

STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES

Volume 2

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Number 6

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Robert A. W. Lowndes, *Editor*

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that a way to beat him is known and that you won't permit it to be used."

The commissioner paced back and forth, nervously.

"We've got to do something to reassure the public," he said harshly.

"There are mobs forming and dissolving. Mobs the police can't handle! The people won't stand this darkness! They've got to be reassured!"

"Der next edition of der papers," said Schaaf scornfully, "point out that Breston don't dare leave der darkness on for more than fifteen minutes, and eferybody knows how to be comfortable for that long."

"But he can get under shelter," insisted the commissioner.

"And we can blow him out of it," snapped Schaff. "*Himmel*, man, haff you no brains?"

"But you can't see him!"

"Der hell we can't," said Schaaf. He snorted. "In fifteen minutes after der last darkness went off, der staff of der research laboratory designed a fision apparatus to take advantage of der fact that ultra-fiolet rays are not affected by Breston's short waves. There are twenty optical shops smashing up kitchen ofenware and grinding lenses. All der rhodamine dye in der city is cornered for our use. And der American Electric Company is equipping automobiles and motorcycles with mercury-fapor lamps. Of course we can see!

"Herr Commissioner, it may not be polite, but you forget that Hines is a smart man, and there is *ein* Herr named Schaaf that is no dumbell either. Pfash! I am going out to take a smoke!"

He got up and marched disgustedly out of the room.

"I've given orders," said Hines quietly, "on my own authortiy. Preston is not going to be bought off. He's going to be licked. If you choose to countermand my orders, you may try it. But I wouldn't advise it. My orders will stand."

The commissioner flushed. "You're relieved of all duty," he said shortly. "Preston's terms have to be met. The business interests of the city demand it. And you will be under arrest in two minutes, for mutiny."

Hines laughed softly. "Mutiny is a hard word," he observed. "But treason is a harder one! The national government is interested in this, now. It's more important than any one city, even New York. Washington has been talking to me on long-distance. Also to the Governor of the State.

"I've told what I know and what I intend to do. I'm ordered, from Washington, to go ahead. Try to stop me and I'll have soldiers and marines take over the job of the police, and the Governor will call out the militia to cooperate with them. You can try surrendering Schaaf and myself

to mobs to be torn apart so you can grovel in the dust before Preston. You can try it. But I'm afraid it won't work."

The commissioner swallowed.

"The next long darkness," said Hines grimly, "is going to be the worst. Just before nightfall every newspaper in the city will be on the streets with an extra, challenging Preston to do his worst. He will, and his worst will be pretty bad. He's not a meteorologist, it's clear, so he's going to get under cover to stand a storm. He's going to turn on his darkness and keep it on. For hours. For days. Until New York starves or goes mad in the blackness."

The commissioner gnawed at his nails. "And what are you going to do?" he demanded at last.

"Find him in the darkness," said Hines, "and kill him, and turn the darkness off."

He went deliberately out of the room, and Kathryn followed him. And almost as if his movement had been a signal, the darkness fell. Utter, deadly, terrible darkness.

Kathryn gasped. Hines reached out his hand. "Steady!" he said quietly. "This won't last long. He said he'd turn on the darkness whenever he chose and for as long as he pleased. He'll probably try a bunch of short doses, to wreck the nerves of everybody in the city."

"But—why?" demanded Kathryn.

Her eyes stared helplessly at the nothingness about her. And she began to realize the deadly danger that Hines was in. His death and Schaaf's were necessary before Preston's persecution could be stopped by a huge money payment. And the darkness was so horrible, unbearable that there were thousands of people in the city who would have killed him in hopes of an escape from it.

"Why—must you—"

She sobbed, clinging to him in mingled terror for herself and for him. And Schaaf's dry voice came to them.

"Hines," he was saying placidly, "you are der damnedest fool I ever saw. If Miss Bush were clinging close to me, as she is to you—well, personally, I would kiss her. I haff heard that it is an excellent remedy for fears, terrors, tremors, and agitation in young ladies."

Hines whirled. "The glasses work? They work?"

"Of course they work," said Schaaf placidly. "They were designed on scientific principles, and der sun is sending plenty of ultra-fiolet rays down through der darkness. I obserfe that Miss Bush has turned away from you and is staring about as if she should see also."

Kathryn gasped. A hand touched her shoulder.

"I haff only one of der fision outfits with me," said Schaaf. "I came to demonstrate to der commissioner, but he gafe me a pain in der neck. Hold to Hines's hand and come on."

Hines took hold of her arm, and Schaaf went on before. It was an incredible sort of situation. Utter blackness all about and Schaaf walking with a possibly exaggerated confidence, leading them through what might have been a sea of ink. And, as always, the darkness was so complete that it seemed to possess a substance. It was too black to be intangible.

Without warning, the darkness vanished. It had lasted five minutes or less. Schaaf was just leading them out of the entrance to headquarters.

Kathryn gasped in relief.

"Here," said Schaaf, "here is der car. Ha! Der light has come on?"

He took down an elaborate contrivance, much like a blindfold with two huge goggling lenses at the front. He blinked.

"Oh, well," he said placidly, "I was getting too proud of my smartness in seeing what other people could not. Get in der car, Hines, and drife like der deffil. Breston will keep this up awhile. Now a minute or two. Now half an hour. He will make it dark nearly all night, I bet you, because he can do that without making a storm. There is no sunlight to heat der upper layer of darkened air. So we will haff to get busy. Home to der American Electric Company, James."

He lolled back, waving his blindfold contrivance negligently, as Hines meshed the gears and shot away along the empty streets. The city was queerly quiet, but there were people everywhere. They saw heads staring out at the blessed night, after the recent darkness. Once they heard a woman screaming in a fit of pure nerves. And once they heard a whole roomful of people laughing horribly in unquestionable, indubitable hysteria.

The darkness came on twice more before they reached their destination. Once for less than half a minute. The other time it stayed on for a full quarter of an hour, and a steady, rising wind began to blow. Then the light came on again and the wind died down fitfully.

"This," said Schaaf meditatively, "will giff der Weather Bureau fits. It will mess up der weather maps terribly."

But then they reached the American Electric Building. The street in front of it was blocked with vehicles. There were half a dozen huge trucks. Twenty or thirty touring cars. Quite as many motorcycles. Mercury-vapor lamps burned bluely in the bright sunlight, and workmen were busy with all the cars at once.

It was just at sunset that newspaper trucks went racing about the city again, scattering papers for all the world to read. The headlines of all of them were nearly identical.

*"TURN ON THE DARKNESS, PRESTON,
I DARE YOU!" SAYS HINES.*

Half an hour later the darkness came on, and remained.

V

KATHRYN FELT HANDS TOUCHING HER. She shivered and stood still. She might have been buried under ten feet of earth, for all the vision she possessed.

"Now, Miss Bush," said Schaaf placidly in her ear, "if you will stop shivering, I will bestow upon you der gift of eyesight. Take off der hat."

Fumbling with her hands shaking uncontrollably, she tried to obey. She could not. She heard movements all about her—confident, purposeful movements. The starter of a car whirred and a motor caught with a roar. It was throttled down and began to purr comfortably. And Kathryn had all the sensations of the blind, even the horrible depression which is enhanced by hearing the movements of those who can see.

Schaaf helped her clumsily.

"Der theory," he observed cheefully, "is fery simple. Today at three o'clock we obserfed that ultra-fiolet rays were not absorbed by der darkness. They penetrate Breston's dark just as well as daylight. But they are infisible to our eyes. Yet, just as Breston makes der light we can see turn into heat we cannot see, there are substances which turn rays we can't see into the light we appreciate fery much, just now. Hold der head still."

Kathryn felt a rather clumsy headdress fitted over hair. Something hard and uncomfortable covered her nose.

"A football head protector is not designed for ladies," said Schaaf placidly, "but you can stand it for der story for your paper. Rhodamine dye, as I haff told you, has der faculty of absorbing ultra-fiolet light and emitting bright red. So, we took opera-glasses to look through. We would make der front lens form an infisible image on a plate coated with rhodamine dye. Der image would become fisible, and so close to der eye that der darkness would haff no time to absorb it. You—"

Kathryn uttered a little exclamation of relief. "I see light!" she panted. "Red light!"

