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CLOAK OF SATAN

By FRANK PATTON

A girl who can actually fly should go over big with a nightclub crowd. At least, Bronson thought so . . . until death stepped in!

RADCLIFF BRONSON'S office was made to order for the big, good-natured night-club owner. The heavy chairs and king-size desk seemed to fit his personality and body.

Bronson's face held that expression of patience he had to use when "Noisy" Malone came in with a new find. "Noisy", thin and nervous, a cigarette hanging in his lips, fidgeted in the chair before the desk. He had been talking almost without interruption for ten min-

utes, when Bronson finally held up his hand.

"Wait a minute." His voice had that quality of ordering people about without hurting their feelings. "I'll admit that the show needs an uplift, Noisy. We were in the red last week. However, we need singers and dancers. What the devil would the Silver Terrace do with a magician act?"

Malone's shoulders drooped.

"But this guy Giraud is different," he protested.

Bronson frowned, but it was a fleeting, quickly hidden expression. He didn't want to hurt Malone's feelings.

"You've picked up a lot of acts before, Noisy," he said. "But somehow you don't get the kind that go over. I need a girl right now, not a magician. If you could find a smart little singer . . ."

Noisy Malone jumped to his feet.

"This guy Giraud has a girl with him," he said eagerly. "Maybe she would fit in."

Bronson shrugged.

"I can't understand why you insist on my seeing Giraud," he said. "Even admitting that the man is clever, why is he working for Mike Humphry? The House of Frivolity is the cheapest burlesque dive in town."

Malone had his argument ready.





Bronson gasped aloud as the bat-like wings began slowly to spread

Bronson was showing interest now. Malone leaned over the desk eagerly.

"This Philip Giraud just came over from France a few months ago," he said. "Escaped from a coast town and showed up in New York without a dime and no idea of what our theaters were all about. He signed with Humphry and now he knows the score. I'm telling you the act is a whizz."

Bronson smiled broadly.

"Barnum went in for big stuff," he said. "That's what I'm after. Any act that hits the stage of the Silver Terrace has to be good enough to jump straight from there into Hollywood. Let's be reasonable. Can this Giraud and his assistant be made into top-flight material? That's what we have to think of."

He settled back comfortably in his chair. Malone hesitated. He had seen Giraud's act a half dozen times in the past week. The boss had given him a lot of chances and thus far Malone hadn't turned up anything good.

"I think I've found the real thing," he said at last. "Will you go watch the act?"

Bronson groaned.

"Okay!" he said. "Call Humphry and tell him to put the magician on as soon as I get there. The girl? Is her part of the act good?"

A broad smile parted Malone's thin lips.

"She flies," he said modestly. "Is that good enough?"

BRONSON leaned forward in his chair, eyes twinkling.

"Remind me to cut your salary!" he said. "I have an idea you've been hitting the bottle pretty hard."

Malone reddened.

"So you don't believe me," he shrugged. "The girl has a pair of fake wings and Giraud pulls some kind of a

gag that makes her look like she really takes off and flutters around in the air."

Bronson clapped a hand over his mouth and stifled a choking laugh.

"Okay," he said when he had gained control of himself. "Let's go see your flying girl friend. If I find out she's a school girl sweetheart who talked you into getting her a break, I'll make you stay sober all next week."

"No chance," Malone insisted. "After you see Philip Giraud, *Magician Extraordinaire*, you'll go out and have a drink with me."

THE House of Frivolty was on South State Street. Its front was so thoroughly plastered with cardboard nudes that the entrance was hard to locate. Bronson scowled as he entered the small, dirty lobby. Bronson hated these dumps worse than poison.

Mike Humphry, the owner, saw them come in. He signaled Malone.

"We'll get the girlie act right off and send the professor out."

Humphry offered his hand to Bronson. "Glad you dropped in, Mr. Bronson. Can't say as the house measures up to your place, but we do our best."

Bronson smiled a little coldly and they went inside. The last pounding notes of a song were cut off as the strip act left the stage hurriedly. The house was filled with loud whistling and hand-clapping. Bronson sat down in a chair near the back of the theater and Malone settled into the cushions beside him.

"It won't take long," Malone said nervously, "Humphry says he'll put Giraud right on."

"I heard him," Bronson answered shortly.

Malone muttered something under his breath. The three-piece band stumbled hurriedly through an introduction and Philip Giraud came swiftly to the stage.

Giraud was a short, swarthy-skinned man. He pushed a coffin-shaped box before him. It was covered with black silk and mounted on a wheeled table.

Philip Giraud stopped in the center of the stage and held up a slim, white hand. He walked to the front of the platform and looked over the audience straight at Bronson.

"Gentlemen, Professor Philip Giraud will, for only a limited time after today, be allowed to offer his act for so little money. There is in the audience an agent who will recognize my worth and place me with the stars where I belong. For this reason I ask for complete silence and respect."

