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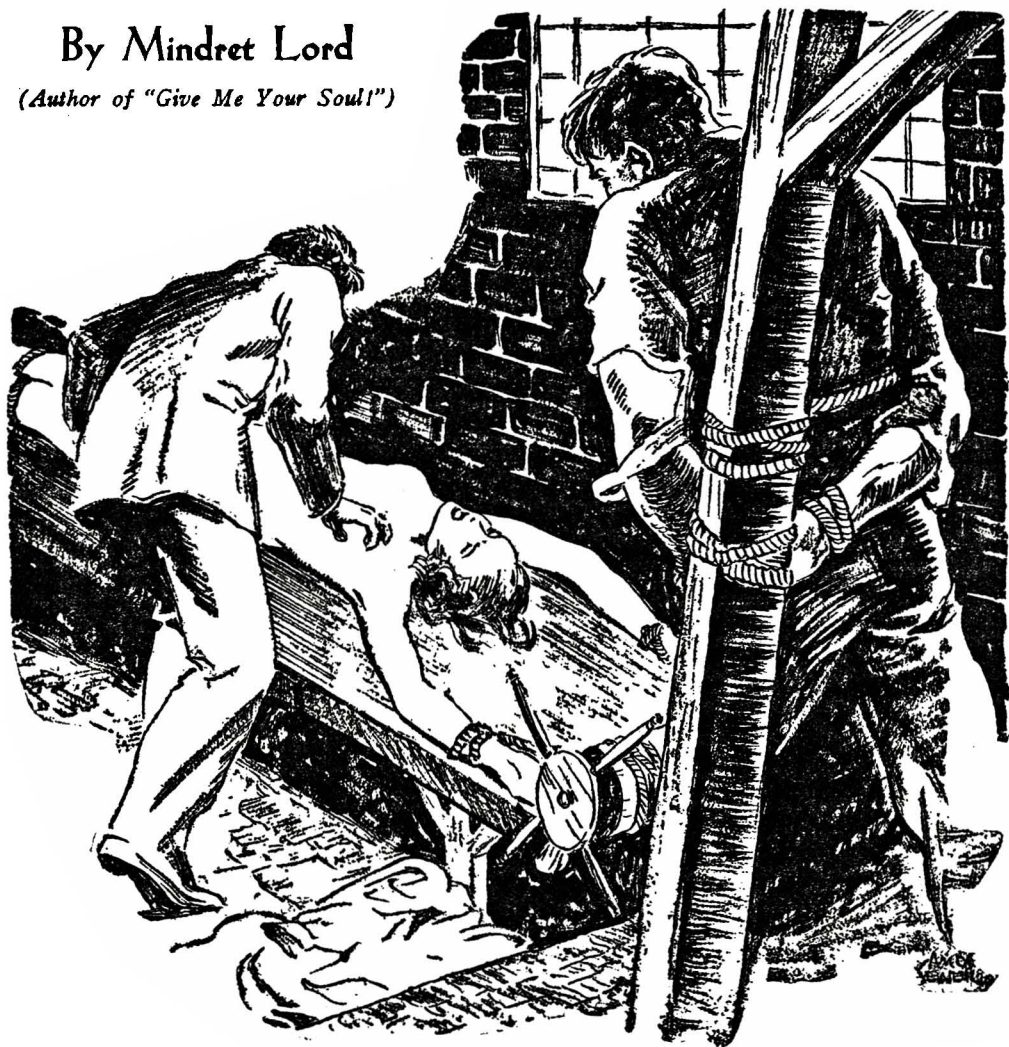
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HOSTAGE to PAIN

By Mindret Lord

(Author of "Give Me Your Soul!")



In modern New York the horrors of the Medieval Inquisition had reared their ugly heads—the thumbscrew and the rack, blood-dripping knives and glowing, hungry coals. And while police searched fruitlessly, the fiend who brewed these fearful tortures prepared Beth Walsh to be his screaming victim!

I WAS driving back along Broadway from a little party uptown. It was a few minutes before midnight. I'd had to leave early to catch the opening of the new floor show at the Persian Market—a

Main Stem hot-spot. I had turned on the radio in the car and was listening to a dance band from one of the hotel roofs. And abruptly, in the middle of a number, the broadcast stopped.

For a second I thought my radio was shot. I was just going to try another station when a masculine voice spoke.

It said: "This is the first public announcement that the Inquisition lives again! I, the Grand Inquisitor, shall make the world tremble at my name! My power shall be felt everywhere. I shall take from the depraved rich to give to the pious poor! I shall restore honesty and integrity to our courts of so-called justice and to our corrupt band of officers of the law!

"That you may see to what extent our police serve selfish interest, tonight I have taken the daughter of John L. Walsh, Commissioner of Police. If any effort is made to find me or to hinder me in my work, she shall die in cruelest torment! Now you will see the police ignore the safety of millions to protect a valueless girl. You will hear of me again tonight. The Inquisition lives again!"

