

All-American Fiction

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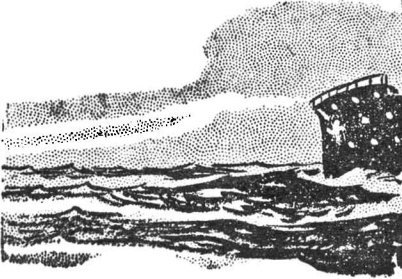
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I'm Dangerous Tonight

by Cornell Woolrich

This is the story of a dress that was haunted by the Devil himself. It bore the label of Paris' smartest modiste but its fabric was woven in Satan's own workshop — where the furies spin and spin. . . .



Complete Short Novel

Prelude

THE thing, whatever it was—and no one was ever sure afterwards whether it was a dream or a fit or what—happened at that peculiar hour before dawn when human vitality is at its lowest ebb. The Blue Hour they sometimes call it, *l'heure bleue*—the ribbon of darkness between the false dawn and the true, always blacker than all the rest of the night has been before it. Criminals break down and confess at that hour; suicides nerve themselves for their attempts: mists swirl in the sky; and—according to the old books of the monks and the hermits—strange, unholy shapes brood over the sleeping rooftops.

At any rate, it was at this hour that her screams shattered the stillness of that top-floor apartment overlooking the Parc Monceau. Curdling, razor-edged screams that slashed through the thick bedroom door. The three

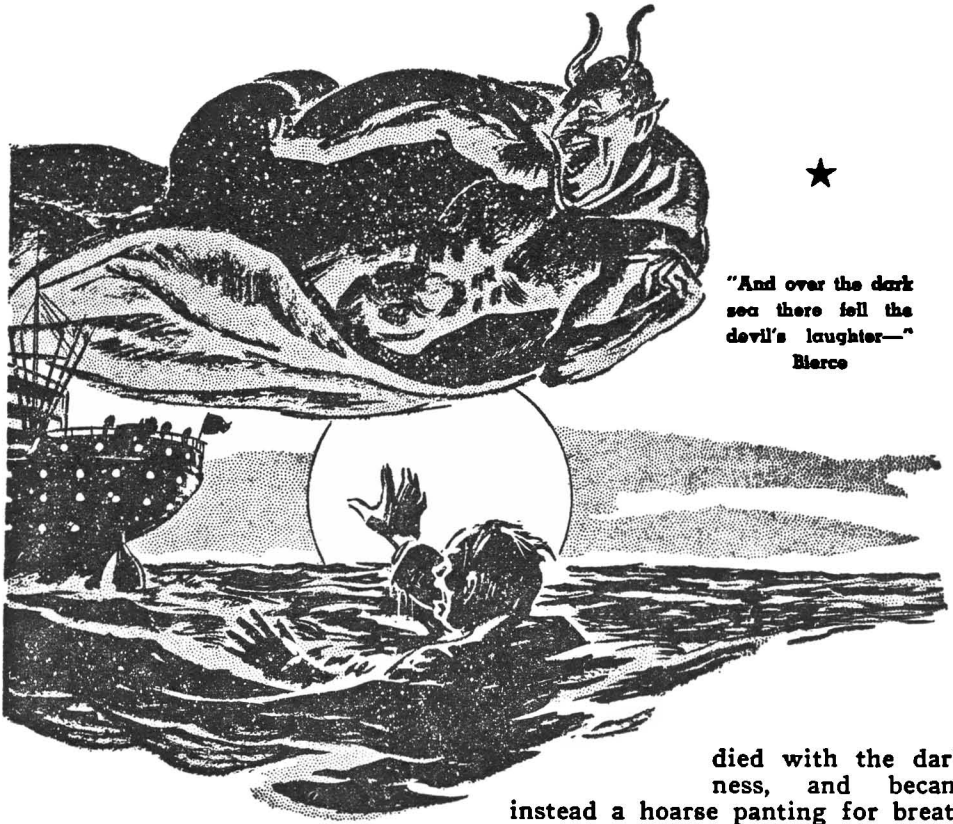
others who shared the apartment with Maldonado—her maid, her secretary, her cook—sat bolt upright in their beds. They came out into the hall one by one. The peasant cook crossed herself again and again. The maid whimpered and seemed ready to add her own screams to those that were sounding in that bedroom at the end of the hall. The secretary, brisk, business-like, modern, and just a little metallic, wasted no time; she cried out, "Somebody's murdering *madame!*" and rushed for the bedroom door.

She pounded, pushed at it; it wouldn't open. But then they all knew that Maldonado habitually slept with her door locked. Still, the only way to reach her was through this door.

The screams continued, a little less violently now than at first.

"Madame Maldonado!" the secretary cried frantically. "Open! Let us in! What is the matter?"

The only answer was a continuation of those long, shuddering moans



★
"And over the dark
sea there fell the
devil's laughter—"
Bierce

of terror. "Come here and help me!" the secretary ordered the cringing cook. "You're strong. Throw your weight against the door. See if you can break it down!"

The husky Breton woman, strong as an ox, threw her shoulder against it again and again. The perpendicular bolt that held it was forced out of its groove in the sill, the two halves shot apart. Something streaked by between the legs of the three frightened women—Maldonado's Persian cat, a projectile of psychic terror, its fur standing like a porcupine's quills, its green eyes lambent, its ears flat—hissing, spitting.

The secretary was the first to enter. She was an intelligent young woman of the modern breed, remember. She believed only what her eyes saw, what her ears heard, what her nostrils smelled. She reached out quickly, snapped the light switch. The screams

died with the darkness, and became instead a hoarse panting for breath. Eve Maldonado, greatest of all Paris designers, lay crouched across the bed like a terrified animal. There was no sign of a struggle anywhere in the big room. It held no intruder in it, no weapon, no trace of blood or violence. Maldonado was very much alive, unbruised and unhurt, but her face was the color of clay, and her whole body trembled uncontrollably. She couldn't speak for a long time.

Her overtaxed vocal cords refused to respond.

But there were things in the room that should not have been there—a thin diaphanous haze of smoke, as from a cigarette, suspended motionless halfway between floor and ceiling. The bowl beside the bed was crammed with cigarette-ends, but none of those butts in it were smoldering any longer, and both windows overlooking the Parc were wide open. The fresh before-dawn breeze blowing through them should have dissi-

pated that haze long ago. Yet it was plainly visible in the electric light, as though it had been caused by something heavier than burnt paper and tobacco. There was a faintly noticeable odor also, an unpleasant one. A little like burnt feathers, a little like chemicals, a little like—sulphur or coal gas. Hard to identify, vague, distinctly out of place there in that dainty bedroom.

"Madame! What was it? What has happened?" the secretary asked anxiously. The other two were peering in from the doorway.

A steel gleam on the night-stand beside the bed caught her eye. She put out her hand and quickly hid the needle before the other two had seen it. "Madame," she whispered reproachfully, "you promised me—!" Maldonado had been in a severe automobile accident a year before. To relieve the pain she had suffered as an after-effect, it had been necessary for awhile to—

THE young woman went over and hid the needle swiftly in a drawer. Coming back, something on the floor touched her foot. She stooped to pick up some kind of triangular cape or cloak. It was black on one side, a bright flame-red on the other. At first glance it seemed to be brocaded satin, but it wasn't. It glistened. It was almost like the skin of a snake. An odor of musk arose from it.

Maldonado affected exotic negligees like this one; she must have dropped it in the throes of her nightmare just now. But then as the secretary prepared to fling it back across the foot of the bed, she saw that there was already one there, an embroidered Chinese thing. At the same instant the designer caught sight of what she was holding; it seemed to renew all her terror. She screamed once more, shrank away from it. Her voice returned for the first time.

"That's it! That's it!" She shuddered, pointing. "Don't bring it near me! Take it away. Take it away, I'm afraid of it."

"But it's yours, madame, isn't it?"

"No!" the woman groaned, warding it off with both hands and averting her head. "Oh, don't—*please* take it away."

"But it must be yours. How else did it get here? You must have brought it home with you from the atelier. You've forgotten, that's all."

Maldonado, beside herself, was holding her head between her two hands. "We have nothing like that at the shop," she panted. "I saw how it got in here! I saw how it came into this room!"

The secretary, holding the thing up by one hand, felt a sudden inexplicable surge of hatred well up in her. A hatred that was almost murderous. She thought, "I'd like to kill her!" And the craving was literal, not just a momentary resentment expressed by a commonplace catch-phrase. She could feel herself being drawn to commit some overt act against the whimpering woman on the bed. Crushing her skull with something, grasping her throat between her hands and throttling her . . .

It must have shown in her face. Maldonado, staring at her, suddenly showed a new kind of fear, a lesser fear than before—the fear of one human for another. She drew back beyond the secretary's reach.

The secretary let the thing she was holding fall to the floor. The impulse died with it. She passed the back of her hand dazedly before her eyes. What had made her feel that way just now? Was Maldonado's hysteria catching—one of those mass-psychoses to which women, in particular, are sometimes susceptible? This woman before her was her employer, her benefactress, had always treated her well. She admired her, respected her—and yet suddenly she had found herself contemplating killing her. Not only contemplating it, but contemplating it with delight, almost with an insatiable longing. Perhaps, she thought, it was the reaction from the severe nervous shock Maldonado's screams had caused them all just now. But even so, to take so horrible a form—

Something was affecting the other two, too; she could see that. Some sort of tension. The maid, who was a frivolous little soul, kept edging toward the door, as if she didn't like it in here, without knowing why. The Breton cook had her underlip thrust out belligerently and the flesh around her eyes had hardened in hostility, but against whom, or what was causing it, there was no way of telling.

Maldonado said, "Get them out of here. I've got to talk to you." The secretary motioned and they went.

The maid returned for a moment, dropped the fugitive cat just over the threshold, then closed the door on it. The animal, perfectly docile in her arms until then, instantly began to act strangely. Its fur went up and its ears back, it crouched in wary retreat from the inanimate piece of goods on the floor, then finding that its escape was cut off, sidled around it in a wide circle and slunk under the bed. No amount of coaxing could get it out again. Two frightened green eyes in the shadows and a recurrent hissing were all that marked its presence.

MALDONADO'S face was ghastly. "That," she said, pointing below the bed where the cat lurked, "and that"—pointing to what lay on the floor—"prove it was no dream. Do dreams leave marks behind them?"

"What was no dream?" The secretary was cool, patient. She had humored Maldonado before.

"What I saw—in here." She caught at her throat, as though still unable to breathe properly. "Get me some cognac. I can speak to you about it. I couldn't in front of them. They'd only say I was crazy—" She drank, put the thimble-glass down. A trace of color returned to her face. "There was someone in this room with me!" she said. "I was lying here wide awake. I distinctly remember looking at my watch, on the stand here next to me, just before it happened. I can even recall the time. It was 4:35. Does one look at the time in one's sleep?"

"One could dream one had," the secretary suggested.

"That was no dream! A second later, as I put the watch down, there was a soft step on the balcony there outside my window, and someone came through it into the room—"

"But it's seven floors above the street, there's no possible way for anyone to get on it! It's completely cut off!" The secretary moved her hands.

"It didn't occur to me to scream at first, for that very reason. It seemed impossible that anyone *could* come in from there—"

"It is," said the secretary levelly. "You've been working too hard."

"It was no burglar. It seemed to be someone in an opera-cloak. It made no hostile move toward me, kept its back toward me until it had gone all the way around there, to the foot of the bed, where you found that—thing. Then it turned to look at me—" She shuddered spasmodically again, and quickly poured out a few more drops of cognac.

"And?" the secretary prompted.

Maldonado shaded her eyes with her hand, as though unable to bear the thought even now. "I saw its face—the conventional face that we all have seen in pictures and at plays. Illuminated from below with the most awful red light. Unspeakably evil. Little goat-horns coming out of here, at the side of the skull—"

The secretary flicked her thumb toward the bureau drawer where she'd hidden the needle. "You'd used—that, just before this?"

The secretary's glance was piercing.

"Well, yes. But the cat didn't. And how do you explain what—you picked up from the floor? Whatever it was, it was all wrapped in that thing. It took it off, kept swirling it around there in the middle of the room—a little bit like matadors do in a bullfight. I distinctly felt the breeze from it in my face, coming from that way, toward the windows, not away from them! And then he, it—whatever the thing was—spoke. I heard it very clearly. There were no sounds from the street at all. He said, 'Why don't you create a dress like this, Mal-

And the dress
touched her, and
the red rage came



donado, and dedicate it to me? Something that will turn whoever wears it into my servant. Here, I'll leave it with you.' That was when I at last found my voice and began to scream. I thought I'd go insane. And even through all my screaming I could hear Rajah over there in the corner with his back up, spitting madly—"

The secretary was getting a little impatient with this preposterous rigamarole. Maldonado was supposed to be one of the brainiest women in Paris, and here she was driveling the most appalling nonsense about seeing a demon in her room. Either the sedatives she was using were breaking down her mind, or she was overworked, subject to hallucinations. "And did this visitor leave the same way, through the window?" the secretary asked ironically.

"I don't know. I was too frightened to look."

The secretary tapped her teeth with her thumbnail. "I think we'd better tell Dr. Renard that that"—she indicated the drawer—"is beginning to get a hold on you. He'd better discontinue it. Suppose you take another swallow of cognac and try to get some sleep—"

She brushed the fallen cloak aside with the point of her toe, then stopped, holding it that way. Again that sudden urge, that blind hatred, swept her. She wanted to swing the cognac-decanter high over her head, to brain Maldonado with it, to watch the blood pour out of her shattered head.

She withdrew her foot, staggered a little. Her mind cleared.

Maldonado said: "Take that thing out of here! Don't leave it in here with me! How do we know what it is?"

"No," the secretary said weakly, "Don't ask me to touch it any more. I'm almost frightened myself now. I'm going back to my room, I feel—strange." She pulled the door open, went out without looking back.

The cat, seeing an avenue of escape, made a belated dash from under the bed, but the door was already closed when the animal reached it again. The cat stood up on its hind paws, scratching and mewling pathetically. Maldonado slipped off the bed and went to get it. "Come here, come here," she coaxed. "You seem very anxious to leave me—" She picked it up and started back with it in her arms, stroking it. As she did so she trod unwittingly on the cloak, lying there coiled on the floor like a snake waiting to strike.

HER face altered; her eyebrows went up saturninely, the edges of her fine white teeth showed through her parted lips; in an instant all tenderness was gone, she was like a different person altogether.

"Well, leave me then, if you want to so badly!" she said, as the cat began to struggle in her arms. Her eyes dilated, gazing down at it. "Leave me for good!" She threw the animal bru-

tally on the bed, then with a feline swiftness that more than matched its own, she thrust one of the heavy pillows over it, bore down with her whole weight, hands turned inward so that the fingers pointed toward one another. Her elbows slowly flexed, stiffened, flexed, stiffened, transmitting the weight of her suspended body to the pillow—and to what lay trapped below it.

The little plumed tail that was all that protruded, spiraled madly, almost like the spoke of a wheel, then abruptly stopped. Maldonado's foot, unnoticed, was still caught in a fold of the cloak, had dragged it across the floor after her.

Hours later, the secretary returned to tell her she was giving up her job. She was putting on her gloves and her packed valise stood outside in the hall. The little maid had fled already, without the formality of giving notice. The pious cook was at Mass, trying to find an answer to her problem: whether to turn her back on the perfectly good wages she was earning, or to risk remaining in a place where inexplicable things took place in the dead of night. As for the secretary herself, all she knew was that twice she had been tempted to murder within the space of moments. There was some unclean mystery here that she could not fathom. She was modern and sensible enough to realize that the only thing to do, for her own sake, was remove herself beyond its reach. Before temptation became commission.

What had precipitated her decision was a phone call she had made to the workshop in an effort to trace the cape that was the only tangible evidence of the mystery. Their answer, after an exhaustive check-up had been made, only bore out Maldonado's words: there had never been anything answering its description in the stockroom, not even a two-by-four sample. An account was kept of every button, every ribbon. So whatever it was, how it had got into Maldonado's room, it hadn't come from the shop.

The secretary saw at a glance that a change had come over Maldonado, since she had left her several hours before. A shrewd, exultant look had replaced the abysmal terror on her face. Whatever unseen struggle had taken place in here in the interval, had been won by the forces of evil. Maldonado was sitting at her desk, busy with pencil and sketch-pad doing a rough draft. She had the cape draped around one shoulder.