Bronson leaned toward Malone.

"Modest little squirt, isn't he?"

"Wait," Malone said anxiously. "He knows he's good."

Giraud went on for several minutes, talking swiftly as he produced the usual card tricks and rabbit-from-the-hat stuff. Bronson yawned.

"Where's the girl?" he asked. "I'll see her and then we'll get the hell out of here."

Professor Giraud had evidently detected Bronson's bored expression. He dropped the small-time business and went to the head of the covered coffin. The silence on the stage affected the audience. Giraud whipped the cloth from the plain, mahogany box. He lifted the lid slowly and turned once more to the men below him.

"Madame Satan," he said, "consented to accompany me on this trip from France. She agrees that Europe is too hot a place now for even the wife of the devil."

TH**ERE** was no humor in the smile that showed his even, white teeth. A snicker went up from the audience. The sound was hushed as the girl sat up in the coffin.

Malone's eyes were on his boss' face. Malone had seen Madame Satan before. He watched Bronson's eyes widen and a slow smile replace the frown that had been continuous since the act started.

The girl, visible from the waist up, was clothed in a flaming red cape. It covered her hair, framing a creamy-skinned, oval face. Her lips were red and full and her eyes, turned toward Bronson, were deep and smoldering as though she had awakened after a long sleep. Wisps of coppery hair escaped from the cape and fell about her neck.

"Madame Satan has been my friend for many years." The little magician stood with one hand on the coffin edge, the other gesturing delicately in the air to illustrate his speech. "It was I who convinced her that she should visit the United States."

The professor was a fraud, Bronson knew, but the girl held his attention. At Giraud's bidding, she took his hand and, standing up, allowed him to lower her to the stage.

Silently she opened the robe and allowed it to fall at her feet.

A sigh escaped Malone's lips. To Bronson's surprise, the girl was not Mike Humphry's type. Queenliness characterized every movement of her lithe, carefully groomed figure.

She faced the audience. Giraud stood behind her, and spreading his arms, fluttered his finger tips in the air.

There was a fluttering, beating sound against the silent air and broad, skin-covered wings spread from her back. She leaned slightly forward and he saw that two bone-like spikes protruded from her head.

Bronson gasped. Someone down front started to chuckle, got a better look and was silent. The illusion was perfect. Bronson realized that he was gripping the arms of his chair. His mouth was dry.

He couldn't tear his eyes away from the girl's face. There was a depth of misery and suffering there that he couldn't plumb. Her lovely shoulders drooped and her lips were parted as though she were about to weep.

"Madame Satan," Giraud's voice was harsh, almost brutal, "I say it is time now to display your skill."

Her movements were so mechanical that the trick seemed quite evident. Madame Satan, looking more like an angel, flapped her wings and arose from the stage into the air. She fluttered there for a moment and dropped to her feet once more. The wings folded behind her.

"Nuts," Malone said. "The last time I saw her she really put it over. Flew around in plain sight. She acts as though she wants to miss her big chance."

Bronson said nothing. He watched the girl back slowly to the coffin and climb in. The robe was once more about her body. Giraud was visibly displeased with her. His manner was abrupt and he left the stage almost at once, his lips pressed in a thin hard line of anger.

BRONSON stood up and went to the lobby. He found a Havana in his pocket, took a light from Malone and stood in the darkness, a puzzled expression on his face.

"The babe could do better than that," Malone insisted eagerly. "Last time I saw her . . ."

"Never mind." Bronson put his hand on Malone's shoulder. "You've done all right this time, Noisy."

"Then you like him?"

Bronson's jaw stiffened.

"Frankly, I never hated a man so much at first sight as I do our little French friend."

"I don't get it."

"To hell with the act." Bronson

turned and went toward Mike Humphry's office. "I want Madame Satan. Once she gets away from Giraud and his wings, we've got the prettiest thing the Silver Terrace has ever presented. Madame Satan has class and beauty. If she can sing or dance, so much the better. If not, we'll put her in front of the spot-lights and she'll go over on her beauty alone."

He placed a hand on the door knob of Humphry's office. Before he could pull the door open, Humphry came out hurriedly.

"Dammit, get out of the——" Humphry stopped, his face violently red. "Excuse me, Mr. Bronson. Thought you were one of the dames. Well, what did you think of the act?"

Bronson wasted no time.

"I want to see the girl," he said.

"Of course, if you take the act for the Silver Terrace, I'll expect a little . . ."

Bronson's eyes narrowed.

"I always pay for what I take," he said. "Do you call the girl or shall I go backstage?"

A cunning smile lighted Humphry's face.

"If you think you can get her without taking the professor," he said, "you're crazy. I know. I tried it."

Bronson turned and went down the dark corridor toward the rear of the building.

"Remember what I said," Humphry called after him. "I want a cut."

"Shut up," Noisy Malone said quickly. "Can't you see the boss is upset?"