The voice ceased abruptly. I pulled up to the curb and tried to think. I thought that of all the damn silly gags that ever happened, this took the booby prize. Maybe I wouldn't have thought so much about it if it hadn't been for the fact that Beth Walsh was the only girl that ever got to first base with me. If, up to that time, her old man hadn't rated me about as low as a snake at the bottom of a forty foot well, I would have married her long before.

There was an all-night drug store across the street. I wasn't worried, you understand, but just to be on the safe side and find out if I could what the ballyhoo was all about, I went in and dialed her number. Mary, the maid, answered. She told me Miss Walsh wasn't there. She thought she'd gone to a theater and supposed she'd be home soon. She thought she'd gone with a girl friend—didn't know really.

I told her to ask Miss Walsh to call me at the Persian market the minute she got in.

When I got to the night-club Tony led me over to the table that had been reserved for me. It was right on the edge of the dance floor and far enough from the orchestra so you could hear yourself speak. It means something to these cabarets to keep New York columnists satisfied.

I ordered whisky and soda and looked around. The place was jammed to the guards with everybody from dizzy Park Avenue debs on down the line to a hard faced, broad-hipped dame I recognized as the strip-tease lead in one of the better-known burlesque shows. Lots of them I knew. At the next table was a man I'd seen and heard about but never met—Bronson Nevin, a stock-broker. Dame Rumor—that grand old girl supports me—had it that things were not so much on the up-and-up at the Nevin establishment of business. It was said that as the result of some client's squawk the D. A. was taking an interest in the place. Nevin was sitting now with a vapid-looking blonde, and I guess they'd just come in, for the top of their table was bare of food and drink.

The band started playing some number that was sweet and hot. I watched the crowd pack themselves onto the dance floor and squirm around like a mess of maggots. I wished that Beth and I were two of them and then I remembered I had asked her to phone me; so I called Tony over and told him I was expecting an important call. He said he'd be sure I got it.

"When does the floor show go on?" I asked.

He told me it would begin right after this dance. He said he was sure I'd like it—it was costing him five grand a week to say nothing of a percentage of the gate. "But," he admitted, "Gilda La Mar is worth it. When the Broadway playboys and the big butter and egg men from the

West lamp her oriental cooch, they'll lose all restraint. Believe me, she's the original Turkish Delight."

I said I wouldn't be surprised.

THE dance ended and the maggots straggled back to their seats. There was a roll of drums and Tony went out to the middle of the floor and held up his hand. He started the usual routine of introductions. You know the sort of thing—"And who is that I see trying to hide away in the corner? Why it's old Joe Glotz! Stand up and take a bow, sucker!"

While all this was going on I got to worrying again about the radio business. I was sure it would have some sort of advertising angle—but what? And why should Beth be mixed up in it? I looked at my watch and wished she'd phone.

Finally there was a rattle of applause, Tony walked off the floor, the house lights dimmed out and the band started to play a fast rhythm number. Colored spotlights flooded the floor and a dozen chorus ponies danced in, each wearing very little more than a string of beads and a satin triangle. They were well matched and good at their job.

After they disappeared, a very close harmony trio of very Southern young ladies sang one of these inevitable songs about pore old pappy, up to his knees in the mud of the delta so dear old mother Dixie don't rain no more.

When they had drawled their way to a slow, blue finish, there was a clash of cymbals from the orchestra, the spotlights changed to blue and Gilda La Mar weaved her sinuous way to the middle of the floor. I could sense a tensing in the crowd around me. The men grew quiet and leaned forward in their chairs. La Mar had what it takes.

She was dressed in Turkish trousers of fine, transparent silk that fell from a heavy, jeweled belt, low on her hips, to her bare

feet. From her belt up, provident nature had provided her with all she wore and she was living proof of the old adage about gilding the lily. There wasn't anything in the least indecent or shocking in her nakedness. She was too beautiful for that. The way those full, flowing curves melted into each other was a poem or a symphony.

To a soft, insinuating musical background she started a slow, undulating dance with the wide, gleaming scimitar she carried. I've seen sword dances of Scotland and Russia and so on, but never one like this. I was almost ashamed of the way it fascinated me—it made me feel more like a schoolboy at his first show than like the hard-boiled newspaperman I am.

In the middle of the dance the spotlights blinked out. Except for the glowing ends of a few cigarettes, the place was pitch black. The music went on but the number certainly wasn't ended. I wondered what was coming next. I was prepared for anything but for what happened.

An agonizing scream cut through the darkness. There was the ring of steel hitting the floor. Someone banged against my table and knocked it over with the clatter of breaking dishes. I jumped to my feet as the lights sprang up.

My stomach turned to water at what I saw. Gilda La Mar lay in the middle of a widening pool of blood. Blood that spurted from where her breasts had been. By her side was the crimsoned scimitar.

In the Persian Market deathly silence reigned while one could have counted ten—then panic swept over the crowd like a wind. Women fainted, men shouted.

Suddenly, from nowhere, a policeman walked onto the dance floor and took over the situation.