"Three times I took this thing to the window, to throw it out into the street," she admitted, "and I couldn't let go of it. It seemed to cling magnetically to my hands. The idea wouldn't let me alone, it kept me hypnotized, until finally I had to get it down on paper—"

A cry of alarm broke from the secretary. "What happened to Rajah?" She had just seen the lifeless bedraggled tail hanging down below the pillow. "Take that off him, he'll suffocate!"

Maldonado paid no attention. "He has already suffocated." She held up the sketch. "Look, that's just the way—what I saw last night—carried it. Call the car. I'm going to get to work on it at once. There's money in it, it'll be worth a fortune—" But her eyes, over the top of the sketch, had come to rest on the secretary's slim young throat. There was a sharp-pointed ivory paper-cutter lying on the desk. As she held the drawing up with one hand, the other started to inch uncontrollably toward it, like a crawling five-legged white beetle.

Inching, crawling—

The secretary, warned by some sixth sense, gave a muffled cry, turned and bolted down the long hallway. The street-door of the apartment slammed after her.

Maldonado smiled a little, readjusted the cape over her shoulder, went on talking to herself as though nothing had happened while she studied the finished sketch. "I'll advertise it as—let's see—*I'm Dangerous Tonight—a dress to bring out the devil in you!*"

And so a deadly thing was born.

Chapter I

American in Paris

SHE was standing on a small raised turntable, about two feet off the floor, which could be revolved in either direction by means of a small lever, on the same general principle as a mobile barber's-chair. She had been standing on it since early afternoon, with short rest-periods every half-hour or so; it was eleven at night now.

They were all around her, working away like ants, some on their knees, some standing up. The floor was littered with red and black scraps, like confetti. She had eyes for only one thing in the whole workroom: a pair of sharp shears lying on a table across the way from her. She kept looking at them longingly, moistening her lips from time to time. When they were closed, like they were now, they came to a sharp point, like a poniard. And when they were open, the inner edge of each blade was like a razor. She was digging her fingernails into her own sides, to keep from jumping down to the floor, picking them up, and cutting and slashing everyone within reach with them. She'd been doing that, in her brain, for hours; she was all black-and-blue from the pinch and bite of her own nails. Once, the seamstress kneeling at her feet had saved her. She'd already had one foot off the stand, on her way over to them, and the latter had stuck a pin in her to make her hold still. The pain had counteracted the desperate urge she kept feeling. It did no good to try to look at anything else; her eyes returned to the shears each time.

The funny part of it was, when she was at rest, off the stand in just her underthings, and had every opportunity of seizing them and doing what she wanted to, she didn't seem to want to. It was only when she was up there with the dress on her that the urge swept over her. She couldn't understand why her thoughts should take this homicidal turn. She supposed it was because she was due to meet Belden at the Bal Tabarin at

midnight, and just tonight they'd picked to work overtime, to finish the thing, keeping her here long after she should have been out of the place.

Meeting him wasn't like meeting anyone else; he was living on borrowed time; he couldn't stick around any one place too long waiting for anyone. He was wanted for murder in the States, and there was an American detective over here now, looking for him; he had to lie low, keep moving around fast, with this Government man always just a step behind him, creeping up slowly but surely. Twice now, in the past two weeks, he'd just missed Belden by the skin of his teeth. And Belden couldn't get out of town until the fake passports his friend Battista was making for him were ready. He'd have them by the end of this week, and then he was going to head for the Balkans—and take her with him, of course. Until then, he was caught in a squirrel-cage.

He was a swell guy; suppose he did run dope from France into the States? She was for him. She'd rather part with her right arm than see him arrested and taken back to die.

He'd killed one of their Department of Justice agents, and they'd never rest until they'd evened things up. They sat you in a chair over there, he'd told her, and shocked you to death with electricity. It sounded awful, a million times worse than the swift and merciful guillotine.

She was crazy about him, steadfast with that utter loyalty only a woman in love can know. She'd have gone through fire and water to be with him, anytime, anywhere. She was ready to be a fugitive with him for the rest of her life—"Whither thou goest, I will go; thy people shall be my people"—and when a Parisienne is ready to leave Paris behind forever, that's something. She hadn't seen him in five days now; he had to keep moving—but last night he'd got word to her along the underworld grapevine: "The Bal au Diable, Wednesday at twelve." And here it was after eleven, and she wasn't even out of the shop yet! Wouldn't that look great, to

keep him waiting, endanger him like that?

SHE couldn't hold out any longer. Pinching herself didn't do any good, her sides were numb now. Her eyes fastened on the shears; she started to edge toward the edge of the stand, her hand slowly stroking her side. One good jump, a grab, a quick turn—and she'd have them. "I'll take Maldonado first," she decided, as she reached the edge of the platform. "The sewing-woman's so fat, she can't get out of the room as fast—" Her knees started to dip under her, bracing for the flying jump.

The designer spoke. "All right, Mimi, take it off. It's finished."

The sewing-woman pulled; the dress fell to the floor at the mannequin's feet, and she suddenly stopped eyeing the scissors, wavered there off-balance, got limply to the floor. Now she could get at them easily—and she didn't try, seemed to have forgotten.

She staggered into the little curtained alcove to put on her street clothes.

"It's been a hard job," Maldonado said, "You all get a bonus." She went downstairs to her car. They started putting the lights out. The rest of the staff, the piece-workers, had gone home hours ago. The sewing-woman stayed behind a moment to stitch in the little silk label: *I'm Dangerous Tonight, by Maldonado*. Without that label it was just a dress. With it, it was a dress worth twenty thousand francs (and if the buyer was an American, twenty-five thousand).

Mimi Brissard looked at the junk she wore to work. Stockings full of holes, sloppy old coat. And it was too late now to go back to her own place and dress decently for him. She'd never make it; she lived way out at Bilancourt. She'd look fine, showing up in these rags to meet a swell guy like Belden! Even if he was a fugitive, even if the Bal au Diable was an underworld hangout, he'd be ashamed to be seen with her. He might even change his mind about taking her.

The sewing-woman had finished the label, hung the dress up. "Coming, Mimi?"

"Go ahead," the girl called through the curtain, "I'll lock up." She'd been with them for five years, they trusted her. There was no money or anything kept up here anyway, just clothes and designs.

"Don't forget the lights." The old woman trudged wearily down the curved stone staircase to the street.

The girl stuck her head out around the curtain, eyed the dress. "I bet he'd be proud of me if I dared wear that! I could bring it back before we open up tomorrow, and they'd never even know." She went over to it, took the hanger down. The dress swept against her. Her eyes narrowed to slits. Her indecision evaporated. "Let anyone try to stop me, and see what they get!" she whispered half audibly. A minute later she had slipped the red dress over her lithe young body and was strutting—there is no other word for it—before the mirror.

She hadn't heard the step on the stairs, maybe because the watchman wore felt-soled shoes to make his rounds. He must have come up to see what was taking her so long.

"Eh? Wait, where do you think you're going in that? That's the firm's property." The old man was standing there in the doorway, looking in at her.

She whirled, and the tiny arrow-headed train, that was like a devil's tail, spun around after her. The shears were still lying there on the table, midway between them.

"Where do you think I'm going? I'll tell you where you're going—right now! To the devil, and you're not coming back!"

There was no excuse for it. The rebuke had been paternal, half humorous. He was a good-natured, inoffensive old man, half crippled with rheumatism. He was certainly no match for her young and furious strength. And the lust to kill—this dynamic murder-voltage charging her—that gave her the force and determination of two able-bodied men.

Her hand gave a catlike pounce,

and the shears clashed; the blades opened, then closed spasmodically, like a hungry mouth, as her fingers gripped the handle. They came up off the table point-foremost.

He saw in her eyes what was coming. "Wait, *mademoiselle!* Don't! Why—?"

She couldn't have told him even if she had wanted to. There was a murderous frenzy in her heart. She closed in on him as he tried to retreat, facing her because he was too horrified to turn his back. There was a spasm of motion from her hand, too quick for the eye to follow, and the point of the shears suddenly sank into his chest.

He gave a cough, found the wall with his back, leaned against it. His head went down and his old black alpaca cap fell off. He could still talk. "Have pity! I've never harmed you! I'm an old man! My Solange needs me—"

The shears found his throat this time. He fell down on top of them and was silent.

Something dark like mucilage glistened where he lay.

She had jumped back—not in remorse, but to keep the bottom of her skirt clear of his blood.

Tensed, curved forward from the waist up, peering narrowly at him like something out of a jungle that kills not for food but for love of killing, she executed strange gestures, as though her arms were those of a puppet worked by strings by some master-puppeteer. Stretched them full-length up over her head, palm to palm, as if in some unholy incantation. Then let them fall again and caressed her own sides, as though inordinately pleased.

At last she moved around him, retrieved the ring of keys that he carried beneath his blouse. She would need them to come back into the building later on. She found the light-switch, plunged the room—and what it contained—into darkness. She closed the door, and moved down the circular stone-stairs with a rustling sound, such as a snake might make on a bed of dry leaves.



Chapter II

First Night of a Gown

THE *bal* was not on the list of synthetic Apache dens that guides show visitors to Paris. It was too genuine for that; sightseers would have been disappointed, as the real thing always makes a poorer show than the fake. It did not pay those who frequented it to advertise themselves or be conspicuous. Nothing ever seemed to be going on there. People would come in, slump down in a chair; no one would pay any attention to them; they would sometimes sit for hours, seemingly lost in dreams; then as suddenly be gone again, as unnoticed as they had come.

There was an accordion fastened to the wall, and a man who had lost an arm in the trenches would occasionally come in, sit down by it, and play softly sentimental ballads with his one hand only, pulling it in and out of the wall.

The *bal* consisted of simply a long, dingy, dimly lighted, smoke-filled semi-basement room; no one ever spoke above a low murmur. If the police never bothered anyone, possibly it was because that was the smartest thing to do. The *bal* often came in handy as a convenient starting-point for a search for any wanted criminal at any given time; it was a focal point for the Paris underworld.

When Mimi, in her red-and-black dress, came down the short flight of stone steps from street-level, Belden wasn't there. At one table was a soiled glass in a china-saucer stamped: *1Fr50*. As she passed by she glanced into it; in the dregs of vermouth-and-cassis floated a cigarette end. That was Belden's unmistakable

trademark; that was where he'd been sitting. He never drank anything without leaving a cigarette in the glass or cup.

She sat down one table away. She knew all the faces by sight, but she gave no sign of recognition, nor was any given to her. No . . . There was one face there she didn't know. Out in the middle of the room, only its lower half visible under a snapdown hat-brim. It didn't have the characteristic French pallor. The chin was squarer than Gallic chins are apt to be. There was a broadness of shoulder there, also, unknown on the Continent.

The man had a stale beer before him. But that was all right; no one came in here to eat or drink. He was staring at the red-and-white checks of the tablecloth, playing checkers on the squares with little *sou*-pieces. He looked at nothing, but he saw everything; it was written all over him. The atmosphere was tense, too. Without seeming to, all the others were watching him cautiously; they scented danger. His presence was a threat. . . .

Petion, the proprietor, found something to do that brought him past her table. Carefully he removed the neglected glass and saucer from the one ahead.

"Where's Belden?"

Petion didn't seem to hear. The corner of his mouth moved in Apache argot. "Get out of here fast, you little fool. That bird over there is the one that's after him. The American *flic*. Luckily Belden saw him arrive. We got him out the back way. He's up at your place, waiting for you. His own room is too hot." Petion couldn't seem to get the grimy cloth at Belden's table straight enough to please him.

The man in the middle of the room jumped a five-*sou* piece with a ten-*sou* piece. You could almost *feel* the eyes peering through the felt of the shadowing brim.

"Now, watch out how you move—you may draw him after you without knowing it and put him onto Belden."

There was a fruit-knife on the table. She glanced at it, then her eyes strayed to Petion's fat neck, creased above his collar. He caught the pantomime, gave her a surprised look, as much as to say, "What's got into you? He been feeding you some of his product?"

He straightened the empty chair and said aloud: "Well, what are you hanging around for? I tell you the dog is a United States Government agent."

"All right, clear away," she breathed impatiently, "I can handle this."

SHE got up and started slowly toward the stairs to the street. Death by electrocution, the thing she'd always dreaded so, ever since Belden had first told her what he had coming to him. Death by electricity—much worse than death at the point of a pair of shears or a table-knife. She veered suddenly, as uncontrollably as though pulled by a magnet, turned off toward that table in the middle of the room, went directly over to it. She was smiling and her eyes were shining.

There was a small, nervous stir that rustled all over the room. One man shifted his chair. Another set his glass of *vin blanc* into a saucer, too noisily. A woman laughed, low in her throat.

He didn't seem to see her, not even when her fingertips were resting on the edge of the table.

"*Soir, m'sieur.*"

He said in English: "Wrong table, *petite. Pas libre ce soir.*"

She'd learned some English from Belden. So now she pulled a second chair out, sat down, helped herself to one of his cigarettes. Her hand trembled a little, but not from nervousness. In the dim recesses of the room whispers were coursing along the walls: "She's giving him the come-on, trying to get him somewhere where Belden can finish him. That's the kind of a girl to have!"

"She'll trip herself up. Those fish are no fools."

She began to speak quietly, her eyelids lowered. "I am Mimi Brissard, and I live at Bilancourt, number 5 rue Poteaux top floor front."

The line of his mouth hardened a little. "Move on. I told you I'm not in—"

"I am Belden's girl," she continued as though she hadn't heard him, "and he is up there right now, waiting for me. Now, are you interested?"

He pushed his hat back with a thumb and looked at her for the first time. There was no admiration in his eyes, nor any gratitude, only the half-concealed contempt the police always have for an informer. "Why are you welshing on him?" he said warily.

She couldn't answer, any more than she could have answered the old watchman when he had asked her why she was stabbing him to death. She fingered the dress idly, as though she sensed something, but it eluded her.

"You better go back and tell him it won't work," he said drily. "He's not getting me like he got Jimmy Fisher in New York, he's not dealing with a green kid now. I'm getting him—and without the help of any chippy either!"

"Then I have to prove that this is no decoy? Did you see that vermouthish-glass with the cigarette in it over there? That was he. This goes with it." She palmed a scrap of paper at him: *Bal au Diable 24h*. "I was to meet him here. You spoiled it. He's up there now. He's armed and he'll shoot to kill, rather than go back—"

"What did you think I expected him to do, scatter petals at my feet?"

"Without me you haven't got one chance in ten of taking him alive. But through me, you can do it. And you want him alive, don't you?"

"Yep," he said curtly. "The man he killed—Jimmy Fisher—was my brother. . . ."

She squirmed eagerly inside the glistening cocoon that sheathed her. But a change had come over him meanwhile. Her nearness, her presence at the table, seemed to be affecting him on some way. He had come alive, menacingly, hostilely, and he

was . . . dangerous, too. His jaw-line set pugnaciously, a baleful light flickered in his gray eyes, his upper lip curled back from his teeth. His hand roamed down his coat toward the flap of his back-pocket. "I never wanted to kill anyone so much in my life," he growled throatily, "as I do you right now!" He started tugging at something, at the small of his back.

She looked down, saw that a flounce of her dress was brushing against his knee. She moved her chair slightly back, and the contact broke.

His hand came up on the table again, empty. His face slowly slipped back into its mask of impassivity. He was breathing a little heavily, that was all, and there was a line of moisture along the crease in his forehead.

"So he's at Bilancourt, 5 rue Poteaux," he said finally. "Thanks. You're a fine sweetheart. Some other dame, I suppose."

"No," she said simply. "I loved him very much only an hour ago, at eleven o'clock. I must have changed since then, that's all. I don't know why. Now I'd like to think of him being electrocuted and cursing my name as he dies. . . . Follow me there and watch which window lights up. Keep watching. My window-shade's out of order. Tonight it will be especially so. I'll have trouble with it. When you see it go up, then come down again, you'll know he's ready for the taking."

"Okay, Delilah," he murmured. "When I first hit Paris I thought there was no one lower than Belden. He shot an unarmed kid of twenty-five—in the back, without giving him a chance. But now I see there's someone lower still—and that's his woman. He, at least, wouldn't turn you in; I'll give him that much. But let me warn you. If you think you're leading me into a trap, if I have to do any shooting, you get the first slug out of this gun! That's how you stand with me, little lady."

She smiled derisively, stood up. She didn't bother to reply to his contempt. "Don't leave right after me, they're all watching you here. I'll

wait for you under the first street-light around the corner. She added dreamily: "I couldn't think of anything I wanted to do more than this. That's why I'm doing it."

