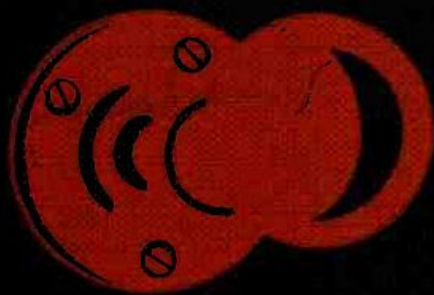


THE HIDDEN DOOR

FRANK L. PACKARD



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Books By

FRANK L. PACKARD

THE HIDDEN DOOR
THE GOLD SKULL MURDERS
JIMMIE DALE AND THE BLUE ENVELOPE MURDER
THE BIG SHOT
TIGER CLAWS
SHANGHAI JIM
THE DEVIL'S MANTLE
TWO STOLEN IDOLS
THE RED LEDGER
BROKEN WATERS
RUNNING SPECIAL
THE LOCKED BOOK
THE FOUR STRAGGLERS
JIMMIE DALE AND THE PHANTOM CLUE
DOORS OF THE NIGHT
PAWNED
THE WHITE MOLL
FROM NOW ON
THE NIGHT OPERATOR
THE ADVENTURES OF JIMMIE DALE
THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF JIMMIE DALE
THE WIRE DEVILS
THE SIN THAT WAS HIS
THE BELOVED TRAITOR
GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN
THE MIRACLE MAN

FRANK L. PACKARD

THE HIDDEN DOOR

To Colin Hewitt, criminologist, great writer of detective stories, a man brought a strange tale and a stranger request—a request with the sinister shadow of death behind it. It was that tale which led Colin into more sinister waters than he had ever known before—into a world where treachery and sudden death were commonplaces—to a climax that all but cost him his life.

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FIRST EDITION

TO

“PAT” PACKARD

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I IN EVENT OF DEATH	1
II ON THE SPOT	9
III THE POLICE ANGLE	24
IV THE CURTAIN POLE	34
V BY PROXY	46
VI SEALED INSTRUCTIONS	55
VII UNDER COVER	63
VIII MAN PROPOSES	79
IX FOG VOICES	90
X FACED CARDS	100
XI THE TWO VISITORS	110
XII THE SPY	118
XIII FIFTY-FIFTY	127
XIV ON THE LAP OF THE GODS	139
XV THE RAID	148
XVI AGAINST TIME	160
XVII ALIAS CLARKIE LUNN	178
XVIII CONTACT	189
XIX "W. P."	209
XX DOLLAIRE	225
XXI THE SIGNAL	239
XXII ON THE STAIRWAY	251
XXIII 608-A	266
XXIV THE MASK	278
XXV THE LETTER	290

THE HIDDEN DOOR

CHAPTER I

IN EVENT OF DEATH

Two murders had been committed there in times gone by. There had been an interval of more than a few years between the two killings, and the one was in no way connected with the other except as to locale—for which reason, those who remembered and were superstitiously minded always claimed that some day sooner or later that same locale would inevitably be the scene of a *third* murder.

Its location—on a side street just off Washington Square—afforded a certain seclusion and, for New York, a comparatively quiet retreat. Colin Hewitt was not superstitious; nor, indeed, was the previous tenant from whom, as it were, he had inherited the place—a fellow writer who, some two years ago, had left New York to make his home in the south of France.

It had once been a small stable. It was reached by a narrow passageway from the street, and fronted on a diminutive yard which separated it from the dwelling to which in past years it had been a necessary adjunct.

Colin's friend had metamorphosed it into a combination of literary workshop and cozy diggings. Colin had made no changes save, of course, to furnish it with his own effects.

Except for a bathroom and pantry-kitchen, it possessed but two rooms: the bedroom above; and the "shop," as Colin called it, on the ground floor, that opened, just as in the days of the old stable door, directly on the yard.

It was perhaps a little bizarre if one took into account the surroundings and the original purpose for which it had been built, and, in the much misused sense of the word, it might even have been designated as Bohemian in its atmosphere; but Colin liked it. He worked well there. Also, he liked it for other and very pertinent reasons.

It was night, near to midnight, and Colin sat now with his elbows propped on the edge of his flat-topped desk, his chin cupped in his hands, his quiet light brown eyes fixed introspectively on the figure of a young man of about his own age who was ensconced in a lounging chair opposite the

desk and who at the moment had just gulped down a stiff spot of neat whisky. Colin's vis-à-vis had many aliases; but when, some thirty years ago, they had both been born in the same obscure little village in the western part of the state, the other had been christened John, and his surname had been Turner. He had flaming red hair. He had never been called John; he had always been known as Reddy.

They had been close chums through the village school days. The old swimming-hole stuff—and, particularly in connection therewith on one occasion, green apples and cramps. It had been touch and go that day. Reddy had nearly lost his own life in getting Colin out of the water. Later Colin had taken a university course followed by a postgraduate one abroad, specializing in modern languages; Reddy, on the other hand, had followed numerous courses of instruction under various wardens in various institutions that were quite as famous in their own way as were the seats of learning Colin had attended. At the age of fifteen Reddy had run away from home, and it was not until scarcely little more than a week ago that Colin, on one of his customary nightly prowls after “material,” had bumped into the other in a joint of excessively ill repute run by one Nigger Joey. Since then

“That’s a laugh!” exclaimed Reddy Turner of many aliases. “You don’t owe me any thanks. I’ve introduced you to some of my mob offhand-like; and that’s as far as you know damned well it’ll ever go. But what I’m saying is that though the papers pat you on the back and say you know your onions when it comes to writing crook stuff better than any other guy that ever dished it out, I’m telling you you don’t even know what’s under the skin of those onions, and you’re only kidding the public that hands you a hatful of dough every time you bust into print.”

Colin laughed easily.

“You’re good tonight, Reddy! Nothing like honest criticism. Don’t spare my feelings. Go on.”

“That’s all right,” grunted Reddy. “Sure! Now that I’m at it, I’ll get it off my chest. You go out at night visiting a lot of dumps and hangouts; you know a lot of lags and cokies and a big shot or two; you’re pals with some of the dicks down at the Homicide Bureau; you’re in thick with the police reporters; and you go out and wrap your arms around the neck of any likely bum or dame you meet in the street or in the parks, bring them in here, where nobody’s to know and where it’s nobody’s business, give them a snort and a bite, and frisk the history of their lives out of them. Everybody knows

you're on the level and wouldn't squawk, but all you're getting out of it is what you call color, and the rest is your imagination. Maybe that's enough. I don't say it isn't; I'm only saying that what you're getting looks like nothing at all alongside of the real works."

"Then, perhaps," suggested Colin quizzically, "you can set me on the right track?"

"Sure!" Reddy shrugged his shoulders. "That's easy! Get into the racket yourself."

Again Colin laughed.

"What are you trying to do?" he inquired. "Proselyte me?"

"I used to know that word before we left school together," retorted Reddy with a twisted grin, "and I guess I haven't forgotten it. Didn't I tell you I was a librarian for two stretches, and that I read a lot of your books while I was in stir? That's what you've been trying to do to *me*, isn't it—proselyte me—ever since the night we met up in Nigger Joey's?"

Colin heaved himself suddenly up from his seat and, circling the corner of the desk, broad-shouldered, a good six feet in height, stood towering over the man in the chair. Then he laid his hand on the other's shoulder.

The hint of banter was gone.

"Well, why don't you cut it out, old man?" he asked.

Reddy's only answer was to fix his eyes abruptly on the toe of his boot.

Colin surveyed the other now in a grave and troubled way. There was age in what should have been a young face. The cheeks were thin and of an unhealthy pallor; the jet-black eyes were deep-set and burned too brightly. Colin's eyes roved over the trim, almost dapper little figure and rested speculatively for an instant on a significant, though almost imperceptible, bulge below the left shoulder of the other's coat. Reddy and the Sullivan Law, except when he was in prison, were always at outs. He, Colin, did not know exactly what Reddy's present racket was—Reddy had not been communicative on that point, in spite of casual introductions to some of his mob—but he knew that Reddy had served two terms for bank robberies, both hold-ups. Reddy was a gangster and in a way already even something of a big shot—but it wasn't too late, was it? He owed this man his life. He owed him more than that. He owed him so many cherished memories of those boyhood days. This thief wasn't the real Reddy—it was just a perverted streak that had got into the man. The Reddy he had known had

been a generous, laughter-loving boy who had never stooped to a mean or underhand act. The old Reddy must still be there if that side of him could only be reawakened and brought again to the fore.

“Why don’t you cut it out, Reddy?” he prodded earnestly.

The twisted grin came back to Reddy’s lips as he raised his eyes.

“I’ve thought of it,” he said. “I suppose we all have—only most of us never get any farther than letting the idea buzz around in our beans a bit. It isn’t so easy. I couldn’t cut it out without ducking my nut and giving my mob the shake, and that means getting out of New York.”

“Which is a splendid idea!” declared Colin heartily, as he appropriated the arm of the other’s chair. “Look here, Reddy! Get away from all this. What you need, to begin with, is a good physical house-cleaning—the mental side of it will follow. You don’t look well—and you’re not. You need a good big dose of the out-of-doors. The mountains, the rivers, or anywhere you like—a camping trip, say. I’ll go with you—a month or two of it. You used to like fishing, and we’ll go after something more gamy than bullpouts this time. Afterwards—well, we’ll talk that out under the stars. A fresh start somewhere. Let’s go! You say yourself that the only way you can shake your mob is by leaving New York.”

“Yes,” said Reddy; “but you see, even if I wanted to, what puts a crimp in that at the present time is that I can’t leave New York.”

“Why?”

“A job.”

“Oh!” Colin smiled grimly. “Then, I think we’d better start tonight!”

Reddy shook his head.

“You soak up all this sort of stuff like a sponge,” he said after a moment’s silence, “so I suppose you remember a fellow called French Pete who was put on the spot up at Carmoni’s spaghetti joint about a year ago, don’t you?”

“Yes,” said Colin crisply; “I do. And if that has any bearing on your present ‘job,’ all I can say is that you’re a proper fool, Reddy. What’s the good of that sort of thing? Lay off, laddy! The chances are an even fifty-fifty that it will only end up by you being put on the spot yourself.”

“I know that damned well,” admitted Reddy laconically. “Better than you do.”

“Well, then?”

It was May, but the weather had turned chilly, and a coal fire was burning in the grate. Reddy leaned forward, poured himself another drink, downed it, and, getting up, walked over to the mantelpiece and stood with his back against it.

“That’s why I blew in here tonight,” he said. “I didn’t just come for a drink and a talk. I’ve been thinking it over. I may get mine all right any old time. I came to ask you to do something for me if I get croaked, but I was afraid I would be asking too much until what you said a minute ago about that camping trip for a month or two. If you could spare that time off with me, which was damned white of you, I have a hunch that after you’ve sent me a wreath and all that sort of thing, you’d oblige me by making that trip, or perhaps something like it—alone.”

Colin’s smile was without mirth.

“See here, Reddy,” he said bluntly, “you’ve had a drink too much, haven’t you?”

“Not yet,” returned Reddy tersely. “Shall I shoot?”

Colin slipped off the arm of the chair and seated himself comfortably in its leather-cushioned depths.

“Yes; go on,” he invited.

Reddy took a cigarette from his pocket and lighted it.

“Well, it’s like this,” he said slowly. “So long as I am alive it doesn’t matter so much; but if I got bumped off, say, within the next two or three months, or two or three days, there’s a letter I’ve written and hidden away that I want a friend of mine to get.”

“Under such distressing circumstances,” Colin offered jocularly, “I would be quite willing to supply a postage stamp.”

Reddy smiled queerly.

“I could do that myself—if I knew the address,” he said. “But I don’t.”

CHAPTER II

ON THE SPOT

COLIN stared suspiciously from Reddy to the decanter and back again at Reddy.

“Is this a riddle?” he asked. “Or what? You want me to deliver a letter, but you don’t know where I am to deliver it.”

“In a way, yes—that’s right. I can only give you a starting point.”

Colin’s brows drew together.

“Oh, I see!” he observed. “I’m to pick up the trail and carry on.”

“Yes.” Reddy’s lips tightened. “I’m afraid it’s asking a lot; but the point is that it’s got to be someone I can trust—and I don’t know of anyone but you. It’ll mean roughing it a bit, I’d say, and it might take a month or two. Cost something, as well; but, as for that, I’ve got plenty of kale, and, if you agree, I’ll hand enough over before I leave tonight—just in case. See?”

Colin sat upright in his chair.

“See here, Reddy!” he ejaculated. “This sounds serious! Damn the kale! Where’s this starting point, and what’s the friend’s name? Man or woman?”

Reddy smiled thinly.

“I’m not dead yet,” he said. “All the dope I’ve got you’ll find with the letter. If I don’t kick off, it doesn’t count, that’s all; but if I do, as I said, I don’t know of anybody I could trust with this thing except you. And there’s a lot at stake in it for me. I am a crook, and you know it, and I’ve a hunch I can guess one thing that’s muddling around in your mind; but I can hand it to you straight right now that if I could tell you the whole story you wouldn’t have any qualms of conscience on the score of any crook stuff I was trying to put over. As for the rest, if you started looking for trouble, you might find it; but you will be in no danger whatever providing you merely deliver the letter as per instructions, and then fade out of the picture. Listen! I’ll put it another way. Let’s suppose I’ve told you where to find the letter if anything happens to me. There’s a large plain envelope with a sealed one

inside without any name on it, 'cause it's safer that way if it was pinched from you or you lost it; also enclosed in the big envelope there's a couple of loose sheets of paper that haven't got any 'Dear Colin' to start off with—which lets you out in case someone else but you finds 'em first—giving you all the dope I've got as to who the letter is for, and how it can be delivered. If for any reason at all you decide not to go any further with it when you've read the dope, you will give me your word to destroy the whole thing without opening the sealed envelope and that'll be the end of it; except that you will also give me your word now, providing you are interested enough to have me really tell you where the envelope is, that you will never under any circumstances say anything about it to anyone.”

Colin stared. A bit strange! A bit curious! Fired the imagination a bit too. In case the man died! A sweetheart somewhere. A ten-to-one chance on that. Long out of touch with her through long years in the penitentiaries. Or something else. Of course—or something else! In any case, a message from the dead. Not a nice thought, that! He did not like to think of Reddy—dead. He much preferred to think of Reddy reestablished in society as an honest and respectable citizen. Reddy with his brains and ability could be successfully honest if he could be separated from his criminal associations. And he meant to take Reddy on along that line—bring the man back to mental health. But this request that Reddy had made was in case of Reddy's death. He couldn't refuse, could he? He didn't want to refuse. Why should he? On Reddy's own terms he was not asked to deliver the letter if, when the time came, if it ever did, he, Colin, for any reason whatsoever decided to go no further with it. Fair enough in view of Reddy's own reticence. Reddy wasn't asking for a blind promise.

“You're on, Reddy,” he said quietly. “I subscribe to all the conditions. I hope to God I shall never be called upon to fulfill any of them, and I don't for a moment believe I ever shall—but where am I to look for the envelope in case I have to?”

Reddy drew hard on his cigarette, as he came slowly back across the room and held out his hand.

“Thanks,” he said simply. “I'm no good on this speech stuff. It means a lot to me, that's all.”

“Which is enough,” returned Colin heartily as their hands clasped. “Well, where's the letter to be found?”

“In my room in the hangout where I introduced you to some of the boys the other night,” Reddy answered. “All you've got to do is to unscrew the

right-hand knob of the curtain pole when nobody is looking. The pole's hollow, of course, and you'll find what you are after inside."

"I don't think I should have thought of looking there," observed Colin dryly. "Too bad! I might have used that in a yarn."

"Oh, I don't know," said Reddy. "It's not so hot. But it was the best I could do."

"Why not have put it in a safe-deposit box?" suggested Colin.

Reddy shrugged his shoulders.

"The answer to that is easy. Counting on you to see me through, I would have had to arrange for you to have access to it. That I had a box at all would have been reported to the police the minute I got bumped off, and the police would have been inquisitive—and you would have had to hand over. I asked you to destroy the whole works, didn't I, if you didn't see your way clear to carry on? I only wrote the letter a few hours ago in the hope that you would see it through for me if I got up against it."

"Well, then," demanded Colin, "why not hand it over to me now and let me take care of it?"

"Because," said Reddy bluntly, "you're safer without it—while I'm alive."

Colin grinned.

"Do you know," he said facetiously, "I'm beginning to hope that I die before you do." And then, suddenly serious: "Look here, Reddy, what I said about your chances of being put on the spot yourself if you didn't cut loose from this sort of life you've been living, I said in a purely general way, but I seem to have rung the bell. You're not the kind of chap to get the wind up, and you're not morbid; but you have certainly given me the impression that you know you are skating at the moment on particularly perilous ice which might go out from under you at any instant. What about coming across on that score? Or is that taboo too? Or, if I am right, aren't you perhaps exaggerating the danger of such a possibility a little?"

Reddy walked back to the mantelpiece, tossed the end of his cigarette into the fire, and lighted another.

"I'll leave you to judge," he said with a mirthless smile. "It's not taboo to you except within certain limits—a name or two. I intended to tell you the story—as much of it as I could. You remember I said a little while ago that, good as you are, the stuff you're writing looks like nothing at all alongside

of the real works. Well, I'm going to give you some of the real works—only you can't print it."

"The devil!" ejaculated Colin. "That helps a lot!"

"I don't think you'd want to." Reddy's voice was suddenly flat. "She was still only a kid of course when you must have left the old town, because she was nearly six years younger than I am, but I guess you remember my sister Annie, don't you?"

Colin nodded uneasily. He did not like the note that had crept into Reddy's voice.

"Annie!" he said. "Rather! I've toted her around a hundred times on the handles of my bicycle, and all the while she'd sing like a little lark. She was a great youngster. I suppose she was about eleven or twelve when I finally left the town. I remember I used to think then that she was one of the cheeriest and prettiest kids I had ever seen. She was a good little pal of mine—after you went away, Reddy. We both missed you a lot. What has made you mention her tonight?"

"She's part of the story I'm going to tell you," Reddy answered with a crooked smile. "Her body was fished out of the river here six months after French Pete, that we were talking about, was put on the spot. That's why French Pete was bumped off—Annie had been married to him about a week before."

Colin, with a sharp intake of his breath, got up from his chair to cross the room and lay his hand on Reddy's shoulder.

"I don't think I quite understand," he said heavily.

"Somebody else wanted her." Reddy laughed unpleasantly. "French Pete was in the way, that's all."

Colin's hand dropped to his side and clenched.

"My God!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Go on!"

"French Pete was a pal of mine." Reddy's voice was flat again. "That's how Annie came to know him. He was a French Canadian, and his name was Mireau—Pierre Mireau. He was in the beer racket, and he wasn't any church-goer, but he was as straight as a string with Annie. You see, after the mother and father died I kept Annie going in a little flat here, and, between stretches, I used to live with her. As I say, that's how she got to know Pete. She wasn't for Pete's racket, and a whole lot less for mine, but she stuck to me through the years like a brick, and what any good woman could do to

shove us both back on the straight and narrow, she did. She loved Pete and Pete loved her, understand that. She loved him well enough to marry him in spite of the racket he was in, always hoping, I know, because she said so, that sooner or later she'd get him out of it."

Reddy paused abruptly, strode over to the decanter, hesitated an instant, and then came back.

"No," he said, "I'll wait till I'm through. I was in stir when Annie got married. She wanted to wait for me, but I had still almost a year to go, and I wouldn't stand for it. I figured she'd be a lot better off and a lot happier that year with Pete. But even the walls where I was don't keep out the news. You know that. The night that Pete was bumped off, Annie disappeared. I got the low-down on it. She was kidnaped. And I couldn't get out. Six months later she was found in the river and identified as Mrs. Pierre Mireau, the wife of French Pete, who had been put on the spot."

"I remember reading about that," said Colin hoarsely. "It was front-page stuff, but the name, of course, meant nothing to me."

The pallor in Reddy's face seemed to have deepened, as, for an instant, he covered his eyes with his hand.

"No," he said; "of course it wouldn't."

"And then?" Colin prompted through tight lips.

"You said something about Annie being pretty when she was a child." Reddy's lips were working now. "Some of them don't grow up that way. Annie did. When she married Pete there wasn't anything in town that could touch her. God! And she was straight! There was only one way that swine could get her. And I still couldn't get out. I got out two months ago, and Annie's been dead nearly five now. I don't know whether that's the way he got rid of her when he got tired of her, or perhaps found out that she'd got to know too much, or whether she managed to escape and, crazy with it all, did it herself; but it was murder either way." Reddy laughed again—it was a jangling, discordant sound. "That's why I can't leave New York. That's the 'job' I was talking about. I'll get the man who did it—or he'll get me. That's why I've got my fingers crossed on what may happen at any time to me, because I know what I'm up against."

Reddy paused and circled his lips with the tip of his tongue.

Colin, hard-faced, remained silent, waiting for the other to continue.

“The police didn’t get anywhere,” said Reddy. “Anyway, it isn’t a police job—it’s mine.”

“The code, of course,” Colin nodded in understanding. “I’m afraid, though, that I’m far from agreeing with you there, Reddy.”

“Coming from you,” said Reddy curtly, “that’s good! You know damned well!”

“Yes; I know,” returned Colin a little sharply. “You’d all tell them on your death beds that it was Santa Claus who did it. We won’t argue the point. Well?”

“I know who drove the car the night Pete was bumped off, and I know who the two guys were that made a sieve of him with sawed-off shotguns, but there’s no hurry about them. Their turn will come—but they’re still *useful*. It’s the big noise they work for that I’m after. I’m thinking just of a slab in the morgue and the man who put Annie there.”

A cigar that Colin had lighted broke in his fingers, and he tossed it into the grate.

“You know who he is?” Colin’s voice was husky.

“If I knew who he was,” Reddy stated evenly, “he wouldn’t be alive tonight. No; I’m not sure yet. But I’ve gone a long way. Listen! I said that what you wrote was nothing alongside of the real works. Your ‘master minds’ and ‘super crooks’ are jokes compared with the one I’m talking about. He swings a mob in every racket there is, from dope and beer and booze to white-slave stuff, with a little murder organization kept on tap to round everything out. He’s got your imagination out for the count at the sound of the gong. Each mob is separate, and no one in any of them knows who the big shot is that they get their orders from. They call him the Mask—that’s all they know about him.”

“You mean he always wears a mask?”

Reddy smiled with grim tolerance.

“Oh, no!” he said. “He leaves that sort of thing to you writers. And yet he is always masked—from the soles of his shoes to the hat he wears, if you get what I mean. He can assume a dozen different characters—and does. Hence the name. No one yet has ever identified him in his real person.”

“But how, then, does he make contact with his gangs? How does he issue his orders?”

“He’s got lieutenants who only know him under one or other of his assumed characters.”

“Do you know who any of them are?—the lieutenants, I mean.”

“Yes.”

Colin waited.

“I told you—no names.”

“All right! The code again, I see. Well?”

“I’ve been working now for two months, but it was only a few days ago that I began to pick up his trail. I’m not kidding myself. If he gets wise to me before I’ve spotted him, you’ll find me where Annie was—in the morgue. Tonight I’m lying low, waiting for a little something I’m counting on to break my way—and, if it does, it won’t be many hours before I’ll have run him down. That’s all.”

“I don’t like it,” pronounced Colin gravely. “It’s all right in a story; but, Reddy, if you get the goods on him there’s the law and——”

“The law be damned!” Reddy broke in fiercely. “With a hundred perjured witnesses and a million dollars to spend, he’d get off. This is between him and me. He killed my pal, and what he did to Annie I’ve told you. Never mind the code; you can’t stand there and talk to me like that, Colin, and make me believe you mean it. He won’t be murdered, shot down when he’s not looking, the way he’s done to others. He’ll get a chance to fight—but he’ll *die*.”

Colin paced the room and back again. In his heart he had no word to say. It would be useless anyway. He halted again before Reddy.

“Look here, Reddy,” he said, “about that letter you want me to deliver if—well, if things go wrong with you. If it’s a fair question, I’d like to know if it has anything to do with this inhuman cur you call the Mask. I know you said that you——” He broke off suddenly.

Someone was knocking at the door.

Colin looked at Reddy.

“Expecting anyone?” Reddy asked.

“I’m always expecting someone,” Colin answered with a faint smile. “You said it a little while ago.”

“The park-benchers?” inquired Reddy. “Your leg-pullers?”

Colin nodded.

“Probably. Do you mind?”

The knock upon the door was repeated—but, it seemed, a little timorously this time.

Reddy shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s nothing in my young life,” he said. “There’s always the chance, of course, that I might be recognized, but if your reputation will stand for me being here, it’s okay by me. Go to it.”

Colin stepped to the door and threw it open. A curious figure confronted him across the threshold; the figure of an old, gray-haired, gray-bearded man in a shabby, black, broad-brimmed soft hat and a shabby black Inverness cloak that was drawn tightly around a pair of stooped shoulders.

“I hope I do not intrude.” There was polish in the man’s voice, but also the quaver of age, and the trace of a Southern drawl. “I will not detain you but a moment if I may come in. A friend of mine to whom you were once very kind suggested that I might have something of interest to impart to you, sir, by way of a story. That you were in the habit of——”

“That’s all right,” said Colin heartily. He shot a glance over his shoulder, and caught Reddy’s grin. Reddy’s grin was eloquent. “Another one!” it twitted. Colin waved his visitor forward. “Come in,” he invited.

The man stepped forward, and with a sort of old-world elegance, with a bit of a flourish, removed his hat. And then halted in his tracks.

“Oh!” he exclaimed apologetically. “I am afraid I *do* intrude. You are already engaged.”

“Quite all right!” smiled Colin, as he closed the door. “My friend, Mr. Williamson. Mr.——?”

“Hargreaves, sir,” supplied the stranger. “Served as a boy in the Confederate Army. ’Sixty-four to ’sixty-five, sir. Long gone by. Later, a colonel by courtesy. I’m a very old man now, sir.” He bowed deeply to Reddy. “The honor of your acquaintance, Mr. Williamson!”

“A spot of Scotch, Colonel?” suggested Colin, with a genial smile. “I’m sorry I have no Bourbon.”

“Sir, indeed, you overwhelm me.”

“Splendid!” applauded Colin. He stepped forward around the desk, lifted the decanter from its stand, and poured out a generous portion. “Neat, or with a splash of soda?” he asked as he looked up—and the glass in his hand crashed and splintered on the floor.

In his left hand, dangling debonairly, “Colonel Hargreaves” held his shabby felt hat; in his right hand, his cloak flung back over his shoulder, an automatic held a bead on Reddy.

“Mr. Williamson, eh?” There was no age in the voice now, no soft Southern drawl; it was curt, decisive, deadly cold. “I suggest that he is far better known as Reddy Turner, alias—oh, well, there are so many aliases.”

Reddy’s hand, arrested on its way to the bulge beneath the left shoulder of his coat, hung across his heart. His face had set.

“Who the hell are you?” he flung out. “What do you want?”

“Two questions!” purred the stranger with a faint smile. “I promised our host that I would not detain him long. I will try to answer them both at once. I am the Mask, as I understand you call me—the man that you believed you had so nearly unearthed. Well, so you had. I will be frank. Much more nearly than even you yourself believed. It is not often that I honor anyone with my personal intervention in matters of this kind; but as a tribute to your pertinacity I so honor you tonight. And, besides, this place in its discreet retirement lends itself so admirably to an *interview* that I could not resist it. What I want, or rather, who I want is—you!”

Colin’s eyes swept swiftly from one to the other of the two men. His throat was suddenly sticky dry. He saw Reddy’s hand shoot swiftly upward beneath the left-hand shoulder of his coat—but it never reached its objective. There was a flash, the roar of a report. Another flash—another roar. He saw Reddy crumple up and pitch headlong to the floor.

And then a madness seized upon Colin. He flung himself forward around the corner of the desk. He heard a voice:

“You are impatient. It is only that your friend had precedence!”

And then a flash—and then utter darkness.

It might have been a minute, or ten—or an hour. Colin never knew. He opened his eyes. All was misty at first. Then, though in a blurred way, his vision cleared. The lights in the room were still ablaze. The fire was still burning in the grate, and in its fitful glow he saw Reddy’s crumpled and motionless figure on the floor. And he remembered.

He crawled across the floor, clutched at the edge of the desk, pulled himself desperately to his feet, and snatched the telephone receiver from its base.

He stood there swaying. Ages later a voice spoke.

“Give me police headquarters,” Colin gasped. “For God’s sake—quick!”

The room was swirling around him. Around and around—he bit at his lips. And then another voice spoke faintly as though through some vast space. He did not know what it said, but he answered it.

“Colin Hewitt speaking,” he babbled. “A murder here. I——”

And then his knees gave way beneath him, and he toppled backward—and was conscious of nothing more.

CHAPTER III

THE POLICE ANGLE

THE superstitiously minded had been vindicated. But if there were any significance to be attached to the fact that the third murder had now been committed on the premises, such significance had left Detective Sergeant Tim Mulvey of the Homicide Bureau unmoved and cold.

Detective Sergeant Mulvey, who was one of those police “pals” of Colin to whom Reddy had referred, was in charge of the case. He sat now where Reddy Turner had sat nearly a month ago in the deep leather-upholstered lounging chair, facing Colin across the latter’s desk. And again it was near to midnight.

Colin’s face, thin and drawn, showed the marks of a long illness. As a matter of fact he had hovered between life and death with the odds heavily against him for a matter of ten days. Then the turn in his favor had come, but convalescence had been slow. It was only that morning he had been discharged from the hospital—with very definite instructions to go slow and take the utmost care of himself until he was back to normal again.

They were discussing the case. From the night of the murder the police had got nowhere.

“If you ask me”—Detective Sergeant Mulvey swung the stub of a thick cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other—“Reddy handed you a fairy tale. He just out-bunked you on your own stuff that you write about the super-crime guy that sits back in his web and pushes a button and has the nation paralyzed. This bird ain’t anything like that. Sure, he’s masquerading around and pulling a front, but when we get him you’ll see he’s nothing more than a dirty rat in a small way of business that keeps under cover from his own gang in order to save his own hide; and the gang falls for the mysterious unknown who yanks the strings, and eats it all up alive—the way your readers do.”

“I don’t agree with you,” Colin replied bluntly. “I’ve told you a dozen times what Reddy said about him that night, and I believe Reddy knew what

he was talking about. Good God, Tim, he was so hot on the Mask's track that night that it cost him his life. Can't you let that sink in?"

"Sure, I can!" returned Detective Sergeant Mulvey gruffly. "It's the old, old story! To hell with the police! Reddy, on a lone hunt, was after the guy that bumped off his pal and killed his sister. He finds out that his man goes around in disguise, leads a double life, and runs a mob off-stage. Finally, just when he thinks that in another twenty-four hours or so he'll be pumping the man full of holes, the other gets him first. That's all right! That's easy! It's open and shut! But it doesn't mean that this Mask gazebo is the one and only! Reddy got excited when he stumbled on that Mask stuff, that's all."

"And again I disagree," returned Colin calmly. "Reddy wasn't the kind to get excited that way."

"Oh, well"—Detective Sergeant Mulvey shrugged his big shoulders—"let that go! You'll see!"

"When?" inquired Colin blandly.

The thrust went home.

"Damn it!" snapped Detective Sergeant Mulvey. "I don't know, do I? We're doing all we can. I ain't writing a book. I can't fake up clues and evidence, and then set the scenes so's everything will end up with me pinning a medal on my breast. I'm not making any bones about it to you. So far the case is a total loss."

"Which rather goes to prove, doesn't it," Colin suggested quietly, "that there is at least some basis of fact in Reddy's assertion, and that you are dealing with an unusual situation? You've had dozens of gangsters up for questioning, and in spite of the fact that—I refrain from using the term 'third degree'—your questioning was both persuasive and persistent, you have told me yourself that they were all deaf in both ears when any mention of the Mask was made. And yet the Mask exists, and was certainly known by that name to some of those men, and in one guise or another they have probably been in actual contact with him. It is true that through his criminal associations Reddy possibly had sources of information that the police did not have, and you have therefore been at a disadvantage in that respect; but it is equally true that Reddy must have come pretty close to unearthing his quarry, otherwise no attention would have been paid to him. He obviously must have been in possession of a lot of inside knowledge that no one else had, and I am thoroughly convinced that all he said was literally true."

“It’s too bad he hadn’t spilled a little of it, then!” grunted Detective Sergeant Mulvey. “Not to the police, of course! No fear! The ‘Reddys’ are all alike. But to you.”

“Granted,” agreed Colin. “But he didn’t. Except for the fact that I was here and saw the man when he announced himself as the Mask just before he shot Reddy down and then turned his attention to me, I have no more idea of his identity than you have. I wish I had. I’ve told you everything Reddy said about him, and so far you——”

The telephone was ringing. Colin reached across the desk and picked up the receiver.

“Yes? Hello?” he said—and then his jaws clamped suddenly together. Over the wire came that unforgettable voice with its quaver and Southern drawl.

“Mr. Colin Hewitt?”

“Yes!” Colin bit off the word.

“Hargreaves speaking. Colonel by courtesy, sir. But perhaps you had already recognized my voice?”

“I had!” said Colin grimly. “Alias the Mask, I believe. Any name will do.” He glanced at Detective Sergeant Mulvey. At the mention of the Mask, the Homicide Bureau man had started up abruptly from his chair and had stepped to the edge of the desk. There was an interrogative scowl on Sergeant Mulvey’s face. Colin nodded an affirmative reply to the unspoken question; then, grittily, into the transmitter: “Sorry you haven’t come around in person, but it’s a pleasure to hear your voice once more.”

“I doubted at one time, sir,” drawled the voice, “if you ever would again. I am considered an excellent marksman and I rarely miss. I had no intention of merely wounding you that night, but nevertheless I have called you up now to congratulate you on your return to health, sir.”

“It is really too good of you,” said Colin evenly.

“And also for another reason—to express the hope that your recovery will be *permanent*. Without, I trust, intruding too much upon your time, I would like to make myself quite clear on that point. I shot you because of the possibility that your friend Reddy might have unduly confided in you in respect of myself. Since then—or shall I say since the beginning of your convalescence and your many conferences with the police in hospital?—I have watched with interest the activities of the latter. It is axiomatic that if

you in turn had anything to confide, you would have confided in the police; but the actions of the police have been so abortive, and at times so ridiculous, that I am convinced you had nothing intimate to impart. It therefore gives me great pleasure to repeat my congratulations on your recovery, and to add, sir, that you have nothing more to fear from me.”

Colin’s eyes, lifting over the telephone, saw Reddy lying there again sprawled on the floor by the fireplace. A sudden flame of fury came. The soft drawling voice was like a hideous shriek beating at his eardrums. He fought for control of himself.

“Again this is really too good of you,” he said levelly.

“Provided,” the voice drawled on, “that you do not meddle. I think, sir, that you would be much better advised to go away somewhere for your health—indeed I understand your doctors have recommended it—rather than spend your time in cultivating an intimacy with Detective Sergeant Mulvey. You might be led into temptation—in which case I assure you, sir, you will not live twenty-four hours. I think that is all, except to ask you to convey my astonished compliments to Detective Sergeant Mulvey, who, I am informed, is again with you tonight after the three hours, doomed from the outset to futility, which you spent together in the rogues’ gallery at headquarters this afternoon. I would have thought that even Detective Sergeant Mulvey might have known I have never posed for a picture in the character of Colonel Hargreaves. Good-night.”

There came a faint click from the other end of the wire. Colin replaced the receiver and, tight-lipped, faced Detective Sergeant Mulvey.

“The Mask—eh?” grunted the other.

“Yes.”

Detective Sergeant Mulvey jerked his hand toward the telephone instrument.

“Why don’t you do what you’d do in a story?” he inquired with a short laugh.

“What’s that?”

“Scene of us trying frantically to trace the telephone call.”

Colin shook his head.

“I wouldn’t do that in a story,” he said. “Granting the Mask even a modest degree of intelligence, and I rank him far above that, it would be

obviously useless. The call came from some place like the Grand Central where there are a number of public booths—not from a drugstore where there is only a single booth and where he might have been noticed and a description of him obtained.”

“Check!” grinned Detective Sergeant Mulvey. “Fair enough! Well, what did he say?”

“He complained about my intimacy with you,” replied Colin dryly. “He said the reason he shot me was due to the possibility that Reddy might have given me some inside information which I in turn would hand over to the police, but that the police work on the case had been so abortive and in some cases so ridiculous that he was convinced I knew nothing that would be of any value to you.”

“I’ll remember that when I get my hands on him!” snapped Sergeant Mulvey. “What else?”

“He said I had nothing more to fear from him providing I did not meddle, but that otherwise I would not live twenty-four hours. He suggested that instead of spending my time with you I go away somewhere—for my health.”

“Anything more?”

Colin smiled a little provocatively.

“Only a personal fling at you,” he said. “He seems to be keeping pretty close tabs on what is going on. He knew you were here tonight, and he knew where we were and what we were doing this afternoon. He said that even Detective Sergeant Mulvey might have known he had never had his picture taken as Colonel Hargreaves.”

Sergeant Mulvey, pricked, bit viciously on the stub of his cigar.

“Oh, yeah?” he drawled. “Well, I’ve known of an identification or two being pulled off that way with less to go on. But forget that! So he warned you to lay off, did he?”

Colin nodded.

“Well, that’s one point on which I agree with him,” announced Sergeant Mulvey decisively. “From tonight you’re through. This is a police job.”

“Reddy said it wasn’t.”

“Yes—and you know what happened to Reddy! Well, it’s not going to happen to you if I can help it. Look here, I know how you feel about both

Reddy and the sister you knew as a kid, to say nothing of anything on your own account, and that you'd let everything go to hell, yourself included, to get the bird that did it. But there isn't anything more you can do. You've done all you can. You've told us all you know. You're out of the picture from now on. It ain't going to be healthy for you to hobnob around with me—and you're not going to get a chance to, anyway, until this case is cleaned up. Whatever I think of this Mask swine, I'm not kidding myself on one point. He's a killer. You get away from here—take a good long trip.”

“Run away, you mean?” inquired Colin thinly.

“Run away nothing!” snorted Sergeant Mulvey. “It ain't as though you were shirking anything by going, or could accomplish anything by staying. And, besides everything else, you need a change, and you need it damn bad. You ain't fit by a long way yet.”

Colin was silent for a moment.

“It's human nature,” he said finally with a queer smile, “to be afraid of appearing to be afraid. And I have now been threatened. As a matter of fact, however, I have been thinking for some time of going away as soon as I got out of the hospital.”

“The first part of what you say,” declared Sergeant Mulvey forcibly, “is the bunk where you are concerned. What the hell do you care if this Mask guy thinks he's put one over on you—there's nobody else to make a chorus out of it. As for the second part, it's the best news I've had since I heard the depression was over. Don't weaken, bo! Where were you thinking of going?”

Colin was thinking of a curtain pole.

“I haven't the faintest idea,” he said.

“Well, no matter,” said Detective Sergeant Mulvey. “Go somewhere! I've got to go home.” He picked up his hat. “That's a go, eh?”

Colin walked with the other to the door.

“Well, perhaps,” he said.

“Nix on the 'perhaps' stuff!” shot back Detective Sergeant Mulvey. “I'll run you out of town myself, if I have to!”

Colin laughed.

“We'll see,” he said. “You're a good scout, Tim. Good-night.”

“So are you—but don’t play the fool!” returned Sergeant Mulvey.
“Good-night.”

Colin closed the door, and, recrossing the room, pulled out one of the lower drawers of his desk, from which, hidden under a pile of odds and ends, he produced a bunch of skeleton keys. He looked at his watch.

It was twenty-seven minutes past twelve.

CHAPTER IV

THE CURTAIN POLE

FOR a moment, his brows knitted, Colin stood there staring at the keys in his hand. Then, abruptly, he thrust them into his pocket, selected a soft felt hat from the stand, switched off the lights, opened the door, stepped out into the warm June night, and locked the door behind him.

And then for an instant he remained motionless. A full moon flooded the little courtyard with light, and his eyes, entirely of their own volition, it seemed, searched every corner of it narrowly. It was deserted—empty. No one was there. Of course not! Who, or what, had he expected to see? A lurking shadow?

He shrugged his shoulders in sudden irritation, as he stepped forward now across the courtyard, and yet as he gained the street he found himself instinctively glancing again in all directions about him. That telephone conversation, of course! The fact that the Mask had seemingly been conversant with his every movement that day! He laughed shortly. Well, there wasn't anyone in sight here, anyway. And, anyway, the chances were a thousand to one that the Mask, having got that damned warning off his chest, would call it a day. Furthermore, if anyone had been watching, Mulvey would have been seen to depart, and it would be obviously apparent that his, Colin's, contact with the police was severed for tonight at least. And yet——

“Oh, all right!” Colin muttered savagely to himself. “Absurd, of course; but no use taking any chances! If anyone is sticking around, I'll be delighted to give him a run for his money.”

A taxi hove in sight, and Colin hailed it. Reddy's erstwhile lodging was in the upper Forties between Fifth and Sixth avenues. Colin gave the chauffeur an address on Fifth Avenue a block away from his actual destination, and, assured by a swift glance up and down the street that there was no one near enough to warrant even the suspicion of being concerned in his movements, stepped into the cab.

He smiled a little grimly to himself as he settled himself back in his seat. That morning when he had got out of bed he had still been in the hospital, still in that sunny white room that he had occupied for nearly a month, and tonight, with midnight gone, flaunting his doctor's parting orders to keep early hours, he was riding uptown with a bunch of skeleton keys in his pocket! Well, at least he hadn't lost much time! Perhaps he should have waited a few days longer?

He shook his head decisively. He wasn't at all so badly off physically—not perhaps quite up to par, but fit enough. It wasn't as though he had been bedridden all the time. He had voluntarily extended his stay in the hospital because, having neither kith nor kin in the world and no one to look after him, except old Mrs. Hidgin, his landlord's wife, who came daily to keep his diggings in order, he could recuperate there better than anywhere else. Yes, he was quite all right. He had no fear on that score. He wasn't overdoing it. And, besides, there was a very good and valid reason why he should go to Reddy's old room tonight. It wasn't so easy to steal into a house and take down a bedroom curtain pole without anybody knowing anything about it! But tonight Reddy's old room was unoccupied, that was all.

Colin screwed his head around and looked out through the back window. Several cars had passed him, but there was none behind. That took care of that! He settled himself back in his seat again.