He followed Bronson toward the dingy dressing rooms at the rear of the stage.

PHILIP GIRAUD'S back was visible in the open door of one of the dressing rooms. He was waving his arms wildly and a torrent of French poured

from his lips. Bronson waited quietly, half hidden behind a curtain. The Frenchman entered the room and approached the girl sitting on the bed. Her head was bent forward and she was crying. Giraud went close to her.

From the shouting tirade that escaped Giraud's lips, Bronson picked up one phrase.

"... *rendezvous avec Satan . . .*"
Rendezvous with Satan!

The girl nodded and lifted her head. Tears were pouring from her eyes. Giraud leaned over coolly and slapped her face.

Cold anger flooded Bronson. He was across the hall and into her room as quickly and silently as a cat. The Frenchman's back was still turned to the door. If the girl saw Bronson, she gave no sign. Malone, at the door grinned broadly as Bronson grasped the Frenchman's shoulder and jerked him around roughly. Giraud started to swear, caught Bronson's fist squarely on the nose and crumpled to the floor.

A gasp of surprise escaped the girl's lips.

"Who—what was that?"

Bronson turned to her.

"I didn't mean to pull the brave knight act," he said quietly, "but I saw him strike you and so I took a crack at him." . .

Her hand reached out falteringly and he took her fingers in his.

"I'm—I'm so grateful," she said. "But you shouldn't have hit him."

Bronson felt the coolness of her fingers, and the way they clung to his hand as though afraid to let go.

"I'm surprised you let him get away with it."

"I can't help it," she answered falteringly. "He thought I spoiled his act today. I try to please but sometimes I'm frightened. I can't see during the day. The light blinds me . . ."

She withdrew her hand from his.

"*Blind!*" The word escaped Bronson's lips in a choked whisper. "And he treats you like that?"

A low whistle escaped Noisy Malone's lips. With one arm he dragged Giraud from the floor and stood him on his feet.

"Shall I hit him this time?"

BRONSON didn't answer. The girl had leaned forward, her face buried in her hands. The robe fell away slightly from her shoulders. Bronson's eyes followed the whiteness of her back. A rough growth was visible between the shoulder-blades of Madame Satan's back. From the growth, two wings hung, with parchment-like skin stretched over their bony ribs. They were folded tightly around her body so that the robe hid them from a casual glance.

Bronson's fists clenched tightly and perspiration stood out on his forehead.

He had seen circus freaks, but never anything like.

She seemed aware of the sudden silence and drew the robe more tightly around her.

"I think you had better go now, before Philip Giraud recovers."

Bronson laughed, determined that his voice would not betray the shock of what he had seen.

"You listen to me, young lady. My name is Radcliff Bronson. In spite of the Radcliff, I'm not a bad guy after you know me. You aren't going to take any more of Giraud's beatings. We'll take you out for dinner and after that, you and I will talk business."

"Business," she drew away from him. "But, I can't leave Philip. Without me he would have no act."

Malone dropped the inert figure of Giraud to his former position on the floor.

"If you don't want to hit him again,"

he said, "let's get out of here."

Bronson's arm went around the girl's waist. She protested, trying to break away from him but he picked her up easily.

"Don't be afraid of me," he said. "I don't go around slapping blind girls. You're going to get some breaks for a change."

Perhaps it was the kindly, concerned voice that reassured her.

"Please, make sure Giraud is all right," she begged.

Bronson looked at the prone figure of the magician.

"He'll recover soon enough," he said. "Too damned soon. He deserves more than he got."

THE following days were busy for Rad Bronson. He knew very little more of Madame Satan than he had that first day at Mike Humphry's. After they left she had consented to eat with him and insisted that they dine in a tiny, dark restaurant on South State. She told him that her eyes, long accustomed to dark places, were able to function only where the light was dim. He accepted this as truth, but the wings and the horn-like growths upset him more than he liked to admit.

Gradually she seemed to forget Philip Giraud, or at least her fear of him. She trusted Bronson, and clung to him every moment they were together. "Noisy" Malone found a room for her in one of the best hotels in town. Bronson, without consulting the girl, went about the task of building up her name as the mysterious Madame Satan.

Every paper in town came to Bronson when publicity items were released from his office. They had helped him build up a hundred stars and his press stories were always good for an increase in circulation. Madame Satan, unknown even to herself, suddenly be-

came the talk of the town. Bronson made sure that she received a wardrobe from the finest designers the city could supply.

Madame Satan went twice each day for a stroll in the park. Always her body was covered by the long, crimson robe and the remote beauty of her sad face captured every photographer who aimed his camera at her. Her blindness prevented her from finding out what went on, and Malone, who always accompanied her, kept the secret well.

Bronson stayed away, afraid that his presence would give the buildup away. Finally he approached her about an appearance at the Silver Terrace.

