

# WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

EDWIN BAIRD, *Editor*

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*A Powerful Novel of Sinister Madmen That  
Mounts To An Astounding Climax*

# The Jailer of Souls

*Complete In This Issue*

By HAMILTON CRAIGIE



## CHAPTER ONE

### SOUTHWEST OF THE LAW

**A**LL THE WAY Westward in the smoker the man in the high-crowned, black Stetson had taken no part in the conversation. He had appeared to doze, slumping in the high-backed seat as the train rushed onward into the golden afternoon.

The three men at his back had been busy with an interminable round of poker: draw, jack-pot, and stud; deuces wild, and seven-card peak. They moved across the aisle now, as the long train slowed for the brief stop at Two-Horse Canyon, facing him obliquely and a little to his left.

Twice or thrice they had essayed to draw him into the talk, but the man in

the black Stetson had been oblivious; he had continued taciturn—morose, almost, one might have said. But he had not been asleep; rather, he had listened with all his ears as their voices had reached him between hands:

“ . . . Yes—Dry Bone—been there myself—they run things pretty much to suit *themselves* . . . Wide-open . . . Sure . . . You might call it a dead

open-and-shut proposition, I'll tell a man!"

The laugh that followed had come to the man in the black Stetson with a curious, grating note:

"Sure-thing gamblers; con-men—it's a regular crook's paradise. . . . And there's that fellow, Rook. . . ."

The eyes of the man in the black Stetson narrowed abruptly at the corners; for a moment, as a curtain is drawn swiftly from right to left, something arose to peer out of those eyes, glowing, deep-down, like a still, festering flame. But it was gone upon the instant—

" . . . And there's that fellow, Rook. . . ." the man had said.

Of a sudden he had stopped short as if he had been muzzled; presently his voice had come again, dry, matter-of-fact:

"I'll see that raise, Carpenter, and it'll cost you just twenty iron men to call. . . ."

Plainly, that name, "Rook," had been taboo; the speaker had been silently reminded of it.

The man in the black Stetson—he had been known as Black Steve Annister in the back blocks at Wooloomooloo before he had made of that name a by-word in the honkatonks and the gambling-hells from San Francisco northward to the Wind River country, and beyond it—Black Steve Annister was sitting upright now, but he had retired behind a wide-spread copy of the *Durango County Gazette*. He was not reading it, however, although he was looking through it—at the three men just across the aisle, studying them through the pin-pricks he had made in it, himself unseen.

Annister had arrived in New York only the week previous from Sourabaya, Java, and he had not waited even overnight before he had begun the long journey, broken at Washington for half a day, which had taken him now half way southwestward across the State of Texas. Presently the long train would cross the Pecos, beyond it the serrated ramparts of the Guadalupe; Dry Bone was just between.

Annister, studying the men, frowned abruptly, yawning behind his hand. Two of the men he put down for ranchers—sheep men, probably; there was about them none of the glamor of that West which lingers even now in the person of a cattleman; and these men were negligible.

But the third man would have been noticeable anywhere. He was a bull's bulk of a man, hard-featured, mouth a straight gash above a heavy chin barbered to the blood; the observer across

the aisle would have said "cowman," and registered a bull's eye with it, point-blank.

The two who were with him, evidently with interests in common, were scarcely friendly with the cowman, if such he was; it was evident in their attitude, the constraint which had fallen upon them following that mention of "Rook."

But the man in the black Stetson continued to study the big fellow through the holes in his newspaper: the hard face, tanned a rich saddle color; the nose, flattened to a smudge of flaring nostril; the cauliflower ear.

He had heard the name, "Ellison" once or twice; somewhere, deep down, it had set vibrating a chord of memory that brought with it, incongruously enough, an altogether different setting: a padded ring under twin, blazing arcs; the thud and shuffle of sliding feet; a man, huge, brutish, broad, fists like stone mauls, yet, for all his bulk, a very cat for quickness. . . .

He put down his paper now—to find those hard eyes boring into his. Ellison, or whatever the man's name was, had shifted in his seat; the glance that he turned now upon the stranger in the black Stetson was searching, probing. There was a truculence in it, a fierce, bright, avid staring, like an animal's, savage in its very directness, like a challenge—which in effect it was.

Annister returned the look, eye for eye, with a bitter, brooding insolence in which there was apparent a certain mockery, his eyes in a veiled gleaming, like the sun on water. For a long moment their glances engaged, in a silent duel, like rapier points; then the giant with the cauliflower ear vented a sound between a grunt and a snort, turning to the window, his gaze outward across the flat levels of the adjacent prairie in a kind of sightless stare.

There had been no reason in it—no logic—that Annister could see, but for the moment he had owned to a sudden sense of crisis; it had seemed to him for a moment that in the giant's eyes there had been almost a knowing, an understanding look. But the man could have no business with him—of that he was certain.

The fellow was just a bully, probably, a big, hulking lump of beef who reasented, as it might chance, Annister's undeniably cosmopolitan air; the sardonic flicker in the gray-green eyes; the cool, contemptuous appraisal. But, after all, it had been the giant who had begun it.

And yet, somehow, Annister was thinking that he had seen him before, and, oddly, illogically enough, he found

himself liking the man—why, he could not have told.

Black Steve Annister, "with the heart of a cougar and the conscience of a wolf," as a disgruntled enemy had at one time phrased it, could have sat into that game had he been so minded, with profit to himself, pecuniary and otherwise, but he had preferred to play the hand that had been dealt him. Later, at Dry Bone, that would be another matter.

Now, his lean, strong, hawklike face darkened abruptly with the thought behind his eyes, and then—for Annister had eyes in the back of his head—he was suddenly aware that the conductor was advancing along the aisle.

The three men opposite had ceased their conversation as if at an order. Two or three of the remaining passengers stared curiously, after the manner of their kind (they were small tradesmen, merchants, going on beyond the border to Tucson), as the conductor halted at Annister's elbow.

"Excuse me, Mister—Mister—" he began.

"—Annister!" The answer was low, even, controlled, but beneath the silken tone there ran a hint of iron.

"Mister Annister," repeated the conductor. "Will you—just a moment, please?"

Annister rose, following the official outward toward the vestibule. And as he went he could feel those eyes, avid, curious, boring into his back. He permitted himself the ghost of a cold grin as the conductor, turning in the entry, laid a respectful hand upon his sleeve.

"I'm—sorry, sir," he said, low. "You getting off at Dry Bone, aren't you?"

The words were less a question than a statement of fact. Annister nodded. The conductor, a tall, bronzed man who might have been an old-time line rider, shot a quick glance over his shoulder. Then he said, his tone even, matter-of-fact:

"I—*wouldn't*—if I was you."

Annister stared. Then, producing his cigar-case, lighting a long, black invincible, the twin to which the conductor had selected, he remarked casually:

"They're good cigars. . . . In the trenches we smoked 'Woodbines'—a cross between tar-heel and alfalfa; you have a lot of alfalfa out here, eh? And the 'third light,' as we used to call it, most always got his—three men lighting up from the same match, you know."

His tone abruptly hardened; the glance that he turned upon the conductor now was like a lance of flame.

"Well—I'm not superstitious—but—will you tell me *why*?"

It is significant that the conductor was breaking a ridged Company rule by joining Annister in a surreptitious cigar. Now he turned guiltily as a voice sounded from the corridor at his back:

"Ex-cuse me—but could I trouble you for a light?"

The third man, as Annister could see, was tall and heavily built, with broad shoulders and a curiously small head. He had a sharp, acquisitive nose, and a mouth tight-lipped and thin. Annister, versed in reading men, was abruptly conscious of an instinctive and overmastering repugnance. For the man's eyes were cold and cruel, sleepy-lidded, like a snake's, roving between Annister and the conductor in a furtive scrutiny.

The match was still alight. Annister, his hand steady as a rock, extended it to the newcomer, who, with an inarticulate grunt, lighter his cigarette, turning, without further speech, backward along the corridor.

Annister waited a moment until he was certain that the man was out of earshot. Then:

"The 'third light,' eh?" he murmured, his tone abruptly hardened. "Well—and why shouldn't I get off?" he asked, grimly.

The conductor for a moment seemed at a loss.

"It's like this, Mr. Annister," he said slowly. "I'm a new man on the S. P., but I've been hearing a lot—no gossip, you understand—but a conductor hears a good deal, by and large . . . And this is a cow country, or it used to be—pretty wild, in spots. Dry Bone, now—they run things pretty much to suit themselves—"

He paused, in a visible embarrassment.

"There's a party of four back there in the diner—I couldn't help overhearing what they were saying, and—well—I'm just repeating what they said, and no offense—"

"That's all right," interrupted Annister, evenly. "Go on."

"Why—they said," continued the conductor, "that you were an Eastern gambler—a—confidence-man—that you were not wanted here in Dry Bone; that it wouldn't be exactly healthy for you if you stopped off—that's all. I thought you'd be wanting to know. And if you'll take my advice, even if you haven't asked it, I'd say: go on to Tombstone—you can figure it out from there."

"Thanks," answered Annister shortly. "I'm getting off—at Dry Bone. How soon are we due?"

"Fifteen minutes," replied the conductor, glancing at his watch. "But if

I was you, sir, I'd stay aboard; it's a bad crowd there, as I happen to know, and they've got a branch of the S. S. S. there, only they work it to suit themselves: tar-and-feathers is just a picnic with that gang; they're a stemwinding bunch of assassins, I'll say! So far they've operated under cover, mostly, and down here in the Southwest—well—it ain't a lot different, in some ways, than it was thirty years ago. You'll see—because they're—"

"—Southwest of the Law—is that it?" Annister laughed shortly. "Well—much obliged, old-timer," he said. "I won't forget it. But I'm getting off."

The long train was slowing for the station stop. Annister, striding to his seat, got down his heavy bag. For a moment he stood, considering, his gaze, under lowered lids, upon the long coach and its passengers in a swift, squinting appraisal.

The three men were gone.

Somehow, they had found out who he was. Well—that made little difference, he reflected, grimly, except to force matters to a show-down, and the sooner the better.

For there was a man in Dry Bone; Annister had known him in the old time; and it was with this man, unless he was greatly mistaken, that his business had to do.

He would put it to the touch, then; he would sit into the game, and would come heeled, and they could rib up the deck on him, and welcome.

He was turning to the door when, of a sudden, there came to him a second warning: there was a swish of skirts, a sudden odor of violets. Annister had a glimpse of a blonde head beneath a close-fitting toque, as the girl passed him, disappearing in the doorway.

And there, on the flooring at his feet, was a square of white.

Annister, stooping, retrieved it, holding the card upward to the light:

*"Stay on board. Dry Bone is not safe—for you. Be warned—in time."*

There was no signature. Annister made a little clucking sound with his tongue, his face set like flint. He was alone in the car.

The train had stopped now as, bag in hand, he shouldered through the doorway. And then, abruptly, as if materialized out of the air, a face grinned into his, lips drawn backward from the teeth in a soundless snarl. It was the big man with the cauliflower ear.

"Hombre," he said, without preamble, in a hoarse, carrying whisper, "take an old-timer's advice: go back—an' set

down—you savvy? This place—it ain't exactly healthy for a young fellow like you, I'm tellin' yu! For if you don't—"

Annister's cold stare was followed by his voice, low, incisive:

"You're blocking the doorway," he said, with a sort of freezing quiet.

The giant's hard mouth twisted in a sneer; his great paw reaching upward with a clawing motion, blunt fingers upon Annister's shoulder. Then—what followed happened with the speed of light.

"You can't get off here, Mister—" the giant was continuing, when the words were blotted out. Annister's right fist, behind it the full weight of his two hundred pounds of iron-hard muscle, curved in a short arc; there was a spanking thud. The big man, lifted from his feet, crashed into the front door-frame, slumping face downward in an aimless huddle of sprawling limbs.

