on the strength of his introduction, had the two documents acknowledged. Then he slipped them in one of his envelopes, wrote "Perpetual Escrow" on the back, signed it, daubed sealing wax all over the flap, and motioned to me.

"You can come with me, Jenkins, and see that I put this in the Trust Company downstairs."

I arose, accompanied the lawyer to the elevator and was whisked down to the office of the Trust Company. We said not a word on the trip. The lawyer walked to the desk of the vice-president, handed him the envelope, and told him what he wanted.

"Keep this envelope as a perpetual escrow. It can be opened by no living party except with an order of court. After ten years you may destroy it. Give this gentleman and myself a duplicate receipt."

The vice-president looked dubiously at the envelope, weighed it in his hand, sighed, and placed his signature on the envelope, gave it a number with a numbering machine, dictated a duplicate receipt, which he also signed, and took the envelope to the vaults.

"That should satisfy you," said Atmore, his beady eyes darting over me, the perspiration breaking out on his forehead. "That is all fair and above board."

I nodded and started toward the door. I could see the relief peeping in the rat-like eyes of the lawyer.

At the door I stopped, turned, and clutched the lawyer by the arm. "Atmore, do you know what happens to people who try to double-cross me?"

He was seized with a fit of trembling, and he impatiently tried to break away.

"You have a reputation for being a square shooter, Jenkins, and for always getting the man who tries to double-cross you."

I nodded.

There in the marble lobby of that trust company, with people all around us, with a special officer walking slowly back and forth, I handed it to this little shyster.

"All right. You've just tried to double-cross me. If you value your life hand me that envelope."

He shivered again.

“W-w-w-what envelope?”

I gave him no answer, just kept my eyes boring into his, kept his trembling arm in my iron clutch, and kept my face thrust close to his.

He weakened fast. I could see his sallow skin whiten.

“Jenkins, I’m sorry. I told her we couldn’t get away with it. It was her idea, not mine.”

I still said nothing, but kept my eyes on his.

He reached in his pocket and took out the other envelope. My guess had been right. I knew his type. The rat-like cunning of the idea had unquestionably been his, but he didn’t have the necessary nerve to bluff it through. He had prepared two envelopes. One of them had been signed and sealed before my eyes, but in signing and sealing it he had followed the mental pattern of another envelope which had already been signed and sealed and left in his pocket, an envelope which contained nothing but blank sheets of paper. When he put the envelope with the signed confession into his coat pocket he had placed it back of the dummy envelope. The dummy envelope he had withdrawn and deposited in his “perpetual escrow.”

I took the envelope from him, broke the seals, and examined the documents. They were intact, the signed, acknowledged confessions.

I turned back to the shyster.

“Listen, Atmore. There is a big fee in this for you, a fee from the woman, perhaps from someone else. Go back and tell them that you have blundered, that I have obtained possession of the papers and they will expose you, fire you for a blunderer, make you the laughing stock of every criminal rendezvous in the city. If you keep quiet about this no one will ever know the difference. Speak and you ruin your reputation.”

I could see a look of relief flood his face, and I knew he would lie to the cat-woman about those papers.

“Tell Miss Hare I’ll be at the house at nine forty-five on the dot,” I said. “There’s no need of my seeing her again until then.”

With that I climbed into my roadster, drove to the beach and looked over the house the cat-woman had selected for me. She had given me the address as well as the key at our evening interview, just before I said good night. Of course, she expected me to look the place over.

It was a small bungalow, the garage opening on to the sidewalk beneath the first floor. I didn't go in. Inquiry at a gasoline station showed that the neighbors believed Compton was a traveling salesman, away on a trip, but due to return. The blonde had established herself in the community. So much I found out, and so much the cat-woman had expected me to find out.

Then I started on a line she hadn't anticipated.

First I rented a furnished apartment, taking the precaution first to slip on a disguise which had always worked well with me, a disguise which made me appear twenty years older.

Second, I went to the county clerk's office, looked over the register of actions, and found a dozen in which the oil magnate had been a party. There were damage suits, quiet title actions, actions on oil leases, and on options. In all of these actions he had been represented by Morton, Huntley & Morton. I got the address of the lawyers from the records, put up a good stall with their telephone girl, and found myself closeted with old H. F. Morton, senior member of the firm.

He was a shaggy, grizzled, gray-eyed old campaigner and he had a habit of drumming his fingers on the desk in front of him.

"What was it you wanted, Mr. Jenkins?"

I'd removed my disguise and given him my right name. He may or may not have known my original record. He didn't mention it.

I shot it to him right between the eyes.

"If I were the lawyer representing Arthur C. Holton I wouldn't let him marry Miss Hattie Hare."

He never batted an eyelash. His face was as calm as a baby's. His eyes didn't even narrow, but there came a change in the tempo of his drumming on the desk.

"Why?" he asked.

His tone was mild, casual, but his fingers were going rummy-tum-tum; rummy-tum-tum; rummy-tum-tummy-tum tummy-tum tum.

I shook my head. "I can't tell you all of it, but she's in touch with a shyster lawyer planning to cause trouble of some kind."

"Ah, yes, Mr.-er-Jenkins. You are a friend of Mr. Holton?"

I nodded. "He doesn't know it though."

"Ah, yes," rummy-tum-tum; rummy-tum-tum; "what is it I can do for you in the matter?"

"Help me prevent the marriage."

Rummy-tum-tum; rummy-tum-tum.

"How?"

"Give me a little information as a starter. Mr. Holton has a great deal of property?"

At that his eyes did narrow. The drumming stopped.

"This is a law office. Not an information bureau."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Miss Hare will have her own personal attorney. If the marriage should go through and anything should happen to Mr. Holton another attorney would be in charge of the estate."

He squirmed at that, and then recommenced his drumming.

"Nevertheless, I cannot divulge the confidential affairs of my client. This much is common knowledge. It is street talk, information available to anyone who will take the trouble to look for it. Mr. Holton is a man of great wealth. He owns much property, controls oil producing fields, business property, stocks, bonds. He was married and lost his wife when his child was born. The child was a boy and lived but a few minutes. Mr. Holton created a trust for that child, a trust which terminated with the premature death of the infant. Miss Hare has been connected with him as his secretary and general household executive for several years. Mr. Holton is a man of many enemies, strong character and few friends. He is hated by the working class, and is hated unjustly, yet he cares nothing for public opinion. He is noted as a collector of jewels and paintings. Of late he has been influenced in many respects by Miss Hare, and has grown very fond of her.

"How do you propose to prevent his marriage, and what do you know of Miss Hare?"

I shook my head.

"I won't tell you a thing unless you promise to give me all the information I want, and keep me posted."

His face darkened. "Such a proposition is unthinkable. It is an insult to a reputable attorney."

I knew it, but I made the stall to keep him from finding out that I had all the information I wanted. I only wanted a general slant on Holton's affairs, and, most of all, I wanted a chance to size up his attorney, to get acquainted with him so he would know me later.

"Stick an ad in the personal columns of the morning papers if you want to see me about anything," I said as I made for the door.

He watched me meditatively. Until I had left the long, book-lined corridor, and emerged from the expensive suite of offices, I could still hear his fingers on the desk.

Rummy-tum-tum; rummy-tum-tum; rummy-tum-tummy-tum-tummy-tum-tum.

I went to a hotel, got a room and went to sleep. I was finished with my regular apartment. That was for the police.

At nine-forty-five I sneaked into the back door of Holton's house, found one of the extra servants waiting for me, and was shown into a closet near the room where the banquet was taking place. The servant was a crook, but one I couldn't place. I filed his map away for future reference, and he filed mine.

Ten minutes passed. I heard something that might or might not have been a muffled scream, shuffling footsteps going down the hall. Silence, the ringing of a bell.

I stepped to the door of the banquet room, and flung it wide. Standing there on the threshold I took in the scene of hectic gaiety. Holton and the cat-woman sat at the head of the table. Couples in various stages of intoxication were sprinkled about. Servants stood here and there, obsequious, attentive. A man sat slightly apart, a man who had his eyes riveted on the door of an ante-room. He was the detective from the insurance company.

For a minute I stood there, undiscovered.

The room was a clatter of conversation. The detective half arose, his eyes on the door of the ante-room. Holton saw me, stopped in the middle of a sentence, and looked me over.

"Who are you, and what do you want?"

I handed it out in bunches. "I'm Ed Jenkins, the phantom crook. I've got a part of what I want. I'll come back later for the rest."

The detective reached for his hip, and I slammed the door and raced down the corridor. Taking the front steps in a flying leap I jumped into the seat of the powerful speedster, noticed the roomy luggage compartment, the running engine, the low, speedy lines, slammed in the gear, slipped in the clutch, and skidded out of the drive as the detective started firing from the window.

I didn't go direct to the beach house.

On a dark side-road I stopped the car, went back and opened up the luggage compartment and pulled out the bound and gagged girl. She was one I had never seen before, and she was mad. And she was the real Jean Ellery or else I was dumb.

I packed her around, parked her on the running board, took a seat beside her, left on the gag and the cords, and began to talk. Patiently, step by step, I went over the history of the whole case, telling her everything. When I had finished I cut the cords and removed the gag.

"Now either beat it, go ahead and scream, or ask questions, whichever you want," I told her.

She gave a deep breath, licked her lips, wiped her face with a corner of her party gown, woefully inspected a runner in the expensive stockings, looked at the marks on her wrists where the ropes had bitten, smoothed out her garments and turned to me.

"I think you're a liar," she remarked casually.

I grinned.

That's the way I like 'em. Here this jane had been grabbed, kidnapped, manhandled, jolted, forced to sit on the running board of a car and listen to her kidnapper talk a lot of stuff she naturally wouldn't believe, and then was given her freedom. Most girls would have fainted. Nearly all of 'em would have screamed and ran when they got loose. Here was a jane who was as cool as a cucumber, who looked over the damage to her clothes, and then called me a liar.

She was a thin slip of a thing, twenty or so, big, hazel eyes, chestnut hair, slender figure, rosebud mouth, bobbed hair and as unattainable as a girl on a magazine cover.

"Read this," I said, and slipped her the confession of the cat-woman.

She read it in the light of the dash lamp, puckered her forehead a bit, and then handed it back.

"So you are Ed Jenkins— Why should auntie have wanted me kidnapped?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "That's what I want to know. It's the one point in the case that isn't clear. Want to stick around while I find out?"

She thought things over for a minute.

"Am I free to go?"

I nodded.

"Guess I'll stick around then," she said as she climbed back into the car, snuggling down next to the driver's seat. "Let's go."

I got in, started the engine, and we went.

A block from the beach house I slowed up.

"The house is ahead. Slip out as we go by this palm tree, hide in the shadows and watch what happens. I have an idea you'll see some action."

I slowed down and turned my face toward her, prepared to argue the thing out, but there was no need for argument. She was gathering her skirts about her. As I slowed down she jumped. I drove on to the house, swung the car so it faced the door of the garage and got out.

I had to walk in front of the headlights to fit the key to the door of the garage, and I was a bit nervous. There was an angle of this thing I couldn't get, and it worried me. I thought something was due to happen. If there hadn't been so much money involved I'd have skipped out. As it was, I was playing my cards trying to find out what was in the hand of the cat-woman.

I found out.

As though the swinging of the garage door had been a signal, two men jumped out from behind a rosebush and began firing at the luggage compartment of the car.

They had shotguns, repeaters, and they were shooting chilled buckshot at deadly range through the back of that car. Five times they shot, and then they vanished, running like mad.

Windows began to gleam with lights, a woman screamed, a man stuck his head out into the night. Around the corner there came the whine of a starting motor, the purr of an automobile engine, the staccato barks of an exhaust and an automobile whined off into the night.

I backed the speedster, turned it and went back down the street. At the palm tree where I'd left the flapper I slowed down, doubtfully, hardly expecting to see her again.

There was a flutter of white, a flash of slim legs, and there she was sitting on the seat beside me, her eyes wide, lips parted. "Did you get hurt?"

I shook my head and jerked my thumb back in the direction of the luggage compartment.

"Remember, I wasn't to stop or open that compartment until I got to the beach house," I said.

She looked back. The metal was riddled with holes, parts of the body had even been ripped into great, jagged tears.

"Your beloved auntie didn't want you kidnapped. She wanted you murdered. Right now she figures that you're dead, that I am

gazing in shocked surprise at the dead body of a girl I've kidnapped, the police on my trail, the neighborhood aroused. Naturally she thinks I'll have my hands full for a while, and that she won't be bothered with me any more, either with me or with you."

The girl nodded.

"I didn't say so before, but I've been afraid of Aunt Hattie for a long time. It's an awful thing to say about one's own aunt, but she's absolutely selfish, selfish and unscrupulous."

I drove along in silence for a while.

"What are you going to do?" asked the kid.

"Ditch this car, get off the street, hide out for a few days, and find out what it's all about. Your aunt tried to double-cross me on a deal where there's something or other at stake. I intend to find out what. She and I will have our accounting later."

She nodded, her chin on her fist, thinking.

"What are *you* going to do?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Heaven knows. If I go back I'll probably be killed. Having gone this far, Aunt Hattie can't afford to fail. She'll have me killed if I show up. I guess I'll have to hide out, too."

"Hotel?" I asked.

"I could feel her eyes on my face, sizing me up, watching me like a hawk.

"I can't get a room in a hotel at this hour of the night in a party dress."

I nodded.

"Ed Jenkins, are you a gentleman?"

I shook my head. "Hell's fire, no. I'm a crook."

She looked at me and grinned. I could feel my mouth soften a bit.

"Ed, this is no time to stand on formalities. You know as well as I do that I'm in danger. My aunt believes me dead. If I can keep under cover, leaving her under that impression, I'll stand a chance. I can't hide out by myself. Either my aunt or the police would locate me in no time. You're an experienced crook, you know all the dodges, and I think I can trust you. I'm coming with you."

I turned the wheel of the car.

"All right," I said. "It's your best move, but I wanted you to suggest it. Take off those paste diamonds and leave 'em in the car.

I've got to get rid of this car first, and then we'll go to my hideout."

An hour later I showed her into the apartment. I had run the car off the end of a pier. The watchman was asleep and the car had gurgled down into deep water as neatly as a duck. The watchman had heard the splash, but that's all the good it did him.

The girl looked around the place.

"Neat and cozy," she said. "I'm trusting you, Ed Jenkins. Good night."

I grinned.

"Good night," I said.

I slept late the next morning. I was tired. It was the girl who called me.

"Breakfast's ready," she said.

I sat up in bed and rubbed my eyes.

"Breakfast?"

She grinned.

"Yep. I slipped down to the store, bought some fruit and things, and brought you the morning papers."

I laughed outright. Here I had kidnapped a girl and now she was cooking me breakfast. She laughed, too.

"You see, I'm about broke, and I can't go around in a party dress. I've got to touch you for enough money to buy some clothes, and it's always easier to get money out of a man when he's well-fed. Aunt Hattie told me that."

"You've got to be careful about showing yourself, too," I warned her. "Some one is likely to recognize you."

She nodded and handed me the morning paper.

All over the front page were smeared our pictures, hers and mine. Holton had offered a reward of twenty thousand dollars for my arrest. The insurance company had added another five.

Without that, I knew the police would be hot on the trail. Their reputation was at stake. They'd leave no stone unturned. Having the girl with me was my best bet. They'd be looking for me alone, or with a girl who was being held a prisoner. They'd hardly expect to find me in a downtown apartment with the girl cooking me breakfast.

I handed Jean a five-hundred-dollar bill.

"Go get yourself some clothes. Get quiet ones, but ones that are in style. I'm disguising myself as your father. You look young and

chic, wear 'em short, and paint up a bit. Don't wait, but get started as soon as we eat."

She dropped a curtsey.

"You're so good to me, Ed," she said, but there was a wistful note in her voice, and she blinked her eyes rapidly. "Don't think I don't appreciate it, either," she added. "You don't have to put up with me, and you're being a real gentleman. . . ."

That was that.

I was a little nervous until the girl got back from her shopping. I was afraid some one would spot her. She bought a suit and changed into that right at the jump, then got the rest of her things. She put in the day with needle and thread, and I did some thinking, also I coached the girl as to her part. By late afternoon we were able to buy an automobile without having anything suggest that I was other than an elderly, fond parent and the girl a helter-skelter flapper.

"Tonight you get educated as a crook," I told her.

"Jake with me, Ed," she replied, flashing me a smile. Whatever her thoughts may have been she seemed to have determined to be a good sport, a regular pal, and never let me see her as other than cheerful.

We slid our new car around where we could watch Big Bill Ryan's place. He ran a little cafe where crooks frequently hung out, and he couldn't take a chance on my having a spotter in the place. One thing was certain. If he was really behind the play he intended to have me caught and executed for murder. He knew me too well to think he could play button, button, who's got the button with me and get away with it.

We waited until eleven, parked in the car I'd purchased, watching the door of the cafe and Big Ryan's car. It was crude but effective. Ryan and the cat-woman both thought I had been left with the murdered body of Jean Ellery in my car, a car which had to be got rid of, a body which had to be concealed, and with all the police in the state on my track. They hardly expected I'd put in the evening watching Big Ryan with the kid leaning on my shoulder.

At eleven Ryan started out, and his face was all smiles. He tried to avoid being followed, but the car I'd purchased had all sorts of speed, and I had no trouble in the traffic. After that I turned out the lights and tailed him into West Forty-ninth Street. I got the

number of the house as he stopped, flashed past once to size it up and then kept moving.

"Here's where you get a real thrill," I told the girl as I headed the car back toward town. "I've a hunch Harry Atmore's mixed up in this thing as a sort of cat's-paw all around, and I want to see what's in his office."

We stopped a block away from Atmore's office building. I was a fatherly-looking old bird with mutton chop whiskers and a cane.

"Ever done any burglarizing?" I asked as I clumped my way along the sidewalk.

She shook her head.

"Here's where you begin," I said, piloted her into the office building, avoided the elevator, and began the long, tedious climb.

Atmore's lock was simple, any door lock is, for that matter. I had expected I'd have to go take a look through the files. It wasn't necessary. From the odor of cigar smoke in the office there'd been a late conference there. I almost fancied I could smell the incense-like perfume of the cat-woman and the aroma of her cigarettes. Tobacco smoke is peculiar. I can tell just about how fresh it is when I smell a room that's strong with it. This was a fresh odor. On the desk was a proof of loss of the necklace, and a memo to call a certain number. I looked up the number in the telephone book. It was the number of the insurance company. That's how I found it, simply looked up the insurance companies in the classified list and ran down the numbers.

The insurance money would be paid in the morning.

That house on West Forty-ninth Street was mixed up in the thing somehow. It was a new lead, and I drove the kid back to the apartment and turned in. The situation wasn't ripe as yet.

Next morning I heard her stirring around, getting breakfast. Of course it simplified matters to eat in the apartment; but if the girl was going to work on the case with me she shouldn't do all the housework. I started to tell her so, rolled over, and grabbed another sleep. It was delicious lying there, stretching out in the warm bed, and hearing the cheery rattle of plates, knives and forks, cups and spoons. I had been a lone wolf so long, an outcast of society, that I thrilled with a delicious sense of intimacy at the idea of having Jean Ellery puttering around in my kitchen. Almost I felt like the father I posed as.

I got up, bathed, shaved, put on my disguise and walked out into the kitchen. The girl was gone. My breakfast was on the table, fruit, cream, toast in the toaster, coffee in the percolator, all ready to press a button and eat. The morning paper was even propped up by my plate.

I switched on the electricity, and wondered about the girl. Anxiously I listened for her step in the apartment. She was company, and I liked her. The kid didn't say much, but she had a sense of humor, a ready dimple, a twinkle in her eyes, and was mighty easy to look at.

She came in as I was finishing my coffee.

"Hello, Ed. I'm the early bird this morning, and I've caught the worm. That house out on Forty-ninth Street is occupied by old Doctor Drake. He's an old fellow who used to be in San Francisco, had a breakdown, retired, came here, lost his money, was poor as could be until three months ago, and then he suddenly blossomed out with ready money. He's retiring, crabbed, irascible, keeps to himself, has no practice and few visitors."

I looked her over, a little five-foot-three flapper, slim, active, graceful, but looking as though she had nothing under her chic hat except a hair bob.

"How did you know I wanted to find out about that bird; and how did you get the information?"

She ignored the first question, just passed it off with a wave of the hand.

"The information was easy. I grabbed some packages of face powder, went out in the neighborhood and posed as a demonstrator representing the factory, giving away free samples, and lecturing on the care of the complexion. I even know the neighborhood gossip, all the scandals, and the love affairs of everyone in the block. Give me some of that coffee, Ed. It smells good."

I grinned proudly at her. The kid was there. It would have been a hard job for me to get that information. She used her noodle. A doctor, eh? Big Ryan had gone to see him when he knew he would have the insurance money. The aunt wanted the girl killed. The engagement had been announced. Then there was the matter of my jade-handled dagger. Those things all began to mill around in my mind. They didn't fit together exactly, but they all pointed in one direction, and that direction made my eyes open a bit wider and my forehead pucker. The game was drawing to the point where I

would get into action and see what could be done along the line of checkmating the cat-woman.

A thought flashed through my mind. "Say, Jean, it's going to be a bit tough on you when it comes time to go back. What'll you tell people, that you were kidnapped and held in a cave or some place? And they'll have the police checking up on your story, you know?"

She laughed a bit and then her mouth tightened. "If you had been one of the soft-boiled kind that figured you should have married me or some such nonsense I wouldn't have stayed. It was only because you took me in on terms of equality that I remained. You take care of your problems and I'll take care of mine; and we'll both have plenty."

"That being the case, Jean," I told her, "I'm going to stage a robbery and a burglary tonight. Are you coming?"

She grinned at me.

"Miss Jean Ellery announces that it gives her pleasure to accept the invitation of Ed Jenkins to a holdup and burglary. When do we start?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Some time after eight or nine. It depends. In the meantime we get some sleep. It's going to be a big night."

With that I devoted my attention to the paper. After all, the kid was right. I could mind my own business and she could mind hers. She knew what she was doing. Hang it, though, it felt nice to have a little home to settle back in, one where I could read the papers while the girl cleaned off the table, humming a little song the while. All the company I'd ever had before had been a dog, and he was in the hospital recovering from the effects of our last adventure. I was getting old, getting to the point where I wanted company, someone to talk to, to be with.

I shrugged my shoulders and got interested in what I was reading. The police were being panned right. My reputation of being a phantom crook was being rubbed in. Apparently I could disappear, taking an attractive girl and a valuable necklace with me, and the police were absolutely powerless.

Along about dark I parked my car out near Forty-ninth Street. I hadn't much that was definite to go on, but I was playing a pretty good hunch. I knew Big Ryan's car, and I knew the route he took

in going to the house of Dr. Drake. I figured he'd got the insurance money some time during the day. Also I doped it out that the trips to the house of Dr. Drake were made after dark. It was pretty slim evidence to work out a plan of campaign on, but, on the other hand, I had nothing to lose.

We waited there two hours before we got action, and then it came, right according to schedule. Big Bill Ryan's car came under the street light, slowed for the bad break that was in the gutter at that point, and then Big Ryan bent forward to shift gears as he pulled out of the hole. It was a bad spot in the road and Bill knew it was there. He'd driven over it just the same way the night I'd followed him.

When he straightened up from the gearshift he was looking down the business end of a wicked pistol. I don't ordinarily carry 'em, preferring to use my wits instead, but this job I wanted to look like the job of somebody else anyway, and the pistol came in handy.

Of course, I was wearing a mask.

There wasn't any need for argument. The gun was there. Big Bill Ryan's fat face was there, and there wasn't three inches between 'em. Big Bill kicked out the clutch and jammed on the brake.

There was a puzzled look on his face as he peered at me. The big fence knew every crook in the game, and he probably wondered who had the nerve to pull the job. It just occurred to me that he looked too much interested and not enough scared, when I saw what I'd walked into. Big Bill had the car stopped dead before he sprung his trap. That was so I couldn't drop off into the darkness. He wanted me.

The back of the car, which had been in shadow, seemed to move, to become alive. From beneath a robe which had been thrown over the seat and floor there appeared a couple of arms, the glint of the street light on metal arrested my eye; and it was too late to do anything, even if I could have gotten away with it.

There were two gunmen concealed in the back of that car. Big Bill Ryan ostensibly was driving alone. As a matter of fact he had a choice bodyguard. Those two guns were the best shots in crookdom, and they obeyed orders.

Big Bill spoke pleasantly.

"I hadn't exactly expected this, Jenkins, but I was prepared for it. You see I credit you with a lot of brains. How you found out

about the case, and how you learned enough to intercept me on this little trip is more than I know. However, I've always figured you were the most dangerous man in the world, and I didn't take any chances.

"You're a smart man, Jenkins; but you're running up against a stone wall. I'm glad this happened when there was a reward out for you in California. It'll be very pleasant to surrender you to the police, thereby cementing my pleasant relations and also getting a cut out of the reward money. Come, come, get in and sit down. Grab his arms, boys."

Revolvers were thrust under my nose. Grinning faces leered at me. Grimy hands stretched forth and grabbed my shoulders. The car lurched forward and sped away into the night, headed toward the police station. In such manner had Ed Jenkins been captured by a small-time crook and a couple of guns. I could feel myself blush with shame. What was more, there didn't seem to be any way out of it. The guns were awaiting orders, holding fast to me, pulling me over the door. Ryan was speeding up. If I could break away I'd be shot before I could get off of the car, dead before my feet hit ground. If I stayed where I was I'd be in the police station in ten minutes, in a cell in eleven, and five minutes later the reporters would be interviewing me, and the papers would be grinding out extras.

It's the simple things that are hard to beat. This thing was so blamed simple, so childish almost, and yet, there I was.

We flashed past an intersection, swung to avoid the lights of another car that skidded around the corner with screeching tires, and then we seemed to be rocking back and forth, whizzing through the air. It was as pretty a piece of driving as I have ever seen. Jean Ellery had come around the paved corner at full speed, skidding, slipping, right on the tail of the other machine, had swung in sideways, hit the rear bumper and forced Ryan's car around and over, into the curb, and then she had sped on her way, uninjured. Ryan's car had crumpled a front wheel against the curb, and we were all sailing through the air.

Personally, I lit on my feet and kept going. I don't think anyone was hurt much, although Ryan seemed to make a nosedive through the windshield, and the two guns slammed forward against the back of the front seat and then pitched out. Being on the

running board, I had just taken a little loop-the-loop through the atmosphere, gone into a tail spin, and pancaked to the earth.

The kid was there a million. If she had come up behind on a straight stretch there would have been lots of action. Ryan would have spotted her, and the guns would have gone into action. She'd either have been captured with me, or we'd both have been shot. By slamming into us from around a corner, however, she'd played her cards perfectly. It had been damned clever driving. What was more it had been clever headwork. She'd seen what had happened when I stuck the gun into Ryan's face, had started my car, doubled around the block, figured our speed to a nicety, and slammed down the cross street in the nick of time.

These things I thought over as I sprinted around a house, through a backyard, into an alley, and into another backyard. The kid had gone sailing off down the street, and I had a pretty strong hunch she had headed for the apartment. She'd done her stuff, and the rest was up to me.

Hang it! My disguise was in my car, and here I was, out in the night, my face covered by a mask, a gun in my pocket, and a reward out for me, with every cop in town scanning every face that passed him on the street. Oh well, it was all in a lifetime and I had work to do. I'd liked to have handled Bill Ryan; seeing I couldn't get him, I had to play the next best bet, Dr. Drake.

His house wasn't far, and I made it in quick time. I was working against time.

I took off my mask, walked boldly up the front steps and rang the doorbell.

There was the sound of shuffling feet, and then a seamed, sallow face peered out at me. The door opened a bit, and two glittering, beady eyes bored into mine.

"What d'yuh want?"

I figured him for Doctor Drake. He was pretty well along in years, and his eyes and forehead showed some indications of education. There was a glittering cupidity about the face, a cunning selfishness that seemed to be the keynote of his character.

"I'm bringing the money."

His head thrust a trifle farther forward and his eyes bored into mine.

"What money?"

"From Bill Ryan."

"But Mr. Ryan said he would be here himself."

I shrugged my shoulders.

I had made my play and the more I kept silent the better it would be. I knew virtually nothing about this end of the game. He knew everything. It would be better for me to let him convince himself than to rush in and ruin it trying to talk too much of detail.

At length the door came cautiously open.

"Come in."

He led the way into a sort of office. The furniture was apparently left over from some office or other, and it was good stuff, massive mahogany, dark with years; old-fashioned book-cases; chairs that were almost antiques; obsolete text books, all of the what-nots that were the odds and ends of an old physician's office.

Over all lay a coating of gritty dust.

"Be seated," said the old man, shuffling across to the swivel chair before the desk. I could see that he was breaking fast, this old man. His forehead and eyes retained much of strength, indicated some vitality. His mouth was sagging, weak. Below his neck he seemed to have decayed, the loose, flabby muscles seemed incapable of functioning. His feet could hardly be lifted from the floor. His shoulders lurched forward, and his spine curved into a great hump. Dandruff sprinkled over his coat, an affair that had once been blue serge and which was now spotted with egg, grease, syrup and stains.

"Where is the money?"

I smiled wisely, reached into an inner pocket, half pulled out a wallet, then leered at him after the fashion of a cheap crook, one of the smart-aleck, cunning kind.

"Let's see the stuff first."

He hesitated, then heaved out of his chair and approached a bookcase. Before the door he suddenly stiffened with suspicion. He turned, his feverish eyes glittering wildly in the feeble light of the small incandescent with which the room was redly illuminated.

"Spread out the money on the table."

I laughed.

"Say, bo, the coin's here, all right; but if you want to see the long green you gotta produce."

He hesitated a bit, and then the telephone rang, a jangling, imperative clamor. He shuffled back to the desk, picked up the receiver in a gnarled, knotty hand, swept back the unkempt hair which hung over his ear, and listened.

As he listened I could see the back straighten, the shoulders straighten. A hand came stealing up the inside of the coat.

Because I knew what to expect I wasn't surprised. He bent forward, muttered something, hung up the receiver, spun about and thrust forward an ugly pistol, straight at the chair in which I had been sitting. If ever there was desperation and murder stamped on a criminal face it was on his.

The only thing that was wrong with his plans was that I had silently shifted my position. When he swung that gun around he pointed it where I had been, but wasn't. The next minute I had his neck in a stranglehold, had the gun, and had him all laid out for trussing. Linen bandage was available, and it always makes a nice rope for tying people up with. I gagged him on general principles and then I began to go through that bookcase.

In a book on interior medicine that was written when appendicitis was classified as fatal inflammation of the intestines, I found a document, yellow with age. It was dated in 1904 but it had evidently been in the sunlight some, and had seen much had usage. The ink was slightly faded, and there were marks of old folds, dog-eared corners, little tears. Apparently the paper had battled around in a drawer for a while, had perhaps been rescued at one time or another from a wastebasket, and, on the whole, it was genuine as far as date was concerned. It couldn't have had all that hard usage in less than twenty-two years.

There was no time then to stop and look at it. I took out my wallet, dropped it in there, and then went back to the bookcase, turning the books upside down, shaking them, fluttering the leaves, wondering if there was something else.

I was working against time and knew it. Big Bill Ryan wouldn't dare notify the police. He wouldn't want to have me arrested at the home of Doctor Drake; but he would lose no time in getting the house surrounded by a bunch of gunmen of his own choosing, of capturing me as I sought to escape the house, and then taking me to police headquarters.

It was a matter of seconds. I could read that paper any time; but I could only go through that bookcase when I was there, and it looked as though I wouldn't be in that house again, not for some time. At that I didn't have time to complete the search. I hadn't covered more than half of the books when I heard running steps on the walk, and feet came pounding up the steps.

As a crook my cue was to make for the back door, to plunge out into the night, intent on escape. That would run me into the guns of a picked reception committee that was waiting in the rear. I knew Big Ryan, knew that the hurrying impatience of those steps on the front porch was merely a trap. I was in a house that was surrounded. The automobile with engine running out in front was all a part of the stall. Ryan had probably stopped his machine half a block away, let out his men, given them a chance to surround the house, and then he had driven up, stopped the car with the engine running and dashed up the steps. If Dr. Drake had me covered all right; if I had managed to overpower the old man, I would break and run for the rear.

All of these things flashed through my mind in an instant. I was in my element again. Standing there before the rifled bookcase, in imminent danger, I was as cool as a cake of ice, and I didn't waste a second.

The door of the bookcase I slammed shut. The books were in order on the shelves. As for myself, I did the unexpected. It is the only safe rule.

Instead of sneaking out the back door, I reached the front door in one jump, threw it open and plunged my fist into the bruised, bleeding countenance of Big Bill Ryan. That automobile windshield hadn't used him too kindly, and he was badly shaken. My maneuver took him by surprise. For a split fraction of a second I saw him standing like a statue. The next instant my fist had crashed home.

From the side of the house a revolver spat. There was a shout, a running of dark figures, and I was off. Leaping into the driver's seat of the empty automobile, I had slammed in the gears, shot the clutch, stepped on the throttle and was away.

I chuckled as I heard the chorus of excited shouts behind, the futile rattle of pistol shots. There would be some explaining for Big Bill Ryan to do. In the meantime I was headed for the apartment. I was going to decorate Jean Ellery with a medal, a medal for being the best assistant a crook ever had.

I left the car a couple of blocks from the apartment and walked rapidly down the street. I didn't want the police to locate the stolen car too near my apartment, and yet I didn't dare to go too far without my disguise. The walk of two blocks to my apartment was risky.

My own machine, the one in which Jean had made the rescue, was parked outside. I looked it over with a grin. She was some driver. The front bumper and license plate had been torn off, and the paint on the radiator was scratched a bit, but that was all.

I worried a bit about that license number. I'd bought that car as the old man with the flapper daughter, and I had it registered in the name I had taken, the address as the apartment where Jean and I lived. Losing that license number was something to worry about.

I made record time getting to the door of the apartment, fitting the latchkey and stepping inside. The place was dark, and I pressed the light switch, then jumped back, ready for anything. The room was empty. On the floor was a torn article of clothing. A shoe was laying on its side over near the other door. A rug was rumpled, a chair overturned. In the other room there was confusion. A waist had been ripped to ribbons and was lying by another shoe. The waist was one that Jean had been wearing. The shoes were hers.

I took a quick glance around, making sure the apartment was empty, and then I got into action. Foot by foot I covered that floor looking for something that would be a clue, some little thing that would tell me of the persons who had done the job. Big Bill had acted mighty quick if he had been the one. If it had been the police, why the struggle? If it was a trap, why didn't they spring it?