"Precisely," said Schaaf placidly, "but I brag a little anyway. It is like a camera, making an image on a sheet of film, but in this instance it is defeloped at once by der fluorescence of der rhodamine dye. Der only trouble was that ordinary glass is no good for der infisible ultra-fiolet rays. It is as opaque to them as a brick. Only quartz glass is good for them. So we bought a quantity of ofen-glass, which is glass that ladies cook cakes and bake pies in, and broke it in small pieces, and had all der optical shops in der city busy grinding them into lenses. Ofen-glass is made of quartz only. Therefore, we haff put a football headdress on your head to hold a nose protector, and a nose protector to hold der remade opera-glasses; and if you will turn around—"

Kathryn turned about. She gasped.

It was almost impossible to believe that she was not looking directly at the world about her. But what a world! There were monstrous, flaming, crimson flares overhead. Only after minutes did she associate them with the blue mercury-vapor lamps she had seen in the street before the American Electric Building, and before that only in the windows of photographers.

They were lurid, unearthly glares of scarlet, licking all about the tubes which were their sources. That same unearthly glow was cast upon the street and upon the buildings. She seemed, in fact, to be in a filmy scarlet fog, at once formed and driven back by the monstrous flames above her.

The people who moved below those lights wore curious, unhuman heads. The long, hard-rubber nose-guards of the football headgear had the protruding lenses of binoculars above them. The human beings looked rather like gigantic insects. She saw a glowing crimson machine move forward and stop. She saw other machines tested. More unearthly lights flared.

And curiosity overcame Kathryn. She lifted the nosepiece and the glasses from before her face. Instantly she gasped. The horrible, tangible blackness closed upon her the more terribly because she could still hear the sounds of movement all about.

Hines came out, monstrous to look at with the expressionless, insect-like seeing apparatus covering his face.

"Hello, Hines," said Schaaf placidly. "Haff you got der bearings from der other obserfation stations?"

Hines nodded. "But we don't need them" he said curtly. "I found Preston's slip. One of my men found his name and address in his own handwriting. A slip, all right!"

Schaaf's jaw dropped. "Der deffil!"

"You gave my men a list of book titles he'd need," said Hines. "They went to every technical library. And they found his trail. He'd used a dozen of those books, several times each. He was copying, I understand, a list of—er— dielectric values—"

"Variations," said Schaaf. "Variations of der dielectric constant with Hertzian wafes of different lengths. He wanted it to extrapolate for his own wafe-length, I bet a nickel. Oh, dammit, why can't I figure out der wafe-length he uses? I would play der deffil with him!"

"We'll do it anyway," said Hines grimly. "When he asked for books in the reading-room, he had to give his name and address on the requisition-slip. My men found those slips. On most of them he'd used a fake name and address. Just once, he'd been absorbed or absent-minded. He signed his real name to one slip—and an address!"

"Where," said Schaaf, "we go and pay him a fisit. Good work, Hines! Where is der address?"

"The same place the observation-stations have bearings on," said Hines. "When will we be ready?"

"In two minutes more. They are fixing der last flare now."

But a crimson workman dropped a crimson tool and nodded to some one in a chauffeur's seat. A starter whirred. A motor roared. Two more glaring crimson flames came into being.

"We are set," said Schaaf. "Now we climb in and start."

"Stay with Schaaf, Kathryn," said Hines curtly. "I'm going to be with the dirty work."

Shouts, orders, a scurrying of men, and the street was empty of all but machines. Those machines moved on in a purring, compact mass.

Staring about in the extraordinary crimson world, Kathryn saw the vehicles as flaming, unearthly monsters in a crimson mist, with expressionless heads as of insects staring out of them. They moved in a glow of fiery light that died away before and behind them. It was weird. It was incredible. It was like some peculiar nightmare, or perhaps a cavalcade upon another planet. It seemed wholly unlike any scene that could be upon Earth.

But when she lifted the extraordinary vision apparatus from her eyes, it seemed more strange still. Darkness pressed upon her like a solid substance. She had an almost hysterical impression that something pressed physically upon her, that if she moved her hand it would be found to be held fast, held firmly. She felt the unreasoning terror of nightmare, the unthinkable horror of those who are buried alive.

There were sounds in that darkness all about her. The purring of

motors. The clanking of metal. And once she heard a far-away hysterical screaming. The motors went grimly on.

She fought off her own panic to try to imagine the feelings of people in those buildings on either side. If there were people! Somewhere in the city there were children crying heart-brokenly, and folk stumbling with wide and straining eyes to answer their cries.

There were curious, rather dreadful little cubbyholes whose four walls were made of bedsprings, through which the flood of darkness could be seen. Bright, unshaded electric bulbs were burning in those cubbyholes, and people would be crowded in them, sweating and staring at the devouring darkness without, and waiting — waiting without hope.

There were other places, other scenes, on which she dared not dwell. Men gone hysterical in the singularly complete emotional breakdown of the manual laborer when he does break down. Men turned into raving beasts by pure panic, gone into maniacal, destructive rages because they could not hope to escape the darkness which broke down all thought of self-control.

In the filmy crimson mist she saw a man upon the sidewalk. A policeman. He was upon his hands and knees, crawling the length of the curbing. She saw his head lift up and saw him staring blindly at the machines. They were invisible to him, but he could hear them passing.

"Hines gafé orders," said Schaaf in her car, "that all der cops should go to der beat-telephone and wait. They could crawl along der gutters for guidance. Some of them will go nutty, but some of them are brafé men. That one, for example."

They left him behind. They moved on uptown. Things began to appear parked in serried rows, which it took thought to identify as cars. Buildings seemed all a vivid scarlet, all the same shade, varying only in brightness.

Hines's car dropped back, and the monstrous head of Hines — machine-like and inhuman with its goggles — peered out at them.

"Have you got cross-bearings, Schaaf?" he called above the thunder of their progress.

"To be sure," said Schaaf placidly. "Of course. Der darkness is coming from der same place as before. It worries me, Hines. Maybe der deffil expects us!"

"It's not unlikely," said Hines grimly.

Cars spread out to right and left, vanishing down side streets as moving specks of vividly crimson light.

"Hines is surrounding der place," said Schaaf. "Der bearings remain der same. I am badly worried, Miss Bush. Breston is too clefer to let us

take him easily. But he has der darkness on. I wonder if he has remote control. If he has, he would be using either batteries or der city current for power. And it would need a hell of a lot of power to make all der city dark. I haff an idea!"

He began to think busily.

The procession danked on. Suddenly, the cars stopped. Hines came back. At an order, all the motors were silent.

"Listen!" said Hines curtly.

Stillness. The queer, unavoidable sounds of bodies moving in their seats. Muted, nerve-racked noises from the houses about, the houses in which men and women crouched in tiny cubby-holes of screening, watching electric bulbs in desperate terror that those lights also would go out and leave them in utter blackness!

Motor horns began to blare, a long way off. Hines grunted in satisfaction.

"Bearings the same," he said shortly. "We'll go from here on foot."

"Hines," said Schaaf nervously, "I don't like it! I tell you, I don't like it! Do you think Breston didn't hear our motors coming? Do you think he did not hear der horns? There is something defilishly wrong. He has a great predilection for bombs and gas and poison and such. Haff you gasmasks?"

"We have," said Hines grimly. "We'll go on."

Kathryn lifted the vision apparatus from her eyes. She was blind, but this abysmal blackness seemed somehow a cover for the terror she knew was showing on her face.

"One minute more," protested Schaaf. "Hines, I haff a hunch. It is a silly hunch, but I belief it. Go to der nearest police telephone and say to der headquarters to haff der electric current cut off from this part of der city."

Hine's goggled face turned to him.

"But the poor devils in those houses, in those screen-coops you told them how to make—"

"They'll go crazy," said Schaaf irritably. "I know it. They will lose what little hope they haff left. But it is a hunch, Hines! Do it!"

It was very queer to Kathryn, to be sitting there in utter blackness, filled as she was with an unnamable terror for Hines and with tears rolling down her cheeks through sheer anguish—to hear footsteps go confidently to one side of the street, and to hear the metallic clanking of a police street-telephone being opened, and to hear the crisp little ring of the instrument.