"The hell you say!" grinned Black Steve Annister, leaping lightly to the platform, with never a backward glance.

Such was the manner of his coming.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE HAND IN THE DARK.

THE ONE HOTEL in Dry Bone was the Mansion House.

Annister, crossing the lobby, was aware of a veiled hostility in the stares directed at him from the group of loungers in the doorway; they gave ground grudgingly, as he came in, with a sort of covert truculence.

Here, as he could see, there was a curious mingling of the Old West and the New: men, whose attire would have created no remark, say, even in New York; others, booted and spurred, cartridge-belted and pistoled—but all, as he noticed, with, for headgear, the inevitable Stetson.

Once in his room, and the door locked and bolted, he busied himself for a moment with a sheaf of papers, several of them adorned with a huge, official seal; they crackled as he put them in an inner pocket. Then, dressed as he was, he lay down upon the bed, but not to sleep.

It was late—hard upon midnight—when the sound for which he had waited came with the soft *whirring* of the window-weights. The sound was not loud; it would not have awakened him had he been asleep; but Annister could hear it plainly enough.

He had removed his shoes upon retiring. Now, in his stocking-feet, he approached the window, a black, glimmering oblong against the windy night without. As he watched, the faint *whirring*

ceased; a pair of hands appeared suddenly out of the darkness, fingers hooked into the window-sill.

Annister drew a faint, hissing breath. In the star-shine, for there was no moon, the fingers showed in a luminous grayness against the sill, clawlike, malformed, like the talons of a beast, which in effect they were.

Annister knew them upon the instant, for, in far-off Java, for instance, he had seen those hands, or, rather, the same and yet not the same. And in that instant he had acted.

Both hands upon the window-sash, he brought it down with a crash upon those fingers; there followed a yelp of pain, inhuman, doglike—a groaning curse—the slam of a falling ladder—a heavy thud—silence.

Annister smiled grimly in the darkness. Whoever it was, the intruder would never be certain as to whether that window had crashed downward of its own accord, or not. And leaning in the window, Annister raised it cautiously again after a moment. He heard presently the slow drag of retreating footsteps; after all, it had not been much of a drop.

Closing and bolting the window, he undressed in the darkness, and with the facility of an old campaigner was asleep and snoring beneath the blankets between two ticks of the watch.

But in the morning a surprise awaited him.

Always an early riser, he was breakfasting alone in the empty dining-room when the waitress brought him a note. Beyond noting that she was pretty, and that she did not look like a waitress, Annister, somewhat engrossed in the business in hand, for a moment stared at the envelope with unseeing eyes.

Then, ripping it open, he took in its contents in one swift, flashing glance:

*"My dear Mr. Annister:*

*"I would be very glad to see you at my office at ten this morning—if you are able to be there."*

It was signed simply: "Hamilton Rook."

Annister grinned fleetingly in answer.

"Well—it's not another warning, at any rate," he said, half aloud, turning to the consideration of his breakfast bacon. Then, at a low voice at his back, he turned:

"Did you—say your coffee needed warning, sir?"

It was the waitress.

Annister had turned the note, face downward, on the table, with a quick flirt of his thumb. How long she had

been there behind him he could not tell, for he had heard no sound.

"Thanks—no," he said shortly, his hard eyes boring into hers with an almost insolent appraisal.

Yes—she was pretty, and more than that, her violet eyes darkening now under his abrupt, almost savage scrutiny. And her voice—it was like a bell just trembling out of silence. Annister spoke:

"Have you been here long—in Dry Bone, I mean?" he asked.

The waitress smiled, and it was not the smile of a waitress, Annister was convinced. Now, with a girl like that for a partner—was his unspoken thought—he could—well . . .

"N-no, sir," the girl made answer, with a sudden affectation of primness. "I came in yesterday, sir—on the same train with you, sir. I—I've just been—engaged."

Annister repressed an absurd prompting to ask her how many times she had been engaged before, and to whom and at what. Her eyes were assuredly hypnotic, with lashes long and delicately fine.

"Umm," he rumbled in answer.

Was it possible, after all, that she had been the girl in the crimson toque? And, with the card in his pocket, for a moment he was tempted to show it to her. Instead:

"Well—I hope you like it here," he said. "You'll know me—the next time?"

And for a moment he could have sworn that in the face of the girl there had come all at once a curious, almost a baffling look, at once enigmatic and self-revealing. But the entrance of the vanguard of breakfasters interrupted.

He watched her for a little as with a swaying, lilted step she moved off to minister to the late-comers, his eyes speculative. Then, turning once more to the letter, he re-read it as a man reading a cipher:

"If you are able to be there." Could there be a double meaning in that? For if Rook had sent that midnight visitor, then there were no lengths indeed to which he might go—for the hand, like a beast's paw, upon the window-sill, had been, as Annister had known upon the instant, the hand of the Thug, the Da-coit, the Strangler.

Warnings, thrice repeated; a hand in the dark; a waitress who was not all she seemed; an invitation, suave, and, as Annister conceived it, ironic—it was a situation not without its possibilities for action.

And Black Steve Annister loved action. Perhaps, after all, he was to have it now, whether he would or no.

Rook he had known aforetime, but he was convinced that the latter would not recognize him save as Black Steve Annister, wastrel of the wide world, gentleman adventurer-in-waiting to the High Gods of Adventure and Derring-do, knight-errant of the highways and byways of Criminopolis, scarce a black sheep, indeed, but a wolf of the long trail and of the night.

Rook had known him as such in the days when, as jackal for certain vested interests, the black-bearded lawyer had run foul of young Annister, just then beginning a hectic career of spending which, but three years in the past, had abruptly terminated with Annister's complete disappearance from joyous jazz-palace and discreetly gilded temple of high hazard.

For he had dropped out of sight, lost, as a stone is lost, in the sea-green waters of oblivion, save for an occasional ripple thereafter which proclaimed him blacksander, beachcomber, *chevalier d'industrie*, until one memorable evening a twelve-month gone . . . but Rook would be knowing nothing of that.

Annister had come home from the South Seas to find his father gone, and a note: "*Do not look for me, for you are not my son.*" And an exhaustive inquiry had failed even to suggest the slightest clue.

The elder Annister could have written his check for seven figures, and it appeared, following his disappearance, that he had done so; they had come in from North and South and East and West, steadily, and, as it seemed, with purpose. But as a clue to his whereabouts they had been unavailing.

But, from the moment of his discovery of that note, Black Steve Annister, visiting a certain office in a certain side-street not far distant from the Capitol, had surprised its guardian with a terse:

"That offer of yours, Childers—I've come to take it up."

The man called Childers had bent a keen look upon his visitor; another might have described it as unpleasant, stern.

"Well, you know just what that means, eh?" he had said. "You'll be merely a cog, a link—remember that!"

"Yes," Annister had answered, and there the interview had ended.

And so Black Steve Annister, serving two masters, had come to Dry Bone, and the end, as it might chance, of the long trail leading Westward into the setting sun.

He rose from the table now, going out into the pale Spring sunshine on his way to the office of Hamilton Rook. He found the building presently; it was the court-house; there was a figure of Blind Justice with her scales just over the entrance. Annister reflected sardonically that, here, in Carter County, distant from a civilization at present as remote as the moon, she was probably also deaf—and dumb. And presently, at the head of a dark flight, there was the office, with the legend:

**HAMILTON ROOK  
ATTORNEY AND  
COUNSELLOR-AT-LAW**

There was a small sign at the corner of the door; in obedience to its invitation to "Walk In," Annister, his hand upon the knob in a noiseless pressure, abruptly flung it wide.

A split second before the opening of that door, and while his hand was on the knob, Annister had seen, or thought that he had seen, a swift shadow pass suddenly across the ground-glass panel; there was the grating sound of a chair being moved backward.

Then, standing in the doorway, Annister's eyes narrowed; he stood rigid, tense.

For the man facing him across the stained and battered desk, lean head like a vulture's set upon wide shoulders; mouth like a straight gash with its thin, bloodless lips; cold eyes fixed upon him in a silent, ophidian brightness—was—the "third light," as he had called him—the man whom he had met for a moment back there in the smoker of the Transcontinental.

**CHAPTER THREE  
BEHIND THE ARRAS**

"MISTER ANNISTER," greeted the man at the desk. "You didn't know me, eh? Well—it's a long time—three years—and my beard—" he passed a bony hand across his chin—"I sacrificed that long ago; it is scarcely the fashion. Now—" he waved a hand, indicating a chair at his left—"sit down, won't you? We can—talk better so."

Annister seated himself, his eyes upon the cold eyes just across. That the man who sat there had inspired those warnings he had little doubt; that he had sent that midnight assassin against him, he was convinced. And yet—he was at a loss to find the reason.

Rook was not aware, could not be aware, of a certain fact known only to himself, Annister, and a certain man just then twenty-five hundred miles distant in that dim office hard by the Capi-

tol; it was beyond the bounds of possibility. No—it could scarcely be that, he told himself.

And of a sudden a cold rage shook him so that he trembled; his hands, flat upon the desk-top, balled suddenly into fists. This man—this suave, secret knave with the eyes of ice, and the implacable, grim mouth—sat there now, removed from him merely by the width of the narrow desk. And if it were true, that which he suspected, then this man, this jackal, this Prince of Plunder with the heart of a hyena and the conscience of a wolf—why, he had earned his quit-tance a hundred times over.

The flat black shape of the automatic hung in a sling under his left arm-pit—Annister had forgotten that. He knew merely that he was face to face with the man whom he had come twenty-five hundred long miles to meet; he saw him now as through a crimson mist. And for the moment the careful plan that he had made—that, too, was forgotten, lost in the almost overmastering impulse to drive his fist into that face so close to his, the cold eyes, the pallid, sneering mouth . . .

Something of this must have showed in his face; plainly visible to the man who faced him across the desk.

There was a semi-twilight in the room even by day. Now the lean head thrust forward like a striking snake; there came a sudden, brief explosion of movement, a darkening flash, as the hand, holding the heavy automatic, swung upward level with his visitor, point-blank.

At such a distance it would be impossible to miss.

There was a curtain just behind him; Annister had noticed it upon entering. Now at his back it rippled suddenly along its length as if at the passage of a heavy body just behind. The lawyer smiled thinly.

"Ah, my friend," he said, "it is so easy to be indiscreet! And one must meet force with force. This—it is theatrical, if you like—but—it is just a little demonstration of my—preparedness. I thought—you see . . ."

There came a sardonic flicker in the nearset eyes; the voice purred now in the semi-darkness like a cat's:

"I must protect myself . . . There are—reasons . . . You see, I thought, for a moment, that you—ah—meditated a resort to—violence. And violence is something that I deplore, my friend; and here I am surrounded by violent men, 'sudden and quick in quarrel,' as the poet has it; sometimes they are difficult to control."

Annister had himself in hand. The veiled threat with which the lawyer had

ended bothered him not at all. Now, casually as it seemed, but with the lightning riposte of a duellist, his hand reached out; there came a sudden wrench, a twist, a snarling oath from Rook; and Annister, pocketing the pistol, smiled grimly now in answer.

"Now—we can talk better so!" he mocked. The balance of power, ha? Now, let me tell you something: You left the big town—for your health; that was three years ago, wasn't it? I didn't recognize you, but it was a pretty close shave, at that!"

He laughed, but there was a ring of menace in it. His hard eyes held the pale ones of the lawyer with a chill malevolence.

"Rook," he said, low, "you're as crooked as a ram's-horn; you're a bent twig; I wouldn't trust you this side of hell further than I could see you, and not even then. Now—" his voice cracked suddenly in the thick silence like the cracking of a whip—"you had the infernal gall to send me—here—after you'd have accounted for me—by the left hand, ha?"