He nodded reflectively to himself. Despite the fact that he had no family ties, he had not lacked for visitors during his illness once he had been able to see them. Rather a heterogeneous lot! Personal friends of perfectly respectable social status; the police; the members of Reddy's mob; and not a few of what Reddy had called the bums and dames that he had befriended and whose domiciles were the streets and the park benches! He laughed suddenly outright. The nurses had been more often aghast than not.

Yes, quite so! But that was how he knew Reddy's old room was empty tonight. Butch Connal had unwittingly told him so yesterday afternoon. Butch was one of Reddy's mob, and Butch had taken over Reddy's room. Butch had casually remarked that he'd be spending the next couple of nights out of town, and wouldn't be calling at the hospital again since he, Colin, was leaving there the next morning. And then and there, seizing upon opportunity, he, Colin, had made up his mind to make an attempt tonight to carry out the promise he had made to Reddy.

So far, so good! But, best of all, he was wholly satisfied that Reddy's secret was still safe. From Detective Sergeant Mulvey he had learned that

the police had searched the room immediately after Reddy had been killed, but that, apart from ordinary belongings, nothing had been found. Reddy's money, "the plenty of kale" he had referred to, some three thousand dollars, had been found on Reddy's person. But, lying there in the hospital, he, Colin, had been worried on another score—the possibility that, during the weeks that were slipping by, the furnishings might have been changed and the curtain pole removed. But Butch, again unwittingly, had set his mind at rest so far as that was concerned. Butch, in reply to a question that apparently had no ulterior motive behind it, had said that after the damned cops had got through with their nosy business everything had been put back and was now just the way it was before.

It remained therefore only to get into the room once occupied by Reddy. Well, he had the "open sesame," hadn't he? Those skeleton keys! He smiled suddenly—a little crookedly. This was getting to be very much like one of his own chapters! He had enacted scenes like this a hundred times—vicariously—in his books. A queer turn of fate that he was to live one of those scenes now instead of write it!

Those skeleton keys! He remembered very well how they had come into his possession. A year ago. At the same Nigger Joey's, in fact, where he had eventually run into Reddy again. He had been sitting around a table one night with a decidedly questionable lot of crooks to whom he was rather well known. He had mentioned the fact that he was writing a story that dealt very largely with skeleton keys, and had laughingly admitted that he had never seen one in his life. They had laughed at him in turn. The next day the keys that were now reposing in his pocket had arrived by mail! A most complete assortment. They had been very helpful so far as his story was concerned. He had, for his own amusement, experimented with them on all of his own doors and locks until, as a matter of fact, he had become rather expert in their use; eventually he had tossed them into the drawer of his desk and had forgotten all about them. He shrugged his shoulders whimsically. Certainly the last thought he had ever expected would enter his mind was that he would sometime actually commit a felony with them! It was felonious, wasn't it? "Breaking and entering!" But then, under the circumstances, the "hero" in any of his books would have been justified, wouldn't he? This wasn't fiction, but the same principle applied, didn't it? Reddy had sworn him to secrecy even if he went no further with the affair than to obtain possession of the mysterious envelope and destroy it.

He felt his nerves tingle suddenly at the prospect before him. Nonsense! Simple enough! Not a single one of his heroes would have batted an eyelash.

The whole street where he was going was filled with speakeasies—people at the peepholes waiting to pass inspection or present credentials. No one would pay any attention to him if it took him a few moments to open a front door; then along the hall to the rear door on the right; then five minutes at most in an unoccupied room—and out again. If he had been writing the scene he would have been hard put to it to raise a thrill! Oh, all right!

He half closed his eyes. That apart, what was it all about? How many times had he asked himself that question? Even if he delivered the letter he would never know. Had it anything to do with this worse than pervert who called himself, like some character out of blatant melodrama, the Mask? He hoped so. In that case there would be no question in his mind even now as to whether he would carry on or not. He had asked Reddy that question, but Reddy had not answered. The Mask had come on the scene then, and Reddy had died—shot down like a dog, in cold blood, without a chance to defend himself. Colin's hands clenched. That voice with its damnable drawl, its mimicry, its hideous imperturbability was ringing in his ears again. Annie! French Pete! His own account to settle! Despite Tim Mulvey, the underworld slogger, even though he had derided it to Reddy's face, was welling up in his soul. To hell with the police! There was an urge upon him, that had been growing since the first moment of his return to consciousness weeks ago, to come to personal grips with this inhuman killer, alias the Mask. It was elemental, and if there was any way whereby he could accomplish it, he would stop at nothing to do so. He understood Reddy better now, and——

The car slowed down and drew up to the curb. Colin glanced out. It was the street corner he had given the taxicab driver as an address. He stepped to the pavement as the man opened the door, paid the other, stood there for a moment, as he watched the cab rattle away, and while a car traveling at a rate that defied all speed laws whizzed by, then he crossed to the west side of Fifth Avenue, walked a block north—and swung around the first corner heading toward Sixth Avenue.

Apart from a rather hilarious sextette of men and women emerging from a basement door, and a parked car here and there, the street at the moment showed little sign of life. Exactly! The life at this hour was indoors! It had once been a very good residential neighborhood, of course, but time and prohibition had wrought its havoc in that respect. The houses were for the most part substantial, but many of them were now used for quite other purposes than those for which they had been erected! Colin smiled thinly. He had a "membership card" himself to the "club" he was just passing.

Quite fitting that Reddy's rooming house should be in this locality! Times had changed. Not rat holes any more. They did themselves very well, these gangsters of today. Spacious, airy, comfortably furnished quarters, good clothes, even glistening shirt fronts—to say nothing of the garish establishments maintained by the overlords in some of the most expensive apartments in the city.

He had been walking briskly. He was now halfway down the block and he suddenly slowed his pace. The house into which he proposed to make that “felonious” entry should be just about here. He had never visited it but once—on the occasion when he had come with Reddy—but there was no possibility of mistaking it. Its neighbor on this side, he remembered, had a dressmaker's sign in the basement window—camouflaging a noted speakeasy. Yes, here it was!

He studied the house for an instant. Steps, forming a sort of porch over the basement entrance, led up to the front door. Not a light showed in any window. He glanced up and down and across the street. There was no one in his immediate vicinity. He mounted the steps then unhurriedly, and quietly tried the door. There was always the possibility that it might—— No, it was locked, right enough.

Aided by the moonlight, he selected a key from among its fellows and inserted it in the lock. It was almost too easy, but he none the less experienced a distinct sense of relief as the door gave under his hand at the first attempt. He opened it, stepped inside, and closed it softly behind him. He took swift counsel with himself. Lock it again? No. Who knew what might happen before he was through in here? Nothing probably, but just the same there was always the possibility of the unforeseen and that he might have reason to regret having done anything to impede a necessary, and in that case, no doubt, a hurried retreat.

He was in the hall now, and here he stood still again, this time to listen. Faintly, from upstairs somewhere, he could hear men's voices, a snatch of laughter, and, unless he was far wide of the mark, the rattle of chips. There was no other sound.

There was no light to be seen anywhere; but again the moonlight aided him, for the front doors were glass-paneled and a streak of it, filtering in, lay along the hall. He started forward; but, as he tiptoed silently down the hall, he became all at once conscious of a sense of eeriness, coupled with a sort of panicky impulse to hurry and get it all over and done with as quickly as possible. No reason for it. Of course not! But somehow he did not feel at all

debonair, not nearly so nonchalant as he had felt in the cab. It was a damned sight easier to *write* about this sort of thing!

There were two doors that opened off the right-hand side of the hall. He passed the first, reached the second, and came to a halt before the latter. This was the room that had once been Reddy's and was now occupied by Butch Connal.

A sudden disturbing suggestion occurred to him. Butch Connal was away, but any one of Butch's crowd might be bunking up in there for the night. Nonsense! His lips firmed. Couldn't he conjure up some other equally pleasant possibility—get another paragraph of suspense out of it? He was becoming a bit jumpy, wasn't he? But, nevertheless, he listened for a full minute with his ear against the panel of the door. There was no sound from within, and the keyhole told him plainly enough that there was no light in the room. He tried the door. Locked, of course.

His keys came into play again. The first one would not work—nor the second. He was not so good, after all! He had merely flattered himself if he had ever imagined he had become even a near-expert with the cursed things. The ease with which he had opened the front door had been more a case of pure luck than anything else. He made a third attempt with a third key, and this time, after persisting for a moment, he was successful. His face cleared as the lock bolt clicked back responsively.

He pushed the door open a few inches at a time, silently, and peered into the room. There was only one window—a bay window that looked out on the rear, and the curtains—or, rather, the portières, he remembered they were now—that hung across the bay window, forming a sort of little alcove, were not quite drawn. The moonlight flooding in enabled him to see plainly. The bed was unoccupied. The room was empty.

Colin slipped through the doorway, closed the door quietly, and stepped swiftly across the room to the window. Behind the portières in the window bay was a chair. He measured the height critically. Added to his own six feet and the reach of his arms, the chair would serve admirably. He passed behind the portières and, standing on the chair, reached up for the curtain pole which, though undoubtedly meant to be ornate, he could see now was an unusually massive and, to him, rather blatant brass affair of some two inches in diameter. It came away readily enough from its supports as he lifted it, but its weight, even though the pole was of course hollow, combined with the weight of the heavy portières, was so much more than he had expected that it nearly caused him to lose his balance. He recovered

himself with a muttered imprecation, stepped down from the chair, and laid the pole and portières on the floor.

“The right-hand knob,” Reddy had said. That would mean the right-hand knob as one faced the window, of course. Well, here it was—the usual finishing touch to most curtain poles, a ball-like ornament. It required no effort to unscrew it. It came away readily.

He probed with his fingers into the hollow of the pole. The envelope, twisted into a roll, was there. He pulled it out, flattened it into shape, and thrust it into his pocket. He was conscious now that all sense of tension had fled; conscious now, while he flung a mental gibe at himself for the “desperate” rôle he had played, merely of the commonplace in respect of his efforts and his surroundings. The whole thing had been simple enough, after all.

He screwed the knob back into place, picked up the pole, and, backing into the window bay, stood up again on the chair. He hoisted the pole above his head to replace it on its supports—and his hands, in mid-air, became suddenly motionless. The portières were slightly parted as they dangled in front of him, and in the track of the moonlight he could still see the far end of the room.

The door from the hall was being stealthily opened.

CHAPTER V

BY PROXY

THE blood for an instant whipped through Colin's veins, pounding at his eardrums, and then a cold, unnatural calm settled upon him. The door was closed now, and a man was coming toward him across the room. He could see but little of the man's face, for it was mostly hidden by the other's hat brim that was pulled far down over the eyes; but he could see quite plainly enough the revolver in the outflung hand. Colin's lips tightened into a straight line. It seemed as though there had endured an eternity of time since he had first seen that door begin to open, though in reality he knew it could have been but scarcely more than the passing of a second.

"Don't move!" snarled the man. "You've got your hands above your head—keep 'em there!"

Colin's mind was delving, probing swiftly. What was he to do? Not a nice situation. A damned tight one, in fact. Not likely, but there was always the possibility that one of Butch Connal's crowd, or one of the gangsters who lodged in the house, this being a gangster hangout, had seen him come in here; if not, then the Mask, both by telephone and physical contact through proxy—for, disguised or not, it was a certainty that this was not the Mask in person—was becoming ubiquitous tonight. This man was too tall to be the Mask. No amount of make-up could have added to Colonel Hargreaves's stature to this extent. Colin stalled for time.

"All right, but this thing's heavy," he complained; then coolly: "And may I ask what you are doing here, and who you are?"

"You're kind of fresh, ain't you?" snapped the other. "Well, you won't be so fresh when I'm through with you! See? It don't matter who I am. What matters is that you are a guy named Colin Hewitt."

"I am," Colin admitted. "But how do you know? My back being to the moonlight, to say nothing of the fact that I am at least partially concealed by these portières, you certainly cannot see my face distinctly enough to recognize me."

“You’re some talker, ain’t you?” sneered the man. “I don’t need to see your map. I followed you here from your dump, that’s how I know.”

“Oh, no, you didn’t!” Colin refuted confidently. “I’m quite sure of that.”

“Sure, you’re sure!” the man chuckled evilly. “Gummed up your trail and kept your eyes open, didn’t you? You’re a hot detective writer, you are! Maybe if you get out of this alive, which the chances are you won’t, you’ll be able to hand out some of the real goods for a change. You were a laugh with your head going around like it was on a swivel trying to make sure no one was lamping you.”

Colin’s ire rose. All doubt but that he was dealing with one of the Mask’s tools was gone now, and it was obviously true that he had been outwitted, but this arraignment was a bit stiff.

“Thank you!” he said curtly. “Tell me how.”

“Aw,” sniffed the man contemptuously, “there was nothing to it! I was waiting just around the corner with a car where I could watch that dinky little alleyway of yours in case you came out. I didn’t know whether I’d need a car or not, but I had it there. See? You got a taxi before you’d gone half a block. I passed your taxi and after that I kept you in sight *behind*. When you got uptown a bit where there was more traffic, *you* passed me. Get it? And when your taxi stopped on Fifth Avenue, I was going by you at about sixty per, like all hell was at my heels. I didn’t have to worry any more. I knew where you were going then, and I didn’t mind giving you a few minutes to get your fancy work in so’s I could get the goods on you—like I have.”

The curtain pole was heavy. But it was only in a sort of subconscious way that Colin was aware his arms were beginning to ache with the strain. He was trapped. This was the end unless he could find some way out. He had seen the Mask at work—seen Reddy shot down callously before his eyes. None knew better than himself that the Mask’s warning tonight had been no idle one. He had meddled—and been caught in the act. And Reddy’s letter was in his pocket. Oh, yes, quite! It was the end, now, or within the Mask’s specified twenty-four hours; he was quite well aware of that—unless he could find some way out.

“Thanks,” he said again curtly. “You have refused to introduce yourself, but I suppose, after all, that would be superfluous, as, I take it, you are representing a certain personage known to both of us as the Mask, and——”

“Cut it out!” interrupted the man savagely. “You’ve gassed plenty! We’ll get down to cases.”

A sudden inspiration dawned in Colin’s mind. Grim, swift humor, an ironic laugh at himself was in his soul. It was what he would have had his “daring and resourceful” hero do, of course, if he had been writing the scene. It was plausible—one always had to be at least plausible to satisfy the reader. Well, if it was plausible, there was a chance, an even chance—if he could bait the trap. This damned thing weighed a ton. How much longer could he stand here balanced on the chair like some trick performer on a stage?

“Look here, I want to be frank with you,” he confided earnestly. “You’ve got me at your mercy anyhow, so just a moment. I had a telephone call from the Mask tonight. He said he was satisfied that I knew nothing more about Reddy Turner than anybody else did, and that I was out of the picture so far as he was concerned; but in practically the same breath, I have to admit, he warned me not to meddle in the affair. What I don’t understand is why, if he thought I knew nothing that would be of any value to him, he still kept a watch over me; or why, if he thought I *did* know something, he should warn me not to meddle, which, if I had followed his advice, would have been the one sure way whereby he would have defeated his own ends.”

The man’s lips in the moonlight, practically all that Colin could see of the other’s face, widened in a wicked grin.

“God, you’re a fool!” he jeered pityingly. “It’s like taking candy from a kid. I’ve always heard that you birds that wrote books were cracked a bit somewhere in the bean. I’ll tell you. If you were okay, you were okay, and that’s all there was to it. If you weren’t, that warning was a hurry-up invite to sit in and show your hand. See? After being told you were Mama’s little darling, but to keep out of it anyway, you’d figure nobody would pay any more attention to you tonight, and that tonight was the best chance you’d ever get. Well, you fell for it—hard. That’s the answer.”

Colin nodded.

“I must confess that thought crossed my mind,” he admitted; “but——”

“Never mind the rest!” the other cut in roughly. “I’ve had enough of your cursed jaw! You’ve talked a lot about the Mask. Well, I’ll tell *you* something now. He had a hunch that Reddy left some little memento behind him. But it wasn’t never found—until now. And now you’re going to come across, my bucko!”

“But if I can’t?” protested Colin. “If I tell you I haven’t the faintest idea what you are talking about?”

The man took a step forward—threateningly.

“You saw Reddy put on the spot, didn’t you?” he rasped. “You know what happened to you once before, don’t you? You try any of that guff on me and I’ll plug you where you stand!”

Colin shook his head judicially. If he could badger the man a little, draw him on a bit!

“As a bluff, that’s pretty bad!” he answered in an irritating way. “I see that your lethal weapon has no silencer. Surely it has occurred to you that it would be inadvisable from your standpoint to fire a shot in here.”

“Don’t you worry any about that!” retorted the other with an ugly laugh. “You know damned well Butch Connal ain’t here tonight, and that’s another reason why, if you were up to anything, you’d fall for the come-on tonight. But Butch ain’t the only one that’s not here—his whole mob’s gone with him. And it’s his mob that rents most of the rooms, see? There ain’t nobody in the house but a few guys playing poker up on the third floor, and you can take it from me with that door shut they couldn’t hear a cannon if it was fired off.”

“Oh!” Colin drawled insolently. “I see! Well, even so, still you wouldn’t—er—plug me. I’m calling your bluff.”

“Is that so?” There was a cold fury in the man’s voice now.

“Yes, that’s so!” mimicked Colin. “Shall I tell you why? If this absurd ringmaster of yours with the lurid name believes that I possess some coveted secret or know the whereabouts of some memento, as you call it, that Reddy has left behind, I wouldn’t be much good as a source of information if I were dead—would I?”

“I’ll take a chance on that!” rapped out the other. “I know all I need to know now without you having to *tell* me about it. Reddy hid something in this room, and the hiding place had something to do with those curtains or that pole, or you wouldn’t have been monkeying with them. But it ain’t there now. It’s in your pocket. It ain’t hard, is it, to frisk a dead man’s pocket?”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow you,” purred Colin.

“You wouldn’t!” mocked the other. “Your dome’s too lofty—not! When I came into this room you weren’t taking that curtain pole down, you were lifting it back into place. You’d got what you came for, that’s all.”

“My God!” exclaimed Colin ironically. “That’s marvelous! Imagine thinking that out all by yourself! But yet you can’t be absolutely sure, can you; and, though of course you just couldn’t be wrong, still, in case you were, what would the Mask say if you killed the goose that *might* have laid a golden egg?”

With an oath, his lips working, the man thrust himself angrily forward.

“Get down off that chair and hand over!” he ordered hoarsely. “And be damned quick about it! I’ve had enough from you!”

While the fraction of a second slipped away, Colin measured the distance with his eyes. The man stood some three feet from him now. The trap was baited. Perhaps too well baited. The revolver’s muzzle was scarcely more than twelve inches from the pit of his stomach. An even chance? It wasn’t that. It was just a chance. The only one.

“All right,” said Colin resignedly. “Look out, then, while I drop this thing.”

The revolver muzzle strayed for an instant, as the man moved slightly to one side—and in that instant, Colin leaped. The brain registers with incredible speed. In mid-air he saw the flash, heard the roar of the revolver shot, knew that it had missed because the tumbling portières had engulfed the other’s hand as he had hoped they might; and then, his hurtling weight backed by every ounce of his strength behind the blow, the brass pole, where it lay bare for a foot or two between his outspread hands, crashed with terrific force full into the man’s face—and Colin lay sprawled atop the other, a smother of portières around him.

There came a choked cry, a moan, then silence. The form beneath him was inert. Colin got to his knees and pushed the pole and portières to one side. He could see the other’s face now, and for a moment he studied it intently. It was not a pretty sight—it streamed blood. But he lighted a match to augment the moonlight and bent over the unconscious man to see the better. No, of course, he had never seen the other before, that was certain, and no more than he had expected; but it was equally certain now that he would not fail to recognize him anywhere if he ever saw the man again.

Colin’s face was grim, hard-set. The luck had been with him—perhaps it would carry still further. Afford a clue, perhaps, to the man’s identity and thereby a connecting link with the Mask.

A minute had passed. How long would it be before the other regained consciousness? He went swiftly through the man’s pockets. Some money,

not an inconsiderable sum; keys, some of them of the skeleton variety; cigarettes; the usual odds and ends; no letters or papers of any description—except a small card in one of the vest pockets.

Colin lighted another match and examined this. Scrawled in pencil he read: “W. P. 9.30 tonight.” Not very informative! He replaced the card and the other articles in the pockets in which he had found them.

Anything else? His eyes searched around the room. Oh, yes! The revolver lying there on the floor where it had fallen from the man’s hand! He reached over, secured the weapon, slipped it into his own pocket, rose to his feet—and a minute later was out on the street.

CHAPTER VI

SEALED INSTRUCTIONS

HERE, on the street, Colin hesitated for an instant, then started briskly in the direction of Sixth Avenue. Fifth Avenue was virtually deserted at this hour, whereas, failing a taxi, Sixth Avenue offered him a choice between the elevated and the surface line to take him—where? He was suddenly not at all sure. Perhaps he had better walk a bit—thrash the thing out in his mind.

He had no fear of pursuit so far as his late antagonist was concerned. The man was in no condition to pursue anything for some time to come, and—Colin grinned savagely—from the looks of his face was more likely to spend the next few days in a hospital than anywhere else! But the man was nevertheless still dangerous tonight. In fifteen or twenty minutes from now, or even less, it was quite conceivable, or, rather, a practical certainty, that the man would have managed to reach a telephone. And then—what?

Colin's brows puckered. Not so good! As between himself and the Mask now, the issue was irrevocably joined. Pursuit! What did immunity from immediate pursuit matter if he now went back home? Long before daylight he would be under surveillance again. As well offer himself meekly for the slaughter to begin with! But to be driven out of his own diggings by this accursed Mask, or anybody else, for that matter! His gorge rose defiantly. The red flushed his cheeks, and his hands clenched. His one thought while in there had been to make his escape if possible from that room—what the aftermath might be had not entered his mind then. But he was faced with it now.

“My God,” he muttered, “I'm in a bit of a jam all right!”

A mirthless smile pulled down the corners of his lips. Times without number when at work on a story, he had racked his brains for a situation involving a deliberate case of homicide which was at one and the same time so wholly and obviously justifiable that no reader could have any grounds for quibbling with it. Well, here was one ready to hand. His own life being in the balance, he had only to go back to that room, bump off the Mask's tool before the man had a chance to communicate with his chief, and, so far

as he, Colin, was concerned, it would then be as though he had never left his home that night. Absurd! He wasn't a murderer, no matter how thick the whitewash. He was merely an ass. Damn his imagination! This wasn't fiction! He was up against stark reality this time!

He reached the corner of Sixth Avenue. A taxi cruising by passed unhailed; so did a surface car.

Colin started along the avenue in a downtown direction. "He who fights and runs away will live to fight another day. . . ." The inane thing had popped into his mind—and then began to repeat itself in singsong fashion. He cursed it with abandon. He bitterly resented the suggestion that he should turn tail and run. It not only did not appeal to him in any degree whatsoever, but it stirred up a sort of savage and stubborn fury within him. On the other hand, cold common sense made it abundantly clear that, with his whereabouts now unknown, the one way to play directly into the Mask's hands would be to return home.

He quickened his steps, unconsciously keeping pace with his thoughts.

There was Reddy's letter. He couldn't come to any final decision anyhow until he had read that, and meanwhile the obvious thing to do was to keep his tracks covered.

But in any case he couldn't stay out on the street all night. Obviously again, then, a hotel. The Crossmore, for instance. It was only a few blocks away and not far from the Grand Central. It was a small, quiet sort of place where few, if any, guests would be about at this hour; and, furthermore, he was not known there. Yes, the Crossmore would do. Whether or not he eventually spent the rest of the night at the Crossmore did not matter; he could at least digest Reddy's letter there undisturbed and at his leisure.

He traversed the intervening blocks rapidly and entered the hotel. The lobby was deserted. Only a sleepy bellboy and the night clerk appeared to be on duty.

Colin crossed to the desk.

"This commuter stuff isn't all it's cracked up to be," he grumbled, as he registered. "Second time this month I've missed the last train!" He took out his pocketbook. "I haven't any baggage, of course, so I'll pay you now."

The clerk nodded pleasantly.

"Well, it's an ill wind, you know!" he said sententiously. "We'll try to make you comfortable, Mr."—he glanced at the register—"Routh. With

bath?”

“Please,” said Colin—and a few minutes later was in his room with the door locked behind him.

And suddenly he felt very tired. What was it the doctors had said about early hours and no excitement? Oh, well—he flung an approving glance around the room—there was solid comfort here for the time being anyhow! And a bed by and by—perhaps. But Reddy’s letter first!

He threw himself into an easy chair, took the envelope from his pocket, and tore it open. It contained, as Reddy had said, a plain, sealed envelope of ordinary commercial size and two sheets of paper folded together. He laid the envelope down on the arm of his chair, and unfolded the sheets of paper. Reddy’s penmanship was clear and legible. He read the closely written sheets through to the end—read them in a sort of tense haste, as though at a single glance he strove to master their entire contents. Then, with a grim smile, he searched in his pocket for a cigarette, lighted it, and reread the letter, if it could be called a letter—Reddy had called it the dope—but this time slowly, as though almost he were committing it now word for word to memory. As Reddy had said, it began without preface:

The man to whom the enclosed letter is to be delivered is somewhere on the north shore of the lower Gulf of St. Lawrence, or on the Canadian Labrador coast. He was last heard of at a place called Cap à l’Orage; but I am sure he is still down there somewhere, and I think has been there for about a year. His real name doesn’t matter. He is known there as Joe Lazarre. He is dark, has black eyes and hair, is thickset, clean-shaven, and is about forty years old; if you have any doubt about him, ask him to show you his shoulder—he has a bullet-wound scar along his right shoulder blade. So much for that, if you decide to go.

If you ever read this, which will only be if I have been taken for a ride, you will remember I told you that I wasn’t letting you in for anything except the time and trouble it would take to find Lazarre (though I didn’t mention his name then) provided you followed the directions I am writing here, and, after handing over the letter, just let it go at that. And that is all true; but, before you finally make a decision, it is only fair to add something here, which is part of what I meant by “following directions,” that I did not tell you about when I was talking to you. And my reason for not having done so then was that it wasn’t anything you needed to

know until the time came for you to sit in and take a hand, if you then felt that way about it—which time would mean, of course, that I'd been put on the spot by the Mask.

Listen! I've found out that the Mask has got some "interests" down that way, though what they are I don't know. So, if you went, you'd have to watch your step—otherwise there *would* be danger. It's a cinch that if he ever gets on to me at all, he'll know all there is to know about me before he's through, and he'll know that you're a friend of mine—and, if he found out you were down there, he'd get curious, which wouldn't be so good. If you decide to go, I'd be Tom, Tom, the Piper's son, or Little Boy Blue, or something like that while you're there, if I were you. Understand? You know how much I want the letter delivered, but I'm telling you straight now—play safe or stay at home. That's flat. Also, it's only fair to tell you that Lazarre is working for the Mask; but you will be in no danger from him on account of any letter you hand over from me, and you can bank on that to the limit—only *he* wouldn't live long if it were known he ever got it. See? That's why it isn't to be mailed to Cap à l'Orage—where he may not be.

If you go, good luck, and a dead man's thanks; if you don't go, remember the bargain—the letter is to be destroyed unopened, and your mouth is shut. That's all.

Colin stared unseeingly in front of him. Mechanically he tore the two sheets into bits, and mechanically he thrust the sealed envelope into an inner recess of his pocketbook.

They spoke mostly French down there, of course. That was all right. So did he. A lonely, desolate stretch of coastline. He knew something about it by hearsay. Heaton Boyce had been down there on a salmon trip last year, and had described it one night at the club. The North Shore, Boyce said they always called it. A pulp mill, or so; timber-cutting; fishing. And, separated by infinite miles, a few diminutive towns, small villages, or settlements that consisted of no more than a cluster of houses. No railroad. Coastal boats from Montreal and Quebec the only source of supplies and transportation in summer—dog teams in the winter. What the devil interest could the Mask have in a locality such as that?

He'd have to write a note to Mulvey. Tell Mulvey he'd taken his advice and was off for a trip—not sure himself where he was going. He couldn't tell Mulvey about the curtain pole, of course—that was part of the bargain

with Reddy. Also a note to Mrs. Hidgin to keep his diggings in order while he was away. He could write them both in the morning. Plain paper. No tell-tale hotel stationery.

Tom, Tom, the Piper's son, eh? Queer! He was already Mr. Routh in the hotel register downstairs. Colin Hewitt had already dropped out of sight. But to underrate the Mask would be fatal. The railway stations would be watched. Suppose he went via Boston? Got a car in the morning, drove as far as Stamford, say, and took the train there? Yes, that would do.

Money? He had plenty in his pocket for the time being, and there was a generous balance in the bank. Old Tommy Braithwaite would cash a check for him in Boston and keep mum about it. Even the Mask had his limitations, and would be hard put to it to discover that a check had come through from Boston—or anywhere else for that matter. In any case, he, Colin, would have left Boston for no one knew where long before the check reached New York.

Clothes? He'd have to buy a few necessary things tomorrow, of course; but for the trip itself, the more or less rough-and-ready sort of stuff that would be required, where better could he outfit himself than where such articles were in constant demand—in Quebec, say, if he went directly there from Boston?

Was there anything else? Had he, as he was sometimes guilty of purposely making his own characters do, overlooked some vital point? He could not think of any.

He stood up. His hand was full of the torn pieces of paper. Distrustful of the wastepaper basket, he thrust them into the side pocket of his coat, and began to undress. He was wretchedly tired, but a few hours' sleep would work marvels.

And then suddenly he became conscious that he had been debating only ways and means and not once the question of whether he would go or stay. Strange? No, it did not seem strange at all now. Nor had his own precarious position tonight been in any way a deciding factor. He had not known it then, but he realized now that his decision had been unalterably made long ago—from the moment he had seen Reddy's dead body lying crumpled there on the floor in his, Colin's, room.

He got into bed and switched off the light. There was a lot in what Reddy had written that he wanted to analyze. What, for instance, was the — No; he was too tired now. . . . Arms ached a bit too. . . . Damned

heavy, that curtain pole. . . . Cap à l'Orage meant Storm Cape. . . . That was queer too. . . .

Colin's eyes closed, and he fell asleep.

CHAPTER VII

UNDER COVER

THE winch clattered. A boxed radio came up from the *Bonaventure's* hold and was swung out into a snub-nosed, broad-beamed power boat alongside that thumped against the steamer's hull, and that was already loaded, one might imagine, beyond the capacity of even two of her kind. And yet, it seemed, there was always room for something more before the forbearance of the tossing craft's freeboard became wholly exhausted—another barrel or two of flour, another drum of gasoline or oil, a bale of this or a case of that, a stove, a washing machine, canned soups, or heaven alone knew what. Easily, all told, a ton or two. Lastly there would be the mail bag. But the mail bag was not usually either bulky or heavy. It generally seemed to have an emaciated and dejected look about it as though self-conscious of its poverty-stricken state which would not even enable it to dole out so much as a letter apiece to that little cluster of houses on the shore there, a mile or so away, whither it was bound.

Colin, leaning over the coastal steamer's rail, watched the scene as he had watched a similar one many times before, always with unflagging interest. Hardy little craft, these open boats; sail-rigged, too, most of them! Here was a bit of "atmosphere" to store away in his mind for future use. An integral part of the life of the north shore of the lower St. Lawrence. The means of intercourse were almost wholly restricted to these boats; the fish were caught in these boats—and fish, except in the timber and pulp localities, was virtually the sole means of livelihood of these people who were scattered along hundreds of miles of coastline that was barren of highways and railroad.

His mind harked back over the four days and a half since he had left Quebec. Not that a great distance in actual mileage had been covered, as the time consumed might imply; but there had been innumerable stops like this one, for the *Bonaventure* was the liaison between the lone villages on the coast and the source of supplies and necessities which came from Montreal and Quebec. In the dead of night, at dawn, at midday, at all hours, the *Bonaventure's* whistle would boom out, her anchor would be dropped, and

the small boats would put off from the shore to claim their share of what was on the purser's manifest—or else, at all hours, too, in the larger places, where none were large, there might be a wharf at which the ship could dock.

He nodded thoughtfully to himself. He had gone ashore frequently, walked through the villages, talked with the people, and had come to admire them for their courage, their faith, and their simple philosophy of life under conditions that were so often those of obvious hardship—and in his heart to pity them for, what seemed to him, their profound loneliness and isolation. A queer, strange, new country to him, so near to civilization, and yet so immeasurably far away! It was——

The boat alongside, fair down to her gunwales, cast off. A figure in the bow, nondescript in dress, one arm wrapped around the plunging mast, waved his cap and shouted in farewell; another figure in the stern, nursing his sputtering engine and half hidden by the heterogeneous pile of cargo that surrounded him, did the same. There came a short, barked order from the bridge. From for'ard on the fo'c'sle head another winch began a staccato drumming. There followed the rattle of the anchor chain coming inboard, the soundful swing of the engine telegraph lever on the bridge, and the answering tinkle of the engine-room bell from far down below. The *Bonaventure* was on her way again.

And the next port of call was Cap à l'Orage.

A few hours from now—this afternoon. Colin swung away from the rail and began to pace up and down the deck. Cap à l'Orage—Storm Cape. He had wondered often enough if there were anything significant in the name—for him?

On the face of it, it all looked simple enough—to deliver a letter to one known as Joe Lazarre at Cap à l'Orage, that was all. But it wasn't all, even if Lazarre were readily found, which, from all that Reddy had both said and written, was at least problematical. There was the afterwards. Granting the delivery of the letter—what then? What was he, Colin, to do? Go back to New York, take up his normal life again? It wouldn't last very long! The Mask, as witness Reddy's end, did not delay attentions of that sort unduly. As it stood now, Colin Hewitt, so far as the Mask was concerned, had—well, vanished. He, Colin, had followed out his plans exactly as he had outlined them that night in his own mind at the Crossmore Hotel. He had left no trace behind him, no trail to follow; he was confident of that. And to make, as the trite saying had it, assurance doubly sure, he was no longer even the “Routh” of the hotel register. His name now was Howard—Donald Howard

—Don to intimates. Where were the intimates? He smiled wryly. How many names had the Mask? He was running the Mask a close second!

All very well! But to resume his life as Colin Hewitt in New York as matters now stood? Merely suicide! What to do, then? This, the purely personal equation in the problem, had been with him of course from the moment he had elected to go to the Crossmore Hotel instead of returning home that night; but now, days later, it was not yet definitely solved, and it still vexed him. So much depended on Lazarre—on Lazarre's attitude. What was in that letter? Why had Reddy laid so much stress upon it? What would Lazarre do? Reddy had stated that Lazarre was working for the Mask—and believed that the Mask had "interests" of some sort on the coast here. Had there been something between Reddy and Lazarre that would cause the latter to swerve in his allegiance to the Mask due to Reddy's murder? If so, that seemed to indicate the way out for him, Colin—a clue to the Mask's identity through Lazarre, though at the same time being careful to protect Lazarre. That latter, as a rider, was tacitly embodied in his, Colin's, promise to Reddy. But if, through Lazarre, he could get a clue down here to the Mask's identity! A savage lust welled up in Colin's soul. To come to grips with this mocking killer! There was a heavy score to settle. He had heard Reddy's story, he had seen Reddy shot down as casually as one might swat a fly on a window pane, and his own world was shattered, his own life dependent now on matching his wits to win against the Mask. What a story it would have made! He would have gloried in it. But, damn it, this was no story—it was stark actuality!

The mental cycle of all the days since he had left New York! He had been able to formulate no more than what might be termed a temporary plan. It all depended on Lazarre. The search for Lazarre might be prolonged, or, even if contact with the other were made readily, an alliance with Lazarre, if that could be accomplished, might necessitate a prolonged stay here on the coast. Primarily he had had to provide for that—an extended stay, plus freedom of movement, and above all justification for his presence on the north shore without exciting comment, let alone suspicion.

Well, his solution, so far as that end of the problem was involved, seemed to have worked out satisfactorily up to now. He was here on a bit of a holiday, that was all—wanted to see something of the north coast, and, later, Labrador, and later still, Newfoundland perhaps. Where the spirit led. Some salmon-fishing, too, though he understood that most of the rivers were privately owned—but that could be had anyway in Newfoundland. He had merely elected to make Cap à l'Orage his first stop because he had been

informed that was one of the few places well down on the coast where anything in the way of boarding-house or hotel accommodation was to be obtained. A good reason! And, from what he had seen in his jaunts ashore, he mentally congratulated himself that Reddy had indicated Cap à l'Orage as a starting point—no matter how primitive the accommodation there might prove to be!

Quite! All this was perfectly logical, perfectly natural. He alone at moments had thrown side glances at his own story—simply because, of course, he alone knew that he had something to conceal! Old as humanity, that! As a matter of fact no one had dreamed of questioning his *bona-fides*. He had unhesitatingly been accepted at his own face value.

His glance traveled up and down the deck—a composite picture—the tourists making a holiday cruise to Newfoundland and back; pulp men and timber cruisers bound for various points; the casual passengers, local inhabitants mostly, and whole families of these sometimes, that kept getting on and off, paying visits or perhaps migrating from one place to another. A queer potpourri! The rough-and-ready rubbing shoulders with the more immaculately groomed in hearty camaraderie. He knew almost everyone on board. The air of unrestraint had been delightful. There were always tales of the early days on the coast by the old-timers. Sometimes in English, sometimes in French. And always there were eager listeners. Excursions ashore when the *Bonaventure* was discharging for an hour or more; a laughing, drenched party often enough when there was no wharf and there was a bit of a sea on. A jolly, carefree crowd. A vague smile crossed his lips. He was the only one on board bent on tracking down a murderer!

Oh, yes! He had fitted into his own little niche perfectly. He had no doubt of that. In one particular perhaps too perfectly! He was Mr. Howard—Mr. Donald Howard, a broker from Boston. There were moments when he infinitely preferred his own name—not for any euphonious reason! Her deck chair was unoccupied. Had been for the last hour. Perhaps she had gone below to pack. Perhaps he would better do the same. In a few hours the *Bonaventure* would dock at Cap à l'Orage. The purser had told him they were the only two leaving the ship there. She, like everyone else, had accepted him at face value. Well, did he wish she hadn't? Damn!

He went down to his cabin, grinned not humorously at the blatant assortment of fishing paraphernalia he had acquired—and would probably never use—and then proceeded to pack his bags.

But as his hands worked, so did his mind. Germaine Tremblay. Mademoiselle Germaine Tremblay. Germaine. Well, what about her? What did he know about her? It was surprising what he knew about her!

The captain, Captain Rainville, had introduced her to him the second day out. “Mademoiselle Germaine Tremblay”—the captain had lingered over the name affectionately. “She was only a very little girl when she first sailed with me. So high. And so, I am permitted to call her Germaine. *Voilà!* It is an honor. You have only to be down here but a very little while, Mr. Howard, to know what the name of Tremblay means on the coast.” She had flushed prettily. “Captain Rainville is always like that!” she had protested. “Don’t you believe a word he says. He is a great tease.” But Captain Rainville, who had himself been born on the coast and knew everybody, had been even conservative in what he had said. Those of the coast who were aboard had treated her with the utmost deference; and even an unwilling ear—and Colin was forced to admit that his was not an unwilling one—could not have helped but hear about the fame of the Tremblays and their connection with the north shore. They had been amongst the earliest settlers, the first Tremblay coming originally from France. Several generations. Prospering. Open-handed. Respected. In short, the story of the Tremblays was the story of the north shore—and vice-versa.

Colin frowned over his packing. Her father was Dr. Louis Tremblay of Cap à l’Orage, the present head of the family. A bit tragic, the accession! Captain Rainville had volunteered the information. Louis Tremblay, then in Montreal, had but just graduated in medicine when an epidemic of smallpox ravaged the north shore. Cap à l’Orage was the family seat, as it were; and, at that time, there was no doctor at Cap à l’Orage. Dr. Louis Tremblay at once returned home. He had never expected to practise in Cap à l’Orage! It was as though fate had taken him by the scruff of the neck. His father and mother died of the disease. He had one sister, but no brothers. His inheritance was there. The people begged him not to leave. He settled down to combine the management of the estate with the practise of medicine—and had remained there ever since. He had married an English girl. A romance begun in his college days in Montreal. But his wife was now dead. There was only a daughter and a son left. The son, following in his father’s footsteps, had graduated in medicine in Montreal, and was now taking a special course in New York. Germaine—Mademoiselle Tremblay—was returning from a visit to some friends in Quebec. English seemed to come to her more naturally than French. Because of her mother, of course. Marvelous hair—like burnished gold where the sun glinted on it. She inherited that from her mother, too, probably. Someone had said she could

drive a dog team with the best of them—and yet she was scarcely up to his shoulder.

Colin slammed shut the last of his bags. Yes, it was surprising how much he knew about her! And they were both going ashore at Cap à l'Orage. Howard . . . Donald Howard . . . from Boston . . . !

He went up on deck. Her chair was still unoccupied. He flung himself into his own chair and tugged a book out of his pocket. For some unaccountable reason he did not feel like talking to anybody—not even to François Joliecoeur, the old timber cruiser over there, who, if one were careful to stand to windward out of range of the “habitant shag” whose deadly odor constantly emanated from a pipe that was never out, told entrancing tales of the coast and his own adventures—alas, not always true! A priceless old liar! A great character for a book written around these parts! A book? What book? Would he, Colin, ever write another? He had his own skin now, to put it bluntly, to think of first.

He began to read, read for a while, tossed his book down—and picked it up again. An hour passed—two.

Somewhere a winch suddenly sputtered and clanked—noisily, discordantly. They were getting cargo up on deck. A sure sign that another port was near at hand. Cap à l'Orage. He looked up.

She had just emerged from the captain's room up there off the lower bridge, the captain following her through the doorway. Colin heard her laugh ring out as she gayly spurned the captain's offer of assistance, and came lithely down the ladder. How would he describe her if he were introducing her as a heroine to his readers? He wasn't much good when it came to his “girl” stuff—never had been. Always afraid of it. Always seemed a bit mushy, what she wore and how she crossed her slim legs. No action in it, any more than a chapter devoted to a tea party—which he couldn't write either. But he wasn't describing her now in a lame and groping paragraph as he rose from his chair to meet her and they automatically drifted over to the rail together—he was just looking at her.

The blue eyes smiled at him frankly out of a face whose only cosmetics were the sun and the out-of-doors.

“I thought you'd gone down below to pack,” he said.

“Oh, no,” she laughed, “I did that before lunch, except, of course, just the few finishing touches. And you?”

“All set,” he answered.