"Tell them," said Schaff nervously, "to try it. Cut off der current for

three seconds. If der darkness lifts, leave it off. If it does not, put it back on again."

He moved uncertainly in the seat beside Kathryn. "It's not natural," he protested miserably. "I know that we should haff der deffil licked, and because it seems so complete I haff fears."

The man at the street-telephone was talking curtly.

"If my suspicions are right," Schaaf said, more miserably still, "Breston has let us come here to be destroyed. He has used der city current for power so that he can haff remote control of der darkness. And—"

Kathryn started and cried out. Her eyes were dazed by the glare of mercury-vapor lamps above her, by the radiance of automobile headlights ahead.

"It's off!" she cried sharply. "The darkness is off!"

Schaaf tore away his vision apparatus. He thrust it into his pocket with a shaking hand.

"We are licked," he said miserably. "Hines, I know it. We haff beaten him in one way, because we haff fixed it so he cannot do this same thing again. But I know that he has beaten us in some other way. I am afraid, Hines! I am afraid!"

Hines stared about grimly, his clumsy headgear in his hands.

"I suppose," he said curtly, "he's got his outfit mined, so we can't examine it; or has it filled with gas. We'll wear gas-masks and go cautiously."

He gave orders. Men got out of the cars and began to group themselves on foot.

"Skirmish order!" snapped Hines impatiently. "Masks adjusted, too! You know what the man looks like. If you see him, shoot to kill!"

He started forward. Kathryn made a futile gesture after him. She heard a chattering noise beside her. It was Schaaf's teeth. He swore to himself in German and climbed clumsily over to the deserted chauffeur's seat.

"I am a *verdammter Esel!*" he said bitterly, "and I am scaredt to der marrow of my bones. But I haff to do it."

He pressed on the starter of the car. The motor whirred and caught. In a moment more the car was crawling along the street after the men on foot.

"It is a garage," said Schaaf, through chattering teeth. "A big garage according to der bearings we haff taken. And der apparatus is inside it. *Ach, mein Gott*, how scaredt I am!"

Slowly the men on foot moved down the street. A dilapidated sign

appeared in the headlight glow. A dirty, unpainted, seemingly deserted building with the monstrous doors of a storage garage.

No lights showed within. No sound of movement. Emptiness. Silence. Desertion.

Other figures on foot appeared far ahead. They hastened to join Hines.

"In there," said Schaaf in a quavering voice, "is der apparatus that would make der scientific reputation of der man that first described it. And I am scaredt!"

With masks adjusted. Hines's men reached the face of the building. A man tried the door. Hines barked at him and took his place. He tried it with his shoulder.

Schaaf fairly screamed. "Hines! Hines! Look! *Die Katze!*"

An alley-cat had crept shivering to the feet of the uniformed men, in the instinct of all domestic animals to turn to man in the face of the inexplicable. The surrounding darkness had been too deep for even her eyes to penetrate. She was rubbing her side against Hines's legs, mutely begging to be comforted.

And suddenly she staggered and kicked crazily, and fell!

"Gas!" gasped Schaaf. "From der crack at der bottom of der door! Hines, der place is full of gas! You haff to get der people out of der buildings around and about. You know what gas can be!"

Hines snarled. He had drawn himself back to fling his whole weight on the door, to break it in. But he gave the orders.

With a dozen men he waited before the building while policemen went shouting through adjoining buildings, flashing their flashlights and ordering all occupants out. The street, illuminated only by the stars, became flooded with humanity almost hysterical with joy at the sight of the stars again, until told that the source of all the darkness was within the building near by. Then they fled in senseless panic. The street became empty again.

"Now," growled Hines, "I suppose it'll be all right."

"Please!" begged Schaaf. "I ask you, Hines, to leafe der gas escape. And when we enter, let us tunnel in through der walls. He will haff expected doors to be broken down, and he could leafe bombs."

Hines growled again. "I'll put a cordon around four blocks," he grunted. "The government at Washington wants to know how the thing was done, for a weapon if we ever have war again. I ought not to risk ruining it."

The building all about were emptied of people now, and those people were racing toward lighted streets in the distance.

The city is divided into many districts by the electric companies, and any one of them may be isolated, in case of damage to the wiring. The street was utterly empty. Hines reached a police telephone. Within minutes there were wild clangings. Load after load of reserves climbed down to the street. There were a thousand men available for duty in twenty minutes after the cutting off of the darkness. And Hines made a cordon about four square blocks that not even a cat could have broken through.

"We're going to wait," he announced curtly, reluctantly, "for the gas to dissipate. Meanwhile Washington will be telephoned to, and Army gas-experts will come by plane. The apparatus is wanted by the national government."

Schaaf was heart-broken. But then Kathryn said timidly: "Do you— do you suppose Preston is in the building? That he may have killed himself when he found he was defeated?"

"We haff no such luck," said Schaaf morbidly. "I am worrying, Miss Bush, because I haff a hunch that my brain has been dead. There is something that I haff not thought of, which I should haff thought of."

He sat with his head in his hands, muttering impatiently at intervals. Kathryn most deplorably forgot even the *Star*, waiting to see Hines, for whom she had felt such horrible terror. He was back in the isolated district, combing the deserted buildings for possibly overlooked human beings.

And then, very suddenly, there was a terrific explosion. A sheet of flame shot upward to the skies. The streets shook. Buildings rocked. Glass fell in tinkling showers from buildings all over the city. And then there were crashes—horrible crashes—as shaken and undermined buildings collapsed.

Kathryn went deathly pale. Her body was rigid. After minutes she whispered. "He— he is in there!"

And Schaaf cursed frantically in German because he believed the same. But a group of men came running, in advance of a thinning, wavering cloud of smoke. Hines broke out in front of them. He came on, calling anxiously: "Kathryn! Kathryn!" She stood up, sobbing in relief. "Here I am! I thought you were killed!"

They seemed to melt into each other's arms.

Suddenly Schaaf groaned, and swore more deeply than ever before, and said bitterly: "Of course, Hines, der deffil has destroyed his apparatus. But more important, and much as I hate to interrupt der party, I beg to inform you that you are one terrible boob, and a guy named Schaaf is another."


Hines flushed deeply and said: "Why? What's the matter?"

"We did not kill Breton, as you know," said Schaaf disgustedly. "But der worst of it is that we nefer efen guessed what he was drifting at all der time! He had no hope of getting ten millions' ransom from der city of New York. But he has got rich, all der same. Before he started any of der works he had sold stocks in der stock market, going short of all der stocks in creation. And when he began to pull his stuff, der stock market went to hell and gone, and he cofered, and began to buy. When der world knows, in der morning, that we haff licked der scoundrel, and haff fixed it so he cannot do der same thing again, all der stocks will go up again. Instead of ten millions, der son-of-a-gun may haff made twenty or thirty of them by der way der stock market behafed—which he was der only man to know in advance!"

Hines growled: "Any police force in the world can beat him now, though!"

"If he tries der same stunt again," agreed Schaaf. He eyed the two of them wrathfully. "Oh, you aren't interested! Go on and hold hands! Make lofe! Go on! I giff you up!"

And they followed his advice to the letter.



The City Of The Blind

by Murray Leinster

(author of *The Darkness on Fifth Avenue*)

WHEN HINES DISMISSED the police chauffeur and started up to his apartment he was tired. Moreover, it was raining; one of those irritating, persistent, drizzling rains against which a top and windshield is no protection whatever. The street lamps and the entrance lights of the apartment building were reflected by the wetted pavements, that even-

Preston—the warped but brilliant man who was behind the darkness on Fifth Avenue—was still alive; and his price for sparing New York was the assassination of Lt. Hines and Dr. Schaaf, the two who had beaten him earlier.

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FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY was one of *ARGOSY'S* many companion magazines, and MURRAY LEINSTER contributed stories to its pages, as well as to the others. The editor was not entirely averse to running a detective story which was also something of a science fiction tale, and when Leinster submitted *The Darkness on Fifth Avenue*, it seemed like a good off-trail crime story to run. But then the author came up with three sequels, of which the present story is the first, and it was obvious that the series belonged in *ARGOSY*, rather than *FLYNN'S*; so that is where all four appeared. To the best of our knowledge and belief, only the first story was ever reprinted before we offered it to you; and these other three have seen no previous reprint at all.

tective bureau of the City of New York without acquiring ill-wishers; and one does not survive their ill-will without a little luck and more alertness.