There was no clue. Whoever it was had been careful to leave nothing behind. I had only a limited amount of time, and I knew it. Once more I was working against time, beset by adverse circumstances, fighting overwhelming odds.

I made a run for the elevator, got to the ground floor, rushed across the street, into the little car Jean had driven, and, as I stepped on the starter and switched on the lights, there came the wail of a siren, the bark of an exhaust, and a police car came skidding around the corner and slid to a stop before the apartment house.

As for me, I was on my way.

Mentally I ran over the characters in the drama that had been played about me, and I picked on Harry Atmore. The little, weak, clever attorney with his cunning dodges, his rat-like mind, his cowering spirit was my meat. He was the weak point in the defense, the weak link in the chain.

I stopped at a telephone booth in a drug store. A plastered-haired sheik was at the telephone fixing up a couple of heavy dates for a wild night. I had to wait while he handed out what was meant to be a wicked line. Finally he hung up the receiver and sauntered toward his car, smirking his self-satisfaction. I grabbed the instrument and placed the warm receiver to my ear.

Atmore wasn't at the house. His wife said I'd find him at the office. I didn't call the office. It would suit me better to walk in unannounced if I could get him by himself. I climbed into my machine and was on my way.

I tried the door of Atmore's office and found it was open. There was a light in the reception room. Turning, I pulled the catch on the spring lock, slammed the door and turned out the light. Then I walked into the private office.

There must have been that on my face which showed that I was on a mission which boded no good to the crooked shyster, an intentness of purpose which was apparent. He gave me one look, and then shrivelled down in his chair, cowering, his rat-like nose twitching, his yellow teeth showing.

I folded my arms and glared at him.

"Where's the girl?"

He lowered his gaze and shrugged his shoulders.

I advanced. Right then I was in no mood to put up with evasions. Something seemed to tell me that the girl was in danger, that every second counted, and I had no time to waste on polite formalities. That girl had grown to mean something to me. She had fitted in, uncomplaining, happy, willing, and she had saved me when I had walked into a trap there with Big Bill Ryan. As long as I was able to help that girl she could count on me. There had never been very much said, but we understood each other, Jean Ellery and I. She had played the game with me, and I would play it with her.

"Atmore," I said, pausing impressively between the words, "I want to know where that girl is, and I mean to find out."

He ducked his hand, and I sprang, wrenched his shoulder, pulled him backward, crashed a chair to the floor, struck the gun up, kicked his wrist, smashed my fist in his face and sprawled him on the floor. He didn't get up. I was standing over him, and he crawled and cringed like a whipped cur.

"Miss Hare has her. Bill Ryan got her located through the

number on a machine, and Hattie Hare went after her. She is a devil, that woman. She has the girl back at the Holton house."

I looked at his writhing face for a moment trying to determine if he was lying. I thought not. Big Ryan had undoubtedly traced that license number. That was but the work of a few minutes on the telephone with the proper party. He couldn't have gone after the girl himself because he had been at Dr. Drake's too soon afterward. On the other hand, he had gone to a public telephone because he had undoubtedly telephoned Dr. Drake and told him of his accident, probably warned him against me. From what the doctor had said, Ryan knew I was there, and he had dropped everything to come after me. What more natural than that he should have telephoned the cat-woman to go and get the girl.

I turned and strode toward the door.

"Listen, you rat," I snapped. "If you have lied to me, you'll die!"

His eyes rolled a bit, his mouth twitched, but he said nothing. I ran into the dark outer office, threw open the door, snapped the lock back on the entrance door, banged it and raced to the elevator. Then I turned and softly retraced my steps, slipped into the dark outer office, and tiptoed to the door of the private office. By opening it a crack I could see the lawyer huddled at his desk, frantically clicking the hook on the telephone.

In a minute he got central, snapped a number, waited and then gave his message in five words. "He's on his way out," he said, and hung up.

I only needed one guess. He was talking to the cat-woman. They had prepared a trap, had baited it with the girl, and were waiting for me to walk into it.

I went back into the hall, slipped down the elevator, went to my car and stepped on the starter. As I went I thought. Time was precious. Long years of being on my own resources had taught me to speed up my thinking processes. For years I had been a lone wolf, had earned the name of being the phantom crook, one who could slip through the fingers of the police. Then there had been a welcome vacation while I enjoyed immunity in California, but now all that was past. I was my own man, back in the thick of things. I had accomplished everything I had done previously by thinking fast, reaching quick decisions, and putting those decisions into instant execution. This night I made up my mind I would walk

into the trap and steal the bait; whether I could walk out again depended upon my abilities. I would be matching my wits against those of the cat-woman, and she was no mean antagonist. Witness the manner in which she had learned that the girl had not been murdered, that I had convinced the girl of the woman's duplicity, had taken her in as a partner, the manner in which the cat-woman had known she could reach me through the girl, that I would pick on Atmore as being the weak link in the chain.

I stopped at a drug store long enough to read the paper I had taken from the book at Dr. Drake's house, and to telephone. I wanted to know all the cards I held in my hand before I called for a showdown.

The document was a strange one. It was nothing more nor less than a consent that the doctor should take an unborn baby and do with it as he wished. It was signed by the expectant mother. Apparently it was merely one of thousands of such documents which find their way into the hands of doctors. Yet I was certain it represented an important link in a strong chain. Upon the back of the document were three signatures. One of them was the signature of Hattie M. Hare. There were addresses, too, also telephone numbers. Beneath the three signatures were the words "nurses and witnesses."

I consulted the directory, got the number of H. F. Morton, and got him out of bed.

"This is Mr. Holton," I husked into the telephone. "Come to my house at once."

With the words I banged the receiver against the telephone a couple of times and hung up. Then I sprinted into the street, climbed into the machine and was off.

I had no time to waste, and yet I was afraid the trap would be sprung before I could get the bait. It was late and a ring at the doorbell would have been a telltale sign. I parked the machine a block away, hit the backyards and approached the gloomy mass of shadows which marked the home of Arthur C. Holton, the oil magnate. I was in danger and knew it, knew also that the danger was becoming more imminent every minute.

I picked a pantry window. Some of the others looked more inviting, but I picked one which I would hardly have been expected to have chosen. There had already been a few minutes' delay. Seconds were precious. I knew the house well enough to

take it almost at a run. When I have once been inside a place I can generally dope out the plan of the floors, and I always remember those plans.

In the front room there was just the flicker of a fire in the big fireplace. Above the tiles there glowed two spots of fire. I had been right in my surmise about the painting of the cat's head. The eyes had been tinted with luminous paint.

In the darkness there came a faint, dull, "click." It was a sound such as is made by a telephone bell when it gives merely the jump of an electrical contact, a sound which comes when a receiver has been removed from an extension line. With the sound I had out my flashlight and was searching for the telephone. If anyone was using an extension telephone in another part of the house I wanted to hear what was being said.

It took me a few seconds to locate the instrument, and then I slipped over to it and eased the receiver from the hook. It was the cat-woman who was talking:

"Yes, Arthur C. Holton's residence, and come right away. You know he threatened to return. Yes, I know it's Ed Jenkins. I tell you I saw his face. Yes, the phantom crook. Send two cars and come at once."

There was a muttered assent from the cop at the other end of the line, and then the click of two receivers. Mine made a third.

So that was the game, was it? In some way she had known when I entered the place. I fully credited those luminous, cat-eyes of hers with being able to see in the dark. She had laid a trap for me, baited it with the girl, and now she had summoned the police. Oh well, I had been in worse difficulties before.

I took the carpeted stairway on the balls of my feet, taking the stairs two at a time. There was a long corridor above from which there opened numerous bedrooms. I saw a flutter of pink at one end of the hall, a mere flash of woman's draperies. I made for that point, and I went at top speed. If my surmise was correct I had no time to spare, not so much as the tick of a watch.

The door was closed and I flung it open, standing not upon ceremony or formalities. I was racing with death.

Within the room was a dull light, a reflected, diffused light which came from the corridor, around a corner, against the half-open door, and into the room. There was a bed and a white figure was stretched upon the bed, a figure which was struggling in the

first panic of a sudden awakening. When I had flung the door open it had crashed against the wall, rebounded so that it was half closed, and then remained shivering on its hinges, catching and reflecting the light from the hall.

In that semi-darkness the cat-woman showed as a flutter of flowing silk. She moved with the darting quickness of a cat springing on its prey. She had turned her head as I crashed into the room, and her eyes, catching the light from the hall, glowed a pale, baleful green, a green of hate, of tigerish intensity of rage.

Quick as she was, I was quicker. As the light caught the flicker of cold steel I flung her to one side, slammed her against the wall. She was thin, lithe, supple, but the warm flesh of her which met my hands through the thin veil of sheer silk was as hard as wire springs. She recoiled from the wall, poised lightly on her feet, gave me a flicker of the light from those cat-eyes once more, and then fluttered from the room, her silks flapping in the breeze of her progress. Two hands shot from the bed and grasped me by the shoulders, great, hairy hands with clutching fingers.

"Jenkins! Ed Jenkins!" exclaimed a voice.

I shook him off and raced for the door. From the street below came the sound of sliding tires, the noise of feet hurrying on cement, pounding on gravel. Someone dashed up the front steps and pounded on the door, rang frantically at the bell. The police had arrived, excited police who bungled the job of surrounding the house.

There was yet time. I had been in tighter pinches. I could take the back stairs, shoot from the back door and try the alley. There would probably be the flash of firearms, the whine of lead through the night air, but there would also be the element of surprise, the stupidity of the police, the flat-footed slowness of getting into action. I had experienced it all before.

In one leap I made the back stairs and started to rush down. The front door flew open and there came the shrill note of a police whistle. I gathered my muscles for the next flying leap, and then stopped, caught almost in midair.

I had thought of the girl!

Everything that had happened had fitted in with my theory of the case, and in that split fraction of a second I knew I was right. Some flash of inner intuition, some telepathic insight converted a working hypothesis, a bare theory, into an absolute certainty. In

that instant I knew the motive of the cat-woman, knew the reason she had rushed from that other room. Jean Ellery had been used by her to bait the trap for Ed Jenkins, but she had had another use, had served another purpose. She was diabolically clever, that cat-woman, and Jean Ellery was to die.

I thought of the girl, of her charm, her ready acceptance of life as the working partner of a crook, and I paused in mid flight, turned a rapid flip almost in the air and was running madly down the corridor, toward the police.

There are times when the mind speeds up and thoughts become flashes of instantaneous conceptions, when one lives ages in the space of seconds. All of the thoughts which had pieced together the real solution of the mystery, the explanation of the actions of the cat-woman had come to me while I was poised, balanced for a leap on the stairs. My decision to return had been automatic, instantaneous. I could not leave Jean Ellery in danger.

The door into which the cat-woman had plunged was slightly ajar. Through it could be seen the gleam of light, a flicker of motion. I was almost too late as I hurtled through that door, my outstretched arm sweeping the descending hand of the cat-woman to one side.

Upon the bed, bound, gagged, her helpless eyes staring into the infuriated face of the cat-woman, facing death with calm courage, watching the descent of the knife itself, was the form of Jean Ellery. My hand had caught the downthrust of the knife just in time.

The cat-woman staggered back, spitting vile oaths, lips curling, eyes flashing, her words sounding like the explosive spats of an angry cat. The knife had clattered to the floor and lay at my very feet. The green-handled dagger, the jade-hilted knife which had been taken from my apartment. At that instant a shadow blotted the light from the hallway and a voice shouted:

"Hands up, Ed Jenkins!"

The cat-woman gave an exclamation of relief.

"Thank God, officer, you came in the nick of time!"

There was the shuffling of many feet; peering faces, gleaming sheilds, glinting pistols, and I found myself grabbed by many hands, handcuffs snapped about my wrists, cold steel revolvers thrust against my neck. I was pushed, jostled, slammed, pulled, dragged down the stairs and into the library.

The cat-woman followed, cajoling the officers, commenting on their bravery, their efficiency, spitting epithets at me.

And then H. F. Morton walked into the open door, took in the situation with one glance of his steely eyes, deposited his hat and gloves on a chair, walked to the great table, took a seat behind it and peered over the tops of his glasses at the officers, at the cat-woman, at myself.

The policemen jostled me toward the open front door.

The lawyer held up a restraining hand.

"Just a minute," he said, and there was that in the booming authority of the voice which held the men, stopped them in mid-action.

"What is this?" he asked, and, with the words, dropped his hands to the table and began to drum regularly, rhythmically, "rummpy-tum-tum; rummpy-tum-tum; rummpy-tum-tumpty-tum-tumpty-tum-tum."

"Aw g'wan," muttered one of the officers as he pulled me forward.

"Shut up, you fool. He's the mayor's personal attorney!" whispered another, his hands dragging me back, holding me against those who would have taken me from the house.

The word ran through the group like wildfire. There were the hoarse sibilants of many whispers, and then attentive silence.

" 'Tis Ed Jenkins, sor," remarked one of the policemen, one who seemed to be in charge of the squad. "The Phantom Crook, sor, caught in this house from which he kidnapped the girl an' stole the necklace, an' 'twas murder he was after tryin' to commit this time."

The lawyer's gray eyes rested on my face.

"If you want to talk, Jenkins, talk now."

I nodded.

"The girl, Jean Ellery. She is the daughter of Arthur C. Holton."

The fingers stopped their drumming and gripped the table.

"What?"

I nodded. "It was supposed that his child was a boy, a boy who died shortly after birth. As a matter of fact, the child was a girl, a girl who lived, who is known as Jean Ellery. A crooked doctor stood for the substitution, being paid a cash fee. A nurse originated the scheme, Miss Hattie M. Hare. The boy could never be traced. His future was placed in the doctor's hands before birth

and when coincidence played into the hands of this nurse she used all her unscrupulous knowledge, all her cunning. The girl was to be brought up to look upon the nurse as her aunt, her only living relative. At the proper time the whole thing was to be exposed, but the doctor was to be the one who was to take the blame. Hattie M. Hare was to have her connection with the scheme kept secret.

"But the doctor found out the scheme to make him the goat. He had in his possession a paper signed by the nurse, a paper which would have foiled the whole plan. He used this paper as a basis for regular blackmail.

"It was intended to get this paper, to bring out the girl as the real heir, to have her participate in a trust fund which had been declared for the child of Arthur C. Holton, to have her inherit all the vast fortune of the oil magnate;—and to remember her aunt Hattie M. Hare as one of her close and dear relatives, to have her pay handsomely for the so-called detectives and lawyers who were to 'unearth' the fraud, to restore her to her place, to her estate.

"And then there came another development, Arthur C. Holton became infatuated with the arch-conspirator, Hattie M. Hare. He proposed marriage, allowed himself to be prevailed upon to make a will in her favor, to make a policy of life insurance to her.

"The girl ceased to be an asset, but became a menace. She must be removed. Also Arthur C. Holton must die that Miss Hattie M. Hare might succeed in his estate without delay. But there was a stumbling block, the paper which was signed by Hattie M. Hare, the paper which might be connected with the substitution of children, which would brand her as a criminal, which would be fatal if used in connection with the testimony of the doctor.

"Doctor Drake demanded money for his silence and for that paper. He demanded his money in cash, in a large sum. The woman, working with fiendish cunning, decided to use me as a cat's-paw to raise the money and to also eliminate the girl from her path as well as to apparently murder the man who stood between her and his wealth. I was to be enveigled into apparently stealing a necklace worth much money, a necklace which was to be insured, and the insurance payable to Miss Hare; I was to be tricked into kidnapping a girl who would be murdered; I was to be persuaded to make threats against Mr. Holton, and then I was to become the apparent murderer of the oil magnate. My dagger was to be found sticking in his breast. In such manner would Miss Hare bring

about the death of the man who had made her the beneficiary under his will, buy the silence of the doctor who knew her for a criminal, remove the only heir of the blood, and make me stand all the blame, finally delivering me into the hands of the law.

"There is proof. I have the signed statement in my pocket. Doctor Drake will talk. Harry Atmore will confess. . . . There she goes. Stop her!"

The cat-woman had seen that her play was ended. She had realized that she was at the end of her rope, that I held the evidence in my possession, that the bound and gagged girl upstairs would testify against her. She had dashed from the room while the stupefied police had held me and stared at her with goggle eyes.

Openmouthed they watched her flight, no one making any attempt to take after her, eight or ten holding me in their clumsy hands while the cat-woman, the arch criminal of them all dashed out into the night.

H. F. Morton looked at me and smiled.

"Police efficiency, Jenkins," he said.

Then he faced the officers. "Turn him loose."

The officers shifted uneasily. The man in charge drew himself up stiffly and saluted. "He is a noted criminal with a price on his head, the very devil of a crook, sor."

Morton drummed steadily on the desk.

"What charge have you against him?"

The officer grunted.

"Stealin' Mr. Holton's necklace, an' breakin' into his house, sor."

"Those charges are withdrawn," came from the rear of the room in deep, firm tones.

I turned to see Arthur C. Holton. He had dressed and joined the group. I did not even know when he had entered the room, how much he had heard. By his side, her eyes starry, stood Jean Ellery, and there were gleaming gems of moisture on her cheeks.

The policeman grunted.

"For kidnappin' the young lady an' holdin' her. If she stayed against her will 'twas abductin', an' she wouldn't have stayed with a crook of her own accord, not without communicatin' with her folks."

That was a poser. I could hear Jean suck in her breath to speak the words that would have freed me but would have damned her in society forever; but she had not the chance.

Before I could even beat her to it, before my confession would have spared her name and sent me to the penitentiary, H. F. Morton's shrewd mind had grasped all the angles of the situation, and he beat us all to it.

"You are wrong. The girl was not kidnapped. Jenkins never saw her before."

The policeman grinned broadly.

"Then would yez mind tellin' me where she was while all this hue an' cry was bein' raised, while everyone was searchin' for her?"

Morton smiled politely, urbanely.

"Not at all, officer. She was at my house, as the guest of my wife. Feeling that her interests were being jeopardized and that her life was in danger, I had her stay incognito in my own home."

There was tense, thick silence.

The girl gasped. The clock ticked. There was the thick, heavy breathing of the big-bodied policemen.

"Rummy-tum-tum; rummy-tum-tum; rumiddy, tumptidy, tumpy tum-tum," drummed the lawyer. "Officer, turn that man loose. Take off those handcuffs. Take . . . off . . . those . . . handcuffs . . . I . . . say. You haven't a thing against him in California."

As one in a daze, the officer fitted his key to the handcuffs, the police fell back, and I stood a free man.

"Good night," said the lawyer pointedly, his steely eyes glittering into those of the officers.

Shamefacedly, the officers trooped from the room.

Jean threw herself into my arms.

"Ed, you came back because of me! You risked your life to save mine, to see that a wrong was righted, to see that I was restored to my father! Ed, dear, you are a man in a million."

I patted her shoulder.

"You were a good pal, Jean and I saw you through," I said. "Now you must forget about it. The daughter of a prominent millionaire has no business knowing a crook."

Arthur Holton advanced, hand outstretched.

"I was hypnotized, fooled, taken in by an adventuress and worse. I can hardly think clearly, the events of the past few minutes have been so swift, but this much I do know. I can never repay you for what you have done, Ed Jenkins. I will see that your name is cleared of every charge against you in every state, that

you are a free man, that you are restored to citizenship, and that you have the right to live," and here he glanced at Jean: "You will stay with us as my guest?"

I shook my head. It was all right for them to feel grateful, to get a bit sloppy now that the grandstand play had been made, but they'd probably feel different about it by morning.

"I think I'll be on my way," I said, and started for the door.

"Ed!" It was the girl's cry, a cry which was as sharp, as stabbing as a quick pain at the heart. "*Ed, you're not leaving!*"

By way of answer I stumbled forward. Hell, was it possible that the difficulty with that threshold was that there was a mist in my eyes? Was Ed Jenkins, the phantom crook, known and feared by the police of a dozen states, becoming an old woman?

Two soft arms flashed about my neck, a swift kiss planted itself on my cheek, warm lips whispered in my ear.

I shook myself free, and stumbled out into the darkness. She was nothing but a kid, the daughter of a millionaire oil magnate. I was a crook. Nothing but hurt to her could come to any further acquaintance. It had gone too far already.

I jumped to one side, doubled around the house, away from the street lights, hugging the shadow which lay near the wall. From within the room, through the half-open window there came a steady, throbbing, thrumming sound: "Rummy-tum-tum; rummy-tum-tum; rummy-tum-tummy; tum-tummy-tum-tum."

H. F. Morton was thinking.

This Way Out

He slipped into my little apartment with a quick glance over his shoulder and a finger to his lips. I frowned at him. A crook he was, and I don't care to have crooks pay me social calls. I have made my reputation in crookdom as being a lone wolf, one who has no friends.

"Ed," he whispered, "I've come as a friend. You did me a good turn once, and I haven't forgotten it. *The woman with the mole on her left hand*—watch out for her. They're after you, Ed Jenkins. The police want you. The crooks want you. You haven't a gang to back you up. . . . Beware of the woman with the mole on her left hand."

That much of a warning he gave me, and then he was gone. It was as well. I pay but little attention to warnings. Also he left the jail smell in the apartment, that sickening, cloying odor of jail disinfectant. He had been in for vagrancy, this crook who was known as the Weasel. When the police couldn't frame anything better on him they'd throw him in on a vagrancy charge and bully him just enough to let him remember that he was nothing but a crook, and a weak crook at that. The stronger ones they left alone until they really had something on them. Little crooks like the Weasel were beaten up, knocked around from pillar to post.

I opened the windows to let the apartment air out.

As I flung open the window and stuck my head out into the balmy air of the summer night there came the bark of a pistol, another and another. Then silence.

The shots had come from around the corner, perhaps a block away. There was the whining shriek of tires as a car skidded around the corner, gathered momentum, and shot away into the night. A woman screamed, a man called out some hoarse question. There was the sound of running feet on the pavement, and isolated masses of animated curiosity sprinted toward the scene of the shooting.

I withdrew my head. Somehow, I had an uncomfortable feeling that the shooting concerned me. There was nothing to go on—nothing but that intangible feeling.

I waited for an hour, sitting there in the dark, giving the police a chance to make their investigations and get away from there, allowing the curiosity seekers a chance to get their fill and disperse. Then I put on hat and topcoat and went out.

At the cigar store on the corner I got the news. The Weasel it had been. Shot from a machine, one of those death cars which figure so prominently in bandit gang wars. He had been killed almost instantly.

I bit the end from a cigar, stepped to the flame which burned steadily and brightly, and thought of the life that had been snuffed out. Was it because of the warning? Was he suspected? Had he been followed to my apartment and killed as he left? Probably—I would never know for sure. The Weasel was one of those third-rate crooks, who allows himself to be shot down by a car full of bandits. The first-class man would have detected that car the instant it came in sight. Eternal vigilance is the price of safety in crookdom.

Off and on I have had many warnings, some sincere and some fake. This was peculiar. A warning by a crook, a warning against a woman with a mole on her left hand. There was no other description. Perhaps the Weasel had no opportunity to see her face. Perhaps he had seen merely the hand, heard her voice—perhaps. I wished I could question him a bit. Probably I had shown my impatience. At any rate it was a closed chapter. The Weasel was dead.

I stepped to the curb, called a taxi and went to a cabaret.

The Purple Rose was a fairly wild cabaret. There were entertainers who had lots of pep, waiters who rushed perspiringly about, amorous dancers who twined and writhed over the floor and a crashing orchestra that blared away into the din of the echoing

room. Crowded, sweaty, brazen, sensuous, it furnished entertainment, gave me a chance to study types, and something to think about.

The head waiter seated me at my usual table, one well back in a shaded corner. Time was when couples would have demanded this as the choice table of the place. Now they preferred to spoon openly, upon the dance floor, at the tables where the lights glared full upon them. Such is life.

I ordered a light meal, ate leisurely, enjoying the various characters I could study, listening to the blaring music, the harsh laughter, looking 'em over.

It was as I finished that a girl came to my table.

"Cheer up! I'm inclined to think it isn't so. How about a dance?"

I shook my head, taking her for one of the paid female entertainers. I knew most of them, had established myself as one to be left alone. This one evidently must be new.

She smiled, whirled about, looked at me coquettishly over her shoulder, held her hand up to a level with her eyes, snapped her fingers, and then smiled, a slow smile of red parted lips.

Her vitality, the quick grace of her motions, the snap and pep of her would have arrested my attention, but there was something else. As her hand came to a level with her eyes I noticed a mole upon her left hand, a small, dark discoloration on the back of the hand, showing sharply against the white of her smooth skin.

I paid my check and left the place. There was one cabaret that would be crossed off of my list. I thought of the Weasel, the barking of those staccato shots.

I summoned a cab and was followed. This was annoying, but not entirely unique. I have been followed frequently. There was no reason why I should not have gone directly to my apartment. In California I am safe. A criminal record makes me wanted in a dozen States, but, through a technicality, I cannot be extradited from California. In that State I enjoy immunity. Known as a crook, I can, nevertheless, live my own life; subject only to those annoyances which come to one who is without the law, who is legitimate prey for every stool pigeon, for every tin-star detective, every square-toed bull.

I had the driver swing through town and then take a spin out in the country. I could not get the thought of the Weasel from my

mind. There was something out of the ordinary in the wind. It was in a particularly dark and deserted stretch of road that the engine stopped. The driver jumped out and raised the hood. He was nervous, his hand trembling.

I slipped from the other door on the dark side of the car. Criminals can be arrested for carrying firearms, and I almost never have a gat in my possession. It is no crime to have one's wits about him, and my wits will get me out of as many jams as would guns.

I watched the back road. Nothing came. A car came from the other direction, going toward town. It was a handsome creation of plate glass and baked enamel. A woman was driving, a woman who was well muffled, despite the fact that the weather was pleasantly warm.

There was the sound of tires sliding over the gravel and the woman leaned out.

"In trouble, Taxi? Can I take a message to town or give your fare a lift?"

It was a pleasantly intriguing voice.

I slipped the taxi driver a bill and stepped out into the light.

"I'd like a ride back to town if it wouldn't inconvenience you."

She laughed, a low throaty laugh, and swung open the door. "Get in, up here in front. You'll be very welcome."

I started as she slammed in the clutch, and I felt the car give a lurch forward. The hand which gripped the steering wheel had a small mole on the back of the smooth skin.

She saw that I recognized her. The right hand came down and rested on my knee.

"You are hard to get acquainted with, Ed Jenkins."

I bowed.

"May I compliment you on the care you used in getting me in the car with you? The detail of the taxicab breakdown, the forethought of having a set of signals arranged, as you must have had, the coming toward town instead of in the same direction I was going. It was all very clever."

She rippled a laugh. "It *was* clever. I had it fixed so the taxi driver would signal to me by flashing on and off the brake light. When he knew what road he was to take he signalled the number of miles from the turn where he would stall the engine. I took the loop and came by, going back toward town."

"If you wanted to see me why not have come directly to my apartment? Why go to all this trouble?"

Her eyes became cold and hard, her mouth tightened to a thin line.

"Because," she said slowly, "I wanted to do more than see you. I wanted to get you entirely in my power."

With the words, I became aware that a small, deadly revolver was in that right hand, a revolver that was held against my ribs.

I looked at her carefully. She could fire if she wanted to before I could get my hands on her arm, before I could move far enough to grasp her. She could fire if she wanted to, but did she want to? Did she have the nerve? I studied her face and decided she was desperate. Whether or not she would pull the trigger I didn't know. She wasn't exactly the type that shoots for the fun of the thing, but she was desperate. Something was on her mind besides her bobbed hair.

"Ed Jenkins," she said, "you are coming with me. I only ask that you do as I say for two hours. At the end of that time you will be free to go where you please as far as I am concerned. Until then you must accompany me. Will you promise you will come and that you won't try to escape, or must I keep you covered? I'll shoot if I have to."

I yawned.

"Keep me covered, kid."

There was a catch in her voice.

"But the gun might go off, accidentally."

"Let it."

Her lips tightened. She stepped on the throttle, and I crooked my right leg, caught the emergency brake back of my heel and gave a sudden jerk of the lever. She had been bracing herself against the acceleration of the throttle, and the sudden locking of the wheels threw her forward against the steering wheel. One of my hands circled her neck, the middle finger locking on her nose, the other wrenched her wrist.

When I had tossed the gun overboard I took my foot off the emergency brake lever, straightened up the car, which had swung sideways on the road, and grinned over at the kid.

"Step on it," I told her.

Her face was white, chalky; there was a fire in her eyes that seemed to make them blaze in the darkness, and her lips were set in a thin, determined line.

"You brute, you cad!"

I yawned again.

"That's the way with you women. You claim the privilege of sticking a gun in my ribs, and then, because I take it away from you I'm no gentleman. You make me sick. Drive on before I take you over my knee and give you a blamed good spanking."

She slammed the car to a stop, doubled up her knees, swung around from the back of the steering wheel, and came on me like a wildcat, biting, scratching, striking, furious. I held her as best I could, keeping her off. Her dress ripped from one shoulder, her high-heeled shoes dug into my leg as she twisted her legs about mine, and her pearly teeth snapped as she tried to bite me. It was a rough party while it lasted.

All of a sudden she stiffened, then relaxed and began to cry, and—such is the consistency of the sex—she began to bawl on *my* shoulder. She was a total wreck. Her stockings had come unrolled and slipped down her bare legs gleaming white beneath the dash-light. Her hair was strung all around her face, her dress was torn, and my hand was resting on the soft warmth of her bare shoulder, and blamed if I wasn't patting her a bit, sort of comforting her. Why I don't know—sort of mechanical, I guess; but I sure didn't intend to sit there and console her because she hadn't been able to kill me.

I shoved her away.

"Oh, how I hate you!" she blazed.

I nodded. "It sure looks it. The next time my taxi breaks down and a girl offers me a ride to town I'll have my roller skates along."

And then she made a lunge at me, pillowed her head on my shoulder again and sobbed some more. I let her cry it out. Disappointment and rage had made her pretty near hysterical, and I wanted her to calm down for a chin-chin. I wanted to find out what it was all about, get a line on this dame with the mole on her hand.

After a while she straightened, reached down and rolled her socks, then she powdered her nose and straightened her hair. Back to normal again.

She slipped up her dress, fastened it somehow, looked at me and then grinned.

"You win," she remarked.

"Where did you want me to go?" I asked her.

The smile faded for a minute and I thought she was going to cry again. "It meant so damned much to me," she said, "I didn't think I could possibly fall down. . . ."

She broke off to look at her wrist watch, then sighed again.

"I was to have you in a certain place in twenty minutes from now. . . . I thought sure I could vamp you, then, when I couldn't, I determined to get rough. . . . Oh, it meant so much to me!"

I watched her curiously.

"Where was this place, and were you under orders from someone else?"

"I can't tell you where it is, Ed, and I was under orders."

I settled back in the cushions. "Well, get started. Don't be so damned weepy, and drive. If anybody wants me at a certain place at a certain time, I'm just obstinate enough to go there—and what's more, I'm going to start a little celebration when I get there. I'm getting tired of having a lot of cheap crooks try to interfere with me. I'm going to take a look at this person who sicced a cave-woman on my trail."

She grinned all over her face.

"I thought maybe you'd come," she gurgled, and then I knew she'd been playing me. Hang women, anyway! I'd eaten right out of her hands.

"I knew you were just brave enough to see it through, Ed Jenkins! It means *so* much to me, and I'll sure remember it. Maybe I can do something for you, some time."

With that she circled my neck and kissed me, jumped back behind the wheel, stepped on the starter, and began to take corners on two wheels. She could drive, that lady, and she was in one grand hurry.

Once in the city we headed toward Chinatown. I sat up and began to take notice. I know Chinese pretty well, know their language a bit, know something of their psychology. If the drama I was to play a part in was to be enacted in Chinatown so much the better.

We stopped before a small, dingy store, a store that had some fly-specked ivory curios in the window, and two Chinese watchmen sitting outside. That was nothing out of the ordinary. The Chinks that sit careless-like around the sidewalks of Chinatown, with their shoulders hunched forward, puffing meditatively on

pipes, aren't just enjoying the scenery, or indulging in philosophic meditation. They're guards, watching the safety of the place in front of which they're sitting.

"Ed," she said, "I'm not responsible for your frame of mind when you get here. All I am supposed to do is to see that you go to a certain room and interview a certain man. I'd like to have it appear that I did a good job, so would you mind looking just a little mooney, sort of mushy, you know?"

I climbed out of the car.

"Lead the way," I told her.

We went in, and, as we entered the place, she slipped her warm little hand into mine. Hand in hand we went back through a storeroom packed with jabbering, beady-eyed Chinese, past a guard who watched the back passageways, and into the gloom of twisting, winding corridors, through heavy oak doors and deserted rooms.

I pulled my hand loose and slipped my arm about her waist, holding her close to me. It wasn't that I wanted to act out what she said about being mushy, but I trusted her just as much as I'd have trusted a rattlesnake.

At length we turned to the left, knocked twice before a heavy door, heard the little click of a lock that was shot back by electricity, and I found myself in a great room, a room that was fixed up with teakwood furniture, expensive tapestries and Oriental rugs. It was rich, quiet, luxurious.

A heavy teakwood desk stood in the middle of the room, and behind this desk was a great bulk of a man. He seemed soft, flabby fat as far as physical appearance was concerned, but there was an ice-cold hardness about his eyes that made them appear like two great diamonds, glittering in the half-light of the dim room.

I stiffened. For months there had been choked off whispers of a crime syndicate, of a great man who sat in an "office" and directed crime, who had systematized blackmailing, bootlegging, gem robberies. No one could be found who knew him, and yet they all knew of him, a mysterious half-knowledge compounded of whispered rumors, vague surmises, wild conjectures. I had heard this gossip of the underworld, and placed it as a fairy tale, one of those wild nightmares which run through the criminal world at times. Now I began to feel an uncomfortable certainty.

He began to speak without introduction or explanation. His voice was surprising; low, soft, almost like a woman's. His heavy frame, thick lips and huge bulk had prepared me for a deep, booming voice, but his words came so softly, so gently, that, had it not been for the moving of the thick lips, I would have thought some woman was concealed behind him, and was doing the talking.

"Ed Jenkins, you have the reputation of being able to open any safe without leaving a single trace showing that the lock has been tampered with, or that the door has been opened."

There was something of interrogation in his tone, but I made no move, gave no sign.

He stopped a minute; then went on: "I have a safe you are to open; an envelope you are to place in the safe. It will be done before midnight tomorrow. It must not appear the safe has been opened."

The blue-gray eyes of ice continued to bore into me. A sarcastic retort was on the tip of my tongue, but I held it. This man was one who would stop at nothing, and I was a known crook, was in the secret passages of Chinatown, and there were big stakes in the center of the table, or I didn't know crooks.