She went slowly up the stone steps to the street-door, her pointed train wriggling after her from side to side. She turned her head and flashed a smile over her shoulder. Then she went out and the darkness swallowed her.

Frank Fisher rinsed his mouth with beer and emptied it out on the floor.

Chapter III

Mademoiselle Judas

THE room was dark and empty when she stepped into it from the hall outside. The dim light shining behind her outlined her; her silhouette was diabolic, long and sinuous and wavering. Two ridges of hair above her ears looked almost like horns. Something clicked warningly somewhere in the room, but that was all. She closed the door.

"Chéri?" she whispered. "I'm going to put up the light. It's all right. *C'est Mimi.*"

A bulb went on, and its rays, striking out like yellow rain, touched off a gleam between two curtains pulled tightly together across a doorless closet. The gleam was black in the middle, holed through. It elongated into a stubby automatic; and a hand, an arm, a shoulder, a man, came slowly out after it toward her.

Steve Belden was misleadingly ogre-like, for a man who had poisoned thousands of human lives with heroin. In repose his face was almost pleasant looking, and his eyes had that directness of gaze that usually betokens honesty.

The girl glanced quizzically at the gun as he continued to point it at her. "Well, put it way, Chéri," she protested ironically. "Haven't you seen me some place before?"

He sheathed it under his arm, scowled. "What took you so long? D'you know he nearly jumped me, waiting for you at the *bal* just now?"

Petion got me out the back way by pretending to shake out a tablecloth, holding it up at arm's length for a screen. For a minute we were both in the same room, he and I! I hope you haven't steered him over here after you without knowing it."

"He wasn't there any more. Must have looked in merely, then gone away again."

"What's the idea of that dress? I nearly took a shot at you when you opened the door just now."

"It's what they kept me overtime working on tonight. I left it on to save time. I'll sneak it back first thing in the morning—"

"You'll have to have some reach, if you do. Battista finally came through with the passports. We're taking the Athens Express at daybreak. Matter of fact I could have made the night-train to the Balkans, if it hadn't been for you. I waited over so I could take you with me—"

"So four hours more in Paris does the trick?" she said, looking at him shrewdly.

He frowned.

"Yeah, and then we're all set. Fisher's extradition-writ's no good in Greece, and Panyiotis pulls enough



The spotlight moved. The man reached forward to claw at the dress

weight there to fix it so we both disappear for good. If I've outsmarted him for three weeks now, I can outlast him the few hours there are left. What'd you say?"

She'd said, "If—" in a low voice. "When did you get any sleep?"

"Night before last."

"Well, take off your coat, lie down here, rest up a while. I'll keep watch. I'll wake you in time for the train. Here, let me have that, I'll keep it trained on the door."

"What do you know about these things?" he grinned, but he passed the gun over to her, stretched himself out. "Put out the light," he said sleepily. He began to relax, the long-sustained tension started to go out of his nerves; he could trust her. She was the only one. . . .

THE gun was not pointed at the door, but at him—at the top of his head from behind, through the bars of the bed. Her face was a grimace of delight. Then slowly she brought the gun down again. A bullet in the brain—You didn't feel anything, didn't know anything. But electrocution—what anguish, what terror preceded it! Electrocution was a much better way.

A sharp click from the gun roused him, after he had already begun to doze off. He stiffened, looked at her over his shoulder. "What was that?"

"Just making sure it's loaded." She kicked something along the floor with the tip of her foot, something metallically round. It rolled under the bed.

His eyes closed again. He turned his head toward the wall. His breathing thickened.

A warning *whirr* of the shade-roller roused him a second time. He raised half upright on his elbow. His free hand clawed instinctively at his empty shoulder-holster.

She was reaching for the cord, pulling the shade all the way down again to the bottom.

"What're you doing?" he rasped. "Get away from that window! I told you to put the light out, didn't I?"

"It slipped. It needs fixing," she

murmured. "It's all right, there's no one down there. Here goes the light—"

The last thing he said, as he lay back again, was: "And take that damn dress off too, while you're about it. Every time I lamp it on you, it throws a shock into me all over again. I think I'm seeing things—"

She said nothing.

He drowsed off again. Then in the dark, only seconds later, she was leaning over him, shaking him awake. Her breath was a sob that threatened to become a scream. The whiteness of her form was dimly visible. She must have discarded the dress while he slept.

"Steve. *Mon* Steve!" she was moaning. "Get up!" She pulled him frenziedly erect with both arms. "*Sauveto!* Out! *File—vite!* Maybe you can still make it by way of the roof—"

He was on his feet, clear of the bed, in an instant. "What's up? What's up?"

"I've sold you out!" The groan seemed to come from way down at the floor, as though she was all hollow inside. "I tipped him off at the *bal*. I signaled him with the shade just now—"

The light flashed on.

"Oh, don't stand there looking at me. Quick, get out this door, he has four flights to climb—"

He was usually very quick, but not this time. He stood there eyeing her as though he couldn't believe what he heard. Then at last, he grasped what she had told him. He pulled the gun from her unresisting hand, turned it the other way around, jabbed it at her heart. It clicked repeatedly, almost like a typewriter.

"I—the bullets—" she shuddered. "Under the bed— Oh, get, Steve— save yourself now—"

A warped floorboard groaned somewhere outside the room.

"Too late!"

Belden had dropped down on one knee, was reaching out desperately toward the bullets. There was no pounding at the door; a shot exploded into it, and splinters of wood flew out

on the inside. The china-knob fell off and lay there like an egg. The door itself ricocheted back off the flat of someone's shoe.

"All right, don't move, Belden. You're through."

Fisher came in slowly, changed gun-hands with a sort of acrobatic twist, and brought out handcuffs.

"Pull your finger-joint out of that trigger-hole," he added.

The automatic turned over, fell upside down on the floor.

Fisher didn't speak again until the manacles had closed. Then he said, "Got a hat or anything you want to take with you?" He seemed to see Mimi for the first time. He nodded, said curtly: "Nice work, *Mademoiselle Judas*."

She stood shivering. The dress lay on the floor behind her, but she made no move to reach out for it.

Belden took his capture calmly enough. He didn't say a word to Mimi Brissard; didn't even look at her. "It's a pleasure," he said bitterly, as Fisher motioned him forward, "if only because it means getting out of a town where there are—things like this." He spat on the floor at her feet as he went by.

Fisher hung back a minute to look her almost detachedly, up and down. He pocketed his gun, took out a wallet with his free hand, removed some lettuce-like franc-notes. "What was it—money?" he said. "You haven't asked for any, but I suppose that's it. Here, go out and buy yourself a heart."

The wadded bills struck her lightly in the center of the forehead, and fluttered down her to the floor. One caught upon her breast, just over her heart, and remained poised there, like a sort of badge.

She stood there with her eyes closed, perfectly motionless, as though she were asleep standing up, while the man she'd loved and his captor began their long descent side by side down the four flights of stairs that led to the street.

When they came out of the house a moment later, they had to force

their way through the crowd of people standing there blocking the entrance.

Fisher thought for a moment that it was his own shot at the lock upstairs in the house that had attracted them. But they were all turned the other way, with their backs to the building. Out in the middle of the narrow cobbled street two or three of them were bending anxiously over something. Some broken white thing lying perfectly still at their feet. One of the men was hurriedly opening and separating the leaves of a newspaper—but not to read it.

Mimi Brissard had atoned, in the only way she had left.

Chapter IV

The Lady from Dubuque

"DO I dare?" Mrs. Hiram Travis said aloud, to no one in particular, in her stateroom on the *Gascony* the night before it reached New York. Or if to anyone at all, to the slim, slinky red-and-black garment that the stewardess had laid out for her across the bed under the mistaken impression that she would wish to wear it. A stewardess who, although she had assured Mrs. Travis she was not susceptible in the least to seasickness, had come out of the cabin looking very pale and shaken after having taken the dress down from its hanger. Mrs. Travis had noticed the woman glaring daggers at her, as if in some way *she* were to blame. But this being Mrs. Travis' first trip abroad, or anywhere at all except Sioux City, she was not well versed in the ways of stewardesses, any more than in those of French couturiers.

In fact she hadn't really known what that Maldonado woman was talking about at all; they had had to make signs to each other. *She* had wanted just a plain simple little dress to wear to the meetings of her Thursday Club back home in Dubuque, and then the next morning *this* had shown up at the hotel all wrapped up in crinkly paper. She hadn't wanted Hiram to think she was a fool, so

she'd pretended it was the one she'd ordered, and good-natured as always, he'd paid for it without a word. Now here she was stuck with it! And the worst part of it was, if she didn't wear it tonight, then she'd never have another chance to. Because she really didn't have the nerve to wear it in Dubuque. Folks would be scandalized. And all the *francs* it had cost!

"Do I dare?" she said again, and edged a little closer.

One only had to look at Mrs. Hiram Travis to understand the reason for her qualms. She and the dress didn't match up at all. They came from different worlds. She was a youngish forty, but she made not the least attempt to look any younger than that. She was very plain, with her chin jutting a little too much, her eyes undistinguished, and her mouth too flat. Her hair was a brown-red. She had never used rouge and she had never used powder. The last time she'd smoked a cigarette was behind her grandmother's barn at the age of fourteen. She'd never drunk anything stronger than elderberry wine in her life, until a week ago in Paris, just for the look of things, she'd tried a little white wine with her meals. She made swell pies, but now that Hi had made so much money in the lawn-mower business, he wouldn't let her do her own cooking any more. He'd even retired, taken out a half-a-million dollar life-insurance policy, and they'd made this trip to Paris to see the sights. Even there the latest they'd stayed up was one night when they had a lot of postcards to write and didn't get to bed until nearly eleven-thirty. About the most daring thing she'd done in her whole life was to swipe a fancy salad-fork from a hotel for a souvenir. It was also the closest she'd ever come to a criminal act. That ought to give you the picture.

She was mortally afraid of about eight million things, including fire-arms, strange men, and the water they were traveling on right now.

"Golly," she clucked, "I bet I'll feel like a fool in it. It's so—kind of

vampish. What'll Hi say?" She reached out and rested her hand on the dress, which lay there like a coiled snake ready to strike. . . .

She drew her hand back suddenly. But she couldn't help reaching out again to touch the dress with a movement that was almost a caress.

Instantly her mind filled with the strangest thoughts—odd recollections of instants in her past that she would have said she had completely forgotten. The first time she'd ever seen her father wring a chicken's neck. The day that Hiram—'way back in high school—cut his arm on a broken window. A vein, he'd cut. He'd bled . . . a lot; and she'd felt weak and sick and terrified. The automobile smash-up they'd seen that time on the State highway on the way back from Fair . . . that woman lying all twisted and crumpled on the road, with her head skewed way around like it shouldn't be—couldn't be if the woman lived.

It was funny . . . When those things had taken place, she'd felt terrible. Now—remembering them—she found herself going over every detail in her mind, almost—lovingly.

In a magazine she had once seen a picture of Salomé kneeling on the ground holding on a great tray the head of Baptist John. The woman's body was arched forward; there was a look of utter, half-delirious absorption on her face as her lips quivered for the dead, partly open mouth. And quite suddenly, with a little shock of revelation, Sarah Travis knew what Salomé had felt.

The dress slipped from her fingers. She hurried to put it on. . . .

GORGES, the *Gascony's* chief bartender, said: "Perhaps *monsieur* would desire another. That's a bad col' you catch."

The watery-eyed red-nosed little man perched before him had a strip of flannel wound around his throat, neatly pinned in back with two small safety-pins. He glanced furtively around over his shoulder, the length of the glittering cocktail-lounge. "Mebbe you're right," he said. "But

the missus is due up in a minute, I don't want her to catch me at it, she'll lace it into me, sure enough!"

Sarah, of course, wouldn't dream of approaching the bar; when she came they'd sit decorously at a little table over in the corner, he with a beer, she with a cup of Oolong tea, just to act stylish.

Hiram Travis blew his long-suffering nose into a handkerchief the size of a young tablecloth. Then he turned his attention to the live canary dangling over the bar in a bamboo cage, as part of the decorations. He coaxed a few notes out by whistling softly. Then he happened to look in the mirror before him—and he recoiled a little, his eyes bugged; and part of his drink spilled out of his glass.

She was standing next to him, right there at the bar itself, before he'd even had time to turn. An odor of musk enveloped him. The canary over their heads executed a few pinwheel flurries.

His jaw just hung open. "Well, fer—!" was all he could say. It wasn't so much the dress she was wearing, it was that her whole personality seemed to have subtly changed. Her face had a hard, set look about it. Her manner was almost poised. She wasn't fluttering with her hands the way she usually did in a room full of people, and he missed the nervous, hesitant smile on her lips. He couldn't begin to say what it was, but there was something about her that made him a little afraid of her. He even edged an inch or two away from her.

Even Georges looked at her with a new professional respect not unmixed with fear.

"*Madame?*" he said.

She said, "I feel like a drink tonight," she said, and laughed a little, huskily. "What are those things—cocktails—? Like that woman over there has."

The bartender winced a little. "That, *madame*, is a double Martini. Perhaps something less—"

"No. That's what I want. And a cigarette, too. I want to try one."

Beside her, her husband could only splutter, and he stopped even that when she half turned to flash him a smile—the instinctive, brilliant smile of a woman who knows what feeble creatures men can be. You couldn't learn to smile like that. It was something a woman either knew the minute she was born, or never knew at all.

Georges recognized that smile.

"I can't believe it's you," Hiram Travis said, stupefied.

Again that smile. "It must be this dress," she said. "It does something to me. You have to live up to a gown like this, you know. . . ." There was a brief warning in her eyes. She picked up her cocktail, sipped at it, coughed a little, and then went on drinking it slowly. "About the dress," she said, "I put my hand on it and for a moment I couldn't take it away again, it seemed to *stick* to it like glue! Next think I knew I was in it."

As the bartender struck a match to light her cigarette, she put her

hand on his wrist to steady it. Travis saw him jump, draw back. He held his wrist, blew on it, looked at her reproachfully. Travis said: "Why, you scratched him, Sarah."

"Did I? And as she turned and looked at him, he saw her hand twitch a little, and drew still further away from her. "What—what's got into you?" he faltered.

There was some kind of tension spreading all around the horseshoe-shaped bar, emanating from her. All the cordiality, the sociability, was leaving it. Cheery conversations even at the far ends of it faltered and died, and the speakers looked around them as though wondering what was putting them so on edge. A heavy leaden pall of restless silence descended, as when a cloud goes over the sun. One or two people even turned and moved away reluctantly, as though they hadn't intended to but didn't like it at the bar any more. The gaunt-faced woman in red and black was the center of all eyes, but the looks sent her were not the admiring looks of men for a well-dressed woman; they were the blinking petrified looks a black-snake would get in a poultry-yard. Even the barman felt it. He dropped and smashed a glass, a thing he hadn't done since he'd been working on the ship. Even the canary felt it, and stood shivering pitifully on its perch, emitting an occasional cheep as though for help.

SARAH TRAVIS looked up, and saw it. She took a loop of her dress, draped it around her finger, thrust it between the bars. There was a spasm of frantic movement inside, too quick for the eye to follow, a blurred pinwheel of yellow. Then the canary lay lifeless at the bottom of the cage, claws stiffly upthrust. Its heart had stopped from fright.

It wasn't what she had done—they could all see that contact hadn't killed it—it was the look on her face that was so shocking. No pity, no regret, but an expression of savage satisfaction, a sense of power to deal out life-and-death just now discovered.

Some sort of unholy excitement seemed to be crackling inside her; they could all but see phosphorescent flashes of it in her eyes.

This time they began to move away in numbers, with outthrust lower lips of repugnance and dislike turned her way. Drinks were left half-finished, or were taken with them to be imbibed elsewhere. She became the focal-point for a red wave of converged hate that, had she been a man, would surely have resulted in some overt act. There were sulky whispers of "Who is that?" as they moved away. The bartender, as he detached and lowered the cage, looked daggers at her, cursed between his teeth in French.

There was only one solitary drinker left now at the bar, out of all the amiable crowd that had ringed it when she first arrived. He kept studying her inscrutably with an expressionless face; seemingly unallergic to the tension that had driven everyone else away.

"There's that detective again," she remarked with cold hostility. "Wonder he doesn't catch cold without that poor devil being chained to him. Wonder where he's left him?"