But the moving figure was a slickered patrolman, who saluted. "Evening, inspector." Hines nodded, relaxing. He saw another slickered officer beyond the first. Others. His eyes sharpened by sudden curiosity, Hines saw four men within a hundred yards, waiting in the rain as if for something expected.

"What is it?" he asked. "How is it you men are posted here?"

"Guard, sir," said the patrolman. He smiled. "For you, sir. The commissioner's orders."

Hines stared. "But what—" He stopped.

"Mr. Schaaf, sir," said the patrolman, "is waiting up in your rooms. We were ordered to stand guard outside and look out for suspicious persons. It's believed, sir, that someone may try to assassinate you."

Hines grunted. "News to me," he growled. "Nonsense, anyhow. I'll call headquarters and have you relieved. No use your standing in the rain."

He went into the foyer of the building. An impeccably dressed man with the air of one waiting in boredom for a taxi was lounging inside.

Hines grunted again. "Hello, Davidson," he growled. "You, too?"

"Yes, sir," said the lounger. "The commisisoner has been worried about you, sir."

Hines frowned. When one has been a lieutenant of police for a few years, seeing very slight hope of promotion, and then after a violent disagreement with the commisisoner one enables the said commisisoner to cope with something brand-new and extremely dangerous coming out of the underworld, it is natural for the commissioner to realize his debt. It is even natural—though unusual—to receive an arbitrary promotion to an inspectorship. But such solicitude over one's health—

The descending elevator clicked its stop. The door swept open silently. Hines stepped in. Four patrolmen on guard outside his apartment house. A plainclothesman inside the foyer. Perhaps other men posted about.

He got out on his own floor. Another man from the detective bureau looked up alertly, stood up, and Hines scowled at him.

"Hully!" he growled. "This is too much! How many of you have been taken off useful duty and stuck around guarding me?"

"There's a man on every floor, sir," said the detective.

"It's a hell of a note," said Hines angrily. "I'll phone and have you relieved at once. I don't need guards!"

He put the key in his door and went in. He entered pitch-darkness.

A voice said placidly, "Now, der fluorescence of atmospheric ions under der influence of short Hertzian wafes—"

Hines snorted. "Schaaf! What the devil is all this foolishness?"

Lights flashed on, and Hines stared blankly at the sight before him. He knew Schaaf, certainly. That tall German scientist had made all the difference between success and failure in his efforts to cope with the malevolent scientific genius Preston in his alliance with the underworld a month or so before.

Schaaf was six feet and something, with a luxuriant blond beard and an expression of complete placidity under all circumstances. Hines had been told Schaaf was waiting for him. But—

Schaaf was present in six separate incarnations. There were six men in the room, and each one of them was something over six feet tall and each one wore an expression of complete placidity and a luxuriant blond beard. It was practically impossible to tell them apart. After an instant's bewildered survey, however, Hines growled and nodded to the man whose whiskers were indubitably his own.

"Hell's bells!" he snapped. "What's the matter? Have you gone crazy and made the police department crazy with you?"

Schaaf beamed. "These gentlemen," he observed placidly, "are a

disguise. When you are encountering a fery intelligent man, Hines, der best way to confuse him is to do der most foolish thing you can think of. Then he cannot anticipate your actions, because if you are fairly clefer you can think of a lot of foolishness."

Hines growled again. "You've done it, all right. What's it all about?"

Schaaf waved his hand. "We go into executife session," he observed. "My disguise will now excuse us, and we think wise, deep, and profound thoughts, and maybe do something sensible for a change. Where der deffil were you to-day? Efverybody on der police force was looking for you."

"Legwork, practically," said Hines, frowning. "That Helman murder case. It looked bad. The idiot had insured his life and couldn't wait a year to commit suicide. Tried to fake his suicide as a murder, so his wife would get his insurance; and he didn't have sense enough to arrange an alibi for her."

"Which you broceded to do. You are always altruistic," said Schaaf. "Now sit down and don't smoke der cigars in your own humidor. Take one of mine. It is safer. My disguise is going out and we can talk."

The five men with blond false whiskers were going out of the room. Schaaf beamed upon Hines, who had halted with his hand on the humidor cover.

"Why—"

"Don't smoke it," said Schaaf with sudden grimness, "because Breston or some friendt of his has been in here today."

Hines jumped. "Preston! But he's dead!"

"Like hell he's dead," said Schaaf placidly. "He is der most actif and most irritating corpse I efer ran across."

He passed over one of his own cigars. Hines took it, staring.

"But that bomb blew him—"

"Nowhere at all," Schaaf assured him. "He took der apparatus that makes darkness along with him down to der Battery, with us chasing after him gayly, shooting sneeze-bombs at him, trying to pour water on him, doing all that der combined resources of me, and you, and der Bolice Department could think of. And he got into a launch, we considered, and was blown to bits out in der harbor. Der army airplane dropped a bomb into his pancake of darkness andt we saw a boat that was sinking when der darkness vanished. And der police launches fished up farious fragments which they pieced together abbroximately into one corpse.for burial. But that was all."

Hines sank into a chair and bit off the end of his cigar.

"But," said Schaaf placidly, "we knew he had two men with him when she started toward der Battery. You shot one of them when he lifted der darkness to see where he was. There was one more left with him. We assumed that both of them got in der launch that was smashed up."

Hines growled, "He wasn't fool enough to stay behind, was he?"

"He wasn't a fool if he did," observed Schaaf. "My dear Hines, suppose he slipped oferboard from der piling while der launch went on out with his companion to be blown into little pieces? It was der sensible thing for him to do. If Breston fanished, der gunman with him would go like der deffil, carrying der dárkness, and wewould go like der deffil after him. Which we did."

Hines eyes narrowed. "We were a pack of fools!" he said grimly. "We should have looked under the wharf. But why are you sure he got away?"

"A man told me," said Schaaf. He puffed comfortably. "I haff a good job with der Research Department of der American Electric Company. I got it because Miss Bush made me famous when she wrote up Breston's party. Today I was working fery hard and my brain went dead on me. And there is a quick lunch near by where they haff abominable coffee which is a great stimulant. I went there to get a cup of it.

"A gentleman came in and sat down beside me. He placed a large bowl of soup on der arm of der chair next to mine. He entered into conversation. He asked if I was Professor Schaaf, der great scientist. I admitted it with becoming modesty. And I saw a car waiting at der door with a number of fery efficient-looking gentlemen in it. I looked back and saw my friend getting out an automatic pistol to shoot me with. I beaned him, as you call it, with his own plate of soup. Then I carried him out to der kitchen and stuffed his head in a tub of mashed potatoes while police whistles were being blown and der deffil raised generally. Der others ran away."

He shook his head reflectively.

"A fery angry person, that gentleman. At der police station he said that Breston had offered him life grand to bump me off, but that when he got out of prison he would do it for nothing, just for his own private pleasure. Der police want him fery badly, and but for der comestibles I beaned him with, he would haff shot me and got away."

Hines chewed savagely on the end of his cigar. "Preston's alive, then," he said grimly.

"I went to der Commissioner. He began to throw fits at once, fery entertainingly. He knows it was by luck that we licked that *verdamm*

Breston last time. He said to find you at once, before you were killed, for Breston will want to kill both of us because we know too much about him. So I borrowed der fife men to wear whiskers and follow me around for our protection. If a gunman wants to kill me, he will haff to kill all of us to be sure he gets der right one, and it will be confusing and possibly tedious. And then I ditched der research work and set people to work looking for you."

Hines chewed his cigar again, remembered and lighted it, and scowled.

"I'll be assigned to the job of finding him," he observed grimly. "And if he tried to have you killed, he'll try for me too. But why do you think he had some one in here today?"

Schaaf grimaced. "When I came in to wait for you. I made myself at home as always. I sat down, and I reached in der humidor for a cigar. And like I always do, I cracked der cigar and smelled it. You smoke fery bad cigars, Hines. Fery bad. But der cigars in der humidor were good ones. So I got suspicious. I cut one open and there are some small crystals inserted in der tobacco which I suspect would not be healthy for you to smoke when der heat reached them. Yes?"