“Captain Rainville chased me away.” She waved her hand shoreward. “We’ll be in shortly. That’s Cap à l’Orage over there. See that bald old mountain sticking out into the water with a lighthouse on top of it? The town is just this side of it in that little bay. You can begin to see the houses now.”

“I see.” He nodded. “Storm Cape. I’ve always meant to ask how it came by its name.”

Studying her, he saw the smile fade from her eyes as she shook her head gravely.

“I am afraid it has earned it,” she said seriously. “I can’t explain it. Of course, the Gulf is very wide here, like the open sea, and you can’t see the other shore; but then that’s true in lots of other places. But the storms *do* seem to center here and at times are very violent; and besides, though the Gulf is famous for its fogs, we seem to get more than our share of those too—and so often they come upon us here almost without any warning at all. The storms are really very treacherous, and there is scarcely a year goes by that one or more of our men, whether fishing in the summer or out with dog teams in the winter, are never heard of again. And another’s sorrow in a little place like ours, you know, is one’s own too.”

Another side of her—quite different from her gay and madcap leadership on the little excursions he had made ashore with her where there was only frolic. Life was not all playtime! A Tremblay! What was it Captain Rainville had said? In a little way he thought he understood.

He nodded his head.

“I can well appreciate that,” he said quietly. “And so that’s how it came by its name, is it?”

She nodded her head in turn; and then her mood changed swiftly and she was smiling at him again—half teasingly, and yet half in earnest too, it seemed.

“Do you know,” she said, “that I’ve really been worrying a lot about you ever since I knew you were getting off at Cap à l’Orage?”

He fell in with her mood.

“How awful!” he exclaimed tragically.

“No, really!” she returned quickly. “Madame Frénier does the best she can with her so-called ‘hotel,’ but it is far from being a modern hostelry and far, I am afraid, from what you will expect. It’s mostly post office and general store. You know, we are supposed to be hospitable here on the coast,

and I am sure Father would take you completely under his wing, only”—her face clouded suddenly—“I don’t think he’s very well. That’s what has brought me back a little sooner than I had expected. But, in any case, I promise you that you won’t be utterly deserted . . . if you like an occasional tramp through the woods . . . and I’ve got a rather jolly little motorboat, not terribly swanky, but a brave little craft just the same.”

“Glorious!” he exclaimed enthusiastically. “As for the rest, I am sure that Madame Frénier and I will get along famously. And besides——” He studied her for a moment. His thoughts raced suddenly. Why not? He couldn’t go around everywhere asking for Joe Lazarre! This was the obvious, the natural, the least suspicious move to make. He didn’t like that—with her! But what could he do? “And besides,” he went on, “I’m not sure that I am going to be wholly a stranger in a strange land. A friend of a friend of mine!” He laughed a little. “You know! I believe he’s down here at Cap à l’Orage. His name is Lazarre. Joe—short for Joseph, of course.”

“Lazarre?” she repeated, and shook her head. “It’s not an uncommon name by any means, but I am sure I know everyone in Cap à l’Orage, and there is no one by that name in the village.”

Colin dug for a cigarette and lighted it. Lazarre wasn’t the man’s real name, of course. Everybody in the whole damnable business seemed to indulge in fictitious names—himself included! But Reddy had said that it was as Lazarre the man was known here. Not so easy, apparently, from what she had just said, to pick up the trail! And yet he had scarcely expected to find the man a resident of Cap à l’Orage. Reddy’s uncertainty as to Lazarre’s exact whereabouts had suggested a decided question mark in that regard. But someone in Cap à l’Orage must have seen or heard of Joe Lazarre.

“Oh, well,” he said lightly, “it really doesn’t matter.”

“Wait!” she cried out impulsively.

He waited. He liked the dainty way in which her brow was suddenly profoundly puckered.

“Of course!” she said. “I hadn’t thought of that! If he’s a friend of a friend of yours, and moving in exalted social circles”—she was a little witch—she made him a staid bow—“perhaps he’s one of the men who come down every year to the club.”

“The club?” he echoed. “Then there is a club at Cap à l’Orage?”

“Hardly! I don’t think Cap à l’Orage could ever aspire to anything like that. The club is about eight or nine miles by water farther on down the

coast. At Rivière des Cascades. A salmon river. A man whose pockets bulge with money, a millionaire from New York, whose name is Kenniston, bought it some years ago and built what he calls his fishing club there.”

Something flashed through Colin’s mind. It was unpleasant.

“Kenniston,” he repeated. “Waldrow Kenniston?”

“Yes,” she said. “You know him, then?”

“No,” he answered; “I’ve heard the name, that’s all. But you know him, of course.”

She shook her head.

“I’ve never even seen him,” she said. “They don’t depend on the canned goods on Madame Frénier’s shelves, and they never come to Cap à l’Orage. They have several big power boats that ferry them back and forth between the club and the Gaspé coast where they can get fresh supplies direct by rail—even from New York. I really do not know much of anything more about Mr. Kenniston and his club than that; but I think Father was called down there once professionally. Anyway, I’ll ask him if he knows whether there is, or was, anyone by the name of Lazarre there. And anyway, whether he does or not, though there is no road overland, there would be nothing to prevent you from going down there by motorboat to inquire for yourself.”

“In that jolly little one of yours then, perhaps—with you?” He laughed away his impudence—but his eyes pleaded.

“Oh!” she mocked demurely; and then brightly: “Why, of course! Why not—some afternoon? But I must fly now! Look! We’re almost in at the wharf. Those finishing touches, you know.”

He watched her as she sped along the deck and disappeared through the saloon entrance. Then his brows knotted. So Waldrow Kenniston owned a salmon river and had built a place down here!

It was quite true, as he had just told Germaine Tremblay, that he did not know Kenniston personally, but he knew, or at least had heard, quite a lot about the other—not to Kenniston’s credit. In the clubs mostly.

He searched back in his mind now, mustering bits of gossip, facts, all he knew about Kenniston. Kenniston was still a young man. How old? Perhaps thirty. Perhaps less, perhaps more. He was a high-roller in every sense of the word. A plunger too. Six or seven years ago he had inherited a goodly fortune from his father. In as short order as possible he had dissipated it and gambled it away until he was on the verge of ruin. Then suddenly he had

recouped his losses. How? No one knew positively, but it was currently understood that an old friend of his father had come to the rescue. Be that as it might, three or four years ago he had blossomed out into full flower again, with apparently more money at his command than ever.

Colin laughed shortly to himself. What was he driving at anyway? Trying to tie Kenniston up with the Mask's unknown "interests" down here on the coast? Ridiculous! But suppose it should turn out that Lazarre was a frequenter of Kenniston's "club"?

Fiction! But a bully good idea, just the same. Perfectly ripping for a story where you could twist things around any old way and saddle the crime on the shoulders of the one and only character that the reader was certain couldn't possibly be guilty! Only this wasn't fiction!

The *Bonaventure's* whistle boomed out raucously. Colin went down to his cabin to look after his gear.

CHAPTER VIII

MAN PROPOSES

CAP à l'Orage had not belied its name. For three days following the afternoon of Colin's arrival the weather had been unsettled and stormy, keeping him indoors except when, taking advantage of a few short-lived bursts of sunshine, Germaine Tremblay and he had gone for walks together. True, he had spent a great deal of time at Dr. Tremblay's house, otherwise the days would have been ones of unutterable ennui. As it was . . .

He struck a match, cupped his hands against the wind, and lighted a cigarette—his eyes on the girl in the stern of the motorboat beside him, who at the moment was bending over the engine with an oil can in her hand. Efficient as a trained mechanic, plus a grace that was all her own! He liked that unconscious little puckering of her lips as she concentrated on her work. He wished he could write her into a book and really picture her as she was; but his pen always stumbled over a girl—and so did his tongue. Oh, at least it seemed to him that his tongue had gone the way of his pen of late. He always addressed her sedately as Miss Tremblay, but he always thought of her as Germaine. He wondered if she, who always called him Mr. Howard—Damn the name!

His eyes roved over the boat. A trim little craft—an open launch, save for its decked-in bow under which one could store perishables in wet weather, or even manage to crawl in uncomfortably oneself if one were concerned only with a dry skin and not with the handling of the boat. He nodded approval. A good sea boat, broad of beam—much after the type of boat in general use along the coast, only more gracefully built and infinitely more spick-and-span in appearance.

She was still absorbed in the engine. His thoughts harked back over the last three days. Dr. Tremblay was quite on his feet again—so much so that he and his sister were planning a little recuperative trip over to Gaspé and then by motor around the peninsula, when the *Belle Fleur*, that made some of the south shore ports, came in tomorrow. Germaine had been unnecessarily alarmed. The ailment had been a slight touch of pleurisy, according to the doctor's own diagnosis. Again Colin nodded. He liked Dr.

Tremblay. Mentally he pictured the other now: a man of perhaps sixty with iron-gray hair, slim, unostentatiously particular about his dress and appearance—and always an air of courtliness about him that made one think of the manners of old France. And Madame de Courval, the doctor's widowed sister—much like the doctor in her cordial and gracious manners, and much like Germaine in her high spirits. An unforgettable household—that included Antoinette, who had once been Germaine's nurse and was now the cook, and Antoinette's husband, Jacques, who was the man of all work about the house and who had been trained to serve at table—without livery. Livery in Cap à l'Orage, even in the Tremblay house, would have been bizarre. But the white coat of Jacques was always immaculate. The open hospitality of the coast! The door had been thrown wide for him. Invariably he must take dinner with them. Dr. Tremblay had even urged him to move over from Madame Frénier's. Which, of course, was not to be thought of. A veritable stranger. One Donald Howard—from Boston! A nice sort of repayment for all they had done, and——

He did not care to continue that line of thought! He forced his mind into another channel. A quaint, picturesque place, Cap à l'Orage—but still strange to him. No roads led out of Cap à l'Orage, either to the east or the west or the north—and its southernmost point was its own wharf. The village began and ended with its own three or four streets, except, of course, for what was little more than a trail here and there that led into the woods for a short distance where timber had been cut, or to a house or two on the outskirts. A little village that was all a world unto itself—except on the none too frequent steamer days. And yet no one seemed conscious of any sense of isolation. It was that way all along the coast. And the people! There was a charm about their frugal and simple lives, their unaffected friendliness, that was irresistible. There was Madame Frénier, for instance. True, the accommodation left something to be desired, but as for Madame Frénier herself, nothing was too much trouble for her. She was——

His thoughts veered suddenly again, and unconsciously a whimsical smile twisted for an instant at his lips. Even from upstairs in his room at the Hotel du Canada, owing to numerous stovepipe holes and the economy in interior construction that had doubtless prompted only a thin sheathing between the rooms, he could almost literally hear everything that was going on in all parts of Madame Frénier's commercially versatile, if one might express it that way, establishment. He could hear them talking down in the general store, which also embraced the post office. Swapping gossip, asking for peas, or flour, or whatever the need of the moment might be—but he had never heard anyone asking for a letter for Joe Lazarre. A little facetious?

Well, it was only another way of saying in less polished English that he was up against it good and hard. Discreet inquiries had convinced him after three days that no one in Cap à l'Orage either knew or had heard of Joe Lazarre.

The club therefore was the only remaining hope in this neighborhood. Dr. Tremblay had stated that on the occasion when he had visited the club, he had seen only his patient, a man named Gregg, and Mr. Kenniston. He had been told that the others had gone up the river for the day. He had not heard the name of Lazarre mentioned; but that really meant nothing at all, of course, since no mention by name had been made of any of those who were away at the time, and it was quite possible that Lazarre might have been one of them. This had been several weeks ago, just before Dr. Tremblay had taken ill.

Colin drew deeply on his cigarette. Failing the club, what was he to do? Wander from place to place along the coast? That had been his original plan, but somehow now he did not want to wander—from Cap à l'Orage. But he would have no alternative. Lazarre must be found. It was not merely a matter now of delivering a letter—the letter that at the present moment was in the inside pocket of his coat. It was what the possibilities of direct contact with Lazarre might mean. He, Colin, did not like this assumed-name business—he liked it less day by day, and hour by hour. Somehow Germaine seemed to have made it particularly hateful. The urge grew to be Colin Hewitt again, to resume his normal life. And the Mask stood between! Lazarre might well prove the “open sesame.” If Lazarre——

He looked up.

She was laughing at him.

“What a brown study!” she exclaimed. “And, really, we’re not going across the Gulf to Gaspé, you know. You are steering very badly, sir!”

He laughed back at her as he glanced ahead.

“So I am,” he admitted as he set the boat on its course again. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not going to offer you the proverbial penny,” she said. “I’m going to give you something else to think about. Look over there! Out beyond the end of the point that we’re heading for.”

Colin looked. A thin, white mist was creeping in from seaward, but there did not seem to be anything at all ominous about it. It was scattered, broken—like a flimsy veil that had great holes torn in it. One could see through it for miles over the water. He glanced overhead. It was cloudy, of course. It

had been cloudy all afternoon. But the sea had been smooth. That was why they had come. It had been the first opportunity of making the trip to the club, and Germaine had certainly had no misgivings about the weather when, perhaps an hour and a half ago, they had left Cap à l'Orage, for it was she, in fact, who had proposed that they should go this afternoon.

"You don't think it amounts to anything, do you?" he asked.

She shook her head cheerfully.

"It's awfully hard to tell," she answered. "You know what I told you about fogs coming up around here with scarcely any warning at all. And a fog, one of our really, truly fogs, I mean, isn't nice."

Colin lighted another cigarette. In spite of her cheery response he thought he had detected a hint of uneasiness in her voice. It disturbed him. He was not much up on the vagaries of Cap à l'Orage fogs, or of any other kind of fog for that matter, but he did not need to be told that it would be an emphatically unpleasant experience for her to be lost out here in one. And, if there was the slightest chance of such a thing happening, it would be far better to leave the question of Lazzarè and the club until tomorrow or even the next day, anxious though he was to settle that question now.

"So a really, truly fog isn't nice, eh?" he grinned. "Well, then, let's forget the club. I suggest that we turn back."

"Suggestion overruled!" She was very prim, regarding him sternly—laughter twitching at her lips. "A decree from the bench! Such a procedure is ultra—er—something or other. I'm afraid I'm getting terribly mixed up. But the decree stands!"

"But I only meant in case you thought we were in for it," he explained.

"I know." She nodded her head. "And that's just exactly the point. If we're in for a real fog, the very last thing to do is to turn back now, for the simple reason that we wouldn't *get* back. We'd be blanketed in no time with all sense of direction lost, and as likely to be heading out into the Gulf or into the transatlantic steamer tracks as anywhere else. Do you know what the *Bonaventure* does in case of fog?—and she doesn't make many trips without running into one."

"No," Colin admitted. "I'm afraid I don't. As you know, there weren't any coming down from Quebec."

"I'll tell you, then. She anchors. And Captain Rainville makes enormous inroads into that enormous tin of *tabac canadien* he has in his cabin—and

waits. Besides being philosophical about it, he has no choice. He does not navigate the way an ocean liner does. He knows every inch of the coast, but he has to be able to distinguish the landmarks. If he can scarcely make out the bow or stern of his own ship from the bridge, he might as well be blindfolded. The Gulf produces the genuine article in fogs, and we yield to no one, not even London, in that respect.”

“Quite! I see!” he agreed. “But not being able to drop anchor in deep water, and not being the *Bonaventure*, what do we do under such circumstances? Wend our way homeward by skirting the shore, and——”

“And almost certainly wrecking our boat?” she interjected. “For the coastline to be of any use as a guide, don’t you see how close in we would have to keep? And there are tides here, and half-covered rocks, and shoals.”

“Well, then?” he challenged a little helplessly.

“Well,” she smiled at him, “we go ashore before it is too late—and, like the *Bonaventure* and Captain Rainville, wait.”

Colin touched his cap.

“All right, skipper!” he said humbly. “What’s the course?”

“No change,” she said. “Straight for the point. We’re nearer there than anywhere else now anyhow. It will take us about fifteen minutes, and by that time we’ll know. These thin mists often disappear almost as quickly as they come, and if that proves to be the case in this instance, we’ll continue on around the point and make for the club just as we intended to do. If it gets bad, we’ll land.”

“Right!” Colin responded.

It wasn’t getting any better out there to seaward. His eyes swept the coastline in turn. They were a longish way out. Naturally! After rounding the long headland at Cap à l’Orage they had set a straight course for the point ahead there. As she had said, they were nearer to the point now than to any other part of the shore line, but even the point was still some distance away. His lips tightened a little. He did not like the way she was speeding up the engine.

Five minutes passed. A fleecy patch of mist drifted across the bow of the boat. It was growing thick out over the Gulf—gray-white, eerie-looking. The point, though they had been approaching it rapidly, was less distinct.

“I fancy we’re in for it,” Colin observed seriously.

“Yes,” she said, “and for one of those real ones I was speaking about, I’m afraid. We’ll have to land.”

The boat sped on. The shore line began to lose its character—to seaward, nothing but that gray-white wall. It grew thicker still—a pall settling down remorselessly everywhere around them. The point itself, their objective, while still visible, was, close though they were to it now, only a hazy outline.

Germaine throttled down the engine to half speed.

“You called me ‘skipper’ a little while ago, I believe?” she questioned with mock austerity.

“Absolutely!” he affirmed.

“Very well, then,” she commanded, “up for’ard with you! With the tiller rope rigged all around the craft, you can steer from the bow as well as anywhere else. It’s just about low tide, so keep your eyes open for partly covered rocks, and also for a sandy spot, if you can find one, to beach the ship. Let me know when you have way enough on to make the shore.”

Neither of them liked the prospect. He knew that. But he answered her in the same debonair way.

“Aye, aye, sir!” he said heartily—and, making his way forward, took up his allotted station in the bow.

It was incredible, the opaqueness of this cursed fog and the suddenness with which it had descended upon them! He strained his eyes ahead. The boat’s length seemed to be about the limit of visibility; but that looked like a sandy stretch over there a little to the left. He steered for it.

“All right!” he called out. “Shut her off! Way enough!”

And then the boat struck—struck with an impact that caused her to quiver from bow to stern. One of those infernal rocks, half covered, that Germaine had warned him about! But no human being could have seen it even in clear weather! However, it had only been a glancing blow. The boat slipped off now into deep water again, and still with some way on her forged on toward the beach.

“All right,” he called out again. “Just a bump! No harm done!”

There was no answer. No good-natured quip such as he had expected.

He jerked his head around, looking over his shoulder.

He could see the length of the boat well enough—the fog, dense as it had become, did not preclude that. She was lying there motionless on the bottom of the boat beside the engine.

CHAPTER IX

FOG VOICES

COLIN leaped back to the stern of the boat.

“Germaine!” he cried. He had thought of her by no other name since almost the first moment he had met her, and that name now came spontaneously, unconsciously to his lips. “Germaine!” he cried out again in alarm.

There was no answer.

He bent over her anxiously. What had happened was obvious enough. She must have been leaning forward and in the act of shutting off the power when the impact had flung her from her seat and her head had struck against some part of the engine. She was stunned, surely no more than that, for there was no sign of any wound. His common sense told him that it could not be anything really serious—but common sense seemed sorry comfort. He was in an agony of suspense.

The boat grounded on the beach.

He picked her up in his arms and carried her ashore. Her face, so close to his, resting on his shoulder, was white, bloodless—the radiant glow of health that he had come to know so well was gone. It brought fear to him. Unreasoning fear—because surely there was no real cause for fear. Her hair brushed against his cheek, somehow strangely urging him to hold her closer still. She was no weight in his arms, and yet his arms trembled.

His eyes searched around him. The beach was strewn with boulders and rocks, but beyond, perhaps a hundred yards away, were trees, already beginning to look ghostly through the gray curtain of fog. He carried her across the beach, found a patch of sward under the trees just at the edge of the wooded land, and laid her down.

And now she stirred, opened her eyes, stared at him blankly for a moment—and smiled.

Relief swept his anxiety away.

“That’s fine!” he exclaimed buoyantly. “You’re better! But just lie still until I get some things from the boat.”

He brought cushions—a tarpaulin to lay upon the ground.

“Now,” he demanded, “how’s that, little lady?”

“Perfect!” she answered. “It is nice of you—and so silly of me.”

“Silly!” he ejaculated. “All my fault! I should have kept my eyes open.”

“For something you couldn’t see?”

“Oh, well,” he said a little lamely, “at least——”

“‘Oh, well!’ ” she interrupted. “That expresses it exactly. It couldn’t be helped, and anyway there’s no real harm done. I pitched headlong against the engine when we struck, as you have already guessed, and I shall probably have a headache—which won’t last.” She felt gingerly over her head with her hand. “Also a goose-egg—which won’t last either.”

“Stout fellow!” he applauded.

The fog was still thickening. It didn’t seem possible that the damned thing could thicken any more! Colin stared out from under the trees. He could scarcely see the boat now at the water’s edge. Thank God there was no cause for grave concern on her account, but what to do now? Suppose the fog lasted on through the afternoon, the night—interminably? He might get assistance from the club. On the other side of this point here on which they had landed, she had explained on the way down, was the bay into which the Cascade River emptied—and the club was quite close to the mouth of the river. If one struck across overland, the club couldn’t be very far away.

“Look here,” he proposed, “from what you said, this club can’t be more than a mile or so at most from here by land, and I think I’d better cut over there and get some of the chaps to help out. I don’t know much about your Gulf fogs, but this one looks like a grand slam—no matter which system you play. You can’t stay here all night, you know.”

She raised herself up on her elbow.

“You will do nothing of the sort!” she stated with finality.

“And why not?” he asked.

“For a host of reasons,” she answered. “In the first place, I’m quite all right, or, at least, I will be in half an hour or so; and, if it became a question of going to the club, I could go with you. In the second place, it would be a

hopeless undertaking. In this fog we'd be lost in the woods before we had gone a quarter of a mile. And in the third place, there is no necessity for attempting to get there as a forlorn hope, for there is no forlorn hope about it. We are perfectly all right as we are, no matter how long the fog lasts. We are not even going to be subjected to any hardships. There's a thermos bottle and a lunch basket in the boat, you know."

It sounded logical. Undoubtedly she was right.

"Still the skipper, I perceive," he teased.

She tossed her head.

"You know the penalty for mutiny, don't you?"

"All right," he grinned; and then, seriously: "But if we don't get back within a reasonable time your father will be frightfully worried."

"No," she said calmly; "not a bit. Father was brought up on the coast. So was I. He knows exactly what we will have done. If it had been a question of sudden storms and wind and hugeous waves, that would be quite another matter. As it is, he won't be in the least anxious. So long as we get back before he leaves for Gaspé, it will be all right—and we're sure to do that, for this fog, of course, will delay the *Belle Fleur* too."

"Splendid!" said Colin. He spread one edge of the tarpaulin over her as a covering, and quite unnecessarily rearranged the cushion under her head. "In that case," he laughed, "I shan't mind, from purely selfish reasons, if the fog lasts on a bit!"

The fog did last—unduly. Darkness came. In spite of her insistence that it was "nothing at all," the blow on her head refused to be treated quite so cavalierly, and she had been content to lie where she was, drowsing a good part of the time. She was asleep now. But now it was a wholly natural sleep. The lunch basket and the thermos bottle, just as evening had set in, had worked wonders.

What time was it? Colin, sitting on the ground beside her, fumbled for his watch, and then replaced it in his pocket. If he struck a match he might awaken her. It must be somewhere around ten o'clock.

A queer smile twisted his lips. The last sort of complication he had expected to encounter on this quest of his for one Joseph Lazarre was—Germaine Tremblay. Like a story! The whole thing so far was like the weaving of one of his own plots. Of course, the girl had to come in. But this wasn't a plot. This was real. Write Germaine into a story—but hesitant

because his pen could never do her justice? It had gone far beyond all that! He knew now that he had written her finally and for all time into his life.

He realized now that, from the moment he had met her on the *Bonaventure*, he had subconsciously known this would be so, but he had never questioned himself. And this afternoon when he had carried her from the boat, and she had lain there in his arms white and unconscious, suddenly he had known then, too, that there never would be need for questioning. He knew now that everything that the world held for him was vested in Germaine Tremblay.

And she? He shook his head. If their companionship had come to mean anything more to her than the frank and open friendship which she offered, she had shown no sign of it. But neither had he, for that matter. His hands clenched suddenly. Over their picnic supper she had asked some natural and innocent questions about his life in Boston—and he had lied glibly. He had

But why go on with that? It had been with him all afternoon and evening. What good did it do to tell himself again that the masquerade was not of his making, and that he was no criminal? What could he say to a girl about love, even if he dared hope that she too might care, when he himself was being hunted for his life and could only be a source of danger to her if he were discovered?

He shrugged his shoulders in vicious dismissal of the subject. He thought of the boat—and wished he could at least glimpse it. Not that he was in any way concerned about the boat—but it would have been an indication that the fog was lifting. But between the fog and the darkness he could not see more than two or three yards in front of him. Perhaps he couldn't have seen the boat anyway from where he sat even if there were no fog. It was anchored out there somewhere just beyond low-water mark. The boat was too big and heavy to pull up on the beach, and it would have been impracticable to keep shifting it constantly with the movement of the tide. It had been low tide, or just on the turn, when they had landed, and after he had made Germaine as comfortable as possible, he had shoved the boat a little way out into the water, anchored it securely, and waded ashore; it was, as nearly as he could judge, about high tide now, and if the fog lifted before low water again, it was a simple enough matter to swim out, bring the boat in, and——

He turned his head sharply—listening. His ear had caught the sound of movement somewhere in the woods near at hand. It came nearer—the

crackle of twigs and underbrush. An animal of some sort, probably. His lips tightened a little. This might not be so pleasant! On the other hand, it might not amount to anything at all. She was still asleep, and he did not waken her. Why should he—yet? His hand went into his pocket and came out with the revolver, for which he had bought a reserve supply of ammunition in Quebec, and which had never left his person since the night he had picked it up in Butch Connal's room.

And now the sounds died away for an instant—then came again. But this time it was the crunching of sand. Whatever it was, it was moving along the beach now. Not far away. But he could see nothing.

And then suddenly there came what seemed like the thud of a heavy body falling on the sand, then a yell of pain, followed instantly by a torrent of vile oaths in English.

Germaine sat bolt upright. Colin felt her hand close tightly over his—then draw quickly away again as she evidently touched the revolver he was holding.

“O-ooh!” she whispered.

“Obviously no acquisition to our party!” he whispered back grimly. “Don't make a sound! When I first heard a noise back there in the wood, I thought it was only some animal on the prowl.”

“What's the matter?” demanded a voice.

“I fell over this bloody rock and bashed my leg.”

“Well, never mind—come on!”

Colin smiled queerly. Two animals—not one!

“Come on nothing!” retorted the injured one furiously. “At least not till I can stand up! Didn't I tell you I'd hurt my leg? It's sore as hell, and I can feel it bleeding.”

“Let's take a look at it. Here—I'll strike a match.”

Colin strained his eyes in the direction of the voices. He heard the match being struck, but its flame was almost indiscernible—no more than a mere pinpoint of light.

“We were damn saps not to beat it back for the club at once!” Colin recognized the querulous voice as that of the injured man. “It was a fool stunt to keep on looking for the swine, or any trace of him, in a fog, even if

Lazarre *has* got the wind up. And now we're lost ourselves, and have been for God knows how many hours!"

Colin, with a quick, low intake of his breath, leaned sharply forward; he sensed, rather than saw, Germaine stir suddenly at his side.

"Maybe we should have headed straight back when the fog first began to settle," the other admitted; "but Lazarre's dead right, and you know it. The man, whoever he is, knows too much. He got one look too many before he ran for cover when Lazarre fired at him."

"Too bad Lazarre missed," growled the injured one, "or we wouldn't all of us have been hunting our heads off ever since daybreak. And a hot chance we ever had of finding him in this God-forsaken wilderness, anyway!"

"Quit your grouching!" snapped the second man. "Hot chance or not, you know only too damned well we couldn't afford to pass it up. He didn't get away in a boat, for Gregg and Mallory were covering the shore before he could have had a hope. He may have been sneaking around here for days, spotting us, in which case he must have camped somewhere. That was something to go on, anyway. I'll admit the chances of getting him are small, but that's so much the worse for us. There's nothing to do now, of course, except to keep on trying to find our way back to the club as soon as you feel like walking again; but there's no use talking about it being Lazarre that's got the wind up any more than the rest of us. There's something that seems to be breaking around here lately that you don't like any more than any of us, and it looks as though this bird was in it. You haven't got to be told where we'll get off with W. P. if we don't play our hand right, have you?"

"No more than you, blast you!" rasped the man with the injured leg. "Strike another match! I know the chances we're up against as well as you do. What are you trying to hand me? All I'm saying is that you and I made a sweet pair of fools of ourselves in not making back for the club right from the start. Here, tie that handkerchief tight—it's a dirty gash, curse it, but it's not bleeding as much as I thought it was—and we'll get going again. I guess I can walk as fast as it will do us any good to go! What do you say, keep along the shore, now that we've found it, until we get to the river? I don't know anything else to do. Maybe by that time the fog will have lifted."

"All right," agreed the other shortly. "Come on!"

Colin's lips were a straight line. Again that night in Butch Connal's room! "W. P." That card he had found in the pocket of the Mask's tool! The Mask's "interests" on the north shore here, to which Reddy had referred,

seemed to be rather definitely linked up now with Mr. Millionaire Waldrow Kenniston's club!

Footsteps crunched upon the sand and died away. Out of the fog, growing fainter in the distance, came an occasional curse—the man with the injured leg was evidently making heavy weather of it!

And then Germaine spoke.

“It would appear that you have located that friend of a friend of yours,” she observed dryly.

CHAPTER X

FACED CARDS

COLIN did not answer at once. His brain was racing. Suppose on their return to Cap à l'Orage Germaine reported what she had heard? It would be the obvious and natural thing for her to do. She had heard enough to know that the club was nothing but a nest of crooks, and that it existed only for some criminal purpose. A millionaire, and a salmon river on the isolated north shore! He paid a mental tribute to the Mask. The camouflage was magnificent. Yes—but Germaine. If she told? Eventually, of course, the police would then— But the police were far away. Would the villagers themselves take action under the leadership of whatever local authority existed, or would someone, counting on being well paid for it, take a warning to the club? He did not care what happened finally to the club or what specifically was going on there—but there was Lazarre. He did not want to see Lazarre in the toils, or on the wing in flight. His own one chance was an alliance with Lazarre. As it was, the “members” were already alarmed at the presence of the man who had “got one look too many,” and that was bad enough from his, Colin's, standpoint without adding anything more to it.

And then there was Germaine herself. From the moment it became known that she was the informant she would be in danger—not imaginary danger. He did not care to think of that. The Mask did not forgive. And then, too, there was himself. He would inevitably be brought into it in court—evidence, testimony in due course. He could not testify under a false name. Enter the Mask! But he could not ask her to remain silent without giving her a reason strong enough to warrant such an, to say the least of it, unusual request. What, then? There seemed to be only one way out; he could think of no other—to tell her as much of the truth as his promise to Reddy would permit. And her reaction to that? In the darkness he shook his head. It would be a relief anyhow. This sailing under false colors with Germaine was becoming unendurable.

“Look here!” he said abruptly. “My name's not Howard.”

“No?” she inquired softly. “And do you always go armed? It is rather obvious that this club here is very far removed from the innocent paradise of sportsmen that it pretends to be! What are you? A detective?”

“Oh, Lord, no!” He forced a laugh. “But I’ve created a lot of them—rather moldy ones, I’m afraid. I’m Colin Hewitt. I write books.”

“I know the name,” she said, “and I suppose, to be really original, I ought to say that I have read and loved every book you have ever written, and——”

“Don’t!” he groaned.

“I won’t,” she assured him calmly. “And since confession seems to be in the air, terrible as it may sound, I’m going to admit that I have never read even one of them.”

“You wouldn’t,” he stated confidently. “I don’t write the sort of stuff that would appeal to you. Just thrillers—as bloodthirsty and as horribly creepy as possible, of course. I’ve never written a love story, for instance, in my life.”

“Oh! And why not?”

“Because I can’t,” he confessed. “If you want the truth, I’m in a blue funk every time the hero and heroine climb out on the limb for a tête-à-tête. There has to be a girl because the dear publishers insist on it, but the best I can do is most awfully unconvincing—I just have to drag her in by the hair of the head.”

He heard her laugh ripple under her breath.

“Just like I’ve been dragged in tonight?”

“Well—er—yes, in a way,” he stammered. “But this isn’t a story.”

“Nevertheless, I rather like it—being dragged in by the hair of the head—so far,” she confided. “But why this sudden shedding of your cloak, Mr. Hewitt—or should I say, Mr. Howard?”

“I see you haven’t judged me harshly—offhand,” he said gratefully.

“Judgment reserved,” she answered. “I asked you a question.”

“Because,” he said earnestly, “I want to exact a promise from you that, for the time being at least, you won’t say anything about what has happened tonight.”

“Isn’t that a very strange request?” Her voice was suddenly serious. “I don’t understand.”

“I want to tell you a little story,” he said quietly; “or, at least, as much of it as I am at liberty to tell you. Do you mind? I will be just as brief as I can.”

“I am listening,” she invited.

“Well, then, here goes!” he said.

The minutes passed—many of them. The story did not lend itself to brevity. There was too much to tell, so many sidelights, if she was to understand. And so he told her of Annie, and French Pete, and the Mask, and Reddy Turner’s murder. Everything—except his promise to Reddy, and the actual purpose of his visit to Butch Connal’s room. He could not tell her about the letter and keep faith with Reddy. He could only tell her that, defying the Mask’s warning, he had gone to Reddy’s old room in the hope that he might chance upon some clue to the Mask’s identity that had been overlooked. But for the rest, he told it all exactly as it had happened.

“And so you see,” he ended, “why at present I am a man without a home and without a name. That brings us to tonight. I haven’t said anything so far about Lazarre; but I will tell you now why I am so anxious to see him—I have reason to hope that I can get him to help me to pick up the Mask’s trail. I am not sure. I don’t know. But it seems the best chance I’ve got—in fact, for the moment, the only one. And that one would be wrecked if any move were made against the club or the news got out that it was suspect before I had a chance to talk to him. That’s why I asked for your promise.”

She had made no comment, had not interrupted once. She had sat silent through it all. He could not see her face.

And now as she spoke her voice was very low.

“You have my promise,” she said simply.

And somehow in the darkness their hands met. She did not draw hers away. And for a moment they sat thus in silence. He was not tongue-tied now—he was fighting to hold back the rush of words that were on his lips. He could not see his way ahead. He could not bring her intimately into his life as matters stood. It would not be fair to her—if he found that she cared. It would only be inviting her into danger of the ugliest kind. The thought of Annie Turner flashed through his mind. He had still to settle with the Mask—one way or the other. One must go. Would it be the Mask—or himself?

His hand tightened warmly over hers and then released it.

“That’s ripping of you!” he said. “I don’t need to tell you that the club, in its own parlance, will be taken for a ride in due course—and the road won’t

be any the smoother because of the delay.”

“What do you think they are doing there?” she asked.

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” he said. “You know I never heard of the club until you mentioned it on the *Bonaventure*.”

“But Lazarre?” she questioned. “I don’t understand about Lazarre. You haven’t told me who he is, or how you knew he was down here.”

“No,” he said frankly; “I haven’t. And I am afraid that is one of the things that I am not at liberty to tell you. Personally, I do not see any reason now why you should not know, but I gave my word and I have no choice other than to keep it. I’m not throwing cold water, am I?”

“Oh, no!” she declared emphatically. “Of course you’re not! I can quite understand. But there *is* one question I do want to ask. You said you hoped to get Lazarre to help you to pick up the Mask’s trail. You remember that one of those two men just said something about W. P.? That was what was on the card you found in the pocket of the man you fought with in Reddy Turner’s old room, wasn’t it?”

“You go up head!” he applauded.

“Well, that pretty definitely proves that the club here is one of the Mask’s enterprises, doesn’t it?” she demanded. “And therefore that Lazarre is one of the Mask’s men? How can you expect help from him?”

“That’s the only other thing I can’t explain to you,” he said, “except to say that I am armed with an approach to Lazarre which may mean everything—or nothing. I may only be grasping at the proverbial straw, but it’s the one chance I see. I do not know any more than you do what it’s worth until I have talked with him.”

“This whole thing is terrible!” she exclaimed. “It is almost impossible to believe that a fiend, such as you have pictured the Mask to be, exists as a human being.”

Colin laughed shortly.

“He exists all right. Witness Mr. Howard. But let’s not talk about him for a moment. There’s a question or two I’d like to ask you. Tell me all you can about the club itself.”

“I can’t tell you very much,” she said. “I’ve seen it, of course, but only from a distance when I’ve been out in my boat. It looks very nice, and

Father says it is very comfortably fitted up inside with electric light and _____”

“Electric light!” Colin interrupted quickly. “That’s interesting! That means they’ve got a power plant of some sort. I suppose they’re harnessed up the river a bit.”

“I suppose so,” she said; “though I don’t know very much about such things. But there are some falls right beside the clubhouse, and I don’t imagine it would be a very difficult thing to do, or a very expensive one either—for a millionaire.”

“You mean it’s what one would expect? All the creature comforts. Mr. Waldrow Kenniston wouldn’t be without them, of course. Quite so. Nothing in that to arouse an outsider’s suspicion anyway. Well, is there anything else you can tell me?”

“No,” she replied thoughtfully; “I don’t think so. I have already told you that no one from the club ever comes near Cap à l’Orage, so I have no personal knowledge of any of them. I believe that when the club was first built several years ago some of the villagers, when out fishing, occasionally used to land there, and though they were treated civilly enough, there is no doubt but that they came away with the very distinct impression that it was a gentleman’s club on private property and that the club would prefer to have its privacy respected—and since then the villagers have respected it.”

“I see,” he said—and fell silent for a moment. Lazarre was back in his mind again. How best to make contact with Lazarre?—and secretly now, both for his own sake and Lazarre’s, since obviously everyone at the club was one of the Mask’s men. “Look here,” he said abruptly, “I know there are no roads out of Cap à l’Orage, but there is nothing to prevent one from going overland to the club, is there?”

“Not if you have the agility of a mountain goat and are an expert woodsman,” she answered laughingly. “And if you possessed those qualifications you would undoubtedly cut the distance by water by more than half, for you wouldn’t have to round the cape, and, besides, the bay on the other side of the point here trends sharply to the westward. You would cut the time in half too, for I don’t suppose, as the crow flies, it would be more than three and a half miles from the village to the club.”

“That’s also interesting,” he said. “As far as agility is concerned, I think I would be prepared to take a chance; but as for the other qualification—well, perhaps you know someone who could supply it?”

She thought for an instant.

“The best man in the village at that sort of thing,” she said, “is an old timber cruiser named Anatole Bouchard. He speaks very good English too, but——”

“Bouchard?” he broke in. “That name sounds familiar.”

“Yes,” she said. “I pointed his shack out to you yesterday on our walk along that wagon track on the outskirts of the village.”

“Oh, yes; I remember,” he said. “And this Bouchard—what sort of a man is he? Is he to be trusted?”

“If you paid him enough to make it worth his while”—there was a sudden note of anxiety in her voice—“I think he could be trusted to do *anything*. I was going to tell you when you interrupted me that he hasn’t got a very enviable reputation. The villagers say that he is drunk half the time since, of late, he has found an easier way than timber-cruising of making a living.”

“What do you mean?”

“Bootlegging—he has made friends, so they say, with St. Pierre and Miquelon.”

“Bootlegging! Here! In the Province of Quebec? But there is no prohibition here.”

“Except as to price. And the revenue cutters are few and far between. It is a thriving business here on the coast—as well as with the United States. There are a great many schooners engaged in the trade.”

“Oh!” he ejaculated. “One lives and learns!”

Her hand reached out. He felt her fingers close tensely on his arm.

“Why all these questions about going overland to the club?” she asked. “You heard what those two men said. I—I am afraid. What do you intend to do?”

Unseen in the darkness, Colin’s face was set. That touch on his arm. One thing was certain, she must be kept out of this from now on. This Bouchard might be worth talking to. He had to see Lazarre—secretly if possible. Bouchard might be the best answer. But for the moment Germaine was obviously alarmed.

“Not a thing,” he laughed disarmingly, “except to arrange somehow or other for a little private interview with that friend of a friend of mine—Monsieur Joe Lazarre.”

CHAPTER XI

THE TWO VISITORS

COLIN sat up in bed with a start, conscious at the same time both of voices and that he had overslept himself. He had flung himself down on the bed after supper solely with the idea of relaxing for a little while before strolling over to spend an hour or two with Germaine, and then, later—when it grew dark, for it had seemed wiser, if anything came of it, not to be seen going there—to pay a surreptitious visit to this Anatole Bouchard of whom she had spoken. And he had fallen asleep. It was dark now. The voices came from the next room through Madame Frénier's flimsy partition. Two men—speaking in French.

He knew who they were. They had arrived on the *Belle Fleur* late that afternoon. He had seen them on the dock when, with Germaine, he had said good-by to Dr. Tremblay and Madame de Courval. Later Madame Frénier had introduced them to him at the hotel. Larocque and Bolduc, their names were. They had come over from Gaspé, they said, to catch the *Bonaventure*, which was due tomorrow on her way back from Newfoundland, and were going up the coast to visit some friends at Seven Islands. A brawny-looking pair, and not overparticular as to their appearance—but on the north shore clothes were no criterion of the man himself. They were talking in low tones, but even low tones in the Hotel du Canada were little less than a broadcast throughout the entire establishment—a fact of which Messrs. Larocque and Bolduc appeared to be blissfully ignorant. He was not interested in what they said. Eavesdropping for eavesdropping's sake held no appeal. He reached into his pocket for a cigarette and a box of matches—and with the match unstruck sat suddenly tense. He was listening now, listening intently.

“*Sacré nom!*” exclaimed a gruff voice. “I tell you, I do not like it. It was to be tonight if he discovered anything at that *maudit* club, but all afternoon there has been no sign of him. He should have been here. He knew the date when the *Belle Fleur* would come in. What do you think, eh?”

Colin's lips firmed. Oh, yes, he was very much interested now! That was Larocque's voice. He had noted that Larocque had a particularly gruff voice.

The club! It would appear that the interests of these two were not centered in a visit to friends at Seven Islands, plausible as had been the reason given for their presence at Cap à l'Orage! And equally plausible, undoubtedly, if they were then still here, would be the reason given for not sailing on the *Bonaventure* tomorrow!

Another voice answered—Bolduc's obviously.