"Naturally you will wonder why I should give you instructions. I know you, Ed Jenkins, know your record, know your activities, know much more than you think. You are a Lone Wolf, one who obeys no man. You have brains, so clever are you that you are known to the police of a dozen states as 'The Phantom Crook,' because of your ability to slip through their fingers, to obscure your connection with any crime.

"It is because of your ability that I am asking you to do this for me. In return I shall do something for you."

With the words he reached in his desk and took out two envelopes.

"This envelope contains two thousand dollars," he said, slitting the flap and sliding the envelope toward me. I could see the edges of the bank notes peeping out, but I did not pick it up. I waited. It had suited my pleasure to keep silent, to leave the burden of the conversation upon this great, hulking figure at the desk. I would use as few words as possible.

At my side I could hear the quick breathing of the girl. She was excited, tense. Her quick breathing told of a racing heart. There was more to this than appeared on the surface.

"This second envelope," went on the man at the desk, "contains papers which should be of interest to you."

He slid it over, and I took a quick glance at the contents. A glance was all I needed. Those papers were ones that I had searched for, high and low; through all of the devious channels of crookdom I had searched for them. They implicated one Chadwick in a crooked scheme, a scheme which would have sent him to the penitentiary. Chadwick was dead, but his wife and daughter lived, and they were of the upper crust, the elite of the city, the cream of society. Helen Chadwick, the daughter, was one girl who had meant much to me, one who had used me square. Her father had been blackmailed over those papers, had given notes to a crook for an even hundred thousand dollars because of those papers. I had helped the girl out of that scrape, but the papers remained outstanding. Somewhere in the great, inky pool of organized crookdom, of blackmailing intrigue, those papers had vanished, and I had searched for them. Their existence was a continuing menace to the squarest girl in the world, a girl who was a pal, who had fearlessly played the game. . . .

I put those papers in the pocket of my coat. They could do what they pleased, and be damned to them. Those papers would not leave my possession.

The ice-cold eyes never left my face.

"I see you are reasonable, Jenkins. You are a man of honor, and your word is good. I shall ask your word that you will open a certain safe for me before midnight tomorrow. When you have given me your word you will be free to leave here with the papers and the cash."

I nodded. I would have spoken, but I did not want my tone to betray my eagerness. I was a crook and he was a crook. I had the papers in my pocket. I would open any safe in the world for those papers. If I could earn them that way, well and good. If not, they remained with me, anyway. I was in his own castle, in his stronghold, but I had been in tighter places before.

He rubbed the fat flesh of his flabby hands together. His face did not change. There had never been so much as a ripple of the soft skin of that flabby face to indicate expression. The rubbing of the hands was the only sign of emotion.

"I see you are a wise man, Jenkins. My assistant will call on you in good time and give you complete instructions."

I spoke at that, the first time I had spoken since entering the room. "Get this and get it straight. I give you my word to open

the safe. However, it is understood that I am to be given a square deal. If you double-cross me in any way I am free to do as I please."

The corners of the flabby lips may have twisted a bit at that. I couldn't tell in the half-light.

"If you dare to play with me, Ed Jenkins, if you dare to disobey my instructions, you are at liberty to do so; but you will act at your peril."

I sighed. He had the same old complex, the warped mind that fancied he controlled all power. I said nothing. There was no need. I had given him my warning.

He again opened the desk and took out a long manila envelope, an envelope that was sealed with great blobs of red sealing wax. On the outside of the envelope appeared simply a number. 543290 was the typewritten number which was on the envelope. It was thin, evidently enclosing but a single sheet of paper.

"Mr. Colby will call on you at your apartment. When he calls you may give him this envelope. He will know what to do with it. Thank you for coming. Maude, you are to be congratulated on having carried out my instructions. You may take Mr. Jenkins to his apartment."

There was no good-night, nothing to show that the interview was ended other than the touch of finality in the tone. The huge figure remained motionless, the icy eyes glaring balefully forth from the semi-darkness.

"I will be at my apartment from nine to eleven tomorrow morning," I told the man, determined to have the last word.

He said nothing, made no sign of having heard. His eyes watched me with unwinking appraisal. The girl's hand rested on my arm. "Come," she whispered, and I noticed that her hand was trembling. Together we left the room, wound our way through evil-smelling passageways, out into the store and to the street.

"Ed, would you mind driving?" she asked, and then I noticed that the girl was completely unnerved. Her face was chalky, her nostrils quivering, and she was shaking like a leaf. Was it excitement, or was it fear? I watched her closely and could not determine.

"So your name is Maude?" I asked her as I stepped on the starter.

She nodded absently. "Maude Enders," she said.

I drove in silence, straight to the door of my apartment.

"Better run up," I told her. "I'll brew you a cup of tea. You seem all in."

She shook her head abruptly. "No, I have only commenced," she said, and there was still that absentminded ring to her voice. It was almost as though she was talking in her sleep.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Maude, you did me a good turn tonight. The papers I received mean a lot to me."

That did not draw her out.

"Yes, yes, I know," she agreed in the same toneless voice, and pressed her foot on the throttle I had relinquished, racing the engine a trifle, indicating that she was impatient to be gone.

"Wait just a minute," I told her, "I'll only detain you for a moment, but I want to give you something."

With the words I turned and ran up the steps to my apartment house. However, I didn't take the elevator. I skipped out of the back door and into my garage. There I opened the outer door, started the motor on my speedster, and got the engine nicely warmed up, then I went back into the apartment house, along the corridor and out the front door again.

"I thought I had a bottle of whiskey left," I apologized, "and I was going to give it to you; but the janitor evidently found my hiding-place. It's gone."

She nodded, her eyes fixed on the road ahead, and slipped in the clutch and purred away, without even a good night. Was she hypnotized, this girl with the mole? Those icy, blue-gray eyes gleaming from the half-darkness of that room in a Chinatown dive seemed to have changed her. However, I was not finished with the problem, not as yet. I had promised to open a safe. That far and that far only was I committed. I wasn't even committed that far if they were double-crossing me.

I sprinted down the driveway, into my machine, and swung down the boulevard scarcely more than two blocks behind the girl's car. I cut down the lead as quickly as I felt it was safe to do so, and followed the other machine. The girl drove as I might have expected, steadily, mechanically, looking neither to the right nor the left.

It was a matter of two miles before she stopped the car, stopped it in front of a flat in the better residential district. I swept on past, swung into a driveway, turned the car, parked on the other side of

the street, and followed her up the stairs, through the door, and up another flight of stairs. She had something on her mind, this woman with the mole, and I proposed to see at least where she went. It was hardly to have been expected that I could have followed her into the house itself, but I took advantage of her preoccupation.

One thing was certain, I had nothing to lose. I had given my word that I would open a certain safe under certain conditions. Beyond that I was not committed. I might be walking into a trap of some kind, but I take those chances every day of my life. Nothing venture, nothing have.

She ran up to the second floor, and knocked on the door. There was a little vestibule and a flight of stairs running on to a third floor. The elevator ran in the vestibule, and the stairway, gave me excellent concealment.

There was silence after she knocked, and she repeated the knock, evidently a knock in code of some kind or other, a single knock, then a double, then, after an interval, a single one again. The silence evidently puzzled her.

Suddenly there sounded a gasping cry, a thud, a soft rustle, then silence. The girl turned the knob of the door doubtfully, as though expecting to find it locked. The sound had come from behind the door. The knob turned, the door swung inward and there was a yawning oblong of black darkness. Puzzled, the girl stood there on the threshold for an instant, then entered. There was a click of the electric light switch, and then the sound of a stifled scream, perhaps a woman's, perhaps a man's, then silence for a minute, then the girl came rushing out of the room, her face as pale as death, her eyes wide with fear, her lips bloodless. At that instant the door below opened and a man and woman started up the steps.

I did some quick thinking. Either that man and woman had the third flat, in which event it was unlikely they would have taken the steps unless the elevator was out of order, or they were going in the second flat. If they went to the third flat it was an even bet the elevator was out of order. If they went to the second I would be concealed if I went up the steps to the third flat. I started up, watching back over my shoulder. The lower part of the stairs was well lighted, the upper flight had a light at the landing above, but the stairs themselves were in semi-darkness.

The man and woman made way for the frightened girl, and they watched her curiously as she dashed past them, white of face and lip, wide of eye. The outer door slammed, and the couple came on up. They passed the second landing and came on up the third flight. I was ahead of them, bending over the button which brought the automatic elevator to the third floor.

"I'll have this fixed in a few minutes," I remarked casually, keeping bent forward, my face pressed close to the button.

"I wish you would," snapped the woman. "I've climbed these stairs as often as I intend to. Either the landlord will keep that elevator in order or we'll ask for a reduction in the rent. It's been out of order too much lately."

I said nothing more. The voice was harsh, brazen, metallic. It was not the voice of a lady. I dared not look at her face for I didn't want her to see mine, but I could tell much from the voice.

They unlatched the door of the flat and went in. I turned and raced down the stairs, and into the flat below. I wanted to know what had happened in that room, who had screamed. I found out. Sprawled on the floor, his arms stretched out, his eyes open, staring at the ceiling, was the form of a man. He had been stabbed in the back, and was in evening clothes, well dressed, clean-shaven, evidently a gentleman. Blood was flowing from the wound, but he was done for, dead as a herring right then.

I thought things over. Had the girl stabbed him after she entered the apartment? Perhaps she had, perhaps she hadn't. If she hadn't, who had? I closed the door and made a quick search of the flat. There was no other person within, and there was no evidence that anyone had been in the place. The man had been sitting reading, and had evidently got up to open the door. Somehow, he had been stabbed, stabbed by someone he had no reason to fear, for there was no evidence of a struggle, just the murdered man, the knife and the blood.

It was no place for a crook. To have been caught in that flat would have been first-degree murder. I had no business remaining there for a second, but I wanted to find out a little more. It seemed impossible that the girl with the mole on her hand could have committed the crime, but who else? True, there had been a sound before she entered the room, but that might or might not have meant anything. The man had been stabbed just as the girl entered that flat. Had she known that she had another mission to perform

that night? A mission of murder? That might have accounted for her terrified manner, her preoccupation.

I made a quick round of the apartment. Evidently, from opened envelopes, old letters and bookmarks, the man was one R. C. Rupert, but who R. C. Rupert was or what he did was beyond me. I had no time to make a thorough investigation. It was no place for Ed Jenkins. Known crooks can't be found in rooms with murdered men without having a hempen knot placed under their ears. I got out and kept my foot pretty well on the throttle after I was in the car.

Back in my apartment I went over my evening's collection. The Helen Chadwick papers came first, and my fingers almost trembled as I sorted them out. They seemed to be in order, everything O. K.

However, it's better to be sure than sorry, and I had secured a complete list of the outstanding papers from the lawyer who had enjoyed Chadwick's confidence in his lifetime. Helen had introduced me to him, told him I could be trusted, and he had given me a complete list. Probably no one knew such a list was obtainable. It wouldn't have been but for two things, one of them being that Chadwick had told his lawyer everything without reservations, and the other that the lawyer was one of those men who have photographic memories. He had checked out a list containing each and every paper that could be used to implicate the Chadwick name.

I checked the papers over with the list. Two papers were missing; a letter and a contract.

In a cold rage I rechecked the contents of that envelope. There could be no mistaking the fact. The big crook with the icy eyes hadn't known that I could check up on him. He supposed that I only knew there were papers outstanding of the nature of the papers in that envelope. He couldn't have foreseen that I could tell if he had held out any on me. Either or both of those two papers would have been as deadly as all. Any of them would have ruined the Chadwick name, have blackened the memory of one who was esteemed as a man of integrity, have killed the widow, have exposed the daughter to scorn as the child of a crook. Society is like that. Chadwick was revered, respected in business and social circles. His standing was unquestioned. His widow and daughter were of the inner circle, of the elect. Let this scandal get out and they would be ostracized overnight. Of course Chadwick had been

framed, had been blackmailed, but Chadwick was dead. He couldn't explain how it had happened.

I put the papers back in the envelope. They were useless. The two outstanding documents made those I possessed without any real value. However, I knew who had those missing papers. That letter and the contract had been taken and were being held by the big man with the icy eyes and the Chinatown office.

His attempt to double-cross me relieved me from any obligation to him. I took out the envelope which bore the number 543290 and looked it over. I couldn't tamper with those seals without showing that the envelope had been opened. The wax was thin, brittle, had been pressed down with a coin of some rare design, apparently some old Roman coin.

There were other ways. I took a photographic film, pressed it closely against the envelope in a darkened room, then placed the envelope over the white light of a printing box. It took me four attempts to get the proper exposure, but I finally got a film which showed pretty plainly what was in that envelope. The film was a mass of crisscrossed lines, lines which were vague and indistinct, but which could be followed. I made a print on rough paper, retouched the lines with a black pencil, and then began to separate all the lines which sloped in the same direction.

It was daylight before I had the film deciphered. A folded sheet of paper, covered with writing, was within that envelope, and that paper was a will. The crisscross effect of the lines was because of the folds in the paper. I hadn't been able to get all the words, but I got enough to see that the document purported to be the holographic will of one Stanley Brundage, and that by its terms it left everything to a former wife who had been divorced. There were two witnesses, whose names were not entirely clear. One of them looked like Davids, or something similar, and the other like Roberts.

I set aside the print, studied the envelope a minute, then stretched and decided I'd take a turn in the morning air.

The east was getting rosy, and over the city there was that cool hush which precedes the dawn. A late car whizzed down the boulevard a couple of blocks away, and a light truck came down the street, distributing the morning papers. I would get my paper at the door of my apartment later in the morning, but, in the meantime, I picked up the rolled newspaper which lit on a neighboring lawn and idly read it.

The murder of R. C. Rupert was reported, and there was the usual smear, a sketch of his career, the story of finding the body, the checkup of his flat, and a diagram showing a black Maltese cross marking the spot where the body was found.

I read of the man's career. It seems he was an attorney who had started in practice for himself after having been identified for several years with Attorney L. A. Daniels. Daniels, I read, specialized on corporate and probate practice, and Rupert had been with him for more than ten years, finally leaving to open an office of his own, in which he had been very successful.

I rolled up the paper, put it back on the lawn, looked at the golden sun, stretched, yawned, and suddenly sprinted back toward my apartment. I had an idea.

With the information I now had there was nothing to it. Strokes on the film which had puzzled me came out with startling clarity, once I knew their meaning. In place of being signed by Davids and Roberts as witnesses, the will was witnessed by L. A. Daniels and R. C. Rupert.

I thought that over. The envelope contained a will. This will was to be placed in a certain safe, and another envelope probably removed. This will was a counterfeit will, but it was to be found in a lawyer's safe. There were two witnesses to that will, either one of whom could and would pronounce it a forgery. One of those witnesses had been murdered within two hours of the time I had contracted to open the safe so that the will might be substituted.

Naturally the assumption would be that the safe I was to open was in the office of L. A. Daniels. It was also proper to presume that the attorney himself would be allowed to live as long as there was no necessity for admitting the will to probate. It would not do to murder the two witnesses to that will just before it was produced. The police might check up on the two deaths in connection with the two signatures. One of the men would be placed out of the way first. The other would be allowed to live until the will was to be admitted to probate or until sufficient time had elapsed so that the police would not become suspicious of the real motive for the murders.

I picked up a suitcase, looked up the office address of L. A. Daniels, got in my machine and was on my way.

Getting into the office of the lawyer offered no obstacles. Office buildings are a cinch, and the locks are all made to open with a

master key. The safe was another matter. As soon as I saw it I realized why the crooks who wanted it opened had been forced to make terms with me. It could have been crashed by a good safe man, but to open it without leaving so much as a scratch on it, or interfering with the combination, was another matter.

My system of opening safes is both simple and complicated. It consists of a combination of technical knowledge with the sound magnification offered by radio amplification. I magnify the sounds of the interior mechanism several thousand times, and I know what to listen for, how to interpret each and every sound which comes through the earphones. Even so, I was half an hour getting that safe open.

I wanted to check my suspicions, and I was right. Within that safe, in a compartment marked "WILLS," I found a series of numbered envelopes, and there was a cross index system in a little card drawer. I ran through the cards under "B" and found Brundage listed as number 543290. The envelopes were filed in numerical order. The 543 was apparently merely a file classification, as the envelopes ran from 543001 to 543450. They were all sealed with a very brittle sealing wax which was smeared over their flaps in great blotches, and pressed down with the same Roman coin.

I had seen all I needed. I made a note of the combination, closed the safe, packed my radio safe outfit in the suitcase and went back to my apartment. Someone would find that double-crossing Ed Jenkins was no laughing matter, and somehow, some time, I would get the missing papers from the Chadwick file. Also I would find out more of the girl with the mole on her hand. I thought of the Weasel, his warning, the barking of those pistol shots. There was more to this than appeared on the surface.

However, that could wait. In the meantime I had an appointment with this chap, Colby, whoever he might be. There was a chance for a few hours' sleep before that time, and I knew I would need lots of sleep before I got through with that case. It was up to me to keep one jump ahead of the organized crooks who were seeking to use me as a cat's-paw.

Charles Colby was attired in the height of fashion. Very apparently he hated himself. Offhand, I sized him up as a man of two gods, a mirror and a checkbook. Money hunger was stamped on his face,

and vanity in his eyes. He came into the apartment, introduced himself, and sat down with a patronizing manner.

"I am a lawyer, Mr. Jenkins, a lawyer who never overlooks the interests of a client. It happens that another lawyer has some documents in his safe which incriminate my client. I want those documents. I understand arrangements have been made so that you will open the safe."

He stopped and looked at me shrewdly.

I sized him up. His eyes were small, blinking and watery. He seemed like a creature of the night, a nocturnal rat, who was afraid of the light. He had a great nose that stuck out in front of his face, and twitched from time to time like a rabbit's—or like a rat's. Aside from that he was good enough looking. He was shaved and massaged until the skin was a soft pink, and his hair was plastered down with some sort of varnish that gave forth an oily perfume, and made the black locks glisten and sparkle in the light. His collar was a great, four-inch affair, and the red tie, that blazoned forth its silken greeting, struck the eyes with the force of a blow. His trousers were creased into a knife-like edge and the socks below would have warmed up the ankles of a stone statue.

"Where is this safe?"

His nose twitched, his watery eyes blinked and he smacked his lips. "Ah, that will be disclosed in due time. It was a little idea of my own that we—er—protect ourselves on that. You will be blindfolded, Mr. Jenkins, conducted to this safe, then open it, and again be blindfolded.

"I am a lawyer, Jenkins, one of those lawyers who overlooks nothing, who plans on everything. Every move in my campaign has been planned out, has been gone over carefully. Others may act haphazardly, but not Charles Colby. I plan in advance. You have an envelope, Jenkins? An envelope with seals and a number that you were to give to me. . . . Ah, yes. Thank you."

He took the envelope, blinked his eyes at it, then, somehow acting as though his great nose was more to be trusted than his eyes, he thrust it under the beak and smelled it. His nostrils twitched, his pale tongue licked his lips, and his small eyes sparkled.

"Ah, yes, yes indeed," he crooned to himself, letting his fingers caress the envelope.

"What time will suit you on this safe?" he asked, after a bit.

"We can handle the job any time between nine-thirty and midnight."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Make it about midnight. That's as good as any."

He nodded. "I'll be here with a machine. Now, Jenkins, you are about to have a novel experience. You are dealing with the master minds of crookdom. If you follow instructions and do not seek to double-cross us it will be well. But remember that we will know your every move, your innermost thoughts. I will not seek to defend the ethics of what I am doing, but I will tell the whole world that I'm doing it up brown. What I do I do well. You'll be caught if you try to slip over a thing. Just open this safe and then ask no questions, that's your job. I've planned . . ."

I interrupted his song of self-praise. When he got to chanting that he seemed as though he'd be good for an hour. He intoned it as though he was taking part in some long-winded ceremony.

"Be here at twelve then," I snapped and got up.

He took out a gaudy, perfumed handkerchief, wiped the moisture from beneath his pale eyes, twitched his nose, bowed, and was gone.

So he was a master mind of crookdom, and he wasn't going to let me know the safe I was to open, know where it was, or anything about it, eh? I chuckled at that. It was a good thing I'd spotted that safe, too. Otherwise I'd have had to let this shyster see me working with the radio outfit, and I didn't advertise my methods to the underworld at large. He'd sure be surprised when he saw me walk up to that safe as a perfect stranger, jiggle the dials and open it. I'd written down the combination, and I knew it as though it had been my own safe.

I gave him half an hour to get well away, and then went out to look up Stanley Brundage. From all of the activities that were being engaged in about his will, I'd have said that Stanley Brundage, whoever he might be, was a poor life insurance risk.

Investigation showed that they wouldn't need to do any dirty work there. Brundage was a real estate operator, and he was slipping away fast. He had some obscure, wasting disease, and the end was merely a matter of days. He had a daughter by a former marriage, and a wife who was to be divorced, but had, as yet, only secured an interlocutory decree. The estate would consist of a goodly lump of property, property that was worth fighting for and over.

I could see the whole situation. L. A. Daniels had drawn a will, a will which Brundage had written himself at the suggestion and

under the direction of the lawyer. R.C. Rupert had been one of the witnesses to that will, and Daniels had been the other. That will probably left everything to the daughter, at any rate cut off the divorced wife without a penny.

The game was to forge a will which would be good enough to get by without either subscribing witness being alive. This forged will cut off the daughter and left everything to the divorced wife. The question of where that will was found and how it was produced would be determining factors in the event of a fight. They would get at the lawyer's safe, switch wills, destroy the genuine and leave the forgery.

I'd reasoned that far the night before, but now I saw the murder program—if I could give it that name—a little more clearly. Rupert could die at any time. They just wanted him out of the way. Daniels, however, was different. Upon his death a search of his safe would be made, and the wills he was keeping would probably be returned to the persons who had made them. If Daniels were to die before Brundage passed away and the Brundage will should be returned and found to be a forgery. . . . That would never do. They would wait for Brundage to die, and then would almost immediately murder Daniels. Then the executor of Daniels' estate would find the Brundage will in the safe, and everything would seem to be regular.

Of course, I might have slipped a bit here and there on a detail, but that would be pretty near the general scheme of the thing, and I wouldn't have missed it much one way or another. That lawyer with the plastered hair, the red tie and the watery eyes was like an open book to me. I've met his kind before.

Because they'd lied to me on those Chadwick papers, I'd have told the whole outfit to go jump in a lake, only I wanted to get more of a line on that fat crook who sat so quietly in the Chinese den, his icy eyes gleaming unblinkingly through the semi-darkness. That man was a master crook. He was one to be respected and perhaps feared, but he had the missing Chadwick papers, and I wanted those papers.

I thought things over until I felt certain that I'd gone through the entire situation as well as could be expected, and then I rolled in and got an afternoon's sleep.

Midnight. The clock on the Court House boomed forth the twelve deep strokes.

As the last deep chime died away there was a knock at the door. I opened it. There were two visitors. Charles Colby, the lawyer with the perfumed hair, and the girl I knew as Maude Enders; the girl with the mole on her left hand. The girl was nervous, white, shaking. The lawyer smiling, debonair, urbane.

They greeted me and entered. In his right hand the lawyer was carrying a blindfold, a mask without eye-holes, one of the most foolproof and quickly adjusted blindfolds there is, one of the type used in lodge work for blindfolding the candidate before the dirty work commences. Evidently he believed in being prepared, this lawyer.

He smirked and smiled.

"Right on time, Mr. Jenkins. You see I keep my appointments. Right on the dot in spite of a busy day, a very busy day."

That seemed to be a conversational lead. He stopped expectantly as though he waited for me to say something. I hated to disappoint him.

"So you've been busy?"

"Indeed yes. I've been retained by the relatives of R. C. Rupert, the man who was murdered yesterday. They want me to assist the county authorities in locating and prosecuting the murderer. Already I've uncovered one clue, one very live clue. I find that the man and woman who occupy the flat above Rupert's saw a young woman rushing frantically down the stairs about the time of the murder. This woman had come from Rupert's flat, and seemed to be actually running away. The elevator was out of order at the time and she had to use the stairs. They had never seen her before, but they had a good look at her face, and they could recognize her if they saw her again.

"There were many things that made me think the murder had been pulled off by a woman, even before I got this evidence. I have told these two people to tell no one of their information or knowledge concerning this phase of the case until I tell them to. In the meantime I shall endeavor to locate the woman, and I think I can put my hand on her.

"You've read of the murder, of course, Jenkins."

I nodded, and looked over at the woman with the mole on her hand. She was as pale as death, swaying in the chair. I thought she'd even faint.

So that was the lay of the land. Not only had the fat crook used this jane to commit a murder, but he'd even planted witnesses that could identify her, and got this shyster lawyer to spill just enough information to let the girl know they could hang a murder charge on her whenever they got good and ready. Whoever this girl with the mole was, she wanted to watch her step. Her neck was in the noose now, and there'd be no turning back. I had wondered at the temerity of this lawyer in allowing himself to get tangled up in this safe business where too many people knew his identity. Now I commenced to understand. I was a crook and my word would be valueless. They had a murder charge they could get the girl on any time. Colby, of course, was not the real name of the lawyer. I had taken the precaution of verifying that. There was no Charles Colby listed in the telephone book; but, Colby or not, he could be identified readily. That beak and those eyes were identification tags that couldn't be overlooked. However, he had nothing to fear.

"All right, Mr. Jenkins. Let us be on our way."

He advanced with the blindfold, and I let him adjust it. I was going to play into his hands, let him think I was a good safe mechanic, but that was all, merely a common crook with no intelligence. I wanted them all to underestimate me.

We went down to the car, and the lawyer on one side and the girl on the other assisted me into the closed car. I had been wondering about the girl, why she was along, but now I found out. This guy, Colby, was taking no chances on me peeking through the blindfold while he was busy with the car. The girl sat beside me, her hands holding my head, keeping the hood tight over my eyes. Her soft hands continually fluttered over my face, and I could smell the delicate perfume of her clothing as she bent over me, watching that blindfold continuously. Also I could feel that she was trembling.

Knowing in advance where we were going, I was able to tell approximately how we reached the building. There was the brilliant illumination of a main artery of the city, a couple of sharp turns, and then gloom. That much I could tell through the blindfold. Evidently we were in an alley, approaching the office building from the rear.

I was helped from the car and into a freight elevator. Slowly we ascended, there was the sound of an opening door, and the girl with the mole guided me down the flagged corridor of an office

building. Colby went on ahead, and I could hear the faint scratching of a key as he fitted it into a lock. The girl guided me directly into an office room, and I could smell the musty closeness of the stale air.

There was a minute or two while Colby was adjusting things to his satisfaction, and I could hear him pulling down the window shades, evidently shutting out any light which might come in from the street. He was thorough after a fashion, this Colby.

At length he came to me and removed the hood. I was standing before a safe, a safe which was illuminated by the beam of a very small flashlight. The rest of the office was in darkness. Only the door and nicked dials were visible on the safe, none of the surroundings showed in the carefully adjusted beam of that flashlight.

"Now, Jenkins, do your stuff," he whispered, bending forward until the oily perfume of his glossy hair surrounded me in a sickening stench.

I reached out and touched the dials.

"And here is where I get a lesson in safe opening," went on the lawyer, still in that same whisper. "I have heard of your ability, Jenkins, and we have wondered how you did it. Now I'll find out."

He would, like fun, but I didn't put him wise. I nodded and began to spin the dials of the safe, back and forth, back and forth. Then I stopped spinning them and placed my nose close to the door, as though I was smelling the metal. Next I took out my knife and tapped the metal carefully, listening to the sounds. I might have been a physician sounding the chest of a patient. When I had indulged in enough horseplay to mystify him, I confidently returned the knife to my pocket.

"I have the combination now," I whispered, and began to turn the dials with the easy confidence of a man opening his own safe. There came a click from the combination and I shot back the bolts and swung the huge door open.

"Well, I'll be damned!" exclaimed the lawyer in genuine awe.

"Ladies present," I reminded him, with a touch of sarcasm.

He showed his true character for a moment. "Ladies, hell!" he remarked, as he dove into the interior of the safe.

In a moment he emerged with envelope number 543290 in his hand, and carefully he substituted the envelope I had given him, then he himself closed the safe and spun the dials.

"I'll never be satisfied until this envelope is destroyed," he said, and, with the words, pulled over a brass cuspidor and struck a match. The flame crackled and snapped up the envelope. The sealing wax began to melt and sputter, dropping into the cuspidor. The ashes dropped and then the last corner of the envelope was consumed. The lawyer took a fountain pen and began to mash up the black, charred fragments of paper. When he had finished that will was destroyed. Beyond a few blackened bits of paper and a red drop of sealing wax in the bottom of the cuspidor there was no trace of the envelope which the safe had so closely guarded, envelope 543290.

"Now we're finished," exulted the lawyer. "Jenkins, you're simply great. I can make a fortune with you, man! You acted as though you had been familiar with that safe for twenty years, and it's supposed to be one of the best safes in the country. You're a wonder!"

The girl said nothing. By pressing back so that my shoulder was against her I could feel her shiver. Whatever her connection with this gang, she had something hanging over her head that would leave her no peace of mind. She was in their power, and she knew it.

The blindfold was again adjusted, and the car swung out around the city, circling block after block so that I could not follow directions, and finally landing me before the door of my apartment house. The lawyer was taking no chances on my even getting a good look at the car, lest I should be able to identify it in some way, but escorted me to my own apartment before he removed the hood.

When they had left I got busy.

I have a reputation of being able to slip through the fingers of the police. To be wanted in a dozen states with one's picture available for publication, with placards distributed, and with police notified, and to still keep at liberty require something in the way of more than average ability in the art of disguise.

A knowledge of Chinese manners, customs, language and psychology has always been a big help to me, particularly in the West. The Cantonese dialect is a funny thing. There are two major tones or octaves, and four varying intonations in each octave. This gives each sound eight different meanings, depending on the octave and the tone. For instance, *ngau* means cow if it is spoken

one way, means dog if spoken in another, and crazy if spoken a little differently, and so on. It's not an easy language to learn, and the Chinks don't help any. They don't like to have the whites pry into their affairs. As far as I know, I'm the only crook that can talk the lingo, and whoever that fat bird with the icy eyes might be, I fancied I could give him cards and spades in Chinatown and come out on top.

Naturally, my knowledge of Chinese language is kept pretty much to myself. I don't let the crooks, the police or even the Chinks themselves, know that I know it. It wouldn't do to have that information get out. Then the police would look for me in Chinatown first.

My Chinese disguise is that of a white-haired old heathen with straggling white whiskers that come well down on the chest. The Chinks respect age, and an old man can have certain eccentricities which a younger man couldn't get away with.

Half an hour after Colby left me in my apartment I was shuffling around Chinatown, an old man, slipping along the streets at a late hour. The legitimate stores were closed. The Chinese merchants were in bed, but here and there storerooms kept open. Some of the places ran on a twenty-four-hour shift. Also I knew that the storerooms were merely the outside entrances. Once back of the main rooms and the rabbit-warren passages all ran together anyway.

When I had a good chance I slipped on back and began to explore. I had a pretty good mental map of the place, but there were a couple of things I didn't know for sure, and wanted to find out about. I'd managed to keep in pretty close touch with Chinatown and quite a few of the Chinks knew the old man that showed up once in a while and shuffled around on mysterious errands. The room that I'd been in when old icy-eyes gave me my instructions looked like the old office of the Fa Kee lottery company. They'd gone out of business a while back, and there had never been very much said about what happened to the place.

I hit the rabbit-warren and began to shuffle around.

"*Hoh shai mah*," intoned a guard doubtfully.

I get a kick out of the Chinese salutation. "*Hoh*," that means good, "*shai kai*," that means the whole blamed world, and "*mah*," that's the sign of a question. What the Chink really inquires in his salutation is whether everything in the world is good. It amuses me

to see a Chink who is steeped to the very slant of his eyes in intrigue, foxier than any fox, smooth as a pane of window glass, bow and inquire of his visitors if the whole world and everything in it is good.

Gravely, I returned his salutation.

"*Hoh shai kai*," I asserted, answering his question with an assertion.

"Where goes the father?" asked the Chink.

I fixed him with a stern gaze.

"The rooms of the Fa Kee Company," I said.

He smiled.

"The Fa Kee Company has suffered losses, and has gone out of business for three moons to let the luck change. Too many ten-spot tickets caused a break of the bank."

I nodded, but shuffled forward.

"The venerable one should be careful not to intrude upon their rooms," went on the guard. "What is it you wish?"

I flickered my eyes in a gesture of aged impatience.

"Is it then given to a babbling brook to question the placid surface of the lake?"

He shrugged his shoulders and went on about his business.

By devious wanderings and workings I got into the lease of the Fa Kee Company, and that was all the good it did me. The place had been cleaned out. The teakwood desk, the expensive tapestries, the Oriental rugs, had all gone. The place where I had been received was barren, empty, devoid of occupancy. The place had served its purpose and had then been abandoned.

I was puzzled, but not for long. In a little room to the rear there were three Chinamen playing at their everlasting domino games. They were furtive, swift-moving Chinks, men who were not of the usual type. To one side, in a darkened corner, sat a fourth Chink, silent, watchful, his beady eyes darting about. I watched the game for an interval, and watched the players more than the game.

At length one of them made a signal, and they changed around. The watcher in the corner came over and took a hand in the game, and one of the players went back to the corner. Apparently they were on guard, Chinese gunmen, watching and waiting. In China the art of murder is one of the professions. Each tong has its paid murderers. In time of need one does not commit his own murders

any more than he fills his own teeth or does his own doctoring. He hires his professional murderer to do the job for him.

These four men were hired murderers, imported gunmen who knew their onions.

"The aged one will find the air better elsewhere," remarked one of the players, significantly.

"When one has attained age he requires but little air," I retorted. "Youth takes much air, for it must breathe and speak needlessly. Age needs but to breathe."

They exchanged glances.

"Father," advised one, rising courteously, "we wait with a mission. At any day, at any hour, there may be fumes which will choke the air, the fumes of powder. The venerable one will find it difficult to vanish quickly before the police come to investigate."

I bowed my head slightly.

"I thank you. Youth has power of quick motion and trusts to flight. Age has learned the lesson of poise and trusts to wisdom. Have no fear."

With that I turned slowly, dignifiedly, and shuffled off, on my tour about the place. So they waited, did they? Waited the coming of one who was to be shot? Was it possible that icy-eyes had left a reception committee for me? That Ed Jenkins, the crook, was expected to enter that room, and that when he entered he was not to leave? The finding of a crook, dead in Chinatown, would hardly be expected to bother the police. If that crook were Ed Jenkins, the police could rather be expected to heave a sigh of relief.