He went to her hotel early in the evening, confident that the girl was the greatest discovery he had ever made. He took the elevator to the eighth floor and, hesitating before her door, thought he could hear singing from within her room. Her voice was low and husky with emotion. All the sadness in human experience was woven into the song and it held him spellbound.

Finally he knocked. She came to the door at once.

"May I come in?"

Madame Satan drew her robe tightly around her and stepped back into the little hall.

"Mr. Bronson," she said quietly. "I'm very glad you decided to come. I'm receiving so many nice things. I'm worried about repaying you."

Bronson took off his coat and sat down. It seemed to him that she was more lovely each time he saw her. More pitiful, too, hiding from him the wings that marred the perfection of her body.

"I imagine you've wondered a lot why Malone and I have taken such an interest in you?"

SHE showed instant concern. Bronson had assured her that she would

have an opportunity to repay him. She knew that he was more honest than anyone she had ever met. Yet the happenings of the past few days troubled her greatly. Perhaps she should have remained with Giraud.

"There's so little I can do," she said.

"I disagree." Bronson's voice was eager. "I promised you that this wasn't charity. I'm a business man. I invest money and expect returns."

His voice was steady and expressionless.

"I told you I owned the Silver Terrace. It's the biggest night-club in the city. When I build up a personality, the city turns out to acclaim a new star. It isn't a business of charity. I invest big money and get big returns.

She frowned.

"Surely you don't plan to . . ."

"I plan to make a star of you," he answered abruptly. "I first thought of making a mystery woman of you. Placing your beauty before the people and letting the movie boys fight for you. Sort of in-between man for a screen contract."

A frown wrinkled Madame Satan's smooth forehead.

"Tonight I heard you singing before I came in," Bronson continued. "It convinced me that you are destined to bring Chicago to your feet the first time you sing at the Terrace."

"Oh, no! No, I couldn't."

Her face was deathly white. Fright, deep and terrible, was in her eyes.

"I have known since that first day of the affliction that has troubled you," Bronson watched her closely, sure that he was not betraying his real emotions. "It will make no difference."

"You mean my blindness?"

Bronson arose and took both her hands in his. His voice was suddenly tender.

"I know that you could not remove

your robe without breaking your heart and sending your friends away from you." He felt her fingers clench his tightly. "I saw your back the first time I met you. I ask for no explanation. I know that you are good all the way through. Now, will you sing at the Silver Terrace?"

Her voice, when it finally came, was hushed with wonder.

"You knew, and yet you went on with your plans to help me?"

Bronson's voice was cool and business-like once more.

"Forget that," he said. "It's our secret and we'll share it as partners. Madame Satan will become famous."

She shuddered.

"That will be the name under which I appear?"

"Unless you prefer another."

She sank back into her chair, head high as though defying the world.

"No," she answered firmly. "No, I guess that name will fit me best."

"And you don't want to tell me anything more about yourself tonight?"

"No. I'm sorry, because you've been fine and good about everything. I owe you for all the happiness you've given me, and I should confide in you. Tonight I cannot. Please accept my gratitude, as you have before. Perhaps someday I can tell you . . ."

She halted brokenly, and tears welled into her eyes.

Bronson got up and opened the door.

"I'll leave if you promise not to cry."

"I won't cry," she said. "And—you're a grand person."

He went out quickly, closing the door behind him.

MADAME SATAN made her first appearance on schedule. The mammoth Silver Terrace was once more in the black. So much so that Bronson realized the voice and figure

of Madame Satan was his greatest find.

Still a mystery to the public, the girl went to and from the hotel with Noisy Malone, ate in quiet places and always wore one of her lovely robes.

Bronson, jubilant over her success at the club, wondered how long he could go on without facing reality. Sooner or later she must offer an explanation. They had eaten together occasionally, attended a few plays, and she had thanked him endlessly for what he had done. Neither of them mentioned Philip Giraud, although Bronson was aware that the girl worried about her former partner. Nor were her eyes a subject of their conversation. She seemed to see well enough in the darkness, but during the day, it was necessary to lead her carefully lest she stumble and fall.

Bronson faced the upsetting fact that he loved the girl, and yet dared not tell her. He feared more than anything else that Madame Satan would think he pitied her.

THE Silver Terrace had kept Madame Satan's name in bright lights for two weeks. Although she was a great success, the girl still acted sad and aloof from everyone but Bronson and Noisy Malone.

Friday was payday for the employees of the Terrace. Bronson held the girl's check until last, and went anxiously backstage and up the steel stairs to her room. As he approached the door, he heard a man's voice, angry and excited, coming from Madame Satan's room. He stopped just outside.

"*Merveilleux.*" It was Philip Giraud and sarcasm seemed predominate in every word. "You are very successful now, Mademoiselle Colbert. It is silly, is it not, this postponing of fate?"

Bronson couldn't hear the girl's reply. It was low and choked as though

she were crying. Bronson took a step toward the door but Giraud's voice, rising high with anger, stopped him.