"How do I know what to think?" returned Bolduc irritably. "It is one of two things. He has become afraid and has run away with the money Dollaire paid him in advance—in which case Dollaire will slit his throat for him if he ever finds him again; or else he has been caught down there at the club."

Colin's bed was against the partition that separated the two rooms—and so, too, now was Colin's ear. It was fairly plain now that the man these two were talking about was the spy at whom Lazarre had taken a pot shot in the before-daylight hours of yesterday. Colin smiled whimsically to himself. He might have stepped into the other room and volunteered perhaps a little constructive information! It would seem that the man-hunt, after all, had been successful. But what was it all about? It was clear that these men were not of the police with suspicions aroused who were trying to round up the club. The police did not slit the throats of their stool pigeons—or, at least, they weren't supposed to!

"It is that of which I am afraid—that he has been caught," Larocque responded with an oath. "They will make him talk. A man talks—eh—when they begin to gouge his eyes out?"

"Bah!" exclaimed Bolduc. "What can he talk about? He knows nothing—except that he has been well paid to find out what he can."

"*Nom de Dieu!*" swore Larocque. "But that is enough, isn't it? They will be on their guard."

"Bah!" Bolduc spat out again. "And suppose they are? They will not know what to expect, and we will be too many for them, anyway. It is only if it will pay us, eh? That is what we are trying to find out. Well, we will go and find out for ourselves if we have to! That was a bad night for them two weeks ago when Dollaire put in at the club to sell some of the whisky we had on board. I laugh every time I think of that. Two of the crowd there were swell crooks that were pointed out to Dollaire in a night club the last time he was in New York selling a cargo. So when we got back on board, Dollaire lays his finger along his nose, and says, '*Voilà!* They are not there to fish salmon, those *gaillards!* Then for what? Let us see. They are not there for

nothing. There must be a lot of money in it, whatever it is. And times are poor with us. Even the fish do not bite in this dam' depression. Let us see about this innocent club—and help ourselves.' ”

“Just because you were with Dollaire that night is no reason why you should repeat the same story a hundred times,” complained Larocque sourly. “What are we going to do now? Take one more look to see if maybe he has come back?”

“But, yes! *Bien sûr!*” Colin could almost see the assertive shrug of Bolduc's shoulders. “Dollaire will not have the schooner off the cape for another two hours, and in any case he will wait for us. *Allons!*”

The door of the adjoining room opened and closed. Footsteps thumped down the stairs.

Colin stared into the darkness. He was thinking fast now. It was clear enough that this Dollaire was the head of a bootlegging outfit of which this precious pair were a part. And what was obviously in the wind now was a sort of hi-jacking expedition. A case of dog eat dog, as it were! That was quite all right, and he could have looked on with utter complacency, not to say applause, at the wreckage and looting of this Mask's nest had it not been for Lazarre. It was quite clear too, now, that the spy of last night was in Dollaire's employ. Who the man was did not matter. What mattered was that, since he had failed to keep his appointment with Larocque and Bolduc, he had apparently been caught. But, even so, it would seem Dollaire was so well satisfied that there were juicy pickings to be had that he would carry on tonight in any case. There would be a fight—and it would not be a bloodless one. Dollaire had evidently come prepared. He was in strength. What was it Bolduc had said? “We are too many for them anyway.” A choice crowd aboard that schooner, beyond question! Garnered from God knew where! It would probably result in a shambles. Well, one lot was apparently as bad as the other—the world would not miss the passing of any one of them. No—except that there was Lazarre.

He could not afford to risk anything happening to Lazarre. He must warn Lazarre. That was imperative.

The fog last night had lifted just after midnight, and Germaine and he had returned to Cap à l'Orage without further mishap. He had had the whole day in which to talk to Bouchard, but caution, perhaps an exaggerated caution, had prompted him to wait until darkness had set in. He had not wanted to be seen going to Bouchard's shack. Anything or nothing might be the result of that visit. It had seemed safer if it were not known that he had

had any dealings with Bouchard. Why should he go to see a man of shady reputation and who was drunk half the time? The villagers' tongues would wag. And if afterwards—well, that was the point. But he wished now, in view of what he had just heard, that he had gone during the day. He would have known now what to do—he would have known whether or not he cared to trust Bouchard in the first place; and, secondly, whether or not Bouchard would be willing to act as guide. If the trip overland were feasible, it had, apart from the element of time, one incalculable advantage over a boat—it could be done much more secretly.

He struck the match now and looked at his watch. Half-past eight. Not so bad! He had thought it much later than that. It would take him, say, half an hour all told to reach Bouchard's shack and have a talk with the man. There was time enough. If everything sized up all right, he and Bouchard would be off at once, and he would have to make his peace later with Germaine for not keeping his appointment with her this evening—but she would then understand. If, on the other hand, Bouchard, for whatever reason, did not fit into the picture, that was another matter and another way must be found. There was always the possibility, of course, that Bouchard might not even be at home—— But one thing at a time.

He swung himself off the bed, paused to slip an extra box of cartridges into his pocket, went down the stairs, and out into the street.

It was inky black. Cap à l'Orage boasted no street lamps, and there was as yet no moon. But the lighted windows of the scattered houses marked the way. At the end of the street, remembering his walk with Germaine, he turned into what was no more than a wagon track that led through a stretch of sparse timberland. Here the going was not so good. The track was full of ruts and full of holes, which in turn were filled with water. He could see practically nothing at all. The land here was marshy, and, besides, it had rained heavily during the past few days, so that once, verging from the track, he went in over his boot tops—and swore heartily.

There was nearly half a mile of it; but finally, as he rounded a sharp turn in the wagon track, he saw a light glimmering through an open window no more than a few yards away. There was no doubt about it being Bouchard's shack, because no one else lived out this way; at least it was the only dwelling, or pretense to a dwelling, that he had seen on his walk with Germaine that day; and there was no doubt but that Bouchard was at home—his fears on that score were set at rest.

And then abruptly he halted. It was a warm, muggy night—which accounted for the open window. Bouchard was at home undoubtedly, but Bouchard was not alone. Voices, speaking in French, floated out to him on the night air. He could not hear what was said from where he stood, but his muscles tensed suddenly, seemingly of their own accord. There was something familiar about two of those voices.

CHAPTER XII

THE SPY

COLIN moved forward again, but this time cautiously. And again he halted. He was within earshot now. The window sill was no more than waist high, and, hidden in the darkness himself, he could see plainly into the interior of the shack. Larocque and Bolduc! So Bouchard was the spy! And Bouchard, it would now appear, had most certainly not been caught down there at the club. Bouchard, though he, Colin, had never seen the fellow before, was obviously the third man seated there at the rough board table—a big man, unshaven and unkempt. And Bouchard at the moment was tilting a bottle to his lips.

The stuff was evidently fiery. Bouchard choked as he set the bottle down and wiped a drooling chin with his shirt sleeve.

“Thousands, I tell you!” he asserted, and thumped the bottle on the table by way of emphasis. “Me, I am telling you, I saw it. It is underneath what they call their power house where the falls come over—you see—eh? It is clever. You would hunt till the death of God and not find it. It is not solid ground beneath the floor of the power house. You would think so—yes. But you would be wrong. There must have been a deep pool there once between the rocks where perhaps it was part of the old bed of the river that is now dry. But from the outside you see nothing like that. You see the power house built on the rocks at the edge of the river, that is all you see.”

“Hah!” observed Bolduc sapiently. “There is a trapdoor, then. That is easy.”

“No,” said Bouchard, and tilted the bottle again. “It is not so easy as all that. You would not find that either. They are not children, those fellows there—except in the woods.” He laughed suddenly, uproariously, as he once more wiped his lips. “There is a story about the children in the woods—eh?”

“Shut up!” exclaimed Larocque sharply. “Don’t make so much noise, and don’t drink so much! To hell with the children! How do you get down under the power house?”

Bouchard scrubbed at his unshaven jowl with dirty fingers.

“It is that of which I am going to tell you,” he answered with an unruffled grin; “but, like the English say, don’t pull the shirt off too quick, eh? When you hear about the children you will laugh too. How do you get down underneath, eh? Well, the floor is all cement. And it is laid like the sidewalks and the roads so that the frost does not crack them all apart—with grooves that make big squares—you understand? But this is not for the frost. No! It is to fool the eye. It does not look like there was a part that was separate from the rest. But I am telling you that is the way it is. I do not know how it comes up and down.”

“We’ll take care of that!” declared Larocque contemptuously. “We can blast the whole damned thing open now that we know. Go on, Bouchard, with the rest of it. How did you find this out?”

Colin stirred—noiselessly—easing his muscles. He shared Larocque’s impatience. He had heard a great deal—but also very little. What were those thousands that Bouchard talked about—what was the secret of this power house? He was watching Bouchard closely now.

Bouchard’s little ratlike eyes were on the bottle—longingly. But it had been withdrawn from beyond his reach, and he now perforce shrugged his shoulders philosophically.

“It was yesterday morning, before it was light,” he explained. “I was watching. I saw someone go from the club to the power house. It is only a little way—maybe thirty, forty yards. I followed. The power-house door was left open. After a little while I looked in. There was a light there, and the machine—what you call it?—the dynamo was running, but I could not see anyone inside. And then all at once a part of the floor lifted and—*sacré* damn!—a man’s head was coming up. I don’t know how. It was like he was riding on an elevator. I did not have time to see any more than I have told you a few minutes ago—but that is enough, eh? The man saw me. He pulled out a revolver from his pocket. He fired at me—and I ran. *Nom de Dieu*—yes! And pretty soon they were all in the woods after me, but they were like puppy dogs chasing their own tails. I knew very well what they were like in the woods, I who have watched them so long. I did not go the way they thought I would go”—Bouchard burst into laughter again—“I went back to the power house. I wanted to see more. But there were two men left there to keep guard. It was no use staying there, so I said to myself, ‘Anatole, you will go home and get a little sleep, and then by and by, when they are not so excited, you will come back again!’ It was getting light then, and all around

me I could hear them as I went along, and, yes, I saw more than one of them, too. But have I not told you that in the woods they were like children? It was funny the noise they made. They were much more sure to get lost themselves than to find me.”

Bouchard paused, wet his lips with his tongue, and looked longingly again at the bottle.

Larocque, relenting, pushed it toward him.

“The last one, you understand?” he cautioned gruffly. “There will be work to do tonight. Go on! What next?”

“*Salut!*” said Bouchard gratefully, as he helped himself to another generous swig. “Well, I got back here, and then that *maudit* fog set in. Even I could not have found my way to the club in that fog. It was not gone until midnight. Then I went back to the club, and stayed there and watched all day. I knew that until tonight you would do nothing, and besides it was a sure thing the *Belle Fleur* would be late because of the fog. I wanted to find out some more if I could before tonight—yes? So you see now, eh, why I was not here this afternoon?”

“That’s all right, now that we understand,” Bolduc conceded heartily. “Well, did you find out anything more?”

“No,” replied Bouchard with a throaty chuckle, “except that some of them were lost for sure nearly all night, and that they do not search any more now. But what I found out before then I have not told you yet. I have stolen close to the club at night, and I have heard them talk. You bet! Listen! The big boss is a man they call the Mask.”

“We will see who is the boss when we meet him!” observed Larocque grimly.

Bouchard shook his head.

“You will not meet him,” he stated with a short laugh. “He is never there. He is always in New York. I have heard them talk a lot about him and—I do not understand—but they do not seem to know who he is themselves. That’s funny, eh?—but it is true. And I have heard them talk a lot about what they call W. P., that is also in New York, but I do not understand about that either.”

“New York is a long way off,” Larocque pointed out derisively. “What do we care what it means? How many men have they got at the club?”

“Ten,” said Bouchard laconically.

“*Bon Dieu!*” ejaculated Larocque facetiously. “Then we are too many! We ought to have refused half of those *braves gens* at St. Pierre and Miquelon who wanted to line their pockets! Think of it, Bolduc, when we come to divide! We could swallow the club alive.”

But again Bouchard shook his head.

“You may not be too many,” he said deeply. “It is only in the woods that they are children. They will fight like the devil and they are well armed. And, besides, they are looking for you. Yes! And before they ever saw me. Don’t forget that!”

Colin instinctively leaned forward—as though in concert with Larocque and Bolduc. Larocque and Bolduc had thrust their bodies forward over the table, staring at Bouchard.

“What do you mean?” they demanded in chorus.

Bouchard laid a significant finger along his nose.

“I will tell you,” he said; “but—another little drink, eh?”

“No!” decreed Larocque with a forceful oath. “You have had enough!”

“*Zut!*” complained Bouchard. “What is the use of bringing a bottle? Is it to look at? But I will tell you just the same. Listen! Someone in St. Pierre has talked too much. That is sure. How do I know? I will tell you. One of the big power boats takes the stuff from the club here over to the Gaspé coast every two or three weeks, though sometimes it goes every week, and one of the gang is left there with it. Where he goes from there and what he does with it, I don’t know; but it takes always maybe a week before he comes back, though it is always arranged when a boat is to go over for him again. You see? Well, a few days ago, the boat brought back one of them, a man named Joe Lazarre, and he said that one of their agents had told him that a fellow called Dollaire, who was a big bootlegger and a smart crook, was certain for sure it would pay very well to get some of the apaches from St. Pierre to join his crew and make a little visit to the club. *Sacré nom!* Lazarre did not know what had made Dollaire think like that, because the agent did not know either, and when Lazarre told the story at the club they laughed at him. But since they saw me, I do not think they have laughed at all. They know it is not the police, or they would not be there now; but as it is, I tell you again, it is only in the woods that they are children, and they will fight like hell!”

Larocque grinned evilly.

“But they are still only ten, eh?”

“Yes,” said Bolduc.

“And they do not expect us tonight, eh?”

“No,” said Bouchard.

“*Bien!*” grunted Larocque. “Well, if we are not too many—we are enough! All right, we will go now and wait for Dollaire, and you will come along, too, Bouchard. But first, Bolduc, you and I will see what is in the bottle, and perhaps we may even let Bouchard have——”

Colin waited for no more. He turned, retreated noiselessly from the shack, regained the wagon track, and, once satisfied that he was far enough away so that his footsteps could not be heard, broke into a run. Knowing the hour that this Dollaire was expected, he told himself he had ample time and that there was no particular need for haste, yet he hastened—and presently to his own discomfiture. Halfway back to the village he missed the track again in the pitch blackness as he had done on the way out, but instead of merely going in over a boot top this time, he pitched headlong into the marshy ground, covering himself thoroughly with mud and water. Dripping, he picked himself up. He was in a state!—and humanly enough he swore again.

He went on once more—but more circumspectly this time. His mind reverted to the problem that faced him. There was no Bouchard to guide him overland! And yet Lazarre must be warned. There was only one way, of course, to get to the club now, and that was by boat. Secretly. The whole town mustn’t know about it—know that he was involved. God knew what the aftermath of tonight was going to be! A bloody battle before morning—or a massacre if this Dollaire succeeded in a surprise attack. A schooner full of thugs! A dead Lazarre was disaster. A live Lazarre, backed by Reddy’s letter, should be grateful—more amenable to an alliance. Meanwhile he already had an ally, and a staunch one at that—and that ally had a boat. Germaine! That was where he was going now—he had known that all along from the moment he had left Bouchard’s shack—he was going now to ask Germaine to lend him her boat. But what the devil were those “thousands” that Bouchard talked about, and what was——

His mind worked on, ignoring time and distance, until suddenly he became conscious that he had not only reached the village, but was standing in front of the Tremblay home. There was a lamp burning in the hall, he could see, and also there was a light in the living room. It was early yet, of course, and it was quite possible that Germaine was still expecting him. He

smiled wryly at the thought of the appearance he presented, as he mounted the steps to the veranda and plied the old-fashioned knocker on the front door.

CHAPTER XIII

FIFTY-FIFTY

GERMAINE herself opened the door, and as the light flooded out upon him she stared for an instant in amazement, then burst into a merry peal of laughter—which she as suddenly checked.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” she exclaimed contritely. “But you do look a sight! What on earth has happened to you?”

He looked past her into the hall. No one was in sight. The doctor and Madame de Courval, he knew, of course, were not there, but there might easily be someone else.

“Is anyone about?” he asked.

“No,” she assured him; “not a soul—except Antoinette and Jacques, but they’re at the back of the house. So come in.”

“Not like this!” he said whimsically. “I couldn’t sit down without ruining the furniture, you know! But that isn’t why I asked you if anyone was about. I wanted to make sure that I could talk to you here for a few minutes without being overheard. I have just come from Bouchard’s shack.”

“Bouchard!” Her hand reached out impulsively—and soiled itself hopelessly on his muddy sleeve.

“Too bad!” he said remorsefully. “Now see what I have done!”

“What does it matter?” Her voice was all anxiety now. “Something has happened. What is it? Tell me!”

“Beastly clumsy of me,” he explained. “I missed my footing on the way back, and took a nose dive into the marsh. Silly, of course—but there you are! Bouchard is napoo. He’s in the other camp. I came to ask you to lend me your boat.”

“Tell me!” she insisted.

“Of course!” said Colin. “I was going to anyway. You remember those two fellows who landed from the *Belle Fleur* this afternoon?”

“Yes.”

“Well, their room is next to mine at the hotel and I heard them talking in there this evening. They belong to a bootlegging outfit, or worse, from St. Pierre and Miquelon that is captained by a man named Dollaire. This Dollaire—I won’t go into details now—has found out that the club is no more than a camouflage for a bunch of crooks engaged in some profitable racket, and he sees no reason why he shouldn’t muscle in and help himself to the profits! And tonight is the night. When I went out there just now to see Bouchard, I found those two men with him. Bouchard is the man they shot at and were looking for at the club yesterday. In short, Bouchard is Dollaire’s spy.”

“Oh!” she said tensely. “Yes—go on!”

“I overheard enough of their plans to know that in another hour or so Dollaire will be off the cape with a schooner loaded to the guards with a crowd of cut-throats chosen from the riffraff of St. Pierre and Miquelon. He will pick up these men here, get Bouchard’s report—and then the club! The vulture idea, of course. It’s not my fight, and I’m not particularly interested as to which side gets the better of it—but there is Lazarre. I can’t afford to let anything happen to him, as you know. He must be warned, and”—Colin grinned philosophically—“since Bouchard has a prior engagement which prohibits me from going overland under his expert guidance, there is only one other way left—by boat. I don’t want to steal a boat, much less hire one. I don’t want all Cap à l’Orage to know later on that I have been in this. So may I have yours?”

“You may,” she said promptly. “And what is more, I’ll run it for you. I suppose we should start at once, shouldn’t we?”

For a moment Colin stared at her blankly, then his jaws clamped. Germaine at the club—*tonight!* She did not realize, of course, what it might mean.

“That’s very good of you, but *you* don’t start at all,” he said firmly. “I am quite capable of running the boat alone, and this is a one-man job.”

“Please!”

“No!”

“I don’t see why,” she pouted. “I was dragged in by the hair of the head, you know, yesterday, the way you said it always happened in your stories, so why can’t I be again? I’d love to be a heroine.”

He could not resist it. She had laid herself open to attack.

“But that would mean,” he challenged, “that you would have to fall in love with the hero—and the hero with you.”

“Not at all!” she retorted serenely. “Don’t you think it would be something at last really original in a story—if they didn’t?”

“Well, that’s an idea, of course,” he admitted with a smile; then seriously: “But this isn’t a story I’m writing, and so far as you are concerned you are henceforth definitely out of it. Quite apart from what might happen down there tonight, if you were ever suspected, they wouldn’t have any more mercy on you than they had on”—he checked himself—“would have on anybody else. This is my job, and tonight particularly, as I told you, it is a one-man job. I am not going to drag anybody else into this—and least of all you. Bouchard would have been a different matter. I could not have gone overland without him, and, besides, he would have been along in the capacity of a mercenary, as it were, and his blood would have been on his own head. As it is now, all I’ve got to do is sit and smoke and steer a boat, and—well, you understand—I’ve just got to see this through on a lone hand.”

She was silent for an instant, and then she shrugged her shoulders resignedly.

“It would seem, then, that I am not to go,” she observed naïvely.

“It would,” he returned grimly.

“And I suppose,” she returned—and hesitated slightly, “that nothing could persuade *you* not to go?”

“No,” he answered quietly. “You know why.”

“Yes,” she said slowly. “I know why. Well, then, go and get on some dry clothes. The boat, of course, is moored out beyond low-water mark. I will send Jacques for it. Jacques can be trusted to say nothing. He will see that it has plenty of gas, and have it ready for you at the end of the wharf in half an hour. Will that be time enough?”

“Like the waving of a magic wand!” Colin declared cheerily. “Thanks a lot!”

She was in shadow, her back to the light that streamed out from the hall. He could not see her face.

“Good luck!” she said—and put out her hand.

And then, before he could answer, she had turned abruptly and was gone.

He was facing only a closed door, and for a moment he stood there hesitant. Why had she done that? He wished he could have seen her face and have read what was in her eyes. Was it that she was afraid of what was before him tonight because—she cared? He felt the blood pound quicker in his veins. The wish father to the thought! He would have given his all to know. Or was she, a girl of the out-of-doors, where the world on this rugged coast was a world all its own, incensed with him, and perhaps a little humiliated, because she might fear she had been misunderstood when he had refused the help that she had so loyally offered?

Every impulse urged him to open the door, follow her, force her physically, because he was the stronger, to lift up her face to his so that he might read the answer there—but he couldn't. That cursed Mask! His jaws locked. The account had grown since he had left New York!

He turned, went down the veranda steps, and made his way over to the hotel at the other end of the village. Here, gaining his room, he lighted the lamp, and proceeded to change his clothes. He did not hurry. It would not take him more than ten minutes to walk from here to the wharf, and he would be there well within the half-hour that Germaine had allowed for Jacques to go from the house, row out to the launch, and bring it in.

There was no sound from the next room. If Larocque and Bolduc had returned to the village, they had not returned to the hotel—and probably never would. He smiled dryly. Madame Frénier's chances of being out of pocket to the extent of their board bill were a hundred percent! What a filthy mess he was in! Ooze, mud, slime—but it hadn't got through into the pockets. Lazarre's letter was untouched, and the revolver, together with the extra supply of cartridges, was quite dry.

He stripped, rubbed down, got into clean clothes, tucked the letter, revolver, and cartridges into his pockets, added an adequate supply of cigarettes and matches—there would be a lonely few hours of it there and back—and looked at his watch. Ten minutes of ten. A lot had happened in less than the last hour and a half! He was surprised to find that it was no later. Well, so much the better! All the longer start on Dollaire! He glanced around the room. Those clothes! But no one would come into the room tonight. And even if the clothes were seen, what then? The only suspicion that might arise was that their unspeakable condition was due to an over-free indulgence on their owner's part in—*whiskey blanc*. A tribute and a

compliment to the national drink of French Canada! He laughed, blew out the lamp, and left the hotel.

Within his allotted ten minutes he reached the wharf. It was deserted, empty save for a figure that emerged suddenly out of the darkness as it clambered up over the edge of a stringpiece.

“Is that you, m’sieu?” a voice that he recognized as that of Jacques asked in French.

“Yes,” he answered. “Everything all ready, Jacques?”

“But, yes, m’sieu. The boat is here. There is plenty of gas. And in the locker at the stern m’sieu will find some hot coffee and sandwiches.”

Instinctively Colin turned his head shoreward along the wharf in the direction of the village and the twinkling window lights. “Germaine!” he said softly under his breath; and then aloud: “That is most kind of mademoiselle. Will you tell her that I—that I am very grateful to her. And now my thanks to you, *mon brave*, and I’ll be off!”

“Yes, m’sieu”—Jacques was suddenly stumbling with his words—“but _____”

“Yes?” Colin asked.

“It is only that perhaps m’sieu would let me go too—to help run the boat. Mademoiselle said that m’sieu desires only to be out on the water for a few hours, and I am sure that mademoiselle would permit.”

Colin clapped his hand heartily on the other’s shoulder.

“No, thanks, Jacques,” he said; “there is no need for it at all. And I’ll see that the boat is made all snug for the night when I get back, so don’t wait up for me, either.”

“*Bien*, m’sieu,” said Jacques respectfully. “That is what mademoiselle said too. It is very good of m’sieu.”

Colin lowered himself over the stringpiece and dropped into the boat below.

“All right, Jacques,” he called back. “Cast off!”

“All clear,” Jacques answered. “*Bonne chance*, m’sieu!”

The launch shot out from the wharf, and Colin, settling himself for his solitary run—about two hours, he figured it, judging from the time it had taken Germaine and himself to get as far as the point yesterday—headed for

the lighthouse on the extremity of the cape. And presently he rounded the cape, his eyes straining then out to seaward. It was pitch black. He was showing no lights himself—and it was rather obvious that Dollaire would not be showing any either! He could see nothing—no shadowy outline of a schooner out there. But it was too early yet for Dollaire, anyway, wasn't it? Dollaire would not be off the cape for another two hours, Bolduc had said at half-past eight. That meant half-past ten. It was only ten now. That gave him half an hour's start to begin with before Dollaire even sent ashore for his men and finally decided on his plans—and Dollaire's schooner, though it would of course have an auxiliary engine, was not at all likely to be any more speedy than this launch.

With the lighthouse behind him now, Colin set his course; but, erring a little on the side of safety, headed slightly in toward the coastline. He grinned capriciously. He had been reprimanded for his steering on that other trip. He did not want to go “across the Gulf to Gaspé!” There was the promise of a moon later—just when, he did not know. But unless it came out before then as an aid to visibility, it would be an hour at least before he could hope to pick up the point.

And then his face hardened. He must get into touch with Lazarre—warn Lazarre. There was no question about that, and he was taking the only way of doing so by going to the club; but the details—— If he had thought of details at all, he had brushed them aside until the time came. Well, that time was now. He did not know Lazarre. True, he had a description of Lazarre—but it was a description that would fit a thousand other dark-complexioned men. Could he go up to the club and ask bluntly for Lazarre? How would Lazarre explain that to the others? Then, otherwise, how pick Lazarre out from his fellows—unless Lazarre went around half naked, exhibiting that bullet scar on his right shoulder? But even granting that he was able to identify the man, how get to Lazarre without any of the others knowing it? This for Lazarre's own sake. Reddy had said virtually, if not in so many words, that the letter would be equivalent to the man's death warrant if it were known that Lazarre ever got it. But suppose he couldn't reach Lazarre without any of the others knowing about it? Let the letter stand aside for the moment. Dollaire's raid involved everyone at the club—including Lazarre. The warning would have to be given just the same. He couldn't let Lazarre be caught in a trap—with the others. How, then, to account for his, Colin's, presence at the club, and how he came to know about Dollaire? He was playing with fire, of course. Every man at the club was a henchman of the Mask. And suppose he did get the ear of Lazarre alone? What would Lazarre

do? He would hardly desert his companions. Then how would Lazzarre explain the warning he had received?

And then, another thing—a dozen other things. He, Colin, did not know what racket they were exploiting there at the club under the Mask's guiding genius, but suppose, even in the face of a warning that made it amply clear to them that they would be hopelessly outnumbered, they decided that the stakes were too big to make discretion the better part of valor, and decided to fight it out? What then? Lazzarre possessed no "charmed life" any more than the rest of them. And Lazzarre dead——

A twister! He laughed suddenly out into the night. He had always claimed that suspense was the essence of a story, and that the apparently unsolvable problems piled one upon another were the essence of suspense. A story? A ghastly analogy! If only this were no more than—a story!

Time passed. The moon came out. There was the point. He swung around it and headed into the bay. Lights, window lights, showed dimly in the distance. The club! On the lap of the gods—there was no other answer.

Hot coffee and sandwiches! Germaine! He had a far greater stake on the board now than the salvaging of his own skin. The vista of years stretched out before him, glad years, all that he yearned for—if she cared.

The roar of waters came to him faintly. He pulled himself together. This was no time for day-, or, rather, moon-dreaming. What was it she had said about the Cascade River on their way down yesterday? Two channels emptying into the bay. Deep water if one hugged the shore of the point—deep enough so that if one went up the river a bit one could moor alongside the shore without fear of the boat being stranded by the tide.

The lights on the shore grew brighter. He was near enough to the club now. It would only be a short walk if he landed here; whereas, from the roar of the falls that portended fast water, the river might prove tricky if he went up any farther. He stopped the engine and headed in for the shore, reversed—and the nose of the launch grounded gently.

He stood up, moved toward the bow—and halted in blank stupefaction. Someone was crawling out from under the bit of decking there. A shaft of moonlight fell upon the figure. Germaine!

And stupefaction passed. He was beside himself with fear and anxiety. He sprang toward her and grasped her by the shoulders—violently.

"You!" he blurted out almost insanely. "Don't you know why I said you were not to come? Oh, my God, don't you understand? Don't you know that

I love you—that there is danger here?”

And then in the moonlight he could see that her eyes were wet, though her lips were smiling.

“It’s fifty-fifty, isn’t it?” she answered. “I love you too.”

CHAPTER XIV

ON THE LAP OF THE GODS

HE was holding her close to him as they stood there together in the boat, her face hidden now on his shoulder, his fingers playing with strands of her hair, soft gold in the moonlight, brushing them back from her forehead.

“Thank God for you and your love, Germaine,” he said brokenly; “but you should never have done this. Why did you come? What did you expect to do—here?”

“I don’t know,” she answered. “I hoped with all my soul that there would be no need to do anything. But I—I was afraid.”

“Afraid? And yet you came?”

“I came because I was afraid,” she whispered. “You were alone—you insisted on coming alone. The boat—how would you get back if anything happened? I knew there would be trouble here and—and—oh, anything might happen!”

“And all this time you have been cramped up in that stuffy little hole!”

“You would have turned back if you had known,” she said. “I knew that. But you could not afford to turn back. Oh—Colin!”

It was the first time she had ever called him Colin. And now the name had come shyly as her arms had tightened around his neck.

“Yes”—he laid his cheek against hers—“but still——”

“After what you told me last night,” she interrupted quickly, “I realized what all this meant; what it means now to—to both of us to get in touch with this man Lazarre, and I know that tonight he must be told about Dollaire. I know all that. I understand. Well, you are here now, and, even on my account, it is too late to turn back.”

“How did you manage this?” he demanded. “In collusion with Jacques, I suppose?”

“No,” she said; “in collusion with hot coffee and sandwiches. Both Jacques and Antoinette think that at the present moment I am tucked safely away in bed.”

“Hot coffee and sandwiches,” he repeated in a puzzled way. “Yes; I know. Jacques said you had sent them. That was like you, Germaine, dear; but I don’t see——”

“Oh, Mr. Detective Writer”—there was suddenly a trickle of laughter in her voice—“where is your imagination? You, who have to create situations to accomplish certain ends—situations in which the reader must find no flaw! Well, see! When I went into the house, I went at once to the kitchen to Antoinette and Jacques. And I said: ‘Mr. Howard wants to use the launch this evening for a few hours’ run, and I have given him permission to do so. He wanted me to go with him, but’—of course, I had to tell a little fib—I am too tired, as I did not get home until very late last night on account of the fog, and I am going straight to bed. I think it would be very nice, Antoinette, if you would make some hot coffee and sandwiches for Mr. Howard while Jacques is away getting the launch. Jacques can come back and get them when he has brought in the launch to the wharf.’ The rest, of course, was very simple. I didn’t go to bed; I went down to the wharf and hid myself behind one of the sheds. When Jacques came in with the launch and went back to the house for the coffee and sandwiches, I—well, I just got down into the launch and tucked myself away. I, too, as you know, had previously told Jacques that he was not to wait up for you—that you’d take care of the boat yourself when you got back.”

He lifted her face to his.

“There is only one Germaine,” he laughed softly. “I’d like to use that situation some time. You wouldn’t sue me for plagiarism, would you—if I waited until after we were married?”

“Silly!” she smiled back at him; and then, seriously: “But now, Colin—what are you going to do now? You are going up there to the club, of course, but what are your plans? You don’t even know which one of all those who are there is Lazarre.”

“I don’t know what I am going to do,” he answered frankly. “I’ve been digging at it ever since I left Cap à l’Orange. I can’t ask for Lazarre without the rest of them afterwards asking Lazarre how I came to know anything about him. I can barge up to the club and tell them one and all that in my room at the hotel tonight I overheard enough to know that a raid was to be made upon them, pretending, of course, I have no suspicion that they are

other than a bona-fide lot of wealthy men indulging in the sport of salmon-fishing—in which case, they being naturally suspicious of everybody, the first question I would probably be asked to test me would be why I did not bring help with me from Cap à l'Orage? You see? And if I admit I know them to be crooks, I am likely to find myself in an exceedingly awkward position. Who is Mr. Donald Howard, one time of Boston and now of Cap à l'Orage? I could explain all this to Lazarre, and leave it to him to make what explanations he saw fit to the others, if I had the luck to run into him first off, but—well, there's the 'but.' It's not so easy. The vital thing is that, for Lazarre's sake, a warning has got to be given. What they'll do then, I don't know. They may cut and run for it; on the other hand, and which is much more likely, knowing them for what they are, they'll probably fight it out—in which case Lazarre is as likely to get his as anyone else. But before that I've got to get Lazarre sorted out from the rest of them some way or other, and some way or other manage to get a word with him in private. A bit complicated, isn't it? I'll have to be guided by circumstance, that's all."

"Much too complicated," she said a little anxiously. "But why did you land so far away from the club? You could see the lights, and I am sure you could have gone almost right up to the club itself, for they must keep their own power boats around there somewhere. Shall we do so now? You won't have so far to walk."

"And run the chance of you being seen! Not much!" he ejaculated decisively. "I didn't go any farther because all I knew about the river was the roar I could hear and I was afraid of running into fast water. As it is, I thank my stars now that I landed where I did. Just the nicest kind of black shadows here against the bank! I couldn't have chosen a better hiding place for the boat—and you."

"Very well," she agreed; "perhaps that's so. I am to be boat tender, then?"

"You are," he stated promptly. "And you're not to leave it. I'm the skipper tonight, and those are orders. I won't be away a moment longer than I can help. I shan't stay for the show, of course"—he laughed lightly—"now that you're here. Whatever else I do, I've got to get you out of this before the fireworks start."

"Yes," she said quietly, "that's another reason why I came."

It was an instant before he grasped her meaning, and, staring at her, understood why her eyes were wet again.

“Oh—I see!” There was a sudden catch in his voice—and then to allay her anxiety he forced a disarming smile. “What a deep, dark little plotter!” he chided gayly as he kissed her. “But I’ll be back in no time, dear—you’ll see!” he promised—and leaped ashore.

“Colin—be careful!” she called after him.

“Right!” he called back reassuringly. “I’ve got to be *too* careful. That’s the whole trouble. Don’t worry.”

The bank was steep, and at the top thinly wooded. He clambered up and began to make his way along toward the club. At times, through the trees, he could catch the glimmer of the club’s lights, and at other moments they were lost to him; but the river was guide enough, for he had only to keep on along the bank until he came to the club itself.

His mind was probing again. What plan was he to pursue? To go straight to the club, meet them as though he had no thought that they were anything other than a group of gentlemen and sportsmen, and tell them that he had overheard in his room a plot to raid the club tonight because of its loneliness and isolation and the belief that there would be money and valuables to be obtained, seemed the most logical and sensible course to adopt. He would meet them all. He would naturally be introduced to Lazarre. And suppose, to test him, they *did* ask him why, under such circumstances, he had come alone and had not brought help with him from Cap à l’Orage? Well, he was a stranger there himself, wasn’t he? He had not known whom to go to for help, and, besides, there had not been too much time to spare. So he had come himself as quickly as he could. They might still have lingering doubts about him, but they could hardly quibble over the genuineness of his efforts to put them on their guard. Quite! Undoubtedly that was the best thing to do. It guaranteed Lazarre against any possible suspicion of having any connection with him, Colin; and it promised, almost certainly, an opportunity of getting Lazarre aside for a few words in private. Hours of mental perturbation—and in the last few minutes, when finally face to face with the issue, he had almost instantly made up his mind what to do. He shrugged his shoulders. Wasn’t it always like that—in life?

He was close to the club now. The distance had not been great—some six or seven hundred yards, he judged. And now he halted suddenly.

He had come out on a broad path that led up from the water’s edge, and, looking down the path, he could see, outlined in the moonlight, a large boat moored alongside a wharf. One of the club’s big power boats, of course. Looking the other way, he could see that, a few yards from where he stood,

the path swerved sharply in the direction of the club. His mind queried—inconsequently. Why hadn't they built the path in a straight line from the wharf to the club? He answered himself—petulantly. Probably because it was impracticable; probably to circle some rock formation, or fissure—or something. What did it matter? It didn't matter!

He went on again, and, as he made the turn in the path, thanks both to the moonlight and the club's window lights which now shone out unobscured, he was at once able to chart his surroundings quite easily. Perhaps ten yards ahead of him the path debouched on a clearing, and across the clearing a short distance away, the clubhouse, facing him, was now in full view. And through the trees, thinning as he neared the end of the path, he could see to his left a single window light and the shadowy outline of another building. He nodded to himself. That would be the power house, of course, that Bouchard had talked about. The *raison d'être* for the club's existence! He nodded again—a little grimly this time. He would like very much to find out what that power house concealed. Well, perhaps he would, even though he wasn't staying for the show! If Lazarre——

He was just at the edge of the clearing now, and for the second time since he had left the launch he came to a sudden halt. It was imagination, no doubt, for the roar of the falls, louder now than ever, would drown out all ordinary sounds; but it seemed as though he had heard something or someone stirring close at hand. He turned, stared back along the path, and suddenly leaped to one side—too late. Two forms which seemed to have risen from the earth at his feet hurled themselves upon him, flinging him to the ground before he had a chance to defend himself. But as he fell, in the space of time it would take a watch to tick, a thought flashed through his mind. These were “members” of the club, of course, on guard out here against another incursion by the spy of the other night—and he was being mistaken for the spy.

“Look here!” he protested. “I——”

A French oath answered him. Something crashed upon his head—then darkness.

CHAPTER XV

THE RAID

COLIN came to his senses conscious that something was being thrust roughly into his mouth, conscious of a voice speaking in French—but only vaguely conscious of the meaning of the words:

“Bah! And so you have no cord, eh? Well, you see! His handkerchief for his mouth, and his necktie to hold it there. Tight! Tie it around the back of his head—tight. And now his arms—behind him and around that little tree. Lash his wrists together. Here’s his belt.”

Colin felt his arms wrenched violently around behind his back, and instinctively, though his strength seemed to have been drained out of him, he made an effort to resist—only to be pushed savagely back on the ground again.

“Hah!” ejaculated the same voice. “His head is harder than I thought. His little nap did not last long. He will not make any noise now to spoil Dollaire’s plans—and he is well anchored so that he cannot run away to his friends over there. And, besides, we will be here until it would be too late for him to do anything anyway.”

Colin’s brain was clearing. He could scarcely have been out for more than the count of ten, he thought, for they had not finished trussing him up by the time he was beginning to regain his senses. He felt his strength returning—but he lay without movement now, listening. Something had been said about Dollaire, hadn’t it? Two men, he could see, were crouched on the ground close beside him. They had spoken in French, and it would seem from what they said that they were Dollaire’s men! But here now? Impossible! His brain, still sick, was playing tricks upon him.

“A knife would have been better,” came the snarling response. “That wouldn’t have made any noise either.”

“Well, use it now, if you want to,” returned the first speaker shortly. “For me, I don’t care. But you will have plenty of killing to do, *mon cher* pig-sticker, before the night is over, and since this one here can’t fight against us

now, for me he doesn't count any more. And, besides, you'll have one less killing to do penance for, if you let him alone."

"*Merci!*" growled the other sarcastically. "But I don't care me, either." He thrust himself forward toward Colin. "You hear?" he flung out. "You are in luck."

Gagged, Colin could not have answered if he would. He had closed his eyes, striving desperately to make sense of what had been said about Dollaire, and he gave no indication of being aware that he had been addressed.

"Try your English on him, Baptiste," laughed the other man. "The apaches from New York don't speak French."

Baptiste ignored the sally.

"*Pour l'amour de Dieu!*" he grumbled impatiently. "We are all here long ago! What is Dollaire waiting for? He's had time enough, hasn't he?"

"For me, I would say no—because he is still waiting," came the dry reply. "Listen, *mon vieux!* You and me, we are the best shots in St. Pierre, eh?—and over there is the door of the club. Very well, we do not miss at twenty yards, Baptiste, it is true; but Dollaire is no fool, and he may not still be sure that we will not need some of the others here with us—and maybe he is making changes in some of the other places too. It is for that he waits, eh? He is like the good general who is sure first where he places all his men before he begins the fight. He has the cunning of a fox, that boy! What does he do tonight when he finds out from that fellow Bouchard that there is a short way over the hills and through the woods? He comes that way—it is safer, there is then no risk of the schooner being seen by any of them out there in the moonlight. And, besides, we save all that time. '*Cré nom,* you can trust Dollaire. You will see! Me, Christophe, I am telling you."

Baptiste answered with a grunt—and the two lapsed into silence.

Colin's head throbbed as though a thousand devils were pounding hammer blows upon it, and as they pounded they seemed to mock and jeer at him in unholy mirth. Despite the pain, his mind was lucid now, functioning normally again. All this for nothing! His brain, numbed though it had been, had played no tricks upon him. He was too late. Dollaire and his men were already here. The start that he had counted on, the time enough and to spare, had simply not existed. To go overland, if one could, Germaine had said, would cut the time in half. He had thought of going that way himself if Bouchard had inspired him with confidence, but it had never

entered his head that Dollaire would land his men at Cap à l'Orage; that, if bent on looting the club, he would do anything else but go there with his schooner to embark the loot. But Dollaire had not come here with his schooner. It had taken approximately two hours to make the trip in the launch. Dollaire, starting from somewhere on the cape half an hour later, had come overland—and it was Dollaire who had reached here first with time to spare.

Colin's mind was working in little flashes now as though it were tossing before him parts of a picture puzzle to be pieced together. Larocque and Bolduc, taking Bouchard with them, he remembered, were to have left the shack to keep their rendezvous with Dollaire shortly after he had started back for the village, so Bouchard, of course, had been on hand to act as guide. . . . Bouchard would not have led them *through* the village. . . . No one at Cap à l'Orage would know anything about it. . . . The loot at the club could be neither bulky nor heavy if Dollaire was prepared to bring it back overland and . . .