I don't want to harrow you with the details of all that happened afterward. Gilda wasn't dead. But she never spoke,

and she died before the doctor arrived. The names and addresses of everybody there were taken. They were all let go—you couldn't hold them all and nothing was discovered to connect one person more than another with the crime. They had all had equal opportunity, but there was no obvious motive for such a horrible deed.

I phoned the story to my paper, including, of course, the astonishing fact that a card had been discovered, floating in the pool of blood. On it was typewritten:

EXECUTED BY ORDER OF
THE INQUISITION

I WON'T enlarge on the police investigation of the crime—at least, not just now. I think you'll understand that from the time I read that blood-soaked card, I had something important to occupy my frantic mind.

I tried, again, to get Beth's house on the phone—only to learn that she had not yet returned from the theater. I decided there was nothing to do but to go to her house and wait for her there.

The maid, Mary, let me in. There was no news. She hadn't heard about the radio announcement and didn't know anything was wrong. I didn't tell her.

While we were still standing at the door, Old Man Walsh came in. He was really an agreeable, good-hearted soul and I imagine we would have been friends if it hadn't been for the fact that I wanted to marry his daughter.

When he saw me he stopped and glared. "Mary!" he roared. "Did you let this keyhole artist in?"

I asked him if he knew where his daughter was.

He doubled up his fists and I could see his jaw set. "No," he said. "But she's nowhere she oughtn't to be. Now let's hear what you've got to say."

I suppose he thought I was doing a little scandal-mongering or that I was going to shake him down. I let him have it. "If you ask me," I said, "she's been snatched."

He took one step towards me. Then he stopped with his mouth open. "Come in and sit down," he said.

I told him about the radio announcement and about what happened at the Persian Market. When I finished my story he picked up the phone and called headquarters and spoke to Johnson who was chief of detectives. Johnson did all the talking until the end when Walsh said, "Put every man in the force on it—every man!" He hung up and turned back to me.

"Three men in black capes and masks," he said, "stuck up the radio station to make that announcement. No clues."

Walsh called Mary in and questioned her but didn't find out much more than I had. Beth had gone somewhere to tea in the afternoon and had intended to go to the theater that night. She hadn't been home since about five and hadn't telephoned.

While Mary was still insisting that she didn't know anything more than she had already told us, the doorbell rang. She went to answer it and came back in a minute with an envelope which she handed to Walsh. He tore it open and as he read the letter, inside, his face grew a deep red.

When he finished it, he looked up at Mary and asked, "Who delivered this?"

"I don't know, sir," Mary answered. "When I went to the door there was nobody there. The letter was stuck under it."

"All right," said Walsh. "You can go."

He shoved the letter over to me and I read it. It was typewritten and went something like this:

Commissioner:

I am holding your daughter as a hostage. If you want her to live you won't try too hard to find me. But don't think this is a guarantee. I may make an example of her, anyway. She is a true representative of this sinful, modern age. She is beautiful, glamorous—replete with all the arts to lead man to destruction. I shall not rest until her kind, among others, has been blotted out of our wicked civilization. For this purpose, THE INQUISITION LIVES AGAIN!

I had a sudden vision of Gilda La Mar, lying in the middle of the dance floor. I felt sick and dizzy, and for a minute I couldn't speak.

Finally I asked, "What are you going to do?"

Walsh threw out his hands in a despondent gesture. "What can I do? There's no choice. I've got to try to find her." He stared at me blankly for a moment and then jumped up. "Come!" he said, "You're supposed to know everybody in town. Maybe you can help. I'll have the list of names of the people who were at the Persian Market sent up here. Perhaps you can give us a lead."

A copy of the list arrived from headquarters within a half hour. We spent four hours over it and knew just as much at the end of that time as we had at the beginning. The list contained a number of questionable characters. One suspected of dope-peddling, two or three well-known gamblers, at least a dozen ladies of very easy virtue, one man who had done time for grand larceny, and so on. The only possible course was to investigate and question every single person who gave the slightest reason for suspicion. And that meant practically everybody. It was an enormous job, but the detective bureau is big.

Walsh promised to call me if he heard anything and I went home and drank myself into a stupor. I'd never gone through such a night. But I was destined to go through a whole lot worse.

YOU can imagine the papers the next morning. There was nothing else on the front page. While I drank a cup of coffee I read the story. It was as garbled as such sensations usually are, but anyway you put it, it was enough to send shivers up your back. Two of the yellower rags tried to inject a sort of supernatural atmosphere into the yarn. "Has Torquemada risen from the dead?" And so on.

I got on the subway and went down to Walsh's office. He was wearing the same clothes he'd had on the night before and he needed a shave. I felt my chin and discovered I did, too, and I wondered if my eyes were as red-rimmed as his.

He flung a piece of paper to me across the desk, growling, "The latest."

It was another typewritten note, addressed, this time, to a Mr. Harvey Foreman. It read:

You are worth seven millions of dollars. The Inquisition has decided to accept from you, one hundred thousand. You will withdraw this sum from your bank. The denomination of the bills must not be over twenty dollars. Have the stipulated amount on hand at all times until you hear from us again.