"Tomorrow night your time will be exhausted." His voice lowered dramatically. "Madame Satan is a fitting name for you, Mademoiselle. If you change your mind about my offer, I will be nearby."

There was a sudden scuffling beyond the door, the slap of a hand against flesh and the girl cried out in pain.

Bronson pushed the door open. The girl was on the floor, shielding her head with her arms. Giraud stood above her, bending as though to strike again. He straightened as Bronson strode toward him and his face turned a sickly white.

"Pardon, monsieur." He cowered away from Bronson, "I meant no . . ."

Bronson's fist caught him squarely beside the ear, ending the speech abruptly.

"Nice work!" Malone stood in the open door. "Two downs for Giraud and one to go. Where shall I dump him?"

Bronson was shaking with anger.

"Get him out of here before I kill him," he half whispered. "If I ever catch him around here again . . ."

Giraud sat up slowly, rubbing his face with a shaking hand.

"Up, Frenchie." Malone grasped him by the collar and dragged him to his feet. "You and I have a little date outside."

Bronson helped the girl to her feet.

"How long has Giraud been here?" Bronson asked.

Madame Satan sat on the small couch, her head bowed humbly.

"Only for a little while." She looked up, tried to face him and started to cry. "I'm—I'm such a fool. Why can't you go away and stop trying to help? It only makes the whole thing worse."

Bronson sat down beside her. He felt awkward, now that the time for an explanation had come. Alone, he had been able to think of the questions he planned to ask, but now he couldn't remember them.

"He called you Mademoiselle Colbert. Is that your name?"

She nodded.

"Yvonne Colbert," she confessed. "I suppose you had to know someday. I will tell you why he came."

"Not until you're ready."

SHE rose abruptly and walked slowly to the far side of the room. Lifting her arms, she took the cape from her body and tossed it away. She sank slowly to the floor as though unable to stand the shame. Bronson swore under his breath. The bone-like horns protruded from her head. The wings which he had seen before, spread out, fluttering on each side of her body. Tipping her head back defiantly, she said:

"There—you see how well my name fits me? Madame Satan, symbol of the underworld, ready to return to her place under the earth."

Bronson was at her side. He reached down, and lifted her to her feet. He was filled with an anger toward something he could not understand. The girl, Yvonne Colbert, was no creature of hell. She was young and lovely. There must be some explanation. Something that could be done.

"Giraud has something to do with this," he said hoarsely. "He was threatening you."

She put her head against his shoulder and her body shook with sobs.

"He has everything to do with it." She was clinging to him, wondering how much she dared tell. "My name is Yvonne Colbert. I came from a small French village. Philip Giraud was a

citizen of our town. Many years ago he wanted to become a great man of magic. At last, with black magic, he caused Satan to appear before him."

As she talked, Bronson led her to the couch and put the cape and robe about her body. She smiled gratefully and went on:

"Philip Giraud talked with Satan, and they made a bargain. Giraud received a magic cloak. He was to place it over the shoulders of three lovely young girls. The cloak casts a spell that causes anyone who wears it to become a slave of Satan. The spell requires six months to become effective and during the last half of that time, wings and horns grow on the victim."

YVONNE recited her story mechanically, as though repeating each word Giraud had told her. Her fists were clenched tightly in her lap and her face was pale and drawn.

"Philip Giraud sent two girls of our village to their deaths. No one knew this. I, being foolish as they were, jumped at the chance of escaping from a war-torn country to become his aid in America. After he had put the cloak about my shoulders, he told me what was going to happen."

"But why didn't you come to me before?" Bronson demanded.

"Because the magic cloak is in Giraud's possession," Yvonne admitted. "He told me once that perhaps he would release me from the spell. I would only have to put on the same cloak a second time and the wings would vanish. I would be normal and free once more."

"You couldn't find the cloak?"

She shook her head.

"It is in a steel trunk that belongs to Philip Giraud," she said. "I couldn't open it. He has the keys. Until tonight I fully believed that he might

feel sorry for me and break the spell.”

“His visit changed your mind?”

Yvonne Colbert shuddered.

“Satan made his bargain well,” she said. “He stated that should Philip Giraud at any time fail to keep his part of the bargain, he would have to give his own body in place of the intended victim. You see, he told me that tonight, and laughed at me when I begged for mercy. I didn’t dare come to you before. It was all so weird, so unbelievable.”

“Don’t be frightened,” Bronson begged. “We may have to break every bone in Giraud’s body, but we’ll get that cloak.”

NOISY MALONE went to Bronson’s office on the run. The boss had sent word that he was in a hurry. Bronson met him at the door. The boss’ face was grim.

“Is Giraud still with Mike Humphry at the Frivolty?” Bronson demanded.

Noisy looked puzzled.

“Darned if I know,” he admitted. “He dragged himself into a cab after I got through with him.”

“Get on his trail,” Bronson said quickly. “Just as soon as you find out where he is, bring him in here.”