But all that was secondary now, wasn't it? Dollaire *was* here, and it was only too plain that, before many more minutes had passed, Dollaire would spring some murderous trap that he was now obviously preparing. And he, Colin, could do nothing. He could not in common justice blame himself for the failure of the attempt that he had made. True, he had not even surmised that Dollaire would come overland; but suppose he had, suppose that he had even actually *known* Dollaire's plans? Well, then, what? Nothing! He could not have set back the clock. He could have done nothing even then. But in that case, of course, he would not have come at all, and—a sudden fear was gripping at his heart—Germaine would not be here.

Germaine! A moment of mental torment came and passed—replaced by a reassuring thought that flashed into his mind. The launch was well hidden in the shadows back there along the river; and, unless its presence was suspected and a search made for it, there was little or no likelihood that it would be discovered. And it was not at all likely that any search *would* be made for it. These two men here had naturally enough mistaken him for a “member” of the club, just as he had mistakenly placed them in the same category when they had first attacked him. His status in that respect was fully established in their minds, and his presence here was accepted as a matter of course. They would not look further to account for it. Logically they wouldn't. The only risk on this score was the chance of contact with, and recognition by, Larocque and Bolduc—but these two men here were not Larocque and Bolduc, and from what they had said he gathered that, having

now been rendered innocuous, he would be left where he was, and that they were callously indifferent as to what became of him afterward. For the time being then, at least, this meant safety for Germaine, thank God!

The gag in his mouth, distorting his lips and jaws, brought him brutal discomfort; his wrists felt numb where the belt was lashed around them. He strained a little at the lashing ineffectually; but otherwise, lying there stretched out on his side, he made no movement. His eyes fastened on the two men. They were standing within a foot or two of him, just off the side of the path and just within the fringe of trees at the edge of the clearing. Both were armed with what looked like sawed-off shotguns—the butt of one of which, he had no doubt, had crashed against his skull not so very long ago. They were silent now, saying nothing—waiting.

A chill came over Colin. No gang stuff that he had ever written was as bad as this—or at least on paper it had never seemed so bad. But he had not *lived* it then. Picked shots! The door of the clubhouse over there twenty yards away! The cold-bloodedness of it all brought him to the verge of physical nausea. They were waiting there to kill. And one of them had grumbled at the delay.

His eyes searched past the two men. The power house, which he could still see from where he lay, was, as Bouchard had said, only a few yards away from the club—perhaps forty at the outside. Trees, rising from the slope of the river bank, showed between the two buildings; but just beyond the power house there was an open space where there were no trees, and it seemed as though he could catch in the moonlight a glimpse of white, tumbling water. The falls, of course—and in order to correspond with Bouchard's description of the place the river must make a decided bend there to sweep out and around the club, and the power house itself must be perched on a high ledge of bare rock rising up from the river's edge. There was no sign of any of the rest of Dollaire's men, nothing to indicate where they might be stationed, for, except for that single open space beyond the power house, the entire clearing was bordered by wooded land.

His glance rested on the two men again for an instant, and then, as though in a sort of premonitory fascination, a fascination that revolted him, but over which he seemed to have no control, his eyes fixed and held on the clubhouse in front of him. Details were of no consequence, but he found them registering themselves on his mind in an extraneous sort of way. What difference did it make that the club was built in the style of a bungalow, that it was roomy and large, that it had a veranda on at least the two sides that he could see, and that——

A low whistle came suddenly from somewhere near at hand. It was answered by one of the two men. A form came into view through the trees.

“That you, Paul?” demanded the voice of the man who had called himself Christophe.

“Sure!” replied the newcomer. “It’s me for sure. You are all ready, you two, eh?”

“*Baptême!*” It was Baptiste’s voice this time, surly with complaint. “You ask us if we are ready! It does not take all night, I suppose, to load a gun! You will tell us next that it is because of us nothing has been done. How much longer do we wait?”

The newcomer laughed in a sort of ugly mirth.

“Just long enough for me to tell you what you are to do—when you are through here. He has done well, Dollaire. He has——” The man broke off abruptly, and, stepping suddenly forward, peered down at Colin. “*Peines de l’enfer!*” he exclaimed. “Who the devil is this?”

“One of the gang here that we caught on his way over to the club,” Christophe answered. “We gave him a little tap on the head to keep him quiet, and then stuffed his mouth and tied him like you see.”

“Good!” applauded the man who answered to the name of Paul. “That will be one less to begin with. Now, listen, and I will tell you. That fellow Bouchard is a good man. He knows all these fellows here, and he has been all around to take a good look. He says that the man named Kenniston who runs the club, and another man named Lazarre, are the only ones in the clubhouse over there now, and that the rest are all down below in the power house, so you do not need any more men here. Bouchard is not sure, but he thinks there may be some way to get out of the power house from down below. So Dollaire is putting some of the boys on guard amongst the trees all the way down to the river on both sides of the power house. You see? We don’t get caught then in the back if there is any way like that to get out. You understand, eh?”

“Sure!” approved Christophe tersely. “And then Dollaire and the rest smash in the power-house door, eh? What did I tell you, Baptiste? That Dollaire, there, he is like the fox!”

“Let Paul talk,” grunted Baptiste. “He is not through yet!”

“No,” said Paul. “Listen! When Dollaire and the rest of us creep up to the power house, and just as we rush the door, Dollaire will fire a shot or

two. That will be for you. You know what will happen, eh? When they hear that, the two men in the clubhouse will come running out, and——”

“*Baptême!*” Baptiste swore grittily. “They will not run far!”

“That is the reason you are here,” Paul chuckled evilly. “Very well, when you are sure they will not run far, you, Christophe, will go with the boys that are on guard amongst the trees on the right-hand side; and you, Baptiste, you will go to the left side. That is where we will need good shots if the rat trap has a hole in it. That’s all! In two or three minutes now—as soon as I get back to Dollaire—and then, eh, *sacré nom*, it will be a big night!”

The man was gone.

“I will take the one that comes out first,” announced Baptiste gruffly.

“*Bon!*” agreed Christophe. “That is all right for me.”

Colin, apparently motionless, strained at his lashed wrists, strained until he felt the leather belt cut into his flesh. It was futile—useless. Kenniston and Lazarre were in there. Lazarre was in there. In a minute—two—three—they would step out into a blast of gunfire. Beads of sweat burst out on his forehead. He had seen one man shot down like this—Reddy Turner. It was hideous, revolting. It sickened him—and aroused a maniacal fury within him. And he could raise neither voice nor finger to stop it. He could do nothing but lie here and watch murder done. He could do nothing else.

His eyes roved in a hunted way around the clearing. Queer the shapes and movements that the trees took on in the moonlight! No, not trees! Those weren’t trees—they were the crouched forms of men moving swiftly out from the edge of the trees and heading towards the power house. There seemed to be a great many of them. There was a shot to be fired—Dollaire was to fire a shot. How long would it be before Dollaire gave the signal? Lazarre! The abysmal irony of it! A chill horror gripped at his heart. He had not come here to warn Lazarre—he had come here to see Lazarre die. Over there—as Lazarre stepped out on the veranda. “X marks the spot.” Savagery tore at Colin’s soul. What the hell made him think of that? Like some damned newspaper reproduction of the scene where the butchery took place, and the body——

A shot rang out from the direction of the power house—another—and still another. Colin felt the blood drain from his face as his eyes fixed again on the front door of the clubhouse. He did not want to look, but he could not drag his eyes away now from that door. What, he knew, were seconds became an eternity of time. It was not the roar of the falls he heard now, it

was the pounding of his heart. Subconsciously he was aware that the two men were no longer beside him, that they had moved out into the clearing, lessening even the meager twenty yards at which range they had boasted they could not miss; and subconsciously he was aware that there was movement, noise, turmoil in front of the power house—but his eyes, pulled there and held as by some remorseless magnet, did not leave the clubhouse door.

The door was suddenly flung open. The light from the interior streamed out and made a path across the veranda. Framed in the doorway stood a tall, fair-haired man. Colin's brain became on the instant strangely clear, strangely incisive, as though it were something that was no part of himself, but was as a machine which, though it functioned with precision, was immune from emotion. That was not Lazarre. That was Kenniston. Lazarre was dark. That was Lazarre standing there in his shirt sleeves on the threshold just behind Kenniston. And now Kenniston moved—out across the veranda toward the steps—and the roar of gunfire beat at Colin's eardrums. He saw Kenniston spin halfway around, topple, then pitch head foremost down the steps and lie there motionless, his head on the bottom step, his feet stretched grotesquely upward to the edge of the veranda. He saw Lazarre's hand reach out to the jamb of the door as though snatching at it for support, then wriggle downward, while his body crumpled up on the threshold—and became an inert heap. He saw two forms, that his impersonal brain told him were Christophe and Baptiste, run forward to examine their handiwork, evidently satisfied, separate, and one run one way and one run another across the clearing.

It was the end of the chase. The end of Lazarre. Colin closed his eyes.

CHAPTER XVI

AGAINST TIME

FOR a little time Colin lay there with his eyes closed, fighting for composure—but there was no composure—either mental or physical. What he had seen was not good for any man to see. His mind was in chaos; his brain, no longer impersonal, in turmoil. And physically he was acutely conscious again of the brutal throbbing in his head; and conscious that the gag in his mouth had become a torture.

He looked around him again. The power-house door was open, and he could see figures milling about in the lighted interior, and other figures grouped just outside the door. Dollaire had obviously got inside with some of his men, but there did not appear to be any fighting going on there—he remembered Bouchard's description of the hidden opening in the cement floor—Dollaire's quarry had evidently taken refuge down below.

Something impelled him against his will to let his eyes rest again on the clubhouse door and the veranda; and, as he looked, suddenly he held his breath. Kenniston was still sprawled there, head downward on the steps, still motionless; but, unless he, Colin, was the victim of an hallucination, Lazarre, who was lying half across the threshold, seemed to be making an effort to move.

A full minute passed while Colin's strained gaze held on the figure in the doorway. There was no hallucination about it. Twice he distinctly saw Lazarre attempt to gain his knees only to sink back again. There was no room for doubt. However badly wounded Lazarre might be, at least he was not dead.

A strange, vague hope came to Colin. Even though he was powerless to reach or aid the other, it was something to know that Lazarre was not dead. It was not the end—not yet. Lazarre was not dead.

Mechanically he strained at his wrists again. No good in that. But there was no one to watch him now, and surely there was some way of getting the gag out of his mouth. He had a certain freedom of movement, of course. His arms made a loop around the tree, but his legs were free, and it ought not to

be very difficult to get on his feet, since his looped arms would naturally slide up the trunk of the tree as he rose. There were no branches low enough to prevent that, he could see, and—yes, he had it now!

He struggled to his knees, working his arms upward behind him. And from his knees he gained his feet. Then with the idea of dislodging the necktie that, knotted behind his head, held the gag in place, he pressed the back of his head hard against the tree trunk, and began to friction vigorously on the necktie. It came away even more readily than he had hoped. After a moment, still knotted behind, it slipped down and dangled like a noose around his neck. He spat out the gag. His mouth was thick, his tongue swollen. He made a guttural sound.

Well, it didn't matter. Speech would come back quickly enough. Anyway, the thing was gone now and no longer tortured him.

There was firing now. He could see flashes through the trees on both sides of the power house. He nodded to himself in understanding. There *was* a hole in the rat trap, as Christophe had phrased it, and the rats had emerged—only to run into Dollaire's men who, strategically placed, were waiting for them.

But Dollaire himself did not seem to be making much headway so far as the power house was concerned. He could see figures moving around inside, presumably searching for Bouchard's "elevator," or the way to operate it; and, outside, the figures he had seen before were still grouped near the door.

He looked across again at the clubhouse door. Lazarre had managed to shift his position a little and had drawn himself back just over the threshold. Colin watched in bitter impotence for a few moments as the wounded man made a succession of feeble and unsuccessful efforts to retreat still farther—and then he abruptly turned his attention once again to the power house.

Something of moment was going on there now. Those inside were pouring out of the door, and, joining those without, were all running away to one side of the clearing. Colin drew his brows together in bewilderment. What was it all about? It wasn't that in some way the club "members" had got the upper hand, for there was still desultory firing going on in the woods on both sides of the power house, and, besides, Dollaire's men must outnumber the others by more than two to one.

Colin stared perplexedly while perhaps a minute, perhaps two, dragged by—and then the front of the power house seemed to bulge suddenly outward, and there came the flash and roar of a terrific explosion.

The lights in both the power house and clubhouse went out. There was only the moonlight now. With an exultant yell, the crowd that had gathered at the edge of the clearing was rushing back again to the power house.

Once more Colin nodded to himself. He quite understood now. He remembered Larocque's contemptuous disposal of any difficulty that a trick opening in the cement floor might present. "We can blast the whole damned thing open," Larocque had said. That was what they had done, of course. And they seemed to have been successful. They were swarming in and out of there now like bees at a hive.

Colin circled his bruised lips with his tongue. His tongue wasn't so sore now. What was it they were after in there? He couldn't see nearly so well as before. The blast obviously had wrecked the dynamo, and the interior was black except for what appeared to be the bobbing and wholly inadequate lights, like flitting fire-flies, of a lantern or two. He could still make out Lazarre though, a crumpled shape on the threshold of the club; the moonlight was sufficient for that, and——

A voice bellowed out, full-lunged, in French, from the direction of the power house, and carried distinctly across the clearing to Colin's ears:

"Heh! *Nom de Dieu!* Get some more light here! Some of you take these cans of oil and spill them over the veranda there, and touch them off. It's near enough for all the light we'll want, and far enough so it won't fry us. '*Cré nom*'"—the voice burst into raucous laughter—"they won't need their club after tonight. It will make a good bonfire!"

That was Dollaire undoubtedly. Dollaire the fox! Fox? The man was an incarnate—— Colin strained forward involuntarily, wrenching violently at his wrists, as the full significance of what he had heard burst upon him. Set fire to the veranda! . . . The whole club would burn like tinder. . . . There was Lazarre . . .

He saw figures running toward the clubhouse, then a queer, spreading glow, then a flame. An inarticulate sound came from Colin's lips. He could do nothing. They had started the fire on the side of the veranda that faced the power house—but it was only a matter of time—not long—not many minutes—before the fire would catch the walls and creep around to the front.

He stood there watching. The figures ran back to the power house. The flames began to mount skyward. It grew brighter and brighter across the clearing as the minutes passed. But none of this was true. It wasn't real. He

wasn't a man lashed here to a tree, incapable of movement, powerless it almost seemed even to keep his own reason. And yet he could see Kenniston lying head downward there on the veranda steps—but Kenniston was already dead. And he could see Lazarre making desperate efforts, as the flames licked along the front wall toward him, to wriggle farther back from the threshold, winning his way only by a hopeless inch or two at a time. And he could see Dollaire's men coming out of the power house with arms full of little packages and bundles that contained he did not know what. And because there wasn't any more firing, he knew that the "members" of the club were penned up somewhere down there on the shore, routed and beaten. But it wasn't real—not even the sweat that was pouring down his face—it was nothing more than the vagaries of some horrible and fantastic nightmare that held him in its shackles for the moment, but from which he must inevitably sooner or later awake and free himself.

A nightmare? It was no nightmare! God knew it was real enough. It was only his brain that was reeling with the horror of it. To stand here and watch! In another five minutes—less than that—the flames would reach that open doorway—that dark object lying there still barely beyond the threshold. Why didn't Lazarre move faster? The man was wounded, of course, but he wasn't dead like Kenniston. Why didn't he——

A low, startled cry came suddenly from behind him. He jerked his head around. His mind seemed fogged for an instant. Someone was standing there on the path within a yard of him—a girl—shadowy—— His mind snapped back into action.

"Germaine!" he said hoarsely.

"Colin!" She was beside him now. "What is it? What has happened? I heard a lot of shots being fired and then an explosion. And—and you didn't come back. I couldn't stay there any longer. I——"

"My wrists!" he broke in tensely. "Undo them, dear—as quickly as you can."

"Oh!" she cried in a low, shocked voice. "I didn't see. Colin, they're—they're bleeding."

"It's nothing serious. Can you manage it?"

"Yes; in just a minute. Tell me——"

"Not now! There isn't any time." His words were coming in fast, jerky sentences. "You shouldn't have come, but thank God you did. You must go

back to the launch the instant I'm free. Before you are seen. Don't leave it again. Wait for me there."

"Wait for you—*there!*" A sudden fear was in her voice. "Colin, what do you mean? What are you going to do?"

"The fire. Lazarre's over there in the clubhouse—wounded." He was still jerking out his words. "The flames aren't far from the doorway now. That's where he is. Just inside the doorway. But there's still a chance that it's not too late. I've got to get him out if I can."

She was working frantically at his wrists.

"But you can't reach him," she protested anxiously. "There are a lot of men around that other building, which I suppose is the power house. You would be seen the moment you stepped out from these trees here."

"No," he answered quickly. "I'll keep among the trees and go around this end of the clearing. It's scarcely any farther, and I can get in through the back of the clubhouse that way."

"Then I could go too," she asserted. "I might be able to be of some help. There—that awful thing is off at last!"

"The only way you can help any more now is to take care of yourself!" He was rubbing the bruised skin of his numbed wrists to restore the circulation. "Anything else is impossible, Germaine. You must get back to the launch at once."

"But, Colin, I"—her voice broke in a half sob—"I can't."

"Germaine," he said huskily, "every second is counting. You've already done far more than your share—don't let that go for nothing now. For God's sake, dear—*quick!*"

"Oh, Colin!" she whispered, as she clung to him desperately for an instant—and then, turning, sped back along the path.

And then Colin was running too—but stumbling at times as he made the short circuit of the clearing, glimpsing as he went the progress of the fire. It was a question of minutes, no more than that, he knew. Lazarre! No, it wasn't just Lazarre. Any man! He would have done it for any man who was trapped there as Lazarre was. There was nothing heroic about it—just to get in through the back of the clubhouse. It was a race with the fire, that was all—to see which would reach Lazarre first. His wrists! Curse his wrists! They were like dead stumps—lifeless. Germaine! God, her courage . . . !

And so he ran, keeping close to the outer edge of the trees, the flames and the moonlight helping him to pick his way. It was not far. He was at the rear of the clubhouse now. There was a back veranda—steps—close to the trees—not much clearing had been done here.

He broke through the trees and ran up the veranda steps. The back door was unlocked. He flung it open and stepped inside. A glare of light from the front of the bungalow showed him the way. He raced forward. A swirl of smoke choked him—stopped him. The smoke cleared away. He went on again. Leaping shadows caricatured a radio, lounging chairs, a table, and a settee fantastically. This was the living room. There, beyond, was the front door, open, that gave on the veranda—and, just inside the doorway, a dark shape huddled on the floor.

Lazarre! That was Lazarre, of course! He lunged forward. A wave of heat that scorched his lungs, robbing him of his breath, drove him back. Queer that he could see out through that open door! No one seemed to be coming and going in and out of the power house any more. He lunged forward again—reached the huddled form on the floor.

“Lazarre!” he called out. “Lazarre!”

There was no answer.

A heat blast, smoke streaked with tongue flames, almost overpowered him. His eyes were smarting. He could scarcely see the crumpled figure that lay there at his feet. He snatched at the other’s legs—dragged the man a yard, two, still another, farther back into the room. He coughed, rubbed his eyes to clear his vision, bent down to pick up the other in his arms—and failed in his first attempt. He cursed his wrists again. His hands seemed to be detached from his arms. He tried again, and this time, lifting the man in his arms, staggered across the living room, and, back the way he had come, out onto the rear veranda. He sucked in the fresh air avidly as he staggered down the steps.

The man in his arms stirred—mumbled deliriously:

“W.P. W.P. Tell the Wine Press to get Dollaire. Tell the Wine Press—d’ye hear—tell ’em! It’s Dollaire—damned scum—tell ’em. . . !”

The words were thudding at Colin’s brain as he reached the bottom of the steps and laid the other on the ground. W.P. Yes, that stood for Wine Press—but what was the Wine Press? What did that mean?

But that could wait. Where was the man wounded? How badly was he hurt? The flames from the side of the clubhouse threw into fitful relief a

white, ashen face, a blood-soaked shirt—and the man was still mumbling in delirium, but Colin could not catch the words now. He tore the shirt open. Of course it was Lazarre. Bouchard had said so. And there was the scar on the right shoulder to which Reddy had referred—a long, jagged cicatrice running parallel with the shoulder blade. But he had not torn the man's shirt open to look for that scar. He had not thought of the scar, or had any doubt in his mind but that it was Lazarre; he had torn the shirt open to look for Lazarre's wound.

And now his lips tightened. There were a good many wounds. Shotgun wounds. Lazarre's body was peppered with them. He did not know how serious they were. What was he to do? If Lazarre——

He rose suddenly to his feet. From the back of the clubhouse here he could not see the power house; but shouts reached him now, volleying English oaths—coming nearer. That answered his question. There was nothing more that he could do for Lazarre now—except leave him to his friends. Yes, and—he smiled grimly—it would be just as well, not only for the sake of Lazarre, but for Germaine's and his own, if one “Donald Howard” were not called upon now to explain his presence here!

He stepped quickly back in amongst the trees that were only a few yards off, and waited. They would salvage what they could, no doubt, and the only way they could get into the club at all now was by way of the back door, so they were bound to see Lazarre lying there. But he must at least make sure of that, for the fire would—— His mind swerved off at a tangent. Dollaire must have collected his loot—and decamped. That glimpse he had got through the front door—there had been no one around the power house then. The grim smile came again. The “members” would think that Lazarre had managed to get this far himself; and Lazarre, if he recovered, would naturally think so too. Queer! So far as everyone was concerned it was as though he, Colin, had never been here tonight. Something ironic in that, though. A sort of damned mockery! As though Fate had thumbed her nose! He had found Lazarre, been alone with Lazarre—but that letter was still in his, Colin's, pocket. He couldn't have left it out there with Lazarre, in Lazarre's pocket, for Lazarre's mob to find, could he? He couldn't put a death warrant in an unconscious man's pocket, or——

Figures came running round the side of the clubhouse—and, halting abruptly, gathered around Lazarre. There came then a medley of voices raised in execration and blasphemy. They all talked at once. The words reached Colin in disjointed snatches:

“ . . . Kenniston’s croaked out there. . . . That makes two with Gregg. . . . The cover’s blown off the works. . . . Ten spaces, maybe twenty, if we’re caught. . . . We got to beat it out of here before anyone comes nosing around. . . . Get Lazarre down to the boat. . . . Better save some of our clothes in there if we can. . . . Wise up W. P. . . . There’ll be a glass wagon and no flowers coming to Dollaire for this. . . . If we work fast enough we can get Lazarre across the border before the cops get their ear mufflers off. . . . Maybe he won’t live. . . . Aw, he ain’t so bad. . . . We got to give him a break anyhow. . . . Maybe Dollaire and his damned schooner are still in the river. . . . He didn’t come that way, he went off through the woods toward Cap à l’Orage. . . . That sneaking rat of a spy . . . ”

Colin edged deeper in among the trees; then, moving cautiously, he began to make his way back around the clearing. A hundred yards away, satisfied that between the crackling of the flames and the constant roar of the falls no sound he would then make could be heard, he quickened his pace, breaking into a run wherever it was possible to do so. His one object now was to reach Germaine and get away before the power boat started down the river—for, dark as the shadows were, close in there against the bank, there was always the risk of the launch being seen. He did not want to be seen now; and above all he did not want Germaine to be seen. It would take fifteen minutes at the very least, he was certain, for the “members” to salvage what they could of their personal belongings, carry Lazarre down to the power boat, and get the power boat under way. Surely he could make the launch in much less time than that.

He made it in five.

Germaine had evidently heard him coming. She was standing up in the launch. The engine was running.

“Let’s go!” He spoke nonchalantly—or thought he did—as he jumped in beside her.

She leaned forward and peered for an instant into his face.

“Sit down!” she commanded. “You look like a ghost. I’ll handle the boat.”

He did not protest. He had forgotten about his head. Rather queer that it should suddenly start throbbing again! He felt almost giddy.

“All right!” he said. “But step on it. The power boat will be along shortly—and it’s moonlight.”

“We’ll keep out of the moon path,” she answered. “If they haven’t started yet, we’ll be so far away they’ll never see us.”

The launch spurted out from the bank. Colin dragged his hand in the water, and at moments surreptitiously bathed his head. It was cool, refreshing; he felt the better for it. There was no sign of the power boat. She had nursed the engine to top speed. The launch was cleaving the smooth water like an arrow. His mind was searching—probing. Suppose Lazarre lived? Suppose Lazarre died? In either case Lazarre would no longer be here—on the north shore. What was he to do? A thought flashed through his mind—startling him. He pondered it a moment. The germ of it grew—flourished. Like the next chapter! Unconsciously he laughed outright in self-derision. How many times had he wondered what he would do in the next chapter? That ubiquitous analogy! How many times must he tell himself that the puppets of fiction were no longer dancing to the strings he pulled, that

“Colin,” she questioned anxiously, “are you really all right?”

“Absolutely!” he lied convincingly. “My wrists were a bit numb at first, of course, but they’re as good as ever now. I’m perfectly fit, dear—but just lazy, willing to let you do the work.”

“Did”—she hesitated—“Lazarre—did you——?”

“Yes,” he answered. “I got him out without much difficulty. No medals. But I’m afraid he’s in rather bad shape—which isn’t so good.”

“Tell me about it,” she said; “tell me everything—when you feel like talking.”

“I’ll tell you now,” he said.

He told her—in detail—except that he made no mention of a gun butt that had crashed against his skull. It took a long time. They had rounded the point, and were heading for Cap à l’Orage when he had made an end of it.

“We needn’t worry about the power boat any more, no matter where it is,” she said irrelevantly. “They’ll head straight across for the Gaspé shore.” Then, pertinently: “But what was it that has been going on down there underneath the power house? What was in those little bundles you saw Dollaire’s men carrying away?”

He shook his head.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I wish I did; but, after all, no matter what it was, it doesn’t alter things one iota so far as you and I are concerned.” His

lips drew into a straight line. “The Mask still forbids our banns.”

“What are you going to do now, Colin? What are we going to do?”

He sat motionless for a moment, then he struck a match and looked at his watch.

“You’ll be back home and in bed by half-past three—not later anyway than four. No one will know, no one is to know, that you’ve been near the club. That’s the first thing. If you get pulled into this, so do I—in which case Donald Howard becomes Colin Hewitt, and if I know the Mask at all you’ll mourn a husband-to-be.”

“Colin!” she cried out poignantly. “Don’t say that!”

“It’s absolutely true,” he said; “but it isn’t as cowardly as it sounds. If the Mask doesn’t get a look at my cards, I think I’ve got more than a fair chance of winning the last hand—and that means our happiness, dear. Yours and mine, the years ahead together. Ethically, perhaps, we may be momentarily compounding a felony by not speaking right out in meeting, but that does not mean that Dollaire will not get his deserts in due course—or the others either. I promised you that the other night. But the Mask is at the bottom of all this, and he comes first. Do you agree?”

Her hand closed over his.

“Yes,” she said; “but what are you going to do, Colin?”

“I’m going back by the *Bonaventure* tomorrow.”

“*Colin!*”

“If Lazarre lives, he’ll eventually land up in New York. And meanwhile there’s—the Wine Press.”

“But you do not know what that is, or where it is, or anything about it.”

“I know it’s in New York; and that, if it isn’t actually the Mask’s headquarters, it’s at least where his orders come from. I’ll find it.”

“But, Colin”—her voice was breaking—“he knows you. You said so yourself. You’ll be recognized, and——”

“Not this time,” said Colin quietly. “I’ll see to that.”

“But how?”

“I don’t know yet. But don’t worry, dear—there are four days in which to figure that out before I even reach Quebec.”

She made no immediate reply. She devoted herself to the engine. Later she opened the locker beneath their seat.

“Coffee and sandwiches,” she said, with a little catch in her voice. “We must keep a lookout for Dollaire’s schooner at the cape, mustn’t we?”

“He’ll be away long before we get there,” Colin answered. “Germaine, dear, it’ll all come out right.”

She nestled close to him.

“Oh, Colin,” she whispered, “I’m terribly, terribly afraid. Isn’t—isn’t there some other way?”

His arms were around her.

“It’s the one chance—for both of us,” he answered buoyantly. “We’ll win. You’ll see.”

It was four o’clock in the morning when they reached Cap à l’Orage. There were no lights in the village. No one was astir.

CHAPTER XVII

ALIAS CLARKIE LUNN

IT was getting late—almost time to start out on the “from twelve to before daylight” rounds again. Colin, pacing up and down the room that he had occupied since his return to New York, halted abruptly and stared moodily at the calendar on the wall. The second of August. It was just a month to the day since he had left Cap à l’Orage.

From the calendar, his eyes traveled to the mirror on the bureau. The reflection that returned his gaze was neither that of Colin Hewitt, nor Mr. Routh, nor Donald Howard—this was an individual with jet-black hair and jet-black eyebrows, and deep circles under the eyes that spoke eloquently of habitual dissipation; the face was pasty in color; the toothbrush mustache gave the lips a cruel and sinister expression. A quite well-dressed individual, though! One Clarkie Lunn, alias—oh, well, like Reddy Turner, Clarkie Lunn had many other aliases on tap!

Colin smiled caustically—so did the reflection. Not a nice face—but a work of art! Yet the art of old Papa Goyette had availed nothing, and the weeks had gone by—fruitlessly.

He flung himself into a chair and lighted a cigarette. Worry showed in his knitted brow. What was he to do? Go on as he had been doing? The result had been nil—neither a break nor a lead nor a clue of any kind. It was becoming a bit difficult to keep on bolstering himself up with the hope that something was bound to turn up just around the next corner.

Could he have done anything other than he had done? Had he let fiction lead him astray? He had a feeling that perhaps unconsciously he had treated himself as though he were actually one of his own characters for whom he was plotting the way out from some ugly situation. It was natural enough that his mind might have run in those channels. But, granting that were so, had he anywhere indulged an instinct for dramatic effect at the expense of bald reality, and thereby lost in any degree his sense of proportion? He shook his head. The plan that he had mapped out for himself had seemed all

right at the time. It seemed so now. But he had accomplished nothing. Perhaps, after all, he had slipped somewhere.

His mind searched back over the weeks that were gone. He had left the *Bonaventure* at Quebec and had returned to Boston. From there he had telephoned to Butch Connal. He had taken no chances of being seen with Butch in New York, for Reddy had been one of Butch Connal's gang. Butch had met him in Boston. He had told Butch much of what had happened, and he remembered Butch's answer when he had then explained what he wanted.

"Sure!" Butch had said. "There's nothing to it. I can fix that for you. When you hit New York even that dick pal of yours down at the Homicide joint would give you the stony stare. There's a guy right here that I've pulled a lot of deals with that'll make you wonder who the hell you're looking at every time you lamp a mirror."

And so Papa Goyette had created Clarkie Lunn. The thought of Papa Goyette brought a smile. Papa Goyette was a stumpy, gesticulating little Frenchman, by profession a costumier, by nature a crook. He paid no income tax on what he received from the rentals of costumes for private theatricals and that sort of thing, for such returns were genuinely meager; and he kept no books to exploit the profits he made through the vast quantity of stolen goods that passed through his hands. Papa Goyette was clever. As a costumier he knew his business, and was highly spoken of in that respect. If he eked out but a bare living thereby, he was cheerfully optimistic and did not complain!

The transformation had taken place in the ultra-strict privacy of one of Papa Goyette's ingeniously contrived back rooms. It had been eminently successful. At its conclusion Papa Goyette had rubbed his hands with delight.

"*Voilà!*" he had exclaimed. "It is my *chef-d'œuvre!* Look! You do not know yourself! No! But do not forget one little thing. It will not last all by itself. The hairs—how do you say *pousse?* Sprout? Yes, that is it. And from underneath the skin they come up with the old color. Very well. I will tell you of a friend of mine in New York who will take care of that, and the other little repairs that will be necessary. But be careful of that so-superb little mustache! You understand? It is incomparable. It is as good as though you had had time to grow one. I, Papa Goyette, have never made anything before that could approach it. It is—what do you call it?—the singing note of the whole face. It is not pleasant? No. But the cement that holds it changes the

expression of the lips! You see? It is art! Yes. I, Papa Goyette, applaud myself.”

Colin swore softly under his breath. Damn the mustache! It had been the source of endless discomfort at first, but he was becoming used to it now. Papa Goyette was right. It was worth while. It distended the lips and quite changed the expression of the entire lower part of his face.

From his chair Colin glanced again across the room at the mirror—and Clarkie Lunn flashed him back a twisted grin. His own mother, had she been alive, as the trite expression had it, would not have recognized him.

He nodded thoughtfully to himself. Papa Goyette, with the subsequent assistance of Papa Goyette’s “friend” here in New York, had performed little short of a miracle. But he owed Papa Goyette far more than that. Papa Goyette had not only created Clarkie Lunn, but Papa Goyette had oriented Clarkie Lunn in New York. It would have been unwise, to say the least of it, for Clarkie Lunn, a newcomer, to throw in his lot openly with Butch Connal’s gang. He, Colin, and Butch had talked that over from every angle. Reddy had been a member of Butch Connal’s gang. Who was this *new* member who appeared suddenly on the scene? The Mask was likely to be of an inquisitive disposition! True, this might possibly have helped to invite contact with some of the Mask’s tools; but it was much more likely to have invited disaster. And so it had been decided that he, Colin, would have the full support and help of Butch Connal’s gang—but that they would work apart. Therefore it was Papa Goyette who had supplied Clarkie Lunn with a “reputation”—not as that of a crook of high degree, but as of one of those in whose past the police would take an abiding interest if certain intimate details were but known—and it was Papa Goyette who had secured his entrée into this rooming house which was a hangout of well-dressed gentry outside the law, very similar to that inhabited by Butch Connal’s mob, which latter, incidentally, was only a few blocks away. It was all rather vague, of course—but then one did not go around shouting from the housetops about the guys one had taken for a ride on orders from a big shot!

Quite! Butch Connal and his mob had worked unceasingly—and Butch, when he communicated by telephone, never personally, was known as Martel. No slip had been made there. And he, Colin, had not spared himself. Days and nights of it! His knowledge of the dens and dives that, not so long ago, he had frequented in search of other material had stood him in good stead so far as gaining admissions thereunto was concerned. He had haunted them; he had also haunted virtually every night club in New York. A stray word, a whisper, a confidence exchanged behind the unhallowed portals of

the underworld where daylight never entered—that was what he had sought and hoped for. But he had been unrewarded. The Wine Press was as much of a mystery as ever. Never had he heard so much as a mention of the Mask. Reddy's letter was still, figuratively speaking, in his pocket. He did not even know whether Lazarre had lived or died. Butch Connal had uncovered nothing. There had been no trace of Lazarre or any of Lazarre's companions since the night of Dollaire's attack upon the club at the Cascade River.

Well, there was probably a very good reason for that. They were keeping under cover. Before he had left Boston the newspapers had had the story. The captions of one in particular, set in lurid type and blazoned across the front page, floated again before his mind's eye:

INTERNATIONAL COUNTERFEITING
PLANT UNCOVERED

FATHERED BY MURDERED NEW YORK MILLIONAIRE

St. Lawrence Gulf Salmon Club Used as
Camouflage

WORLD-WIDE RAMIFICATIONS—POLICE BAFFLED

It was the first inkling he had had of the actual nature of the Mask's "interests" on the north shore. He could not say that he had been startled. He had known that the club cloaked some criminal enterprise. What difference did it make what the precise nature of that enterprise was so far as he was concerned? What had interested him far more was the "stories" that the papers had run day by day. They had supplied some details, of course, that he had not heretofore known; but they had not furnished him with anything concrete in the way of a clue, and certainly had not blazed any trail for him to follow. Perhaps, though, he might have overlooked something. He pieced the stories together again in his mind.

A few days after he, Colin, had left on the *Bonaventure*, a fisherman from Cap à l'Orage, passing the mouth of the Cascade River, had noticed that the club had been burned down. The fisherman had landed, discovered the wreckage of the power plant and the bodies of two murdered men—one of whom he knew to be Kenniston. He had returned post-haste to Cap à l'Orage and had made his report. A crossing was at once made to the Gaspé coast and the wires had begun to hum.

Colin lifted his shoulders whimsically. In the twinkling of an eye Cap à l'Orage had emerged from obscurity into the fierce glare of newspaper publicity! Well, as had been so often said, it was an ill wind that blew nobody good. Madame Frénier's Hotel du Canada must have done a thriving business! By planes, by boats from the Gaspé shore, police and reporters had flocked to the scene—and Cap à l'Orage had automatically become their headquarters.

And therefrom there had then issued a flood of mingled facts and theories. Below the ground level of the wrecked power house had been found the presses—and the numerous plates that proclaimed the uses to which the presses had been put. The work had been done on a vast scale—the paper currency of many nations, where there was worth-while value behind such nations' genuine notes, had been masterfully reproduced in various denominations. A salmon club! Closed tight each year during the winter. Who would think of digging up the cement flooring of the power house, or dream that, underneath, a modern and up-to-date printing plant had been installed that was capable of turning out a year's supply of spurious notes in a few months or so—and without working overtime at that!

The reporters had sensationally flung questions broadcast that they could not answer themselves. Kenniston's life had been laid bare from the day of his birth, but who were the men he had gathered around him? No one knew. Gregg, later identified by Dr. Tremblay as a patient he had once visited at the club, was simply Gregg. The trail ended there. Who had blown up the power house? Very few of the spurious notes had been found—had Kenniston's men turned against him, put him on the spot, and made off with the notes? Or what? Who were the two men who, giving their names as Larocque and Bolduc, had arrived in Cap à l'Orage, announcing that they were going up the coast to visit friends at Seven Islands; but, instead of boarding the *Bonaventure* in due course, had mysteriously disappeared?

No answer. No answer to anything. There had been no mention of one Dollaire, for instance. Colin drew deeply on his cigarette. No; there had been nothing in the published news that had afforded him any help. Lazarre and his companions might as well never have existed so far as their identities and present whereabouts were concerned. No mention of one Anatole Bouchard, either! Therefore Bouchard was still at Cap à l'Orage—and was probably engaged in drinking himself into a state of coma; for, otherwise, Bouchard's sudden disappearance must inevitably have attracted attention too.

Cap à l'Orage! He would have liked to know more of what was going on at Cap à l'Orage day by day. No; that was not at all what he meant! He jumped to his feet and began to pace the room again.

It was Germaine he was thinking of now. It was news of Germaine he wanted. It was an impossible situation for them both, yet one where a false move or the slightest slip would spell disaster. Though Clarkie Lunn had not then been created, he had, when he had said good-by to Germaine, explained in a general way what he proposed to do. She had been anxious and afraid—the more so because there would be no word from him. But in view of the police activity that must follow the discovery of what had happened at the club, and the fact that, incident thereto, the Mask would be more than ever on the alert, she had unhesitatingly agreed that, with the departure of Donald Howard from Cap à l'Orage, his connection with the north shore should be entirely severed for the time being, even though by some roundabout way it was possible that a means of communication might be established between them. Not a happy solution for either of them—but, with their world at stake, the only safe one. Letters had been known to go astray—or to be intercepted. Clarkie Lunn, as yet at the time unchristened, would be treading on thinner ice than even the proverbial——

He halted abruptly in his stride. A voice was calling from the hall:

“Heh, Clarkie! You’re wanted on the phone. Not a dame—you’re out of luck!”

Colin opened the door and stepped out.

“Thanks!” he said to an empty hall.

There was a telephone booth here on the ground floor—its sound-proof quality unquestionably guaranteed by virtue of its environment.

Colin entered the booth.

“Hello,” he said.

Butch Connal’s voice came over the wire:

“That you, Clarkie?”

“Okay—Martel,” Colin answered. “Shoot.”

“I just got tipped off by one of the boys. That rum-runner guy you was telling me about is in town—usual business. You know who I mean?”

Colin caught his breath. There was only one “rum-runner guy” he had ever talked about to Butch Connal. Dollaire! And, from what Bolduc had

said, Dollaire at times sold his wares in New York.

“Sure!” he said.

“Well,” said Butch Connal, “he’s over at Spinelli’s hobnobbing with a booze baron. It looks like they was going to make a night of it, but you never can tell. They may blow. So, if you want to see him, hop to it. I know you ain’t never lamped his map and don’t know him, but you’ll find the dope waiting for you. The drunk in the bar. Get me? So long!”

Colin hung up the receiver. The blood was tingling in his veins. Dollaire—here in New York again! Had Dollaire underrated the Mask—or was he merely contemptuous? A break at last! If Dollaire was over there at Spinelli’s, it was a hundred-to-one bet that the Mask, or some of his minions, hot on Dollaire’s trail, would be there too.

Colin raced back to his room for his hat, and, a minute later, left the house.

CHAPTER XVIII

CONTACT

SPINELLI'S enjoyed a reputation. There was no night club in New York that afforded better entertainment—or afforded a wider opportunity to spend money. It was expensive, but adroitly cosmopolitan. Dinner jackets and “tails” mingled in utmost freedom with tweeds and what-nots; the ladies were equally without restriction in the choice of their ensembles, and a street costume was as welcome as an evening gown. Salvatore Spinelli demanded only two requisites from his patrons: an “introduction” by way of entrée—and the price.

Colin, as Clarkie Lunn, possessed both.

It had been a matter of only six or seven blocks from his room, and, encountering no taxi, he had walked; and now, still in one of the lower Fifties, he rang the bell of the three-story brownstone front with its shaded windows that harbored Spinelli's admittedly colorful contribution to the night life of New York.

He had been there many times before. The doorman therefore admitted him without question. He crossed the wide reception hall to the desk just inside the iron grille that barred further progress, but which was so disarmingly artistic and ornamental that its existence was robbed of any suggestion of premeditated offense. Here he laid down his five-dollar “subscription”—and the door of the iron grille opened for him. A petite, blonde maiden, habited as a page, took his hat.

Colin thrust his hands in his pockets and for a moment stared around him. It was already after midnight. Spinelli's was in full swing. “Guests” were swarming in—he had not been the only one admitted at the same time. Straight ahead of him was the dance floor, the entrance blocked by a bevy of men and women gathered around the doorway. From within, a saxophone was playing; and someone, a lovely boy undoubtedly, with glistening teeth and slicked hair undoubtedly, was crooning a song. Colin shrugged his shoulders. Oh, well, some people liked that sort of thing—and Spinelli's catered to all tastes!