"Locked up below, probably, while he's up getting a bracer," Travis answered mechanically. His chief interest was still his own problem: what had happened to his wife in the brief minutes from the time he'd left her preparing to dress in their state-room until the time she's joined him up here? "I suppose they asked him not to bring him up with him manacled like that, for the sake of appearances. Why are you so sorry for his prisoner all of a sudden, and so set against him? Only last night you were saying what an awful type man the other fellow was and how glad you were he'd been caught."

"Last night isn't tonight," she said shortly. "People change, Hiram." She still had the edge of her dress wrapped around her hand, as when she'd destroyed the canary. "I don't suppose you ever will, though." Her voice was low, thoughtful. She looked

at her husband curiously, then deliberately reached out toward him with that hand and rested it against him.

Travis didn't go into a spasm and fall lifeless as the bird had. He displayed a sudden causeless resentment toward her, snapped, "Take your hand away, don't be pawing me!" and moved further away.

She glanced disappointedly down at her hand as though it had played a dirty trick on her, slowly unwound the strip of material, let it fall. She stared broodingly into the mirror for awhile, tendrils of smoke coming up out of her parted lips.

She said, "Hi, is that half-million-dollar insurance policy you took out before we left in effect yet of still pending?" and narrowed her eyes at her image in the glass.

"It's in effect," he assured her. "I paid the first premium on it the day before we left Dubuque. I'm carrying the biggest insurance of any individual in Iowa—"

She didn't seem particularly interested in hearing the rest. She changed the subject abruptly—or seemed to. "Which one of the bags have you got that gun in that you brought with you for protection? You know, in case we got robbed in Europe."

The sequence of questions was so glaringly, so unmistakably meaningful, that he did what almost anyone else would have done under the circumstances, ascribed it to mere coincidence and ignored it. Two separate disconnected chains of thought, crowding upon one another, had made her ask first one, then the other, that was all. It just would have *sounded* bad to a stranger, to that professional crime-detector over there for instance, but of course *he* knew better. After all he'd been married to her for eighteen years.

"In the howhide bag under the bed in the stateroom," he answered calmly. "Why? Every time you got a peek at it until now you squeaked, 'Throw it away, Hi! I can't stand to look at them things!'"

She touched her hand to her throat briefly and moistened her lips.

Travis noticed something, and said: "What's the matter, you seasick? Your face is all livid, kind of, and you're breathing so fast—I coulda told you not to monkey 'round with liquor when you're not used to it."

"It isn't either, Hiram. I'm all right. Leave me be." Then, with a peculiar ghastly smile lighting up her face, she said, "I'm going down below a minute to get something I need. I'll be back."

"Want me to come with you?"

"No," she said, still smiling, "I'd rather have you wait for me here, and then come out on the deck with me for a little stroll when I come back. That upper boat-deck . . ."

The little undulating serpentine train of her dress followed her across the cocktail lounge and out. Hiram Travis watched her go, wondering what had happened to change her so. Georges watched her go, wondering what had gone wrong at his bar tonight. Frank Fisher watched her go, wondering who it was she kept reminding him of. He had thought of Belden's sweetheart in Paris at once, but discarded her, because the two women didn't resemble one another in the least.

FIFTEEN was the number of her stateroom, and she knew that well, yet she had stopped one door short of it, opposite seventeen, and stood listening. The sound was so faint as to be almost indistinguishable, a faint rasping, little more than the buzz of an angry fly caught in the stateroom and trying to find a way out. Certainly it was nothing to attract the attention of anyone going by, as it had hers. It was as though her heart and senses were tuned in to evil tonight, and the faintest whisper of evil could reach her.

She edged closer, into the little open foyer at right-angles to the passageway, in which the door was set. None of the stateroom-doors on the *Gascony* opened directly out into the public corridors. There was a food-tray lying outside the door, covered with a napkin, ready to be taken away.

She edged it silently aside with the point of her foot, stood up closer to the door. The intermittently buzzing fly on the other side of it was more audible now. *Zing-zing, zing-zing, zing-zing.* It would break off short every so often, then resume.

Mrs. Hiram Travis, who had been afraid of strange men and who had shuddered at the mere thought of criminals until twenty minutes ago, smiled knowingly, reached out and began to turn the glass doorknob. It made no sound in her grasp, but the motion must have been visible on the other side. The grating sound stopped dead, something clinked metallically, and then there was a breathless, waiting silence.

The faceted knob had turned as far as it would go in her hand, but the door wouldn't give. A man's voice called out: "Come on, jailer, quit playing hide-and-peek! Whaddya think you're going to catch me doing, hog-tied like I am?"

She tried the knob again, more forcefully. The voice said: "Who's there?" a little fearfully this time.

"Where's the key?" she whispered.

"Who are you?" was the answering whisper.

"You don't know me. I'd like to get in and talk to you—"

"What's the angle?"

"There's something you can do for me. I want to help you."

"He's got the key, he took it up with him. Watch yourself, he'll be back any minute—" But there was a hopeful note in the voice now. "He's

got both keys, the one to the door and the one to these bracelets. I'm cuffed to the head of the bed and that's screwed into the floor—"

"I left him up at the bar," she said, "If I could get near enough to him maybe I could get hold of the keys."

There was a tense little silence while the man behind the door seemed to be thinking things over.

"Wait a minute," the voice said, "I've got something here that'll help you. Been carrying it around in the fake sole of my shoe. Stand close under that open transom, I'll see if I can make it from here—"

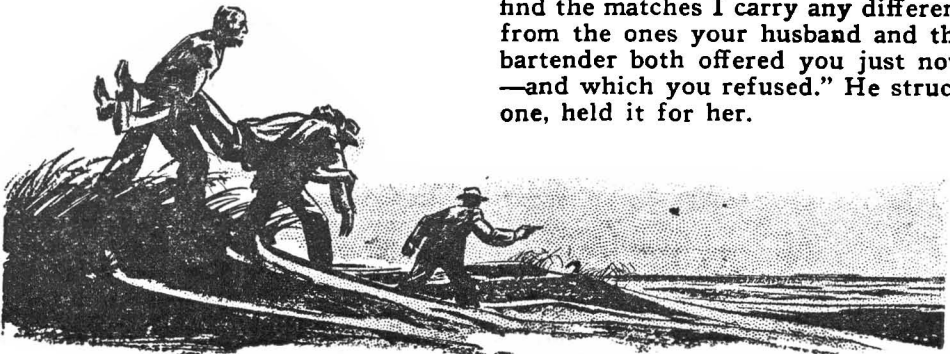
Presently a little white, folded paper packet flew out, hit the wall opposite, landed at her feet.

She stooped swiftly to pick it up, scarcely conscious of the unaccustomed grace of her movement.

"Get it? Slip it into his drink, it's the only chance you've got. Now listen, the cuff-key is in his watch-pocket, under his belt; the door key's in his breast-pocket. He turned his gun over to the purser when we came aboard, said he wasn't taking any chances of my getting hold of it while he was asleep. I don't know who you are or what the lay is, but you're my only bet. We dock tomorrow. Think you can do it?"

"I can do anything—tonight," Mrs. Hiram Travis of Dubuque answered as she moved away from the door.

FISHER looked at her a full half-minute while she stood beside him holding her cigarette poised. "Certainly," he said at last, "but you won't find the matches I carry any different from the ones your husband and the bartender both offered you just now—and which you refused." He struck one, held it for her.



"You see everything, don't you?"

"That's my business." He turned back to the bar again, as though to show the interruption was over.

She didn't move. "May I drink with you?"

He stiffened his finger at the Frenchman. "Find out what the lady is having." Then turned to go. "If you'll excuse me—"

"With you, not on you," she protested.

"This isn't a pleasure trip," he told her briefly. "I'm on business. My business is downstairs, not up here. I've stayed away from it too long already. Sorry."

"Oh, but a minute more won't matter—" She had thrust out her arm deftly, fencing him in. She was in the guise of a lady, and to be unnecessarily offensive to one went counter to a training he had received far earlier than that of the Department. It was ingrained in the blood. She had him at a disadvantage. He gave in grudgingly, but he gave in.

She signaled her husband to join them, and he came waddling up, blowing his nose and obviously beginning to feel his liquor. Tonight was one night Sarah didn't seem to give a rap how much he drank, and it was creeping up on him.

Georges set down three Martinis in a row. Mrs. Travis let a little empty crumpled white paper fall at her feet.

"Y'know," Travis was saying. "About this fella you're bringin' back with you—"

"Sorry," said Fisher, crisply but pleasantly, "I'm not at liberty to discuss that."

Mrs. Travis raised Fisher's drink to her lips with her left hand, moved hers toward him with her right. Georges was busy rinsing his shaker.

"Last Spring one of you fellas showed up in Dubuque, I remember. He was lookin' for some bank-robber. Came around to the office one day—" Travis went into a long, boring harangue. Presently he broke off, looked at Fisher, and turned a startled face to his wife.

"Hey, he's fallen asleep!"

"I don't blame him much," she said, and brushed the lapel of Fisher's coat lightly, then the tab of his vest. "Spilled his drink all over himself," she murmured in explanation. She took her hand away clenched, metal gleaming between the finger-cracks. "Take him outside on the deck with you, Hi," she said. "Sit him in a chair, see if the air'll clear his head. Don't let anyone see him like this in here. . . ."

"You're right," said Travis, with the owl-like earnestness of the partially-intoxicated.

"The boat-deck. No one goes up there at night. I'll join you—presently." She turned and walked away.

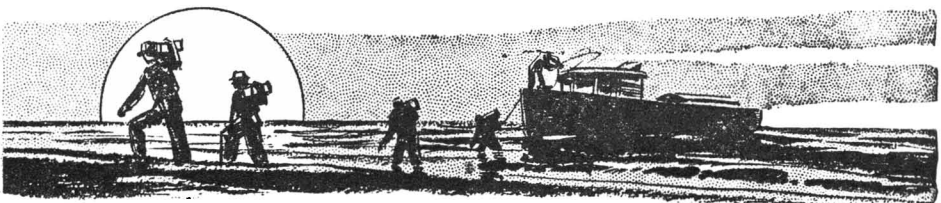
SHE dangled the handcuff-key up and down in the palm of her hand, standing back just beyond his reach. He was nearly tearing his arm out of its socket, straining across the bed to get at it.

There was something oddly sinister about her, standing there grinning devilishly at him like that, something that made Steve Belden almost afraid. This ugly dame was really bad. . . .

"Well, come on, use that key! What'd you do, just lift it to come down here and rib with me it? That knock-out-powder ain't going to last all night. It's going to pass off in a few minutes and—"

"First listen to what I have to say.

(Please turn to page 138)



I'm not doing this because I'm sorry for you."

"All right, let's have it! Anything you say. You're holding the aces."

She began to smile and it was a terrible thing to see. Poisonous . . . the pure distillation of evil . . . like a gargoyle-mask.

"Listen," she began. "My husband—there is a half-a-million dollar insurance policy on his life—and I'm the sole beneficiary. I'm sick of him—he's a hick—never will be anything but a hick. I've got to be rid of him—got to. And I want that money. I've earned it. I'll never get another chance as good as now, on this boat. I don't want that half-a-million when I'm sixty and no good any more. I want it now, while I'm young enough to enjoy it. But even if there wasn't any insurance at all, I'd still want to do it. I hate the way he talks and the way he walks and the way he eats his shredded-wheat and the way he always is getting colds and talking like a trained seal! I hate everybody there is in the world tonight, but him most." And she gave the handcuff-key one final fillip, caught it again, blew her breath on it—just beyond his manacled reach.

He rubbed his strained shoulder, scowled at her. "What do you have to have me for?" he asked. "Not that it means anything to me to put the skids to a guy, even a guy that I've never set eyes on before; but for a dame that can get Fisher's stateroom-and bracelet-keys out of his pocket right under his eyes—why do you have to have help on a simple little stunt like that?"

"I'll tell you why," she said. "You see, mister, I had him with me when I came aboard, and so I have to have him with me when I go ashore tomorrow. That's why I need you. You're going to be—Hiram, bundled up in his clothes, with your neck bandaged, and a great big handkerchief in front of your face. You won't have to speak. I'll do all the talking. If I just report that he disappeared at sea, I'll never be able to prove that he's dead, I'll never get the half-a-million. . . ."

"But suppose I do go ashore with you, how you gonna prove it then?"

"I'll—I'll find something—I don't know just yet. Maybe a—a body from the morgue—or something." She gave him a peculiar searching look.

Steve Belden was no fool. That look made him think that maybe he was slated to play the part of the "remains" in question, when the time came. But he was in no position to bargain. The important thing was to get these cuffs open and get off the ship. And he'd need her help for that. Then later—

"And do I get a cut of the five hundred grand?"

She laughed mirthlessly. "Why, no," she said. "I don't think so. I'm saving your life, you see, and I think it's enough. Your life—for his . . ."

"All right," he said. "No harm in asking. Now get busy with that key."

A quick twist of her wrist, a click, and the manacle dangled empty from the bed-rail. The murderer of Frank Fisher's brother was free again. His first words, as he chafed his wrist and stamped back and forth like a bear on a rampage, were not of gratitude—the underworld knows no gratitude—but low growls of revenge.

"A week in that filthy pig-pen of a French prison! Four days in this coop, chained up like an animal. Chained to him while I ate, chained to him while I slept, chained to him even while I shaved. He's never getting off this ship alive—!"

"Of course he isn't," the woman agreed. "How can we let him? The whole idea would be spoiled if he does. That'll be your job. I'm attending to—Hiram myself."

Belden waved his fists in the air. "If I only had a gun!"

"There's one in my cabin, in a cow-hide suitcase under the bed—" Then as he turned toward the door: "Wait a minute. You can't do that. You'll bring the whole ship down on us, the moment you show your face, and there'll be a general alarm raised. Now if you go into my cabin next door, you can hide in the bath. I'll go up and find a way of bringing him

down there with me—after I— Somehow your—Mr. Fisher—we have to get him in there before he comes back here and finds you gone. Now wait a minute, we can fix this bed in case he takes a quick look in here first.”

She pushed pillows together under the covers, made a long log-like mound. “Give me your coat,” she said. “You’ll be wearing Hiram’s clothes, anyway.” She extended the empty sleeve out from the coverings, locked the open manacle around its cuff. “You went to bed fully-dressed, waiting for him to come down and tuck you in!”

“Hurry up,” he kept saying. “We ain’t got all night! We must be near Ambrose Lightship already.”

“No. We mustn’t rush,” the lady from Dubuque, who had been afraid of strangers and weapons and violence, said quietly. “Follow me, and I’ll get the gun out for you and rig you up in Hiram’s things.” She eased the door open, advanced to the mouth of the foyer, and glanced up and down the long passageway. “Come on.”

She joined him a moment later, unlocked her door for him. She crouched down, pulled out the valise, found the gun and held it up. “You’ll have to use this through pillows,” she said, “or you’ll make a noise.” She was handling the weapon almost caressingly. It pointed at his chest for a moment, and her eyes grew misty.

Belden jumped aside out of range, pulled the gun angrily away from her. “What’s the matter with you anyway?” he barked. “You kill-crazy? I thought it was Fisher and your husband you were out to get!”

“Yes,” she said sullenly. That was the greater treachery, so it had first claim on her. “But I told you, I hate everyone in the world tonight. Everyone—you hear?”

“Yeah? Well, we need each other, and until we’re out of this squeeze, let’s hang together. Now go on up there and get that dick down here. I’ll be just behind the bathroom-door there, waiting for him.”

She grabbed up a long gauzy handkerchief and sidled out of the room.

Behind her Belden wiped his beaded brow. He’d never run into a woman like her before and—hard-bitten as he was—he never wanted to again.

Chapter V

Collusion

TRAVIS looked up from a deck-chair at the shadowy figure looming before him on the unlighted deck. “That you, Sarah? What took you so long? I don’t think it’s so good for my cold, staying up here in the wind so long.”

“This is going to cure your cold,” her voice promised him raspingly.

He motioned to the inert form in the chair beside him. “Hasn’t opened his eyes since he came up here. Sure must be dead for sleep. Guess he ain’t been getting much rest, chained to that fella down there—” He tittered inanely. “Wonder what they did when they wanted to turn over in bed?”

She bent over Fisher, shook him slightly, ever so slightly, one hand above his breast-pocket, the other at the tab of his vest. Then she straightened again. “I didn’t know they ever slept like that—did you?”

