



TIGER CLAWS

Frank L. Packard

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TIGER CLAWS

BY
FRANK L. PACKARD

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TORONTO

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TIGER CLAWS

CHAPTER I

The Signal

WHERE the wind blew and cargo offered, the *Malola* traded. All Polynesia and the Malay Peninsula knew the trim little schooner. Where steam was not profitable, the *Malola* made money. The fly-specks that peppered the charts, nameless isles and atolls over a vast expanse of ocean, which were but a ubiquitous source of worry and anxiety to the navigating officers of more pretentious craft, were, on the other hand, a most lucrative source of income to the *Malola*, and were in a large measure responsible for the very comfortable balance that lay to the credit of the two brothers, her owners, in the banks of Sydney, Auckland and Singapore.

For fifteen years and more, Keith and Allan Wharton, Keith being but a nipper of ten in the beginning and Allan twenty-two, had sailed the *Malola*, not only to their financial advantage, but to the earning, as well, of the esteem of all with whom they had dealings—from the lone white men who held the outposts of civilization on isles that were scarcely known, and rarely visited, to the merchants who sat in greater comfort in their city offices, and bartered for either a charter or the cargo that the schooner might at the moment have under hatch.

They were tall, bronzed, muscular men, not handsome, but ruggedly good-looking, Keith and Allan Wharton; both clean-shaven, both with clear, gray, steady eyes, and light brown hair—Allan, six feet in height, topping his younger brother by perhaps a scant inch. And now as they stood together at the schooner's rail staring out through the darkness to where, a point off the starboard bow, a light persistently flared up and died down at regular intervals, Allan flung a perplexed gesture shoreward.

“Well,” he demanded, “can you make anything more out of it than before?”

“No, I'm hanged if I can!” Keith replied in a puzzled way. “As we've already said, it's obvious that they spotted us long before twilight, and, knowing we would pass close to the island, they've kept the light showing ever since it grew dark enough to attract our attention. That's clear enough;

and, also, there's no possible doubt about it being a signal. But the whole thing is just as queer as ever it was—unless we're out in our bearings, and I don't see how that could be for we both checked up on the noon observations."

"There's nothing wrong with our bearings," Allan Wharton answered. "The island's down on the chart, though I'll admit you'd need a magnifying glass to see it; furthermore, we expected to rise it by late afternoon even in this light breeze. There's no question about it; it's the same island where we put in for water about a year ago, and counted ourselves lucky at finding any in so small a place."

"Right!" said Keith. "I'm sure it is, too; but, of course, that's just what's bothering us. We stretched our legs ashore there, went all over the island in less than two hours, and there wasn't a living soul on it, nor any sign that there ever had been. And now there's a signal fire on the beach."

"Yes; and I'd say they've seen our answer now, for they haven't smothered their blaze for the last few minutes." Allan turned his head, and shouted along the deck. "You needn't swing that lantern any more, Gur Singh!" he ordered. "And stand by to heave-to. We won't go much farther in. If I remember aright, the reefs run a long way out all around the island."

"Yes, sahib," a voice replied out of the darkness.

"It's a bit queer, as you say," resumed Allan Wharton, turning to Keith again, "and I'm getting rather curious about it, though we have both agreed that some poor devils, natives or whites, must be in trouble there from some cause or other. I don't suppose there's a chance in a thousand that any other vessel, except their own or whatever they came in, has even sighted the island since we were here last. However, we'll hear their story presently. It's luck for them, in any case, that we came along! We'll let Hoka and Taipi row us ashore, and Gur Singh can stay with the schooner."

Keith nodded.

"Yes," he said; "and with those reefs in mind, I'd say we're already close enough in, as it is. It can't be more than a mile to the shore, and we're just about abreast of the light. What do you say?"

"All right," agreed Allan Wharton, "see to it, old top!"

The schooner was smartly hove-to, and the boat lowered. The two Malays, who, with Gur Singh, comprised the schooner's entire crew, took their places at the oars, and, leaving Gur Singh aboard, began to row the two brothers toward the shore.

Keith lighted his pipe, and, while his elder brother exchanged an occasional word with one or other of the two Malays, sat smoking in silence. Now that he was actually on the way to an explanation of this signal fire on a previously uninhabited island, he set speculation aside, and his mind became immersed in a matter that was of much more serious concern to him—one, indeed, that he had been discussing with his brother almost daily for the past month.

It had come about through an opportunity to purchase, in Singapore, and at a very favorable and attractive price, another schooner of about the same tonnage as the *Malola*. Economically, the opportunity presented was perfectly sound—there was no doubt whatsoever but that, backed by their reputation and the connections they had made in their years of trading, they could put another schooner into commission, keep it just as busy as the *Malola*, and practically double their profits. But from his, Keith's, standpoint, and from Allan's too, for that matter, the business end of it, the money and the profits, were not everything.

He shook his head now in the darkness over his pipe. It meant separation from this man beside him who was more than brother, who had been father, mother, tutor and friend to him since he had been in short pants. It meant a wrench that he could not even contemplate without dismay. Allan would command one of the schooners, and he would command the other. He was to have his choice. That was like Allan. Allan had also insisted, if they finally decided on this undertaking, that the old crew, the three men who had sailed with them for years, Gur Singh, an excellent navigator, and Hoka and Taipi here, faithful and splendid fellows, should go with him, Keith, while Allan would pick up a new crew. And that was like Allan's unselfishness, too. Gur Singh and Hoka and Taipi were more like trustworthy old friends than anything else. Allan would miss them sorely.

Keith bit a little savagely on the stem of his pipe. It wasn't worth it! Pounds, shillings and pence weren't everything; and, besides, they already had a neat little pile salted away, as it was. Allan's preference in a personal sense was to let things remain as they were; but Allan was too practical to dismiss a good business opportunity purely on the grounds of sentiment without at least discussing it in its every phase. And so they had discussed it—and were still discussing it!

Again Keith clamped his jaws on his pipe. There were moments when he felt he ought to be guided by the strictly common-sense business viewpoint of the project—and there were moments when, with memories surging upon

him, he could not abide the thought of it. This was one of those latter moments.

It wasn't worth it! All the money in the world wasn't worth it! He did not remember his mother at all; but he remembered when his father had died, and Allan had come back to the little island plantation from the University in Sydney. He, Keith, had been ten years old then. His father's affairs had not been in very good shape; indeed, the plantation, at best a very moderate one in point of size and output, was in difficulties. Allan had realized what he could do on it—just about enough to cover the purchase price of the *Malola*, for Allan, all through his boyhood days, had loved the sea and had spent his vacations upon it, and saw in the purchase of the *Malola* the best investment that he could make for both of them with the small amount of money at their command. And he, Keith, remembered how he had pleaded piteously with Allan to be taken along, too. At first Allan had been dubious about it, but finally his pleadings had won. He remembered the day of Allan's surrender. He remembered Allan's words: "I'm not sure I'm doing the right thing by you, youngster—you should be at school. But I haven't the heart to send you away to a boarding-school now with the dad just gone. I don't suppose, however, a year will make any serious difference, and meanwhile I will take you on myself with your lessons."

And so he had sailed with Allan that first year—and all the years thereafter. He had never measured his "education" by orthodox standards, but he had never had reason to sense inferiority in any company, for he had had a tremendous incentive to work, especially in the beginning—more than most youngsters had ever had. He had not wanted Allan to send him away from the schooner at the end of that first year. He had worked hard, and Allan, a great student himself, as a reward, had agreed to carry on so long as he, Keith, continued to make the same progress. At first it had been just the elementary subjects, of course, then higher mathematics and navigation, the classics and the best in literature. Even the school books of those boyhood years were still out there in the *Malola's* cabin—sentiment had prevented them from ever having been destroyed.

To part with this man here beside him to whom he owed so much! This man who had loved him and mothered him as a kid! And then afterwards—chums. The years of companionship, and—yes, he remembered this, too—it came gripping at his heart now with an icy clutch—just as though it *were now*, and he was living through it again—the night when the doctors in Singapore had said Allan would not live till daylight. He, Keith, had been only twelve then, hardly old enough to appreciate the full meaning of death,

but old enough to know a grief and despair that had blotted out the whole world around him. Memories! They were so many and so intimate that——

A hand was laid upon his shoulder, breaking in upon his thoughts.

“What’s the matter, little brother?” asked Allan. “Back on the subject of the *Malola*’s running mate again?”

“Yes,” Keith answered.

“Guilty on the same count—when I haven’t been occupied with keeping Hoka and Taipi on their course,” admitted Allan; then abruptly: “And I’ve come to the conclusion, though just why I should have reached it to-night and at this moment I do not know, that we’ve been making a pair of fools of ourselves for the last month because the whole thing was actually settled right at the start.”

Keith swung around to face the other.

“What do you mean?” he demanded. “In what way was it settled?”

“It was settled,” said Allan quietly, “because, in the last analysis, neither of us would have been willing to tear up by the roots all that it means to both of us to be together. It’s just the old *Malola* out there, and these two lads here, and Gur Singh, and you and I, just as it has always been, isn’t it, Keith?”

Keith’s hand closed on his brother’s with a mighty grip.

“Thank God!” he cried happily.

“Yes—righto!” Allan’s voice was suspiciously husky. He cleared his throat. “Well, that’s that—and here we are within a hundred yards of the beach. They’ve let the fire die down pretty low, but I can make out three or four figures standing around it at the water’s edge.”

Keith stared shoreward, but a sudden mist had come before his eyes, and he rubbed them with his knuckles.

“Four, I’d say,” he pronounced as his vision cleared. “They’ve seen us coming, of course, though it’s beastly dark; but we might as well give them a hail now.” He raised his voice. “Beach, ahoy!” he shouted.

A cheer answered him.

“Whites!” said Allan. “There’ll be crowded quarters on the *Malola* to-night; but a thankful lot, unless I miss my guess, to be anywhere but here.”

Keith nodded by way of answer. He was intent upon the shore now, which was but a matter of a few strokes away. Yes, there were four figures there—four men. As Allan had said, the fire had died down, and was now but a glowing lump of embers with an occasional flicker of flame; but, as they stood at the water's edge, the four figures had become distinctly silhouetted against the remaining light, little though it was. They were talking, laughing in an hysterical manner, jumping up and down on the beach like men who, having once abandoned hope, were now crazed and delirious with joy at the certain promise of rescue.

“Poor devils!” Keith muttered, unconsciously repeating Allan's words.

The boat's nose grated on the sand.

Keith stood up, and, with Allan beside him, began to clamber over the thwarts, as Hoka and Taipi jumped out to pull the boat up on the beach. He smiled then—as both he and Allan nearly lost their balance. Hoka and Taipi might have saved themselves their efforts, and the wetting of their feet! As though fearful of having their means of salvation snatched from them even when it was at hand, the four figures had seized upon the boat's gunwales and had given a concerted tug that jerked the boat up the beach until it was almost clear of the water.

“Here, easy there! Have a heart, you chaps!” Allan laughed out cheerily. “Everything's all right now, and you——”

The short, vicious flame-tongue of a revolver shot stabbed through the darkness—then another, and another. Something hot seared itself across Keith's cheek. He heard Taipi scream. He saw Allan just in front of him fling up his hands, his sentence never finished, and pitch headlong over the bow of the boat onto the sand.

For the space of time it might take a watch to tick Keith's brain was numbed and inactive with shock and surprise; and then, with a distraught and piercing cry that welled up from a soul riven with anguish and fury, he launched himself in a plunging dive from the boat's thwart full at the nearest figure on the beach.

The blaze of a shot blinded him, the heat of it scorched his face, and the bullet winging just above his lowered head tore his cap away; but like a human catapult he had struck the other, and with the force of impact both rolled upon the sand.

A lust for vengeance was upon Keith; a lust to kill—with his bare hands. He had nothing else—only his bare hands. They had murdered Allan. Allan

was dead. He was fighting tigerishly now—to kill. Because Allan was dead. Because this man around whose body his arms were locked was one of those who had murdered Allan.

There seemed to be another struggle going on a few yards away. He caught glimpses of it—indistinct, shadowy, swaying forms in the darkness—as he rolled over and over. That was Hoka—for Taipi's scream had been that of a man wounded to death. They would kill Hoka, too—the odds were too heavy. And then it would be his turn. But that mattered nothing if he could take toll for Allan's death; this man he fought with first—and another of them if he could! But if no more than one, then at least this foul thing whose breath was upon his cheek, who snarled and raved and slavered like a beast as he fought.

But the man was strong; his strength as greatly multiplied by the fear of death as his, Keith's, strength was multiplied by the flaming fury that possessed him. Again and again they writhed and tossed this way and that, neither of them able to break the other's hold and gain his feet, each seeking to imbed his fingers in the other's throat. And it was the other, not Keith, who succeeded first.

Gasping, choking, Keith tore at the man's hold. It was like something bony, slimy covered—like the clutch of some creature that was not human, tearing and digging into his neck. And he became conscious that the other's right hand, as his own closed over it, possessed only the thumb and the jagged stumps of the four fingers—and the feel of it was abhorrent. Madly, he wrenched it away, and his own hand in turn shot to the other's throat.

They rolled over on the sand. And Keith's fingers tightened—tightened—tightened. But as he rolled over he became suddenly aware that the shadowy forms which had been engaged in the near-by struggle were now hovering above him. It had not lasted long—Hoka's struggle—nor his own, either—just a matter of little more than moments. But he almost had his man now. Just a few more of those moments, just a——

Something struck him with a crushing blow on his head. He felt his hands relax, his strength flow from him—and then nothingness.

CHAPTER II

The Nameless Isle

IT was breaking dawn, the sun's first rays just beginning to crimson the east when Keith returned to partial consciousness. He opened his eyes to find that he was lying on a stretch of beach; and, wondering in a dazed way how he had come there, he was suddenly assailed with a sense of profound depression and foreboding that he could not understand.

He stirred—and the movement brought him intense pain. His head ached violently, and there was an unaccountable soreness and stiffness in his right side. It was very strange; there was an ugly bewilderment about it all. And what were those great red blotches on his white jacket and on his shirt? He touched them with his fingers. His fingers became tinged with the same color. Blood! He must have been bleeding profusely. Perhaps he was still bleeding.

What was it all about? What had happened? Why couldn't he remember? Why was his brain clouded like this? By rights he should have been on board the *Malola*.

The *Malola*! Yes, that brought vague glimmerings of recollection—the schooner and a beach somewhere were mixed up together. And there had been a fire, too, hadn't there? Yes, there it was—or rather the charred, dead remains of it. He could see it from where he lay; and beyond, just a little way off, farther up on the beach, there was green foliage and a skyline of palms and other trees.

He raised himself up painfully, first to his elbow, and then to a sitting posture; and, facing seaward now, stared around him. And suddenly his eyes widened and became fixed. A dead man lay there a few yards away, his limbs twisted beneath him, his arms flung out on either side, his glazed eyes turned to the morning light.

Keith's lips moved. A moan came from them.

“Allan!”

And in the fullness of returned consciousness, as it swept upon him now with all its unendurable grief and bitterness, he covered his eyes with his hands, and, throwing himself face down on the sand, sobbed like a child.

The paroxysm passed—but it was a long while before he regained control of himself. He was very weak—miserably, physically weak—perhaps that was why it was so hard to get a grip on himself. He remembered it all now, *lived* it all again. The callous, inhuman, brutal treachery of which Allan and himself and Taipi and Hoka had been the victims. The signal fire on the beach, which had caused them to put off from the schooner in the boat, and——

Where was the boat? Where was the *Malola*? And where were Taipi and Hoka? He had looked only at Allan lying there on the beach—his eyes in that first gaze had looked nowhere else.

He sat up again, and this time it was not only Allan that he saw. Something hot and choking welled up in his throat. Taipi and Hoka, those brown-skinned friends of years, were here—Taipi and Hoka were the two forms, a little distance apart over there beyond Allan, that lay motionless on the sand.

Keith swept the beach line with his eyes. There was no boat. The boat was gone.

He stared out to sea. There was no sign of the schooner. The *Malola* was gone.

Keith gained his feet and staggered to Allan's side. Reverently he closed the sightless eyes, and, kneeling on the sand, lifted the other's hands and clasped them in his own. His lips moved, but he made no sound. And no tears came; but into his gray, drawn face there crept a look, grim and remorseless, dominating agony and grief, that set a seal upon the oath of vengeance which was being sworn by those silently moving lips.

After a little while, he made his way to Taipi. Taipi, too, was dead; and, like Allan, had evidently been killed instantly with no chance to make even a fight for his life, for he had been shot through the head.

Keith passed on to Hoka, and, kneeling here in turn, gave a quick and sudden cry. Hoka, though unconscious and wounded in many places by knife thrusts, was still breathing, still alive.

An object lying on the sand a little way off attracted Keith's attention. It was his cap, which he remembered had been torn from his head by a revolver shot. He staggered and lurched toward it, picked it up, staggered

and lurched to the water's edge, filled it with water, and, pinching the bullet-ridden cloth into folds so that he should lose as little of the contents as possible, regained Hoka's side and began dashing water into the Malay's face.

Presently the man opened his eyes; and, after a little while, his gaze wandering to the two inert forms on the beach, he spoke faintly.

"They are dead, *Tuan*?" he asked.

"Yes," Keith answered. "And there is little doubt but that you and I, Hoka, were also left for dead. In any case, we are alone here."

"Great evil has fallen upon us, O master," said Hoka after a moment's silence. "Does the *Tuan* know the meaning of it?"

Keith shook his head.

"No," he replied; "I do not know any more than you do, Hoka—neither why we were treacherously attacked, nor how those men came to be on the island, nor who they were."

The Malay sat up suddenly, a clenched hand uplifted above his head.

"I swear an oath, *Tuan*," he said hoarsely. "Because of my love for the *Tuan* who is dead, and my love for Taipi, who also is dead, and because of what has been done here, if I live, I will know who they are, and they shall die. Let the *Tuan* bear witness to the oath that I have made!"

"I, too," said Keith in a low voice, "have sworn an oath that is not far apart from yours. But now we must think first of ourselves, and what we are to do."

"My strength returns, O master," Hoka answered. "And I can walk, even if it be but slowly and but a little way at a time. But I have great thirst."

"We know that there is water on the island, at least," said Keith. "But we'll tie up each other's hurts a bit before we do anything else. We've both of us lost too much blood, as it is."

"I will tear up my *sarong*, *Tuan*," Hoka offered. "It will make many pieces, and be enough for both."

"No," said Keith—and found his voice suddenly unsteady. "Taipi has no longer any use for one. We will take his. Try your strength, Hoka. See if you can walk that far. If not, I will get it."

Hoka got slowly to his feet.

“It is well, *Tuan*,” he said. “See, I stand—and walk.”

Keith nodded—and, sitting on the sand, watched the other. Hoka made but slow progress. Hoka was very weak—just about as weak as he, Keith, was. He continued to watch Hoka for a moment as the man began to remove Taipi’s *sarong*; then his eyes travelled to where Allan lay—and abruptly he stared in another direction. There was something else that ought to be done beside the binding up of wounds and the searching for water—but both Hoka and he were too weak to attempt it now. Perhaps by evening, if they rested in the shade, and found water, and found fruit of any sort that would serve for food, they would be stronger—perhaps not. Allan would understand, and so would Taipi, that it was not because of callousness that they were left lying there.

Hoka came back bringing the *sarong*. They tore it into strips. It made grotesque and ludicrous looking bandages, which, under happier circumstances, would have brought a smile to Keith’s lips; but now the gaily flowered pattern of the cloth seemed to possess only a grim irony wholly in keeping with all else that had transpired—and with the strips they bound up each other’s wounds.

This done, they rose and began to make their way across the beach toward the trees. It was not far, but it took them long; their footsteps were halting—one sometimes supporting the other, where neither out of his meagre store had any strength to spare. And as they stumbled on with still some yards to go, Hoka spoke.

“*Tuan*,” he said thickly, “the sun grows hot, and I burn as though with fire. Does the *Tuan* remember where the pool is from which we carried water to the *Malola* when we came here before?”

“No”—Keith circled his own fevered lips with the tip of his tongue—“but that doesn’t really matter, for I remember that in walking over the island, we found springs in a lot of places. We’ll find plenty of water, Hoka, never fear! And near at hand, too, unless I miss my guess. Those fellows who attacked us would not be living far away from water, and it is more than likely that their camp is very close to this spot where they made their fire. Yes, see!” He pointed suddenly a little to the right. “There’s a path there! Water, Hoka! My God, I want it, too! Come on! Come on!”

Where they had stumbled before, they stumbled the more now in their eagerness as they attempted to hurry—and like two drunken men they swayed and reeled their way across the remaining stretch of sand to where the path that Keith had pointed out led in through the trees. And here,

because the path was very narrow—indeed no more than a footway where the thick undergrowth had been trampled down—they were obliged to go in single file, and their stumbling brought them more than once to grief, for each in turn tripped and fell several times.

For perhaps fifty yards they followed the twisting path, Keith leading, and then abruptly they came out on the edge of a little clearing. And Keith saw across the clearing a crude shelter that was made of the boughs of trees; but also, and what was of infinitely greater moment for the instant, he saw, almost at his feet, a little pool of clear spring water.

He flung himself down upon the ground and drank, and Hoka drank beside him. It was deliciously cool. It was nectar. In all his life he had never drunk so gratefully. And when the torment of thirst was gone he plunged his throbbing head beneath the surface, and tearing open his shirt, splashed the water upon his neck and chest. It did not dispel the pain of his wounds nor magically restore his strength, but he rose to his feet refreshed and thankful.

He nodded in the direction of the shelter across the clearing, as Hoka, too, stood up.

“That’s where they lived, of course,” he said; “and it’s possible they may have left some food in there that will keep us going until we are able to forage for something for ourselves. We’ll go and see.”

He led the way to the hut, and, with Hoka behind him, entered. It was quite roomy, thickly roofed with branches, and three sides were enclosed. On the ground and around the sides, armfuls of leaves had been heaped together, obviously to serve for beds. In the corner at the rear of the hut was a large biscuit tin. There was nothing else.

Keith went over to the tin and opened it. It was still about a quarter full.

“Hard-tack,” he said; and, handing one of the biscuits to Hoka, took one himself. “We’ll have to go sparingly with these, for there doesn’t seem to be anything else.”

They sat down opposite each other, each on a heap of leaves, munching at their coarse fare.

“*Tuan*, I am weary,” said Hoka, his biscuit still unfinished. “Is there anything that we must do now for a little while?”

Keith, too, had eaten but a portion of his own ration, and that without relish. He put the remainder of the biscuit in his pocket now as he looked across at Hoka. The man seemed utterly done in.

“Yes,” he said, forcing a cheerful smile; “rest, Hoka—and sleep if we can.”

“It is well, O master,” said Hoka gratefully—and stretched himself out at full length on his pile of leaves.

Sleep! Keith shook his head. He, too, was in sore need of rest; sleep, though, was another matter! How could one sleep with a mind so tortured that one’s physical sufferings by comparison became insignificant?

But sleep, born out of pure exhaustion, came quickly to Keith, nevertheless.

When he opened his eyes again the light was fading. It was late afternoon. Hoka had obviously wakened earlier and had gone out somewhere, for the heap of leaves opposite was untenanted and the hut was empty.

Keith sat up and stared around him. Nothing but the biscuit tin and the strewn leaves! But they were enough—enough in their stark, correlative significance, to set his mind remorselessly at its bitter work again, and to bring a gnawing at his heart. And then suddenly as he sat there with his chin cupped in his hands, his eyes became fixed on something white just at his feet and amongst the leaves, which latter he must have disturbed in his sleep. He stooped over and picked it up. It was a small sheet of somewhat soiled paper that showed signs of having been wet—undoubtedly a page that had fallen out of a loose-leaf notebook, for the little punch holes at one side, though frayed and torn, were still plainly in evidence. Pencil writing covered both sides of the paper, but the light in the hut was too dim now to enable him to read it.

He got up and went outside. There was still light enough here, but the writing was badly blurred in places and he could only decipher it with difficulty. It began abruptly in the middle of a sentence:

“. . . end will come. I am in no sense deceived. Except that they have taken the mahogany box from me I can complain of no harsh treatment. But they are the stamp of men who would crush out a human life, if it stood in their way, with no more compunction than they would have in exterminating the merest insect that crossed their paths. While we remain on this island and there is no escape for any of us, I am safe because I am useful to them, for I am made to do more than my share in the work of gathering fruit and such other edibles as are to be found. But I

know only too well what will happen if the chance ever comes for them to get away. One of them goes each day to the beach and remains on watch for the sight of a sail or a passing vessel whose attention may be attracted. God help me if one is ever sighted, for that will be the day of my death. It may be to-morrow. I do not know. It may be never.

“Saturday: It is two days now since I have written anything here. During that time nothing untoward happened until early this afternoon when . . .”

As abruptly as it had begun, the writing ended here in mid-sentence at the bottom of the reverse side of the page.

Keith’s brows drew together, and his lips straightened in a grim line. It was obviously a portion of a diary, and, if it were to be taken at its face value, there had been a *fifth* man here on the island. Where was that man now? He shook his head, and now his hand went wearily to his eyes. God, was there more of this—still more to come! Could there be other than one meaning to it? There had only been four men on the beach. Of that he was certain, and——

He turned with a start as a hand touched his elbow. It was Hoka. He stared into the Malay’s face. What was the matter with the man? Hoka was wounded and weak, of course, which could account for much, but not for the twitching lips and the naked fear in the other’s face.

And then suddenly Keith reached out his hand and laid it on the Malay’s shoulders. He knew what was the matter with the man. Instinctively he knew what was coming. He lacked only the details.

“Tell your tale, Hoka,” he said in a low voice.

“It is an evil one, *Tuan*,” Hoka cried out in shrill, almost hysterical tones. “A black curse rests upon this place. It is the abode of devils. Death, O master! There is only death here! I am afraid! The smell of it and the touch of it is upon me, and I, too, shall die!”

“Nonsense!” said Keith with quiet reassurance. “You’re done in now—both of us are; but a few days will set us straight again. Now, pull yourself together, and tell me all about it.”

For an instant Hoka made no response, then his shoulders straightened.

“Yes, *Tuan*,” he said, steadying his voice with an effort. “I am ashamed. If I die, I die. I no longer fear. Listen then, O master! While the *Tuan* still

slept, I awoke and went out of the hut. It was not long ago—only a few minutes. The *Tuan* must have awakened before I had gone many steps in there amongst the trees.” He flung out his hand, pointing the direction. “I had not enough strength to take me far, but I hoped to find fruit while it was yet light. I found no fruit. I know not if there is any fruit; but I found that, instead, which was not good to see, and it was then that the fear the *Tuan* has seen came upon me.”

“I know,” said Keith gravely. “You found a dead man.”

Hoka’s eyes widened:

“The *Tuan* knows! How does the *Tuan* know?”

Keith held up the piece of paper in his hand.

“I, too, found something,” he said. “It was amongst the leaves on which I had been sleeping in there in the hut. It was written by the man you have just seen. He expected death at the hands of those men who killed my brother and Taipi on the beach last night. Was it so you found him—murdered?”

Hoka’s lips were twitching again.

“I have told the *Tuan*,” he said hoarsely, “that what I saw was not good to look upon.”

“Take me there!” said Keith tersely.

Without a word Hoka swung around and headed in amongst the trees and undergrowth. For a hundred paces Keith followed, and then Hoka halted.

“It is here, *Tuan*,” Hoka said—and drew to one side.

Keith stepped forward—and with a sharp ejaculation that mingled pity and anger, stooped over the body of a white-haired man of perhaps sixty years of age that, half-hidden by the foliage, lay sprawled upon the ground. And then for an instant Keith turned away his eyes. He was weak and ill himself, his mind already in torment, and, as Hoka had said, it was a sight not good to see. The man’s head had been battered with some heavy instrument, presumably an axe, and one side of his face was no more than a smear of coagulated blood.

But presently, regaining his grip upon himself, Keith knelt beside the body. Who was the man? Was there any clue to his identity—any clue as to where he had come from? That loose-leaf notebook, for instance—the diary!

Keith searched through the pockets—which were not many in number, for the man was scantily clad—but they had evidently been rifled, for they contained not a single article of any description. But Keith’s examination, once undertaken, was thorough. He searched inside the shirt and elsewhere about the man’s person for the notebook. It was not there. He searched the clothing then for the maker’s name, for a laundry mark, for anything that might by any possibility lead to identification. Nothing! That the man had obviously been some one of education and refinement was all he discovered—the excellent texture of such clothing as there was, the indefinable stamp of good breeding on such portions of the face as were still unmarred, and the page from the diary, proved that.

Keith stood up.

“There is nothing that we can do here, Hoka,” he said slowly. “We have neither the strength nor any tool with which to dig up the earth, and we have not the strength to carry him to the beach where we can dig up the sand with our hands as we will do for my brother and Taipi. Perhaps to-morrow we will be able to tear away small branches and cover him. It is all that we can do.”

“Yes, *Tuan*,” Hoka answered.

“We will go back to the hut now”—Keith was speaking more to himself than to his companion, scarcely conscious indeed that he was speaking aloud—“and rest for a little while again before we go to the beach. We will have the cool of the night to help us there with our work.”

“Yes, *Tuan*,” Hoka said again.

They returned to the hut and both threw themselves down on their respective pile of leaves.

Keith lay with his face in his hands. Rest—yes! But not mental rest. How could there be mental rest? There were Allan and Taipi, and this sight that he had just seen! Who were these five men who had been here on the island? And why had the fifth been murdered? What was that mahogany box the fifth man had written about? Had that anything to do with it? If only he had been able to find the rest of the diary! But it was gone irrecoverably. The four men had unquestionably taken it, as they had taken everything else belonging to their victim. Whether or not they had discovered after the murder that a page was missing from the book it was hard to say; but it was practically certain that the owner himself had not been aware of its loss, for if he had had any deliberate intention of leaving it as a message it would

have been much more definite in its tenor. He would unquestionably have told who he was, and he would likewise have named the four. There was little doubt, therefore, that the page had merely fallen out of the book unnoticed by him, and had been covered up with the leaves. Did it matter, after all?

Allan was gone.

Keith crushed his face in his hands. That cry kept welling up from his heart. But it would numb the agony a little, wouldn't it, if he could keep his mind fixed on these other matters, instead of allowing his thoughts to dwell wholly upon Allan?

Why had those four men not been content to get into the boat and go out to the schooner with Allan and himself, and Hoka and Taipi? More than once throughout the day he had asked himself that question and could find no answer. He found none now. It couldn't have been because they had murdered the fifth man, for neither he nor Allan would ever have known that a fifth man had existed.

What had happened to Gur Singh? Yes, he could probably answer that with only too good reason to fear that his answer was the right one. Gur Singh was dead. They had taken the boat, gone off to the *Malola*, killed Gur Singh, and sailed away. One against four! What chance would Gur Singh have had?

If only it hadn't been so dark on the beach last night! If he could but have seen their faces! As it was, he knew only that one of them had a mutilated hand—a right hand with only bony, irregular stumps where the fingers had been. Did it do him any good to know that?

Allan was gone!

He lay very quiet then. It was useless to fight it back. Let the memories come, let his heart grieve its full if it would. To-night, do what he could, he realized there was room for nothing else.

When he finally raised his head his face was wet, and darkness had fallen.

“We will go to the beach now, Hoka,” he said.

And Hoka, from tossing restlessly on his pile of leaves, rose to his feet and answered:

“Yes, *Tuan*.”

When the sun rose there were tracks upon the beach as though two heavy objects had been laboriously dragged across it; and in the sand just above high-water mark, where two men, ill and spent, had dug and clawed with their hands throughout the night, were two crosses crudely fashioned out of small tree limbs which were held together with creepers.

CHAPTER III

Some Threads Are Knotted

KEITH stared with puzzled eyes around him. He felt out with his hands. This wasn't a pile of leaves on which he was lying—and he should be lying on a pile of leaves. No, that wasn't right, either; he should be lying on the ground beside a pool of very clear, cold water. He had crawled there from a hut of some kind. But there were no trees overhead now, and there was a door in front of him that was kept partially open by a brass hook, and a hanging swayed gently. Everything seemed to sway gently.

He struggled desperately to correlate all this; he felt out with his hands again, and his fingers plucked at some kind of covering. Yes, of course, he quite understood now! He had been dreaming. He could not remember the details of the dream, but it had been a vile and hideous thing that, though he was now awake again, still left him profoundly depressed, so great was the lingering impression of reality. This swaying was the swaying of a ship; this soft and yielding thing on which he lay was a bunk; and that door there on a brass hook was a cabin door. It had been only a dream. He was lying on his bunk in his cabin on the *Malola*, of course. But there was something irritatingly unfamiliar about the cabin. The bookcase with all the old school books in it that used to be at the right-hand side of the door must have been moved out. He would go down somebody's street about that!