I shuffled out into an all-night tea-room. I wanted to sit and think. At a small teakwood table I had a cup of tea and sat, stroking my beard, running over things in my mind. The good actor becomes a part of the character he is impersonating. To carry Occidental habits of thought into Chinatown while disguised as an old Chinaman would be to court discovery. Knowing the psychology of the Chinks as I did, I always managed to think the part as well as to speak it and look it. As I sat there I was really tempering my thoughts with the philosophy of the Chinese, a philosophy which sees time in a cycle of ages, rather than in the span of a lifetime.

Calmly, philosophically, I went over the events of the past few days, thinking, planning. From curtained booths to the right there came the occasional sound of spooning couples who had picked

the half-light of a Chinese restaurant as the place to finish up their wild night. Also there was another sound, the steady sound of sobs, the sound of a woman crying softly.

Moved more by curiosity than otherwise, I went to the booth from which the sounds came and threw aside the curtain, slipping within.

A girl sat on the cushioned bench, her head thrown forward on the table, the tea dishes pushed to one side. Her arms were twined about her face, and she was sobbing her heart out. There was a mole on the skin of the left hand.

Quietly I sat down across the table, assumed a dignified position and began to stroke my beard.

"Suffering follows wrong as the wheel follows the path of the ox," I said, making my voice thin and reedy, speaking English with an accent.

Startled, she straightened at the sound of my voice. It was the girl I had known as Maude, the girl against whom I had been warned.

"Who are you?"

I stroked my beard. "It is the function of age to counsel youth."

She looked me over with her red-rimmed eyes. There in the soft light of the curtained booth she stood no chance of recognizing me. My disguises are good. I fancied I could tell what was on her mind, but I wasn't sure.

"I did not kill him," she said abruptly, "but I could have saved him. He went to his death, and there is the death of another, a friend, a man who should mean nothing to me and yet who fascinates me."

I stroked my beard again, keeping my eyes on her face.

"Death is but a sleep," I said; "the sooner we sleep, the sooner we wake."

Her head fell forward on her arms.

"I must warn him," she said, "and if I warn him I will hang. They have me in their power. What will I do, oh, God, what will I do?"

I placed my hand on her shoulder.

"Do nothing," I said. "I will warn him."

"You?" she asked, half rising. . . . "Who are you, anyway? There is a soothing strength to your touch. Your hand on my shoulder thrills me. How do you know what I am talking about?"

I had gone too far. That touch might have told her much. She was sensitive, this woman with the mole on her hand. I slipped through the curtains, shuffled along the passageway and into the kitchen in the back. White girls would not be allowed in here. I went down the back stairs, through some more passageways and out into the night. Putting two and two together, I began to see a great light.

I went back to my apartment, removed my disguise, and waited. Something seemed to tell me that I was booked to be framed with a murder. A certain fat, icy-eyed crook and myself were going to have an accounting one of these days. In the meantime I would wait and see what developed. I knew too much to suit him, and he was perfectly willing that the law should silence my lips. No, that would hardly do. I might make a confession that would tally too closely with the known facts. Nevertheless, a murder was impending and I was to be removed. Putting two and two together again, what more plausible than that the murder should be committed and that I should be killed on the scene of the crime? Suppose I had walked into that apartment where R. C. Rupert had been killed, had walked in while the body was still warm, and suppose a hidden accomplice had killed me, shot me down from ambush, and then telephoned the police that he had seen me walk into Rupert's flat, thought that I acted suspiciously, followed, saw me kill Rupert, had called upon me to surrender, and when I had resisted had shot at me. The police would have taken him into custody pending an investigation, have found out that the dead man who was charged with the murder was Ed Jenkins, the Phantom Crook, and released the man who gave the information, with a vote of thanks. He would be a benefactor to society, one who had caught a notorious crook in the act of murder and killed him.

So I began to run over the whole plan in my mind, putting myself in the shoes of the others, wondering what I would do in their place. Almost I thought I would vanish from my apartment, and remain in concealment until the whole affair had been concluded, but there were those confounded Chadwick papers. I had to have them, and the only way I could keep in contact with the fat crook with the icy eyes was by continuing to play into his hand. The next time I established a point of contact with him he would not vanish into thin air and leave a squad of hired murderers to wait for me.

On the third day I received a letter. It was typewritten, unsigned.

"Ed: I knew you when you touched my shoulder. Thanks. I am being watched and can't communicate with you. There is danger impending, but I can't learn where or when. All I can do is to tell you there is a corridor connected with it somewhere. Whatever happens do not run down any dark corridors."

I read the letter and grinned. It might be a genuine warning, and it might be a plant. I shouldn't have touched the girl. Women are sensitive to a man's touch, and my hand had more warmth and strength than would have been found in the hand of an aged Chinaman. I was sorry I had made that mistake, but it had shown me a weakness in my disguise.

If the letter was not a genuine warning, it was part of a plant. If the latter, I couldn't see just how it would fit in, but I couldn't forget the look in the eyes of the Weasel when he had warned me of the girl with the mole on her left hand. And then there had been the matter of those pistol shots, and the death of the Weasel. Was it because he had been followed to my apartment that he had been made the target of the pistols of that death car?

I shrugged my shoulders.

There is a limit to what a man can think out. To attempt to go beyond that limit involves the mind in a tiresome race around a circle. It is profitless and worse than useless, for then, when the time for action comes, the mind is weary. I prefer to think as far as I can see my way clearly, and then sit back, waiting for subsequent events to develop additional information. In that way my mind is always receptive, fresh, ready to act when the emergency comes.

Another three days passed, and then the morning paper told me of the death of Stanley Brundage. There was half a page of eulogy, of his life, his business activities. I didn't stop to read it all. I knew I was going to need plenty of sleep, and I rolled in and slept soundly throughout the day.

Colby called on the telephone late that afternoon.

"I want to see you, Jenkins. Can you come to my office?"

I smiled at that. He had no office—not under the name of Colby, anyway.

"Maybe I'd better run up there, though," he added quickly. "I can run right up, and it's a matter of importance."

"All right," I said, and hung up the receiver.

Ten minutes later and he was at the door, nervous, excited, his eyes blinking and watering, his nose twitching, sniffing, his mouth working, the pale tongue continually flicking the lips.

"Jenkins, I am too rushed to explain here, but there were certain papers you were to have as reward for opening that safe, and I have just found out that you were double-crossed. I want you to come out to my house tonight and go over it with me. In a way I feel responsible since you were doing work at my request, and I want to get those papers for you. At any rate, I can give you some information that will be of value."

I looked at him quickly, letting an expression of dumb surprise flicker over my face.

"Why, I thought they were all there," I said, openmouthed, stupid.

He shook his head, adjusted his gaudy tie and patted his sleek, oily hair. Apparently he was well satisfied with himself. He was playing me for a mechanical dumbbell, one who was clever at safe-opening, but no good for anything else.

"No, they held out on you. Come to my place at nine tonight, and I'll give you the lowdown on the whole thing."

I took out a pencil and held it over my notebook.

"Your place is where?"

"3425 South Hampshird," he said, and watched me like a hawk as he said it.

Innocently I wrote down the address. There was not so much as the suspicion of an expression on my face. The address was that of the house of L. A. Daniels. He was watching my face to see if, by any chance, I knew. The rat-nosed, water-eyed crook would have stood more chance reading expression on the sheet of my notebook than on my face just then. I wouldn't have lived as long as I have if I'd been in the habit of letting my face tell my thoughts.

"Just ring the doorbell twice when you come, Jenkins," he said, "and be sure that you get there at nine sharp. The events of the next hour will be of great interest to you."

I nodded and pocketed the notebook.

"I'll be there," I said, and showed him to the door. His hair was scenting up the apartment and I wanted to be rid of

the oily rat before I was tempted to choke him with that red necktie of his.

I couldn't have much of a line on what was to come, but one thing I could be sure of. From the time when I rang that doorbell twice, things would move with the precision of clockwork, with the bewildering speed which marks the swift efficiency of an execution at San Quentin prison. They had had too long to think things over, to lay their plans. If I was to place any monkey wrenches in the wheels of their machinery it must be done before I rang that doorbell.

I got in my machine and swung out toward Hampshird Drive.

3425 sets well back from the street, a great pile of a house, surrounded by shrubbery, surmounted by strange turrets and architectural gingerbread. It was a relic of older times, times back in 1910 or 1911, when the district was just opening up, and was considered well out in the country; the subdivisions were in acres, and the houses were built as country places. Now the district was pretty well in the heart of the city as far as the apartment section was concerned. Most of the old houses had been taken down because they occupied too much ground space, and square apartment houses and flats had taken their places. This building was one of the older type.

I parked the car a block away and made a complete survey of the premises. There was no guard about that I could find, and I watched pretty carefully. At eight-thirty I picked one of the back windows and dropped in. The house seemed pretty well deserted. There was a light in one of the front rooms on the ground floor, and I gumshoed along the corridor, keeping well within the shadows, looking for a chance to get a line on the stuff that I wanted.

There came the sound of voices from the front room, and I picked out the tones of Charles Colby. He was talking in a low, strained voice, as though he himself was interloping, which he was.

"Now remember, when he runs, shoot. Don't take any chances, and don't wait. Shoot. I'll see that he gets stampeded."

The reply was a grunt. Evidently the other fellow was one of those who are strong on action, but weak on conversation.

Again there was silence, broken by the creaking of a chair as it rocked back and forth. "We'll take him right upstairs to the

study," went on rat-face nervously. "As soon as we get him in, we'll start the action, and then you get ready."

That gave me the clue I wanted. I slipped up the stairway, and finally located a sort of study on the northwest corner of the house; a long, gloomy corridor stretched the length of the upper floor, and the study was the last room on the north to open from it.

The room was in a half-light, a small fire in the fireplace making things cheery without throwing out too much warmth. A big chair was before the fire, and at first I thought it was empty. There were great bookcases on the walls, heavy rugs on the floor, some elaborate ornaments of various kinds, including statuary and paintings.

There was a slight movement from the chair, and then I saw that it was occupied. A small man with muttonchop whiskers was reclining before the fire, his toes stretched out, his head thrown back, resting. I stepped up to the chair, an idea forming in my mind.

It wasn't until my weight rested on the arm of the chair that the man opened his eyes with a start. I was looming in the dark above him.

"Not a sound," I said.

He sized me up, his sharp, steely eyes going over me from head to foot, but there was no sign of nervousness, no quick intake of the breath that would mean he was getting ready to scream. This lawyer was an old campaigner, one who had seen much of life, and considerable of death. He wasn't to be stampeded. I heaved a sigh of relief. I had hoped he'd be like that.

"Thank God you can control your nerves and listen to reason," I told him. "Listen, I'm Ed Jenkins, the Phantom Crook, you've probably heard of me or read of me, and I'm here to do you a favor."

He nodded, placed his finger to his lips and began to whisper.

"I have been warned that you were going to try and kill me. A detective agency told me they had the inside tip on what your plans were, and that they wanted to send out a couple of men to guard me. I'm in your power if you mean evil. If you don't, tell me what you are here for. I'm an old man, and I don't care greatly when I die, but I like to know what's going on about me."

While he was talking he was adjusting himself in his chair, moving his arms and hips as though to get a better view of me. He

was so quiet, and so careful to speak in a whisper that he nearly had me fooled. As it was, I grabbed the gun he was twisting around from under his coat just before he had the drop on me.

I grinned at him, and he smiled back. He was an old war-horse, and he accepted the fortunes of war as they fell.

"Now listen," I said, jabbing the gun in his ribs to impress upon him the fact that I was in earnest. "I don't give a damn about you. You're nothing in my young life, but there's a plot on to get you out of the way and to get me killed. They'll murder you and claim that I did the job. Get me?"

He still smiled wanly.

"That should interest me, but why should anyone want to kill me?"

I handed it to him straight, sticking the gun against his ribs from time to time, just reminding him that he wasn't in any position to start anything.

"You and Rupert signed a will as witnesses. Rupert is dead—that's one witness gone. You'll be the next. Then a forged will can be probated."

He chuckled outright. I really believe the shrivelled-up old campaigner was enjoying the situation.

"That sounds all right, only the genuine will would be in my safe, and they'd never get it out. That safe is absolutely and positively burglar-proof."

"Yeah," I explained, wearily. "They all are. This one of yours opens when you turn the small knob five times to the right to forty-six, the big one three times to the left to fifty, then the small knob four times to the left to thirty-one, the big one twice to the right to ten, the little one three times to the right to seventy, and the big one once to the left to ninety, then slip the little knob to the left until it reaches nineteen, turn the big knob to the right until it stops, and open the door."

That got him. His eyes got as wide as half-dollars.

"There's no one on earth that knows the combination of that safe but myself," he whispered, more to himself than to me.

"And me," I reminded him. "Now who have you got an appointment with at nine o'clock?"

"With a Mr. DeLamar, the head of the detective agency," he answered, readily enough.

I smiled. That was all I wanted to know.

"All right," I told him. "That man is really myself. I am to be brought into this room, and then you are to be murdered while I am here, and probably by someone whom you trust. They wouldn't have trusted you with a pistol if it hadn't been intended that the murder was to be pulled while you thought everything was all right. Now do you know a man with plastered, oily, perfumed black hair, little, blue-gray watery eyes, and a big red nose?"

He nodded, studying my face.

"He is in the house visiting my butler. I believe he is the father of the butler, or some relation, an uncle perhaps. I haven't paid much attention to him."

I nodded.

"Well, I'll be going. When I come back just keep silent, no matter what happens. You trust me, and don't make any noise when I start the fireworks."

Again he sized me up.

"How do I know that I can trust you? By your own admission you are a crook."

I got up off the arm of the easy-chair and tossed him his gun. "Don't trust me. Shoot me if I make a move against you, but don't interfere otherwise as you value your life."

He smiled at that.

"Spoken like a man, Jenkins," he said, "and since you've been so frank with me, I'll tell you something. This man you have described, who is going under the name of Colby, is an impostor. He is a shyster attorney who has offices here in the city, and I saw him once years ago. I have a photographic memory for faces, and I am positive of my identification. When he showed up here under an assumed name, and supposedly as a relation of the butler, I fancied he was up to some deviltry. That's why I kept the revolver handy. I wanted him to show his hand."

I patted the little fellow on the shoulder. I sure liked him. He was a man after my own heart, and I only hoped I'd be like him when I got to be his age.

"See you later," I said, and, with the words, slipped out of the door, hugged the shadows down the corridor, picked a porch window, and dropped into the night.

Five minutes later, on the stroke of nine, I came up the front steps, and rang the bell twice.

"Mr. Colby," I told the man who appeared at the door.

He was a heavyset fellow, this bird, and he sized me up in a way I didn't like. It occurred to me that he might be the one to kill Daniels as soon as I got in the room, and I didn't propose to take any chances with him. His face was coarse, brutal, the face of a killer, and beyond doubt he was in on the death plan, otherwise he would not have introduced Colby as his father.

"Right this way, sir. Mr. Colby is expectin' you."

I followed the man up the flight of stairs and down the long corridor. At the door of the study he coughed, knocked, and motioned me to follow.

"Step right in, sir."

I stepped in, and, as the door closed, I tapped him over the head with a blackjack. It was a swift tap on the temple, and he went bye-bye right then. He was good for at least an hour's sleep and a hell of a headache when he awoke.

With the sound of the blow the little, shriveled lawyer had jumped from the chair. I motioned for silence, and slammed the butler down in the chair Daniels had vacated, turning the chair so the back was toward the door, and only the top of the butler's head showed as it rested on the back of the upholstery.

I motioned the lawyer back into the shadows of the dim room. "Get back and stand in the shadow," I said, and the words were no more than out of my mouth than the door flung open and the little, rat-nosed lawyer popped into the room.

"Ah, Jenkins, thought you had got in the wrong place, did you?"

As he spoke he darted forward. Prepared as I was, I couldn't anticipate his motions. The very swiftness of the thing took me by surprise. I had expected a few words, something like a quarrel, some statement or other. There was nothing. As he spoke he advanced with hand outstretched, and, managing to get close to the chair, his hand suddenly swooped over and down, and there was the glitter of steel.

I gasped. Casually, as smoothly and easily as though he had merely swatted a fly in passing, he had slipped a big dagger clean to the hilt in the form of the man in the chair.

"Jenkins," he said, speaking rapidly, "you have killed this man. I saw you do it, and the footman over there saw you do it." He indicated the man standing in the shadows. "I'm going to be merciful, to give you one chance to escape, but I shall have to report the murder."

In my time I have seen much cold-blooded disregard for life, but never anything to equal that. The butler's life blood was spurting out around the haft of the knife, splashing on the flags of the fireplace, and yet this man talked as easily, as casually as though he and I were alone in the room.

"You see, Jenkins, I fooled you. Get started."

He turned, and flung open the door into the hall, and, as he did so, something about the figure standing back in the shadows caught his eye. Perhaps it was the glint of the light on the pistol which the old man was holding.

He gave one great oath and sprang forward, bending over the form in the chair. As he saw the man's face, he gave a shriek and rushed to the hall door.

Instantly things began to happen.

The old lawyer shot instantly, and I think he missed. Colby spurted around the door and into the corridor, and then there came two heavy reports, the reports of a shotgun that was probably loaded with buckshot. That had been the trap that was planned for me. I was to run from the room, and the private detective who had "warned" the lawyer against me was to shoot me fleeing red-handed from the scene of the murder. Colby and the butler were to be witnesses.

With the dropping of the bullet-riddled body there came a wild scream from the stairs, the scream of a woman. Also from all about the house there sounded hoarse shouts, the shrilling of police whistles. All hell had broken loose, and there was I, Ed Jenkins, notorious crook, in the center of everything. I fancied the old lawyer would stand up for me, but then there was the matter of that safe combination. He'd naturally be curious to know how I knew about it.

All in all it was one hell of a party.

Again came the scream from the woman. This time nearer. I sprang to the hall. A white figure was bending over the prostrate body. She looked up as she saw me and then gave a glad cry.

It was the girl with the mole on her hand, the girl I had known as Maude Enders.

"Quick, Ed. Come this way. The police are here. There is only one way to go. Quick Ed. *This way out!*"

She didn't even see the form of the aged lawyer standing there, his steely eyes twinkling softly, the revolver in his hand.

How she knew the house I don't know, but know it she did. She swept me into the back of the study, through a doorway in the rear, down a little back passageway, into a small storeroom which had a window opening on a garage, out on the roof of the garage, crouching low, bent double, and we dropped to the ground.

I tried to hold her back. I wanted her to escape, and this seemed like suicide. It was a cinch the police would have the house surrounded. In some manner they had been tipped off. I had rather trusted to the lawyer than to take a chance on the sawed-off shotguns of the officers. However, there was no holding her back, and I remembered the murder of R. C. Rupert. Perhaps she dared not trust her life in the hands of another. To be arrested meant to be identified as the girl who had rushed from that flat while Rupert was bleeding on the floor.

At the back of the garage there was a sudden blurr of motion as a figure detached itself from the shrubbery. I braced myself for the crashing report, the red burst of flame as the shotgun exploded. The police would not ask questions when they were on the trail of Ed Jenkins.

To my surprise the figure seemed not to have seen us but moved back again into the shadow, and the girl and I rushed across the lawn, through a hedge, down the street and into my car.

"Oh, God!" she panted. "I tried to get there in time. I knew the house, but I didn't know they had framed you. I only knew you were to be trapped in a corridor, but I didn't know it was in that corridor. How did it happen it was not you that was shot?"

I grinned at her as the machine purred away into the darkness. "Thanks to your warning, I turned the tables on our friend, Mr. Colby."

She was silent for a while.

"Daniels—did they kill him?"

I shook my head. "I planted another of the crooks in his chair and Colby stabbed him."

She thought for another moment or two.

"Gee, but you're thorough when you get started; aren't you, Ed Jenkins?"

I laughed at that.

"But the genuine will was destroyed. Even if a forgery could be proven to be spurious, the real will would be destroyed and now Brundage is dead."

She knew a lot about the case, this girl. She puzzled me, and how had she known enough to have told me "this way out" when she rushed out of that house? She was holding something back.

I started to tell her, then thought better of it.

"Let me out here, Ed," she said. "It would mean my death if they saw me with you now."

She was right, at that, and I swung the car into the curb.

"Why did you come to the house?" I asked her.

She hung her head. "I wanted to save you, Ed. I prayed I'd be in time."

"And you ran the gauntlet of the police, and took chances on your own life?"

She made no answer. It was obvious that she had done so.

"Listen, kid," I told her in a burst of confidence. "I don't know your connection with this case, but I'll tell you something. That genuine will was never destroyed. I knew a little about the care and devotion that Brundage girl had shown to her father, and the way the woman had wrecked his life. I slipped up to that safe in Daniels' office and took out the genuine will and substituted the fake envelope. Then when I gave Colby the envelope I really gave him the genuine will. He, himself, substituted it when I opened the safe the second time, and the envelope he burned was the one containing the fake will."

She looked at me, her eyes big and round.

"But how could you have known the location of the office, the identity of the man whose safe you were to open?"

I laughed a little. Better not to explain too much to her, to have her guessing a bit.

"That's a trade secret. Now I'll tell you something else. With the death of the lawyer there is one witness gone who could implicate you in the Rupert case. You play ball with me, and I'll try and get the other one where he can't hurt you. You must know that the fat crook with the icy eyes planted those two witnesses who came up the stairs as you were coming down."

Her eyes got so big that I thought they would fall from their sockets.

"Good God! How did you know all about that?"

I laughed again.

"Another trade secret. Will you play with me, play fair?"

She brushed back her hair, and nodded, her eyes starry, watching me with awe.

"As far as I can I will, Ed Jenkins," she whispered, swaying toward me, "and this will seal the bargain."

With that she tilted her face to mine and gave me a long, clinging kiss. The next moment and she had gathered her skirt about her and was gone.

I sat in the car, my lips tingling with that kiss, it dawning on me that I knew virtually nothing about this girl, except that I had been warned against her by a man who had given his life for the warning, a grim sacrifice to friendship.

Also I knew that somewhere in that great, throbbing city was a crook whose name I did not know, a crook with a fat face, puffy lips and ice-cold eyes. He had two papers that I would get.

Sitting there in the machine I made a vow that I would have those papers and exonerate the girl with the mole from the murder charge that he might place against her. The world would be too small to hold this fat crook with the icy eyes and myself. It would be a battle to the death.

Slowly I drove the car along the boulevard. I had no intention of ever returning to my apartment. After what had happened in the house of L. A. Daniels, after the probating of the genuine Brundage will, this fat crook who fancied himself the master mind of crookdom, would realize that he had been outgeneraled, would understand the challenge I had flung him in the death of his two trusted accomplices, in the switching of wills. I fancied I would hear more of this man.

Smiling grimly, I turned back the windshield so the cooling air of the night would come to my flushed face, and drove aimlessly into the night, looking for a new place to hide, a place from which I could plan my campaign.

Come and Get It

I gazed into the black muzzle of the forty-four "Squint" Dugan was holding to my face, and secretly gave him credit for being much more clever than I had anticipated. I had hardly expected to be discovered in my hiding place, least of all by Squint Dugan.

I watched the slight trembling of his hands, and listened to the yammering of his threats. Dugan is of the type that does not kill in cold blood, but has to bolster his nerves with dope, arouse his rage by a recital of his wrongs. Gradually, bit by bit, he was working up his nerve to tighten his trigger finger.

"Damn yuh, Ed Jenkins! Don't think I ain't wise to the guy that hijacked that cargo. Fifty thousand berries it was, and you lifted it, slick and clean! Just because you worked one of those Phantom Crook stunts don't mean that I ain't hep to yuh. I got the goods on yuh, an' I'm collectin' right now. I ain't alone in this thing, either; not by a hell of a lot, I ain't. There's men back of me who'll see me through, back me to the limit. . . ."

He blustered on, and I yawned.

That yawn laid the foundation for a little scheme I had in mind. Crooks of the Dugan type really have an inferiority complex. That's what makes 'em bluster so much. They're tryin' to make the other man give in, tryin' to sell themselves on the idea that they're as good as the other bird.

"Rather chilly this evening," I remarked casually, after that yawn had had a chance to soak in, and got up, calmly turned my

back on the blustering crook, and stirred up the fire with the poker. Apparently I didn't know he was alive.

That got him. His voice lost the blah-blah tone, and rose to almost a scream.

"Damn yuh! Can't yuh understand I'm croakin' yuh? I'm just tellin' yuh what for. I'm puttin' out your light, yuh hijackin' double-crossin' dude crook. You'll never see the sun rise again. . . ."

I had been holding a chunk of firewood poised over the top of the wood stove, and, without warning, I tossed it at him—not in a hurry, just easily, smoothly.

If he'd had any guts he'd have stood his ground and fired, but he didn't have the nerve. He quailed a bit before his muscles tightened his trigger finger, and that quailing was what I had counted on.

A knowledge of fencing is a fine thing, particularly for a crook, and I'd hooked the toe of that poker through the guard of his gun and jerked it out of his hand before his wrist had dropped from the blow I struck first.

"Now I'll talk," I said, as he cowered in the corner before the light that was in my eyes.

"You don't need to tell me there's been a crime trust organized. I know it. I bargained with the very head of that trust to receive certain papers in return for services rendered, and he held out on me. I can't locate him, but I do know certain members of the gang, and I'm declaring war.

"You got hijacked out of fifty thousand dollars' worth of hooch, and the reason you couldn't get any trace of it afterward was because it was dumped in the bay. I didn't want the hooch. I just wanted to attract somebody's attention.

"Now you go back to the man that sent you and tell him to tell the man higher up to tell the man who is at the head of this crime trust that Ed Jenkins, the Phantom Crook, is on the warpath, that until I get those papers they can't operate. I'll spoil every scheme they hatch up, ball up everything they try to pull; and if anyone harms a hair of the head of Helen Chadwick in the meantime, I'll forget my rule of never packing a gun, and start on the warpath and murder the outfit.

"Now get going!"

It was tall talk, but it was the kind of talk that gets through with men like Dugan. Those crooks had never seen me really in action,

but they had heard tales from the East. A man can't be known as the Phantom Crook in a dozen states, because he can slip through the fingers of the police at will, without having something on the ball.

Squint Dugan knew that I meant what I said. He took the opportunity to go, and he didn't stand on the order of his going. I knew that my message would reach the chief of that gang, would come to the ears of the man who was so careful to keep his identity a secret from all save his most trusted lieutenants. Also I knew that I had been careless, that I had slipped in allowing them to get a line on my apartment, and that I would have to get another hideout, and be more careful when I did it.

Before Dugan was down the stairs I was working on a new disguise, planning a new place to conceal myself. It was to be a war to the bitter end, with no quarter given nor asked, and I knew it and the other side knew it. Also, I had won the first round, taken the first trick.

My disguise I slipped in a handbag—a white beard, slouch hat, shabby coat. I took a heavy cane and locked the apartment. It was a cheap joint in a poor district, and the rent was paid. I wouldn't be back.

Before I put on the disguise I took a cab to Moe Silverstein's. Moe knew every crook in the game, never forgot a face or a gem and was the smoothest double-crosser in the business.

He looked up as I entered his room on the third floor of a smelly tenement. As soon as he saw me he began to rub his hands smoothly together, as though he were washing them in oil. He was fat, flabby, bald, and he stunk of garlic. His eyes were a liquid, limpid brown, wide, innocent, hurt. He had the stare of a dying deer and a heart of concrete.

"Mine friend, ah, yes, mine friend. It is so, mine friend, Ed Jenkins, the super-crook, the one who makes the police get gray hairs, and you have something for me, friend Jenkins? Some trinket? Some bauble? Yes?"

I drew up a chair and leaned forward, over the table, my face close to Moe's, so close I could smell the gagging odor of the garlic, could see the little muscles that tightened about his eyes.

"A new crook, Moe—a girl with a mole on her left hand. She goes by the name of Maude Enders. Where can I find her?"

His eyes stayed wide, but it took a tightening of the muscles to do it. His hands stopped in their perpetual rubbing.

"For why?"

"Do you know the Weasel?"

His hands began to rub again.

"The Weasel is dead, and I remember no dead crooks. I can make no money from them. It is only the live ones who can make money for Moe Silverstein."

I nodded.

"Yes, I know all of that; but the Weasel was at my apartment just before he was killed. He came to warn me of this girl with the mole, to tell me that she would trap me; and then he was killed with the words scarcely cold on his lips—killed by crooks who had followed him in a closed car."

Again he raised his shoulders, ducked his neck and spread his palms.

"But he is dead."

"Exactly, and the woman with the mole got acquainted with me, and through her I met the man who poses as the head of the new crime trust, the new master mind of the tenderloin. He is fat with skin that does not move and has eyes that are like chunks of ice. I want to locate the woman with the mole, and, through her, her master."

Moe stopped all motion. He became a frozen chunk of caution, poised, tense, thinking, pulled out from behind his mask.

"Why?"

"Because this man has some papers I want, papers he held out on me. I want to warn him that unless I get those papers he will die."

Actually he shrunk away from me, drew back from the table.

"I know nothing of what you speak. There is no girl with a mole in the game. This talk of a new crime trust is police propaganda for more men. You are crazy, Ed—and soon you will be dead, and then I will have to forget you, to lose another fine prospect. You could deliver much to me if you wanted to work, Ed, but you just hang out on the fringes and meddle. . . . I do not know of the people you mention, and soon you will be forgotten. Good-bye."

As I went out of the door his hands had resumed their rubbing, but his eyes had slipped; they were two narrow slits through which there came stabbing gleams of cold light. I was satisfied.

I went down the steps, doubled back, slipped down the corridor, and hid in a closet, a tight, dark, nasty-smelling closet, and waited.

An hour passed, and then there came the sound of quick, positive steps, steps that pounded down the hall with a banging of the heels, steps that paused before Moe's door.

Again I peeked.

This would probably be my man. He was broad-shouldered, red-faced, aggressive. A young fellow with lots of pep, quick, positive motions, an outthrust chin, coal-black eyes, latest model clothes and dark, bushy eyebrows. His hands were small, slight, dark, jeweled. His face was scraped, massaged, pink. There was a swagger about him, a bearing.

He vanished within the door, and Moe did not throw him out. There was the soft slur of Moe's voice, the harsh bass of the visitor's tones, and I slipped down the hall, down the stairs and out.

The sheik came out in about half an hour, looked cautiously around him, walked a block, rounded a corner and doubled abruptly back, crossed the street, waited a few minutes, and then went on about his business with no further worry about his backtrack.

I followed him to the Brookfield Apartments, waited half an hour, picked him up again and followed him to the Mintner Arms, an exclusive bachelor apartment house where only men of the highest references were admitted.

Three hours later I figured he was bedded for the night, and went to a cheap hotel, adjusted my disguise in the washroom and got a room. At daylight I was back on the job in front of the Mintner Arms. My man came out at eight and went into a barber shop and got the works. At nine-thirty he took his complexion out into the open air and headed for the fashionable jewelry district.

I was at the counter in Redfern's Jewel Shoppe looking at the most expensive stones in the case when he made his spiel to old man Redfern. Five caustic comments on stones handed me had ensured the respectful silence of the clerk who was showing me the stones, and I got most of the spiel.

The sheik introduced himself as Carl Schwartz, held out his hand, grasped Redfern's and worked his arm up and down like a pump handle, reeling out his talk in the meantime. It sounded good.

He was the representative, the special solicitor, of the Down Town Merchants' Exhibit, and they were putting on a great jewel exhibit. All of the leading stores were to be represented. Space was to be sold by the foot, the exhibitors furnishing their own clerks and their own guards. Ten policemen would be in constant charge of the crowd. Admission would be by invitation only. The Exhibit would arrange to have the invitations given to the most influential and wealthy society leaders. The Exhibit would furnish music, a free talk each day by an expert on the intrinsic value of gems, the best mountings, the methods of judging stones, the appropriate gems for each occasion, and give photographic lectures on the latest mountings from Europe. The Exhibit would furnish an armored car to take the gems and the guards from each store to the place of exhibit. The Exhibit would also furnish daily flowers for decorative purposes.

After that he let go of Redfern's hand and produced a diagram of floor space. He was a glib talker, a convincing salesman, and Redfern was falling. The jewel business was pretty quiet, and an exhibit like that would go over big, provided they could get the society women to come, and bring their checkbooks with them.

"Now, Mr. Redfern, I don't want you to say no right now, and I don't want you to say yes. I want you to think it over, to study the diagram, to look up my references. Then, *if* I can convince you that we will absolutely have the cream of the cream there on the opening day; *if* I can get one of the society leaders to act as hostess on the opening days; *if* I can convince you that your exhibit will sell over twenty thousand dollars gross the first day, *then* will you sign up? The space runs from one hundred dollars a day to three hundred, depending on location. The first day we'll have the society leaders. We'll get a big write-up. The next day we'll let down the bars a bit, and finally we'll let in the New-Rich, the splurgers, the spenders, who'll come to get in on the social advertising, to get their pictures in the paper, and they'll buy. That'll be understood before they get the invitations."

Redfern placed a fatherly hand on the boy's shoulder.

"It can't be done, but have a cigar. Come into my private office. What are you doing for lunch? Let's look at that space chart again. . . ."

They moved off, and I waited five minutes and then got in an argument with the clerk, and stumped out of the door, pounding

my cane, working my beard, a picture of white-haired indignation—one of the old boys who knew what he didn't want and wasn't going to be smart-alecked into buying it.

I had food for thought.

They would make money out of the exhibit alone, perhaps ten thousand dollars—perhaps not. But did they intend to make money out of the exhibit? Did they intend to get the cream of all the jewels in the city under one roof, a roof which had been especially prepared to receive them, and then make a grand haul which would take the best of every jewelry store in the city?

It would be a wonderful thing, a super-crime, and if that *was* the game there were brains and money back of it. But how could they swing it? Each store would furnish its own guard. There would be an armored truck to transport the exhibits. There would be special policemen on duty. The insurance companies would be on the job. There would be a deadline for crooks established. There would be watchmen, spectators, guards, police, and the exhibit would be in the crowded downtown section.

Carl Schwartz made three calls that day.

The evening papers featured the new jewelry exhibit, mentioned the prominence of the social leaders who would conduct the opening, hinted that invitations were confined to those whose standing was beyond question, and that others of the outer shell were bidding high for invitations. It was a good bit of publicity.

That evening I tailed Schwartz. He was a cinch after one got to know his habits. Always at the start he took great precautions to see that he wasn't followed, and then, when he had convinced himself there was no one on his wind, he went simply about his business without so much as a glance at his backtrail.