Hine's eyes glowed suddenly. "I see," he said shortly.

"Breston is making ready to turn on der darkness of his, and he wants to get us out of der way. He is starting a new campaign—"

Sudden, dense, abominable blackness filled the room. The glow of the lighted lamps went out utterly. The windows did not even show as grayish rectangles from the streetlights outside. Hines felt his heart pumping suddenly. He looked at his cigar. The glow of its tip was totally invisible. He touched his finger to it and was scorched. It was still burning, but the air no longer transmitted its light. The blackness seemed even tangible. Hines reached up to the electric bulb over his head and felt it. It was hot, but it did not glow.

Schaaf's voice came through the horrible darkness. It was placid as before. "Yes. He is starting a new campaign. And this is der opening gun."

"Just a minute," said Hines.

He jerked off the shade of the lamp by his chair. The hot bulb scorched his fingers. He brought it close to his eyes. At eight inches he could see the filament as a dully glowing red line. At six it was bright. At four inches from his eyes he could see his fingers on the other side of the bulb.

"It's Preston's darkness, all right," said Hines coolly. "Nothing else

on Earth absorbs light like that. And at a guess he's aiming for us, somehow."

"I haff a hunch," said Schaaf in the absolute darkness. "It is a splendid hunch and fery comforting. If you will giff me your wordt of honor not to touch der telephone—"

"I ought to call headquarters," said Hines, every sense alert, "and report this right away."

"So you should. But for der luff of Gott don't do it! Wait!"

Silence fell. A woman screamed affrightedly somewhere, floors below. There was a hammering on the door of the apartment.

"Keep out!" barked Hines. "All right in here! The darkness will lift presently."

Silence, and blackness. Horrible, absolute blackness. The utter blackness in which the blind live always.

Sounds became magnified by the utter lack of light. Hines could hear his heart beating. He heard Schaaf breathing, five feet away. He heard the rustling of cloth as Schaaf seemed to lift his cigar to his lips. The ticking of his watch became suddenly deafeningly loud. There were sounds, a long way off, as if people were exclaiming alarmedly at something. A man began to bellow, "Get a doctor! I've gone blind! Somebody get a doctor!"

And then, with the barest possible flickering, the room leaped back into light. The bulbs glowed dazzlingly after the incredible darkness of a moment before. The torn-off lampshade looked astoundingly untidy, flung on the floor.

Hine's face was grim and hard and a trifle pale. Schaaf was much paler.

"It was a strain on der hunch, to wait," Schaaf said quietly. "But it worked out. I think der telephone is phony, Hines. Der apartment cannot be rung from der switchboard below. Come and stand in der doorway with me. If I did not stop you, you would have called headquarters at once, wouldn't you?"

"I'd have called while the darkness held," said Hines grimly.

"And that," said Schaaf soberly, "was maybe what der darkness was for. Now I ruin a book. Dodge behind here, Hines."

He motioned Hines back behind a wall and held a book ready. "If der instrument is phony," he observed, "it will spring its little surprise when der receiver goes off der hook."

He flung the book with a quick motion of his hand and darted back to the telephone. The book sailed across the empty room. The telephone was

struck obliquely and knocked to the very edge of its stand. It tottered there a moment, wavered, and started to fall to the floor.

A terrific explosion rocked the building! It was so sharp a detonation that it was over before the ear had time to register its impact. It was stunning in its brittleness. It was incredibly loud and incredibly fierce and incredibly venomous. Plaster from the ceiling fell upon Hines and Schaaf, in the next room.

There was a huge, gaping hole torn in the floor. The walls were shattered, the furniture smashed. The telephone, the stand—everything within five feet of the telephone instrument had been blown to powder.

If Hines had lifted the receiver to call Police Headquarters, every fragment of his body would have been annihilated.

II

It was impossible to keep the thing out of the newspapers. Too many people had been in the three-block circle which had gone dark for the sole purpose of making Hines pick up the telephone and so be blown to bits. But the bomb-explosion itself disturbed very few people. Hines could have been spattered against the walls of his apartment without causing any great commotion, had it not been for the accompanying darkness. It was the darkness which frightened New York.

Some six weeks before, a beam of darkness had been laid upon Fifth Avenue for precisely fifteen minutes. In that quarter of an hour a forewarned underworld had reaped a harvest. Jewelers had been robbed. Pedestrians had been stripped of their possessions. Every possible source of valuables that could be cleaned out in fifteen minutes had been looted. In addition, there had been many deaths in the panics caused by the darkness, and there had been some crimes too horrible for the newspapers to record.

For two weeks, New York was in panic. Hines knew, and Schaaf knew, and Kathryn Bush of the *New York Star* knew who had caused the darkness, and partly how it had been done.

A certain man, Preston, had made use of Schaaf's researches and had discovered that the ionized particles of the air absorbed all light that struck upon them, and re-radiated it as heat, when under the influence of certain short Hertizian waves. Preston had made a deal with the underworld for a share of the profits they could win in a street with all men blind. His profits had been enormous.

Two weeks after the Fifth Avenue episode, Preston had tried to use the

same flood of blackness to make possible the theft of four million dollars in currency and securities in transit between two banks in the financial district. With Hines and Schaaf forewarned, the entire resources of the police and fire departments had enabled them to foil the attempt, and it seemed that Preston had been killed. New York breathed more easily. But in less than a full day from the bomb explosion in Hines's apartment, New York was a bundle of nerves again. Everybody knew that at any instant any part of the city might be plunged into abysmal blackness in which lights served no purpose at all; a blackness in which the forewarned hordes of the underworld would be quickly at work to loot and kill with complete impunity. And New York's nerves went bad.

First, of course, the Stock Exchange began at its opening to show symptoms of panic at least as great as that of the public in general. And the public in general was on the edge of hysteria and sometimes slipped over that edge.

A fuse blew out in a Lexington Avenue subway train. The lights went out, leaving it in darkness. A woman shrieked "The Darkness!" and there was a wild surge of fear-crazed passengers. Four people were dead when it was over.

At the Yankee Stadium, a dark thundercloud formed quickly overhead and a deep shadow fell upon the grandstand. The crowd went mad with terror, and fifteen people died.

For the rest, the Broadway theaters were nearly deserted, but there was instance after instance of mob insanity in neighborhood moving picture houses until the police rather desperately considered closing all public gathering-places until the tendency to panic subsided.

Hines worked. The average man considers detective work as mostly the art of sitting still and thinking intensively about certain conveniently distributed clues. It is much more complicated and much less comfortable than that.

Hines was directing practically the whole detective force of the city in a frantic quest for Preston. First, of course, there was the attempt to locate the spot from which the short waves that produced the darkness had been transmitted. The area of the darkness was found by painstaking inquiry.

It was a circle some three blocks in every direction. Plotted on the map, the center of that circle turned out to be a tiny triangular park with a seedy patch of grass and a seedier statue of an obscure patriot.

"He was in a car," said Hines drearily. "He had his outfit in a car, probably parked there, as he watched for me to pass going home or

maybe just for lights to go on my windows. Then he turned on the dark knowing I'd identify it for what it was and start to telephone headquarters at once. He probably heard his damned bomb go off."

But no car had been noticed as parked where the center of the darkness had been. That was a blind lead.

The investigation of the bomb was similarly fruitless. The fake telephone instrument had been blown to fragments too small to offer any clues. It seemed to have been loaded with mercuric fulminate, an explosive so powerful that it is commonly used as a detonator for the ordinary "high explosive."

All that could be learned about the bomb was that an elderly telegraph messenger had been deposited on Hines's floor with a box apparently of flowers. But no telegraph messenger had been sent to the building by any messenger service.

It seemed most probable that the messenger had been a lock worker and had opened Hines's door, changed telephone instruments and the cigars, and gone peacefully out again. He had left no fingerprints in the apartment. And the elevator-boy, though he gave a voluble description of the elderly messenger, was unable to identify any photograph in the Rogues' Gallery until a picture of a messenger's uniform was cut out to be held over the standard photographs to assist his memory. Then he identified nine separate photographs as those of the messenger in question, and ultimately gave up in despair.

That also was a blind lead, so Hines set grimly to work to check up on every person in New York who had bought certain essentials of all short-wave radio sending outfits within the past four weeks. It was a task of titanic proportions.