On his right was a richly carpeted, spacious stairway. He turned in that direction. The bar was on the second floor. His feet sank noiselessly into the deep pile as he mounted the stairs. Dollaire! A month of futility, and now, least expected of all—Dollaire! An uplift was upon him that he had not known for weeks. Whether merely contemptuous or not, or whether he knew it or not, Dollaire was playing against stacked cards. If Butch Connal and his mob had discovered that Dollaire was here, it was as good as a certainty that the Mask had discovered it too—and the Mask had a very large account to settle with Dollaire! Contact at last! If luck broke for him tonight, he would be able to identify—not the Mask, he could hardly hope for that—but one, or more perhaps, of the Mask's tools. That would be enough! He would not ask for more than that—just to pick up the trail. And that once done, he promised himself grimly that he would not lose it again.

He gained the landing and entered the barroom. It was a huge room—its appointments lavish. The polished mahogany bar that ran its entire length glistened even in the soft, rose-shaded lighting. People were coming and going, pairs and groups were standing about here and there, glass in hand; and yet the room was not crowded, for the bar, though it kept four or five white-coated attendants busy, was not the sole Mecca of the thirsty at Spinelli's—one came here mostly for the hard stuff.

Colin glanced up and down the room. Butch Connal's "drunk at the bar" was not hard to identify—or, at least, there was but one man present who was outstanding in that particular. Colin watched the man for a moment—a middle-aged man in a dinner jacket, his tie sadly awry, his gait none too steady as he moved here and there, chatteringly attempting to insinuate himself into everybody else's conversation. The typical inebriated pest of the garrulous variety! Who was the man—if it *was* the man? He had never seen the other before. The man had certainly not been one of those from Butch Connal's gang who had visited him, Colin, when he was in the hospital. Of course not! Butch didn't work that way. None better than Butch knew what was at stake and the danger that would be invited if Clarkie Lunn were in any way linked up with Reddy Turner's old mob—but Butch, when it came to details, made few mistakes. Clarkie Lunn would be thoroughly safeguarded on that score.

The man, carrying his glass rather uncertainly, and having been summarily ejected from a group near by, was moving slightly in Colin's direction. Colin, starting toward the bar, purposely allowed their paths to cross. They bumped into each other, and the contents of the other's glass was spilled on the floor.

“Shay,” said the man thickly, “sorry! Most awfully damn sorry! I—hic—apologize. Buy you another.”

“I’m afraid it was your glass, not mine, that was spilled,” smiled Colin. Someone in the immediate vicinity laughed.

“’S no matter!” declared the inebriated one. “Buy you another all the same. Come on.”

“All right,” agreed Colin good-naturedly. “Just as you say.”

There was an empty space at the far end of the bar. The “drunk” lurched in that direction. Colin followed.

“Make it—hic—two highballs,” commanded Colin’s new-found companion.

They were served with the drinks.

“Four dollars,” said the barkeep amiably—Spinelli’s was not cheap.

The “drunk” was apparently hard of hearing; and besides, he was clinging a little precariously to the bar.

Colin pushed a bill across the bar.

The barkeep grinned.

“And besides that,” he said in a friendly undertone as he returned the change, “he’ll talk the lug off you if you give him a chance—and he ain’t got any bottom to his tank.”

“Thanks,” said Colin, “I’m on! But don’t worry. I’m no Santa Claus.”

The “drunk” had still apparently heard nothing; but, as the barkeep moved away to serve another customer, he turned and leaned heavily with his back against the bar. He spoke then over the rim of his glass as he lifted it shakily to his lips:

“Clarkie Lunn?”

“Yes.”

“Ever hear of anyone by the name of Connal?”

“Butch sent me.”

“Okay. Sorry to sting you for those four bucks—but it lets us both out. Got to keep up appearances, you know, or I wouldn’t be worth a nickel to Butch. I don’t travel around with the gang—not known as one of them.

You're all right there. I'm undercover—see? There's a lot of things—worth cash—to get next to in these joints and around town.”

“Anyone who's in with Butch is right with me,” Colin answered.

The man swayed, upset a goodly portion of his high-ball, and then with a valiant effort carried the glass again to his lips.

“That goes both ways,” he said. “You're not one of the mob, and I don't know where you fit into the picture—but that's Butch's business. 'Nuff said. I know what you want. Dollaire's brought his schooner up from St. Pierre with a full load of high-priced goods. It's somewhere out there just beyond the twelve-mile limit. Dollaire's been ashore all day angling for the best offer. It looks like Heimie Schwarm, the big booze baron, was coming across with the biggest wad. Anyway, the two of them are making love to each other now in the dance hall downstairs.”

“I don't know either of them,” said Colin.

“Well, you can't miss Heimie. He's a straw-haired Dutchy in a red tie and light suit like he always wears. He's sitting in one of those little stalls near the door, and the fellow that is with him is Dollaire. Anyway, they were both of them there a few minutes before you came in, and I guess they're there still, for they were just starting in on a fresh bottle of fizz.”

“Right!” said Colin. “I'll push on, then.”

“Wait a second. Leave the breakaway to me. It'll screen better—and there's no telling who's looking. And—listen! I don't know what your game is, but watch your step! There's something queer going on around here tonight. I don't know yet what it is, but I've a hunch that hell is going to bust loose before it's over, and——” The “drunk” was suddenly patting Colin's arm. His voice rose: “'Scuse me for a minute. Just saw an old friend of mine—hic—very intimate old friend over there. I'll—hic—get him, and we'll have another.”

The barkeep was back. He grinned at Colin as the “drunk” lurched away.

“What's his name?” asked Colin.

“Peter K. MacBride.” The barkeep's grin broadened. “Didn't he wish a card on you?”

Colin shook his head.

“No. Have I been neglected?”

“We sweep ’em up off the floor in the morning,” confided the barkeep with a laugh. “He carries a pocketful around with him. But he’s all right when he’s sober. Got a bit of money, so they say—retired—or something.”

“Well, I think I’ll blow,” smiled Colin. “When he comes back tell him I had a telephone call.”

He swung away from the bar, left the room, and began to make his way downstairs. Peter K. MacBride, whatever his real name might be, was obviously one of Butch’s “inside” men—a “feeder” for the gang. And MacBride’s warning was ringing in his ears. How much, or how little, MacBride already knew, or whether the man had only “sensed” something in the air, mattered little. That, in MacBride’s words, hell would bust loose here before the night was over, was exactly what he, Colin, was expecting—and he was quite sure in his own mind that he could have told MacBride why!

His own plans? He had none—except to watch Dollaire and be guided by circumstances. Dollaire was the bait. His, Colin’s, job was to see who snatched at it!

Colin reached the entrance to the dance hall and paused for a moment in the doorway amongst what seemed the ever-present knot of people who stood there peering in. A “turn” was on. He had seen it before. A girl was covering the floor with prodigious leaps and bounds—but very little covered the girl. Spinelli called it his psychic dance.

Colin’s eyes roamed around the room—and came to rest almost immediately on Heimie Schwarm, whom he identified without hesitation from MacBride’s description. At the table beside the booze baron was a stocky, powerfully built, black-haired man—Dollaire, of course. They were sitting, as MacBride had said, in one of the “stalls” near the door, a bottle of champagne between them. Colin smiled cryptically. Spinelli never overlooked a bet that meant a little extra profit. The “stalls” were nothing more than railed-off spaces on a slightly raised platform that was built around three sides of the room, but they possessed comfortable lounge chairs and the view was better, so why should not a small fee be charged for their use? Spinelli charged it. But they were popular. Most of them were occupied tonight.

Colin moved forward into the room. He contented himself with a table on the floor level not far from the booze baron’s stall—he could watch Dollaire, not only unobtrusively, but much better from here than from a stall.

Again his eyes roamed around the room. The tables, three deep, that separated the space reserved for dancing from the stalls were fairly well occupied too. Spinelli would be able to declare a dividend tonight!

He ordered a bottle of wine, and sipped it leisurely. Applause greeted several suggestive numbers on Spinelli's programme. Colin saw little of them. The minutes and the quarter-hours slipped by. Heimie Schwarm and Dollaire had become a little uproarious, though not offensively so. Had the deal been perfected? Had Heimie Schwarm become the owner of a choice cargo from St. Pierre and Miquelon? It mattered little. They were attacking another bottle of champagne. Heimie Schwarm had paid for it from a huge wad of bills that he had wrenched, because of its bulk, with no little difficulty from his pocket. The Dutchman's combination of straw hair, brilliant red tie, and inch-square checked suit of light fawn as a color scheme struck a distinctly bilious note. Dollaire, swarthy, beetle-browed, narrow-eyed, with thin, hard lips and protruding jaw, was the reverse of being prepossessing.

And then, as he watched the two, a fine point of ethics arose in Colin's mind to trouble him. Believing that Dollaire was in immediate danger, had he any right to sit here and not warn the man? Mentally he began to debate the pros and cons. What could he say to Dollaire? Nothing definite—but enough, say, to cause Dollaire to take alarm and leave the place. Well, what then? If the Mask had Dollaire under surveillance here, Dollaire would be no better off outside than in. Dollaire had gratuitously thrown his hat into the ring. He had destroyed one of the Mask's pet schemes, and had murdered at least two—for Lazarre might still be alive—of the Mask's men. If he, Colin, knew the Mask at all, Dollaire, whether he were put on the spot here or elsewhere, was a doomed man from the night he had raided the club on the Cascade River. Dollaire was a callous, cold-blooded murderer—boasting his prowess. One's finer instincts revolted even at the thought of his existence. Warn Dollaire? If the Mask or any of his men were here to see, then Clarkie Lunn might as well never have been created. He had not come here to warn Dollaire; he had come here to watch the Mask play his hand. There were Germaine, himself, their future, his own life at stake. Ethics! His lips tightened. Was it ethics to fling all that aside on the chance of being able to accomplish what, at the utmost, could be no more than a postponement of the inevitable showdown between the Mask and Dollaire? Suppose he were writing it? Angrily he sought to fling the sudden intrusion aside—but it persisted. One always had to justify the hero's actions. Would the hero be justified in the readers' eyes if he stood pat under these circumstances?

“By God,” Colin stated fiercely to himself, “I’d write it that way, anyhow!”

It was getting late. Colin looked at his watch. Long after one o’clock—and nothing had happened. Perhaps he had been wrong. Perhaps nothing would happen. And yet it seemed incredible that, with Dollaire making no effort at concealment, but, instead, even flaunting, as it were, his presence in New York, the Mask would not know——

A waiter stood at his elbow.

“Pardon me, sir. There’s a couple of gentlemen over there”—the waiter, with a wave of his hand, indicated a table behind Colin—“that would like you to join them.”

Colin turned around. One of the two men was beckoning to him. Oh, well, one could watch Dollaire from there as well as here—and it would not be politic for Clarkie Lunn to refuse an invitation from such a man as Harry the Lynx. Harry the Lynx was a crook of no small degree. He, Colin, did not know just what the other’s racket was, but he had met the man many times in various dives and hangouts when, as Colin Hewitt, he had been out on his nightly prowls after material—and, subsequently, as Clarkie Lunn, he had met the other frequently in the same places.

Colin rose to his feet—and stood there for an instant as though riveted to the spot, the blood pounding in sudden hammer blows at his heart. The face of Harry the Lynx’s companion had until now been hidden by the former’s back—but now it stood out, alone, as though it were the only face in all that crowded room. It was the face of the man with whom he had fought that night in Reddy’s old room—the man in whose pocket he had found the card with its cryptic “W. P.” scrawled upon it—the man he had left unconscious there on the floor.

He fought for composure, affecting an air of nonchalance, as he strolled over to the other table. There was no question in his mind now but that Dollaire’s presence here was known to the Mask. He had hoped for a break, hoped that he would be able to “ticket” whoever might make a move against Dollaire; but he had not dared to hope for a wide-open break like this. Here was a man that, whether any move were made against Dollaire tonight or not, he knew definitely was one of the Mask’s trusted tools. Was Harry the Lynx another? Almost certainly! Otherwise he would not be at the same table—watching Dollaire. But if Dollaire was, say, to be put on the spot here tonight by these two and possibly others, why was he, Colin, invited over to

their table? He did not know. But, whatever the reason, nothing would have deterred him now.

“Hello, Clarkie!” Harry the Lynx greeted heartily. “Meet my friend Benny Malone. You’re never talking to the wrong one when you’re talking to Benny.”

Colin extended his hand.

“Glad to know you,” said Benny Malone cordially, as he pulled out a chair. “Sit down. Harry was telling me about you.”

Colin sat down in the chair indicated. It placed him with his back to the entrance, and his back to Dollaire—but he was no longer interested in watching Dollaire. His interest was centered now in Benny Malone and Harry the Lynx, the two men between whom he sat.

“Sure!” he said pleasantly. “Harry and I have met up a lot. What’ll you have?”

“Nix!” Benny Malone laughed strangely. “There’s enough here to last as long as we’ll want it, I guess—there’s another glass for you. Help yourself. Let’s talk—quick. Harry says you’re from Boston, and that you’ve pulled a few deals with Papa Goyette—and that you had to blow out of Beantown ’cause the pussy-foots were getting curious.”

Colin poured out a glass of wine for himself.

“Harry said a mouthful,” he stated laconically. “That’s right, all right.”

“Working any racket now?”

“Nope.”

“How’s funds?”

Colin shrugged his shoulders.

“The last handout I got from Papa Goyette,” he grinned philosophically, “is getting down to a thin layer.”

“Looking for something?”

“The wadding’s out of my ears.”

“Okay. Suppose I could let you in on something where your cut would be a grand or maybe more, what would you say?”

“I’d say”—Colin’s voice held an eager note—“that you were kidding.”

Benny Malone leaned across the table.

“I’m not kidding if you’re there with the guts”—he was speaking more hurriedly than ever, and in an undertone now. “Maybe you’ll get a chance to prove whether you’ve got ’em or not in the next few minutes. If you come through, we’ll talk about the other thing later. Listen! Harry’s just got a tip that he’s in a jam. If he’s got to get out of here, maybe we’ll need some help. He spotted you over there, and said you’d keep your face closed anyway. What do you say? Are you sitting in, or do you want to fade?”

Fade—and lose the promised chance of future intimacy with Benny Malone! Colin was thinking in high. He did not know what this “jam” was that Harry the Lynx was in, or what his, Colin’s, participation therein might mean, though he was uncomfortably aware that he did not like the sound of it at all—but there was only one answer.

There was no apparent hesitation in his reply.

“Deal the cards,” he said, with a convincingly twisted smile. “I’m sitting in.”

“Attaboy!” applauded Harry the Lynx. “I ain’t going to forget this, Clarkie, and——”

“Jeese!” interrupted Benny Malone in a fierce whisper. “There he is now, and it looks like he’s got two or three with him. And he’s got you lamped, Harry. Well, here’s where Spinelli gets the tip to put the lights out.” He pulled an automatic stealthily from his pocket. “Keep your feet out of the way, Clarkie,” he warned—and fired three shots in rapid succession under the table into the floor.

Women’s screams, the scraping of chairs as both men and women rose in frantic haste from the tables, and a babel of panicky voices answered the shots.

And then, almost on the instant, the lights went out.

“Scram, Harry!” snapped Benny Malone. “Spinelli’s on the job, all right. Here’s your chance. You know the way. Take the first train out of the burg. Clarkie and I’ll entertain ’em long enough to let you make your getaway.” And then, with a short laugh: “Look out for yourself, Clarkie! Behind you! Stop him—but keep your rod parked.”

It had all happened, it seemed to Colin, in no more time than it had taken him to gain his feet. He whirled around. Someone, a black bulk out of the surrounding darkness, was rushing upon him. He caught a blur of lighter color—the face. And at that face he whipped out with his right, driving home an uppercut with all his strength behind the blow. But the blow,

though it reached its objective, did not stop the impetus of the other's rush, which drove him back against the table, where, losing his balance, he fell to the floor, his opponent on top of him. And then, as he grappled with the other, he felt a gun in the man's hand. But the other did not grapple in return—he was only a dead weight. Colin snatched the gun away and stood up. It was a lucky knockout, that was all; but—he smiled grimly—the gun was safer, from his standpoint, in his possession than in the other's! One sometimes did not take even the count of ten!

Pandemonium reigned around him, hysterical cries, a bedlam of noise; but he could see a little better now that his eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness. A furious struggle was going on a few feet away—the swaying forms of two men. One of them, of course, was Benny Malone. He could not tell one from the other; but, as he sprang forward in that direction, one of the two forms crashed with a heavy thud to the floor—and then he heard Benny's vicious challenge:

“Who's that?”

“It's all right,” Colin answered. “My guy's asleep.”

“Good boy!” approved Benny Malone hurriedly. “I had to plug mine with the butt. I guess there were only two, after all. Come on, beat it! I'll show you the way.”

But what the “way” was, Colin never knew—except that there were numerous doors and passages through which he was guided with Benny Malone's hand on his arm until they came out on an alleyway and from there, presently, reached Fifth Avenue. And then, turning down a cross street, Benny Malone spoke for the first time as he slowed his pace to a leisurely stroll.

“That was a swell piece of work you did tonight, kid,” he said enthusiastically. “And, take it from me, you ain't going to lose by it. You remember what I told you?”

“That's what I've been thinking about all along,” confessed Colin insinuatingly.

“Well, then, listen,” confided Benny Malone. “I'll let you in a little way on this so's you'll be able to watch your step, even if your back *was* turned until the lights went out and he didn't get a look at you anyhow.”

“Who didn't?” Colin inquired.

“The guy you plugged. His name’s Mulvey—Detective Sergeant Tim Mulvey of the Homicide Squad.”

Tim Mulvey! A prickly sensation ran up and down Colin’s spine. Tim Mulvey! Out of the night from somewhere a burst of ironic laughter seemed to be ringing in his ears. Tim Mulvey’s gun was in his pocket—and a man wanted for murder, for the Homicide Squad never wanted anyone for anything else, had got away! He dragged deeply on the cigarette he had just lighted.

“That’s okay by me,” he said, as he exhaled the smoke complacently through his nostrils. “But that Homicide bunch never shows up anywhere except for one thing. It looks like Harry had made the scam all right, but what about you? This Mulvey bird isn’t going to laugh about his pinch being queered, and he saw you, didn’t he?”

Benny Malone laughed contemptuously.

“Maybe yes, maybe no; but it was Harry he was after. He’s got nothing on me. If he makes a crack it’ll be a joke. Mistaken identity—get me? He doesn’t know me. I was over in Philly tonight—with the other boys who were at the party there to prove it. See?”

“Sure!” agreed Colin. “That’s easy.”

“It’ll be in the papers tomorrow,” said Benny Malone, “but I’ll wise you up now. Mulvey was after the Lynx and a fellow called Conk Eagan for a little shooting up at Nigger Joey’s about a year ago when a guy named French Pete was bumped off. The cops got Conk Eagan tonight, and he’s down at headquarters now getting the works.”

Outwardly calm, Colin’s brain was in riot. French Pete . . . The two men that Reddy had said were already known to him. . . . Two of the lesser breed. . . . Reddy had said their turn would come, but they were still *useful*, that it was the big noise he was after. . . . And now Detective Sergeant Mulvey was on their track. . . . How far had Tim Mulvey got? . . . Was it still only a case of the lesser breed? . . . Or what?

“That’s tough!” he deplored. “Who squealed?”

Benny Malone’s smile was unpleasant.

“An old geezer that saw the shooting and had it on his conscience, but didn’t dare make a spiel,” he said. “He got run over or something this afternoon, and just before he croaked in the hospital tonight he got it off his chest. Named the Lynx and Conk Eagan. See? That’s the way we got the

story when the tip was slipped to Harry that Mulvey had a dragnet out for him. Conk was pulled before anyone could put him wise, and Harry only got the tip a minute or two before he gave you the high sign. There's no better place for a getaway than Spinelli's if you know the tricks and Spinelli knows you, so we sat tight because we didn't want to leave Spinelli's unless we had to—never mind why—and, besides, Mulvey might miss that bet; but if he showed up it would be safer if I didn't have to play a lone hand. That's why you got a chance to ante. Understand?"

"I get you," said Clarkie Lunn with a crooked smile. "I'm nature-ray on that. But where do I go from here?"

Benny Malone halted on a corner.

"Don't you worry about that after tonight, kiddo. Got a telephone number?"

Colin gave it to him.

"All right," said Benny Malone. "You stick around tomorrow where you can listen to its merry chimes. I got to talk to someone first, and he's got to talk to someone else, but you'll hear from me. That okay?"

Colin nodded. He remembered what Reddy had said. The Mask, personally unknown to the numbers of his various mobs, worked through trusted lieutenants. The "someone" was a lieutenant, the "someone else" was almost certainly the Mask.

"You won't have to call me twice," he jerked out with an engaging grin. "I'll be listening in for you."

Benny Malone thrust out his hand.

"Take the air, then, before we get the once-over from the flat-foot on the beat," he said, as his grip tightened. "So long, Clarkie—till tomorrow."

Benny Malone strode away. Colin watched the other for an instant, then started to make his way back to his room. Swift as only thought is swift, theories and possibilities stabbed at his brain. But only one thing stood out clearly in his mind. Tim Mulvey, except for the fact that he now knew, through a death-bed statement, two of the lesser breed, was no nearer the Mask than he had ever been. And those two, even granting that Harry the Lynx was also caught, would take the rap. The code again. It ended there. None knew that better than Tim Mulvey himself. He, Colin, therefore, had in no way wrecked the big issue in blocking Detective Sergeant Mulvey's efforts to make an arrest. On the contrary, the crime he had unwittingly

committed of impeding justice plus an assault upon a personal friend, had, it seemed, through a resultant promised initiation into one of the Mask's gangs, at last definitely justified the creation of Clarkie Lunn—if Clarkie Lunn had wit enough and luck enough now to see it through!

What would tomorrow bring?

CHAPTER XIX

“ W. P. ”

IT was unbearably hot and muggy. Men and women, a heterogeneous hodgepodge of nationalities, seeking refuge from the furnace temperature of crowded, airless rooms, sat on the doorsteps of tenements and houses in scarcely less hot discomfort, mopping at their faces; the men coatless with bared necks and chests, the women in flimsy dishabille. Only the younger children seemingly had the energy to move—scantly clad, some frankly nude, they played in the gutters. The day had been one of blistering heat, and even now in the waning light the pavement still seemed to shimmer. The street, typical of so many another on the lower East Side, was gasping for its breath—listening eagerly to the low, but still far distant, rumbling of thunder that promised, if the storm did not fight shy of the city, at least some measure of temporary relief.

Colin, as he made his way along the street, walked slowly—not wholly on account of the heat. He was looking for a tobacco store that, according to the directions Benny Malone had given him, should be somewhere in this block. He flicked the ash from his cigarette jauntily—to help camouflage his own emotions. Could his mind never work in any but one groove? Could he never think except in the terms of one of his own thrillers? Well, all right! Why fight against it? If he ever wrote again, he should, if he but availed himself of it, be able to profit vastly by virtue of personal experience! Suppose he were writing this scene in which he was not only actually taking part, but in which he was even playing the leading rôle and holding center stage at this precise moment? Here was a situation. Would Clarkie Lunn walk along the street steel-nerved, icy cold in determination, unmoved, immune from even a flutter of emotion, contemptuous of the risk that was sometimes run incident to thrusting one's head into the lion's mouth; or would Clarkie Lunn experience a slightly hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach and a noticeably quicker tempo in his heart pound—as Colin Hewitt, none too courageously, was doing now?

Benny Malone had kept his word and had telephoned that morning. He, Colin, had been instructed to go to a certain uptown restaurant, Mariotte's,

to be exact, take lunch there alone at a table that he would find had been reserved for him, and then return to his room. He had obeyed. He had been under observation of course at the restaurant, that was obvious enough, but he did not know by whom or whether by one or many. Then, later on in the afternoon, Benny Malone had telephoned again, and this time had given him the street and number of a tobacco store where he, Colin, was to report at half-past seven that evening. If no other customer was in the store at the time, he had been instructed to ask for a package of W. P.'s—otherwise he was to make any purchase he liked that would serve as a pretext for his presence there and wait until he was alone with the proprietor.

Colin's lips compressed on the butt of his cigarette. A package of W. P.'s! The Wine Press! Cap à l'Orange had taught him that! This was more than the thin edge of the wedge—it looked like a wide-flung door with "Welcome" blazoned on the doormat. Or was it the old, old story of the spider and the fly?

It was nearly half-past seven now. He glanced around him. He was approaching an old, elongated, two-story frame building with dormer windows, a relic of New York's early days, that flanked a modern six-story tenement. It looked as though it had been made over into two houses—at least there were two entrances, one at either end—but, while the one nearer him boasted a narrow porch before its door, the one at the far end seemed to be that of a store, and, judging from the way the house and tenement numbers had been running, it obviously must be the tobacco store he was looking for. His glance, apparently casual, was suddenly critical, absorbing details. He was abreast of the porch now. An old, white-haired man, the only person in the neighborhood who, it would seem, did not feel the heat, for he wore a rusty black, shabby Prince Albert coat buttoned tightly around him, sat there on the porch in a rocking chair, a cane across his knees, intent upon a newspaper which he was reading through steel-rimmed spectacles that straggled far down his nose.

The man did not look up as Colin passed by. Colin did not alter his pace. A curious place, this! Besides the two entrances he had already noted, there was also a third one he now saw, in about the center of the building—a basement entrance from the sidewalk. This was wide open, and over the head of the doorway at the bottom of the steps there was a "Shoes to Mend" sign. The obvious questions flashed into his mind. If this was the Wine Press, was the cobbler down there a factor—also the old man on the porch?

He halted now in front of the store. The window display had a cheap appearance. White-painted lettering on the panes, the paint scarcely

discernible on many a letter, proclaimed the fact that one Michael Barney dealt in cigars, cigarettes, pipes, and tobacco. It was the store he was looking for undoubtedly—and through the window Colin could see that there was no one inside at the moment except a wizened little man with red hair who stood behind one of the counters.

Colin mounted the three steps from the sidewalk, opened the door, entered, and shut the door behind him. It was a small place. Prosperity did not seem to lurk in the seedy showcases or on the none too generously stocked shelves. There was a public telephone booth in one corner at the rear. Colin nodded pleasantly. The man with the red hair was looking at him inquiringly from across the counter.

“I’d like a package of W. P.’s,” Colin requested.

The man nodded in return.

“You’re Clarkie Lunn, ain’t you?”

“Yes,” said Colin.

“I’m Barney,” announced the other. “It’s all right. I’ve been looking for you.” He jerked his head in the direction of a door at the rear of the store beside the telephone booth. “Go on in there. First room you come to.”

“Thanks,” said Colin.

He crossed the store, opened the door indicated, and found himself in a narrow passageway. On his left was a closed-in staircase; just a few paces ahead, on his right, was an open door. He reached the latter and paused for an instant on the threshold. It was quite a sizable room—evidently Mr. Michael Barney’s “parlor.” Shabby genteel. Knickknacks and china ornaments in profusion, a worn carpet, chairs of the long ago, plush-upholstered, the plush faded and colorless, a horsehair sofa—and on the sofa, sprawled at full length, was Benny Malone.

“Hello, Clarkie!” Benny Malone called out with a grin. “We meet again. How’d’ye like your lunch?”

Colin grinned back.

“You’re all to the good, Benny. I was getting the once-over, eh?”

“Sure! I’ll say you were! But the gate’s wide open for you now. Sit down—but leave the door open. Some of the boys’ll be blowing in by and by. Sorry I can’t flash a drink”—he drooped an eyelid—“but this dump is on the level. Booze, cards, and skirts is ruled out. Mr. and Mrs. Barney are just a

quiet old pair—got a bedroom where they sleep, and a kitchen where they cook and eat, just behind here along the hall, and a couple of rooms upstairs just because they're there, that they rent sometimes to roomers. There ain't much dough in running a tobacco emporium in these parts. Poor but honest, get me? The pastor of their church comes around regular to see 'em—the cops gave that up long ago!"

Colin slumped down in a chair.

"You mean they're in the know?" he inquired.

Benny Malone laughed.

"What d'ye think! Just as much as I am—or you ever will be unless you get picked out for one of the Mask's big shots. They're undercover stuff."

The Mask! The name had dropped offhandedly, unexpectedly, from Benny Malone's lips. He, Colin, had talked to the man once before on a certain night about the Mask—but, on that occasion, on not what could be exactly described as confidential terms! How far was the trail to be blazed now so that even Clarkie Lunn could follow it?

He shook his head.

"Maybe I'm dumb," he admitted. "Who's the Mask?"

Benny Malone reared himself upright on the sofa and leaned toward Colin.

"Listen!" he, said. "There's something doing tonight; but, before that, there's a lot of things you've got to know. You've got to know the rules and regulations, and I'm here ahead of the others to give you the low-down. You got the okay today. You said you wanted it. Well, you're in. You're on the payroll now, and you get a bunch of kale every month besides a cut on every job that's pulled—so long as you don't hurt the feelings of any of the big boys. Which wouldn't be so good! I'd hate to see Clarkie Lunn come riding back from the country in a morgue wagon like I've seen some."

"I should worry about that!" declared Clarkie Lunn confidently. "Go on and spiel."

"All right," responded Benny Malone cheerfully. "Just keep your fingers crossed, that's all. What was I saying? Oh, yes. You wanted to know who the Mask is? Well, you'll have to ask me another. I don't know. None of us knows—except the big shots that he gives his orders to. And they ain't telling! I've never seen him, but he's always jake with the coin. All I know is that he runs a lot of mobs from this hangout, and that each mob has its

own big shot, and”—Benny Malone grinned suddenly—“here’s one of them now.”

Colin swung around in his chair. A man stood there in the doorway—a familiar figure. Colin, simulating mild interest while mentally he seemed to be suddenly upside down, reached nonchalantly into his pocket for a cigarette. It was Heimie Schwarm, the booze baron.

“Hello, Heimie,” said Benny Malone. “Meet Clarkie Lunn. He’s traveling with Buck from now on.”

Heimie Schwarm came forward into the room as Colin lunged up from his chair.

“Saw him with you last night, Benny,” said Heimie Schwarm genially; then, extending his hand to Colin: “Good boy! Too bad Harry got the bracelets after all.”

“What’s that?” rasped Benny Malone as he jumped up suddenly from the sofa. “When did you hear that?”

“About an hour ago.”

“Hell!” snarled Benny Malone. “Where did they make the pinch?”

“Pulled him off a train this afternoon just before he got to the border,” Heimie Schwarm answered unexcitedly. “He was making for somewhere up in Canada. I haven’t got the details yet. But don’t break your face scowling, Benny. It’ll cost something, but both Conk and Harry’ll be taken care of all right.”

“Maybe,” admitted Benny Malone sourly.

Heimie Schwarm laughed.

“You’ve seen it done before, haven’t you? You ought to know! Forget it! Has Buck come in yet? He said he’d be here.”

“I haven’t seen him. Maybe he’s upstairs.”

“He’s not there,” stated Heimie Schwarm. “I’ve just come down.”

“Well, then, he hasn’t come in yet.”

Heimie Schwarm pulled a sealed envelope from his pocket and handed it to Benny Malone.

“All right,” he said. “There’s too much doing tonight, and I can’t wait. Give him that. Tell him it’s the dope he wanted, and that I’ll have everything

ready for him. Understand?”

“Sure,” said Benny Malone. “Leave it to me. So long, Heimie.”

“So long,” returned Heimie Schwarm—and, with a nod to Colin, left the room.

“That’s tough about Harry!” said Benny Malone morosely as he dropped back on the sofa.

Colin sat down again.

“It sure is,” he agreed; “but I guess from what this fellow Heimie, that you just introduced me to, said, it’ll be fixed up without much trouble. And speaking of Harry, has Detective Sergeant Mulvey been nosing around for you today?”

Benny Malone permitted a grin to drive away his morose expression.

“Nothing doing!” he answered. “So it’s a cinch he didn’t get my number last night.”

“That’s good,” said Colin heartily. He paused for a drag on his cigarette; then apologetically: “Look here, I guess there’s a lot I’ve got to be wised up on. Who’s this Heimie—and what’s his other name? You didn’t mention it.”

“Schwarm,” said Benny Malone. “Heimie Schwarm. He’s a foam czar. Every bootlegger in town knows him. He runs the suds and hard-stuff racket for the Mask.”

Colin dragged again on his cigarette. His mind was probing swiftly, striving to bring order out of confusion. Last night at Spinelli’s—Dollaire and Heimie Schwarm together—Heimie Schwarm one of the Mask’s big shots—what was the Mask’s game? No answer—but not nice for Dollaire, whatever it was!

“I see,” he nodded. “And who’s Buck? You said something about me traveling with him from now on.”

“Buck O’Mara,” explained Benny Malone. “He’s the big shot of our mob—and a damned square shooter. You’ll like him.”

“I hope that’ll go double,” said Colin earnestly. “What’s our mob’s particular racket?”

It was growing dark. Benny Malone got up and switched on an electric light.

“Anything—everything,” he replied with a short laugh. “Wherever we’re needed. You’ll see. And you’ll get your first work-out tonight.”

“Well, then,” asked Colin complacently, “what’s doing tonight?”

Benny Malone shook his head.

“I don’t know—yet. We’ll get our orders from Buck. But never mind about that. I’ve got to finish giving you the low-down on this dump before he comes in. It used to be a pretty hot joint that was named the Wine Press—we call it W. P., get me? And it was all fixed up with passages and half a dozen ways to get in and out—playing the boobs for suckers, you understand? The boobs being the slumming parties that blew down from Fifth Avenue way looking for shivers and thrills and thinking they were naughty. That cobbler’s shop, which maybe you saw when you came along, used to be a grotto all got up fancy with low lights and a secret way out and a way into here—both of which same are still useful! Solly down there was one of the bunch that was giving you the once-over at lunch, and he’ll pass you in that way any time it’s necessary. He cobbles all right—see?—but that ain’t the way he makes his money.”

“It sounds swell!” Colin exclaimed eagerly. “Go on, Benny. Keep on shooting. It looks like the place had been made to order. How did the Mask get onto it?”

“Knew about it, I suppose, when it was running full blast back in the old days,” Benny Malone answered with a shrug of his shoulders. “That’s a long time ago—before the war, and before the booze law started making money for us. I guess there aren’t many even around here that remember the name it went by then. When the law came in against it, the people who were running the place kept on selling booze just the same until they got pinched enough times to make them quit cold. Then somebody else tried to run it on the level as a restaurant and it was a flop. It wasn’t good for anything the way it was. It was put up for sale, and I guess it went cheap—or else old Keppelstein would never have bought it! He made two houses out of it, but he didn’t spend any more on alterations than he had to, so he left this part a good deal like it was, except that he put in a store front at this end. He moved into the other part himself.”

“I saw an old bird sitting on the porch as I came along,” observed Colin. “Was that him?”

“If you saw anyone sitting on that porch,” said Benny Malone with a malicious grin, “it was old Keppelstein and nobody else, because he lives

there all by his lonesome, and he's too much of a miser to let anyone else sit in one of his chairs without paying for it!"

Colin looked puzzled.

"You don't mean that he's in on——"

"Him!" ejaculated Benny Malone. "Nix! He's as dirty a crook as there is in New York—but he ain't our kind of crook. He'd slap a court order on your false teeth if you owed him money. The only thing he's in on here is his rent—and he comes around to get it from Barney before breakfast the first of every month. He owns a lot of property and is worth a lot of money, but nobody ever knew him to blow any of it—even on himself! Some day, if he lives long enough, somebody'll bump him off. I'd take the job on myself and enjoy it. He put a widow and three kids that lived in a tenement he owns in the next block out on the street in a hell of a storm a couple of days ago. What do you know about that? But," Benny Malone admitted grudgingly, "he makes a hot blind for us here just the same."

"I get you," laughed Colin. "Say, I feel like a kid at school putting his hand up. What else have I got to learn?"

"How to get in and how to get out—and that you're never to come here unless you're sent for," returned Benny Malone. "And get that last good and hard, Clarkie! This ain't any clubhouse, and there ain't any loafing done around here. Mr. and Mrs. Barney are supposed to be respectable. See? Only the big shots like Buck O'Mara and Heimie Schwarm come here when they like, and sometimes when there's a big job on one or two of them sleep here—being the roomers I was telling you about that the Barneys sometimes take in. The rest of us maybe aren't here more'n once a week, and sometimes not for two or three weeks—only when we're wanted. And when *you're* wanted you'll get a card with W. P. on it and the hour, or else the same thing over the phone. Savvy?"

Colin licked his lips greedily.

"I'm sucking it in," he said.

"Well, then," said Benny Malone, "listen to the last shout. If you have to show up here in daylight use the store, or else go down and see if Solly's got your shoes mended yet. Switch about, shuffle your cards—see? If it's dark there's another way in. Duck into the alleyway alongside here and then around into the lane. There's a door there that opens off this lower hall. It's got a latch. Lift the latch and you'll find the head of a nail—only it's a push button. Push it once, wait a second, then push it twice—two quick ones—

and one of the Barneys will let you in. There's another door there, a little farther away from the alleyway, but don't monkey with that. It leads to the back stairs, and the big shots are the only ones that have got keys to it. There ain't anything else that——”

A form bulked suddenly in the doorway and a man came into the room. Benny Malone, as master of ceremonies, performed the introduction. The man's name was Klengell. At intervals of some few minutes two more men appeared—stocky chaps like the first, with weather-beaten faces. Again Benny Malone went through the rites. The latest comers answered respectively to the names of Smudge Kilrea and Geordie Napp.

“Heimie Schwarm's right-handers,” Benny Malone announced for Colin's benefit. “Clarkie here is a new one. Any more to come?”

No one in particular being addressed, the man who had been introduced as Smudge Kilrea answered.

“Nope!” he said. “Three of the fleet'll be all that's needed. But where's Buck?”

“Here!” said a voice curtly from the doorway.

Colin looked up. A sandy-haired man, with thick, bushy, sandy eyebrows, and a tight, determined mouth, met his gaze—and the mouth suddenly relaxed into a not unpleasant smile.

“Hello, Clarkie,” Buck O'Mara flung out. “I hear you've joined up. We'll get to know each other better.” He looked around the room. “All set, eh?—except that I haven't heard from Heimie. Do any of you know whether he's been in?”

Benny Malone dragged from his pocket the envelope that Heimie Schwarm had given him.

“Heimie was here a little while ago,” he said. “He told me he couldn't wait, but that this was the dope you wanted and I was to give it to you.”

Buck O'Mara tore the envelope open, extracted a sheet of paper, and studied the latter attentively for a full minute—then he broke into a grim laugh.

“Some boy, Heimie!” he exclaimed. “It looks like the goods to me—but you three birds ought to know. What do you say?”

He handed the sheet of paper to Smudge Kilrea, who studied it in turn, while Klengell and Geordie Napp peered over Kilrea's shoulder.

“Okay by me,” stated Smudge Kilrea tersely. “A blind man could find it.”

“Same here,” said Klengell.

“Me too,” said Geordie Napp.

“All right, then,” said Buck O’Mara briskly. “Scatter! The rest is all fixed. We’ll be right on your tails. And tomorrow night show up here around ten, you three—I’ll be here and there’ll be a cut for you to take to the boys no matter what happens tonight.”

The three men left the room.

Buck O’Mara turned to Colin.

“Ever read the papers, Clarkie?” he inquired abruptly.

“Parts of ’em,” Colin admitted with a grin; “but I pass up the eye-wash and the noise the menagerie that’s in politics makes.”

“Ever read about a mob a few weeks ago that was doing a nice quiet little business down on the St. Lawrence turning out the queer?”

Colin’s face was instantly intent.

“Sure!” he said. “Everybody’s read about that. Somebody muscled in and put two of ’em on the spot.”

Buck O’Mara barked out a laugh.

“And then some!” he said thinly. “The papers don’t know it all. Besides the two, there was another one that got a hide full of lead and had a tough break between trying to get well and keeping under cover at the same time. And also there ain’t any nice little business down there any more.”

There was only one man that Buck O’Mara could be talking about—Lazarre. Lazarre had pulled through and was alive, then! Colin rummaged for a match as he hung a fresh cigarette on his lip.

He stared inquiringly, a little bewilderedly, at Buck O’Mara.

“I’m not sure I get you,” he said. “What are you asking me if I’d read about that for?”

And then Buck O’Mara laughed again.

“Why? Well, just because the guys that got the works happened to be friends of ours, that’s all—and we happen to know who did it. I thought you’d like to know that anyone you use your rod on tonight—and you’ll

have plenty of use for it—is only getting what he asked for. Come on, let's go.”

CHAPTER XX

DOLLAIRE

THE storm, though still hesitant, was as threatening as ever. The banked clouds, with no sign of moon or stars, were like a dead black ceiling overhead. There was a slight sea on, but not enough to impede progress—the boat was making near to thirty knots. To port and to starboard, one on either side, were the dark shapes of two other boats, running without lights, and mostly discernible by reason of the flying spray flung from their bows as they cleaved through the water.

Colin stood in the shelter of the wheelhouse out of the sweep of the wind—the only superstructure that the craft possessed. There was a small cabin aft below deck where some seven or eight men were gathered—several of whom had been engaged in assembling a number of sub-machine guns, while the rest, with blasphemous and obscene comments, looked on. It had been stuffy and hot in the cabin—and something about it, a foulness not merely of fetid air, had driven him on deck.

His face was hard and set. He was in a situation that revolted him in every fiber of his being, that turned his heart sick with dread—but from which there was no escape. As Benny Malone had said: “You got the okay today. You said you wanted it. Well, you’re in. You’re on the payroll now.” It was quite true. He had asked for it—and he had got it. Where had he expected Clarkie Lunn to draw the line? Nowhere—if he harbored any hope of running down the Mask! Well, the end justified the means, didn’t it? His hands tightened, clenched. He was not so sure. For the moment he was mentally off balance. Tonight it was murder and pillage—wholesale murder—human slaughter—at thought of which his soul retched. And tonight he was sailing under the Mask’s colors, one of Buck O’Mara’s mob, one of those that Reddy had termed the “little murder organization” that the Mask always kept on tap.

They, Buck O’Mara, Benny Malone, and himself, had picked up a waiting car a block away from the Wine Press, and had driven to somewhere on Long Island—just where, he did not know. There a small army of men had embarked, and these three fast motor cruisers had put to sea. That had

been considerably less than an hour ago, but in that time, both through the talk that had gone on around him, and because Buck O'Mara, once well started on his way, had been more communicative, he had acquired a very sure and certain knowledge of what was afoot. He did not like it—and with every minute that passed, bringing the end that much nearer, he liked it less.