The door began to open very softly, very slowly, just a few inches at a time. Keith blinked his eyes painfully. Now what was up?

A face appeared. Then the tall gaunt form of an East Indian came silently into the cabin. Gur Singh! Ugly mug Gur Singh had—always had had! What was the man tiptoeing about in this sly fashion for?

Keith pointed a finger.

“Who the hell took my bookcase, Gur Singh?” he demanded. And then he frowned—he thought he had shouted at the man, but his voice seemed to sound no louder than a faint whisper even in his own ears. But, anyway, why didn't Gur Singh answer? Instead, the man had crossed the cabin to the bunk, and, bowing his forehead, laid his, Keith's, hand upon it. Also the

man's eyes seemed to be full of tears. "What's the matter with you, Gur Singh?" he inquired querulously. "What are you crying for?"

"Sahib," Gur Singh answered, "I cry for joy. It was in my mind but a little while ago that I would never hear the sahib's voice again."

Keith frowned again. In a way this seemed to fit in somehow or other with his dream, but he couldn't make anything out of it.

"Where's my bookcase," he insisted. "Who's been messing about here with the gear in my cabin?"

"This is another cabin, sahib," Gur Singh answered gently. "The sahib is not on the *Malola*."

Keith closed his eyes for an instant. Not on the *Malola*! It was very hard to think at all clearly, everything seemed to be muddled in his mind.

"Then where's the *Malola*?" he muttered.

Gur Singh shook his head.

"I know not, sahib."

Keith pondered this, but the effort to concentrate only brought more confusion.

"Where's Allan?" he questioned wearily.

"Sahib"—Gur Singh's eyes were averted as he spoke—"rest now for a little time. The sahib has been very ill. When the sahib has grown strong again we will talk more together."

Keith was conscious that Gur Singh's words brought a strange sort of relief. He did not want to talk—and Gur Singh said he mustn't. A sense of curiosity seemed to have been dimly awakened, but his brain was too indolent to struggle with it—and Gur Singh said he must rest.

"All right, Gur Singh," he murmured—and, but vaguely aware that the East Indian was stealing softly out of his cabin, fell asleep again.

There came long periods of slumber, and periods, brief at first, of wakefulness. And in these latter periods, as he lay staring at the cabin ceiling, he distinguished between night and day, because sometimes the sunlight flooding in through the porthole hurt his eyes, and sometimes it was dark. And then there came a time when, though through weakness of body he could scarcely move, his mind regained its strength and clarity. And this happened in the night, and it came upon him suddenly as he awoke. And for

a moment, stunned, as a blow or knife thrust first stuns the nerves before the pain and torture come, he lay without a sound as memory flooded in upon him, and then, in his mental agony he moaned—and bit his lips that he might not repeat it and give way like one wholly unmanned.

Self-control returned, and again for a little space he lay there motionless and silent; then suddenly he raised himself on his elbow.

“Gur Singh!” he called loudly. And again: “Gur Singh!”

Like an echo from somewhere he heard the name caught up and repeated, and presently the cabin door opened.

“I am here, sahib,” a voice said softly out of the darkness.

“Light the lamp, Gur Singh,” Keith ordered.

Gur Singh obeyed; and as the yellow glow from the swinging lamp filled the cabin, Keith’s eyes fastened on his own bare forearm and his hand that lay upon the coverlet. Gur Singh had said that he had been very ill; but he had not thought it had been like this. His arm and hand were thin and emaciated almost beyond belief. He looked up at Gur Singh.

“Worse than I thought!” he said tersely.

“Yes, sahib,” said Gur Singh simply.

“There’s a lot I want to know—a great many things,” said Keith. “Shut the door, and sit down.”

Gur Singh hesitated.

“The sahib’s eyes are clear, and his mind has come to its strength again,” he said; “but there is still no strength in the sahib’s body. Sahib, wait then yet a few days more. Will the sahib not say that it would be better so?”

“No!” said Keith decisively. “It won’t do my body any good to lie here, if I torment myself mentally.” He motioned toward the door. “We will talk now, Gur Singh.”

Gur Singh closed the door.

“As the sahib wills,” he said—and, squatting on his haunches on the cabin floor beside the bunk, folded his arms.

“I am going to let you tell your story in your own way presently,” said Keith slowly. “But first, taking it for granted that it was you who somehow returned to the island and found me there, there is something that I want to know. If you returned to the island, tell me this: Hoka is dead, isn’t he?”

“It is even so, sahib,” Gur Singh answered in a low voice. “I it was who returned to the island, and Hoka was dead.”

“I was afraid so,” said Keith bitterly; “but I wasn’t sure. I can remember but little of anything that happened on the island after the first few days. Hoka’s wounds, I know, grew worse and worse; and I was in a raging fever. We had very little to eat—practically nothing but the few biscuits we found in a tin in the hut, and they were hardly the right sort of nourishment for men in our condition. We tried to find some fruit, and I think Hoka got a little on the second day; but after that we neither of us could do much more than crawl from the hut to the water pool and back again. At first we emptied the biscuit tin and filled it with water, but the tin leaked, and the water didn’t last very long, and after a bit, the tin, if there was any water in it at all, was so heavy that we couldn’t carry it. So Hoka crawled to the pool when thirst drove him to it, and so did I. While my senses still remained, I could hear Hoka raving in his delirium on those journeys, and in the hut, too; afterwards, I suppose I did the same. And then, though this is very indistinct in my mind and I do not know when it was, it seemed to me that I was conscious of a great stillness about Hoka as he lay on his pile of leaves. The last I remember is that I was lying on the ground beside the pool which was so clear that a distorted face mirrored on its surface—my own, of course, though I didn’t recognize it—seemed to jeer at me; and so cold that, as I struck at the face with my fist, the water felt like ice.”

“It was there we found the sahib,” said Gur Singh gravely; “and likewise we found Hoka on the leaves in the hut. Also we found two crosses and we knew that Allan Sahib and Taipi were dead.”

Keith’s fingers, from plucking at the covering of the bunk, curled into the palm of his hand.

“Yes, they were killed that night,” he said hoarsely; and then, after an instant’s silence: “Did you find the other man in the woods? We were unable to bury him.”

Gur Singh shook his head:

“Another man, sahib? No; we knew naught of him. Who was this other man of whom the sahib speaks?”

“I do not know,” Keith answered. “I found a page from his notebook, but it did not tell very much. In any case, it is certain he was murdered by the other four.”

“The piece of paper was in the sahib’s pocket,” said Gur Singh. “I have kept it safely.”

Keith nodded. He was conscious that for the first time he was scrutinizing this squatting figure on the floor minutely. Perhaps it was due to the play of light and shadow as the ceiling lamps swung in a slow arc with the heeling of the vessel, but Gur Singh seemed changed. Gur Singh was still comparatively a young man, not more than thirty-five, but the olive brown face with its thin, patchy beard seemed to have aged ten years since he had seen it last; and it no longer possessed its customary mask of Eastern immobility—the eyes denied that now, for there was something smoldering ominously in their jet-black depths that had never been there before. Also the man wore a makeshift turban, and clothes that obviously were not his own—and that made a difference too.

Keith suddenly reached out his hand toward the other.

“You too, Gur Singh, have been through hell,” he said compassionately. “Tell me your story now.”

Gur Singh caught the outstretched hand, and for the second time pressed it against his forehead; then, lifting Keith’s hand back on to the coverlet, he folded his arms again.

“I am the sahib’s servant, and the sahib is my life,” he said brokenly.

“I can see that you have saved mine,” Keith answered simply. “Now tell me all, Gur Singh.”

“Yes, sahib; but the sahib must have patience, for the tale is not easy to tell in the sahib’s tongue. When the sahib and his brother and Hoka and Taipi went away in the boat to the beach that night, I, Gur Singh, as the sahib knows, was left alone on the *Malola*, and once, for a few minutes, I went below the deck. It was there, sahib, that I thought I heard the sound of shots, but the sounds were very faint, and I was not sure—and why, sahib, should there be shots? I had seen no flashes. I went to the deck and looked toward the shore. I could see only the fire on the beach, and the fire was but as a little point of light in the darkness. I watched then, and after a space the splashing of the oars came to my ears, but it was not until the boat was close to the *Malola*’s side that I could even see it. The sahib will remember that it was very dark?”

“I remember,” said Keith grimly.

“I called out,” Gur Singh went on, “and I was answered by a voice that said, ‘All right!’ I could not have said that it was the sahib’s voice, or that it

was the voice of Allan Sahib, for, in the splashing of the oars which was great at that time, who could tell the voice of any man from that of another? Furthermore I could see that, as there had been four in the boat when it had left the *Malola*, so there were four in it now when it returned. I ran then to get a lantern so that the sahibs might the better see their way to come aboard. After that, sahib, for a time, I knew nothing, for as I leaned over the side with the lantern, a figure from the boat sprang over the rail and with something he carried in his hand, I know not what, struck me upon the head, and my senses fled. Sahib, I know not how long it was before my eyes opened again, but I was still lying on the deck, and two men were standing above me, and one had flung a pail of water over my head, and the *Malola* was running before the wind. Then, sahib, I was stood upon my feet, and pushed along the deck to where the other two were at the wheel, and the four stood around me. Their faces were evil beyond any I had ever seen before, and one man held a revolver close against my heart. Another asked me if I could find my way upon the sea, and steer the ship from one place to another and——”

“You mean navigate her?” Keith interrupted tersely.

“Yes, sahib. And it was for that reason my life was spared, for they knew not how to find the way themselves.”

“I see!” Keith nodded. “You told them that you could. Where did they want to go?”

“Wait, sahib, but a moment. It was then, when I had told them that I could take the ship from place to place, that I first knew what had befallen on the island. They said if I took the ship where they directed and was faithful to them, I should live and be set free, but that otherwise I should die there upon the deck, as the sahib, and Allan Sahib and Hoka and Taipi had died at their hands on the island. And then, sahib”—Gur Singh flung his arms sharply above his head in a fierce, impassioned gesture, and the smoldering light in his eyes seemed to leap into sudden flame—“I, Gur Singh, grovelled like a dog upon the deck before them, and begged for my life, and swore that what it was their will I should do, that would I do, and be faithful to them. Does the sahib understand?”

“I understand,” Keith answered.

“No man”—Gur Singh’s arms were folded across his breast again and his voice was low and even—“has yet called Gur Singh a fool. I knew well that when I had brought the ship within sight of such place as they desired, I, too, should then die. Would I be allowed to go amongst men and tell the tale

of those who had been murdered on the island, and all else that I knew? All this I thought of and all this I knew as I grovelled upon the deck; but, sahib, what was on my lips was not that which was in my heart. If by dying then I could have brought destruction likewise upon them all, then would I have gladly died, for I knew grief and fury then such as I had not thought it was given man to know. Sahib, should I have died? Would it have availed anything? Whereas if I lived who could tell what might come to pass?"

"You did well, Gur Singh," said Keith with a twisted smile. "Otherwise I, too, would have died. Go on!"

"Yes, sahib. They talked long together amongst themselves, and they said then that I should steer the *Malola* for Surabaya. It was in my mind, sahib, that, though they were English, they had no liking for an English place. Also they spoke, too, of the Dutch ships that sailed from Java."

"I can quite see their point!" said Keith. "Roughly, with fair weather, it would have taken you about two weeks to make Surabaya. Well?"

Gur Singh smiled curiously.

"They were well content that it should take that many days," he said, "for even in Surabaya were there not those who might know the *Malola*? And how would these men say they had come upon her? But if the ship were painted black where before she had been white, and if she bore another name, what then, sahib? Was there not always paint aboard the *Malola*, and color to mix it as we would? The next morning they began to paint the *Malola*!"

Keith sucked in his breath sharply.

"So they're making for Surabaya with the *Malola* in a new dress, are they?"

Gur Singh shook his head.

"Who is there now to guide the ship, sahib?" he asked. "And would they still go to Surabaya, even if they could find the way, knowing that I, Gur Singh, would make it known that they should be looked for there?"

"Yes, that's right!" Keith agreed, with a hard smile. "They'll have to get a navigator, pick one up on an island somewhere, before they can make for any definite destination—and that means God knows where. But go back a bit, and let me get this straight. I take it from what you say that they're still sailing more or less blindly around. How and when, then, did you escape

from the *Malola*, and did you at any time shape a course for Surabaya as they told you to do?"

"I will answer the last of the sahib's questions first," replied Gur Singh, "for so will the sahib understand better the answer to the others. They knew little of the sea, but they were men with sharp minds, and the compass and the charts could not be made to lie. I could not steer north if I should steer south; but a little this way or a little that way out of the true course was as nothing, sahib. I pointed out the course to Surabaya, and they were well content; but always I took the *Malola* a little to the east, for there lay the island of Laoolu. And did not Rogers Sahib, the sahib's friend and the friend of Allan Sahib, dwell upon Laoolu; and did not Rogers Sahib own a large schooner?"

Keith nodded.

"I am beginning to understand," he said softly. "Carry on, Gur Singh."

"Sahib, was there any other way? It was in my mind that my tale must be told, and that even if the sahib and Allan Sahib, and Taipi and Hoka were indeed dead, still must I go back to the island for them. But the coming to Laoolu must be in the evening or at night, for otherwise I, Gur Singh, could not make the land. And so for four days we sailed, and because of the handling of the ship as I directed, it came about that we were passing not two miles from Laoolu an hour after the sun went down on the fourth night. Sahib, what was the passing of an island? Had we not passed many islands? Three of the four men were in the cabin. The other and I, Gur Singh, were on the deck. And I made pretense that the jibs were not drawing as I would have them, and I called to the man to take the wheel. And this he did. Then I, Gur Singh, went along the deck, and, hidden by the darkness and the sails, climbed over the bow of the *Malola* and dropped into the water. Thus it was, sahib, that I made my escape, and, by swimming, came to the shore and reached the house of Rogers Sahib. But whither after that the *Malola* went, I know not; but this I knew, that they would not dare to stop the ship and follow me ashore into the hands of those to whom I would have related all that had come to pass."

"I think I can supply the rest," said Keith. "You told Rogers what had happened. This is his schooner, and you went back to the island with it. But where is Rogers? It's true that up to now I probably wouldn't have known the difference if he had spent half his time in the cabin here, but why isn't he down here with us now?"

“Sahib,” Gur Singh replied, “Rogers Sahib is not on the schooner. When I got to Rogers Sahib’s house he had been ill many days by reason of a tree that had fallen on his leg and broken it, but he listened to my tale. Sahib, he was a strong man, and yet he wept. And he gave me the schooner and his native crew that I might return to the island as I desired.”

“Good old Rogers!” Keith murmured; then abruptly: “So I suppose we’re on our way back to Laoolu now?”

“No, sahib. In three days if the wind is fair we will come to Surabaya.”

“Surabaya!” Keith stared. “You think *they’ll* go there, after all—that there’s a chance of catching them there?”

“No, sahib. I know not where they will go, or where they will make land, for are they not now like a ship that is without a rudder? But to Surabaya they will not go knowingly, for have they not spoken of that place to me, and would not I, Gur Singh, in the telling of my tale say that it was to Surabaya I was to take the *Malola*? It is for the sahib’s sake, and because Surabaya was nearer than any other place where that which I sought was to be found, that we go there now. The sahib has been very ill, and the sahib is still very ill. Is there a hospital on Laoolu, and those things that the sahib must have to make him whole again?”

For the second time, Keith reached out his hand impulsively to the other.

“Gur Singh,” he said huskily, “is there anything you haven’t thought of, or done for me?”

“Sahib”—Gur Singh’s deep voice broke a little—“have I not said that the sahib was my life? And now, sahib, we have talked long together. Will not the sahib sleep for a little while?”

Keith flung out a clenched hand.

“Not yet!” he said. “I’m going through with this now. There are more things that I want to know. I want you to tell me something about the men themselves. You must have heard them talking a lot together. Did you get any idea of where they came from, or how they originally came to be on the island?”

“No, sahib; though they spoke of many things, they spoke not of that at all. I know not where they came from, nor yet how they came to be on the island. But this, sahib, I know, that when we went to seek the sahib, I and those with me searched for a boat or perhaps a wreck that might have brought them there, but we found nothing.”

“Well, then, their names—what did they call each other? And, yes—that mahogany box! Did you see any one of them with a mahogany box, big or little?”

Gur Singh inclined his head sharply.

“Twice I saw it, sahib,” he replied. “One of the four carried it under his arm when they talked with me just after they had come aboard the *Malola*. It was twice the length of a man’s hand, and in width and depth the breadth of a man’s hand. And afterwards I saw it once again, sahib, when I was called into the cabin the next day, and it was in the *Malola*’s safe.”

“In the safe!” ejaculated Keith. “I don’t understand that! They would have had to blow the safe open in the first place. What was the use of putting anything in a safe that had been blown open?”

“Sahib, the door of the safe was open, but it had not been blown open.”

“But it was locked!” Keith’s brows drew together. “I am positive of that. I saw Allan lock it when we left the last port, and that was at Talufaigna a week before we got to the island where we were attacked. And neither Allan nor I would have had any occasion to open it in the meanwhile. It was certainly locked that night when those devils came aboard. How did they open it, then? Are you sure there were no signs of force having been used, no holes drilled in it, or anything like that?”

“I am sure, sahib.”

Keith’s frown deepened—then he shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, never mind,” he said. “Did you see the mahogany box itself opened, or hear any of them say what was in it?”

“No, sahib. I know not what was in the box; and the next time I was in the cabin the door of the safe was no longer open.”

Keith smiled thinly.

“A bit queer!” he ejaculated. “But let’s get back to the men themselves. Tell me anything you found out about them. Their names now! What did they call each other?”

“Sahib,” said Gur Singh, “I heard much talk between them, for at night I was for hours alone upon the deck, and by reason of the wind being light and by the lashing of the wheel, I was able to creep often to the cabin skylight which was open, and there I listened to their voices. But many times their words were strange in my ears, for, though they were of the same

tongue as the sahib's, and as Allan Sahib's, they were not the words of the sahib and of Allan Sahib; and the names by which they spoke to each other were such as I had never heard before, and were beyond understanding, for they were the names of colors, and of beasts, and of birds."

Keith came up on his elbow.

"What do you mean—colors and beasts and birds? Can you remember them, Gur Singh?"

"Yes, sahib. One they called Black-ee; and one they called White-ee; and one they called the Weasel; and one there was who had but a thumb on one hand, for the fingers of that hand were gone, and him they called the Magpie."

"We're getting on!" Keith laughed shortly. "A coterie of professional crooks—wherever they came from! I can understand now how the safe was opened! What else, Gur Singh?"

Gur Singh was silent for a moment.

"Sahib," he asked finally, "what is the name of that great city from which came Clinton Sahib, who was the sahib's friend and the friend of Allan Sahib, and who sailed on the *Malola* a year ago, and who played a joke on the sahibs by the changing of his face and clothes at Nukualofa?"

"New York," Keith answered.

Again Gur Singh inclined his head.

"It was even as I thought, sahib, but it was in my mind to make sure. And was not this Clinton Sahib a great officer of the police amongst his own people?"

"Yes," said Keith—and looked at Gur Singh in a puzzled way. "What are you driving at, Gur Singh?"

"Sahib," replied Gur Singh, "when I lay by the cabin skylight and listened to the talk of those who killed Allan Sahib and Taipi and Hoka, it was of New York they talked; and they laughed, sahib, at the evil plans they would bring to pass when they reached this place that I have named—for it was there, sahib, first by taking ship at Surabaya, though it will be by some other way now, that they agreed amongst themselves to go."

Keith came bolt upright on the bunk.

"You're sure of this, Gur Singh?" he cried excitedly. "They've headed for New York—you're sure of that?"

“I am sure, sahib. Nay, more, I am sure, from what talk I heard, that in the days gone by there were those amongst them who had lived there and done evil things there. And thus it was, sahib, that the thought of Clinton Sahib came to me, for was not Clinton Sahib one of those in whose hands is the strength of the law in his own country? Is it not in the sahib’s mind that these men shall be found and shall pay the price?”

“Whether by the law or by other means, there is nothing else in my mind, Gur Singh, nor ever will be”—there was a sudden strange and ominous quiet in Keith’s voice—“until each one of the four and I have settled our reckoning together.”

“It is well, sahib,” murmured Gur Singh, “for by that which is in the sahib’s voice I know that these dogs shall surely die.”

Keith dropped back upon his pillow, and lay for a little time staring in silence at the cabin ceiling; then he spoke abruptly:

“Put out the light, Gur Singh. I may not sleep, for you’ve given me a lot to think about, but we won’t talk any more to-night.”

“Yes, sahib.”

The light went out. The door closed. Keith still stared at the ceiling.

So the four of them, apparently old-time criminals, were headed for New York—which, in turn apparently, was one of their old-time stamping-grounds! Well he, too, would go to New York—as soon as he was able to travel and was fit for anything. Meanwhile there was Bob Clinton—and Clinton’s home address was New York. Thank God for that chance meeting in Suva a year ago, where a mutual liking had developed between Allan, Clinton and himself, and had resulted in Clinton accepting an invitation to make the cruise on the *Malola* to Auckland. The one man in the world, probably, who could best help him now! Bob Clinton, of the United States Secret Service! He had come to know Clinton pretty intimately, intimately enough to recognize the other’s sterling worth, his bull-dog tenacity, his ability and his almost uncanny faculty of out-thinking one—to say nothing of the man being an artist in his profession, and not the kind of a chap one would like to cross swords with in any serious business! Clinton had come to Suva on sick leave—to recuperate from a bullet wound received in an affray with a counterfeiting gang somewhere on the Pacific Coast. The trip to Auckland on the schooner had been just what was needed to put him on his feet again—and it had cemented a fast friendship between the three of them. He remembered the stories Clinton used to tell in his quiet, self-

effacing way, stories of his “run-ins” with Federal transgressors; and he remembered particularly the one Clinton had told about a man who had disguised himself so cleverly that for years he had not only impersonated a dead man, but had lived with the dead man’s family. Allan had called that a bit thick, and they had accused Clinton of trying to pull their legs. Oh, yes, he remembered that—and had good cause to do so! That was the joke of which Gur Singh had spoken. Clinton had laughed and let the subject drop—but a week later, just after getting under way on the morning that they left Nukualofa, as hard a specimen of a gin-soaked stowaway beachcomber as he, Keith, had ever seen had crawled out from the schooner’s forecastle. Angrily Allan had ordered the schooner hove-to, and, lowering a boat, had incontinently and none too gently deposited the beachcomber therein, with the laudable intention of ridding the *Malola* of the pest by sending the man ashore—only the “beachcomber” was Clinton, the man with whom they had lived and slept and eaten for days on end in closest intimacy!

Thank God for Bob Clinton! Clinton wouldn’t leave a stone unturned—for old Allan’s sake! He wasn’t always in New York, of course—his duties took him everywhere—but the New York address would always find him, he had said.

Keith turned on his side. He was suddenly conscious that he was very weary—that he had over-stepped his strength. His mind, however, worked on—but in snatches now.

Where would the *Malola* make land? . . . When would those four men reach New York? . . . He would get a description of each one of them from Gur Singh to-morrow, and write Clinton a letter. . . . He might not be able to travel for weeks himself, and the four men might get to New York ahead of him, but in that case, Clinton might get on the trail, and . . .

After a time, Keith fell into fitful slumber.

CHAPTER IV

The Entrée to the Underworld

THE streets had been dingy, none too well-lighted, narrow; but, even in the darkness, blatant of poverty—a maze of them. Small, cheap stores—in little, low buildings that gasped for breath and refused to be crowded out by the countless, elbowing tenements. Here a butcher shop with a display of festooned sausages, or a Chinese laundry with steamy odor—there a basement entrance whose four or five steps descending steeply from the pavement were cluttered with the offerings of some purveyor of second-hand clothing.

Some of the streets were almost deserted; others teemed with life. Over some there seemed to brood an almost eerie silence and isolation with the falling of the night; over others a feverish activity and a bedlam of noise—for here pushcarts lined the curbs and the hawkers shrieked their wares, and shawled women, plus ear-ringed men, wrangled over prices, hurling unkind words in each other's faces, while scantily clad children played riotously in the gutters, or, from under a pushcart, if the god of luck were kind, surreptitiously sampled that which their small souls craved greedily, whether it were a shoe-string or an over-ripe tomato.

A bit of New York's lower East Side!

Keith's lips were set in a half-grim, half-whimsical smile as he walked along, his eyes constantly straying from his immediate surroundings to glance in an almost incredulous way at the shuffling, unkempt figure of his companion, and to glance down involuntarily, too, over his own rather disreputable attire. He remembered well enough Clinton's metamorphosis into the beachcomber on the *Malola* at Nukualofa; but, even so, it was hard to make himself believe that this shifty-eyed, furtive creature, with the dissipated face, who occasionally flung curt greetings out of one corner of his mouth to passing acquaintances of equally unprepossessing appearance, was the same Bob Clinton. The man was incomparable! It was as though he had reduced to a fine art the ability to assume at will any character that he desired.

Keith shifted a battered and cheap valise from one hand to the other. It was almost three months now since Gur Singh had taken him to the hospital at Surabaya. He had been far more seriously ill than even he had imagined—and then his convalescence had dragged out through many seemingly interminable weeks. He had written Bob Clinton as he had planned, setting down minutely Gur Singh's description of the four men who had tricked Allan to his death, and stating his own determination to leave for New York the moment he was able to travel. The prolonged convalescence, of course, had given Clinton, this shuffling, sordid, shabby figure here, time to reply.

"I will do what I can for old Allan's sake and yours," Clinton had written amongst other things. "I understand, God knows, that you mean to see this through yourself; but you must not come here with any blare of trumpets. That would be fatal. Say nothing of your intentions to any one; and on no account attempt to bring Gur Singh with you. . . . We will talk things over and make our plans when you get here. . . . Meanwhile I shall not be idle. . . . Cable me your sailing."

He had sent the cable, and six days ago on the arrival of his ship at San Francisco had found a letter waiting for him from Clinton, which, following the instructions it contained, had brought him to New York to-night in a garb that, to say the least of it, marked him out as no man of fashion.

He had not recognized Clinton in this man here, as the other had sidled up to him at the station.

"Say, youse're Rookie Dyke, ain't youse?" the other had said gruffly. "Me, I'm Canary Jim."

Clinton's letter to San Francisco had been cunningly guarded in its phraseology, and he, Keith, had not quite known exactly what to expect, but he had taken it for granted that Clinton would meet him on his arrival. This was the first time, however, that he had ever been called Rookie Dyke, and he had never heard of Canary Jim before. It was either, therefore, a mistake, or some sort of a come-on game. The fellow's looks were far from inviting in any case! He had started to push the man brusquely away when the other had spoken again—this time without the slightest movement of the lips, without change of facial expression, and in a voice so low that it was almost inaudible:

"*Keith!*" And then instantly, in gruff tones again: "Come on, bo; let's hit de subway! Youse can give me de family news when we gets to de dump!"

There had been very few words exchanged after that.

“Wait,” Bob Clinton, alias Canary Jim, had said over the rattle of the subway. “We can’t roll up to where we’re going in a taxi, and we can’t talk here. We’ll have to walk a few blocks after this, but you won’t need to be told when you see them that the streets are no place for confidences either. Wait till we get to my place.”

From the subway they had traversed a number of streets, and had——

Keith’s thoughts were interrupted by a quick-flung, “Dis way, Rookie!” as Clinton swung suddenly around a corner, and, shuffling rapidly along, led the way down a cross street that was comparatively deserted. Keith nodded to himself as he followed and fell into step again with the other. There were very few people in evidence here, but Clinton now appeared to be known to everybody they encountered, and to know everybody in turn. They were obviously in the near vicinity of the “dump,” and amongst Canary Jim’s immediate neighbors.

Keith pursed his lips a little. A queer lot, and an unpleasant, smelly street—darker, too, it seemed, and more poorly lighted than any of the others! Two lurching figures that appeared suddenly out of the mouth of a dark alleyway; a curious looking Jew who supported himself on crutches in the doorway of a small tobacco store; a swarthy complexioned hand-organ grinder with one empty, flapping coat-sleeve, who trudged along with the broad leather strap of the organ over one shoulder and a small, shivering, garishly-bedecked, wizened-faced monkey balanced on what was apparently the stump of the lost arm; and an old woman with face half hidden in a torn and dirty muffler, who slouched by at the edge of the curb—all these and others, even to an urchin or two, gave greeting to Canary Jim. A bit strange! It was as though Bob Clinton had lived here in close companionship with these people all his life!

And now halfway along the second block, Bob Clinton made for the doorway of what, so far as Keith could make out in the shadowy light, was a three-story, down-at-the-heels tenement. Bob Clinton pushed the door open, and Keith, following, found himself in what of necessity must be a hallway of some sort, though it was so black that he could not see a foot in front of him.

“Put yer left hand on de wall, an’ follow me,” instructed Canary Jim.

Keith obeyed. The place was musty, and also it smelled pungently of garlic. From somewhere above his head there came a medley of sound, muffled, as though from behind closed doors—the fretful crying of a child, an inebriated voice raised in unmelodious song, the scuffling of feet as

though moving on bare floors, a phonograph with a cracked record. He passed a door; and then a few paces farther on the hallway seemed to open out abruptly to the left. But here he halted. He could hear Clinton just ahead of him opening a door—and then, the next instant, an air-choked gas jet was wheezing and spluttering, and, moving forward again, he found himself standing in a small and squalidly furnished bedroom.

A cursory glance showed him a rickety chair, a washstand, a cot that had not been made up since last it had been occupied, and a threadbare square of carpet on the floor; but his interest was centered on Bob Clinton. The shuffling, ungainly tread was gone, and in its stead was bewilderingly swift and utterly silent movement: the closing of the door, the sudden opening of a window behind the drawn roller shade, the window closed again, the shade dropped back into place, the opening of a door that appeared to connect with another room on the left and into which Clinton disappeared for a moment—only to come back, and, with a smile that was no longer the twisted grin of Canary Jim, suddenly clap both hands on his, Keith's, shoulders.

“The windows in both these rooms open on a backyard, and they're only about three or four feet from the ground.” Bob Clinton's smile broadened. “I use them myself quite often, but”—he shrugged his shoulders—“conveniences sometimes work both ways! And now we can talk ourselves out. There's the chair or the cot. Help yourself. It's all I've got to offer. That other room there is the same as this one, and it's for you if you want it—but we'll get to that in a few minutes. First though—about Allan. I tried to write you, but words somehow never seem to mean anything when some one you think a lot about goes out. It leaves the heart sore, Keith, and I ——” He turned his head abruptly away. “Sit down, won't you?”

Keith's hand found the other's and held it in a long clasp. He made no other answer. There was no need for one. He sat down on the rickety chair.

Bob Clinton perched himself on the edge of the cot.

“We'll get down to business,” he said—and cleared his throat. “That letter of mine to you in San Francisco must have left you pretty well up in the air, and so far to-night I've no doubt you've been guessing harder than ever; but before we get to that, there's a question I want to ask you. I know from your letters pretty well all the details of what happened, but what I particularly want to know now is whether or not anything further has been heard of the *Malola* since the night Gur Singh escaped from her?”

Keith shook his head.

“Not a thing,” he said tersely; “not a sign nor vestige of her.”

Clinton’s brows drew together in puzzled lines.

“Does that essentially mean that those four men are still floating around on her, then—that they couldn’t be anywhere else?” he asked.

Again Keith shook his head.

“No,” he said bitterly; “far from it! They could be almost anywhere. It simply means that the *Malola* hasn’t been reported from any place where there was wireless or cable communication. There are no end of things they could have done. For instance, we know from Gur Singh that they were going to disguise the schooner, and they might easily have put in at some out-of-the-way place where, since nothing would be known of Allan’s murder, no suspicions would be aroused. They might even sell the *Malola* in such a place on some specious pretext or other, and then clear out on some other craft. The Archipelago is vast enough, the Lord knows, to make it more than likely a transaction such as that would not come to the knowledge of any one in a position to put two and two together for months on end. On the other hand, of course, knowing nothing of navigation, and failing to pick up any one, white or native, from some island to help them out, they may be sailing aimlessly around out there yet.”

“I see,” said Clinton. “You don’t think, then, that it is beyond probability that they are now—well, say, here in New York?”