On pain of death do not communicate this demand to the police.

I looked up and asked, "Well?"

Walsh said, "The papers have scared him. He's getting the money from the bank, today. He came here, first, and asked for protection. Two men are tailing him."

"Look here, Commissioner," I said, "isn't there something I can do to help? I'm going screwy just hanging around waiting for news. Make me a deputy or something, can't you?"

Walsh looked me up and down coldly and started to shake his head. Then he changed his mind and said, "Why not, after all? You might be able to turn up something. But in your usual Peeping

Tom capacity—not as a detective. Some of these people will talk to you when they wouldn't let an officer come within a hundred yards. Go on and see what you can do. I'll give you a list of the people you might tackle."

I started out with the names and addresses of five men who were at the Persian Market the previous night. One of them was Tony Manzenari who was the manager of the place. Jack Gilroy, the picture actor was another. There was Jake Silverman, the theatrical agent; Honest John McGuire, big-time gambler; and Bronson Nevin, probably the operator of a bucket-shop.

I began at the beginning of the list and found Tony at his hotel. He was wearing loud purple pajamas and a dressing-gown.

"Sit down," he said. "You want some breakfast? I haven't had any yet. Isn't it pretty early for you?"

I said I'd have a beer. He ordered my drink and his breakfast and then sat down facing me. "What's on your mind?" he asked.

I threw my legs over the arm of the chair and inquired, "How well did you know Gilda La Mar, Tony?"

He straightened in his chair and looked at me for a long moment before answering. Then he asked, "What's the idea?"

I was as casual as I could be. "Oh, I'm playing sob sister. The editor wants the human angle—you know—hearts and flowers and crocodile tears."

Tony slowly relaxed. Finally he said: "Well, you won't find much of that sort of thing in this story. La Mar was the coldest, hardest dame that ever hit the show business—always on the make."

"Yeah," I said. "But what I want to know is: who were her friends and lovers? What did she do with her time? Did she send her salary to her dear old mother in Kokomo, Indiana? Or what?"

There was a little irritation in Tony's voice, but he answered me. "I don't think anybody knew very much about her—except, maybe, Jane Steed, the girl she lived with. Of course, she had a lot of friends and generally a sugar daddy hanging around. But never anyone for long. I guess she was a pretty dangerous play-thing."

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"Well," he slowly explained, "she was supposed to have a lot more money than she ever got for dancing or—um—homework."

"A little plain and fancy blackmail?" I suggested.

Tony shrugged. "Would I know? But whatever it was, she made it pay. She played the stock market a lot. Nevin was her broker."

I inquired if the relations of Gilda and Nevin had been of a strictly business nature. Tony said he wasn't sure, but he thought so. From seeing them together a few times at the night-club, his impression was that there wasn't much love lost between them.

From here on, I couldn't get anything but vague generalities out of the wop. He admitted there might have been men at the Persian Market who would be happier now than they had been in a long time. But he hadn't any idea who they were.

I realized I wasn't going to get anything out of him—if he knew anything, which I doubted. I finished my beer and went to the door.

"Thanks, Tony," I said. Then I added, "It seems to me I remember you were nuts about La Mar a couple of years ago. You wouldn't have murdered her out of jealousy or something, would you, Tony?"

Tony had the nerves it takes to run a place like this. Without a change in his expression, without raising his voice, he said: "You damn fool! Do you realize

this is going to cost me fifty grand? I've got to close the place and reopen with a new name—everything new. Anyhow, I got an alibi. The cops got it all last night—ask them."

I nodded and left him in his purple pajamas, playing with a dish of ham and eggs.

I WENT over to 44th Street and saw Jake Silverman next. He talked my arm off about the shows he was going to put on, and shut up like a clam when I mentioned Gilda La Mar. Everybody knew he had been one of her boy friends when she first made her appearance on Broadway. There was no use of his denying it, and he didn't. But he claimed he hadn't seen La Mar in years and just happened to be at the opening of the Persian Market by accident.

"Coincidence plays funny tricks," I remarked.

Jake said: "Listen. Are you trying to rake up scandal or find a killer? When did you join the force?"

I laughed it off as best I could. When I left I was thinking of Jake's new wife that he was supposed to be so crazy about. But Jake didn't strike me as being the kind of person who would ever write letters.

Next, I tried to see Honest John McGuire. He was out and so was Jack Gilroy. That left only Bronson Nevin on my list and I took the subway down to his office.

I gave my name to a girl in the ante-room and while I waited a young woman came in and sat down next to me. She had Broadway written all over her. She seemed nervous and fidgeted with her bag until it dropped on the floor. As I picked it up for her, the girl came back and said Mr. Nevin would see me.

If Nevin hadn't been rather weak and puffy looking, he might have been hand-

some. He shook hands and said: "This is a pleasure, Mr. Lynch. I often read your column and enjoy it very much. What can I do for you?"