At eleven he was at The Purple Cow, a cabaret and night club of the wilder sort, and there he was joined by the girl I had lost, the girl I knew as Maude Enders, the girl with the mole on her left hand. That was the break I had been looking for.

By that time I was willing to hazard a bet that the girl was living at the Brookfield Apartments. If Schwartz was in touch with her every night that would explain his visit to the Brookfield the night before.

I knew this girl as a member of the gang of Icy-Eyes, the master crook. I knew that she was a close worker, an inner lieutenant, and somewhere along the line she would report to the man himself.

Was Schwartz a crook? Going to Moe Silverstein's would indicate that he was. Perhaps he was merely being played by the girl with the mole. Icy-Eyes had the girl with the mole under his thumb. There was the matter of that murder I had stumbled on. . . . Perhaps Maude Enders hadn't killed that man, but the simple facts of the case would look pretty black before a jury, and Icy-Eyes had those facts, had planted witnesses who would see and hear. Maude Enders would do as he said or . . .

I knew the girl had the eye of a hawk when it came to penetrating disguises, and I had enough of a lead for one night. I sauntered back to my hotel without hanging around The Purple Cow.

At the hotel I got a shock. The police were on my trail. I knew it even before I got in the lobby. There were too many people hanging around the front of the hotel. There was the car with the red spotlight on the right-hand side. I ducked in an alley and slipped off my disguise. I had another concealed in a little bag under my left armpit, a disguise that was good enough to fool the police.

I slipped into the lobby and listened. There was no doubt of it. The clerk was explaining volubly as he took back my room key. I got a glimpse of the number as it was hung back on the board.

"He'll probably be in any time now," said the clerk.

The flat foot who was holding him under the hypnotic stare of the police department's best glare shifted his cigar and tried to look tough.

"Give me the office when he shows up. We've a straight tip on this thing."

I sauntered over and sat in the lobby behind a palm tree and did some thinking. I hadn't been followed when I came to the hotel. My disguise would fool the police. Somewhere I had slipped. Probably there had been someone watching Schwartz, and that someone had picked me up as I took a hand in the game. After all, I was playing against a big combination, a clever combination, and they were pretty keen to have me out of the way. The police in California had nothing on me, but with my record they didn't need much. Just the faintest bit of circumstantial evidence, and they'd have me before a jury, and the jury would take one look at my past record, and the verdict would be in inside of ten minutes.

I went out, took off my disguise so that I was myself once more, and set my feet toward the Brookfield Apartments. I was

just a little hot under the collar. I'd respected my immunity in California, and hadn't gone after other people's property. As a result the California police, the California crooks didn't know the real Ed Jenkins. I'd only bestirred myself when there was something in the wind, when someone had tried to frame something on me, and then, nine times out of ten, I'd handled the thing so smoothly, and kept in the background so entirely that the crook who had got his didn't know that the peculiar coincidences which had betrayed him were really engineered by the man he was trying to frame.

It wasn't difficult to get the girl with the mole located. It took ten dollars and five minutes. That mole on her left hand was a big help. She had come in alone fifteen minutes ago.

I went to her apartment, and selected a pass key before the door. It was probably a little ungentlemanly to walk into a girl's apartment that way, particularly when she might be retiring, but I couldn't very well stand in the hall and carry on a conversation through the closed door, telling the whole world the message I was going to deliver to that girl.

The second key did the trick, the lock slipped back and I was inside. The room I entered was illuminated by a silk-shaded reading lamp, furnished after the manner of furnished apartments, and filled with the odor of some subtle perfume. There was no one in the room, but there came the sound of rustling garments from a little dressing closet that opened off of the back end.

I walked in toward the light.

"Come in, Ed Jenkins, draw up a chair. I'll be with you as soon as I have my kimono on."

It was the voice of the girl with the mole, and she was in the dressing closet. She couldn't see me. How did she know who I was? It was too many for me. This gang was more confoundedly clever than I'd given it credit for, but I wouldn't show surprise.

"Take your time," I said. "You got my card?"

If she was going to act smart I'd pretend I'd sent up a card and see what that got me.

It got me a laugh, a low, rippling, throaty laugh.

"No, Ed, I didn't; but after I saw you at The Purple Cow this evening, and after you had to fit two keys to the door in order to get it open, I didn't need any card. In fact I rather expected you. The others thought you'd spend the night in jail, but I knew you better."

With that she walked out, a rose-colored kimono clinging to her youthful form, one bare arm outstretched and her soft, white hand held gracefully out.

I took the hand and raised it to my lips.

"Why the sudden deference?" she asked.

"Merely a recognition of your cleverness," I answered. "You know, Maude, I should hate to have to kill you—after all."

"Yes," she rippled, "I should hate to have you."

I bowed. "About the murder of R. C. Rupert. I happened to stumble across some witnesses, some witnesses who saw a girl with a mole running frantically down the stairs just about the time of the killing. They claim they could identify the woman if they should see her again."

Her hand went to her throat, her face white.

"Ed," she gasped, "Ed. . . . It wasn't you! You didn't do that job?"

There was such genuine emotion, such horror in her tone, that I was puzzled. My whole plan of action began to dissolve into nothing.

"I kill him?" I said. "I never saw the man in my life. I had thought *you* killed him."

She shook her head, her eyes wide.

"I came into the apartment just after he had been struck down. In fact the blow was delivered just as I stepped inside the door. It was dark, and by the time I found a light I saw what had happened, and then I knew I had walked into a trap. For once I lost my head and dashed down the stairs, and there was that man and woman coming up, and then I knew, knew that they were there to see me as I burst from the apartment, knew that some people wanted to hold a murder charge over my head—and now when you sought to use that club I thought that it was you."

I looked her over narrowly. She was one woman I couldn't read. She might have been telling the truth, but a jury wouldn't believe her. I wasn't sure that I believed her. I had followed her that night, and she had left my apartment, gone to this flat, entered the door, and then there had been a blow and a gasping cry, the sound of a fall, and she had come tearing out. R. C. Rupert had been stabbed, and he hadn't so much as raised a hand to protect himself. There was no sign of a struggle, just the man, the knife and the blood.

And while I studied her, she studied me, studied me in just the same way, searchingly, wonderingly, seeking to penetrate to my thoughts. It was masterly acting.

I waved my hand.

"We'll forget about that, only I know where those witnesses are. It is only incidental, anyway.

"You were with me when I was taken to the head of your gang. In fact you took me there, and you saw him hand me an envelope containing papers, papers which were to be my reward for opening a safe. There were two papers missing from that collection. I played fair and earned the papers, and I got shortchanged. I want you to do this for me. Get me into the hangout of this crook who is the head of the crime trust. Let me talk with him."

She looked at me narrowly.

"Ed, I believe you'd kill him."

I looked her squarely in the eyes.

"I'll kill him if he so much as tries to use those papers."

She laughed, a rippling laugh of good-natured amusement.

"What a wonderful actor you are, Ed! You know you wouldn't, know you couldn't, and yet you almost look as though you would. The head of that crime trust, as you call it, is too well protected, protected by money, position, power, pull, and by the fact that no one knows him. In all the underworld there are only two people who can get to that man at will."

"And you are one?"

"Yes, Ed. I am one."

"And you'll take me?"

She laughed again and shook her head.

"Certainly not. You don't want me to. You're really just running a big bluff, trying to frighten that man from using those papers. Listen, Ed, it can't be done. He knows no fear—knows no mercy. He is planning to use those papers and use them he will. He can afford to ignore you because you are helpless, but you mustn't make any trouble or you will go out—like a candle."

I thought for a bit. She was lying to me, stringing me along. The man did fear me, or he wouldn't have put the police on my trail, wouldn't have sent Squint Dugan with a gun to get revenge. It hadn't been Dugan who had located my apartment. It had been a far shrewder man than the loudmouthed killer. Why should the girl lie to me, why taunt me with my helplessness? When a woman

taunts a man with being helpless she usually gets him into a condition of blind rage. Did she want to get me so worked up that I would kill old Icy-Eyes, would shoot him down as soon as I came face to face with him? Did she plan to do that and thereby remove the man who held a murder charge over her head?

I could not tell. Women are peculiar; and she had known I was coming, had planned her story, had donned an elaborate negligee, and was sitting there beneath the silk-shaded lamp, her rose-colored kimono drawn apart, revealing a glimpse of lace, an expanse of gleaming silk hose, and was laughing at me, her bare arm toying about beneath the gleaming light, her red lips parted in a smile as she taunted me with my inability to accomplish anything definite.

I arose and bowed. Again I took her hand and raised it to my lips.

"What for this time?" she asked.

"Respect again, m'lady. You seek to have me remove a man you fear. You are clever, and I salute you for your cleverness."

Her face fell.

"Ed, *you* are clever—clever as hell."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"That is something I won't argue about; I admit it. When a woman pays me compliments I admit them and become twice as cautious as before. Here is something you can do, though. Tell this icy-eyed master crook of yours that until he has returned those papers to me his life is not safe. More, you can tell him that he can't pull a single crime of any magnitude and get away with it.

"I shall be watching the underworld, and I will balk him in any crime he tries to pull off if it's worthwhile, and if it's a small, petty crime I'll just dump enough monkey wrenches into the machinery to throw out a gear here and there. Tell him that."

There was a strange light in her eyes, an inscrutable light.

"You mean that, Ed?"

I nodded.

For a long minute she studied my face.

"If that's the case, leave by the back entrance. There is a car parked in front with gunmen in it. You are to be killed as you step on the sidewalk."

I could feel my face redden.

“You said I was clever,” I told her, “and yet you think you have to warn me of *that!* Bah! As soon as you said that you’d rather expected me, that the ‘others’ had thought I’d spend the night in jail, but that you knew me better, you gave me my cue to vanish by the rear door. That showed that you had told the others about recognizing me at The Purple Cow, showed that I had been discussed, and that you had said I would probably come to call on you.”

“The others thought I would spend the night in jail because they had located my hotel. When they realized that I was on guard, that I knew of their plans, knew that the police had visited my room, then they knew you were right, and they would have a closed car waiting. I appreciate the warning, but don’t again tell me of the obvious.”

With that I bowed my good-nights and left her, and as I stepped out into the corridor there was a gleam of admiration in her eyes as she stood there, her kimono forgotten, falling from her, her hand outstretched, her lips parted, her eyes warm with emotion. And yet she was cold. There was nothing of physical charm about her despite her wonderful figure, her flashing arms, her heaving breast, her shapely stockings. She was a girl with brains, and she admired but one thing in life—brains. There was no sex appeal about her. She was merely a reasoning machine. Her body was merely the vehicle for her brain—and she was most damnably clever.

At that I didn’t take the back entrance. I went up to the top floor, and then out on to the roof. It was cold and there were wisps of fog drifting in from the ocean, leaving globules of moisture on the stucco coping of the roof. Yet I could see the street clearly. It was as she had said. There was a machine parked there, a closed car with motor running, curtains drawn.

I crossed the roof and looked down into the alley. There, beneath my very eyes, crouched in the shadow of a fence was another man waiting, tense, expectant. Did she know he was there? Had she warned me of the obvious peril at the front door to send me to my death at the back? I had no means of knowing, but this much I did know. I had saved my life by coming to the roof.

I stepped back to the front of the roof and watched the machine.

The fog thickened until it became a white pall. Lights from the windows of the apartments below sent out golden paths of light

into the swirling moisture. The sound of the running motor was queerly muffled.

A curtain was raised. Out into the fog there shone a path of yellow light. The curtain was lowered and the light blotted out. Three times this was repeated. The light shone from the window of Maude Enders' apartment. Probably a signal to let the watchers below know that I had left. If that was so she had delayed giving it, delayed nearly ten minutes. Was she on the square after all—this girl with the mole on her left hand?

Another ten minutes passed. There came the sound of a slamming door as someone got out of the machine below, clicked across the cement sidewalk, pounded up the steps, and entered the apartment house. Five minutes later and he was back out and into the machine. There came the acceleration of the motor as the car moved away, swinging slowly down the street, around the corner, and in front of the alley.

I tiptoed around the coping, following the course of the machine, watching it as it stopped at the alley.

A man got out and walked up the alley, whistling a soft signal. The man who was crouched behind the fence answered it, and then the two moved together, joined in a whispered conference, and then both got into the machine. Once more there came the sound of the motor accelerating, and then the car whined down the block, turned into the main boulevard and was lost in the traffic.

I got back to the trap door and went down the steep steps, back down the floors until I came once more at the apartment of Maude Enders.

This time I knew the right key, and I turned the lock noiselessly.

She was sitting in her chair, her chin cupped in her hands, her luminous eyes staring out into space.

"Ed!" she exclaimed as the light fell on me.

I bowed.

"Just a final good-night, and a reminder that you mustn't forget to tell old Icy-Eyes what I said."

"Ed," she pleaded, her voice suddenly soft. "Ed, I swear I didn't know there was a watcher in the alley, didn't suspect it until after the man came up to see why you hadn't come out; and I delayed the signal for ten minutes, Ed. Honest I did!"

I grinned at her.

"Don't waste any time worrying about me, sister," I told her. "No apologies necessary. I saw your delayed signal and I just dropped in on the road out to say thanks."

Her eyes were wide this time.

"Ed, you *are* clever! . . . I can put you up here if you can stay, Ed. The streets are unsafe, and every hotel is watched."

I bowed my thanks.

"I have work to do, Maude. Thanks all the same, but the streets are never unsafe for the Phantom Crook. Good night."

Perhaps I was showing off a little, but half the pleasure of doing something clever is to have an appreciative audience, and this girl with the mole on her left hand knew clever work when she saw it. Then again, I wanted to satisfy myself that she had been on the square with that tip to pass out by the rear door.

There was a telephone in the lobby, and I phoned for a cab, and didn't step out of the front door until the cab was at the curb. It took me three cabs and half an hour to get to the place I wanted to go, the house of Helen Chadwick. I hoped I'd find her up. It was the second time I'd been there, once just before our engagement had been announced.

Helen Chadwick and her mother were of the upper, upper crust. They were in the middle of the social-elect. Helen's father had been unfortunate before he died. It was worry that killed him. Crooks held evidences of his indiscretion, and they had threatened Helen once or twice with exposure of their knowledge. It wasn't that Helen cared for herself, but there was the memory of her father, and the failing health of her mother to be considered.

Once they had forced Helen to pass me off as her husband-to-be, and we had spent a weekend at the country home of Mr. and Mrs. Loring Kemper, the leaders of the socially elect. I had got her out of that scrape safely, and when I broke the engagement with a smile, there had been tears in the girl's eyes. I had told her that I would come to her if danger threatened again. . . .

I half expected the house would be dark, but it was lit up like a church. There was a late dance going on, and shiny cars were parked all around the block, cars that had chauffeurs hunched behind the wheels, dozing, nodding, shivering.

I paid off the taxi, and skipped up the steps.

A butler answered my ring.

"Miss Chadwick," I told him crisply.

He gave me a fishy eye.

"Your card?"

"Tell her Mr. Jenkins is here, and I'll step in while you're telling her."

He gave ground doubtfully, but give it he did, and I walked on into a reception room. From the other side of the house there came shrill bursts of laughter, gruff voices, the blare of an orchestra, the tinkle of dishes.

Twenty seconds and the man was back.

"Not at home, sir. Step this way, sir."

He bowed me to the door.

As he held the front door open I took him by the collar and swung him around.

"You didn't deliver my message. Why?"

His fishy eyes glinted a cold, hostile glare of scornful enmity.

"Miss Chadwick is never at home to crooks. I recognized you from your published pictures."

I nodded.

"I was afraid so. I recognized you from having seen you with Squint Dugan. Published pictures—hell! You know me because you're a crook. On your way."

A push sent him out on the moist porch, a kick sent him the rest of the way down the stairs, the momentum skidded him across the wet sidewalk and into the gutter. Across the street a chauffeur voiced his approval by a short blast of the horn. In the darkness someone snickered. The butler got up and tried to scrape off the muddy water with the palm of his hand. His livery was a mess, and his face was smeared.

"You needn't come back," I told him. "Your references will be forwarded to you care of the warden at the Wisconsin penitentiary at Waupin. I believe you're wanted there, and I intend to see that you get there."

"What is all this?"

The remark came in a cool, impersonal voice, the sort of a voice one uses to peddlers and office boys.

I carefully closed the door and sprung the night latch. Then I turned to face the owner of that voice. She was gowned in the latest style, her bare arms and throat contrasting against the dark of her gown, her hair framing the soft curve of her oval cheek. There was a patch of rouge high on her cheeks, her lips were vivid

crimson. She was a flapper, and yet there was a something else, a something of poise, of more mature responsibility about her than when I had last seen her.

"Ed!" she breathed. . . . "Ed Jenkins!"

I grinned at her. I didn't want any dramatics.

"H'lo, Helen. I just fired your butler. He was a crook, an ex con., and he was spying on you."

There were tears in her eyes, and her face had gone white beneath the rouge, but she twisted her mouth into a smile.

"Just when I had been hoping, praying that I could get in touch with you."

I nodded.

"More trouble over those papers of your father?"

There was no need for an answer.

"Listen, Helen. I have got all of those papers except two. There's no need of going into details. I wasn't going to bother you by reporting, but was just going to trace those documents through the underworld, get 'em and destroy 'em. Two got away, and I had an idea you'd be bothered, so I looked you up."

"Come on in here, Ed," she said, and gave me her hand, leading the way into a small room which opened off the rear hall. "This is filled with wraps, but we can talk here for a minute. . . . Oh, how I hoped I'd see you again, Ed."

I patted her shoulder reassuringly, and she cuddled into the hollow of my arms with a little, snuggly motion, as natural as though we'd been engaged for years.

"Ed, there's a man by the name of Schwartz who holds one of those papers. He showed it to me, and it's genuine all right. He insists that I must use my influence to see that a jewelry exhibit given by the Down Town Merchants' Exhibit is a success. He wants me to have Mrs. Kemper act as hostess and sponsor for the exhibit. Otherwise he threatens to use the paper against me, and expose father, blacken his memory, give the story to the newspapers and all the rest."

I did some rapid thinking.

"When do you get this paper?"

"As soon as Mrs. Kemper announces that she will act as hostess."

"And will she?"

A voice from the doorway answered.

"She'll do anything for Helen Chadwick. Ed, how are you? It's a pleasure to greet you once more."

I turned and looked into the smiling eyes of Edith Jewett Kemper, leader of the social world, head of the four hundred.

There was a certain wistful sadness in her face as she gave me her hand.

"Ed, you never took advantage of my invitation to come to my house for a visit. There are lots of people who would have given much for such an invitation. I like you, and my husband likes you—and Helen likes you."

I bowed again.

"Thanks. I appreciate it, but to have a crook spending the week at your house might not appear to the best of advantage in the social columns of some of the papers."

She shrugged her bare shoulders.

"The papers be damned. I have my standing sufficiently assured to do as I please."

The conversation was getting a little too personal for me. Those were my friends, and yet they didn't understand how impossible it was to maintain a friendship with a crook. I knew their sincerity, appreciated their interest, but I was a crook, a crook who was known from coast to coast. Ed Jenkins, the Phantom Crook, could have nothing in common with people such as these. The memory of a pleasant weekend, the haunting recollection of those soft eyes of Helen Chadwick's, and a sense of gratitude—those were the ties that bound me to a world that was another existence from my own life, an environment foreign to me, a something separate and apart.

"How did you know I was here?"

She grinned at that.

"I happened to be standing near the front windows, and saw the butler as he went out—down and out. I fancied that would mean Ed Jenkins was calling, and I took the liberty of intruding long enough to say that I don't like to be snubbed. You're not using me right, Ed; and then there's Helen."

I nodded.

"Yes, there's Helen," I said. "It would be a fine endorsement for her future if the papers should learn that the Edward Gordon Jenkins who was with her for a visit at the house of the Kempers was none other than Ed Jenkins, the Phantom Crook. It would surely look well in print!"

Her eyes were soft, dreamy.

"There are things more important than reputation. One should not sacrifice all life for the sake of conventions, for social standing. Social position is merely a bauble, Ed, a pretty, glittering trinket that's as cold as ice."

I could feel the clinging girl press her face against my shoulder. The party was due to get all weeps if I didn't strut my stuff and make a getaway.

"I've been thinking it over, and I want you to act as hostess for the jewel exhibit. See that Helen gets the paper, and then I'll get in touch with you later. In the meantime, I'm on my way. There's work to be done before sunrise."

I gently broke away and started for the door.

Helen stood there, motionless. Mrs. Kemper made as though she would detain me, then thought better of it.

"So long, Ed," called Helen, in a gay voice.

"Be good," I told her.

Mrs. Kemper said nothing, but her eyes were moist, and, as I rounded the corner into the hallway, I saw the two women go into a clinch.

That was over.

The cold fog of the night felt cool and welcome on my face. I was commencing to know the truth. That sense of fierce protection which had come over me as I held Helen to me, that swift pounding of the pulse when I had first heard her voice. . . . I put those thoughts behind me, firmly, resolutely. I was a crook. The girl was a thoroughbred. I shook myself out of my daze. There was work to be done, a necessity that I keep my wits clear. Through the foggy night there were crooks peering the streets, closed cars circling about, cars that were filled with armed men. All crookdom was looking for Ed Jenkins. I had warned the head of the new formed crime trust. Too much was at stake to take chances. War had been declared and no quarter would be asked or given. Single-handed, my wits were pitted against those of an organized underworld, and the safety and happiness of a girl who had shown friendship for Ed Jenkins was at stake.

The fog cleared my brain, and I began to think, to put together the pieces of the puzzle that had been placed in my hands. There would be a few thousand profit to be made from the jewelry exhibit, but the crook who had engineered that game would not be

content with a paltry few thousand. It was intended to loot the exhibit, but how?

Then there was the girl with the mole. She had given her signal ten minutes after I had departed, and then, when the man had gone to her apartment, he had called off his gang without any delay. Without enough delay. Was it possible they suspected this girl with the mole of double-crossing them as far as I was concerned?

I swung down the street until I came to an all-night drug store, summoned a taxi, and took another look at the apartment house where Maude Enders lived. One look was enough. There was a light in the girl's apartment, and a closed car before the door.

She had been summoned, this girl of mystery, this perfectly formed woman who was absolutely unconscious of any charm, who dwelt in a mental world, who thought swiftly and cleverly.

I spoke to the taxi driver and had him drive me around the block, stop at an alley and turn out the lights. From the alley I could see the light in the girl's apartment.

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Three minutes and the light snapped out.

The girl with the mole came out of the front door, leaning on the arm of a man who was bundled up in a heavy overcoat, and entered the car. I didn't have to be a prophet to know that the girl was being taken to account, that she was a prisoner right then—a prisoner of the man on whose arm she was leaning, that she was being summoned to the headquarters of the crime trust.

I had almost overlooked that bet. A moment or two more and it would have been too late. I had intended to look up this Schwartz and have it out with him, but this was a better lead. It might result in almost anything.

The closed car moved off and I followed, followed in a way that made it virtually impossible to detect the car in which I was traveling, and in which a twenty-dollar bill had placed me in the driver's seat with the uniformed chauffeur as a passenger.

I cut across in back of the car, swung around a block, headed behind it again, ran a block ahead and let it pass, followed for a ways, ducked through alleys, always watching the taillight whenever possible, detouring where I was fairly sure of my ground—and then I lost it.

The car had turned off, where? I swung around the four sides of the block, saw a taillight down a side street, swept past and knew that I had located my quarry.

It was a flat in the better residential district, and the front was black, gloomy, respectable as became a flat-building at that hour of the night. I left the car a block away and began to cross backyards. Somewhere a dog barked, but he was chained. Exclusive residential districts do not cater to tenants with dogs. Rapidly I adjusted the white whiskers, the steel-rimmed glasses, the wig, the touch of complexion paste which was a part of my disguise as an old man, a pasty-faced, white-haired old blusterer. It had been a good disguise, but the agents of the crime trust had penetrated it. I wore it so that they wouldn't think I knew they had discovered the secret of that disguise. I would let them think Ed Jenkins was a bit of a fool . . . until it suited my purpose to let them think otherwise.

A man guarded the back of the flat, a man who took his job none too seriously. I stooped and filled the little leather pouch—which I always carried as a pocketbook—with fine sand from the back of the yard, a sandy loam which packed hard and fast, and made a formidable weapon out of my purse.

Ten minutes of careful stalking, fifteen, and then he saw me. His hand raced to his hip, there was a swish through the air, and then he went bye-bye, without a sound, the skin hardly bruised.

I stepped over him and took one of the back windows. The kitchen was deserted. A long hallway showed a faint light. A man sat with his back to the wall, a gun in either hand, nodding, breathing heavily, regularly. I stepped past him and paused before a door from which came the sound of voices.

Without knocking I opened the door and stepped into the room. It was furnished as an office, and a huge desk occupied the center of the floor. Upon this desk was a small, portable reading lamp, and the circle of its rays showed the white face of the woman with the mole, the thin, rat-like features of the man who had accompanied her, and whom I recognized as one of the most prominent of the criminal lawyers in the city, and showed, also, the huge bulk of the man who was sitting behind that desk.

It was that man in whom I was interested.

He was big, flabby, his skin dead white, his lips fat and spongy, and his face hung in folds about his chin, but there was a soft

sheen to the skin, a smoothness of texture. His eyes caught the reflection of the reading lamp and seemed to shoot it forth in a glittering collection of icy rays. There was never so cold and remorseless an expression upon the face of any living mortal I had seen as was contained in the eyes of this heavy man behind the desk.

He was speaking, and he finished his talk before he shifted his glance toward the door. His voice was soft, gentle, and an even monotone, and there was no expression in it. It was his eyes which gave the expression, a cold, deadly intensity of purpose.

"Yet you delayed the signal. In some manner he escaped, and he left by neither the front nor the rear."

The girl chose her words carefully, and there was a slight break in her voice, the faintest inkling of hysterical panic which she was fighting to control.

"Perhaps . . . perhaps he was . . . hiding on an upper floor."

"Not unless he had been warned," came the colorless tones of the man's voice. "And if he was warned, who warned him?"

The slight noise I had made in opening the door had been overlooked. Temporarily it had slipped the mind of this man with th eyes of ice. So engrossed was he in probing the mind of the girl that he had forgotten to raise his eyes. Had he done so he would probably have taken me for one of his guards. The light threw a sharp glare on the desk, but the rest of the room was in gloom.

I advanced to the table.

The girl was weakening. I could see her head droop slightly. What her face told I knew not, but that sag of her head and neck told me much.

With an effort, scowling his impatience, the man with the eyes of ice tore his gaze from the girl and raised his glance.

"Well?" he said, and his tone was as colorless as ever, notwithstanding the impatience which gleamed from his eyes.

"Well," I answered, "very well, thank you. In fact I am quite well, and I dropped in to say good evening."

I was watching him like a hawk, looking for that tell-tale start, that swift tightening of his facial muscles which would show that I had jarred his self-control; but there was nothing. His face remained as passive as though it had been so much pink putty. His eyes were so hard and flinty one would have expected no change there. His voice remained well modulated.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Jenkins, himself. Come in and draw up a chair, Jenkins. We were discussing you."

I walked on in, my eyes on his hands. The rat-faced criminal lawyer had plunged his hand into a side pocket of his coat, but I had no fear of him. He wouldn't have the nerve to shoot until the last minute, and I didn't intend to let them get the lead. I was going to play my own cards for a while.

"I dropped in to tell you that you're all wrong. I waited outside this girl's apartment for a second, just to see if there was to be any telephoning or signaling, and I heard the curtain roller go up and down three times. That meant a machine in front, and a machine in front probably meant a guard in the rear. That's all there was to that.

"However, I wanted to get in touch with you, and when I saw you were going to have this girl down here so you could throw a scare into her, I decided to tail along and have a little conversation on my own hook."

The big man at the desk brushed his hand slightly as though he was waving the girl with the mole entirely to one side, and his eyes never left my face.

"Jenkins, I offered you once before, and I offer you again, a place with me, a place where you can make much money, have men beneath you to do the dangerous work, and can really find some market for the brains you have."

I nodded easily.

"Just after you made that offer before you double-crossed me by holding out some papers on me."

This time there was just the faintest flicker of expression in the gray-blue eyes. It was a slight twinkle of appreciation. He had a sense of humor, this man with the dead-white skin and the ice-cold eyes.

"You should talk of a double-cross. You slipped something over on us that time that was so fast no one ever caught it. It happened that I made a price for certain things in that case, the opening of a safe, let us say. The rest of it was up to the others. How you slipped it over on them I don't know. The lawyer swore he destroyed the will with his own hands and that he watched you to see there could be no substitution, and yet . . ."

I broke in.

"Never mind all that. You double-crossed me at the start by holding out two papers on me. What came afterward was my method of registering disapproval. Now I want those papers and I want them right now, or I'll register a hell of a lot more disapproval, and you'll find yourself sitting in the gutter."

The eyes were cold and hard again.

"Jenkins, I deliver those papers when and how I choose. However, you will throw in with me before you leave this room or you'll leave it feet first."

I hitched my chair closer and let my own eyes bore into his.

"Either you give up those papers or else you will suffer some very great inconvenience."

I could see his fingers gripping the edge of the desk, gripping until the nails were white, but, aside from that, there was no sign of emotion.

"Jenkins," he said in his quiet, well-modulated voice, "you interfered a few days ago and cost me a rake-off on fifty thousand dollars. I can't allow you to be in a position to do it again. I have given you your chance. . . ."

I didn't let him finish. I had played my cards, had given him warning, had let him know that I could find him, could walk into his den at will. The next trick would have been his and I would have lost my lead—my lead and my life.

I swung my wrist and the leather bag filled with packed, sandy loam crashed down upon the desk light. The bulb crashed and the room was in darkness.

I jumped back toward the door, but didn't make the mistake of opening it. The hall was lighted, and I would have been filled with lead before I had got over the threshold. However, I'd counted on that sleepy gunfighter who was supposed to be on guard, and I'd counted on the lawyer.

I figured right both times.

The lawyer fired at the chair in which I had been sitting, fired three times. Then there was sudden silence.

"Fool!" exclaimed the man with the eyes of ice.

There came running steps, and the door crashed open. The man with the two guns had burst into the room ready to go into action, and encountered a wall of inky darkness. The momentum of his rush carried him well past the sill, and I was standing by the door, ready, waiting, planning on just such a move.

As the man plunged in I gave him a quick thrust from behind, pushed him farther into the room, and, shielded behind his stumbling body, I darted through the door and down the hall. The lawyer fired again. The mere fact that he might kill his own guard meant nothing to him. He was desperate. What the bullet struck I didn't find out. I was on my way. It didn't strike me. It would have taken sheer luck for that bullet to have stopped me as I darted around that doorway with the stumbling guard blocking the view.

The man in back was still asleep when I went past. I had handed him a pretty solid tap, and I figured he would be good for an hour or so more. The dog barked again, but that was all. If the pistol shots had been heard in the neighborhood they had probably been taken for the backfires of an automobile exhaust, for the windows were all dark.

I chuckled to myself as I gained the street. The fat bird with the ice-cold eyes would have to change his headquarters again. Beyond doubt I was annoying him greatly. Also I had this to remember. He appreciated his danger now. It was either he or I. The city was too small for both of us. One or the other was doomed.

However, there was one thing in my favor. He had gone too far with his jewel exhibit to back down now and that gave me a trail that might be followed.

My first problem was a place to hide out. Every rooming house, every hotel, would be watched. Through some means he had set the police on my trail, so that my California immunity temporarily meant nothing. If he could keep me in jail until after the looting of the jewel exhibit he would be satisfied. However, I didn't intend to have either the police or the crooks get on my trail. I had money, and one can do much with money.

I purchased a furnished house from a real estate agency, a bungalow out of the way in a quiet neighborhood.

The police and the crooks expected me to try some disguise, to go to a hotel or a rooming house; but they hardly expected I would go and buy myself a little bungalow in the respectable, residential district. That slipped one over on them, and disposed of that part of the problem.

Shadowing Schwartz was different. They had tipped him off, and he was one cagey bird. I didn't try to keep him in sight all the time, but tried to cut in on him at certain hours, particularly before

he started his jewelry store canvass in the mornings, and after he had knocked off at night.

The more I saw of that jewelry exhibit the more puzzled I became. The newspapers started to play it up big. Day after day they featured the show, mentioned the social distinction of the persons who had received invitations for the opening, wrote of the manner in which Edith Jewett Kemper would be gowned, and handed out a blah-blah of the usual slush.

I sat snugly ensconced in the little bungalow and read the papers, read the frothings of the society editors concerning the importance of the coming show, and took my hat off to the man with the ice-cold eyes.

One thing puzzled me. The newspapers featured the elements of protection which the exhibit was taking to safeguard their patrons from loss, and it was good.

At night the gems were to be parked in a big safe which had been loaned from one of the prominent safe companies as an advertisement. This safe would be set in the *middle* of the floor, and at least five men would be constantly on duty watching that safe.

If the safe had been placed in one end of the room, so that only its doors were visible to the watchers, that would have been one thing. Putting it in the middle of the floor was quite another. I'm a handy man with boxes myself, but if there was any way of crashing into that bread-box with all those precautions, then I sure was a back number. I couldn't figure one out, and that's where I shine, figuring out ways of springing boxes that are seemingly impossible.

Schwartz was a hard baby to handle, and I didn't get the line on him I wanted until the day before the exhibit was to open. That afternoon he slipped out to a downtown garage and inspected an armored truck. This truck was plastered with a sign that was painted on cloth and hung clean across both sides, "JEWEL EXHIBIT ARMORED TRUCK." It was the real thing, too, that truck. Steel sides, bulletproof glass, railroad iron bumpers protecting it on all four sides, protected radiator and hood and solid rubber tires. It would take a stick of dynamite to faze that truck.

I didn't dare stick around Schwartz or the garage. Just a quick once-over and I was on my way, stepping on the gas of a car I rented by the week. Automobile shadowing was all I dared to do

with the whole gang laying for me, and watching Schwartz in the hope that they'd get track of me through him.

Time was getting short and I was stumped. I could tell that there was something big in the wind, but I couldn't tell what. The head of that organization wasn't going to monkey with any small stuff. The eight or ten thousand dollars that might be made from the exhibit wouldn't prove interesting. What they intended to do was to get the cream of all the fancy jewelry in the city gathered in one place so they could make a regular haul. An organization the size of that wasn't interested in small profits.

I went back to my bungalow and sat down at the table to do some figuring. For once in my life I was worried. I was going up against a game I couldn't fathom. The other man was holding all the cards, and he was holding 'em close to his vest. My only hope of dominating him was to bust up this proposed gem robbery; and my only hope of being able to live or to get the papers for Helen was in dominating that man with the icy eyes.