Keith leaned sharply forward in his chair.

“I most certainly do not!” he exclaimed tensely. “But there is something more than mere generality behind your question. Do you mean that you _____”

“Yes,” said Clinton quietly, “if it is not a physical impossibility that they *could* be here, I think that they, or some of them at least, are in New York now.”

Keith was on his feet.

“You’ve seen them?” he cried hoarsely.

“Yes, I think so—two of them,” Clinton answered gravely. “Coupling what you’ve just said with the presumption that New York was where they intended to make for, I——”

“There isn’t the slightest doubt about where they were making for,” Keith interrupted swiftly. “That’s why I’m here! There was nothing to make

them change their minds. They couldn't even have a suspicion that Gur Singh overheard their plans. So they're ahead of me, are they? Well, I was a long while getting on my feet, but"—a queer whiteness came into his face—"I'll try now to make up for lost time! Go on, Bob! What do you know?"

"Not so much as I wish I did," Clinton replied soberly. "But we'll get to that in a moment. In order to understand what I have to tell you, and also to be in a position to make an intelligent decision on a proposition that I am going to put up to you, you've got to know, well—let's put it in a nutshell this way—why temporarily you're Rookie Dyke and I am Canary Jim, and we are both at this moment occupying a room in pretty nearly as unhallowed a crime hatchery and nest of crooks as is to be found anywhere on the East Side. So let's go at it from my end first. Right?"

Keith pulled his chair closer to the cot and sat down again.

"Yes," he said. "I'm pretty foggy on everything since I got your letter in San Francisco."

Bob Clinton was silent for a moment, staring at Canary Jim's aggressively-checked peaked cap which he had just removed from his head.

"I was wondering just where to begin," he said. "I think perhaps I ought to make it clear first of all that I have absolutely no connection whatever with the local police or detective force. I am, as you know, in the Secret Service—which is very distinctly a different matter. Federal matters alone are within our jurisdiction. I have been with the Department a good many years now; but, with the exception of two or three of the heads, there is no one who knows that Canary Jim is not all that the underworld thinks he is—otherwise Bob Clinton's life would very certainly come to a most speedy and unpleasant termination. I don't want to make a long story of this—I just want you to understand the situation clearly. It has taken me years, of course, to establish the character of Canary Jim both here and in other cities. When I am not working on a case where Canary Jim's help is of any value, that is, when I am living my own normal life and Canary Jim disappears for perhaps months at a time from his usual haunts, the dope is 'planted' that the police are taking such a warm interest in his activities that he has ducked for cover to some other city until the storm has blown over. As this is a well-worn habit of the fraternity of those outside the law, it occasions no surprise, arouses no suspicions, and Canary Jim is free to bob up again when he pleases. Is this all plain to you?"

Keith smiled grimly.

“I can see how Canary Jim gets away with it,” he said.

Bob Clinton smiled in turn.

“All right!” he said. “Well, just about the time your letter arrived, we started in to tackle one of those big Continent-wide jobs the Department sometimes has to face. I would not be at liberty to tell you what it is unless there were something to justify me in doing so, which, at the moment, there is not—but the head and front and brains of what I’ll call the ‘combine’ seemed to be here in New York, so Canary Jim, who was supposed to be away somewhere in modest retirement, reappeared upon the scene, permitting it to leak out through the underground exchanges that he had temporarily at least patched up his differences with the police. And that’s why I’ve been Canary Jim for some time past, am so at this present moment, and will be until the case I referred to is cleared up—you understand? Now, getting back to you, having reported the full details of the murder to the authorities in Surabaya, as you did, and having given them all the information furnished by Gur Singh, the police in the big centers all over the world, and particularly here in New York, have been, and are, of course, on the look-out for your men. But that does not mean that the police will necessarily be successful—unapprehended criminals are by no means rare! Obviously, therefore, no available outside effort was to be ignored. For example, Canary Jim, being in the full confidence of his fellow citizens of Gangland and with the entrée into every den and dive in New York, opened up a very promising prospect, and one with better chances for success, perhaps, than the police had; and, on top of that, there was also—yourself. When you stated so categorically in your letter that you were coming here to take a personal part in——”

Keith flung out his hand abruptly. There was something of self-deprecation, more of finality in the gesture.

“I don’t want to be misunderstood,” he said. “It has nothing to do with heroics. It is something one does. Allan would. Police, or no police, I am going to take a hand in this myself. Nothing could alter what I said in my letter.”

Clinton nodded sympathetically.

“I know,” he said; “and I was so well convinced of it that I—but wait a moment! One of the vital factors in the problem was, and is, to preclude any warning leaking out that would drive our quarry scurrying away from New York before anybody could close down on them; and that’s why I wrote you

not to come here with any blare of trumpets, and above all not to bring Gur Singh with you, for——”

“A decision,” Keith broke in, “to which Gur Singh took violent objection—and I’m not sure but that I agree with him, though, of course, on your say so, I left him behind. He took it pretty badly. In fact, for the first time in all the years he’s been with us, he got a bit out of hand. It’s a personal matter with him, too. He said he was the only person who had seen and could recognize the four—for, as you know, it was too dark on the beach that night for me to see any one of them distinctly.”

“Who do you think would have been recognized *first*, if he had come here?” inquired Clinton softly. “The four by Gur Singh, or the East Indian by the four? No, it wouldn’t do, Keith! I admit that you would not be recognized, but we would be playing our hand very badly if we failed to credit them with having discovered who the owners of the *Malola* were. They would know your *name*. And once it became known that you and Gur Singh were here, one of two things would have happened. A bullet or a knife would very promptly have eliminated you both as potential enemies and witnesses; or else, if that could not be managed safely and swiftly, they would simply have quit New York. Gur Singh’s description of the four is quite good enough to go on; it would be only playing into their hands if he were seen here.”

Again Keith smiled grimly.

“Well, anyway, he didn’t come,” he said; “and there’s been no noise about *my* arrival either—which is the point you are making. I can see the reason for that now, in view of Canary Jim! But what follows? Is Rookie Dyke the ultimate answer?”

“That is for you to decide,” Clinton answered seriously. “I have left it open to you. I mean that, though it might appear to be otherwise, you are not in the slightest degree committed to the character of Rookie Dyke. Listen, Keith!” He leaned earnestly forward. “*You* were the greatest problem of all, for I knew you were not to be calmly set aside to enact merely the rôle of an interested spectator. It worried me a lot. I didn’t come to any decision until your cable reached me saying you were sailing. You see, in the meantime, there was always the chance that I, or the police, might round up our men, and that, of course, would automatically have solved the problem. Nothing like that, however, happened; in fact, it was not until the night before last that I had any reward at all for the personal search I had been making as Canary Jim—I’ll tell you about that presently. But meanwhile you were

actually at sea and on your way here, and I was forced to come to some definite decision regarding you. Well, I made it; and, incidentally, in so doing, I might say I was somewhat influenced by the fact that, both from the standpoint of danger to you and on account of the possibility of putting our men on their guard, I did not like the idea of having your arrival in New York become publicly known. Anyway, I decided, then to give you the chance, if you wished to take it, of getting into the game in perhaps a good deal deeper personal way than even you had either intended or anticipated. Now I obviously dared not communicate what I had to say to you by wireless, nor did I dare say anything in a letter which, if by the odd chance it went astray, would jeopardize the Department's plans by unmasking Canary Jim; so I simply wrote you to forward your belongings to New York, to acquire the sort of duds you are wearing now, and to come along yourself on a certain transcontinental train which I specified."

Keith nodded.

"It was quite enough," he said. "I knew something was up, and I was perfectly satisfied to carry out your instructions to the letter—that is, as best I could. I tried to profit by that lesson of yours at Nukualofa. I christened myself with a new name of my own choosing, but it appears now that I am Rookie Dyke."

"Or Keith Wharton," amended Clinton gravely. "You mustn't forget that the die isn't cast yet. If you decide for Rookie Dyke, you can consider yourself already established as an altogether unsavoury character here in the underworld, and, incidentally, with a fairly effective 'open sesame' everywhere. As soon as I had made up my mind to put the proposal up to you, I created Rookie Dyke and passed the word around that he was an old pal of mine in the West with a police record, who was ducking for cover, and was going to lay low for a while in New York. Then I moved in here a few days ago, because where I was before I had no room for you. It's the same old yarn, but the one that is never questioned; the same old plant, the one Canary Jim uses—when it gets too hot in one place the fallen brother goes into retirement somewhere else. That's why Rookie Dyke has unostentatiously blown into New York, and is sponsored by Canary Jim. But Rookie Dyke does not need to stay. He can be non-existent in the next half hour if he so elects—while I pass along the word that the police were so hard on Rookie's heels that he had no use for a stop-over ticket. Now, then, it's a question of the pros and cons. You did not see the faces of any of those men on the beach that night because it was too dark; so, by the same token, as Rookie Dyke, you can spend your days and nights searching for them

quietly in the dens and dives and speak-easies here without any chance of being recognized yourself. You and I and the police have their description to work on—they have nothing. But you must understand that if you carry on as Rookie Dyke you must do so independently of, and unknown to, the authorities; for, remember, you are being sponsored in the underworld by Canary Jim, and Canary Jim must never, on any account, be linked up with the police. That may put a different complexion on the whole matter. It is for you to decide. I am not underestimating the police for an instant. They may fail, and so may you; but, as Rookie Dyke, you have——”

“With a chance to be Rookie Dyke,” said Keith, with a short, mirthless laugh, “I’ll be Rookie Dyke until the last one of those four men is nailed. Had you any doubt about it?”

Clinton grinned suddenly.

“Not the slightest!” he returned imperturbably. “It doesn’t look like it, does it? But, nevertheless, I had no right to commit you irrevocably either way. Very well, old man—from now on, you’re Rookie Dyke. You won’t have any difficulty in playing the part, except for the personal discomforts you’ll have to put up with. You don’t have to talk about yourself. Just keep a close mouth. Nobody expects you to spill your own secrets. You’re keeping away from center stage and the police spotlight just now—that’s your line. Though you have come upon evil days, you were a gentleman once, which will account for your grammar, and the fact that you have never acquired the vernacular. Don’t give any one a hint as to what you are after; don’t trust any one; don’t ask any leading questions—this is where you will have to depend on your ears and eyes alone. And now let’s get down to cases. I was fairly sure the night before last that I saw the two men Gur Singh described as Blackie and the Weasel; I don’t think there is the slightest doubt about it now that I know you believe it was possible for them to have reached here even quite some time ago.”

For the second time Keith came impulsively to his feet.

“Where did you see them?” he demanded tensely.

“In Morissey’s Palace,” Bob Clinton answered. “That doesn’t mean anything to you at the moment, though you’ll probably become well enough acquainted with it, as well as with a good many other places of the same sort, before you’re through; anyway, it’s a dance-hall that camouflages more than one of the major iniquities.”

“Yes? And then?” Keith was biting off his words now.

Clinton made a wry grimace.

“The luck didn’t hold,” he said. “There was quite a crowd there, and a lot of drinking at the tables. When I first noticed them they were three or four tables away from me. A minute or so later they got up to leave. I followed them, of course; but, as I got to the door, a half-dozen people, coming in from the street, wriggled in between us, and I only reached the sidewalk in time to see the two drive off in a car. I was back there last night transacting”—Canary Jim’s twisted smile came suddenly into play again—“a little private business of my own, but I didn’t see them.”

Keith was silent for a moment.

“Well, that’s no reason why they won’t be there, or in some other likely place *to-night*,” he said at last crisply. “The main thing is that we know they are here in New York. It can’t be more than ten o’clock. What about it—*now?*”

“I was going to suggest it,” said Clinton. “In any case, the sooner Rookie Dyke makes acquaintances the better. Morissey is one of the *élite* you’ve got to know. We’ll start in there, and then drift——” He stopped abruptly.

Keith whirled around to face the window. There was a curious sort of scraping noise on the sill, accompanied by what seemed to be something metallic banging against the pane.

Clinton jumped up, and opened a small wall cupboard at the foot of the bed.

“That’s all right!” he said. “It’s Beppo.”

“Beppo?”

“You’ll see!” said Clinton—and from a shelf in the cupboard, untidy with the litter of a few pieces of crockery, a milk bottle, some bread and a piece of cheese, obviously Canary Jim’s larder, he produced a somewhat blackened banana; then, stepping across the room, he raised the roller shade, and threw up the window.

Keith stared. On the windowsill was a small, chattering monkey, whose head was adorned with a jester’s cap, and whose body was clothed in gaily spangled attire. He recognized the creature at once from its dress—it was the same monkey he had seen perched on the shoulder of the one-armed organ-grinder out there on the street a little while ago. The monkey was well trained! As the window went up the monkey doffed its cap and extended a large-sized tin cup.

A smile that had flickered across Keith's lips vanished. There was something more than the mere antics of a trick animal involved here. From the cup Clinton extracted a piece of paper, presented the monkey with the banana, closed the window, pulled down the shade again, stepped abruptly under the gas jet, and stood there frowning as he studied the paper in his hand.

And then as Keith watched, his eyes questioning, Clinton looked up suddenly.

"Beppo belongs to Tony Larfino, that organ-grinder we met on the street," he said. "He pays me an occasional visit—for cause. Hence the banana. Tony lives in the basement below us."

"Yes, I recognized the monkey," Keith nodded. "But Tony was going in the other direction, as though, since I know now he lives here, he was setting out for a night's work. That's rather queer, isn't it? Do they allow hand-organs to be played all night on the New York streets?"

Clinton was staring at the paper in his hand again.

"I can't say," he answered a little absently. "Not being a policeman I'm not up on the city regulations—but I imagine not. In any case, Tony doesn't play on the streets at night. He seems to have a pull that gets him into pretty nearly every dump in town."

"You mean that they let him play in dance-halls and——"

"Speak-easies, dives of all sorts—yes!" Clinton shrugged his shoulders. "I haven't known him long, only since I've moved in here, but I've a pretty well-grounded suspicion that hiding behind this organ-grinder and his versatile Beppo is one of the biggest dope pedlars in this part of the country. However, be that as it may, he has done me several good turns, and he'll be of incalculable help to you. He can visé your Gangland passport almost anywhere. I'll put you next to him to-morrow."

"Why not now?" suggested Keith. "He has apparently come back home for some reason or other."

"He has!" Clinton laughed grimly. "And that same reason will keep us home, too. You might as well chuck your things into your room there, and put in the rest of the time to-night in hanging up on the wall any pictures or works of art you happen to have brought along!"

Keith stared at the other in a puzzled way.

“Something has happened—a rather disastrous set-back in my work,” Clinton said gruffly. “And, besides that, without an iron-clad alibi, a very good chance of Canary Jim’s underworld career being ended forever, amen! Here, read this!”

Keith took the piece of paper. He made out the badly scrawled words with difficulty:

“You hava da squall wid da Moke last nite. Some guy just killa da Moke in da lane of China Jack. Da bulls is out and da gang is sore. You keepa in da house tonite sure.”

“Well?” prompted Keith.

Canary Jim was smiling his twisted smile again.

“The altercation last night was a bit of stage-play between the Moke and myself,” he said. “The police will be on the rampage because the Moke was one of their most trusted stool-pigeons; also the Moke’s crowd, who never dreamed their pal was betraying them right and left, will be out hot-foot for revenge. And Canary Jim was known to have had a row with the Moke last night! Yes, I guess I’ll need a home-alibi to-night. We’ll probably have a visit from several gentlemen from headquarters before long, to say nothing of the Moke’s gang, once they think the coast is clear, and—listen! Clever devil—Tony! It won’t be his fault if we make a misplay!”

Keith listened. From below, faintly, but none-the-less audibly, came the whiney notes of a hand-organ plaintively grinding out an old-time familiar strain:

“Home, sweet Home,
... There’s no place like Home. . . .”

CHAPTER V

Under Cover

THREE nights had passed since the Moke's murder, nights that Keith had spent in ceaseless vigil—and had spent futilely.

Thanks to Canary Jim's sponsorship, and, in no little measure, to Tony Larfino's ready good offices and "introductions," the underworld had ungrudgingly opened its doors to Rookie Dyke; but there had been no sign of the men he sought. From place to place, from den to dive he had gone; he had moved amidst a sordidness that he had never dreamed existed; vice-holes hidden deep beneath sub-cellars, crime-cradles that reared a monstrous progeny, had received him into their unhallowed folds; resorts of specious respectability that but camouflaged mires and wallows of depravity had accepted him as a creature worthy of being enrolled in the list of their unholy clientèle; he had lived in a world that shunned the sunlight, in a world where every man's hand was against the law, where criminals, the petty and the great, skulked and hid and plotted, and, at propitious moments, stole forth like rats from their holes to prey upon the unwary, and sink their teeth in such tit-bits of spoil as came their way—but so far he had gone unrewarded in his search except in the sense that, besides familiarizing himself with a locality to which he had been a stranger, he was rapidly establishing himself as one welcome within the intimate precincts of Crimeland, where, sooner or later, he was confident he would at least be of assistance in running his men to earth.

He was not impatient; neither was he in any way dismayed by his momentary lack of success. It was no easy task he had set himself—Crimeland was a big domain. But Crimeland, too, within itself was a domain of whispers. He counted on more than the mere chance of coming face to face with one or all of the four. There were the whispers; and there were always whispers if one listened—and he always listened—listened above all for a whisper about a man with a mutilated hand.

They were whispering around him now. He raised his head from his arms that had been outflung across the table, and where one elbow had acted as a mop for a half-spilled glass of liquor. Supposed to be hiding from the

police of a distant city, and eschewing all further criminal activities until the present hue and cry had died down, Rookie Dyke apparently found comfort for his enforced idleness in a state of perpetual inebriety. It encased him in an armor that was hard to pierce. It justified his constant flitting from one dive to another; it justified—Rookie Dyke. Rookie Dyke was always good for a drink. It made him solid with both the leeches than ran the dives and those that patronized them. But though he bought much for others, and was equally generous in providing for himself, what he paid for on his own behalf was, for the most part, tipsily spilled on floor or table, or surreptitiously found its way to any place other than down his throat.

He looked around him owlshly—and dropped his head again upon his arms. Lugo the Spaniard ran a safe place! Before one could penetrate deeper into the Spaniard's establishment, one was obliged to have one's passport viséd here in this outer room. Half an hour ago he had made a circuit of Lugo's gaming tables and pipe rooms, assuring himself that his men were not there, and then he had returned to his present observation post. Later on, unless luck broke for him here, he would try somewhere else!

The two men hobnobbing over a bottle in the corner near him, obviously two old lags and crooks of the lesser breed from their somewhat shabby attire, were not whispering about a man with a mutilated hand; they were whispering, as he had heard many others whispering in the last few days, about—Tiger Claws.

His face hidden in his arms, Keith's brows furrowed. What these men were saying now he had heard a dozen times before—with this or that embellishment. He had even been a frank and open listener on occasions. It was a queer story—though how much of truth there was in it, or how much was mythical and imaginary, he did not know. But there were moments when he was even tempted to believe that this Tiger Claws might actually be one of the four men from the *Malola*. He had nothing conclusive on which to base such a deduction—merely that, according to Gur Singh, some, at least, of the four had originally been New York crooks. There was nothing to go on—no description. No man could say he had ever seen Tiger Claws.

Keith smiled a little whimsically to himself. Was he snatching at straws? There was, of course, the fact that the purported reappearance of Tiger Claws was more or less coincident with the return to New York of at least two, and probably all, of the four who had been on board the *Malola*. But was there actually such a man as Tiger Claws? A man who had never been seen! Did he even exist?

Keith's smile died away. There could be little doubt but that up to three years ago some one whom the underworld had elevated to its inglorious peerage and invested with the title of Tiger Claws had imbued that same underworld with both admiration and an awe that was akin to terror, and had brought the police to a state of almost insensate fury at their inability to apprehend him and put an end to a murderous and wholly ruthless criminal career. The details of scores of crimes now being resurrected and gruesomely recounted were obviously too indelibly stamped on the memory of the underworld to leave any question as to their authenticity. And if Tiger Claws had never been seen, and had never been recognized, it was, according to the underworld, because he was a man of many faces and a master of disguise, and because those of his victims who might have identified him never lived to do so. He had preyed not only upon society, but had snatched from his fellow crooks, as well, many a juicy plum that they had already filched at the risk perhaps of their own necks. He had robbed and pillaged when and where he would. He had killed without compunction. And then, suddenly, three years ago, he was heard of no more.

And now, as suddenly, and as mysteriously as he had gone, he was back again—at least so the whisperers said. There was no definite authority whereby to establish his return as a fact. Nothing, apparently, to go on—no one to say what he was like, what he had done, when he was seen, where he lived. But the news had spread like wildfire from one end of Crimeland to the other. The word was out. The underworld knew.

Keith stirred now a little impatiently. The idea intrigued him. There was the undeniable possibility, of course, that Tiger Claws might be one of the four men who had lighted the murderous signal fire on the beach that night; but that such a possibility was at all likely or even worthy of serious consideration was, he was obliged to acknowledge, born purely out of his obsession to find those men. Otherwise, it would never have suggested itself to him—it was worth no more than that—a mere possibility.

Some one was entering the room. Through half closed lids Keith's eyes sought the man's right hand, and from the hand his eyes travelled to the other's face, scanning it closely as he scanned every face he saw now. There was nothing the matter with the other's hand, and the man's face did not interest him—the man was merely a type, one of the night prowlers that one saw everywhere.

The man was crossing the room in his direction, but, paying no further attention to the other, Keith's head slumped lower on his arms—and then he felt his shoulders being somewhat roughly shaken.

Keith raised his head—and blinked. The man who had just entered was standing over the table.

“Youse’re Rookie Dyke, ain’t youse?” demanded the other.

“Sure,” said Rookie Dyke thickly.

“Well, den, Canary Jim’s over at Kinter’s dump in de back room, an’ he’s askin’ for youse,” said the man—and passed on.

Keith, as though striving to assimilate this information in a befuddled brain, continued to blink and stare vacantly after the other for a moment, then he rose somewhat uncertainly from his chair and made his way out to the street.

But once on the street, however, the night air seemed to have a magical effect upon him, for, though he continued to usurp more of the sidewalk than was justly his, he walked swiftly. This was good news, no matter what Bob Clinton wanted him for. He had not seen Bob for two days now. The notes he had left under Bob’s mattress still remained there; there had been no note from Bob under his, Keith’s, mattress. Bob had not been near their rooms in all that time; neither, until now, had Bob made any attempt to communicate with him. In one sense, he knew that Bob’s sudden disappearance had nothing to do with the Moke’s murder, for, thanks to Tony Larfino’s warning, the alibi which had been established that night had been satisfactory both to the police and to the Moke’s gang; but, in another sense, the passing of the Moke was almost certainly responsible for Bob’s absence from his usual haunts.

It wasn’t far to Kinter’s—just two blocks away, with the back entrance on an alleyway—but Keith unconsciously quickened his pace. Whatever the work was upon which Bob, in the rôle of Canary Jim, was engaged, it had received a serious set-back through the Moke’s death. Bob himself had said so. It meant—well, it might mean anything. Canary Jim, at best, wasn’t a good insurance risk; and he, Keith, without any word from the other, had become anxious—that was the long and short of it.

Keith turned into the alleyway, and, through an unobtrusive door—it was not Keith’s first visit to Kinter’s—entered a long, narrow hallway that was dimly lighted by a single low-powered incandescent lamp at the farther end. A man’s figure confronted him suddenly out of the gloom.

“Who’s dat?” demanded the other peremptorily.

Kinter’s had the welfare of its clientèle—and its own—at heart.

“Rookie Dyke,” Keith answered. “I’m looking for Canary Jim.”

“Wot makes youse think he’s here?” inquired the man gruffly.

“I don’t—hic!—think”—Rookie Dyke indulged his hiccoughs—“I know he’s here ’cause he sent for me.”

“Youse ain’t on de list”—the other’s tones became more gracious—“but if youse’re one of de invites it’s all right. Canary’s doin’ himself proud in de private room to-night. Youse’re de first to show up. It’s de last door on de right. Hop to it, Rookie—but if youse lap up much more, youse won’t enjoy de whole of de evenin’!”

Rookie Dyke had acquired at least the groundwork of the underworld’s amenities.

“You go to hell!” said Rookie Dyke politely.

He walked up the passage, opened the door of the room indicated, stepped inside—and promptly closed the door behind him. The room was fairly spacious, but made no pretense to any furnishings, save for half a dozen chairs and a table that was generously laden with glasses and bottles. Canary Jim, his feet up on the table among the bottles, a fag hanging pendant from his lip, was lounging back in a chair.

“Hello, Canary!” said Rookie Dyke boisterously for the benefit of any one who might be within earshot in the hall—and, crossing the room, dropped into the chair beside Bob Clinton.

“You’re coming on!” said Clinton in an undertone and with an approving grin. “You’re getting pretty well known, too—in the right way, eh? I’ve heard a lot about Rookie Dyke lately.”

“Yes, but I haven’t heard *anything* about you,” said Keith earnestly; “and I was beginning to——”

“Let me do the talking,” interrupted Clinton, suddenly serious, and lowering his voice still more. “There isn’t much time, for you’ll have to clear out when my”—he smiled wryly—“guests arrive; in fact, I’d rather you went before they came. I’m all right, nothing to worry about, except that the Moke’s death left me in a jam. It was as though the wires had gone down and central didn’t answer any more—you understand? I had to get busy—I’ve even been out of town. If I’ve any luck to-night this little party I’m giving here is going to act as a repair gang, and fix the line up again—and if they fall for it, it means that I’ve got to make another little trip away to-

night, by midnight, and I don't know how long it will be before I'm back—maybe a day, maybe a week. Now, then, has anything opened up for you?"

"No." Keith shook his head a little grimly. "They seem to be wearing an invisible mantle—especially the man with the mutilated hand."

Bob Clinton nodded.

"Well," he said, "maybe here's something—and maybe it isn't. I only got it an hour ago. There wasn't any use trying to trail you all over the lot, and there wasn't any time to do it either—that's why I slipped the word around that I wanted to see you here. If you hadn't shown up before I left, I suppose I would have had to put it on paper for you—but that's about the last thing I'd want to do. It's too risky. However, you're here."

"Yes!" said Keith tensely. "What is it?"

"Don't count too much on it," Clinton warned. "It's this: The crowd I'm cultivating at the present moment have been looking for a new hang-out—they think the police have been getting a little too inquisitive about the old place. I am afraid"—Clinton's lips thinned—"they keep a lot of questionable merchandise about pending the psychological moment to dispose of it, and they're getting funky about a raid. Two of them were talking it over in my presence. This was about an hour ago, as I said. It seems they had had Old Cully's place in mind. You don't know old Cully, and it doesn't matter. He died last week, and I won't speak ill of the dead further than to say he was probably the cleverest damned scoundrel that was ever connected with the dope ring here in New York, and that the narcotic squad probably loved him less than any man that was ever born because they could never get the goods on him. Well, one of the two chaps that were with me said it was all off about Old Cully's—that his room had been rented shortly after Old Cully had cashed in. Very naturally the chap tried to find out who this new tenant was that had nosed him out; but all that he was able to discover—I'm giving you the conversation in tabloid form—was 'dat de man was sick or something, an' dat he was a stranger, a queer looking gink wid a bald head and a face so long dat it looked as if it had been stretched out like a piece of elastic!'"

Canary Jim's fag had gone out—he lighted it; his eyes, through the match flame, holding on Keith's face.

Keith's hands tightened slowly—became clenched.

"Gur Singh's 'pull-down' face!" His voice was a whisper. "Whitie!"

Bob Clinton shifted his cigarette dexterously from one corner of his mouth to the other with the tip of his tongue.

“Sounds remarkably like Gur Singh’s description of the man,” he said quietly. “That’s why I sent for you. I wouldn’t bank too much on it, but it’s worth investigating anyhow.”

“You saw Blackie and the Weasel the other night,” said Keith in a monotone; “and if this is Whitie, that accounts for three of them—that leaves only the man with the maimed hand, who ought to have been the easiest of all to find.”

Bob Clinton shook his head.

“No—the hardest,” he said. “I think I’ve said that before, haven’t I? You mustn’t forget that the man naturally believes Gur Singh will have described him to the authorities, and, even though that was on the other side of the world, you may be quite sure he will take no chances with a distinguishing mark such as that, and he’ll never flaunt that hand in public anywhere if he can help it. But if you can run down the bed and lodging of any one of them, the rest of the problem solves itself. The fourth man will appear in due course. When he does, and you know where, either collectively or individually, the whole four of them are to be found—the trap closes, that’s all. In the meantime, if this man proves to be Whitie, the one thing to guard against is showing any of your cards until he has blazed the trail to the others’ doors; otherwise, if they get the wind up—well, you understand, eh—Rookie?”

“Where’s this Old Cully’s place?” demanded Keith tersely.

Bob Clinton’s voice dropped lower.

“Damn it, Rookie, I wish I were going with you!” he exclaimed impulsively. “But, of course”—he shrugged his shoulders—“I can’t. You know Morissey’s?—where I saw, or thought I did, the Weasel and Blackie the night before you came.”

“Yes,” said Keith.

“Well, you can’t miss the other, then. It’s on the same side of the street, and in the next block east. It’s in a big yard, once a wagon yard, behind a row of brick houses; and right in the middle of the row, and roofed by the second story of one of the houses, there’s a covered driveway that leads into the yard. There may be worse hang-outs in New York, but if there are, I’ve yet to hear of them. It’s a fierce dump, and it’s got ours, bad as it is, backed out of the picture as a crooks’ warren. Sol Isaacs, who owns it, never put any

gas in because the fixtures would be stolen—and that’s literally true. It used to be an old stable, and I suppose that’s how it got its name—it’s known amongst the fraternity as the Stalls. There’s nothing much ever been done to it except to stick in a couple of front doors to make it look like two connecting houses, and to divide the barn floor and the loft into so-called rooms.”

“Do you know which room it is that this man has got now”—Keith was rising from his chair—“the one Old Cully used to have?”

“I was interested enough to ask—when I heard the description of the new tenant,” said Bob Clinton with a twisted smile. “It’s the back corner room of the right-hand house.”

“That’s good enough”—Keith was biting off his words—“I’ll find him, all right.”

Bob Clinton, too, had now risen from his chair.

“Listen, Rookie!” he said earnestly. “You can’t be too careful—both for your own sake and for mine. Bringing myself into it sounds selfish, but you know what I mean. I’ve told you before. If Rookie Dyke is shown up, it’s the finish of Canary Jim, and just at the present moment”—he smiled queerly—“I assure you Canary Jim would be an irreparable loss to his country. All you can hope for to-night is to spot your man. If the fellow proves to be Whitie, you’ll be busy enough for the next few days running down the others, and by that time I ought to be able to horn in with you—strong—if you’ve left me anything to do except pull the police string so that nobody’ll ever know who was on the other end of the line.”

A furrow gathered between Keith’s eyes.

“The best laid plans of mice and men!” he quoted grimly, after a moment’s silence. “I’ve got a queer hunch it isn’t going to work out that way; but, in any case, I promise you that Canary Jim is safe with Rookie Dyke.” He held out his hand. “That goes—no matter what happens. And now I’ll push off before your crowd comes. Good luck to both of us!” He raised his voice. “’Night, Canary; thanks for asking me, just—hic!—the same.”

“So long, Rookie!” Canary Jim answered. “Sorry youse couldn’t stick around.”

CHAPTER VI

“The Stalls”

ROOKIE DYKE, his battered felt hat pulled far down over his eyes, slouched past the covered driveway as though he were wholly unconscious of its existence—the majesty of the law, in the shape of a harness bull, was swinging a night stick and marking time on the corner behind him; and the other’s eyes, he knew very well, were following him now down the dimly lighted street. The police and Rookie Dyke and the Stalls—if anything happened to-night in the Stalls! Nothing was likely to happen—not to-night. He wanted the *four*—not *one*. But he could not afford to take any chances with the police. Suppose something *did* happen! Suppose the police arrested him and his identity were disclosed! There would be no chance of covering that up even if the police fell into line with him. The eyes and ears of the underworld were everywhere. It would spread like wildfire through the underground exchanges—and Canary Jim would pay.