I said: "You can tell me what you know about Gilda La Mar. I've got to write a sort of an obituary."

He sat down and lit a cigarette. Then he said, "Gladly. All I know about Miss La Mar is that she was a very good client. I am extremely sorry about what happened. I was there, you know. It was horrible."

I waited for him to continue, but he was finished. After a moment I asked, "You knew nothing about her personally—socially?"

He shook his head and smiled. "Hardly. I had dinner with her several times—to talk business, you know. When she was too busy to come here. But that was all."

Again there was a silence which I broke. "Did you ever meet Jane Steed—the girl she lived with?"

For a second I thought Nevin looked startled. However, he sounded only mildly curious. "No-o. I was under the impression, though, that Miss La Mar lived alone."

We talked a little while longer about the murder. Like everyone else, he seemed to believe it was the work of some group of religious fanatics.

When I left, the nervous girl was still sitting outside.

I went down to the newspaper office and wrote my column and read my mail. Then I sent out for a pint of whisky. While I drank it, I looked out of the grimy window at the river and tried not to think of Beth. It grew dark while I sat there.

About nine o'clock Old Man Walsh called me up and asked me to come over to his office. When I got there, Johnson was with him. Walsh told the detective to wait outside and when we were alone,

he closed the door and walked back to his desk without a word.

"Is there any news?" I asked.

"Johnson's got an angle," Walsh said. I wanted to know what it was.

Walsh picked up a long paper knife and balanced it on his hand. He said: "He thinks you did it."

I LAUGHED. "He's crazy!"

"He thinks," Walsh went on, "that you couldn't get Beth by fair means so you took her the best way you could. He thinks all this Inquisition business is just a cover for the kidnaping. He hasn't yet figured out a motive for the murder. Do you want to tell me what it was? You've got no alibi for that or for anything else."

I said: "I'd never have believed you'd try to hang a murder rap on me just because you don't think I'm a suitable match for your daughter."

Walsh looked up sharply. "Beth's life may be at stake," he said. "I've got to listen to everybody. But I'll tell you one thing—if I agreed with Johnson, I'd cut your gizzard out with this!" He pointed the paper knife at me.

At that moment Johnson threw open the door and said, "Sorry, Commissioner—I guess I was wrong about Lynch. Forman has just been killed—hanged. And the hundred thousand dollars taken from his safe."

Walsh looked at him with astonishment written large over his face. "My God!" he groaned. "Where was his guard?"

Johnson's voice was grave. "They haven't been found yet. But when they are, they'll be dead, of course. The butler discovered Forman hanging in his bedroom with a note pinned to his chest. They read it to me over the phone. It said: 'This man dared disobey the Inquisition's commands. He went to the police and thereby signed his death warrant.' —I'm going out there, now."

Without a word, Walsh picked up his hat from the desk and followed the detective out of the room. In his face was mirrored the terror and the gnawing fear for Beth that I, too, felt.

I wandered out into the street and wondered what I could do. I wanted to do anything to keep busy—anything to fool myself into thinking that I was helping to find Beth. But I didn't even know where to begin. Then the idea occurred to me to visit Gilda La Mar's apartment and meet Jane Steed—the girl Tony had told me she lived with. I knew it was silly because the police had undoubtedly learned everything they could from her—but I went, anyway, because I didn't know what else to do.

The apartment was in the eighties off Riverside Drive. I looked at my watch as I rang the bell. It was almost eleven o'clock. A colored woman answered the door and I asked if Miss Steed was in.

"No, suh," she said, "but she's a half hour later than she said she'd be, right now. Is you from the police?"

"Sort of," I said.

"Yas, suh," she nodded. "They been comin' here all last night and today. They've tore up the house something awful. You comin' in to wait till she gets here?"

I said I might as well.

The living-room was small but beautifully furnished. A radio was playing softly when I entered and the maid started to turn it off, but I told her it didn't disturb me. I rambled about the room, looking at the pictures on the walls, the titles of the books on a couple of open shelves and so on. On top of the grand piano were a number of framed photographs. One was a large head of Gilda, another was the famous profile of Jack Gilroy; there were several more I didn't know and one I passed by at first and then looked at again. It was a picture of a good look-

ing, blonde young woman in a bathing suit. I wondered where I had seen her before and then suddenly, I remembered. She was the girl who had been waiting to see Nevin when I was at his office.

I called in the maid and asked her if she knew who the bathing beauty was.

"Yes, suh," she said. "That's Miss Steed."

I thanked her and she went back to the kitchen.

I sat down on the divan and tried to think. But so far as I could see there wasn't any line of thought to follow. Except for another murder and a theft, the case stood just where it had last night and Beth was no nearer to rescue.