This wheelhouse against which he leaned was steel, bullet-proof out of compliment to the marksmanship of any revenue boat that might at any time be inquisitive enough and inconsiderate enough to stage a pursuit. A rum-running craft—like those others to port and starboard. A part of Heimie Schwarm's flotilla. Ahead, somewhere out there in the darkness beyond the twelve-mile limit, was Dollaire—Dollaire and his crew, and his schooner, the *Alouette*. And tonight Dollaire would pay. As it had been at the Cascade River, so it would be here—the hi-jacking of Dollaire's illicit stock-in-trade through a cold-blooded, murderous attack upon him. A repayment in Dollaire's own coin! Only in this case neither Dollaire nor any one of his men would escape. A massacre—and the men down there in the cabin, fingering sub-machine guns, had licked their lips and blasphemed in glee at the thought of it!

There had been no thought of putting Dollaire on the spot at Spinelli's last night. That would have been, it now seemed, neither subtle enough nor, in retribution, adequate enough to quench the Mask's thirst for revenge. Benny Malone and Harry the Lynx had been detailed there, not to watch Dollaire, but as body-guards for Heimie Schwarm—and Heimie Schwarm had been there to bait the trap that would write a gory finis to the careers of Dollaire and his entire crew. Heimie Schwarm, haggling patiently and craftily, had at last agreed to Dollaire's greedy and somewhat exorbitant price for the *Alouette's* cargo; and Dollaire had fixed a rendezvous—given Heimie Schwarm a position out here where the schooner would be waiting at ten o'clock tonight—the position that Buck O'Mara in turn had handed on to Klengell, Smudge Kilrea, and Geordie Napp, the skippers of the three boats that were speeding abreast of one another now in eager haste to keep the last rendezvous that Dollaire would ever make.

It must be almost ten o'clock now. At the speed the boats were traveling, it could not take long for them to reach their objective unless the *Alouette* was at some considerable distance up or down the coast from the point of their departure—which was not likely. Colin drew his hand across his forehead. It came away wet—not with spray. The other two boats, carrying Heimie Schwarm's experienced rum-runners, were to look after the disposal of the *Alouette's* cargo and the schooner itself; this boat that he was on

carried the Mask's murder squad, *of which he was one*, with Buck O'Mara in command.

The businesslike, snub-nosed automatic with which he had been supplied bulged in his pocket. The job of Buck O'Mara's mob had nothing to do with the disposal of the cargo—their job was merely to put Dollaire and all his crew on the spot and then return to shore. Hideous—even if it were by way of retaliation!

Dollaire, suspecting nothing, would be taken by surprise, and he and his men mowed down. And he, Colin, must appear to take an active part in the killings. There was no way out of that. No bullet of his, of course, would find its mark anywhere; but if he were caught at that sort of thing, or the slightest suspicion was aroused that he was playing a passive rôle, his life would not be worth a second's purchase.

But then, sooner or later, his life was forfeit anyway unless he could uncover the Mask's identity and force out into the open this little-less-than fiend, who more and more continued, it appeared, to grow and acquire the stature of what might well be the most ruthless, versatile, and powerful criminal of his time. The stakes were heavy. Thoughts of Germaine came to him. He was fighting not only for his own life but for Germaine's happiness as well. His all was on the table. He shrugged his shoulders fatalistically. There was no turning back now. It was the toss of a coin. But he had come a long way on the road. Heimie Schwarm and Buck O'Mara, it was certain, were both at times in direct contact with the Mask—and he, Colin, was now in Buck O'Mara's mob. Heimie Schwarm was remote; it was Buck O'Mara's confidence that he had to win, and Buck O'Mara that he had to watch. That was why he was here. He smiled without mirth. Misgivings and fears were the human lot and came unbidden, but why subject himself to this mental torment? It was useless, purposeless—even if it was human to do so. He had chosen his course deliberately, there had seemed to be no other way, and, whatever happened tonight, he must perforce go through with it—to the end.

He drove his mind afield. More had been said about Lazarre and the "members" of the club who had taken flight on the night of Dollaire's attack. They were still in hiding, still under cover, and New York knew them not! The identification of Kenniston, their roué millionaire leader, had been awkward—Kenniston's life was still being subjected to a searching investigation, as were the lives of all those who, so far as the police could discover, had ever been associated with him. And since the uttering of counterfeit money was a matter that automatically involved the federal

authorities, the Secret Service was in the forefront of the picture. Lazarre's name had not actually been mentioned, but through inference, a reference to the man who had got a "hide full of lead," it was apparent that Lazarre had entirely recovered, and, like the others, was still in hiding. Colin smiled queerly. So, after all, he had saved Lazarre's life. He was glad in a purely humanitarian sense that his efforts had not been in vain; but in a material sense it mattered little now whether Lazarre was dead or alive. Instead of Lazarre there was now Buck O'Mara. Probably from the start, Lazarre, even if Lazarre had been willing, could have helped but little. He rated Lazarre as being perhaps of the same status and on the same plane amongst the Mask's tools as Benny Malone—quite a different status from that of Buck O'Mara or Heimie Schwarm. And yet Reddy's letter, though still undelivered, had proved to be by a strange twist of fate the "open sesame" to the Mask's operating headquarters at the Wine Press, and to whatever measure of Buck O'Mara's confidence he already possessed. If it had not been for that letter he would never have gone to Cap à l'Orage; if he had not gone to Cap à l'Orage he would never have heard of Dollaire. And, if he had never heard of Dollaire, he would not have gone to Spinelli's last night; and—— The trail led on, blazed by that letter, to where he stood at this moment, an initiate into one of the Mask's mobs. Nevertheless, though it had now outlived its usefulness so far as he was concerned, he wondered, as he always had, what was in that letter. Some day perhaps he would meet Lazarre again and deliver the letter—and perhaps not. And perhaps Lazarre would explain the nature of his liaison with Reddy—and perhaps not. It mattered little now. Lazarre was no longer needed, and could no longer be of any help.

Again his mental scene shifted. Buck O'Mara and Benny Malone had talked about Spinelli. Spinelli was on the payroll too. Detective Sergeant Mulvey might prove to be altogether too curious as to the way in which Harry the Lynx had left the night club whose obvious exits might well have been closely guarded—to say nothing of the fact that the lights had so fortuitously gone out almost instantly at the sound of those shots! The subject had been introduced casually, dismissed casually. A possibility, that was all. No SOS had come from Spinelli, so everything was apparently jake so far. Why worry about it? Spinelli would be given "protection" if necessary. Colin cupped his hands over a match and lighted a cigarette. A side issue that concerned him little—no bearing on the main issue.

He stepped out from behind the wheelhouse and moved over to the boat's rail. Someone was leaving the wheelhouse. Benny Malone. Buck O'Mara was still in there with Smudge Kilrea at the wheel.

“Oh, hello, Clarkie!” said Benny Malone as he stepped over to Colin’s side. “I was just going to hunt you up. Buck wants a couple of us to go aboard with him and have a little social visit with Dollaire before the boys get busy—get the idea?—so’s Dollaire won’t turn his toes up without knowing what it’s all about. That would be just too bad! I said I’d pick you to help play the hand, seeing that you didn’t miss any tricks last night, and Buck said that was okay by him.”

“Sure!” agreed Colin enthusiastically.

“You just look innocent,” cautioned Benny Malone, “until Buck gives us the high sign to flash our rods. Dollaire’s schooner ain’t showing any lights, but Smudge has just picked her up out there. We’ll be alongside in a few minutes. You just hang around here, and then trail along with Buck and me. Understand?”

“Sure!” said Colin enthusiastically again. “Thanks a lot, Benny, for a ringside seat.”

Out of the darkness Benny Malone’s features grinned in friendly fashion.

“It was coming to you, Clarkie,” he said. “You made good. Now I got to check up with the boys down in the cabin and hear ’em recite their lessons the way Buck doped it out for them. I won’t be long.”

He moved away—heading aft at a half-run.

Colin swallowed hard. Bad as it had looked before—this was worse. Dollaire’s executioner! Or co-executioner with Benny Malone!

He stared out into the blackness ahead. Something out there was taking shape. He felt the boat’s speed slacken, the vibration cease as the engine was shut off. A hail came across the water. Buck O’Mara stepped out of the wheelhouse and answered it, using his hands as a megaphone.

“That you, Dollaire!” he bawled. “This is Heimie Schwarm’s outfit.”

“Sure it’s me, by cripes!” the voice answered. “Come alongside. The *bon Dieu* could not have given us a better night, eh?”

“Attaboy!” Buck O’Mara called back heartily.

The boats maneuvered—bumped against the schooner’s hull and were made fast. Colin brushed his hand across his eyes. His mental processes blurred his vision. It was all strangely indistinct—and yet it was all horribly real. He found himself mounting a short rope ladder on the heels of Buck O’Mara and Benny Malone. There were no lights showing anywhere; but,

his eyes grown accustomed to the darkness, he could see, as he reached the deck, a dozen or more forms leaning over the schooner's rail—while a chatter of voices, as bantered greetings were exchanged between the crew on the deck and the boats below, resounded discordantly in his ears.

Buck O'Mara was shaking hands with someone—and then Colin heard Buck O'Mara speak:

"I'm Buck O'Mara. Heimie sent me. You're Dollaire, of course. Glad to know you."

"Me? Sure, I'm Dollaire!" There was a tinge of boastfulness in the other's voice. "So Heimie, he's not here, eh? He said maybe he'd come out."

"Heimie—out here!" Buck O'Mara laughed derisively. "He must have been corned to the eyes if he said that. He doesn't take any chances of getting his feet wet, or getting peppered by the revenue boys any more. He don't have to. Heimie's big business now and nothing else."

"Well, me," said Dollaire, "I don't give a damn about that. But maybe he sent something else besides you, eh? That was the bargain. What you call it?—spot cash before a case she's go over the side. Yes?"

"I've got it here." Buck O'Mara patted his pocket. "I suppose you'll want to count it. If you do, we'd better go down to your cabin, hadn't we? You can't count it in the dark."

"You bet you I want to count it," Dollaire asserted bluntly. "Do you think, me, I am foolish? Heimie, maybe he is all right, but the money, she is talk."

"Got your fingers crossed, eh?" Buck O'Mara inquired jestingly. "Well, lead on. We're wasting time. The boys'll probably have to make more than one trip tonight to land everything that Heimie said you told him was aboard. And, say, Dollaire, that goes the other way too—we're counting the cases as we get them. Fair enough, eh?"

"That part, she's all right," grunted Dollaire. "Come on!"

Dollaire, followed by Buck O'Mara with Benny Malone and Colin trailing behind, led the way aft.

Benny Malone's elbow prodded Colin's side.

"Keep your rod handy," whispered Benny Malone. "You're going to see something, Clarkie, take it from me—you're going to see that big stiff down on his knees and the sweat pouring out of him like he was a hydrant. And

when they hear a shot from the cabin the boys'll pile aboard and mop up the rest."

But the sweat at the moment was on Colin's brow—not on Dollaire's. In the darkness he wiped it away with a sweep of his sleeve. His feet seemed unsteady—perhaps it was the rise and fall of the deck as the vessel rode the swells. The chattering voices around him became the screams and yells and shrieks of doomed men—the forms he saw lining the rail and the figures that flitted here and there about the deck were but wraiths returned to gibber and haunt the schooner, which once, in their earthly existence, had been their habitat. He remembered the St. Valentine massacre. He felt physically ill. He would never write this sort of stuff again. Reddy had been a thousand times right in saying that, in substance, imagination was but a ghastly mockery of the actual and the real. And there was no single thing that he could do, no warning he could give that would have any effect other than to precipitate the impending holocaust and bring about his own destruction as well.

"That goes by me!" Unbelievably it was his own voice speaking—callously—with even a jeer in it. "It's coming to him, isn't it?"

"Clarkie," said Benny Malone open-heartedly, "you're the real goods. I wish you and me had met up before. Now watch your step, or you'll bust your neck."

The advice was not ill-timed. The descent to the cabin was by way of a short, steep, ladder-like companionway. Colin, bringing up the rear, negotiated it—and stood in the cabin itself.

He flung a swift, comprehensive glance around him.

The cabin was not elaborate, nor was it large. Running fore and aft, a bunk was on one side, a settee of sorts, with torn covering, on the other. A swinging oil lamp, lighted, hung low over a table in the center. A small safe stood against the after bulkhead. There were two chairs, one on each side of the table—and, flanking the companionway, a locker, whose top appeared to be a catch-all for everything from nautical instruments and charts to bottles and glasses.

Dollaire waved his hand toward the locker.

"Help yourselves," he invited with a grin; "and then you tell Heimie how many bottles he can make out of one, with the kick she's still there! By gar! Me, sometimes I think I will do that like you fellows before I leave St. Pierre."

“Thanks!” said Buck O’Mara—and, pouring out a stiff portion, downed it at a gulp.

Benny Malone did likewise.

The bottle was steady in Colin’s hand as he poured for himself. Queer! They were going to kill Dollaire in here. And his, Colin’s, hand was steady. The fiery three-fingers was like so much water.

Dollaire took one of the chairs. Buck O’Mara took the other, facing Dollaire across the table. Colin, obedient to a nudge, slumped down beside Benny Malone on the settee behind Buck O’Mara. Benny Malone’s hand was thrust negligently into the side pocket of his coat. Dollaire was in full view from the settee.

Buck O’Mara tossed a rubber-banded pile of crisp new bills down on the table in front of Dollaire.

“Here’s the dough,” he said. “Go ahead and count it.”

Dollaire reached for the money greedily, ripped off the rubber band, and began to count. He counted laboriously, steadily, wetting his forefinger on his tongue. At the end he snapped the rubber band back into place around the bills.

“She’s right!” he announced. “And Heimie, he’s all right, too. I put this in the safe. Yes? Then we all have another little drink, eh?”

“I’m glad you’re satisfied”—there was a purr in Buck O’Mara’s voice. “We wouldn’t like you to feel when you’re sitting in with our outfit that we’d hold anything out on you, or that you’re not getting all that’s coming to you.”

“Sure, I’m satisfy,” grinned Dollaire as he stood up, moved over to the safe and swung its door open. “Sure, I’m satisfy! I’m satisfy”—he swung suddenly around, a revolver in his hand, his face working with fury, his voice a snarl—“I’m satisfy, by God, it is a trick. You move—one of you three—and I shoot. This money—I got lots like this. I know where she come from. She’s counterfeit.”

CHAPTER XXI

THE SIGNAL

No one moved. The metamorphosis had been dynamic, almost instantaneous. In the fraction of a second, Dollaire, the condemned, had become Dollaire, the potential executioner. Dollaire, behind that ugly, unwavering muzzle, held the whip hand—and Dollaire would not have the slightest qualm about using it.

And then Buck O'Mara spoke.

“Aw, snap out of it!” he retorted coolly, contemptuously. “You sound like you’d got a leak in your dome cover. If you think there’s anything phony about that dough, slip it back to me quick, boy, for, say, I can use it, believe me! Counterfeit hell! It’s so good it’s worth a rake-off where you come from anyhow. What’s the matter with you? Have you gone crazy—or what?”

It was a volte-face—and Colin, listening, as he stared at the revolver muzzle in Dollaire’s hand, did not need to be told that Buck O'Mara had no other chance, no other play to make. Counterfeit money! So that was it. It seemed as though he could see again Dollaire’s attack upon the club. It seemed as though he could hear, from out of nowhere, the Mask’s burst of laughter as he had conceived this ironic bit of by-play. But now? Buck O'Mara had perhaps not expected that the spurious money would be recognized at once, and possibly not at all; in which latter case, he had obviously intended, as part of the baiting of Dollaire, to taunt the man with it in the end. On the other hand, should Dollaire recognize it of his own accord, O'Mara had undoubtedly expected some sign of such recognition, and had been prepared to act accordingly the moment Dollaire appeared to be aware that the bills he was handling were twins to those that had been hijacked by himself from the Cascade River. Natural enough. But Dollaire had given no such sign. Buck O'Mara was certainly no man’s fool, and was undoubtedly resourceful enough himself as he was proving now, but he could not have known of, and therefore had not counted on, Dollaire’s outstanding trait. Cunning! Christophe’s words that night on the Cascade River swept through Colin’s mind: “*Cré nom*, you can trust Dollaire. You

will see! Me, Christophe, I am telling you. He has the cunning of a fox, that boy!”

Dollaire was rocking on his feet, his face was contorted, his beetle brows a straight line, his jaw outthrust, his eyes like black, luminous pinpoints glinting through narrowed lids.

“So!” he flung out through twisted lips. “You think you fool me some more, eh? You think you make a monkey of Dollaire? So! I see the whole business now. You are friends with those fellows at the Rivière des Cascades, eh?—and that Heimie Schwarm is a *sacré maudit* rat! You come out here to laugh at Dollaire, and steal his cargo, eh? But you do not know Dollaire. No! I will show you what Dollaire does to”—he broke into a torrent of vile French epithets—“*cochons* like you!”

Buck O’Mara shrugged his shoulders as Dollaire, with pointed gun, backed to the companionway.

“You’re all wet, Dollaire,” he said as patiently as though he were talking to a refractory child. “I don’t know what you’re yapping about. Better put that rod down, and come back here and talk it over.”

Dollaire had backed nearly to the top of the companionway. He laughed now in a low, ugly way as, halting, he patted his revolver with his free hand.

“I talk with this now,” he jeered through working lips. “Maybe once you go to church, eh? Maybe you remember some little prayer, eh? Well, for me, I do not think about that any more, but I have the good heart. I give you one minute, and then I count—not that nice fresh money—but one, two, three dead *chiens de l’enfer* on the floor.”

Dollaire meant it—of that there was no doubt in Colin’s mind. Dollaire was in a maniacal rage—and Dollaire had the drop on them. Well, it was merely what Buck O’Mara had intended to do to Dollaire! The end? Colin was conscious of strange mingling sensations and thoughts rushing in a flood upon him that he could not analyze. Bewilderment? Fear? Numbed resignation? He saw Germaine—and she smiled wistfully at him. He was alive, full of vitality at this instant—what would death be like the next? The muzzle of Dollaire’s revolver was like a magnet from which one’s eyes could not be dragged away. Would one both see the flash and hear the report? Which of the two, light or sound, traveled the faster? Was there——

He heard Buck O’Mara speaking again—but there was something sharp, imperative in O’Mara’s voice now:

“Listen to me, Dollaire. You’ve got a gun on us, so I’ll come across. That money’s phony all right, and we had it in for you for what you did to some of our boys down the river, but you’re not so hot even now. You don’t get out of this unless I say so; but, as it stands, if you want a rain check on your own life I’ll give it to you now, and we’ll call it all off for tonight. A shot fired down here’ll mean just one thing. It’ll be the signal my mob is waiting for to come aboard and clean you up. If any of us three go out, you’ll go out too. Don’t kid yourself about that. But we’re willing to walk out of here to the boats with our hands up and push off. What do you say? I’m not bluffing. I’m showing you my cards face up on the table. A royal straight flush, Dollaire. Take a look at it!”

Colin’s brain was in riot as Dollaire stood there glaring, licking hungrily now at his lips. Would Buck O’Mara get away with this? Buck O’Mara was lying, of course—not as to what would follow on the heels of a shot being fired down here, for that was true, but as to the bargain he was offering Dollaire. He had not the slightest intention of keeping his share of that bargain, even if Dollaire agreed—he was merely seizing upon what seemed to offer the only chance to escape from the immediate peril in which he himself stood. No matter what happened here in the cabin, neither Dollaire nor one of his crew would escape with their lives tonight. That was certain. But would Dollaire fall for this? It meant his, Colin’s, life too. Would Dollaire——

“Bah!” jerked out Dollaire. “I take a look—and I laugh. It is like the money, your cards—they come from the same place! You got some boys on them boats, and they come out to fight, and steal my *Alouette*, eh? Well, me, I got big crew that fight plenty good. Dam’! I show you! I show you three of the *sacrés voleurs* that do not give my boys much trouble. I finish with you first. When I shoot that is the signal, eh? Well, my fellows they hear that quick like hell, too. So”—he grinned ferociously—“I give that signal—like this!”

There was a flash—and the roar of the report in the confined space dinned in Colin’s ears. He was conscious that Buck O’Mara, anticipating the shot by a split second, had flung himself out of his chair to the floor. But neither Benny Malone nor himself had been so prescient. Another crash—another report. What sounded like a deep sigh came from Benny Malone. Seconds that seemed to span eternity! Dollaire, like some great ape, was crouched there on the topmost step of the companionway, still firing down into the lighted cabin. There was one chance, only one. Colin flung himself

from the settee, leaped for the low-hung lamp that was scarcely two yards away, and brought it smashing down, a shattered thing upon the table.

The cabin was in darkness.

“Good boy!” Buck O’Mara’s voice called out—and from the floor came the flash now of Buck O’Mara’s gun.

But the companionway was empty now. The slam of the cabin door proclaimed the fact that Dollaire was gone.

There was a stinging sensation in Colin’s left forearm—like the sting of a burn. Strange! He heard Buck O’Mara groping, stumbling up the companionway, then the rattle of the cabin door as it was shaken viciously; then Buck O’Mara’s snarl:

“Locked! You, there—Benny!”

There was no answer.

“What’s the matter?” demanded Buck O’Mara sharply. “Strike a match, Clarkie, and see what’s wrong with him.”

Colin obeyed. Benny Malone was still on the settee, only he was slumped there now with his head sagging to one side. Colin crossed to the settee and bent over the other while the match burned itself out.

“Well, what about it?” Buck O’Mara rapped out. “Is he hurt bad?”

Colin felt his lips twitch as he answered.

“He’s got his,” he said tersely.

Buck O’Mara, lighting a match in turn, came down the companionway into the cabin.

“That’s a tough break!” he exclaimed with a bitter oath. “Benny was one of the best of them. But if there’s any knowing anything where he’s gone, he’ll know that he’s the last man Dollaire will ever put on the spot, which would help some. You hurt?”

“No,” said Colin; “nothing to talk about. Got a little graze on the arm, maybe, but that’s all. How about you?”

“I’m all right,” Buck O’Mara replied gruffly. “But you didn’t get that lamp out any too soon. The last slug hit the floor about an inch from my head. Thanks, Clarkie.”

“Aw,” said Clarkie Lunn modestly, “that was nothing, Buck.”

And then Buck O'Mara laughed out in ugly jubilation.

"It won't take long!" he promised grimly. "The boys'll let us out in a minute or two. Listen!"

But Colin had already been listening. Almost from the moment Dollaire had slammed the cabin door he had been subconsciously aware, while he had been primarily occupied with Buck O'Mara and the dead man on the settee, of a medley of ominous sounds from the deck above. He gave his whole attention to them now. They were the muffled sounds of shrieks, and yells, and curses, and whimpering cries—and an almost constant rat-tat-tat like the muffled roll of snare drums. But the sounds were growing momentarily fainter, and presently, as he listened, they died away.

And then the cabin door opened, and a lantern showed at the head of the companionway.

"You down there, Buck?" a voice called out.

"Yes," Buck O'Mara answered. "Who's that?"

"Smudge Kilrea. Come on up."

Colin followed Buck O'Mara to the deck. Three men stood there in the lantern light—Smudge Kilrea, Klengell, and Geordie Napp. Instinctively Colin's glance traveled around the deck. A few lanterns glimmered at various points, but the comparative darkness was merciful. Here and there he could discern sprawled shapes. He did not look again. He did not want to see more.

"Well?" demanded Buck O'Mara curtly. "What's the tally?"

"All of them," grinned Smudge Kilrea, "and none of us."

"You're sure you got Dollaire?"

"Every one, I tell you. Sure, we got Dollaire! He's over there if you want to take a look at him. We got him about the first. He was an easy mark bellowing around like a bull. But how'd he make his getaway from the cabin?"

Buck O'Mara lighted a cigarette meditatively.

"He got his gun on a neat play," he said quietly; "I'll give him credit for that—and he got Benny."

"The hell he did!" Geordie Napp sucked in his breath. "That's——"

“Yes; it *is!*” Buck O’Mara broke in, his voice gone suddenly hard. “Only I don’t want to talk about it. You fellows got your orders from Heimie for the rest of the night?”

“Sure,” said Klengell. “We know where the revenue birds are tonight, so that’s jake. We’ve got time enough before daylight to get the goods off. Then we put the crew to bed in the hold with the hatches on and sink the schooner.” He chuckled. “Ever hear of ships being lost at sea with all hands, and never heard of no more?”

“All right,” said Buck O’Mara tersely. “That’s your and Heimie’s end of it. Remember what I told you about tomorrow night. There’ll be a juicy cut in this for all of us. The Mask’ll pay bigger for tonight than he ever did before even if there ain’t a case landed. That’s all just velvet. It was Dollaire he was after—and we all know why. Smudge, get my mob together, and take us ashore.”

“That listens good to me,” said Geordie Napp. “But, say, Buck, what about Benny? What are we going to do with Benny? He sure was one swell guy, and he deserves a swell funeral.”

Buck O’Mara lifted his shoulders in an impotent shrug.

“A parade, you mean,” he said, “with the papers asking where the corpse was found and who did it? Think it out for yourself, Geordie. I don’t like it any more than you do, but he’ll have to go with the rest.”

“By God, that’s tough,” muttered Geordie Napp; “but—well, I guess you’re right, Buck.”

“It isn’t a guess,” said Buck O’Mara. “Good luck, you fellows. Let’s scam, Smudge. Come on, Clarkie.”

Blood was trickling hotly down Colin’s hand as he boarded the motor cruiser. He saw Buck O’Mara and Smudge Kilrea enter the wheelhouse, then he made his way down into the cabin, where the rest of Buck O’Mara’s murder squad were gathered. He took off his coat and rolled up a blood-soaked sleeve. It was a flesh wound, no more than that—nothing serious about it except that it had been bleeding profusely. Some of the mob put a rough bandage on for him. They asked no questions. This time he felt physically a little giddy, a little nauseated. He went up on deck again.

The boat was speeding for the shore. The wind whipped his face. The faintness passed. There was but little pain in his arm—scarcely enough to make him conscious of it. It was not his arm, it was his brain that tortured him. And, fight against it as he would, the night with its scenes and sounds

of unbelievable horror kept passing again and again in review before him. Only one thing stood out in compensation. He must inevitably have grown in Buck O'Mara's estimation—and Buck O'Mara was the one man now on whom he was depending to bring him into contact with the Mask. How, or where, he did not know; but at any cost, or through any means he could devise, he must cultivate Buck O'Mara. Benny Malone . . . Dollaire . . . the cabin . . . the muffled screams—the cycle over again. The cycle over and over again.

A wharf showed up out of the darkness; a house, still more shadowy, loomed up beyond. And then a light appeared suddenly in one of the windows of the house—and went out again.

Buck O'Mara came out of the wheelhouse as the boat drew up to the wharf.

"You go back in the same car you came in with me, Clarkie," he said. "I'll drop you somewhere in the city. Stick around."

"Thanks," said Clarkie gratefully.

The mob debarked, and Buck O'Mara dismissed them at the shore end of the wharf.

"Wait here for me, Clarkie," he instructed. "I've got to go up to the house for a minute."

In the blackness Colin could see little—only the vague outlines of the wharf and house. He heard several cars depart. He heard the motor cruiser start away again—to assist the other two boats presumably in emptying the *Alouette's* hold. Perhaps ten minutes passed, then Buck O'Mara came toward him through the shadows. Buck O'Mara was grumbling and cursing audibly to himself.

"Anything wrong, Buck?" Colin inquired solicitously.

"Yes," growled Buck O'Mara. "You heard Benny and me talking about Spinelli, didn't you? Well, he's in a jam all right. He's got to have some kale tonight for his fixer. It's Heimie's racket, but nobody's been able to connect with him, so I guess I'll have to take it on—and it looks like you weren't through with your job yet tonight either."

"That's all right by me," declared Colin cheerfully. "What do you want me to do, Buck?"

"Oh, not so much, at that," replied Buck O'Mara; "but I was just thinking that you'd fill the bill okay. You've got the entrée to Spinelli's, and

none of the dicks knows you. See? I guess there's enough kale at W. P. in the emergency safe to see Spinelli through for a starter. I'll take you there and get it, and then you hop over to Spinelli with it. You ought to make it by one o'clock, and then you can beat it home to bed."

"Say, that's easy!" exclaimed Clarkie Lunn heartily. "I thought you were going to ask me to do something. Sure, I will, Buck!"

"All right, then," returned Buck O'Mara briskly. "Spinelli's in a hurry. Let's step on it."

CHAPTER XXII

ON THE STAIRWAY

THE car had been ordered to wait half a block away, where Colin was to rejoin it and then continue on to Spinelli's.

He followed Buck O'Mara now along the alleyway that flanked the tobacco store, and turned into the lane behind. It was intensely dark, but as they began to skirt the rear of the building he could distinguish the outline of a door. They passed this—and halted before another one a few yards farther on. He remembered what Benny Malone had said. The first door was the one common to the mob; this one, of course, was the private entrance to the quarters above that were sacred to the big shots. He would very much like to see those quarters! But would Buck O'Mara invite him inside, or would he be told to wait out here for the money he was to take to Spinelli?

Buck O'Mara had been fumbling in the darkness with his key. He opened the door now and stepped inside.

“Shut the door after you, and follow me,” he said; “it'll save me coming downstairs again.”

Colin obeyed—and then, unheralded, as he moved across the threshold into an unlighted interior, a sudden inspiration flashed into his mind. His brain was virile, working at lightning speed now. Suppose that instead of merely visiting these quarters as he was now obviously going to do, he could spend the night here! He would give a great deal to spend a night in the Wine Press! Much might come of it, or nothing might come of it, but it held untold possibilities. There was Buck O'Mara himself, for instance. After what had happened in the last few hours, O'Mara was almost certain to communicate with the Mask tonight. Would it be from here? How?

The night might answer those questions—and others—if only he could stay here! And there was at least a possible way whereby he might succeed in doing so. He meant to try it now anyway. It was too big a chance to lose. If the ruse worked, it worked; if it failed, he lost nothing, for certainly now, with the events of the early part of the night to endorse him, Clarkie Lunn would hardly be suspected of guile! His arm had been bleeding a little again

on the ride in. He had felt the blood soaking through the bandage, but it had not run down on his hand. Buck O'Mara had not noticed it—and he, Colin, had said nothing about it. It would take very little to start the blood flowing as profusely as ever; it would look infinitely worse than it really was, and

A light went on. Buck O'Mara was mounting a flight of stairs whose rather shabby carpet, Colin noted, was strictly in keeping with the Barneys' floor coverings downstairs.

“Come on,” O'Mara called over his shoulder.

“Sure!” said Colin—and, gripping his coat sleeve, wrenched at the bandage underneath. He felt the bandage give—and, by the time he had mounted three or four more steps, a trickle of blood upon his hand. He kept his hand behind his back. It would not look serious enough yet.

Keeping close behind the other, he reached the topmost stair and stepped out into what proved to be a narrow hallway carpeted like the stairs—and here Buck O'Mara spoke again:

“Wait here, Clarkie,” he directed. “It'll take me two or three minutes to get the kale, and then you can go back the way you came.”

“Sure!” said Colin for the second time.

And then, as Buck O'Mara moved away along the hall, Colin squeezed at his wounded arm—and bit his lips. Damn it, it *was* paining now—but the blood was flowing freely. His hand was red with it. As for the rest—that remained to be seen! The stage was set, anyway.

His eyes searched swiftly around him. Buck O'Mara had disappeared through the doorway of the farther one of the only two rooms that led off from the hall—and had even left the door open behind him. A sort of *beau geste* on O'Mara's part perhaps—that cost nothing, since from O'Mara's casual reference to the emergency safe it was certainly no secret from the rank and file that there was one here! The two rooms, of course, were the two bedrooms of which Benny Malone had spoken, and which obviously looked out on the alleyway, since they were on his left. On his right was a sort of heterogeneous wall, some of it ornate in both plaster and wood, relics no doubt of the old Wine Press in its heyday—and some of it of newer but cheap construction, undoubtedly the parsimonious handiwork of old Keppelstein when he had made the building into two. At the far end of the hall was another stairway—the one, of course, that led to the Barneys' quarters below, and that he had seen when he had come in through the

tobacco store. Nothing else! It was a bit bizarre, of course, with its two stairways and its crazy-quilt wall; but, since these were readily explainable to anyone as being but an inheritance from the old Wine Press, there was nothing else about the place to excite comment, let alone suggest that it was the lair of gangster and mob leaders.

His inspection at an end, Colin moved over and leaned against the wall. A minute, two, another passed. His eyes were on the doorway of Buck O'Mara's room now—and he was nursing his arm and hand, and sagging heavily against the wall as Buck O'Mara, carrying a large, bulky envelope in his hand, stepped out into the hall.

Buck O'Mara came to an abrupt halt. Mechanically he took the cigarette he was smoking from his mouth.

“What the hell!” he ejaculated.

Colin swayed a little.

“I'm sorry, Buck,” he protested. “I didn't mean to let you down. I—I feel kind of weak.”

With a perplexed scowl Buck O'Mara crossed the hall and fronted Colin. He stared at Colin's hand.

“Why didn't you tell me about this before?” he demanded.

“I did,” said Colin. “In the cabin.”

“But you said it wasn't anything.”

“I didn't think it was. Then, my arm began to bleed—bad.” He was jerking out his words heavily. “Some of the mob put a bandage on it for me, and it stopped. But coming back in the car it began a little again, and——”

“Well,” Buck O'Mara cut in bluntly, “why didn't you say something about it then?”

Colin clutched vaguely at the wall—steadied himself.

“Aw, say, I didn't want to welch on you,” he explained earnestly. “It wasn't bad enough for that—only a drop or two. It was only when I was coming up the stairs there that it got like this. The—bandage must've slipped, or—or something.”

Buck O'Mara laughed out shortly.

“Well, anyway, you're not as bad off as Benny!” he flung out. “I guess you're some kid, all right.”

“It don’t amount to anything,” asserted Colin weakly, “except that I—I’m afraid I couldn’t get very far right now. It’s only that kale for Spinelli I’m thinking of. Gee, I’m sorry about this, Buck.”

“Forget that!” said Buck O’Mara crisply. “Barney can attend to it. But I can’t send you to a hospital with a gunshot wound even if it’s not serious, so it looks like you’d have to rest up here for a few hours. I’d let you stretch out in that other room only I’m expecting Heimie’ll blow in, and’ll want it. But there’s the sofa downstairs in Barney’s parlor that you can have, and Mrs. Barney’ll fix your arm up for you.”

Colin’s right hand went to his wounded forearm—and tightened over sleeve and bandage. He had lost all the blood he cared to spare! He knew a sense of exultation. Nothing might come of it; but at least he had won the first trick—he would spend the rest of the night in the Wine Press. He would have preferred that room next to Buck O’Mara’s, had indeed hoped for it, but he would be no prisoner in Barney’s parlor.

“That’s fine, Buck,” he said gratefully. “I’ll be as good as ever by daylight.”

“Sure, you will,” agreed Buck O’Mara. “Do you want me to get Barney and carry you down, or do you think you can make it yourself?”

“I’m still on my feet,” said Colin with a forced grin. “Leave it to me—I can make it.”

“All right, then,” said Buck O’Mara. “Come along.”

Colin moved forward unsteadily, reeling slightly at times, but, supported by Buck O’Mara, traversed the hall and descended the stairs. And here, as they crossed the lower hall and entered the parlor, Buck O’Mara shouted for Barney. A sleepy voice answered from somewhere in the rear.

“Come in here,” Buck O’Mara ordered, as he turned on the light. “And tell your old woman to bring a basin of water and some cloths.”

With Buck O’Mara’s help Colin got his coat off, and for the second time that night rolled up his blood-soaked shirt sleeve. He slumped down on the horsehair sofa as Barney, barefooted and in his nightshirt, entered the room.

The wizened little red-haired man blinked in the light, rubbed his eyes—and stared at Colin.

“It’s Clarkie Lunn!” he exclaimed. “Cripes! What’s the matter?”

“What’s the matter doesn’t matter!” Buck O’Mara rapped out sharply. “What matters is that you know Spinelli when you see him—don’t you?”

“Of course I know Spinelli. He’s been here often enough, hasn’t he?”

Buck O’Mara thrust out the envelope in his hand.

“Well, then, get your clothes on, and take this over to his joint on the double hop. There’s a car waiting down the block. They probably wouldn’t let you in, so I’ll telephone him to meet you outside. Don’t give it to anybody but Spinelli himself. And when you get back here report to me. I’ll be up in Number One room. Beat it—quick!”

Buck O’Mara lighted a cigarette.

Colin began to fumble with the bandage on his arm.

“Better let it alone, Clarkie,” advised Buck O’Mara with a short laugh. “Here’s your nurse.”

Colin looked up. A tall, angular woman of perhaps sixty, clad in a not overly clean kimono and carrying a basin in her hand, was advancing toward him. Not an alluring face—wrinkled, hard black eyes, thin tight lips. He saw her glance at his arm, then she slapped the basin down on the table and turned to Buck O’Mara.

“I wish you’d take your dirty work where it belongs, Buck O’Mara!” she said tartly. “This ain’t any hospital, and I ain’t any nurse!”

“Shut up!” retorted Buck O’Mara curtly. “Strut your stuff, and let’s have a look at the arm.”

The woman, evidently on the point of making a sharp rejoinder, but contenting herself with a scowl instead, produced a pair of scissors, cut away the old bandage, and washed the wound. Colin lay back with half-closed eyes.

“No; it ain’t so bad,” pronounced Buck O’Mara judicially. “It’s the blood you’ve lost, Clarkie. You’ll be okay after a few hours’ quiet and a bit of sleep. He’s going to park here for the rest of the night, Mrs. Barney.”

“If you say so!” grunted Mrs. Barney as she began to put on a fresh bandage. “That’s your business!”

Colin heard a door close at the rear. That was Barney, of course, leaving on his errand to Spinelli.

Buck O’Mara swung on his heel.

“I’ll get that telephone call through,” he said, and left the room.

Colin heard him go into the tobacco shop—obviously to the telephone booth there.

“Some day, sonny,” prophesied Mrs. Barney acidly, “a bandage ain’t going to do you any good!”

“You said it, mother!” Colin returned with a thin smile.

Mrs. Barney gathered up the basin and discarded bandage, and went out—but came back in a moment or two with a quilt.

“Here!” she said ungraciously—and departed again.

Buck O’Mara returned from the telephone booth.

“How you feeling?” he jerked out.

Colin raised himself on his good elbow.

“Fine!” he declared. “It’s like you said, Buck. A bit of sleep and keeping quiet for a few hours is all I need.”

“Go to it, then! Good-night, Clarkie.”

“Good-night, Buck—and thanks again,” Colin responded fervently.

Buck O’Mara switched off the light and went out, leaving the door open.

Colin listened. He could hear the other going up the stairs, and then the closing of Buck O’Mara’s door in the hall above. O’Mara would not leave there until Barney came back and reported; nor would it be safe for him, Colin, to make a move until then. And then what? When that time came? He did not know. But he was satisfied in his own mind that Buck O’Mara would in some way or other communicate with the Mask tonight; indeed, so much that was vital had happened that such a move on O’Mara’s part was all but a practical certainty. Would it be here? Buck O’Mara had intimated that he expected Heimie Schwarm. Was the Mask coming too? Was there to be a conference of the three of them? If so, it was not scheduled until later, else Buck O’Mara would never have told Barney to come up to his room and report. Or would Buck O’Mara go out again to keep a rendezvous or communicate from elsewhere? O’Mara might never have come here at all tonight except on Spinelli’s account. But if that were so, why should he have expected Heimie Schwarm? Questions hammering at his brain. Contradictions. Had he accomplished anything through having become the accredited occupant of this horsehair sofa? It was damned uncomfortable!

In any case it was fairly apparent that nothing would happen until Barney came back—and until then there was nothing to do but lie here and wait. He took physical stock of himself. His self-diagnosis was at least reassuring. He was not a hundred percent, the blood he had lost could not help but have had its effect, and his arm that he had maltreated throbbed and burned a little; but so far as actual strength went he was fit enough.

The time dragged by. It seemed as though the waiting would never end. And then at last he heard the back door open and footsteps come along the hall and go up the stairs; and presently they came down again, and he heard a door open at the rear of the hall, and Barney speak to his wife, and the door close again.

The zero hour! He sat up on the sofa and removed his shoes. If he were caught! He shrugged his shoulders. They had given him a snub-nosed automatic tonight that was in his pocket now, and they had taught him tonight what price human life. Buck O'Mara up there was a murderer—perhaps, with the exception of the Mask, his master, the most cold-blooded and callous of the lot. If he were caught, it would be the end, but not his end alone—that was all. But he did not mean to be caught. His quarrel was not with Buck O'Mara!

Everything appeared to be in darkness.

He crossed the room without a sound, went out into the hall, and gained the staircase. But he halted as a faint glow coming from above puzzled him, since obviously the lights themselves in the upper hall had been switched off. And then he remembered that there was a transom over Buck O'Mara's door. He went on again, up the stairs, but on hands and knees now. He had made no sound, and he had heard none.

Four or five treads from the top he halted again, and this time stretched himself out flat. This was the point of vantage that he had determined on. In the light from the transom he could watch Buck O'Mara's door, while he was hidden from view himself even if the hall lights were turned on. There was no light showing through the transom of the adjoining room, so evidently Heimie Schwarm had not come yet. Or perhaps he might be in O'Mara's room. No, there would be voices if that were so. By listening intently Colin could even hear O'Mara moving about in his room, for the transom was open—but there were no voices.

The minutes went by—many of them. A grim sense of defeat began to settle upon Colin. No Heimie Schwarm, no Mask came up that private stairway at the other end of the hall. And Buck O'Mara had shown no

indication of leaving his room. What if O'Mara were merely preparing for bed, and had no——

Colin crouched low. O'Mara's door was opening, and O'Mara, a cigarette in his mouth, appeared now on the threshold. For a moment he stood there, glancing up and down the hall, then reaching back into the room he switched off the light. There was no sound save the closing of the door. There was nothing to be seen in the hall save the glow of a cigarette tip and a blotched shape to which it seemed to be attached. Colin's eyes strained through the darkness. The glowing tip and the blotched shape moved straight across the hall and through the wall, as though there had been no wall there—and disappeared.

For a moment Colin lay there motionless, his mind in a daze—then it began to clear. There was no illusion about it, no possibility of mistake. Buck O'Mara at the present moment was somewhere on the other side of the wall. A trick door, of course—that was obvious. One of the “stunts” of the old Wine Press, unquestionably, left there intact.

Well, he had been right about one thing—that Buck O'Mara would communicate with the Mask tonight. That was unquestionably a certainty now. That was where Buck O'Mara had just gone—either to the Mask in person, or to make contact with him in some established way.