The whole thing was a bit paradoxical—grimly so. As Rookie Dyke he might have a private feud with any one he liked in Gangland, shoot up the Stalls here to-night, for instance, and, except for those intimately concerned, the underworld would sit by complacently and with closed mouths; but let Rookie Dyke be discovered by the underworld to have been introduced into its midst under false pretenses by a trusted member of the inner circle, not only for the purpose of running down a gang of crooks, but with the ultimate intention of delivering those crooks into the hands of the police, and it would inflame a demand for vengeance so swift and unanimous that, if by a hair’s-breadth it did not actually result in Bob Clinton’s death, would mean the instant and utter annihilation of Canary Jim as an existent personality. That was what he must guard against. By and by, if the authorities themselves had had no success, and his own trap, if ever, was ready to be sprung, Rookie Dyke would depart for parts unknown and Keith Wharton would simultaneously arrive in New York from the East, while Bob Clinton, through the Secret Service Department, through channels that would bring no suspicions on Canary Jim, would tip off the police—and the law would close in and take its course; but, meanwhile, for Canary Jim’s sake, those Rookie Dyke had most to fear were—the police.

He turned the corner without looking around, and shuffled on—to circuit the block.

There was a strange and eager excitement upon him—too eager perhaps. It was as though he held himself in leash—yet fought to break away. There was a very vital psychological factor in this rôle of Rookie Dyke; and, though he had never at any time ignored it, he had, as it were, always pushed it to one side. It would not be pushed to one side now, to-night. That man there in the Stalls might not be the man he sought, but if he were, he, Keith, would be face to face with the other now in a few minutes, and then—*what?* Would the leash, which was the instinct for law and order, hold against the primal and the elemental in him that strained against it? His face was suddenly white. Why ask that question now? What would he have done if he had come unexpectedly upon any one of the four last night, or the night before, or at any other time? He wasn't logical—but his mind was working that way. The actual probability of meeting one of the four who had been on the beach of that nameless island was imminent now, and, in the face of that definite prospect, he could only see that beach with its struggling forms, and, in the morning sunlight, Allan's body, bullet-shattered, lying there upon the sand. It was his to strike in return, his to pay the reckoning, man to man—all his life it had been man to man, here, there, everywhere, in the outermost posts of civilization, amongst a hundred savage tribes, on the sea itself. What had a judge or jury or the tinselled trappings of a courtroom to do with this! It was his to mete out retribution with his own two hands, his to——

But he was not a murderer.

The color came slowly back into his face. Yes, that was it—he was not a murderer. That was the leash, and with it he must hold himself in check—if he could.

And yet—what was murder? Would it have been murder that night on the beach if he had snuffed out, as he had tried to do, the life of that man whose jagged finger stumps had clawed at his, Keith's, throat? What was the difference, then, to-night? His hands clenched fiercely. No; he wasn't sure of himself. Face to face with any one of the four, he did not know what he would do.

Hoka's voice came to him: "I swear an oath, *Tuan*. . . ." His own words to Gur Singh rang in his ears: ". . . until each one of the four and I have settled our reckoning together." And Gur Singh's answer: "It is well, sahib,

for by that which is in the sahib's voice I know that these dogs shall surely die."

One hand was in his pocket now, tight-gripped over the stock of his automatic. Well, would the leash hold? He did not know.

He laughed out suddenly, unnaturally. That man there in the Stalls might not be Whitie at all!

He had come around the block. The policeman was no longer on the corner, nor anywhere in sight—and a moment later Keith was lost in the blackness of the covered driveway.

Traversing this quickly, he came out into the yard Bob Clinton had indicated, and here he halted for an instant to take a critical survey of his surroundings—much as he would have done on a black night on the *Malola* with the warning sound of the sea pounding on uncharted reefs around him. In front of him, perhaps twenty yards away, a long, low building, obviously the old barn and now the Stalls, loomed up out of the darkness. A dull gleam came from one or two of its windows, but for the most part the place was in blackness. It was too dark to see anything distinctly, but the yard seemed to be everywhere enclosed by a high fence. The yard itself, so far as he could see, was empty, deserted—and silent, save for an occasional noisy outburst of snarling and contentious voices that appeared to come from one of the upper right-hand windows of the Stalls. Behind him, the rear windows of the row of brick houses that separated the yard from the street were nearly all lighted, but the light here came only in stray gleams from behind drawn window shades, and did not in any degree relieve the surrounding darkness.

He moved forward now, swiftly, noiselessly, and, locating the two front entrances that the Stalls boasted, halted again before the one on the right-hand side. The quarrelling voices, evidently due to cards from a stray remark he caught, were just over his head—and growing more noisy and quarrelsome. He smiled a little satirically. Not very good for a sick man! The man in the rear room was sick, so Bob Clinton's informant had said.

Sick! Well, that had relieved him of more than one problem, hadn't it? There was no question of having to keep watch, possibly for hours, in case the man happened to be out—the man was there; and, besides, should it prove not to be Whitie, or proving to be Whitie and the leash *held*, a sick man was little likely to demand a detailed explanation of a stranger's visit to him—that one inebriated to the point of fuddled brains and unsteady legs had barged into the room by mistake would suffice. Quite! No suspicions would be aroused. Rookie Dyke had nothing to fear on that score.

Keith opened the door—it creaked a little—and stepped inside. The door creaked again as he closed it behind him. The floor beneath his feet was rough and uneven—the old barn planking had obviously never been replaced when the tumbledown structure had been converted into a so-called human habitation. Glass of some sort, a bottle probably, crashed and broke on the floor overhead—oaths accompanied the catastrophe. It was utterly dark around him. Should he light a match? Better not! He moved forward—and stumbled over the lower steps of a stairway. He felt out then with his hands. There was an open space to the right—which did duty for a hallway probably! He edged farther over in that direction. His fingers touched the wall; no, a door. Again he moved forward, feeling along the right-hand wall. It would be the *next* door—the depth of the building would hardly permit of more than two rooms. No—he was wrong. Here was a second door—but beyond again, along the line of the floor, though so faint that but for its contrast with the intense blackness it could scarcely have been seen, was a dull, tiny, broken thread of light seeping out over a door-sill.

And at this third door now Keith stood and listened. There was no mistake. He had come to the end of the passage. His shoulder touched the rear wall of the building. This was the back corner room of the right-hand house.

There was no sound from within—only that constant and obviously drunken quarrelling from above. Keith's lips were a straight line; his jaws were clamped. Every muscle in his body seemed to be taut—like bow-strings at the snapping point. He was a prey to emotions that swirled this way and that upon him . . . that unholy eagerness . . . the leash. . . His hand went to his pocket again, and closed over his automatic; and, as though some invisible force were exerted, his hand was withdrawn—empty!

A cold, unnatural calm supplanted the sweep of emotions. He jerked his soft-brimmed, battered hat still further forward until it shadowed his eyes—and tried the door. It gave under his hand. But where the front door had creaked a blatant protest at being molested, this door made not the slightest sound. Strange! Or was it strange? Silent, mirthless laughter came to him. Was it the quiet of a sick ward—or the well-oiled hinges of a crook's sanctum?

He pushed the door wider open. There was a lighted candle there stuck in the neck of a bottle, the bottle standing on a chair. It gave a very feeble light. The shadows at the far end of the room were too deep to disclose the wall in detail; but he could distinguish a small square of glass, the only pretense to a window that the room possessed. It didn't seem to be more

than a foot square. Queer! No—he remembered! This had once been a stall. The window, if so it could be called, had obviously served for ventilation more than anything else, and, like the barn floor, had been left unchanged in the unsavoury metamorphosis that the place had undergone.

Still no sound! And yet, with the door fully open now he could see that the chair which held the candle was drawn up beside a cot, which latter was ranged along the side of the wall toward which the door opened, and that on the cot, covered by a thin and ragged blanket, there lay the figure of a man. But there was no sound of breathing—no stir, no movement. He stepped forward, picked up the candle and bent over the cot—then he turned swiftly, closed the door, and came back to the cot again.

Holding the candle, he stared at the face lying there before him—stared at it, though it was not a pleasant sight, for a long time—stared at the unshaven jowls and the abnormally elongated chin—stared at the head bald of hair, the skin of which was waxen in color. There could be little doubt but that it was Gur Singh's "Whitie." The face was the face that Gur Singh had described. But—wait! There was another mark of identification, Gur Singh said the man had a snake tattooed in a coil like an armlet around his left forearm. Keith drew back the blanket. The figure on the cot was clothed only in shirt and trousers—the shirt deeply blood-stained in the region of the heart. He pushed back the man's left sleeve. Yes—there it was! Encircling the forearm was the tattooed snake. The man was Whitie.

Keith, in a mechanical way, as though unconscious of his own act, set the candle back on the chair. Here was one of the four he had set out to find. Here was one of the four whom he had sworn he would bring to account for that treacherous and murderous attack that had cost Allan and Taipi and Hoka their lives. Here was the end of part of his quest—but his mind seemed to be blunted, shocked out of its normal ability to function. He was conscious of only one sensation as he continued to stare at the figure on the cot. He had a queer feeling about it—as though he had been robbed. The man was dead.

He pulled himself together with a violent effort. Furthermore, and herein there seemed to be something at least akin to appropriate justice, the man had been murdered. It looked as though there were a bandage underneath the shirt. He leaned over to examine it. Yes! And the blood stains on the shirt were dry.

His mind began to function again—coolly, efficiently. With the blood on the shirt dry, the wound, whether from a bullet or a knife, had not been

inflicted in the immediate past—it might even have been days old. And meanwhile the wound had been bandaged—proof that it had not caused instant death. Who had bandaged it? Who had looked after this man here, the man reputed to be—*sick*? One, or all, of the other three? And now—what? Would they come back; or, chary of the police where murder was obviously involved, keep away from here now and cover up their tracks? If the latter, the trail was broken and he stood exactly where he had stood before his talk with Bob Clinton a little while ago—except that now there were only three to seek, instead of four; if the former, his object in coming to the Stalls was accomplished, and he had only to watch and wait—but not in here! This room, the scene of a crime, with the possibility of the arrival of the police on the one hand, and almost the certainty on the other of arousing, if he were found here by any one of the three, the suspicion that he was much too intimately concerned in their movements, was no place for Rookie Dyke, and decidedly therefore no place in which to institute a vigil! He must find some place where, though unseen himself, he could still watch the door of the room. Well, then, the hall outside there, beneath the staircase; it was dark enough there to defy detection, and——

He stood suddenly rigid. A low, startled cry came from him. *It seemed as though the man's eyelids had flickered.* Absurd! He was getting a little jumpy. The flicker came from the candle flame. The man was dead. He could have sworn that the man was dead.

He snatched up the candle and thrust the light almost into the other's face. Dead? The man's eyes were wide open now! There was no light of intelligence in them, and they were dull and unseeing—but they were wide open. And now there was a distinct twitching of the lips—and even incoherent sounds began to come from them.

In a sort of dazed way Keith set down the candle again. The semblance of death had been perfect. It had deceived him utterly. It would have deceived anybody. He tried to tell himself that it was incredible. But there was nothing incredible about it. People had been pronounced dead by competent medical authorities before this and had been buried—alive. If, then, even medical men had been deceived on occasions, what was there to wonder at in the fact that he, a layman, had been deceived in the present instance? What was it they called the phenomenon—suspended animation?

Anyway, the man wasn't dead. But though there was a momentary revival, a slight movement of the limbs now, and even a faint muttering, the man was certainly at death's door—almost over the threshold. Nevertheless, the man *was* still alive. What was to be done? If Rookie Dyke——

A burst of angry shouts and cries, four or five voices all raised furiously at once, came suddenly from overhead; and then, as the uproar subsided, he heard the creaking of the front door—and, almost coincidentally, the sound of footsteps coming quickly along the hall.

For an instant he stood tense and strained; then he moved swiftly without a sound to the far end of the room, and crouched there in the shadows. There was no time, no chance to do anything else. He was too late to get out of the room; and to have obliterated that thread of light seeping out over the door-sill would have been but to evidence the presence of someone here in the room.

His hand was in his pocket over his automatic—but he did not draw the weapon. If it were to be Rookie Dyke in a drunken rôle, the pistol would remain hidden; if it were to be a grimmer rôle, he could still fire first—through his pocket. There was, too, a very good chance that he might not be seen at all. He remembered that he had been able to see nothing in the shadows except the little square of glass. Perhaps whoever was out there wasn't coming to this room at all. No! the footsteps had halted at the door. The door was opening now.

And then out of the shadows Keith stared in blank amazement. He had expected and been prepared to see one of Whitie's companions, or perhaps the police, or even some tenant of the place—but he had expected no such visitor as this.

Framed in the doorway, the candle light soft upon her face, stood the slight, trim figure of a young woman—a girl of certainly not more than nineteen or twenty. And Keith stared. Like bronze her hair was where it showed under her hat—mingling gold and copper. He could not take his eyes from her face. It was an alluring face, piquant—a little pale perhaps, a little wistful, but there was self-reliance there, and wholesomeness. It was a clear, fresh, beautiful face—one utterly and wholly out of tune in surroundings like these. What was such as *she* doing here in a place like the Stalls, this hive of criminals; and what had brought her, in particular, to this room tenanted by a man that he knew to be a depraved and vicious murderer?

And so he stared at her out of the shadows, his mind in riot. How long had she been standing there? It seemed that an age had passed, though, in reality no doubt, it had been but a matter of seconds. She had made no movement. From the first, with widened eyes, with lips slightly parted, she had remained there gazing at the cot—in hesitancy and indecision

apparently. And yet she had come directly to the door, and with a sure step along that black hallway as though she were familiar with it!

The man in the cot broke into mumblings; a spasmodic movement of his limbs made the cot squeak. A low, half-suppressed cry came suddenly from the girl. She closed the door quickly now, and stepped across to the side of the cot. For a moment she bent over its occupant; then, with a sharp ejaculation that seemed to mingle anxiety and helplessness, she raised the candle above her head and swept its light around the room as if in a despairing way she sought for aid—in the shape perhaps of stimulants or medicines.

The light fell full on Keith's face.

His eyes met hers. He was conscious that her eyes were a deep hazel; that, wide before, they grew wider still now in a startled way—but that there was no fear in them. The candle remained poised above her head. For an instant neither moved. Then she set the candle down upon the chair.

“Who are you, and what are you doing here?” she asked steadily.

Keith stepped toward her. It seemed impossible, incredible that she could have anything to do with these men, or be in any way mixed up with them—and suddenly, in her presence, the unkempt, dissolute rôle of Rookie Dyke became as a millstone around his neck. And yet *why* was she here?

“Perhaps you will answer the same question—about yourself?” he countered.

“Which means,” she said sharply, “that you do not intend to tell me! Perhaps you are wise!” She pointed to the cot. Her voice hardened. “That man is dying.”

Keith nodded grimly.

“Yes,” he said. “A few minutes ago I thought he was already dead.”

She did not answer. A strange thing was happening. The man was struggling to raise his head. His face was contorted.

“The mahogany box! The mahogany box!” His voice whistled and wheezed in his throat. “It was Tiger Claws! I tell you it was Tiger——” His words ended in a gasp. A tremor shook him. His head sagged on his shoulders, and he fell back—motionless.

The mahogany box! Keith swung his hand across his eyes. Yes, Whitie would know about the mahogany box. But Tiger Claws! Who was this Tiger

Claws, and what had he to do with the mahogany box that linked an island thousands of miles away with this miserable creature here upon the cot? Let Whitie finish! Let him tell the rest—all he knew! Whitie looked as though he were dead—but he had looked that way before. The man had fooled him once—but, at least, he wouldn't be fooled again. There was more to be told—a lot more! In a sort of savage fury he leaned over the cot to shake the man—and felt a hand close tensely on his arm. The pressure increased—there was something curiously significant in that tightening grip.

It was the girl's hand, of course. He looked around. Her eyes were fixed on the door, and he followed the direction of her gaze. And then, in that one instant, it seemed to Keith he lived a lifetime. The door was being slowly and noiselessly opened; being pushed open by a hand that was thrust around the edge of the door, *a hand whose fingers were all jagged stumps*—and through the widening opening there showed the muzzle of a revolver.

A fraction of a second passed—no more than that, no more than the time it took to register the scene upon his brain; and then, with a swift, outward thrust of his hand, Keith's fingers closed on the candle wick and snuffed out the flame.

And the room was in darkness.

CHAPTER VII

All Four!

WITH a bound, his automatic wrenched from his pocket, Keith sprang toward the door—but even as he sprang the door was slammed shut, and a snarl of voices reached him from the other side.

He halted—stood hesitant. Had he made a misplay? Had the leash slipped? Was that what the impulse that had bade him snuff out the candle meant? Perhaps! His brain was racing now. The sudden sight of that hand, the urge to get to grips with the malevolent, inhuman monster between whom and himself lay, not only Allan's blood, but that unfinished death struggle on the island beach, had blotted out everything else from his consciousness. He had leaped in the darkness, expecting a shot, but trusting that it would go wide; he could not have made a move with that candle still burning—he would have been dropped in his tracks!

Yes; but suppose he had done nothing? It did not begin and end solely with one man; a final settlement here and now with the man with the mutilated hand did not account for the other two! Perhaps they were here now; perhaps they were the ones who were snarling there outside the door. The three of them! Suppose he had disregarded the menace of that revolver muzzle and had let the man walk into the room; suppose he had done nothing—except play Rookie Dyke in the rôle of the innocent by-stander? The girl's presence complicated matters, but there was the bare chance that Rookie Dyke might have got away with it and thereby have been in the better position to track them down afterwards. But, as it was now, he had, as it were, thrown down the gauntlet; and, if he had been recognized, Rookie Dyke might as well proclaim himself from the housetops for all the use the rôle would be to him in the future.

In the future! What about *now*? He experienced a mental jolt that brought him forcibly and grimly back to his immediate surroundings. Instead of trapping his quarry, his quarry had trapped him. There was only one way out of the room, and that was through the door to where they stood in the hallway there outside—a child could not have crawled through that small square of glass that did duty for a window. What was going to be their

reaction to the discovery that outsiders were in here? How far would they go? How vital a matter was it to them? Unrecognized themselves, would they slip away and let matters take what course they would; or, fearing they might be traced perhaps through the mumblings of a dying man, would they join the issue here and now? They were evidently debating it now outside there in the hall—he could hear the snarl of their voices intermittently over the blasphemous clamour that was constantly growing in volume from the room overhead.

A hand touched his—the girl was whispering in his ear.

“I don’t know how far you are to be trusted,” she said tensely; “but it is evident you are not a member of that gang out there. Fasten the door—quickly! There’s a heavy bolt on the inside. And then come and help me move the cot.”

“The cot?” he stared at her in the darkness.

“The bolt!” she urged. “The bolt first. Hurry!”

With a shrug of his shoulders, Keith moved silently forward to the door. A bolt on the door! Again it was apparent that she was no stranger here! The bolt didn’t matter very much, nor the cot either—his automatic was stronger than any bolt or barricade if they tried a rush. Who *was* the girl? His hand felt up and down along the edge of the door jamb and the door. There was no bolt.

They were still snarling, still arguing out there. The situation was more or less an impasse—on both sides of the door. He placed his ear against the panel. But for that din upstairs, which was obviously the reason why their own voices were not guarded, he could have heard all they said, and even as it was he could catch most of it.

A voice was growling furiously:

“Haven’t I told you I didn’t get a look at the fellow! His head was turned, and he was too quick with the light. But we’ll find out before we’re through. And as for the girl, she’ll come across, too. I saw her plain enough, but I don’t know who she is, so——”

The words were lost in the uproar from the room above.

An uplift came to Keith. Rookie Dyke was safe! They had not recognized Rookie Dyke! No—but it was a little far-fetched to say that Rookie Dyke was safe! His rejoicing was a little premature, wasn’t it? He smiled half grimly, half ironically at himself. He couldn’t vanish into thin

air, could he? There was no way out of the room except through the door—and they had obviously no intention of permitting that exit to be used!

Snatches of the heated conference on the other side of the door reached Keith again:

“. . . Whitie must have come across with a lot, and maybe everything, before he got too bad to talk much. What'd they be doing here if he hadn't?"

"Sure! . . . Maybe two or three days ago."

". . . the mahogany box . . ."

"The only thing to do is to bump 'em off anyway. They know too much."

"We got to know what they know first."

"Smash the door, and make a jump for 'em."

". . . and get drilled doing it! Nix! That's why I shut the door again. My God, didn't you hear him say Tiger Claws? There's a better way than that. Fume 'em out. Bust in a panel for a squirt hole. . . ."

"What d'ye mean?"

"Ammonia! That's the easiest stuff to get a lot of with no questions asked. One of us can chase it, while the other two watch the door. It won't take long to get, and I'll . . ."

The voices were drowned out. The ceiling shook as though a *mêlée* were in progress.

Keith's lips were tight, his jaws clamped. A new sense of irony beset him. He had distinguished three distinctly different voices out there. Here they were undoubtedly—the three men he had been prepared to do anything, risk anything, to find! No, not the *three* of them; counting Whitie dead on the cot there, or probably dead—*all four*. All four! Here they were. He had found them, all right. But he was helpless, powerless, impotent. Worse than that! The tables were turned. He had become the hunted, not the hunter. He was the one who was trapped—not they! It was a showdown, wasn't it? He knew their next move—what was his to be? Irony? It went a long way beyond irony—it was more than likely that his quest would end by his own life being snuffed out here in this miserable hole to-night. But at least he would not go alone! A queer smile came. One against three—plus ammonia fumes! A bit hopeless! He would be a fool to wait for that! But one against two—a sudden opening of the door, a sudden shot! Not so bad! One of the three was going for the ammonia. As soon as the——

“Oh, hurry!” The girl’s voice came in a strained whisper from the direction of the cot. “Hurry!”

She had been waiting for him to bolt the door, and then help her move the cot with Whitie on it. He had forgotten. Both absurdly futile anyway! What made him want to laugh? There wasn’t, God knew, any place for humour here!

“There isn’t any bolt,” he whispered back.

She was beside him in an instant, her hand feeling up and down along the edge of the door.

“But there is!” she breathed swiftly. “There must be! I—Oh!”

The report of a revolver shot from the room above went racketing through the house. It was followed by a piercing scream—then another shot, and a burst of yells and shouts.

A voice outside the door cursed hoarsely, bitterly:

“Damn the blasted fools! They’ll have the police down on us!”

There came another shot—and then pandemonium itself seemed loosed. The drunken, infuriated shouts rose louder still; a door slammed with a violence that shook every one of the flimsy partitions in the house; and footsteps began to race madly down the stairs.

A shout came along the hallway from the direction of the front entrance:

“Blackie! Weasel! Beat it! There goes a cop’s whistle. We’ll have a regiment of ’em here in a minute. We can stick around outside and spot those two birds as they come out.”

Keith drew his breath in sharply. That settled it! Those were the names by which Gur Singh had said the other two were known. The man who had shouted the warning therefore was the Magpie; the man, in Gur Singh’s words, “who had but a thumb on one hand for the fingers of that hand were gone.” It was plain enough. The man with the mutilated hand had started off on his self-elected mission, had heard the police signal, and had rushed back to warn the other two.

Footsteps scurried away from the other side of the door.

The coast was clear. Quite so! Keith laughed now in a hard unnatural way. Quite clear, except that the three of them would be waiting there outside the house—and Rookie Dyke would to a certainty be identified.

Well, better that, for Canary Jim's sake, than that Rookie Dyke should be found here by the police in the room of a murdered man!

His hand reached out, fumbling for the door knob.

"Come on! Quick!" he flung out in low tones to the girl beside him. "It's our only chance, or mine anyway! I can't afford to be caught here by the police. I don't know about you—perhaps you'd prefer the police to having those men out there pick up your trail. You've got to make up your mind in a hurry!"

"Rather than the police, I'd prefer anything!" There was a sudden catch in her voice. "But it's too late to take the other risk even if I dared to do that, either. There's sure to be an officer there at the front door by now. But—there's another way. I tried to move the cot alone while you were looking for the bolt, but I couldn't without dragging it, without making a noise. He"—again her voice caught—"he was too heavy. Help me lift it now."

"Another way! The cot!" The words tumbled in amazement from Keith's lips—but he was instantly in action now, and, back across the room, groping out in the darkness, he laid hold of one end of the cot, and began to lift it out from the wall. "I thought you only wanted to use it as a barricade."

"It will serve for one now—give us an extra minute or so in case we need it. That's why I wanted you to bolt the door." She was lifting the other end of the cot, panting a little with her exertion. "Set it against the door!"

Gruff, curt commands were echoing through the house now—the sound of blows—protesting cries. The police! And not over gentle in their tactics!

"Search every room and dig out every rat you find here!" ordered an authoritative voice. "Line 'em up for the wagon!"

A footstep, running, sounded in the hall. The door of the adjoining room was flung violently open.

"A match!" she whispered frantically. "We'll have to risk it. Quick! Quick!"

Keith struck a match. She was kneeling beside the wall, rolling back the oilcloth on the floor. For an instant she seemed to be searching for something in the feeble light—and then she lifted up a small trap-door in the flooring.

The match flame flickered—and went out. The girl, the trap-door—a momentary glimpse of a white, still face with weirdly elongated chin on the

cot! Dead! Certainly dead now! Keith's brain was in chaos. He groped his way toward the girl.

"My God! Who *are* you?" The words came involuntarily.

That footstep was in the hall again, coming from the adjoining room. The door knob rattled.

"Open up!" came a snapped command.

"Let yourself down!" Her voice reached him in a muffled way. "It's only shoulder high. And let the oilcloth roll back over the trap-door as you close it."

Keith's jaws came together with a snap. Touch and go! The door was being forced against the cot. He dropped on his hands and knees, felt out for the trap-door opening, lowered himself through it, and, as his feet touched the ground some five feet below, reached up and closed the trap-door over his head again, allowing the oilcloth to roll back into place.

It was rough under foot, uneven—not a cellar, more likely nothing more than a shallow excavation that had been dug under the original barn to facilitate the cleaning out of the stalls. Did it matter? It was inky black. He could see nothing. Her hand touched his, guiding him forward.

"Be careful!" she cautioned in a guarded voice. "You will have to stoop lower. It's only a few steps, but they will hear you if you stumble. We can't risk a match here for the floor is full of cracks and the light might be seen—the oilcloth is in shreds in lots of places."

His hand tightened fiercely, unconsciously over hers.

"Who are you?" he demanded again in a hoarse whisper. "What had you to do with that man up there? What do you know about the mahogany box? Answer me!"

"You are hurting me!" she said with a stifled cry.

He lessened the pressure on her hand, though he still held it tightly.

"I'm sorry!" he said gruffly. "But I've got to know. You've got to tell me."

"I might ask you the same question if there were time!" she flung back hurriedly. "For I certainly would like very much to know who you are, and I wonder what you would look like in decent clothes! But there is something else to think of now, isn't there? Listen!"

From overhead came the sound of the cot legs squeaking and grating on the floor as the cot was pushed away from the door; then the clatter of heavy boots, followed by a startled shout, and a voice yelling, "Sergeant! Here, sergeant!"

"This way!" she urged frantically. "How long do you think it will take them to find the trap-door? Are we to be caught, after all? Everything else can wait until we are outside! Come on! Quick! Come on!"

Yes, that was quite true! There would be time enough for questions once they were out of here. Keith frowned—a curious sense of irritation taking sudden possession of him. He could not see her here in the darkness, but her fresh young face, with its allure and its hint of wistfulness, as he had seen it up there in the candlelight, seemed to visualize itself before him. Strange! Incongruous! He was unaccountably angry with her for being here. He wished she were not here—under compromising circumstances.

"Go on, then!" he said.

For perhaps four or five yards, still guided by her hand, Keith moved forward; and then, halting, she spoke again, hastily now, in sketchy sentences:

"This is the rear wall. It's within a foot or so of a high board fence along the lane. There's a hole here under the building and just under the surface of the ground outside. The earth on this side of the fence has been piled up. Old refuse—many years. So the level of the lane is lower—just enough lower to make an opening out into the lane that one can squeeze through. A wide board in the fence moves up and down. Hides the opening in the lane. It pushes up easily and drops back into place by its own weight. Understand?"

"Yes," said Keith.

"Reach out with your hands—breast high," she instructed. "Do you feel where the earth has been burrowed away?"

"Yes," said Keith again.

"All right, then," she said. "You'll have to crawl, of course, but it's not more than four or five feet. Work yourself in head first, and follow me."

He could hear her wriggling and squirming now in what, from the sounds, was obviously a very confined space; and then, a moment later, her voice reached him again:

"I'm through. Come on!"

From above came gruff voices, and the tramping of feet moving rapidly about the room as though a hurried search were in progress. The trap-door! She had been quite right. They would not be long in finding that, for they would know that some one must have been in the room to have placed the cot with a dead man on it against the door! The police would hardly entertain the theory that the occupant of the cot had dragged the cot there, and then had got on it and died!

Certainly there was no time to lose!

He projected himself into what, as he expected, he found to be little more than a mere hole in the wall of earth, and, extended full length on his stomach, worked his way forward. His shoulders scraped the earth on either side, his head rubbed against something hard and unyielding. He felt upward with his hand and nodded to himself in a sort of grim understanding. It was a sheet of rough, thick metal of some kind—to prevent the earth from caving in. The surface covering, unless the old refuse she had referred to were banked very high, could not be more than a matter of a few inches thick here, otherwise the level of the lane would have to be so much lower that

Once more her voice came to him in guarded tones:

“I am holding up the board. You can reach it now, can’t you? Work your head in underneath it, and then crawl through.”

The little tunnel, if it could be dignified by that name, was not even the length of his body—his feet were still protruding into the excavation beneath the old barn. He pushed out his hand ahead of him, and felt an open space that was topped by the edge of a movable board.

“Right!” he answered back. “I’ve got it.”

There was very little room. The board moved upward readily enough under the pressure of his head and shoulders, but it took him a minute’s laborious struggle before he could manage to squeeze through into the open and gain his feet in the blackness of the lane.

From the other side of the fence came noise and confusion—many voices, excited cries. Of course! A police raid was a major attraction. The dwellers in that row of brick houses fronting on the street had flocked out of their back doors into the old wagon yard.

“There seems to be a bit of a row on,” he said grimly, “and the sooner we get out of here the better!” He laughed suddenly, shortly. “But, anyway, the tables are turned again. What ‘spotting’ there is done, *I’ll* do as those

three men leave the yard! The police will be holding that covered driveway, but everybody who is in the yard will have to come out. *We* can watch from the street—there'll be a crowd gathered there by this time, so we won't be noticed. Also we can talk as we make our way around to the front. You haven't forgotten that there are several rather pertinent questions to be answered, have you?"

There was no answer.

He stared around him. She was nowhere to be seen. The lane was pitilessly black. Close as he was to the fence, he could scarcely distinguish its outlines.

"Where are you?" he demanded sharply.

Again there was no answer.

Impulsively he ran, searching, a few steps in one direction, and then in the other. And then he halted. The procedure, besides being futile, was not even intelligent. A feeble and chagrined smile twisted his lips. He had been neatly tricked!

She was gone.

CHAPTER VIII

For Past Favours

IT was early evening—but already quite dark. The window shade was drawn down, and Keith sat on the edge of his bed under the wheezy gas jet with a collection of the late editions of the newspapers scattered around him. He had read them all; that is, he had read everything that each separate journal had to say about “The Stall Murders” of the night before. The headlines were blatant; all of them sensational, some of them in two-inch type, several of them in red. Most of the stories were as lurid as their captions; but even in those papers which had preserved a modicum of dignity and reserve, the accounts were all substantially the same.

The drunken brawl in the upstairs room that had first brought the police on the scene had the death of one man and the wounding of two others to its credit; but the *pièce de résistance* was the discovery of a murdered man in a room downstairs—a room that, until his death a short time before, had for years been occupied by a notorious underworld character known as Old Cully, who, though it had never been proved, was suspected of being one of the most successful drug distributors in the country.

Keith’s eyes wandered over the papers. Quite so! No details were lacking. The description of the murdered—and unidentified—man on the cot was harrowing. The trap-door and exit to the lane had been discovered. There was a sketch of the “tunnel” in one of the papers. Obviously some one had departed by means of that secret exit, since the cot was pushed tightly up against the door. Who? Was it the murderer—or murderers? There was no clue. The police were frankly at sea. Nevertheless, the ramifications—and so forth, and so on!

The papers stated that the man he, Keith, knew as Whitie was dead. He had had very little doubt of that—would, of course, have had none at all, except for his own strange experience when he had first seen the man and had prematurely pronounced the other dead. Whitie’s death now, however, was indubitably established. He did not question the reporters’ statement on that score; but there was another statement that he was by no means so sure

about—that Whitie was unknown to the police, and that there was no clue to his identity.