Through my mental fog, a voice on the radio said: "We interrupt this program to give you the latest developments of the so-called Inquisition Murders. . . ." I snapped alert and the voice continued: "The fire department was called out to quench a fierce blaze in the middle of Central Park. When the blaze was extinguished it was found that an unidentified young woman had been tied to a tree, soaked with gasoline and burned to death. The police department wishes us to broadcast the fact that the woman was about five feet, four inches tall and that the smallest toes were missing from both feet. If anyone knows a woman answering to this description, will they please get in touch with police headquarters immediately."

The announcer went off the air and the program was continued.

I SEEMED to be frozen where I sat, listening stupidly to the music that followed. "It's over," I thought, "it's all over. Beth is gone. I'll never see her again. . . ."

In a daze I got to my feet and started for the door. I wanted to go out—no matter where. I started across the room with-

out looking where I was going and bumped into the piano, knocking over several of the photographs on its top. Automatically, I picked them up and replaced them.

As I did so, I suddenly felt an unbelievable thrill of discovery and relief. I knew that the dead girl was not Beth. It was Jane Steed—she whose picture I held in my trembling hands. I told myself that it could not be coincidence that each foot of this bathing girl should be minus a toe. Until this second I had imagined terrible visions of Beth's torture before her cremation.

I realized there was only one thing for me to do now and that was to ask Bronson Nevin why Jane Steed had come to see him today. It might mean nothing—simply that she had come on some business of her dead friend. But it might mean everything. I grabbed my hat and rushed out into the dark street.

No cab was in sight and I started to run towards Riverside Drive. Then two things happened simultaneously. A black limousine came speeding up from behind me, slowed for a moment as it drew parallel and then raced on. At the same instant my hat flew off my head and I stumbled and fell headlong.

When I picked myself up, the car was out of sight. My hat was lying a few feet away. When I went to retrieve it, I found that it had been transfixed by a slender, wicked-looking arrow. Wired to the feather was a card which I read under the street light. It said:

Scandalmonger.

Executed by order of the Inquisition.

For once, the Inquisition was mistaken. I smiled, perhaps a trifle grimly, as I broke the arrow in two and dropped it in the gutter. The card I flipped away as I resumed my search for a cab.

Ten minutes later I stood in front of

Bronson Nevin's sedate brownstone house. As I hesitated a second before climbing the steps to the door, a man passed by and stared into my face. I recognized him as a plainclothes detective whom I had met once in my days as a police reporter. I called after him, "Malinsky!" and he turned and came back.

"You remember me," I said. "Lynch—Max Lynch."

"Sure," said Malinsky. "I read your stuff. What a soft job you got."

It was hardly the moment to argue that point. I asked: "You don't happen to be watching this place, do you, Malinsky?"

"Maybe," he said. "All you got to do is go to shows and parties and—"

"Well, listen," I interrupted, "do you know if Nevin is in?"

Malinsky nodded. "Yeah. Got home at six. Been there ever since."

"Thanks," I said. "I've got to talk to him for a minute. See you later."

I ran up the stairs and rang the bell. The door was opened by a middle-aged, grey-faced butler. I told him I wanted to see Nevin. He asked me to come in and said he'd take my name to his master. In a few minutes he was back with a message to the effect that Mr. Nevin was sorry but he would be unable to see me for about three-quarters of an hour. Would I care to wait or come back later?

I said I'd wait and was led into a small library where the butler left me. The hands of the clock on the table indicated twelve-thirty. With a great effort of will I sat quietly while five minutes elapsed. Then sitting became unbearable and I got up and walked around the room.

If it hadn't been for the fact that the room was too small to move about in comfortably, I don't think it ever would have occurred to me to venture out of it. But I was so nervous and impatient and the little library got so annoying that I decided to see more of the house. It was

really just for something to do, and I didn't care if my rambling was discovered or not.

I went through a living-room about which I remember nothing, into a hall that led to the back of the house. At the end, a door stood partly open with a light shining behind it. I went and looked in.

At that instant something collided with the back of my head. But the blow didn't quite knock me out. I twisted around as I slumped to my knees—grabbing, as I fell, the legs of my attacker. He fell in a heap on top of me and we fought in the semi-darkness like mad creatures.

But the battle lasted only a few seconds. Abruptly a pair of hands caught my neck from behind and squeezed both breath and fight out of me. Just when everything was growing black, I was jerked to my feet and my arms were pinioned behind my back.

"Good!" a voice said. "Take him down to the cellar."

WE ENTERED the lighted room—it was an ordinary study—and then I saw it was Nevin whom I had been fighting in the hallway. I supposed that the man who held my arms behind me was the butler.

"So it's you!" I said.

"Who else?" said Nevin, dusting off a sleeve.

When we reached the center of the room, Nevin threw back a rug, drew a knife from his pocket and inserted the blade between two boards in the floor. Instantly, a cleverly concealed trap-door rose, revealing a narrow flight of steps.

"I don't mind showing you this," said Nevin, "because you'll never live to tell about it. About that arrow, you were lucky. But no amount of luck will do you any good, now. You go ahead, George. I'll follow."

The man called George gave my arms

an extra twist—they felt as if they were going to crack—and pushed me ahead of him down the stairs. Nevin's voice followed us. "I wouldn't try to kick if I were you. George might break your arm."

