

*The* ROOM  
UNDER *the*  
STAIRS

*by*

HERMAN LANDON



---

---

# THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

---

---

**BOOKS BY HERMAN LANDON**

**THE GRAY PHANTOM**

**THE GRAY PHANTOM'S RETURN**

**GRAY TERROR**

**THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS**

# THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

BY

HERMAN LANDON

AUTHOR OF "THE GRAY PHANTOM" STORIES



NEW YORK

G. HOWARD WATT

558 MADISON AVENUE

1923

**COPYRIGHT, 1923, BY  
G. HOWARD WATT**

***Printed in the United States of America***

**To One Who Doesn't Like Mystery Stories,  
Yet Suggested the Plot of This One**

**2136950** ' .



# CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. A CURIOUS OBITUARY . . . . .	I
II. THE WILES OF BEULAH . . . . .	11
III. ENTER THE WOMAN .. . . .	17
IV. THE HOUSE ON HUDSON STREET . . .	26
V. THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS . . .	37
VI. BESIDE THE DEATHBED . . . . .	46
VII. THE SCARRED NECK . . . . .	54
VIII. BACK TO HUDSON STREET . . . .	61
IX. A PIECE OF GLASS . . . . .	70
X. THE WRITING ON THE WALL . . . .	78
XI. CUL-DE-SAC . . . . .	89
XII. A MIDNIGHT VISITOR . . . . .	98
XIII. THE TEST . . . . .	113
XIV. THE SECOND TEST . . . . .	120
XV. BLANCHING CHEEKS . . . . .	128
XVI. SCREAMS . . . . .	140
XVII. TWO VOICES—AND A SHOT . . . .	149
XVIII. MURDER . . . . .	154
XIX. MIDNIGHT . . . . .	162
XX. SHIRLEY LAMONT . . . . .	172
XXI. MISS LAMONT WAVERS . . . . .	182
XXII. THE VOICE ON THE WIRE . . . .	192
XXIII. BEHIND THE DOOR . . . . .	204

## CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
XXIV. BLACK MOMENTS . . . . .	215
XXV. DEAN'S CHOICE . . . . .	225
XXVI. THE FIFTEEN-MILLION-DOLLAR SHOT .	232
XXVII. THE TWO VISITORS . . . . .	242
XXVIII. THE NEW MENACE . . . . .	254
XXIX. BACK TO LIFE . . . . .	265
XXX. THE TEMPTER'S SNARE . . . . .	272
XXXI. CHECKMATED . . . . .	280
XXXII. THE SECRET OF ARSELENE . . . .	286
XXXIII. THE MURDERER OF LAMONT . . .	294
XXXIV. THE SHATTERED CRYSTAL . . . .	302

## **THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS**



# THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

## CHAPTER I

### A CURIOUS OBITUARY

OVER his coffee and toast Thomas Dean glanced idly at the headlines on the front page of his newspaper. Always squeamishly conservative in its treatment of the day's news, *The Era* seemed more than ordinarily dull this morning. There were long and ponderous accounts of the Ruhr situation, of the prospects of an early revival in the building trades, of the difficulties experienced in enforcing a certain amendment to the Constitution, together with the usual quota of political gossip and prognostication, most of which Dean would dutifully read later in the day, as soon as he had finished another chapter of his forthcoming novel. A man who lived by his imagination had to have an antidote of some kind to sustain his mental equipoise, and the dreamy columns of *The Era* supplied it.

## 2 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

He was about to toss the paper aside when a headline below the middle of the page caught his eye:

### CONFESSES MURDER ON HIS DEATHBED

The caption was printed in small, obscure type, as if conveying an apology for presenting a sensation of that sort in the sacrosanct pages of *The Era*. Dean gazed at it with mild interest. Three out of the five words suggested the kind of material of which he was always in search. He pronounced them slowly: "Confesses"—"murder"—"deathbed." Each one bristled with dramatic possibilities, stirring the alchemizing faculty of Dean's brain into action. Yet, on second thought, a deathbed confession was a rather ordinary thing. Ever so many people, when their time came to die, found something of which they wished to unburden their conscience. Unless the circumstances should prove unusual and striking, *The Era's* article possessed no particular value for Dean. He tore it out from the page, meaning to give it more careful attention later. As he did so, a name seemed to leap out from the half column of type.

"Paul Forrester!" he exclaimed. Then he laughed shortly, huskily, the way a man might laugh when his faculties are momentarily stunned. "Paul Forrester!"

Dean replenished his cup from the shining nickel pot placed at his elbow by his housekeeper, the

estimable Mrs. Blossom. He took two deep, bracing swallows. Paul Forrester! It was a bit staggering. Nobody had a better right to that name than Thomas Dean himself. Though he had not used it for several years, and though the reading public, his publishers, his few friends and acquaintances knew him only as Thomas Dean, he was still Paul Forrester. Partly as a matter of convenience and partly for certain other reasons, his pseudonym had to all practical purposes become his one and only name. But that did not alter the fact that he was still, legally and by birth, Paul Forrester. And Paul Forrester, according to the account in the acutely conservative *Era*, was dead. He had been murdered five and a half years ago by one Martin Lamont, who now, face to face with eternity, sought to relieve his conscience by confessing his crime. It was there, in black and white, before Dean's blinking eyes, and it was all the more impressive because *The Era* bore the reputation of being at all times scrupulously truthful.

He tried to clear the confusion in his mind. It was all a ridiculous mistake, of course; a case of mistaken identity, no doubt. Perhaps *The Era* had got the facts tangled somehow. Perhaps Martin Lamont's mind had been wandering, the way a dying man's sometimes does. At any rate, the statements were a flat contradiction of what Dean knew to be the truth. Yet, the thought that someone had confessed to the murder of a person named Paul Forrester was bewildering. And the name was

#### 4 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

a rather uncommon one, particularly the combination of surname and Christian name. If it had been George Brown or William Jones it would have been different. Yet it was conceivable, of course, that there had been another Paul Forrester. In fact, it was the only sensible explanation.

Dean steadied himself and started to read the account from beginning to end. No doubt a careful perusal of the confession would show convincingly that what appeared to be inexplicable was only a coincidence. Dean read on, and again the type began to whirl and blur before his eyes. Coincidences, though it was growing increasingly difficult to regard them as such, were piled up in astounding profusion. One familiar reference after another caused his mind to reel. His name was accurately given, and so was the name of his father, Jordan Forrester. The murder, according to the confession, had been committed in the old and creaky house on Hudson Street, formerly occupied by the Forrester family. The motive, the execution of the crime, the scene with its intimate details of description, the disposition of the body and the murderer's subsequent movements were all related with a wealth of circumstantial coloring that left nothing to the imagination. Violently as his reason rebelled against it, Dean was forced to the conclusion that he was the Paul Forrester whom the dying man had had in mind when he made his confession. If nothing else, the biographical matter at the end of the article shattered all doubt on that point.

Thoroughly dazed, Dean let the torn-out extract slip to the floor. To few men is given the dubious privilege of reading their own obituaries, although newspapers are in the habit of preparing such matters in advance of death when the subject is a person of importance. Dean felt quite sure that he was the only man who had ever experienced the sensations of reading a vivid and circumstantial account of his own demise by murder. He felt an impulse to laugh, but there was an element of gruesomeness in the thing that sobered him. His reason told him that it was a ghastly mistake, for he was very much alive, and no deliberate attempt had ever been made on his life, but how such a blunder had come about was beyond him. Again picking up the article, he scanned each detail of the account with great care.

Martin Lamont, being of sound mind and realizing that the time had come to make his peace with God, was setting forth the following facts: For a number of years prior to 1917 he had been associated in various business enterprises with Jordan Forrester, father of the man he declared he had subsequently murdered. In the year mentioned the elder Forrester had died in Colorado, following a series of unlucky ventures. At the time of his death he owed Lamont the sum of ten thousand dollars, leaving behind him barely enough to defray his funeral expenses. In the months that followed, Lamont was hard pressed for money because of his daughter's serious illness and other reverses. Finally, in des-

## 6 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

peration, he decided to try to collect the money due him, or a portion of it, from Forrester's son.

Paul Forrester, the confession stated, was then living in New York, occupying the same house on Hudson Street in which his father had lived during his periodic visits to the metropolis. His numerous letters to young Forrester remaining unanswered, Lamont went to New York to appeal to him in person. Arriving in the city late in the evening, he took dinner in a restaurant and then went to the house on Hudson Street. Young Forrester received him coldly, even insultingly, and flatly declared that he was neither cognizant of nor responsible for his father's obligations.

At this point in the narrative, Dean looked up from the article and tried to steady his brain before he went on with the perusal. It was true that for a short time following his father's death he had occupied the old house on Hudson Street, but he had never heard of Lamont, nor was he aware that his father had left any unpaid debts behind him. This might easily have been the case, however, for the elder Forrester, an irresponsible knight of fortune, was sadly lacking in business acumen, and he had had his financial ups and downs as far back as the son could remember.

In a sardonic humor Dean went on with the reading of the article, which from this point on grew more and more dramatic. Lamont related how he had pleaded with young Forrester, whom he believed to be in possession of ample funds, explaining that

the money was a vital necessity to him in view of his poverty and his daughter's illness. The latter was in need of hospital care and the services of costly specialists. He told the young man that his daughter was everything in his life, that his heart would break if she should die for the want of the few thousands which young Forrester could so easily spare.

"The young fellow just stood there and laughed at me," the account went on. "Finally, he got insulting and showed me the door. Things began to swim before my eyes. I thought of my sick daughter, whom I loved a thousand times more than my life, and then the sight of his grinning face and the sound of his mocking voice maddened me, and I lost control of myself. Even now I hardly know how it happened, but all of a sudden I saw young Forrester stretched out on the floor, with an ugly bruise on his temple, and I was standing over him with a fire tongs in my hand. I must have grabbed it without realizing what I was doing, and struck at him with all the fury that was in me.

"For a while I just stood there and stared at him. I think I shouted to him to get up, but he never moved. Finally I bent over him and felt his face, and then I knew he was dead. His heart had stopped, and he had ceased breathing.

"Since then I have deeply repented my crime, committed in the heat of passion, but at the time I could think of nothing else than that I mustn't be found out. I felt young Forrester had goaded me

## 8 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

to it, but I knew it would go hard with me if I should be brought to trial. Some time—maybe fifteen minutes or half an hour—passed before I could think straight. It seemed to me that the only safe thing was to hide the body so it wouldn't be found till I was out of New York. I looked around for a while, wondering where it would be best to conceal it. Then I remembered that right under the main stairway there was a room that had never been used by anybody but Jordan Forrester. He showed it to me once when I went to New York with him and spent several days at his house, explaining that he went there when he wanted to be alone to figure out some problem. The door was so arranged that people wouldn't be likely to find it unless they knew it was there.

"I decided to hide the body in that room under the stairs. The lock gave me some trouble, but finally I managed to open it. Going back to the sitting room to get the body, I happened to glance at the fire tongs. There was a red smear at the end. I rubbed it with my handkerchief, but it didn't seem to come off. That red stain bothered me; I stared at it till the whole room seemed to be full of red. Finally I decided to hide the tongs beside the body in the room under the stairs. I had heard of murderers being caught through just such things as that. After hiding the body and the tongs, I closed the door and left the house, taking the first train out of New York."

The confession, duly attested and signed, ended with the repeated declarations of repentance, and it was also stated that the condition of Lamont's daughter had taken a sudden turn for the better and that she was still living.

Dean drew a long breath when he came to the end of Lamont's statement. The article went on to state that Lamont, who had made his confession late at night, was still alive at the time of going to press, but that his death was expected any moment. It was explained that he had come to New York to attend to certain business matters, and that on the night of his arrival he had been seized with a cardiac affection that had troubled him for several years. The attending physician gave no hope of his recovery.

Dean got up, crossed the floor twice, then sat down again and stared dully at the article. Most of the contents were incongruous, but here and there was a statement that he knew to be a fact. He had a vague recollection of the room under the stairway of the old house. His father, who had a penchant for turning his hands to mysterious and unaccustomed tasks, often puttered around in there at night, after the others of the household were asleep. Furthermore, the confession was couched in terms so simple and straightforward that Dean, could he have read it in a detached and impersonal mood, would not have doubted its authenticity for a moment. As it was, being vitally concerned through

## 10 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

the use of his name, he felt that to let his mind dwell on it was not only useless but a strain on his sanity as well.

The opening of the door and the appearance of Mrs. Blossom gave a welcome interruption to his tortuous processes of mind.

"Lady calling, Mr. Dean," announced the housekeeper.

## CHAPTER II

### THE WILES OF BEULAH

**T**HE turning point in the life of Thomas Dean had been intimately associated with the designs of a young charmer known as Beulah Vance, at that time one of the chief attractions in the chorus of "The Fools' Revel." Thomas, then a pale and impressionable youth of twenty-three, had lost both his heart and his head in a way that afterward made him wonder at youth's capacity for idiotic behavior. The upshot of it had been a suit for breach of promise which the chorus girl apparently had instituted under the erroneous impression that her young admirer had unlimited wealth at his disposal. Thomas wondered at the time how she could have so grossly overestimated his financial status, and he did not realize till months afterward that the entire episode had been an ingenious and fairly successful maneuver on the part of the fair Beulah's press agent. His distaste of newspapers, especially the saffron-hued kind, dated from that time.

The breach of promise suit was still treading its leisurely way through legal routine when Thomas received word that his father had died near Leadville, Colorado. In recent years he had seen his

## 12 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

father only at infrequent intervals, the elder Forrester being an indefatigable and usually luckless rover over the face of the earth, but an intimate correspondence had been conducted between father and son. His mother was only a misty memory in Thomas' mind, and his only close associate during these years was an old female servant who did her valiant best to keep the old house on Hudson Street from crumbling into decay. She had died shortly before Thomas received news of his father's death. Upon the arrival of the telegram he proceeded immediately to Colorado, arriving at the mountain town just in time to attend the funeral.

The simple ceremony, attended by a handful of the elder Forrester's acquaintances, took place on an afternoon when leaden clouds hung low over the frozen hills. Thomas walked away from the little cemetery alone, for he felt a vague distrust of the stern-faced and tight-lipped men who had been his father's associates. An overwhelming loneliness was upon him, and in addition to his grief over his father's death, Beulah Vance's trickery still rankled. Thomas walked on, neither knowing nor caring where he was going, and of a sudden, as often happens in mountain regions, the world was transformed into a wilderness of whirling snow.

He walked on for hours, finally stumbling upon a trapper's cabin, occupied by a sour and lynx-eyed individual named Simon Cabell, whose churlish and sullen manner contrasted unpleasantly with the stern but generous natures of the other men Thomas had

met in the mountain region. Upon his offer to pay for the accomodation, Cabell ungraciously set food and drink before the hungry and frozen man. It developed that he had known Thomas' father, and the mere mention of Jordan Forrester's name stirred him to fury and insulting invective. The slurs against his dead father's name incensed Thomas, who gathered that the trapper's hostility dated from an occasion when he had received a well-earned trouncing from Jordan Forrester, a quick-tempered man, though full of generous impulses. Although he was ill and exhausted, Thomas hotly demanded a retraction, but Cabell only grew more insulting, and the two men came to blows. The trapper fought with a savagery suggesting that all his pent-up hatred against the father had suddenly descended upon the son. He was of wiry build, with arms hard as flails, but Thomas profited from the rigorous athletic training to which he had subjected himself in order to overcome a physical handicap that had been with him since childhood.

He did not know exactly how it happened, but of a sudden there was a flash of steel in Cabell's hand, and he felt the sting of a treacherous knife thrust slashing at his throat. The perfidy of the attack rallied his scattering strength. Cabell reeled back from an explosive blow to the jaw, striking his head heavily against the corner of the wood stove as he fell. He rolled over once, with a curious fragmentary groan on lips stained red. In an instant the ecstasy of combat deserted Thomas, leaving him

## 14 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

dazed and horrified. To all appearances the trapper was dead, for neither heart-beat nor sign of breathing could be detected, yet there might still be life left in his body. The motionless form, with the features frozen into a fixed look of malevolence, left an imprint on Thomas' impressionable mind that was never erased.

Unthinkingly he rushed out into the storm. The wound at the side of his throat was bleeding, but he could tell that the knife had not cut deep. He was conscious only that he must summon help, if possible find a doctor, in order that any spark of life in his fallen adversary might be revived. Not until he was completely lost in the white, swirling chaos did he realize the folly of the attempt. How he found his way out he never knew, but three days later he boarded a train at a little mining town some thirty or forty miles from the point where his father had been buried. Snatches of conversation which he heard as he stood on the platform waiting for the belated train told him that a sheriff's posse was searching the hills for the murderer of Simon Cabell. Murderer! The word rang with sinister echoes in his ears during the journey back to New York.

Trying to forget the encounter in the lonely cabin in the hills, Thomas went back to the house on Hudson Street, but the old surroundings had become unbearable. On the side of his throat was a deep, ragged scar, an unpleasant reminder of his fight with Cabell, but a high collar obscured it successfully except when he twisted his neck too far to the left side.

He found that Beulah Vance's press agent had made the most of his opportunity. Though never known as a wealthy man, Thomas' father had been prominent in various ways, and this made the son a shining mark for the wiles of a publicity agent. Finally, in disgust, Thomas closed the house and boarded a steamer for a foreign port. He spent the next two years visiting strange places and acquiring a new philosophy of life. When he returned, the pale, slender and melancholy youth of two years before had been transformed into a robust man with healthily bronzed cheeks, a keen sparkle in his brown eyes, and the springiness of exuberant spirits and virility in his step. In odd moments during the past years he had exercised his imagination at writing, and now he took it up as his profession, throwing all his vigor and perseverance into the task. His output appeared under the name of Thomas Dean, and as Thomas Dean he became known. Of his former self there was little left save a livid scar which he took pains to conceal by appropriate neckwear. Paul Forrester, he soon learned, had been all but forgotten except by those who associated the name with Beulah Vance's publicity campaign. The breach of promise suit, by the way, appeared to have been dropped; at least Thomas heard nothing more of it. If news of the trapper's death had drifted Eastward, it appeared to have attracted no attention. The memory of the episode remained with him, however, for it had occurred at a time when he was peculiarly susceptible to impressions and in

a mood to exaggerate the importance of anything that touched his emotions deeply.

He decided that Paul Forrester might as well remain forgotten. To all practical purposes that misguided youth existed only in the sturdy memories of a few Broadwayites and in the files of the metropolitan newspapers. On a promontory overlooking the Hudson River, a short distance back of the Palisades, he found a small roadhouse tottering on the brink of decay. "Top O' The Hill" it was called, and at one time it had enjoyed a widespread if somewhat shady reputation. Dean bought it for a song, made a few necessary repairs and improvements that did not impair the musty atmosphere of the place or disturb the ghosts slumbering in the dark corners, engaged a crabbed but efficient housekeeper, and relished keenly the success that gradually came his way. His former acquaintances did not recognize him on his rare trips across the river, and Dean neither sought nor avoided them.

The course of his life ran along smoothly until the morning when he picked up his newspaper and read Martin Lamont's astounding confession.

## CHAPTER III

### ENTER THE WOMAN

“**A**—LADY?” stammered Dean. A feminine caller at Top O’ The Hill was something of a rarity.

Mrs. Blossom nodded. Though reddish of face and built on copious lines she gave a curious semblance of fragility. Dean often found himself staring at her as if she were the embodiment of a contradiction. He had an odd feeling that she was likely to burst into tears at the most unexpected moment and without the slightest provocation.

“Who is she?” he inquired.

The housekeeper handed him a card. “Miss Viola Gray,” it read, but the name meant nothing to him. From the card he glanced out the window and down the sloping hillside to where the Hudson glimmered in the June sunshine. In the distance was the checkered skyline of Manhattan, with here and there a stately minaret thrusting a slender spire into blue ozone. The outlook seemed to give him a fresh grasp on reality, banishing the goblin world into which the article in *The Era* had precipitated him.

“All right, I’ll see her,” he declared. “Will you show her into the library, Mrs. Blossom?”

With just a hint of asperity in her manner, the

## 18 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

housekeeper withdrew. Dean, vaguely anticipating an ordeal and instinctively coupling Miss Gray's call with Martin Lamont's confession, inspected himself in the mirror. The face reflected in the glass looked normal and sane, with no hint that he had just perused a flabbergasting account of his own demise at the hand of a murderer. From force of habit he ran his fingers along the edge of the up-standing collar to make sure that it concealed the scar. A moment later he entered the library.

"Mr. Dean?" spoke a voice out of the dimness of the room, pronouncing the name with a faint, elusive emphasis. He might have only imagined it, but he thought he detected a slight trace of mockery, perhaps even skepticism, implying a doubt as to whether he was really Mr. Dean. With a murmured response he stepped to the windows and raised the shades, a detail which the usually thoughtful Mrs. Blossom appeared to have neglected. Then he turned and saw a slight, kittenish creature seated in the large rustic chair, his own handiwork, which stood beside the typewriter. Her hair, very abundant and of a lustrous flaxen color, seemed to corral all the sunshine that was flooding the room. A pair of great amber eyes regarded him in frank curiosity.

"So that's you," she said after an interval of silent inspection. "The celebrated Thomas Dean! Do you know, I've imagined all along that you would look just as you do?"

She had an adorable little mouth, and it was spraying him with smiles of sentimental admiration.

Dean could not quite repress a frown. He thought he knew the type to which Viola Gray belonged, the romantic, unsophisticated, ecstatically gushing kind, with a penchant for hero worship and a morbid yearning for adventure. Now and then a letter from one of these distant admirers crept into his mail, only to be dropped into the waste basket or answered with a formal note.

"Hope you don't mind my trespassing," she went on. "I've read everyone of your novels, and I think they are simply wonderful. Your characters are splendid, especially the masculine ones—so strong and masterful! I have been wondering if you draw them from life or if you dig them out of your imagination. Sure you don't mind my intruding like this? You see, I found your address in Who's Who, and I just couldn't resist the temptation to drop in and look you over."

Dean essayed a smile, but inwardly he cursed the publishers of a certain obese, red-covered volume that stood among other reference books on his library shelves. He studied Miss Gray with a professional eye, appraising her as character material for his new novel. At any rate, the morning would not be entirely wasted. Perhaps she would fit in as the heroine of a love episode. He noted the effect of the trim navy-blue suit that covered her slight, vivacious figure and of the jaunty, close-fitting turban with its black and white satin folds that formed an inverted V over the center of the forehead, giving her face something of an Oriental look.

"Do you work in this room?" she asked, glancing at the hooded typewriter as if it were an object of sublimity.

"Yes, this is the scene of my crimes," Dean dryly admitted.

"I just knew it! The room is chock full of inspiration. And this darling old house! I can imagine hearing all kinds of queer noises at night. No wonder you get so many creeps into your stories. Do tell me about your characters. Do you take them from life?"

"Only in part. Some of them require a lot of brushing up and disguising. People as a rule would not be flattered if they should recognize the resemblance."

"Do you think so? I should think they would be delighted. I think it would be perfectly thrilling to see myself tripping across the pages of a book written by you."

Her big amber eyes shone with enthusiasm, but suddenly Dean became conscious of a contradiction, something similar to what he occasionally felt in Mrs. Blossom's presence. All at once it came to him that she would not do as the simple and adorable heroine of a love story. There was a complexity, even a suggestion of duality, in her nature that had eluded him at first but which gradually insinuated itself into his senses with a light and vaguely disturbing touch. If he used her at all, it would be in a different rôle, perhaps as a sly and artful adventuress whose apparent naïvete and youthful allure

were merely a mask concealing Heaven only knew what dark and sinister designs.

"Would you really?" he asked, more interested now, but also correspondingly vigilant. Then, in a playful humor, he decided to put her to a little test. "And what kind of rôle would you prefer to play?"

"I don't know," she confessed; then considered gravely. "Something like Sheila Sand in 'Crossroads,' maybe. I think 'Crossroads' is the best of your novels, and Sheila is a perfectly adorable character."

Dean nodded absently. It was odd that her judgment should coincide with his in regard to "Crossroads." He had always thought it was the best of his products, notwithstanding the fact that he had expended the least amount of time and labor on it.

"Why do you prefer 'Crossroads' to the others?" he asked.

"Oh, I hardly know. Not so much because of Sheila's part in it as on account of the hero, Jimmie Ferguson. I think a man is always more interesting than a woman, anyway. Don't you? I could just love a man like Jimmie Ferguson. That scene in the lonely cabin in the woods is the most thrilling thing I ever read. I sat up most of the night to finish it."

Dean gave her a long, intent look. A flickering shadow of uneasiness crossed his face. He had a curious feeling that the mask was slowly slipping away from her. It was odd that she should have singled out that particular scene. Not until the

## 22 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

book was off the presses had Dean realized how closely it paralleled his own terrific experience in the icy hills of Colorado. The ashen face of the dead trapper must have drifted in and out of his subconscious mind while he wrote it. For weeks after the publication of the book he had lived in fear that someone might recognize the author in the hero. But as time passed and nothing happened, he saw the absurdity of his misgivings. It was extremely unlikely, after all, that any one of his readers would have heard of the episode in the trapper's cabin, much less associated it with the author of "Cross-roads." Paul Forrester was dead, to all practical purposes, and the tragic fate of the trapper had accompanied him into oblivion.

"It made such an impression on me I could think of nothing else for days," Miss Gray went on in enraptured tones. "I could picture Jimmie Ferguson as he rushed out of the cabin to find a doctor. And that blizzard! It was so real it positively made me cold all over. And there was Jimmie Ferguson lost in it for days, not knowing whether he had left the man in the cabin dead or alive. How perfectly splendid he was through it all! I cried in sympathy with him. Honestly, Mr. Dean, didn't you take that scene from life?"

Dean gave her another keen look, then smiled. "That question doesn't leave much credit to my imagination, Miss Gray."

"But it was so real I don't see how you could have taken it out of your imagination."

"An author's chief task is to make the unreal seem real."

She pondered this for a moment. "It sounds dreadfully difficult, but I suppose that's so. Anyhow, Jimmie Ferguson is real to me. I shan't ever forget how he felt about the scar on his cheek, always trying to hide it, and always imagining that everybody was looking at it. I suppose a man in his position would feel just that way about it."

"Doubtless," said Dean noncommittally, almost certain now that there was a deeper purpose behind her questions. He was fervently wishing that he had consigned the manuscript of "Crossroads" to the flames. What an ass he had been to expose Paul Forrester's secret with such a reckless fidelity to facts! He thought he had disguised the truth, but the disguise was too thin. He had merely shifted the scar from Paul Forrester's neck to Jimmie Ferguson's cheek, and the rest was little more than a juggling with names and places. Strange that no one had seen through such shallow dissimulation before. He was almost sure now that this trifling chit of a girl, as she appeared to be at first glance, had seen through it.

"I'm afraid I am boring you with all these silly questions," she murmured contritely, then rose and came closer to where he sat. "You have destroyed an illusion of mine, Mr. Dean," she added with a pout. "I had been imagining that Jimmie Ferguson was *you*."

"Indeed?" His eyes narrowed a trifle as he saw

her at closer range. The child receded into the background as the woman came forward. She seemed more mature now, and there was a furtive glint of shrewdness in the depths of her eyes. "I can't believe it," he added. "Illusions don't die so easily. They generally survive us—some of them do, at least. If you have taken a fancy to Jimmie Ferguson, you ought to be thankful that he is made of sturdier stuff than flesh and bones."

"That's a charming way of putting it." She smiled brightly, and the candor of her smile clashed oddly with his new conception of her. "Let me come again, won't you? And do call me up when you are in town and take me out for tea somewhere. I'll teach you the latest steps and bore you to death with a lot of foolish questions. That's a threat and a promise in one."

She laughed gaily, and in a moment she was on her way. Dean, standing at the front door, saw her drive off in a racy little roadster she had parked just outside the gate. He shook his head bewilderedly as he reëntered the house. He did not know which was the more puzzling—Martin Lamont's confession or the personality of little Miss Gray. Why had she come, and what had she accomplished? Did she suspect that he was Paul Forrester and, if so, what did she propose to do about it? What did Paul Forrester mean to her? Dean didn't know what to think of her. The mind inside her pretty little head seemed to work in strange ways, a veritable Pandora's box of surprises. But the dominant

impression she had left with him was that of an adventuress treading dark and mysterious paths.

Late in the afternoon he instructed Mrs. Blossom to pack his bag, announcing that he was going to New York and might not be back that night.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE HOUSE ON HUDSON STREET

**A**S he rode into the city Dean determined that his first step should be a visit to the old family home on Hudson Street. It was obviously the hub of the whole mystery, for it was there the crime mentioned in Lamont's confession had been committed. At any rate, it seemed the logical starting point for the investigation he intended to conduct.

Repeatedly he told himself that he must keep an open mind until he could learn the true state of affairs from first-hand inquiry. He could not hope to discover much, for five and a half years had elapsed since the commission of the crime of which the dying man had spoken, and time had doubtless obliterated whatever clues had existed. Yet he felt he would be in no mood for either work or rest until the tantalizing riddle had been solved, and it was just possible that the gloomy nooks in the house on Hudson Street would yield up a hint that might shed some light on the mystery. In the meantime he tried to dismiss from his mind the perplexing phases of Lamont's confession. The whole thing was so incongruous; it caused his reason to shrivel up.

He stepped from the suburban train, and then another difficulty presented itself. He had not visited the old house on Hudson Street since he closed its doors more than five years ago, and to do so now might result in complications. With a lack of acumen characteristic of many in his profession he had neither rented the property nor offered it for sale, although for sentimental reasons he had paid the taxes on it through an attorney. With this slight exception there was no link that connected Thomas Dean with the ownership of the place. It would be humorous, though embarrassing, if anyone should question his right to enter the place. Too, there was the ever present chance, given added importance since Viola Gray's call on him that morning, that someone might recognize him as Paul Forrester. But that, he promptly decided, was a hazard he would have to risk.

As he passed a newsstand in the Pennsylvania station, he stopped and stared at a photograph conspicuously displayed on the front page of an afternoon newspaper. Dropping a coin on the stand, he snatched up a paper and walked on. The photograph was of himself as he had appeared several years ago, and evidently it had been exhumed from the newspaper's files, where it had reposed since it was first printed at the time of his affair with Beulah Vance. Dean studied the picture as he walked out of the station. At first he was impressed only by the great change his appearance had undergone since the picture was taken; then the significance of its

republication at this late date struck him with stunning force.

While crossing the street, unaware that he was risking life and limb in the swirl of trucks and taxicabs, he ran his eyes down the column of print accompanying the photograph. It seemed that an enterprising reporter, desiring to settle all doubts concerning the identity of the man whom Martin Lamont had confessed to murdering, had taken twelve photographs from the newspaper's files, all representing the likeness of men around the age at which Paul Forrester had been at the time of the murder, and these he had taken to Lamont's bedside and requested the dying man to identify his victim. Without hesitation Lamont had selected the photograph of Paul Forrester, thus disposing of all possible doubts in the matter.

It was the final straw. Dean, blinking his eyes at the sunlight, asked himself if he was going mad. Or was the whole outside world in a suddenly acquired state of dementia? Trying to get a grip on his senses, he entered a hotel, sat down in the lobby, and in a spirit of grim fortitude read the article from beginning to end. Until now it had seemed possible that Lamont had made a mistake in the name of his victim, but this latest development shattered that theory to bits. It had been farfetched, anyhow, for the collateral facts had pointed unmistakably to Paul Forrester as the dead man. Now the web of perplexities was drawn into an inextricable knot. The dying man had identified him,

Thomas Dean, alias Paul Forrester, as the man he had murdered in the Hudson Street house five and a half years ago. It was a bit uncanny; Dean's mind turned into a lump as he contemplated the situation. His repeated assurance to himself that there was still a mistake somewhere did not seem sufficient.

The concluding paragraph of the article stated that Lamont's deathbed confession had solved the mystery of the disappearance of Paul Forrester, who, it was recalled, had dropped out of sight and become forgotten shortly after a showgirl had instituted suit against him for breach of promise. It was also mentioned that the police and the district attorney were at work verifying the various statements made by Lamont, although there appeared to be no doubt of their accuracy.

In a sort of dogged humor Dean stuffed the paper into his pocket and walked from the hotel, but not until he had given the picture on the first page another close glance. There was very little likelihood, he thought, of his being recognized as Paul Forrester. True, there was a hazy resemblance, but it would take a keen pair of eyes to see it, and there was no reason why anyone should look for it. It was gratifying, for on the whole he preferred to remain Thomas Dean for the present.

He jumped into a taxi and gave the driver the address on Hudson Street. He had promised his mind a rest until he should make some tangible discovery on which to base his inquiries, but the loose

ends of the mystery kept dangling teasingly before his mental vision. This man Lamont evidently was under the impression that he had committed a murder in the old Hudson Street house. The dying man's conviction on that point was apparently so strong that he had sought to ease his conscience by making a formal confession. So far there was nothing incongruous about the matter. Lamont might have been laboring under a dying man's hallucination, or the murder might have been actually committed; in either event, up to this point his statements were susceptible to logical interpretation. But Lamont had gone further; he had given his victim's name as Paul Forrester, and he had supported the identification of the murdered man with a staggering mass of names, dates and circumstances.

Yet, even so far it was possible to explain matters without stretching one's imagination to the snapping point. Lamont might, through some queer mental aberration, have been mistaken in his victim's identity. The corroborative incidents could possibly be explained in the light of what psychologists called association of ideas, granting that Lamont had heard of Paul Forrester or met him personally. Such a hypothesis was at least within the range of reason. Dean had seen and talked with thousands of people in his life, many of whom he had completely forgotten, and Lamont could have been one of them. But the dying man had not stopped there; he had put the final touch of grotes-

querie on the matter by positively identifying Paul Forrester's likeness from among a dozen photographs of men of similar ages. No amount of sophistry and specious reasoning could evade that argument.

Dean's mind had rounded the circle of incongruities when the taxi stopped. He paid the driver, then lingered on the sidewalk while he contemplated the weather-bitten stucco front of the old house, consisting of three stories and attic, with three dormer windows projecting from a steeply sloping roof. It was more than five years since he had set foot within, and a queer hesitancy, amounting almost to a dread, seemed to hold him back. To disturb the ghostly memories slumbering in there would be akin to an act of profanation. He could picture the quaint furnishings of the rooms, arranged in accordance with his father's peculiar tastes, a heterogeneous collection gathered from many strange lands. He wondered if the large stuffed trout was still hanging over the mantel, and what had become of Cæsar, the mongrel pup with whom he had romped on the narrow strip of lawn in front of the house. Everywhere, from attic to cellar, he could visualize relics of intimate history.

A blue-coated officer at the door caught his eye, and the spell was broken. The profanation was already an accomplished fact, for it appeared that the police were conducting an investigation inside. He approached the guardian at the door, who brusquely inquired his business and interposed a stalwart form

against further progress. It was odd to be treated like that at one's door, but Dean's mind was too full of other things to catch the humor of it. He was in a ticklish situation, for how was he to explain his right to enter without letting out the troublesome fact that his rightful name was Paul Forrester? He was pondering the problem when the door suddenly opened and a broad-shouldered man with astoundingly blue eyes came out so hurriedly that he all but ran into the novelist.

"Why, hello, Dean!" he exclaimed briskly, checking his catapulting exit.

Dean congratulated himself on his luck. Lieutenant Shane and he had been friends for two years. The detective, a strangely many-sided man, often helped him with technical points in connection with his mystery novels. Shane was not only one of the shrewdest men on the force, but an obliging and likeable sort as well.

"Looking for material again, I suppose," remarked the detective, unconsciously supplying the very subterfuge that had been on the tip of Dean's tongue when he encountered the policeman. "Well, you've come to the right place." Hurriedly, as he did all things, from consuming a sandwich to catching an express train, the lieutenant looked at his watch. "Just going out for a bite. Come along and I'll tell you all about it."

Dean had no appetite, but he accepted the invitation, and they went to a restaurant a short distance down the street.

"I'm going to take you back to the house afterward," said Shane when they had ordered. "You'll find all the atmosphere you want. I've been inhaling it all day. My lungs are full of it. I don't believe the place has been ventilated since the murder, over five years ago, and when I walked in this morning the air was so thick you could cut it with a knife."

"Nobody living in the house then?" inquired Dean, pretending ignorance.

"Not a soul. The furniture is still there, and it seems a friend of the family has been paying taxes on the property, but the house hasn't been occupied since young Forrester lived in it."

Dean seemed duly interested. The lieutenant evidently supposed that the newspaper accounts of Lamont's confession had whetted the novelist's natural curiosity in matters of that kind and that he had come to the house to learn the facts at first hand. As for the taxes, Dean had paid them in cash each year, but in such a round-about way that the payments could not be traced without great difficulty.

The lieutenant was keeping up a rapid-fire narrative. "Until last night, when Lamont made his confession, nobody seemed to know what had become of Paul Forrester. As a matter of fact, nobody cared a whole lot. He dropped out of sight after that mixup with the chorus baby, and that was the last heard of him. The neighbors seemed to think he was dead, as it now appears he was. Since he didn't leave any relatives, as far as anybody

knows, I suppose the state will take charge of the property."

"Then you don't doubt Lamont's story?" asked Dean, as casually as he could.

"Why on earth should I? A man doesn't invent yarns of that kind on his deathbed. Lamont made the confession in the presence of a lawyer and a notary public. He seemed anxious that there shouldn't be any doubts about the genuineness of it. Anyhow, we've already verified most of the details."

"So I understand. Some people have strange hallucinations, though."

"No hallucination in this case. Lamont knew he was about to step into another world, and he wanted to get the thing off his conscience. He came here from the West to attend to some business matters. Since he wasn't feeling very well, he didn't go to a hotel, but put up at the house of a lawyer, Dennis Littleby, who lives out on Long Island and has been attending to some legal matters for him. It seems Littleby and Lamont have been friends for years; besides, Littleby is one of the few people Lamont knows in New York. He grew worse from day to day, and when he realized he was going to die he told Littleby he wanted to make a confession. Littleby thought he was out of his mind, and he wasn't satisfied until a nerve specialist had been called in and pronounced his friend sane. The old boy knew what he was doing, all right."

"So it seems," muttered Dean, looking a trifle giddy as he saw the detective eat with a healthy

appetite. The last of his theories had collapsed with a crash. If Lamont, as now seemed evident, had made his confession while of sound mind, then Dean's fertile imagination could see no explanation whatever.

"I phoned Littleby's house an hour ago," the lieutenant went on, "and the nurse told me Lamont's life is hanging by a thread. Something queer about that, Dean. The doctor that's attending him didn't expect him to live through the night. Lamont seems to be hanging on to life by sheer will power. Usually, when a man hangs on like that, it's because something is troubling him, something he feels he ought to attend to before he dies."

"What do you suppose it can be?"

"You've got me there, Dean. In the ordinary course of events, a man in Lamont's condition would have passed away soon after the confession was off his mind. There would be nothing more to live for after that; the incentive would be gone. Lamont, though, seems to have something else on his mind that won't permit him to let go of life. He's worrying about something or other, and that's what is keeping him alive. If he relaxed completely, he would probably be dead inside a few minutes."

"Haven't you any idea?"

For a moment Shane's keen blue eyes looked off into space. "He keeps calling for his daughter. She's teaching school out in Wichita, Kansas. Littleby sent her a telegram when it was seen that her father couldn't live, and yesterday he received a

wire from her saying she was starting for New York immediately. Maybe Lamont has a special reason for wanting to see her before he dies, but I've got a hunch it's something else he's worrying about."

Dean looked up. There was a hard, puzzled look in the lieutenant's face, sun-browned and freckled. He knew from previous experience that Shane's "hunches" were apt to be accurate. This one interested him particularly. As the lieutenant had pointed out, why did Lamont, with his conscience unburdened, cling so stubbornly to life? The question held a weird fascination, and it was possible that the answer to it would explain a great many other mysteries.

"I've got a bit of a surprise waiting for you over at the old Forrester house," said Shane, finishing his coffee. "Ready?"

Shane felt an anticipatory shiver as they walked out.

## CHAPTER V

### THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

**W**HILE the detective walked ahead, Dean stopped in the vestibule and looked about him with mingled feelings. The oppressive atmosphere and the memories that crowded upon him gave him a choking sensation. He gazed abstractedly at the staircase, sweeping upward in a majestic curve. As a youngster he had often slid down that massive railing, to the detriment of tender skin and fresh-laundered togs.

"Come here, Dean," called the detective from the other side of the staircase.

Dean scarcely heard him. Each of the dim corners seemed to cloister some cherished ghost. Just now his eyes were on a great Chippendale armchair which, as he recalled, his father had relegated to the hall when assailed with doubts as to its being genuine.

"Coming, Dean?" called Shane. "You're always keeping the best parts of your stories for the climax, and I'm following your example. Let me show you what I found this morning."

Reluctantly Dean came forward, around the huge curve of the staircase. Something he had not thought of until now was brought to his mind with

## 38 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

unpleasant force by the detective's words. Shane was standing at the door leading to the room under the stairs, the ghastly compartment mentioned in Lamont's confession. He dragged his feet unwillingly over once bright-hued rugs now drab and frayed from age and neglect. Something, he knew not what, drew his gaze to the left side of the hall, and, though he tried to resist the attraction, a morbid feeling of curiosity impelled him to look. Shane was standing, calm and erect, a few feet away, pointing impassively toward an open door.