That might be true—and it might not. It was more than likely that it was not true. With Gur Singh's description of the four men in the hands of the New York police, as vouched for by Bob Clinton, the odds were very much in favor of Whitie having been identified as one of the four—perhaps not last night by any of the squad who had participated in the raid, but as soon as the police, as a whole, had a chance to check up on the description. The statement that the man was unknown meant nothing—except that it would be the obvious statement to make if Whitie's identity *had* been established. To have said anything else would only result in putting the other three on their guard! Well, granted the police knew who Whitie was, what then? It could in no way affect his, Keith's, own activities; it did not bring him, as it were, into the picture at all. The result would be greater activity on the part of the police. Yes, certainly that—and so much the better! He was not in competition with the police. It was only the end that mattered. He would have asked nothing better than to have read to-night that the police had closed in on the other three.

But there was another side to all this. Whether the police had identified Whitie or not, and whether or not they increased their activities, it was certain that what had happened at the Stalls last night would cause the remaining three men to be even more cautious in their movements and more careful to cover up their tracks than ever before. And they had not up to now showed any startling negligence in that respect! Perhaps they might even fly New York!

Keith got up from the edge of the bed and began to pace nervously up and down the room. The thread was broken again. Last night had brought him nothing except the knowledge that one of the four men was dead—that, and the face of a girl which still haunted him, and those words of Whitie's about the mahogany box and Tiger Claws that had been ringing in his ears ever since!

He halted abruptly in the middle of the room. The girl—and Tiger Claws—and the mahogany box! Who was the girl? And Tiger Claws—that all Crimeland whispered about? Tiger Claws—the mysterious phantom of the underworld, whom, snatching at a straw, he had thought might be one of the four! Had he been right after all? Was Tiger Claws one of them? How could that be? The other three men had been outside the door. Whitie had said: "It was Tiger Claws." What did that mean? That it was Tiger Claws who had killed him? Why had he coupled Tiger Claws with the mahogany box? Why

had he mentioned the mahogany box at all? What had happened to the mahogany box? Why did——

The questions were pounding at Keith's brain—surging one upon the other so fast that they but multiplied confusion. He swept his hands across his eyes. This wasn't getting him anywhere. One thing at a time. Go back to the girl.

She must be intimately connected with all this in some way—and yet at the same time she was just as obviously not in collusion with any of the four except Whitie. Her intimacy was clearly confined to Whitie. But why even Whitie? For what purpose? What was the connecting link? And why with Whitie alone to the exclusion of the others? That was strange, queer—most devilishly queer! If he could only find her again!

He made a wry grimace. Yes—*if* he could! It was all of a piece. As well say, *if* he could pick up the trail of any one of the three men again! He had nothing to go on. He did not even know her name. He would recognize her again if he saw her, of course; a face such as hers was——

Keith laughed out shortly in sudden introspection. Her face was assuming undue prominence, wasn't it? Was it only because of what she must know and what she could tell if she would, and because she had therefore become an important factor in the problem, that he was so anxious to discover who she was, and where she lived? Or had she herself, her own personality, those clear steadfast eyes, that winsome face, which, despite the fact that she was unquestionably in close and intimate contact with the vicious surroundings in which he had seen her, stamped her as one wholly apart from such a life, any bearing on his desire to find her? Well, would there be anything strange about it if this were so; that it should be, say, a subsidiary motive? Subsidiary! Yes, of course, it must necessarily be subsidiary; it couldn't be anything else. It was a satisfying word—but he was somewhat conscious of self-deceit. Anyway, she had got him out of a very ugly situation—and literally out of a very tight hole indeed. And then, quite as coolly, had tricked him!

Keith swore very humanly under his breath. There was no more trace left of her than there was of the three men. He had lost her in the lane; and then, although he had hung around the neighborhood until every one else had gone, he had failed to see, or at least, to identify, the man with the maimed hand, alias the Magpie, or either of the Magpie's two companions.

Everything had broken wrong for him! As he had expected, a crowd had gathered in the street, and the police had stood guard over the entrance to the

yard. He had mingled with the crowd, and no single man of all those who were being herded out of the yard had escaped his notice—but in spite of the fact that the darkness was against him and that he had only their description to work on, he was convinced that those he sought were not amongst that number. But he could not watch everywhere. There was more than one way out of the old wagon yard—by climbing the fence and getting into the lane; or by any one of the three or four back doors of that row of brick houses through which the tenants had invaded the yard, and by means of which the street obviously might very easily be reached.

In any case he had lost them!

He resumed his pacing up and down the room. There was nothing to do but begin all over again to-night; but it was still a little too early for Rookie Dyke to set out. The underworld was not yet astir. He would have liked to have talked to Bob Clinton, to have got Clinton's angle on what had happened—but the "repair gang" of last night had evidently proved amenable to Canary Jim's proposals, and Clinton was away.

His mind was a bit riotous. There seemed to be something not far removed from irony, or as though a jeer were being flung at him, in that he had actually been in contact with the three men, and, instead of trapping them, had not only been very nearly caught himself, but was now again even in complete ignorance of their whereabouts. That was the net result of last night—nothing!

Well, no—he had profited by last night in a small measure at least. Rookie Dyke would set forth to-night somewhat more efficiently equipped than on his previous adventurings! He thrust his hand into his pocket, drew forth a small flashlight and a black mask designed to cover the upper portion of one's face, and regarded the two objects with a whimsical and speculative smile. There had been an occasion last night when a flashlight, instead of a match, would have stood him in excellent service; and when Rookie Dyke would have been exceedingly more at ease behind a mask! Rookie Dyke's identity was——

He returned the two articles hurriedly to his pocket, and, gathering together the newspapers, which, both from their number and their obtrusive display of type, might suggest too keen an interest in the Stalls on the part of Rookie Dyke, tossed them under the bed. Some one was coming along the hall. It might be only Bob Clinton, but—— No; it wasn't Clinton. There was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" invited Keith.

The door opened. It was Tony Larfino, with his hand-organ, his sweep of untrimmed mustachio, his heavy gold earrings that dragged down the lobes of his ears, his empty sleeve, and his gaudily bedecked and ever-shivering monkey.

“Oh, hello, Tony!” said Keith genially.

“Hello!” responded Tony. He came forward into the room with obvious diffidence, and closed the door behind him. “Canary Jim no hava come back?” he asked.

“No,” said Keith. “Want him? Anything up?”

“No, just aska da question. I not seen him for two, three day. Canary Jim gooda da friend of me.” He shuffled hesitantly from one foot to the other. “I gooda da friend of you too, eh, Rookie?”

Rookie Dyke was becoming Americanized.

“I’ll say you are!” he declared heartily. “You’ve done me a dozen good turns since I blew in here.”

“Then maybe”—Tony grinned hopefully—“you do da one for me?”

“Sure I will, if I can,” said Keith readily. “What’s on your mind, Tony? Spill it!”

“You knowa Bowery Sal?” inquired Tony Larfino.

“No,” replied Keith. “Never heard of her. What about her?”

“She gooda da friend of me too.” Tony Larfino fiddled unnecessarily with the broad leather strap of the hand-organ. “She ver’ old woman. Needa da help.”

Keith stared at the other. This was not at all like Tony Larfino. He had never seen Tony Larfino either diffident or embarrassed before.

“Say, what’s the matter with you, Tony?” he demanded.

The monkey, leaping from the man’s shoulder to the hand-organ, began to chatter volubly. Tony Larfino promptly cuffed the beast into silence.

“Damma da monk!” he exclaimed. “He maka too mucha da noise!” Then he grinned. “Nothin’ da matter, Rookie. I just not lika ask, for maybe you not lika do.”

“Come across!” suggested Rookie Dyke amiably. “Is this Bowery Sal stranded? What sort of help is it she needs? Money?”

Tony Larfino shook his head.

“No,” he said. “She getta da mon’ all right, if she getta da help. She know somethin’ dat’s worth da mon’! She wanta sell dat to—how you call him?—a tough guy. If she go alone she tella what she know, but not getta da mon’ ’cause da guy squeeze her by da throat instead of giva her da pay to maka her talk. See? No gooda for me to go”—he flapped his empty sleeve eloquently—“Tony no gooda for help. No man scared of Tony.”

Rookie Dyke smiled queerly.

“I don’t know whether I’ve got you right or not, Tony,” he said. “This Bowery Sal has got some information that she wants to sell to some fellow; but, if she goes to him with her offer, she’s afraid he will take the cheaper way of rough-housing all she knows out of her without paying for it unless there’s some one along to protect her. Is that it? And you want me to be the one that makes the other fellow shoot the kale over on the level?”

Tony Larfino’s face beamed.

“Yes,” he said brightly.

“Nothing doing!” said Rookie Dyke promptly.

Tony Larfino’s face fell; disappointment and a hurt expression settled on his swarthy and not over-cleanly countenance.

“You not lika do dat?” he said plaintively. “No! I aska too much? Yes! All right, maybe I getta ’noder friend.” He adjusted the hand-organ strap, and turned toward the door. A sudden bitterness crept into his voice. “Gooda da night, Rookie!”

A troubled look gathered in Keith’s eyes. He owed Tony Larfino not a little. Tony Larfino had made smooth the way and opened many an exclusive door for him in the underworld—and had both offered and given his services ungrudgingly. Also Tony’s influence was far-reaching. If there was any man in the underworld that he could ill afford to offend, it was Tony Larfino. And yet, in no single aspect of it, did he like the other’s request. It might lead anywhere—to a brawl—a feud—the police. Rookie Dyke was not inviting complications!

“Here, wait a minute!” he called out.

Tony Larfino turned slowly around and waited silently. His face was harder; he was no longer a suppliant.

“Look here,” said Rookie Dyke earnestly, “I don’t want you to think I’m throwing you down. Canary’s told you what I’m up against. I had to duck the bulls out where I came from, and I’m keeping under cover here. Don’t you see that I can’t afford to start anything.”

“I not aska you to start anythin’.” Tony was on his dignity; he pushed the rebuke home: “I not aska a friend to getta himself into troub’.”

“Oh!” said Rookie Dyke uncomfortably—and sat down on the edge of the bed. “What makes you so keen about this, Tony?”

“I tella you before, Bowery Sal ver’ gooda da friend of me,” Tony replied a little shortly; and then, ingenuously: “I getta little piece of da mon’ too. I maka da split wid you.”

Rookie Dyke searched for a cigarette, and lighted it. Tony Larfino, if he, Keith, was any judge of the man’s nature, could only be one of two things—a friend or an enemy. And he would make a very inconvenient enemy! Within limits, it was decidedly worth taking a risk if thereby the other’s friendship could be preserved.

“I don’t want the money,” he said. “And I’m for helping you all right, but I’ve got to look out for myself. I can’t take any chances of getting nipped, and being presented with railroad fare to a jug back west. What makes you think there wouldn’t be any trouble?”

Tony Larfino shrugged his shoulders—to the accompaniment of the creaking strap and the discomfort of the monkey.

“If some man go wid Bowery Sal, den dere be no troub’; if Bowery Sal go alone, den dere be hella da troub’! Dat’s da reason some man gotta go wid Bowery Sal. Yes? It not taka long. Only little half hour. They just maka da talk, and da man pay da mon’. I picka you for da best man to go wid Bowery Sal, ’cause you not ver’ well known here, and you not care da damn what dey maka da talk about. Maybe you go, eh, Rookie?”

Tony’s logic might not be bomb proof, but it was, at least reassuring. Rookie Dyke decided that the risks were not prohibitive.

“All right!” he announced. “If that’s all there is to it, I’ll go, Tony.”

Tony Larfino’s face became wreathed in smiles.

“Mucha da thanks, Rookie!” he cried. “Mucha da thanks! Tony he not forget dis. You gooda da friend. You maka Tony ver’ glad.”

“Happy to do it,” lied Keith composedly. “Where do I link up with Bowery Sal?”

“I fixa dat,” said Tony Larfino. “I tella her. You meeta her in an hour. Dat all right? She waita for you outside Lugo’s. Yes?”

“Suits me,” agreed Rookie Dyke.

“I go right off den,” Tony Larfino opened the door. “Mucha da thanks again, Rookie! Mucha da thanks!”

Tony Larfino, the hand-organ and the monkey disappeared.

Keith stared dubiously at the closed door!

“Damn!” said Rookie Dyke fervently.

He stretched himself out on the bed—quite apart from Tony’s “date” he had time on his hands anyway—and suddenly laughed outright. A *preux chevalier*! The old damsel and Rookie Dyke! He had probably taken the whole matter too seriously; he could see the humourous side of it now. A serio-comic! A bit of sordid, underworld by-play—where, cannibals all, every one preyed and fed on everybody else! And the gallant Rookie Dyke standing by to see that an old hag didn’t get scragged while she extorted a few dollars in return for some dire secret of probably very questionable value! No; it was not likely to amount to anything. He would see that it didn’t, as a matter of fact. Anyway, it would have been unpolitic in the last degree to have forfeited the smiles of one Tony Larfino!

The gas jet wheezed assent.

Keith dismissed the matter from his mind temporarily. His thoughts reverted to the happenings of the previous night—and became as tangled and unproductive as they had been before Tony Larfino’s interruption. The girl. . . . Whitie. . . . The Stalls. . . . The three men. . . . Tiger Claws. . . ! The cycle began again. The questions, renewing their importunities, were like a mob out of control; they jostled and pushed each other to one side; they stamped on each other’s heels—and remained unanswered.

At the expiration of some three-quarters of an hour, he extinguished the light, locked the door behind him, and went out. Ten minutes later, as he stood waiting on the street, an old woman emerged from Lugo the Spaniard’s doorway and came toward him.

Bowery Sal, of course—but his appraisal of her as she approached was not uplifting. She was not an inviting personality. Gray strands of hair, unwashed, greasy, straggled over her eyes and cheeks. A crumpled bonnet

out of the ages past adorned her head. Her attire in the main seemed to consist of a huge and shabby black shawl which enveloped her from her bent shoulders to her waist, and which, clutched with hands hidden in its folds, was drawn tightly around her. A threadbare skirt, also black, and shoes that were sadly in need of repair, completed her costume. But if she was disreputable in appearance, she was also a frail and pitiable looking object.

“You’re Bowery Sal, aren’t you?” Keith inquired.

She peered up at him through a pair of broken, steel-bowed spectacles.

“Sure! An’ youse’re Rookie Dyke. Come on!”

Her voice was hoarse and cracked. Keith diagnosed it as a “gin voice”—one of the symptoms, her breath, was pronounced!

He looked at her critically as he fell into step beside her. Of gin, or spirits of some kind, she had undoubtedly partaken freely, but at least she was not drunk. Her walk was far from sprightly; but, within the limits of her age, she was unquestionably in complete control of her limbs. Keith smiled grimly. A good thing! Otherwise, Tony or no Tony, the next corner would have terminated this budding, but unsought alliance!

“Tony says youse’re de real goods, an’ ain’t nosey, an’ won’t start no double-crossin’,” she cackled in a friendly tone.

“That’s nice of Tony,” admitted Rookie Dyke modestly.

“An’ wot Tony says—goes. See?” She wagged her head in emphasis. “An’ say, youse don’t need to think I’m runnin’ youse into anythin’ dat’s goin’ to do youse any harm. Tony slipped me a spiel about youse havin’ to keep yer own nut ducked, and dat’s goin’ to be all right. Say, I likes de looks of youse, Rookie—youse’re big enough to put de fear of Gawd into any gazabo around dese dumps.”

“If you were younger,” said Rookie Dyke facetiously, “I’d think you were——”

“Aw, I ain’t joshin’,” she interrupted earnestly. “I’m tellin’ youse straight, I likes yer map an’ I trusts youse. Now, listen, Rookie, an’ I’ll wise youse up. De bird I got de date wid lives on de top floor of a tenement in de next street—dat’s why Tony told youse to meet me at Lugo’s. ’Cause it was near dere—see?”

“Yep!” said Rookie Dyke laconically.

“Well, den, dis is de steer. Wot I got to tell him is somethin’ he’ll come across for wid a wad. But he don’t know wot it is I found out—yet. See? He’s a dirty pup, an’ if old Bowery Sal went dere alone, de first thing he’d do ’ud be to lock de door, an’ choke all I knows outer me widout payin’ a nickel for it. But he’s yellow all de way up from de soles of his feet, an’ when he sees I got a friend along he’ll be as lovin’ as a pet lamb—though mabbe he’ll bleat some like one, too. D’youse get me?”

They had turned the corner and were halfway down the next block.

Keith nodded.

“That’s about the way Tony handed it to me,” he said.

“Sure! Well, den, dere’s just one thing more. We’re nearly dere. He hangs out in dat tenement on de next corner. Youse’ll have to hear wot I says, ’cause youse’re pretendin’ to be a pal of mine an’ in on de whole show. Now mabbe, bein’ a new guy here, youse won’t know wot we’re talkin’ about anyhow, but so long as youse keeps yer trap shut it don’t make no difference. I’m just tellin’ youse. If youse do dat, youse have nothin’ to worry about. If youse butts in afterward, an’ thinks youse can pull somethin’ for yerself, dat’s yer own funeral. I’m handin’ it to youse straight, ain’t I? Me, I’m through when I separates de bird in dere from his wad. It don’t make no difference to me wot youse knows, or wot youse don’t knows, or wot youse does when we comes out. I’m just warnin’ youse dat if youse don’t fade away den and forget it, youse can’t blame Bowery Sal.”

Rookie Dyke smiled a significant and twisted smile.

“I’m taking the rest cure in this town,” he said.

Bowery Sal nodded her head vigorously in approval—they had halted before the corner tenement.

“I get youse,” she said. “Well, den, come on! Follow me. He lives up on de top floor.”

Keith followed her obediently inside the tenement and began to mount the stairs. It was a poor and squalid place, a three-story tenement—like so many others in that quarter of the city, and not dissimilar to the one where he himself had found a lodging. There was the same predominating odor of garlic and general mustiness. There were no lights in the halls.

They climbed the first flight of stairs, then another; and then Bowery Sal led the way along the hall to the rear of the building, and came to a halt

before what was, of course, a door, though it was scarcely discernible in the darkness.

“Youse keep close to me, Rookie,” she whispered.

“Sure!” said Rookie Dyke.

He heard her knock upon the door. In answer, the sound of a footstep came from within, and the door was jerked open. It was not very light, for the room on which the door opened was in darkness, and what light there was came from a second room through a connecting doorway at the left—but there was light enough to send the blood pounding and racing suddenly through Keith’s veins.

A man was standing there—lowering at them; a man with black, beetle-brows, with furtive, pin-point, rat-like eyes, with pock-marked face; a man whose stature was scarcely more than that of a dwarf. Gur Singh’s description identified the man beyond question.

It was Blackie!

CHAPTER IX

Bowery Sal Hawks Her Wares

BLACKIE! ROOKIE DYKE thrust his hands into his pockets—to hide them. The nails were biting into the palms of his hands. Blackie—here! He fought for self-control—to master the impulse that bade him fling himself in a blind fury upon the man. What was it Clinton had said?—“if you can run down the bed and lodging of any one of them, the rest of the problem solves itself.” Yes! His one play was to hold himself in check now. He had only to enact the rôle of silent partner for which Bowery Sal had cast him, and his work was as good as at an end!

The luck of it! And he had very nearly refused Tony Larfino’s request; would never, indeed, if he had followed his own inclinations, have entered into this alliance with Bowery Sal, which, instead of increasing his difficulties as he had feared, had brought him face to face with one of the three men that he would have risked anything, done anything, to reach! But there was something strange here, perhaps something even sinister; certainly something beyond mere luck that had brought Bowery Sal to this man’s door! What did Tony Larfino and Bowery Sal have——

Blackie was speaking.

“You’re the woman, I suppose, that sent the kid around this afternoon to make a date with me,” he said gruffly.

“Sure!” smirked Bowery Sal. “Dat’s me. Ain’t youse goin’ to ask us in? I ain’t so young as I was, an’ I could do wid a chair after bustin’ me lungs comin’ up dem stairs. An’ besides, youse ain’t de only one dat’s payin’ rent on dis floor, an’ we ain’t holdin’ no open-air service for de public, are we?”

“You’ve got a tongue that needs its brakes inspected,” said Blackie unpleasantly. “You didn’t say anything about bringing anybody with you. Who’s this guy?”

“He’s a pal of mine. He’s got a lot of names. Sometimes I call him Sammy.” Bowery Sal, secure in the protection afforded by her escort, was impudent. “He’s in on dis wid me—all de way, see? An’ anyway, youse don’t think a poor old female, even if de bloom has gone off her, ’ud trust

herself alone in de spider's parlor, do youse? It's de both of us, or dere's nothin' doin'! See?"

"I'm not sure there'll be anything doing anyway!" snarled Blackie. "But I'll listen to what you've got to say." He stepped aside, inviting entry. "Come in!"

Keith, following Bowery Sal, stepped across the threshold. Blackie closed the door behind them, and, crossing the outer room, led the way through the connecting doorway into the lighted room beyond.

Keith's eyes, under the lowered brim of his hat, roved unostentatiously around him—the appointments were not luxurious in spite of the obvious fact that Blackie possessed a two-room apartment. The floor was bare. There were a few cheap chairs, a deal table, a sink, and a stove. A can of beans and some unwashed dishes were on the table. Cracks in the wall plaster yawned precariously. The single window in the room, opposite the door and evidently opening on the rear of the tenement, boasted a roller shade, which, being drawn down, disclosed the fact that its dilapidated condition was wholly in keeping with its surroundings. The other room was probably where Blackie slept, and probably quite as poorly furnished; it had been too dark to see—but at least the floor there, too, was bare.

A two-room apartment! Keith's eyes narrowed slightly under the hat brim, as, leaning against the door-jamb, he watched Bowery Sal dispose herself promptly and without formality upon a chair, while Blackie stood and scowled at her a few feet away. In such a place as this a two-room apartment did not spell affluence—the term alone was grandiloquent. One would be poor indeed who could not afford such accommodations! On that count it meant nothing, it possessed no significance; but two rooms would house more than *one* man. Was Blackie the only one who lived here? Or was it the home of—*three*?

"Well, get down to cases! Shoot the works!" snapped Blackie.

Bowery Sal's eyes made a circuit of the room.

"Dis dump ain't overflowin' wid milk an' honey!" she observed critically. "But mabbe dem words don't register wid youse, seein' dat it ain't likely youse've ever heard dem before! It's a motto I pinched from me Sunday school teacher last week. It means I don't see no signs of any loose coin lyin' around, an' dat's wot I came for. I'd feel happier if I got a squint at yer wad. I'd like to know youse had one. Let's see it."

Blackie gulped.

“You’ve got your nerve!” he snorted angrily. “Perhaps you’d like to have me hand it over now, and then call a taxi for you to ride home in? Any money you’ll get out of me, you’ll earn! And you’ll have to do *some* talking first—of the right kind—before you get it!”

“Nix!” said Bowery Sal emphatically. “It’s de money dat talks. I was in a dumb asylum for four of de best years of me life ’cause I’d lost me fortune an’ didn’t have de money to pay de doctor to operate on me so’s I could talk again! Wot’s de use of stallin’? If youse’ve got a wad, flash it. Dat’s all I’m askin’. All I want do is see it, Blackie.”

“Blackie!” The man took a menacing step forward. “Where did you get that from? That’s not my name. What did you call me Blackie for?”

Bowery Sal’s hands under the shawl jerked the threadbare garment more closely around her bent shoulders—and to Keith, watching, the act suggested a derisive shrug of her shoulders. Then she twisted her head around in his direction.

“Sammy, youse snuggle up closer to me,” she snickered. “If youse wasn’t here I’d be feelin’ me heart bumpin’ hell out of me ribs.”

Keith nonchalantly shifted his position to the opposite jamb of the door. This brought him to within a foot of Bowery Sal’s chair—but his eyes were on Blackie. There was an ugly rush of color sweeping across the man’s face.

“Blast you!” Blackie shouted furiously. “You come across! Why did you call me Blackie?”

This time Bowery Sal shrugged her shoulders unmistakably.

“Mabbe youse has a lot of names like me pal Sammy here,” she answered caustically. “How does I know? If dat ain’t yer favorite incognerto all youse have to do is say so. De reason I called youse Blackie is ’cause dat’s de only name dat I ever heard handed out to youse.”

“You heard me called Blackie?”

“Sure, I did!”

“When? Where?”

“Last night.”

“Where?”

“Say, listen!” Bowery Sal smiled happily. “Wot d’youse take me for? Dat’s part of de story—an’ I ain’t seen dat wad yet!”

Blackie shook a clenched fist at her.

“I’d like to wring your neck for you, you scaly old skirt!” he choked. “And I——”

“Sure, youse would,” interrupted Bowery Sal complacently. “An’ dat’s just wot youse’d do, too, if Sammy wasn’t wid me. But Sammy *is* wid me—see? I don’t trust youse—get dat? I ain’t goin’ to talk for nothin’. I sent youse word dat it was goin’ to cost a century, but I ain’t sure youse went to de bank an’ frisked ’em for a loan! Youse’ve got to show me. Youse can flash it, or I don’t open me trap, an’ dat’s flat, an’ dat’s de last word. Youse can take yer choice *Blackie!*”

Blackie glared—and hesitated. Then, with an oath, he thrust his hand into his pocket and produced a roll of bills, on the outside of which a yellow back of goodly denomination was plainly in evidence.

“Take a look at it, then—take a *good* look at it!” he invited savagely. “You see it, don’t you? It’s here all right—but that doesn’t mean you and your blasted Sammy there’ll get one damned red of it by pulling any bunk!”

Bowery Sal leaned forward in her chair, squinted through her spectacles at the fistful of bills—and settled contentedly back in her chair again.

“If youse had done dat in de first place, youse’d have both saved yerself from gettin’ sore an’ from hurtin’ a poor old woman’s feelin’s,” she sighed plaintively. “I ain’t worryin’ none about de other end of it. Youse’ll be glad to pay, Blackie. Youse’ll be shovin’ de money at me—an’ blushin’ for shame dat youse ain’t payin’ more ’cause wot youse’re gettin’ for de price is like stealin’ it.”

Blackie restored the money to his pocket.

“Shoot!” he snapped. “I’m listening. What about my name to begin with? Where’d you hear it?”

“Last night at de Stalls,” answered Bowery Sal, with a curious smirk.

The Stalls! Keith, by a narrow margin, choked back a startled exclamation. The Stalls—last night! The rôle of silent partner was not so simple! Where did Bowery Sal fit into that affair? What was she going to tell? How much did she know? His lips tightened. His eyes travelled from the smirking, and impudently self-contained old hag, to Blackie standing there by the table. The man’s eyes had grown suddenly beady. He seemed to be groping for a reply, hesitating perhaps whether to admit or deny the old woman’s statement.

But it was Bowery Sal who spoke again. Blackie's agitation had very obviously not escaped her.

"Dat's de first bull's-eye, ain't it?" she cackled. "Well, dere's some more—a lot of dem." She grinned significantly. "Dere was a couple of murders, too, at de Stalls last night. But mabbe youse read about dat in de papers? Only dere wasn't nothin' in de papers—so far—about youse an' two of yer pals bein' dere."

"Where were *you*?" questioned Blackie hoarsely.

"In de hall—before de bulls came. It's a nice, dark hall, ain't it, Blackie? I didn't think youse'd seen me."

Blackie's hands were suddenly clenched at his sides.

"So that's it, is it?" he rasped, his voice out of control. "That's your game, eh? You dirty pair of skates! Putting the screws on, are you? That's what I'm to pay you money for, is it? To keep your mouths closed!"

"Youse gives me a pain!" said Bowery Sal with dignity. "I ain't no snitch—an' Sammy ain't neither. Youse'd better go chase a cake of ice so's youse can sit on it an' cool off! I said I seen youse at de Stalls last night—do youse want me to slip youse wot I knows about de dead man in dat room at de end of de hall, an' a whole lot more, or doesn't youse?"

Blackie was still scowling.

"If you're on the level, go ahead," he growled ungraciously. "But it's no deep secret there was a dead man in that room. The papers have been telling all the world about it in ink splashes a foot high. I learned to read once myself!"

"Sure!" said Bowery Sal softly. "But the bird *wasn't* dead when I first fixed me lamps on him. Him an' me we had a little confidential talk together."

"You—*what*?" Blackie's head shot forward from between his shoulders; the muscles of his face were twitching excitedly.

"An' I guess dat's one more bull's-eye, eh?" Bowery Sal grinned engagingly. "I guess youse're gettin' interested, ain't youse, Blackie?"

"When did you see him?" demanded Blackie tensely.

Bowery Sal drew her eyebrows together as though pondering the question carefully.

“Well, I ain’t sure of de exact time, but I’d say it was a couple of hours before youse an’ yer two pals blew into de hall dere.”

“And you say he talked to you?”

“Sure, he talked to me!” Bowery Sal cackled shrilly. “D’youse think I was listenin’ to a phonograf?”

“What did he say?” Blackie was biting off his words now, flinging them at Bowery Sal. “What did he talk about?”

“Aw, say!” protested Bowery Sal. “Youse’re gettin’ me all twisted up! Why don’t youse let me make me speech from where it starts off? Youse’re missin’ de drama of it, an’ de climaxes ain’t comin’ right! Wot he talked about most was a girl dat he was askin’ for.”

“Do you know who she is?” Blackie’s voice had suddenly dropped almost to a whisper.

“Sure, I know!” asserted Bowery Sal calmly. “Didn’t I take a message to her? She was de girl dat was in de room dere wid another man when youse was outside de door in de hall tryin’ to dope out some way of gettin’ de drop on ’em.”

Keith moved suddenly—with apparent unconcern. He could not have remained there sphinx-like, leaning motionless against the door-jamb, to have saved his life. His brain was whirling. He yanked a chair toward him and slumped down on it—simulating as best he could a resigned patience with the entire proceedings.

Bowery Sal screwed her head around in his direction.

“Dat’s right, Sammy!” she approved. “Youse can make yerself nice an’ comfortable widout worryin’ no more about Blackie makin’ any crack. He’s tame now.” She nodded brightly at Blackie. “An’ youse too, Blackie. Sit down, an’ make yerself sociable.”

Mechanically Blackie threw himself at the nearest chair—then he laughed harshly.

“You’re pretty slick!” There was a new note in Blackie’s voice—something, Keith fancied, of cunning creeping into it. “But how am I to know that what you’re handing me is straight? Maybe it wouldn’t do any harm to check up a bit. Who was the man you talked to there in that room? What was his name?”

Bowery Sal shook her head.

“I don’t know his name. I don’t know who he was,” she said.

“Oh—you don’t!” Blackie smiled satirically.

“No—I don’t!” retorted Bowery Sal sharply. “He wasn’t handin’ out his family history. How was I to know? He didn’t tell me! Anyway, what’s dat got to do wid it?”

“Nothing—much,” said Blackie. “Well, then, he sent you with a message to the girl, you said. If that’s true, where does she live, and what’s *her* name?”

“Ain’t youse clever!” drawled Bowery Sal. “Nix on dat stuff! Dat’s wot youse’re goin’ to hand me de hundred bones for. Slip me de coin, an’ youse gets her name an’ address right off de bat. Dat’s a lot easier way of gettin’ it than by makin’ a hole in de door an’ squirting in ammonia!”

Blackie was silent for a moment—eyeing Bowery Sal speculatively.

“Look here, I’ll tell you something.” His voice was suddenly placating, almost confidential. “I guess you were in the hall there, all right enough. And it’s true we were kind of curious about the girl—but that don’t say it’s worth a hundred dollars to know who she is. Maybe it is, and maybe it ain’t. You come across, and if there’s anything worth while in it for me I’ll see that you get the cash.”

“My Gawd!” whispered Bowery Sal. “Listen to him! Say, can all dat! Youse’re gettin’ off cheap, an’ I don’t like youse anyway, nor dat lover-like smirk on yer lips neither, an’ I’m thinkin’ of boostin’ de price. I’m tellin’ youse now dat de girl I’m talkin’ about is de girl dat knows wot youse *thinks* she knows, an’ wot youse’d be willin’ to murder her for to find out.”

Again Blackie was silent for a moment—and then ungraciously accepted defeat.

“Show me!” he said curtly. “Prove that, and you get the hundred—when you’ve told me who she is and where to find her.”

“Dat’s de first real shout youse’ve made!” sniffed Bowery Sal. “I can prove it all right. Listen! I was down dere at the Stalls yesterday at about de time I said, an’——”

“What for?” Blackie broke in grimly. “What were you doing there?”

“Aw, say!” Bowery Sal stared insolently at the man. “I went down dere for afternoon tea wid a friend of mine dat uster be in de House of Lords over in England. Only I was a little late, an’ de butler told me his Lordship was

out. An' youse can bite on dat, Blackie, an' mind yer own business! I was dere, an' dat's enough for youse to know. It hadn't nothin' to do wid yer affairs."