"I left that window open, because, if you want to know, I was expecting something of the sort. And now—"

The hand holding the pistol became rigid as a rock.

"—I want the reason *why*—in a holy minute, Mister Hamilton Rook—or else—"

For a heart-beat the face of the lawyer seemed swollen to a poisonous whiteness; the veins in his neck and temples stood out in ridges. Then—the long, spatulate fingers spread wide with a curious, flicking motion, thumbs downward; the curtain bellied outward suddenly as if in answer.

Abruptly Annister felt for a heart-beat a something that was like a cold wind blowing upon the back of his neck, and it was a wind of death. Something slid past his shoulder with the speed of light; talons of steel, thumbs downward, pressing at the base of his brain. He heard a hoarse, whistling croak—a sound that was nothing human. Then—

There is but one answer to that stranger's grip, and it is a secret known only to a few. Annister had learned it, no matter where, and in the learning he had paid . . .

Now, an infinitesimal split second before the beast paws had encircled his throat, his forefinger and thumb had flashed upward, hooked, as steel gaff is hooked, between those fingers and his throat.

There followed a straining heave; a cry, inhuman, beastlike, like the mewing of a cat. Annister, rising to his feet,

leaned abruptly to the left—straightened, with one quick, explosive heave of his powerful shoulder-muscles—and the body of his antagonist catapulted over his head.

Flung clear of the desk, he landed, heavily, on one shoulder-point, twitched a moment, lay still. It was the “flying-mare,” and none but a master could have summoned it.

Annister turned the unconscious man over with his foot.

“*Jivero!*” he muttered, between set teeth.

He shivered slightly in the humid air of the warm room. For the man was an Ecuadorian savage—a jungle-beast; once, in Quito, Annister had seen two or three: flat-faced, rather handsome savages; how or where Rook had acquired the fellow only the lawyer could have said.

According to his savage code, he had been faithful—as a tiger is faithful to his trainer, his keeper. Annister, brave as he was, would have preferred a rattler, a fer-de-lance, for company. He turned now with an abrupt movement to Rook, who, slumped in his chair, sat staring at the huddled figure of the Indian where he had fallen.

“Now,” said Annister, “I’ve a notion, Mister Hamilton Rook, to shoot first, and ask questions afterward . . . However, I confess I’m still a trifle curious as to your motive—more so, since this second pleasant little interlude with your man Friday here. Now—may I ask you—*why?*”

The lawyer’s lips were moving, fumbling together, without sound. Fingers trembling, like a man in a fit, at length he lifted dull eyes to his interrogator:

“This,” he enunciated thickly, gesturing toward the huddled figure on the carpet. “It was to save my—life—that is the truth, Annister—you must believe. The reason—for the others . . . I did not know it was you there in the smoker; I thought—that is—” he appeared to breathe of a sudden like a man who had been running—“we had a report—that you were quite another man—one who was—ah—would be antagonistic, in fact, to certain operations—and so—”

He spread his hands wide with a little, flicking gesture.

“—That is why—but now, of course, you will understand—?”

“Yes,” answered Annister, bluntly. “I understand. You thought I was—an operative, ha? Well—I’m not—that kind of an operative. But—” his manner became all at once sharp, incisive; the gaze that he bent upon Rook was the shrewd look of a man who sees his op-

portunity ready to his hand. Cunning was in that look, and an infinite guile; the lawyer did not miss it.

Here was something that he could deal with. He had known of Annister’s reputation as of old; it had been none of the best, certainly, and with that knowledge now there came a measure of reassurance. And if he was any judge of men, here was one whom he could use: the acquisitive gleaming in the eyes; the hard, incisive mouth, the predatory, forward-thrusting tilt of the head—if he, Rook, was any judge of men, here was a man whom he could use.

Old Travis Annister had disinherited him: the son who had been a waster in the far places of the earth—that was an added reason. And at the thought there came a pale gleaming in the lawyer’s close-set eyes, like the sun on water. Travis Annister . . . and Travis Annister had disappeared . . . well, of course, he had heard of it. His voice reached the younger man in a purring whisper:

“As I have hinted, Mr. Annister, I am interested in—certain operations; shall we call them—speculative? For some time now I have been in need of a sort of silent partner, or, rather, the Doctor—”

He caught himself with a *click* of his strong, white, even teeth. Annister’s face continued impassive, save for the keen eyes, veiled now under lowered lids. Rook continued:

“Annister,” he said suddenly, as if he had abruptly come to a decision, “I’ll lay my cards on the table with you: I need a man, and he can not afford to be too—scrupulous, do you understand? The—the doctor tells me I have been overdoing it.” He gave a faint, wintry smile. “We are—out of the beaten track here—southwest of the law, as you might call it . . .”

He lowered his voice to a faint, hissing sibilance:

“I will expect you to ask no questions. You have been a cow-man; there are certain interests to the north and the north-east of us; I am naming no names, understand? There is a good deal of range left, as you know, and—now, listen to me . . .”

His voice went on. For perhaps five minutes Annister listened in a heavy silence. And all that time, although the lawyer had not once called a spade a spade, the thing that he had unfolded was clear enough:

It was the old story; with something of a novel twist. First, there were the outfits scattered north and north-east, as Rook had said. The running off of a few cows, for instance, re-branding, and the rest of it—it was an old story to An-

nister—but there was something more. Annister, as he listened, realized that the thing was big, worthy, indeed, of the keen, devising brain that had evolved it.

A good many of the ranches had, for some time past, been owned and operated by the packers themselves; three of these: the Bar T, the Cross Circle L, the Flying U, were northward from Dry Bone scarce a hundred miles. But there were still other outfits. And, as Annister listened, he was hearing again a name, or, rather, a symbol, the name and the symbol of masked and hooded violence, and it was “S. S. S.”

Rook, it appeared, was the moving spirit of it, in Dry Bone, at any rate, but as the tale unfolded Annister, putting two and two together, supplied for that cryptic symbol a name, nation-wide and respected: the name of a great Company, an Octopus indeed, which, with Hamilton Rook as its agent, planned nothing less than the ruthless despoiling of those independent cattle men who, out of a desert of sand and sage, had won a living for their stock and for themselves, the rear guard of the order, now, as it seemed, indeed, caught in the far-flung tentacles of a monster, unscrupulous and without soul.

Annister’s part in it was to be simple. He was to do nothing as yet until the lawyer should give the word. But a man was wanted: a gun-fighter; a man bred to violence who would not consider too closely the method or the means. For, as Rook had said, his eyes upon Annister in a sudden, biting scrutiny:

“If, as a first step, say, the owners of these outfits should—ah—disappear. . .”

There was to be no outright violence, it appeared; murder—that was an ugly word; but it was of course possible that there might be—resistance. But—there would be a fortune in it.

Annister’s part would be comparatively simple. He would merely carry out his orders. Rook, eying him now in a close-lipped silence, watched as a spider watches from his ambush. Annister would be needing money; if the lawyer knew his man, and he thought that he did, here was something that would be a lever, and a powerful one.

Annister lifted his head, then he brought his hand, palm downward, to the desk-top. It was a movement, slow, even, controlled.

“I’m with you,” he said.

“Good!” exclaimed the lawyer. “Now—I want you to go over to the club; there are a few men there I’d like you to meet. *Ha!*”

At his exclamation Annister, turning, followed his rigid, pointing finger.

The huddled figure on the carpet had disappeared. There had been no sound, no sign. The Indian had vanished.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

##### THE FACE IN THE MOONLIGHT

ANNISTER had thrown in with Rook, but he trusted him no further than he would have trusted a cougar, a mountain cat.

At the club, as the afternoon wore on to evening, he had met four or five men: Beaton, the county judge, a red-faced tippler with, on the surface, a heartiness that was repellant; Lunn, the hotel proprietor, a vast, asthmatic man with a small, porcine eye; Daventry, the Land Commissioner, whose British accent, Annister noticed, would on occasion flatten to a high, nasal whining that was reminiscent of Sag Harbor or Buzzards Bay.

The rest, hard-faced, typical of their environment, Annister put down for the usual lesser fry; hangers-on, jackals, as it might chance, "house-men," in the parlance of the "poker-room"—Annister knew the type well enough.

They seemed hospitable, but once or twice Annister had thought to detect in their glances a grimly curious look: of appraisal, and of something more.

There had been a game going, but he had not sat in, nor had the lawyer invited him. The visit had been meant, plainly enough, as a sort of introduction.

"We're all here," Rook had said.

But it was apparent, too, that there were one or two others who were absent; Annister heard several references to "Bull"; but for the most part there was a silence, beneath which Annister could feel the tension; it was like a fine wire, vibrating, deep-down; almost, he might have said, a certain grimly quiet anticipation of that which was to come.

Presently the telephone tinkled, loud in the sudden stillness; Annister could hear the voice at the other end: harsh, strident, with a bestial growl that penetrated outward into the close room.

"He can't come," came from the man at the telephone. "Bull—yeah—an' I reckon he seems some disappointed."

Annister noticed that the tension had all at once relaxed, and with it, as he could see, there was plainly visible in the faces about him a certain disappointment. It was as if they had been waiting for something—something, well, that had not materialized. There was a laugh or two; a word stifled in utterance; one or two of the men, glancing at Annister and away, gave an almost imperceptible head-shake. Even Rook, as Annister

could tell, appeared relieved as the newcomer rose, turning to the company with a conventional good-night.

For just a split second it seemed to Annister that something *was* about to happen; for a moment he saw, or fancied that he saw, a quick, silent signal flash, then, from eye to eye; Lunn, the hotel man, had half risen in his chair; out of the tail of his eye, as he was turning toward the door, Annister was aware of a quick ripple, a movement, the shadow of a sound, like the movement of a conjuror manipulating his cards, white hands flashing in a bewildering passade.

But nothing happened.

Leaving, he had walked slowly toward the hotel, turning over in his mind the story that had been told him by the lawyer. And there was one more question he wanted to ask him: a question that had to do with a square of paper that he had come upon among his father's papers in New York, for it had been this chance discovery that had sent him, post-haste, to Dry Bone, and the lawyer's office.

Thinking these things, he was turning the corner to the hotel when, out of nowhere as it seemed, a man had passed him, walking with a peculiar, dragging shuffle. Seen under the moon for a moment, this man's face had impressed itself upon Annister: it was dark and foreign, with high cheek-bones, and—what seemed curiously out of place in Dry Bone—a black moustache and professional Van Dyke.

Annister, watching the man, saw him turn into the doorway he had just quitted; it was the entrance to the "club"—two rooms above a saddler's shop at the corner of the street.

Halting a moment to look after the man, Annister was wondering idly who he might be—certainly not the man called "Bull," if there was anything in a name. And then, abruptly, he was remembering what the lawyer had let fall about the "doctor"; perhaps that was who he was; he had had a distinctly professional air.

The man's eyes had lingered upon Annister for a moment, and for a moment the latter had been conscious of a curious shock. For it had been as if the man had looked *through* rather than at him; those eyes had glowed suddenly in the darkness, gray-green like a cat's, in an abrupt, ferocious, basilisk stare.

Annister, in his day, had seen some queer corners and some tight places; in Rangoon, for example, he had penetrated to a certain dark house in a dim back-water stinking and dark with the darkness of midnight even at high noon.

And it was there, in that dark house, with shuttered windows like blind eyes to the night, that he had seen that which it is not good for any white man to have seen: the rite of the Suttee; the blood-stone of Siva, the Destroyer, reeking with the sacrifice—ay—and more.

And something now, at that time half-perceived and dimly understood, came again with the sight of the dark face with its high cheek-bones, and black, forking beard; for he had seen a creature with a face and yet without a face, mewling and mowing like a cat, now come from horrors, and the practitioner had been—

The man who but just now passed him at the corner of the street, the man with the dark, foreign visage, and the eyes of death.