"What is it?" asked Dean, a little thickly, though he had instantly guessed what the detective meant. He followed the pointing finger and looked into a gloomy, low-ceiled room, illuminated only by the gleam of Shane's flashlight.

"Come and look."

Dean advanced a few steps, then stopped. He had the strong nerves that go with a body in the pink of condition, but he shrank against the sight he knew his eyes would encounter in that dim, misty room. It was unbelievable and hideously fantastic, yet he knew what it was that Shane was pointing at with such a matter-of-fact air about him. Had not Lamont stated in his confession that he had hidden the body of his victim, together with the implement of murder, in the little room under the stairs?

"What's the matter, Dean? You're white as a ghost. Not afraid of a few bones, are you? That's all that's left of Paul Forrester."

With a tremendous effort Dean forced his legs

to move. A chill ran down his spine as he followed Shane's pointing finger. After a brief, horrified stare he turned away.

"Nerves on edge, I see," said Lieutenant Shane, closing the door. "Well, don't know as I blame you. Sights like that used to bother me, too, before I got used to them. You look as if you needed a bit of air."

Dean jumped eagerly at the suggestion. He was not ordinarily squeamish, but the circumstances lent a weird touch to the contents of the room they had just left. As they walked out into the slanting sunlight, something Shane had said a few moments ago kept echoing through his mind: "All that's left of Paul Forrester." The words had a terrific significance to Dean's senses. It was just as if Shane had said, "All that's left of Thomas Dean," for the two names applied to the same person.

"Feeling better?" asked the lieutenant.

"Much," said Dean, though his tone belied his words. The air of sweltering Manhattan had never felt so fresh and pure, the sunlight had never seemed brighter. But as they walked on his thoughts strayed back to the room under the stairs. It was easy to understand why Shane regarded its gruesome contents as final and conclusive proof of Martin Lamont's confession. To him it did not seem necessary to identify the ghastly heap on which Dean's eyes had rested for just one shuddering moment, even if such a thing as identification had been possible at this late day. No one but Thomas Dean

knew that Paul Forrester was still alive. The remains had been found in the identical spot where Lamont declared he had hidden the body, and that was more than enough for the police.

"Where to?" asked Dean.

"A little trip will be good for your nerves," said Shane cheerfully. "We're going out to Littleby's house and have a look at Lamont. A train from the Pennsylvania station will take us there in twenty minutes."

"You are still curious to know what's worrying Lamont?"

The lieutenant nodded. "We may learn something if we get there before he dies. There may be some good character stuff in it for you, Dean."

The novelist smiled grimly. Every nerve in his body was drawn taut, his mind was all loose ends, and now he was on his way to face another wildly grotesque ordeal. In a little while he would see the man who, according to his own sworn confession, was his murderer. He wondered whether the imps of fate had ever before contrived such a diabolically farcical situation. Would the maddening mummery never end?

They boarded a car for the Pennsylvania Station, arriving there just in time to catch a train for Kew Gardens, where Littleby's residence was situated.

"Will the doctor permit us to see him?" asked Dean as the train thundered through the tunnel.

"He won't refuse us when he learns I am on the force."

Suddenly, on the spur of a vagrant impulse, Dean said: "Let's ask Lamont if he is positive the man he killed was Paul Forrester."

"Eh?" Shane blinked his bright blue eyes in bewilderment. "Oh, I see. That imagination of yours is at work again. Isn't the case dramatic enough as it is, without adding any extra frills?"

"I suppose so. I'm only looking at it from a scribbler's point of view. It's possible, you see, that Lamont was mistaken."

"Not a chance! Wasn't the murder committed in Forrester's own house?"

"Yes, but——"

"And hasn't Lamont given us a description of the man he killed? Didn't he pick out young Forrester's photograph from a group of twelve?"

"True enough, but——"

"And you saw yourself what's in the room under the stairway, right where Lamont says he hid the body. The fire tongs he did the job with is there too. I would have shown it to you if you hadn't been in such a hurry to get away. What more do you want?"

Dean found no answer for a moment. He realized that, from every point of view but his own, the evidence was complete.

"I am just wondering," he said at length, "what I would do with the material if I were to work it into a mystery yarn. As the case stands, there is no mystery. Lamont murdered Paul Forrester, keeping his guilt a secret until he was about to die.

Then he made a circumstantial confession, and that's all there is to it. To create a mystery, I would have to juggle the circumstances a bit, and I think I should begin with the contents of the room under the stairs. That's where I would look for the unknown factor in the situation."

"Unknown factor?" Shane regarded him blankly. "But there is no unknown factor."

"Call it an element of reasonable doubt, then."

The lieutenant shook his head. "Too much for me," he confessed. "But go ahead and spin your little yarn. I've stuck to facts so long that I like to listen to a man with an imagination like yours. Where is your reasonable doubt, as you call it?"

"In the circumstance that it is now too late to identify the body in the room under the stairs."

"So that's it! Well, Dean, I must confess that I expected something better from you than that. In the first place, in view of all the other corroborative circumstances, no identification is necessary. In the second place, I found certain things in the room under the stairs, things which time and the rats hadn't done away with yet, and they can still be identified. This is one of them."

From his pocket came a small object wrapped in tissue paper. He opened it gingerly and held it under Dean's popping eyes. It was a gold watch. Even before Dean saw the initials "P" and "F" engraved on the back, his mind received a fresh jolt. The watch was one he had carried a number of

years ago, though at the moment he was too dazed to recall how it had left his possession.

"Identification enough, I guess," Shane declared, putting the watch back in its wrapping and returning it to his pocket. "You will have to try again, Dean."

The novelist nodded dully. He restrained a wild impulse to shout to Shane that a mistake had been made, that the watch was his property, that he was Paul Forrester, but he realized in time how useless it would be. Shane would either think that he was indulging in a poor jest, or that he had suddenly gone insane. And then it suddenly occurred to Dean that he might find several obstacles in his way if he should ever wish to prove that he was Paul Forrester. People would either laugh at him or look at him pityingly, just as Shane would have done a moment ago if he had blurted out the statement that had been on the tip of his tongue. Lamont's death-bed confession seemed to have cut every link connecting him with his past.

"Of course," said Shane, as if trying to humor him, "if you insist we'll ask Lamont if he's positive the man he killed was Paul Forrester. The joke may keep him alive another day."

For a time they rode in silence, Dean's mind conceiving and discarding all sorts of fanciful theories. Now and then there flashed through his mind the suspicion that some form of dual identity was responsible for the amazing situation. The supposition seemed absurd, but nothing that was within the

range of reason fitted the circumstances. He wondered if it were possible that Lamont had killed a man whose name was Paul Forrester, whose description tallied with that of Paul Forrester, who had been in the Forrester house on the night of the murder, and who had carried Paul Forrester's watch in his pocket, yet was not the same Paul Forrester who was now known as Thomas Dean. His reason promptly quashed the idea. Such a combination of circumstances had never existed and never would. Yet, unless he resorted to a supernatural explanation, it seemed to be the only theory that covered the facts in the case.

With a slight start he looked up from his profitless musings, uncomfortably aware that the oldish man in the seat opposite the one occupied by himself and his companion was regarding him with a rather sustained glance. More embarrassing still, his gaze seemed fixed on the point where Dean's collar obscured the blemish on his neck. Perhaps he was only imagining; he was often seized with an absurd feeling that the scar was exposed to the view of anyone who cared to look. The man in the opposite seat might be in the habit of looking at people like that. And his gaze, though fixed, was not at all curious. Dean resolved he had been mistaken again, but in the next moment a grimly fantastic idea struck him. He wondered whether the other Paul Forrester, if such a person had ever existed, had also been afflicted with a blemish of that kind. Since the resemblance covered so many other points,

why not also this one? It was a preposterous reflection, but well suited to his mood, just the kind of vagary that was apt to steal into a mind incapacitated for sane and sober thought.

A moment later the train stopped at Kew Gardens.

## CHAPTER VI

### BESIDE THE DEATHBED

**T**HE residence of Dennis Littleby, the lawyer, was a substantial structure of unlovely architecture and a somewhat forbidding aspect. It had a dreary and ancient look that set it off from its more modern neighbors in the suburban community, and evidently it had been built many years ago, in anticipation of the rapid expansion of the city that drove the cows away from what not so long ago had been rolling prairie.

A servant admitted them, and Shane announced that they wished to speak with the master of the house. They were shown into a gloomy drawing-room, the servant admonishing them to be quiet, as Mr. Lamont was very low, but the warning scarcely seemed necessary, for in that dispiriting atmosphere it came natural to walk softly and speak in whispers.

Soon Littleby appeared, a long, thin and saturnine man with hard gray eyes whose beetling brows seemed to accentuate their sharp luster. He was possibly in his late fifties. His nose was long and narrow and seemed to be constantly on the alert for stray scents. Together with the thin and tightly compressed lips it gave him an appearance of owlish intentness.

"My friend Lamont is a very sick man," he announced gravely in reply to Shane's inquiry. "It is doubtful whether he will live through the night. I left my office early, though I have pressing business on hand, wishing to be within call if he should need me. What's your pleasure, gentlemen?"

The lieutenant explained that they wished to see the sick man.

Littleby frowned and fingered the gold-rimmed pince-nez that hung from a ribbon around his neck.

"Doctor Ballinger has just left," he explained, "leaving orders that he was to be called immediately in the event of a change in Lamont's condition. He gave no directions in regard to visitors. I suppose you may see him, but I doubt whether he will be able to tell you anything. What do you wish to discuss with him?"

Shane introduced the novelist, and instantly the latter felt the scrutiny of the lawyer's eyes, penetrating and yet unobtrusive, giving him the impression of being in the presence of a subtle and forceful personality.

"As you know, Mr. Littleby," said the lieutenant, somewhat apologetically, "it is my job to look into every angle of this case. I don't want to slip up on anything. My friend Dean here, who has a lively imagination, has an idea that the man Lamont killed might have been somebody else than Paul Forrester."

Dean was aware of an odd flicker in the eyes that

## 48 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

regarded him so fixedly and yet without the slightest hint of a stare.

"I thought my client's confession was quite conclusive on that point," said the lawyer dryly. "I don't see what basis you can have for such an assumption, Mr. Dean."

The novelist felt an impulse to retort that his "assumption" was founded on the soundest possible basis, but he checked it in time. Without waiting for an answer, Littleby turned and motioned the two callers to follow him up a stairway. Dean felt a little awed as he meditated on the weird features of the forthcoming interview with the dying man. As yet Shane had said nothing to Littleby in regard to his real object in visiting the sick chamber, but Dean knew what that object was. The lieutenant wished to verify his hunch, as he had expressed it, that the guilt of murder was not the only thing that was troubling Lamont.

They entered a large, heavily furnished room, illuminated by a single electric light. There was a reek of medicaments in the air, and also, as Dean instantly perceived, that vague and nameless essence which is often present in a room where death stands at the threshold. The dying man lay on his back in a huge four-poster bed, his gray-fringed head propped up with pillows, his shriveled and ashen face staring rigidly at the ceiling. His breath came hard and raspingly, but for the present he seemed to suffer no pain.

At a whispered word from the lawyer, the nurse in attendance withdrew. The lieutenant sat down on a chair beside the bed, with Dean and Littleby watching behind his back. As yet the sick man seemed unaware that others were present.

"Mr. Lamont," said the lieutenant gently, and a paroxysm shook the man on the bed. He turned his head, and his eyes, with their shattered luster, stared into the faces of the three watchers.

"These are friends of mine," Littleby explained. "They wish to ask you a few questions."

With a weary nod of comprehension the sick man resumed his original position.

"I want to ask you a question, Mr. Lamont," said Shane. "Have you any proof, aside from what you have already given us, that the man you killed five and a half years ago was Paul Forrester?"

The rise and fall of the coverlet over the sick man's chest stopped for a few moments. Lamont fixed a dazed look on the speaker.

"Proof?" His voice was scarcely above a whisper. "Haven't you enough already? What more do you want? Of course I killed him."

"You saw him clearly? There was a light in the room? Are you sure you didn't mistake someone else for Paul Forrester?"

A ghastly smile twisted the dying man's lips. "I'm sure," he said raspingly. "There was a light in the room! I saw him face to face. There was no mistake. Why do you ask me?"

His voice grew feebler and feebler with each sentence, and there were little pauses between the words.

"Think hard, Mr. Lamont. Can't you think of something else that will convince us that the man you killed was Paul Forrester? Wasn't something said by Forrester that would have identified him even if the room had been dark and you hadn't been able to see his face? Or did you notice anything else——"

Shane paused and leaned over the bed, the better to hear what the sick man was about to say. Even from where he stood behind the lieutenant, Dean could see that a change had come over Lamont's face. The lawyer stood tense and expectant beside him, waiting for the dying man's answer. Shane was looking intently into the bloodless face, and Dean knew that he was less interested in the forthcoming answer than in ferreting out the secret which he believed the dying man was still keeping.

Then Lamont turned his head until his eyes fixed on the small table beside the bed. A few bottles were standing there, also an extension telephone. Dean, watching him with tremulous interest, saw his eyes grow wild as they fell on the nickel-trimmed instrument. He could not understand, but Lamont was staring at the telephone as if it were an object of extreme horror.

Shane too appeared to notice the sick man's strange behavior, but he merely repeated his question.

"Didn't you notice anything else, Mr. Lamont?"

For a moment longer the sick man's eyes were fixed with shuddering intentness on the telephone, then he wrenched his gaze away from it.

"Anything else? Yes, there was—something else," he said brokenly. "Forrester ducked to escape the blow when I struck out at him. He twisted his neck a little, and then—then I saw the scar."

"The scar?" echoed Shane in perplexed tones, while a chill quiver ran down Dean's back.

"Yes, the scar," mumbled Lamont. "I saw it plainly when he ducked and craned his neck to dodge the blow. A big livid scar that looked like an old knife wound. I can see it yet."

The sick man closed his eyes. Dean, with a whirling tumult in his head, moved toward the bed. He felt he must see at closer range the face of the man who had just made that astounding statement.

"You are sure of that?" he asked sharply, heedless of what the others might think of his conduct. "You're positive you saw a scar on Forrester's neck?"

Lamont turned his head a little; his eyes, with their fluctuating sparkle, widened slightly. While Littleby remained in the background, Dean leaned over the dying man to catch the answer that trembled on his blue-tinged lips.

"Yes, I'm posi—" Lamont's words choked on a queer gurgling sound. A great tremor shook his shrunken figure, propped up against the pillows. His face grew rigid, with lips agape and eyes star-

ing. His chest heaved, and a deeper pallor settled over his shrunken features.

Dean, still leaning forward, heard a perplexed mutter at his back. It came from Shane, who understood nothing, but sat engrossed with the spectacle that was being enacted before his eyes. The sudden transformation in the sick man was startling enough to absorb him. In the rear stood Littleby, tall and somber, his fingers restlessly picking at the ribbon of his glasses.

Then Lamont reached down and, summoning all his paltry strength, raised himself a little higher on the pillows. Dean felt a clammy hand running along the edge of his collar. The physical contact gave him a chill, but his mental revulsion was still greater. In a twinkling he knew the reason for the sick man's feverish excitement. Lamont had seen the scar!

Their eyes met, staring into each other, and Dean writhed for a moment beneath the dreadful spell of the other's flaming orbs. Then Lamont's head rose higher. It seemed as if all the force that was left in him was being spent in that slow upward movement. His eyes grew wider and more terrifyingly bright, shattering the film that had dimmed them a few minutes ago. For a little he sat thus, rigid in every muscle, and then another violent spasm shook him. The mouth sagged, the eyes lost a portion of their feverish luster, a shadow spread over the gaunt face, a long trembling cry

broke from his lips, and his head fell back against the pillows.

Littleby threw the door open and called loudly to the nurse. She entered quickly, gave the man on the bed a swift, calm inspection, and reached for a hypodermic needle.

"Not—dead?" asked Littleby.

"No, but he has had a severe shock. Please telephone Doctor Ballinger. And you gentlemen must leave him at once."

The lawyer hurried out. Lieutenant Shane jerked up his broad shoulders, drew a long breath, and whispered to Dean.

"Let's go," he said.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE SCARRED NECK

“**C**REEPY, wasn't it?” asked Shane as they walked toward the station. “What did you make of it, Dean?”

Dean did not answer immediately. His mind was still awlirl. The awful moment when Lamont's eyes stared into his while the luster slowly faded out of them was inflaming his senses like some ghastly dream. The lieutenant's covert scrutiny brought him back to the present.

“I don't know, Shane,” he said tonelessly. “I haven't the least idea what it meant.”

It was partly true. Though Dean knew that he had been the direct cause of the sick man's agitation, and though he understood the meaning of the weird scene that had preceded Lamont's collapse, the mystery was in nowise lessened. He turned as hurried footsteps sounded behind them. It was Littleby, pale and slightly out of breath.

“What did you think of it, gentlemen?” he inquired, falling into step with them.

“What did *you* think, Mr. Littleby?” It was Shane who spoke the question, looking fixedly at the lawyer.

Littleby gave one of his eloquent shrugs. "There is no accounting for a dying man's preoccupations. All sorts of strange fancies come to people at times like that. It probably meant nothing at all."

Dean gave him a curious glance. He felt the lawyer had been guilty of an evasion, or perhaps he had only been trying to reassure himself.

"What was that about a scar?" asked Shane, directing the question to Dean.

The novelist hesitated. To push back his collar and expose the scar on his neck would have delighted his dramatic sense, but he checked the mad impulse in time.

"Why ask me?" he rejoined. "I heard Lamont say that he saw a scar on Forrester's neck. Do either of you gentlemen happen to know whether Forrester carried such a scar? If we could establish that he did, the last possibility of a case of mistaken identity would vanish."

Shane said he had no information on that point, while Littleby merely shook his head. They came to a corner drugstore, and there the lawyer left them, explaining he was having a prescription re-filled. Dean and the detective walked on to the station, each feeling an awkward hesitancy. A curious tension seemed to have grown up between them in the last half hour.

"Seems to me Littleby could have sent a servant for that prescription," mumbled Shane.

"Maybe he was curious to know how we interpreted the scene in Lamont's bedroom," Dean sug-

gested. "Well, Shane, did you satisfy your curiosity in regard to Lamont's secret worry?"

"No," said the lieutenant after an appreciable pause. "I still think he is brooding over something that has little or nothing to do with the murder of Forrester." He glanced queerly at his companion. "If the shock he received should kill him, then we'll never find out the cause of his worry, I suppose."

Dean nodded uncertainly, and neither man spoke until the train rolled into the station.

"Now let's have it," said Shane when they were seated in the smoker. "I didn't blame you for not wanting to talk in Littleby's presence, but you needn't keep any secrets from me. Three of us heard and saw everything that happened in Lamont's room, but you were the only one that understood anything. Spill it, Dean."

"I think you overestimate my sagacity," countered Dean.

"Now you're talking like the characters in your stories. What I want is plain words. In the first place, what's the meaning of the scar Lamont spoke about?"

"I don't know," said Dean after a brief hesitation. He spoke candidly enough, for the matter of the scar had only complicated still further an already hopeless situation.

Shane regarded him doubtfully. "I could see you got a jolt when Lamont spoke about the scar. It seemed to touch you on the raw."

"The whole scene did. I swear I understood

nothing," said Dean, emphatically and truthfully. "I was just as nonplussed as you and Littleby were. Even more so," he added under his breath and with a significance that was lost on Shane.

"All right, then," said Shane resignedly, "but there's something else you can tell me. Till my dying day I'll never forget the way Lamont stared at you just before he collapsed. What did it mean?"

"Sorry, but I am at a loss there too. I know he looked at me in a most peculiar way, but I can't tell you why."

"Did you ever see Lamont before?"

Dean hesitated, searching his memory. The question had already occurred to him. "To the best of my knowledge," he declared, "I never saw him until this evening."

Shane gave him a quick, skeptical look. "If I didn't know you as well as I do, I'd call you a first-rate liar. While I was watching you and Lamont, I could have sworn that you were wise to all that was going on."

"On the contrary, I was flabbergasted."

Shane thought for a moment. "Since you say it, I believe you, of course. Now let me try a different tack. A man with an imagination like yours ought to be able to think up an explanation of what happened in Lamont's room a little while ago. Just look at it as a mystery, from the point of view of a writer of fiction, and give me your idea of what the solution ought to be. Can you do that?"

Dean smiled. "Well, I've solved pretty hard

riddles. If I understand you correctly, you want me to put my imagination to work and give you a fictitious solution of the scene that took place in Lamont's bedroom?"

"Just that."

Leaning back against the seat, Dean thought for a while. The faint smile on his lips and the intent look in his eyes showed that the problem fascinated him.

"I think I have it," he said at length, without looking at his companion, "but you mustn't forget that it is only a fictitious solution. It accounts, at any rate, for Lamont's terrific excitement. When he saw me at his bedside, he suddenly realized that he had made a mistake in regard to the identity of the man he killed five and a half years ago."

"How is that?" Shane seemed somewhat disappointed.

"Well," said Dean slowly, weighing each word, "it came to him all at once that I was Paul Forrester, and that consequently he had killed the wrong man."

"That *you* were Paul Forrester?" Shane, as the novelist had expected, laughed at the suggestion as if it were utterly preposterous.

"The shock of such a discovery would be enough to overcome a man in Lamont's weakened condition, wouldn't it?"

"Of course it would, but why on earth should he think you were Paul Forrester? Why, it's—" Shane seemed at a loss for words. "Your imagination isn't in its usual form tonight, Dean?"

"Apparently not," said the novelist plaintively. "I admit it isn't a very good solution. There is a hole in it big enough for an elephant to walk through."

"It's all holes, as I see it, and nothing else. What particular hole have you in mind?"

"The only one that my imagination isn't capable of filling in. I might plug up the others if you gave me a little time, but I would never be able to explain why, if Lamont killed the wrong man, a watch bearing Paul Forrester's initials on the back should be found in the room under the stairs."

"That's so," said Shane thoughtfully. "I didn't spot that one till you pointed it out. It tears your solution to shreds, of course."

"Of course," echoed Dean in queer tones. He looked as if his mind were still wrestling with the hypothetical solution. For several minutes the men sat silent, swaying with the motions of the train; then Dean added: "I've found another hole. Did you notice the queer way Lamont stared at the telephone?"

"I did. He looked at it as if he expected it to fly up and bite him. What do you suppose it meant?"

Dean shook his head. "A satisfactory solution of a mystery is supposed to account for all the facts. My solution leaves Lamont's behavior with regard to the telephone unexplained, so I guess it won't do. There are two holes already."

"And I have found a third," said Shane, just as the train dipped into the humid jaw of the tunnel.

"There's another thing that your solution doesn't take into account at all. If Lamont killed the wrong man, who was the fellow with the scar on his neck?"

Dean glanced down the length of the swaying coach. "You've got me there again," he confessed. "It's an interesting point. Well, I warned you it was only a fictitious solution. Let's drop it. My head is swimming."

"So is mine," said Shane.

## CHAPTER VIII

### BACK TO HUDSON STREET

**I**MPS of incongruity were still cavorting in Dean's mind when, after leaving Lieutenant Shane, he walked into a restaurant and ordered a late dinner. One must eat even though the heavens fall, and Dean made the best of the necessity. He was in no mood to go back to Top O' The Hill, and he was glad he had brought his bag along. Of a sudden he had lost all interest in the half-done novel that lay on his cluttered desk at home. The work of his imagination seemed pallid and stale beside the mystifying realities that surrounded him.

Dallying over his cigar and coffee, he made several vain efforts to shatter the fog in his mind. At one time he was tempted to leave things as they were, to let Paul Forrester remain dead. If the truth came out, he should once more have to live down his mortifying affair with Beulah Vance, and the resulting publicity would not only be humiliating, but it might damage his professional standing as well. Moreover, it was dangerous to ventilate the dusty corners of the past. The name of Paul Forrester was too intimately associated with an episode that Thomas Dean had long tried to forget. But on the other hand he knew that his mind would never

## 62 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

be at rest until the mystery of Lamont's confession had been solved.

Besides, Dean was rather vexed at his inability to work out a satisfying solution of the riddle. In the seclusion of his work-shop at Top O' The Hill he had pounded out on his typewriter many a mystery as tangled and inscrutable as this one appeared to be, chuckling at the ease with which he conducted his characters in and out of labyrinthine passages, but he had always confessed to himself that he was merely romancing, that such things could not be in a world of hard facts. But for once hard facts had outstripped his imagination, and this was humiliating. As he himself had admitted, the theory he had offered Lieutenant Shane suffered from several discrepancies, chief among them being the monogrammed watch and the look of dread with which Lamont had regarded the telephone beside his bed.

Time and again he reviewed in his mind the scene that had been enacted in Lamont's bedroom, but he felt himself slipping into a sea of incongruities whenever he tried to interpret the dying man's words and actions. Lamont's mention of the scar on his victim's neck was the culminating touch of the riddle. As far as external evidence went, it seemed to prove beyond possibility of doubt that the man who had been murdered in the Hudson Street house five and a half years ago was Dean himself.

He laughed shortly as his mind hurdled this staggering conclusion. From that point on his thoughts

drifted into strange metaphysical realms. Perhaps the explanation was to be found there. He had heard and read of duality, metempsychosis and other things that were only words to him. But thinking along that line seemed to lead nowhere. He would continue his search for a more rational explanation first. But where was he to begin?

The confession itself seemed the logical starting point, but he had already considered it from all possible angles. He had made inquiries which satisfied him in regard to the trustworthiness and professional standing of the alienist who examined Lamont just before the confession was taken down. He had also learned that the notary public who had witnessed the dying man's signature was a man of unquestioned honesty. Moreover, he had ascertained that the professional standing of Dennis Littleby, Lamont's host, was excellent in every respect. The confession and the circumstances under which it had been made seemed unassailable from every point of view. Then where was he to make a start?

A picture of the drab house on Hudson Street flashed across his mind. It was there the murder had been committed; it was from there the tangled threads of the mystery radiated. Luckily Dean had retained a key to the house, and he had brought it with him from Top O' The Hill that morning, having dredged it out from a jumble of useless odds and ends in his desk drawers. It was just possible that on the scene of the murder he would find some-

thing that might shed a little light on the matter.

It was nearly nine o'clock when he left the restaurant and took a taxicab for Hudson Street. As he stepped inside the cab a fleeting impression caused him to glance quickly through the little window in the rear. Was he mistaken, or had someone in the passing throng given him a sustained glance? He decided he had either been mistaken, or else the incident was meaningless, and he had quite forgotten it by the time he arrived in the house on Hudson Street.

The policeman who had been on duty at the door earlier in the day was no longer there. Evidently the authorities had concluded their investigation as far as the old house was concerned. This relieved Dean's mind of the possibility of an embarrassing encounter. He let himself in with his key, struck a match, and spent several minutes looking for a light fixture before he realized that the gas must have been turned off long ago. Here was a difficulty, for he could accomplish nothing in the dark, but he recalled that there had been a supply of candles in the pantry back of the kitchen. Luckily they were still there, and he took several of them and went back to the living room. After seeing that the shades were drawn, he lighted the candles and distributed them in advantageous positions, exiling the shadows to the farthest corners.

Slowly he let his glance wander over the room. The very air seemed charged with dark hints. It was here, in this memory-environed room with its

musty scents and fading colors, that the murder had occurred, according to Lamont's confession. It was from the curiously wrought brass rack beside the fireplace that the murderer had taken the tongs with which he had dealt the deadly blow. Dean's imagination pictured the swift thrust; he could almost see the victim crumpling into a twisted heap. His eyes, slanting downward, fixed on a point between the old redwood table and the grate. Perhaps it was there the man had fallen after receiving the mortal blow, later being dragged by the murderer to the room under the stairs.

The candles that flickered so oddly, as if there were a draft somewhere, seemed to give wings to his imagination. Who could the murdered man have been, and by what strange vagary of destiny had his name been linked with that of Paul Forrester? What mysterious errand had drawn him to the house where he was to meet his doom? And why—Dean's mind was beginning to spin and whirl anew. He raised his glance and sent it roving over the room. There was dust everywhere, on the table, the chairs, the mantelpiece, the uncarpeted portions of the floor. The air was clogged with it, making breathing difficult.

He stepped to the window and raised it a little, inhaled a few times, looked out into the dim, silent street, far removed from the main arteries of nocturnal traffic, then turned and looked once more at the point between the table and the fireplace. It was grimly fascinating to speculate that the murder

had occurred there, that Lamont's victim had fallen in this very spot.

He came forward a few steps, his gaze still fixed on the floor. Parts of it were covered with a carpet, but this particular spot was bare. His speculations, though interesting, were leading him nowhere, and he took one of the candles and stepped out in the hall, reflecting that perhaps he was retracing the very path the murderer had traveled when he dragged his victim from the room. The candle drooped languishingly in the stale air as he approached the room under the stairway.

The door was open. Stifling his repugnance he stepped in. There a sigh of relief escaped him. The grewsome relics he had seen earlier in the day had been removed, but the air was still charged with something ghastly and infinitely repelling. The room was cluttered with an odd collection of books and papers and curious implements. Often he had seen his father use these things, but the purpose of them he had never been able to comprehend. He had dim recollections of maps and diagrams and cabalistic designs that had intrigued his boyish fancy and which his father, a taciturn and secretive man, had never explained.

The room yielded nothing to his search, and from its disordered condition he gathered that Lieutenant Shane had probably made a thorough search. He took the candle and returned to the living room. He had scarcely known what he expected to find in the house, and now it began to look as if his search

would be fruitless. Disappointed and not knowing where to turn next, he sat down in one of the large upholstered chairs.

A breeze was blowing in through the narrow opening at the window, and the candle flames winked and fluctuated, throwing creeping shadows over the floor. He watched them abstractedly, but now and then his glance went back to the bare spot between the table and the fireplace. It was odd what a magic effect it exerted on his senses, how it spurred his imagination to strange flights. Again the tragedy that Lamont had so vividly described was reenacted in his mental vision. He could see the dull brass of the fire tongs gleaming in the light as it described a curve in the air. And then the victim crouching swiftly to evade the blow, and in doing so exposing a livid scar on his neck.

Of a sudden the picture faded away. Sitting erect in the chair, Dean was conscious of a curious impression. He looked rigidly at the door leading to the dining room. While his imagination was etching a picture of tragedy, it seemed to have opened very softly, and he had a hazy impression that for an instant a face had appeared in the opening, regarding him with wide, startled eyes.

In a moment, candle in hand, he had passed through the door, but he returned shortly, deciding that his imagination had deceived him. Now he stepped to the fireplace and gazed down at the spot that held such a strange fascination for him. Presently his eyes narrowed and became fixed on a small

crack between two boards in the floor. Down there in the tiny crevice, something was winking up at him with a coy, glassy sparkle.

Getting down on his knees to see what it was, he took out his pocket knife and pried out a piece of glass that had lodged edgewise in the crack. It might have been lying in that snug retreat a long time, secure against broom and vacuum cleaner. One could have crossed the floor a thousand times without seeing it. Dean had noticed it only because that particular spot in the flooring held a peculiar attraction for him. Now he got up and examined his find under one of the candles. It was a wedge-shaped sliver of glass, with one end beveled and slightly rounded. Its shape, and particularly the beveled edge, suggested that it was a part of a watch crystal.

It seemed a far leap, but Dean's mind went back to the watch Lieutenant Shane had shown him, the one bearing Paul Forrester's initials on the back. The next moment he realized that there could be no connection between the two objects. The fragment of glass in his hand could not have come from the watch Shane had shown him, for he remembered distinctly that the crystal of the latter had been intact. But he wrapped the fragment in his handkerchief and went back to the crack to search for more pieces.

Soon he found one, much smaller than the other, deeply lodged in the crack. Again he prodded with his knife, but the small piece of glass was hard to

get out of the crevice, and repeatedly it slipped off the blade of his knife.

All at once he stopped, and two impressions flashed through his mind. He had been kneeling on the floor, with head bent low and turned a little to one side. As a result of his position, his collar had slid back, exposing the scar on the right side of his neck. The thing was apt to happen whenever he strained his neck, and he never took any pains to avoid it when he was alone. Now, however, he had a distinct impression that he was no longer alone. The slight creaking of a board had revealed someone's stealthy approach. He looked up and saw Dennis Littleby.

## CHAPTER IX

### A PIECE OF GLASS

DEAN, still kneeling on the floor, noticed with a quiver of apprehension that Littleby appeared to be gazing fixedly at the exposed scar. Though the summer night was warm, the lawyer's long, gaunt figure was wrapped in an overcoat. Stooping slightly forward he leaned heavily on a gold-knobbed walking stick.

The novelist sprang confusedly to his feet, and Littleby instantly shifted his gaze.

"Hello, Dean," he said pleasantly, and there was nothing in the classical mold of his features to indicate that he had seen anything out of the ordinary. "Looking for something?"

Dean smiled foolishly. For once he was at a loss for an answer. He knew Littleby had seen the scar, and he was puzzled by the man's rather elaborate pretense that he had noticed nothing. Then he realized that the blemish could mean nothing to the lawyer, despite Lamont's statement that he had seen such a mark on his victim's neck. In itself, a scar was a trifling and rather ordinary thing. But Dean's confusion was aggravated by the bland and yet oddly disconcerting way in which the lawyer stood there looking at him. Evidently Dennis Lit-

tleby was one of those characters who unfold panoramically, little by little. Dean felt that he was in contact with a dynamic personality, one who exerted a magnetism that was neither pleasant nor unpleasant but left the subject in a bewildered state of doubt.

"I didn't hear you come in," said Dean lamely.

"Evidently you were too preoccupied."

"Besides," Dean floundered on. "I thought you were at your home in Kew Gardens."

"So I was, but Doctor Ballinger prescribed a sedative which put poor Lamont to sleep and gave me an opportunity to run into town and look over my mail. On my way back I couldn't resist the temptation to drop in here and look over the scene of my client's misdeed. The door was unlocked, so I walked in."

Dean could not contradict him, though he was almost certain that he had locked the door after entering.

"Are you in doubt about Lamont's confession?" he asked. "Is that why you—ahem—dropped in?"

"Oh, no. Mere curiosity." The lawyer smiled a thin-lipped, disarming smile that yet had the effect of putting Dean on the alert. "May I ask what you expected to find in that crack between the boards?"

"You may," said Dean, and now his smile was as inscrutable as the lawyer's, "but I may not care to answer."

Littleby chuckled softly. "I think it was Oscar Wilde who said that questions are never embarrass-

ing, but answers sometimes are. You will answer or not as you choose, of course." He bent his gaunt frame and looked sharply into the crack. "I may be able to gratify my curiosity without your assistance. H'm. I see nothing but a small piece of glass."

"There is nothing else to see, Mr. Littleby."

The lawyer stood erect, giving Dean a long glance out of his bright little eyes. Dean again went to work with his knife and, after repeated efforts, succeeded in dislodging the tiny splinter of glass. With great care, while the lawyer watched him in astonishment, he tucked it away in his handkerchief beside the larger fragment.

"Why do you do that?" asked Littleby.

"I hardly know." Dean chuckled lightly. "I'm following the example of the detectives in my novels. They are always indulging in some sort of mysterious hocus-pocus. It is supposed to indicate a high degree of astuteness. The principle is simple. Do something that appears utterly useless and ridiculous, and the average man will swear you are a genius."

"H'm." Littleby's keen eyes appeared to take his measure. "I don't think I've read any of your novels, Dean."

"I shall be pleased to send you a copy of my latest, but I warn you it is lurid melodrama. Anyhow, that's how some of the critics describe it."

"I see. The kind of things that never happen in real life."

With a laugh that puzzled the lawyer, Dean

noded. "Precisely, Littleby. The kind of things that never happen in real life. If they ever did, life would no longer seem real, and the lunatic asylums would be jammed."

A smile that seemed oddly pale in the light of the candles touched the lawyer's lips. "You interest me, Dean."

"Thanks." The novelist was again down on his knees examining the crack, but there seemed to be no more pieces of glass. "Wish I could find the rest," he muttered. "No use, though. They must have been swept away. Too bad!"

"What would you do with them if you found them?"

Dean got up from his kneeling position. "Why, I don't know. I might try to find the watch they came off from."

"Watch?" Littleby jerked out the word in a queer tone.

"The two pieces I found are fragments of a watch crystal, unless I am mistaken." Dean rocked gently on his heels as he spoke, but his eyes did not leave the other man's face. For a moment it seemed as if a mask had dropped from Littleby's face. It lasted just long enough to convince Dean that he had stumbled upon another angle of the mystery, but in another instant the veil of inscrutabilities was back again.

"You are a riddle, Dean," said the lawyer. "Are you in the habit of walking into strange houses at night and looking for pieces of broken glass?"

"I wouldn't call it a habit. It's a new hobby of mine."

"I suppose you realize you are trespassing?"

It wasn't true, but Dean could not contradict him. "I might ask you the same question," he countered.

"In which event I should follow your example and maintain a discreet silence." He chuckled, evidently well pleased with himself. "Come now, Dean. Nothing gained by talking at cross purposes, you know. Be as mysterious as you like about the pieces of glass, but tell me something else. When did you first meet my friend Lamont?"

"This evening, at your house in Kew Gardens."

"Positive of that?"

"As positive as I can be of anything."

"Lamont's behavior was very strange. The sight of you seemed to excite him tremendously. How do you explain it?"

"I don't. I was hoping you could throw some light on his strange behavior."

"Why?"

"Being Lamont's lawyer, you are in his confidence more or less, I take it."

"Rather less than more. He has told me nothing whatever that explains the way he stared at you just before he took that nasty turn. I tried to analyze the expression on his face, but it kept eluding me. What would you have called it, Dean?"

On a guess Dean would have called it a mingling

of terror and startled recognition, but he did not care to confide in the lawyer.

"I don't think words could describe it," he said evasively, then smiled engagingly. "It would be much easier for me to characterize the expression I see on your face this moment."

The lawyer started slightly. "And how would you characterize it?" he demanded stiffly.

The novelist sighed. "It's too late now. I've lost it. Your expressions are so ephemeral, Littleby, that one needs a mind that works like a camera to catch them. A moment ago I thought you seemed greatly worried over something but tried hard not to show it."

"Worried?" The lawyer's laugh sounded not quite natural. "What should I worry about?"

"Who knows? Two small pieces of glass, perhaps."

"You are a humorist, Dean. Being a close friend of Lamont's, I can't see the funny side of it as you do." A scowl of bafflement darkened his face. "Curious case, Dean. I can't help wondering what affected him so terrifically when you stood at his bedside. And as for the scar he mentioned—H'm. Something peculiar about that, too. I once heard of a man who had a scar in the exact position indicated by Lamont."

Dean stiffened. His hand started toward the right side of his neck, but he checked the movement in time.

"That's interesting," he remarked, trying to seem only mildly curious.

Littleby looked upward indefinitely, as if searching his memory. "The man I have in mind was accused of murder. He was never apprehended, as far as I know. It happened out West some years ago, and it was a particularly foul crime. As I recall the facts, he killed a defenseless trapper with whom his father had had a feud of some sort. Of course, it isn't at all likely that this was the same man Lamont had in mind."

"No, not at all likely." It required a tremendous effort on Dean's part to speak calmly.

The lawyer shrugged. "Well, I must be going," he declared with a glance at his watch. "I felt a curiosity to look over the scene described in Lamont's confession. You see," and he chuckled apologetically, "I was a private detective before I went into law. The old habits cling. Well, good night, Dean. Hope you find the other piece of glass."

He walked away, but his faint smile haunted the novelist. His mind was echoing certain phrases Littleby had spoken: "—a particularly foul crime—defenseless trapper—a feud of some sort—never caught." Was that how the tragedy on the frozen hillside had appeared to the people of the community? No doubt time and mouth-to-mouth gossip had distorted the episode out of all semblance to the true facts. Or had the lawyer deliberately put a dramatic veneer on the circumstances of Simon Cabell's death? If so, what had been his object?

Dean blew out the candles and started to leave.

"Queer cuss!" he mumbled. "A look into Littleby's mind would be illuminating. In regard to those pieces of glass, for instance. They mean something. Littleby knows what it is, but I don't."

## CHAPTER X

### THE WRITING ON THE WALL

**D**EAN was a limp and exhausted man at the end of the weirdest—he could think of no other fitting adjective—day of his life, and in the end his aversion to a strange bed decided him to return to Top O' Hill rather than go to a hotel for the night.

It was nearly midnight when he reached the clump of woods that flanked the house in the rear and let himself in with the key he carried. Mrs. Blossom, who was given to regularity and decorum and couldn't understand why any normal man should wish to live in a spooky old house that was in constant danger of the roof tumbling in, always retired early, and she always enjoyed the sound slumber that goes with an easy conscience.

Being bodily fatigued but mentally alert, Dean went to his workshop on the ground floor instead of retiring at once to his bedroom. He lighted the gas, stuffed his pipe with a villainous mixture compounded by himself of several pungent brands, tossed his unfinished manuscript into a drawer, and picked up a novel in the hope of reading himself to sleep.