I sat and thought, a pencil in my hand tracing aimless lines along a sheet of paper which I had spread before me, and then, suddenly, the answer came to me, came in a flash, and made me want to kick myself all up and down the main street of the city. It was so absurdly simple that there was nothing to it.

When a magician walks down through the audience, borrows a watch from the man in the center aisle, and then turns his back to walk up to the stage, he has an interval of several seconds during which his hands are concealed from the audience. He can switch that watch a hundred times over, and yet, when he appears on the stage, facing the audience, waving a gold watch in his hand and asking the spectators to keep their eyes fastened upon it, no one thinks of questioning the fact that it is the original watch he is holding; no one wonders if perhaps he has not already performed the trick, if the substitution has not already taken place.

It was the same way with the jewelry exhibit. The precautions for taking care of the gems after they had arrived were featured so elaborately that one always thought of the possibility of a robbery taking place then and at no other time. There was a twofold reason for that. One reason was that it would tend to make the jewelry stores send but one clerk to act both as clerk and guard, and the other, and main reason, was that no one would pay too much attention to the armored truck that was going to take the

jewels there. The words "armored truck" had a potent significance, a lulling sense of absolute security. An "armored truck" was like a bank vault. The very words suggested probity, safety, integrity, and yet, after all, an armored truck was merely an inanimate something. It was the driver of the armored truck who had the power of directing the car as an agency either for good or evil.

Even as the details of the scheme were formulating themselves in my mind I was working on a counter scheme, and busying myself with proper preparations. A suit of overalls and jumper from under the seat of my car, a little grease smeared over my bare arms, a derby hat stuck on my head at an angle, and I was ready. A couple of good cigars also came into the picture.

Thirty minutes later and I was at the garage where the armored bus was stored.

"Howdy," I told the night man.

He was a sleepy-eyed, loose-lipped, single-cylinder sort of a bird, and he squinted a suspicious eye at me. I fished out a cigar, handed it to him, took another for myself and squatted beside him while I tendered a match.

We smoked in silence for a minute or two, and then a man came in for his car and the night man had to do ten minutes' work moving and shifting. By the time he came back he looked on me as an old acquaintance.

"Mechanic?" he asked sociably.

I nodded and jerked my head toward the armored truck.

"Yep, that's my baby. I'm the bird that the agency sends out to go over this elephant every ten days and see that it's in runnin' order. I understand it's goin' out tomorrow, and I've been a little slack lately."

The suspicious look came into his eyes again.

"Orders is not to let nobody get near that bus."

I nodded and blew a smoke ring.

"Sure, they have to be careful. There's a guy named Schwartz that's got it rented and you can let him get into it or drive it out, but don't you let nobody else get near it, not unless he's got a written order from Schwartz—or from me."

That registered. He looked me over again with a new respect. I said nothing further but smoked on in silence. Another man came in after a car, and the night man started moving and shuffling the

stored cars about. That was my cue! I parked my stub on the bench and sauntered over to the armored bus.

Schwartz had the key to the thing and it was locked tight as a drum, and that bothered me. I had been hoping against hope that it would be open. As it was, I melted around behind it and plastered myself between the rear of the car and the wall of the garage. The gas tank was protected by a sheet of armor, but the cap was in plain sight, and so was the gauge. The tank was full of gasoline. All set, ready to go.

All in all it didn't look like an easy job, and I had a hunch the guy that was acting as night man, car mover and watchman all combined, would be curious enough to come over to see what I was doing. It was going to require quick thinking, and quick action. Somehow or other I had to get that car fixed so it would only run about a certain distance.

A little faucet-like arrangement at the bottom of the gas tank proved the best bet. It was the faucet which turned on an emergency gas tank when the big tank ran out. I had a kit of tools with me, and I set to work.

In ten minutes I had short-circuited the emergency gas tank, and had inserted a tight-fitting length of copper tube in the gasoline line to the carburetor. This tube was carefully measured and stuck up to within half an inch of the top of the gasoline level in the main tank. I figured out the approximate gas consumption of the mill, and was willing to bet that bus would run just about three miles and then stop. When that pipe was pulled out it would start going again, but until that was done the armored bus would be anchored. It wasn't as smooth a job as I'd have done if the bus hadn't been locked up, but I fancied it would do. The fact that the sign advertising the car as that of the jewelry exhibit was printed on cloth was a big clue. I fancied I knew what was going to happen all right, and if I was right there was going to be a little surprise party the next day.

Next I went and purchased a siren, one of the kind that are limited by law to the use of police and fire cars. I installed this on my rented car myself, and was ready to go.

Some time after midnight I woke up with an uneasy feeling that everything wasn't just as it should be. The house was dark and still, a clock ticking away the seconds in the living-room, a gentle

night breeze coming in through the open window and swaying the white lace curtains. At first I thought that it must have been one of those curtains which had brushed across my face, and had awakened me with that strange feeling that danger was present.

I looked out of the window, feeling the cool breeze on my face. The yard showed faintly in the weird light of a distant street lamp. The stars were blazing steadily overhead. The gray shapes of other houses loomed like intangible shadows . . . and then came the sound again.

It was a faint scraping noise, a gritting, cutting sound which meant much to my trained ears. Someone was cutting a hole in one of the glass windows of the adjoining room, with a diamond glass cutter.

Hurriedly, noiselessly, I arose, got into my clothes, arranged the pillows in the bed so that they represented a sleeping form, and slipped into the closet. There was a shelf in that closet, just over the door, and I climbed up on it silently, swiftly. I was unarmed, but I really needed no weapon. Above that shelf was a small trap door which led into the space between the ceilings and the roof. If necessary I could get through there; but I wanted to see what was in the wind. On that shelf I could stoop and peer into the bedroom. If anyone should enter the closet I could drop on his shoulders as a cougar drops from a tree upon a passing deer.

Silence for a few minutes, then the soft sound of a sash being gently raised. Again there was a period of silence, then I could hear the bedroom door softly creak. Perhaps it was swaying in the wind which came through the window, perhaps not.

Suddenly there was a spurt of flame, a swift hissing noise, another and another . . . shots from a pistol equipped with a silencer.

Again silence, a whisper, the beam of a flashlight shooting swiftly over the bed. "Did yuh get him?"

"Deader'n a herring," came the whispered answer.

The men turned and ran swiftly from the house, making more noise than when they had entered, yet making no sound which would have been so audible as to have attracted attention from without. There came the sound of a starting motor, the spurt of an engine, and a machine slipped smoothly down the pavement.

I climbed down from the shelf and pulled out the pillows from beneath the bedclothes. The upper pillow had three holes in it and

feathers were wadded and scattered all over the sheets. Whoever had fired that gun was a good shot, one of the sort who can shoot in the half-light by the feel of the gun and be sure of his mark, who can group three bullets within a circle of three inches in a pillow.

I sighed, climbed into bed and went back to sleep.

This man with the icy eyes certainly was a smooth customer. Of course I'd had to play into his hands by keeping an eye on this fellow, Schwartz. That had given him a lead all the time, but, at that, he was clever.

In the morning I took a look around and found the circle of glass that had been cut from the upper pane so that the window lock could be sprung, and I smashed the glass into a series of jagged fragments so that it would appear the break had been accidental. There was no need to advertise my private affairs to the neighborhood.

I shaved, breakfasted, got out my car with the siren all attached and in perfect working order, and rolled slowly down the street in the line of traffic of early workers. A block from Redfern's I picked my parking place and slipped into the curb. I had come early to get the car located just right, and I stuck there behind the wheel to see that no one interfered with a quick getaway.

About eight o'clock the armored truck, with its painted cloth signs on the sides, showed up and backed to Redfern's curb. Close behind the truck was a high-powered car driven by a man in uniform.

A crowd collected, and I was close enough to the outskirts of the crowd to see what was taking place, and to hear what was said. Schwartz was in charge of things, and he was the typical salesman. He greeted old man Redfern as though it was a family reunion after a ten years' absence, and worked his arm up and down with rhythmic regularity.

The jewels were brought out and placed in the truck, and Schwartz explained its bomb-proof features to Redfern the while.

"I'm driving the truck myself, and there's a machine full of guards coming right behind. I guess that'll insure us safety all right. And you've seen the precautions we've taken down at the place. Say, Redfern, why don't you come yourself? The armored truck is full, but there's lots of room in the open car in back. You see, I've got a girl to check up the list of exhibits, and an armed guard with me in the truck. I'm relying on the jewelry stores to

furnish the guards for the open car. Stick a gun in your pocket and get in next to the officer there in the car.'"

Redfern didn't need much urging. He blinked, smiled, patted Schwartz on the back and climbed into the open car. The truck started off, the open car came along behind, and the officer who was driving signaled for open traffic signs from the cops at the intersections. The procession was started.

Ten calls were made, ten loads taken on, five guards crowded into the open machine. Five of the stores didn't think it was necessary to add a guard to the collection. They were satisfied with old man Redfern's respectable face. He was known all up and down the street, was old Redfern, a shrewd, canny old bird with a long head and a tight purse.

The truck headed toward the exhibit place and I settled down behind my wheel. This was going to be good. I hoped I hadn't missed any bets or bungled any guesses, and I was gambling strong that I hadn't.

All of a sudden there was a whirl of a rapidly driven motor. A long, gray roadster shot past me as smoothly and swiftly as a trout skimming through a still pool, and then there was a crash. The roadster had tried to cut in on the open car back of the armored truck, had locked wheels, battered in the front of the open car, skidded to the curb, crashed into a parked car, sprinkled broken glass all over the sidewalk, chased a couple of pedestrians up lamp posts, spilled the cop out on to the curb, scattered the guards about a bit, and the armored truck went gaily on its way, seemingly oblivious of what had happened to the car full of guards.

A crowd collected. Everyone shouted and cursed, the driver of the gray roadster sprinted to another car that was parked with motor running, parked in a second line of parking, and dashed down the street. The cop yelled and pulled his gun. There was some wild firing, screams, police whistles, pandemonium.

I worked through the tangled mass of traffic at the corner and started out after the armored truck, keeping pretty well back. The truck went easily and smoothly onward. At the corner, where the main out-of-town boulevard ran in, they stopped, and one of the men slipped to the sidewalk and scooped in the cloth signs, hung out two others, and they were on their way.

I sprinted ahead by a round-the-block detour and got a look at that new sign. I fancied I knew what it was, but I wanted to make sure.

“FEDERAL RESERVE—INTERURBAN SHIPMENT” read the new sign, and I chortled to myself at that. It was so slick it was greasy. They could take that armored truck anyplace they blamed pleased with that sign on it. By the time the police got the accident untangled, got in touch with the exhibit and found the car hadn’t arrived, got the word spread out to the traffic cops . . . by that time the armored truck would have vanished from the face of the earth. There were a dozen similar trucks, engaged in banking transportation, keeping busy in the city—it would be one grand smear.

Then it happened. The truck hesitated, backfired, and coasted over to the curb. That was my cue. I swung around the block and stopped on a side street, with the engine running.

One of the men got out of the rear door and bent over the gas tank, then ran around again to the front. I figured he was switching on the auxiliary tank. There was the sound of the starting motor, but nothing happened beyond a slight cough.

I fancied there was much conversation going on in that truck just then. At length the carburetor filled again and the truck ran along for a few feet, then stopped. A man jumped from the driver’s seat and sprinted to a car that was parked by the curb a block or so away. It was a little roadster, but apparently it was unlocked, for he got it going and dashed back to the truck. They were going to shift cargoes, to salvage what they could.

A machine came along, slowed down curiously, and was ordered to move along. Seconds were precious. In a few minutes that stalled truck would have a crowd of curious motorists rubbering at it. That would be fatal.

They swung open the heavy rear doors, backed the roaster . . . and then I got into action.

I opened the cut-out, raced the engine, and started the siren in a long, low, wailing scream. Then I waited. They didn’t spot the car where it was hidden behind some drooping shade trees, but the sound did hit their ears, a sound associated with powerful police cars which tore around with wailing sirens and shotgun squads looking for trouble.

In consternation they looked at each other, and then the flight began. A second wail from my siren stirred things up a bit, and the roadster tore away from the stalled truck and out into the boulevard.

I had fancied I saw only two figures in that roadster, which would mean that one had been left behind, but I had no time to worry over details. It was now or never and I must act quickly. I swung my car around the corner and skidded to a stop beside the stalled truck. Quickly I jerked off the cap of the gasoline tank, pulled out the tight-fitting metal tube I had worked into the gasoline line, put back the cap, jumped into the truck, closed and locked the doors and looked about me.

The girl with the mole on her left hand was sitting on the driver's seat, her eyes wide, sparkling.

"You!" she exclaimed.

I had no time to analyze her tone, no opportunity to indulge in friendly conversation.

"You make a move or try to interfere and I'll throw you out on your ear," I told her, and meant it. She was a member of a gang that was out for my life, and there was to be no quarter given or asked. I had work to do, and to blunder at this stage of the game would be fatal. I had been warned specifically against this woman with the mole, and the man who gave me that warning had paid for his friendly interest with his life. He had been killed with the words still warm on his lips. Somewhere, somehow, there was a sinister influence exerted by this woman. Death and violence followed her every contact. For myself I was taking no chances.

Without a murmur, she slid off of the driver's seat and sat, her hands in plain sight, folded on her lap, looking at me curiously. Beyond that first exclamation there had been nothing to give me a clue as to her thoughts.

It was the work of an instant to start the motor and turn the heavy truck, and in that minute the two men who had fled in the roadster knew they had been duped. They were watching their back trail for pursuit, wondering whether the police would stop to take possession of the abandoned truck or would give pursuit. They had seen me rush to the armored truck, do something to the gasoline tank, and then jump inside. In that brief instant they had recognized the deception that had been played on them, and had swung the roadster and started back.

I turned the truck and opened the throttle, roaring down the boulevard. The lighter roadster gained rapidly, and was soon alongside. Faces that were distorted with rage glared up at me. There came the crack of a pistol shot, and the bulletproof glass

radiated a thousand fine lines of silvery cracks where the bullet struck, but the leaden missile did not penetrate. That finished my last worry. I made faces at the two helpless bandits without, twiddled my fingers at my nose, and finally, making a quick swerve of the heavy car, ran them clear into the opposite curb.

There was a crash as the heavy, railroad-iron bumper did its stuff and the light roadster crumpled like an eggshell, glanced from the curb to a telephone post, and the men pitched out to the cement sidewalk.

I did not look back. They may have escaped unhurt. They may have been seriously injured. They may have been killed. This was no picnic. This was war with no quarter given or asked.

Once more we entered the traffic of the business district. At my side the girl with the mole on her hand sat and watched me with a queer look upon her face. Her lips were slightly parted, her eyes almost starry, and they seldom left my face. Shut in there in that armored truck we were safe from attack of everything except a cannon or a bomb. Perchance, emissaries of the gang who had engineered the great robbery watched us as we thundered past. If so they were helpless.

I swung up to the curb of the place where the exhibit was to be held. There was a great crowd of excited people milling about. A squad of police held back the crowd. I saw old Redfern running about, frantic with excitement, his eyes bulging, hands waving . . . and then he caught sight of the truck backing up to the curb, and his eyes *did* bulge. Somewhere a police whistle shrilled, and there came the screech of a siren. Policemen began to cluster about the truck.

"Keep your face closed and start checking the stuff as it goes out," I told the girl with the mole, and flung open the doors.

"Get ready to handle this stuff," I yelled at the excited officer who thrust his head in at the door, and slammed a tray of choice, platinum jewelry at him.

Mechanically, he took it, stood there, mouth open, eyes wide, seeking to interrogate me, and I slammed out another tray.

Watchmen and guards ran up, police officers milled about, and I had no words for any of them. I simply answered their questions by slamming out trays of choice jewelry, and the very apparent value of those goods was such that they mechanically turned and bore them into the place where the exhibit had been arranged.

I took the last tray in myself.

"Here's the list," said the girl with the mole, thrusting it into my hands; "and, oh, Ed! I had so *hoped* you would do just that!"

With that she was gone. A hell of a way for a member of a gang to congratulate the crook who had just outsmarted her of God knew how many thousand dollars.

I pattered on in with the tray, and an escort of cops clustered behind me. They didn't know exactly what it was all about, but this was once they figured they had Ed Jenkins dead to rights, and they didn't intend to let him live up to his reputation as a phantom crook by slipping through their fingers.

From somewhere behind me I caught the tail-end of a hoarse whisper.

"... too deep for me; but we'll make the pinch as soon as he starts for the door. With his record he's sunk. He can't alibi nothin'."

Up ahead there was a crowd of jewelry men and customers milling around, asking questions, gabbling away like a bunch of geese. I had the cops behind me and knew I'd be pinched when I started for the door. That meant I had to keep going straight ahead; and it meant I had to think fast. However, thinking fast is the thing that's kept me out of lots of jails.

I sat the tray down and climbed up on a chair.

"Silence, please!" I bellowed.

Everyone turned to rubber at me, and then I started my speech.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said, "I am a crook!"

That got 'em. If I'd started to make an address of welcome or tell 'em a story they'd all have been buzzing with whispers of their own and I wouldn't have got their attention, but that single sentence made 'em stand stock-still, and then I went on.

"But I am an honest crook, a man who has sought to make an honest living, to show that it is possible for a crook to go straight.

"I planned out this vast jewelry exhibition because I knew that it was a move in the right direction. The jewelry stores need an opportunity to exhibit to the select trade. The potential customers need to have a chance to study the latest styles in settings, to get up-to-the-minute information.

"Unfortunately, my assistant, the man upon whom I relied to sell space, to explain the idea to the merchants, turned out to be a crook. Knowing my record, he thought he could get away with the

truckload of gems, and have the police blame it on to me. However, I managed to outwit this criminal and recover the entire truckload, and here it is, safe and sound, ready for the approval of the prospective purchasers."

I made a bow and stood there, watching the maps of the cops, wondering if I was going to make it stick.

"I think I shall purchase my season's supply of gems right now," said a woman whose voice carried to the farthest ends of the room. "I think this is a wonderful idea, but, really, we don't need the police here now, do we? Mr. Redfern, I wonder if you'd mind asking them to withdraw. It makes me feel sort of nervous and interferes with my purchasing."

It was Edith Jewett Kemper, and she was playing a trump card in the nick of time. I think I had the cops buffaloed at that, but when old Redfern charged down on them, waving his hands, sputtering, expostulating, it was a rout. The cops thinned out that door like mosquitoes before a smudge.

Redfern came back to me, his eyes shining, his hands outstretched.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" he exclaimed. "Did you hear that Mrs. Kemper is going to purchase her *season's* supply of jewels? It's a great success. Everyone will follow suit. In fact, we will have to make her a little present, something to remember the occasion by."

I grabbed his arm.

"Yeah, in the meantime you'd better make out your check for the space. I'm goin' to get collected up right now so I won't have any books to keep."

Without a whimper he pulled out his checkbook.

"Payable to . . .?" he asked.

"Just make it payable to Ed Jenkins," I told him. "The Down Town Merchants' Exhibit' was just a trade name."

He nodded and made out the check, dazed and happy.

A sergeant of police elbowed his way over, but he was smiling.

"Jenkins, you're all right!" he said. "I've had an anonymous tip these last two weeks to get you on suspicion of a big gem robbery, and here you were actually on the square. Bringing back that truckload was a wonderful thing. How did you do it?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Just by bein' honest, sergeant, an' never lettin' that crook, Schwartz, get a chance. I was watchin' him like a hawk. Next time don't be so anxious to believe evil of me."

He shook his head as though he were in the middle of a dream and walked away, and, as he walked, I saw him pinch himself to find out whether he was really awake.

Helen Chadwick was over in a corner, away from the crowd, waiting.

"Ed, you won't be such a stranger, now that you've got this thing over with, will you?"

There was a wistful something in her voice, and I suddenly came down to earth, realized that in spite of any brilliant tricks I might play on the police or on other crooks, that I was, after all, a crook, myself. I realized also that no good could come to this girl from knowing me, and I cared so much for her that I wanted to protect her, even from myself.

"I'm going to get that other paper for you, Helen," I temporized, "and then we'll have a chance to sit down and talk other things over."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You're the most obstinate brute I ever was engaged to," she said, and instantly became all vivacious chatter, all social small talk.

I grinned at her.

"Do I get any reward for that last paper, young lady?" I asked her.

She gave a quick glance around, then tilted her head, and pursed her lips.

"Come and get it," she challenged.

Fifteen minutes later, when I had started down the street to get those checks cashed, a dirty urchin thrust a paper in my hand.

"The man said there'd be an answer," he said, peering up at me with his young-old wise eyes.

I unfolded the paper.

"You can't make it stick" read the note. "Other papers are outstanding and will be used in a way to ruin persons you would protect. Give this lad an answer, stating when and where you will turn over the commissions. I mean to have those space checks. That money is to come to me. Where do I get it and when?"

The note was unsigned. It didn't need a signature. I had jarred old Icy-Eyes out of his calm. I grinned, took a pencil from my pocket and started to scribble an answer, and then those words of

Helen Chadwick's came to my mind. I chuckled and scribbled my message of defiance on the back of the note.

"COME AND GET IT," I wrote, and handed the paper back to the boy.

"The answer is on the back," I told him, and, with that I started on my way, knowing that they would try to follow me, knowing also that I must thrust aside the ways of civilized society and vanish within the shadows, knowing that this conflict with the icy-eyed criminal would never cease until one of us had written "In Full of Account" against the life of the other. But in the meantime I had turned the tables, had got the police guessing, and had seen Helen Chadwick again—that joyous little flapper who was such a baffling combination of vivacious frivolity and courageous fortitude, that girl who was commencing to be so much in my thoughts.

Let Icy Eyes come and get it. He would find a warm reception waiting him.

In Full of Account

The man at the door bowed suavely, his fat face looking like crinkled lard.

"Mr. Philip Conway, I believe. I had quite a hard time locating you, Mr. Conway."

I stood to one side and motioned him in.

"Come in and have a chair," I urged, and I said it only because I had caught a glimpse of the house detective prowling around a corner of the corridor.

He strutted into the room with that complacent self-satisfaction which men with fat necks usually assume when they think they have pulled something clever.

"Ah, yes," he went on, when I had closed and locked the door, "Mr. Philip Conway, whose real name is Ed Jenkins, more generally known to the police of a dozen states as The Phantom Crook. I had a devil of a time finding you, Ed Jenkins."

His eyes had narrowed like a cat's, and he was watching my face. On one thing he was right. He certainly had had a devilish time finding me, and I was at a loss to know how he'd done it, but I wasn't going to let him see so much as a flicker of surprise in my expression. I had been very much incognito when I picked that hotel, and I would gamble that I hadn't been followed.

"Sit down," was what I said, and then added, just to jar his self complacency a bit, "I was rather expecting you, you know."

The fatuous smile dropped from his face like a chunk of hot lead from a piece of lard.

"You what?" he yelled.

"Expected you," I repeated with a smile.

The eyes were wide open now, bulging. I had jarred him all right.

The telephone rang; and with the sound, I was rigid with suspicion. That was too much of a coincidence. No one had business with me. No one was supposed to know where I was. Philip Conway was merely a man of mystery who had dropped into the Colisades Hotel and secured a room with bath.

The telephone was fastened to the wall. To answer it and talk into the mouthpiece I would have to turn my back to my visitor. That probably was part of the plan—to get this fat slob in the room and then have me turn my back for a minute or two. Not to answer the telephone would be to confess fear, to let him see that I was afraid, and I didn't propose to give him that advantage.

Without seeming to do so consciously, I managed to angle toward the telephone so that I could keep a watch on my visitor. As I lifted the receiver I bowed and faced him.

"Excuse me," I said to him, and to the telephone transmitter, "Hello!"

A woman's voice answered, a voice which was shrill with terror, hysterical with fear.

"Ed, don't . . ."

That was as far as she got. There was a scream, the sound of a blow, a jarring fall, and then a series of thudding sounds which could have been made by the receiver at the other end of the line as it dangled back and forth, knocking against the wall.

I did not so much as bat an eyelash. Still half turned toward my visitor, I carried on a one-sided conversation as though the call were part of a program which had already been blocked out.

"That's quite all right," I said. "He's here now, but I'm glad you called. Thank you. Good-bye."

I hung up the receiver and turned to my guest.

"Now just what was it you had in mind?" I asked.

His mouth was sagging open and his face was two shades whiter. Score one for me. It was plain that he was not privy to that telephone call. It had been coincidence after all. I had thought so when I heard the voice. There had only been two words, and they were shrieked in high-pitched terror, but the voice had been that of the woman with the mole on her left hand, the woman I knew as Maude Enders, and I had been warned against her by a man who had paid for the warning with his life.

She was a mystery, this girl with the mole. There was a master crook who was after me, who meant murder, and she was, beyond doubt, a member of his gang, and yet she had seemed to side with me. Once or twice she had evidently betrayed the interests of her master in order to take steps which she had fancied were necessary to save my life—and yet I had been warned against her by the Weasel, and the Weasel had been riddled with bullets from a curtained death-car while the words of warning were still warm on his lips.

“My name is Wallace, Walter Wallace,” my caller lied nervously, “but, perhaps if you are so familiar with me and my visit you know my errand?”

This last was a subtle dig, an attempt to call my bluff.

I yawned while he anxiously watched my face.

“I thought you might be able to tell me better than to have me piece together the information I already have—thought it might be better for you, that is; but since I know the general nature of your mission, I can save the time of both of us by giving you a direct and immediate answer. The answer is NO, absolutely NO!”

I snapped out that last and glared at him.

I could see beads of perspiration upon his fat forehead, and, just then, the telephone rang again.

This time I answered it with more confidence. The previous ring had shown that a telephone call was no part of the program of Walter Wallace, whatever other tricks he might have up his sleeve.

It was the bell captain.

“A special delivery letter, sir.”

“Send it up,” I answered, and hung up.

By the time I had the door unlocked and open, I could hear the bell boy coming down the corridor. I flipped him half a dollar, and looked at the envelope. It was addressed to “Mr. Philip Conway, Room 456, Colisades Hotel,” and it was in the handwriting of the girl with the mole.

Quickly I slit the envelope and read the message.

“Ed, they are trying to murder you, and they know your hiding place. Secretly leave your hotel and meet me at eleven o’clock tonight in the alley back of Lip Sing’s. There I can tell you much that you want to know.

Maude.”

I thrust the note back into my pocket and returned to my guest.

"Look here, Jenkins," he said with a forceful manner that was meant to be bluster, but barely hid the fear that was creeping into his eyes, "you can't turn this thing down like that. It ain't right . . . it ain't . . . er . . . safe."

I sneered openly.

"Nothing is unsafe for me, except that it would really be more dangerous to accept than to reject the proposition."

I was talking in circles, seeking to keep within character, to let him believe that I knew all about him, all about his errand, and I was getting thoroughly sick of the whole business. Also I would have to get into action pretty sudden. If the gang I was fighting knew where I was located,—and the special delivery letter and telephone call was proof enough of that,—I would have to start getting under cover, and blamed quick. I had no time to waste bandying words with fat men.

He was on his feet now, trying to "sell" me on the idea.

"Listen, Jenkins, for God's sake listen to reason. You know that I am only a messenger. There are other interests who are back of me, and who are invincible. You have elected to try and balk powerful men. In order to clear the name of Helen Chadwick's father you have secured possession of valuable documents, documents which prove that old Chadwick was the one back of that paving graft, but, unless you surrender those documents to us and let us place the blame on the political party which should shoulder it, there will be great harm done.

"Now I'm handing it to you straight, Jenkins, you can't leave this hotel alive unless you give me those documents. You might kill me, but you'd hang if you did. You're playing in too big a game. Killing me wouldn't save your own life, and I must have those documents by midnight. This is an ultimatum."

So that was it. I pretended to reconsider, and while I bowed my head in silence I did some real thinking.

There were two parties who wanted that last paper that related to the paving graft. Two powerful parties. One was the crook, old Icy-Eyes, the man who was at the head of the newly organized crime trust. The other was a big politician. Also I wanted that last paper, wanted it bad. If the memory of old Chadwick were blackened it would kill Mrs. Chadwick, ruin Helen's life, undo all the

work I'd already done to keep Helen happy, to keep her mother from finding out.

Old Icy-Eyes had been too smooth to let the political crowd know he had the paper. He had claimed it was in my possession. That started the two opposite factions fighting with each other, tended to keep us both busy, and left him free to plan and execute his murder of me.

This fat fellow talked too smooth to be a plain crook. He was probably a lawyer, a "fixer" who was on the inside. All right, he'd threatened me with death, and he could take the consequences.

"All right," I said at length, "perhaps I have been too hasty in this thing. Here"—I tossed him a ring of keys—"my car's down in the hotel garage. The attendant will show it to you. Here is my key ring. Take my car, get out of here, and drive it into the alley back of Lip Sing's at eleven o'clock tonight. Wait there for a minute, and you'll have my final answer. I can't promise anything, but the car I give as my security of good faith, and to show you that I'll be there."

That satisfied him. His green eyes sparkled and he held out a flabby hand.

"Fine!" he wheezed. "That's the spirit. I knew I could count on you seeing the thing in the proper light. I'll be there. Mind you, though, no funny business. I'll have cops posted on every corner."

I smiled and nodded, and took his hand with an effort.

If Icy-Eyes wanted to get me in trouble with the political powers that were, I'd show him a thing or two. That note from Maude Enders was a plant. In some way they had found out that I had confidence in her and had forced her to write the note. She had reached a telephone and called to warn me not to keep the appointment. There could be no other interpretation of the words "Ed, don't . . ." She had never finished, because someone of her own gang had caught her at the telephone.

All right, Icy-Eyes had sicced the politicians on me. I'd slip this bird into my car, have him drive down the alley, and keep my appointment. We'd see if he'd make any more death threats against me.

"I'll see you to the elevator," I told him, and walked down the corridor, my hand on his shoulder in token of perfect understanding.

Somehow I sensed that this was the last round. Sinister forces were seeking my death, forces of power and position. There was

something uncanny in the way this head of the crime trust, the man whose name I did not know, but whose outstanding characteristic was a pair of cold, icy eyes, had been able to put his finger on me at will. I was tagged from place to place by the head of this crime trust despite my best attempts at disguise; regardless of my precautions, he could send me visitors, special delivery letters . . . my back was to the wall. It would be a fight in which no quarter was asked or given.

The worst of it was that I couldn't disappear entirely from the city because this Icy-Eyes had a document I must have. The last of a series of papers which connected Helen Chadwick's father with the paving graft. The Chadwicks were a proud family. The head of that aristocratic family had been trapped into a grafting intrigue, had been blackmailed, and had been hounded to his grave. His widow still maintained the social prestige, his daughter was of the inner social circle, but a sword was hanging over their heads. Let this last letter get out and Chadwick's name would be blackened, the family ruined, and the mother would die.

Helen Chadwick had befriended me. More, she had an effect upon my emotions which I dared not pause to analyze. Ed Jenkins, the Phantom Crook, had no business having a love affair. To confess my feelings, to meet with success in my suit would ruin the happiness of the girl I lov . . . No, I would not say it, even to myself. Circumstances had impressed upon me that Helen cared for me, yet I would not let her. I would get the letter, destroy it, and then shut myself out of her life, vanish once more into the shadows of the underworld. But there was one thing I would do first. I must show Icy-Eyes that I was his master. And, before I did that, I would dispose of this Walter Wallace, this political henchman who smugly called upon me and threatened my life.

Such were the thoughts which raced through my mind as I walked to the elevator with the fat man who smiled his self-satisfied grin. One hand was on his shoulder, and the other was clenched at my side, ready to crash into his fat neck at the first signs of treachery.

And so we came to the elevator, and I pressed the button, the red light flashed, the door slid open, the fat politician stepped in, and the car whisked down the shaft, and then I glided into swift action.

My hiding place had been discovered, was known to both factions who sought my life. An instant's delay might be a second too long.

I sprinted for the back stairs, felt my way silently down them, slipped past the lobby, into the basement, through the laundry where tired-eyed girls looked up wearily from their endless tasks, out into the delivery chute where a truck waited with parcels for outside delivery. I stood for a moment sizing up the situation, and then dove inside among the bundles of laundry, burrowing my way past the paper packages until I was fairly hidden.

The driver had been checking his lists in the office, and he came back to the chute an instant later. The light was shut off as the outer door slammed, the car swayed as the driver climbed into the seat, there was a lurch, and we were off.

I dared not stay long within the truck. There would probably be some early deliveries within the business district. I knew that the Colisades Hotel was part of a chain of hotels and that the laundry served some half dozen of the downtown hostelrys. Whether it also served outside customers I had no means of knowing, and I could take no chance.

The doors were latched, and it took all the pressure of my shoulder to spring them, and then I nearly catapulted over the rear of the truck as they came open; but I caught my balance, turned, grinned at the smiling occupants of the car behind, as though it was all a huge joke, slipped to the street, and, helped by the momentum from the truck, angled to the curb on a swift trot, ducked across the sidewalk, got my bearings and began my counter offensive.

It was now or never. Either old Icy-Eyes was going to take the count this time or I was, one or the other. I was sick of the whole business. All I wanted was to be left alone, given a chance to live my own life, and I wanted Helen Chadwick left alone.

The place I was headed for was three blocks away, and I took blamed good care that I wasn't shadowed on those three blocks. It took me half an hour to get there, but I was sure of myself.

It was in a little, blind office in the back of one of the older buildings that are rapidly coming out to make way for skyscrapers. Twenty years ago and the building was a source of civic pride. Today it's an eyesore. There were wide staircases, gloomy halls, a small, wheezing elevator, great offices that rambled over the

building, insufficiently lighted, covered with dust and grime. Here the cheaper tenants who desired downtown addresses, yet couldn't afford large rents, held the offices on month-to-month leases, waiting until such time as the owners could finance a skyscraper, when they would have to move to some other, similar building.

There was a Japanese photographer, a small job-printing concern, a "school for secretaries," and a suite of offices which had absolutely nothing on the doors. Not by the slightest vestige of a sign was any inkling given as to the identity of the business which was housed back of those blank doorways.

I picked the center door, knocked three times, then paused, knocked once, another pause, and then twice.

From within there was a peculiar shuffling sound, and soon there came the rasp of a key in the lock, the shooting of a bolt, and a skull cap thrust itself around the corner of the jamb. Beneath the black skull cap were two piercing eyes and a drooping mustache tacked on to a sallow, wrinkled skin.

"Ach! It is the Herr Jenkins. Come in at once, Herr Jenkins."