She turned toward the rail, went and stood beside it, outlined dimly against the stars. The wind fluttered her gown about her. She held the long gauzy handkerchief in one hand like a pennant. “What a lovely night,” she said. “Come here and look at the water.”

There was no one on this unroofed boat-deck, but the two of them—and Fisher.

“I can see it from here,” her husband answered. “’Twouldn’t be good for my cold to lean way out into the wind like that.” He blinked fearfully into the gloom. “You look just like—some kind of a bogey-man standing there like that, with the wind making great big bat-wings grow behind your back. If I didn’t know it was you, I’d be scared out of ten years’ growth—”

She opened her fingers and the handkerchief fluttered downward like a ghostly streamer. A wisp of cloud passed over the new moon just then.

"Hiram," she called in a silvery voice, like the sirens on the rock to Ulysses, "I've lost my handkerchief. Come quickly, it's caught around the bottom of the railing. Hurry, before it blows loose—!"

Hiram Travis heard the voice of the woman he had been married to for eighteen years, asking him a common favor, and the obscured moon and the simulated bat-wings and the chill foreboding at the base of his skull became just the playthings of an overwrought imagination. He got up awkwardly from the deck-chair, waddled across to the rail beside her, peered down. His eyes were watery from his cold and blurred from unaccustomed liquor.

"You sure it's still there?" he said uncertainly. "Thought I saw it go all the way down."

"Of course it's still there, can't you see it? Bend over, you can see it from here—" Then as he prepared to squat on the inside of the guard-rail and peer through it from there, she quickly forestalled him with a guiding hand at the nape of his neck. "No, lean over from above and look down on the outside, that's the only way you can see it. I'll hold you."

On the deck-chair behind them the unconscious Fisher stirred a little, mumbled in his drugged sleep. He seemed to be on the point of awakening. But the stupor was too strong for him. He sighed heavily, became inert once more.

"Blamed if I can see a dratted thing!" Travis was piping. He was folded almost double over the rail, like a clothespin, with his wife's hand at his shoulder. He made vague groping motions with one hand, downward into space; the other was clasped about the rail.

"You're nearly touching it. It's just an inch away from your fingertips—"

"Get one of the stewards, Sarah, I'm liable to go over myself first thing I know, doing this—"

It was the last thing he said in this world. The last thing she said to him was: "We don't need a steward—for this, darling."

She crouched down suddenly beside him, took her hand away from his shoulder. She gripped his bony ankles with both hands, thrust viciously upward, broke their contact with the deck, straightening as she did so. He did a complete somersault across the guard-rail; the arm that had gripped it was turned completely around in its socket, torn free. That was the last thing she saw of him—that momentary appeal of splayed white hand vanishing into the blackness. His screech was smothered in the sighing of the wind.

She thrust out her arms wide, in strange ritual of triumph, as Mimi Brissard had in Paris. She was a black, ominous death-cross against the starlight for a moment. Then she turned slowly, her eyes two green phosphorescent pools, toward where the helpless secret service man lay.

FISHER blinked and opened his eyes. He was still groggy from the dreams he had been having. Dreams in which long, skinny black imps out of hell had pushed people over the side of an immense precipice down into a bottomless abyss below. He'd been chained down, unable to help them, though they screamed to him for assistance. Over and over it had happened. It had been the worst form of torture, the most ghastly nightmare he had ever had. Then toward the end the imps had concentrated on him himself. They had tugged and pulled, trying to get him to the edge of the precipice, and he had held back, dug his heels in, but inch by inch they had been overcoming him. . . .

He saw that he was partly off the chair he had been sleeping on. One leg, one arm and shoulder, hung down over the side, as though somebody had actually been tugging at him. But the lady from Dubuque, the harmless, inoffensive, eccentric middlewestern lady from Dubuque was the only person around, stretched out there in the chair beside his. His mouth tasted like cotton-wool, and everything looked warped, like an

Image in a corrugated mirror. He fell down on his knees when he tried to get off the chair.

Instantly she was all solicitude, helping him get to his feet. She said, "Well, whatever happened to you? My husband and I have been taking turns watching over you. We didn't like to call any of the stewards, because—well, because of your position. People talk so on these ships—"

He could feel the drug-dilated pupils of his eyes slowly contract until they were normal again. The lines of the things he looked at resumed their straightness. But even then, the "kicks" wouldn't go away altogether; he had a regular hangover from them. There was cement on his eyelids and it took all the strength he could muster to keep them open. He said surlily: "Where is he? I remember vaguely coming up here with him, leaning on him the whole way—"

She said, "He went below just a few minutes ago, to fix you up a bromo-seltzer. It's just what you need, it'll clear your head marvelously. Come on down with me a minute, and let him give it to you."

He could feel a sense of resentment toward her stir through him, as when you rub a cat's fur the wrong way. Yet she wasn't doing or saying anything to antagonize him. "Why don't you stay out of my business?" he blurted out uncontrollably, "What is this? I never saw you before until tonight—" And then as though the word *business* had reminded him of something, he stabbed his hand toward his watch-pocket, then upward to his breast-pocket.

"Did you lose something?" she asked innocently.

"No," he scowled, "and it's no thanks to myself I didn't, either! I ought to be shot!"

She bared her teeth momentarily at that, as though she found the phrase privately amusing, for some reason of her own.

He stood up abruptly, stalked toward the faintly outlined white staircase leading to the deck below. She came hurrying after him. "Will you

help me down the stairs please? They're hard for me to manage on these high heels—"

Grudgingly, he cupped his hand to the point of her elbow, guided her down the incline after him. Yet at the contact his antagonism rose to such a pitch it was all he could do to keep from throwing her bodily down past him, to break her neck or back. He took his hand away, jumped clear, to keep from giving in to the impulse, and a moment later she had gained the safety of the lower deck.

HE didn't wait. The muscular lethargy that had gripped him was slowly wearing off. Suddenly it broke altogether, and he was normal again. By that time he was hurrying along the inner passageway toward his stateroom, to see to his prisoner. Behind him, like something in a bad dream that couldn't be shaken off, came the rustle and the slither of Mrs. Travis' dress as she followed him.

He unlocked the door, threw it open, turned on the light-switch. Belden lay there sound asleep. The covers up over his head, one arm stiffly held in place by the manacle. Fisher let out a deep breath of relief.

Before he could get in and close the door after him, the rustle and the slither had come to a stop directly behind him. He turned his head impatiently. This woman was worse than a burr.

She said, "We're right next door. Won't you stop in a moment and let Mr. Travis give you the bromo-seltzer before you retire? He came down, specially to mix it for you."

"That's good of him," he said shortly, "but I could get one from the steward just as well." An odor of musk enveloped him, at her nearness. Again his early training intervened in her favor, wouldn't let him slam the door in her face and end her importunities once and for all.

She suddenly reached past him and gently closed the door. "He's all right," she purred. "He'll keep a moment longer. He's not running away." She took him by the hand, began to

lead him gently but persistently down toward the next foyer.

The contact, as on the stairs just now, again inflamed with nearly uncontrollable and entirely murderous anger. His hands on her throat . . . He pulled his hand away, face whitening with the effort to overcome it. "I can walk—"

She threw open her own door, called out loudly: "Hiram, here's Mr. Fisher for that bromo. Did you mix it yet?"

The stateroom was empty. A cowhide valise had been pulled partly out from under the bed, allowed to remain there with its lid up.

"He's in the bathroom, I guess," she said. She moved unobtrusively around behind Fisher and closed the stateroom door.

A frog-croak from the direction of the bathroom answered, "I'm mixing it now." Fisher glanced over that way. A blurred reflection created a flurry of movement across the mirror-panel set in the bathdoor, which was turned outward into the room.

She distracted his attention by standing in front of him, turning him around toward her, smiling that same saturnine smile that had been on her lips so often tonight.

He gave her a searching look, wary, mistrustful. "There's something about you—" The back of his hand went out and flicked her shoulder. "Where'd you get that dress? All night long it's kept reminding me of—"

"Paris," she said. "It's a Maldonado. . . ." The blur on the mirror-panel had become a shadow that lengthened as it crept out over the floor into the room. "See, I'll show you." She turned an edge of the shoulder over, revealed a little silk tab with lettering on it. "Can you read what it says?"

He bent his head, peered intently, off-guard.

I'm Dangerous Tonight

HER arms suddenly flashed around him like white whips, in a death-embrace, pinning his own close to his sides. "Now, Belden, now!" he heard her cry.

The lurking shadow in the back-

ground sprang forward, closed in. The white oblong of a pillow struck Fisher between the shoulders, as though this were no more than a friendly pillow-fight. Then through it came a muffled detonation.

Fisher straightened suddenly, stood there motionless. The woman unclasped her arms, and he collapsed to the floor, lay there at her feet, eyes still open.

From over him came Belden's voice: "Go tell your brother you weren't so hot yourself!"

"Close his eyes," she said, "you've only stunned him!" as though she were talking about some insect.

The pillow fell across him again, and Travis' revolver and Belden's fist plunged into the soft middle of it. There were two more shots. Little goose-feathers flew up and settled again. When Belden kicked the scorched pillow aside, Fisher's eyes were closed.

"They don't come any deader than that!" he said.

She was crouched beside the door, listening.

She straightened up finally, murmured triumphantly: "We did it! It could have been champagne-corks, or punctured party-balloons. Half of them are drunk tonight, anyway!" Her lip curled.

"Let's get going," Belden answered impatiently. "We must be passing the Narrows already. We dock in a couple hours; we want to clear off before they find this guy—"

"All right, get in there and put on Hi's things, while I'm changing out here. Better put on two coats one over the other, he had more of a bulge than you. Turn your collar up around your face and hold a big handkerchief under your nose, you've got a bad cold. I'll pin one of those cloths around your neck like he had. I've got the passports and everything we need."

Belden disappeared into the bath with an armful of Travis' clothing. She stood before the mirror, started to tug at the dress, bring it down off her shoulders. It looped at her waist, fell down to the floor with a slight

hiss. She stepped clear of the mystic ring it had formed about her feet, and as she did so the contact between it and her body broke for the first time since ten the night before.

She staggered against the wall, as though some sort of galvanic shock had pushed her. Her mouth opened like a suffocating fish out of water, slowly closed again. She was as limp and inert as the bullet-riddled man bleeding away on the floor.

Her hands went dazedly up to her hair, roamed distractedly through it, dragging it down about her shoulders. She was just Sarah Travis again, and the long bad dream was over. But darkness didn't give way to light, darkness gave way to perpetual twilight. Something snapped.

She had one more lucid moment. Her eyes found the opened closet door, where some of Travis' things could still be seen hanging on the rack. "Hi," she breathed soundlessly, "My husband." Then she began to shake all over. The shaking became low laughter, that at first sounded like sobbing.

Belden came out, in Travis' camel-hair coat, cap pulled down over his eyes. "Are you nearly—? What's the matter, what're you giggling about?"

The laughter rose, became full-bodied, a terrible thing in continuous crescendo.

"I'm getting out of here, if I gotta swim for it!" He could make it, he told himself; they were far enough up the Bay now. And he knew just where to go to lie low, until he could get word to—

The door closed behind him, muffling her paeans of soulless mirth, that throbbed there in that place of death.

When the ship's doctor was summoned, shortly after the *Gascony* had docked and lay motionless alongside one of the new piers at the foot of the West Fifties, he found her crouched on her knees like a Geisha, back to the wall, one arm extended, pointing crazily to the motionless form lying outstretched on the floor. The rise and fall of her ceaseless wrenching laughter was unbearable.

The doctor shook his head. "Bring

a straitjacket," he said tersely, "she's hopelessly insane."

"Is he gone?" they asked, as he examined Fisher.

"Just a matter of minutes," was the answer. "He's punctured like a sieve. Better call an ambulance. Let him do his dying ashore."

Chapter VI

The Chain Snaps

FISHER'S nurse at the Mount of Olives Hospital, Miss Wellington, was a pleasant young person with sleek auburn hair and a small rosette of freckles on each polished cheekbone. She wore rimless hexagonal glasses that softened, instead of hardened her eyes. She came down the gleaming, sterilized corridor in equally gleaming, sterilized white, carrying a tray containing a glass of milk, a cup of cocoa, and a geranium. Every convalescent's breakfast-tray in the hospital always had one flower on it. Miss Wellington remembered, however, that it had had a queer effect on the patient in Room Ten. He had growled he was not dead yet, the last time she had brought one in, and heaved it out of the open window with so much energy that his scars had reopened and begun to bleed again.

Miss Wellington wisely removed it from the tray, hid it in her uniform-pocket, and replaced it with two smuggled cigarettes. Fisher was a favorite of hers; she disliked tractable, submissive patients, and she was something of a philosopher anyway. A hundred years from now it would be all the same, whether the poor devil smoked or didn't.

She freed one hand to turn the knob and was about to enter Ten, when an alarmed, "Hold it! Just a minute!" was shouted at her from inside. Miss Wellington, undeterred, calmly barged right in.

"Oh, so that's it," she remarked, setting the tray down. "And where do you think you're going, young man?"

Fisher was hanging onto the foot of the bed with one hand, to keep his balance, and belting his trousers

around his middle with the other. He had on one shoe, one sock, and his hat.

"Listen," he said, "I got a job to do, a report to make, and you can have my bed back. You can keep the slugs you took out of me, too; I'm generous that way."

"You get back there where you belong," she frowned with assumed severity. "D'you realize that they could put a new roof on this entire wing of the building, just with the lead that was taken out of you? And there was enough left over to weatherstrip the windows, at that! You don't deserve hospitalization, any of you young huskies, the way you crowd your luck—"

He sat down shakily on the edge of the bed. His knees had gone rubbery. "I certainly don't," he agreed. "Any guy that falls down on his job—what good is he, tell me that? They should have left me where they found me, bleeding to death on the *Gascony*. That's all I had coming to me. That's all I'm worth."

"That's right, cry into your soup," she said. She struck a match, held it for him. "Here, smoke this—on an empty stomach; you've broken every other rule of the place, you may as well go the whole hog."

"You don't know what it means. The men I work with—not to be able to look any of them in the face—to have to go around tagged a failure for the rest of my life. That's all anybody has, Wellington, his pride in his job—"

She sighed. "I guess we'll have to let you go. It's better than having you die on our hands. If we try to keep you here you'll probably pine away. And I'm getting worn to a shadow pushing you back in bed every morning at eight, regularly. I'll get MacKenzie in, have him look you over. Put out that cigarette."

MacKenzie looked him over, said: "I'd strongly advise you to give it a week more—if I thought it would do any good. But if you're going to be rebellious and mentally depressed about it, it might do you more harm

in the long run. There's really no reason for keeping you here any longer, only try to stay off your feet as much as you can—which I know you won't do anyway."

"Sure, and stay out of drafts," Fisher smiled bitterly, "and live to be a hundred. What for?" He put on his coat and tie. "Where's my gun?"

"You'll have to sign for that downstairs, on your way out."

At the door he turned and looked around the room, as though he was just seeing it for the first time. "Who paid for all this?"

"Somebody named Trilling."

Fisher nodded glumly. "He's my boss. Why did he bother?"

MacKenzie and the nurse exchanged a look.

Fisher picked up his hat and walked out, head down, staring at the floor. Along the corridor outside he had to steady himself with one arm against the wall, but he kept going until he'd stumbled into the elevator.

Miss Wellington touched the outside corner of an eye with her finger, stroked downward. "We didn't do that boy any good," she murmured. "The bullets were in his soul. Wonder what it'll take to get 'em out?"

AT the local FBI headquarters half an hour later Fisher's face was ashen, but not entirely from the effort it had cost him to get there. He stood facing Trilling across the desk, a proffered chair rejected in the background.

"I haven't come to make excuses," he said quietly, "the facts speak for themselves. He got away. I hashed up the job. I let you down. I begged, I pleaded with you to give me the assignment. I not only put you to considerable expense with nothing to show for it; but through me Belden even got back into the country, which he never could have done by himself."

He laid it down before him on the desk. Jealously close to him, though, as if afraid to have it taken from him. "You want this—back?" he said huskily. There was almost a prayer in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Trilling said, and drew it the rest of the way across the desk. It fell into an open drawer, dropped from sight. "I don't, but Washington does, and I take my instructions from them. They seem to want results. What damned you was, not that he got away, but some story about a woman being involved—"

Fisher just stood there, his eyes on the desk where the badge had last been visible. His Adam's apple had gone up just once, and stayed high. After awhile, when he could speak again, he said: "Yes, I wonder what that story is, myself. I wonder if I'll ever know."