We descended one flight of steps and then went along a low tunnel that ran straight ahead for perhaps a hundred feet. At the end, we came to a halt against an iron door. Nevin passed us and opened it and George pushed me inside.

It was a large, cement furnace-room—gloomy and cold. I was pushed to the stone wall and chained by the arms and ankles. For the first time, I saw George. He was not the butler, after all, but was a tall, heavily built German with a face deeply pitted by smallpox. When he finished locking the iron cuffs around my wrists, Nevin said, "Tell Hans to bring the girl down, George. And stick a couple of pokers into the furnace. I'll want them later."

"Ja," said George. "Goot."

Nevin looked at me and smiled. "Well," he said, "it's been a long day—and it isn't over yet. But don't be impatient. For you and your young lady friend it's almost over. As one might say, it's all over but the shouting and you'll both do plenty of that!"

I didn't feel any of the assurance I tried to get into my voice. I said: "You silly ass! Don't you know this house is watched? I even know the man who's watching it. I spoke to him before I came in. How are you going to laugh it off if I don't come out?"

Nevin chuckled. "I've prepared for that very nicely," he said. "You see, Hans is just about your size. In an hour or two, a taxi will drive up to the door and Hans, dressed in your clothes and with your hat pulled down over his eyes, will run down the steps, wave to your friend—if he is there—and drive off."

"It won't work," I said. "I promised

Malinsky I'd have a drink with him when I came out."

"He'll think you were in a hurry and forgot. And when your dead body is found, he'll swear you were alive when you left here."

I didn't feel so good then. Here I was, spread-eagled against a stone wall—helpless as a babe unborn—my head throbbing with the pain of the knock Nevin had given me. Alone and completely at the mercy of one of the most ruthless and cold-blooded murderers of the twentieth century. Somewhere in the house was the girl I loved—also a candidate for the tender ministrations of these fiends. It's no use saying I wasn't afraid. I was scared sick—at least as much for Beth as for myself.

I realized there would be no use in shouting or cursing Nevin, so I tried to carry on a conversation in ordinary tones. Not that I thought it would do any good, but there was nothing else to do. I said: "I'm still enough of a reporter to be curious about the whys and wherefores of all this business. Do you mind telling me what it's all about?"

Nevin lit a cigarette and flipped the match at my feet. "Not at all," he said. "I got into trouble with my brokerage firm—spent clients' money on other things than stocks. It was only a question of a very short while before there would have been a stink and I would have spent the next few years in Atlanta. Well, Gilda La Mar found out how matters stood and tried to shake me down for ten times the amount of her account with me. I knew I was going to have to do something and I finally hit on this Inquisition plan. And though I do say so myself, it's not a bad one."

"You'll be caught," I said.

NEVIN shrugged. "Maybe. There's always a chance. But I don't think so.

See how clever I've been: where we are now is the basement of the house behind mine and in the next block. I own this house, too, and had them connected by a tunnel. Naturally, an alibi is the easiest thing in the world to arrange. My Butler, by the way, is honest and believes I'm in my study at this moment. I'm not afraid of Hans and George—they're both wanted in Germany for murder. I smuggled them off a tramp steamer. No—I don't think I have much to worry about."

"But why," I asked, "why didn't you stop all this when you had killed La Mar?"

"Why should I?" He seemed surprised. "With a few more murders I'll have the whole city so terrorized that at the merest whisper from me, millions will drop into my lap. It will be like taking candy from a baby. I got a hundred thousand from Forman already and that's only a beginning. Can you image what a panic it will cause when the Walsh girl and you are found tortured to death?"

I said I wanted to know why he had picked on me.

"You know as well as I" he said. "You are the only person who would have been likely to identify Jane Steed—or to connect her with me. I don't think you'd figured it all out when you came here. But given enough time, you would have."

At that moment the door through which George had left the basement opened, and he and another man—Hans, of course—came in holding Beth between them. At sight of her my heart suddenly jumped into my throat and choked me. With her golden hair streaming loosely over her shoulders and her big, sad eyes staring straight ahead, she looked like an early Christian martyr being led to the arena between two gladiators.

"Bring her over here," Nevin directed. "You stay with her, Hans, and let her talk

to Lynch while George and I fix up the rack."

At mention of my name Beth looked up, startled. When she saw me, chained to the wall, she gasped and tried to make a movement toward me; but the German with the shaved head called Hans, jerked her back. While George joined Nevin somewhere in the shadows across the room, Beth and Hans slowly approached until they were within a few feet of me.

I could see in Beth's expression the abandonment of all hope. There was horror and resignation in her eyes. When she spoke, it was in a low, broken whisper. "Max!" she said. "Max—you, too!"

I asked: "Beth, darling—are you all right?" A silly question, but what could I say?

Beth said in that hoarse, throaty whisper: "They say they're going to kill me, now, Max. They're going to torture me to death. I'm afraid, Max. I can't stand it."