Soon he gave it up. His eyes skipped unseeingly

over the printed lines while his mind dipped in and out of dark corners. He was not thinking of the two fragments of glass now; that was a matter that required a fresh mind and sustained effort. Instead his imagination kept reënacting the scene in Lamont's bedroom. The subdued light and the stillness all around seemed to give a touch of realism to his mental picture of the sick man as he sat upright in bed and stared wildly into Dean's face. Would he ever forget the ghastly look he had seen in Lamont's shrunken eyes just before he dropped back against the pillows?

Mad thoughts rushed through his brain. Had Lamont recognized him as Paul Forrester, the man he thought he had murdered? Recognition of an astounding sort was what Dean had read in the sick man's face, but how was he to reconcile this theory with the fact that, to the best of his knowledge, they had never met before? He could not be quite sure on this point, however, for of the thousands of faces he had seen in recent years his mind retained impressions of only a few. It was possible that Lamont, for reasons of his own, had studied him at a distance, without Dean being aware of it. Too, in his childhood he had often been told that he had his father's eyes and mouth, and it was conceivable that Lamont, granting that he had known the older Forrester, had recognized the resemblance. That would account, at least in part, for the look of dreadful recognition he had seen in the man's face.

But it explained nothing else. It did not account

for the amazing dovetailing of circumstances, or for the sick man's detailed description of the person he had murdered in the Hudson Street house, or for the look of shuddering dread that had come into his face as he glanced at the telephone instrument at the bedside.

Dismissing these inexplicable phases of the mystery, Dean's thoughts turned to Littleby and his encounter with the lawyer in the Hudson Street house. The man's behavior had been vaguely puzzling, and his curious personality, alternately magnetic and repelling, although it touched no extreme in either direction, had resisted all efforts to fathom his motives. His allusion to the trapper's death might have been only a random remark, but it could just as easily have been a slyly aimed thrust at the novelist. The latter supposition took for granted that the lawyer knew Dean's true identity, but such a presumption was hard to accept. Littleby had seen the scar on Dean's neck, and he had taken elaborate pains to pretend either that he had not noticed it or that it meant nothing to him, but his demeanor through it all really proved nothing except that the lawyer's mental processes ran a deep and devious course.

"And that's only natural, since he is a lawyer," Dean told himself, finding that all his conjectures faded away in a haze. He was too tired to think, anyway. In the morning he would attack the problem with a fresh mind. Another talk with Lieutenant Shane might give him a new slant on things.

He rose, knocked the ashes from his pipe, and his roving eyes paused on the big armchair beside the writing desk. A fresh, vivid picture blazed through the chaos in his mind. It was in that chair little Viola Gray had sat that morning, mouthing ecstatic trifles while unwittingly filling his mind with doubts as to her seeming ingenuousness. Strange how the sorcerous little creature had slipped his mind in the rush of complications that had filled his thoughts since morning. Odd, too, that she should have called on this particular day, that was to be marked with a huge interrogation point in Dean's career. Was Viola Gray, with her pretty face and her clashing subtleties, a puppet in the screaming mummery centering about Martin Lamont's deathbed confession?

He shook his head doubtfully, and then something drew his gaze to the wall over his writing desk. Until this moment he had been too preoccupied to notice that a square of white paper, with pencil tracings in the center, was pinned to the wall. He was certain that the paper had not been there when he left for the city. He stepped closer, muttered an exclamation. The tracings dissolved into a crude print. A name was written there. He spelled it out slowly, in a hushed breath:

"S-i-m-o-n C-a-b-e-l-l."

For a time he stood rigid, gazing at the characters on the paper, knuckles whitening as he gripped the edge of the desk. The clumsily formed and yet startlingly legible letters seemed to symbolize a

dread that had been ever present despite his efforts to fight it down. Littleby's words, giving a new and more appalling twist to the tragedy on the hillside, recurred to him. What did it mean, this sinister inscription on a scrap of white paper pinned to his wall? A threat, a warning, an ill-natured reminder? He could not know, but at least one thing was certain. He could no longer evade the fact that someone knew—or, at least, guessed—his secret. It was equally obvious that someone had stolen into his house during his absence and left this dolorous reminder on his wall. It was a crude bit of melodramatic claptrap, but effective nevertheless. And what could be the object? He found no answer, but he seized eagerly upon the one tangible clew contained in the inscription. Someone knew that he was Paul Forrester. The realization left him strangely calm, instead of terrifying him as it might have done under different circumstances. He was no longer dealing with shapeless shadows; he had found something substantial at last.

He unfastened the paper and concealed it in a drawer of his desk, then turned out the gas and went to bed. The last image in his consciousness was not the writing on the wall, but the bewildering loveliness of little Miss Gray.

He was up early the next morning. The world, or as much of it as he could see from his window, was full of sunshine and fresh breezes. His muscles, as he performed his usual morning calisthenics, were found to be in excellent trim. His mind was keen

and fresh, as if it had shaken off an abysmal spell during the night. After a cold shower and quick shave he went down for breakfast.

"Glorious day," he confided to Mrs. Blossom.

"The weather prediction is rain, sir," remarked the housekeeper gloomily.

"The weather man is a chronic pessimist. By the way, where were any callers after I left the house yesterday?"

"Only an insurance agent. I wasn't going to let him in, but there was no getting rid of him. These agents are a pest."

"An infernal nuisance," Dean agreed. "You didn't admit him to my workroom, I hope?"

"Certainly not, sir," with asperity. "I never go in there myself, except to clean up on Saturday mornings. I know my orders."

"To be sure, Mrs. Blossom," said Dean soothingly. "You are very good about protecting my privacy, and I appreciate it. You didn't let that pestiferous agent out of your sight while he was in the house?"

A vigorous negative was on the housekeeper's lips, but she held it back as a concession to strict veracity. "Only for a moment or two. He asked me for a drink of water, and of course I couldn't refuse him."

"Of course not. Asked you for a drink of water, did he? And you fetched it from the cooler in the dining room, I take it. H'm. Tell you what you do, Mrs. Blossom. If he should come back when

I am out, ask him to call again. In view of the uncertainties of life I may be interested in a moderate amount of insurance. Your coffee is excellent this morning. Another cup, please."

The housekeeper gave him a sad, puzzled look. There were times when Dean's whims were beyond her, and so she merely nodded when her employer, rising from the table, told her he expected to be absent most of the day.

Arriving in the city, Dean decided to call on Shane. He did not feel he had played quite fairly with his friend. There were so many angles of the case that threatened to swamp his thoughts whenever his mind dwelt on them, and he did not know how to broach them to the lieutenant. He had tried once, in an indirect way, while stating his hypothetical solution of the mystery, and the lieutenant had laughed at him. With the two pieces of glass it was different. They were at least tangible, and he could talk about them with Shane without laying himself open to suspicion or ridicule.

He took the precaution of telephoning police headquarters from a public booth to see if the lieutenant was in. After a brief delay Shane was finally located in the bureau of identification, and he told Dean to come over at once. The novelist boarded a car, and fifteen minutes later he found his friend poring over a set of records in an office located in the basement of the building.

"What luck?" asked Dean.

Shane raised his eyes and regarded him with a shade less than his usual candor.

"Oh, so-so. I've been trying to check up on one or two things in Lamont's confession."

"Then there is a doubt in your mind?"

"Not exactly a doubt. All the statements in the confession hang together, and until yesterday I thought the case was closed. Then, last evening, Lamont pulled that queer stuff just before he collapsed, and I started wondering. It can't cut any ice as far as the facts in the case are concerned, but— Well, I'm still wondering." He looked at the novelist with a scowl on his broad face, as if his bewilderment were partly due to him. "What's up, Dean?"

Dean sat down and unfolded his handkerchief, exposing the two pieces of glass. Shane gave him a puzzled glance, looked at the smaller of the two fragments, dropped it, then examined the larger one.

"Looks like a piece from a watch crystal," he observed, holding the beveled edge to the light. "Where did you find it?"

"In the sitting room in the Forrester house. The two pieces were lodged in a crack in the floor."

Shane lifted his blue eyes from the fragment of glass and gave Dean a curious glance. "So, you went back there. Didn't you get enough atmosphere the first time? Well, what do you see in this piece of glass?"

"Nothing yet," said Dean, glad that Shane had not inquired how he had entered the Forrester

house. "I am not sure it means anything. There is just one little point in my mind that I want to clear up. Shane, will you let me see the watch you found in the room under the stairs?"

The lieutenant whistled softly. "You're off on the wrong track. Even if this piece of glass came off the watch I found, it wouldn't mean anything. It didn't, though. The crystal of that watch isn't broken."

"I know, but please let me see it."

Shane produced the watch, with the air of one humoring a child. It was an open-face timepiece, and Dean unscrewed the rim and took out the crystal, then placed it on a sheet of paper and drew a circle around it with a pencil. Finally he laid the larger of the two fragments against the periphery of the circle. He shook his head.

"So much for that," he said, a trace of excitement in his voice. "They don't match. This broken piece has a smaller degree of curvature than the crystal belonging to the watch."

"Well, what of it?" demanded Shane, who had watched him in a mood of mingled amusement and impatience.

"Having a smaller degree of curvature, it must have been a larger crystal. Consequently it belonged to a larger watch than the one you found in the room under the stairs, probably one of the kind that used to sell for a dollar before the war."

Shane eyed him uncomprehendingly. "Suppose you tell me what you are driving at?"

"Only this. It looks as if, at one time or another, a watch crystal was broken in the room where Lamont says he killed Paul Forrester. If I were to chuck the facts and draw on my imagination, I should say the accident happened during the struggle between Forrester and his murderer."

Shane looked as if he were trying very hard to keep his patience. "But you have said yourself that the broken piece doesn't fit Forrester's watch."

With a faint smile Dean looked up at the detective. "It doesn't fit the watch you found in the room under the stairs," he said with a slow emphasis.

The detective grunted, but suddenly he sat back in his chair and stared. His eyes had a dazed look, as if a staggering idea had come to him.

"But that's crazy!" he declared at length. "There isn't a shred of sound fact to support such a wild idea."

Dean still smiled. "Yet you picked the idea out of my head before I had time to put it into words."

"Makes no difference. It's just one of those woozy things that look all right in fiction but have no place in a world of hard facts. Why, for all you and I know a dozen watch crystals may have been broken in that house."

"It has stood vacant for over five years," Dean pointed out, "so this particular crystal must have been broken either at the time of the murder or shortly before. By the way, remember the fictitious solution I gave you yesterday?"

"It was as full of holes as a sieve. You said you could fill in all of them but one."

"And I think I could plug up that one with this piece of glass. Just now my mind isn't equal to the performance, though. See you later."

Dean was off, and with an intent look on his face the lieutenant picked up the watch he had found in the room under the stairs. For a long time he regarded it closely.

"It's crazy as the dickens," he declared fretfully, concluding a long and twisted train of thought, "but nothing else explains the way Lamont looked at Dean just before he collapsed. H'm. Next time I see Dean I'm going to ask him, just for fun, if there's a scar on the right side of his neck."

## CHAPTER XI

### CUL-DE-SAC

**A**FTER a solitary luncheon Dean took a train to Kew Gardens and visited the notary who had witnessed Lamont's confession. He found the man in a real estate office only a few blocks from Dennis Littleby's residence. He was a busy little man, bald and fat, riding high on the crest of the realty boom sweeping that section, and the brief interview was punctuated by several telephone calls.

"Have you known Mr. Littleby long?" inquired the novelist.

"What's that? Known him long? Don't know him at all except by reputation. They tell me he won't look at a case unless he's paid a retaining fee of a thousand on the spot."

"I understand he sent for you when he wanted a notary to witness Lamont's confession."

"So he did. It was thought his friend would cash in that night, so naturally he sent for a notary living in the neighborhood."

Dean nodded. The explanation seemed sufficient. He leaned forward a little out of his chair, hesitating before he put his next question.

"Was there anything about the confession that

seemed suggestive to you—queer in any way?”

“What’s that?” The notary’s comfortably rounded body bristled. “Anything queer about it? If there had been, do you suppose I would have put my seal on it?”

“Certainly not,” Dean hastened to say, for he could see that the man had a keen regard for the proprieties and the responsibilities of his position. “It just occurred to me that you might have noticed something that didn’t strike you as peculiar until afterward.”

The notary gave him a long, wondering look, then shook his bald head. “No, nothing like that. Everything was straight and aboveboard—just a simple case of a man wanting to go into the next world with a clear conscience. Why did you ask?”

Dean explained that he had certain interests at stake that he could not go into at present, thanked the notary and started for the door. He had accomplished nothing beyond substantiating his previous impression that the circumstances of Lamont’s confession contained nothing of a doubtful character.

At the door he turned back, impelled by an impulse that he could not understand, and looked diffidently at the notary, already absorbed in a mass of papers.

“Just one more question,” he said, in the tone of one who realizes that his words must sound idiotic, “Did Lamont act as if any sort of pressure was exerted on him?”

The notary jerked up his head and stared blankly for a moment. "What's that? Pressure? Say, what are you driving at?" Then he laughed in a mollified way as he saw Dean's disarming smile. "No, nothing like that. He acted like a man who had something on his mind and couldn't get rid of it quick enough. If there was any pressure, it was his own conscience." He paused, and his good-humored eyes wandered off into space. "There was one funny thing, though, come to think of it. Not that it mattered as far as the confession is concerned, but it struck me afterward as a kind of queer."

"Yes?" said Dean expectantly as the man hesitated.

The notary scratched the side of his bald head. "Lamont comes from out West, doesn't he?"

"So I understand."

"Don't you suppose people use telephones out there?"

Dean smiled at the simple question; then, as a recollection came to him, he stiffened suddenly.

"Without doubt they do," he said as calmly as he could. "Why?"

"Well, there's a telephone beside Lamont's bed. I caught him looking at it once, just before he put his signature on the paper. He acted as if he'd never seen such a thing before. He seemed actually scared of it, as if he was afraid it might blow up. Funny, wasn't it?"

"Very," Dean admitted, his whole body tingling

as he recalled a similar observation made by himself at Lamont's bedside. Shane had remarked upon it too, stating that Lamont had looked at the instrument as if he expected it to "fly up and bite him," and now it appeared the notary had observed the same thing.

"But of course it didn't mean anything," the notary hastened to say, once more turning to the papers on his desk. "People do act queer at times like that. Good-day, sir."

Dean took his leave with heavy thoughts thronging his mind. He was almost inclined to share the notary's opinion that Lamont's peculiar attitude toward the telephone was only a dying man's vagary. What else, indeed, could it mean? Dean had read and heard many curious things about the delusions that precede death, weird and astonishing fancies that distort the fading realities of life. Doubtless the explanation was to be found there.

He walked slowly, drinking in the sunshine and the breezes as if they were an antidote for the clouded condition of his mind. His inquiries seemed to have led him into a blind alley bounded by the solid rock of incongruities and contradictions. Where should he turn next?

An inscription on a brightly polished brass plate in a window suggested a make-shift solution. He stopped at a corner and looked uncertainly at a handsome three-story residence bordered on two sides by well-kept lawn. "John P. Ballinger, M.D.," read the sign in the window, and he recalled that

this was the name of the physician who was attending Lamont. On a reckless impulse he ascended the steps and rang.

A young woman, fresh and crisp in the uniform of a physician's attendant, admitted him, and after a brief wait he was ushered into the consultation room of Doctor Ballinger, a powerfully built man in his early forties, with an infectious smile on clean-shaven lips and a magnetic twinkle in his fine gray eyes. He had short, crisp hair that was almost black but shaded into a premature tinge of gray at the sides. The office, small but cheerful and simply furnished, was just the sort that one would expect a suburban practitioner with a limited practice to maintain.

"What seems to be the trouble?" he asked briskly, measuring Dean with a gaze that had little of the diagnostician in it.

The novelist felt vaguely embarrassed. The physician, as well as his surroundings, breathed a candor and openness that seemed to suggest that he had come to the wrong place.

"I fear I am here under false pretenses," he confessed. "I didn't come to you as a patient."

"Then have a smoke," said the doctor genially, reaching into a drawer for a box of Havana's. Dean lighted one while he cudgeled his brain for an excuse, finally deciding on a direct approach. "How is Lamont this morning?" he inquired.

Something—it might have been only surprise at the blunt question—flickered for an instant in the

physician's eyes, then was gone. He did not speak until he had lighted his cigar and exhaled a few times.

"So, you're interested in Lamont. Curious case! He had a sinking spell last night, but rallied slightly after midnight. He may live through the day, if no unforeseen developments set in. Are you a relative of his?"

Dean confessed that he was not, and a look of hazy remembrance dawned in the physician's eyes.

"Ah, I seem to place you now. You write fiction. That's a thing I never read. All I have time for is the medical journals and a few squints at the newspapers."

Dean nodded. He was often amused at people's apologies for their unfamiliarity with his output; it was as if they were trying to plead extenuation for a crime of omission. Then he recalled Lieutenant Shane's shrewd deduction in regard to Lamont's tenacious hold on life.

"What do you suppose is keeping Lamont alive?" he asked.

Doctor Ballinger seemed surprised, not at the question itself, perhaps, but at the fact that it should have come from a layman.

"Heaven knows. That's what I have been asking myself. I am administering stimulants, of course, but they would ordinarily be insufficient in such a case. What has kept him alive for the last forty-eight hours is a mystery to me."

"Has his daughter arrived yet?"

Ballinger smiled oddly. "No; and in asking that question you may have hit the nail squarely on the head. We had a wire from Miss Lamont three days ago stating she was starting for New York immediately. Can't imagine what is delaying the young lady. One thing is certain, though. Lamont is alive at this moment simply because he refuses to die. There are cases like that. His daughter's absence may have something to do with it. He may have something important to tell her."

"In other words," Dean suggested, "the confession didn't quite clear his mind. There is something else that's troubling him."

"Perhaps so, though I don't see what it could be. I consulted Littleby on that same point, but he had no explanation to offer."

Dean hesitated as before a plunge. "Doctor Ballinger, is it your firm conviction that Lamont made his confession of his own free will and while in sound mind?"

The physician looked startled, then laughed. "Why ask me? As far as I can see, his mind is clear as a bell, but you needn't take my word for it. Littleby insisted on having him examined by one of the best alienists in the state. He thought Lamont's mind might be affected, and he didn't wish his old friend to place himself in a false light by confessing a crime of which he was innocent. As for your suggestion of coercion, it is simply ridiculous."

Dean agreed that it was. Lamont had repeated

the essentials of his confession in the presence of himself and Shane, even adding a few details to the original story, and there had not been the slightest indication of coercion then. Dean had asked the question, knowing how absurd it must sound to Doctor Ballinger, only because he seemed to have exhausted every other possible and impossible theory.

He made one more faltering attempt, detailing for the physician's benefit what Shane, the notary and himself had observed regarding Lamont's apparent dread of the telephone at his bedside.

"I hadn't noticed it," said Ballinger, looking interested. "It is quite possible, though. There may be some remote form of suggestion that affects him that way. It is possible that at one time in his life a telephone instrument figured in some disastrous episode or other, and now, in his weakened condition, the recollection brings him a shock. Nothing very peculiar in that. I once knew a dying man who went into hysterics at the sound of a violin. I must speak to Littleby about having the telephone removed. Not that it can possibly prolong Lamont's life much farther. His death is only a question of hours."

Dean fell silent. Every thought that rose in his mind seemed to rebound against a wall of rock. Feeling that he could not decently presume further on Ballinger's hospitality, he thanked the genial physician and took his leave.

"I've enjoyed our little chat," said the doctor,

following him to the door. "It is stimulating to come in contact with a mind like yours."

Dean, walking away from the house, could not be sure whether Doctor Ballinger had complimented him or given him a sly dig.

## CHAPTER XII

### A MIDNIGHT VISITOR

**E**LEVEN o'clock had just struck when Dean, after a profitless day, reached Top O' The Hill. Light clouds were scattered over the sky, at intervals obscuring the moon, and slowly moving shadows, vague and jagged of outline, covered the landscape.

All the way from New York he had been pursued by an impression that had come to him several times in the past forty-eight hours. As he walked away from police headquarters after another interview with Lieutenant Shane, he had looked back a number of times to see if anyone were following. While waiting outside the ferry gates, surrounded by a crowd of suburbanites returning from the theater, he had been dimly aware of someone's covert scrutiny. The same tantalizing feeling had been with him throughout the short journey, but at no time had he been able to trace the disturbing impression to its source. Now, as he stood on the porch and peered sharply into the shadows on all sides, he realized that he had been in a state of high mental tension for two days and that perhaps he was giving undue attention to trifles.

After a final glance, he entered the house and

went immediately to his bedroom, determined to give his mind a rest from arduous speculations. He turned on the light, undressed, and picked up one of the books he usually read until he grew drowsy enough for sleep. The volume was of a kind that would ordinarily have exerted a soothing influence on his nerves, but tonight it had the opposite effect. Finally he laid it down, turned out the light, opened the window wide, and tried to compose himself for sleep.

But sleep would not come. While he lay listening to the whispers of the wind and watching the slow movements of lights and shadows across the floor, his mind went back to the happenings of the last two days. The image of Lamont, hanging grimly to the fragile thread of life, flitted in and out of his consciousness. He could see little Viola Gray, a vision of disturbing loveliness and sinister contradictions. The distracting and inscrutable figure of Littleby paraded across his mental vision, fingering the ribbon attached to his pince-nez while his long coat-tails fluttered in a breeze that seemed to have no definite origin. And there was Doctor Ballinger, unimaginative and addicted to facts, as a man of science should be, whose very candor and straightforwardness seemed to place an additional obstacle in front of Dean's search. Even the little notary, plump and red-cheeked, joined the procession of shadowy figures, but he quickly vanished from view.

Gradually his mental pictures grew blurred, and

there were intervals when his mind seemed a blank. Sheer weariness was relaxing his tension of body and mind. His head settled deeper into the pillow, and finally he slept.

Outside, the trees nodded drowsily in the breeze, dappling the ground with undulating shadows. The clouds thickened, the night grew darker, the landscape became as shapeless and unreal as Dean's dreams. The shadows lengthened till only a few scattered patches showed among the trees.

Dean stirred on his bed; for a few moments the rhythm of his breathing was broken, then he turned over on his side and slept again.

Among the trees outside a shadow came suddenly to life. Hither and thither, with furtive motions, it skipped lightly from trunk to trunk, now and then vanishing from sight in the darkness, then reappearing again a few yards nearer the house. By a zigzagging route it reached the open space in front, and then it dropped to the ground and crawled forward until lost among the shrubbery.

Once more Dean moved uneasily on his bed. In the midst of chaotic dreams, a fugitive sound came to him, leaving a trail of uncanny silence behind it. For a while its echoes lingered, stirring a vague disturbance in his drowsy brain, then he became aware of another and different sound, so intangible that he could not tell whether it was real or whether it belonged in his jumbled dreams.

Suddenly his eyelids fluttered open. He was quite certain now that a board in the stairs had creaked

under someone's foot. In an instant, fully awake, he lay on his back, listening. There was a gray blur at the windows; the curtains fluttered lazily in the night breeze; the dusk was vibrant with a multitude of slight sounds. Now he gazed fixedly in the direction of the door. A feeling for which he could not account told him that someone was standing outside.

He reached out a hand and took a pistol from the drawer of the table beside the bed. Then he lay flat on his back again, simulating the deep breathing of sound slumber. His right hand, clutching the weapon, hung over the side of the bed, partly shielded by the coverlet. A faint sound, scarcely distinguishable from the creaks of ancient timbers, told him that a hand was turning the doorknob.

Breathing steadily, but quiveringly alert, Dean continued to look in the direction of the door. Moments passed, and then a draft, accompanied by a slight squeaking of hinges, indicated that the door was being slowly opened. The curtains fluttered sportively as the two currents of air met, and then the abrupt cessation of the draft signified that the door had closed again. Dean waited, his fingers tightening round the pistol. The interruption of his night's repose and the stealthy approach of the intruder seemed but a fitting interlude in the solemn mockery of the last two days. At first he could see nothing, but gradually a blurred shape disentangled itself from the darkness. For a while it remained

## 102 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

at the door, then moved forward with the stealth of a jungle creature approaching its prey.

Dean breathed as calmly and regularly as if immersed in sound sleep. Now the shadowy shape was at his bed; a pair of baneful eyes seemed to pierce the gloom. A hand prowled across the coverlet, reaching upward until it touched his face. The touch was repellent, but his only response was the slight stirring of a sleeper who is disturbed, but not awakened, by the sudden interruption of his dreams. A pause came, and now it required all his self-control to remain still. A white gleam from the intruder's flashlight cut a narrow path through the darkness, causing a throbbing in the region of his eyes as it fell on his face. For a moment it was a torment to keep up the semblance of sleep. The white beam moved downward, along the side of his face and down to his throat, then paused directly over the scar.

A chuckle sounded hoarsely in the stillness. The man at the bed seemed to have recognized the scar. Dean had no time to ponder what it meant, for his astonishment was swallowed up in a sense of imminent danger. The white beam retreated, and he dared to open his eyes a narrow crack. A faint gleam, like a blade of steel, vibrated in the dusk. He felt the intruder's breath on his face, and in an instant his clenched fist shot out.

A startled yaup came, followed by the sound of a body staggering backward. Dean flung aside the coverlet and sat upright, one hand aiming the pistol

at a blurred shape, the other reaching toward the lamp on the table.

"Steady, my friend," he calmly advised. "I have you covered."

The intruder stood a few feet away, crouching as if in readiness for a spring. His hand clutched a long, slim knife, with blade pointing backward. There was an evil look in his face, with teeth bared in a snarl, but the steadily pointing pistol in Dean's hand appeared to exert a sobering effect.

"Drop it," said Dean, indicating the knife. His voice trembled with scorn, for he had the average clean-minded man's contempt for such a treacherous attempt on his life.

A look of sullen submission came into the other's face. He made as if about to obey, but in the next instant he darted forward, swung the knife over Dean's head, and would have landed a murderous thrust if his intended victim had not been on his guard. Dean dodged, clutched the fellow's arm at the wrist, wrenched it until a snarl of pain broke from his lips, dislodged the knife and flung it into a corner of the room. Then he grabbed the man by the coat collar and pitched him into a chair.

"You will be sorry for that move," he said grimly, regarding the cowering figure in the chair with great disgust. He was a lean, undersized man, equipped with the low cunning that makes up for a scrimped body, rather foppishly dressed in a vivid brown suit.

His hat had fallen to the floor, showing his black,

thinning hair, plastered smoothly against the skull. Dean studied his sleek, repulsive face, and concluded that the man was probably one of the professional thugs of the underworld who may be hired to do the bidding of those who lack either the nerve or the craftiness to carry out their own designs.

Crossing the floor he picked up the knife, contemplated the vicious implement for a moment, then flung it into a drawer. His mind was at work on a plan for dealing with the thwarted assassin.

"Guess what I am going to do with you?" he asked grimly.

"Turn me over to the bulls, I s'pose," said the man stolidly, his crafty little eyes watching Dean's every move.

"Oh no!" Dean smiled, a thin, cruel smile that was designed to impress the other man. "You aren't going to escape quite so easily. You'd probably jump bail or get out some other way, and in a day or two you would be back here trying to stick a knife into me. No, I know of a more effective way of dealing with a rat like you."

He studied the man askance as he spoke. An uneasy look appeared in the hard, glassy eyes; a drooping of the lips disturbed the stolid expression that had sat on his face. Dean, knowing that he had appraised his man correctly at first glance, dangled the pistol in an apparently aimless way.

"I have about as much use for a man of your type as I have for a snake," he went on contemptuously. "I don't know why I shouldn't deal with

you accordingly. Instead of taking your chances like a man, you go about your cowardly work like a coyote. Now I'm going to kill you. It will be a good night's work."

His words had the desired effect. True to his type, the other man had weakened the moment he saw his advantage torn from him. His sallow face twitched nervously, and fear showed in his eyes.

"Tell you what I'll do," said Dean, his loathing growing stronger every moment. "I'm going to kill you, but first I'll give you a chance for your life. That's more than you granted me. Stand up and fight. But remember that if I win, I'll choke you to death with these hands."

He flung the pistol behind the bed and stretched out his arms, giving the other man an exhibition of brawny lines and rippling muscles. Dean flexed his limbs tentatively as he approached the chair where the other sat.

"If you are a man, get up and fight," he said scornfully. "If not——"

But the other man only shrank farther back in the chair. Already he was trembling violently, and his lips twitched at the corners. Yet Dean knew that he would take instant advantage of the slightest slip on his part. For the present, though, his show of contemptuous rage and magnificent strength had cowed him thoroughly.

"Look here," he whined. "What's the use gettin' rough? If you'll let me go——"

Dean's scornful laugh interrupted him. "Thought

so! Like the coward you are, you wilt at the first sign of fight. You are brave enough when you sneak in on a sleeping man to murder him, but it's different now. Got anything to say before I kill you?"

A jumble of whines and whimperings was the other's only response.

"Stop that!" cried Dean disgustedly after he had listened a few moments. "No more of that sickening drivel. There's just one thing that might induce me to spare your rotten life, and that's the truth." He regarded the fear-stricken man narrowly. "What's your name?"

"Mills—Freddie Mills."

"Mills, eh? Well, that name will do as well as any other. I suppose you have quite a collection of aliases. Tell me, Mills," and Dean made an apparently playful gesture with the pistol, "who sent you here to kill me?"

"Nobody sent me."

"That's a lie." The pistol rose a little higher in Dean's hand. "I can see that you have a practical turn of mind, Mills. You don't go around killing people just for the fun of it, and you have no grievance against me. Who is paying you for the job?"

Mills regarded him sullenly, apparently weighing the respective advantages of truth and mendacity.

"How should I know?" he said with surly emphasis.

Dean considered, concluding that Mills was probably telling the truth. In accordance with the habits

of the underworld, he had probably contracted for the murder through an intermediary. Likely as not, even the intermediary was not known to Mills personally. The professional murderers of the underworld rarely came face to face with their employers. Knowing this, Dean thought it quite probable that Mills was in ignorance concerning the instigator of the crime.

"Well, we'll drop that for the present," he said. "How much were you to be paid for this heroic deed?"

"A grand," said the thug, after brief hesitation.

"A thousand, eh?" mused Dean, familiar with the slang of criminals. "Not bad for a few hours' work. Somebody must be playing for high stakes. Didn't know my life was worth that much. How were you approached with reference to the job?"

"Somebody telephoned me to meet him at a certain place. Don't know the guy's name; never laid eyes on him before. He just told me what he wanted done and how much was in it, and I took the job."

"Snappy and businesslike," commented Dean. "I suppose this anonymous individual instructed you to get on my trail and murder me at the first favorable moment?"

"That was the idea!"

"How and when were you to be paid?"

"The guy what hired me said he'd mail me a thousand-dollar bill as soon's I tipped him off the job was done. He didn't want to run the risk of bein' seen in my company more'n was necessary."

"Can't say I blame him. You had no fear that your employer would conveniently forget the money after you had done the work?"

"I had to take a chance, didn't I?"

Dean nodded. This, too, was in accord with the ways of the underworld, with its curious code of honor and its elaborate precautions.

"Well, Mills," he remarked, "I suppose somebody is waiting anxiously for news from you. How is your employer to learn that you have carried out your part of the bargain? Through the newspapers announcing my untimely and regrettable demise?"

"I was to tip the guy off as soon as the job was done," said Mills, evidently rendered communicative by the implied promise of immunity.

"I see. He didn't want to remain in suspense longer than necessary. He was anxious to report to the man higher up. But, since you say he has a pronounced aversion to being seen in your company, I don't see how you were to tip him off. A letter takes several hours, and my mysterious enemy would wear out considerable shoe leather in the meantime. Besides, one doesn't like to allude to such things in a letter."

"Nix on the letter business! I was to tip the guy off by phone."

"Ah! A telephone message travels faster than a letter—but it is almost as dangerous. Central or somebody might listen in on the wire. Better tell me the truth, Mills." Dean toyed impressively with the pistol.

"I'm givin' you the straight goods," whined Mills. "One small word goes a long way over the wire."

"Oh, I see. The cheerful news is to be slipped to your employer in code. Admirable precaution, Mills. What the code word is makes little difference, but I'm curious to hear it."

The thug, overcoming some of his nervousness, grinned.

"It's a queer one, but I s'pose one word is as good as another. It's 'scar.' "

"Scar!" echoed Dean, his eyes widening. Then he laughed shortly. He knew now that Mills, governed by the wholesome influence of fear for his life, had told him the truth. The instigator of the crime had selected the one word that was uppermost in his mind, the word that had figured so prominently in the mystery arising from Lamont's confession. Dean gave a little start as a suspicion, which had flickered dimly in his mind since Mills' appearance, took definite form. Somewhere there must be a connecting link between the mystery of the room under the stairs and the frustrated murder plot. Why else should the instigator have chanced upon this particular word?

"It's as good a word as any," he remarked, remembering how Mills' fingers had worried along his throat just before he brought the knife into play. "But you tell me you don't know your employer's name or anything about him. How are you going to reach him by telephone?"

"Aw, that's easy. The message will be relayed from a joint on Bleeker Street."

"I see." Dean nodded. Once more the cunning hand of the underworld was exhibiting itself. "As I understand your agreement with your employer, you were to go to a telephone immediately after murdering me and, calling the number of the joint on Bleeker Street, speak the one word 'scar' in the transmitter. Is that correct?"

"That's God's truth."

Dean reflected. "To test your veracity still further," he went on, "I want you to give me the telephone number of that joint on Bleeker Street. You have memorized it, of course?"

After a brief hesitation and a glance at Dean's menacing pistol, Mills gave the number.

Dean smothered a smile with his palm. Then, in another instant, his face hardened. He peered at the thug narrowly, with an expression that was all the more disquieting because of its inscrutability. Mills shifted uneasily beneath the steady, ominous gaze.

"Say," he blurted out, "why do you look at me that way? "You don't mean to—?" He stopped, shivered, moistened his lips, and stared in unwilling fascination into Dean's eyes, as if trying to fathom the nameless something he saw there.

Dean said nothing, but his smile took on a chill tinge.

The thug's terror was growing apace. "You—you aren't goin' to pull any rough stuff after I've

come clean," he stammered shakily. "You gave me your word to let me off if I spilled the straight goods. You—you promised——"

"Stop it, Mills," said Dean quietly. "A promise made to one of your kind isn't binding. I think you have told me the truth, but what to do with you is still an open question. It depends to a great extent on whether you are willing to do me a small service."

"Spill it!" said the thug, gulping down his anguish.

Dean got up and, watching the man over his shoulder, stepped to the door and opened it. He listened for a moment, thankful that Mrs. Blossom was a sound sleeper.

"Come this way," he said gruffly, seizing the fellow by the neck and leading him through the door. Limp and trembling, Mills followed him to the workshop on the lower floor. Its heavy doors and substantial walls had been designed with a view to shutting out all stray noises. Dean locked the door, then shoved his captive into a chair, and pushed the telephone in front of him.

"I'm giving you one more chance for your life, Mills. If you try any tricks, you will never leave this room alive. Here's the telephone. I want you to call up the joint on Bleeker Street and say 'scar.' "

A whimper fell from Mills' lips. He looked up into Dean's threatening face, swallowed a few times, and with an air of abject submission removed the receiver.

"Remember—no tricks," said Dean quietly. He

112 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

stood at the thug's back, pressing the muzzle of the pistol gently but significantly against his neck.

With a fresh shiver Mills brought the receiver to his ear. A sleepy voice in a distant exchange inquired what number was wanted. Then came a long delay, finally broken by a chesty "hello" in a masculine voice. Leaning over the sitting man, Dean could hear it rising clearly over the myriad whispers on the wire. He increased the pressure of the pistol against Mill's neck.

"Careful!" he whispered.

Mills drew a long breath, hunched forward a little, put his lips to the transmitter, and spoke the one word:

"Scar."

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE TEST

**I**T'S a corker! I'll tell the world it is! Sounds just like a chapter from one of your novels, Dean."

Lieutenant Shane spread out his long legs and looked somewhat like a disillusioned youngster who refuses to swallow the tale of the fairy queen and the ogre. They were sitting in an office at police headquarters, and Dean had just told the story of his encounter with Freddie Mills the preceding night.

He had risen early, breakfasted in a hurry, and traveled into the city in a taxicab, for it had seemed the part of discretion to avoid the use of a public conveyance. He was anxious to see what construction the astute lieutenant would put on his adventure with the thug and to gain a hint as to how he might best pursue the advantage he had gained.

"Well, you know, truth is stranger than fiction," he tritely pointed out, speaking almost gayly, for the events of the night had left him in a mood of exultation that refused to be dampened by Shane's apparent skepticism.

"So it seems," remarked the lieutenant dryly. "Sometimes I wonder, Dean, if you haven't been working your imagination overtime so long that you

## 114 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

can't tell the difference between fiction and fact. . . . The things you have just been telling me bear a strong family resemblance to the kind of stuff you write. No offense meant. All I am saying is that you have been looking at life through a fiction writer's glasses so long that everything you see is apt to be pretty highly colored. What did you do with Freddie Mills after you made him call up that joint on Bleecker Street?"

"I just threw one more scare into him, then invited him to accompany me to the old ramshackle garage in the rear of the place, and locked him up for safe-keeping."

"More melodrama!" jeered the lieutenant.

"Call it anything you like. Mills can't get away, for the old shack is pretty solid, even if it hasn't been used for years. I warned him that if he let out one single peep he would live just long enough to regret it, and no longer. Early this morning I brought him his breakfast and repeated the warning, giving him the impression that I would remain within earshot all day. No one will disturb him, for my housekeeper never goes near the old garage." He chuckled amusedly. "The old dear would throw a fit if she knew that a hired assassin was locked up on the premises."

Shane nodded and looked queerly at the novelist.

"It was a neat job," he remarked sarcastically, "but what did you hope to accomplish by it?"

"Don't you see? By this time the tip has been

passed on to the instigator of the job that Mills carried out his mission as per instructions. Mills, being kept incommunicado, will have no opportunity to correct the erroneous report. His absence is not likely to create suspicion, for his part in the affair ended when he called up the joint on Bleecker Street last night. In other words, somebody—I'm not mentioning names as yet—is at a disadvantage. He's under the impression that I am dead, while on the contrary I have never felt so thoroughly alive in years. When a man is laboring under a misapprehension of that sort, he is badly handicapped. He is very much apt to make a slip and betray himself."

Shane seemed unimpressed. "What you did was irregular as the dickens," he pointed out. "If this bird Mills made an attempt on your life, you should have turned him over to the authorities. We'll let that pass, though. Anyhow, your place over there is out of our jurisdiction, so I should worry about such a little thing as unlawful detention. What I don't see is where your advantage comes in or how you are going to make use of it."

"I was hoping you would give me a suggestion on that point."

Shane considered. His skepticism seemed a little less pronounced. "Got any idea as to who put Mills up to the job?"

Dean shook his head.

"Know of anyone who has a reason for wanting you bumped off the earth?"

"No," said the novelist, "but I'm willing to wager a good bit that it's somebody I've been in contact with the last two or three days."

"While you've been snooping around the edges of Lamont's confession?"

"Exactly. I believe my enemy is one of the persons I've met while conducting this investigation. But it is only a hunch, remember. Don't ask me to explain, for I can't."

"Well, let's see. There is Littleby, the nurse, Lamont himself—" Shane ticked the names off on his fingers. "Anybody else?"

"I interviewed the notary who witnessed Lamont's confession, also Doctor Ballinger," explained Dean, but for some reason, not quite clear to himself, he neglected to mention little Miss Gray.

"That makes five," Shane summed up. "Mean to tell me that one of those five hired Mills to kill you?" His voice sounded incredulous.

"I warned you it was only a hunch. And I am not accusing anybody. But I would like to meet those five persons separately. If one of them thinks I am dead, it will be quite a shock to him to come face to face with me. Even if his nerves are insulated with copper, it will be hard for him to control his surprise."

"You will have lots of material for your next novel, Dean. But haven't you forgotten something? What about the newspapers? The bird who planted the job will naturally expect to find an account of the murder in the papers. If he doesn't find what he is

looking for, he may get suspicious, and that would spoil the surprise."

"Yes, I've thought of that. But the surprise will keep a few hours longer, at least until the evening editions come out. I am supposed to have been murdered at midnight. The morning papers go to press about three, but dead bodies aren't always found in time to catch the edition. For the next seven or eight hours the murderer will have no reason to think otherwise than that I am dead."

Shane laughed shortly. "All right, make the most of them. You will have a chance to spring your surprise on one of the five persons you mentioned this morning." He glanced at his watch. "Mr. Littleby is due in a few minutes. He said he had something to tell me and would drop in about ten on his way to the office."

A look of sudden interest came into Dean's face. He had not singled the lawyer out for special consideration in connection with the attempt on his life, but there was Littleby's peculiar behavior when they met in the house on Hudson Street. The mere hint of suspicion seemed to rebound against the lawyer's rectilinear dignity, but there were several phases of his character that puzzled Dean.