#### CHAPTER FIVE

##### PARTNERS OF THE NIGHT

ANNISTER, pausing a moment at the corner of the street, was conscious of a feeling of coldness, like a bleak wind of the spirit, as if death, in passing, had touched him, and gone on.

For the face of the man whom he had seen had been like the face of a damned soul, unhuman, Satanic in its sheer, visible malevolence. So might Satan himself have looked, after the Fall.

Somehow, although the man had looked straight ahead, seeming to see merely with the glazed, indwelling stare of a sleepwalker, Annister had felt those eyes upon him; he was certain that he had been seen—and known. But now he had other things to think about.

He had intended going to the hotel. Now, on an impulse he bent his steps away from it, turning to the building in which were the offices of Rook.

But he did not enter by the main doorway. There was an alley further along; into this he melted with the stealth and caution of an Indian, feeling his way forward in the thick darkness to where, as he had marked it earlier in the day, there was a rusty fire-escape; its rungs ran upward in the darkness; they creaked now under his hand as he went slowly up.

Rook's office was on the second floor. Annister, reaching the window, found it locked, but in a matter of seconds had it open, with the soft *snick* of a steel blade between sash and bolt; the thing was done with a professional deftness, as if, say, the man who had opened that window had done that same thing many times before.

Now, crouched in the darkness by that dim square of window, the intruder stood silent, listening, holding his breath. A



sound had come to him, faint and thin, as if muffled by many thicknesses of walls; it penetrated outward from the private office, with the snick and slither of rasping steel on steel.

And at the instant that Annister, with a grim smile in the darkness, recognized it for what it was, he knew, too, that someone had been beforehand with him; someone interested, also, in Hamilton Rook; for the sound that he heard now, loud in the singing silence, was the sound of a steel drill upon a safe.

Annister had seen that safe; it was scarcely more than a strong-box, a sheet steel, but thin; a "can-opener" could have ripped it from end to end, easily, in no time at all. Rook must feel secure indeed, he thought, to put his trust in so flimsy a repository unless, perhaps, he had other means. The Indian, for instance; the savage who, but a few hours ago, had missed with his long talons for Annister's throat by inches.

But somehow Annister did not think that the Jivero would be on guard. There was no burglar-alarm protection; he had made certain of that; but the man who was now busy with that safe must have come up by the stairway; doubtless he was on familiar ground. Perhaps he might be some disgruntled confederate of the lawyer's; well, he'd have a look-see, at any rate.

Advancing silently, on the balls of his feet, Annister traversed the length of the outer office, peering around the doorway to where, under the dim glow of a single drop-light, a figure, back toward Annister, knelt before the safe.

The drop-light, carefully shaded, would not be visible from without; under its cone-shaped radiance Annister could see merely that the man was wearing a cap, pulled low over his forehead; but something in the attitude of that kneeling figure: the turn of the head, the deft, darting movement of the hand, was strangely familiar.

Annister grinned in the darkness at the same moment that he was aware of a curious contraction of the heart. This lone-hand cracksman worked evidently without confederates, unless, possibly, he might have a lookout posted on the sidewalk below. He spoke, barely above a whisper:

"Hello!" he said. "Pretty careless, aren't you? Now, do you think it's—safe?"

The figure whirled; the hand, holding an automatic, came upward with the speed of light; then dropped limply at her side as the girl surveyed him with a stony look.

It was the waitress of the Mansion House.

"Well," she said, "you've caught me, but it looks to me as if I beat you to it, Black Steve Annister. . . Oh, I've heard of you, Mister Black Steve. . . Well, now you've caught me, what are you going to do about it?"

The darkly beautiful face was scornful; the violet eyes, under the light, stormy with a something that Annister could not all define.

Annister bit his lip. To find her like this! And, all at once, realization came to him with a sudden tightening of the heart.

This girl, waitress or not, crook or not—he had to confess that, in all his wanderings up and down the earth, he had never met her like. A girl in a thousand, he had decided, back there in the dining-room of the Mansion House. What a partner she would make! Now, with a girl like that for a partner. . . !

On a sudden impulse he leaned forward, his eyes upon the safe door; it swung outward now; somehow she had opened it.

"Pretty smooth," he commented. "The combination, after all, ha? You worked it. Now, before we have a look, I want to tell you something. I—I'm looking for a partner, Miss—ah—Miss—"

"—Allerton," she told him, in her eyes a sudden, leaping spark, the brief, baffling, enigmatic look that he had seen back there in the hotel dining-room. But it was gone again even as she spoke:

"All right—partner!" she said, low. "When do we start?"

"Right now!" answered Annister, his gaze upon the girl frankly admiring. He had expected the usual feminine evasions, a play for time, hesitation—anything but this ready acquiescence in his abrupt proposal.

He was not entirely sure of her; his admiration for her beauty, her poise, had nothing to do with the cold judgment whispering now that the whole affair might, after all, be a blind, a trap, devious and crooked as the devious and crooked turnings of Hamilton Rook.

But with Annister to decide was to act.

Bending; he swung wide the safe door, groping forward with exploring hand. His back was toward the girl; consequently he did not see the sudden, revealing gleam in the violet eyes, the quick hardening of the mouth. Swinging forward his pocket flash, the light danced, glimmering, upon a packet of papers, a sheaf of documents. Annister, running over them swiftly, gave a quick exclamation, his hand, in a lightning movement, palming something which he secreted in an inner pocket.

He turned sidewise to the girl.

"Lord!" he exclaimed disgustedly. "Nothing but papers! Partner, we're out of luck!"

Evidently the girl had been oblivious. Now, however, her quick, flashing fingers sorted the contents of that safe as with a practiced hand, to leave them, as had Annister, inviolate, save for that oblong of paper reposing now in the pocket of his coat.

In the shadow of the entrance it was black dark as they parted. The girl did not live in the hotel, she told him; that had been a part of her plan. They would meet again, of course. But once in his room, and with the shades drawn and the door locked and bolted, Annister, taking the paper from his pocket, smoothed it out under the light.

He looked; then looked again, breath indrawn sharply through clenched teeth.

For that paper was a canceled check; it had been drawn to "Cash"; and the signature, in a hand that he knew upon the instant, was the signature of his father, Travis Annister.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE LIVING GHOST

ANNISTER had heard nothing from Rook other than that he had been again invited to a further session of the "Club" for that evening.

Alone in his room on the morning following his adventure in Rook's office, his eye had been caught and held by a news item printed on an inside page of the *Durango County Gazette*; he had nearly passed it over; but now the lines leaped out at him as if they had been blazoned across the paper in a double-column spread:

**Travis Annister Still Strangely Missing—Retired Capitalist Gone Since January—Foul Play Feared**

And, separated from it by the width of a single column, he read:

**Retired Banker Disappears—Newbold Humiston a Suicide?—Friends Fear for Safety**

But it was at a third item, tucked away in an obscure corner that Annister stifled a quick word in his throat. Newbold Humiston had been a friend of his father's; it was an odd coincidence, to say the least of it. And the story went on to say that three other men, all nationally known, had, so to speak, between suns, disappeared as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed them.

And that third news item, irrelevant as it might have been, told of an incident, odd and unusual enough; it had happened in Palos Verde, distant from Dry Bone a long twenty miles of hazardous mountain trail:

A man had come in, in rags and tatters; at first they had thought him a desert rat, a prospector, light-headed from starvation, for his incoherent babble had proclaimed him no less a personage than Rodman Axworthy, prominent banker of Mojave. The sheriff of Palos Verde, on the off chance, had wired Mojave, and the word had come back that Axworthy had been missing; they were sending a man.

With the arrival of this man, however, the mystery deepened, for it appeared that the derelict was indeed Axworthy, and yet not Axworthy at all, for whereas the true Axworthy had had a high, aquiline nose and a wide, generous mouth, the derelict was snub-nosed, swarthy, where the banker had been fair; he was, simply, another man.

But there had been this about it: on the banker's left forearm, underneath, there had been a curious birth-mark; the derelict had spoken of it, but upon examination the arm showed smooth and bare. The investigator from Mojave had been obviously skeptical until, abruptly, the ragged claimant had taken from his pocket a curious, removable bridge; a dentist in Mojave who had made it, he said, could identify it. It fitted perfectly.

This looked like proof, but the thing was obviously impossible. And then, as "Axworthy" was being taken back to Mojave, he went suddenly stark, staring crazy, repeating over and over, with reference to the bridge:

"It's the one thing they didn't get—the one thing. . ."

And there the matter rested, save that, upon arrival in Mojave, the bridge was found to be missing. The emissary from Mojave seemed to remember a dark-faced stranger who had been seated opposite them in the train, but that was all; the man had jostled against his charge upon alighting; the last proof, if indeed it might be called a proof, was gone.

Annister frowned thoughtfully, his mind upon that canceled check in his pocket. And he was remembering one other thing, and that was the square of paper which he had found among his father's effects, for on it had been a name, or, rather, two: the name of Hamilton Rook, and of another, unknown to Annister. And as to that Axworthy case, it was common knowledge

that lunatics, for instance, entertained frequently the delusion that they were people of importance. There was nothing new in that.

Somewhat, it seemed to him that he held in his hands the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle that, even if put together, made but a patchwork of motives and design, which yet, if he could but find the key, would be as clear as crystal.

That paper found in his father's office; the interview with Childers, at Washington; the long trip westward; the warning message on the train; the big man with the ice-blue eye and the square jaw of a fighter; the attack in the hotel; the meeting with Rook, and the meeting with the girl; the finding of that canceled check—and, last, the matter of those queerly related news items just under his hand—these made a pattern to be unraveled only by the warp and woof of Fate.

And the chance meeting with the bearded stranger at the corner of the street; consider how he would, Annister's mind kept turning backward to that meeting and those eyes that were like the eyes of a damned soul, malignant, cold, in their abysmal, cold cruelty of discarnate Evil.

Discarnate! That was it; that would express it; for the man, as he recalled him, seemed somehow less than human; there had been about him an aura, an emanation, that was like a tide rising from the depths, from darkness unto darkness. . .

Annister was scarcely superstitious, but he was again conscious of that icy chill; he shivered, as a man is said to shiver when, according to an ancient superstition, someone is said to be walking over his grave.

He rose, walking to the window, to peer outward into the sunwashed street. The coil was tightening; he felt it; and he was but one man against many. And knowing what he knew, or suspecting what he suspected, it seemed to him all at once that the sunlight had flattened to a heatless flaming of pale radiance; there seemed a menace in it, even as there seemed a menace in the very air, a waiting, a tension, like a fine wire drawn and singing at a pitch too low for sound.

Abruptly he heard a sound; it was like the scratching of a rat in the wainscot, faint and thin. His door was locked.

Now, looking at it, the knob turned, slowly, stealthily. He could see it turning.

Then, faint but unmistakable, came a knock.

## CHAPTER SEVEN THROUGH THE DOOR

THE KNOCKING was not loud; it was merely a discreet tap; but there was a quality of hurry in it.

Annister, moving without sound on the thick pile of the rug, almost with the same motion turned the key and flung wide the door.

At first he could see nothing. The corridor, thick-piled with shadows even at high noon, showed merely as a darkling glimmer out of which there sprang suddenly a face, like a white, glimmering oval; a voice came, with a quick, hissing sibilance:

"Ssh! Quiet! I must not be seen! Or else he. . . Close the door!"

The girl stepped inward swiftly, her white face turned to the man before her in a sort of frozen calm. Annister had a vague impression of having seen her somewhere before: that golden head beneath its close-fitting toque; the faint, remembered odor of fresh violets; the face, with a piquant loveliness just now, however, white and drawn; it was like a strain of music, heard and then forgotten.