Trilling had turned his head away from the look on Fisher's face. He was on his way to the door now, his former superior knew. The voice came from further away. "There's no use standing here," it said. "I never did like a guy that crawled, myself. I guess you know what this means to me, though."

Trilling said, "I ought to. I'm in the same outfit. I'm you—a couple of notches higher up, that's all. Let's not consider this irrevocable, let's just call it temporary. Maybe it will be straightened out in a few months. And again I say, this isn't me. This is word from Washington." He fumbled embarrassedly with a wallet inside his coat-pocket. "Fisher, come here a minute—" he said.

But the door had opened already. He heard Fisher say, to no one in particular: "That was my whole life. This is my finish now." The frosted-glass panel ebbed shut almost soundlessly, and his blurred shadow faded slowly away on the outside of it.

Trilling resignedly let the wallet drop back in his pocket. Then he caught sight of a wire-wastebasket standing on the floor beside his swivel-chair. He delivered a resounding kick at it that sent it into a loop, with the inexplicable remark: "Damn women!"

THE honkytonk bartender, who doubled as bouncer, waiter, and cashier, was in no mood to compro-

mise. Mercy was not in him. He came out around the open end of the long counter, waddled threatening across the floor in a sullen, red-faced fury, and began to shake the inanimate figure lying across the table with its head bedded on its arms. "Hey, you! Do your sleeping in the gutter!"

If you gave these bums an inch; they took a yard. And this one was a particularly glaring example of the *genus* bar-fly. He was in here all the time like this, inhaling smoke and then doing a sunset across the table. He'd been in here since four this afternoon. The boss and he, who were partners in the joint—the bartender called it *jernt*—would have been the last ones to claim they were running a Rainbow Room, but at least they were trying to give the place a *little* class, keep it above the level of a Bowery smoke-house; they even paid a guy to pound the piano and a canary to warble three times a week. And then bums like this had to show up and give the place a bad look!

He shook the recumbent figure again, more roughly than the first time. Shook him so violently that the whole reedy table under him rattled and threatened to collapse. "Come on, clear out, I said! Pay me for what you had and get outa here!"

The figure raised an unshaven face from between its arms, looked at him, said something.

The bartender raised his voice to a bellow, perhaps to bolster his courage. There had been a spark of something in that look. Just a spark, no more, but it had been there. "Oh, so you haven't got any money! So you think you can come in here, do your drinking on the cuff, and get away with it! Well, I'll show you what we do to bums that try that!"

He gripped the figure by his coat-collar, took a half-turn in it, brought him erect and held him that way, half-strangled. Then, treacherously, he began to pump short jabs into the man's unguarded face, the muscles of his great beefy arm tightening and pulling like knotted ropes. Blood came, but the man couldn't fall; he was held

tight by the nape of the neck. Heads in a long row down the bar turned to watch in idle amusement, not a hand was lifted to help him.

Then something happened. The bartender was suddenly floundering back against the opposite wall, the line of his jaw white at first, then turning a bruised red. He held it, steadied himself against the wall, spat out pieces of tooth-enamel. The figure across the way—the width of the narrow room separated them now—was holding onto an edge of the table for support, acting as though he'd fall down in another minute. He was holding, not his face where the barman had pummeled him, but his chest as if something hurt him there.

The bartender shrieked, "You will, will ya? Sock me, will ya? *Now ya gonna get it! Now I'll cut ya to pieces!*" He reached behind the bar, caught up an empty bottle from one of the lower shelves. Liquor dispensaries are supposed to break their bottles once they're emptied. This was the kind of place that didn't.

He gripped the bottle by the neck, cracked the bottom of it against the bar so that it fell off, advanced murderously upon his victim with the jagged sharp-toothed remainder in his hand for a weapon. And even yet, no one in the place made a move to interfere. He was only a bum; what difference did it make what happened to him?

The bum made no move to try to bolt for the door and get out of the place. Perhaps he sensed an outstretched leg would trip him if he tried it. Perhaps he was unequal to the effort. Perhaps he didn't care. He even smiled a little, adding fuel to the blazing fire of the bartender's cowardly rage. "Matter, can't you use your hands?"

The bartender poised the vicious implement, to thrust it full in his face, grind it around, maim and maybe kill him.

And then suddenly a girl stood in between them, as though she had dropped from the ceiling. No one had seen where she had come from. A

beautiful girl, shabbily dressed. Cheap little blouse and threadbare skirt; golden hair like an angel's, cascading out from under a round woollen cap such as boys wear for skating. She set down the little black dressing-case she'd brought out of the back room with her, caught the bartender's thick wrist in her slim fingers, pushed it back.

"Put that down, Mike!" she said in a cold, angry voice. "Let this man alone!"

THE bartender, towering over her five-feet-four of determination, shouted wrathfully: "What do you know about it? He's a bum, and he's going to get what's coming to him! You stick to your canarying and I'll handle the front room here!"

Her voice was like a whip. "He's not a bum. You're the bum. So much of a bum that you can't tell the difference any more! *I still can, thank heavens, and I'm going to get out of here for good before I lose the ability to distinguish!*"

The bartender retreated a step or two, put the shattered bottle shamefacedly behind his back. A sallow-complected, chunky man, with his hair all greasy ringlets, was standing at the entrance to the inner room. The girl turned her head toward him briefly. "Find someone else to do your canarying, Angelo. I'm not showing up Wednesday." She faced the bartender again. "How much does he owe you?"

The latter had had all the ground cut away around him. "Couple dollars," he mumbled indistinctly. "He's been riding along all evenin'—"

She snapped open a ridiculous little envelope-sized bag. There were five dollars in it; she'd just been paid tonight. She took two of them out. She didn't hand them to him, she dropped them disdainfully on the floor before him, with a million dollars worth of contempt.

Somewhere in back of her, Fisher spoke. "Let him use the bottle. You're only pushing me down a step lower, doing this."

She said without turning her head, "You're sick. Your mind's sick. I've watched you every night. No one's pushing you down, you're pushing yourself down."

The ringleted man in the doorway said, "Don't do this, Joan, what's matter with you? Why you quit?"

She didn't answer. She picked up the kit-bag standing at her feet, put two fingers behind Fisher's seedy coat-sleeve, said: "Come on, shall we? We don't belong in here—either of us."

Behind them, as they went out into the darkness side by side, the crest-fallen bartender was saying to anyone who would give him an ear: "She must be crazy, she don't even know the guy, never saw him before!" And then with a guilty look at his partner: "She was the best singer we ever had in here too."

A block away they stopped, in the ghostly light of an arc-lamp. He turned toward her. "A man doesn't thank a woman for doing a thing like that," he blurted out. "That was the finishing touch you gave me in there just now. Hiding behind your skirts. Letting you buy them off for me."

She said, almost impatiently, "You're so easy to see through! Looking at you, listening to you, almost I know your whole story—without actually knowing any of it. A code is doing this to you. A code of your own that you've violated, or think you have. You'll go down under its weight, let it push you down into what that mug mistook you for. But you won't, you can't, slur its weight and responsibility off you." She shrugged as though that was all there was to be said. "Well, aren't you worth saving—from bottle-glass?"

He smiled derisively.

She went on, "You didn't see me slowly walking around that inside room with my mouth open, from table to table, three nights this past week. You didn't hear me. But I saw you. I watched you through the cheap music. You sat there at that little table just outside the door, looking my way but seeing ghosts. Your eyes were the

only ones in the place turned inward. You drank until your head fell down, but you weren't drunk—you couldn't get drunk."

She picked up the little kit that contained her costume, made to move on once more. "My name's Joan Blaine," she said, "and I like people with personal codes, because I've got one, too. But handle it right. Don't go down under it; make it push you, lift you up, instead. Come back with me awhile and I'll make you a cup of coffee. I can see that you've been ill recently, and you've probably been sleeping around on park benches lately."

He moved weakly after her, shaking his head. "You're a funny girl. How do you know I won't turn on you, rob you, maybe even murder you?"

"Faces don't lie," she answered. "Why didn't you run out with your tail between your legs when he came at you with the bottle? A real bum would have. You faced him, hardly able to stand up. Besides, something, someone's, got to come out right for me."

"Most of it didn't?" he said, in the pitiful little threadbare room, with its single fly-blown bulb, its white-painted cot with the iron showing through.

"Most of it didn't." She handed him a chipped cup of steaming black coffee. "I didn't come to New York to sing in a Third Avenue honkytonk at five dollars a throw. You'll never know how many tears and busted hopes this room of mine has seen. I was letting it get me down, too. The sight of you pulled me up short. That's why I quit my job so easily just now. Don't blame yourself for that. You've helped me, and perhaps I'm going to be able to help you before I'm through. Fisher—that what you said your name was?—you're going back and tackle this thing that threw you, all over again."

"Yeah," he said slowly. "Yeah, I am." There was a steely glint in his eyes that hadn't been there before. "It isn't over. Why didn't I see that

before? Just round one is over. But round one's never the whole fight. Even though I'm on my own now—"

She didn't ask him what he meant. "Then the credit and the glory'll be all your own too, look at it that way."

"I'm not doing it for the credit and the glory. I'm doing it because it was my job, and I can't find rest or peace until my job is done. And even though it's been taken away from me, I'll see it through—no matter what—!" He balled a fist and swung it with terrific emphasis around him where the shadows had been. Shadows that a man could fight, even though he couldn't understand them.

She smiled as though she'd gained her secret point. "All right, then," she said. "Tonight—there's a vacant room, little more than an attic, over me. Without a stick of furniture in it, without even a lock on the door. I'm going to give you one of the blankets from my bed, and you roll yourself up in it on the floor up there. No one needs to know. Tomorrow you and I are going out. You're going to get a shave and a necktie, and you're going after this thing that threw you, whatever it is. And I'm going to find the kind of a singing job I came to New York for, and lick it to a standstill when I do! Tomorrow—the world starts over for both of us, brand new."

He looked at her and he said once more what he'd said out on the street: "You're a funny girl. But a lovely one, too."

IT DIDN'T work itself out in no time at all, in an hour or a day or even a week, it never does. He'd slipped further down than he'd realized, and there were certain realities to be met first of all—to keep his head above water; to keep a roof over his head; to get his gun back out of hock. But he had to have money. He wasn't on the Bureau's payroll any more. So to have money he had to have a job. He knew he could have gone to Trilling or any of the other men that had worked with him, and written his own ticket. But his pride

wouldn't let him. He would have worked for nothing, without salary, but—"Washington wants results," Trilling had said. He would have swept streets, waded through the filth of sewers, if only he could have had one thing back again—that little metal disk that had dropped so emphatically from the desk top into a drawer that day, pulling the sun and the moon and the stars down out of his sky after it.

So he sought Sixth Avenue and the melancholy Help-Wanted cards tacked up so thickly on its doorways, that usually mean only an unproductive agency fee. There was plenty that he could do—and agent's training is nothing if not painstaking, but most of it was highly specialized and in the upper brackets; there seemed to be more demand for waiters and dishwashers along here than for deadshots, jiu-jitsu experts.

As he moved from knot to knot of dejected employment-seekers gathered before each doorway to scan the cards, he became aware of a face that seemed to keep up with his own migrations from group to group. Which was not unusual in itself, since scores of people were moving along in the same direction he was. But this particular man seemed to be studying him rather than the employment-cards. Was it somebody who had recognized him from the old days, when he was with the Bureau? Fisher had a good memory for faces. He studied the man stealthily at first—he was a slimy, furtive-looking customer; but his clothes were both flashy and expensive. Fisher took care to keep his glance perfectly expressionless, to see if he could get the man to tip his hand. The man returned the look in a sort of questioning way, as though he were trying to ask him something.

Fisher took a chance, gave his head a slight nod in the affirmative. The man instantly left the group, strolled slowly on for a few yards, then halted with his back to the window of an empty store, obviously waiting for Fisher to join him.

Fisher moved as he had moved,

with seeming aimlessness and unconcern, and stopped by him. The man turned his head the other way, away from him, then spoke through motionless lips even while he did so.

"Could you use any?"

FISHER understood instantly. A peddler, the lowest cog in that devil's hierarchy whose source of supply had been Belden, and whose capstone was lost somewhere in the nebulous clouds overhead. There had been a day when Fisher had hoped that pulling Belden out from under would bring the top man toppling within reach; that hope had been blasted. Fisher had to start over, single-handed now, at the lowest pier of the structure, work his way up. This slimy individual who tramped Sixth Avenue pavements probably no more knew who the ringleader was than Fisher did himself. But he was a means to an end.

Fisher understood the reason for the mistake the peddler had made, that only a short while before would have been so irretrievable. But then only a short while before, it wouldn't have been made. Now he, Fisher, still had the telltale pallor and gauntness of his wounds and hospitalization. A misleading pallor, coupled with a suit whose cut suggested that he was not altogether penniless. So the peddler had jumped to the wrong conclusion. But then if anything backfired, the *could-you-use-any* gag could always be switched to shoelaces, razor blades, or anything equally harmless. Fisher knew many peddlers carried just such articles around with them in their pockets, just for an out. They never had the real thing; peddlers always traveled clean, to guard against sudden seizure and search. A second appointment was always necessary, no matter how well known both parties were to each other.

He answered the surreptitious question in a manner equally covert. "I could," he said, and saw to it that his hand trembled unnecessarily as he lit a cigarette. That wasn't wasted on the peddler.

"Who's been handing it to you?" he said, "I never saw you before."

Fisher pulled a name out of his mental card-index as you do a card in a card-trick. Someone that he knew had been rounded up while he was in Paris, was in a Federal pen now. "Revolving Larry," he said.

"He's at the Boarding House. So are half the others," the man told him. "What's your dish?"

Fisher knew the different underworld abbreviations for the deadly stuff—usually a single letter. "C," he said promptly.

"We're getting forty for it now. The lid went down something fierce six months ago."

Fisher whistled. "I'll never make it."

"That's what they all say. Ain't you got some gold teeth in your mouth or something?" Then he relented a little. "I'll get it for you for thirty-five, bein' you're an old buyer of Larry's."

Things must be pretty tough, Fisher knew, for it to come to that; Trilling and the rest must be doing a grand job. Only he—he alone—had fumbled.

"I'll raise it somehow," he said. Ironically enough, he wasn't any too certain of being able to. Which was just the right attitude; too ready a supply of money would have immediately raised the other's suspicions.

"Go to Zillick's down the block. It has three booths at the back. Go in the middle one and wait. When you lamp me turning the pages of the directory outside, shove your money in the return-coin slot and walk out. Take it easy. Don't let the druggist see you. Your stuff'll be there when you go back for it. If you're even a dime short don't show up, it won't do ya no good. Twelve o'clock tonight."

"Twelve o'clock," Fisher agreed.

They separated. How many a seemingly casual street-corner conversation like that on the city's streets has just such an unguessed, sinister topic. Murder, theft, revenge, narcotics. While the crowd goes by around it unaware.

HE DIDN'T have thirty-five dollars. Go to Trilling or any of the others for it he could not and would not. Not because of any possible risk attached—he'd played and looked his part too well just now for the peddler to bother keeping him under observation.

He'd looked his part too well—that gave him the answer. He went back to the Mount of Olives, asked for MacKenzie. "So you want to borrow a hundred dollars?" MacKenzie said. He insisted on giving him a thorough physical examination first, as part of the bargain. Probably figuring it was the only way he could have got Fisher to submit to one. The results didn't seem to please him any too much.

"What've you been doing to yourself?" he snapped. "Not eating, and by the looks of you— See here, Fisher, if this is for liquor, you don't get it."

Fisher wondered what he'd have said if he knew what part of it was actually to be for. He said, "If it was for that, why would I have to have a hundred? Ten would be enough. I don't go around giving my word of honor these days. All I can say is, it's not for liquor."

"That's sufficient," MacKenzie said briskly, and counted out the money. "For Pete's sake, soak a finn of it into a good thick steak. And don't be in any hurry about returning it. You working?"

Fisher smiled. "I'm starting to again—tonight at twelve." The full story of how he had been shot on the *Gascony* had of course never been divulged—either at the hospital or to the newspapers. Trilling had seen to the former, the *Compagnie Transatlantique* to the latter.

Wellington, who had been in the room watching him closely, said after he had gone: "He had a close shave, but it looks like somebody's beginning to probe for those bullets in his soul I spoke about."