“Wait a minute, boss,” Malone protested. “How about letting me in on this? Half an hour ago you threw him out. Now you want me to turn the town upside down to find him. What goes?”

Bronson looked grim.

“Life or death for Madame Satan,” he said. “Is that enough for you to work on?”

Malone’s face sobered.

“Where’ll I find you?” he asked.

Bronson was already at the outer door.

“At the Frivolty,” he said. “I need Giraud’s trunk.”

BRONSON heard the clang of fire trucks as he turned on to State Street. The pavement was roped off. A dozen trucks were already on duty.

Mike Humphry’s House of Frivolty was in flames. The old structure sent billowing clouds of smoke into the sky. With a strange fear in his heart, Bronson ran through the crowd until he was stopped by the safety ropes. Humphry was standing close by in his shirt sleeves, a wry look on his fat face. Bronson went to Humphry’s side.

“Tough luck, Mike,” he said.

Humphry turned. His eyes were red with smoke.

“I never seen nothing like it,” he groaned. “No insurance, no nothin’. Worst part of it is, I’m afraid to tell them how it happened.”

Bronson’s facial muscles tightened.

“How’s that?”

Humphry looked sick.

“Magic, I’d say,” he confessed. “I had a fight with this goof, Giraud. Since you took his girl from the act, he ain’t amounted to a thing. I told him so and he said he’d get even with me. Still, I don’t think he started the fire.”

“Then who?”

“I was back stage just after he left,” Humphry said. “He had a heavy trunk that he was gonna send a cab for. I was sitting alone backstage and the trunk was in the middle of the floor. All of a sudden I smelled smoke. I looked around, trying to find out where it came from. Then I seen flames licking right through the side of that steel trunk, like a blow torch was cutting from inside.”

Humphry paused, shaking with excitement.

“I ran for a pail of water and damned if the trunk didn’t bust wide open before I got back. The whole place was burning in a minute. Smelled like brimstone straight outa’ hell.”

Satan himself had a hand in this, Bronson thought. Yvonne Colbert was right. Giraud could not change his mind now. Yvonne was doomed. The cloak, she said, was always locked in the trunk. No fire started by man could burn from inside a steel chest and burst out to destroy a building.

Philip Giraud had chosen his third victim so well that Satan was taking no chances of losing her. Bronson murmured something to Mike Humphry and left the scene of the fire. More trucks rolled up as he hurried back to the car.

It was mid-afternoon when he returned to the Silver Terrace. Philip Giraud had said Yvonne would have until tomorrow night. The whole thing was pretty hopeless.

NOISY MALONE was in terrible shape. He had been on Philip Giraud's trail since the previous day. It was close to five in the afternoon of Yvonne Colbert's last day when Malone stumbled into Bronson's office, ready to drop from lack of sleep.

"But I'm telling you, I heard the whole thing," Malone insisted. "I guess you know I been carrying the torch for her just as long as you have. I hated to believe it myself, but my eyes and ears weren't kidding me."

Bronson shook his head. Malone must be wrong.

"I can't believe it, Noisy," he said finally. "I trust you, but you're dead tired. Maybe you fell asleep and dreamed it. Yvonne couldn't do that."

"Listen," he shouted. "I saw the two of them backstage. Giraud must have sneaked in after I kicked him out. He's been around here all day while I been looking for him all over town. They were talking, and I slipped behind a curtain and waited until they passed me. I heard him say, 'Make

sure Bronson is in front of you when the spotlight comes on,' and she nodded. Then Giraud said, 'When he is dead, I will release you. Together, with the money you have saved, we will buy controlling shares of this place. It will be a superb ending to our little drama'."

"You're crazy," Bronson insisted.

"You can trust me!" Malone almost screamed. "Godammit, boss, I didn't dream this up. She just shook her head and agreed to everything he said. I tell you, the girl's gone crazy."

"No," Bronson said, "she wouldn't pull a trick like that on me. When I introduce her tonight, I'll stand in the middle of that spotlight deliberately. If Giraud plans to murder me, I'll take that chance. If Yvonne *is* on his side, then—I guess it won't make much difference."

"You'll be dead, that's all," Malone said. "And, boss, there's a lot of us who wouldn't want to be getting along without you."

"Look, Noisy, you've been around me for a long time. I don't hide out when the going gets tough, do I?"

Malone shook his head.

"And knowing how much I love Yvonne, do you think I'd give a damn what happened to me if she pulled a double-cross?"

"But I tell you she's . . ."

"I know," Bronson interrupted quietly. "She seems to think that by sticking with Giraud she can escape the spell that has been cast over her. I don't know if I can condemn her for that. If I were in her position I might do the same thing."

"You're trying to smooth things out for her," Malone insisted. "Giraud will wait until you are focused in that light. Then he'll take a pot shot at you from the dark and it will be all over. You act as though I'm to blame for telling you."