Closing the heavy door and locking it, he turned swiftly to the girl.

"Well—?" he said, his gaze upon her in a cold, searching scrutiny. "Isn't this a trifle—*sudden*?"

But the girl lifted a stony face.

"I have little time," she said, with a curious, spent breathlessness, as if she had been running. "I am Cleo Ridgely, secretary to Hamilton Rook—that is, I was; I am his secretary no longer, but he does not know about it—yet."

She paused, again with that hard-held breathing, moistening her stiff lips.

"I warned you that day on the train; do you remember? I warned you because I knew Hamilton Rook. . . I know him even better now. He meant to kill you, Mr. Annister, and now he schemes—"

"—To use me—is that it?" interrupted Annister dryly; then, at her slow head-shake, he stiffened.

"He would have finished you even after your—agreement—but that is not his way. But he will not make use of you in the way that you think. That careful plan of which he told you—that was just a blind; there are no ranches near enough. The S. S. S.—that, too, was just a part of the story. You see, he wants to keep you here, that is all, until such time as he thinks it necessary to—remove you. But his real motive, his actual plan I know nothing about. I may suspect, but I do not *think* about it."

She paused again, her expression rigid, as there sounded a faint, half-audible footfall from the corridor without. It passed.

"He would—kill me—if he knew," she continued tonelessly. "That warning on the train—I did that at his order. If he could have frightened you off, he would have been satisfied with that, but now, it will be—different. I tell you this on my own account. And now—" she laid a slim hand on his arm—"don't go to that rendezvous tonight, Mr. Annister. Ellison will be there; you remember him? He was the man who tried to keep you on that train."

She smiled faintly with her lips, but her eyes were sombre.

"Ellison is Rook's jackal, just as Rook is—"

The sentence was never completed. There came a coughing grunt from just outside the door, a streak of flame from the half-open transom just above; the girl stiffened, her face went blank; she slid downward to the rug, even as Annister, snapping back the lock, had flung wide the door.

Gun out, he burst into the corridor, as, from the shadows at a far corner, he fancied that he heard the faint echo of a taunting laugh.

But there was no one there.

Rushing to the stair-head, he found nothing, nobody. The man who had fired that shot had used a silencer; he had disappeared, either into one of the bed-chambers to right and left, or down the stair. But it was no time for speculation. The girl would be needing attention, if, indeed, she was not already past all aid.

Annister had wasted no time. But, for a heart-beat, as he raced backward along the hall, his eye was caught and held by the quick glint of metal from the carpet at his feet. Stooping as he ran, he swept up the object, possibly an empty shell; then, on the threshold of his room, recoiled with a gasping oath.

For the girl had vanished!

Stunned, Annister stood silent, mechanically unclosing his stiff fingers upon the object which they held. He stared at it now, rigid with remembrance, and a growing fear.

Oddly twisted and distorted, its dull gold surface glinting dully under the light, the thing that he had found lay on his open palm.

*It was a dentist's bridge.*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### ODDS—AND THE MAN

ANNISTER had been absent from that room not longer than ten racing seconds. It was unthinkable that the

girl had vanished of her own volition, even had it been physically possible.

Glancing around the room, he saw that the windows were closed and bolted; the flooring was solid, substantial; there could be no ingress save by the door through which he had just come.

There was another door; it led to the next room; but Annister, with a habit of inbred caution, had tried it, and found it locked. Now, in two swift strides, he had covered the space between, had tried that door, setting his weight against it as he turned the knob.

Under his weight it gave outward with a sudden slatting clatter. They, whoever they might be, had unlocked it; it had been through this adjoining room that they had taken the girl.

Annister, glancing swiftly around this room, saw that it was obviously unoccupied; the bed had been made up; there was no sort of clue that he could see. The invisible assassin had had a key; that was it, of course.

But as to the rest of it, Annister could only speculate. It was an impasse, and a mystery.

Going downward to the dining-room, as it was now past noon, he glanced toward the desk, but if he had had any thought of reporting the attack upon the girl, or her disappearance, he thought better of it; he would keep his own counsel; a decision helped by a sight of Lunn, the hotel proprietor, who, lounging at the desk, raised his sleepy-lidded, vulture gaze at Annister as the latter was turning toward the dining-room.

Annister, in that brief glance, thought to detect in those eyes, milky-pale, a veiled, sardonic flicker. If, behind this latest happening, there was the fine, Italian hand of Hamilton Rook, Lunn was in cahoots with the lawyer, of that there could be little doubt. For, as Annister was convinced, there had been a menace in those eyes half turned to his, an insolence, a bright, burning truculence, that, as he turned into the long dining-hall, brought the swift blood to his cheek in a dark tide.

But at his table another surprise awaited him. Mary Allerton was gone. The heavy-handed Swede who served him told him that she had left, suddenly, that morning; a message had come for her, it appeared, but the substitute could tell him nothing further. Annister let it go at that.

Rising from the table, he went outward to the long bar, a cool, pleasant oasis, indeed, in the fierce heat of the drowsy afternoon. He greeted the bartender, a tall man with the wide shoulders of a cowman, with a smile.

The man had been friendly; in fact, he had been the sole friend that Annister appeared to have made since his arrival in Dry Bone. Now the bartender leaned forward, speaking in a whisper behind his hand:

"Watch your step, Mr. Annister," he said.

Annister gave an almost imperceptible nod. Then, his drink before him upon the stained and battered mahogany, he glanced sidewise along the rail, to where, at the far end, two men stood together, eying him under lowered brows.

To Annister it seemed that there had fallen a sudden quiet. Just prior to his entrance he had heard talk and laughter, the *clink* of glasses, a thick, turgid oath. Now there appeared to rise and grow a tension, as of something electric in the air; Annister felt it in the white face of the knight of the apron, the sudden silence, the rigid figures of the two men at the end of the long bar.

Behind him, and a little to his left, three men were seated at a table: Bristow, sheriff of Dry Bone, a big man with a bleak, pale eye, and a mouth like a straight gash above a heavy chin barbered to the blood. With him were two others whom he did not know.

Lunn was nowhere in sight.

The taller of the two men standing at the bar turned, and Annister recognized him as Tucson Charlie Westervelt, a gunman with a dangerous record. Westervelt was wearing a high-crowned, white Stetson; Annister marked it at the distance, beneath it the fierce, hawklike face, turned now in his direction, the thin lips set stiffly in a sullen pout.

The old West had passed with the passing of the *remuda*, the trail herd, the mining camps; the wide, free range of the long-horned cattle was no more; but Dry Bone had not changed save that the loading-pens had gone; a cow would be a curiosity. But the lawless spirit of the ancient West remained. "South-west of the Law," indeed, Dry Bone was a law unto itself, and now about him Annister felt the menace; it appeared that he had walked into a trap.

The judge, the sheriff—what mockery of law there was—Annister knew that it would be against him, either way, attacking or attacked. He was certain of it as Westervelt, moving slowly along the bar, halted when perhaps three paces distant, elbow raised, right hand extended, claw-like, in a stiff, thrusting gesture above his guns.

It was the gesture of the killer, the preliminary for the lightning down-thrust of the stiff fingers; Annister knew that well enough. Now the gunman's gaze, sleepy-lidded like a falcon's,

bored into his; his voice came with a snarling violence:

"Mister Black Steve Annister," he said, without preamble. "I understand you're some wizard with a canister, ha? A bad hombre! Musta been a little bird done told me, an' that bird was sure loco, I'll tell a man! But *me*—" his tone hardened to a steely rasp—"I'm not thinkin' you're such-a-much!"

It was a trap; Annister knew that now, just as behind the gunman he could almost see the dark face of Rook, with its sneering grin; the lawyer had inspired it.

His automatic hung in a sling under his left arm-pit, but even if he could beat Westervelt to the draw, he knew well enough what the result would be: a shot in the back, say, from the men sitting just behind, or—arrest, and the mockery of a trial to follow it. Either way, he was done.

His own eyes held the gunman's now, glancing neither to the right nor to the left. He was conscious of a movement from the three men at the table; Westervelt's companion, a short, bowlegged man, with the pale eyes of an Albino, had stepped backward from the bar; Annister felt rather than saw his hand move even as his own hand came up and outward with lightning speed; flame streaked from his pistol with the motion.

Once in a generation, perhaps, a man arises from the ruck who, by an uncanny dexterity of hand and eye, confounds and dazzles the common run of men. As a conjurer throws his glass balls in air, swifter than eye can follow, so Annister, crouching sidewise from the bar, threw his bullets at Westervelt.

The gunman, bending forward at the hips, crashed to the sawdust in a slumping fall, as the Albino, firing from the hip, whirled sidewise as Annister's second bullet drilled him through the middle. For the tenth of a second, like the sudden stoppage of a cinematograph, the tableau endured; then Annister, whirling, had covered Bristow where he sat; the two men with him, white-faced, hands pressed flat upon the table-top, stared, silent, as Annister spoke:

"You saw, Bristow," he said, low and even, his eyes upon the cold eyes of the sheriff in a bright, steady, inquiring stare. "Now—what about it?"

For a moment a little silence held; then Bristow, moistening his stiff lips, nodded, his gaze upon Annister in a sudden, dazed, uncomprehending look.

"All right, Mr. Annister," he said heavily. "They came lookin' f'r it, I reckon. . . Well, you were *that* quick!"

Annister smiled grimly, pocketing his pistol. Westervelt lay where he had

fallen, a dead man even as he had gone for his gun, lips still twisted in a sullen pout. The bowlegged man, stiff fingers clutching his heavy pistol, lay, face downward, in the sawdust. The bartender, with an admiring glance at Annister, leaned forward as Bristow and the two men with him went slowly out.

"They may try to get me for it, Mr. Annister," he said, "but I'm no man's man; well, not Rook's, and you can lay to that! Bristow and his friends kept out of it, you noticed? Bristow'll do nothing, *now*; not yet a while, at any rate, but—mebbe they sort of savvied me a-watchin' t' see they didn't run no whizzer on you!"

He lifted the heavy Colt, where it had lain hidden by the bar-rail, thrusting it in its scabbard with a grin.

"Well, sir, I *aimed* t' see that they was sittin' close, an' quiet, Mr. Annister," he said.

"Thanks, old timer," said Annister. "I'll not forget."

But as he went outward into the waning afternoon he was thinking of that rendezvous of the night. For Rook would be there, and it had been Rook, he was certain, who had engineered that ambush in the Mansion House bar.

## CHAPTER NINE

### THE BATTLE IN THE "CLUB"

THE TIME was nearly ripe. The clue of those newspaper items; the canceled check; the somewhat repellant evidence of the battered piece of goldwork picked up in the corridor of the Mansion House—Annister had been able to put two and two together, to find a sum as strange, as odd, say, as five, or seven, or even one.

But that name that had trembled on the lips of Rook's secretary remained a secret; with it, Annister was convinced, he would be able to pull those threads together with a single jerk, to find them—*one*.

He had had news from Mojave: the dentist had identified the insane man as his patient by means of his chart, but, with that face, the man could not be Banker Axworthy—it simply could not be. And yet he was!

It was something of a riddle, and more, even, than that, for the thing savored of the supernatural, of necromancy, of a black art that might, say, have had for its practitioner a certain personage with the eyes of a damned soul and a black, forking beard, curled, like Mephisto's; Annister thought that it might.

Further, the conductor of that train had been able to describe, somewhat in detail, the man who had jostled the der-

elict and his companion; the man had been a stranger to the conductor; he had been tall and thin, with a small, sandy moustache, and a high-arched, broken nose, and he had been wearing the conventional Stetson. The fellow might have been disguised, of course, but if Annister could find the black-bearded man, discover his identity, he was reasonably certain that he would not draw blank.