The house next door! No—wait a minute. Colin's brain was probing, sifting swiftly now. There was Solly the cobbler. Benny Malone had spoken of a secret entrance from what used to be the grotto. He considered this for an instant—then shook his head decisively. It could not be that, for Benny Malone had stated that the passage to and from Solly the cobbler's was used by all the members of the mobs, whereas no one was permitted up here in the big shots' terrain except the big shots themselves. There remained then only—the house next door.

A grim smile twisted the corners of Colin's mouth as he began to retreat downstairs. To search for the trick opening of a trick door here in the darkness was impracticable. He knew there was a hidden door here, and approximately where it was—that was enough for the moment. To wait for the arrival of Heimie Schwarm would avail him nothing. Heimie Schwarm, as all the other big shots obviously did, knew about that door, and Heimie Schwarm would simply go through the same performance that Buck O'Mara had already staged. And besides he had no assurance that Heimie Schwarm would come at all. He could quite understand now why Buck O'Mara had

not wanted Clarkie Lunn in that other room tonight! Heimie Schwarm's expected arrival might only have been used as a pretext.

He regained the horsehair sofa and lay there staring into the dark. The house next door. That brought old Keppelstein into the forefront of the picture. Old Keppelstein, who had made two houses out of the original building, and had carefully preserved the trick doors and passages that had been the appeal and stock-in-trade of the cabaret that once had flourished under the name of the Wine Press! In spite of what Benny Malone had said about the man, and though Benny had undoubtedly vented an honest opinion, old Keppelstein was now proved to be far from just the innocent bystander that Benny had believed him to be. The memory of Colonel Hargreaves flashed through Colin's mind. Who was this old Keppelstein? A masquerader? The Mask himself? Perhaps. Or was he just a rung higher up the ladder than the Barneys here—the keeper of the inner gate?

Out of the darkness there came no answer. Colin expected none. The point was he was now in possession of the fact that the house next door held the secret of the Mask's existence, identity, and activities. How solve that secret? How put the finger indisputably on the Mask? Suppose even, for instance, that old Keppelstein was the Mask—how prove it? It was not so easy, in spite of all he now knew! But there was a way, there must be a way—if he could only hit upon it. This was the last chapter, wasn't it? The climax. He couldn't afford to be stuck. How would he—— He swore softly under his breath, then hunched his shoulders. Well, how *would* he write it?

He gave his mind free rein. It stumbled at first, there were too many pitfalls; then a plan—or was it a plot?—took seed, began to germinate—flowered.

And he was still rehearsing its details an hour later when, in spite of the discomfort of his couch, nature at last had her way and he dropped off to sleep.

CHAPTER XXIII

608 - A

COLIN looked at his watch as he made his way toward the public telephone booths in the Grand Central Station—and frowned slightly. It was ten o'clock, the morning already half gone. Not altogether his fault though, of course. To his own amazement he had slept soundly on that accursed horsehair sofa. It had been long after eight o'clock when he had awakened to find Buck O'Mara standing over him.

His frown gave place to a tight smile. He wondered again now, as he had wondered then, how long O'Mara had spent last night in "the house next door"! Buck O'Mara had told him he wouldn't be wanted on another job for the next few days—which was very good of Buck O'Mara! After that he had come uptown to his room. There he had divested himself of his blood-stained shirt, replaced the bandage on his arm with absorbent cotton and adhesive tape, which he had purchased on the way up, and which, to his relief, he was satisfied was all that was necessary; then, changing his clothes, he had gone out to get something to eat—Mrs. Barney had not mentioned breakfast!—of which he was sorely in need. Well, perhaps an hour more or less wouldn't make much difference!

Reaching his objective, he entered a booth and called a well-remembered number. Receiving an answer, he asked to speak to Detective Sergeant Mulvey. A moment later a concise, official, but unmistakable voice came over the wire.

"Sergeant Mulvey speaking."

"Oh, hello, Tim," said Colin. "It's good to hear that old growl of yours again."

There was a sudden gasp—and with the gasp officialism fled.

"Well, for God's sake!" boomed Sergeant Mulvey jovially, "if it ain't _____"

"Better not!" warned Colin. "Listen, Tim, I've got to see you and see you quick. And it's got to be somewhere where there's no chance of a hitch-

up between you and me being spotted.”

“What’s up?” Detective Sergeant Mulvey’s voice had sobered.

“A lot!” said Colin tersely.

“You’re not kidding, are you?”

“I wish I were!” exclaimed Colin fervently. “Name the place. It’s got to be water-tight.”

There was a pause, then Sergeant Mulvey spoke crisply:

“Where are you? Uptown or thereabouts?”

“Yes.”

“All right. I’ll fix it. Go over to the Kranway-Stratton. One more coming or going in *that* lobby’ll be lost in the shuffle. Don’t register. Ask the room clerk for the key to 608-A. That ain’t the key you’ll get, but it’ll be the key to the right room. Go up to the room and wait for me. I’ll be right along. Got it?”

“Yes,” said Colin laconically as he hung up the receiver.

And fifteen minutes later, having followed out Sergeant Mulvey’s directions, he found himself the occupant of a large, pleasant “room with bath” on the second floor of the Kranway-Stratton. He pulled an easy chair into a position across the room facing the door and sat down to wait. He had come to the point, he realized, where he could no longer play a lone hand—a fact which in itself afforded him intense relief. He needed help now. The right sort of help. Not the kind that Butch Connal could supply. Police help—the sort that Detective Sergeant Mulvey had at his command. That had been the basis of the plan he had evolved last night.

He lighted a cigarette. There did not seem to be a flaw anywhere in the plan. He had gone over it detail by detail a dozen times. He went over it again now. It ought to work if Tim Mulvey picked the right men, and Tim Mulvey could be depended upon to do that. It was——

There was a perfunctory knock as the door opened. Detective Sergeant Mulvey stepped briskly across the threshold—and came to an abrupt stop. Then with a suddenly set face, he shut the door behind him and planted his sturdy shoulders belligerently against it.

“Who the hell are you?” he rapped out.

Colin got up from his chair and held out his hand.

“Coming from you, that’s a compliment, Tim,” he laughed, “and don’t say you ‘wouldn’t have known me’—because you didn’t. Incidentally, at the present moment, I’m Clarkie Lunn—all except the voice.”

“Well, I’ll be damned!” gasped Sergeant Mulvey as he caught Colin’s hand in a hearty grip. “What’s the big idea?”

“How’d you work this sort of thing?” Colin countered as he waved his hand around the room.

Sergeant Mulvey grinned.

“By special request from the police,” he said, and his grin widened. “The gag’s so old it ought to make a hit in one of your books if that’s what you’re thinking about! I just get the right number coming in, and the floor desk up here’s been tipped off. Nobody knows who’s got the room, and there’s nothing to tie us up together. You can talk your head off, and for as long as you like.”

“All right,” said Colin. “Lock the door then, and sit down.”

Sergeant Mulvey complied.

“Shoot!” he invited, as Colin also seated himself. “It looks like you’d got something to say. What’s it about?”

Colin did not answer instantly. It was not only a long story, and he hardly knew where to begin—but he had just noticed with some inward misgivings that Detective Sergeant Mulvey’s left jaw was angrily red and swollen!

“Well?” prodded Sergeant Mulvey. “Shake it loose. What’s it about?”

Colin’s eyes lifted, met Sergeant Mulvey’s, and held the other’s for a moment.

“The Mask,” he said quietly. “Would you like to land him, Tim?”

Sergeant Mulvey leaned tensely forward in his chair.

“You mean,” he asked half under his breath, “that you’ve got a line on him?”

“Yes,” said Colin; “I’ve got a line on him. But I want to say first that Reddy was a million times right in what he said about him, although you wouldn’t believe it, Tim. My description of the Mask would be that he’d borrowed an invisible cloak from Satan and then had gone to work to show Satan how it was done—I don’t know how long ago he began, but long

enough so that he's swinging a mob today in every line of criminal activity there's any big money in. It may interest you to know, for instance, that the counterfeiting plant down on the St. Lawrence we were all reading so much about a little while ago was one of his rackets."

"What makes you think so?" demanded Sergeant Mulvey bluntly.

"Not 'think,' Tim," corrected Colin gently. "I was one of those 'also present' on the night the place was hi-jacked and Kenniston was bumped off."

"What!" ejaculated Sergeant Mulvey incredulously. "Then perhaps you know who did it?"

"Yes; it was a man named Dollaire."

"Who's Dollaire?"

"A rum-runner from St. Pierre."

"That's worth knowing!" Sergeant Mulvey sucked in his breath sharply. "I'll make a note of that!"

"I wouldn't bother if I were you," advised Colin confidentially. "He was hi-jacked in turn outside the twelve-mile limit here last night, he and his crew put on the spot, and his schooner sunk."

Sergeant Mulvey stared.

"How in God's name do you know that?" he rasped.

"I was there," said Colin.

"My God!" Sergeant Mulvey's hand roved helplessly through his hair. "I don't get you! How did you come to be there?"

Colin bent forward and touched Detective Sergeant Mulvey lightly on his swollen jaw.

"That's the reason—mainly," he said dryly. "And here's your artillery. I brought it along with me from my room." He reached into his pocket and tossed the gun into Detective Sergeant Mulvey's lap. "Sorry, Tim! I didn't know it was you at the time, but I would have had to do it anyway."

"Almighty Moses!" stuttered Sergeant Mulvey. He picked up the gun and examined it as though suspicious of its identity, then, with a grunt of recognition, dropped it into his pocket. "So you're the bird that laid me out, are you?" he blustered. "I've been looking for him—hard. I could send you up the river for that! Aiding and abetting a man to escape arrest on a murder

charge is penitentiary stuff, my bucko! Damn it”—he fingered his jaw tenderly—“I’m telling you!”

Colin thrust out his wrists.

“Bracelets, Tim?” he asked contritely.

Detective Sergeant Mulvey coughed.

“Go to hell!” he retorted. “Got anything else to spring? You’ve done pretty good so far.”

“Yes—lots,” said Colin soberly. “And, except for the reason, which I am not at liberty to tell you, that took me to Reddy’s old room on the night you left my place, which reason in turn was the reason why I went down on the north shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, I’m going to give you the whole story right up to this minute. Now listen.”

Sergeant Mulvey produced a cigar, bit off the end, and lighted it.

“Go to it!” he urged. “I haven’t forgotten that you said you had a line on the Mask.”

And then, as briefly and concisely as he could, though interrupted by many a quick-flung question or comment from Sergeant Mulvey, Colin told the story of the weeks that had elapsed from the night he had paid the visit to Reddy’s old room until the hour or so ago when he called up his listener on the phone.

“There’s the story,” he ended; “and here’s where you draw cards. I’m putting in an emergency call.”

Detective Sergeant Mulvey jumped to his feet and began to pace excitedly up and down the room.

“Boy,” he burst out, “I ain’t got it all yet! I’m trying to make myself believe I ain’t been dreaming! This’ll bust New York wide open!”

“Yes,” said Colin with a queer smile, “except that perhaps New York would like to know *who* the Mask is, and—well—just *how* he was caught.”

Detective Sergeant Mulvey paused suddenly in his stride—then flopped down in his chair.

“You’re right,” he said. “I was counting the chickens. Well?”

“Well?” inquired Colin.

“What’s up your sleeve?” demanded Sergeant Mulvey. “You’ve been thinking this over.”

“Yes,” said Colin with a dry laugh, “I’ve been thinking it over. In fact I’ve mapped out a little plan. What I suggest is that you and I get into old Keppelstein’s house on the quiet tonight, say around ten o’clock. Just how that’s to be done without Keppelstein knowing it is up to your crowd. Between now and then you ought to be able to dope out some way—even if you have to run the fire brigade down the street and draw him to the front window while we get in through one at the back!”

“You can leave that end of it to me, as far as that goes,” asserted Sergeant Mulvey complacently. “You think Keppelstein is——”

“No; I don’t,” Colin interrupted calmly. “I don’t think anything about him, except that he’s in on this up to his neck. He may even be the Mask himself for all I know. Incidentally, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to find out what you can about him this afternoon.”

“I wasn’t overlooking that bet,” stated Sergeant Mulvey with a hard smile. “I’ll have a line on him all right. But what are you and I doing in his house at ten o’clock tonight?”

“To use the same tense,” explained Colin composedly, “we are waiting for the raid on the tobacco shop end of the Wine Press that you are staging at about the same hour.”

“What!” Sergeant Mulvey pulled himself sharply forward by the arms of his chair. “Come again, please!”

“Yes, that’s the idea,” said Colin patiently. “That’s it exactly. Have you forgotten that Buck O’Mara is handing out a little cut to those three skippers of Heimie Schwarm in Barney’s parlor tonight?”

“No,” said Sergeant Mulvey gruffly, “I haven’t forgotten it, and that’s why I’m wondering if you’ve gone crazy. You said something funny about me getting the fire brigade a minute ago. Why don’t you get a torch-light parade with transparencies to let the one guy we want know his number’s up so’s he can have time to pack his trunk before he makes his getaway?”

Colin laughed quietly.

“Well, in a way,” he said, “that’s precisely what I’m after.” Then earnestly: “Any old reason for the raid will do—except the real one. You can figure that out to suit yourself. The main thing is that we know Buck will be there at ten o’clock. So now get this, Tim—and get it right! It’s a certainty

that Buck O'Mara and Heimie Schwarm, and God knows how many more of the big shots that the Mask keeps on his payroll, all communicate with the Mask on old Keppelstein's side of the wall by using that trick door. Whether they talk to him in person, or whether there's a private wire, or what there is, I don't know. But I do know the answer's there. And the way to get the answer is to force Buck O'Mara's hand. If he gets the wind up and is afraid the whole place is going to be pinched, what's he going to do? He's going to make a bolt through that hidden door and wise up the Mask—and we'll be waiting there to see how he does it."

Sergeant Mulvey's fingers felt thoughtfully, tenderly, the sore spot on his jaw.

"That doesn't sound so bad," he admitted. "Except how's he going to make a break if he's caught in the raid?"

"That's where you pick your men—and give them a dress rehearsal," replied Colin coolly. He got up from his chair, went over to the desk, procured a sheet of notepaper, and drew a rough diagram upon it. "Look here," he said, returning to his seat, and using his pencil as a pointer, "here's Barney's parlor, here's the lower hall, here's the closed-in stairway leading up to the big shots' private domain, and here approximately is the trick door. You see it's only a step or two from the parlor door to the foot of the stairs. And, going back to the parlor again, here's the electric wall switch. It's one of those cheap knob affairs that push up and down. Just see that Buck O'Mara is lined up next to the door when one of your men accidentally rubs his shoulder against that switch—and leave it to Buck to do the rest. And if there's any light in the lower hall when your boys are gumshoeing in to make themselves unpopular, tip 'em off to put it out."

Sergeant Mulvey's gray Irish eyes were dancing with the light of battle.

"Gimme that!" He took the sheet of paper, folded it, and placed it in his pocket. "I'm beginning to like this. But suppose nothing happens? Suppose Buck O'Mara just walks in and then walks out of old Keppelstein's front door? The game's up, ain't it? With the scare thrown into them, there's a 'To Rent' sign going up on the Wine Press just the same, ain't there? And then what?"

"Something *will* happen," declared Colin confidently. "If it doesn't it will be just too bad for Clarkie Lunn, because then he'll have to sit in for another hand and trail along with Buck O'Mara again to pick up the broken pieces. And that brings to mind one sweetly solemn thought. Clarkie Lunn

isn't looking for any publicity, or even an introduction to any of your myrmidons."

"I ain't buying any flowers these days," returned Sergeant Mulvey grimly. "Does that lane run all the way between the cross streets?"

"I don't know," Colin answered. "I suppose so. It would hardly be confined to the rear of the Wine Press."

Sergeant Mulvey got up.

"I got a lot to do!" he said with a crooked grin. "You stay put here. Have your meals sent up. I may want to get in touch with you. Anyway, I'll meet you on the corner a block east of the Wine Press at nine-thirty tonight."

"It'll be a long time to wait!" said Colin as he accompanied the other to the door.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MASK

IT proved to be. Colin's philosophy was not proof against the impatience and anxiety induced by the one question that, with its incident ramifications, was never out of his mind as the hours, unrelieved even by any word from Sergeant Mulvey, went by. Would tonight see Clarkie Lunn but a nightmare phantom of the past, and Colin Hewitt, with all that meant, but most of all Germaine now, free to resume his normal life again, or——? There was always that fateful "or". But the hours passed eventually—and evening came.

It was misty, raining a little, the street lamps throwing only a murky glow, as he joined Sergeant Mulvey at the appointed hour and place.

"All set, Tim?" he asked the lone figure he found waiting on the corner. "I suppose it is, of course, or I'd have heard from you."

"Sure it is," Sergeant Mulvey answered easily. "Likewise we're in luck. The first part of it's a cinch. We worked the peddler dodge and one or two others. Keppelstein ain't home and nobody's gone in or come out since we put the spot on the house around noon-time. It's empty. One of the boys, who's pretty nifty at that sort of thing, got to work on the back-door lock after dark. Some lock, he says. But he got away with it so's it'll look like it had never been touched if we want to lock it again. All we got to do is walk in. As for the rest, I dunno!"

Colin had shaken off the depression of the afternoon.

"It can't go wrong," he said decisively. "It's the one sure play that Buck O'Mara will make."

"Well, I'm counting on it too, ain't I?" returned Sergeant Mulvey grimly. "What do you think I've got half the New York police force picketed around here for? To give me the laugh? Anyway, come on. We'll slip down from this end of the lane, and get a look around inside before the band starts." And then, abruptly, as they moved away: "Say, Benny Malone had the wrong dope on this Keppelstein bird in more ways than one. He ain't here a

lot of the time—like tonight. We got some check-ups on him today. Sometimes he ain't seen around here for a week or maybe a month at a stretch."

"I shouldn't be surprised," said Colin quietly.

"What do you mean, you shouldn't be surprised?" demanded Sergeant Mulvey in sudden suspicion. "You holding something out on me?"

"No," replied Colin simply, "you know all I know. I mean I wouldn't be surprised at anything that went on here—and I shan't be no matter what happens."

"Maybe you won't, and maybe you will," observed Sergeant Mulvey ponderously as, reaching the entrance to the lane, he paused to glance sharply about him. "If anything happens at all, it's my hunch that you will. All right. There's nobody around. Duck!"

They stepped into the dark shadows of the lane and, silently now, made their way along it with Sergeant Mulvey in the lead. Somewhere ahead, Colin knew, was the rear of the Wine Press and the alleyway that flanked Michael Barney's specious tobacco store, but it was so dark that he could scarcely see Sergeant Mulvey's form in front of him—so dark, in fact, that when finally Sergeant Mulvey halted suddenly Colin bumped into him.

"Here we are!" cautioned Sergeant Mulvey under his breath.

It was much like last night, much like that other door—which could not be many yards away—only that tonight, instead of Buck O'Mara, the big shot of the Mask's murder squad, it was Detective Sergeant Mulvey of the Homicide Bureau who acted as guide.

Sergeant Mulvey opened the door soundlessly and closed it behind them soundlessly—and then for a full minute they stood motionless, listening.

Then Sergeant Mulvey spoke.

"Kind of force of habit," he grunted, as the ray from his electric torch stabbed suddenly through the blackness, "even though I know there ain't anybody here." He thrust his wrist watch into the flare. "Twenty minutes yet. Lots of time for a look-see around."

The rooms were comfortless, scantily furnished, containing scarcely the bare necessities—no one giving them a single glance would question the status of old Keppelstein as a miser of the first degree—yet a smile twitched at the corners of Colin's mouth as, trailing Sergeant Mulvey, he went from one room to another. By contrast, the mural decorations, untouched,

obviously, except by age, since the days when the Wine Press had been in its prime, were ludicrously grotesque: here a painted jungle scene, there a group of nymphs dancing nudely in the moonlight—above a rickety kitchen table! But Sergeant Mulvey seemed little concerned with these details. His flashlight poked persistently and inquisitively into cupboards and corners and out-of-the-way places.

“Nothing down here in the shape of any private wires or that sort of stuff,” he announced finally, “unless they’re damn well hidden.”

“That trick door opens on the floor above,” Colin reminded him.

“Yes, I know. Force of habit again. Well, let’s go up.”

There was only one room on the second floor, and Colin’s eyes followed the round, white circle of light as Sergeant Mulvey’s flashlight traveled from the threshold slowly around it. The room ran the entire depth of the house and had once, it was quite obvious, been the cabaret’s combination dance floor, bar, and main dining room. Little alcoves, where tables for two, inviting tête-à-têtes, might have been placed, still punctuated the walls at irregular intervals, while the walls themselves were adorned with huge plaster casts depicting scenes even more fantastic than those painted on the walls of the rooms downstairs. The only windows in the room looked out on the street, and the shutters of these were tightly closed. At the rear of the room and stretching across almost its entire breadth was the remains of a bar, a decrepit and woebegone affair now, the mirrors above it streaked and blistered until they were almost beyond recognition. There were no furnishings whatever—just litters of rubbish piled, or rather thrown, in heaps here and there about the floor—a veritable catch-all—old packing cases, chairs, and various pieces of furniture broken beyond repair, and all now covered thick with dust.

“I can’t say this listens good to me!” exclaimed Sergeant Mulvey dubiously. “It looks like this was just another way out, without anybody knowing it, through Keppelstein’s front or back door.”

Colin shook his head stubbornly.

“If that’s all it amounts to,” he answered tersely, “why did Buck O’Mara use it last night—when he didn’t have to? And tonight—there’s nothing to prevent him from making a bolt down that private staircase. If he does that, of course, the only thing that’s left for us to do then will be to go home and begin all over again.”

“Well, we’re here—and we’ll see,” returned Sergeant Mulvey crisply. “Where would you say that hidden door was?”

“Run your light along the wall over there again. Not so fast! There! Allowing for the stairs on the other side, I’d say it must be just about there.”

The light was focused on a plaster barge *à la* Antony and Cleopatra that was decidedly daring in its conception, and which floated on what had once doubtless been, in color, though calamitously faded now, a sunlit azure sea. It was about midway along the wall.

“Some dump!” ejaculated Sergeant Mulvey. “Before my time on the force. Those were the days, eh?—when the highlights were down here, and before they turned the good old Bowery into a morgue! Well, come on! Time’s nearly up.” His flashlight circled again. “How about getting down behind that old packing case up there against the wall on this side near the bar? It’s big enough all right. We’ll be facing that trick door then, and’ll be able to see plenty without being spotted.”

“All right,” agreed Colin briefly.

The flashlight pointing the way, they moved up the room, and lifting the dilapidated case out a little way from the wall crouched down behind it. Given anything to see, by peering around the ends of the case, or even with due caution over the top of it, the view would be practically unobstructed.

“It’s ten o’clock,” said Sergeant Mulvey, “but it’ll take the boys a few minutes to work their racket.”

“Right!” said Colin.

The flashlight went out.

It was inky black. Colin could not see an inch in front of him. And there was no sound—though he strained his ears to catch one from the other side of the wall. No movement now from Sergeant Mulvey. Just stillness and blackness everywhere around him. And now time itself seemed to have stopped. Had a minute, two, or three, or ten passed since Mulvey had switched off the torch? He grew uneasy. This room here, this house, as Sergeant Mulvey had said, did not look very promising—there was nothing to inspire confidence in the belief that the link between the Mask and the big shots of his mobs was here. Certainly the Mask himself was not here. Sergeant Mulvey and he, Colin, were unquestionably the only two persons in the house. Surely by now Buck O’Mara would have come if he were coming at all. Was this, after all, merely another exit and entrance sacred to the big shots—and Buck O’Mara in flight had chosen instead the private

stairway? He shook his head doggedly in the blackness. There was too much to point the other way. It *must* be here, somewhere, somehow, that the contact between the Mask and his lieutenants was made. His brain churned on. The silence grew heavy and oppressive. It began to palpitate audibly and finally to thunder at his eardrums. In spite of himself, uneasiness and misgivings were beginning to obtain the upper hand. There had been more than time enough by now, and——

There came a faint sound from across the room—indefinable. And then suddenly a cluster of ceiling lamps went on and the room was ablaze with light. His eyes blinked in the glare. The barge bearing Antony and Cleopatra seemed to have bobbed up and down as though it had ridden on a swell. His vision cleared. A figure was running across the room in the direction of the bar—Buck O'Mara—and Buck O'Mara was tearing off his coat as he ran.

And now there came another sound—a distinct click this time. And Colin, peering around the edge of the packing case, mechanically rubbed his eyes. The bar was revolving upon itself—and now it presented the reverse side. It had become a huge wardrobe. Rows of clothing, wigs and hats hung there from end to end—and in the center, below a mirror, was a sort of shelf, waist high, strewn with small pots and jars and tubes in endless variety.

Something was thudding at both Colin's heart and brain. His eyes swung back to O'Mara. O'Mara's outer clothes were off now, the sandy hair was gone—and the back of a short-cropped, black-haired head presented itself to view. He could not see the face.

Again Colin's eyes shifted and, as though drawn by a magnet, fastened, amongst the rows of clothing, on an inch-square checked suit of light fawn, and, hanging on a peg above it, a brilliant red tie and a straw-colored wig. That was Heimie Schwarm! His eyes traveled on—and were arrested again. This time by a shabby black Inverness cloak and, on its corresponding peg, a shabby black broad-brimmed soft hat, and a gray beard and wig. That was Colonel Hargreaves!

He felt the blood whipping through his veins, pounding at his temples. There was no doubting the evidence of his own eyes, no misinterpreting the significance of the substitution of that wig of white hair that the man he had known as Buck O'Mara was pulling on now to replace the one just taken off. Colonel Hargreaves, Heimie Schwarm, Buck O'Mara, the character that was now being assumed, all of those other characters represented by that array of clothing, were one and the same—the Mask.

Colin gripped Sergeant Mulvey's arm fiercely and breathed into the other's ear:

"That fawn, checked suit—Heimie Schwarm. That Inverness cloak—the night he killed Reddy. Get it?"

"Sure, I get it!" Sergeant Mulvey breathed back. "And I'll get him! But you stay out of this now, or his mob'll get Clarkie Lunn! Let's see who he is this time."

The erstwhile Buck O'Mara was working with incredible speed, leaning toward the mirror, dabbing swiftly at his face as his fingers dipped into this jar and that. It could have been scarcely more than a minute since he had begun his transformation. And now he was donning a black coat, buttoning it to the throat. The next instant he had adjusted a steel-rimmed pair of spectacles upon his nose and a cane was in his hand. He turned slightly. It was old Keppelstein.

Sergeant Mulvey's revolver was in his hand as he stepped suddenly out on the floor and toward the other.

"Don't move, O'Mara, or Keppelstein, or whatever you want to call yourself," he said coldly. "The game's up."

The man did not move—he stood there as though frozen to the spot. But there was a sudden whiteness in his face that no pigment could defy, and his lips twisted jerkily for an instant.

"How did you get in here?" he asked hoarsely. "Who are you?"

"Never mind how I got in!" snapped Sergeant Mulvey. "And you know damned well who I am. According to your own story you kept pretty close tabs on me after you bumped off Reddy Turner. And so you're the Mask! Well, by God, you're well named!"

The man shook his head as he faced Sergeant Mulvey now.

"You're crazy," he cried out defiantly. "I never heard of him. Who said I was?"

"Cut it out!" There was an ominous snarl in Sergeant Mulvey's voice. "Where do you think that's going to get you? You said so yourself—the night you went to Mr. Hewitt's home in that Inverness cloak I see hanging up there."

The man's eyes roved around the room in a hunted way, and it seemed to Colin that he sagged a little as he supported his weight on the cane in his

hand.

“It’s—it’s a lie!” The man’s voice had suddenly become a craven, unnerved whine. “It’s a lie—all a lie! I tell you it’s a lie!”

“Sure it is!” agreed Sergeant Mulvey contemptuously. “And so’s Heimie Schwarm, and Colonel Hargreaves, and Buck O’Mara, and old Keppelstein and God only knows how many other aliases you’re working—but I’d kind of like to know what the Mask himself looks like when he hasn’t got any war paint on. I didn’t get a look at your face in that mirror because the back of your head hid it.” He stepped abruptly toward the other. “I think we’ll take that wig and those spectacles off, and——”

Swift as a lightning flash the cane swung up from the floor, cutting under Sergeant Mulvey’s wrist, knocking the gun from his hand—and, with a jeering laugh, far from the craven, unnerved creature of a moment gone, the Mask leaped for the weapon with the agility of a panther and secured it. But Sergeant Mulvey, too, was agile. Before the Mask, who had stooped for the revolver, could quite regain his poise, Sergeant Mulvey, hurling himself forward, had borne the other to the floor. And then, like madmen struggling, they rolled over and over as they fought.

And in that moment Colin forgot Clarkie Lunn. It was the Mask who had the gun—not Sergeant Mulvey. And it was Sergeant Mulvey who counted now. He flung the packing case aside, wrenched his own gun from his pocket, sprang out on the floor—and came to a sudden halt as a shot muffled by close-hugged bodies rang out.

Colin leveled his snub-nosed automatic—and lowered it again. It was Sergeant Mulvey, not the Mask, who was rising to his knees. The Mask lay there motionless, his hand that still gripped the revolver flung across his chest.

“It went off—the wrong way—for him,” panted Sergeant Mulvey grimly, as he tore open the man’s coat and shirt. “I guess he’s a goner, but come and lend a hand.”

Colin stepped to Sergeant Mulvey’s side and knelt down over the Mask.

“He’s dead all right,” announced Sergeant Mulvey gruffly.

But the words were meaningless to Colin. He was staring at a bared right shoulder—at a long, jagged cicatrice that ran parallel with the shoulder blade.

It was Joe Lazarre.

CHAPTER XXV

THE LETTER

COLIN stood at the open window of room 608-A in the Kranway-Stratton and stared restlessly out into the rainy night. From somewhere a clock boomed out the hour of two. What was keeping Sergeant Mulvey?

Back there in the Wine Press, as they had stood looking down on that lifeless form on the floor, he had briefly explained his connection with Joe Lazarre, and had told Sergeant Mulvey what little he knew of the man. Then, on Sergeant Mulvey's advice, Clarkie Lunn had unobtrusively left the place. From the Wine Press he had gone to the rooming house that for the last month had harbored him as one outside the law, packed his belongings, and with the simple but eloquent explanation that he had to scam, had paid his bill and departed. No questions had been asked, no surprise expressed—others before him had been known to deem it the better part of wisdom to depart abruptly and in haste! But even so he had not despised caution. A taxi had taken him to the Grand Central Station, and a redcap had taken his bags—to the parcel room. Ten minutes later another redcap had collected his bags, and another taxi had brought him here to the Kranway-Stratton—where he was not registered. By the time any of the Mask's mobsmen picked up the trail, if they ever did, Clarkie Lunn would have ceased to exist. Indeed, the deep circles under the eyes, the pasty color of the skin, and the toothbrush mustache were already gone—and there now remained of Clarkie Lunn only the jet-black hair and eyebrows which tomorrow, as artificially as they had come, would as artificially be gone.

But all this had been hours ago! Sergeant Mulvey had said he would be here by midnight—and he had not yet come.

Colin turned uneasily away from the window, and his eyes, roaming around the room, fixed and held on an open letter that lay upon the writing desk. Furrows gathered between his eyes. It was the letter that, under a pledge of secrecy, had taken him to Cap à l'Orange. But Reddy was dead and Lazarre was dead now, and his promise to Reddy was no longer binding. For that reason he had told Sergeant Mulvey at the Wine Press what he then knew about Lazarre; and for that reason here, on his return to this room,

extracting it from inside the lining of one of his bags where he had hidden it, he had opened and read the letter Reddy had entrusted to him.

It was a long letter—many pages of it, closely written on both sides of the sheets. He had spent an hour over it. And now he laughed out suddenly—mirthlessly. The memory of that night at the Cascade River and the burning clubhouse came vividly back to him. A human life was a human life, and even had he then known that Lazarre was the Mask he still might not have acted very differently; but had he known what was in that letter, had he known what he knew now, he would have hesitated long before he had lifted even a finger to save Lazarre's life.

He raised his hand and brushed it across his eyes. Lazarre—the Mask! Queer that he had saved Lazarre's life at all! Fate must have got her fill of ironic laughter out of that! Queer that it——

The door opened and closed. Sergeant Mulvey came across the room, tossed his hat into one chair, and slumped wearily down in another.

“Began to think I wasn't coming at all, eh?” Sergeant Mulvey flung out. “Well, I couldn't help it. The first check-up started something hot, and I haven't had a minute. Anyway, I've got some news for you. French Pete's real name, you know, was Pierre Mireau. Well, Joe Lazarre's real name was Louis Mireau. They were brothers.”

Colin's lips were tight.

“I know it,” he said. “It's rather ghastly.”

“That!” exclaimed Sergeant Mulvey savagely. “Forget it! Father, mother, sister, brother, wife, or what-not, don't mean a thing to these birds. Nobody does that's in their way. They're even letting the children playing on the street have it these days—damn them! But how do you know they were brothers? You didn't know it when you were telling me about Lazarre down there in that dump, did you?”

“No,” said Colin; “I didn't know it then.” He jerked his hand toward the desk. “The answer's in that letter over there—the one I was to deliver to Joe Lazarre. I opened it when I got back here tonight. It's rather longish, as you see; but it cleans up pretty well everything, and if you want to read it for yourself, go ahead. Otherwise, I'll give you the gist of it in a few words.”

“I don't want to read it now,” Sergeant Mulvey answered. “I'm too tired. And I've got a few things to say myself. So spiel! All I want to know is what made Reddy think it was the Mask who bumped French Pete and Annie off in the first place, and how, according to that other letter you told me about,

the one he left for you, Reddy supposed that Lazarre had been down on the north shore of the lower St. Lawrence for a year, and what made him think Lazarre was working for the Mask down there—and, in the which case, since it was the Mask he was after, and Lazarre was one of the Mask's outfit, why in hell he ever wrote a letter to Lazarre at all?"

Colin lighted a cigarette, and, facing Sergeant Mulvey, leaned with his back against the wall.

"It's the code, of course," he said. "No help asked or wanted from the police. A rift in a mob is another story. Annie was Reddy's sister, and French Pete was Lazarre's brother. Reddy's idea, in the event of anything happening to him, was to pass on the torch. He believed that Lazarre would turn against the Mask to avenge his brother's murder and the murder of his brother's wife."

"Check!" said Sergeant Mulvey.

Colin's brows puckered.

"It's a little difficult to iron it all out in its proper sequence," he said, "though Reddy explains everything at length in his letter as though he believed that Lazarre was in ignorance even of the murders themselves. That latter point, however, you can readily understand, because it appears from Reddy's letter that Lazarre, as an alibi for himself we can safely say now, dropped out of sight a month or so before French Pete was murdered; and when Reddy wrote that letter he believed that all this time—then roughly a year, counting the time Reddy still had to serve, and the two months he lived after he got out—Lazarre had been living far down on the Gulf of St. Lawrence and practically out of touch with civilization."

"In other words," observed Sergeant Mulvey, "Reddy went on the assumption that Lazarre knew nothing at all about anything that had happened?"

"Yes," said Colin, "even to the extent of Lazarre being unaware that Reddy knew him to be Louis Mireau, French Pete's brother. And it would seem that very few indeed knew that fact. French Pete obviously knew it, and he used to take Louis, or Lazarre—we'll call him Lazarre hereafter to avoid confusion—with him frequently to Annie's flat. That's how and where, of course, Lazarre's infatuation—you can call it by an uglier name if you like—for Annie began; but with Annie, we may be certain, having none of him, and with French Pete standing always in the road. Well, French Pete naturally enough told Annie, the girl he was going to marry, who Lazarre

really was, and in turn Annie confided in Reddy, her brother—all this, apparently, without Lazarre being aware of it. Reddy explains this in his letter, then goes on to give details of French Pete’s murder and of the finding later on of Annie’s body, and then he goes in detail into his own attempts to run down the Mask.”

Colin paused, flicked the ash from his cigarette, and stared introspectively at the carpet.

Sergeant Mulvey’s eyes were narrow with interest.

“Well, go on!” he prompted impatiently. “What did he do?”

“While he was still in stir,” Colin went on, “he got tipped off to the men who were in the murder car the night French Pete was put on the spot. And as soon as he got out he went to work with that as a starter. He worked alone. For two months, as you know. From the occupants of the murder car, the circle began to widen. Then overheard conversations that took place between the men he was watching brought this mysterious overlord, the Mask, into the picture, and definitely linked up the Mask with French Pete’s murder and Annie’s abduction. Also, one night he overheard one of these men say that Lazarre was on the Cap à l’Orage job, and from that, since these were the Mask’s men who were talking, he concluded rightly enough that Lazarre likewise was allied with the Mask, and assumed with fair enough reason, though wrongly as we now know, that Lazarre had been at Cap à l’Orage all the time since he had left New York. That’s about all. He ends by giving Lazarre a list of the men he has spotted and putting it up to Lazarre to carry on. I don’t know how far he got, but he was a lot farther from the truth than he seemed to think he was, or, it is needless to say, he would not have written to Lazarre. Somewhere a false step or ill luck exposed him—as witness his murder in my room that night. There’s just one thing, though, that he does not explain in that letter, and it’s something that I must confess I cannot quite understand.”

“What’s that?” inquired Sergeant Mulvey.

“Why Louis Mireau assumed the name of Joe Lazarre. One would think that when he wasn’t masquerading as Heimie Schwarm, or Buck O’Mara, or old Keppelstein, or somebody else, he would have reverted to his own name whenever he reverted to his natural self.”

Sergeant Mulvey smiled grimly.

“I can explain that,” he said. “I told you we’d had a pretty busy night of it. That scar on his shoulder started the ball rolling—and identified him

down at headquarters. He had a police record—that's why he didn't have his calling cards engraved with Louis Mireau on them. See?"

"Oh!" Colin nodded. "So that's it, is it?"

"Yes," said Sergeant Mulvey. "And now listen to what we dug up out of the files. I told you I'd have a word or two to say when my turn came. The Mireau family originally came from somewhere down on the Gulf of St. Lawrence—which probably, later on, gave Lazarre the idea of locating that counterfeit plant there where its isolation made it look sure-fire as far as safety went, and the natural resources made it practical. He's about forty years old—eight or nine years older, I'd say, than French Pete was, but that doesn't make much difference. When he was twenty, and that's twenty years ago, he was on the vaudeville stage—and, say, what the hell do you think his 'turn' was? He was one of those lightning-change artists—an impersonator."

"The devil he was!" ejaculated Colin tensely; and then, with a tight smile: "Well, that explains a lot!"

"I'll say it does!" Sergeant Mulvey laughed harshly. "Just about that time, however, he got caught at a pretty dirty bit of blackmailing and forgery and got two years for it. When his term was up he disappeared—and it must have been around then when he turned himself into Keppelstein and started in on his own private theatricals at the Wine Press, and began to build up his mobs, creating a new big shot out of himself for each one as it came along. He was never heard of again until tonight. And it wasn't until about eight years ago, as far as we've been able to check up yet, that even Joe Lazarre appeared on the scene—by which time he figured, I guess, that no one would connect him with Louis Mireau unless he himself went around asking for it. And nobody did, either! There wasn't any charge hanging over him, you understand, but he was an ex-convict with a record, and he didn't want to send out an invitation to the police to give his activities the once-over. So, as I said, when he wasn't playing around as Heimie Schwarm and Buck O'Mara and suchlike, he was Joe Lazarre instead of Louis Mireau when his make-up was off. That Keppelstein stunt was a winner. He could come and go in any character the next scene called for, and make those hops down the Gulf, obviously inspection trips from 'headquarters,' whenever he liked—though it's open and shut that he always had to go down there as Lazarre on account of it keeping him so long away from his make-up base. But I guess you said it all when you made that crack about him getting to work to show Satan how it was done!"

Colin was staring moodily at the floor. He was silent for a moment; then abruptly:

“Annie was bound to find out the truth, of course, and there’s no doubt that’s why in the end she was found in the river—but I wonder where he took her? He certainly never lived in a place like the Wine Press. He must have had quarters somewhere.”

Sergeant Mulvey shrugged his shoulders.

“More than one, probably,” he said. “Heimie Schwarm, for instance, no doubt had a swell layout somewhere. Anyway, we’ll dig that all out in time. We found some addresses and papers tucked away in a drawer of that revolving bar, which latter, by the way, according to the suddenly awakened memory of one of the old-timers down at headquarters, turns out to be nothing but another come-on circus stunt that was pulled by the Wine Press to amuse the clientele at the time prohibition was in the air and everybody was talking about it—only there wasn’t any wardrobe on the other side of it then! But no matter about that! Besides the addresses, we found a list of the members of the different mobs. And”—Sergeant Mulvey grinned suddenly—“the last name on Buck O’Mara’s list was Clarkie Lunn with an ‘O. K.’ after it. We’ve got a dragnet out now—and there ought to be quite a haul by the time we’re through. And what’s more, with those lists and some other dope we found, we won’t need any help from Clarkie Lunn to ‘make’ our cases either.”

“Which is just as well,” returned Colin quietly, “since Clarkie Lunn no longer exists.”

“I noticed that when I came in. Well, we’d have had to keep Clarkie Lunn out of it anyway—that was understood from the start.” Sergeant Mulvey yawned—and glanced toward the twin beds. “God, I’m tired!” he said.

“I’ve got an extra suit of pyjamas in my bag,” suggested Colin hospitably.

“I think I will,” accepted Sergeant Mulvey. “It’s pretty late to go home.” And then, with a good-natured fling as he began to undress: “Kind of makes the fake stuff you’ve been getting away with in your books look sick, eh?”

“Yes,” said Colin. “And that’s another thing Reddy was right about. But I’m not going to use it—at least not for some time to come. As a matter of fact, as you may perhaps have surmised from all I’ve told you, I’m working on a love story at the present moment, and incidentally”—Colin flung a

quizzical glance at Sergeant Mulvey—"I am leaving tomorrow to write the last chapters—at Cap à l'Orage."

"H'm!" commented Sergeant Mulvey oracularly, as he donned Colin's pyjamas and climbed into bed.

Colin turned out the light and followed suit. There was a moment's silence, and then out of the darkness Sergeant Mulvey spoke again:

"Colin!"

"Yes?" inquired Colin. "What is it?"

"Nothing much," said Detective Sergeant Mulvey. "I was just thinking it was a damned lucky thing for you that you never delivered that letter!"

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Hidden Door* by Frank L. Packard.]