I entered, and the German locked and bolted the door, and stood waiting. After his salutation there was not so much as a word of greeting, none of the handshaking palaver which the modern shop-keeper salves a sale over with. This bird was the best workman in the country, and he relied on his ability to get and hold trade.

"Bachmar," I told him, "I want a crown, and I want it of genuine, heavy plate. I want it literally encrusted with gems, and I want enough color designs in the stones so that the general effect will be dazzling. Then I want some of the stock stuff, fake diamonds, sapphires, emeralds and the rest, but I want 'em stuck in great, plush-lined cases of the most exquisite workmanship. That crown must be in a dark-stained mahogany box *without* any plush lining whatever, and I want the box made so tight the crown will just fit in it."

His hawklike eyes peered intently at me from beneath the black border of the skull cap.

"And you want him how soon?"

I grinned.

"Here's where I shock you. I want 'em by tomorrow night."

He shook his head.

"Come on, Bachmar," I urged. "I know you *can* make 'em by tomorrow night. You've got all the stuff here, and it's just a question of throwing 'em together."

His face became fairly livid.

"Ach, you and your throw them together. Me, I can make them by tomorrow, yes, but what will they be? Herr Bachmar has never made a shoddy thing in his life, and here you come and offer to pay me double to throw away my pride in my work. Such are the times. An honest workman is insulted right and left by men who turn out anything to get the money. Bah! These men who work by the clock and for money and who have no pride in what they do! I could spit them in the face by the ten thousand.

"You, Herr Jenkins, you get your things by Friday afternoon or you get them not. Which is it to be? I am a busy man. Speak."

I mollified the old man as best I could, agreed that he was to make delivery on Friday, and then began to give him more details as to what I wanted. At that his eyes sparkled and beamed, and a smile crinkled over the parchment skin.

"Ach, yes," he said. "I know what you want. The treatment is to be Russian, yes? And you will want the workmanship of the crown to be similar to that famous crown which is reported to have been offered for sale in this country. . . . Ach, I waste time with talk. Come with me and I show you a picture once—where is that pencil?"

Fifteen minutes later and I was headed down the back stairs of the ramshackle building. Wherever else I might be followed I could not be followed into that building. Nor had I said anything to Bachmar about keeping my visit confidential. That was not necessary. He was one of the old school, a workman who loved his work, took pride in his performance, and made his prices not on the basis of what he could get, but on what he figured was a fair value.

My next bet was to hole up and stay there, and I covered it to the best of my ability. The hotel I selected was one of the best, and the secondhand baggage I sent up had been purchased in a pawnshop, filled with a miscellaneous assortment of junk, and if there was anything to distinguish me to the average spectator, the clerk or the house detective as being other than a casual tourist, I couldn't detect it, and I'm willing to bet that when I can't, they can't.

My room was in the rear of the corridor, near the freight elevator and the back stairs, and there was a fire escape two doors away. I had picked up some magazines and was all ready to settle down in comfort, eat, sleep and read.

And I soaked up rest like a blotter soaks up ink. I knew I was going to have need for all the rest I could cram into my system because there'd be a while when there wouldn't be any such thing as sleep.

The morning papers were full of it, and I chuckled to myself. Walter Wallace had been his right name after all, and he had driven my car down into the alley back of Lip Sing's. He kept my appointment, drove my car, and got what had been laid out for me. There was this difference: he had been suspicious, and he hadn't been a lone crook with the hands of society turned against him. He had been a political henchman of the inside powers, and he could crook his fingers and have men rush to do his bidding. He'd threatened to have a cop on every corner, and he'd done that and more.

When he brought my car to a stop in the alley back of Lip Sing's he collected enough lead to make a cork sink in molasses. He'd never known what had struck him, but had slumped against the wheel, riddled with bullets. Evidently old Icy-Eyes wasn't taking any great chances with Ed Jenkins. I was to keep the appointment and be shot down before I had so much as a chance to unwind from behind the steering wheel.

The murderers had their car all parked, ready for the getaway, and after the shooting, while everything was confusion, they piled into their machine and dashed through the alley, out into the street, and into the arms of a squad of cops who had been posted near the alley and, attracted by the shots, were organized for just such a capture.

The names of the gunmen in that car read like a list of Who's Who in the Underworld, and when they found that a reception committee was waiting for them they nearly fell off of the Christmas tree. One of 'em made the mistake of trying to shoot it out, and he was a good shot. The cop he'd got had been popular.

They'd pulled their alibi before they knew what it was all about—that Ed Jenkins, notorious crook, had opened fire on them without provocation, and that they'd returned the fire and sought to make their escape. Each and all of them swore they recognized me and that I had fired the first shots. When they led 'em back to the scene of the crime and showed 'em Walter Wallace pumped full of lead . . . oh, it was a great piece of reading, all right.

I lay in bed with my pot of coffee and my newspaper and chuckled until I slopped the coffee over the edge of the cup. I could imagine Icy-Eyes when he read that paper. They'd captured his strong-arm squad, and it was a hundred to one shot that at least one of those guns would squeal, blow the works. How much they knew was hard to tell. Certainly Icy-Eyes didn't let any cheap thug have direct contact with him, but they unquestionably knew his lieutenants, and if they squealed on the lieutenants and the lieutenants should take a notion to get immunity by joining in the chorus . . . oh, Icy-Eyes was having a bad breakfast all right.

Lazily I read through the paper because there was nothing else to do, and then, in the society columns, I caught an announcement in prominent, black headlines:

"EDITH JEWETT KEMPER
ENTERTAINS."

Mrs. Kemper wasn't the type to go in for any great amount of advertising in the society columns. She didn't need to. That dame was of the inner circle of the inner circle, the upper crust of the top story.

I read on, through the maudlin gush, until there was a list of the guests, and noticed that Edward Gordon Jenkins would be among those present.

Here was a fortunate coincidence. The Kempers were necessary in the plans I had formulated, and I was expecting to get in touch with them soon. Now this meant that Helen wished to see me. Undoubtedly she was feeling the pressure of the net closing around her. She needed me, and this was Mrs. Kemper's clever way of letting me know.

I went to the telephone and rang her up.

"Understand I'm to be a guest at your party," I told her.

She was bubbling with enthusiasm, although I could tell that there was someone within hearing at her end of the wire by the care with which she chose her words.

"You are to be the guest of honor. The party is really being given for you."

"I gathered as much from the newspaper," I told her. "Now, listen. Put out another notice that the real guest of honor is a Mr. Alexandrovitch, who is to spend a day or two at the house

and who has an important business matter pending with your husband."

"That will be entirely satisfactory," she cooed, using commonplace words, as though she were merely conversing with a friend about the weather or the length of the skirts. "But be sure and keep the engagement. There is much to discuss."

I knew that, and if she had known what I knew she would have been just that much more anxious; but there was no use spreading a general alarm so I thanked her with my best social grace and hung up.

Good girl that. She didn't waste a lot of time asking me where I was, where she could reach me if she needed me and all that rot. I was a lone wolf and she knew it. She had enough confidence in me to figure I'd be on the job. And she was one of those wise, matchmaking women. Hang it! She couldn't see any reason why I shouldn't marry Helen and settle down. If Helen wanted me and I wanted Helen that was all there was to it in the eyes of that dame. I knew the world better than that, knew that if I should ever speak, should ever allow myself to slip, there would be a lifetime of misery ahead of Helen Chadwick. Not that I was conceited or thought that the girl was crazy about me; but there had been a time when we had been forced to pretend we were engaged, and from that time on I knew that the girl looked on me differently from the rest of the society namby-pambies who buzzed around her.

However, there was work to be done, and I couldn't allow myself to waste time building air castles. I had had many experiences with desperate crooks, but this was the first time I had ever run into an organization that was so baffling, so powerful. I had my back to the wall, fighting for life and for the happiness of the one woman I cared greatly for.

I sent out for a kit of tools and fitted up a little workshop in my room in the hotel. Also I had myself measured for dress clothes, called for the crown and the phoney jewelry and was all set.

In the meantime there had been quite a splurge in the papers concerning the mysterious Alexis Alexandrovitch. The reporters had found Mrs. Kemper to be quite mysterious, and she particularly took pains to assure the reporters that Mr. Alexandrovitch desired to remain quite incognito. His business was with her husband, but she did not know the details of that business nor would she divulge them if she did; it merely happened that he was

to be present over the weekend and she had determined to entertain him at the informal gathering, etc., etc., etc.

That woman had a knack of handing out the blah-blah which made the reporters gush all over the society columns of the paper. Of course anything the Kempers did was duck soup for the social columns anyway. They were the leaders, and the smaller fry followed and imitated.

The stage was all set, everything ready for the ringing up of the curtain. I had completed my little work with the tools, and folded my tents like the Arabs and silently slipped out of the back door, leaving sufficient money on the dresser to pay my bill, so there wouldn't be a howl.

I went a hundred miles out of town by machine, and when I came back, I came in style, none other than Mr. Alexis Alexandrovitch, himself. The telegrams I had sent Mrs. Kemper had insured a respectable sprinkling of reporters who met the train.

It was working fine. Loring Kemper was a noted jewel collector. It was well known that he had the means to purchase almost any collection of gems, and the fact that Mrs. Kemper had emphasized that the Russian gentleman who insisted on remaining incognito under the name of Alexis Alexandrovitch had *business* with her husband was all that one could ask for in the line of advertising. She might as well have stated that I would have the Russian crown jewels with me and be negotiating for a sale with the well-known collector.

This was the game I had determined upon to bring the battle into my own hands, and if that bait didn't attract the gang of Icy-Eyes, then I didn't know what would.

I was disguised, of course, and it was a good disguise. I had taken more time with that disguise than I had taken with any other part I had ever assumed. There was either an uncanny ability on the part of that gang to penetrate disguises, or there had been a leak somewhere.

There were special police at the station, and there was Loring Kemper. I saw him at once and tipped him the high sign, and he came over to me with just the right shade of respectful deference in his voice.

"Ah, you are . . . er . . . Mr. Alexdrovitch? This is indeed a pleasure!"

His right hand clasped mine cordially, and his shrewd eyes twinkled into mine.

"You have the—?" he asked, lowering his eyes significantly to the strapped, locked bag which I held determinedly in my left hand, and which I allowed no porter to touch.

I glanced guardedly about and then nodded.

In such a manner did we leave the crowded station, and that evening photographs of my arrival were published in the papers, and each and every photograph showed me holding that double-locked bag firmly in my left hand.

The trap was baited. It remained to be seen what would come to it.

During the drive to the Kemper mansion, Loring Kemper said but little. He was a man of strong silences, and one could almost feel his emotions from the very quality of his silence. Now he was honestly glad to see me, and there was a perpetual twinkle in his eyes as he swung the steering wheel of the big car.

The magnificent residence seemed almost homelike to me as we rolled up the graveled driveway and came to a stop before the side door. Servants were there, waiting for my bags, a chauffeur took the car to the garage, and, arm in arm, Loring Kemper and myself came upon Helen Chadwick and Mrs. Kemper.

I have forgotten the casual remark with which Mrs. Kemper prefaced our greeting. She was too shrewd a diplomat, too much a woman of the world, to have jarred the occasion by saying anything which would have demanded my entire attention by way of reply. Her welcome was cordial and sincere, the mere fact that I was there was proof enough of that. But she greeted me casually enough, swung just enough so that her arm engaged that of her husband, and Helen gravitated to me as the older people strolled off down the corridor without so much as a backward glance, taking it for granted that we were following.

Nor was Helen Chadwick one to display her feelings. She was a little thoroughbred, the type who smile bravely into the inscrutable depths of fate, meet Dame Fortune halfway and play the game of life with steady eyes and calm poise.

"Well, Ed, back again."

The words were accompanied by a frank grin of perfect camaraderie. Despite her flapper dress, which displayed the charm of her perfect form, there was an entire lack of that stilted sex consciousness, that biological hypocrisy which tends to accentuate rather

than conceal. She might have been just a good pal greeting a chum of her own sex.

"How's tricks?" I asked, almost casually, meeting her mood.

She shrugged her shoulder and turned twinkling eyes toward me.

"The plot thickens. I understand from Mrs. Kemper that things are getting pretty hot. There's one letter left and I guess that's going to be pretty hard to get, isn't it, Ed?"

And then I made a statement to cure which I could have cheerfully bitten off my tongue. Her casual, offhand manner had put me too much at my ease, and when she directed my thoughts to the gang of criminals who were drawing their net tighter and tighter in an effort to ruin her and to sweep me into their power, I unconsciously thought out loud.

"They're after us," I said. "It's life or death, and our backs are to the wall, Helen. They're strong and clever, diabolically clever, and we can't tell just when they'll strike."

She whirled and the mask of mirth dropped from her eyes, and I saw her regarding me with concern.

"Are *you* in danger, Ed—that is, physical danger?"

I laughed lightly.

"I am always in danger if I let other people have their way. In this instance, as in the others, I don't propose to let 'em."

That was all. We had reached the spacious library and Mrs. Kemper motioned for me to be seated.

"Sprawl out, Ed, and have a cigarette with us," she said, and then gave a worried glance at Helen.

Boob that I was, I had let her realize that more than the paper was at stake; that the game was life and death, and that it was coming to a showdown one way or the other.

There was a cough at my elbow, and I turned to see the impassive face of Riggs, the butler. His bearing was as stiff and proper as one could ask for, but there was a twinkle in his eye which showed me that the trusted servant was in on the secret, knew that Alexis Alexandrovitch, the man with the military bearing, the formfitting suit and the Van Dyke, was none other than Ed Jenkins, the Phantom Crook. Riggs and I had become quite well acquainted on my former visit, and I sprang up and gave him my hand. He was a splendid fellow, and I liked him. Servant or no

servant, he was a regular man, and Ed Jenkins was certainly not a man to be snobbish.

Mrs. Kemper beamed her approval.

"Yes, Ed, we told him. We thought it would make it easier for you if you could let the bars down before Riggs. By the way, Riggs has a father coming from the East, a father whom he hasn't seen for three years. You'll want to be starting for the train soon, Riggs? Instruct the chauffeur to run you down in the blue car."

Riggs smiled and bowed his thanks, one of the family, yet always in his proper place.

"He just got the telegram this morning," said Mrs. Kemper. "I guess the old boy wanted to stage a little surprise."

Riggs withdrew, grinning, and the conversation ran into small talk. A casual observer would hardly have thought that of that small party two of us were in the last trench, fighting a gang of organized criminals, while the other two had taken us in, knowing that by so doing they were inviting anything from notoriety to death.

So for an hour we talked of trivial things, cementing our friendship by the undercurrent of mutual understanding and confidence which flowed among us. And I liked it. I, Ed Jenkins, the creature of the shadows, the dweller of the underworld, sat there in the presence of three of the cleanest thoroughbreds that society could produce, reclining in a massive chair, amidst sumptuous furnishings, and watching the curl of cigarette smoke as it wound up toward the ceiling, outlined sharply against the formal, booklined walls.

Of a sudden Mrs. Kemper turned the conversation to the channels which had probably been in all of our minds.

"Ed, we can see that you're setting a trap. You're baiting it with—with yourself. Tomorrow night is a reception at which there will be a throng. I suppose the attempt will be made at that time. Do you suppose there is any danger before then?"

I squinted at the curling smoke and answered lazily, as though I were completely relaxed, enjoying every moment and without great thought of the morrow.

"Oh, I think not. That'll be the logical time for a crook to try and either get what he is after or take the chance to slip in the house and hide."

She nodded, and I glanced sideways at Helen, wondering whether I had managed to deceive her by my casual manner. As a matter of

cold fact I felt that the attempt would be made before tomorrow. Time was short, and if I knew the gang with whom I was dealing, they would manage to strike at an unexpected time, at a moment when great precautions would not be taken. To their mind I was Alexis Alexandrovitch, a Russian with immensely valuable gems in my possession. At any moment I might reach a bargain with Loring Kemper, and then the gems would become part of the Kemper collection, stored in his safe, under his protection. Until then I would probably want to retain the physical possession of the gems. It was true that I had set the trap, and baited it with myself, but little did they dream of how I intended to spring that trap. Crook that I was, I was still too much of a gentleman to bring my fights into that home, even when I was, in a measure, making war on their behalf.

My inspection of Helen's face told me nothing except that she had read more from my glance than from my words. What goes on back of the doll faces of these flappers is more than mortal man can read, anyway. I had seen her in action before, had seen her match her wits with a skillful crook, a ruthless criminal who had her in his power, and she had seemed more intent upon getting her mouth on straight with her pink-tipped little finger, as she gazed into the mirror of her vanity box, than in what was being said by this crook, and yet his words were bringing the structure of her very existence down about her ears like a house of cards.

The telephone shrilled, and there was a something jarring, almost hysterical, in the ringing of that bell. It was as though jangling discord had interrupted the harmonious flow of perfect understanding between us.

Loring Kemper himself answered it, drawling out a deep-throated "hello" into the transmitter, the receiver held lightly between the powerful fingers of his left hand.

And then, suddenly, I saw his fingers tighten, tighten until the skin showed white over the knuckles.

"Nothing can be done for him?" he asked, then waited a minute, and nodded.

"He was to have had his father with him . . . was to have met him at the train . . . all right . . . Tell him to come right out here. He's uninjured, you say? Very well. Have him come out here, and get the best medical attention for the chauffeur. I'll have my own doctor there inside of half an hour."

Mrs. Kemper had arisen with wide eyes. Helen was watching her with a puzzled expression. I could feel my own eyes narrowing in spite of myself, could feel my lips tighten, and I strove to keep my face expressionless so that I could assume just the proper degree of sympathetic surprise when Loring Kemper should turn and tell us the news. It would never do for me to let them glimpse the savagery of my soul at the time. Had they caught upon my face a hint of the emotions which were seething within me at that time they would have known.

Unwittingly I had sent a good man to his death.

In baiting the trap with myself I had discounted the danger. I was always in danger. Daily, almost hourly, I faced death, danger from a hundred sources, and I had grown accustomed to it, had learned to take care of myself. As trap bait I took my gamble with my eyes open, and the resourcefulness I had developed from years of experience had quickened my perceptions, given me self-reliance and confidence. . . .

Kemper turned from the telephone.

"It's Riggs. A truck got out of control at the station, backed up on the sidewalk and crushed him against the side of the building. The chauffeur was also injured. What makes it particularly tragic was that Riggs' father had just got off the train, and was in time to see the whole accident, although Riggs had no chance for even a word with his father before he died—killed instantly."

Mrs. Kemper's face went white. Her tongue licked her lips, and her eyes showed the anguish she did not betray in words.

"Such a shame! You'll have the father come here, of course."

He nodded.

"So I've instructed them at the emergency hospital," he said, and then turned again to the telephone to set in motion the machinery which would rush the best of surgeons and nurses to the bedside of his chauffeur.

I kept my eyes upon the cigarette smoke. Over that little gathering had swept the hush of death, and I was forced to look down the end of my glowing cigarette and pretend that my emotions were merely those of keen sympathy at the tragedy. In reality I was anxious to get away, to start the action.

I sensed that sunup tomorrow morning would either find me dead or victorious, and I did not propose to let any grass grow

upon my trail, now that I had been given a definite clue. My quarry was already within the trap, was nibbling at the bait itself.

Riggs' father seemed pathetic in his hopelessness. He had journeyed half across the continent to see his son, and death had snatched that son away from him at the very moment of meeting. He was a wisp of a man with watery gray eyes, and a certain helplessness of carriage, motion and thought. He seemed dazed, bewildered, preoccupied in his sorrow, yet seemingly unable to realize that the Kemperes were only helping him to get himself accustomed to the situation. One would have thought that, by some subtle process of the aged mind, he had adopted the Kemperes as his children to take the place of the one he had lost.

Mr. Kemper was tact and sympathy itself, and made the arrangements personally for the funeral and burial. Also he made a swift investigation of the circumstances, and I fancied there was something of cold-blooded revenge in the calm manner in which he went about his investigation.

The investigation was startlingly simple. It stopped almost where it began. The truck had, through some mechanical fault which could not have been anticipated, locked itself in reverse and the driver had really been blameless—according to the reports which were submitted by telephone to Mr. Kemper, through the attorneys who had placed investigators on the case.

It was rather a hectic evening, what with the necessity of soothing the elder Riggs, making arrangements for the funeral, and having the accident investigated. We turned in about eleven-thirty, and, before we retired, Loring Kemper took me for a stroll through the grounds.

I noticed that there were two watchmen on duty, patrolling the grounds, keeping an eye on the house. They had their orders, and they knew everyone within the house. A stranger was to be shot on sight unless he halted at once at their hail.

To blind him, I nodded my approval, and congratulated him on his foresight and preparation—Bah! It is ever human nature to overlook the obvious!

I rolled into bed and turned out my light, and then I rolled out on the other side, having arranged the pillows beneath the covers so that they showed a general outline of a sleeper. The double-

locked bag was fastened to the bed by a thin, steel chain, a chain which caught the reflected light which came through the window, and glittered and shimmered.

I hid within a closet from which, through a small crack in the opening of the door, I could see the general lay of the land, and keep the bed under observation.

An hour passed and the house settled down into a deep quiet. Strain my ears as I would, I could not hear a sound. From within the room there came a faint glitter where the chain caught the reflection of a distant street light. It was a well-made house with hardwood floors, and one would hardly expect a creaky board, yet there was something tangible about the silence of that house. It was the silence of a grave, a deep, absolute silence.

And so I crouched, muscles strained, waiting, watching and listening—always listening.

And then, suddenly, I noticed that I could no longer detect the glitter of the chain. Could the light have been extinguished? No. It was still there. I could see the gleam of it through the window, yet the chain had ceased to glitter and there had not been a sound.

At that instant there came one sound, and only one,—a deep “clink,” then silence. However, I knew now what was happening. That sound had been made when a pair of heavy nippers had cut their way through the slender steel chain.

Again there was utter, absolute silence. The trap was ready to be sprung. The prey was inside, and it only remained to plan out the rest of the campaign—yet I could see nothing, could hear no sound.

Then a shadow came between me and the window, a dark something which blotted out the light, a human being moving noiselessly through the gloom of the room. I watched, breathless, tense, muscles ready. There was hardly the faintest motion from that blot. As smoothly, gradually, and imperceptibly as the disc of moon rises above the gold-rimmed hills in the east, the shadow was stealing across the lighted square of that window; and then I knew why I had heard no sound. The intruder was one of those men whose muscles are so well trained, so smooth and flexible, that he can move with infinite slowness. There was no sudden jerk of motion, no faint scratch or shuffle as a muffled shoe slid over the floor, no faint sound of garments brushing against a chair. The reason there were none of these sounds was because the man was

moving an inch at a time, slowly, cautiously, and absolutely noiselessly.

It would be difficult to follow such a man. Trained as I was in the art of stealing about in the night shadows, I could hardly expect to trail such a thief and not betray myself in some way. However, I, too, was a master of stealth, and, matching my caution with his own, I stole forth from the closet an inch at a time.

So we went from the room, down the corridor, and stairs, two grim shadows, engaged in a duel of life and death, pursuer and pursued, and both moving at a snail's pace through the surrounding darkness.

I could not be sure that the man was ahead, that he had not stepped to one side and allowed me to go past, nor could I be sure that I would not stumble upon him, that my gait was not too fast and would run me up on him in the dark. All I had to guide me was the pace he had taken when I saw him slip past the window, and I knew the route he must follow to the lower floor. After that I would have to trust to luck to give me a lead, or else rely entirely upon my knowledge of crookery. I dared not be too slow. Disastrous as it might be, I must be too swift rather than too slow. To let this man get away in the dark would be equivalent to losing my life and the happiness of Helen Chadwick.

And then there came a break in my favor.

It was no longer a noiseless darkness. The slipping, sliding sounds of stockinged feet on the floor could be heard as the man made for the kitchen. Evidently he was now sacrificing everything to speed, and I followed in the same manner, seeking to keep pace with him.

At the kitchen window he turned and played a flashlight in one swift circle about the room, but I had been prepared for that move and was crouched back of the table which stood near the stove.

He paused on the window sill and then dropped out into the night, and I gave him a second or two before I followed. I did not wish to attract the attention of the guards, and I could not risk detection by the man who had taken that bag through the window, but I dared not delay. Those gems were going straight to old Icy-Eyes, himself. The quarry that had taken my bait was carrying it to the lair, and I must not lose that trail. With the theft of those gems I felt I had taken a long step toward insuring the safety of

Helen Chadwick, and that was all I cared for. My own life was of no value, save and except as my existence offered some protection to her.

I went over the sill doubled up, cautious, and I dropped to the ground easily. I could see neither of the watchmen, but I could hear the footsteps of one of them as he approached through the darkness, walking with that measured, marching tread which showed that he suspected nothing.

He was approaching, and that indicated that he had been even farther away when the man with the bag had jumped from the window. There were two watchmen, one to each side of the house, and they were, of course, not adequate protection. In grounds such as those it would have taken two dozen men to form any sort of a patrol; but those watchmen could and did become damnable nuisances. To run into one of them now would be a fatal mistake. Now that the gems were out of the house, I must follow.

What had my man done? Was he crouched in the shadows waiting for the watchman to pass? In that event he would see me as I slipped through the grounds if I should sprint on before the watchman came nearer.

Or had the thief slipped right along through the shadows, taking advantage of the auspicious moment which had found the watchman at the other end of the yard? In that event I dared not wait longer.

In the game I was playing I could take almost any chances other than the chance of losing the man I was following. If I should overtake him I could capture him in my character of Russian Grand Duke who was following his priceless gems, and the man would never be the wiser. If he should get away from me, however, I would have taken desperate chances without being absolutely assured that my scheme had worked, that the trap had sprung upon the prey I sought. I would know when the trap sprung all right, but I wanted to be morally certain of the prey I had caught.

So I prayed a short prayer that I was acting on the right hunch and slipped away in the dark shadows of the yard, finding, as I had suspected all along, that it was absolutely no trick to elude the watchman.

Then I got a jolt. I made my way toward the garage, thinking that I would find the man with the bag preparing to take one of the

cars, perhaps merely to borrow it, perhaps stealing it. The cars were all there, all in order, and I could find no trace of anyone in the garage.

Had I misjudged the man? Had he been ultra cautious and waited in the shadows there at the house? If so, beyond a doubt he had seen me follow what I supposed his trail had been, and there would be no chance that he was going to make it easier for me to capture him by coming to the garage—taking the very direction in which I had sprinted.

That left but one bet, and that was the paved road at the foot of the hill to the left. I swung out of the garage and skipped lightly through the shadows of the hedge, working my way over toward that paved road.

It was when I was halfway there that fortune once more played into my hands. There was a peculiar gleam ahead—darkness—the gleam again, then darkness, and then a small circle of light thrown down on the ground.

I slowed and began to stalk that circle of light. Under the circumstances, considering the stage of the game, and the stakes for which I was playing, I could afford to overlook no bets, and I had to find out what was in that light circle.

As silently as a moving shadow, I slipped along the deep grass, and then, suddenly heaved a great sigh of relief. It was the thief, and as might be expected, he was taking the first, apparently safe opportunity to make certain that he really had what he wanted. It would hardly do to bring to Icy-Eyes a substituted bag stuffed with paper and loaded with brick for weight.

The plush cases with the separate gems he hurriedly passed over, apparently anxious to examine the contents of the massive box in which I had placed the crown.

Prying back the cover with a small jimmy, he directed the beam from the flashlight inside, and then gasped. Well he might. I had worked out the color combinations of that crown with an eye to beauty, and with the idea of dazzling the eye so that an accurate appraisalment would be nearly impossible. Now, in the reflected light which came from the brilliant beam of that flashlight, the whole interior of the box seemed to be one brilliant fire of dancing lights, of scintillating splendor. No wonder he sucked in his breath in a gasp of pure admiration, of sheer delight.

After a moment's examination he bent to consider the workmanship of the box and crown more carefully. Here I could watch him, and must. I sneaked even closer, saw the prying fingers go down and examine the unusual manner in which the box had been constructed, the foreign touch to the workmanship, the crown which was set into the box with screwed clamps which must require a small wrench to unfasten them so that the crown could be taken out, and which, in the meantime, held the glittering bauble rigidly in place, preventing it from shifting about in the box.

These things he examined, then shut the lid of the box, picked up the cases which were on the grass, and tumbled them all back into the bag which he had slit open with a knife.

That done, he went through the hedge and gave a low whistle. Almost immediately there was the purr of a motor. A long, racing car which had been concealed within the shadows of some trees came quietly throbbing to the curb opposite the hedge, and the man with the bag scuttled across the sidewalk.

In that instant when he was getting in the machine and stowing the bag between his legs, while the attention of the two was distracted, the thief's upon the bag, the driver's upon his gears, I sprinted for the rear of the car.

But they didn't see me. I was like a fast flying shadow as I dashed on noiseless feet across the sidewalk, and by the time they raised their heads for an inspection of the hedge and street, I was hidden from their sight. Luck certainly had been with me so far, and I considered it as an omen. Not only had things worked out as I had hoped, but there was one of those folding luggage carriers on the rear bumper.

I did not have to cling desperately to a spare tire as I had expected would be the case, but was able to sit in comfort upon the flat surface of the trunk rack, taking my ease, chuckling at the antics that machine went through in order to make sure it was not being followed.

It was in one of the older residential districts where the houses sat well back from the street with plenty of elbow room, where the new type of construction had not penetrated, that the machine slowed down, swerved into the curb, and the man with the bag jumped from the seat and dashed up a walk.

With hardly so much as a pause in its progress, the car gathered speed and swept on. I left it at the next corner. My business was

with the man with the bag, and while the car might come back, I could take no chances. It had to slow enough for the turn to enable me to jump clear without taking a spill, and that was my only move.

I worked through dark yards and regarded the back of the house into which the man with the bag had gone. There seemed to be no watchers in the yard. The whole place was just as a thousand other similar houses—to all outward appearance, anyway.

It was a small insulator on the side of the house that gave me my first clue. It had no business being there, for one thing, and it caught the light from a street corner and reflected it in my eyes, for another. It was not for a telephone wire, nor for electric light service.

I stopped, studied it for a moment, and then went over the side of the house with my eyes, covering every bit of surface. Down near the ground I saw another dot which looked suspiciously like another insulator. Despite the risk, I took my electric flash and turned the beam on the side of the house, and then followed its path as I directed it over the ground.

Running down the end of the house were two small wires, and these wires formed a veritable network of tightly strung wire, over such windows as I could see. So fine was this wire and so dark was the night that it would have been almost invisible unless one were looking for it with care.

The first wire was within two feet of where I was standing. Probably another step and I would have given an alarm to those within the house.

Carefully I retraced my steps, searching for some means by which I could get into the house, knowing that time was precious and that at any moment I might be too late to accomplish that which I sought. It was just as I had almost made up my mind to try the front of the house that I found a short length of bare wire, dangling from a clothes post. It was the work of a moment to trace the leads of fine wire to a convenient window and short-circuit the network that guarded it.

An instant later I was slipping through that window, and, in the meantime, I had removed my Van Dyke. I would be my own self without disguise for this last chapter of the affair. The house had been easy after the electrical device had been negotiated. Apparently the head of the crime trust was either short of men, or placed his faith in mechanical efficiency more than in human ingenuity.

Once within the house I sought for a place where I could remain for a few minutes while I could hear what was going on. I had arranged a slight diversion for old Icy-Eyes, and when that took place I wanted to be where I could get a chance at his safe. Unless I was greatly mistaken, the paper I wanted was within that house, and all I wanted was a fair break.

While I listened, getting ready to act when the time came, and seeking to learn what was going on within the house, I heard a faint cry, a stifled gasp that was like the suppressed scream of a woman. Instantly there was the sound of a scuffle, and the hoarse curse of a man, a man who was crying with pain. All this was not on the program—not on the program I had arranged.

It called for action, and I slipped my automatic into my hand and skipped down the dark corridor. A door was open on my right, and I slipped into that open door, wondering if the room was occupied, seeking to learn the source of the sounds I had heard.

Apparently there was no one within the room, and it was dark, but, from a little closet at one end, I could see an indirect gleam of light. I tiptoed over to that closet, and then stopped, startled.

A former alcove at the end of the room had been made into a closet, and in this closet had been erected a platform with a flight of steep steps leading up to it. The platform was about seven or eight feet above the floor, and it was from over the top of this platform that the light was coming.

Now I could hear the sound of rapid breathing, the rustle of swift motions, the short panting of breath which spoke of bodies moving in a struggle of some sort, a silent, deadly struggle.

I was alone in a house filled with murderers, thugs, the scum of the underworld. The ruler of this gang desired my life with an intentness of purpose which probably overshadowed every other aim in life right then, and I was being forced to take desperate chances, but there seemed no other alternative. So far the breaks had been with me, and I am a great hand, whether in cards or in life, to press to the limit when fortune is smiling.

As nimbly as a monkey I scampered up those stairs, ready to encounter almost anything, yet not prepared for what I found.

The platform was flush against the wall, and there was a grille effect of ornamentation which apparently constituted the wall of the adjoining room. It was through this grille that the light was streaming and that the sounds were coming. A chair was at one

end of the little platform, a chair fitted with a cushion, and against the chair stood a sawed-off shotgun. Apparently here was a little sentry box, a watch tower by which a guard could watch and wait, concealed from the room beyond by the ornamental grille, yet able to command its every corner with the deadly weapon which rested by the chair.

Something had happened to call this watchman from his post, a something which was evidently very unexpected in its nature, an emergency which had not been contemplated, and the answer to which evidently lay in the sounds of a struggle which was taking place within the other room. Now that I saw the platform and the secret watch tower I could see it all. Icy-Eyes was not underestimating me, Once before he had found that when he pressed me I would turn and attack. He had determined he would not be caught napping again. This watch tower had been prepared for my especial benefit and a man was kept constantly in charge. Should I enter that other room, and think, by any chance, that I had cornered old Icy-Eyes, he would have his hidden guard ready to shoot when he gave the signal.

I thought of all this in the fraction of a second it took me to get my eyes to the openings of the grille. That first glimpse showed that my surmise had been correct. The room which stretched out below me was evidently a den, an office, the headquarters of Icy-Eyes himself. Within it was a great desk, a massive safe, several chairs, a couch, and a couple of filing cases. Icy-Eyes was evidently doing business upon a big scale.

However, I had time for only an incidental glance at the furnishings of the room below. It was the swirling mass of struggling figures which interested me. There were several men and a girl engaged in a desperate, silent conflict, and, even as I looked, the conflict ended.

One of the men was evidently fighting on the side of the girl, and two men were opposed to them. The clothes had been almost entirely torn from the girl, her body was bruised and bleeding, and there was sheer, stark terror in her eyes. The man who had been with her was battered almost beyond semblance of a human being. At the last he had been struck repeatedly in the face with the butt of a pistol, and his features were a mass of blood, yet he was conscious.