Malone stood up and started toward the door. Bronson took hold of his shoulder, turned him around and clasped his hand.

"You're okay, Noisy," he said. "Remember, I'm playing this my way. I have to trust Yvonne, or give up the fun of living. It sounds pretty dramatic, but that's the way I feel."

"I guess I know how you feel," Malone muttered, "but, if things look too bad, for God's sake don't get yourself shot, boss."

"I'll try not to," Bronson said.

HE LOOKED at his watch. Five to eight. At eight o'clock Yvonne would leave her dressing room, clad in the long crimson robe of Madame Satan. Bronson left the office, switching the light off as he went out.

The patrons of the Silver Terrace had learned to expect Madame Satan's slim, vibrant presence in the glow of soft lights. They had returned week after week to listen to the gentleness of her voice and to admire the haunting loveliness of her features.

Bronson, always present in his own shows, introduced each personality with the grace that made him and his club famous. Bronson had grown increasingly nervous as the hour approached. He had eaten alone in his office and stayed away from Yvonne Colbert until time for her appearance on the stage.

Malone, Bronson knew, had told the truth. At least, the truth as he had heard and seen it. There was little chance that Noisy was wrong, and yet the fact that he might be mistaken was the only hope Bronson could cling to.

The orchestra downstairs was playing the soft strains of *Stardust*. He walked along the hall and saw the flashing red of Yvonne's robe on the stairs ahead.

"Good evening." He took her arm and they went down the steps. "Don't worry. I think this thing is some joke Giraud has been playing. It's inconceivable that he could have the power to go through with it."

She didn't answer, but her grip on his arm tightened.

"I'm proud of you," he said, and turned her around before him under the light at the bottom of the stairs. "You've been a wonderful success."

Her eyes, turned up to his, were moist and warm.

"There's no use pretending, Rad; this will be my last night with you."

It was the first time she had called him Rad. Bronson caught his breath.

"I think you know I don't care much about going on, if—if anything should happen to you," he said. "But we can't worry like this. It's a crazy farce. The days of black magic are over, thank God."

Yvonne said nothing. They both knew what lay ahead. They faced it and walked to the stage together.

MALONE had spotted Philip Giraud. He was taking no chances with fate. If Giraud was armed, he intended to take care of that detail with the same poison. He watched the Frenchman come in at seven-thirty and take a table near the stage. The lights were dim and Malone was sure the man had not seen him. His fingers closed over the solid grip of the .32 in his coat pocket.

The orchestra lingered over the last strains of *Stardust*, the lights faded entirely and the dining-room was hushed, awaiting the arrival of Madame Satan.

Malone crouched forward over his table, eyes focused on the dark form of Philip Giraud. He saw Giraud reach into his pocket and was sure, as the white spotlight flashed on, that

metal glinted in the Frenchman's hand. Malone drew his own gun and waited.

Bronson and Yvonne Colbert stepped into the circle of light. A round of applause arose from the audience. Malone could hear Bronson's voice.

"There is no need for an introduction. . . ."

Malone could see Giraud quite clearly now. The gun was hidden in the folds of the Frenchman's napkin. Yvonne stayed close to Bronson's side. Her eyes focused toward the darkness before her. Malone stood up and moved softly toward Giraud's table. He was suddenly frightened, remembering that Yvonne could see well in the dark. There would be some signal soon.

Bronson's voice went on calmly.

"Personal pride forces me to accompany Madame Satan to the stage tonight. You all know my reputation for accepting nothing but the finest here at the Silver Terrace. I can honestly say that I have taken the finest for my personal life as well. Madame Satan, or as I know her, Yvonne Colbert, has consented to become my wife . . ."

Malone was close to Giraud's table. A low curse escaped the Frenchman's lips. His pistol whipped upward quickly and aimed at the circle of light in which Bronson and Yvonne stood.

Malone sprang at Giraud. He misjudged by a second.

Crack!

A cry of pain came from the stage. At the same time, Malone's gun slammed down on Philip Giraud's skull. The Frenchman slouched forward against the table, his head streaming blood from the force of the blow. A gurgle escaped his lips as he slipped from the table and sprawled on the floor.

Malone stared at the stage in utter

disbelief. Yvonne Colbert was on her knees, both hands grasping her side. Blood ran down the folds of her gown. Bronson staggered from the darkness and picked her up quickly.

It was clear enough to Malone now. Yvonne had seen Giraud in the darkness and had expected the shot. She had pushed Bronson to one side and received the bullet that was meant for him.

At Malone's side, there was a sudden brilliant flash of light, as though a dozen flash bulbs had gone off simultaneously. Then the lights came on and the orchestra started playing again.

Malone knew he would have to move Giraud's body before it was seen. He leaned forward, eyes bulging.

Philip Giraud was gone!