"I think you love the guy," MacKenzie said testily, perhaps to get the fact that he'd loaned a hundred dollars out of his system.

"Sure I do," was the defiant reply. "You just finding out? I love every slug we ever took out of him, but what good does it do? He doesn't know a woman from a fire-hydrant."

But he was beginning to, even if he didn't know it himself yet. There was a difference to her knock on his room door that evening, as though she too had had a break that day. It was the twenty-third day after they'd met in the honkytonk. He had his gun out, was sitting there cleaning it and going over it lovingly. It was like a part of him. He'd got it out about an hour before, with part of the hundred. He jumped nervously, thrust it out of sight under his mattress. The door of his room didn't have a lock yet, but she wasn't the kind would walk in on him, luckily, or she might have wondered, jumped to the wrong conclusions. He hadn't told her anything about himself yet, out of old habit and training that died hard. What he'd been, nor what it was that had thrown him. He'd tell her everything when—and if—the second pay-off came. And he had a long way to go yet before he reached that. Until then—

He went over and opened the door. She was standing there glowing. It always surprised him all over again, each time he looked at her, how beautiful she really was. Blond hair, blue eyes, and all the rest; somehow it all blended together into a gem. But that was for other men, not for his business. A shield in Trilling's desk-drawer—that was *his* gem.

She said, "I brought in a can of spaghetti with me. Come on down. I've got news for you." And down in her room, while he pumped a can-opener up and down and—of course—gashed his knuckle, she asked: "What luck?"

"I'm on my way, that all I can say."

"Great. Looks like I am too. It's been on the fire for several weeks now, but I'm superstitious; I didn't want to say anything for fear I'd jinx it. Some fellow—he's new to show business—is opening up a road house tomorrow night. He has a spot for a specialty singer. Lots of backing and

he doesn't care what he pays for his talent. I've already auditioned for him three separate times; I'm beginning to wonder if it's my voice he's interested in or if he just likes to have me around. He's not using a floor show, you see—just a band, and a combination-singer and hostess. So by tomorrow I'll know definitely whether I've clicked or not."

"You'll click," he assured her, "unless the guy's stone-blind."

She opened her mouth in pretended amazement. "The great block of ice is actually beginning to thaw!"

Chapter VII

Hot Spot

THE phone-booth was cramped and stuffy, so small that the pane of glass kept clouding with his breath. He cleared it off each time with the point of his elbow, holding a dead receiver to his ear for a stall. At 12:10 the peddler was suddenly standing there at the little rack outside, wetting his thumb as he busily flicked the leaves of a city directory. He didn't look up.

Fisher took out the three tens and a five he'd prepared, wedged them tightly into the return-coin slot. He came out, walked by to the front of the store, lingered there by the door. The peddler seemed to find the elusive number he was looking for just then, went in the booth, came out again a moment later, and brushed by Fisher without so much as a glance.

It wasn't really necessary for Fisher to have the little package that was back there in the booth now. This was not a decoy sale for the purpose of getting enough evidence to make an arrest. Fisher no longer had the authority to make an arrest, and even if he did have, he lacked witnesses. But he retrieved the packet nevertheless, to prevent its falling into the hands of some innocent person. He pocketed it and turned the corner in the same direction the peddler had.

Fisher walked on, then turned to glance quickly over his shoulder.

The peddler was still in full sight. Fisher plunged into the nearest doorway, lingered a moment, and came out—not exactly disguised but with a sufficiently altered silhouette to be mistaken for someone else at a great enough distance along the dimly-lighted streets. His snugly buttoned coat was open now, hanging loosely from the shoulders; instead of being bareheaded he had a disreputable felt hat jammed down on his head. A pair of heavily-outlined but lenseless eyeglass frames were stuck around his ears. He set out after the distant figure using a purposely altered gait and body-carriage.

When he returned to his room at three that morning, he knew where this minor bird-of-prey lived, what his name was. What remained to be found out was where and to whom he turned over the accrued profits of his transactions. That was tomorrow's job, for the peddler had made no further sales that night after leaving Fisher. Undressing, he left the little sealed packet in his coat-pocket. It was probably three-quarters bicarbonate of soda, anyway.

He didn't see Joan in the morning, but he knew she had performed her usual self-imposed chore of brushing his suit before leaving, for it was neatly folded across the back of a chair just inside the door. He went back to where he had left off last night, resumed his vigil on the street-corner near the peddler's room. They were ripping up car tracks on that street, and the presence of the WPA workers covered him beautifully. He dawdled on the curb, coatless, smoking and chatting with them, indistinguishable from the rest to a casual observer. Occasionally one would go out to the middle and strike a few lethargic blows with a pickaxe, very occasionally.

It was well past midnight again when he wearily climbed the rooming-house stairs, but the day hadn't been wasted. He knew now where the peddler forked over his intake, where he secured his stuff. He was creeping back up the ladder again, at least as

high as when they'd sent him over after Belden.

There was a dim light still on behind Joan's door and he thought he heard a sound like muffled sobbing coming from inside, as he went by. Her hopes of landing the job she had spoken of must have been dashed, the thing must have fallen through. He stopped and rapped lightly, thinking he might be able to cheer her up.

She didn't open for a minute or two. Then when she did, her eyes were bright and hard, like mica. She didn't smile.

"Did you land the spot?" he asked tentatively.

To his surprise she nodded, almost indifferently. "Yes," she said coldly, looking him up and down as though she'd never seen him before. "I signed the contract this afternoon."

"You don't act very happy about it," he remarked uncertainly.

It was obvious something had happened to change her. "Don't I?" she said hostilely, and prepared to close the door in his face.

He threw out his hand and held the door open. "What's the matter, Joan? What's the rub? I thought I heard you crying just now—"

She flared up at that. "Don't kid yourself, mister!" she cried bitterly, "I don't waste my time crying over—over snowbirds!"

"So that's it!" He forced his way into the room, closed the door behind him.

She kept her back turned to him. "Go ahead; lie about it! Say that what I found in your coat-pocket this morning was sugar to feed the horses, or chemical to develop films! Go ahead, alibi why don't you?"

"No, it isn't," he said grimly, "it's cocaine. Now you listen to me, you little fool!" He caught her by the shoulders and swung her around to face him, and none too gently. "If you were a man I'd part your teeth in the middle—"

THERE were tears in her eyes again, tears of rage. "This crazy town's got to quit playing tricks on

me! I can't take it any more! No wonder something threw you, no wonder something got you down! And I wasted my time feeling sorry for you—"

"I wasn't going to tell you," he said, "but if you're going to go around making noises like a kitten left out in the rain, then here goes. I was a Department of Justice agent. We were cracking down on the ring that imports and sells this stuff. They waylaid my kid brother, got him alone and unarmed, and shot him down like a dog. I got myself put on that job—I was in Texas going after marihuana-smugglers at the time—I followed the man that did it to Paris. I got him, and I started back with him. What happened is too long a story to go into now. I made the worst hash of the assignment that anyone could make. He got away from me almost in sight of the dock, left me for dead. My badge was taken away from me. That was the thing that got me, that had me down when I first met you. I'm trying to come back now, trying to lick the thing singlehanded. I bought that stuff you found in my pocket purposely, from a peddler, as a means toward an end. Through him maybe I can get to the higher-ups."

He glared at her. "Now you either take that or leave it. I'm not going to back it up with papers and documents—to try to convince you. Believe it or not as you choose."

He could tell by her face she did. It was radiant again. "I might have known you had some perfectly good reason. The mere fact that what I found hadn't been opened—Why, I remember reading about your brother. It was in all the papers the day I first came to New York; it had happened that very day. Fisher, the lady begs your pardon."

"The lady's going to make some guy a hell of a wife," he assured her grumpily, "the way she goes through pockets. Now tell me about yourself."

She had the signed contract right there with her. Six weeks at fifty a week, and, if she went over, it would be renewed for another six at seventy-

five. Graham was the man's name, and the formal opening was set for tomorrow night. Luckily she wouldn't have to rehearse much, she was using most of the same numbers she had at the Third Avenue place, only one new one. She had to supply her own costumes, she rattled on, that was the only part of it she didn't like. And, oh yes, it was a little out of the way, hard to get to, but she supposed she'd get used to that. Chanticler was what they were going to call it, and they had a great big rooster set up on the grounds, outlined in electric lights, and fixed so that its head swung back and forth and it seemed to be crowing—

She broke off short, stared at him. "What are you looking at me like that for? You're all—white."

He said in a strained voice, "In Westchester? Just within sight of the Sound? A low white rambling place?"

"Yes, but how did you—?"

"I followed that peddler there and back today. On the return trip he was carrying several little parcels he hadn't had when he went in. I suppose if they'd been examined, they'd have been found to be samples of favors and noisemakers for the festivities. He poses as a toy- and novelty-maker. You've signed on as singer and hostess at what's really a dope-ring headquarters."

They were very still for awhile. Finally she said, in a small scared voice: "What shall I do, Frank?" She'd never called him by his given name until now. "How'll I get out of it? I can't—really I can't."

"You take the job anyway," he told her. "Nothing'll happen to you, you'll be all right. They're just using you, and the electric-lighted rooster, and the white rambling roadhouse, as a front. If you back out now, after wanting the job as badly as you did, you may be endangering yourself. It's safer if you go through with it. Besides, I'm going to be there—tomorrow night—within call of your voice."

She went white herself this time. "But suppose they recognize you?"

"It'll be a ticklish spot," he admitted, "but it's a risk I've got to take. Trilling never exactly handed out publicity-photos of any of us around town, so I'm probably safe enough. Belden would be the only one would know me, and I hope he does!"

"But you're not going to walk in there alone, are you?"

"Certainly I'm going alone. I have to. I haven't been assigned to go there, because I'm not a member of the Department any more, and accordingly I can't ask it to back me up. I'll either bring them this Graham, and Belden and the rest of the outfit too, or I'll end up a grease-spot on one of the Chanticler's tablecloths."

She said, with almost comic plain-tiveness, resting her hand on his arm, "Try not to be a grease-spot, Frank, I—I like you the way you are!"

At the door he said, "I'll see you there, then, tomorrow night. Don't let on you know me, try not to act nervous when you see me, or you'll give me away. Little things like that count. I know I can depend on you." He smiled, and faked a fist, and touched her lightly on the chin with it. "My life is in your hands, pretty lady."

She said, "I had my costumes sent up there ahead, to the dressing-room. My agent's smart as a whip, he dug up some notice about an auction-sale they were having—the wardrobe of some wealthy Iowa woman who went out of her mind and had to be committed to an asylum. I went there today and picked up just what I was looking for, for that new number I spoke of, and dirt-cheap. Wait'll you see, you won't know me in it."

CINGER ALE, the little gilt-edged folder said, was a dollar a bottle. You had to pay five dollars just to sit down, anyway, whether you ordered anything or not. Fisher'd had to pay an additional ten, at the door just now, to get a table at all, because he wasn't known. Twenty dollars to rent the dinner-jacket he had on, five dollars for cab fare to get out here—and oh yes, twenty-five cents for the crisp little white carnation in his button-

hole. He smiled a little when he thought of the old days and the quizzical look Trilling's face would have worn if he'd sent him in an expense-account like that. When tonight was over the only coin he'd have left would be the six bullets in the gun under his arm. He hoped tonight would bring him something; he didn't see how he could come back again in a hurry.

He was up to his old tricks again—and it felt swell, like a horse must feel when it's back between the wagon-shafts—staring idly down at the little silver gas-beads in his ginger-ale glass, yet not missing a thing that went on all over the big overcrowded room.

They were drinking champagne, and most of them, he could sense, were just casual revelers, drawn here unwittingly to front for Graham, to aid a cause they would have shuddered at. Graham must have decided it was high time he had some enterprise to which he could safely ascribe the money he pulled out of the air—if he were suddenly pinned down. Awkward to be raking in money hand-over-fist and not be able to explain what it was derived from. By the looks of this place tonight, and the prices they were charging, he needn't worry; it could account for a big slice of his profits, with just a little juggling of the books. And it made a swell depot and distribution center, Fisher could see that with one eye closed.

That gigantic electrically-outlined rooster outside, for instance, that towered high above the roof of the building, must be visible far up and down the Sound on the darkest night. It could come in handy as a signal and beacon for, say, small launches making shore from larger ships further out, sinister tramps and freighters from Marseilles or Istanbul, with cargoes of dream-death.

What gave the whole plan away to him, what showed that it was meant for something more than just a way-side ad to motorists going by on the Post Road, was that the sign was un-

necessarily outlined in bulbs on *both* sides, the side that faced landward, and the side that faced the building—and the Sound. The people around him didn't need to be told where they were, they knew it already. He had a good view of the sign from where he was sitting, through a ceiling-tall French window. The side that faced outward toward the highway was illuminated in dazzling white bulbs, the side that faced the building—and dwarfed it—was in red. Red, the color that means *Stop—Danger*. White, the color that means *All Clear—Go ahead*.

Here and there, spotted about the room, were quiet watchful individuals, whose smiles were a little strained, whose laughter rang false. . . . They sat and minded their own business, while the rest of the guests raised the roof. They kept their heads slightly lowered, making geometric arrangements with the silverware or drawing designs on the tablecloths; they were taut, waiting for something.

Ten of them in all—no more than two at the same table. And no fizz at those tables, just black coffee and dozens, scores of cigarettes, chain-lighted, one from the last.

That stocky man standing beaming just inside the main door must be Graham, for he had an air of proud ownership, and he looked everyone over that came in, and twice Fisher had seen the maitre-d'hotel step up to him for unobtrusive instructions.

Suddenly the lights went down all over the place; the lighted rooster outside peered ruddily through the window-outlines. People shifted expectantly in their chairs. Fisher murmured to himself: "Here she comes now. What a chance I'd be taking, if I didn't know I could count on her!"

He settled back.

There was a rolling build-up from the drums. Twin spotlights, one red, one green, leaped across the polished floor, found the door at the rear that led to the dressing room. Joan stepped out into the green spot, and a gasp of appreciation went all around the big silent place.

Chapter VIII

When Satan Sings

HE thought he'd never seen anything, anyone, so weirdly beautiful in his life before. But something like a galvanic shock had gone through him just now, had all but lifted him an inch above his chair for a moment. As though some forgotten chord of memory had been touched just then. Something about Joan reminded him of someone else, made him think he was seeing someone else. Before his eyes, a ghost from the past came to life and walked about in full sight.

Wait, that French mannequin, Belden's girl in Paris—that was it! No—that woman on the *Gascony*, that Mrs. Travis, that was who it was! But could it be both? And yet it seemed to be both. Stranger still, Joan didn't look in the least like either one of them, not even at this moment.

The red spot remained vacant, yet followed her around the room; the idea—and a fairly clever one at that—being that it contained the invisible tempter whom she addressed in her song, over her shoulder.

Slowly she circled the room from table to table, filling the place with her rich, lovely voice, making playful motions of warding-off, equally playful ones of leading-on. Then as she reached Fisher's table, suddenly she wasn't playful any more. She stiffened, seemed to glare; there was a noticeable break in her song.

The perimeter of the green spotlight fell across him too, revealed his face like a mask. He smiled up at her a little, admiringly, encouragingly. She answered—and yet there seemed to be menace, malice, in the parody of a smile that pulled her lips back clear of her teeth more like a snarl than anything else. Unaccountably he could feel the hairs at the back of his neck bristling. . . .

Get Thee Behind Me, Satan—
Stay where you are, it's too late!

Her bell-like voice, singing the Irving Berlin tune, throbbed down upon him; but its tone wasn't silver any

more, it was bronze, harsh and clanging. He could see her bosom moving up and down, as though rage and fury were boiling in it.

She started to move backward toward the door by which she had entered, bowing to the thunderous applause that crashed out. But her eyes never once left his face as she did so. They were beady and hard and merciless. And that smile was still on her face, that grimace of derision and spite and undying hostility.

The lights flared up and as she stood there a moment by the exit door, her eyes finally left his face to travel the length of the room to the opposite doorway. He followed their direction, and saw Graham over there, pounding his pudgy hands together to show that he liked her.

Fisher looked back to her just in time to catch the beckoning toss of the head she sent Graham's away. Then she slipped through the door.

It was so obvious what that signal meant, and yet he couldn't believe it. No, not Joan. She wanted to ask Graham's advice about an encore; something like that, that was all. For more thoroughly than he realized, he had, in Nurse Wellington's words, learned the difference between a woman and a fire-hydrant these past few weeks, and he couldn't unlearn it all in a flash, couldn't teach himself to mistrust something he had learned to trust—any more than Belden could have in Paris, or Travis on the boat. Men's loyalty to their women dies hard—and almost always too late.