The cigars were examined minutely, and offered no suggestions whatever. They were a standard brand, sold by thousands of stores and counters. The cyanide crystals had been inserted with a needle from the trimmed end. They were untraceable.

The gangster who had tried to assassinate Schaaf was obstinately silent, but it soon became evident that he knew nothing to tell, even had he been willing to talk. The others who had waited in the car outside had vanished utterly.

The last possibility came to Hines as he was racking his brains desperately for some other possibility, however unpromising. He was chewing at a cigar he had allowed to go out, and talked to himself in default of a more inspiring audience.

"He covers his tracks, always. We stepped on his last scheme by

jumping ahead on him. What will he try now? What was the weakness of his last scheme? Hm. Lack of power. He could only blanket a certain area. He'll want to make the whole city dark, for safety, next time."

Inspiration came. He jumped for the telephone and had Schaaf on the wire in minutes.

"Look here!" Hines snapped. "If Preston wanted to design a bigger outfit, would he have to look anything up? Consult authorities, charts, figures, or anything of the sort?"

Schaaf's placid voice came over the wire. "It is fery probable. Yes. A good technical library would safe him fery much trouble. I haff an idea, Hines, all my own. Der ionization—"

"Hold it!" said Hines. "Get a stenographer and dictate as many titles of the books Preston will need, as you can think of. I'm sending down some of my men. Give each one a copy. They'll go to all the technical libraries in the city and try to check up who's used those books lately. See?"

"Smart!" said Schaaf approvingly, over the wire. "Der more especially as Breston will surely want certain titles, like Strutt on der Differential Ionization of Isotopes, which not forty men in der United States can make head or tail of, and then they can't see der difference. Yes, you haff an idea, Hines. Send them down. And I haff a little idea of my own. When you get a chance to see me, I will tell you."

Hines rang off, satisfied. It wasn't a bad idea. The chances were against finding anything useful, but every man makes some slip, somewhere, and most detective work depends exclusively on finding that slip.

The door of his office opened and Kathryn Bush came in. She looked at once excited and apprehensive; thrilled and filled with an uneasy dread. Hines jerked to his feet and took her hand.

"My friend," said Kathryn with a queer smile, "why have you set two detectives to guard me?"

Hines turned brick-red and scowled. "Confounded, clumsy—" he began.

She shook her head. "They were awfully careful, and very good," she protested. "It was fully half a day before I noticed them. And—I need them, I think. Preston knows we're friends, you and I."

Hine's muscles grew taut.

"He telephoned me today, at the *Star*," said Kathryn quietly. "He used your name to clinch my interest, and made threats. Then he told me, very unpleasantly, to look for—this."

She dropped an envelope on Hines's desk. "It was in the morning

mail, not yet opened. There's a legman waiting to take it back to the *Star*, when you've read it."

Hines picked up the envelope, felt it over, went to the window and carefully tore it open. He sniffed at it cautiously before he came back to his desk and shook it out on the blotter.

"He's got me nervous," he admitted with a wry smile. "Gas, for instance. He might have anticipated your bringing it to me."

He opened the sheet with the ends of two rulers. "I've been wanting a good set of his fingerprints," he observed, in a certain amount of apology for his caution. "The ones we got last time weren't perfectly clear."

And then he read:

To the Editor of the *Star*:

Today, at twelve fifteen o'clock, daylight saving time, I shall blanket the entire metropolitan area in darkness for five minutes.

Tomorrow, at three o'clock, I shall blanket the city in darkness for one-half hour.

Thereafter, each day, I shall blanket the city in darkness for such times as please me, at such hours as I shall select, until my terms have been met.

I will agree to leave the City of New York unmolested for one year for the sum of ten millions of dollars, to be remitted to me as I may later direct, and when Police Inspector Hines and Professor Albert Schaaf are no longer living. The news of the acceptance of my terms may be broadcast by all radio stations.

I am not concerned with the source of the ten millions of dollars. I do not care who shall kill Inspector Hines or Professor Schaaf. But I will pay, personally, twenty-five thousand dollars to any person who will kill either one of them, or fifty thousand dollars for them both.

Other newspapers in the city are receiving copies of this letter.

THOMAS PRESTON.

Hines looked up and smiled pleasantly. "I'll give your legman a photographic copy in ten minutes," he observed. He pushed a button. "Now I begin to have hopes!"

Kathryn was deadly white.

"Sit down," said Hines. "It's ten five now, and I'm going to get busy. You'll have a story for your paper, and if you want to phone it in, there's a telephone."

Kathryn moistened her lips. "You're going to— let the letter be printed?" she asked unevenly. "Offering money to kill you?"

Hines laughed and went out. In five minutes or less he was back. He took up the phone and began to give crisp orders. As an inspector of police, he had vastly more authority than as a mere lieutenant, and moreover the commissioner was in nearly as bad a nervous state as the city at large. Hines had been given nearly unlimited authority in the matter of Preston, and he began to use it.

Kathryn heard him give a blanket order to all traffic stations and all traffic orders. Another to go to all patrolmen on duty. A third to be transmitted to all business houses. A statement to be broadcast by radio. An order to the subway and elevated operating departments. To the surface car lines. Then a series of directions as to the redistribution of police reserves.

He swung about in his chair. "There's your story," he observed, "on the answer to Preston's threat. Why don't you phone it in? The *Star* will be getting out an extra, won't it?"

Kathryn tried to smile. "When I left, for here, they were clearing the way for one, holding a blank front page and all the rewrite men championing at their typewriters."

A voice came up from the street below. "Wuxtry! Wuxtry!"

"We're beaten to the street!" wailed Kathryn. "Because I brought the letter to you instead of having it opened."

Hines smiled. "You've better stuff to go in the extra of the *Star*. Here, use this telephone."

He got the connection for her. A legman was streaking it for the *Star* offices with the photographed letter. And Kathryn began to dictate feverishly over the wire to a swearing city room which was collectively tearing its hair over having carried an honorable cooperation with the police to the extent of being beaten to the street with an extra on Preston's announced intentions.

But as Kathryn began to talk, that swearing died down. Typewriters began to hum and rattle. The crashing roar of linotypes began on the lower floors. The *Star* was ready for its story. The story was written, set up, matted, cast, trimmed, and inserted into the waiting presses in time which beat all records for the *Star* or any other paper.

It was, as a matter of fact, little more than thirty minutes from the time Kathryn hung up the receiver before trucks began to spread over the city with huge bundles of papers being torn apart and hurled wildly at

newsstands by bulk distributors already racing at full speed toward other stands.

It was a little after eleven when Hines spread out the paper on his own desk. Kathryn had once absurdly visualized Hines's name in hundred-and-and-twenty-point type in a *Star* headline. She saw it now in hundred-and-sixty-eight point. The headlines screamed.

HINES FIGHTS PRESTON!

*Traffic Ordered Stopped Before Darkness
Falls — Pedestrians to Get Under Shelter
at Noon — All Buildings Closed During
Darkness — Subways to Stop — All
Travel Suspended*

As news-matter in a city already terrified by the threat of universal blindness, the moves taken against that darkness were vastly more important than anything else. Preston's letter and its photostatic copy were on the front page, to be sure, but "Ten Millions Ransom Demanded," with its appropriate write-up, was crowded away down to the bottom of the sheet.

At a quarter to twelve the streets of New York seemed almost deserted. There were vehicles parked by thousands. Parking rules were not only suspended, but parking was ordered by the police. The sidewalks were empty. At twelve o'clock the sun shone down brightly upon a city that seemed to have been deserted by all its inhabitants. Stores were closed and barred. Banks had drawn huge grilles across their entrances. Surface cars stopped short at any spot their motormen chose and remained still.

The city was motionless without movement of any sort. Even the boats in the harbor were docked or anchored wherever they happened to be. Railroad trains puffed and hissed, quite stationary, upon their tracks. Only the windows of the city were alive. Every window of every building was packed with faces, staring out for the beginning of the darkness.

But it came on with an utter absence of the spectacular.