At Malone's feet, where the Frenchman had fallen, the carpet was burned and blackened as though fire had licked across its surface. Malone backed slowly away from the spot, saw several couples staring at him with open mouths and realized he still held the .32 in his hand. He turned and ran backstage as though Satan were after *him* and not Philip Giraud.

MALONE found Rad Bronson and Yvonne in the first-aid room backstage. The girl's side was carefully bandaged and her cape was gone.

The ugly horns that had grown from her skull were no more. Her back was as smooth and perfect as ivory.

Malone stood in the door, the .32 hanging in his limp fingers.

Bronson turned, complete happiness dominating his face. Yvonne smiled warmly at him from the cot. She held her hand out to Malone and he went to her as though hypnotized. Her fingers closed over his.

"You see, by some miracle, I am normal again."

Malone felt choked up inside.

"I thought you double-crossed Rad. I saw you push him out of the way and take that bullet yourself."

Rad Bronson sat down on the edge of the girl's cot. He kissed her softly on the forehead and then looked up at Malone.

"Satan may be strong," he said. "But Yvonne proved herself worthy tonight of a better fate. It looks as though Giraud's black magic wasn't so powerful after all."

Malone remembered the blinding flash of light that played over Giraud's body. The burned carpet. The man-

ner in which Giraud disappeared. He smiled a slow, understanding smile.

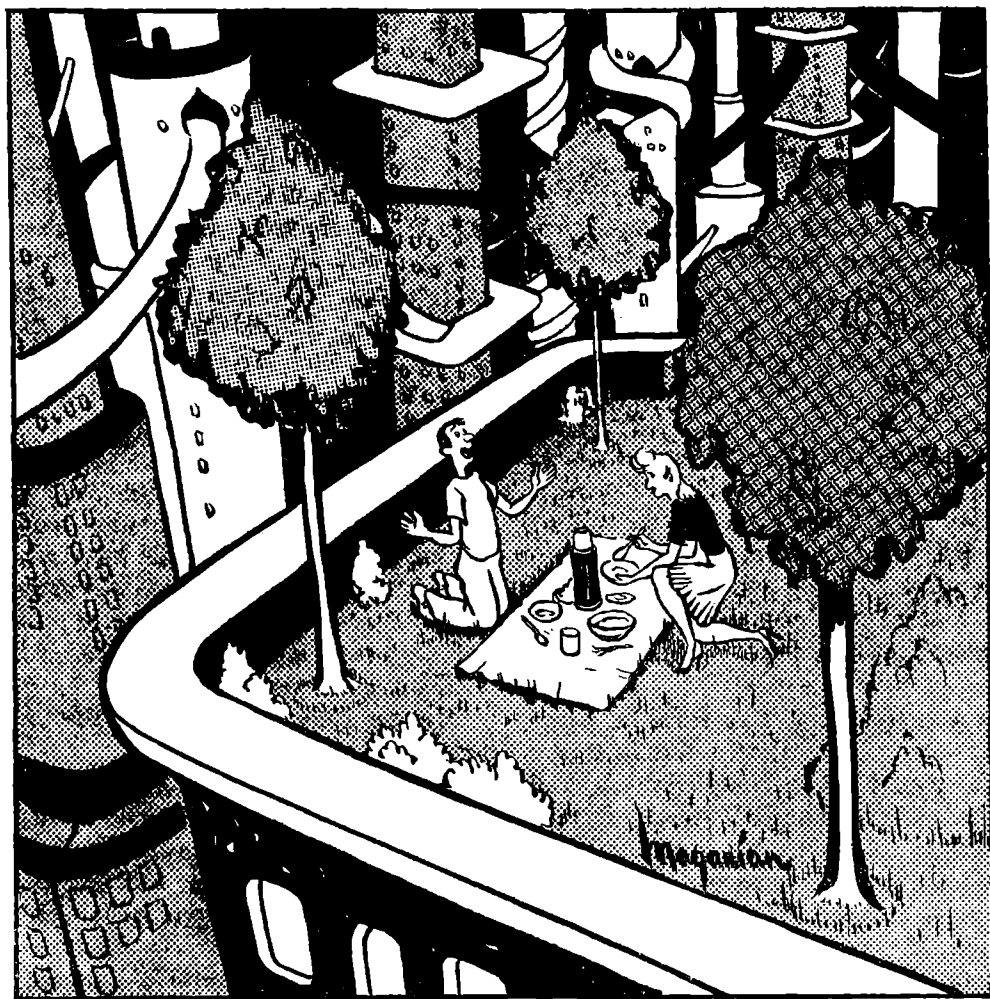
"He's gone where he won't do any more harm," he said.

Malone thought:

If Philip Giraud failed to send the girl to Satan, then Giraud himself would have to take her place.

Satan must have figured that Philip Giraud, having slain the girl slated for a place in Hell, must take her place.

Malone went downstairs alone, circled the burned spot on the carpet and sat down once more at his table. He was sure that he could detect the pungent odor of brimstone in the air.



"This is the life. Back to nature!"