"Not that I expect anything to come of it," remarked the lieutenant. "Littleby isn't the kind that hires rats like Freddie Mills to commit murders. I don't believe he has anything to conceal. Do you?" His lips twisted in a peculiar way and he leveled a cocked eye at the novelist. "By the way, speaking

of people who are concealing things, what about yourself?"

"Me?" Dean started guiltily, his embarrassment aggravated by the fact that Shane appeared to be looking at the right side of his neck.

The lieutenant spoke softly, with a faint drawl: "Tell me, isn't there a scar on the right side of your neck, in the exact position where Lamont said Paul Forrester had a scar?"

Dean was silent for a moment. So Shane had seen the scar, despite his studied efforts to conceal it.

"Why, yes," he said as calmly as he could. "What about it? Didn't think you had noticed it."

"I hadn't, as a matter of fact." The lieutenant's eyes twinkled. "I only asked a question, and you answered it. Thanks for gratifying my curiosity. Lots of people—millions of 'em, I suppose—have scars of one kind or another. It's a safe bet that among those millions there are several that have scars on the right side of the neck. That yours and Paul Forrester's should be in the same place is only one of those meaningless coincidences that creep up now and then. Anyhow, that's the way I look at it. The only thing that puzzles me is why you are acting so mysterious about it."

Dean felt himself flushing, and the fact that his embarrassment was visible made him irritated with himself.

"There's no mystery about it," he managed to say. "One is sensitive about a blemish."

"Even when it's covered by a high collar," drawled the lieutenant. "I'm just wondering why

you didn't say anything about the coincidence after Lamont spoke of Paul Forrester's scar. I think I would have remarked on it, if I had been in your place—provided, of course, that there was no reason why I should keep mum."

The insinuation was too palpable to be ignored, but Dean was more embarrassed than resentful. Yet he could see that so far Shane had drawn no definite inferences from the coincidence of the scar; to him it meant only a complication that was muddled still more by Dean's attempt at secrecy.

Just then, to his intense relief, there came the sound of briskly approaching footsteps. Instantly he thought of Littleby, enjoying in anticipation the rich dramatic flavor of the forthcoming scene. He might be mistaken, of course, and the test might fall flat, yet his expectations were keyed to a degree that sent a tingling sensation down his spine.

The partly open door was flung wide. Littleby, his gaunt figure looking spruce and dignified in his smart swallow-tail coat, walked in with a serene and decorous air. For a moment, in an ecstasy of suspense, Deant felt a whirling tumult in his head. He was eager to see the lawyer's complacent smile fade away and a look of dismay take its place. Littleby advanced with his curious strutting gait, spoke a cordial greeting to Shane, placed his hat and cane on a chair, and then he saw the novelist.

"Oh, hello, Dean," he said genially, without a flicker of surprise on the intellectual mold of his features. "Pleasant surprise!"

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE SECOND TEST

**D**EAN stared dumbly at the lawyer, conscious only that the collapse of his expectations had left a vast chaos in his mind. . . .

The man was comporting himself just as he would at any casual encounter with someone he was superficially acquainted with. Either his nerves were made of brass, or else Dean's suspicions, much more pointed than he confided to the lieutenant, had no substance.

The seconds dragged with the slow tread of hours, encompassing a silence that seemed appropriate for a knell. Dean, aware that Shane was looking at him with a sarcastic twinkle in his eye, managed to mumble a commonplace in reply to the lawyer's salutation.

With an air of condescension, as if realizing that a man in his position was doing a magnanimous thing in calling on a humble police official, Littleby turned to the lieutenant.

"Since I saw you yesterday," he began, "a matter has come up that I wish to consult you about. Unless I am mistaken, it requires the attention of the police. Last evening——"

He paused and looked doubtfully at the novelist.

"Don't mind Dean," said the detective. "He already knows more about the case than I do. You can say anything you like in his presence."

"Very well, then. Last evening Miss Shirley Lamont arrived."

"Lamont's daughter?"

Littleby nodded. "The young lady was expected three days ago, as you know, but something delayed her on the way. Her poor father has been calling for her repeatedly. It appears she arrived in the city about seven last evening and, in accordance with the instructions I wired her, went direct to my house in Kew Gardens. I did not leave my office until half-past eight, so did not see her. In fact, the only person who saw her was Babson, the butler. He met her on the main stairway as he was coming down. Startled at the presence of a strange person in the house, he demanded her business and her name. Miss Lamont seemed greatly agitated and——"

"One moment," Shane interrupted. "Do you mean to tell me that nobody knew Miss Lamont was in the house until Babson met her on the stairs?"

"That's it exactly. It is most peculiar, as you will admit. I have personally questioned all the servants, and none of them admitted her to the house. How she got in, and why she entered without ringing the bell, is a mystery. Stranger still, Babson says she was bareheaded, tremendously excited, and did not look as if she had just come off a train. By that he means, I suppose, that she was

not in traveling dress. She told him her name was Shirley Lamont and that she must see her father at once. Babson was naturally suspicious and suggested she wait in the drawing room until he could inquire of the nurse whether her father was in a condition to see her. Just a pretext, of course. The excellent Babson did not intend to let her go any further until he had satisfied himself that she was really Lamont's daughter."

The lawyer paused and bent a gravely troubled look on the lieutenant. Dean's presence he appeared to have forgotten.

"Did the young lady say anything to Babson," the novelist inquired, "that explained why she entered your house in 'such a—er—unconventional way.'"

"Not a word of explanation of any kind."

"Yet you told us a moment ago," Dean pointed out, "that the lady arrived in the city at seven o'clock. Since Babson was the only person who saw her, and since she gave no account of herself to him, how do you know the time of her arrival?"

Littleby gave a slight start, but it might have been only a gesture of irritation. For a moment Shane's half-closed eyes widened and looked blinkingly at the novelist.

"I have ascertained," replied Littleby patiently, "that a train arrived from the West half an hour before the lady's appearance in my house. It would take her a little less than thirty minutes to make the trip from the city to Kew Gardens."

Dean nodded as if the explanation were satisfactory. Shane's lids dropped back to their former position.

"Where is the young lady now?" he asked.

"Wish I knew!" Littleby shook his head in a troubled way. "The entire affair is inexplicable. After Babson had conducted Miss Lamont to the drawing room, he went to consult me over the telephone. When he returned, the young lady had disappeared."

"Disappeared?" echoed Dean. Shane's lids fluttered wide open.

"And she has not been seen since," declared the lawyer in a tone of grim finality. "There is your mystery, gentlemen. I am hoping you can elucidate it."

He sat back, twirling his long, white fingers over his chest, giving a little nod now and then with his long, narrow head. Shane drew a pad of paper toward him and picked up a pencil.

"Can you give me a description of the young lady, Mr. Littleby?"

"I can only repeat what Babson told me about her, and that isn't very illuminating."

Shane jotted down the meager information. From time to time he stole an incomprehensible glance at the novelist.

"She may turn up before night," he told Littleby. "How is Lamont?"

The lawyer's lips twisted into a baffled smile. "It is most remarkable! Doctor Ballinger now

tells me there is a hope—just a ghost of a hope, of course, but a hope nevertheless—that he may pull through.” He rose and reached for his hat and stick.

“Just one moment, Mr. Littleby,” said Shane respectfully. “Did you ever hear of a slick bird who calls himself Freddie Mills?”

Dean gave the lawyer a narrow, covert glance. The question seemed to bewilder him.

“A bird, you say? My knowledge of ornithology is very deficient.”

“Freddie Mills is a crook, a professional slugger and gunman,” Shane elucidated. “His scale of prices, I understand, runs from five hundred up to anything his clients are able or willing to pay. Ever hear of him?”

Littleby, frowning, inclined his head and pondered. Suddenly his brows came up; his face cleared.

“Yes, I remember now. Mills was a witness in the Stapleton murder case. I was engaged by the defense, as you may remember. Yes, I remember Mills.”

“When did you last see him?”

A brief pause intervened between the question and the answer. Apparently the lawyer was trying to refresh his memory.

“It was about two weeks ago, I think. Mills came to my office and tried to interest me in behalf of a friend who was under arrest. The case did not interest me, and I referred Mills to another lawyer who specializes in matters of that kind.”

"You have not been in communication with Mills since?"

"Why, no," said the lawyer, as if wondering at the trend of the questioning. "He is a repulsive character, and I have as little to do with his kind as possible."

"Don't blame you," said Shane. "Well, thanks, Mr. Littleby. You have helped me a lot, and I appreciate it. We'll try to get on the trail of Miss Lamont at once."

For a full minute, after the lawyer had departed, Dean and Shane faced each other silently across the desk; then the lieutenant remarked: "Well, Dean, it seems our seance fell flat. To tell you the truth, I expected it would."

"Why?"

"Because, in the first place, when a wise gazabo like Littleby goes in for crooked work, he is too smart to get caught at it. In the second place, I have no evidence that he has done anything crooked."

"Except my hunch," said Dean ironically.

"Except the hunch of a man who makes his living exercising his imagination."

"Why not call me a liar and be done with it?"

"All right—just as you like. No offense meant, though. There are licensed liars just as there are licensed embalmers and chauffeurs. But I don't think you are lying, exactly. You are just slicking up the facts. Now, Littleby didn't act like a guilty man, did he?"

"A clever man never looks guilty."

"Something in that. I admit Littleby is clever. It takes a clever man to collect the fees he gets. But cleverness wouldn't have helped him very far in this case. He couldn't have stood there, cool as a cucumber, without batting an eyelid, if he'd had any reason for thinking that Mills bumped you off last night. And he didn't deny that he knew Mills, as he would have done if he had anything to hide. He told the truth like an honest man."

"Or like a man who is too shrewd to get caught in a lie," Dean suggested. "However, I wasn't positive that Littleby was the rascal. I only contended that out of the five persons we mentioned he seemed the most likely suspect. I wish one of the others would drop in." He grinned and looked wistfully at the door. "Tell me, Shane, do you really believe that everything in connection with Lamont's confession is just as it appears on the surface?"

The lieutenant considered, and his answer, when it came, evaded the question. "You have a queer knack, Dean, of firing shots in the dark and almost hitting something."

"For instance?"

"You fired one at Littleby when you asked him how he could know the time of Miss Lamont's arrival. I had a funny feeling that he was about to trip on that question, but he caught himself in time." He paused and peered queerly in Dean's direction without looking straight at him. "And then there are those pieces of glass you found in

the floor in the Hudson Street house—the ones that did not match the crystal of the watch I discovered. I've been thinking about that, too. And I am still wondering what was in Lamont's mind when he stared at you in that peculiar manner."

Dean felt a gentle shiver at the recollection.

"I wonder if we shall ever know," he mumbled.

"And I am wondering whether you want it to be known," said Lieutenant Shane.

## CHAPTER XV

### BLANCHING CHEEKS

DEAN chuckled ironically as he walked out of Lieutenant Shane's office. It seemed as if all the threads of destiny had been drawn into an inextricable knot. He walked briskly, as if trying to outdistance a horde of nagging perplexities. Everything his thoughts touched seemed to turn into a wilderness of paradoxes.

Shane's suspicious attitude was merely a trifling detail in the maddeningly chaotic scheme of things. It scarcely mattered any longer, but he was forced to the conclusion that the lieutenant had definite reasons, beyond those he had stated, for questioning Dean's story of his encounter with the thug. The fact that he had tricked the novelist into admitting the existence of the scar on his neck was an embarrassing, but relatively unimportant, detail. In a situation where incongruities were heaped upon incongruities, isolated complications lost their significance.

For want of something better to do, he boarded a train and went out to Top O' The Hill. He fancied that Mrs. Blossom received him with an air of gloomy suspicion, but he could not be certain. Mrs. Blossom's repertory of moods had always

baffled him. He ate the luncheon she sat before him, smuggled food and drink to the prisoner in the dilapidated garage, smoked a pipe in his workshop and, shortly after two o'clock, announced to the housekeeper that he was returning to the city and might not be back in time for dinner.

"By the way," he added as an afterthought, "did anyone call this morning?"

"Nobody, sir."

"Any telephone calls?"

"No, sir." For a moment she regarded him with a sort of sour anxiety. "Hadn't you better see a doctor, Mr. Dean? You haven't been acting right since Tuesday."

Dean assured her he had never felt better in his life, and in a moment he was on his way.

There was a crumb of satisfaction in the thought that there had been neither visitors nor telephone calls. It meant that the person seeking his life had not taken the trouble to verify Freddie Mills' monosyllabic report over the wire. At least until the evening papers came out, his unknown enemy would be in ignorance of the outcome of the murderous attack.

But Dean's expectations in that direction had already received a setback. There had been more of instinct than of logic in his suspicions against Littleby, and they had crumbled like a punctured toy balloon. He could see now that his distrust of the lawyer had been rather absurd. An inscrutable manner and an unreadable physiognomy did not

prove a man a criminal. The elimination of Littleby from the range of his speculations left his suspicions without a perch to light on. As for the other four persons he had mentioned to Shane, it was hard to think of any one of them as the would-be murderer. Lamont, Doctor Ballinger, the nurse, the notary—it was preposterous!

There remained only little Miss Gray. For some reason, Dean had not mentioned her in the lieutenant's presence, although he dimly felt that she had her dainty little foot in the mystery—how deeply Heaven only knew. It could not have been just an accident that her visit to Top O' The Hill should have coincided with his introduction to the riddle. And there still lingered in his mind, as a result of her visit, a distinct impression of a subtle and intriguing personality.

"Rot!" said Dean half aloud, abruptly punctuating his thoughts. It was sheer idiocy to think of Viola Gray as an instigator of murder. It would be just as reasonable to suspect the notary, or even Doctor Ballinger—yes, even the nurse at Lamont's bedside. He had caught only a glimpse of her, enough to fix her in his mind as a colorless and matter-of-fact individual and far removed from the inner circle of the mystery, her only connection with the case being her position as attendant to the dying man.

Dismissing all these speculations as useless, Dean suddenly decided to go out to Kew Gardens. Anyhow, the air would be fresher out there, and his

brain needed the stimulant of fresh air. Besides, there might have been developments explaining the mystifying movements of Shirley Lamont, the dying man's daughter, of whose arrival and subsequent disappearance Littleby had told. It was of her he was thinking as he alighted at the little station and swung down the street leading to the Littleby residence.

He had proceeded only a few blocks when the sight of a roadster, flashing red in the sunlight, made him draw in his steps. A slight, vividly garbed figure was exploring the mysteries under the hood. For a moment he studied the profile, then walked up and tipped his hat.

"Can I be of assistance, Miss Gray?" he inquired.

She looked up from her bewildered inspection of spark plugs and coils. Possibly she had not recognized his voice, but the proffer of assistance, even if coming from a stranger, must have been a relief. Her pout gave way to a hopeful smile, but in an instant, as she saw his face, Dean stood thunder-struck at the change that came over her.

It was as if a demon's wand had touched her face, transforming its young charm into a look of ghastliness. There was terror in her eyes, a look of icy fear about her gaping lips. She shrank back, shuddering.

"You?" she gasped, in a curiously hollow voice, "You—I thought you were——"

Dean steadied himself. Her stricken face had telegraphed a staggering revelation to his brain,

and he was still reeling from the shock of it. Her face—it seemed a decade older of a sudden—swam before his eyes in bits of gray film and distorted lines, but he thought he knew how to complete the sentence she had left unfinished. It seemed incredible, preposterous, but the fragmentary utterance admitted of but one interpretation.

Even as he tried to gauge the limits of her involuntary self-betrayal, she regained a paltry semblance of composure.

"You gave me such a fright," she told him, and he could see that the words cost her a desperate effort. "You see, I had just been thinking of you, and then to see you appear in person like that was—Well, it gave a sort of shock."

"So I see," said Dean unsympathetically, steadily watching her face. The color was coming back, and with it some of the loveliness that had been erased from it.

"It isn't often one's thoughts materialize as mine did just now," she went on, sweeping back a few curls of her glorious hair that had fallen into disarray. "That's why I got so startled."

"I can understand. You must have felt all the thrills and shivers that one experiences at a seance when the spirit materializes."

"Yes, something like that," she said hesitantly, with a keen glance out of her great amber eyes, as if half suspecting that he had spoken with a double meaning. "Only your appearance was entirely un-

expected. One is more or less prepared for the materialization of a spirit. That's why I got a double shock."

"Sorry," said Dean, looking anything but contrite. "At any rate, it is flattering to know that you were thinking of me. I would have guessed from your expression that your whole mind was on the engine."

"Why on earth should you try to guess what a woman is thinking from the way she looks?"

"It's foolish, I know." Dean regarded her with a mingling of wonder and admiration. Her quick transition from terror to light-heartedness was marvelous, hinting of a more mature experience with life than went with Viola Gray's flowering youth. But again, as on their first meeting, it came to him that probably she had more years and more worldly wisdom to her credit than one would have judged from her face.

"Not only foolish, but disillusioning," she corrected him. She seemed to have herself well in hand once more, but he detected an undercurrent of excitement beneath her vivacious exterior. "Now that you have shocked me out of my wits," she added, "please make yourself useful. What in the world do you suppose is ailing this car? It stopped all of a sudden."

Dean made a rapid diagnosis, conscious that her eyes followed his every movement. The trouble, an obstruction in the carburetor, was soon found and easily remedied. She thanked him gaily, though

again he perceived a hidden strain under her outward sprightliness, climbed to her seat, and was off.

"Don't forget that I shall expect an invitation to afternoon tea soon," she flung back over her shoulder.

Dean nodded grimly. His head was in a state of aching confusion as he started off down the street. The scene just closed could have but one significance, and that one his mind refused to accept. His thoughts were haunted by the withering film of pallor that had rushed across her features as she saw his face. Who would have thought that little Miss Gray, a mere child in many ways, had guilty knowledge of Freddie Mills' attempt on his life?

A mere child! He laughed in scorn as he recalled his earliest impression of her and how he had revised it in the meantime. As he saw her now she was a strange amalgam of childish naivete and womanly maturity, of youthful caprices balanced by precocious adroitness and a marked resilience of mental fiber, but a murderess? Dean's mind simply refused to accept the verdict of his senses.

He glanced back before turning a corner, just in time to see the red roadster draw up at the curb and its occupant step out and hurriedly enter a drugstore. To purchase something soothing for her nerves, perhaps? But no—little Miss Gray was not the kind of person whose nerves were dependent on stuff that came out of bottles and jars. Far more likely that she had stepped into the drugstore to

telephone someone. That seemed much more plausible than the theory of smelling salts. Dean, gazing absently at the empty roadster two blocks down the street, gave a start all of a sudden. Had she entered the drugstore in order to telephone a warning to somebody? The suspicion entered his mind with the abruptness of an inspiration, but in the next moment he shrugged his shoulders and walked on. Even if he had been so disposed, it was now too late to steal up behind the booth and eavesdrop. Besides, he had learned all that his mind could hold for the present.

He walked on a few blocks, and then, for the second time in two days, the brightly polished plate in Doctor Ballinger's office window caught his eye. The door stood open, and a servant was energetically scrubbing the latticed glass panes. Deciding to have a chat with the genial physician, Dean turned and walked up to the door.

"The doctor's in his office, sir," announced the servant. "You can walk right in."

Dean entered. The white-capped attendant who had admitted him on his first visit was nowhere in sight. The door to the doctor's office stood open, and Ballinger was seated at a cluttered desk. He was gazing absently at the opposite wall, as if pondering some difficult problem, perhaps a baffling case of illness. His powerful body was motionless, so deeply did he seem absorbed in his reflections. His face, with its strong and boldly etched lines, appeared hard and cold for want of the smile that

had softened and illuminated it the day before. It was a face, perplexing in its total detachment, that seemed closed up against scrutiny.

"Hello," said Dean, standing in the doorway. "Not intruding, I hope?"

Ballinger turned in his chair, glanced toward the door, then half rose from the chair and, remaining in that position, stared stonily at his visitor. There was a queer twitching of the lips, a momentary blanching of the healthily tanned cheeks, a brief flicker in the deep, gray eyes, and then Doctor Ballinger dropped back into the chair and smiled a cordial greeting at his visitor.

Though he thought his mind had absorbed all the surprises it was capable of receiving, Dean stared at him in astonishment. The doctor's bewilderment had been only a matter of seconds, and then his superb nerves were on the rebound again, but Dean had seen enough. For just an instant Ballinger's eyes had turned glassy, with a flickering haze over the pupils, and there had been just the merest hint of pallor in his cheeks. Dean knew that he had received a shock as great as Miss Gray's, but he had thrown it off in a twinkling. It was maddeningly strange that, within the narrow space of ten or fifteen minutes, two persons should be so startled by his appearance.

"Oh, you, Dean," said the doctor genially, extending a cool, firm hand across the table. "Glad to see you. I have a particularly stubborn case over at the hospital, and I was just debating with myself

whether it is a case for medication or surgery. That's why I didn't hear you come in."

Dean shook the outstretched hand. It transmitted a steadying current to his senses, testifying to the physician's marvelous mental equipment. Then the telephone rang, and Ballinger murmured an apology and turned to the instrument. There was something almost sinister in the complete control his will exercised over his nerves, suggesting a mind schooled in the art of instantaneous readjustments.

It was very still in the room. Dean, slipping into a chair a few feet away, could hear a brisk stream of words overflowing the confines of the wire. It was a feminine voice that was speaking, and it instilled a suspicion in his brain. Five minutes, at least, must have passed since he saw Miss Gray hurry into the drugstore. She could easily have finished her telephoning by this time, unless delayed by such a commonplace irritation as a busy wire or a wrong number. In the latter event it was probable that she had just now been able to get her connection.

The physician listened impassively, with a slightly bored air, the fingers of his right hand toying absently with a prescription pad. "Yes, I know," was all he said, but to Dean it sounded as if he were trying to convey the maximum of meaning through the minimum of words. His magnificent composure was almost irritating.

"Do you happen to know a young lady named

## 138 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

Viola Gray?" Dean could not resist asking when the physician had hung up.

If the question surprised Ballinger, his face did not betray the fact by so much as a flicker. Before answering, he reached into a drawer and handed a box of perfectos across the table.

"I am changing my brand, and I think you will like it," he explained. "Miss Gray? Curious you should ask that question just now. Miss Gray left my office only a few minutes ago. She called me up just now to tell me something she had forgotten." He smiled amusedly. "Why do women always leave the most important part for the postscript?"

"I met her two and a half blocks from here," said Dean. "She had some trouble with her car."

"Didn't know you were acquainted. Miss Gray's father was one of my best friends. Charming girl! Well, Dean, have you received any more brilliant ideas in regard to Lamont's confession?"

Dean shook his head. "I understand he has a chance to pull through," he remarked, remembering what Littleby had told Shane and himself at police headquarters.

"I would hardly call it a chance. Only a faint glimmer of hope. He seems to have a considerable amount of reserve energy that has not yet been exhausted. Curious thing about his daughter, wasn't it?"

"Very. Any further news of her?"

"None at all." Ballinger twirled his cigar, gazed at it appreciatively, and sent a coil of blue smoke

spinning ceilingward. "Miss Farnham, the nurse, telephoned me just before you came, but she had nothing to report beyond a slight change in the patient's temperature."

"I wonder," said Dean, impelled by a sudden idea, "if it would be possible for me to see him—alone?"

Ballinger frowned for an instant, then a flicker of amusement appeared in his eyes. "You writers are veritable ghouls," he remarked good-naturedly. "Always hunting material in the weirdest places. I fear it wouldn't be advisable. In his present condition the slightest shock may have a disastrous effect. But you are at liberty to interview Miss Farnham. She may be able to tell you what you want to know. I wish you luck."

"Thanks." Dean rose to go, for there was the faintest hint of dismissal in the last words, conveying the idea that a doctor's time belongs to his patients. Soon he was out in the slanting sunshine of the late afternoon, doubly bright by contrast with the fog in his mind.

An hour later, after an unappetizing dinner in a restaurant near the station, he turned his steps toward the Littleby residence.

## CHAPTER XVI

### SCREAMS

**A** GAIN, as on his first visit to the lawyer's house, Dean was impressed by its gloomy aspect and the chill breath it exhaled. Its very immensity seemed forbidding, and the dreary walls of stone and stucco, with a row of darkly shuttered windows on the upper floor, intensified its atmosphere of desolation. The central part had evidently been built on Colonial lines, but subsequent additions had failed to adhere to the original scheme, producing a singularly discordant effect. Creepers clung listlessly to the murky walls, as if having despaired early in life of their ambition to attain the roof. The very grass on the lawn had a sickly look, as if withered by some poisonous breath, and the thin scattering of gaunt and surly oaks had an undernourished appearance.

As he turned in at the gate, Dean's glance slid along the lengthy rows of windows, arranged with painful exactness and an eye to rigorous symmetry. The vastness of the house, as he saw it with the waning shimmer of the sun gilding its roof, might have been designed with a view to providing ample play for the forces of evil that seemed to be hovering over the sick man's bed.

He was admitted by the same female servant who had answered the bell when he called in the company of Lieutenant Shane, and evidently she recognized him, for she did not inquire his business until he was inside.

"I have just seen Doctor Ballinger," he told her. "He referred me to Miss Farnham. Don't trouble to show me the way. It's the second door to the left, I remember."

He started up the stairs before she could voice a protest. Of a sudden he had conceived the notion that it might be interesting to come face to face with the nurse without being announced. It was just possible—since nothing seemed to be beyond the pale of possibility of late—that his unheralded appearance would have the same startling effect on Miss Farnham as it had exerted on Miss Gray and the physician. The prospect was diverting in a grim, sardonic way, but he saw the shallowness of it before he was half way up the stairs. More than an hour had passed since he left Ballinger's house, and in the meantime the physician had had ample time to warn the nurse, granting that she was involved in the conspiracy.

Leaving the stairs, he turned in the upper hall and knocked on the door to the sickroom. He gave but a gentle rap, so as not to disturb the sufferer unduly. No response came, and after a brief wait he knocked again, this time a little harder. Still no response; the measured taps seemed swallowed up in an immensity of silence. At length, unthink-

## 142 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

ingly, he turned the knob slowly in his hand. A groan, low and feeble yet startlingly impressive, made him fling the door wide.

He muttered an exclamation under his breath at the sight that met his eyes. A shaded light in a wall fixture cast a subdued illumination over the room. Probably the nurse had stepped out, for she was nowhere in sight, and in an instant the man on the bed claimed his full attention. With head and shoulders straining violently toward the little table beside the bed, the one on which the telephone stood, Lamont was occupying a half recumbent, half sitting position while his shaking hand held the receiver to his ear.

For a moment or two Dean stood spellbound before the spectacle, gripped by the awful fascination of the wild look that distorted the sick man's face. His gaunt body was writhing with slow, quick spasms, as if in an ecstasy of terror. Huge drops of moisture beaded his ashen, grotesquely twitching face. His sunken chest heaved as if racked by untold agonies, while now and then a fragmentary groan broke from his lips.

Dean stood motionless, momentarily shaken by the sight. He remembered the terrorized look that had come into Lamont's face when, on his first visit to the room, the sick man's glance had chanced to fall on the telephone. In a moment he realized that the cause of the sufferer's present anguish was that same telephone. Whatever it was that Lamont heard as he crouched on the edge of the bed with

the receiver pressed to his ear, it must be something that inspired him with a great, overwhelming fear.

Firmly Dean disengaged his cramped fingers from the instrument. The sick man looked up, a look of astonishment mingling with the horror stamped on his face, as if now for the first time aware of another man's presence in the room. He uttered a raucous protest, but the receiver was already at Dean's ear, filling his senses with horrible, jangling sounds.

His face grew dark and tense. It was diabolical! The instrument in his hand seemed alive with hideous sounds. He heard a scream, long and piercing, edged with a freezing anguish. The voice was a woman's. Another scream came, followed by a medley of cries and moans and a hubbub of rushing feet. Then silence.

He thrust the telephone from him as if it were a venomous thing. A monstrous discord was echoing in his ears. It seemed to fill the room with horrible sounds. He looked at Lamont, leaning weakly against the pillows, his chest heaving with labored breathing.

"Who was it?" he asked. "Where did it come from?"

The sick man's lips twisted open. There was a look in his straining eyes, fixed shudderingly on Dean's face, that seemed to clamor for vocal expression, but no words came. In the next moment it seemed as if an alien power had sealed his lips.

He uttered a groan, and his head sank a little deeper among the pillows.

"It's all right. There will be no more of that," Dean assured him, scarcely knowing the meaning of his words, his only thought being to quiet the sufferer. He glanced toward the door, and suddenly he felt that he must not be found there. He had made a discovery, though as yet he did not know what it meant. If he were to follow it up, it was best that his visit to the room should remain a secret between the sick man and himself. He moved a little closer toward the bed.

"I am your friend," he whispered, then paused for a moment. There was a bit of grotesquerie in his declaration of friendship for a man who by his own confession was his murderer. "Everything will be all right. But you mustn't tell anyone that I have been here. Will you promise?"

A light of understanding broke through the film of dread in Lamont's eyes. He nodded, and then his eyes slid downward a little, to the point where Dean's collar obscured the scar on his neck. With a little shiver Dean reacted to the incongruity of the moment, then quickly left the room and closed the door behind him. In Lamont's stricken face he had seen a sign which told him that the sick man would tell no one of his visit to the room.

He turned toward the stairs, but ascending footsteps made him pause. Looking down the dusky, winding staircase, he caught a glimpse of a nurse's white headdress. He had no desire for an encounter,

so he decided to proceed upward instead of down. The third story of the building, whose shuttered windows he had seen from the outside, should contain a number of nooks in each of which he could hide securely while planning what to do next. Lightly he swung up the carpeted stairs, reaching the landing just as he heard the door to the sick-room open. The nurse was returning to her patient.

It was very still up there, scarcely a sound penetrating from the lower floors, but his head seemed full of shrill echoes. Those fearful cries! Each haunting echo sent a shiver down his spine. He felt a tingling horror each time they were re-created in his imagination. What had they meant? Did Lamont, vacillating on the brink of the black abyss, know their significance? If so, why hadn't he—? But Dean's mind reeled beneath a welter of incomprehensible things. All he knew was that the cries had been uttered by a woman, wrung from the depths of a soul in anguish.

At random he had entered one of the rooms bordering upon the long hall. The air was stale in there, as if sun and wind had not freshened it in months. The furnishings, with their white draperies, looked ghostly in the darkness. Evidently he was in a part of the house that had not been used of late, having probably been closed soon after the death of Littleby's wife. Moving guardedly in the gloom, he stepped to one of the windows, raised it a few inches, and opened the shutter.

The sun had set and black clouds were rolling

up over the horizon. There was a sultriness in the air that presaged a stormy night. The lights of the town glimmered tranquilly in the heat waves that clung to earth like a quivering mist. He was looking out upon a backyard, cluttered with an accumulation of shadowy objects, with a high stone wall in the rear. From one of the houses on the opposite street came the strains of a violin, breaking in upon his reflections with a curiously irrelevant note.

Those cries? In Dean's mind they had already obliterated the significance of little Miss Gray's blanching cheeks and Doctor Ballinger's brief but tell-tale discomfiture. The mystery had taken a new and appalling turn. Until now it had been only a fantastic web of incongruities, but now the woof was stained crimson with tragedy. Of a sudden he recalled the unearthly pause that had followed the cries, swallowing up time and space in its immensity. Did it mean that someone had died—been murdered, perhaps?

The speculation brought a quickening impulse to his brain. When he left Lamont's room, with mind awlirl, he had formed a shadowy resolution to trace the cries to their origin. How to go about it he did not know, and to solve the difficulty he had sought a few moments of undisturbed reflection. The cries had sounded quite close, and they might easily have been transmitted from one part of the house to another by the mere turn of a switch. Yet, distances were deceptive on the telephone wire, and

he was no longer certain what he ought to do. Perhaps the sensible thing was to tell someone what he had heard.

But whom was he to confide in? The least incautious move might only aggravate matters, and since his recent encounters with Miss Gray and Doctor Ballinger he felt a great reluctance toward trusting anyone. Littleby, the master of the house, was logically the man to notify, but he was as suspicious of the lawyer as of any of the others. Shane, perhaps—but Shane had politely intimated that he regarded Dean as a liar, if nothing worse. He could picture in imagination the dubious twinkle that would come into the lieutenant's eyes if he should venture to describe the screams he had heard. It was not a story that could be documented and verified, and Shane was a stickler for evidence. Lamont could substantiate it if he would, but would he? Dean remembered the rigid set of the sick man's lips when he asked for an explanation, as if a power outside himself had clamped them shut. There were the local police, but they might not take his story any more seriously than Shane would. It would be hard to convince them that such sensational things could happen in the house of the estimable Dennis Littleby, and any perfunctory inquiries they might make would only aggravate matters and put the guilty persons on their guard. For the present, at least, Dean was thrown on his own resources.

Faint mutterings of thunder sounded in the distance. Near the horizon, pallid streaks of lightning

## 148 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

played along the velvety blackness. Dean struck a match and glanced at his watch. It was a few minutes after nine. He closed the shutters, lowered the window, and crept noiselessly down the second flight of stairs. It seemed as if an irresistible magnetism were drawing him back toward the room where Lamont lay, hemmed in by inscrutable terrors.

His imaginary picture of the sick man made him relax his caution. The staircase was but dimly lighted, and at a turn his foot slipped and struck one of the pillars in the balustrade. The resultant noise seemed appallingly loud. He stopped and listened, uncertain whether to proceed or turn back, but a voice close by quieted his misgivings. The calm, casual tone assured him that his clumsiness had escaped notice, but the words themselves sent a thrill through his body:

“But what’s in a scar?”

## CHAPTER XVII

### TWO VOICES—AND A SHOT

THE voice, subdued and mildly incredulous, was Doctor Ballinger's. Dean, his hands clutching the stairway railing, waited a moment, and then the answer came. The speaker was Littleby.

"Everything or nothing, my dear doctor. It depends upon circumstances."

Dean, positive now that neither of the speakers was aware of his presence, descended a few steps lower. The voices, he now discovered, came from a point where the second floor hall opened upon a balcony. The rich aroma of excellent cigars hung in the still air. For the moment Dean's interest in the subject under discussion overcame all other considerations.

"But circumstances are sometimes deceptive," the doctor pointed out, speaking in the deep, rather brusque voice that had gone far toward capturing Dean's confidence at their first meeting, a confidence that had since received a violent shock. "And there is nothing remarkable in a scar. In my practice I have come across hundreds of them."

"Doubtless," admitted Littleby. His voice, pleasingly modulated, sounded somewhat deferential, as

if he were arguing a case before a judge jealous of his dignity. "Let me make my point clear. I shall call your attention to three circumstances that may seem isolated at first glance but assume a certain degree of correlation when you regard them more closely. Here is number one. Some years ago—five or six or so—a trapper named Simon Cabell was murdered near a small mining town in the Leadville district. The murderer, who, by the way, was never caught, was Paul Forrester."

"The man who was subsequently murdered by Lamont?" asked the doctor, suddenly interested.

Littleby did not answer the question. "Cabell's death occurred in an isolated section," he went on. "It attracted little attention. The murder of an obscure trapper is of no consequence, and it is doubtful if the news of it ever reached the East. At any rate, it was soon forgotten. Now, here is circumstance number two. Something like two years ago there appeared a novel entitled 'Crossroads.' The author was our officious friend, Thomas Dean. The climacteric passage in that novel was a highly melodramatic scene in which the murder of Cabell was described exactly as it happened, barring the substitution of a few names and dates. The murderer even carried a scar with him through life as a result of the episode. His sensitiveness about the blemish was described with an astounding fidelity to human nature. Really, you ought to read the story, doctor. The author's insight into criminal psychology is marvelous."

"But what of it? Dean may have heard the story of the murder and adopted it bodily. Novelists often do, I understand."

"Wait," said Littleby. "I now come to circumstance number three. Dean has just such a scar as is described in 'Crossroads,' except that it is located on the neck instead of the cheek. Perhaps the novelist exercised his license to juggle the facts a bit. At any rate, I saw it myself. He knows that I have seen it, and, though he has said nothing about it, I know that he has been greatly upset by it. Moreover, Lamont saw it the day Lieutenant Shane and Dean called. It was the sight of that scar that excited him so tremendously, although I didn't tell you at the time. Now, why did Lamont receive such a fearful shock at the sight of a scar?"

Doctor Ballinger gave an incredulous little chuckle. "Wasn't the scar on the neck one of the means by which he identified Paul Forrester as the man he murdered five and a half years ago?"

"Exactly," said Littleby in a mildly triumphant tone, "and a few days ago he almost died of shock upon seeing just such a scar on Dean's neck. How do you explain it?"

"I'd rather not try."

"And how," asked Littleby impressively. "do you explain the fact that Dean has taken such pains to hide the scar on his neck and that he acted so peculiarly—almost like a guilty man—when I discovered it?"

The answer came after a measurable pause.

"There is no doubt about the identity of the man Lamont murdered?"

"Apparently not. It is the most convincing identification I ever heard of. To make it doubly positive, Lamont identified Forrester's photograph. To remove the last iota of doubt, a skeleton was found in the exact spot where Lamont concealed the body, and beside the skeleton was found Paul Forrester's watch."

"Then—" The physician appeared to hesitate. The rumblings in the sky were growing louder; now and then an angry flash pierced the darkness. "Just what are you thinking?" Ballinger demanded. "Not that Dean is— Why, that's ridiculous!"

"I know. Utterly ridiculous. But what other construction would you put on the circumstances?"

A breath of moist wind coming in through an open window somewhere swept Dean's burning face. He leaned forward tensely, waiting for Ballinger's answer.

"It's out of my line," confessed the doctor. "I'm a hard-boiled materialist. Let's hear your explanation."

The lawyer appeared to hesitate, and his answer, when it came, was evasive. "Dean seems very solicitous about Lamont's health. He has been making daily inquiries, I understand. I wonder why."

"When a lawyer talks that way, he generally knows the answer. What do you think?"

"Oh, nothing. It just occurred to me that perhaps Dean suspects that Lamont is holding something

back and is afraid that he may divulge it before he dies."

"In other words, he would be pleased to learn that I have lost a patient?"

"Something like that. It's just a surmise, you understand. By the way, how did you find Lamont this evening?"

"Very weak, but still hanging on. I fear something is still worrying him. I asked Miss Farnham if anything had happened to disturb him, but she could offer no explanation. If he lives another day——"

"Dean's secret may leak out," Littleby suggested.

"I didn't mean that. Dean impresses me as an upright young man. I am not sure he has any secrets. What I meant was that if Lamont lives one more day, the crisis will be past and he may hang on indefinitely. Has his daughter turned up yet?"

"No," said Littleby in a baffled tone. "Most mysterious how she appeared and then vanished again so suddenly. I can't imagine why she should—Good Lord!"

A crack, viciously sharp, came out of the stillness of the old house. Dean felt a tremor under his feet. The house seemed full of sinister echoes. Then a silence came, broken only by the beat of huge raindrops against the windows.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### MURDER

“**W**HAT was that?” gasped Littleby.  
“Sounded like a pistol shot,” remarked the doctor in a curiously calm tone. “And it was fired in this house, unless I am mistaken. Let’s investigate.”

Two dim figures moved hurriedly across the hall, a few feet from where Dean stood leaning over the balustrade. In a moment he was following them, without thinking it strange that they should be walking straight toward the sickroom. It seemed only the logical thing to do. Lamont’s name had instantly leaped into his own mind the moment he heard the shot.

Miss Farnham’s terrified face appeared in the doorway as Littleby and the lawyer approached the room. She pointed dumbly toward the bed, and Dean, entering shortly behind the other two men, saw the figure of Lamont crumpled back against the pillows. One arm was flung wide, the other hung limply over the side of the bed. The face, lying on its side and partly buried in the pillow, bore an expression of fixed horror. For a moment Dean’s eyes rested on a splash of red above the

chest, and then a morbid attraction drew his gaze toward the telephone beside the bed, an inanimate thing of metal, yet imbued with a voice of dread. With Lamont dead, would the mystery of the fearful cries ever be solved?

It was Ballinger who, after a brief inspection of the body, spoke first. "What has happened?" he inquired of the nurse.

For a moment Miss Farnham could not speak. Her professional poise seemed to have deserted her. Dean, as yet unobserved by the others, shifted his gaze from the telephone to the nurse. She appeared to be in her late twenties, rather stout for her age, with regular but rather heavy features and the appearance of impassive capability that sometimes characterizes the profession. Now, however, she appeared to have received a shock which her calmly efficient nature was unable to withstand. Trembling, she bent a frightened gaze on Doctor Ballinger.

"He was sleeping quietly," she explained, "so I lay down on the cot for a few moments. I've had a hard day, but I didn't mean to go to sleep. I must have dozed off, though, for the next thing I knew was that dreadful shot, and then——"

"How did it happen that the night nurse did not relieve you?" asked Doctor Ballinger sharply.

"Miss Thompson had an engagement, and I offered to stay on until midnight."

A faint scowl appeared in Doctor Ballinger's good-natured face. He glanced about the room, his eyes lingering for a moment on the cot at the

farther side. "Did you see anyone in the room when you got up?"

Miss Farnham shook her head.

"Was the door closed?"