Old Icy-Eyes himself was there and had actually been engaged in the struggle. In fact, from the looks of his face I would have

ventured a guess that the girl had grabbed him and scratched his flabby skin, for there were several parallel scratches upon his face from which blood was streaming and he was flushed and panting, yet his eyes were as ice-cold as ever. In fact he seemed to radiate a cold, frosty light from those eyes, and their expression was not pleasant to see.

As the girl was flung on the couch and gagged, her hands lashed behind her back, I was able to get a glimpse of her features. She was the girl I had known as Maude Enders, the girl with the mole on her left hand.

Apparently that struggle had been swift, fierce, and unexpected. The man who was on guard in the watch tower had had no opportunity to use his shotgun. The struggle had swirled about Icy-Eyes himself, and it had been necessary for the watchman to enter the room and take a hand. To have shot at the strugglers would have been to kill Icy-Eyes, for a shotgun is not a weapon with which one can pick and choose.

Then I noticed a man lying on the floor, his eyes closed, his face pallid. He was out, perhaps out for keeps, and I knew him. He was the man who had stolen the gems of Alexis Alexandrovitch—the man who had posed as the father of Riggs, the butler.

Rapidly Icy-Eyes restored order. The man with the battered face was bound, gagged and thrown on the floor. The girl with the mole, bruised, battered, her arms bound, her mouth gagged, was left, lying on her back on the couch, her eyes showing terror and helplessness. Here and there a few silken rags remained, but, for the most part, the clothes had been literally torn from her. Both of her shoes were gone, and there remained a small part of one stocking. Her other leg was entirely bare, and already there were forming several livid bruises upon the white skin.

Icy-Eyes heaved himself into a chair at the desk, picked up the double-locked bag, which had been placed on the plate glass top, and reached inside, taking out the jewel cases, spreading them over the desk, preparing to take an inventory with pencil and paper at his side. He was methodical, this huge bulk of a man with ice-cold eyes, and the red scratches which dripped blood upon his collar.

I reached out to grip the gun behind me, ready to change all of my plans, to get Icy-Eyes covered, and, from my point of vantage, dictate my terms.

Instead of touching the gun, my hands encountered the body of a man, a man who had taken advantage of my preoccupation to creep silently up the steep steps, and was ready to spring upon me.

Desperately I threw myself around. Luck, which had played so nicely into my hands that night, seemed on the verge of playing me false. Apparently this was some new member of the gang who had crawled up the stairs, ignorant of the struggle which had been waged in the other room, seeking, perhaps a word with the watcher on duty. Instead he had seen my outline silhouetted against the light of the grille as I watched what was going on below, and he had stolen up behind me ready to strike.

He flung himself back, and I could see the gleam of light on steel as he threw around a revolver. I had pocketed my own gun when I had reached back for the shotgun, and that bit of carelessness seemed likely to cost me my life. It was my own fault, too. I had often claimed that a man should have his wits about him all the time, and here I had allowed my attention to become distracted by the unexpected sight of a struggle in the room below.

He had me covered, and that was all there was to it. There was no use making a senseless martyr of myself. He was ready to shoot and I saw it in his eyes, so I stepped back, my hands up, knowing that Icy-Eyes would decree my death, that it was now only a matter of minutes unless I could find some method of turning the tables.

Silently, he motioned me to descend the steps, reaching for the shotgun in the corner. Apparently Icy-Eyes had instructed his men to never speak a word while they were on that watching platform. At all costs he must keep the men whom he did not trust from finding out the secret of that hidden platform.

I started down the steps, ready to grab the man who was covering me by the leg if the opportunity arose, and jerk him from the platform, ready to jump back if necessary, whip out my gun and shoot it out—and then I noticed a second man standing in the room below, covering me with another one of those sawed-off shotguns and I knew the jig was up.

Ed Jenkins, the Phantom Crook, cornered at last, murdered in a crook's dive and his body thrown out in an alley. How the police would chuckle to themselves! And all because of one moment's carelessness at a time when I could least afford to be careless.

After I had descended the ladder, the two men engaged in a brief, whispered conversation, searched me for weapons, taking

my automatic from me, and then prepared to escort me into the main office where Icy-Eyes held forth. The men did not recognize me. Their whispered comments showed that they had no inkling who I was, or the unholy glee it would give their chief to get me in his power.

Having relieved me of weapons, the two seemed more at their ease, and led me into the corridor, one walking behind me, one ahead.

"Don't interrupt the Chief until he gets the other matter over with," cautioned one of the men in a whisper.

I turned on him, resolved to run a big bluff in the hope I could at least partially distract their attention.

"Ain't you guys dicks?" I asked, a well-simulated look of surprise coming over my face.

They looked at one another blankly.

"Hell, I thought the joint was pinched," I said. "The Chief had t' call the other guy down to help him with the skirt, an' he asked me to take a trick up there on the platform. I was keepin' guard when youse guys threw down on me, an' I figured it was a pinch."

They scowled, and the spokesman seemed to waver a bit.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked.

I laughed.

"I'm the guy that worked out the whole dope on that Russian trick at Kemper's. I got the dope on this here grand duke and told the Chief how he could work it."

"The hell you did!" exclaimed the man, thrusting his face closer to mine. "I thought it was Lefty did that."

I laughed, a sneering, chuckling laugh.

"Shucks, you don't know nothin'. Here, I got the whole dope right here in my shoe, also my written pass from the Chief. I always keep 'em under the linin' of my shoe. A bull will never think of lookin' there on a frisk."

With that I raised my shoe as though to untie it.

The men were puzzled. It was plain to be seen that they were fearful of making a mistake, either one way or the other. Apparently the Chief did not care for bunglers.

Taking advantage of their preoccupation, I had raised my right foot as though to take out some papers from my shoe. Instead I crashed it back in a terrific kick, leaning forward as I did so, and

grasping the barrel of the gun which the man in front of me was holding.

My foot caught the man behind in the pit of the stomach, and he slumped to the floor an inert mass, unconscious. The blow had been terrific. The man who had been in front of me was taken by surprise, and I had the gun half out of his hands before he could tighten his muscles. Using the gun barrel as a lever, I pulled him over toward me, and, at the same time butted my head at his chin.

The impact dazed him, and I promptly released the gun and swung my fist to the angle of his jaw with all my weight behind it. He staggered, his knees wobbled, and he sank backward, the gun still in his hands; and I turned. They would expect me to take advantage of the occasion to make my escape, and I counted strongly on that. The one who had been hit the last would open his eyes, would be on his feet in a matter of seconds. Seeing the corridor before him he would conclude that I had dashed out into the night. He would hardly think of looking for me back on the platform.

It was with this in mind that I jumped back into the dark room and closed the door behind me. Once more I was up on the platform, but this time I was unarmed. In the necessity of returning to this place before I was seen there had been no time to recover my pistol, and, in plain truth, so urgent was my haste, that for once it had slipped my mind. I cursed my stupidity. In the game I play one cannot relax one's vigilance for a moment, regardless of the reason.

Old Icy-Eyes had been entirely oblivious of the struggle in the hall. I had hoped that I would see him when he made his inventory of the jewels, but, apparently, he had sidetracked the jewels for other more important matters.

He was sitting on the couch beside the girl with the mole, and in his hand was a small bottle and a fine camel's hair brush. His face was absolutely immobile, devoid of any expression. His eyes were cold and hard, and when he spoke his voice had the same toneless quality I had noticed before. It was as though he spoke almost mechanically, without expression. If the man had any feelings at all he certainly kept them from showing in his voice.

"You have sought to betray me, Maude, and you shall pay the price," he said in that even, almost monotonous voice. "Heretofore two or three men have crossed me, and you know what has

happened to them. With a woman it is different. One would be foolish to kill a woman when there are so many more effective methods of inflicting punishment.

"Your skin, for instance—I have noticed what excellent care you have taken of your skin. See how soft and white it is. Beyond doubt you are a beautiful woman, and you pride yourself on your beauty. . . . In this little bottle I have an acid. A few strokes of this brush and your beauty will be ruined. You will be forced to go through life with a body that is finely formed, a skin that is lovely, and a face that will repel all men, all save the most bestial.

"Also I will place a drop in one eye. Not in both. I will want you to have partial sight so that you can see what a spectacle you have become. When I have finished with you your name will be a byword in criminal circles, and the woman who takes your place will remember what happens to women who seek to betray me."

There seemed to be no gloating in his voice, no rage, but merely the cold, dispassionate tones of one who is without emotion, who experiences emotional reactions, but has them entirely in the control of the intellect, who gives no expression of feelings or passion.

With that he dipped the brush in the bottle, carefully pressing it against the side of the phial to squeeze out all of the surplus acid, to enable him to make a workmanlike job of it.

The girl was gagged and could not scream. Her arms were bound and the big hulk had part of his weight resting on her so that she could not squirm. Her legs were free, and they alone registered her panic. They kicked, twisted, writhed, and gleamed in the light of the huge incandescent in the ceiling. He had spoken but the truth when he had said that she had a pretty skin, when he had said there were more terrible ways to punish a woman than by death alone.

The man who had been fighting for her, he whose face had been so battered, struggled and strained at his bonds in a very frenzy of desperate energy. Over in the corner three of Icy-Eyes' henchmen stood, grinning their enjoyment. There is a perverted something about men of that ilk which makes them enjoy torture.

Here was another development I had not counted on. I could not sit by and let Icy-Eyes carry out his intention. The woman with the mole had actually helped me once or twice. True she was a member of his gang, but it might well be that her present predicament was because she had sought to save me. Of course I had been

prejudiced against her because of the warning the Weasel had given me, and what had immediately followed.

I sucked in a deep breath, preparing to run a bluff, to call out that I had the man covered from his secret tower, ordering him to release the girl or I would shoot. It might have worked, or might not. For all he knew I had the shotgun up there.

I never gave the shout, however, for, of a sudden there sounded another voice, a voice coming from the hallway, and then my heart stood still. The voice was that of Helen Chadwick!

I have faced death often for myself, and have faced it with an inner tranquillity, a calm smile; but here was something infinitely worse, a something I could not control, yet which caused me to break out in a cold sweat. Helen in the power of this brute.

He looked up.

"I have come to surrender, to meet your terms," she said, as she entered the room, and there was almost a note of levity in her voice. To all appearance she was merely a carefree, brainless flapper with painted, smiling lips, steady eyes and modish clothes. It was only because I had come to know her, to appreciate the real character of the girl that I could detect the underlying heartbreak in her voice.

Icy Eyes sat down the bottle and looked at her.

"Helen Chadwick?" he asked.

She nodded.

He heaved himself to his feet and retired behind his desk. His face was smiling. It was the first time I had ever seen any expression on his countenance, and it was terrible, a gloating, triumphant, malign smile.

"You wrote me once that if I was ready to surrender, a certain man would take me to you provided I came alone and that no one sought to follow or knew where I was going. I give you my word that I have complied with those conditions."

He nodded.

"And your reason?"

This time emotion showed in her eyes, her forehead flushed, her lips parted and she leaned forward.

"That Ed Jenkins be left alone. He got in this for my sake, and I know that he is in danger. I will acknowledge the power you have over me, and I will do as you suggest. Either I will give you money, if it is money you want, or if you desire to use me and my position I will carry out your orders."

His eyes were as cold and frosty as twin icebergs, and he let her have it straight from the shoulder.

"Bah, you fool! Do you think I would give up Ed Jenkins for a hundred of you? But it is well. He loves you. I shall get money for the evidence I hold, and I shall get my revenge. Indeed, yes. There is a resort in Mexico which would give me real money for a girl of your beauty . . . and how that would torture Ed Jenkins. Think of it! I would be paid for selling you. . . . Hah. . . . Hah. . . . Hah!"

It was a laugh, the first laugh I had ever heard from the man, and it was a laugh which caused cold chills to run up and down my spine. It was the laugh of a something within him, a demon, a streak of insanity, a lost soul—whatever you will—it was not a human laugh.

And then Helen caught his drift, realized the significance of the grinning men behind her, the half-naked girl lying bound and gagged on the couch.

And she smiled, a slow smile of perfect poise.

Then I knew that she was aware of her danger, of how foolish she had been to seek to sacrifice herself for me, of how futile her attempt had been, and I knew also that she was going to play the game through, to play into his hands for the sake of getting a chance to kill him.

"Well if I'm going to be sold as merchandise I'd better be looking my prettiest," she said after the manner of an empty-headed, vain flapper; and crossed her knees, opened her vanity box, and took out a compact.

The men watched her, spellbound. Even Icy-Eyes himself was at a loss. This little slip of a girl with her casual coolness held every eye in the room. She was unarmed; of course, she would be. I had hoped desperately that there would have been a gun in that vanity case . . . but no, she was, as I was, merely armed with her wits, depending upon her poise, her quickness of perception to carry her through.

And then I saw something else.

The bare legs of the girl with the mole were moving, and they were moving to some purpose. While Icy-Eyes had been talking to Helen, the girl with the mole had worked her bare feet over to the little stand, behind the desk, upon which stood a telephone. Her well-formed feet seemed as graceful as hands, her toes as sentient

as fingers. Despite the danger of the moment, the knowledge that I must presently venture down into that hell-pit below, I could not help thrilling at the sheer beauty of those well-formed limbs and the sure skill of the motions.

She had lifted the receiver with the toes of one foot. It was clever, ingenious—and, more than either, it was a last, desperate chance.

And then I thrilled with pride for Helen Chadwick, game little campaigner that she was. Her eyes had seen the feet of the girl with the mole, as well. While Icy-Eyes was watching her, trying to break through her calm mask of jaunty indifference, she had seen what the girl with the mole was doing, and had suddenly changed her conduct accordingly.

Abruptly her self-possession left her. Her hand trembled, her lips worked, her eyes grew wide, and she leaned a trifle forward, over toward the face of old Icy-Eyes—incidentally, nearer by inches to the telephone.

“No! NO! Not that!” she screamed. “Save me! Help! Not that!”

Almost there was a glimmer of satisfaction upon the expressionless face of the man who sat behind that desk, his pudgy fingers gripping the top, his cold eyes fastened on the girl before him. His face was heavy, sagging, but held rigidly immobile, and the great scratches gave it a peculiar, striped look, as though the soul was walled into the fleshy covering by bars of blood which stretched down his face.

“Ah, that’s better,” he breathed. “I thought I could break through that calm. You have played into my hands. Jenkins shall die, but, before he dies, he will know that the woman he loves has been sold to a Mexican hell—and that I have the money.”

“No, no” screamed the girl again. “You’re killing me. It’s worse than death. Help! Help!”

Something in the shrill carrying power of that voice seemed to disturb the man behind the desk. It was as though he sensed that the words were a signal for help, a cry that was not being wasted. He stirred uneasily.

The other men in that room, coarse, callous crooks, men who regarded women as tools and chattels, were gloating over the suffering of the girl. They had ranged themselves in a corner

where they might watch her face, where they might be between her and the door. The girl with the mole lay on her back on the couch, her feet in such a position that only Helen and I could see what they were doing.

Icy Eyes shifted his position and the girl on the couch gave her legs a graceful twist, the telephone receiver dropped back into place, and Helen Chadwick became silent.

"Shut up," growled Icy-Eyes, his hard eyes showing a look of suspicion. "This house is pretty soundproof, but you can keep your yells to yourself. I wanted to hear you scream, but I've had enough to satisfy me. Another yell and you'll have a little taste of what's coming later on."

He turned to the three men who were standing ready to do his hell bidding.

He opened his mouth to speak, and then stopped, his eyes on the doorway.

A man with bloody features was standing on the threshold, one of the men I had knocked out.

"A spy in the house," he said weakly, "a man was peering in through the grille. We caught him, but he broke away and got out the back some way. The wires are dead."

This time there was expression and to spare on the face of the man at the desk.

"What! Another spy!" he shouted, glancing at the bound man on the floor, his face working in a strange mixture of rage and fear. "What is all this? Is the house full of spies? And you let him escape! Fool!"

The level tones of Helen Chadwick broke in on him.

"That will have been Ed Jenkins," she remarked casually, as though she were speaking of the weather, "and you can prepare to die. I should have known better than to doubt him."

There was a calm certainty in her words, something more than a threat. It was as though she spoke a prophecy.

Actually the big man quailed.

"He is a devil," he muttered, and it was plain to be seen that at last his nerve was shaken.

"Who is now on guard at the station?"

Silence while the men exchanged glances.

"You called me to come down and help you," ventured one of the men, "an' I guess nobody ain't gone back up."

Icy-Eyes muttered a foul oath, a soul-shriveling combination of degraded words.

"Get back up there, and get ready. You'll pay for being slack on the job later. In the meantime keep your gun trained on the door, and shoot the first man that opens it unless he's one you know."

The man he had addressed slunk out of the door. He would go down the corridor, enter the room below, climb the stairs and raise an alarm when he saw me. In the meantime I was unarmed, and there was no way of escape. Damn Icy-Eyes, why did he delay? Why didn't he walk into the trap I had baited?

The door below slammed open, and I could hear footsteps on the floor, hands groping on the stairs. I had flattened myself against the base of the grille, trying to block as little as possible of the light which was coming from the den below where Icy-Eyes, confident in his own power and security, still wanted to gloat over his treasure, to make his victims wait in the horror of their suspense.

"I'll take a look at this stuff," he said, "and then I'll do a little acid painting, and we'll get started. We are going to leave this place. It has served its purpose."

With that he reached for the box which contained the fake crown, opened it, and began to unscrew the little bolts which fastened the crown in place. Across the room the two guards watched him with inquisitive eyes, occasionally flicking a hungry glance toward the two girls.

I turned, crouched, gathered my hands beneath my chin, saw the top of a man's head coming above the floor of the platform, and shot forward.

I had timed myself to a nicety. The head and neck had just appeared when my swooping hands shot out on a level with the floor and sought his neck.

There was a choking, gurgling cry, a smothered exclamation, and then my gripping hands had locked on the man's throat. He tore at my hands, and finally, flung himself from the steps, throwing the whole burden of his weight upon my wrists. It was more than flesh and blood could stand. My muscles could not hold that hundred and eighty pounds of dead weight at arm's length, and the tortured tendons weakened.

There was only one thing to be done, and I did it with what was

almost a prayer. I threw myself forward, still retaining my grip, and we plunged headlong into the darkness of the drop below.

There was not enough space for us to turn in the air. I held my arms out before me like a driver holds his hands, and between my fingers was the neck of the crook. We fell in that position, and I thudded to the floor atop him. I had felt his head strike first, had felt the bones beneath my fingers give a twist, a dull snap, and I knew I had no more to fear from that man.

Quickly, I dashed up the ladder to the platform again.

Icy-Eyes had loosened the bolts and was on the point of lifting the crown from the box.

"What was that noise?" he bellowed, his pasty face turned toward the grille.

I disguised my voice as much as possible.

"Fell off the stairs and knocked out a tooth," I said.

He cursed again.

"Of all the damned incompetency. You fellows are going to have an accounting for all the blunders you've pulled today."

With that he lifted the crown from the box, his hands cupped about the gold rim, in exactly the position a man's hands would naturally assume in lifting such an ornament.

And then he yelled, yelled and jumped back.

"I've been stabbed," he shouted, holding his bleeding hand high in the air.

A trickle of blood was coming down from the palm. And then his eyes caught the flutter of paper within the box. Without thinking he read the few words it contained aloud.

"You have fifteen minutes to live. Nothing can save you. This pays you in full of account."

ED. JENKINS."

And then the coward of the man came out. He saw the ingenious construction of that crown, saw that when it was lifted from the box a hollow needle sprang out on each of the four sides and that a greenish fluid was squirted through the hollow openings. One of these needles had caught him full in the palm.

"Quick!" he shouted, tying a handkerchief about his wrist, trying to choke off the circulation of the blood. "I have been

poisoned—I must get to a doctor. Bring that stuff, those jewels, get the things in the safe. I will take them with me. Hurry!”

Bah! What a fool he was for all of his boasted intelligence. A certain amount of cunning I granted him, yes. He could sit behind his desk with a score of crooks to do his bidding and direct their activities. He was ruthless and cruel enough to inspire a certain amount of deference in his underlings. All of these things had helped to give him power, to make him feel that he was invincible; but it is one thing to sit behind a desk with armed guards watching to insure a man's safety, and quite another to be out in the world without an organization of helpers, fighting society single-handed.

If he had known crooks as I knew them he would have never betrayed that secret. They had seen the blood, had realized the ingenious construction of the crown, had heard him read the note, and saw the fear of death on his face. These men who worked for him as long as he was a power, as long as he could hold murder charges over their heads, grant them police immunity while they worked for him, guarantee the gallows when they failed, were like rats in a vessel, half-starved, desperate. Let one among them become stricken and he became the prey of the pack.

So it was with Icy-Eyes. As these crooks looked at it, there was a fortune in jewelry before their eyes, another fortune in the safe, ready to be taken for the asking, two beautiful women in their power. The chief wanted them to take all of the booty to a safe place, wanted them to rush him to a doctor. Why should they do so? In fifteen minutes, if they but waited, he would be dead. He had lost his power over them and there was a king's ransom within reach.

They exchanged glances, and then advanced.

At that last minute Icy-Eyes read their faces, saw what he had turned loose, realized that the pack had turned against him. Already the fear of death was bringing the cold drops of perspiration to his brow, oozing through the white, taut skin of the temples, trickling down the blood-stained cheeks. He was not a pretty spectacle.

At that, his mind did not entirely desert him, for he looked toward the grille.

“Shoot these traitors,” he ordered. “Shoot to kill!”

Then he waited.

The others had momentarily forgotten about that watch tower behind the grille and they fell back, white, startled, of half a mind to surrender. Had he taken advantage of that moment he might have again controlled the situation, forced them to do his bidding. Had he countermanded those orders promptly and bluffed his way through, he could have cowed them.

But he was too vindictive, too cold. He waited, eyes upturned, wondering why there was no response to his orders.

Fool! Even had the watcher been there, he would have naturally sided with his comrades. One does not gain honor or advancement by fighting for the dead, and, in the eyes of his men, Icy-Eyes was as good as dead already, merely a meandering corpse who was cheating the grave by minutes.

When there was nothing but silence from behind that grille, the men advanced again, and this time with more confidence. Icy-Eyes read their intent, and his cowering was painful to behold. The part of the suppliant did not become him, and yet, like most fat men, he was a physical coward. It was the gleam of the knives as much as the fear of poison that sent him to his knees, pleading, begging, promising, and yet, through it all, despite the terror in his eyes, there was the same old chill in their frosty depths.

At the last he lowered his face, covered his eyes, moaned, whimpered, shrieked, and then the knives plunged home. They did not care to wait, these two crooks, so intent upon getting their hands on the loot. If they waited for the poison there might be other crooks show up, more accomplices to divide with. As it was, they would split everything two ways, jewels, money and women.

Nor had Helen Chadwick been idle. She had flown to the side of the girl with the mole, had stripped off the gag and was working at the knots of the rope.

I dashed from the platform, scurried down the steps and into the hall. They would need protection now, those two girls.

And then there came a sudden, spine-chilling sound, a sound which is well calculated to strike terror into the marrow of a crook—the long shrieking wail of a siren!

Then it was that I entered the room.

“The police are on their way up the front walk, *gentlemen*,” I said, with a bow toward the bloody-handed crooks. “Murder will be the charge if you are caught. The back way is still open.”

They needed nothing further. Like rats leaving a sinking vessel, they stampeded from the room and flat-footed it down the hall, running with the heavy, awkward, lumbering gait of men whose minds and bodies have commenced to slow down.

I heard a metallic, gurgling sound from the floor, and saw Icy-Eyes, stabbed as he was, his life blood gurgling from him, his eyes filled with a stony hatred, trying to crawl toward me. He knew now, damn him. Then he saw that he could not make it . . . there was sheer panic in his eyes, panic and a cold hatred, as the film of death crept over those icy eyes.

Helen Chadwick was in my arms, and there was the sound of a police machine skidding to a stop before the curb.

"Quick!" I told her. "For you to be caught in this hell-hole would be worse than the publication of the papers. Out the back way, quick! There is still time. I will join you later; my way of escape is all blocked out. Have faith in me and hurry!"

I pushed her toward the door, and she saw the truth in what I said, and she, too, floated down the corridor, as lightly as gossamer. They would not catch her.

Frenziedly, I turned to the safe.

It had been said of me that there was no safe I could not open, and open in such a way that it would not show it had been tampered with. Never had I such need of my reputed skill. I was working against minutes, against seconds. The police were banging the doors of the machine as they tumbled out, got their shotguns at ready, and started to rush the house. They were coming all right, but they were coming prepared.

A stethoscope attached to a battery-worked sound-amplifier was all I ordinarily needed, a little outfit that was always carried in a case suspended beneath my left armpit. In a very ecstasy of haste I spun the dials, detected the combination, flung open the doors and dove inside. Jewels there were, money, gold, platinum. All of these I flung to one side. The police were banging at the door of the house, trying to force it. From the side, there was the crashing of glass as they broke in a window. On the couch behind me I could hear the sound of movement as the girl with the mole cast loose her bonds. On the floor the man with the battered features, he who had championed her cause and who had been a witness of all that had taken place, writhed and twisted.

I would get life, anyway, perhaps would be hung. Do what I might, the police would catch me in that room of corpses, that rendezvous of crooks, surrounded by thousands of dollars worth of stolen gems, find me even in the act of looting the safe. My criminal record and the very fact of my presence would be all a jury would need; but they could all be damned to them. I would find and destroy those Chadwick papers.

Just as there came the sound of feet in the corridor, the heavy, aggressive footsteps of the law, I found the paper I wanted, the last of the evidence against Helen's family, against her father's name, the paper that was to be published by one party to help in a political campaign for city control, the paper that two factions were fighting for, the only scrap of evidence that was left.

The flame from my match flickered a bit, then caught.

"Hands up!" yelled a bluecoat from the door.

I stepped to one side and elevated my hands with a grin. The evidence I had sought to destroy was rapidly becoming a mass of ashes and the slow-witted officer could not fathom the situation, had not the presence of mind to try and stamp out the flame. It was as well. I would have killed him with my bare hands.

The flame died down, and the hallway was a jostling, crowding mass of men. I stepped back, and, in doing so, managed to grind the ashes beneath my heel.

"It's Ed Jenkins, the Phantom Crook!" yelled a detective who stood behind the bluecoat in the doorway. "By God, Ed, you'll get the rope for this night's work!"

Then they advanced with a rush. Handcuffs were nipped over my wrists and over my ankles as well. These men knew of my reputation, had had too many dealings with me. They were taking no chances on my living up to my reputation to escape them.

Then there sounded the voice of a man with authority, and a sergeant came down the hall. He had arrived a little late, apparently, but there was something in his bearing which showed the importance he gave the case.

"Thelma!" he shouted. "Are you all right, Thelma?" and there seemed more than mere anxiety in his voice.

Then she spoke, that girl on the sofa—the girl with the mole, the girl I knew as Maude Enders.

"Jake a million," she said. "Get the men out of here while I put some clothes on."

She was sitting up on the couch, and there was an end of the couch cover which she was holding up beneath her chin. The officers had been so excited over capturing me, over the tumbled mass of jewelry which had come from the safe, that they had hardly noticed her.

"Benny's on the floor," she went on, "and he's been pretty badly done up. Get the men out. I'm a sight."

The sergeant snapped out crisp orders, and the men left the room, taking me with them. The girl said something else I could not catch, and the sergeant bawled out another order. "Hold that bird, Jenkins. Don't take him to the wagon," he said.

Thereafter the door banged shut and I could hear nothing other than the excited comments of the policemen who had staged the raid, a summary of my past crimes, speculation as to whether or not I had committed the murder, and puzzled comment on the fact that I had not tried to escape when I heard the siren.

I said nothing.

The law had me in its toils. I could not even make a defense. The truth could never be told. Any story I might try to make stand up before a jury would be instantly ridiculed when the prosecutor showed the string of convictions after my name. Society damned me, just as I damned society. Laws were made for the protection of the innocent, not to insure a fair trial for a crook.

And then the door was thrown open and the sergeant snapped an order, as crisp as the rattle of a machine gun.

"Jenkins, there—turn him loose and send him in here, alone. Alone, mind you; then go through the house and keep out of this room until I call you."

In wondering silence the men complied with his orders. Their responsibilities ceased when I went through that door, but they took good care that I did go through it. I was covered by no less than three shotguns as I went into the room.

The door banged shut and I noticed the girl with the mole sitting still on the edge of the sofa, some other clothes around her, and some of her old ones pinned up. The man with the battered face was laying back on the sofa. Behind the desk, in the chair where Icy-Eyes had sat, there was the sergeant, and his keen gray eyes went over my every feature.

"Jenkins," he said crisply, "you are a wonder. We can't follow your every move in the whole thing, but you have done us all a great service.

"As you probably have surmised, Thelma here is a police 'lure,' a girl who has gone from the night life to helping the police. This was the toughest job we have ever had to tackle. No one knew of her identity as a tool of the police other than the Weasel. We suspected that he had warned you, but others suspected him as well of having interests against the interests of this crime ring, and he was killed.

"This man," with a gesture toward the crumpled corpse of Icy-Eyes, "was the greatest criminal of modern times. He had unlimited financial resources, and he organized a regular crime syndicate. He got his start through bootlegging, and whatever else prohibition may have done, either of good or bad, it has certainly made it easy for the criminal classes to organize, to get funds for their war on society. This man had a genius for organization and for discipline, and he recognized the weakness of crooks in general. He wielded absolute power, and he knew no limits. He took the whole composite mass of crookdom and organized it. He had fences on a salary, gem cutters, even owned jewelry stores. Thelma and Benny got the dope. Thelma made the contact and got Benny into the game.

"But all the time you kept butting in. Twice Thelma tipped us off to give you a free hand, just in the nick of time, and the police facilitated your escape instead of hindered it. Several times you did us good turns. All of the time Thelma was collecting lists of names, places and properties. Now we can crush out the whole thing.

"What you have done tonight, and why, is known to but three of us aside from yourself, and those whom you took into your confidence. As far as the department is concerned, there will never be so much as a whisper. Are you satisfied?"

I looked at their faces.

"I am free to go?"

He nodded. "Not only that, but the police are going to be more friendly with you. We have seen something of what you are up against. If you want to come on the force as a secret operative there will be an opening."

I shook my head, but said nothing. I would not hurt the feelings of Thelma, the police lure, by saying ill of her profession. Each man to his taste.

"Thanks," I said. "I'll be going."

He extended his hand.

"Here's to a brave man," he said, and his eyes were two shining points of light as his hand clasped mine.

There came a tumble of feminine charm, of fluttering silk, and then two bare arms went around my neck, and two warm lips pressed to mine.

"That's my tribute," said the girl with the mole, and then, half hysterically, she grabbed a handkerchief and began daubing at my mouth.

"My lips came off," she giggled, "and you're going to see *her* tonight—this morning. It would never do to have my mouth plastered on your face."

It was indeed morning.

I stepped to the door and looked at the sergeant.

He nodded, threw it open, and escorted me to the battered outer door.

"Boys," he said, "the department has nothing on Ed Jenkins, nothing at all. Good morning, Jenkins."

I walked down the steps, on to the cement walk. Dawn was breaking. A rooster crowed somewhere in the distance. Behind me I saw the startled faces of half a score of policemen and detectives.

"The Phantom Crook—through our fingers *again!*" exclaimed a voice behind me. "How did he do it?"

They never knew the answer.

I strolled out into the crisp air as casually as a banker taking an early morning constitutional.

They were sitting up for me at Kemper's house, and there was a chorus of relieved exclamations when I came walking in.

My taxicab was waiting outside, but, somehow I sensed I should not mention the fact. The driveway to the garage was a distance back from the house.

I smiled at the girl.

"It's finished, Helen. The paper is destroyed and Icy-Eyes has been paid in full of account."

Her eyes were big, luminous.

"Ed," she said, slowly, "you stayed behind to get that paper. I didn't think of it at the time. How did you escape the police?"

I rubbed the back of my hand over my lips.

"Easy," I grinned, "the detectives were kissing me when I left."

Kemper laughed, but his wife watched me narrowly.

I fancied I saw a slight shudder come over the girl's face.

"Ed . . . Ed—tell me—did you poison him?"

I shook my head.

"Poison would have been too good for him, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. It was sort of sneaky. However, there wasn't any need for it. I planted a green dye in those needles, and knew that the note would do the rest. You see I know crooks, and I knew that the gems would be delivered to him at the place where he kept his other gems, knew that no one except him would have the time to take a small wrench and take out the crown, knew that when he was pricked and saw that note, he would spill the beans. I understand the psychological processes of crooks and knew that as soon as the men he had associated with him realized he was doomed, they would set on him like wolves, and that he would go down before the pack.

"The girl with the mole was a detective. That was why I had been warned against her. She managed to call the police and that interfered with my plans. The operator heard your voice imploring for help, connected the line with the police station, traced the call and they came out. That gummed my game. I had expected the death of the arch crook and then I wanted to get that paper after the gang had looted the safe of jewelry. I knew they wouldn't touch papers, but would only take gems and cash. The arrival of the police made it difficult; but—well, I burnt that letter."

Helen hung her head a trifle.

"I should have had more confidence in you, Ed. When I realized that you were baiting a trap with yourself, and, watching in the night, saw you go, I determined that I'd give myself up before I'd let you take such chances, run such dangers. I went directly to this man to surrender, to let him keep the paper, to do anything to obtain your safety."

Loring Kemper blew his nose violently.

His wife was watching us with a tolerant, indulgent smile.

"Mr. Kemper thinks he can get pardons for you, Ed," went on the girl, "fix it so you will be free to come and go as you choose . . . to live like any other person . . . to have a business . . . join clubs . . . settle down. . . ."

I kept my eyes averted while I tried to tell them.

"That would be wonderful of him, mighty square; but you don't understand, Helen. I am of the shadows. Society is against me and always will be, in spite of all the pardons in the world. My wife would always be known as the wife of a crook . . . my children would be handicapped from the start. My name tarnishes that which it touches. . . . Excuse me a minute. I'll get some things from my room."

With that I was up, bowing casually, and through the portieres. I could not stand more. I loved her, and my ways were of the half-world, the borderland. I could not bring disgrace upon a thoroughbred, and they could not understand.

They did not suspect my purpose, but waited for my return, and I sprinted down the hall, through the side door, across the dewy grass, and into the taxicab.

"Anywhere," I snapped at the driver as I banged the door shut.

He looked at me curiously, started the car with a lurch and rounded the corner.

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