It was no certainty, of course, but it was worth the risk, he told himself. It would be a desperate hazard that he was about to face, he knew. Thinking of his father, together with the remembrance of that unholy and unspeakable horror that he had witnessed, born of the stinking shadows of that dark street in a city foul and old, its people furtive worshipers of strange gods, Annister felt again that crawling chill which had assailed him with the passing of the tall man with the eyes of death.

With Annister, to decide was to act. Dispatching a brief telegram in code to a certain office in a certain building in Washington, he went now to keep his rendezvous with Rook and the rest. It was yet early, scarce eight in the evening, and the street was full of life and movement, before him, and behind.

And before him and behind, as he went onward, he was conscious that those who walked there walked with him, stride for stride; they kept their distance, moving without speech, as he turned the corner of the dusty street.

If he had had any doubt about it, the doubt became certainty as, wheeling sharply to the left, they kept him company now, still with that grim, daunting silence: a bodyguard, indeed, but a bodyguard that held him prisoner as certainly as if the manacles were on his wrists.

It was not yet dark, but with a rising wind there had come a sky overcast and lowering; low down, upon the horizon's rim to the eastward, the violet blaze of the lightning came and went, with, after a little, the heavy salvos of the thunder, like the marching of an armed host.

But Annister, his gaze set straight ahead, turned inward at the entrance of the saddler's shop, mounting the stairs, as, behind him he heard the heavy door slam shut.

Perhaps it had been the wind, but as Annister went upward he heard, just beyond that door, the murmur of voices; they reached him in a sing-song mutter against the rising of the wind, in a quick, growling chorus.

There had been something in that snarling speech to daunt a man less brave than the man on that narrow stair, but Annister went upward, lightly now,

to meet whatever waited behind the door set with its narrow panel that he could see merely as a dark smudge of shadow in the encircling gloom.

He rapped, twice, and the door fell open silently, disclosing the long room in which, as he remembered, he had sat, but a few nights in the past, to listen as the lawyer and his crowd had waited for the man called "Bull."

The room was brightly lighted. At a long table, midway between door and windows, five men were seated: Lunn, his fat face gray with a sort of eager pallor, was chewing nervously at an unlighted cigar; he glanced up now at Annister's entrance, turning to a big man on his right. At the head of the table, his veiled glance like the stare of a falcon, sat Rook, but it was upon the big man next to Lunn that Annister's glance rested with an abrupt interest as the lawyer spoke:

"Welcome to our city, Mr. Annister!" he said, in a voice that reminded Annister of molasses dripping from a barrel. "I want you to meet—Mr. Bull Ellison; he's been right anxious to meet you, haven't you, Bull?"

Annister, in the passage of an eye-flash, understood. This was the man whom he had encountered in the vestibule of the smoker, and, of a sudden, memory rose up out of the past, and, with it, a picture: a padded ring under twin, blazing arcs; the thud and shuffle of sliding feet; a man, huge, brutish, broad, fists like stone mauls, yet, for all his bulk, a very cat for quickness.

"Bruiser" Ellison, they had called him then; a heavyweight whose very brute strength had kept him from the championship; that, and a certain easy good nature which was not apparent now in the bleak staring of the eyes turned now upon Annister, remorseless, under lowered brows.

Now, as if at a signal, the men about the table rose; the table was hauled backward to the wall, leaving a wide, sanded space under the lights.

And then, even as Rook spoke, Annister abruptly understood: this gang of thieves, as he knew now—"Plunder, Limited," as Cleo Ridgley had called them—Annister knew them now, under the leadership of Rook, for an outfit which would stop short of nothing to attain its ends. His eyes, roving the long room up and down, searched now for that dark face, with its black, forking beard, but he was not really expecting to see it, but that, if Rook was the actual leader, Black Beard was "the man higher up," Annister was, somehow, convinced.

They had failed with Westervelt and his *segundo*; now, as the man called "Bull" came forward across the floor, Rook spoke:

"Ellison hasn't forgotten his meeting with you, Annister; he says you played him a dirty trick; hit him when he wasn't looking; that right, Bull?" he asked, with a certain sly malice directed at the giant with the cauliflower ear.

"And now," Rook's purring tones continued, "he wants satisfaction; he'll get it, won't he, Mister Annister?"

For a moment, as Annister's eyes bored into his, the lawyer's face showed, like an animal's, in a Rembrandtesque shading of high light and shadow beneath the lights. Stripped of its mask, it was like the face of a devil; now the mouth grinned, but without mirth, the lips drawn backward from the teeth in a soundless snarl. He laughed suddenly, and there was nothing human in it, as Annister, his back to the wall, smiled grimly now in answer.

He had been somewhat less than discreet, he reflected; Rook's purpose had shown in his eyes; he, Annister, had walked into a trap from which, this time, there could be no escape. He had meant to beard them to their faces, wring from Rook an admission as to his father, perhaps more; then shoot his way out, if need be.

But now—he would have to fight this giant, a ring veteran of a hundred battles, with bare fists, surrounded by an encircling, hostile cordon; who, if by any chance he might prove the victor, would see to it that he paid for that victory with his life.

Annister knew that it was on the cards that Rook, for instance, would shoot him down as remorselessly as a man would squeeze a mosquito, say, out of life between thumb and finger. But it was the lawyer's humor, doubtless, to see him manhandled, perhaps killed beneath the drumming impact of those iron fists.

Calmly, he removed his coat, bestowing his automatic in the pocket of his trousers. He did it openly, turning to face Ellison, who, stripped to an athletic undershirt and trousers, regarded Annister with a grinning assurance.

He was big; perhaps twenty pounds heavier than Annister, with wide shoulders and a deep arching chest; with his forward-thrusting jaw and bullet head, with its stiff fell of pig's-bristles, the long arms like a gorilla's, he towered over his antagonist like a cave bear, a grizzly waiting for the kill, and like a cave bear, at Rook's snarling call of "Time!" he was upon the lesser man like a thunderbolt, fists going like flails.

Annister, in his day and generation, had absorbed the science of hit, stop, and getaway under masters of the art who pronounced him, as an amateur, the equal of many a professional performer of the squared circle; he was lean and hard, whereas Ellison's waistline showed, under the thin shirt, in folds of fat.

If the onlookers expected to see Annister annihilated by that first, furious rush, they were mistaken. Crouching, lightly, on the balls of his feet, he drove forward a lightning straight left, full on the point. Ellison, coming in, took it; grunting; the blow had traveled a scant six inches, but there had been power in it.

It set him back upon his heels, from which, as he rose, raging, he dove in with a ripping one-two punch, which, partly blocked by his antagonist, yet crashing through the latter's guard, landed high upon his cheek-bone with a spanking thud.

It had been a grazing blow; otherwise, the fight might have ended then and there. Annister, backing nimbly before the giant's rush, realized that he must avoid a clinch; at in-fighting the giant would have the edge: those mast-like arms and massive shoulders, the huge bulk—they would, at close quarters, with the drumming impact of the great fists, have spelled a quick ending with the sheer, slugging power of the attack.

He heard Rook snarl as, side-stepping like a sliding ghost, he countered with a long, curving left.

So far, he had been holding his own. If he could keep the giant at his distance, he might wear him out. For this was not a fight by rounds; a professional pugilist, fighting in the pink, would have had bellows to mend at the end, say, of five minutes of a give-and-take encounter moving at high speed.

Circling, feinting, ducking, Annister kept that long left in his adversary's face, forcing the pace, yet keeping out of harm's way save for an overhand swing, which, landing high up upon his cheek-bone, turned him half round with the impact, throwing him off balance to a slumping fall.

Up like a flash, however, he ducked, dodged, evading those mighty arms that strove desperately to reach him through that impenetrable guard.

A fight with four-ounce gloves can be a bloody affair enough, but with nature's weapons, under London Prize Ring rules, it can be a shambles. Armed with the cestus or the mailed fist, Ellison might have wreaked havoc as a gladiator of old Rome punished his adversary to the death. As it was, Annister, his face a bloody mask, where that socking punch

had landed, gave Rook and his supporters heart of grace.

"Take him, Bull!"

The screaming advice was in the high voice of Lunn; the others echoed it. But if Annister was in desperate case, the giant, sobbing now with the fury of his spent strength, was weaving on his feet.

Legs like iron columns upbore that mighty strength, but a pile-driving right, behind it the full weight of Annister's two hundred pounds of iron-hard muscle, sinking with an audible "plop!" in his adversary's midriff, brought from the giant a quick, gasping grunt.

Ellison's endurance was almost done. He could "take it," but, hog-fat from a protracted period of easy living, professional fighter as he had been, this amateur, with the arching chest of a greyhound and the stamina of a lucivee of the long trail, was wearing him down.

Trading punch for punch now, Annister abruptly cut loose with pile-driving right and lefts; they volleyed in from every angle; there was a cold grin on his lips now as he went round the giant like a cooper round a barrel, bombarding him with a bewildering crossfire of hooks and swings, jabs and uppercuts.

Annister, at the beginning of the fight, had expected the usual tricks of the professional: holding in the clinches; butting; the elbow; the heel of the hand against the face; but Ellison had fought fair.

Now, as the giant, boring in against that relentless attack, faltered, mouth open, labored breath sucked inward through clenched teeth, Annister stepped backward, hands dropping at his sides.

Ellison, almost out, stood, weaving on his feet, fronting his adversary, a queer look of surprise in his face, and a something more. Annister, strangely enough, as has been mentioned, had, in spite of his encounter with Ellison in the smoker, conceived something for the man that had been close to liking. Somehow, rough as the man was; crooked, by all the signs; the tool of Rook and of his minions, he had the blue eye of a fighter—the straight, level look of a man who, though an enemy, would yet fight fair.

Annister, breathing heavily, thrust out his hand.

"A draw, ha?" he said. "Well—suppose we let it go at that."

For a moment Ellison appeared to hesitate; there came again the queer look in his eyes, as of surprise, wonder, and a something more. There came a grating curse from Lunn; a sudden movement from the onlookers roundabout.

Ellison's great paw closed on the extended hand with a grip of iron, as

Rook's voice rose, strident, under the lights:

"Bull—are you crazy? This man—he's just—a dam' dick!"

## CHAPTER TEN

### "IN THE NAME OF THE LAW!"

IT WAS OUT. Rook, his hand in a lightning stab for Annister's coat, turned over the lapel, holding it forward for all to see.

On it was a small gold badge—the symbol of the Secret Service. The secret was a secret no longer.

How long Rook had known of it Annister could not be certain, but now, at the growling chorus of swift hate, he whirled. His pistol came up and out, as there came a startling interruption, or rather, two.

He heard Ellison's voice, roaring in the narrow room:

"Hell's bells, young fellow, I'm with you, and you can lay to that! For this once, anyway! You sure can handle yourself!"

He turned to Rook and the rest. "Now—you bums, get goin'! Dick or no dick, I'll play this hand as she lays. Get goin'!"

The great hand, holding a heavy Colt, swung upward on a line with Annister's as the door burst inward with a crash; and, framed in the opening, there showed on a sudden the flaming thatch of the bartender, Del Kane.

His cowboy yell echoed throughout the room, eyes blazing upon the hotel man where he sat.

In two strides, he had joined Annister and Bull; guns on a line, the three fronted the five who faced them, silent, tense. Kane's voice came clear:

"I followed you, Mr. Annister; thought they'd try t' run a whizzer on yuh; I'm pullin' m' freight after today, anyway; Mister Lunn can have his job, an' welcome! Now—I ben keepin' cases on Mister Rook, he's a curly wolf, aint you, Rook? A real bad hombre, an' you can lay to that! But he ain't goin' northwest of nothin', he ain't. . . Now, you dam' short-horns, show some speed!"