"I think so," she replied uncertainly. "It must have been, for I am sure it was closed when I lay down. But I heard a slam of some kind just after the shot. I'm not sure just what it was, though. I was so horrified that——"

"I understand, Miss Farnham," said Ballinger gently. His eyes swept the room as if looking for a weapon, but he either ignored Dean's presence or else was curiously unaware of it. "Well, Littleby," he added, "it seems I've lost my patient."

The lawyer, grim, erect and saturnine, frowned at the doctor's little jest. "And I have lost an old friend," he solemnly pointed out. With his back turned to Dean, he stood gazing at the still form on the bed. "Why should anyone wish to murder a dying man?"

Doctor Ballinger shrugged. "I was just remarking, a minute or two before we heard the shot, that if Lamont lived one more day he might live indefinitely. Perhaps an indefinite prolongation of his life did not coincide with the murderer's plans."

"That's possible." Littleby nodded thoughtfully. "Remember what else we said, Ballinger? Something about a certain person who might be seriously embarrassed if Lamont should live long enough to——"

"That was your conjecture, not mine," interrupted the physician. "The person you had in mind is here. He will doubtless answer for himself. How about it, Dean?"

The lawyer whirled round abruptly and faced Dean, whose presence he had not noticed until now. The grief went out of his eyes; they took on a hard, lustrous look.

"How did you enter my house, sir?" he demanded.

Dean came forward and measured the lawyer's long, gaunt figure with a slightly impudent glance.

"In the time-honored way," he replied. "I rang the bell and a servant let me in."

"When was this?"

"Shortly after seven, I should say."

"Seven?" There was a tightening of the fine lines in Littleby's face. "That's more than two hours ago. What have you been doing?"

Dean glanced at the doctor, who was listening with an air of tolerant cynicism. "I called on Doctor Ballinger late this afternoon," he answered, "and asked if I could see Lamont for a few minutes. Doctor Ballinger stated it was inadvisable and suggested I interview Miss Farnham instead. I told the servant who admitted me that I knew the way to Lamont's room and that she needn't trouble to show me."

Littleby glanced at the doctor, who nodded by way of verifying the statement.

"And did you see Miss Farnham?" Littleby inquired.

"No; apparently she was out. I knocked on the door, but no one answered."

"And then?"

"I took a look around the house," said Dean, eliding the episode of the telephone from his narrative but otherwise adhering strictly to the truth. "An old house like this always has its points of interest. Hope you don't mind the liberty I took, Littleby?"

Littleby stroked his smooth chin and looked meaningfully at the physician. "Did you hear the shot?" was his next question.

"I had not yet reached the foot of the stairs when it rang out," replied Dean, again skirting the edges of the truth. "I saw you and Doctor Ballinger rushing in from the balcony, and followed you. That's all."

"It's enough," remarked Littleby dryly. "You admit being a trespasser in my house at the time Lamont was murdered."

"That's putting an ugly twist on a plain statement of fact."

Littleby merely compressed his lips into a tight line. "We are wasting time," he observed. "The authorities must be notified. Not in a hurry, I hope, Dean?" There was a faint sarcasm in the question.

"Well, said Dean, looking at his watch, "it has just occurred to me that there is a certain little matter that requires my immediate attention. I must run out to my home and look after it."

"Indeed?" drawled the lawyer. "And you have just now remembered it." He cocked an eye in Ballinger's direction. "Anything very important?"

"Rather. It's a matter of dietetics. Doctor Ballinger will bear me out in the statement that it isn't good for a man to go without food for eight hours."

Dean's glance shifted from one man to the other as he spoke. Doctor Ballinger drew up his head a little, and an inscrutable gleam entered his narrowing eyes. But Littleby's face betrayed nothing but stark bewilderment.

"I call that unseemly levity," he declared stiffly.

"But I am afraid," said Dean, looking him full in the eyes, "that Freddie Mills would call it cruel and inhuman treatment. He must be a very hungry man by this time."

For a mere instant the lawyer looked as startled as if Dean's fist had swung out and struck him between the eyes. Something too fleeting for the eye to catch passed across his face and was instantly gone.

"Freddie Mills?" he murmured with a slow shake of his head. "Why worry about a gentleman of his type?"

"Freddie Mills isn't a gentleman, as you probably know," Dean explained. "But one needn't be a gentleman to have a healthy appetite. How about it, doctor?"

Ballinger turned to him, looking rather awkward. "You are right, I dare say. I have known persons

whose gentlemanly instincts were in inverse ratio to their appetites."

Dean moved casually toward the door. Freddie Mills' predicament was a grotesquely irrelevant topic for discussion in that room of tragedy, but he had gained a point in throwing the lawyer off his superb mental balance, even if only for a moment. And Dean had no desire to be present at the investigation that would soon be in progress. The lawyer, while conversing with Ballinger on the balcony, had dropped several disturbing hints, each conveying a warning to Dean that he might be called upon to answer a number of difficult questions. Littleby had even cleared the way for attributing a motive to Dean in the event that Lamont's lingering existence should come to an abrupt end. It was all very absurd, but the entire chain of events leading up to the firing of the pistol shot was intimately interwoven with things that touched the core of his sensitiveness.

The door stood ajar. A little knot of awed and gaping servants was gathered outside. Ballinger stood with arms folded across his chest, a thin smile playing about his lips, while Littleby gazed irresolutely at the retreating figure.

"You will know where to find me if you should want me, gentlemen," said Dean. In a moment he was at the front door one flight below. He opened it a foot or so and, still remaining inside, closed it again with a slam calculated to reach the ears of the little group upstairs. Then, swiftly and silently,

he darted back across the vestibule and down the dark basement stairs.

"A few hours' fasting will do Freddie Mills a world of good," was his thought. "It may even make a gentleman of him."

## CHAPTER XIX

### MIDNIGHT

**I**N the light of a match Dean saw that his watch pointed to a quarter to twelve.

For upward of two hours he had sat listening to footsteps overhead, alternating now and then with the opening and closing of doors and an occasional loud-spoken word, all sounding oddly remote and unreal in the vastness and gloom of the house. His hiding place was a room cluttered with odds and ends of discarded furniture, with a small iron-grated window looking out over the lawn in front. Now and then a flash of lightning illuminated his dismal retreat, full of gnawing and creeping noises.

A face haunted him as he waited, offering a piquant relief from tedium and suspense. Time and again he recalled the brief but unforgettable expression that had crossed Littleby's features as he mentioned the name of Freddie Mills. It could not have been the name itself that disturbed the lawyer, for he had previously admitted having had certain dealings with the thug, so his momentary perturbation must have been due to the particular connection in which Dean had alluded to the fellow's famished condition.

Granting that Littleby had instigated the attempt on Dean's life, the details would probably have been arranged by a middleman, as was the custom in quarters where murder was a commodity to be bought and paid for, and there would be no need of communication between the man who paid and the man who committed the deed. It was all the more puzzling in that the lawyer, unlike Miss Gray and Doctor Ballinger, had shown no commotion whatever when he came unexpectedly face to face with Dean in the presence of Lieutenant Shane that morning. Since the novelist's appearance had failed to shock him, why should he be disturbed by a casual reference to the thug's appetite?

Dean found the question unanswerable, but he wondered how Littleby would comport himself after the hubbub of the investigation had subsided and, the authorities having withdrawn and the servants retired to their quarters, the house would be quiet once more. That was his reason for waiting in that remote and squalid basement room.

Doubts assailed him as he tried to while away the heavy-footed minutes. Perhaps his suspicions in regard to Littleby were rooted only in a stubborn and unreasonable bias, nourished, perhaps, by Lieutenant Shane's refusal to consider his views seriously. Suspicion feeds and thrives on ridicule and skepticism. Moreover, the behavior of Miss Gray and Doctor Ballinger had been just as equivocal as Littleby's. Both had shown unmistakable surprise at his appearance in flesh and blood following Fred-

die Mills' attempt on his life, yet these two had made no distinct impression upon him, nothing stronger than an acute sense of mystification. With Littleby it was different, and he wondered whether he was being led astray by superficial appearances.

The commotion upstairs was gradually quieting down. Looking out through the little iron-barred window in front, he saw a number of shadowy forms hustle through the downpour and step into a waiting car. Evidently the investigation was over for the night, and he wondered what turn it had taken and how many times his name had been mentioned during the questioning. He chuckled grimly as his imagination pictured Littleby deftly turning suspicion in his direction, elaborating on the idea he had outlined to Doctor Ballinger on the balcony. The murder of Lamont was an astonishing thing, baffling in the extreme with its apparent lack of motive, and the authorities would clutch at any straw that came floating along in their efforts to solve the mystery.

Dean found himself dealing with staggering enigmas whenever his thoughts turned to the murder. Well, on that point at least, the lawyer was beyond suspicion, even such suspicion as might be conceived in the mind of an imaginative novelist. Dean himself could vouch for Littleby's absolute alibi, for he could testify that he had been in conversation with Doctor Ballinger when the shot rang out. But neither Littleby nor the doctor, even if so inclined, would be able to support any alibi that Dean might be required to produce.

"No reciprocity in a situation like that," thought Dean, leaving the upturned packing case on which he had sat and fumbling his way toward the door. "I can testify that neither Littleby nor the doctor committed the murder, but they can't oblige me in return. That's what comes of being an eaves-dropper."

He opened the door and listened. No sounds came, but he waited a while longer before he stepped out in the wide open space that occupied the greater part of the basement. Cautiously he picked his way toward the stairs and looked upward to where a light glowed dimly far above his head. The utter silence of the house, disturbed only by the slashing beat of rain and wind against the walls, testified that the members of the household had gone in search of whatever rest was to be found in a place haunted by the ghosts of tragedy.

Silently he crept upward, unceasingly alert against a possible interruption. Now he was in the main vestibule, and directly overhead were the bedrooms, including the death chamber and probably also Littleby's sleeping quarters. His conduct in prowling about a strange house at night was fantastic in the extreme, but he was dealing with a wildly fantastic situation. In a moment he was ascending the main staircase, passing the turn where he had stood listening to the conversation between Ballinger and the lawyer. A dozen more steps, and he reached the landing, faintly illuminated by an electric candle in the hand of an obscure brass figure

poised against the wall. In front of him were several doors, the one directly ahead communicating with the death chamber. Beneath one of the others, located a few steps to his left, was a slim pencil streak of light.

"Littleby's room?" he wondered, with eyes fixed on the narrow sliver of light that was the only sign of life in the surroundings. He drew a little closer, listened for a moment, then drew back with a start and bounded silently toward the stairs, crouching low in the shadows just as the door came open. From his position, sheltered by a massive pillar, he could see the tall and gaunt form of Littleby appearing in the doorway and looking suspiciously to right and left.

The sight, with its suggestion of stealth and an uneasy mind, accelerated his pulse beats. Evidently the lawyer wished to assure himself that he was unobserved before he proceeded with whatever undertaking he had in mind. It was only the dimness of the light and the sheltering pillar in front of him that saved Dean from discovery.

After a brief wait the lawyer closed the door behind him and stepped cautiously forward, pausing directly in front of the room Lamont had occupied. For a few moments his lean form stood silhouetted against the dusky background, in an attitude of troubled brooding, then he pushed the door open and entered. Dean, stretching forward in his hiding place, saw him reach out an arm along the

wall, and in the next moment, with a slight click, the light went on in the death chamber.

The watcher could scarcely restrain himself. His vision of the room encompassed only a side view of the bed, but he could see a lifeless arm drooping down over the edge, with fingers slightly spread out, just as he had seen it when he entered the room behind Littleby and the doctor a few hours earlier. The lawyer was standing a few feet inside the door, erect and motionless, his head turned toward the bed, seemingly absorbed in contemplation. As yet Dean was at a loss to know the purpose of his visit, nor could he determine whether the lawyer was moved by morbid curiosity, or by a sentimental affection for the dead man, or something far stronger.

Presently Littleby moved again, disappearing from the watcher's range of vision, but an occasional scraping sound suggested that the other man was down on his knees and moving about on the floor as if searching for something. Dean wondered whether he should risk venturing forward to see better, but just then a faint metallic sound, like that produced when a telephone receiver is lifted from the hook, sent a reminiscent thrill down his back. Littleby was using the telephone, the same telephone that had been an object of dread with Lamont and over which Dean himself had heard those appalling screams.

He strained his ears, but the lawyer was talking in tones so low that he could not distinguish a single word. The conversation lasted only a minute or so,

and then Littleby abruptly extinguished the light and stepped out of the room, leaving Dean a meager moment in which to readjust himself in his position. For an instant he thought the other man had seen him, for he moved straight toward the point where he was crouching behind the pillar, but to his relief the lawyer turned within a few feet of him and swung up the stairs. Dean waited, consumed with curiosity concerning the man's peculiar movements. Littleby was now prowling about the deserted rooms upstairs, with their shuttered windows and bur-lapped furniture, in one of which Dean had spent an hour in solid but unavailing thinking before he descended to become a chance eavesdropper upon the conversation on the balcony. What could Littleby be doing up there, in those dreary and moldy-smelling rooms?

He started in pursuit as he asked himself the question. Reaching the upper landing, he could detect neither sound nor sign of his quarry. A long, black hall stretched before him, with doors on either side. Here the darkness was impenetrable, almost a palpable thing. Dean moved forward, constantly on his guard against an accidental encounter. The hall was wide enough to permit two persons to pass if one kept close to the wall. The slight sounds he made as he continued his difficult progress were instantly swallowed up in the clamor of wind and rain.

Suddenly he drew in his steps, then stepped into the shallow recess formed by a door. Toward the

farther end of the corridor a slim wedge of light had suddenly appeared. The pale glow, evidently a small electric flashlight, jogged and skipped swiftly down the length of the hall, as if to spy out a possible watcher lurking in the shadows. Dimly outlined in the wake of the darting beacon stood Littleby.

Dean pressed close to the door, thankful that the narrow niche sheltered him against the prying eye of the flashlight. Doubtless the lawyer wished to assure himself that he was unobserved before he proceeded. Now he turned and faced the blank wall that seemed to border the corridor at that end, and in a moment Dean saw his thin, clawlike hand crawling upward, moving toward a point level with his head. Though the light was dim, the picture of those slim, white talons creeping with a predacious touch over the wall held him fascinated, but he had little time to wonder what it signified. A click sounded faintly, then the light was blotted out.

Dean waited. The darkness, with Littleby's clawing fingers flashing in his vision, had a choking quality. No sounds came from the farther end of the corridor; it was as if Littleby had vanished through the solid wall in front of him. After a bewildering interval Dean moved cautiously forward, approaching the point where the lawyer had disappeared. The wall, as his hands groped over it, gave him an impression of baffling solidity. It was unthinkable that the lawyer had passed through

## 170 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

such an obstruction, yet there seemed to be no other solution.

A warning signal flashed through his consciousness as he stood pondering the enigma. Instinctively he felt that the lawyer was about to return as mysteriously as he had disappeared. He had been gone about five minutes, perhaps a trifle longer. Dean slid back, hugged another sheltering doorway, waited in a tremor of suspense while something passed him in the blackness, moving in the direction of the stairs, until the opening and closing of a door on the floor below told him that Littleby had gone to his room.

Then Dean stepped out of his shelter and again approached the point of Littleby's egress and ingress. He felt that the explanation of the lawyer's movements would, if he could but find it, explain several other things as well. Absently he moved his hand toward the upper level of the wall where Littleby's fingers had described that peculiar movement. Back and forth his hand slid, moving within a radius circumscribed by his recollection of the scene, and at length a slight protuberance, yielding elastically to a firm pressure, signified that he had discovered something. A sluggish current of air told that a door had glided silently back into its groove, opening an aperture in front of him.

Dean passed through, feeling an exultant throb of his pulses. Soon he would know the secret of Littleby's nocturnal venture. Evidently he was in a small hall or anteroom, for there were walls on

either side as he moved forward, guided by a slim streak of light a few feet ahead.

It was as if he had suddenly stepped into a sanctuary of silence. Not a sound was to be heard, not even the beat of rain or the claps of thunder that had broken the musty quietude in the outer hall. On all sides reigned the complete stillness that is afforded only by sound-proof walls.

In a moment, his whole body atingle with suspense, he reached the faintly penciled streak of light. His fumbling fingers found a knob. He turned it, pulled gently, and a door came open. Before him was a large, well-lighted room, hexagonal in shape and having a domed ceiling. It was a curiously arranged room, and the strangeness of it made him stop and blink his eyes in wonder.

But stranger still was the young woman who, with a look of dread in her eyes and a gasp of fright on her lips, sprang up to meet him as he entered.

## CHAPTER XX

SHIRLEY LAMONT

“GOOD evening,” said Dean lamely, for it was one of those stultifying moments when the tongue finds only banalities to utter. “Hope I didn’t frighten you?” He stared at her—a bit rudely, he realized—and then an idea flashed like an inspiration through his mind. It came out of nowhere, as it seemed, but with a force that staggered him for a moment. “I suppose you are Miss Lamont—Shirley Lamont?”

She did not answer, but merely looked at him in her frightened, palpitant way, but somehow Dean knew that his wild supposition had been right. After all, and in view of all the other astounding things that had already happened, it did not seem so strange that his prowling through the rambling house of Dennis Littleby should have brought him face to face with the young woman from the West whose mystifying appearance and equally mystifying vanishing had been one of the multitudinous angles of the mystery.

He searched her face, but his analytical faculty failed him. One could no more analyze Shirley Lamont than one could analyze the fragrance of

the cottonwoods or the exultant sweep of the prairies from which she hailed. She was of medium height, with fluffy medium-brown hair, a slightly uptilted nose which under ordinary circumstances would have given her a provocative, inquisitive air, and large gentian eyes which, Dean felt, would in more tranquil moments be capable of a frank and friendly gaze. Her simple tailor-made suit of navy blue seemed so intimately a part of herself that Dean felt anything else would have been out of harmony. The pallor that lay like a withering film over her cheeks gave an incongruous touch to the picture.

"What—what do you want here?" she demanded.

Dean's eyes left her face while his mind fumbled for an answer. There were no windows in the room, but air seemed to find ingress through some hidden ventricle. Its large size, together with its meager furnishings, gave it a cold and unfriendly air. With a start his eyes paused on a telephone, a common enough thing to find in a house equipped, as this one was, with an intercommunicating system. By some untraceable process of thought his mind connected it with the instrument in the death chamber, a symbol of unfathomable dread. Suddenly he wondered whether Littleby had told her of the murder. It was doubtful whether she had heard the shot, for no sounds from the outside seemed to penetrate to this cloistered room.

Miss Lamont's shuddering gaze, reminiscent of some dreadful experience, made him raise his eyes to her face.

"Did Mr. Littleby send you here?" she asked suddenly.

"Oh no," said Dean, hoping to win her confidence by frankness. "I am a trespasser. Littleby would throw me out or have me arrested if he found me here."

She looked at him as if uncertain whether to believe or doubt. He had an indefinable impression that all her instincts of faith and confidence had been shaken to the depths by some fearful ordeal.

"How did you find me here?" she asked.

"It was an accident. For reasons of my own I made it my business to watch Littleby tonight. Call it curiosity if you like. I followed him, and here I am. Of course, he didn't know that I was on his trail. He might have been more cautious if he had known."

Her eyes, with a faint glimmer of awakening trust in them, searched his face intently. "You distrust Mr. Littleby then?"

"Not exactly. I am trying to keep an open mind in regard to him, as well as a pair of open eyes. The two go well together."

She seemed to ponder his statement for a moment. When she spoke again there was an aching throb in her voice. "You know what happened here tonight?"

He nodded gravely. "Did Littleby tell you?"

A trembling "yes" came on a long, despairing intake of breath. For the moment she seemed so

pathetically crushed and forlorn that Dean felt a powerful impulse to comfort her just as one would a grief-stricken child.

"Poor dad!" she murmured brokenly. "I was prepared for the end, but I never imagined it would be anything so dreadful. And they wouldn't let me see him—not even for a moment. That's what makes it so dreadfully hard. Oh——!"

He took her hand and pressed it gently, vaguely wondering whom she meant by "they." Her big blue eyes, downcast for the moment, burned with an anguish too great for tears, rousing within him a virile sympathy that swept away all the staggering complications that had piled up in the past few days. Her cold little hand trembled in his own, and the electric contact seemed to transmit a flood of turbulent emotions.

"You must go away from here," he said gently. "Will you come with me? Can you trust me enough for that?"

Her dry sobbing ceased. "Yes, take me away!" she cried. "I can't endure this dreadful place another hour. Such horrible things have happened here——!" She lifted her head, and a fresh tremor shook her. "Have they taken—him away yet?"

"Not yet."

"I want to see him—just once—before we go. Will you take me to him?"

"Of course," promised Dean readily. A visit to the death chamber would mean only a few minutes' delay and would involve no great risk. Littleby had

presumably retired, and it was not likely they would encounter any obstacles. If they did, his new responsibility would sharpen his wits sufficiently to find a way out. Though Miss Lamont had not said so, everything indicated that she was being kept a prisoner in this strange room. If nothing else, the curiously arranged entrance and the girl's apparent isolation were proof of that.

"One moment," he whispered, a fresh difficulty occurring to him. He crossed the little hall outside and passed to the point where an opening had so magically appeared at his touch. Upon entering, he had been dimly conscious that it had automatically slipped back behind him, but in his eagerness he had given no thought to the circumstance. Doubtless the hidden door could be manipulated from the inside as well as the outside, and in all probability the mode of operation was similar, but he wished to make sure.

In a few minutes he was back, having discovered the secret mechanism and satisfied himself that the road was clear.

"Littleby seems to be fond of melodramatic clap-trap," he remarked. "Didn't know that legal erudition included familiarity with secret springs and levers. If you are ready——"

He paused, taken aback by the curious questioning gaze she fixed on his face. During his brief absence some of her doubts seemed to have returned.

"Mr. Littleby has told me about father's confession," she remarked in a low, hesitant voice. "Are

you sure you want to have anything to do with the daughter of a——”

“Rubbish!” said Dean as she hesitated over the last word. “If your father killed Paul Forrester under the circumstances he described, there was ample extenuation. You were very ill at the time, I understand?”

“Desperately. I wasn’t expected to live.”

“And your father had to have money to give you the medical attention you needed. Forrester grew insulting when he tried to collect a just debt from him, and your father lost his head. That was all there was to it. Lots of men would have acted just as he did.”

The words slipped out easily enough, prompted by his quick compassion for the girl, but a feeling of weirdness rose to his head. What would Miss Lamont think if she could know that he was the very man whom her father confessed having murdered?

“Do you believe the confession?” she insisted.

“To tell you the truth, I haven’t given it much thought,” he lied brazenly. “Do you?”

“I don’t know what to think. So many awful and mysterious things have happened lately that my brain refuses to work.”

“Then let’s not bother about trifles. One thing is sure. Your father was a man of absolute honor, and whatever he did was prompted by his love for you. You can remember that. Ready to start?”

“Wait.” A wan little smile fluttered about her lips. “Do you realize that you haven’t told me who

you are? If you are to be my escort, don't you think we had better know each other?"

He frowned, impatient at the delay, but he could see that her recent experiences had left her constantly alert against snares.

"You are right, of course, he assented. "My name, though it probably won't mean anything to you, is Thomas Dean."

He started as he saw the magical effect of his words. Her eyes, which had been raised to his with a shy gleam of confidence in their blue depths, grew suddenly rigid. For a moment her face remained expressionless, then a freezing film seemed to pass over her anguish-stricken features.

"Thomas Dean?" she echoed in a small, hard voice, at the same time shrinking away from him as if he were a venomous being. "How dare you come near me? What's your object in pretending to be my friend? You—you monster!"

Dean could only stare, his faculties stunned by her sudden turn to fury and loathing.

"What on earth is the matter?" he at length blurted out. Could she have discovered that Thomas Dean and Paul Forrester were one? It did not seem possible, and even if such were the case, it did not account for her abrupt change of attitude.

"You know," she said in an icy, trembling voice. "I was a fool to trust you, even for a moment, after the way you sneaked in on me, but I felt as if I must confide in somebody. What a contemptible hypocrite you are! What did you want with me?"

Haven't you already committed enough crimes?"

"Crimes?" he echoed dully; then shook his head in despair. "Do you know, Miss Lamont, that I haven't the faintest idea what you are talking about?"

"Oh, you are clever, very clever—like all the rest. You came here pretending to be my friend so you could—I don't know what contemptible thing you had in mind. But you made a mistake when you told me your name. I suppose you didn't think I knew."

"Knew what?"

"That you—that you murdered my father." It seemed to require a colossal self-control for her to speak the words calmly.

"Murdered your father?" Dean, utterly stunned, gazed at her incredulously. "What put such a ridiculous idea into your head?"

"Oh, don't pretend that you don't know." She flung the words from her contemptuously, as if they scorched her tongue. "You killed him because you feared he would live long enough to tell something he knew about you."

"Oh!" Dean was beginning to see a faint glimmering of light. The theory just put forth by the girl was the same as the one Littleby had suggested during the conversation on the balcony. Coming from the lawyer, the dark hints had failed to disturb him to any great extent, but their repetition by the murdered man's daughter seemed to clothe them in a new significance.

"So, the estimable Mr. Littleby has been talking

to you," he remarked. "That explains. You must trust him exceedingly to take his word for a thing like that."

"I didn't have to take Mr. Littleby's word for it," she rejoined, looking at him as if his very presence in the room inspired her with unspeakable shudders. "Father told me himself."

"Your father?" Dean suddenly wondered if she were raving. "When?"

"Day before yesterday."

Dean shook his head despairingly. "How could he tell you of something that only happened a short while ago? Besides, it was my understanding that you were not allowed to see him?"

"But I was permitted to talk with him over the telephone." She cast a quick glance at the instrument in the rear of the room. "I was not allowed to converse with him more than a few moments, but he told me enough. He seemed to have a warning—call it a premonition if you like—of what was to happen. He told me he had information in his possession which, if it were made known, would send a certain person to the penitentiary. He said this person was desperately anxious that he should not have a chance to reveal what he knew. Father also said that if he should come to a sudden and violent end, I would know whom to suspect. He mentioned the person's name, and told me I mustn't forget it. It was Thomas Dean."

Dean gazed at her in dull stupor. There was a dizzying churning in his head. Was the girl's mind

reeling, or had her father been out of his senses when he made that astounding statement over the telephone?

"It's all an absurd mistake," he managed to say, coming forward hesitatingly. "Look at me, Miss Lamont. Do I look like a murderer."

"No, you don't," she said coldly. "You look like an honorable man. When you first came into the room, I wanted to trust you. You looked like the kind of man I could place confidence in. That's what makes you doubly dangerous—and doubly despicable." She retreated with an expression of intense aversion as he came closer. "Don't touch me! You should be turned over to the police, but all I want is that you go away from me. I can't endure the sight of you."

Dean made a despairing gesture. He could see that she was hysterical, that further arguments were of no avail, that his presence in the room revolted her—and all the while he felt an absurd, unreasoning impulse to take her in his arms and soothe her. Resisting the urge, he made one more attempt:

"Is there nothing I can do to convince you?"

She merely shook her head and motioned him away from her, and in the same instant a voice came from the little hall just outside the room:

"Ask him, Miss Lamont, where he was when the shot was fired that killed your father."

Both turned their heads in the direction whence the voice came. In the doorway, erect and lugubrious, stood Dennis Littleby.

## CHAPTER XXI

### MISS LAMONT WAVERS

**T**HE lawyer, fingering his inevitable pince-nez, came forward with a prim and doleful air. Evidently he had not retired since Dean followed his movements in the corridor, for he still wore his sedate swallow-tail coat and trousers of a faint gray check. For a moment his eyes met the girl's in a way which made Dean wonder whether an optical message were being exchanged between them, and then the lawyer seated himself with the ceremonious deliberateness which he affected in all things.

"I wonder if there is such a thing as mental telepathy," he said musingly. "Ever since I left you—it must be fully an hour ago, isn't it?—I have been troubled with a persistent feeling that all wasn't well with you, Miss Lamont. At length I decided to investigate, arriving here just in time to find you engaged in a highly diverting conversation with this—this officious young man. You showed admirable discretion in your refusal to accept him at his face value—the same sagacity in regard to character that was one of your poor father's sterling traits." He sighed ostentatiously. "May I suggest again that

you ask him where he was when the fatal shot was fired?"

His eyes sought the girl's downcast ones as he spoke, and when she looked up their glances once more tangled in a manner which to Dean suggested a secret understanding. Yet he perceived in Miss Lamont's manner a sign of dread and inward shrinking, while behind the lawyer's sleek personality there was a hint of a subtly domineering influence. He wondered what it meant, and then he found Miss Lamont fixing him with a questioning gaze.

"Will you answer that question, Mr. Dean?" she said coldly.

Dean hesitated, weighing the possible consequences of a full and candid explanation and what effect it might have on the girl. He did not know what it was that drew his gaze to the telephone in the rear of the room, but of a sudden his brows contracted, and the light of an idea, at first staggering in its immensity, came into his eyes. He looked at the lawyer, sitting a few paces away with a sort of gloomy self-satisfaction on his face, then at Miss Lamont. He studied the oval of her face, white and tense and showing signs of a terrific struggle.

A scream echoed in his memory and went booming down an arcanum of mysteries. He recalled the scene at Lamont's bedside when the dying man sat upright in bed, his wasted form trembling in an agony of unspeakable dread, with the telephone receiver pressed to his ear and a look of abysmal

terror in his shrunken face. Dean, obsessed by the fearful spectacle, had snatched the receiver from his hand, brought it to his own ear, and then——

Something seemed to snap within his brain, releasing a torrent of wild ideas. Was it Miss Lamont who had uttered that nerve-tearing shriek that was still resounding in chaotic echoes in his mind? If so——

"Miss Lamont has asked you a question," the lawyer reminded him. "Will you tell her where you were when her father was murdered?"

"Gladly," said Dean, a strange calm sweeping over him in the wake of the blinding flash that had just come to him. "I heard the shot distinctly. When it rang out, I was in the stairway, between the second and the third floors. Doctor Ballinger and you, Mr. Littleby, were talking on the balcony. I heard my name mentioned and couldn't see any harm in listening in on a conversation that concerned my humble self. Shall I detail what I heard, Mr. Littleby?"

"You needn't," said the lawyer dryly. "I recall that your name came up in a casual way in a chat I had with Doctor Ballinger. The details wouldn't interest Miss Lamont. It is quite possible that you heard a part of our conversation. We talked for twenty minutes or so if I remember correctly. However, it is only a few steps from the stairway to the room Lamont occupied. You could reach it in less than a minute."

"True," admitted Dean, grasping the implication,

"but I had not moved from my position in the stairway when the shot was fired."

The lawyer smiled, a sad, indulgent smile. "Miss Lamont may be satisfied with that statement, but I fear it would fail to convince a hard-headed jury. But we shall let that pass for the present. Perhaps Miss Lamont would be interested to know what explanation you can give for trespassing in another man's house."

"I can satisfy Miss Lamont on that point, but first I would like to know if I am under suspicion."

The lawyer made a deprecatory gesture with his hand. "Oh, I wouldn't say that, but the matter has a certain relevancy in view of something Lamont told me a day or two ago. He believed very strongly that a certain person was interested in hastening his death, and that person was you."

"So Miss Lamont has told me. You are right, Littleby. I owe Miss Lamont an explanation. I came to this house to have a talk with Miss Farnham. Doctor Ballinger had suggested to me that she might enlighten me on certain points. I entered in the approved fashion, ringing the bell and being admitted by a servant. I told her I had come to see Miss Farnham and could find my way up without being shown."

"Ahem, yes," murmured the lawyer, with a significant glance in Miss Lamont's direction.

"I went up, knocked on the door, but no one answered," Dean went on. He looked as if he found the recital rather boring, but his voice carried

a faint note of excitement. "Finally I went in. Apparently the nurse had just stepped out, for Lamont was alone in the room. He was sitting upright in bed, with the telephone receiver at his ear, in a state of tremendous excitement. I could see that he was listening to something that disturbed him inexpressibly."

Dean paused. Miss Lamont, who had remained standing, looked as if she were about to fall, and he conducted her to a chair, meanwhile watching the lawyer askance. At the turn the narrative had taken, Littleby's face had suddenly lost something of its mournful sublimity, its sorrowful calm, taking on instead a look of growing distress.

"Most remarkable," he mumbled, trying to give a skeptical emphasis to his tone.

"It was," Dean assented. "Seeing that Lamont's excitement was approaching the danger point, I took the receiver from him. Naturally I couldn't resist the temptation to find out what was affecting him so tremendously, so I put the receiver to my ear and listened. I don't wonder that he was terrified."

Miss Lamont leaned back in her chair, her lips tightly compressed, her eyes partly closed, looking as if the narrative had conjured up a terrifying scene in her imagination. Littleby, now and then clearing his throat ineffectually, seemed momentarily on the point of interrupting.

"What I heard," said Dean, drawling out the words in a way that gave them a curious emphasis, "was a scream—a succession of screams. They

were awful! Never heard anything like them. I couldn't imagine where they came from or who was uttering them—but I think I can now. What's the matter, Littleby? Not feeling well?"

"It's nothing," said Littleby hoarsely, essaying a sickly smile of skepticism. "You are always diverting, Dean, when you exercise your imagination. Makes me feel shivery all over. Go on."

"I have nothing more to tell, except that I took your hospitality for granted and remained in the house in the hope of locating the origin of the screams. I am still mystified, but perhaps Miss Lamont will give us the explanation. You raised those cries, didn't you, Miss Lamont?"

The lawyer gave a husky, incredulous laugh.

Miss Lamont looked as if the question had roused her from a deep and troubled reverie. She raised her head, but her eyes were fixed on an indefinite point in space. Instead of answering Dean's question, she asked another:

"Did you say, Mr. Dean, that the nurse was out when you entered father's bedroom?"

"She was, Miss Lamont."

"And father was sitting upright in bed with the receiver to his ear?"

"Exactly."

"And when you took it away from him and put it to your own ear, you heard a scream—several screams."

"Yes, and they were dreadful ones, Miss Lamont."

She sat lost in thought for a moment, unaware of the mocking glance Littleby leveled in her direction.

"Perhaps I should remind you, Miss Lamont," said the lawyer insinuatingly, "that our friend Dean is a novelist and has a novelist's imagination. There is another question you might ask him. See if he will tell us why, after leaving Doctor Ballinger, the nurse and myself in your father's room, he went out of his way to create the impression that he was leaving the house by slamming the outer door, while as a matter of fact he remained inside."

The girl, absorbed in her own problems, paid him no attention. She got up from the chair, and now there was no sign of weakness or hesitation in her movements. She walked direct to where Littleby sat and looked steadily into his eyes.

"I think I understand now," she declared firmly. "It was all a hideous conspiracy. Everything is clear to me—everything but the motive. And you arranged everything, Mr. Littleby. You did it so cleverly that I never suspected anything until this moment. What a beast you are!"

Littleby gave her a long, virtuous look, deigning no answer, but gazing at the young woman as if trying to control his temper in the face of an ugly and unworthy accusation. Dean could only wonder at her sudden change of front, asking himself whether her woman's intuition had been at work or whether the strange statement she had just made was a crystallization of knowledge already in her

possession but whose significance she had not realized until now.

While he was still marveling, he saw a spasm pass across her face. It hardened, grew darker, and a vehement flame seemed to flash from her eyes into Littleby's. She drew back a step, raised herself a little, and the words she spoke sounded as if wrung from her lips by an irresistible force.

"If you did those other things," she declared, "then you did the rest too. You killed my father!"

Littleby gave a violent start. An ugly sneer appeared on his lips, but it vanished almost instantly.

"You are hysterical, my dear child," he murmured soothingly. "You don't realize what you are saying. But I understand. You are not responsible. In a little while you will regret your hasty words. There now——"

She waved him aside as he rose and tried to take her hand.

"Don't come near me!" she cried. "You have deceived me long enough. You are a murderer. I see murder in your eyes. And then you tried to shift the guilt on an innocent man. Oh, you monster!"

She was beside herself, but Littleby's suavity only grew more pronounced as her emotions mounted higher and higher. He argued with her as one might argue with an unreasonable child.

"Now, aren't you just a little unfair? Haven't you forgotten what your father said, that a certain

person who is now in this room would be to blame if he should come to a sudden end?"

"Don't speak of my father? You killed him, and now you are adding insult to your crime. I believe you deceived father just as you deceived me, and then, when you found you couldn't deceive him any longer, you murdered him."

Littleby's face darkened, expressing the resentment a righteous man might feel at repeated slanders.

"I see you are in no condition to listen to arguments," he said with dignity, "but I shall give you just one more before I leave you to think the matter over. Dean has been good enough to provide me with an alibi. He has told you that I was engaged in conversation with Doctor Ballinger when the shot was fired. If you ask Doctor Ballinger, I am sure he will support the statement."

She gave him a long, doubting look, then turned aside, her figure drooping as if the ebb of her emotions had left her exhausted.

"Oh, I don't care," she mumbled brokenly. "I know!" Then, turning to Dean: "If you can forgive me for what I said a while ago, take me away at once—anywhere."

"Come," said Dean eagerly, holding out his hand and instinctively squaring his shoulders, for he had noted a quick change in Littleby's expression.

With a pathetic trustfulness that touched his heart, she placed her hand in his. It was cold and moist and quivered like a frightened bird. With a

sidelong glance over his shoulder he led her toward the door, momentarily expecting a show of opposition.

But none came. He saw Littleby rise from his chair and stroll casually toward the center of the room, and for a moment he was struck by the peculiar smile, reflecting a sort of serene malevolence, that hovered about the lawyer's lips. He tried to erase the unpleasant impression from his mind as, with the girl beside him, he crossed the little vestibule outside the room. While she watched him in wonder, he reached up a hand and pressed a point on the wall almost level with his head. He pressed again and again, and gradually a look of bafflement came into his face.

"Something's wrong!" he muttered. "It worked all right before, but now——"

He paused and glanced through the open hall door into the room where they had left Littleby. Eyes widening, he moved forward a few steps and swept the room with a startled glance.

The lawyer was gone.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE VOICE ON THE WIRE

“GONE!” exclaimed Dean dully, again searching the room with an incredulous stare.

“How strange!” remarked Miss Lamont, coming up behind him. “He was here a moment ago, and this seems to be the only way out. Nobody can disappear like that.”

Dean smiled mirthlessly at the paradoxical observation. Littleby’s parting smile, illegible and yet sinister, was still tantalizing his imagination. Without a word he recrossed the little hall and repeated his attempt, but after a few efforts he was forced to admit that it was useless.

The girl scanned his anxious face in perplexity.

“There’s a spring hidden in the woodwork up there that controls the mechanism of the door,” he explained. “At least it did a while ago. Littleby must have done something to it when he stole in on us. Anyhow, it refused to work.”

“Meaning that we are trapped?” suggested Miss Lamont.

“Meaning that we shall have to find another way out,” Dean amended, leading her back through the hall into the large hexagonal room. For twenty minutes he searched unceasingly for a concealed

opening, but without success. At length he stood aside, surveying the imposing walls, with their faded decorations of a once gaudy hue, with a critical eye. It was a curious room in many respects, and it contrasted sharply with the ponderous sedateness and stuffy conventionality of the rest of the house.

"What I don't see," remarked Dean, "is how Littleby did the vanishing stunt so suddenly behind our backs."

"Neither do I." With now and then a little shudder in her glance, as if the sight awakened a series of horrors in her recollections, she surveyed the four walls of the room. "But I suppose anything can happen in this place."

It sounded significant, but Dean held back the questions that came to his mind. Explanations could wait until a more appropriate time. For the present it gave him a gentle thrill to observe how confidently she accepted his companionship in this new predicament. Yet, only a little while ago, she had seemed firmly convinced that he was her father's murderer. The swift transitions of her mind, suggesting either a keen intuition or else a deep understanding of mysteries that to him were still unexplored fields, were at once astounding and fascinating.

"I wonder what Mr. Littleby intends to do with us," she remarked after he had made another unavailing attempt to find a way out.

"Keep us here, I suppose, until he has had time to consider the situation."

Dean spoke lightly, but Littleby's parting smile as

it lingered in his imagination filled him with dark doubts. "You gave him quite a jolt when you accused him of murdering your father. But you were wrong there, Miss Lamont. Whatever other villainies he may be guilty of, he didn't do that. He was not more than seven or eight feet from me when the shot was fired."

"Are you sure you didn't make a mistake? Couldn't it have been somebody else than Mr. Littleby?"

"Not a chance of that. I recognized his voice distinctly. Not only that, but I saw his face clearly when he and Doctor Ballinger stepped away from the balcony. No, there isn't the slightest doubt on that point, and Doctor Ballinger will doubtless confirm what I say."

She pondered for a moment, then shook her head in a charmingly obstinate way. "Yet I feel he did it. I am almost as sure as if I had seen blood on his hands. It came to me all of a sudden, while we three were talking together. It was just like a flash, revealing everything."

"Everything?" echoed Dean absently, wondering if such a thing were possible. For a moment his hand fumbled mechanically along the right side of his neck. "Well, in a sense you may be right. Littleby may have instigated the crime, but under the circumstances it would have been a physical impossibility for him to execute it in person."