Blackie scowled.

"All right!" he jerked out. "Go on, then!"

"Well," said Bowery Sal, "I was standin' dere in de hall, an' I thought I heard some one moanin' in dat room we're talkin' about. So I goes to de door, an' shoves me face in—see? An' dere he was tossin' an' groanin' around on an old cot, an' lookin' like it wasn't long before he was goin' to be counted out for keeps. Say, dere's mabbe some hard things been slipped around about Bowery Sal, an' I ain't sayin' I'm any saint wid a halo on me head, but I gotta heart. So I goes over to him, an' asks him if dere's anythin' I can do. An' den he looks at me like I was a bloomin' angel of mercy, an' den he says, 'Yes.' An' I says, 'What is it?' An' den he takes a long time to get de words out, cause he's so weak he can't hardly talk, but wot he's askin' is if I'll do a message for him. An' I says, 'Sure, I will!' An' den he give me de name of de girl, an' tells me where she lives."

Bowery Sal stopped—and leered knowingly at Blackie.

"That don't prove anything," commented Blackie gruffly.

"No," said Bowery Sal—and suddenly leaned forward in her chair; "but I'm comin' to dat. I heard wot youse were all sayin' out in de hall last night. I knows wot youse wanted an' wot youse were tryin' to find out about. Youse ain't heard yet wot de message was dat de man gave me for de girl. He says, '*Tell her dat de man dat gave her de mahogany box is dyin' an' wants to see her.*'"

Blackie jumped to his feet.

"The mahogany box!" he cried out eagerly. "So the girl's got it, has she? That settles it, then! That's where it's gone!"

Keith did not move. By, it seemed, a superhuman effort, he preserved his sprawled and careless attitude in his chair. The girl *was* in it, then! But why should that, the proof of it, come as a shock to him? It had been obvious as long ago as last night, hadn't it? What was it, then? Was it that he did not *want* to believe? No; there was something more than that. He was conscious of fear—a sudden, gripping fear. The girl—her peril! Yes, that was it! It was in Blackie's face. A demoniacal, triumphant something in the man's eyes, in the lips that had twisted into a cruel grin.

Bowery Sal's cackle jangled through the room:

"Well, is dat good enough?"

"You've said it, sister!" said Blackie, his voice hoarse with excitement. "You've put your money on the winning horse!" He pulled the roll of bills from his pocket. "Show your ticket, and get your cash. What's her name?"

Bowery Sal, her eyes on the money, licked her lips greedily.

"Her name's Doris," she said. "Doris Marland."

"What did you say?" Blackie fairly shouted. "Say it again! The last name!"

"Youse heard me, didn't youse? I said it was Marland."

"Marland!" Blackie seemed to be rolling the word on his tongue as though it was some sweet morsel. "No, you couldn't make that up! That's the cleanest bull's-eye you've hit yet! And, say—you stick around a bit. One of those pals of mine isn't feeling well, but the other one's coming over here in a little while, and I want him to hear your story."

"Forget it!" said Bowery Sal rudely. "Youse can tell him yerself! One of youse at a time is all Sammy an' me wants to see. I don't know either of de other two of youse, an' I don't wanten. When I gives de girl de message she says she knows wot it means an' where's she to go all right, so I pretends to make me getaway, but I trails her to de Stalls. An' den youse three comes an' I goes in after youse. An' den de bulls comes an' I slips outside an' waits for youse. I didn't have no particular reason for pickin' youse out of de three. All I wanted was to get next to just one of youse—an' youse were it. See? Youse all separated when youse beat it out of de yard, an' one of youse was all I could follow anyway. I wasn't breakin' me heart about dat 'cause one was enough to do business wid. An' dat goes now. I ain't interested in nobody but youse. I've slipped youse de girl's name, now youse fork de money over an' I'll give youse de address, an' Sammy an' me'll say good-night."

"Well, have it your own way!" grunted Blackie. "It wasn't for the sake of your company!" He counted out a hundred dollars. "Here's your money! Now where does she hang out?"

One of Bowery Sal's hands darted avariciously out from under her shawl. She snatched at the little wad of bills, tucked her hand under the shawl again, and stood up.

"Do you know Kee Wong's hop-house down in Chinatown?"

Blackie nodded.

“Well, den, dere’s a lane runs alongside of Kee Wong’s and through to de next street. An’ dat’s where she lives—in de house beside de lane on de next street. It’s de one wid its backyard up against Kee Wong’s. Get me?”

“I get you,” said Blackie; and then, his voice suddenly thinning viciously: “But just be sure you get—*me!* You spill any of this anywhere else, and you’ll wish to God you’d never been born! And that goes for both of you! One word out of either of you, and the morgue wagon’ll be making a double trip!”

Bowery Sal flared up.

“Youse could have saved yer breath makin’ dat speech!” she jerked out indignantly. “I ain’t scared of youse, but me mother told me never to do no double-crossin’, an’ Bowery Sal don’t play dat kind of a game. Good-night, Blackie—an’ thanks!” She scuffled toward the door. “Come on, Sammy!”

Keith got up, and, trailed by Blackie, followed Bowery Sal through the outer room into the hall.

Blackie closed the door behind them—but almost instantly opened it again.

“Here! Wait a minute!” he said.

“Wot d’youse want?” demanded Bowery Sal.

“Come here! Closer! I don’t want to shout!” Blackie’s voice fell to a whisper. “There’s a question I forgot to ask you. Who was that man who got away through the trap-door with the girl?”

“I don’t know.” Bowery Sal shook her head. “He didn’t go dere wid de girl—I’m sure of dat. An’ I don’t know when he got into de room, or how he got dere. I don’t know nothin’ about him, an’ never seen him. If youse want to know who he is youse’d better ask de girl!”

“I will!” said Blackie with an ugly laugh—and shut the door.

CHAPTER X

Birds of Prey

KEITH, tight-lipped, followed Bowery Sal down the dark tenement staircases, and out onto the street. He had kept his hands off Blackie, had fought back the primal instinct that had urged him then and there to take a just vengeance on the man, had sat there with the check-rein tight upon himself; but it was almost as hard now to keep his hands off this old hag.

Until even the last moment, he had been too intent on the disclosures that were being made to realize the full significance of what was taking place. It was true that, in a measure, he had sensed the peril in which the girl who had effected his escape from the Stalls last night, and whose name he now knew to be Doris Marland, stood; but it was that final, raucous laugh from Blackie, the menace in it, the sinister promise in the man's words, that had brought home to him the naked fact that Bowery Sal had callously sold for her hundred dollars what she must well know would literally put the girl's very life itself in jeopardy.

The mahogany box! That page from the notebook that was hidden in the lining of his coat now! He saw again the body of a white-haired man half-hidden in that far island foliage—a face so mercilessly battered that the features seemed scarcely those of a human being. He did not know what was in the mahogany box; but he knew that it had already been the cause of one murder in which Blackie had certainly participated. Was there to be still another? It was only too obvious that, for whatever it might represent or might contain, neither Blackie nor either of the other two would stop at anything to regain possession of the mahogany box. And now he——

“Youse're de hot stuff, Rookie!” Bowery Sal was cackling jubilantly as they moved away from the tenement doorway and started down the street. “An' say, Tony told me wot he said about slippin' youse a piece of de money, an' dat goes for me, too, if youse wants it. I'm on de level, I am.”

Keith choked back a bitter and savage retort. It was not in consonance with the rôle of Rookie Dyke to denounce her to her face for the despicable female-Judas that she was. He would have liked to have throttled her, to

have torn her miserable blood money into shreds before her eyes; as it was, the only thing he could do was to get rid of her as quickly as possible without inviting her enmity, or arousing any suspicion that he had an ulterior motive in view.

He drew a cigarette from his pocket, pausing deliberately to light it.

In a sense he had been a party to Doris Marland's betrayal, and for that reason, if for no other, he owed her the limit of his protection. It was a moral responsibility that he could not shirk even if he wanted to—and he was conscious of a grim eagerness to accept that responsibility rather than in any way to evade it. The sooner he could get away from Bowery Sal, the sooner he could get back to the tenement. Blackie had said that one of the other two was coming there. That was enough reason in itself for going back! But, besides that, they would certainly discuss Doris Marland and lay their plans; and he meant to hear that discussion—somehow!

“Well, wot about it?” prodded Bowery Sal.

Keith threw away the match stub, inhaled deeply—and leisurely expelled the smoke through his nostrils.

“Forget it!” said Rookie Dyke, with a magnanimous wave of his hand. “I only did it to oblige Tony. Where are you going now?”

“Home—so's not to keep de servants waitin' up for me,” grinned Bowery Sal. “I'm through for de night.”

Keith experienced a distinct sense of relief.

“All right,” he said. “I'll leave you at the corner, then. I'm going over to Lugo's for a while.”

“Sure!” agreed Bowery Sal—and, save for occasional, and, so far as Keith could interpret them, self-congratulatory mumblings anent the lucrative outcome of the evening, traversed the remainder of the block in silence. At the corner she halted abruptly. She peered up at Keith through a combination of gray hair and ill-fitting spectacles, and wagged her head in friendly fashion. “Well, so long, den, Rookie! I'll tell de world youse're all to de good. An' say, I didn't let youse down, did I? An' we're out of dere now widout no row, just de way I told youse it'ud be. An' dere won't never be one neither if we keeps our traps shut. I want to slip it to youse dat wot Blackie said about dat ain't no joke, even if I did hand him back de frozen mitt. I got a hunch dat de gang he travels wid ain't no tame menagerie. D'youse get me, Rookie?”

“I get you—all the way,” said Rookie Dyke earnestly. “Didn’t I tell you I was laying low in this burg? There were two murders down there at the Stalls. The last thing Rookie Dyke can afford to do is to get his picture in the papers. Don’t you worry any about me watching my step. I’ve got my fingers crossed for fair.”

Bowery Sal nodded her head, and grinned approval.

“Well, den, I’ll beat it,” she said. “Thanks for wot youse’ve done. Youse can count on Bowery Sal for anythin’ youse wants any time; an’ I’ll tell Tony youse’re de one an’ only. So long, Rookie—I’ll see youse again one of dese days.”

“So long!” said Rookie Dyke—cordially.

He watched her cross the road; then he turned, and, walking without haste along the intersecting street, passed in through Lugo’s dimly lighted doorway. But he penetrated no farther into the Spaniard’s establishment than the entrance hall. Here he waited for two or three minutes, then, emerging, he retraced his steps to the corner again. It had perhaps been unnecessary to go into Lugo’s at all, but he had said he was going there, and, for no reason other than the promptings of her innate, vicious inquisitiveness and cunning, Bowery Sal might have taken it into her head to watch him. He had taken no chances—that was all. In any case, she was gone now.

Keith started down the block in the direction of the tenement whose top floor and Blackie’s two-room apartment was again his goal. But now he kept well in on the inside of the sidewalk, hugging the shadows of the houses, and looking narrowly about him. Blackie’s expected visitor—either the Weasel or the man with the mutilated hand! It could not be more than ten minutes since he, Keith, had left the tenement. Had the visitor arrived in the interval—or might he even be one of the few pedestrians here on the street? Several men had passed by him—but none of them had turned into the corner tenement.

Keith smiled queerly as he moved along. This second visit might terminate very differently from the first! Two of them!

His mind began to work now in flashes, formulating, as it were, the concrete out of the subconscious. He had to get into that outer room. Well, he was not depending blindly on pure chance to accomplish that purpose. He remembered that when Bowery Sal had knocked at the door he had heard Blackie come from the inner room, but he had not heard Blackie *unlock* the hall door. It was a fair inference, therefore, that if it had been unlocked then,

it would be unlocked now. Also, Blackie apparently held his conferences and received his visitors in the inner room. Hence, he, Keith, had only to make sure that the Weasel or the Magpie, whichever it might be, had arrived, and then steal into the outer room where, unobserved himself in the darkness, he could watch both men and hear what they said.

A sudden uplift came to Keith. It was the beginning of the end—and very near the end, wasn't it? It was obvious now, in spite of the fact that Blackie inhabited both rooms, which fact had suggested the possibility that all three might hive together, that the other two lived elsewhere; but it should not be a very difficult matter now to discover where *their* lairs were. By the time Bob Clinton returned, or in the next few days anyhow, he, Keith, would have that information in his possession, and then Clinton, acting through the Secret Service and still safe-guarding the character of Canary Jim, would tip off the police—and Rookie Dyke would be metamorphosed into Keith Wharton, just arrived from the Far East. Yes, undoubtedly, the end appeared to be in sight; but meanwhile Doris Marland must be taken care of. Well, he would do that to-night; he would warn her just as soon as he had heard what Blackie and his visitor proposed to do, and before they could make a move to put their plans into execution.

He had reached the tenement entrance now—and now he glanced sharply in all directions around him. There was no one in the near neighbourhood. He pushed the door open, entered the unlighted hallway, and closed the door behind him.

A footstep on the stairs, the creaking of the bannisters, what did that matter?—so far as the ground-floor and second-floor tenants were concerned! There were many tenants, and they came and went at all hours, didn't they? Keith mounted the stairs without exaggerated caution until halfway up the second flight—and then suddenly his tread became as silent as that of a cat.

He gained the third-floor landing, reached Blackie's door—and stood there listening. At first he heard nothing; then, indistinctly, a chair leg scraped on the floor as from the uneasy movement of its occupant—but there was no sound of voices.

Keith drew back from the door. The second man had not yet arrived. Well, so much the better! He would miss less of what was said!

He stared about him in the darkness. Blackie's door, of course, was the one nearest the rear of the tenement on this side of the hall, for the window of the inner room, he remembered having noted, opened on the rear, and had

no door leading into the passage. But from where he stood, short as the distance was, he could not see the wall at the end of the hall. He smiled grimly. That was good enough! He could not be seen there either—by any one else who came to Blackie's door!

He moved forward cautiously. A dozen steps brought him to the end of the hall. He turned then, facing in the direction of the stairway, and leaned back against the wall. There was nothing to do now but wait.

The minutes passed. He did not know how many of them. They seemed interminable. Occasionally he heard a door open and shut here and there throughout the tenement; occasionally he heard footsteps ascending the lower stairs—but none upon the second flight! Otherwise there was silence—and the silence seemed curiously to become more noisy than the closing of those doors, or the creaking of those stair treads. It began to thud at his ear-drums in regular and unpleasant tempo. It became intolerable—and then suddenly it ceased.

Some one was coming up the second flight of stairs—a man who stumbled in the darkness, and cursed freely at his discomfiture. Keith strained forward. The footsteps were on the landing now; and now something shapeless, something a little blacker than the surrounding blackness, moved to Blackie's door, and knocked upon it—but, without waiting for an answer, opened the door and vanished within. The door shut again.

And then Keith was in action. In an instant he was crouched for the second time at Blackie's door—listening. The door wasn't locked—he knew that without trying it. The man who had just gone in had opened it without waiting for any response from Blackie. He could hear footsteps retreating across the outer room; the mingling of voices; and chair legs again scraping on the floor.

His fingers closed on the door knob and turned it slowly, carefully, silently—and then, a fraction of an inch at a time, he pushed the door inward. The two men were in the inner room, all right; he could almost hear what they were saying.

Noiselessly the door opened under his hand—just far enough to allow him to pass through. He slipped inside, and stood for a moment motionless; then he swung the door back again until it was no more than ajar, and, pressed close against the wall, stole forward for perhaps a yard or a little more. This gave him the required angle of vision. He could not only see into the lighted inner room now, but he could see the two men. Both were seated

at the table—Blackie, side face, at one end; his companion, back to the window, facing the connecting doorway.

It was the Weasel—not the Magpie. Gur Singh’s description was not needed this time—the process of elimination sufficed. The man’s elbows were on the table, both hands in plain sight—and both hands were whole. But Keith noted, too, the man’s distinctive features as Gur Singh had set them down—the close-set, dark, shifty eyes; the low forehead; the protruding ears; the almost mulatto-like skin; the spreading nostrils; and the thick, sensuous lips.

The Weasel was talking excitedly:

“You say this old dame was down there last night, and is wise to everything?”

“Yes!” said Blackie. “That’s what I said.”

“And that the girl’s got the mahogany box, and that you know where she hangs out?”

“That’s what! And *who* she is, too! Bowery Sal slipped me the whole works for a hundred bucks.”

The Weasel’s tongue circled his lips thirstily, as though they had become suddenly dry.

“It’s cheap at the price,” he grinned viciously. “But are you sure it’s on the level? She might have been down there all right, and still be stringing you. Her sort would fake up anything for the chance of getting away with a dime, let alone a wad like you gave her.”

Blackie smiled thinly.

“Do you think I’m as soft as that? She told me something that she couldn’t fake up, and wouldn’t know would register with me anyhow. You can take it from me that I’m sure—and so will you be in a second. She said that the girl’s name who was with Whitie, the girl Whitie gave the mahogany box to, was Marland—Doris Marland. And maybe,” he laughed suddenly, significantly, “you’ve heard that name before?”

The Weasel jerked head and shoulders half across the table, and, hanging there tensely, stared at Blackie in a half-startled, half-fascinated way.

“My Gawd!” he whispered. “That proves it! How did Whitie get next to *her*?”

Blackie shrugged his shoulders.

“Ask me something easy!” he said gruffly. “I don’t know! I only know he did. Why’s another matter. Having double-crossed us, and knowing he was dying, it’s just the kind of thing I’d say he’d do, if he could.”

The Weasel brushed his hand across his eyes—and suddenly gave vent to a sharp exclamation.

“A blind man could see that,” he said shortly; “but I’m beginning to see a lot more. The Magpie was keeping the mahogany box for us, and we all knew where he had it hidden. And then a few days ago it was pinched—and Whitie does the vanishing act at the same time. That puts it up to Whitie, all right; but Whitie and the Magpie being as thick as peas and always together, you and me weren’t so sure that the Magpie wasn’t in on it too, so we started to watch the Magpie. And he gets on to us, and gets sore, and gives us hell, and says that if we’d spend our time trying to run down Whitie the way he was doing, instead of watching *him*, we’d have a better chance of getting the mahogany box back again. I ain’t saying he hasn’t got a yellow streak in him, and is always scared stiff somebody’ll spot that hand of his, but he was right. And even when he found Whitie, and told us Whitie’d been stabbed and was dying in that two-by-twice hole in the Stalls, and took us down there to make Whitie tell with his last gasp what he’d done with the mahogany box because the Magpie said that, though he’d looked, it wasn’t in the room where Whitie was, we weren’t putting it past the Magpie to have lifted it himself when he first found Whitie and before he came and told us that he’d——”

“That’s a long speech!” interrupted Blackie impatiently. “And it’s old stuff! What are you driving at?”

“I’m driving at this,” said the Weasel. “It’s a cinch that if Whitie hadn’t got pinked, and knew his number was up, he’d have hung on to the mahogany box himself. I don’t know when he collected that jab he got, but if we’d helped the Magpie out instead of putting the screws on him we might have run Whitie down before he got knifed, or at least while he still had the goods on him.”

“Well, maybe,” admitted Blackie. “But that’s finished and over with. And anyway we know who’s got the mahogany box now. There’s no harm done, so what’s the difference?”

Again the vicious grin spread over the Weasel’s face.

“I don’t know. I’ll tell you later—when we’re through with the girl! It would have been an easy job to get it away from Whitie! See? Suppose she’s

put it somewhere else except on the mantelpiece where we could reach up and help ourselves nice and handy? And suppose Whitie gave her something besides the mahogany box—suppose he gave *us* away too?”

Blackie’s rat-like eyes narrowed.

“I’d thought of that, but I don’t think Whitie’d split that wide open; anyway, she ain’t showed no signs of it yet—and she’ll never get a chance to now!” He shrugged his shoulders, and swore coarsely. “And no matter where she’s put the mahogany box, we’ll scrag it out of her. She’ll squawk fast enough when we get our hands on her. And afterwards—well, we ain’t taking any chances! She’s better out of the road anyhow!”

“You said something that time!” agreed the Weasel with an ugly laugh. “But give us the whole layout first—how this Bowery Sal got onto it, and all the rest of it.”

Blackie began a detailed rehearsal of the old woman’s story—but Keith now was no longer hanging on every word. He could not only have told the whole story himself, but could have thrown several additional side lights upon it as well! And, his mind for the moment detached from what was being said, he became conscious that, crouched there against the wall, his hands were tightly clenched; conscious, too, of a strange sense of unreality that this room here in the heart of one of New York’s most sordid quarters could hold anything in common with a lonely, nameless island thousands of leagues away on the other side of the world. Strange scene shifting—strange indeed! But the characters were the same—the same callous, inhuman brutality; the same foul work afoot—murder committed there, murder projected here. What was it that unknown man on the island had written in his diary?—“they are the stamp of men who would crush out a human life, if it stood in their way, with no more compunction than they would have in exterminating the merest insect that crossed their paths.” Yes! They had crushed out that man’s life; they had crushed out Allan’s life, and Taipi’s and Hoka’s lives—and now they proposed to crush out another’s!

His eyes, travelling from the face of one man to the other, and thence about the room, became suddenly fixed on the window. And this was strange, too! *He thought he had seen it move!* The roller shade was drawn down only to the level of the wooden framework of the window itself, leaving a space of some three inches to the sill; and the window itself was now open to the extent of about an inch. He watched it. It did not move any more. Perhaps it had been that way all along. Certainly, neither of the two men had noticed anything—but then, unless a sound loud enough to attract

their attention were made, they wouldn't anyhow, for the Weasel sat with his back directly to the rear of the room, and Blackie's position at the end of the table was such that he could not see the window without turning almost completely around in his chair. Keith smiled a little wryly to himself. He was under a bit of a strain—keyed up. A fair field for the imagination! That was it, probably. His imagination was getting in its work!

Blackie's voice cut in on Keith's consciousness absorbing his attention again:

“. . . That's all she knew.”

“It's plenty—and then some!” said the Weasel eagerly. “What've you doped out—anything?”

“There's nothing much to dope out. We'll go down there to the girl's place, and clean up, that's all!”

“When?”

“To-night, of course! We're not going to wait until next year, are we?” Blackie looked at his watch. “But it's only half-past ten—too early yet.”

The Weasel hitched his chair closer to the table, and stared at Blackie with a sudden avaricious glint in his eyes.

“I wonder if I get you?” His voice had dropped to almost a whisper. “The Magpie's out of it, eh? He's pretty slick at doping out stunts, I'll say that for him, but this is worth the whole bunch of cribs put together that he's led us to—and it ain't saying that we ain't for using his brains hereafter either; but this trip it's just you and me—and we cop what we get, eh? Is that what you mean? The Magpie doesn't know anything about what Bowery Sal has spilled—and don't need to. That's why, besides not giving the girl a chance to pull anything on us, you're for it quick—to-night, eh, when the Magpie ain't around? Have I got you straight?”

“I'd never have thought of it!” Blackie's lips twisted in an evil smile. “I was only thinking that we'd have to do without the Magpie's valuable help, unless we wanted to sit around and suck our thumbs and wait for him, 'cause he's down and out for fair to-night—eh?”

“He sure is—and no error!” declared the Weasel, with a sneer. “He's been at it all day, and when I saw him about seven o'clock to-night, he'd drunk himself into a blind coma. He's scared stiff. It's that yellow streak showing up in him—and this time it ain't his hand he's worrying about. You know as well as me that he's had the wind up ever since he opened that door

and heard Whitie say, ‘I tell you it was Tiger Claws’; and that he’s got a hunch that’s who it was that was in there with the girl.”

Blackie, as though suddenly ill at ease, shifted his position in his chair a little.

Keith’s eyes reverted to the window—and held there in a startled, fascinated way. It was not a question of imagination; it was cold fact! The window was a good inch farther up than it had been before.

“Maybe that’s who it was.” Blackie’s voice seemed to have lost a little of its self-confidence. “I’ll say this for the Magpie, I was for him there good and plenty. I’d feel better myself if we’d been able to get that bird’s number last night.”

“Ah, say!” exclaimed the Weasel incredulously. “You, too! It’s the bunk! This Tiger Claws stuff gives me the pip! Everybody yaps through their hat about him—and nobody’s ever seen him. Some one started a spook yarn—and it went across.” His voice became contemptuous. “That’s the way I size it up—and it don’t register with me!”

“Don’t it?” inquired Blackie softly.

“No; it don’t! I don’t believe a damned word of it! I’ve got to be shown. When I see him, I——”

“I don’t know what your favorite flowers are!” Blackie cut in with a harsh laugh. “So Tiger Claws doesn’t exist, eh? And you don’t believe he’s anything but a spook, eh? What made Whitie say what he did, then, last night?”

“I don’t know,” returned the Weasel stubbornly; “but I’ll ask you a question. If nobody ever saw him, how do you get away with the idea that there is any such bird? Just because a lot of queer murders were committed and nobody ever caught, doesn’t prove that some one labelled Tiger Claws pulled them all!”

Keith’s ears were attuned to every word the two men were saying, but his eyes never left the window now. It had moved up again another inch—to just about the level of the lower edge of the roller shade.

“He *was* seen,” said Blackie laconically.

“That’s the first I’ve heard of it, then! Who saw him?”

“The ones he murdered!”—there was something far from facetious in Blackie’s voice.

“Say,” demanded the Weasel half angrily, “what are you giving us?”

“The straight goods!” Blackie was speaking in a low, quick way—in deadly earnest now. “Listen! You’re new to New York, and you weren’t here a few years ago when this started—but I was. I’ll tell you something about Tiger Claws that I guess you never heard before, and something that everybody doesn’t know—and something that’ll account for what Whitie said, and for the Magpie taking to drink to chase the shivers out of his back. He had a nice, pleasant little habit, had Tiger Claws. He did it to a pal of mine that he murdered. He did it to others that I know about. He always killed in the dark—and *whispered* his name into the ear of whoever he was bumping off.”

“Hell!” said the Weasel uneasily.

“That’s what happened to my pal—he lived long enough to tell about it. And that’s what must have happened to Whitie.”

Something was glittering there now in the window opening—a pair of eyes—yellowish-green in color—like the eyes of an animal—like the eyes of a cat perched outside there on the windowsill. But a cat couldn’t push up the window, and it would have to be a very big cat to have eyes as wide apart as that. Keith suddenly experienced a creepy and uncomfortable sensation. A big cat! What was a tiger but a big cat? Those yellowish-green balls of fire out there—a big cat! Was that where the name came from?—*Tiger Claws!* His lips drew together in a straight line. Tiger Claws! He had no doubt about it. He *knew*. He was not the only surreptitious visitor to this council chamber of crime. Tiger Claws, that phantom of the underworld, was a phantom no longer—Tiger Claws was there, outside that window now.

“You think it was Tiger Claws who croaked Whitie, then?” The Weasel’s voice had more of awe than contempt in it now.

“Sure, I do!” Blackie answered emphatically; and then, in a puzzled way: “But I’m blamed if I know why!”

“The mahogany box,” supplied the Weasel. “What else for would it be?”

“Well, if it was, he got fooled,” Blackie argued, “because Whitie slipped it over to the girl. You remember what the message was that Bowery Sal took to the girl, don’t you? ‘Tell her that the man that *gave* her the mahogany box is dying, and wants to see her.’ That’s plain enough, isn’t it? And, besides, how would Tiger Claws know anything about it?”

“I don’t know!” The Weasel was growling in perplexity. “But according to the stories about him—and I’m admitting he’s real all right after what

you've told me about your pal—getting wise to things don't seem to bother him none. Anyway, as you say, he hadn't got the mahogany box up to last night, and unless he was the man who was with the girl and has pinched it from her since, he hasn't got it now. It doesn't change anything, does it, except"—the Weasel mouthed a sudden, savage oath—"to make it a surer thing than ever that we've got to pay that nice little social visit to the girl, and no lost time about it."

"I'm looking forward to it," said Blackie with cold brutality. "What I've said about Tiger Claws was just to set you straight in case we had to go up against him, too. But I don't think there's going to be anything to it except the girl—and you and me sitting here again in the early morning light and pawing over what's in the mahogany box."

The Weasel sucked in his breath greedily.

"Gawd!" he said.

"I'll play you cold hands until it's time to go," suggested Blackie.

"You're on!" agreed the Weasel. "Got anything to drink?"

"Sure!" said Blackie. "You'll find a bottle over there in the corner. And get the cards, too—they're on the bottom shelf."

The eyes were no longer at the window.

Keith inched his way softly back to the door, noiselessly swung it open, stole out into the hall, closed the door again, and descended the top flight of stairs cautiously. But once on the lower flight, regardless of any noise he made and risking a spill in the darkness, he took the stairs two and three at a time.

A curious smile, a smile devoid of all mirth, parted his lips. *He* knew that it wasn't Tiger Claws who had been in the Stalls with Doris Marland last night; but he also knew that Tiger Claws had learned now where the mahogany box was, where the girl was, where——

He raced out through the doorway and around the corner—and standing on the sidewalk, peered up at the rear of the tenement. The fire-escape showed up in spidery outline out of the black. He stared at it until his eyes became accustomed to the darkness and he could trace it out quite distinctly from top to bottom. Nothing bulked upon it. Nothing moved upon it.

Tiger Claws had disappeared.

CHAPTER XI

The House of Mystery

THROUGH cross streets and along main thoroughfares Keith hurried now. A glance at his watch under a street lamp showed him that it was five minutes to eleven—but, though it was no great distance from the lower East Side and the Bowery to the heart of Chinatown, Keith lost not a moment now. As regards Blackie and the Weasel he had time to spare, perhaps hours of it, for it was quite evident that their predatory entry into the house would be postponed until its occupants were asleep and at their mercy; but there was another factor in the problem now—Tiger Claws.

Tiger Claws was in a position to forestall the others. What would he do? Strike first? Probably! Yes, but Tiger Claws, none-the-less, could not afford to ignore the very likely possibility of Blackie and the Weasel arriving on the scene at, as it were, a most inconvenient moment. How would Tiger Claws develop his game on this sinister chess-board of crime?

Keith shook his head. He did not know. Out of a multitude of awed whispers that were amply verified by his own experience to-night, he knew that Tiger Claws was a master player and that the game was on! But whether it were Tiger Claws or Blackie or the Weasel who made the opening move, their objective was the same. In either case, Doris Marland was in grave danger, not merely of losing that mysterious mahogany box, but of losing her life as well. If the stories about Tiger Claws were true, and he, Keith, did not doubt them now, the man, far from hesitating about taking a human life, seemed to go out of his way to commit a murder as though he found a fiendish joy in his victim's death; and so far as Blackie and the Weasel were concerned, he, Keith, had only too good reason to know—for otherwise "Rookie Dyke" would never have existed!—that they were scarcely one whit behind Tiger Claws in their bestial callousness.

It was up to him! There was no other way. The character of Rookie Dyke, the safety of Canary Jim, forbade the police; but, even if this were not so, the authorities were not to be thought of because of the girl herself. Who she was, what her strange and apparently criminal entanglements were, he

could not even guess, but last night in the Stalls she had said in so many words that any risk was preferable to contact with the police.

Keith's hurried stride slowed to a casual saunter. Ahead of him was a lane, abreast of him was a small Chinese tea shop. White letters painted on the window proclaimed the proprietor to be Kee Wong. The shop appeared to be closed for the night. Keith smiled queerly. He had never been in Kee Wong's. It was a very modest and unobtrusive little place—and so obviously a tea shop! One could see the tea chests themselves in the window. Perhaps there was another entrance!

But, other than it gave him his bearings, he was not interested in Kee Wong's to-night. Glancing about him to assure himself that he was not observed, and following the directions Bowery Sal had given Blackie, Keith turned into the lane. It proved to be scarcely more than a hundred yards in length, the two parallel streets which it connected being surprisingly close together, and, a minute or two later, Keith found himself in front of the house that was his objective.

It was a modest and unpretentious three-story brick house. Not a light showed from any window. Keith shrugged his shoulders a little grimly. Blackie and the Weasel were perhaps over-conservative in delaying their visit—even the house itself seemed to be already sound asleep! So did the immediate neighbourhood. There was not a soul in sight anywhere. He experienced a sudden and curious sense of isolation. From far away came the occasional sounds of night traffic: the jangle of a trolley bell, the rumble of a heavy truck—here there was no sound. The silence was bizarre! It might have been a street in the city of the dead for all the signs of life that were in evidence.