"They won't do it, dear," I said. "They're just trying to scare you." My God! It sounded so hollow.

She slowly shook her head. "No. I know. . . ." She raised her eyes and looked squarely at me. "Max, dear," she said, "I'm sorry I never married you. I'm sorry I never gave myself to you. I've been stupid and frivolous—but I want you to know I've always loved you. . . ."

I tried to speak but I couldn't. Tears were in my eyes and I couldn't even see.

Nevin walked briskly over to us and said: "Well, we're all ready, now. Let's get started."

I tried to keep my voice calm. "Listen, Nevin," I said, "why do you want to torture a poor, defenseless girl? If you've got to do it, at all, why not kill her cleanly and quickly?"

Nevin paused as he took Beth by the arm. "I should think you could see that," he answered. "It's no pleasure for me,

but I've got to do it on account of the psychological effort on the public. Nobody is very much afraid of sudden death—but they don't like to suffer."

"But why, if that's what you think, don't you mutilate your victims after death, instead of before it?"

"Because any doctor would be able to tell the difference," Nevin answered. "For a corpse to *look* as though it has suffered, it's *got* to have suffered. Come along, Hans. Come along, Miss Walsh."

Although I knew it wouldn't do any good, I cursed and pulled with all my strength against my chains. They were as solid as the Rock of Gibraltar. As Beth was turned around, she looked over her shoulder. "Good-bye, Max, dear," she said.

FROM that moment on, my memory of what happened is a dim nightmare of visions vaguely seen through a bloody haze. Across the room lights were turned on. I saw a rack, like a great, wooden bedstead with heavy ropes passing through the head and footboards. The ropes were attached to windlasses at either end.

Beth was dragged up to this horrible contrivance. Then, while Hans and George held her arms, Nevin put his hands inside the neck of her dress and ripped it down the front. In a second, her clothes were lying on the floor in tatters and she was as naked as the day she was born.

Now George took her by the feet and Hans by the arms. They lifted her and laid her on the floor, inside the frame of the rack. Nevin tied her hands and feet to the ends of the ropes and Hans and George tightened the two windlasses, raising her body and suspending it taut in that devilish wooden contrivance. I'd cut my wrists against the handcuffs.

Nevin turned to me and said: "I think you ought to have a better view. Bring him over here, boys, and lash him to this post."

George lumbered over to me. Hans followed, carrying a heavy poker. The pock-marked German stooped down and fumbled with my right foot.

I don't suppose I would have done what I did then if I hadn't been completely mad. The instant I felt that my leg was free, I kicked out with it with every atom of weight and force that I possessed. The toe of my shoe caught George in the teeth.

There was the sound of a sharp smack. His head jerked back and cracked against the cement floor! He twitched once and lay still.

Almost simultaneously, Hans swung his poker against my leg. I heard the shin-bone splinter. There wasn't much pain—only a numbness. But my legs gave way and I hung from my wrists.

Nevin ran up and bent over George. Finally he stood up and snarled: "He's dead, Lynch. Do you know what this is going to cost you and the girl? Hours of agony—days of it!" He turned to Hans. "You've broken his leg, so he can't kick again. Come on—we'll drag him over together."

With my right leg dangling uselessly, I was pulled along the floor. My feeble struggles did not help. They tied me to a post only a few feet from the rack in which lay the youthfully molded, beautifully curving body of the girl I loved. Constant shudders ran through her stretched muscles. I could see her heart pounding in her breast. A thin line of blood ran down her cheek from where she had bitten her lip.

I heard Nevin say, "We'll begin with this!" And suddenly he was standing at her side, holding a branding iron, its tip glowing redly. Deliberately, he touched it lightly to her thigh and raised it again. A tiny thread of blue smoke rose as Beth screamed and struggled frantically.

Over the sound of the scream I heard

the sharp, sudden report of a gun! Nevin took a step forward, dropped the red-hot iron to the floor. Then he slowly lay down and put his cheek on the point of the iron. It sounded like a steak frying.

All at once the whole room seemed to be full of people. I saw Old Man Walsh bending over his daughter and I saw a cop smack Hans over the head with the butt of his revolver. And that's all that I remember until I woke up in the hospital. . . .

Walsh was sitting by my side. He didn't let me talk but explained everything he knew I'd want to know. It seems that what saved my life was that arrow that was shot through my hat. Or rather the card that was attached to it. Walsh had had some man shadowing me ever since La Mar's murder. But when I was shot

at, he was too far behind to see it—he had only come up in time to see me tear up a card and throw it away.

Naturally, when he pieced it together, it seemed to indicate that I was the criminal. So he got in touch with headquarters and Nevin's house was raided to arrest me. When they found that neither of us was there, they went through the place practically with a microscope and found the trapdoor and the tunnel.

When he finished his story, we shook hands and he left. Immediately, the door opened again and Beth came in.

"My God, Beth!" I said, "You just missed your father. "He'll catch you here with me."

She laughed. "He brought me—silly!" she said.