Again she shook her head in a determined way, her blue eyes brimming with a strange obsession.

"I can't help it. I just know that he did it himself. I stood quite close to him for a minute or so while we were talking together. I had the most dreadful sensation, but I can't quite explain it. It was just an overpowering feeling that I was standing in the presence of someone who had taken human life—with his own hands."

Dean regarded her in astonishment. The simple statement rang with a conviction that seemed to transcend all the arguments of logic and reason. Though he knew that the lawyer could not have murdered Lamont, for the moment he was gripped and swayed by the contagion of her firm belief.

"And that isn't all," she went on. "I felt that Mr. Littleby meant to kill me too. I could feel it when he was looking at me. It lasted only a moment, while we held each other's eyes, but it was enough. He was afraid of me. He knew that I knew."

"That you knew what?"

A tremor passed over her, then her glance moved to the telephone. Her expression told him that the instrument was in some way connected with the answer she was framing in her mind, but to himself it suggested a more practical idea. It was just possible that Littleby had neglected to switch it off from outside connections. If so, it should not be difficult to summon help. He stepped to the rear of the room, put the receiver to his ear, but a dead and prolonged silence told him it had been a forlorn hope.

"That you knew what?" he repeated, anxious to divert her mind from their predicament.

For a little longer she remained in a rigid attitude of concentration, then shook her head despairingly. "It all seemed so clear a while ago, but now I seem to have lost it. When Littleby was here I saw everything in a flash, but now—" She lifted her big, clouded eyes to his face. "Strange, wasn't it, what you told us about finding father listening at the telephone? That's what started me thinking, though I wasn't really thinking at all. Not in the ordinary sense. I just felt thoughts rushing over me. Now everything is a blank again."

A frown crossed her face, wondrously appealing in its tragic pallor. For a few minutes not a sound was heard in the room. They were in a world of their own, bounded by walls that shut off all manifestations of outside life and that would prove impenetrable barriers against any shouts they might raise for help. Dean scanned them with a vindictive eye, vexed with himself for his helplessness. The girl was bearing up bravely, perhaps for the reason that her capacity for dread and suffering had been exhausted, but how would it be when the inevitable crisis came? Somehow he felt that it was not far off, that Littleby would soon show his hand.

He tried to shake off his misgivings, doubly distressing because the girl shared his plight. There was a fresh, quiet charm about her that stamped her as belonging in an atmosphere of sunshine and tranquillity, with the friendly breezes of the prairies

ruffling her hair and touching her cheeks with magical carresses. She had been snatched away from all that, precipitated into a miasmic slough of dark and sinister intrigue.

For that matter, so had he. Only a few days ago he had been leading a humdrum life at Top O' The Hill, his days filled with the placid concerns of an ambitious and moderately successful young man. All that seemed ages remote now, separated from the present by a chasm seething with inscrutable mysteries. Events had come with a breath-taking rush, beginning with the preposterous article in *The Era*. After that the vivid little Miss Gray had flashed into his retreat on Top O' The Hill, bringing with her a premonitory tang of tragedy.

The rest had been a madly dissonant medley of incongruities—his visit to the house on Hudson Street, the grewsome relics in the room under the stairs, the accumulating evidence that seemed to substantiate Martin Lamont's astounding confession, his discovery of the fragments of glass crystal—an incident whose significance still eluded him—his visit with Lieutenant Shane to Lamont's bedside, terminating in a wildly grotesque scene, Freddie Mills' attempt on his life and the violent effect his subsequent appearance produced upon Miss Gray and Doctor Ballinger, the haunting cries he had heard on the wire, the murder of Lamont, and, finally, the bewildering circumstances of his meeting with the dead man's daughter.

"What next?" he wondered, drawing a deep

breath as the various episodes in the mystery flashed in shapeless fragments through his mind, provoking a speculation as to whether there was a connecting thread running through the entire web of complexities, uniting the beginning and the end.

As if in answer to his question, a low buzzing was heard in the rear of the room. Instantly both turned in the direction whence the sound came. For a moment their eyes were fixed on the metal trimmings of the telephone. A gasp fell from the girl's lips, as if the buzzing had brought a slumbering horror to life. She sprang forward, but Dean held her back.

"I'll answer," he declared decisively. The buzzing, still continued, had a subtly disquieting sound, like a prelude to fresh horrors. "You remain here."

Paying no heed, she followed him as he crossed the room with brisk strides. In a moment he had picked up the telephone and removed the receiver.

"Hello." His voice was edged with ill-suppressed excitement.

"Oh, you, Dean?" The answering voice, provokingly calm, was Littleby's. "I rather thought you wouldn't permit Miss Lamont to answer. It is just as well. What I have to say is meant for you rather than her, though both of you are concerned. I am speaking from my bedroom."

"Well?" said Dean, with an uneasy glance over his shoulder at the girl who stood tense and palpitant behind him.

"I suppose," the lawyer went on, "you have discovered by this time that doors sometimes turn only

one way. In that case it isn't necessary to point out to you that you will remain where you are until I deem it expedient to release you."

Dean did not answer. Littleby's voice sounded so clear over the wire that he feared the girl could hear every word.

"It is just as well," the lawyer continued, "that you understand the situation clearly. No matter how clever you may be, you will never find a way out. You can shout all you like; no one will hear you. The walls are proof against assault. Any attempt to extricate yourself will be quite useless. You will have to amuse yourselves as best you can. For instance, by searching the cracks in the floor for pieces of glass."

"Capital idea," said Dean.

"Or you might discuss the relative advantages and disadvantages of scars."

"Another excellent suggestion."

"Or you might try to solve the mystery of who murdered Lamont."

"You are improving, Littleby."

"Or figure out how I vanished so suddenly a while ago."

"This is getting better and better."

"Just one more suggestion. You and Miss Lamont might improve the time by exchanging views on the uncertainties of life."

"You are full of brilliant ideas tonight."

"And I give them to you gratis, Dean. That's more generous treatment than I accord my clients."

I believe you will find the last topic I suggested, the one pertaining to the uncertainties of life, the most profitable one. Have you the time?"

"A quarter after three," said Dean after a glance at his watch.

"H'm. Two hours should be ample time for an exhaustive discussion of the subject. You may have until a quarter past five. I hope you and Miss Lamont will give the subject all the serious consideration it deserves. At a quarter past five you will receive an object lesson that will teach you in a most convincing way how very uncertain life is. Understand, Dean?"

A moment passed before Dean could answer. The speaker's tone, with its silken insinuation, left no room for doubt as to Littleby's intentions. A gasp sounding behind his back told him that Miss Lamont had not only heard the words, but grasped their significance as well.

"I understand," he said evenly enough. "You have been so generous with suggestions that I feel like reciprocating. Here is a problem that may interest you. What became of the watch that was broken in the house on Hudson Street? If you think fast, you may solve it before Lieutenant Shane does."

With that he hung up and turned toward the girl. Her eyes were full of tragic comprehension, but a smile hovered unsteadily about her trembling lips.

"Why did you follow me?" he demanded in mock severity. "I told you to remain where you were."

"Littleby is going to kill us, isn't he? We have only two hours to live?"

"Since you heard everything, there's no use denying that that's his plan."

"Then don't scold me, Tommie. Let's not spend our last two hours quarreling. And I'm not going to call you Mr. Dean any longer. People who are going to die needn't be ceremonious. Anyhow, I've thought of you as Tommie for the whole last hour."

Dean wondered why a full-grown, practical-minded man should experience a thrill at such a little thing as being addressed by his first name.

"I didn't realize till just now how nice a common garden variety of name can sound," he told her. "By the way, Shirley——"

"Lee for short," she interrupted.

"Well, then, Lee, why do you suppose Littleby took the trouble to call me up and tell me what he intends to do?"

She did not answer, but her eyes flashed the question back at him.

"This is how I look at it," said Dean. "Something has gone wrong, and Littleby feels vindictive. His voice was full of snarls, though he tried to suppress them. Now, when a man like Littleby gives way like that to one of the baser passions, it's a sign that he's mighty near his wits' end."

"But that doesn't make him any the less dangerous."

"Maybe not, but there is some satisfaction in

## 202 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

knowing that your enemy is worried. A man who feels sure of himself doesn't snarl and bite."

"I believe you are right, but—" She paused as if hesitating to voice her misgivings. "What was that you said to him about a broken watch?"

Dean smiled vaguely. "To tell the truth, I hardly know myself what it meant. Just wanted to give Littleby something more to worry about. You heard me mention Lieutenant Shane? Shane's a friend of mine—or was until the other day. If my hint sinks in, Littleby will do some hard thinking."

"Yes, and then?"

"He may come to the conclusion that, with Shane exercising his wits over a couple of pieces of watch crystal, his difficulties will not be removed by the simple expedient of committing a double murder."

The girl thought for a few moments. "That's pretty deep, but I think I understand. Tommie, you are a genius!"

Dean shook his head deprecatingly. There was only a very meager chance that Littleby would be impressed by the sly hint he had thrown out. As astute a man as the lawyer would soon perceive that his victim was but clutching at impossible straws.

"Oh, no," he said glumly. "A genius would do something. He wouldn't be content with exercising his conversational talents while the most wonderful woman in creation was in danger."

She hastened to his defence. "But you have done all that is possible. Since nothing more can be done, we might as well fiddle while Rome burns."

Dean eyed her in wonder. Her apparent vivacity in the face of dangers ahead and with her father lying dead in one of the rooms downstairs was almost as mystifying a thing as any of the riddles that had thronged the past few days. Shirley Lamont, with her amazing vagaries and her infinity of moods, was adding the crowning, human touch to it all. Then he saw the shadows that lurked behind the smiles on her lips and in her eyes, flickering blurs which told him that she was only dipping her tribulations in the soothing lotion of make-believe.

He was framing a reply, but an interruption came just then. The light went out with a suddenness that gave him a sharp premonitory thrill. And through the blackness, inundating them like a swiftly tossing billow, came the girl's terrified cry.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### BEHIND THE DOOR

**I**T was a few minutes after eleven when the door of the old Forrester house on Hudson Street turned on its squeaking hinges, admitting Lieutenant Shane and a gust of wind and rain into the pitch-black interior.

It threatened to be a profitless as well as a most disagreeable night for Lieutenant Shane. He had just returned from Kew Gardens, where he had gathered the outstanding facts of Lamont's death from the local police authorities. What he had learned was not very illuminating, but it had provided much food for thought, and Shane had pondered the information given him so diligently that after arriving at the station he had walked through the downpour all the way to Hudson Street, receiving a thorough drenching. When in deep thought, he usually forgot such conveniences as street cars and taxicabs, not to mention umbrellas. Furthermore, he seldom cared whither his steps led him. That in this particular instance they should have led him to the Forrester house might have been either an accident or else some subconscious urge stampeding his mental processes.

Closing the door behind him, he shrugged a cas-

cade of raindrops from his gray sack suit, drew an electric flashlight from his pocket and hung his limp and dripping hat on the newel post in the hall. What he hoped to accomplish was not clear in his mind, but it was his habit, when in doubt, to take things in their chronological order. The death of Lamont, although it constituted a sensational development, was antedated by five and a half years by the tragedy in the Hudson Street house, and there were several circumstances pertaining to the latter event that Shane was anxious to clean up. He had told Dean that Lamont's confession left nothing unexplained, but since his interview with the novelist a number of vague doubts had risen in his mind, centering largely round the two fragments of glass Dean had shown him.

Shane was half annoyed with the novelist for upsetting, by random hints and vague innuendo, what would otherwise have been an altogether simple case. In fact, in the past few days Dean had been beyond comprehension. Only that morning Shane had listened patiently, keeping his doubts largely to himself, while the novelist told an astounding tale of having been attacked by a hired assassin whom he had subsequently locked up in his garage. Only a few hours later, the lieutenant had paid a flying visit to Top O' The Hill, finding the garage empty. This, in the natural order of things, should have confirmed his suspicion that the novelist had been fabricating a story out of whole cloth. Yet Shane was loath to jump at conclusions. He and

Dean had been friends a long time. And it was just possible that the thug had managed to escape.

Guided by the beam from his flashlight, he entered the sitting room, dreary and musty-smelling and full of ancient scents. There was a dead stillness in the room, except when the old timbers shook before a blast of wind. The furniture looked uncomfortable enough to be genuine antique. On the mantel-shelf were a row of candles, red and green, with little ridges of drip along the surface. Possibly Dean had lighted them the night he found the two pieces of glass. The lieutenant scanned the cracks in the floor as if expecting to find additional fragments. His forehead wrinkled in petulant bewilderment. Dean and his pesky pieces of glass could go hang. What did they amount to, anyway? Why, nothing at all! Yet, the moment Dean told about his find, Shane had felt one of his familiar hunches impinging upon his well-ordered mind. It was ridiculous, and yet——

He raised his flashlight a little higher, until the little white gleam caught one of the candles on the mantel. It was a green one, and he would scarcely have singled it out for special attention except that he noticed it had burned a little lower than the others, being fully an inch shorter than its companions. He regarded it with an intent, narrowing eye. No reason, as far as he could see, why that candle should have burned down faster than the others. Instinctively his mind fastened on the trivial circumstance. He touched the formation of drip.

It was warm and pliant, suggesting that the candle had been burning within the last hour.

Shane looked about him in the light of his electric flash. Nowhere could he see the slightest sign of a recent intrusion, yet the little green candle gave ample evidence that there had been a trespasser in the room not long ago. His mind instantly turned to Dean, registering still another item of questionable conduct on the novelist's part.

After another long glance at the candle, he slowly walked away from the room, reflecting that Dean, if indeed he had visited the old house, had probably departed by this time. Something made him turn toward the hall and the room under the stairs. He proceeded quietly, making no unnecessary sounds, one half of his mind still occupied with the conclusion he had drawn from the green candle. Everywhere were creeping, gnawing noises, as if the shadows were grumbling at being disturbed by the flashlight. Even a man of Shane's unimaginative mold of mind felt a gently tingling sensation as he approached the little room whose ghastly contents had been so recently removed.

At the door he paused and stood listening. Into his face came an alert, curious look. He smiled rather grimly, flung the door open, then stood blinking in amaze at the sight he saw.

The trespasser was not Dean, but a woman—a flapperish young thing, as Shane would have described her. His quick eye registered a pair of great, startled amber eyes, a flashing mass of flaxen curls

beneath a jaunty little toque, uptilted nose and gaping lips, a highly utilitarian raincoat, with a glimpse of knickerbockers underneath, all revealed in the light of a candle, this time a red one, socketed in an empty ink bottle.

"Oh, how you startled me!" she gasped.

"Sorry," muttered Shane dryly, drawing closer for a better inspection. "Looking for something?"

She did not answer, and he glanced over her slight shoulders at the confusion of odds and ends in the room, as if trying to find the answer to his question. There was nothing that gave the slightest clew to her presence, nothing but the same dusty and hopeless accumulation of scraps that Shane had already gone carefully over.

"Suppose you give an account of yourself," he suggested with official brusqueness.

The woman—she seemed more mature and less flapperish on closer inspection, despite her shy airs and hoydenish attire—was evidently searching her mind for a convenient subterfuge.

"You are an officer, I suppose?" she ventured.

"Lieutenant Shane is my name."

"Oh yes," brightening. "I've seen your name in the papers. You have been investigating the Lamont case. I know you are tremendously clever. It must be great to be a famous detective. There's nothing I'd rather be—except, possibly, a writer. Do you know Thomas Dean? I just adore him!"

It was an odd time and place for a discussion of

literary values, but Shane could not repress a smile. Her naivete, even if partly assumed, as he strongly suspected, had about it a sort of infectious drollery. Besides, he had already reconciled himself to the prospect of a profitless night.

"Yes, I know Dean," he declared. "Great imagination he has. Never had the pleasure of meeting you before, though."

"I am Viola Gray," she announced simply, as if that explained everything.

Shane searched his memory, but there was no Viola Gray registered there. His broad, freckled face was an arena of warring expressions. Suddenly he asked:

"Did Dean send you here?"

"Mercy, no!"

"The doors were locked."

She smiled tantalizingly.

"Hairpin, I suppose?" he said dryly. "I've been told a woman can open almost anything with a hairpin."

She tossed her head, shaking her flaxen curls by way of emphasizing their independence of such implements.

"I suppose you smashed a window then?"

"I found one that didn't need smashing. All I had to do was to take out a piece of broken glass, stick my hand through the opening, and loosen the fasteners. Simple!"

Shane nodded. She seemed full of unsuspected capabilities. It would be a shame to disturb her

blithe innocence by reminding her that there were laws against house-breaking.

"What a delightfully spooky old place!" she exclaimed, with an enraptured glance about the walls, thus forestalling further questions.

"That's what Dean thought when I showed it to him. Queer place for a lady to be prowling around in, this time of night. What were you looking for?"

"Nothing in particular. You can never tell what you may expect to find in a room like this. Scraps of paper, for instance."

"Paper? Is that what you have been looking for?"

"Oh no! I've just kept my eyes open for anything that might prove interesting. Talking about old scraps of paper, I found one this morning that—" She came to a mysterious pause. "By the way, do tell me what you think of Lamont's confession."

"I think it speaks for itself," said Shane, deciding to humor her whims a little longer.

"You actually believe Lamont killed a man named Paul Forrester in this house five and a half years ago?"

"Not a doubt of it."

"It was on the night of the sixteenth of November, wasn't it?"

Shane nodded. Through careful perusal of the confession, the date was well fixed in his mind.

"I can imagine what kind of night it was," she confided. "Raw, blustery, with lots and lots of

clouds, and maybe a little snow on the ground. Doesn't November seem the ideal month for murders, just as June is the ideal month for brides?"

The inverted comparison made him smile.

"Are you sure it was the sixteenth of November?" she asked abruptly, with a little thrill in her voice that belied the apparent casualness of the question.

"Lamont didn't seem to be in any doubt about the date. He remembered it particularly because it was the day after his birthday. But I don't believe he would have forgotten it, anyhow."

"No, I suppose not. If I ever committed a murder, I should look back upon the day when it happened with the awfulest shudders." She demonstrated the assertion with a shiver. "Are you familiar with Lamont's handwriting?"

"I couldn't mistake it," said Shane with conviction.

"Then just look at this." She picked up her bag, extracted from it a folded piece of paper and handed it to him.

"Lamont's handwriting," muttered Shane as he glanced at the contents. The paper was of cheap quality and slightly faded from age. He began to read:

DEAR JIMMIE:

Your letter received. Am starting to-morrow for Butte to take up the matter with the Amalgamated people. If they won't listen to arguments, we will find a way to convince them that——

"You needn't read any further," interrupted Miss Gray. "The letter itself isn't of any consequence. The only things that matter are the handwriting and the date. Look at the date."

Shane's narrowing gaze moved to the top of the sheet. "Leadville, Colo., November 15, 1917," he muttered, then glanced curiously at the girl.

She was again fumbling in her bag. "Here is the envelope," handing it to him, her hand trembling a little. "You will find that the postmark agrees with the date of the letter."

Shane examined it with a gathering scowl of perplexity on his forehead. "Where did you find this letter?" he demanded, almost gruffly. "Here?"

"No. I found it—somewhere else. It doesn't matter, does it? What I don't see is how Lamont could be in Leadville on the fifteenth of November and commit a murder in New York the next day. Do you?"

"It's a bit thick," Shane admitted, again scanning the letter. "And he says he was starting the next day for Butte. There must be a mistake somewhere."

"I am sure there is."

Shane's eyes left the letter and slanted downward to a point on the floor. "There's no mistake about what we found *there*," he said significantly. "Dean turned sick from just one look at it. And the fire tongs and the monogrammed watch? I don't see how— Who's this Jimmie the letter is written to?"

"Does that matter?"

"It might. If he is still living——"

"He isn't," interrupted the girl tensely.

"Oh," giving her a sardonic glance. "Been going through a dead man's papers, eh? Well, you certainly turned up something interesting. It's a great little mix-up—what with scars and pieces of glass and other things. Too bad that everybody who could have explained matters to us is dead. If Lamont had only lived a few hours longer——"

"Lamont?" she echoed in a dazed, horrified tone. "Lamont dead?"

"Murdered about three hours ago. The morning papers will tell you all about it."

"Murdered?" she gasped, then stood rigid, a great pallor dimming the brightness of her piquant little face. Her eyes, full of dread, appeared to be fixed on some distant point, far removed from the confines of the room. For the moment she seemed to have forgotten Shane's presence. "If Lamont is dead," she said tonelessly, "then Littleby murdered him. I didn't think he would——"

"Who said anything about Littleby?" interrupted the lieutenant impatiently. "Littleby seems to have a perfect alibi. He and Doctor Ballinger were talking together when the shot was fired."

"Doctor Ballinger?" She came out of her abstraction with a start. "Are you sure of that?"

"Well, both of them told the officers out there that they were talking on the balcony when the shot rang out. Unless they are in cahoots and faked up an alibi——"

"No," she declared with conviction. "Doctor Ballinger wouldn't do such a thing. He's an honorable man."

"That's the way I sized him up, and his word is good enough for me when he says that he and Littleby were talking on the balcony when the shot was heard. Who killed Lamont is a poser, unless," and Lieutenant Shane smiled a grim, baffled smile, "my friend Dean had a hand in it. The Kew Garden authorities are looking for him."

"For Mr. Dean?" she exclaimed incredulously. "Was he there?"

"He turned up just after the murder was discovered. Admitted he had been in the house for two hours, but couldn't give a very satisfactory account of what he had been doing. Then he disappeared, just before the police arrived. Can you beat that?"

The girl stared at him, her face alive with indefinable fears. Suddenly she pulled herself together, adjusted her hat, and started for the door.

"Quick!" she said. "We must go to Kew Gardens at once—before there's another murder."

Shane stared at her for a moment, shrugged his broad shoulders, then followed.

"Well, I'm damned!" he muttered.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### BLACK MOMENTS

**M**ISS Lamont's cry, quavering on a note of fear, roused Dean from the momentary daze that had seized him when darkness rushed down upon them.

"There's no danger," he told her, fumbling in the blackness until he found her hand. "Something's happened to the lights—that's all."

"Turn them on—quick, Tommie!" she pleaded. "Such dreadful things always happen in this room when the lights go out like that."

It sounded mysterious, but he asked no explanations, but picked his way to the table where an electric lamp had been burning under a soft green shade a few moments ago. A touch confirmed his suspicion, which he had refrained from communicating to the girl, that the blotting out of the lights had been a deliberate move, possibly intended to serve as a prelude to further surprises. Striking one of his few matches, he saw that the filaments in the bulb were intact, and it was the same with the light fixture on the wall. Someone had shut off the current by throwing a switch in another part of the house.

The match went out. Observing that the dark-

ness seemed to fill her with incomprehensible terrors, he struck another.

"A fuse must have burned out somewhere," he remarked as casually as he could. "Let's sit down here and talk."

He placed a chair for her. With a long, doubting look at his face, signifying strong skepticism in regard to the burned-out fuse, she sat down beside him with a slight nestling movement of her shoulder. The second match went out, leaving an interval of darkness that seemed something more than just ordinary gloom. He felt a shiver passing through the shoulder that was lightly touching his own.

"My last!" he groaned inwardly, as he struck another match on the bottom of his shoe. In its glow, the girl was darting quick, frightened glances to all sides, as if suspecting the presence of some invisible danger. It reminded him of the cryptic statement she had made just after darkness swooped down over them: "Such dreadful things always happen in this room when the lights go out like that." The words carried a hint of some terrifying experience heralded by the abrupt going out of the lights and explained the expression of dread with which she looked about her.

The last match flickered out. He gazed fixedly at the dying shimmer of the stub, and then an intensified darkness, with something subtly appalling in it, rolled up over them. Her trembling shoulder moved a little closer to his in an intimacy of dread, giving him a gentle thrill. It was odd how, even in

these black moments of suspense, he was capable of experiencing life's softer emotions.

"How close it is!" she murmured after a while. "I can hardly breathe."

"Only imagination," said Dean lightly, trying to reassure her, but the remark had confirmed a disquieting impression of his own. Until five minutes ago there had been a slight current of air in the room, hinting at the presence of a concealed ventilator somewhere, perhaps high in the domed ceiling. Now this had ceased, leaving only an oppressive stillness in the stagnant air.

"I hope Littleby took the hint I gave him," he added, trying to take her mind off the present and its uncertainties.

"About the pieces of glass?"

"Yes, and about Lieutenant Shane trying to guess what they mean. I hope Littleby takes it to heart. He is a very shrewd individual, the kind that weighs his chances carefully before he acts. He may decide that murder is risky business."

He felt her hand quivering within his own. "Let's not delude ourselves, Tommie. Littleby is a cold, conscienceless blackguard."

"But he has a wholesome respect for his own skin."

"But don't you see? He is determined to kill us because he thinks he will be safer as soon as we are out of the way. We might as well face the inevitable."

"And follow Littleby's advice and meditate on

the uncertainties of life? I refuse. The subject is too depressing. Anyhow, as long as there is life there is hope. If Littleby means to sneak in on us through one of his secret passages and attack us in the dark, he'll have a fight on his hands. I have been still so long that I feel the need of a bit of healthful exercise."

"Oh, but he wouldn't attempt anything so crude as that. Littleby fights with subtle weapons, and he never takes unnecessary chances. I know."

"I wonder how much you know, Lee!"

"A lot, but not everything. Please don't ask me. I couldn't explain. I could tell you of many strange things that have happened since I came here, but my head begins to swim whenever I try to reason out what it all means."

"Then don't try. Just tell me what has happened," he persisted, thinking it better that her thoughts should be occupied with the past than with the unknown terrors the next few hours might hold in store for her. "What delayed you on your way to New York?"

"I was not delayed. I left Wichita three hours after I received the telegram announcing my father's illness. Thirty-six hours later I arrived in New York and went direct to Kew Gardens, in accordance with the instructions in the telegram. It was quite late—nearly midnight. Mr. Littleby, himself, let me in, and I inquired immediately about father. He answered evasively, though it didn't strike me that

way at once, saying that father was under the influence of opiates, and that the physician had left positive orders that he should not be disturbed. Then, remarking that the servants had retired, he offered to show me to my room. I suspected nothing until I found myself a prisoner in this very room."

"The viper!" muttered Dean savagely. "He gave out the report that you had been delayed somewhere between Wichita and New York, that no one really knew what had become of you. Nobody doubted his word, and there was no apparent reason why anyone should. But what about day before yesterday, when the butler met you in the stairway?"

"Oh, that was an accident. One of the servants—he is in Littleby's confidence, I suspect—has been bringing me food three times a day. On this particular occasion I caught him off his guard and managed to follow him when he left the room. Out in the hall I escaped from him, then promptly lost my way. The house seemed so big, and I didn't know which way to turn. I ran helter-skelter, all the time hoping to find the room where father was. I was a bit dazed when I met the butler in the stairs, and gave him the only explanation that came to my mind. I let him show me to the drawing-room, hoping I would have a chance to escape as soon as he turned his back. For a minute or two I sat there trying to collect my faculties, and then—I scarcely knew what happened, but I was forcibly carried away, and when things began to clear again I was back in this

room. After that they watched me even more closely than before."

"Is that all?" asked Dean gently when she paused. Her recital had been interesting, but it had explained nothing, if possible leaving the mystery even more involved than before.

"No, not all, but I don't like to think about the rest. It is too horrible. It was all the harder because, whenever Littleby came in to see me, I had to restrain my feelings. I felt myself turn cold with hate every time I saw him, but I dared not say a word. I was in his power, and he never neglected to emphasize the fact. Sometimes I felt as if— But let's not talk about it, Tommie. Anything is preferable to that. Do you suppose it is still raining outside?"

"Most likely," he replied absently, struck by a new and vaguely alarming impression. Something drew his gaze upward through what seemed a limitless stretch of blackness.

"But in the morning, Tommie, the sun will be shining, the winds blowing, the birds singing. It is always that way after a storm. I wonder——"

She paused. Vaguely his mind completed the sentence while he continued to gaze upward, to where a few gray flecks seemed to swim in the gloom.

"Oh, yes," he said confidently, answering her unfinished question, "we'll be there to enjoy it. I'm sure the old sun will be so glad to see us that he will smile more brightly than ever. My lungs are

simply aching for a few whiffs of ozone after being locked up in this stuffy old place."

He sat rigid, spellbound. Up there toward the ceiling, a flock of sinuously fluttering wisps of gray seemed to mock his tone of airy confidence. In vain he tried to tell himself that it was an optical illusion produced by his overwrought senses and the soundless blackness that surrounded them. Moment by moment the gray specks took on a more vivid reality.

"I wonder if you really feel the way you talk," she murmured, "or whether you are only trying to cheer me up. There is a possibility that you may be wrong, that we may never see the sunlight again, and that possibility makes everything look different, doesn't it? I never imagined one could see things so clearly in the dark." She laughed nervously, with a little catch in her throat. "I feel as if most of the things I've lived for don't matter at all any longer. And other things that seemed insignificant before—how big and wonderful they appear now! Just suppose, Tommie, that the worst should happen and——"

"But it won't," he interrupted doggedly. "Don't be a pessimist."

"I am just wondering," she went on, "if you and I would be sitting like this, close together, with my hand in yours, if there wasn't a chance that in a little while we should both be dead."

"Oh Death, where is thy sting?" quoted Dean lightly, watching with growing intentness the strange spectacle overhead. Now there were a myriad shim-

## 222 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

mering wisps up there, a translucent blanket of mist that was gradually descending toward them, giving him an impression of something loathsome and menacing.

As yet the girl appeared to have noticed nothing. "Just think!" she continued, speaking scarcely above a whisper, "a little while ago I couldn't find words harsh enough to describe how I felt toward you. I thought you were even more despicable than Littleby. Now——"

"Yes, now?" he asked softly, for the moment letting his attention wander from the grimly fascinating spectacle overhead.

Her hand stirred ever so slightly within his own, a gesture at once infinitesimally small and yet marvelously eloquent. In the next moment he felt her start forward.

"Look!" she exclaimed, releasing her hand, and he knew she was pointing to the gray, luminous host gleaming vaguely through the blackness. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"Wonderful," he assented in a queer voice, feeling a sharp inward twinge. For the moment she could see nothing but a phenomenon of rare beauty in a thing that to him meant oncreeping death. Beauty and death! What a grotesque intermingling of contrasts!

"Did you ever see it before?" he asked. "Is this what you had in mind when you spoke of certain dreadful things having happened in this room?"

"Oh no! The other was something quite differ-

ent. There is nothing dreadful about this. It's lovely—like a silver mist rising over the waters. But this," with a touch of awed wonder creeping into her tone, "isn't rising. It is falling instead. What do you suppose it means?"

Dean remained silent, searching his mind for a plausible subterfuge, but finding none. He had noted a queer little huskiness in her voice, but could not tell whether it was due to excitement or something else. The mist was gradually drawing lower, circling like wind-scattered fog over their heads, luminous in itself yet apparently incapable of transmitting light.

"What is it, Tommie?" she repeated. "I feel so queer, as if I were dreaming and wide awake at the same time. There is a hot sensation in my nostrils and my throat. Tommie, you don't suppose that——"

A tremor of her shoulder told him that the faint poisonous breath that stirred in the air, gradually growing more pronounced, had instilled a suspicion of the truth in her mind. A treacherous dizziness, unaccompanied by physical pain but striking terror to his senses, was rising to his head. Inwardly he cursed his helplessness to combat the insidious, venomous thing that was stealing into their bodies with each intake of breath.

"Littleby is trying to frighten us," he declared. "I'll make him pay for this. If only——" He started up from the chair as an idea suddenly came to him.

"The hall!" he exclaimed. "Why didn't I think of that before. We can close the door and——"

Excitedly he took her hand and conducted her to the small hall outside the room along whose farther wall he had searched in vain for the opening that had admitted him to the apartment. The venomous mist, like a ghostly exhalation, seemed to dog their steps. He closed the door, but the deathly essence seemed to seep through myriad crevices, filling the darkness with an abysmal breath.

"It's no use, Tommie," the girl murmured. "There is no escape. We might as well——"

She paused and stood leaning breathlessly toward him. Through the door came a low buzzing sound.

"The telephone," muttered Dean. "Littleby is willing to make terms. You stay here."

## CHAPTER XXV

### DEAN'S CHOICE

**D**ISOBEYING his injunction, Miss Lamont followed him through the poisonous haze to the stand where the telephone stood. He could see nothing but a swimming effluvium, but the continued summons of the buzzer guided his steps.

"Hope you have followed my suggestion," said Littleby's voice when he had answered, "and given solemn consideration to the uncertainties of life."

Dean did not answer. There was a humid husk in his throat that seemed to render economy of words advisable.

"I adopted the one you gave me—the one about the broken watch. I have meditated upon it for upward of an hour, with considerable profit to myself. By the way, Dean, I trust you and Miss Lamont are comfortable?"

"Far more so than you will be a few hours from now."

The lawyer chuckled in a satisfied way. "Glad to hear it, even though your voice sounds as if you weren't feeling just right. Perhaps you had better let Doctor Ballinger look you over. I hope the air agrees with you?"

"It has certain advantages over the air at Sing Sing, which you will be sampling soon."

"Good joke, Dean. Glad to know that you are keeping up your spirits while under my roof. There's nothing palatial about my humble home, but it has several things to commend it. Ever hear of The Nine Oaks?"

"Never."

"Well, there is nothing in a name. The Nine Oaks was a notorious hotel and gambling house some years ago—long enough ago so that most people have happily forgotten about it. It was frequented by a wealthy and reckless crowd from Manhattan and Brooklyn, who didn't mind going a few miles out of their way for the kind of amusement they craved. The Nine Oaks had several advantages that made up for its isolated surroundings. It was genteel, quiet, exclusive, and safe against intrusion by the police. The reason for that was that it was equipped with a number of ingeniously contrived emergency exits. The proprietor had many a good laugh at the expense of the police. You would never guess it, Dean, but the cozy little nook you and Miss Lamont are now occupying was one of the gambling halls of The Nine Oaks."

"That explains," said Dean dryly.

"Thought you would be interested. I bought the house for a song a number of years ago. The business had taken a sudden and incomprehensible slump, and the proprietor had his eye on greener fields. I remodeled the house into a private residence, but did not disturb the emergency exits. Mighty glad that I didn't. They have proved a great conve-

nience. Moreover, one can enjoy the utmost degree of privacy in such a room as you are now occupying. Most of the people who frequented The Nine Oaks in the old days are widely scattered, and the rest have forgotten that such a place existed. A stranger could search the house from cellar to attic without finding the room in which you and Miss Lamont are now enjoying my hospitality. See the point, Dean?"

"Perfectly."

"Dear me, your voice does not sound at all well. As I was saying, anyone occupying the room in which you now are is assured of the highest degree of privacy. His enemies or friends could look high and low for him without ever finding him. If he should fall asleep and, for some mysterious reason, fail to wake up, his remains would rest in peace until Gabriel blows his horn or the house burns down. You follow me?"

"It is perfectly clear," said Dean huskily. Behind him he could hear Miss Lamont's labored breathing, warning him that she was hearing every word. "Architecture is a fascinating subject, but suppose we get to the point?"

"As you like. It is now a quarter after four. You have nearly a whole hour in which to consider things. We agreed that you should have until a quarter past five, you know. By that time the atmosphere you are inhaling will, I fear, not be conducive to clear thinking. In fact, you will not think at all. You will have ceased to exist. Did you ever hear of arselene?"

"Never."

"No matter. It is a compound of arsenic, acetylene gas and certain other ingredients that are less well known. You are experiencing the effects of it now. It is flowing into the room where you are through an old gas connection far above your reach in the ceiling. As yet the pressure is very slight, but it shall be increased directly, supplying just the quantity required to bring about the desired result at about a quarter past five. Hope I am making myself clear?"

"Oh, very clear," said Dean, exasperated by his calm and faintly mocking tones. "Incidentally, it is a lucky thing for you that we are at opposite ends of a telephone wire."

"Ha! You will not feel quite so belligerent in a little while, Dean. And don't think I am doing this to amuse myself, or to punish you for your silly meddling in matters that don't concern you. My reasons are sound and practical; how practical they are you can not even guess. As for Miss Lamont, she is merely a victim of circumstances. It is unfortunate she must be dragged in, but necessity knows no law. Charming creature—eh, Dean? The kind of woman that arouses all the instincts of chivalry in a man."

"Now you are discussing things that you know nothing about."

"That was a rather neat retort, but not very exact. I am talking of the average man, the type to which you belong. I understand his instincts perfectly. It

is only the average man who bothers with such silly notions as chivalry. The superior man has no time for such nonsense. To prove that I am right in classifying you as an average person, let me ask you a question. You would sacrifice a great deal if thereby you could extricate Miss Lamont from her predicament, wouldn't you?"

"Of course," said Dean matter-of-factly.

"Just as I thought. You would do it even at the expense of your own personal safety, I take it?"

"Any man would."

"Provided he is the average sort of man, the kind whose head is full of lofty moonshine. All right Dean. I'll put the average man in you to the test. As the situation is at present, nothing on earth can save either of you. Miss Lamont may leave my house unharmed on two conditions."

Dean leaned against the table to steady himself. There was a din in his head like that of a distant waterfall. He felt dizzy and very hot, and the voice at the other end of the wire had a remote and illusory sound. He could perceive only two things clearly, the tremulous nearness of the girl and the fact that Littleby had just said something about conditions.

"Name them," he said hoarsely.

"The first is quite simple. You have in your possession two little pieces of glass. Your home was searched this afternoon, but the pieces were not found. They are of no great importance, but on the whole I should prefer to have them."

Dean smiled despite his physical and mental distress. Evidently his veiled hint about the broken watch had exerted the desired effect. The fragments of glass were locked up in a small drawer in his desk, safely enough hidden so that even a fairly thorough search would not be apt to reveal them.

"And the second?" he asked.

"The second will be the test of your chivalry. There is a little drawer directly beneath the surface of the telephone stand. You can easily touch it by reaching out your hand. In the drawer is a pistol which I carelessly neglected to remove. Or, rather, I left it there for a purpose entirely different from my present one. The pistol contains but a single bullet."

"Yes?" said Dean dazedly.

A little pause intervened before the lawyer spoke again. Dean, with a confused churning in his head, felt the girl leaning anxiously toward him.

"Remember," said Littleby, "that as matters now stand, both of you will be dead inside an hour. If you follow my advice, one of you will live. Being a man of chivalrous instincts"—the words were drawled out with a sarcastic intonation—"you prefer, I am certain, that Miss Lamont should be the survivor."

"Naturally."

"I knew you would see it that way. It is the only sensible view to take under the circumstances. Now listen carefully. Remain exactly where you are. Place the telephone on the stand, but do not hang up the receiver. Now reach into the little drawer

under the top of the stand and take out the pistol. Point it at your heart or your temple—any vital point that you prefer. Then shoot. I shall wait at this end until I hear the shot. It will not prove that you have followed my instructions, but I shall know. Trickery will be of no avail. If you wish to save Miss Lamont's life, I advise you to do exactly as I say. If the arrangement appears melodramatic to you, remember that I have the best practical reasons for disposing of the situation in this way. I am waiting."

The flow of words on the wire, with their wildly fantastic meaning, ceased. Dean's thoughts groped dazedly through the ensuing pause. There was a choking constriction at his throat. His body was burning with a strange fever. His limping thoughts seemed to center round a single obsession. There was a lethal breath in the air. . . . In a little while both of them would be dead. If he must die anyway, what mattered it how the end came? A pistol shot or a slow succumbing to venomous vapors—there was not much choice. But the first method would spare Lee's life, while the second would kill them both. Two lives or one? The issue seemed simple, the conclusion inevitable.

A hand brushed his hand, and an odd feeling of ecstasy broke through the black tumult that surrounded him. Then a crack sounded, malignantly sharp, followed by a flash of fire. A blistering agony ripped his flesh, drawing a cry of pain from his lips. With a thunder of crashing noises in his ear he sank to the floor.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE FIFTEEN MILLION DOLLAR SHOT

**T**HE angry, thunderous roar of a pistol . . . a short, fragmentary cry that ended curiously in the middle . . . the thud of a body striking the floor . . . a jangling medley of small sounds. Then silence.

Dennis Littleby stood stonily motionless, with receiver pressed to his ear. The lines of his face were drawn taut, closed up into a blank rigidity signifying a terrific intentness that left no ripple on the surface, only a still, reflexive glow in the narrow-lidded eyes.

Very slowly, as if the movement were entirely detached from his thoughts, he replaced the receiver on the hook. But he remained a while longer beside the telephone, his gaunt form bent slightly forward, his eyes fixed on the instrument as if he were listening to retreating echoes. As he stood there, scarcely breathing, the only sign of life about him was the slow flapping of his coat-tails in the fitful breeze coming in through the window, left open a few inches at the bottom.

Finally, with a slow nod, he emerged from his stupor-like stillness.

"Dean's dead," he mumbled, with a slight, contemptuous twist of the lips, "but chivalry lives."

The faint smile of derision lingered on his lips as

he moved away from the telephone. For no apparent reason he opened the door, looked up and down the dimly lighted passage, listened for a moment, but heard no other sounds than the diminishing drone of the storm.