Keith mounted the three steps that led up from the sidewalk to the front door, rang the bell, and waited. There was no response. He rang again—still with the same result. Surely, even if asleep, some one would hear the bell! Suppose no one was in; suppose she was out somewhere? What then? What would he do? It was imperative that he saw her. For the third time, anxiously now, he rang the bell—and then, his finger still on the button, the door opened suddenly.

Involuntarily, Keith drew back a step. He had heard no sound from within, had heard no one approaching the door. Well, why should he? What was the matter with him? Was he trying to conjure up absurd fancies and set his nerves on edge? A Chinaman in a white blouse was standing there—the

house-servant, or cook, or something, probably. Also the man had on quilted slippers. No wonder he, Keith, had not heard the other approach the door.

“What you want?” inquired the Chinaman sleepily.

“Miss Marland—Miss Doris Marland lives here, doesn’t she?” asked Keith.

“Yes.” The Chinaman nodded, and parrot-fashion repeated his first question: “What you want?”

“I want to see her,” Keith answered.

The Chinaman shook his head.

“Mabbe she all same gone to bed. Mabbe you come back to-morrow, yes?”

“To-morrow won’t do,” said Keith earnestly. “I’m sorry to disturb her if she has gone to bed, but I’ve got to see her to-night—now.”

“Me not say she gone to bed,” corrected the Chinaman imperturbably; “me say mabbe. What your name?”

Keith hesitated. He had no name to give.

“Miss Marland doesn’t know my name,” he said. “It wouldn’t mean anything to her. You tell her that the man she was with last night wants to see her.”

It was the Chinaman’s turn to hesitate. Keith was conscious that he was being subjected to a close, and, he felt, unfavorable scrutiny.

“You wait,” instructed the Chinaman abruptly—and closed the door.

Keith waited.

At the expiration of three or four minutes, the Chinaman opened the door again.

“Missy say no can see,” he reported calmly. “Good-nlight!”

Keith put his foot against the door barely in time to prevent it being shut without further formality.

“Look here!” he said evenly. “Listen! You go back and tell her that I’ve got to see her, and that I’ll camp here and ring your bell until I do! Understand? Tell her something very serious has happened that she must be told about—that it is for her own sake. I’ve got to see her, and I’m going to see her, and I won’t go away! Is that plain enough?”

The Oriental appeared to be impressed.

“I tell,” he grunted. “You wait.”

Again Keith waited—before the closed door.

And then the door opened for the third time.

“You come.” The Chinaman motioned Keith forward. “Missy all same velly much angry, but you come.”

Keith entered, and, passing through a vestibule doorway, found himself standing in what was presumably a hall; but it was too dark to see anything. It seemed a very strange house indeed! There was no more sign of light from within than there had been from without. He heard the street door being shut, and then felt the Chinaman brush past him.

“No can see?” The Chinaman’s voice came out of the darkness. “Velly well! Wait little minute for turn on light.”

The light came on—a ceiling light so subdued by a thick, red globe that the effect, though soft, was almost murky, leaving the surroundings shadowy and somewhat indistinct. Keith could now see, however, that he was standing in what might be called a wide reception hall; that there were closed doors both to his right and left; and that the stairway was directly in front of him. The lower portion of the walls were panelled in dark wood—but the wood, he noticed, appeared to be sorely in need of paint. The general impression he received was one of genteel shabbiness—but perhaps that was due to the poor light.

“You come,” directed the Chinaman—and led the way up the stairs.

Keith followed. The carpet was of no rich and luxurious pile, rather it was of a cheap variety and worn almost to the point of being threadbare; but he was struck by the fact that his footsteps made not the slightest sound upon it—nor, now that he came to think of it, had he made any sound in coming across the hall. And *he* was not wearing quilted slippers like his conductor! It brought him a suggestion of eeriness. The explanation, however, was simple—merely that the carpet padding had been generously laid.

At the head of the landing, the Chinaman halted, and pointed to a door at the right.

“Missy in there,” he said. “You go in.”

Keith knocked. A girl's voice answered him—*her* voice. He smiled to himself, suddenly, whimsically. Curious that he should be able to recognize her voice even through a closed door—and be so sure of it! He hadn't heard it over-much last night—when he had heard it for the first time!

He opened the door, entered, closed the door, and remained standing with his back against it. Subdued lighting to an exaggerated degree, when there was any light at all, seemed to be an inherent feature in this strange house! The room was quite large, a sitting-room, none too well furnished, and a small reading lamp on the table, heavily shaded, supplied all the light there was. She had evidently been reading, for a book lay open on the table; but she had risen from her chair, and her hands now were tightly, nervously clenched at her sides. There was no trace of color in her face—it seemed to loom up out of the shadows so white that it was almost deathlike.

“Yes—it's you!” she said in a low, strained voice. “I don't know how you found out where I lived, but you should never have come here. And you should never have insisted on coming into this house when I tried to send you away. You don't know what you are doing.”

He stared at her for a moment without a word. He had been looking at her all day, hadn't he? Ever since last night! Those clear, hazel eyes! That glint of gold and copper in her hair! Only now she was here in reality before him—and somehow, it seemed, he could not look enough.

“There was nothing else that I could do!” He spoke now in sudden haste to hide a quick confusion that had fallen upon him. “I sent word to you that it was for your own sake. I assure you I wouldn't have acted as I have at this hour if I had had any choice in the matter. I don't want to alarm you unnecessarily; but I am afraid, indeed I know, that you are in danger to-night. Please tell me who is in the house here? What protection have you got?”

She was looking at him now—studying him from head to foot. He became acutely conscious that, far from inspiring confidence, Rookie Dyke looked like a thug, and a very possible source of danger himself; and, as it had been last night, so now for the second time in her presence he loathed—Rookie Dyke.

He flung out his hands in an impulsive gesture.

“Don't look at my clothes!” he begged. “They may not mean all they seem to imply!”

A faint smile for the first time relieved her tense and anxious expression.

“I formed that impression last night,” she said.

“Thank Heaven for that!” ejaculated Keith earnestly. “Now, who is in the house here?”

“Well,” she answered evasively, “in any case, there is Hin Wu, the Chinaman, who let you in.”

“Ah, yes—Hin Wu!” Keith’s brows drew together. “A curious sort of a beggar! I’ve been wondering about him; and, since it will perhaps be safer if everything I say is not overheard, I’m wondering where Hin Wu is now?”

He turned suddenly, opened the door, and slipped out into the hall. There was no Hin Wu in sight—but Keith’s eyes narrowed in a puzzled way. The light in the lower hall was out.

For a moment he stood staring around him in the darkness; then he returned to the room, and shut the door again.

“The light is out downstairs!” he exclaimed in a strained, almost brusque way.

“Yes,” she said briefly. “It would be.”

“Why do you say that—as though it were quite the ordinary thing?” Keith continued. “It seems to me to be at least a little strange.”

“I told you that you should not have come into this house!” Her voice, suddenly out of control, broke a little. “Oh, why did you?”

She was nervous, upset, and obviously laboring under great agitation. Keith, instantly remorseful for his brusqueness of a moment gone, crossed from the door to her side.

“You are in trouble,” he said gently. “And the worst of it is, I am afraid that I have come to warn you of more. But I have come to help you, too, if I may; in fact”—he tried to force a lighter note into his voice—“to help you whether you permit it or not. But time is a vital factor—I don’t know how much margin there is—and for your own sake I beg of you to believe in me and answer my questions. Never mind about the light for the moment, but tell me if Hin Wu is the only one in the house?”

Again Keith found her studying him; but there was something now in her eyes that had not been there before—a shy confusion almost it seemed; and, as her eyes suddenly sought the floor, a tinge of color crept into her cheeks.

“I don’t know,” she replied in a low tone.

“You mean,” suggested Keith, “that some of those who live here, some of the family perhaps, went out, and you do not know whether they have returned?”

She shook her head.

“No,” she said. “I mean that sometimes there are a great many people suddenly in the house, and that sometimes, very often, I may not know that they are here.”

“Boarders?”

Again she shook her head.

“I don’t understand!” exclaimed Keith helplessly.

“No,” she said. “And I can’t explain. I tell you again, you should not have come into this house. I—I tried to keep you from doing so. There are things here that I do not understand myself—a door that is always locked—a room that I have never been in.” Her hands were clasping and unclasping nervously—the cool composure of the night before was gone. “That is more than I should have told you—but it is to try to make you realize the seriousness of what I am saying. You must go at once—while you have the chance. And—and I think you still have that chance. Come”—she laid her hand anxiously on Keith’s arm—“we’ll try it anyway—I’ll go down to the door with you.”

Keith did not move.

“I don’t know what it is that you fear on my account; but whatever it may be, it is secondary to what I came here for,” he told her simply. “We’ll talk about my going when you’ve heard what I have to say, and when I know that you are safe.”

“No—go now!” she urged frantically. “I do not know what might happen to you. I am safe enough. It doesn’t matter about me.”

She was very close to him; she was pleading with her eyes; she was frightened, trembling—and the fear was obviously not for herself. And something came to Keith in that moment—a great yearning, an almost uncontrollable impulse to take her in his arms and comfort her and soothe her. Since last night, as he had told himself not a moment gone, she had scarcely been out of his thoughts; since last night she had lived again and again before him as though she were actually, physically present even as she was now—and in return since then, like a sorry, misunderstanding fool who saw no depths beyond the shallows, he had but flung gibes at himself, and

questioned who and what a woman might be whose life was linked with the criminal surroundings in which he had found her. But now, suddenly, without warning, the awakening had come—he *knew* now. He cared. Doubt of her because of her associations did not any longer exist. How could he care—without faith? What sort of faith was it that first waited for explanations!

“It matters a great deal!” he said hoarsely. “It matters everything. That is why I am here. That is why I will stay.”

She drew back from him—startled.

“Oh!” It was a queer little exclamation, scarcely above a whisper—and again her eyes searched him from head to foot.

Rookie Dyke! He looked down at himself—miserably. What had he said? Strange words from the mouth of a dissolute and abandoned character such as he appeared to be!

“It is not that,” she said, as though she had read his thoughts—and a wave of color flooded her cheeks. “It is because I am sure you are—you are”—she was stumbling wildly for her words now—“oh, I don’t know who you are, only that you are not what you pretend to be; and it is because of that fact that I am so afraid of what might happen to you here. I”—she sank down in the chair beside which she had been standing, and for a moment covered her face with her hands—“Oh, what am I to do?”

Keith was beside her in an instant.

“You are going to forget for a moment anything that might happen to me here,” he said quietly. “I do not pretend to know what you mean; but anything that is ordinarily connected with your surroundings here and which spells danger for me, may well be a source of protection for you—and I would ask for nothing better. But I would have to be sure of that now before I left you, or left this house even if I could. Listen! You remember what that man said last night when he was dying?—‘The mahogany box! The mahogany box! It was Tiger Claws!’ ”

“I remember,” she answered under her breath. “How could I forget it?”

“Had you ever heard of Tiger Claws before? Has the name any significance for you?”

“Yes,” she said. “I—I have heard it. I have heard stories too incredible to believe.”

“I am afraid they are all true,” said Keith gravely. “And I am afraid that Tiger Claws is coming here to-night. I am not certain that he will, though there is little doubt of it in my own mind; but I *am* certain that, independently of Tiger Claws, two others whom I know to be little less averse to—well, anything that serves their purpose, will break in here, or at least attempt to do so, between now and morning.”

“Why? What for?”

“There couldn’t be any reason but one, could there?” Keith answered. “For the mahogany box, of course.”

“But why here?” she asked, her eyes widening.

“Because,” said Keith bluntly, “they know you’ve got it.”

She sat straight up in her chair, staring at him in bewilderment.

“But I *haven’t* got it!” she gasped out. “I never heard of it in all my life until that man spoke of it last night.”

Keith’s eyes searched hers in sudden perplexity. He believed her; for all the rest of his life now, come what might, he would believe her—but he could not believe that he had heard aright.

“You haven’t got it? You never heard of it until last night?” he muttered in a dazed way.

“No! What is the mahogany box?”

“I don’t know,” he said dully. “I wish I did!” He pushed his hand jerkily across his eyes. “Look here, let us try to get to the bottom of this. A woman by the name of Bowery Sal came to you yesterday afternoon with a message from that man in the Stalls who subsequently died—is that right?”

“Yes,” she said.

“And her message was that ‘the man who gave you the mahogany box wanted to see you?’ ”

“*No!*” Doris Marland cried out sharply. “There was no such message as that! How could there be? I had never seen the man before. I had never heard of the mahogany box.”

“What was the message, then?”

She hesitated.

“The woman said a man who was dying in that room wanted to see me,” she replied finally. “That was all. There wasn’t anything more.”

“And you went because of that *room*—was that it?” Keith queried swiftly. “You had been there before; the tunnel and all——”

“You must not ask me those questions,” she interrupted in almost a frightened way. “I—I cannot answer them. There is nothing I can tell you. And—and I have not asked *you* for confidences. I have not even asked you how you came to be in the Stalls last night!”

Keith bit his lips. His heart prompted him to tell her everything, to hold nothing back; his judgment opposed it—but not through lack of faith in her. He did not know who her associates were, but he could only account for her actions of last night because of some hold they must have upon her—and for that reason he had ample cause to mistrust them. He did not know by what trick or turn of fate they might become involved. An unwitting disclosure, or one forced from her, small though the risk of it might be, was still too great, for he dared take none at all. It was safer for Rookie Dyke, safer for Canary Jim, safer even for her, that she should not know for the present, at any rate, the *raison d’être* for Rookie Dyke.

“No,” he said heavily, “that’s true. Each of us seems to have been forced, you for one reason, I for perhaps another, into masquerading in rôles that are abhorrent to us; and, possibly for the sake of others, possibly because of the stake for which we are playing, neither of us is free to speak. But this cannot last forever, and meanwhile, so far as I am concerned”—his voice caught slightly—“it would mean everything to me to know that you took me on trust and believed in me—as I do in you.”

“But you saw me in that room, and you know that I had a criminal knowledge of its secrets,” she said tremulously. “And I am here now in a house that, from what I have said and from your own suspicions, you know hides probably criminal secrets, too. How could you, how could any one, believe in me and trust me?”

Her hand was resting on the table—Keith covered it in sudden masterfulness with his own.

“Because you are you,” he said softly. “There is no other reason that could mean so much.”

Quick, unbidden tears were in her eyes. She turned away her head.

“You strange, strange man!” she whispered.

“Some day, when there is no more need for masquerade,” said Keith, his voice as low as hers, “I will try to teach you to use other adjectives than those.”

She shook her head.

“That day may never come,” she said, “for I—I—” She broke off abruptly, and suddenly her mood was changed. She was the girl of the Stalls again—cool, alert and self-possessed. She withdrew her hand with a tense little smile. “We are forgetting, aren’t we—I, that you should not be here at all; you, that you came to tell me I was in danger because of that mahogany box? Let us go back to that. I do not think there is anything to fear so far as I am concerned. I do not think those men, or any one else, could break into this house.”

Keith laughed grimly.

“Well, meanwhile, I am facing both the window and the door,” he said. “You don’t know them!”

“No,” she said, answering him literally. “How should I?”

“But they know you, and”—Keith’s eyes grew puzzled—“that’s what I can’t understand. Whitie—that’s the man who died in the Stalls last night—must have known your name and address, or he could never have sent Bowery Sal to you. And afterwards the mention of your name had a very convincing effect on the other two. Why? Can you account for that?”

“No,” she said. “And I can’t account for the fact that you know my name and address, either.”

Keith smiled wryly.

“You did your best to prevent it last night anyhow!” he said. “I heard Bowery Sal give it to those two men. There were four men altogether who were at one time in joint possession of the mahogany box. Whitie was one of them; and Whitie, it seemed, stole it from the others and hid in the Stalls. As you know, the other three found him there. Bowery Sal followed you and was in the hall outside—listening. I can account, I think, easily enough for the story she told. I believe I can see what she was up to now. She saw the chance to get a few miserable dollars, and, with the cunning of her kind, she lied glibly. She had heard the three men speak of the mahogany box when they were in the hall and trying to get into the room where we were, and she knew that was what they were after; so she twisted the message Whitie gave her for you to suit her own ends—and she got her money. They believed her. And they believe you’ve got the mahogany box, or at least know where it is.

Nothing would make them believe anything else—that’s why they are coming here to-night. But what I still can’t understand is the fact that Whitie must either have known you, or known something about you, in order to have sent Bowery Sal to you at all; and, as I’ve already said, the others seemed to know you, too. Can’t you explain that in any way?”

“No!” she said emphatically. “I cannot explain it in any way. As I told you, I never saw nor heard of this man Whitie until last night; and from what you say, I am sure I know nothing of the others, either. But you have spoken of two men coming here. Where is the third? Didn’t you say Whitie stole the mahogany box from three of them?”

“The third man is being double-crossed,” Keith answered with a tight smile. “Whitie’s mention of Tiger Claws scared him off; and the others, less impressionable, though they also believe it was Tiger Claws who killed Whitie, are taking advantage of their pal being in a funk—and blind drunk.”

“But Tiger Claws?” she asked quickly. “You said you thought he was coming here, too. What can *he* know of me?”

“I overheard the two men talking about their plans to-night,” Keith replied; “and I think—no, I’ll say I’m sure that Tiger Claws did, too. He was _____”

Keith’s sentence was never finished—he was leaping for the door. Over his shoulder he caught a glimpse of Doris Marland’s face—it had gone ashen white.

Some one in the hall below had screamed out in agony.

CHAPTER XII

The Door That Was Always Locked

KEITH'S automatic was in his hand as he reached the hall and ran for the head of the stairs. He could hear nothing—see nothing. There had been that one scream of terror and pain from somewhere below; after that—only silence.

He halted on the topmost stair, every muscle tense—listening. It seemed as though he had never known such blackness; it seemed as though he could almost feel it, as though it had actual texture like some curtained pall hung before him—perhaps it was because he had come only a fraction of a second ago from a lighted room, perhaps it was the contrast. He remembered the flashlight in his pocket that he had procured for himself that day, but he dared not use it now. Thanks to the mode of carpeting in vogue in this mysterious house he had made no sound himself, and the flashlight would not only discover his presence, but would serve as a target for whoever was below there.

He began to descend the stairs—but two steps down he halted again. A premonitory instinct? He did not know. He seemed to sense something moving toward him—and moving quickly. He braced himself as against an expected shock. Yes—*breathing!* He could hear low, rapid breathing, as a man might breathe who ran at speed.

And then the impact came.

Keith reeled from it, but maintained his balance. A snarl and an oath cut the silence—and Keith struck through the darkness, struck with his clubbed automatic, struck with every ounce of strength that was in him behind the blow. A grunt that mingled pain and fury answered him, and almost on the instant came the flash of a pistol shot, and the roar of the report was in Keith's ears.

Blindman's-buff on a staircase! Not a yard apart—and the shot had missed! Keith's face was set like stone. He fired in return, and hurled himself forward. His arms locked around the body of a man.

His own shot, too, had evidently missed, for it was no wounded antagonist now who met his attack in kind. The man fought with the rage of a maniac, and with the strength of one. This way and that they reeled, maintaining a precarious foothold on the stairs. And now, with their arms gripped like steel around each other, Keith's automatic hampered him as he sought for a waisthold to throw the other; but, equally, too, the other's weapon, he knew, kept one hand partially engaged. He was at least at no disadvantage there!

They crashed against the wall, and, rebounding from it, half fell across the stair rail. It sagged outward beneath their weight. There was the snap and creak of rending wood; and both, instinctively acting in concert to save themselves, lunged sideways and lost their footing.

They rolled over and over down the stairs, gaining momentum as they went. Keith felt his grip upon the other loosening. He heard Doris Marland cry out wildly from the landing above—he could not catch her words.

His grip was loosening, and try as he would he could not regain it. The stair treads, as he bumped and thudded from one to the other, seemed to be leagued against him! They struck the bottom—Keith undermost. The man wrenched himself free, and sprang to his feet.

Keith, with lightning-like rapidity, rolled to one side, fearing a shot. He gained his own feet swiftly and without sound on the padded carpet. A yard, two yards away? That stygian blackness lay between them again. He could not see the other.

For a moment there was utter silence, then Doris Marland's voice came once more from above.

“What is it? Oh, what is it?” she cried out almost incoherently.

He dared not answer her, and for a moment again the silence held. And then Keith heard a sound that was eloquent enough both of the man's whereabouts and his intentions. The inner, or vestibule door was being opened—the man was making for the street.

Keith, instantly on the run now, made for the door in turn—and, suddenly stumbling over some bulky object on the floor, pitched forward face downward, his automatic flying from his hand, the side of his head striking violently against something hard and unyielding. The blow dazed him for an instant, but he was conscious that at the moment he had fallen he had heard the outer door slam shut. He rose to his feet groggily. The man was gone. There was no use in attempting to follow the other; he, Keith,

could scarcely stand. He was dizzy; his head was going around like a top. He reached out with his hands aimlessly in blackness—and touched the half-open vestibule door. He told himself that was what his head had struck.

And then he remembered his flashlight again. He dragged it out of his pocket with difficulty, and switched it on.

Her voice was calling appealingly again from the landing above—but he did not look in her direction. His eyes were focused on the round, white spot of light made by the flashlight's ray as it met the floor.

“Don't come down!” he said hoarsely. “Wait!”

Hin Wu was lying there in a huddled heap. It was Hin Wu's body he had stumbled over. Body? No! The Chinaman wasn't dead; the man was showing signs of returning consciousness—but it was a sight that Doris Marland should be spared if possible. Hin Wu's neck was ugly red from a great knife gash that stretched down and disappeared beneath the collar of his blouse.

Hin Wu's lips moved; his eyes were wide with terror.

“Him whisper, ‘Tiger Claws,’ ” he gasped out.

Keith's own head was reeling from the blow he had received. His swirling brain caught up the words, “Tiger Claws, Tiger Claws,” and repeated them over and over in a hideous sort of sing-song fashion.

He steadied himself with a desperate effort. Brandy—or something! She would have to come down, have to see, after all. Hin Wu was perhaps too far gone for help of any kind, but——

Hin Wu's fingers were plucking weakly at Keith's arm.

“You fellow come see missy? Yes?”

“Yes,” said Keith.

“Tlake key then”—Hin Wu choked over his words—“but not let missy come down.”

Keith closed his eyes. Was he going to keel over himself? He was on the verge of nausea.

“What key?” he forced himself to say.

Hin Wu's hand struggled beneath his blouse, and produced a small key.

“Not first door—next door”—the man made a feeble gesture toward the right-hand side of the hall. “You turn key back—then front—then back. That make signal, then everything all right. But you not open door”—Hin Wu’s words were coming with greater effort than before—“you not go in. You velly sorry open door. You—you plomise? You velly sorry open door.”

Something was buzzing curiously around in Keith’s brain. Oh, yes! *She* had said something about a door that was always locked.

“I won’t open it,” he said. “I promise.”

“Quick, then!” urged Hin Wu faintly.

Keith took the key, lurched to his feet, and swept the ray of the flashlight around the hall. Where was the electric-light switch? Well, it didn’t matter! There was his automatic, though, lying there on the floor almost at his feet. He stooped dizzily, picked up the weapon, pocketed it, and began to make his way along the right-hand side of the hall.

Queer the way he stumbled! Queer how groggy he was! That must have been a nasty crack he had got. His head ached as though a thousand fiends were pounding upon it with a thousand hammers. Just the same, even if help were coming to Hin Wu through the door that was not to be opened, Hin Wu ought to have brandy—or something. It was beastly awful for Doris up there, too. He repeated her name over to himself. Doris! It was very natural to say Doris. She just seemed to be Doris. Always had! Yes, but the brandy for Hin Wu—and, besides, he couldn’t leave her in suspense. She must be near mad with it already.

“Doris!” he called. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” she answered instantly. “This is terrible! What has happened?”

“Hin Wu has been hurt,” said Keith, and, conscious that he was speaking thickly, strove to control his voice. “Get some bandages together—and some brandy. I’ll be up there for them in a minute.”

“Yes—but you?” she replied anxiously. “Your voice sounds strangely. Those shots on the stairs! Are you hurt, too?”

“No; I’m all right,” he said—and caught at the wall for support.

He went on again, the flashlight throwing a jerky, wavering ray ahead of him. “Not first door—next door,” Hin Wu had said. He had passed one door, and now he had come to another. He halted. This must be the one.

He leaned for an instant against the jamb. That sense of nausea and giddiness was worse than ever. Where was the keyhole? Oh, yes—there it was. He inserted the key. What was he to do? Some kind of a signal. Weird place, this! Electrical connection, probably. “Turn key back first.” He turned the key. That unlocked the door of course. Curious there wasn’t any door handle! Just the lock—a spring-lock. Now front—that locked the door again. Now back—the door was unlocked once more. But he wasn’t to go in. He had promised Hin Wu he wouldn’t go in. Three turns—some sort of a signal. He’d go back now, and get those bandages and the brandy—they’d be needed no matter who answered Hin Wu’s signal.

But he still leaned against the door-jamb. He could do with a little brandy himself! It ought to pass away in a moment or so—this dizziness. It was the headache, of course—made him wobbly—shaky at the knees. He ran his hand jerkily over the back of his head. Strange, he wasn’t cut anywhere, or bleeding! There was just a sizeable swelling there behind his left ear. He must be making a lot of fuss over nothing, and——

Unconsciously he had sagged against the door, and, as his weight pushed it open and it swung suddenly inward, he partly lost his balance and lunged forward across the threshold. He was conscious of a whirring sound above his head; and, as instantaneously as the opening and closing of the shutter of a camera registers an impression on the negative, so a scene was registered on his brain—a wall panel wide open . . . its interior lighted . . . men emerging from it in haste. And then that whirring thing had struck him—and his senses were blotted out.

When he returned to consciousness he was lying on his back—in blackness. He felt out with his hands. Carpet! He was lying on the floor of some room, then—as though he had been unceremoniously flung there and callously left to look after his hurts as best he could. Not the room whose door he had unintentionally opened—that was most unlikely. He would hardly have been left in *that* room with its secrets!

He sat up; and then for the second time that night he felt with his hand over the back of his head. He wasn’t dizzy any more. Perhaps the bleeding accounted for that—his hair was wet and sticky with something that couldn’t be anything else but blood. That second blow had left him with entirely different sensations. His head was sore to the slightest touch of his fingers, insupportably sore; and it still ached, if anything more brutally than ever, but not in that blinding, nauseating way. He could stand this—this was merely pain. It didn’t leave him in that half-stunned, half-dazed condition which he had been in before.

His mind began to pick up the broken threads of events and weave them together.

Tiger Claws! It was Tiger Claws he had fought with there on the stairs. Tiger Claws—who, in Blackie’s words, “always killed in the dark, and whispered his name into the ear of whoever he was bumping off.” There was something horrible, something fiendish, something outside the *human* in that. He should have known that it was Tiger Claws even when he was fighting with the other on the stairs, for he had been expecting Tiger Claws to come here. Would it have made any difference? He had put all he had into that fight, hadn’t he? Tiger Claws would have got away just the same.

Hin Wu had been the victim this time. He wondered if Hin Wu had died?

And then that door with its infernal and murderous attachment! That wasn’t Hin Wu’s fault—Hin Wu had warned him. It wasn’t his own fault either that he had lurched unsteadily against it. A nice lot here in this house! Not so much to choose, after all, between them and Tiger Claws! It seemed to be wholly a question of luck whether that thing, whatever it was, that whirred downward when the door was opened, merely rendered the unwary or inquisitive intruder instantly unconscious or killed him outright—a matter apparently of complete indifference to them!

Where did the passage behind the wall panel in that room lead to? What was the secret that it hid—that this whole house hid?

What were they going to do with him? What sort of a room was this that he was in? He might just as well have a look. He felt in his pocket for his flashlight. It was gone. So was his automatic and his mask. So was everything else that his pockets had contained—but they had contained nothing that mattered very much. A few dollars, and——

How long had he been here?

Fear gripped at him suddenly, and, with a low cry, he rose to his feet. He had expected Tiger Claws—and Tiger Claws had come. But he had expected Blackie and the Weasel, too! What of them? What of Doris? How long had he lain here unconscious? Ten minutes—or two hours? He did not know. He had no means of knowing. Had Blackie and the Weasel come in the meantime? Where were those men who had entered through the secret passage? Had she told them what he had said—told them of his warning to her? Or was Doris *alone* upstairs as she had been before?

Was there any way out of this room?

He began to grope about in the darkness—they had taken his matches as they had taken everything else. He stumbled over a chair, then a table, and finally came up against the wall. Feeling his way along the wall, he came to a door. It was locked. Making a complete circuit of the room then by following the wall, he encountered no window, and came back to the door.

And, standing there, his fears for her safety became suddenly accentuated, and he began to pound frantically upon the door panels with his fists. Dully, muffled, from somewhere in the house he had caught the unmistakable sounds of revolver shots. Doris! Was it Blackie, was it the Weasel, who had fired those shots?

He beat upon the panels until his fists were raw; and shouted until his voice grew hoarse and became no more than a croaking sound echoing around the room. And then suddenly the door was flung open, and in the hallway without, a hallway that was lighted now, he saw three men, an ugly looking trio, standing in front of him, and found himself staring into the muzzle of a revolver.

“We heard you!” snapped the man with the revolver. “You seem to have come around at just about the right time. You’re wanted! Step out here into the hall!”

Keith obeyed—besides being unarmed, he was in no condition to offer resistance; and what did it matter if his hands were being tied now behind his back by the other two! He was in their power anyhow. It was Doris who mattered!

“Look here,” he jerked out desperately, “tying me up doesn’t make much difference, or what you do to me afterwards either—but those shots I heard! I want to know if Miss——”

“Close your map!” the spokesman broke in with a snarl. “You’ll find out all you’re supposed to know maybe sooner than you’ll like it! You come along with us!”

They were in one of the upper halls, Keith saw, though he could not tell whether it was that of the second or third floor. Obviously then, he had been carried upstairs from that room with the secret panel off the reception hall. It was useless asking any——

His captors pushed him roughly forward. It was not far to go—merely across the hall. Here another door was opened; he was thrust forcibly over the threshold, and the door was closed behind him.

He felt the color ebb and flow from his face. He was startled, shocked out of all composure. A man in immaculate evening dress, whose hair was sprinkled with white, and the upper portion of whose face was covered by a mask, sat calmly smoking in an arm-chair—and a few feet away, bleeding from a wound in his head, muttering in delirium, Blackie lay sprawled upon the floor.

CHAPTER XIII

The Man In Evening Clothes

“YOU recognize, I see,” said the man in evening clothes unemotionally, “that casualty there on the floor.”

Keith did not answer for a moment. His first reaction at sight of Blackie lying there was one of relief; it meant that Blackie and the Weasel had failed—it meant that Doris was safe. His second reaction was curiously different. Blackie was obviously very seriously wounded, was, in fact, apparently very near the end. This was the second one of the four he had seen in this condition. He had seen Whitie die—and now Blackie! Retribution? Possibly! He did not know. Vengeance seemed somehow out of place; the nearness of death seemed to mellow the passions. Here was one, the second one, of Allan’s murderers. Earlier that night when the man was in health and strength, he, Keith, would willingly have gone to death grips with Blackie, and in fury would have killed the other with his own hands if he could—now he knew almost pity. They had done nothing for Blackie, made no attempt to bind the wound or stop the flow of blood—Blackie simply lay there, perhaps where he had fallen, not even semi-conscious, gasping stertorously for his breath, occasionally muttering broken and wandering words.

“Are you going to do nothing for him?” Keith burst out. “You can’t leave him there like that! He’s dying!”

“So I perceive,” said the man in evening clothes indifferently. “And dying rather unpleasantly, somewhat incoherently, as it were—which makes me regret the more that his companion unfortunately escaped.”

“But this is inhuman!” Keith protested violently.

“We are not here to discuss ethics—nor to alleviate suffering,” said the other coldly. “And I would suggest that you particularly bear that latter fact in mind—for your own sake. The only interest I could have in rendering him medical attention would be to restore lucidity. I have, however, had some experience professionally, and I know that it is too late for that; it would be but fleeting, transitory, at best—it is merely a matter of minutes.”

Keith stared at the other. The dark blue eyes behind the mask seemed to possess a *benignity* that in its mockery repelled and revolted—and chilled him.

“And does it afford you any added satisfaction to bring me here to watch the man die?” he demanded through tight lips.

“I cannot say—as yet,” replied the other complacently. “I am given to understand that you know something about this man. The incoherencies of a dying man are sometimes not only interesting but *instructive*—if one can follow them. They are frequently utterances that are based, if only fragmentarily, on crises in the patient’s life. I am going to ask you to pay very strict attention to what our friend there is saying. I can assure you that you will be closely questioned.”