Graham was making his way around the perimeter of the room, to follow her back to her dressing room where she had called him. The background music kept on vamping, waiting for her to return and pick up her cue. A pale pink and a faint green ghost of the spotlights hovered there by the door, ready to leap out into full strength again as soon as the house lights went down.

The quiet, sullen men he'd noticed before didn't move their palms, their heads or their eyes. One of them glanced at his wrist-watch, without

raising his arm. One of the gaudy women with them yawned in boredom. Outside, the rooster's red beak kept opening, closing, as its head and neck wavered back and forth, current passing from one circuit of lights to another, then back again.

Fisher kept pinching the bridge of his nose, groping, baffled. Why had Joan reminded him of two other women—one dead, one vanished into limbo—as she stood before his table a moment ago? Why had he thought he was seeing Mimi Brissard, and the Travis woman, when she didn't in the slightest resemble either one of them physically—nor had they resembled each other either, for that matter. Why had she seemed to be evil incarnate, the spirit of all wickedness, when he knew her to be just the opposite? It was more than just clever acting to go with her song; the very pores of his skin had seemed to exude her animosity, her baleful hatred. They couldn't be mistaken; that was an instinct going far back beyond man's reasoning power to the jungle ages.

ONLY a very few seconds went by; how hurried her whispers to Graham out there must have been! Graham came out again, sideward, his head still turned to where she must be standing, unseen behind the door. His face was whiter than it had seemed just now. His glance, as he turned to face the room again, arched over Fisher, purposely avoiding looking at him directly. He didn't return to where he had been. He went casually to the nearest table where a group of those silent, waiting men was. He lingered a moment, then moved on to another table. The flamboyant woman who had been the tablemate of the man he had spoken to, stirred, got up, moved slowly toward the entrance as though she had been told to leave. Her companion kept his eyes lowered; but as the woman neared the door she couldn't resist throwing a casual little look over at Fisher.

He didn't see it. Graham had signaled the band, and Joan had come

back. The lights went down again and Graham's movements, and the mass-exodus of the lady-friends of the "deep thinkers," were concealed by the darkness, while she sang.

She started her routine in reverse this time, began at his table instead of going around the other way and ending up at it. Began, yet ended there too, for she didn't move on, stayed there by him while the sultry, husky song enveloped him.

He sat there motionless, while she moved in closer, came around the table to his side. Slowly her bare arm slipped caressingly around his shoulder, inched affectionately down the satin-faced lapel toying with the white carnation in his buttonhole.

And again Fisher saw Mimi Brissard writhe her snakelike way up the stone steps of the *Bal au Diable*, the tiny little train wriggling after her—saw her stop and look back at him after she had betrayed her man. Again the heady, musk perfume of Mrs. Travis was in his nostrils; she seemed to stand beside him in the *Gascony's* deck. . . . Was he going crazy? Had those bullets done something to his mind? Was it just the colors of the dress—red and black—the cut of it—or was it something more?

The caressing hand had traveled a little lower than the flower now, was turning insinuatingly in under his coat. And the audience chuckled, thinking she was pretending to be a gold-digger, playfully pretending to pick his pocket. There was a momentary break in the spotlight-beam, as though the switch had been thrown off then on again. For an instant or so they were blacked-out, he and Joan. Then the green glare came on again. Her hand wasn't inside his jacket any more, it was held stiffly behind her back, hidden from the room at large. A white shirtfront gleamed there in the dimness as Graham approached her from behind, then ebbed away into the dimness again.

Fisher's hand reached upward, came to rest on her shoulder. He touched the fabric of her gown. A surge of un-

reasoning hatred welled through him. That too seemed to be a memory out of the past. He remembered doing this, turning his hand back like this, turning the lining of a gown—

She tried to pull away, and he held her fast. The shoulder of her dress turned over as he pulled, and on it was a little silk cachet. In the flickering green light he made out dim lettering.

I'm Dangerous Tonight—Maldonado, Paris.

THE yell that came from his throat drowned out the music, silenced it. His chair reeled backward with a crash, and he was erect, facing her. "It's the same one!" they heard him shout. "Now I know! Now at last—!"

The green spot sputtered out. The lights flared up. People jumped to their feet all over the room, staring petrified at the incredible sight taking place there in full view of everyone. For the man the girl had been teasing seemed to have gone suddenly mad, was growling like a hydrophobic dog, tearing, clawing at her gown. It came off in long, brutally-severed tatters, revealing strips of white skin that grew and grew before their very eyes, until suddenly she stood there all but nude, trembling, statuelike.

They were shouting: "Stop him! He's crazy. . . !" But a mad, panic-stricken rush for the door had started on the part of all the other celebrants, that couldn't be stemmed, that hampered those who were trying to reach the attacker and his victim. Other women were screaming while their men pushed and jostled, trying to clear a way for them.

She alone hadn't screamed through the whole thing. She stood there facing him quietly now, given a moment's grace while Graham and all his silent men tried to force their way to them.

He took his coat off and threw it around her. The tattered remnants of the dress lay on the floor behind her. There was a look on her face impossible to describe—the stare of a sleep-walker suddenly awakened—then she let out a low, fearful cry.

"I've betrayed you, Frank! I've killed you. I told them what you were—and what you were here for—"

His hand instinctively jabbed toward his exposed shoulder-holster. It swayed empty at his touch.

"I took that too," she gasped, "while I was singing—I gave it to Graham just now—"

She was suddenly thrust aside, and they were ringed about him—ten of them and Graham, their guns bared and thrusting into his body.

Outside, the enormous rooster was slowly pivoting on its base, turning its white-lighted side inward, toward the roadhouse—and the Sound. White—that meant *All Clear—Go ahead*. Far across the water sounded the faint bleat of a steamer's whistle, two short ones and a long one, that seemed to end in a question-mark: "*Pip? Pip? Peep? Are you ready?*" Some lone night-bound vessel, furtively prowling these inner waters of the Sound instead of sticking to the shiplane that led up through the Narrows.

"No, not in here."

Graham's crisp command stopped death, forced it back from the very muzzles of ten guns. "Take him out where he can get the right treatment," he said and grinned a little.

Through the encircling ring of his enemies Fisher had eyes for only one thing—the face of the girl who had done this to him. She was wavering there in the background, like a sick, tormented creature, his coat still around her. He saw her clasp her hands, hold them out toward him in supplication, unseen by all the others. As though trying to ask for pardon. The coat slipped off her shoulders, fell unheeded to the floor.

He stared at her without emotion. She might have been a stone or a tree-stump. She was beneath his anger. To them, scathingly, he said: "Well, get it over with. Make it fast. . . ."

One of the guns reversed, chopped down butt first, caught him across the mouth. His head went back, came forward again. A drop of blood fell, formed a splashy scarlet star.

Graham said with almost comic anxiety: "Not on my floor here! What's the water for?"

"Who's so smart now?" the girl behind them shrilled vindictively. "Use me for a stepping-stone, will you! You're going to get it now, and I hope you get it good!" She had changed again. The tattered dress was nowhere near her, its remnants lay kicked far out on the deserted dance-floor, and yet she had changed back again—to all she had been before, as though the very core of her being had become corroded with hate and malice.

Graham patted her commendingly on the shoulder. "You're worth your weight in gold, honey. You wait for us here, put something over you so you don't catch cold. Graham's going to get you a mink wrap for this, and a diamond bracelet, too, if you want. You're riding back to town tonight in my own private car. We won't take long. If you hear any screaming out on the Sound, don't pay no never mind. It'll just be the wind coming over the water. All right, boys."

As they hustled him toward the entrance, in what was almost an exact replica of the old "flying wedge" at Jack's, he glanced back over his shoulder. Again she had clasped her hands, was holding them out tremblingly toward him.

They hurried down a long slope to where black water lapped whisperingly against the gray sand. "Okay, left," Graham said tersely. They broke up into Indian file, except for the pair gripping Fisher grimly each by an arm bent stiffly backward ready to be broken in its socket at the first sign of resistance. The Sound was empty of life, not a light showing anywhere. Their footsteps moiling through the soft sand were hushed to a hissing sigh.

"Flirt a little," Graham's voice came from the rear.

Somebody took out a pocket-torch, flicked it on, off, on, off again. There was an answering firefly-wink straight ahead, on the shore itself. "There they are. They landed a little off-center."

THE white blur of a launch showed up, seemingly abandoned there at the water's edge; there was not a soul anywhere in sight. But a human voice crowed like a rooster somewhere near at hand. *Kri-kirri-kri-kre-e-e-e*.

Graham called out impatiently, "Yeah, yeah, it's us, you fools!"

Dark figures were suddenly swarming all over the lifeless launch; their trousers were rolled up to their knees. They started passing small-size packages, no bigger than shoe-boxes, to those on shore.

"Come on, reach! Come out closer. Don't be afraid to get your feet wet."

Fisher spoke for the first time since they'd hauled him out of the clubhouse. "Pick-up and delivery. Nice work."

There was a sudden stunned silence, tension in the air. "Who's that? Who you got with you?"

"Dead man," answered Graham tonelessly. "He's going out to the ship when we get through."

"Wait a minute! I know that voice!" One of the men jumped down into the water with a splash, came wading in, stood before Fisher. A torch mooned out, upward, between them, illumining both faces.

Fisher said, almost inaudibly, "Belden. So you came back, couldn't stay away. Glad you did. You came back to your death. They can kill me ten times over, but I'm still going to get you, murderer, somehow!"

Belden lunged, grabbed Fisher by the throat with both hands, sobbing crazily: "What does it take to kill you? What does it take to make you stay dead?"

They had to pry him away. Graham yelled: "No, no, no. Not here. On the boat. C'mon. Break it up."

Eight of those that had come with him were toiling back, Indian file, each with a shoe box under each arm.

"Tune her up!" A motor started to bark and cough, the boat to vibrate. Graham said something about his fifteen-buck patent-leathers, went wading clumsily out, scrambled aboard. Fisher was dragged floundering backward through the shallow water,

caught at the hands and feet, hauled up over the side. He watched for the moment when his legs were freed as his spine slipped up over the rim of the boat; buckled one, shot it out full-length into one of the blurred faces.

The man dropped like a log, with a long-drawn exhalation that ended in a gurgle. They floundered around in the water over him. A voice exclaimed, "Holy—! He's busted Mickey's jaw and nose with that hoof of his! Pull him up out of there!"

Vengeful blows from the butt of a gun were already chopping Fisher down to his knees; in another second he'd gone flat on his face. He went out without a sound somewhere at the bottom of the little launch. The last thing he heard from far off, was Graham's repeated cry: "Wait, can't you—and do it right? I got ideas—"

BELEDEN was saying, in the lamp-lit cabin of the motionless ship, "You can give the instructions, but I'm laying it on him personally. You can even take it out of my cut if you want to, I'll pay for the privilege, that's how bad I want it!" Fisher opened his eyes with a groan.

"So you're awake, stupid!"

Fisher said, trying to stem the weakness in his voice: "Just how personal do you want it, louse? 'Cause I want it personal too. You remember Jimmy Fisher, don't you?"

"Yep," Belden said, "we made him run the gauntlet down the stairs of an old five-story brownstone house. On every landing we put another bullet in him, but not where it would kill him. He started to die on the fourth landing from the top, so we rolled him the rest of the way with our feet."

Fisher's eyes rolled idly upward to the oil-lamp dangling on a hook. "Jimmy's all right," he said thoughtfully, "all a guy can do is die once. The big difference is whether he dies clean—or dirty—"

His arm suddenly swept out from the shoulder in a long downward arc. The hoop of the oil-lamp sprang from the hook, there was a tinny crack and

a crash of glass where Belden's face had been, and then he was lathered with lazy little flame-points, giving off feeble light as if he were burnished with gold paint.

They tried to grab him, hold him, beat the flats of their hands against him. He gave a hoot-owl screech, turned and bolted out the door, and the cabin turned dark behind him. Fisher sprang after him with a quickness he hadn't thought he'd be able to muster; left all his contusions and his gun-butt bruises and his aching human weariness behind him where he'd been, and shot out to the deck after that flickering squawking torch like a disembodied spirit of revenge.

Belden was poised on the rail, like a living torch. He went over with a scream, and Fisher went over after him, hurdling sidewise on one wrist. They must have both gone in at about the same spot. He got him below the surface, collided with him as Belden was coming up, and got the hold he wanted on his neck with both arms. They came up again together—not to live, but to die.

Fisher sputtered: "Now this is for Jimmy! This!" The throb that came when Belden's neck snapped went through him. They went down again together.

When he rose to the surface again he was alone. The launch was chugging around idly near him, and angry pencils of light from torches came to a focus on his head, as he threw it back to get some air in. "There he is!"

"It's taken care of, Jimmy," he panted. "You can sleep tight."

"Save it till you get to him—you'll be right down to hell yourself!" The pencils of light now were suddenly orange, and cracked like whips, and made the water spit around his head.

Graham's voice said, "I can get him. It's a pushover," and he stood up in the bow of the circling launch. Fisher could see the white of his shirtfront.

A violet-white aurora borealis suddenly shot up over the rim of the water—behind the launch—and Graham was an ink-black cut-out against it. Then he doubled over and went

in, and something banged in back of him. A voice megaphoned: "Throw 'em up or we'll let you have it!"

Distant thunder, or a high roaring wind, was coming up behind that blinding pathway of light.

Fisher wished it would get out of his eyes, it was putting the finishing touch to him. He flopped his way over to the near side of the launch to get out of the glare, caught the gunwale with one hand, and hung there like a barnacle, tired all over.

THERE were shoe-boxes stacked up on the tables next to overturned champagne-glasses, and a line of men were bringing their hands down from over their heads—all but Graham and a man sitting back-to-front on a chair, wrapped in an automobile-laprobe, watching everything, looking very tired, very battered—and very eager. And, oh yes, a girl crumpled forward over one of the little tables, her blond head buried between her arms. Outside the rooster was black against the dawn; the current had been cut and they were pulling it down with ropes. Chanticleer would never crow again to dream-laden ships out on the Sound.

None of it mattered very much to the bundled-up man in the laprobe just then: the questioning or the taking-down of statements or Trilling's staccato machine-gun firing of orders right and left. Only two things were important: an ownerless badge lying there on a table, and the tortured, twisted fragments of a dress huddled on the dance-floor.

They came to the badge first. Trilling took time off between orders to glance at it. Then he brought it over, held it out. "What're you waiting for?" he said gruffly, "It's yours."

Fisher took it with both hands and held it as a starving man would hold a crust of bread. Then he looked up and grinned lopsidedly. "Washington?" he said.

"Washington wants results," Trilling snapped. "Well, look around you. This whole job is yours. Don't try

to act hard about that hunk of tin either, I know you're all mushy inside." He glanced at the girl and said, "What's *she* crying about? She got us out here in time, didn't she?"

They came to the other thing last. "Fire-extinguishers?" said Trilling as he was ready to leave in the wake of the captives, "What do you want fire-extinguishers trained on the floor for? There's no fire."

"There's going to be," said Fisher.

He stepped forward with a tense, frightened face, struck a match, dropped it on what lay coiled there like something malign, ready to rear and strike at whatsoever ventured too near it. He retreated and put his arm around the girl, and she turned her face away and hid it against his chest. "I think I—see," she said.

"Never mind. Just forget it," Fisher murmured, "That's the only out for both of us."

A glow lit up the dance floor of the Chanticleer. There was a hissing like a pit of snakes or a vat of rendering fat. There wasn't any smoke to speak of, just a peculiar odor—a little like burnt feathers, a little like chemicals, a little like sulphur or coal gas. When the flames they had fed on were reduced to crumbling white ash, the fire died down again, sank inward. Then at the very last, just as it snuffed out altogether, a solitary tongue—thin as a rope and vivid green—darted straight up into the air, bent into the semblance of a question-mark, poised motionless there for a split second. Then vanished utterly without a trace.

A gasp went up. "Did you see that? What was it?" A dozen pair of trained eyes had seen it.

Trilling answered, after a long horrified silence. "Some chemical substance impregnated in the material the dress was made of, that's all, A dye or tincture of some kind—"

Fisher just stood there lost in thought, without saying anything. There is always a rational explanation for everything in this world—whether it's the true one or not. Maybe it is better so.

THE END