He closed the door, turned toward the window and, with hands dug deep into trouser pockets, jingled a few coins while he rocked slowly on his heels. The metallic tinkle seemed to suggest a pleasant thought.

"Fifteen million dollars," he mumbled slowly, with a little pause between the words. "That's what that shot was worth to me."

He gazed musingly out into the black night, darkening as the hour of dawn approached. The sneer on his lips changed into a gentle glow of gratification. There was an ecstatic look of greed in his eyes, a smile of pleasant anticipation on his long, thin lips, the smile of a man who is about to reap the reward of intricate calculating and patient scheming. The soul of Dennis Littleby, adroitly masked in his daily contacts with life, was being revealed to the four walls of his bedroom.

"Fifteen millions!" The soul of Dennis Littleby seemed to bask in the glow effused by the two words. "And the final coup came so easily, just as I was beginning to fear that everything was turning against me. It was a ticklish situation, requiring stern measures, but I won. Thanks to chivalry!"

He chuckled elatedly, but in a moment his face clouded. He had managed the last part of the en-

terprise with an ease that was amazing, but also a little disquieting. His appeal to Dean's chivalry had been a spectacular thing, savoring strongly of the melodramatic, but it had seemed the logical course to adopt under the circumstances. He had merely put into practice that profound knowledge of human nature on which he had always prided himself. It had been a psychological maneuver, depending for its success on the sentimental impulses that, in Littleby's estimation, characterized the average type of man, the type to which Thomas Dean belonged.

Yet, despite all his careful calculations, Littleby had felt somewhat stunned when the shot boomed out over the wire, testifying that the experiment had succeeded. He had scarcely dared to hope for such a gratifying outcome. There had been about one chance in a hundred that Dean's sentimental imbecility would stand the test, but it had been well worth trying. It offered an easy and pleasant way of meeting a disagreeable necessity. Littleby's nature shrank from coarser tactics, and it was his rule of conduct to try subtler methods first. If they failed, one could always resort to more direct measures. To a mind like his, there was a soothing distinction between suicide and murder, yet, in this particular instance, the net result would have been the same in either case.

Yes, he reflected, it was infinitely better that Dean should have died by his own hand rather than by another's. Freddie Mills', for instance. Mills was

a highly useful person, but he had his limitations, and one could not always depend on him. The difficulty was aggravated by the fact that a man in Littleby's position could not have direct dealings with a common thug. The unpleasant details had to be arranged through a middleman, and that always increased the risk.

Littleby recalled the scene in Lieutenant Shane's office when he came face to face with Dean. Luckily he had been warned only half an hour earlier that the attempt had failed, so he had betrayed no surprise. But even then he had not known that Freddie Mills was the man who had been assigned to the task. That discovery had come later, through a hint dropped by Dean himself when he made a flip-pant allusion to Freddie Mills' famished condition. Then, by a process of putting two and two together, Littleby had guessed the truth, and it had been a simple matter to send a trusted agent out to Dean's place and release the imprisoned thug.

Now that difficulty was removed, thanks to a sagacious appeal to a man's sentimental weaknesses. Littleby could congratulate himself upon having disposed of the matter with subtlety and finesse, without resort to violence or sordid tactics of any kind, tactics that were to be scrupulously avoided except in a case of absolute necessity and which then always left him in a state of morbid depression. Yes, the method he had adopted, and which had succeeded with such surprising smoothness, was infinitely the better.

"Fifteen millions!" he repeated, but his voice quavered a trifle over the last syllable. Once more he was assailed by doubts—foolish doubts, in all likelihood. Suppose Dean was shrewder than he had credited him with being? Suppose Miss Lamont, with the quickness of wit a woman sometimes displays in a crisis, had furnished the inspiration for a clever hoax? What if Dean had fired the bullet into the ceiling or the wall. Such would have been the logical stratagem in a dilemma of that kind, provided either Dean or the girl had been in a condition to think logically.

Littleby's darkening gaze moved toward the telephone. His face began to clear again. He had heard the shot, Dean's broken cry, the fall of a body, the girl's shuddering moan. All could have been faked by a bit of clever acting, but there had been no time between the delivery of Littleby's ultimatum and the firing of the shot for Dean and Miss Lamont to plan anything. No impromptu acting could have been so convincing, no matter how clever the actors. The cries, Dean's as well as the girl's, had been *real*. Littleby, with all his senses on the alert against trickery, had been positive of that. Dean had cried out just as a man would in the shock and agony of feeling a self-inflicted bullet tearing through his body, and Miss Lamont's exclamation had been one of genuine horror.

No, there could be no mistake. Dean, his faculties dulled by the sinister vapors of arselene, had

yielded to the instincts that governed his type. Littleby resolved that his misgivings were due to nothing else than the astounding ease with which he had managed the episode. Yet, to remove every particle of foolish doubt from his mind, it would be just as well to investigate. After that he could sleep in peace and dream of fabulous wealth.

It seemed only a minute or two had passed since the shot boomed out on the wire. His mind had worked quickly, crowding each passing moment with speeding reflections. Now he stepped through a door along the side of the bedroom, remaining in the adjoining room barely a minute, just long enough to touch a lever or two. When he came out he glanced at his watch. Then his gaze moved upward, trying to visualize the scene in the room upstairs where Miss Lamont was alone with the lifeless body of Dean. The lights were again burning up there, the flow of arselene had stopped, and inside five minutes every vestige of the vapors would have been sucked out of the air by a simple mechanism which he had set in motion. It would be quite safe for Littleby to enter and satisfy himself that all was well.

He waited a few minutes, then armed himself with a pistol, and silently left the room. He moved hurriedly toward the stairs, as if anxious to relieve his mind of a troublesome matter. Now and then he glanced back, but only for a moment. There were times, especially at night, when the vastness of

the house had a subtly alarming aspect. His imagination conjured up figments of dread which, in the light of day, his logical mind would deride. He hastened upward, but in the center of the stairs he paused, seized with an inexplicable tremor. The servants had long ago retired to their quarters, occupying a separate division of the house. There was no one else, so he could not account for the sound he had heard, like the furtive closing of a door.

He listened intently, gripping his pistol in one hand as he leaned over the stairway railing, but now the sound was gone. Through the gloom he glanced toward the room where the body of Lamont lay. Somehow he thought the sound had come from that direction. It seemed incredible, and yet— With an effort he stifled the oppressive feeling that had come over him, and continued upward. He was a little nervous, he told himself, and his imagination was playing him tricks. Yet, on the whole, he wished the body of Lamont had been taken away. He could not understand why it had not been removed soon after the officers left. Official red tape, perhaps, or maybe the investigation had taken a turn of which he was kept in ignorance.

Again he stopped. Another sound, brief and indefinable, came to his ears. With a little mutter and a forced shrug he continued on his way. The old house was always full of queer noises at night. It was natural enough, yet they had a vaguely disturbing quality. At times he almost hated the house

because it inspired him with fears of which he was ashamed. He looked forward with relief to the day when, certain matters having been finally adjusted, he could sell it and move away.'

Down the corridor he went, silent as a shadow, the tips of his shoes gliding soundlessly over the floor. The darkness was so intense it made his eyes ache, but he cautiously refrained from making a light. A few hours ago Dean, as it afterward appeared, had followed and watched him as he went to visit his prisoner in the hidden room, and the consequences had nearly upset a deftly woven plan. But Dean had failed to learn the whole secret concerning the mechanism of ingress and exit; besides, Dean was dead now and could no longer harm him. Yet there might be others, so it would not do to let his vigilance relax. Despite all his efforts to shake it off, an impression of stealthy pursuit lingered in his consciousness. The sounds he had heard in the stairs, whether real or imaginary, seemed to haunt him with their echoes. The sensation communicated a tremor to his hands as, guided by the sense of touch, they moved systematically over the woodwork.

All at once his fingers paused; he shrank back with a little gasp. He could hear it quite distinctly—a measured foot beat on the floor below, not far from the room where Lamont lay dead. As if to substantiate what might otherwise have been but a vagrant fancy, a loose board squeaked somewhere under someone's foot. He was tempted to draw

back and investigate, but already a beam of light fell through an opening. It would take only a moment or two to satisfy himself that Dean was dead.

He advanced on tiptoe, then stopped, looked, and his tense face relaxed momentarily in a glow of intense relief. He took it all in at a glance—a motionless form on the floor, Miss Lamont, with loosened hair tumbling about her face, staring down into a rigid countenance, the telephone lying where it had fallen a few feet away, an arm flung wide in a gesture of death.

“Dead!” he heard the girl say in low, hollow tones sounding as if they were wrung from a terrified soul. “Dead! My God!”

He was anxious to be on his way, but the spectacle held him. With a curious shrinking motion, as if at once repelled and fascinated, the girl stroked the cheek of the man lying on the floor. There was something infinitely tender about the simple gesture, but it had also in it a touch of dread and awe.

Suddenly, with a hoarse cry, the girl raised the hand that a moment ago had caressed the recumbent man’s face. Even from a distance Littleby could see that it was streaked red—a moist, vivid red. He withdrew silently as she started to erase the stains from her fingers, closed the opening, and moved down the hall. He would have been entirely at ease once more but for the peculiar sounds he had heard on his way to the hidden room. He had almost forgotten them, so engrossed had he been in the scene he had just witnessed, but now they

recurred to him in all their disquieting significance. He moved forward cautiously, anxious to let no slip deprive him of the advantage he had won.

Almost at the foot of the stairs, he drew in his steps and clutched his pistol a little more tightly. In the dim light he could vaguely distinguish two figures, a man's and a woman's, the former tall and broad, the latter short and slight. The woman was speaking in a subdued whisper:

"There's a light in his bedroom, but he isn't there."

After a moment's hesitancy Littleby moved silently down the remaining steps, touched a button above the newel post, producing a glaring light, and inquired in unctuous accents:

"Looking for me, madam?"

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE TWO VISITORS

**A**T the sound of the quietly spoken words, coming so abruptly out of the stillness, the woman who had previously spoken, whirled round with a cry of surprise. Behind her, twirling his soft hat with a diffident air, stood Lieutenant Shane.

Littleby regarded them with a sarcastic twinkle in his eyes. If a few moments ago he had been gravely disturbed, his present appearance did not show it. He returned the pistol to his pocket.

"Ah, Miss Gray," he murmured. "Believe we have met before. This is indeed a pleasant surprise. Hello, lieutenant. Always glad to see friends, even at five o'clock in the morning."

Shane grinned in a shame-faced way, as if secretly perturbed.

"Guess I owe you an apology, Mr. Littleby," he said awkwardly.

"An apology?" echoed Littleby, apparently greatly puzzled. "Why?"

"Well, it isn't strictly according to the rules to break into a man's house in the dead of night. It would be about as much as my job is worth if you

should report me to headquarters. I took a chance—and it seems I've lost. That's all there is to it. The responsibility is all mine."

"Don't you believe him," chimed in Miss Gray, quickly recovering her self-possession. "By using the proper technique a woman can make a man do anything she wishes. Lieutenant Shane growled and fumed at first, but finally yielded to persuasion. It was all my fault."

Under his breath the lieutenant mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like a "damn."

Littleby wagged his head bewilderedly. "I fail to understand a single word, but, whoever is at fault, I grant absolution right here and now. Am I to understand, lieutenant, that this visit isn't official?"

"You understand just right, Mr. Littleby. I was playing a wrong hunch."

"The hunch was mine," said Miss Gray firmly. "I bullied and bamboozled Lieutenant Shane into helping me find him. But it seems he isn't here. We've searched the whole house. Last of all we looked into your room. I saw a light, but you weren't there. That's the whole story. By the way, Mr. Littleby, it would be a good idea to get a new lock for your back door. Any simpleton can pick it—even I."

Littleby blinked his eyes in acute perplexity. "Let me get this straight, please. It seems you entered my house in a somewhat unconventional manner. You were looking for somebody. Whom, may I ask?"

"Mr. Dean," said Miss Gray. "Mr. Thomas Dean, the famous novelist."

"Oh, Dean." Littleby smiled, but in the next moment a look of gentle reproof crossed his face. "You went to all that trouble looking for a man who isn't here? It must have taken you all of two hours to make a thorough search. If you had but rung the bell in the accustomed way I could have saved you a lot of needless bother."

"We didn't like to disturb you," explained Miss Gray. "As a matter of fact, Lieutenant Shane wanted to do exactly what you have suggested, but I disapproved. You see, there was just a possibility that, if we had come straight to you and asked you whether Mr. Dean was in the house, you would not have told us the truth."

Littleby started impressively. The young woman was smiling in a way that seemed to soften the barb in her words.

"What a droll idea! Dean was here in the afternoon, as a matter of fact—just about the time of the unfortunate death of poor Lamont—but he left soon afterward, and I haven't seen him since. Won't you step into the drawing-room? We can chat there."

"No thanks," said Miss Gray. "Lieutenant Shane is mad as hops, though he tries hard not to show it. I must take him out and tame him." She paused, studying the lawyer's dignified garb with a sly eye. "I am so glad to see you are fully dressed and that we didn't get you out of bed," she added

sweetly. "At five o'clock in the morning one can't expect to find a man presentable, as a rule. Or do you sleep with your clothes on?"

Littleby frowned for a moment, but her impudent levity carried its own extenuation.

"You forget, my dear young lady, that a most tragic occurrence took place in this house a few hours ago. Under the circumstances I was in no mood for sleep—with my clothes on or otherwise."

"I understand. It must have been a dreadful shock. You knew Mr. Lamont a long time, didn't you?"

"Since both of us were young men."

"Then you must have known him very well. He was just an ordinary mortal, wasn't he?"

Littleby's gaze narrowed a trifle, as if he were wondering what lay hidden beneath the young woman's flippant airs and roguish smiles.

"Alas, yes," he murmured. "Just an ordinary mortal."

"He didn't, by any chance, possess the happy knack of being in two places at once?"

An uncomprehending expression, accompanied by a cautious glint in the hard gray eyes, crossed the lawyer's face.

"That's an odd question, Miss Gray."

"I have a reason for asking it. An ordinary mortal couldn't be in two places at one and the same time, could he?"

"Naturally not."

"That's what I would say, but Lieutenant Shane,"

with an arch glance at the detective, "has discovered evidence that seems to prove that Lamont was about two thousand miles from here on the night the murder on Hudson Street was committed."

A slight tremor disturbed the lawyer's magnificent equanimity. For a moment his face seemed to freeze up; his personality appeared to retire behind a screen of glacial inscrutability. Then, with a shrug, he turned to Shane with a smile.

"I suppose even a hard-working lieutenant must have his little jokes. What about it, Shane?"

Shane's apologetic airs had suddenly vanished. He had noticed the lawyer's momentary confusion, and it seemed to instill a mingling of suspicion and perplexity in his mind.

"Miss Gray is too modest," he declared. "She found the evidence herself. Don't know why she should want to give me the credit."

Littleby shifted his bland and yet cautious gaze from Shane to the girl.

"I fear it will take a great deal of evidence to controvert Lamont's confession," he remarked sadly. "Of course I should welcome anything that would clear his name of such a deplorable stain. I am afraid it is hopeless, however. What did you find, Miss Gray?"

"Just an old letter. I found it among a heap of rubbish. I didn't suppose you would be interested." She paused for a moment, smiled tantalizingly, and then, to Shane's bewilderment, abruptly changed the subject. "Did you ever hear of Beulah Vance?"

Again the lawyer started. He bent a quick, searching gaze on the young woman's face, as if suspecting a hidden purpose behind its teasing serenity.

"Beulah Vance? Let me see. Ah, I believe I recall the name. Wasn't she the showgirl who instituted breach of promise proceedings against Paul Forrester some years ago?"

"You ought to know, Mr. Littleby. Weren't you her lawyer?"

Littleby coughed, vaguely disturbed by the girl's question as well as by Lieutenant Shane's sidelong glance.

"Ahem, not exactly. If I remember correctly, my connection with the case was only in an advisory capacity. I did not appear personally in the matter. All that happened several years ago, and the details have escaped me. Why did you ask?"

"Vulgar curiosity—that's all. Wasn't the case finally dropped?"

"I believe so. It appeared that young Forrester was practically penniless, so there was no reason for prosecuting the suit. Afterward he dropped out of sight, and the mystery of his fate remained unsolved until Lamont's confession cleared it up."

"And Beulah Vance? What became of her?"

Littleby shrugged. "How should I know? Perhaps she married a title, as some showgirls do."

"Or maybe she neglected her figure and permitted herself to go fat and frowsy. In that case she

would hardly have married a title, would she? Do you suppose, if Paul Forrester were alive today and should happen to meet her, that he would recognize her?"

Again the lawyer stiffened perceptibly, but his outward expression was one of patient weariness with the girl's idle speculations.

"Maybe not. People do change, and showgirls faster than others."

"Especially if they have had disappointments," suggested Miss Gray. "Do you know, Miss Farnham, who was Lamont's nurse, looked to me as though she'd had a lot to contend with. She has a hard look in her face, and she's let her figure turn into a lump. A few years ago—say five or six—she might have been just as beautiful as Beulah Vance."

Littleby's lips came open, but he found no words. For the moment all his poise seemed to have left him. Shane, standing a little to one side, watched him with a grim, calculating eye.

"By the way, who engaged Miss Farnham?" was the girl's next question. "Did you or Doctor Ballinger?"

"I—I believe I made the suggestion," stammered Littleby, "and Doctor Ballinger approved."

"So I thought." Miss Gray reflected for a moment, her big, dancing eyes fixed inexorably on the lawyer. "Showgirls sometimes go in for nursing, don't they? It's one way of doing penance for a frothy past. And I suppose it helps them forget

things that—that they want to forget. I wonder if Miss Farnham——”

She paused, her roguish eyes sobering a little, but in the next moment her volatile mind seemed to have skipped off on a different trail. Littleby, perceiving that her questions were about to take a new turn, looked instantly relieved, but her next words had an immediately startling effect.

“Have you had any news of Miss Lamont?”

“Not a word,” said the lawyer with a sigh. “It is very peculiar.”

“Very,” said Miss Gray gravely. “She was last seen in your house, I understand. One of your servants saw her in the stairway. Then she disappeared. And there is Mr. Dean. He, too, was last seen in your house, only a few hours ago. That makes two disappearances in the same place.”

“Rather astounding, isn’t it?” admitted the lawyer. His face was averted, but her vaguely tormenting eyes seemed to pursue him. “As for Dean, though, it is just possible that he had the best of reasons for disappearing.”

“Think so? Do you know, Mr. Littleby, that for a while Lieutenant Shane and I thought you had disappeared, too? We were coming down the hall, about three quarters of an hour ago, and could hear you talking in your room. After a while we moved on, and a little later, coming back the same way, the door stood open, there was a light in the room, but you weren’t in. We wondered where you could have gone.”

"Curiosity is characteristic of trespassers," remarked Littleby in a tone of mingled jocularly and petulance.

"And then," Miss Gray went on, "we began to wonder who you could have been talking to. We couldn't hear what you were saying, even if we had been inclined to eavesdrop. At first we thought you were talking to yourself, for all the talking was in the same voice. Then we finally decided that no man would talk as long as that to himself, and that you must have been speaking with someone on the telephone."

"A natural deduction, I should say," remarked Littleby stiffly.

"Were you?" persisted Miss Gray in the naive tone that seemed to save her questions from sounding impudent.

"Really, my dear young lady, you are overwhelming me with your interest in my trivial doings."

"If the doings are trivial, you surely can't object."

"I don't in the least. I am extremely complimented, but also a bit puzzled. As for my conversation over the telephone, it suddenly occurred to me that I would be unable to go to my office in the morning, so I called up one of my associates and called his attention to certain matters that require immediate consideration."

"Oh." Miss Gray exchanged brief glances with Lieutenant Shane. "That makes it all the stranger. You see, Mr. Littleby, the lieutenant was so curious that he went to the telephone exchange—it is only

a few blocks from here, you know—and inquired if any calls had been put through from your house in the last hour. The operator seemed positive there had been none.”

Littleby gave her a lowering glance. He seemed to require a great exertion of will power to maintain his dignity.

“Your conduct is truly amazing, Lieutenant Shane,” he declared stiffly. “You enter my house without my permission, search it from top to bottom, and subject me to a surveillance that is nothing short of impudence. I shall be constrained to report your conduct, sir.”

“Go ahead,” said Shane carelessly. “I expected it. Now that we’ve caught you in a lie, I don’t mind. At first I felt like apologizing, but now I’m beginning to think Miss Gray’s hunch was right. It was your fib about the telephone call that queered you, though I’ve discovered lately that there are a whole lot of other things that need explanation. You were talking to somebody inside the house, Mr. Littleby.”

“Indeed?” drawled the lawyer sarcastically.

“You must have been, since your call didn’t go through the exchange. I’ve noticed that this house has an inter-communicating system of telephones.”

“You are very observant, but you are overlooking two facts. One is that a telephone operator is a hard-working person and cannot remember all the calls that come in. The second is that a busy man of affairs, when pestered with foolish and impudent

questions, is justified in resorting to subterfuges that are just as good as the truth. You may take that any way you like."

Littleby drew himself up; a mantle of ineffable righteousness seemed to drape itself around his tall, gaunt form.

Shane seemed impressed, but only for a moment. "Mind if I have a look at your telephone connections?" he asked softly.

"I do," declared the lawyer coldly. "If you had approached me in the proper fashion at the start, I should have acquiesced without a murmur. After the way you have conducted yourself, you will have to go and apply to a magistrate for a search warrant before you proceed a step further. The local magistrate knows what sort of reputation I enjoy in this community as well as among my professional colleagues in the city. He will probably have a good laugh. Good morning, sir."

He opened the door, smiling triumphantly as Miss Gray and the lieutenant passed out into the drizzly dawn.

"Come again, Miss Gray," he called after her. "I have enjoyed our little chat. I never imagined that such a pretty little head as yours could be so full of odd hunches."

For a moment he stood watching their departing figures, then closed the door and crossed the vestibule toward the stairs. The austere directness had suddenly left his body, leaving it limp and drooping. There was a black look in his face, a

glint of baffled malice in his eyes. His steps dragged as he ascended.

"Narrow escape," he muttered. "If Shane gets his warrant— But he probably won't. At any rate, I have an hour or two in which to arrange things. Confound that little Miss Gray!"

He reached his room, where the light was still burning, sank into a chair, and for a time sat gazing dully at the telephone.

"And there is still Miss Lamont," he mumbled, finishing a long train of thought. His face had once more hardened into a fixed, glacial composure. "She must be disposed of, somehow. Wish she would follow Dean's example. H'm. Arselene?"

He jumped up nervously. In the gray, wet dawn the doorbell's peal sounded uncannily sharp.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### THE NEW MENACE

**C**AUTIOUSLY Littleby opened the door a few inches. Outside, with a dripping slouch hat on his head, and his powerful figure draped in a raincoat which he had neglected to button, stood Doctor Ballinger.

"Come in," said Littleby, and showed the way to his study on the ground floor.

Without a word the physician followed, hanging up his hat and coat on the rack in the vestibule. Entering the study, the lawyer turned on a light and motioned his visitor to a chair. There was an illegible frown on Ballinger's handsome face. His quick gray eyes traveled over the objects in the room, resting for a moment on a safe encased in an oaken cabinet, occupying an inconspicuous position behind the writing desk in a corner.

"Well?" said Littleby, breaking an awkward silence during which the two men looked like poker players trying to outguess each other.

"I haven't slept a wink all night," said the physician. "Guess you haven't either, Littleby. Every time I looked this way I saw a light in your bedroom window."

"Insomnia?" questioned Littleby, with a lift of his brows.

"No. I could cure that. It's something worse—a malady that I didn't know existed until just recently. In fact, I used to laugh when other people spoke of it. It's my conscience, Littleby."

"Rot!" said the lawyer with a lofty shrug. "You will get over it. We are succeeding, old boy. Everything is coming along splendidly. In a short time I shall have some very good news for you. There remain only one or two details to be disposed of."

"Yes?" said the doctor doubtfully. "That's strange, for you looked positively worried when you met me at the door."

"Irritable, rather. Lieutenant Shane and Miss Gray had just left."

Ballinger started from his chair. "Miss Gray has been here?" he exclaimed. "What did she want?"

"Compose yourself, doctor. She asked a few rather embarrassing questions, but I managed to hold my own. Clever girl! Don't blame you for succumbing to her charms." His smile faded, and his eyes bored into Ballinger's face. "What have you been telling her, doctor?"

"Nothing of importance."

"Don't lie," said Littleby evenly. "Miss Gray knows several things that she couldn't have found out for herself."

The doctor bristled for a moment, then shrugged

his huge shoulders wearily. "Have it your own way, then. I doubt if Miss Gray knows much, but she suspects a lot. And there is such a thing as feminine intuition. Oh, sneer all you like, but I know. Miss Gray suspects that Thomas Dean is Paul Forrester. She got the germ of the suspicion out of a novel of his which she read—'Crossroads,' I believe it's called—and she confirmed the suspicion to her own satisfaction by visiting Dean at his home."

There was an ominous glimmer in Littleby's eyes. "When a man falls in love he is hopeless," he remarked. "I suppose Miss Gray came to you with her suspicions, and you told her everything?"

"It wasn't necessary. What did I tell you a moment ago about a woman's intuition? They have an uncanny knack at putting two and two together, and there are some things a man can't keep away from them."

"Especially if he is in love," said Littleby with a sneer. "I thought you were the exception, though. You disappoint me, Ballinger."

The doctor smiled absently. "It seems the decree of fate that our friends should disappoint us. I admit I have changed since our humdrum days out West. We were a motley group of friends, you and I and the others. Just think what a few years have done to us! You are the only one of us who has prospered, and your success has come fast. Two years ago you were practically unknown."

"I've had just a taste of life's good things," admitted the lawyer softly. "I am hungry for more."

Ballinger appeared not to have heard him. "You went out and hung up your shingle on the edge of the wilderness, in the same God-forsaken town where I was peddling pills and liniments. We eked out a living as best we could, by all sorts of funny makeshifts and devices. Once or twice we even caught the contagion of the mining fever. That's how we happened to pick up all those strange friendships. There was Jordan Forrester, for instance—Paul Forrester's father—a sort of glorified roustabout who turned his hands to all sorts of crazy things. And Martin Lamont, who once went almost dippy trying to figure out how to turn baser metals into gold. And then there was Miss Gray's father—Silent Jim, they called him because he seldom spoke, being so busy poking into those dead silver mines in the Leadville district. It was a queer crowd, Littleby, and you and I are the only ones who are left."

Littleby's gaze trailed off into space. "There was one you forgot to mention," he said casually. "Parson Bill, they called him—the strangest one in the lot."

"That's so," said Ballinger in an odd voice. "Well, Parson Bill is dead, too."

A strained silence fell between them. Each man looked at the other, but neither spoke a word for a long time.

"I don't think," said Littleby at length, "that little

Miss Gray will annoy us much. If she goes too far, it may be well to give her a hint to the effect that I am familiar with the history of Parson Bill. Apparently she doesn't suspect that I am. It would be unfortunate, however, if she should be seen too much in Lieutenant Shane's company."

The doctor nodded listlessly; apparently his thoughts were far away from the subject.

"Littleby," he said abruptly. "I am through."

The lawyer gave him a blank look.

"The project was all right in the beginning," Ballinger went on. "The scientific features of it interested me, and the scheme seemed legitimate enough. Then Thomas Dean bobbed up unexpectedly, and you lost your head, got panicky. From that point on I couldn't follow you, but I didn't dare say anything. You had me where you wanted me. I couldn't say a word without— Well, you know. Matters reached the crisis when you told me you had put Thomas Dean out of the way."

"I told you nothing of the kind," protested the lawyer. "I had received information through certain channels that Dean was dead. I did not say anything about having had a hand in it personally, and you can't prove that I did. Anyway, a few hours after my talk with you, I received information that there had been a mistake, that Dean was still alive."

"And I almost jumped out of my skin when he appeared at my office that afternoon," grumbled the lawyer. "You have gone too far, Littleby. I

won't have anything to do with a criminal conspiracy."

Littleby sneered. "But you were willing to accept your share of the fifteen million dollars. Besides, you agreed to leave the practical details to me."

The doctor regarded him a trifle contemptuously. "I think those fifteen millions have gone to your head, Littleby. I was never particularly interested in the money. It was the other things that attracted me. You have gone too far, and I am through. I want to be able to hold up my head and look my fellow man straight in the eye."

"Oh, I see." The lawyer assumed a different tone. "Well, get this straight. I am not responsible for what you think. Go ahead and make as many wild guesses as you like; you can't prove anything. And what about little Miss Gray? Would she be able to hold up her head much longer if——"

"Leave her out of it," interrupted the doctor hotly. "If you dare say a word against her I'll choke you to death."

"How crude! Your tactics don't appeal to me at all. Now let this sink in, Ballinger. If you go about voicing your silly suspicions, I shall be strongly tempted to repay you by telling the history of Parson Bill. There—I think that evens up matters."

Ballinger seemed to control himself with great difficulty. He cast another sidelong glance toward the safe in the corner.

"Where is Dean?" he asked in an altered voice.

"Haven't seen him since he walked away from us last evening."

"I don't believe you."

"No matter. You can't disprove what I say."

"Any news of Miss Lamont?"

"No; the young lady seems to have dropped off the face of the earth."

"I think you are lying, Littleby."

"And I think you are a fool. If you are anxious about Miss Lamont's whereabouts, why not ask Miss Gray? She seems to know a little of everything."

Ballinger's lips tightened as if to hold back an angry retort. His strong features seemed haggard and a little inflamed; he was the picture of a man shaken to the depths by some strange and violent emotion.

"I've been wondering lately," he remarked, as if trying to ease his feelings by resort to a more tranquil topic, "why you insisted on having Miss Farnham, alias Beulah Vance, attend to Lamont. You had some specific reason."

"Perhaps," admitted Littleby dryly.

The doctor frowned. "The fact that Miss Farnham is Beulah Vance doesn't seem to explain why you wanted her in particular."

"Why bother your mind with things you don't understand? We agreed that the heavy work of planning and execution should be left to me."

"It's strange Dean didn't recognize her."

"Not strange at all. He saw her only for a

moment, and at that particular moment his mind was occupied with other things. Miss Farnham was just a passing incident. Besides, she has changed, lost her curves and dimples. She is dumpy and stolid. Ugh!"

He made a gesture of supreme disgust, but his eyes instinctively sought the ceiling as if he had just thought of something of an alarming nature. Ballinger sat with head bowed, fitfully twirling his thumbs, his eyes peering upward at his companion. The little reading lamp on the writing desk was heavily shaded. A streak of gray along the window sill gauged the onward march of a dreary dawn.

"Littleby," said the doctor suddenly, "who killed Lamont?"

"Why ask me? But, since you ask, isn't Dean as good a guess as any? There will be a warrant out for his arrest shortly."

Ballinger lifted his head, giving the other a long, searching glance.

"You know as well as I do," he said slowly, "that Dean didn't kill Lamont. Where is the motive?"

"In the murder of a trapper in a lonely cabin in the God-forsaken hills of the Colorado mining district, some years ago. Dean is still sensitive about that episode. He feared Lamont had recognized him as Paul Forrester and might live to tell what he knew."

"Rubbish!" said the doctor. "You are stating

the case as you want it to appear, not as it is in reality. I have looked up the facts since we discussed the subject last night. Cabell, the trapper, was known as a surly and ill-tempered person, always looking for a fight. As soon as the excitement had died down, everybody in the community was satisfied that the killing was done in self-defense. Even if the incident should be revived, Dean would never be brought to trial."

"But he doesn't know that, so the motive still exists," Littleby pointed out. "From Dean's point of view, the removal of Lamont was highly desirable. Besides, doesn't his conduct speak for itself?"

"Does it?" asked Ballinger. A wan smile hovered about his sagging lips, but he fixed his companion with a gaze whose penetrating quality made Littleby stir uneasily in his chair. "I've been thinking——"

"That's deplorable. A physician can't think except in terms of formulas and prescriptions, and that gets us nowhere in a case like this, —and I am almost sure," the lawyer doggedly went on, "that I know who killed Lamont."

"Ah! And who killed him, pray?"

"You." The quietly spoken word had a crashing sound in the surrounding stillness.

Littleby laughed, but with an uneasy twang. "If that is a sample of how your mind works, you had better give it a rest. Weren't you and I standing on the balcony, having a genial chat over our cigars, when the shot was fired?"

Ballinger swept the argument aside. "Oh, you arranged it very cleverly, but I know."

The lawyer's eyes narrowed into tiny, glittering streaks. "And have you told little Miss Gray what you think you know?"

Ballinger shook his head.

"I wouldn't, if I were you," the lawyer advised. "Not that it would do any harm, but it is best to be discreet. Neither would I tell anyone else. Miss Gray might be the one to suffer in the end."

The mocking tones produced a change in the doctor. He drew himself up; the sullen, despairing look faded from his face, leaving in its place something cold, hard and sinister.

"That reminds me," he said quietly, with a furtive motion of his right hand. "I want that little bundle of papers you keep in a brown portfolio in the safe—the documents in the case of Parson Bill. I came here to get them, and I shan't leave without them."

A pistol gleamed in his hand, its muzzle pointing steadily at the lawyer. In an instant Littleby's face froze up; he sat rigidly motionless, staring narrowly at the menacing weapon. Moments passed, and then his face relaxed in a grin.

"Next to being a good fighter," he murmured with a shrug, "the best trait in a man is to know when he is beaten. Your face tells me that this is no bluff. You are quite ready to drill a hole through me. You win this time, Ballinger."

He stepped to the safe, and for a few moments

his lean back obscured the dial. When he turned, there was a slim brown package in his hand.

"Congratulations," he murmured dryly. "And remember me to the charming little Miss Gray."

Ballinger glanced at the contents of the little portfolio, then backed out of the room, keeping the other man covered until he was out of sight. Littleby remained in his position until a triumphant little slam sounded at the front door. A faint, contemptuous smile touched his lips.

"Poor imbecile!" he mumbled, a little fret in his tones. "I suspected months ago, when he first began to succumb to the blandishments of little Miss Gray, that Ballinger would turn yellow some day. Well, I was prepared. I'd like to see his face when he discovers that the brown portfolio contains only copies."

## CHAPTER XXIX

### BACK TO LIFE

DEAN returned to consciousness with a confused medley of noises in his brain, and, on his forehead, a vaguely delicious sensation of a shy caress.

His eyes fluttered open. There was a light in the room. The diabolical fumes were gone. A face was bending over him, an enraptured face, full of a queer blend of terror and tenderness.

He stroked his forehead, letting his fingers linger just over the left temple, the seat of a tantalizingly remote and yet wondrously exquisite sensation.

"I'm—still—alive," he observed dazedly.

"Yes, thank God!" murmured the girl passionately. "But for a time I thought you—you—" She paused on a note of shuddering dread. "But you were only stunned. My hand slipped and I—I shot you."

Dean closed his eyes. Again his hand moved over the left side of his forehead.

"Then shoot me again. But I forget—Didn't Littleby say something about there being only one bullet? Blast the old skinflint for being so stingy with his ammunition. Lee?"

"Yes—dear."

"Couldn't we just pretend that you had shot me again and that you were—Well, that you were doing whatever your heart moves you to do to a man after you've shot him."

"Be sensible," she admonished severely, but he reopened his eyes just in time to see a faint blush tingeing her white face. "There is an ugly scratch in the back of your head. I mopped it with my handkerchief till the flow of blood stopped, but you really ought to have a doctor."

"Doctor?" Dean laughed, then sat upright, though it cost him a painful effort. "Lee, tell me everything that happened, and don't leave out a single thing. Remember—not a single thing."

She colored slightly and looked aside. "Well, I heard everything Littleby told you. I could scarcely believe my ears; it sounded so outrageous. All at once an inspiration came to me. I took the pistol from the drawer, where Littleby said it would be, meaning to fire it into the ceiling. I reasoned he would hear the shot and conclude that you had obeyed his instructions."

Dean nodded as if impatient for her to reach the more important points in her recital.

"I don't know whether it was my hand or foot that slipped, but anyhow I knew at once that something terrible had happened. You screamed, then dropped to the floor, dragging the telephone with you, and then I think I screamed, too."

"Good," said Dean casually. "It must have been realistic enough to fool even a shrewd old sinner

like Littleby. We couldn't have faked it as convincingly as that. What else?"

"Nothing, except that soon afterward those dreadful fumes stopped, and then the light came on again."

"Go on."

"But there isn't anything more, except that I was terribly frightened for a while. I knew it was all my fault and——"

"I can imagine that part of it—remorse, self-reproaches galore, and all that sort of thing. Lee?"

"Ye-es."

"Can you look me in the eyes and say that you have told me everything?"

She regarded him soberly, with just the faintest twinkle in her eyes. "There's a pitcher of water on the table back there," she said matter-of-factly. "I'm going to bathe your wound."

Dean uttered a mock groan, then struggled to his feet and sat down in a chair, yielding himself to her ministrations.

"Lee," he said, "you're an angel!"

"No, nothing of the sort. Angels don't shoot defenseless men."

"But, as it turned out, it was the best thing that could have happened, even from a crass practical point of view. . . ."

"I wonder," she said soberly, "if you would have done what Littleby told you to do. I think you were capable of it, just to save me."

"Thanks, but halos are an antiquated fashion in

headgear. I didn't have anything quite so romantic in mind. You see, I had strong doubts that Littleby would fulfill his part of the bargain even if I carried out mine. That being the case, nothing would have been gained by indulging in a bit of mock heroics. Anyhow, I thought I would try something else first."

"Yes?" she said wonderingly while with a touch light as a caress she bathed the bruised portion of his head.

"Littleby said something about two pieces of glass," he explained. "He wants them badly, but doesn't know where to find them, and nobody but myself can tell him where they are. I thought I might dicker with him for a while about those glass pieces—engage in the time-honored pursuit of stalling, in other words. But your way was better. Let's see that pistol."

She picked it up from the floor and handed it to him. He examined it gravely, peeping with a frown through the now empty cartridge chambers.

"No good," he declared, tossing the weapon from him. "If Littleby should come here, as I think he will, I'll have to go at him with my fists. It will be the most useful work they ever did. But wait—We'll treat him to a surprise. Dead men are not supposed to move. Tell me exactly what sort of position I was in."

"After you fell?"

"When you kissed me?" Dean grinned brazenly.

She gave him a scandalized glance, but told him what he wanted to know.

"That's all arranged then," said Dean, leaning back comfortably. "At first sign of Littleby's approach, I shall assume the highly dignified position of a corpse. As for you, Lee, you will have to do a bit of acting. Think you can do it?"

"I'll try," she said hopefully.

Dean himself was not so hopeful. He had no doubt that Littleby meant to dispose of the girl, just as he thought he had already disposed of himself. What if, instead of appearing in the room in person, he should turn on the deadly arselene? It was a dread possibility, but his face did not betray his misgivings. Instead he busied his mind with the likelihood that the lawyer would pay Miss Lamont a visit, possibly with a view to arranging some kind of compromise. He would probably come armed, and in that event it would be best to take him by surprise, just as Dean had already planned.

"You are not particularly fond of Littleby—eh, Lee?" he asked suddenly.

"Certainly not!" she declared, a hard note in her voice.

"You don't mind if I muss him up a little?"

"If you get too rough, I can look the other way."

He regarded her keenly. She was smiling vaguely, but something blazed in her eyes.

"Isn't it true," he asked, "that, no matter how rough I get with him, I'll only be repaying him in a small way for his treatment of you?"

She nodded—a slight, emphatic gesture that said far more than words could.

“It wasn’t Littleby himself,” she said tensely. “Littleby never did me any physical harm. He always sent someone—someone whose face I couldn’t see, for the light always went out before he entered. I scarcely heard anything at all. I merely saw the lights go out, and then I would feel somebody’s fingers twining round my throat till I almost choked. It was dreadful, Tommie. And the strange part of it was that their sole object seemed to be to terrify me. I feel like screaming whenever I think of that clammy touch at my throat.”

“The low-down curs!” muttered Dean hotly, feeling suddenly a deeper hatred toward Littleby. “And you think their only object was to frighten you?”

“That’s the impression I got.”

“But why?”

She shook her head uncertainly. “They also told me of dreadful things that would happen to father if I tried to oppose them in any way. There was nothing definite in what they said; only vague threats. That’s why I had to pretend to treat Littleby with respect whenever I saw him. Oh, how I loathe that man!”

Dean scarcely heard the last. He sprang from his chair, his face aglow with grim excitement.

“Tell me, Lee!” he exclaimed. “When this man tried to terrify you—this man who always appeared in the dark—do you happen to know whether the

telephone receiver was off the hook each time?"

She started sharply at the question. "How was I to know? I couldn't tell in the dark. But it's strange—very. This man—this monster—was always dragging me toward the telephone. I wondered at it, but it never occurred to me till now that——" She paused, a ghastly glow of comprehension sweeping over her face. "Tommie, I believe you are thinking exactly what I am thinking!"

They stared at each other for a moment, then Dean's eyes became fixed on the opposite wall. An optical message flashed between them, and then he dropped to the floor, rolled over a few times, flung out an arm, let his head droop to one side, and lay rigid.