But there was no fight in Rook, Lunn and Company. Glowering, their hands in plain sight, weaponless, they sat in a sullen silence, as Annister, backing to the doorway, was followed by Ellison and Kane. Outside, under pale stars, the giant spoke:

"I don't aim to be too all-fired honest, Mister Annister," he said. "I throwed in with Mister Rook, that's so, but he's played it both ends against the middle with me, I guess. . . I reckon I'll be

movin' out o' Dry Bone in two—three hours."

He grinned, wryly, out of the corner of his mouth.

"You sure pack a hefty wallop, young fellow! I wish I could tell you somethin', but that man Rook, he's as close-mouthed as an Indian, and that's whatever! His game—nobody knows what it is—Lunn, maybe—but they sure got a stranglehold on th' county; it won't be healthy for me here after tonight."

The three men separated at the hotel, Annister entering the lobby with a curious depression that abruptly deepened to a sudden, crawling fear as a call-boy brought him a note. The fear was not for himself, but for another, for, although he had never seen the handwriting before, he knew it upon the instant.

Ripping open the envelope with fingers that trembled, he read, and at what he saw his face paled slowly to a mottled, unhealthy gray:

"Partner:

"If you get this in time, please hurry. I'm in the toils, at Dr. Elphinistone's—it's the stone house at the right of the road leading north from Dry Bone—twenty miles, I think. I've bribed a man to take this to you, and if he fails me, God help me!—God help us all! If you fail me, you'll never see me again—as Mary Allerton, because the Devil's in charge here, and they call him the Jailer of Souls. I'll be watching for you, at the south window—you'll know it by the red ribbon on the bars. And now—be careful. If you get here at night beware of the guards—there are three. And if it's night there'll be a rope hanging from the window—you can feel for it in the dark. Now hurry.

"MARY ALLERTON (No. 33)."

"You'll never see me again—as Mary Allerton." Annister was aware again of that crawling fear. "The red ribbon on the bars." The place was in effect a prison, then.

But—"No. 33"! Annister's heart leaped up. He knew the meaning of those numerals well enough; he had been blind not to have suspected it. But "Dr. Elphinistone," and "The Jailer of Souls!"

Who could be the jailer of souls but the Devil? And Annister fancied that he had seen the Devil at the corner of that street under the moon, with his black, forking beard, and the cold eyes of death.

The trail was warm now, as he thought, but—if he were too late? He

put the thought from him, turning to the perusal of a telegram in code which he had found waiting for him at the desk; translated, it read:

"With you Thursday with four, six, twenty-one, and the others. Look for thirty-three.

"CHILDERS."

But there was no time to be lost. Thursday was tomorrow. He would have to take his chance of their finding him, for there was nobody whom he could trust. Ellison had gone, even if he might have chanced the giant in so delicate a matter; Del Kane, likewise. He must take his chance. Striding to the door, he stiffened abruptly at a drumming rap, and a hoarse voice in the corridor without:

"Open up in there; open up!"

Annister, a pulse in his temple beating to his hard-held breath, jerked back the door, to face—

Bristow, behind him three men whom he recognized as hangers-on at the hotel bar. They had something of the look of long-riders, villainous, hard-bitten; as one man, they grinned now, but without mirth, as the sheriff spoke:

"Annister—I arrest you for the murder of Tucson Charlie Westervelt and Bartley Pattison. In th' name of th' Law!"

Annister knew that if he resisted they would shoot him down; in fact, he knew, too, that was what they wanted; it would be the easiest way. Under the menace of the guns, he spread his hands, palms downward, preceding the four men down the stairs outward to the jail.

But as the heavy door clanged shut behind him, Annister, his gaze in a sightless staring into the north, groaned, in bitterness of spirit.

Mary was needing him; she was in peril, the greater because it was unknown—and—he would not be there.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### THE HOUSE OF FEAR

A HOUSE OF SILENCE, broken at times by a weird wailing as from the Pit; a house of dreams, gray in the moonlight, under the leprous-silvered finger of the moon, brooding now, a grim, gray fortress of the damned: the stronghold of the Beast.

Dense pines grew about it, so that when the wind wailed among them, like the wailing of a lost soul, it met and mingled with an eerie ululation rising as if muffled by many thicknesses of walls, to end, after a little, with a quick shriek and a sudden hush, with, after a mo-

ment, the faint echo of a taunting laugh.

That laugh would have struck terror to the swart soul of a *lucivee*, if *lucivees* have souls, for it was like an *eldritch* howling, faint and thin; like the thin, tinkling laughter of a fiend, without pity and without ruth.

Here, in the sanitarium of Doctor Elphinstone, there were secrets within secrets, walls within walls, downward, as in Dante's Seventh Hell, and from this monastery of the hopeless there penetrated, on occasion, outward from its battlemented walls, wild, frantic laughter, but there was nothing demoniac about it, because it was the laughter of the insane.

But that other laughter, like a sound heard in dreams—passers-by, if there were any such, hearing it, would shudder, and pass on. For the secret of that house of doom was a secret, terrible and grim; a secret, for him who might have guessed at it, to be whispered behind locked doors and with bated breath. And there had been those who had whispered of the lost souls within those walls, and the whisper ran that they were, indeed, madmen who had not been always mad, because—they had become such *after* their commitment to the bleak house within the wood.

These were but whispers, merely, for the power upon that house was not alone the power of Evil, rising like a dark tide among the pines; for in Dry Bone, and beyond it, in Palos Verde and Mojave, it was rumored that the strong arm of the Law upheld it, or such law, say, as might have issued from the devious hand of Hamilton Rook.

Once—and it was never repeated—a man had come there from the capital; he had demanded to see the doctor's patients; that had been a long time in the past.

And as the investigator had stood there, viewing with a faint, creeping horror the nondescripts paraded before him, gibbering, mouthing, in an inarticulate, furious babble, a man had burst suddenly from the line with a strangled cry:

"Jerry—don't you know me? I'm Humiston—Newbold. . ."

The voice had been the voice of Humiston, but the face—it had been the face of another, totally unlike; there had been no possible resemblance. But the man had been—*sane*. The investigator was persuaded of that; suffering under a peculiar delusion, indeed, but sane.

The man had rushed forward then, baring his arm; and there, on that thin, pitiful flesh that had once been healthy and hard, there ran a curious design in

red; the investigator sucked in his breath as that tell-tale birth-mark sprang, livid, under his gaze. For he had seen it before.

The doctor's eyes had narrowed to slits; somehow, the man from the capital had gained the impression that it was the first time that he had seen that mark. But the investigator could do nothing. Birth-marks can be duplicated. He had waited then, in a curious indecision as the bearded doctor had interposed a suave:

"Well, of course, Commissioner, you're quite aware, or you should be, how it is: these paranoiacs are noted for their delusions—ah—megaloccephalic tendencies, I should say. . . They believe themselves to be—someone else, and always a bank president, say, a famous actor, an author, a great general. . . Now—Mr. Humiston—you knew him, I believe?" Beneath the silken tone there ran suddenly a hint of iron, of menace, veiled but actual; the investigator felt it. "This patient knew your name, of course," the suave voice had continued. "Poor fellow—we must be gentle with him."

And there the matter had ended. Curiously enough, the man who had claimed to be Banker Humiston had, after that first burst of frenzied speech, kept silent. Perhaps that mordant gleaming in the doctor's eyes had telegraphed a warning, a message, a command.

But the investigator went home, oddly shaken, to dream, like Pilate's wife, of a white face with staring eyes which changed, even as he gazed, into the face of his friend, Newbold Humiston; to hear, even in his dream, a voice, and it was the voice of the living, and of the dead.

IN A BARE CELL, six feet by six—a cubicle in which there was barely sufficient head room for a tall man to stand upright—a figure stood with its hands clenched upon the bars, staring outward at the grim wood visible to the south.

Travis Annister had abode here in this living tomb three weeks now, three centuries, in which, as in a nightmare of cold horror, he had been aware merely of a face, three-pointed, bearded, the eyes active with a malign intelligence. The lips smiling always with the cold smile of death.

Twice a day the small panel in his cell door had slid backward without sound, to frame, in the opening, the face of Dr. Elphinstone, like a face without a body, and without a soul.

The father of Black Steve Annister knew that it was not a dream that would

pass, because, on the second day, the bead had spoken. Travis Annister was scarcely a coward; he had fought like a baited grizzly when surprised in his Summer camp by the men who had brought him, under cover of the night, to this prison-house beyond the pale.

Now, at the voice, like the slow drip of an acid, Annister stared straight before him, with the gaze of a man who has abandoned hope:

"My dear Mr. Annister," the voice had whispered, "the little matter of that check, if you please. . . You will make it out to 'Cash'. . . Ah, that is good; I perceive you are—wise."

It had not been the pistol in the lean, clawlike hand; nor the eyes, even, brooding upon him with the impersonal, cold staring of a cobra; Travis Annister might have refused if it had not been for those sounds that he had heard, the sights that he had seen when, taken at midnight from his cubicle, he had beheld the administration of the Cone.

And, like Macbeth, with that one sight, and the sight of that which came after, he had "supped full of horrors," until now, at the bidding of that toneless voice, he had obeyed. Three times thereafter, at the command of his dark jailer, he had paid tribute, nor had he been, of all that lost battalion, the single victim; there had been others..

Now, separated from him scarce a dozen feet, a girl with golden hair sat, huddled, eyes in a sightless staring upon the stone floor of her cell. Cleo Ridgley had not been killed; she had been saved for a fate—beside which death would be a little thing—a fate unspeakable, even as had—Number Thirty-three.

Mary Allerton, removed from the others by a narrow corridor running cross-wise in the cell-block, watched and waited now for the signal of the man to whom she had dispatched that message, it seemed, a century in the past.

That morning they had found the rope; they had removed it without comment, while the ophidian gaze of the dark Doctor had been bent upon her with what she fancied had been a queer, speculative look: a look of anticipation, and of something more. So far she had been treated decently enough; her cell was wide and airy, plainly but comfortably furnished; but as to that look in the gray-green eyes of the Master of Black Magic—she was not so sure:

There came a sudden movement in the corridor without; a panting, a snuffling, and the quick *pad-pail* of marching feet. Mary, her eye to the keyhole of that door, could see but dimly; she made out merely the sheeted figures, like grim, gliding ghosts; the figure, rigid, on the

stretcher, moving, silent, on its rubber-tired wheels. Then, at an odor stealing inward through the key-hole, she recoiled.

That perfume had been sickish-sweet, overpowering, dense and yet sharp with a faint, acrid sweetness; the odor of ether. And then, although she could not see it, a man in the next cell had risen, white-faced, from his cot, to sink back limply as the dark hand, holding that inverted cone, had swept downward to his face.

A choked gurgle, a strangled, sharp cry, penetrating outward in a vague shadow of clamor—and then silence, with the faint whisper of the wind among the pines, the brool of the rushing river, the faint, half-audible foot-falls passing and repassing in that corridor of the dead.

TRAVIS ANNISTER sprang to his feet as the narrow door swung open to press backward against the window-bars as the High-Priest of Horror, followed by his familiars, cowled and hooded, entered with a slow, silent step. The Doctor spoke, and his voice was like a chill wind:

"My friend, I bring you—forgetfulness . . . A brief Lethe of hours . . . And then—ah, then, you will be a *new* man, a *man* re-born, my friend . . . Now . . ."

Annister, his face gray with a sort of hideous strain, stared silent, white-lipped, as, at a low-voiced order, the attendants came forward.

The lean hand reached forward; it poised, darted, swooped; and in it was the Cone.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### CASTLE DANGEROUS

ALONE IN HIS CELL beneath the court-house, Black Steve Annister sat in silence, gazing northward through the barred window to where, invisible in the thick darkness just across the street, the road ran, straight as an arrow from the bow, to that dark forest brooding in a changeless silence where lay the House of Fear.