An aviator was flying twelve thousand feet up, by Hines's order, to take an air-photo of the phenomenon. A slow-motion motion-picture camera clicked inaudibly beside him, its noise drowned by the roaring of the motors. He leaned over the side of the fuselage, his companion waiting with a ray-filter camera and its plates. Gazing down upon the city, the

saw no sign or symptom of anything wrong. The city lay bright and glittering below him. Extraordinarily still, of course.

Only the ever-present tiny plumes of steam from the tops of tall buildings moved. No ships steamed about the harbor. No crawling traffic stirred in the streets. The city was extraordinarily still, but bright and brave and glittering in the sunlight.

And then — it *was not*. The city was there no longer. Instead of the city, there was a vast expanse of blackness. It extended to the outskirts of Newark in a dense black flood. It reached up toward Yonkers, and it overwhelmed all Brooklyn, and it blotted out even the Narrows. From aloft it did not seem to possess a substance. It looked rather as if a bottomless gulf, the abyss itself, had opened a gaping mouth nearly twenty miles wide and swallowed the city into oblivion.

III

A little more than twenty-four hours later the streets were similarly and singularly dead when the big police car drew to a stop before the American Electric Building. It was half past two in the afternoon, and New York had been warned that all its inhabitants would be blinded for half an hour, at three.

Coming down Broadway, all through the wholesale district there had been the same spectacle. Empty store-windows, with grilles in place where grilles could be provided. Doors locked. Few cars, or none. No pedestrians at all. Worried policemen looking more and more suspiciously at the few scurrying vehicles darting uptown.

The city already seemed like a city of the dead. The five minutes of blackness, the day before, had made New York a city trembling on the verge of blind panic. There were nervous persons already having chills from terror of the darkness which would come on at three. The hospitals already began to experience an influx of hysterical patients, in advance of the event which called forth their hysteria.

Always, of course, there are a certain number of people with unstable mentalities in a city the size of New York. Always there a certain number who will be pushed over the edge to complete insanity by any exciting event. A doctor at Bellevue can estimate with a near approach to accuracy just how many citizens of New York will go insane over almost any given event, from a transatlantic flight to a national election.

In the case of the darkness Preston turned on at will, the estimate can below the probable figure for, say, a comet visible to the naked eye,

like Halley's comet, but it was considered that more mental patients would be produced than even by a financial panic in Wall Street. The event justified the prediction. Bellevue's observation wards were nearly filled by bright-eyed feverish people who could think of nothing but The Darkness.

There were a dozen people lingering before the American Electric Building when Hines got out. Policemen on duty there thrust them back. But they eyed Hines nervously, or hopefully, or balefully, as their natures dictated. One man began to shout hysterically, and was promptly collared by a burly patrolman.

"It's Bellevue for you, me lad," said the cop philosophically, "an' don't be bringin' the Lord into it, because 'tis your own nuttiness that makes ye think the Inspector is at the bottom av all the trouble."

Hines's expression was grim, and he was beginning to look very, very tired, when he turned to Kathryn inside the building.

"That man's typical," he said, smiling without any mirth. "Since the publication of Preston's letter sixty or seventy crank letters have come in, explaining why I should permit myself to be assassinated for the good of the city. One woman wrote that I would be dying heroically if I permitted her to do the job, because I would be dying for the benefit of millions, and letting her bump me off would give her twenty-five thousand dollars she needed very badly."

"You — you are in danger," said Kathryn, unevenly, "with people getting hysterical like this."

"After today," said Hines, smiling wearily, "I'm to be given a body-guard. But we're progressing. We've got a picture of Preston now, thanks to you, and we're printing posters by the hundred thousand."

The elevator began to carry them swiftly upward. Hines looked at his watch. "Twenty minutes more," he said tiredly. "I hope Schaaf's little tricks work. I'm still hoping for something from some of mine."

Kathryn watched his face anxiously. He did look tired. He had been working night and day for four days, now. Ever since the bomb explosion in his own apartment. His eyes were beginning to be sunken in.

"That picture," he said suddenly. "We got a clear set of Preston's fingerprints from that letter he sent you yesterday. We sent them to Washington by telephone transmission. They were all ready to work on them, and had twenty clerks looking them up."

At Kathryn's expression of mute interrogation, he explained wearily.

"Preston is thirty-five or so. He should have been in the army in the last war. And the fingerprints of every man who was in the army are on file in Washington. They found him. Private, Chemical Warfare Battalion.

Found his home town, Clinton, Delaware. The police there jumped to work, hunting up his relatives. All dead. They finally found a girl who'd been engaged to him. She had a picture. They sent it on to us by airplane. Schaaf and I watched a photographer retouch it—age it, to look just as he does now, beard and all. The posters are being run off now."

The elevator stopped. Armed guards watched them come out of the elevator. Hines smiled.

"Schaaf doesn't like to, be shot at. Quite sensible, really. I hate to be trailed around, though."

He followed a guide through a wide-open door marked, "No Admittance Without A Pass." A man with yellow whiskers started to his feet, then sank down again. A second man, identical with the first in whiskers, height, and clothing, even to a tiny flower in his botton-hole, pointed silently to another door.

Then four yellow-whiskered men—the exact doubles of the first two—were seen. Three of them were tugging some heavy piece of apparatus into place under the direction of the fourth. It was the fourth who waved his hand abstractedly to them.

"Just in time, Hines. Ah, Miss Bush! Sit down! We haff fifteen full minutes, because that *verdamm!* Breston is always on time to der second. Just a minute."

He went on, busily superintending the dragging into place of a huge screen that seemed to be made of wire netting. His three doubles worked willingly, but unskillfully.

"It looks," said Kathryn under her breath, "like something he does with mirrors—all those doubles of his."

Hines managed to smile. Schaaf seemed to be satisfied, looked at his watch, and emitted an anguished howl. Instantly, it seemed, men were running and seating themselves at various predetermined positions and taking up pieces of apparently complicated apparatus in their hands.

"I did der placing of der instruments with members of der Whisker Sextette as my assistants," explained Schaaf placidly, "because I can shout at them, and they do not giff a damn. But der people in der laboratory here mostly understand German profanity and they find themselves insulted. Do you want to sit there in der dark, or ofer here where we may possibly throw a little light on Breston?"

Hines and Kathryn moved forward.

"A screen," said Schaaf amiably, "which intercepts all der known lengths of Hertzian wafes. Here is an apparatus with a bit of radium emanation in it. Radium emanation ionizes der air about it. We compare

der intensity of der darkness when a known ionization is present, and der intensity of der darkness in normal air. Here we see if der *verdammt* darkness prevents der transmission of light in a closed metal container. We haff an hour in which to work. Here are farious apparatuses trying to measure der wafe-length Breston uses. Here is a spectroscope with a thermocouple and a relay instead of an eye. It is to measure how much of der spectrum is absorbed by der atmospheric ions and re-radiated as heat. Here is a soft X-ray, and here der spintharoscope screen. We see if X-rays penetrate der darkness. Here is a mercury fapor lamp, which is rich in ultra-fiolet rays, and here a rhodamine plate with a filter. We see if der ultra-fiolet end of der spectum is affected. That is my pet idea, Hines, that I told you on der telephone. We haff a hell of a lot of apparatus all around. When we finish, we ought to know efery thing about Breston except der size of his collar and does he like blondes or brunettes. Sit down here. We haff three minutes more. We rehearse."

For two minutes more he conducted himself like a general. The men at the separate instruments closed their eyes. At his order they made their tests. And little bells rang, or buzzers buzzed, and curt reports were snapped in the silent laboratory.

"Good. Fery good," said Schaaf. "We work this, Hines, like an astronomical obserfation of an eclipse of der sun. Now, *Gott strafe* Breston! It's time!"

There was half a minute, three-quarters of a minute of dead silence. And then, with utter soundlessness, the world went dark. Hines felt Kathryn shrink, beside him. He groped for her hand and held it fast. They were in the horrible blackness for which there is no simile.

The darkness was so deep, so terrible, that it clutched at one's throat. There was an hysterical impulse to make a light—any sort of light. To strike a match. To flee from this horrible blindness. It felt as if there were massive walls all about, shutting off the light, as if one were buried alive, as if the boards of a veritable coffin were about one, and solid earth atop.

A man said in a staccato fashion: "Selenium cells do not respond."

"The wafe-length is not above five meters," said another curtly.