A moment later approaching footfalls told him that Littleby had entered the room.

## CHAPTER XXX

### THE TEMPTER'S SNARE

**A**S if startled by the sudden intrusion, the girl sprang aside with a little cry.

"Don't be alarmed," said Littleby, beaming on her. "These mysterious entrances and exits are a hobby of mine. Sit down here, my dear, with your back to—*that*." He cast a brief glance at the still, crumpled form at the other side of the room. "You have had a trying night. Can you compose yourself for a few minutes? I have something to tell you."

Silently, with an air of strong aversion, she sat down, avoiding Littleby's soothing gaze.

"I am sure you have regretted the hasty words you spoke at our last meeting," murmured the lawyer. "I didn't take offense, knowing you would soon realize how unjust you had been. Just a case of hysterics—that was all. I quite understood."

"You didn't understand at all," Miss Lamont corrected him. "And you needn't make apologies for me. I meant every word I said, and I mean it now. The only difference is that in the meantime, you have added still another murder to your record."

The lawyer's brows went up. "My dear child, you are raving. You surely don't mean to insinuate

that I am in any way responsible for what this unfortunate young man has done."

"I heard every word you told him over the telephone. He killed himself to save me."

Littleby smiled indulgently. "I wonder if you realize how that would sound if you were to repeat it to a third, unprejudiced person. How would a hard-headed police official take it, for instance? Or a judge, or a jury? And where is your proof? You have none—not a scrap of proof. People would merely construe your statements as the hallucinations of a young woman whose mind has been unbalanced. They might go farther, even, and make certain embarrassing inquiries. The average person is always ready to suspect the worst. You would be asked to explain how it came about that you were found alone in a room with the body of a young man beside you. The harder you tried to clear yourself, the deeper you would sink. There would be all sorts of nasty insinuations, from the press, from the police, from the man in the street. Just think how it would look."

With a shudder of loathing, the girl edged farther back in the chair.

"Scandal, my dear, is a nasty thing," remarked Littleby, sententiously. "Once it touches you, you are contaminated for life. You are still very young, and it would hurt me deeply to see your future ruined, all the more so since you are the daughter of the man who was my best friend. Take my advice and be sensible."

"What do you advise?" asked the girl in a tone indicating that the lawyer's black prognostications had taken effect.

"You are going to be reasonable? That's splendid!" Littleby beamed on her approvingly. "I would advise, in the first place, that you abandon all plans of returning to Wichita to teach school. Wichita is a dull place, and school teaching a trying profession. There are so many interesting things one can do at your age. All you have to do is to say the word, and life in all its glamor lies open before you. You may travel, have a private yacht, a palace on Fifth Avenue, an old château in one of those romantic spots along the Riviera. I can make you rich. Anything you wish is within your reach. Isn't that better than Wichita and a stuffy class room?"

"It sounds very attractive," admitted Miss Lamont in a tone which might have meant that she was vacillating a trifle. "What else do you advise?"

"My next suggestion has to do with the immediate present. Something must be done to avert a scandal. We mustn't give evil-minded people a chance to construe things their own sordid way. Two courses are open to you. If you adopt the first, you will tell what in your present hysterical condition you believe to be the truth. If you do, you will be laughed at—or worse. If you choose the second course, you will gloss over certain unpleasant details, interpreting them so that you will not be

placed in a compromising position. You understand, my dear?"

"I think I do."

Littleby raised his brows for an instant, as if vaguely suspicious of a double meaning, but the guileless expression of her pale face reassured him.

"Splendid!" he ejaculated. "You will choose the second course, naturally. As a matter of fact, I anticipated your choice, and am prepared to make certain suggestions in regard to the explanations you will make. I have put them in the form of a statement which you may sign if you approve of it. Would you care to glance it over?"

She extended her hand, and Littleby drew a folded paper from an inside pocket. He watched her with a faint smile of satisfaction as she read. He permitted himself a sigh of relief, as if already approaching the happy conclusion of a task which he had approached with misgivings.

With a little frown and a shake of her head, Miss Lamont looked up from the paper.

"But this is all a pack of lies," she objected.

"A lie, my dear, is nothing but the bright side of truth. Why tell things that people will either doubt or sneer at, when it is so easy to present the situation in a plausible and agreeable form?"

Miss Lamont appeared to consider. "But what about him?" she asked, inclining her head in the direction where Dean lay. "How are you going to explain—*that*?"

"Oh, no explanation is necessary there. Dean will simply disappear. The secret of this room is almost as safe as the secret of that little room under the stairs in the house on Hudson Street. It isn't likely that anyone except myself will set foot within this room in years. Moreover, a steady current of arselene for five or six hours will remove every trace. Great thing, arselene! It has so many different uses. Well, my dear?"

A shiver shook the girl; then she drew herself erect. Her eyes, with a little flame in their depths, looked steadily into his. She tore the paper into bits.

"Thank you for making everything so clear, Mr. Littleby," she said in a tone of withering scorn. "I wouldn't have listened to you for a moment, but I wished to see how far you would go. I understand. You spared my life only because you thought I could be persuaded to tell a few convenient lies. I was more useful to you alive than dead. Otherwise you would have murdered me with no more scruple than you murdered the others."

The lawyer gave her a blank look, as if her sudden change of front had been too abrupt for his mind to follow. Then a sultry flash came into his eyes; his lips curled unpleasantly.

"Oh, just as you prefer," he said indifferently. "I was hoping extreme measures wouldn't be necessary. I see I was wrong. I shall leave you now, but—" With a shrug he turned and walked away from her, then flung back over his shoulder: "As I remarked

a moment ago, arselene is a great thing. You will soon discover——”

The words ended in a gasp. Sounds of a hurried movement had come from the other side of the room. Littleby, turning suddenly, stood as if transformed into a pillar. His mouth sagged, his eyes protruded, his face turned ashen.

“Not yet, Littleby!” cried Dean, leaping forward.

For a moment longer Littleby stood as rigid as if all his faculties had suddenly congealed into a lump. Then his hand whipped out, clutching an object that gleamed with a steely flash in the light. The girl gave a tremulous, warning cry. Two cracks came in such quick succession they sounded like one, followed by a splintering sound; then the room went dark.

Dean ducked just in time to hear a bullet whistle in murderous glee above his head. Then he rushed forward again, straight toward the spot where he had seen Littleby just before the second bullet obliterated the light. The lawyer was moving toward the wall, doubtless making for one of his mysterious exits. Dean floundered in the dark, conscious only of a burning rage and a fixed determination that the lawyer should not escape. A gentle draft fanned his hot face, signifying that an opening had appeared somewhere. He sprang directly into its path, collided with a fleeing form, felt a random blow scraping his cheek, and clutched a flying coat-tail.

"This way, Lee!" he shouted hoarsely. "I've got him!"

No answer came, but he thought nothing of it. Just then a vigorous jerk at the coat-tail sent him bounding forward, lurching wildly against the sides of a narrow opening. A grim, vindictive fury was burning in his veins, a savage determination to inflict primitive justice on Lee's tormentor. The lawyer twisted and squirmed while he ran, struggling with all the strength and agility of a man in despair to free himself of the pursuer's dogged grip. They were out in the hall now, and a short distance ahead a dim light told the direction of the stairs. Dean hung on with an exultant ferocity, all his sensibilities submerged in a single purpose, and it seemed a little odd that such an all-important purpose was to be attained through his grip on a prosaic thing like a coat-tail.

Then, in a twinkling, the coat-tail was gone. At the turn in the hall, Littleby made an unexpected plunge to the side, and Dean's head crashed dizzyingly into a post. For a moment he stood dazed, seeing the attainment of his flaming purpose slipping away from him, but the sounds of the lawyer's tumbling progress down the stairs revived the zest of the hunter. In a moment he was following, reaching the lower hall just in time to see his quarry dash through a door.

In a few seconds Dean, too, was at the door. To his surprise it opened easily; he had expected that the lawyer would shoot the bolt on the inside and

utilize the delay thus gained by attempting an escape through the window. He rushed inside, stared in a dim light at the four massive walls surrounding him, but the lawyer was not there. His darting eyes fixed on an inner door, then he hurried forward.

He was half way across the room when the door came open and Littleby stepped through. He was smiling—a thin, malignant smile that seemed to spread a glow of triumphant venom over his face.

“Too late, Dean,” he murmured softly. “I win.”

## CHAPTER XXXI

### CHECKMATED

DEAN heard nothing; neither did he see the transfiguring glow of malicious satisfaction in the lawyer's face. He could feel nothing but a tingling, pulse-quickenning ecstasy in the thought that at last he stood face to face, on a footing of equality, with the monster who, to gain as yet inscrutable ends, had terrorized Shirley Lamont. His fingers itched with a strange and savage craving that he had never known before, enrapturing his senses and blinding him to the pistol that gleamed menacingly in the lawyer's hand.

He leaped forward, his fist described a lightning curve, and the pistol halted in its quick upward movement, and fell to the floor. A blow on the jaw silenced the lawyer's outcry and sent him whirling to the floor. In a moment Dean was upon him, all his explosive frenzy gathering for a fresh blow.

But the blow did not land. A glance into the lawyer's fear-stricken face, and of a sudden the brutish, exultant strain left him. His muscles grew limp; in a twinkling his fierce vindictiveness changed into an innocuous sense of contempt. Littleby, with ashen face twitching in a spasm of fear, seemed so

feeble that Dean experienced an instant revulsion. He got up, cheated of his vengeance by a palsied old face.

"Stop that whining," he said disgustedly. "I wish to Heaven you were twenty years younger!"

Littleby, at first uncomprehending, struggled to his feet. He cast a designing eye at the pistol, but Dean kicked it under the bed. A sullen, maliciously calculating look transplanted the terror in the lawyer's face.

"It's just as well you changed your mind," he muttered, a silken venom in his tones. "Rather fond of Miss Lamont, aren't you, Dean?"

"Shut up," said Dean hotly, "or I may forget that you are only a weakling."

"How impetuous we are!" The lawyer, still breathing hard, was rapidly recovering his composure. "Miss Lamont is a very charming young lady, and you are still young enough to be impressionable. The intimacy of common peril makes excellent soil for romance to sprout in. The young lady has suffered a grievous loss, but that only makes her all the more susceptible to the appealing qualities of anyone who is ready to offer her sympathy. I'll wager, Dean, that you made the most of your opportunity. Now, don't get into a huff, please, and don't look at me as if you were ready to tear me to pieces. Where do you suppose Miss Lamont is now?"

Dean started. The loathing died out of his face, giving way to an expression of stark bewilderment. Of a sudden he threw the door open and looked out.

In the dusk and silence that reigned everywhere there was no sign of Shirley Lamont.

Littleby chuckled complacently. "That's what comes of being so hot-headed. You supposed Miss Lamont was following, didn't you? But she wasn't. She never got through the opening. It closed automatically behind her while you were doing violence to my coat-tails."

Dean stared at him in consternation, but gradually his face cleared.

"No matter," he said. "Miss Lamont can stand imprisonment a few minutes longer. I'll find her as soon as I've disposed of you."

"How will you find her?" asked the lawyer mockingly.

"I'll get an ax and smash the walls if necessary."

"Unfortunately there is no such implement handy. Even if you find one, the walls are quite substantial, and it will take you some time to demolish them. And really, Dean, you have no time to waste. In ten minutes—fifteen at the most—Miss Lamont will be dead."

A look of incredulity, followed quickly by one of horrified comprehension, came into Dean's face.

Littleby regarded him gloatingly. "I see you understand," he murmured. "Yes, the arselene is at work again. Turned on full force this time. It acts quickly when the entire current is turned on."

A gasp of horror broke from Dean's lips. He sprang on the lawyer, standing erect before him with a faint leer on his thin lips, but in a moment he saw

the futility of violence. He threw open the inner door, the one Littleby had stepped through a few minutes before, but all he saw were the usual fixtures of a well-appointed bathroom.

"Quite useless, my friend," said Littleby. "It would take you a long, long time to find the contrivance that governs the flow of arselene, and by that time— Well, you can guess."

Dean, conquering his tumultuous anguish, took out his watch.

"I'll give you precisely sixty seconds," he said evenly, "to shut off your devilish arselene. If you refuse, I'll choke you to death."

Littleby gave him a long, appraising look. "I believe you would," he said quietly. "You are crazy enough for anything. But how could such violence benefit Miss Lamont?"

"Thirty seconds," said Dean.

"Thirty hours would be all the same. Life would be of no use to me unless I succeed in my present enterprise. You and Miss Lamont stand in my way. If you win, I might as well die. But I don't intend that you shall. There is only one thing can save Miss Lamont's life, but you fooled me the last time I suggested a compromise. You shan't fool me again. Care to hear my terms?"

With a gesture of complete indifference he folded his arms across his chest. Dean looked down at his watch. Its serene ticking shrieked in his ears like a thunderous knell of doom.

Suddenly he jerked up his head and stared fixedly

at a door to his left, directly opposite the bathroom. A dull booming sound came.

Littleby awoke from his sublime composure with a gasp and leveled a startled glance at the side of the room.

"A shot?" he muttered, then whirled round just as the door leading to the hall came open. In the doorway stood Lieutenant Shane, with a uniformed officer at his side, and behind them appeared the powerful figure of Doctor Ballinger.

"Hear anything?" asked Shane, casting an oddly incurious glance about the room, his eyes resting for a moment on Dean's pale face.

"Something that sounded like a shot," replied Littleby, evidently ill at ease.

The lieutenant chuckled dryly. "I guess you wouldn't have heard it if there hadn't been a communicating door between this room and the one where Lamont was murdered." He glanced for a moment at the door through which the booming sound had come. "Maybe it doesn't fit quite tight at the bottom."

"What—what of it?" stammered Littleby, seemingly bewildered and also greatly worried. "And what does this intrusion mean?" he added, making an unsuccessful show of dignity.

"It means," said Shane, "that Doctor Ballinger, Officer Buckley and myself have been making a little experiment. I'm sure you don't mind, Mr. Littleby. We have demonstrated that, with the door closed, a shot fired in the room where Lamont died can't

be heard by a person standing on the balcony. The walls looked as though they were almost sound-proof when I examined them, and our experiment proves it. Get the idea, Mr. Littleby?"

For a moment the lawyer stared uncomprehendingly at the three faces in the doorway, then a great tremor shook him, an ashen pall rushed across his face, his lips twisted into a ghastly smile; a devastating terror seemed to come over him.

"It's quite plain," he said, in a weak, hollow voice.

Dean had watched the scene through a blur. It seemed so grotesquely trivial by contrast with the agonizing fear that was uppermost in his mind. He rushed toward the door, scattering the little group standing there.

"Lee—arselene—ax!" he shouted incoherently. "We must find an ax—quick!"

"You'll have to hurry," said Littleby in a voice strangely unlike his own, yet edged with malignant sarcasm. "I fear you will be too late, Dean. I win there, anyhow."

## CHAPTER XXXII

### THE SECRET OF ARSELENE

**D**OCTOR BALLINGER followed as Dean rushed breathlessly from the room.

"Hold on!" he shouted, seizing the novelist's arm on the run. "Where to? What was that you said about arselene?"

Dean turned, looked into the physician's eyes for a moment, saw something in them which upset all the inchoate suspicions of the past and instantly won his confidence. He blurted out a few rambling but illuminating statements.

The doctor loosed a few curt and blistering invectives at Littleby's expense, thereby completing his conquest of Dean's confidence.

"Wait here," he said brusquely.

In a few moments he was back, carrying a huge ax, and Dean conducted him up the stairs and down the hall toward the point where an apparently impregnable wall blocked their progress. The novelist dealt a thunderous blow with the ax.

"Run and get an antidote of some sort," he shouted hoarsely as he swung the ax back over his shoulder. "You've got something at your office, haven't you? It will probably be needed by the time we break through."

"Antidote?" echoed the physician grimly. "There is no antidote for arsene." "

The ax bit into the wood with a resounding crash. Time and again Dean struck, working with desperate strength.

"Let me have a chance at it," said the doctor after a while.

Dean continued the whacking, refusing to let Ballinger relieve him. Even though he had the strength of a bull, the doctor lacked the terrific incentive that put power into Dean's blows. A grim and savage melody thundered in his brain; a picture, at once enchanting and terrible, flashed in and out of his mind as he worked. The seasoned pine timbers shivered and groaned with each fresh assault. The ax bit hungrily into the wood, each crashing blow sinking deeper and deeper, as if the inanimate implement felt the ecstasy of fury that governed the man wielding it.

"Marvelous!" muttered the doctor. "Never saw a man of sedentary habits wield an ax like that. Bravo!"

With a long, splintering din the obstruction yielded. Dean dropped the ax and squeezed through the ragged hole.

"One at a time," he said hoarsely as Ballinger started to follow. "If these hellish fumes get me before I can get her out, then it's up to you."

He sprang forward, floundering in a welter of stinging, sense-drugging vapors, shouting Lee's name, fumbling for her in the misty gloom. No

response came; his voice grew husky, each intake of breath seemed to blister his lungs and scorch the lining of nose and throat. His head felt as if ravaged by fire; an insidious weakness was stealing over him, making him giddy and filling him with despair. What if he should be overcome before he could find Lee in this swirl of horrors? What assurance was there that Ballinger would succeed where he had failed? And if both of them succumbed——

A husky shout rose from his tortured lungs. His feet encountered an obstruction, something soft, yielding. In a moment, staggering over his limp burden, he was hastening toward the opening, guided by Ballinger's anxious shouts. He passed his burden through the aperture into the doctor's waiting arms.

"To the balcony!" cried the doctor.

Carrying the unconscious girl between them, they reached the balcony and stretched her out on a wicker sofa. As the doctor made a hasty examination, Dean looked despairingly into her rigid face, fringed by hair in tumultuous disorder. With a provokingly methodical air, Ballinger produced a needle from a leather wallet, dipped it into a small vial, and inserted the point in the girl's arm.

"Another minute's delay might have been fatal," he said in reply to Dean's anxious glance of inquiry. "As I told you, there is no known antidote, but the stimulant I gave her may carry her through the crisis. Nasty stuff, arselene. Ever hear of it before?"

"Never. That is, not until Littleby mentioned it."

"That's strange," said Ballinger in an odd voice, but Dean scarcely heard him. He was watching anxiously a flicker of returning life in the girl's face. The eyelids were fluttering; there was a feeble rising and falling movement beneath the lines of the throat.

"For the present she is as well off here as she would be in a hospital," remarked Ballinger. "Next to a heart stimulant, fresh air is what she needs most. So, you never heard of arselene before? Well, well." He rose from his stooping position over the patient and regarded Dean in a queer way. "Aren't you Paul Forrester?"

Dean shrugged. The matter of identities seemed suddenly to have lost all significance. His whole world revolved round the feebly palpitating form on the sofa.

"You needn't answer," said Ballinger. "I asked only because a Forrester ought to know arselene. Jordan Forrester discovered it."

"My father?" asked Dean in a dull, mildly curious voice.

Ballinger nodded. "Your father was a Jack of a thousand trades, and the discovery of arselene was one of those lucky accidents that come along now and then. Your father didn't realize the importance of his discovery; in fact, nobody realized it till long after he was dead. Today a certain European principality is willing to pay fifteen million dollars for it."

"Eh?" said Dean dazedly.

"Fifteen millions," repeated the doctor. "Littleby has been negotiating for some time with the representatives of the foreign power. Arselene—it's a composition of arsenic and acetylene gas and a few other ingredients, by the way—is one of the most destructive poison gases ever invented. No nation, or combination of nations, could stand up against a foe equipped with it. It's a hellish thing, Dean. With arselene in its possession, even a small army would be invincible. It would be a blessing in the cause of righteousness, but a terrible thing if employed on the side of imperialism and greed. It would change the map of the world in no time."

The astounding statement seemed to touch only a small corner of Dean's mind. An agency that could turn the world topsy-turvy and demolish empires seemed of little consequence just now in comparison with his concern for the girl on the sofa. He watched in tremulous anxiety as a pale wisp of color returned to her cheeks.

"She'll be all right in a little while now," said Ballinger after another examination. "Don't blame you, Dean, for not showing more interest in what I am telling you about arselene. Anyhow, all the empires in the world don't amount to a row of pins. The only things that really matter are those that live in here." He administered a slap to the left side of his powerful chest.

Dean gave him a wide-eyed glance. It was

strange talk, coming from a physician. He wondered suddenly if little Miss Gray had a nestling place inside Ballinger's expansive chest.

"Damnable stuff!" muttered the doctor. "It's fascinating, in its way, but I wish now I had never got interested in it. There are only two formulas in existence. One is in my possession; the other in Littleby's. Littleby and the foreign agent have had their heads together for some time, making demonstrations and calculating profits. I never dreamed, though, that Littleby would demonstrate it in this particular way."

His indignant glance traveled to the girl on the sofa. "I suppose it gave him a convenient weapon," he muttered. "The minutest quantity of the stuff is enough to fill a house and kill everybody in it. Fine!" he exclaimed, feeling the girl's pulse. "Getting stronger every moment. She will be on her feet soon, Dean. You see, your father, Littleby, myself and a few others were engaged in various enterprises out West some years ago. We formed a close corporation, informal in a way, yet having a legal standing. When your father died—practically penniless as he himself and everybody else supposed—he left a will providing that whatever property he left behind should go to his son—to you, in other words—but that in the event of the son's death the estate should go to his former associates. Littleby can tell you all about the legal phases of the will. It was a joke in a way, for there was no estate, as far

as anybody knew; consequently there was nothing to inherit. Furthermore, everybody supposed that Paul Forrester was dead.

"Then one day Littleby tumbled to the commercial value of arselene. How it happened I can't tell you, but he sent for me to give my professional opinion of the formula. Before long we saw that old Jordan Forrester had left us a legacy that, if handled properly, would make us immensely wealthy. Right away a demon got into Littleby. He could think and talk only in terms of millions. I was smitten myself, but in a different way. There was something in the immensity of the project that appealed to my imagination. We had our first disagreement when Littleby insisted on selling the product to the highest bidder instead of offering it to the United States government, and we've been having disagreements ever since. I knew only a little of what was going on between Littleby and the foreign agent, and, because of certain circumstances, I couldn't say anything."

He gazed off into space with a scowl on his face. "What a dam' ridiculous fix a man can get into!" he muttered. "I wouldn't go through it again for all the millions in the world. Littleby, Lamont and myself were the only ones left out of the old group of associates; the others were dead. That meant that the formula belonged to us three, for nobody supposed that Paul Forrester was still living." He glanced queerly at Dean. "We might not have known till this day that he was living under an as-

sumed name if the newspaper reports of Lamont's confession had not brought him out of the woods."

"And I don't see yet how Lamont came to make such an absurd confession," said Dean, looking pointedly at the doctor.

"I don't know," said Ballinger, scowling. "I can only guess. I prefer you get the explanation from Littleby. He can tell if he will." He threw back his head and sniffed. "The arselene is coming this way," he remarked. "I think we had better remove Miss Lamont to a safer place."

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### THE MURDERER OF LAMONT

**A**FTER Dean and Doctor Ballinger had left the room, Buckley, the uniformed officer, came forward impressively and touched the lawyer's arm.

"I arrest you, Mr. Littleby," he declared, repeating the stereotyped phrase with a solemn air, "for the murder of Martin Lamont. You're a lawyer, so I needn't warn you that anything you may say will be held against you."

"I say you are a fool," retorted Littleby. "I have the best alibi in the world. Doctor Ballinger and I were on the balcony when the shot was fired that killed Lamont."

"Yes, I know," interposed Shane dryly. "An hour or two ago, when Miss Gray and I were here and she asked you all those questions, my mind kept revolving a million turns a minute. I couldn't make head or tail to what she said, but as we walked away from here she explained a few things. She would have explained them before, but it would have caused a sensation, and she has a sick mother who can't stand too much of a shock. In a few hours she will do the sensible thing and take her mother on a sea voyage. By the way, do you know Miss Farnham?"

"Of course. She was Lamont's nurse."

"Wasn't she formerly known as Beulah Vance?"

"Far be it from me to inquire into a lady's past."

"And didn't you advise her in the matter of her breach of promise suit against Paul Forrester?"

"I refuse to gratify idle curiosity."

"Then I'll answer my own question. After the suit had been dragging along for a time you told Miss Vance she had better drop it. You convinced her that she would never be able to collect anything. Young Forrester had disappeared, and as far as anybody knew he never had more than a few dollars to his name. Some time afterward you discovered that Jordan Forrester, Paul's father, had left something behind him that was worth a good many millions. In the meantime you had been keeping in touch with Miss Farnham, thinking she might prove useful, and you sent for her when Lamont came to your house sick."

"Naturally. She lived near by."

"You promised her," Shane went on, "that if she would oblige you in certain matters you would pay her twice as much as she could ever have collected on the breach of promise suit, even if young Forrester had been a rich man."

Littleby was momentarily taken aback. "Oh," he said stiffly, "I perceive you have gone to the trouble of interviewing Miss Farnham. Well, no harm done. The word of a common adventuress, even though she is masquerading as a nurse, will not have great weight in court. I am not——"

He paused and glanced toward the open door.

"Sounds like somebody wrecking the house," muttered Shane. "Wonder what Dean's up to this time. Well, Littleby, I convinced Miss Farnham that you would never be able to live up to your promise, and finally I persuaded her to come clean. She didn't seem to realize until then that complicity in a murder is just as serious as the act of murder itself, and she took the one chance she had of escaping the chair. I know all about your alibi, Mr. Littleby. You knew Doctor Ballinger was coming that night, and you had everything arranged beforehand."

Littleby's face sagged a little. An intensified pallor settled over his features. He started nervously as a deafening crash sounded over their heads. From the hall came the excited voices of servants rudely startled out of their early morning slumber.

"Hope Dean doesn't tear down the house over our heads," muttered the lieutenant. "Let's go back over the case and see what we have, Mr. Littleby. You and Doctor Ballinger were out on the balcony, smoking your cigars. There is no doubt on that point, for each of you supported the other in that statement. A shot rang out, and you rushed into Lamont's bedroom, followed by Dean, who appeared mysteriously from somewhere. Miss Farnham told you she had been dozing on the cot, and that she knew nothing until the shot wakened her. Sounded plausible enough on the face of it, and so did her added statement that she had seen no

stranger in the room. Evidently the murderer escaped while she was rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. To walk into a room, fire a shot, and walk out again takes only a few seconds. Yes, Miss Farnham told a convincing enough story, and no wonder. She had been drilled by an expert. The credit belongs to you, Mr. Littleby."

"Oh, thanks," said the lawyer, with feeble sarcasm.

"As things looked on the surface," Shane went on, "Lamont had been murdered by a mysterious intruder. Dean's conduct looked rather suspicious—on the surface, that is. You had an apparently perfect alibi, and so did Doctor Ballinger for that matter. The way things looked, you couldn't have killed Lamont without being in two places at once. There were one or two curious features of the affair, though. In the first place, the murderer must have left the door open when he walked in and fired the shot. His natural impulse would have been to close it, so that the report wouldn't create more disturbance that was necessary. The less noise he made, the more certain he would be of making his getaway. But it appears he left the door open—on purpose, it would seem, so that you and Doctor Ballinger could hear the shot on the balcony. We demonstrated a while ago that, with the door closed, the report of a shot does not travel that far.

"Then there was another curious thing, but Doctor Ballinger will tell you about that. It had to do with something he noticed when he stood at La-

mont's bed. Certain things didn't look just right to him, but it was only a hazy sort of an impression, and he didn't say anything till later."

Shane paused, took a folded handkerchief from his pocket, unwrapped it, and exhibited something reposing within.

"Here is still another funny twist, Mr. Littleby. See this bullet? It's the same size as the one that killed Lamont. Maybe it was fired from the same pistol. I found it imbedded in one of the oaks on the lawn outside. Guess how it got there?"

"You tell," said the lawyer, glaring at him. "You put things so interestingly."

"All right. This bullet was fired from the window of Lamont's bedroom by Miss Farnham while you and Doctor Ballinger were talking on the balcony. The window being open, you heard the report clearly. It was fired for the sole purpose of establishing an alibi for you, Mr. Littleby. Everybody would suppose that the shot you heard was the one that killed Lamont. There was no reason for anyone to think otherwise. You and Doctor Ballinger heard a shot, rushed into Lamont's bedroom, and found him dead from a pistol shot. What could be simpler? As a matter of fact, the bullet that actually killed Lamont had been fired fifteen or twenty minutes earlier. It wasn't heard outside the walls of this room, for both the window and the door were closed. You fired that shot, Mr. Littleby. After firing it, in accordance with a plan prearranged between you and Miss Farnham, you

---

hunted up Doctor Ballinger, who was about to leave the house, and suggested a smoke on the balcony. The rest was up to Miss Farnham. It was fairly clever, Mr. Littleby, neither too subtle or too complicated, just the ordinary sort of thing that makes the best kind of alibi. Too bad, though, that Miss Farnham didn't use a blank cartridge. Are you ready, Mr. Littleby? Buckley is getting impatient."

The uniformed officer produced a pair of handcuffs with a business-like air. Littleby stared at them reluctantly, then drew himself up to something resembling his usual pompous height. He tried to smile his habitual supercilious smile, but it was a ghastly failure.

"Just one minute, gentlemen," he said with an approach to his old-time suave tones. "Surely you can't object to my having my customary morning shave. Couldn't think of appearing like this in public."

He opened the bathroom door and, without waiting for their consent, stepped in and closed it behind him. Buckley followed him with an anxious and suspicious stare until he disappeared.

"Don't worry," said Shane, who had swept the bathrom with a comprehensive glance during the brief interval while Littleby held the door open. "He can't escape, and a man of his type is a stickler for appearances till the last. Bet he'll have his shave as usual the morning he goes to the electric chair. Wonder what's become of Dean and Doctor

## 300 THE ROOM UNDER THE STAIRS

Ballinger. That hammering a few minutes ago sounded like the house coming down."

He crossed the floor and stood at the window, looking out into the drizzle. Minutes passed, and no sound came from the bathroom. "Seems to me he's had time for a dozen shaves," muttered Buckley.

Shane tried the bathroom door. Littleby had closed it behind him. The lieutenant, his face darkening, sniffed audibly a few times, then looked down at the sill.

"Notice that queer odor, Buckley?"

"Maybe he uses scented shaving soap."

The odor, with its exotic tang, was growing more and more pronounced. Shane, refusing to accept his companion's flippant view, pounded vigorously on the door. No response came, only a dead silence. He cleared his throat, which suddenly felt a little raw.

"Don't like the looks of this," he muttered. "Buckley, you go and——"

The sudden opening of the door leading to the hall interrupted him. Doctor Ballinger entered, advanced a few steps, then stopped, his nostrils dilating.

"Who is in there?" he asked sharply, indicating the bathroom door.

"Mr. Littleby," Shane replied. "He insisted on having a shave before we took him away. Guess we'd better smash the door."

Ballinger smiled oddly. "I'm afraid you will be too late, gentleman. You will find him dead. It kills quickly sometimes." And under his breath he added: "Arselene!"

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### THE SHATTERED CRYSTAL

**G**HOSTS everywhere! Ghosts of dimly remembered days, of childhood and early youth, of love and tragedy and death. They seemed to peer out from dusky corners, where the light from the candles on the mantle-shelf did not reach, whispering dark and sinister secrets.

With Shirley Lamont walking in moody silence beside him, Dean followed Lieutenant Shane through the old house on Hudson Street. The lieutenant, always thorough-going in his methods, had expressed a desire for a final glance at the place—"just to check up on a few points," as he had confided to Dean before they started.

They paused before the door to the room under the stairs, and Dean recalled with a shudder what he had seen in there, the ghastly heap whose presence in that particular place had seemed a mocking travesty, a challenge to his reason.

"Guess we won't go in," said Shane, with a glance at Miss Lamont. "We'll let the ghosts rest. They need it after all this hullabaloo. Suppose we step in here?"

They returned to the sitting room, where the candles had been lighted once more, for it was late

in the evening of the day following Littleby's suicide in his house at Kew Gardens. Dean placed one of the old chairs for Miss Lamont.

"It's been a day I'll never forget," sighed Lieutenant Shane.

"I shall remember it chiefly," said Dean, "as the day on which I escaped becoming a millionaire." That afternoon, with the assistance of Doctor Ballinger, he had searched Littleby's papers until he found the lawyer's copy of the formula for arselene. Then the lawyer had surrendered his own, the only other copy in existence, and they had burned them both, jestingly remarking as they did so that fifteen million dollars were going up in smoke. "On the whole I think," he added, "that the world is better off without such diabolical things as arselene."

"Guess you're right, seeing how much deviltry has grown out of it already," Shane assented. "But fifteen millions is a lot of money."

"It makes my head ache to think in such vast amounts," Dean confessed.

"Mine too," said Lee promptly.

Dean gave her a mysterious glance. "Two headaches under one roof would be an awful calamity. Now, dear," as she blushed confusedly, "don't waste your blushes on a hardened ruffian like Shane. He knows I am hopelessly in love with you."

"I've got eyes," said Shane dryly, but with a twinkle in his astonishingly blue eyes.

"And I've got ears," Dean rejoined. "There's something they are aching to hear. Who was mur-

dered in this house five and a half years ago?"

Shane waited a few moments before he replied. Lee sat tremulously erect in her chair, casting fascinated glances into the dim corners.

"A man called Parson Bill," said the lieutenant. "He was one of the group your father associated with out West. I don't know how keen a judge of character your dad was, but he seems to have made one or two bad mistakes in picking his friends. One of them was Littleby, though he didn't turn bad till he saw a chance of making a pile of millions. The other was the fellow known as Parson Bill. Now, I haven't found anybody who knows the whole story, but I've pieced it together from what I could get out of Miss Farnham and from what Doctor Ballinger and Miss Gray told me. Great girl, that Miss Gray! She's smarter than she looks, and I guess a few years older, too. Had me all up in the air for a while. Guess she will keep Doctor Ballinger guessing, though she is just as wild about him as he is about her. It's a good match. Doctor Ballinger is what I would call a twenty-four carat man, and though he'll all of forty, there's a lot of the twenties in him."

"But what about Parson Bill?" inquired Dean.

"He was bad clean through, as near as I can judge from reports. Somehow he seems to have got into your father's confidence. As you know, your dad traveled about a lot and spent very little time in New York, except when he came East on business. He wasn't particularly fond of New York, and now

and then he would send Parson Bill here to look after things for him. Your father told him to put up at this house and make himself at home. He even gave him a set of duplicate keys. It seems Parson Bill objected to staying at hotels for some reason, so the arrangement suited him fine. I guess, Dean, you didn't spend much time in this house after your mother died and your father got the wanderlust. That's why you never ran into Parson Bill."

Dean nodded.

"It seems," Shane continued, "that there was a young girl in this town that Parson Bill had his eye on. She was very young then, and she didn't care for him, but he was a friend of her father's, so she had to stand for a certain amount of attention from him. One night Parson Bill struck New York and started drinking. By some hook or crook—possibly by pretending he had a message from her father, who was then in Colorado—he induced her to call on him at this house. There was a scene; you can imagine something of what happened. The girl fought like a hyena. Finally, in desperation, she picked up the fire tongs. When it was all over, Parson Bill was lying dead on the floor, and the girl was terrified at what she had done. She couldn't report the facts without starting all sorts of nasty gossip. She was strong, and Parson Bill didn't have any flesh on his big bones, and her only clear thought was that the body mustn't be found there—at least not for a while. She hid it, together with the fire

tongs, in the room under the stairs. Now maybe you understand?"

"The girl was Viola Gray?" Dean exclaimed.

"Right. For a long time she told no one but her father what had happened. Somehow Littleby, who was a member of the same group, got hold of the facts, but he kept them to himself. Later, when Doctor Ballinger began making love to her, she confessed to him, and he treated her confession as any twenty-four carat man would. Now you understand why he has kept his mouth closed and looked mysterious throughout this whole mess. Littleby had the facts, and he used them to exert pressure on the doctor. Then, early yesterday morning, as we were leaving Littleby's house, little Miss Gray decided that matters had gone far enough and told me the whole story."

Dean and the girl had listened with rapt attention. A little pause followed the lieutenant's recital.

"But Lamont's confession?" asked Dean, reverting to the core of the mystery.

Shane smiled wryly. "There's such a thing as being too thorough-going," he said musingly. "That was Littleby's fault. He wanted to improve on an almost sure thing. The arselene project was coming along in fine shape, except for one thing. The formula was by rights the property of Paul Forrester. Everybody thought Paul Forrester was dead. Littleby was almost sure of it, but he had no proof. He didn't want to bring matters to a successful conclusion and then have Paul Forrester

walk in on him some bright morning and claim the entire profits. Such a thing wasn't likely to happen, yet it might. Littleby wouldn't take chances. He decided to appeal to the courts to have Paul Forrester declared legally dead, as is sometimes done when a person has been missing a number of years. But the courts would insist on some proof, aside from the mere fact of Paul Forrester's absence, and Littleby had none."

Shane cast a solicitous glance at the girl. "Then Mr. Lamont came to town, a very sick man, and Littleby invited him to his house. A telegram was sent to Miss Lamont at Wichita, advising her to come to New York at once. Then— Will you tell the rest or shall I, Miss Lamont?"

"Go on," said the girl in a low voice.

"Miss Lamont has already told me," Dean put in, "how she was trapped by Littleby and made a prisoner in his house."

"Well, Littleby had a bright idea," said Shane contemptuously. "He thought he saw his chance to fabricate evidence that would induce the courts to pronounce Paul Forrester legally dead. A confession of murder would serve as well as anything. He knew a great many details about Forrester's life until the time he disappeared. He also knew about the heap of bones in the room under the stairs. He pieced all those things together and dictated a confession which he persuaded Mr. Lamont to sign. It was complete and convincing enough to satisfy anybody. But just how he got Mr. Lamont to put

his name to that paper in the presence of a notary is something I don't see. I have an idea, but——"

"I think I understand," Dean interrupted. Scraps of observation, together with scattered remarks dropped by the girl, became suddenly a unified whole in his mind. "Mr. Lamont knew that his daughter was kept hidden in Littleby's house. He was warned that she would be put to death unless he signed the confession. There was a telephone at his bedside, and whenever he showed signs of wavering he was told to listen in on the wire and hear his daughter's screams as she was being terrorized by Littleby's henchman. Mr. Littleby loved his daughter, and he simply did what any real father would have done.

"Then I appeared on the scene, after the confession had been published in the newspapers, and several circumstances led Littleby to suspect that I was Paul Forrester. He tried first to frighten me away, then to have me murdered, but he failed both times. Then, in the event that I should declare myself as Paul Forrester—which, by the way, I had no intention of doing—he tried to substantiate the confession still further by compelling Mr. Lamont to give added details—such, for instance, as having noticed a scar on his victim's neck. He was even forced to declare that he suspected me of trafficking after his life.

"If at any time he rebelled, the screams on the wire quickly subdued him. He had been warned that if he told anyone—Doctor Ballinger, for instance—of his daughter's presence in the house, she

would be instantly murdered. A strong and healthy man would have yielded to such persuasion, much more readily a dying one. And in the end, fearing that he might live long enough to retract his confession, Littleby murdered him."

Dean's voice grew a little thick toward the end. Even now that Littleby was dead, he felt a resurgence of rage against the man. "Arselene was too good for him," he muttered.

"He isn't the first man who's lost his head over a bunch of coin," Shane philosophized. "By the way, remember those pieces of glass, Dean? What do you make of them by this time?"

"Oh," said Dean thoughtfully, "I think I can turn my imagination loose on that problem and solve it, though it puzzled me for a while. I suppose Parson Bill's watch was broken in his struggle with Miss Gray. The fragments I found were from his watch. Littleby, I suppose, inspected the room under the stairs when he arranged his material for the confession Mr. Lamont was to sign, and he found the broken watch. Perhaps there was something distinctive about it; anyhow, he feared it might upset his whole scheme. While roaming about the house he had found an old watch of mine, and he substituted it for Parson Bill's. That's how I would dope it out."

Shane grinned. "You're improving. Last time you tried to theorize about that watch, you handed me a solution that was full of holes. But maybe,"

with a shrewd wink in the novelist's direction, "you were only shamming."

"Perhaps," said Dean evasively. "Anyhow, I've come to the conclusion in the last few days that truth is a lot stranger than fiction—even my sort of fiction."

Shane yawned ostentatiously and got up. Soon he bid them good-night and walked out. For a time they sat silent in the wavering glow of the red and green candles, then Dean took her hand and led her slowly from the room. In the hall their steps faltered; by common instinct they stopped in front of the room under the stairs.

"Tommie," she whispered, leaning against his shoulder and drawing a long breath, "life has its happy endings, too, hasn't, it?"

"Happier," he said with great conviction. Then, impetuously, while they were still standing in front of the room under the stairs, he tilted her head back. His cheek brushed hers. Then a kiss—their first.

"That will lay the ghosts," he declared triumphantly.

THE END

---

"you

I've  
that  
t of

don  
me  
nd  
ner  
al-  
of

is  
ts

1,  
it  
:  
:  
-



UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



**A 000 129 893 4**