Childers would have had his wire long since; but by the time that help could come it would be—too late. Annister, fatalistic after a fashion, felt this to be the fact even as he hoped against hope.

But they were many, and he was but one. Tomorrow—it would be too late.

Head bowed in his hands, oblivious, at first he had heard it as a thin whisper, like a knife blade against the silence; it penetrated inward now, with the dull rasp of metal upon metal from without:

*Sit tight, old-timer; I'm comin' through!"*

There came a muffled thud, a twist; Annister, reaching forth a hand, found it clasped in thick groping fingers. Then, as he thrust head and shoulders through the sundered bars, a Shadow arose, gigantic, against the stars; the voice came again, in a quick, rumbling whisper:

"It's me, old-timer—*Bull*."

Annister, crawling through the opening, alighted upon soft turf. He heard Ellison's low chuckle as, following the giant, he passed along the lee of the building to where, showing merely as a black blot against the night, there stood an automobile, its engine just turning over, with the low, even purr of harnessed power; at twenty paces it was scarcely audible above the rising of the wind.

"Tank's full," said Ellison. "Now—"

He turned abruptly as a dim figure rose upward just beyond. For a moment Annister set himself for the onslaught; then his hand went out; it gripped the hard hand of Del Kane.

"Ellison done told me, Mr. Annister," he said. "An' so I come a-fannin' an' a-foggin' thisaway from Mojave; certain-sure I don't aim to leave no friend of mine hog-tied in no calaboose!"

Annister, his heart warming to these friends, debated with himself; then turned to Ellison with a sudden movement.

"Bull," he said. "I'm putting my cards on the table with you and Del, here."

He told them briefly of the message from Mary, the need of haste; then, of his mission, and of the help that was even now due, or would be, with the morning. If they were coming with him, northward along that road of peril, word must be left behind.

Kane thought a moment; then, wheeling swiftly, with muttered word, he disappeared in the darkness, to return presently with the good news that he had fixed it with the station-agent. The latter had just come on; he was a friend of Kane's, and no friend of Rook and Company; he would see to it, Kane said, that the reinforcements would be warned.

Boarding the car, they swung out cautiously along the silent street, under the pale stars, northward along that shadowy road. Presently there would be a moon, but just now they went onward in a thick darkness, with, just ahead, the dim loom of the road, flowing backward under the wheels, which presently ran like a ribbon of pale flame under the bright beam of the lights.



A half mile from the town, and Bull, who was driving, opened up, and the car leaped forward with the rising drone of the powerful motor, thirty, forty, fifty miles an hour; the wind of their passage drove backward like a wall as the giant's voice came now in a rumbling laugh:

"Some little speed-wagon, Mr. Annister, ha?" he said. "An' that's whatever! It ought to be. The man who owns it—who *did* own it half an hour ago—he's some particular, I'll say! Because—it's Mister Hamilton Rook's!"

Annister laughed grimly in answer, speaking a low word of caution as, after perhaps a half hour of their racing on-rush the lights glimmered on dark trees to right and left.

"Somewhere about here, I think," he said, low. "Three outside guards, I understand. We'd better stop a little way this side, Bull . . . that's it. Now, look!"

As the big car slid slowly to a halt, the moon, rising above the trees, showed them, perhaps a hundred yards just ahead, a low, rambling, stone house, its windows like blind eyes to the night. Upon its roof the moonlight lay like snow, and even at that distance it was sinister, forbidding, as if the evil that was within had seeped through those stones, outward, in a creeping tide.

"Looks like a morgue," offered Ellison, with a shrug of his great shoulders, as the three, alighting, pushed the car before them into the wood.

Then, guns out, they went forward slowly among the trees.

Annister had formed no definite plan of attack. The red ribbon at that window-bar might or might not be visible under the moon, but, the guards eliminated, it seemed to him that, after all, they would have to make it an assault in force. Pondering this matter, of a sudden he leaped sidewise as a dim figure rose upward almost in his face.

Spread-eagled like a bat against the dimness, the figure bulked, huge, against the moon as Annister, bending to one side, brought up his fist in a lifting punch, from his shoe-tops.

It was a savage blow; it landed with the sound of a butcher's cleaver on the chopping-block; there came a gasping grunt; the thud of a heavy body, as the guard went downward without a sound.

"One!" breathed Ellison, as, trussing their victim with a length of stout line brought from the car, they left him, going forward carefully, keeping together, circling the house.

But it was not until they were half way round it, with, so far, no sign of

that signal for which he looked, that they encountered the second guard.

He came upon them with a swift, silent onrush, leaping among the trees, a great, dun shape, spectral under the moon, fangs bared, as, without a sound, the hound drove straight for the giant's throat.

A shot would bring discovery; they dared not risk it. Annister could see the great head, the wide ruff at the neck, the grinning jaws . . . Then, the giant's hands had gone up and out; there came a straining heave, a wrench, a queer, whistling croak; Ellison, rising from his knees, looked downward a moment to where the beast, its jaw broken by that mighty strength, lay stretched, lifeless, at his feet.

By now they had come full circle, when, all at once, Annister, peering under his hand, sucked in his breath with a whispered oath.

Fair against the bars of a window, low down at their right, there was a dark smudge; the ribbon, black under the moon. Annister's heart leaped up in answer, as, with a quick word, he halted his companions in the shadow of a tree. A moment they conferred; then Ellison and Annister could almost see his grin in the darkness spoke beneath his hand:

"Why, that'll be easy! I've got m' tools; they're right here in my pocket, Mr. Annister! Those bars ought to be easy! For a fair journeyman sledge-swinger, it'll be easy an' you can lay to that!"

"Good!" whispered Annister in answer. "But—hurry!"

The moonlight lay in a molten flood between them and the house. But it was no time now for deliberation. Crossing that bright strip at a crouching run, the three were at the window; Annister's harsh whisper hissed in the silence, through those iron bars:

"Mary!"

For a heart-beat silence answered him; then, faint and thin, in a faint, tremulous, sobbing breath, there came the answer:

"Steve—thank God!"

Annister had spoken the girl's name without thought. At that high moment forms had been futile; that whisper had been wrung from him, deep-down, as had her answer. And then the soft rasp of steel on steel told that Ellison was at work.

But the giant was working against time. At any moment now might come the alarm; they had no means of knowing the number of those within those walls; perhaps even now peril, just behind, might be stalking them, out of the dark.

And still that soft rasp went on, until, at a low word from the girl, the giant, laying down his file, bent, heaved, putting his shoulder into it; and the bars sprang outward, bent and twisted in that iron grasp.

Annister, his hand reaching for the hand of the girl, went inward silently, to stand a moment, without speech, in the thick darkness of the little cell. But it was no time for dalliance.

Kane and Ellison behind him now, he set his shoulder against the door, as, Ellison aiding, it splintered outward with a soft, carrying crash. Ahead of them, along a dark, narrow corridor, there had come on a sudden a sound of voices, murmurs; Annister, going toward that sound, saw suddenly an open door; light streamed from it as the murmur of voices rose:

"My friend, I bring you—forgetfulness . . ."

The words came in a sort of hissing sibilance as Annister, reaching that doorway, halted a moment as the tableau was burned into his brain:

He saw his father, helpless, his face gray with the hideous terror of that which was upon him, in the grasp of two cloaked and hooded figures, their dark faces grinning with a bestial mirth.

And before him, hand upraised and holding a curious, funnel-shaped object at which the man in the corner shrank backward even as he looked, he saw a tall man with a black, forking beard—the same that he had seen that evening at the corner of the street; the same that he had seen in that dim backwater of Rangoon, the Unspeakable—the man with the dark, foreign visage, and the eyes of death.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### THE JAILER OF SOULS

ANNISTER'S GUN went up and out as the black-bearded man, turning, saw him where he stood.

Travis Annister, parchment-pale, took two forward, lurching steps, as the doctor, backing stiffly against the wall, hands upraised, called something in a high sing-song, savage, inarticulate.

Then—everything seemed to happen at once. A snarling, animal outcry echoed from the passage just without; it rose, as there came a far, gobbling mutter of voices, and the *pad-pad* of running feet.

The hooded Familiars, as one man, turned, and ~~the~~ long knives flashed, luminous, under the lights, as Kane and Ellison, meeting them half way, raised their heavy guns.

Annister, covering the Doctor, froze suddenly in motion as that gobbling horror mounted, and then, filling that narrow way like figures in a dream, they came: the outcasts, the lost battalion, the Men Who Had no Right to Live.

In their van, but running rather as if pursued than as if in answer to that snarling call, there came three men, guards by their dress, their faces contorted, agonized, upon them the impress of a crawling fear. They streamed past that door, pursuers and pursued, as Black Steve Annister, finger upon the trigger of his pistol, saw that lean hand sweep upward; it flicked the thin lips; the dark face grayed, went blank; the Dark Doctor, his gaze in a queer, frozen look upon Eternity, pitched forward upon his face.

In some way, as Annister could understand, the madmen had won free, but—how?

Turning, he saw a white face at his elbow as there sounded from without the staccato explosions of a motor, and a swift, hammering thunder upon the great door.

"I am—Newbold Humiston," said the face, "and I am not mad, or, rather, I am but mad north-north-west when the wind is southerly," he quoted, with a ghastly smile. "This devil—" he pointed to the body of Elphinstone—"has gone to his own place, but the evil that he did lives after him—in us."

His voice rose to a shriek as there came a rush of feet along the corridor: a compact body of men, at their head a tall

man at sight of whom Stephen Annister flung up a hand.

"Well, Childers," he said. "I'm glad!"

Childers spoke pantingly, in quick gasps:

"We just made it, old man," he said. "A day ahead at that. The station agent put us on the track. We got 'em all—Lunn, and the rest; all but Rook—"

He paused, at Annister's inquiring look, turning his thumb down with an expressive gesture.

"We found him—strangled—in his office . . . a queer business . . ."

Annister gave an exclamation.

"The Indian!" he said. "Well, Rook was the 'Third Light,' sure enough!"

Again he was seeing the lean, avid face in the vestibule of the smoker, the lighted match; himself, and the conductor, and Rook, the lawyer's pale eyes brooding above the glowing end of his cigarette . . . And again, as the picture passed, he was aware of the white face at his elbow as Mary Allerton, her hand in his, behind her the golden hair and the wide eyes of Cleo Ridgley, turned to Childers with a smile that yet had in it a hint of tears.

He that had been Newbold Humiston continued:

"The others—they're quiet now. The guards have gone—to follow *him*—the others saw to that."

He gestured toward the silent figure on the floor.

"His plan was worthy of his master, the Devil, because it was diabolically

simple: Rook was his procurer and his clearing-house; you see, Rook found the victims, and cashed the checks that Elphinstone wrung from them; and then, when they had cleaned up, or when they deemed the time was ripe, the victims—disappeared. Rook's secretary they kidnapped for revenge; Miss Allerton because she knew much; they suspected that she was in the Secret Service. And so—these others disappeared."

He laughed; the laugh of a dead man risen from the tomb.

"They disappeared—yes—but—they remained, as you see—myself—a living ghost!"

"But how?" asked the younger Annister, in the sudden quiet, the realization of what his father and Mary had escaped burning like a quick fire in his veins. The toneless voice went on:

"Elphinstone was a surgeon, a master . . . You've heard of Dermatology? Well, it's been done in India, I believe; practiced there to an extent unknown here, of course. An anesthetic, and then an operation: new faces for old; forged faces; the thing was diabolically simple. And so when they, the victims, saw themselves in a mirror, sometimes they went mad, for who could prove it? Who would be believed?"

His voice rose, died, gathered strength, as a candle flames at the last with a brief spark of life:

"It's done," he muttered. "He's gone—but his work lives after him, even as he called himself—the Jailer of Souls!"

THE END.