"Not above two meters," said a third voice shortly.

"Not above one-half meter," said a fourth voice.

Schaaf swore audibly in German.

"Light is transmitted in the closed tube," snapped a voice. "I shall open one end and try to get a bearing."

Schaaf stopped swearing, then began again.

"X-rays penetrate the darkness, sir, quite normally," said a tranquil voice at one side.

"Sir! The rhodamine dye is fluorescent at a distance of six feet!" said another.

Schaaf began to swear again, but this time with satisfaction.

And then a voice, shaking with excitement, said: "Herr Schaaf, I have the honor to report that the screen absorbs the short waves Preston is using. I am in light, sir, and can see the screen from six feet by the light of an electric bulb."

Schaaf emitted an explosive whoop. "Hines! Miss Bush! Walk here and shake hands with me where we can see each other! Der rhodamine dye means that we practice all der faforite forms of *Schrecklichkeit* on that deffil!"

Hines felt Kathryn's hand close convulsively on his. He stood up and fumbled his way with a peculiar feeling of helplessness, through the absolute opacity. And suddenly an arm caught at his outstretched, fumbling hand and pulled at him, and Hines felt absolutely the most peculiar sensation of his life.

His head came out into brightness. He was in a triangular space where light was visible. At the base of the triangle there was a square of ordinary wire screening, some four feet square. It rested on a table, as Hines remembered. An electric bulb burned brightly before it. At its edges the darkness began again, and the area of lightness narrowed to a point.

His head seemed disembodied. Kathryn's face was pale and blondless, and seemed dismembered from her body. Schaaf sputtered and gesticulated—judging by the motions of the head—but Hines had a singularly ghastly feeling that the three of them were decapitated heads, talking together in some noisome vault into which they had been thrown.

And then through the wall of darkness all about them a voice said harshly: "Inspector Hines! Herr Schaaf! Police Headquarters speaking on the telephone. Fires are breaking out. Panic-stricken people, in a frenzy for light, are setting fire to their houses in hopes of being able to see. Headquarters wants to know, in God's name, if there is any way to get the fire engines to the flames?"

The three bodiless heads stared at each other, there in their little tomb of light.

"Tell them," said Hines steadily, "there's only one way. Broadcast by radio that Schaaf and I are to be executed summarily and that all of

Preston's terms will be met. If they want to do that, Preston will turn off the darkness. Not otherwise."

Kathryn's eyes turned to him in horror. And Schaaf said angrily:

"And tell them that now we know how to lick der *Schweinhund*, and that they are *verdammte* fools if they do it!"

And the darkness held . . . and held . . . and held. Somewhere off in that darkness buildings were burning, wholly without light, and human beings were dying in the flames they could not see.

It was very still in the research laboratory of the American Electric Company. But suddenly a new sound arose. It was wind. It began as a humming noise. It arose to a whine, and then to a shriek. A gale of unparalleled intensity blew through the darkness which enveloped New York. When it had reached its height there began a torrential downpour of rain. Storm and flame and flood had their will for a space, of the city which was a city of the blind.

IV

THE HEADLINES WERE IN the largest obtainable type, and a good part of the reading matter below was in leaded twelve-point, double column, instead of the more customary seven. All the papers had nearly identical stories, but that of the *Star*, as having been written by Kathryn, was perhaps the most complete.

HINES DEFIES PRESTON!

Declares Darkness Can Be Neutralized

To the public these stories offered hope, because they told of a way by which the darkness could be locally defeated. Since it was produced by the action of short Hertzian waves on ionized bodies in the atmosphere, anything that would absorb Hertzian waves would "absorb" the darkness.

Metallic screens, placed vertically and grounded, had been proved to allow a space of transparent air to remain on the side away from the transmitter of the darkness-producing waves. The public was informed that ordinary bedsprings, placed upright and connected to a water pipe, would cut off the darkness on one side. Four such springs, all grounded, would make a room in which lights could be used. It was advised that such areas should be formed in houses and apartments, and that on the falling of darkness the occupants of the houses should place themselves within them.

The interiors of bank vaults, likewise, would not be affected by Preston's darkness, and it was believed that if metal-sheathed buildings had their sheathing grounded that lights could be used in the interiors. The essentials were a screen of metal and a connection to the earth.

Less important than that information, but horrible enough, was the account of the damage that had been done by the storm. Thirty fires had broken out in the darkness, too, and had raged uncontrolled for half an hour. And people had been in those houses, and unable to see the flames which licked at them.

Newspapers are commonly considered callous, but the horrors of those fires could not be described—not in words which any man could bear to read. And panic was widespread enough without added horrors. The observation wards of all the hospitals were wholly inadequate to take care of the hysterical and mental breakdown cases that poured in.

The darkness was nerve-racking to anyone. It was terrible to a strong man, deliberately exercising self-control. To the ignorant, to the excitable, to the inherently unstable among New York's population, it was literally intolerable. Cases turned up which in all their symptoms were exactly like those cases of shell-shock of which the public had learned in the last war.

When the darkness lifted, mobs surged crazily back and forth in the streets. Stark terror filled all the city. The underworld, this time, took no advantage of the blackness, because the underworld was terrified too.

The storm was described as a totally unheralded cyclone of which New York City was the center. It had reached a velocity of more than a hundred miles an hour toward its peak, and the list of damage done was heart-rending. Many shacks and flimsy frame buildings in Jersey City had collapsed from the sheer impact of the wind. The summer cottages of the Rockaways formed a tangled heap of debris. Nearly half the death list of the darkness was caused by the collapse of buildings insufficiently strong.

And then, too, the later editions of the newspapers carried additional news of further disasters to shipping, and of mobs fighting for places on out-going trains, and of mad panics on bridges and ferries among people fleeing from the city.

The commissioner of police spread out a newspaper on his desk and pointed to the headline. Hines and Schaaf and—it seemed quite natural by now—Kathryn had been summoned to him by a peremptory message. The commissioner looked drawn and haggard.

"I want this retracted," he said in nervous doggedness. "We've got to

deal with Preston. We'll try to save your lives, of course, but we've got to buy him off. We can't stand another day like this one. The whole financial district is going to pieces, the stock market's closing, and there were four hundred people killed. We can't stand another day like this!"

He pointed to the headline again.

"Hines Defies Preston!" he quoted bitterly. "That's daring him to do his worst. And four hundred dead in half an hour! Of course the storm was an accident, but—"

Schaaf snorted. "Accident, der Deffil!" he said disgustedly. "Of course, Breston may not haff anticipated it. He is no meteorologist. But do you realize that when der atmospheric ions fluoresce under der influence of his short wafes, der light-energy they receife is turned into heat? Der air gets hotter. When it gets hotter, it rises. More air underneath is heated. That also rises. Der result is like a gigantic chimney der size of der City of New York, or der blob of blackness, full of hot air and rising like der deffil. It draws in der air from round about, starting a wind. Der wind becomes a storm. Der storm becomes a cyclone. Der cyclone—well, Breston had to turn off der darkness fife minutes before he intended."

The commissioner ran his hands through his hair. "That makes it worse! We can't stand such storms! We've got to buy him off!"

Schaaf snorted again. "Buy off my grandfather Schmidt!" he said wrathfully. "My dear sir, you do not realize that now we haff Breston up a tree! He was in a car before, a truck, most brobably, and der wind nearly scared him into fits. We had bearings on der source of der darkness, and it mofed. Der fact that we gafe instructions for neutralizing der darkness profes to him that we had bearings on him. Now he knows that der darkness produces a storm in which it is not safe to be out in a truck. He knows that we can take bearings on him and find out where he is, so it is not safe for him to be under shelter. He will not dare to leafe on her darkness more than fifteen minutes at a time! Buy him off? It is foolishness."

"But we can't fight him!" snapped the commissioner. "He did more than ten millions' damage today, and Wall Street—"

Schaaf sputtered. Hines said steadily: "Do you realize that he gives only his promise to leave the city alone for one year? How much will he ask next year, if he keeps his promise? And how much the year after?"

"Not mentioning," said Schaaf scornfully, "that Hines and I now haff der scheme that will smash him, and that it will be necessary to bump us off before Breston will permit you to grofel in der mud before him."

Kathryn added quietly: "And the *Star*, of course, will print the fact