Again Keith stared. The man in evening clothes was composedly lighting a fresh cigarette—but there was something in that composure that was more deadly than any threat. What was back of this? What did the man expect to learn? Something about the mahogany box? How much had Doris told?

“For your information”—the words came without inflexion from the occupant of the arm-chair—“I might say that our expiring friend has mentioned a mahogany box. And now I believe he is making some further remarks. I suggest that you devote your *entire* attention to him.”

A sudden possibility presented itself to Keith. He stepped abruptly to Blackie’s side. He, too, wanted to hear now all that Blackie might say. The Weasel, so this man in the mask had said, had escaped. The Magpie was out of the running to-night. He, Keith, did not know where either the Weasel or the Magpie lived, and with Blackie now as good as dead that top-floor tenement apartment offered very little prospect of picking up the trail again. The other two would shun it after to-night as they would shun a pest-house. But perhaps Blackie might say something about the Weasel or the Magpie that would give him a clue as to where they could be found—if he, Keith, ever got out of here himself to make use of it! The fingers of his fettered hands, interlacing, tightened over each other. He had not forgotten his own precarious position. That room below, this inimical figure in the arm-chair, all, everything that had transpired here, boded him no good. But that was for afterwards!

He looked down at Blackie. Yes, pity came now—even for such as Blackie. But he could do nothing. With his hands bound behind his back he could not even lift the man into a more comfortable position. Blackie’s lips

were moving, but he was not talking; sounds came but they were not words. No, he was wrong about that. He caught one word that sounded something like ‘orangi.’

That conveyed nothing.

There was a long period of hopeless incoherency, then a few scattered words:

“Weasel . . . Magpie”—Keith dropped suddenly on his knees, and bent over the other to hear the better—“Gawd, we’re done! . . . Rush ’em! . . .” The words trailed off again.

Once more there followed a period of incoherency; and then finally a few more words:

“Go on, Whitie! . . . Go on, I tell you! Shoot! . . . Look at ’em! . . . Shoot quick . . . Only chance . . . Only——”

There was complete silence now—not even incoherency.

The man in evening clothes spoke abruptly.

“I think,” he observed casually, “that the final moment has arrived.”

Blackie opened his eyes, and, as they fixed on Keith bending over him, a light of recognition dawned in them. His face became contorted. He tried vainly to raise a clenched hand.

“Sammy! Bowery Sal’s pal! Curse Bowery Sal!” he snarled—and died.

Keith turned around, his face hard set.

“Well?” he demanded through clenched teeth.

“Well?” echoed the masked figure, imperturbably.

“I haven’t the slightest idea what he was talking about,” said Keith tersely. “His words were utterly without significance so far as I am concerned.”

“Except the last,” corrected the other softly.

“Except the last—that is admitted,” Keith flung back shortly.

“Quite so!” murmured the other. “And we will discuss that—among other things—presently. But first, I will have our deceased friend here removed in order that his presence may not offend the sensibilities of Miss Marland”—he paused and smiled ironically—“I think you know Miss

Marland? Yes? Well, do not be impatient! I shall send for her at once. I have some things to say to her myself.”

Keith made no reply. He watched the other rise from his chair, cross the room and open the door. He heard the man speaking in low tones to some one outside in the hall. What sort of a cat-and-mouse game was this that was being played? He did not like the tones in which the other had spoken about Doris—they had been too smooth, too silky—too *sinister*. Why was Doris being brought in here? For no good—he was quite certain of that—and yet surely he had nothing to fear on her account at the hands of—— He checked his thoughts savagely—but he had already mentally formulated the words: *her own associates*. That wasn’t true in a moral sense at least! Whatever the reason might be for her presence here in this house, whatever——

The two men who had bound his wrists came into the room, picked Blackie up, and carried him out. Keith’s thoughts swung abruptly into another channel. How would they dispose of Blackie? They could hardly invite the police to take charge! Well, there was that secret passage! Where did that lead to?

The man in evening clothes had remained standing by the open door. He spoke now with a sudden sharpness in his voice:

“While we are waiting for Miss Marland, perhaps you can tell me who killed Hin Wu?”

So Hin Wu had died! Keith eyed the other steadily.

“Yes, I can tell you that!” he said curtly. “It was Tiger Claws.”

And then it seemed to Keith that there came a sudden darkening in the eyes behind the mask, but it was almost imperceptible at best, and, if there at all, was gone in an instant—and then the other was smiling superciliously.

“Ah, Tiger Claws!” The words came in an ugly murmur. “How convenient! We hear a great deal of Tiger Claws these days. Shall I say frankly—or have you perhaps already surmised it?—that I am quite curious about *you*. From the report I have heard of Miss Marland’s story, you were upstairs when Hin Wu was attacked, and I am therefore prepared to believe that you personally did not kill him. But I do *not* know who might have entered this house with you and have escaped with certain information in his possession which—I put it mildly—I would prefer that he did not have. How, may I ask, do you know that it was Tiger Claws?”

Keith experienced a sudden grim and savage sense of satisfaction. For all his outward show of *sang froid* the man was anxious and uneasy. And he,

Keith, could see why quite plainly. A second man might easily have seen into that room with the secret passage—and thereafter might easily have made his escape through the street door. And then, as suddenly as it had come, the sense of satisfaction passed. It merely brought home to Keith the fact that he stood in little less than a well-nigh desperate situation himself.

“Hin Wu said that it was Tiger Claws,” he answered; “that——”

“So Hin Wu spoke to you, did he?” interrupted the other icily. “Hin Wu was dead when he was found. And the key to that room—where did you get that?”

“From Hin Wu!” Keith’s own voice sharpened. “He gave it to me, and told me to turn it three times in the lock as a signal for help.”

“It is peculiar”—an unpleasant smile was flickering on the lips below the mask now—“very peculiar, that if he told you so much as that he did not warn you not to open the door!”

The man was baiting him—or attempting to do so. Keith’s temper rose.

“He did warn me,” he flashed back.

“Then it was very unfortunate for you,” observed the other ominously, “that you did not heed the warning, for——”

Keith did not catch the other’s final words. He was facing the open door; his inquisitor had his back to it. Doris Marland had come silently along the hall, and was standing there in the doorway now—and, as their eyes met, hers flashed a warning, and her finger was raised for an instant to her lips. And then she came forward into the room with scarcely a glance at him.

“You sent for me, I believe?” she said quietly to the man in the mask.

“Ah, yes—Miss Marland!” The man’s silky tones were in evidence again. He closed the door, and waved his hand toward a chair. “Will you sit down?”

Keith watched her as she took the proffered chair. Her face was pale, but she showed no signs of agitation—and yet that warning she had given him! She must know, where he only guessed, that there was danger here. She had given him glimpses earlier that night of her real self, her woman’s self; but it was that other side of her now she showed, that resourceful, self-reliant, dependable side in the face of crisis that had stood him in such good stead in the Stalls last night. Danger! Of whose danger was he thinking? If she intervened for him, it meant danger for *her*. He twisted suddenly at his bound wrists behind his back. Useless! He had tried that before, hadn’t he?

The man in evening clothes came back across the room, and, facing Keith, took up a position close to Doris Marland's chair.

"Is this the man," he asked her, "who, as I understand it, came to warn you that you would be the recipient of—er—unwelcome attentions to-night?"

"Yes," she said.

"You will correct me if I misquote you," he said blandly. "I only arrived a few minutes ago, and only have your story at second-hand. You passed on the warning after Hin Wu was killed?"

"Yes," she said again.

"And the objects of these visits, I am told you said, was a mahogany box. This is borne out by the fact that the man who was caught and has since died also mentioned—a mahogany box. What is this mahogany box?"

"I do not know," she answered.

"Strange!" He pointed his finger at Keith. "Let me ask you the same question."

"I have only the same answer to give," Keith replied. "I do not know."

"Stranger still!" The man was purring his words now. "And yet you came to warn Miss Marland about it! I am deeply interested in your—ignorance! I am also greatly intrigued by—the mahogany box. It must obviously be of extreme value in order to account for the frantic efforts that have been made to obtain it during the past few hours. You pretend that what was said by that man in here as he died had no significance for you. You pretend that you do not know what the mahogany box is yourself. But both you and that same man came here because of it. May I suggest that, feeble as my intelligence is, you insult it? Again I ask you, what is this mahogany box—and, *particularly*, where is it now?"

The man was in deadly earnest, there was no trifling here. From what Keith had seen in the house, from what he had seen of the other's inhuman callousness toward Blackie, a dying man, he understood that well enough; but it seemed that, even in the face of the peril which he sensed was closing in upon him, he could have laughed outright in mockery at the irony of the question. The mahogany box! *What* was it? *Where* was it?

"And I tell you again," he said, "that I do not know."

“And I do not believe you!” The eyes behind the mask were playing over Keith in steely menace now. “But perhaps there is another way to loosen your tongue. Perhaps, valuable as it undoubtedly is, I might offer you a satisfactory price for the secret. Perhaps I might *buy* it from you. You know too much; you have seen too much here—that signal—that door—the interior of a certain room. Am I making myself entirely plain? The consequences of that knowledge——”

The man had broken off abruptly in mid-sentence. Keith’s muscles seemed suddenly to become tense. He was listening to sounds that once before he had heard in the house that night. Pistol shots! And, as before, they reached him in the same faint, muffled way. But there were more of them now—almost like a fusillade.

And then there came a pounding upon the door.

“Quick!” a voice shouted. “We’re being raided! They’re at the back and front both! Run for the passage!”

“Trapped!” The man in the mask had lost his composure now; he was snarling furiously. “Are you at the bottom of this, too?” He stepped toward Keith, his hand reaching for his hip pocket. “Well, at least, I can spare the second it will take to prevent you from ever giving evidence on a witness stand, or of——”

Involuntarily, Keith had retreated a step. He stood stock-still now, breathing hard, helpless with his bound wrists to render any aid. It had happened so quickly that he had hardly realized what had taken place. Doris had sprung silently from her chair and had knocked the revolver to the floor as the man was drawing the weapon from his back pocket—and now she kicked it out of reach under a table across the room.

Came the sound of shots again from below—louder. Voices shouting!

For an instant the man hesitated; then, mouthing oaths, he rushed in panic haste to the door, wrenched it open, and disappeared down the hallway.

“Doris!” Keith’s soul was in his voice. If only his hands were free—but he could only call to her. “Doris!”

The reaction had set in—tears were filling her eyes.

“Yes, I—I know,” she said tremulously. “And I—I am so glad that you—you are safe. But, oh, now, what shall we do? The police! There is no trap-door here like last night!”

She had brought him back to the immediate reality. The police. What did it mean to her? What price would she have to pay for whatever cause it was that had forced her into this criminal environment? And for him? No—not for him—not for Rookie Dyke. There were only two of the four left now. If not as Rookie Dyke, then in some other way he would still find the remaining two. It was Canary Jim who was in jeopardy. Doris and Canary Jim who——

He was staring at the open doorway, staring at the leader of a grim-faced, armed little group of un-uniformed men who stood there. He blinked his eyes—they were playing him tricks. He saw the leader turn to his men as though giving them instructions, and then come forward into the room alone and shut the door behind him.

Bob Clinton! Not Canary Jim—Bob Clinton, with his left hand tucked in between two buttons of his coat to serve as an improvised sling as though his hand or arm had been hurt.

“Hello!” said Bob Clinton quietly to Keith. “This is a bit of a surprise! What are you doing here? No—perhaps you’d better not answer that now. Tied up, I see!” He searched in his pocket with his free hand, produced a knife, and handed it to Doris Marland. “Would you mind opening this?—I’m a bit out of commission myself. Thank you!” He cut the cords around Keith’s wrists. “Now then, I——”

“Wait!” Keith interrupted tensely—and pulled Clinton forcibly to one side. “I don’t understand this, but you’ve got to get *her* out of here. It’s a long story, but I tell you now that she——”

“You needn’t!” Bob Clinton smiled queerly. “I know her story, or most of it already. I am compounding no felony in letting her go; nor”—his smile broadened—“in letting you go, either. But I want to talk to her when I get through here. And for that purpose, and to avoid exposing her to the possible newspaper publicity that a visit to headquarters might entail, I was going to send her to my house with one of my men. Suppose you take her there instead?—it being understood, of course, that you know me only as Bob Clinton.”

Keith wiped clinging drops of perspiration from his forehead.

“Thank God!” he said in a low voice.

Clinton turned to Doris Marland.

“I propose sending you with this man, whom I can vouch for, to my house. I shall want to talk to you there. Afterwards you will be at liberty to

go where you please. Are you willing to do this?"

"Yes!" she said eagerly. "Oh, yes!"

Clinton produced a card from his pocket, and handed it to Keith.

"This is the address," he said. "My housekeeper will let you in. There are some things still to attend to here and I may stop to get my arm dressed, though it's not serious; but I shall not be long after you. And now, come along!"

Together they followed Bob Clinton out of the room, and down the stairs. At the front entrance a man stood on guard.

Clinton motioned the man to open the door.

"Let these two pass," he said.

CHAPTER XIV

Through The Night

CLINTON'S bachelor home proved to be on a street in the upper Fifties. A motherly old woman, the housekeeper, had admitted them; and, though she had been aroused from her bed, had insisted on bringing them coffee and light refreshments. And then, adding her persuasions to Keith's, had induced Doris to lie down on the couch in the cosy sitting-room—where the girl, through pure nervous exhaustion, though bravely asserting that she was quite all right, had almost immediately fallen asleep.

Since then, Keith, as he waited for Clinton, had sat crouched in a chair, smoking, his eyes scarcely ever leaving the couch. Tired and fagged out though he was himself, sleep, even in the semblance of a doze, was not for him. His head was brutally sore; his mind too active—his thoughts running a gamut that touched chords wide as the world apart; harsh chords, and those of great bitterness; soft chords, and those of great happiness. *She* was safe. Here! He was close to her. There had been something in her eyes to-night when he had brought her here—something that had shone through her weariness to make him glad. Queer thing, this always-beckoning hand that one called Life! Yesterday he had not known her!

Perhaps an hour had passed—and then, as he heard the front door open, Keith rose quietly from his chair, and, treading softly that he might not arouse the sleeper on the couch, went out into the hall. It was, as he had expected, Bob Clinton—but at sight of the other, Keith's brows puckered in sudden consternation. Clinton's face was white; his arm was bandaged from the elbow down, and was supported in a sling suspended from his neck.

"I say!" Keith exclaimed. "Your arm, old chap! I thought you said back there that it——"

"Not so good!" Clinton smiled wryly. "It's a bit angrier than I thought it was, but the bullet considerably skipped the bones. I've had worse! Remember the crock I was in Fiji? Gentle crowd of jackals, those to-night, eh? I am afraid Rookie Dyke will have to spare a few odd moments for surgical dressings down at our dump for the next few days."

Keith stared perplexedly.

“Rookie Dyke—the dump!” he echoed. “I don’t know the ins and outs of it, of course, but on the way up here the only thing I could see from what happened was that you’d cleaned up for keeps to-night. You don’t mean to say you’re going back to the tenement do you?”

“Before daylight,” said Clinton with a short laugh. “This is the one moment in his checkered career when Canary Jim cannot afford to fade out of the picture. There’ll be *some* noise in the papers to-morrow—a sort of massed band effect. Coincidences don’t go in the Bad Lands—and so Canary Jim doesn’t go either! Not till the tumult and the shouting have died away! Get me? And listen!” He touched his bandaged arm. “Here’s the story to account for this—and we’ll slip it first to Tony Larfino; that’ll be all that’s needed. I was trying to make a quiet little pinch to-night of some cash that I’d had my eye on lately, but I had bad luck. I could have plugged the cop that broke in on me, but all I got for my soft-heartedness was a bullet in my arm as I made my getaway. It doesn’t matter *where* the pinch was being made—that’s Canary Jim’s own business—it was dark, and the cop didn’t recognize him. All set?”

Keith nodded a little grimly.

“I’ll do my share,” he said.

“Good!” said Clinton. “Where’s Miss Marland?”

“She’s in there”—Keith motioned toward the room he had just left—“asleep on the couch.”

“Plucky kid, that!” commented Clinton. “She’s had a thick time of it lately. She’s what you’d call where you come from a little bit of all right.”

“I’ll go farther than that,” declared Keith impulsively—and, conscious that Clinton was suddenly observing him quizzically, felt the color rise in his face.

Clinton whistled low under his breath.

“Oh!” he grinned. “As bad as that, eh?”

“If you want to put it that way—yes!” Keith admitted frankly.

Clinton’s good hand closed on Keith’s shoulder with a hearty grip.

“Good boy! I’m glad! D’ye hear—I’m glad!”

“You’re a little previous,” said Keith hastily. “It’s—well, it’s rather one-sided so far.”

“I’m still in the cheering section,” laughed Clinton. “And now before we wake her, tell me how you came to be in that house to-night.”

“I’d rather hear your end of it,” suggested Keith. “You seem to know a lot more about Miss Marland than I do.”

Clinton shook his head.

“That’s all part of what I’ll have to say to her presently. There’s no use covering the same ground twice. Tell me your story.”

Keith told him—speaking rapidly, but omitting no detail from the time he had entered the Stalls on the previous night down to the present moment.

“Well, what do you think of it?” he asked as he brought his recital to an end. “What’s the answer, Bob?”

Clinton’s face was grave.

“I don’t know,” he said slowly. “There are some things I don’t understand—and some things I don’t like at all. The pieces don’t fit! We’ll go over it again by and by—to-morrow, say, down in the tenement. But now it’s Miss Marland’s turn. By the way, what did you tell her about me?”

“Only that you were an officer—which must have been fairly obvious to her anyway,” Keith answered; “and that you were an old friend of mine. And, as a matter of fact,” he added glumly, “all I’ve told her about myself is that I’m known as Rookie Dyke.”

Clinton chuckled suddenly.

“That must have been tough—for you!” he said—and led the way into the room. And then he coughed apologetically—and Doris Marland, with a start, sat upright on the couch. “Feeling better for that bit of rest, Miss Marland?” he asked courteously. “I’m sure you needed it!”

“Oh, yes—much, thank you,” she answered; and then, her eyes on Clinton’s bandaged arm: “But you——”

“Nothing more than a scratch,” Clinton interrupted lightly; and then, seriously: “It’s a ghastly hour, I know; but under the circumstances I don’t think that matters much to any one of us, does it? I have not only something that I must say to you; but I have heard Rookie’s story as well, and that alone appears to involve possible consequences for you both that are too grave to admit of anything but immediate consideration.”

Her hands were suddenly clasped tightly together in her lap.

“I—I want to hear what you have to say now,” she said in a low voice. “I know you said I would be free to go after you had talked to me, and it was good of you to let me leave that house without—without subjecting me—to let me leave it without any publicity—and Rookie here has been trying to reassure me ever since; but I am really under arrest, or at least under surveillance, am I not? I don’t see how it could be otherwise since—since I lived there.”

Clinton drew a chair toward the couch and motioned Keith to another.

“No, Miss Marland,” he answered, “neither one nor the other; and I am happy to say that I see no reason why you should ever appear in the case even as a witness.” He hesitated for an instant—and then in a troubled way leaned toward her. “I have been trying to find words to express less bluntly what I have to say. It will be a shock to you, I know. Your uncle, Herman Keloe, died four days ago and was quietly buried here in New York.”

She stared at him wide-eyed.

“My uncle—dead—buried!” She repeated the words as though she hardly understood. “And I was never told!”

“I know,” said Clinton gravely. “But there was no heartlessness intended, and—you will forgive me if I am very blunt now—it was not as though it were one for whom you could have any deep affection. Had there been any other way, it would have been taken. But there was no other way. There was too much at stake. He had become involved with a band of men who were a menace to society—and with one man in particular whose criminal activities were nation wide.”

“I do not understand,” she said faintly.

“No, I know you don’t,” Clinton nodded; “but you knew, of course, that Herman Keloe was a drug addict, and in the last stages of the disease.”

“Yes,” she said; “I knew that.”

Keith spoke suddenly, impulsively.

“Do you mind my hearing this?” he asked gently.

“No! Oh, no! I—I want you to!” she said almost eagerly. “Please go on, Mr. Clinton.”

“Keloe was picked up on the street in a dying condition, and taken in an ambulance to the hospital,” Clinton resumed soberly. “It was primarily a

heart attack, though no doubt a recent and apparently prolonged indulgence in the vice that was his weakness had a great deal to do with its fatal termination. He realized that he was dying and made a confession. This is his story—which has since been investigated and authenticated:

“He was a man of moderate means, and lived more or less the life of a recluse in the house which he owned, and in which he had spent many years. His wife—your mother’s sister, Miss Marland—died, as you know, last month. He had quite a wide reputation as a scientist, a man immersed in his books, a biologist, to be exact, on which subject from time to time he contributed articles to the leading journals interested in that field. In the eyes of the world he was a citizen above suspicion or reproach—and entitled to live his life shut up with his books, and as eccentrically as he chose.

“Some years ago he began to take drugs. He said he began innocently enough—to relieve brain fag. It grew on him. He took more and more—and more. It became a habit. He depended on it. He could not do without it. And then suddenly one day, without warning, he found himself unable to procure any more. His supply was stopped. Money would not buy it. Tears and pleadings would not buy it. As though proscribed, as indeed he was, he was even turned away from every hop-dive when he sought to get it there.”

Clinton paused, his eyes sombre, staring at the floor.

“I wonder if either of you realize what that means?” he went on. “The torment of a drug addict unable to satisfy his cravings! I have seen it—I hope to God you never may! For just a grain of it, one would steal, or murder, or commit any crime—*eagerly!* The Gray Death, they call it! He was allowed to go almost to the verge—and then a proposition was made to him by a man he had never seen before. He was to continue to live on in his house as he had always lived, but certain alterations were to be made in the lower rear room, and a certain door was always to be kept locked—he could call it a biological laboratory, if he liked; also, as some of the upper rooms would at times be secretly used at night, the hall and stair carpets were to be double padded. His wife, then a bed-ridden invalid, was to be kept in ignorance of what was going on, and should her suspicions be aroused that things were happening in the house which she could not understand, he was to see to it, at any cost, by threat or warning, or by whatever means he chose to employ, that no breath of her suspicions ever reached an outside ear. Finally the servant he employed was to be discharged—to be replaced by one that would be chosen for him. In return for this, all the drug he wanted would be his reward. He accepted. He would have accepted anything—gone to any length. Nothing mattered save only that his craving should be

appeased. He was like a ravening beast. The man had a package of ‘snow’ in his hand.”

“My word!” said Keith under his breath. “I’ve heard of such things, but I never believed them before! And then?”

“And then?” Clinton shrugged his shoulders. “Well, Keloe’s home became the depository, the clearing-house for what we believe to be the biggest drug ring in the East. It is full of the stuff, packed with it. That opening behind the panel that you saw, Rookie, leads under the yard into a sub-cellar beneath Kee Wong’s. We had been suspicious of Kee Wong for a long while, and I had been in there many times—but never found anything! How would I? It was not there! We were never suspicious of Herman Keloe. How could we be? I might as well admit it—they had been too clever for us in the selection of their cat’s-paw. What possible connection could there be between an almost world-acknowledged savant and the lees and dregs of criminality!

“But”—there was a grim note in Clinton’s voice now—“we did know the one particular man I referred to a moment ago, the one man above all others that we wanted to get; but we did not know him *legally*. You know what I mean? We had no proof—not enough evidence. He was here, there, everywhere—apparently a man of wealth and leisure, and well known socially, especially in club life, in a dozen cities between Maine and California. He was originally a doctor, though he has not practised for many years, and——”

Keith straightened up with a jerk in his chair.

“Well, unless I’m badly mistaken, he gave a professional opinion to-night!” he exclaimed sharply. “A doctor, eh? I think I’m beginning to see! It was that man who had me roped up, wasn’t it?—the man in the mask and the evening clothes?”

“Yes,” said Clinton. “And, if you’re interested in his name, it’s Doctor Volner.”

“I hope you got him!” gritted Keith fervently.

“We did!” Clinton’s jaws came together with a snap. “He ran into our arms as he came out of that room. But just a moment. We believed Volner to be the most important figure in the dope game in this country. Wherever drugs were being regularly smuggled in any quantity, there Volner was to be found from time to time—in a social capacity. The Mexican border,

California, the eastern ports—everywhere. But we could never get the goods on him.

“Now, Keloe told us in his confession that Volner came often to his house through that secret passage—and we knew at last that we were near the end of the chase. But we had to be careful. We still had to get Volner into the trap. If we could catch him in that house with his secret passage and his drugs, we had an open and shut case against him. But how to do it? We did not dare to make public Herman Keloe’s death, and have Keloe’s body brought back to the house. Anything might have happened. Those in Kee Wong’s place might have got the wind up—become afraid that that door might be opened. They might even have destroyed the passage from their side. They might, on the other hand, have done nothing. But we were taking no chances. Keloe had said that at the time he was seized with that heart attack on the street, he had been on his way out of town for a few days. Therefore his absence during that period would cause neither disquiet nor alarm, nor arouse any suspicions. But Volner, though we knew where he was, was not in New York. The problem was to get him back before inquiries began to be made about Keloe.

“I am not going into the details of how that was accomplished—a lot of it was stool-pigeon work. He returned this evening. He spent the first part of the night playing cards in a rather exclusive uptown club, and then, as we knew he would, he went to Kee Wong’s and from there through the secret passage into the house. This was after Blackie had been shot, of course, so we didn’t know anything about that at the time. We were concentrating only on Volner and his movements. You know the rest; and I think you will understand now, Miss Marland, why you heard nothing of Herman Keloe’s death until to-night.”

Her hands were tightly pressed against her temples.

“That house!” she whispered.

There was silence for a moment, and then Clinton spoke again.

“If you feel up to it, Miss Marland,” he said, and there was all of consideration and kindness in his voice, “I would like to hear your side of the story. You may be as brief as you like, and I wouldn’t suggest it at all to-night, except that I shall be away to-morrow for several days. As I have told you, Herman Keloe has wholly exonerated you, and kept insisting over and over again that you did not even know what was going on in the house, and that you came there only to nurse your aunt in the last stages of her illness; in fact, I believe it was really on your account, and for your sake that he

made a confession at all. And as matters stand now, I want to repeat that I am confident you need never appear publicly in the case at all; but to insure ourselves against the possibility of any other line of action being taken, I am anxious to make a full and *confidential* report concerning you.”

“I understand,” she said readily. “I am only too glad to tell you everything. I had just finished my last year at college, and was staying with a school friend, when I received a letter from my aunt saying she was very ill, and begging me to go to her. I had not seen her for many years, for my home was in San Francisco and hers was in New York; but she was the only blood relation I had left in the world, and I had been very fond of her as a child. And, besides, there seemed to be something so pathetic and anxious in the way she pleaded with me in her letter that I could not have thought of refusing.

“I was a little less than two months altogether in that house—a month before my aunt died, and during the month that has passed since then. I—I think her terror of unseen things helped to hasten her end. Again and again she made me promise that I would never disclose anything I might see, or hear, or think, because *they* would kill my uncle if I did, and would kill me also. My uncle warned me much to the same effect. I did not know until just now who ‘they’ were—which explains a great deal that I did not understand before. It was imperative that some one should be with my aunt, and I suppose the reason I was allowed to come was because, apart from threats, my loyalty to my relations would keep me silent in case I found out anything.”

Clinton nodded in agreement.

“Yes,” he said. “Exactly! Please go on, Miss Marland.”

“I am not going to attempt to describe my life there,” she continued; “but I am glad I went, for I think that, in spite of my own fears, which soon became as acute as hers, I was a comfort to my aunt—and, strange as it may sound, I am glad I went for my uncle’s sake too. That is why I remained during the last month. I soon discovered that he was a drug addict—and between his heart affection and the drug there were times when he needed even more attention than my aunt did.

“I do not know how much longer I could have stayed—how much longer I could have borne it. I knew that there was something wrong about the house; a door, for instance, that I was never permitted to approach—and many times, though I never saw any of them, I *knew* there were strangers in the house who had come there in some mysterious way. My fears became

sometimes almost unbearable, but it seemed inhuman to leave my uncle after my aunt died. He had treated me with the utmost kindness and consideration from the first, and his condition was steadily becoming worse and worse. Anyway, I stayed.

“There is just one other thing I want to say; an explanation that”—she smiled seriously at Keith—“I feel I owe to you. I mean my visit to the Stalls last night, and how I knew about that passage to the lane. One evening about four weeks ago—I cannot recall the exact date, but it was just a day or so after my aunt died—I heard the door bell ring. My uncle was ill in bed with one of those attacks, and—and that other thing. As the bell kept on ringing and Hin Wu—the Chinese house servant, Mr. Clinton—did not answer, I went to the door myself. It was a telegram for my uncle. I took it up to him. He read it, and became, in his condition, dangerously excited. He frightened me. He told me to get him a pencil, some paper and an envelope, and then tell Hin Wu he was to go out on a message immediately. I gave him the writing material, and then went to look for Hin Wu. But I could not find Hin Wu. The man had obviously gone out. When I returned to my uncle the telegram had been torn into little shreds, the pieces scattered on the floor beside the bed, and my uncle held a sealed envelope in his hand. When I told him that I could not find Hin Wu he became more excited than ever. ‘But this cannot wait! This cannot wait!’ he cried out wildly. ‘My God, what shall I do?’

“He was working himself into a frenzy. I would have done anything to quiet him. I offered to go. He stared at me for an instant strangely, then he shouted out eagerly: ‘Yes, yes! Why not? I will give you the address. This is for a man called Old Cully. He will be there, and will give you a written answer. You will not have to do anything else—just go there and come back as quickly as you can!’

“He told me how to find the Stalls and where Old Cully’s room was. I do not know what was in my uncle’s message, nor what Old Cully’s answer was. It was a horrible place, and Old Cully was a wretched looking creature, and I was terrified. I became more terrified when, as Old Cully was writing his reply, I heard a number of men come along the hall, laughing and shouting drunkenly, and begin to bang upon the door, though I knew Old Cully had bolted it when I had entered and that they couldn’t get in unless he let them. He screeched out at them to make less noise, and to wait a minute. Then he said to me: ‘You’re scared, eh? Well, you won’t be seen. I know who you are, and all about you. We can’t afford to have you spotted in here with me—and I guess you know how to keep your mouth shut, or else, after

being sized up for a month, you wouldn't be as *healthy* as you are to-night!' And that is how I came to know about the trap-door, and the way out into the lane. He let me out that way. And as for last night, I have no doubt but that I should have gone there in response to a message from a dying man anyway; but, my uncle being away, what was uppermost in my mind was that it must all be in connection with what had caused him so much anxiety before, and that there might be something I could do to help him. I did not know until this morning, when I read the newspaper account of what had happened in the Stalls last night, that Old Cully, the man I thought had sent the message, had died since I went there on the first occasion."

"Bravo!" Keith cried out buoyantly. "That clears the decks, eh, Bob? Clean slate! Say it! Say it!"

"Oh, yes—quite!" Clinton laughed. "Though I had already said it before Miss Marland began! But"—his voice sobered—"we must remember that there is another side to to-night in which Miss Marland is involved, and we must decide what she is to do."

"By Jove—yes!" Keith became suddenly sober too. "You mean in connection with the mahogany box?"

"Yes," said Clinton; "and I must confess I am not a little anxious about her on that account. Frankly, I do not understand it. Rookie tells me that you know nothing about the mahogany box, Miss Marland; in fact, that you had never heard of it until to-night—and yet those men who are after it became, at the mention of your name, more firmly convinced than ever that it was in your possession. That strikes me as the strangest and most pertinent fact in the whole affair. If we could account for that, I think we could account for everything, so far as you are concerned. Please tell me something in an intimate way about yourself and your life."

She shook her head gravely.

"I am afraid I have nothing to tell," she said earnestly; "certainly nothing that could in any way have anything to do with a mahogany box."

"Tell me just the same," Clinton urged. "Tell me about your home and the people you are most closely associated with."

"My home?" She shook her head again. "I can hardly say that I have had any home except college for the last four years. You see, my mother died a number of years ago. Then father and I were alone together. Then four years ago, just as I was entering college, father, who was an engineer, accepted a commission in India for some extensive irrigation work. He didn't want me

to go out there; and so, as he expected to be away for three or four years, it was decided that I should take my college course, live at the college, spend my vacations in any moderate way I wished, and that we would close our little home. And that is just what we did—and that was the way I was living when I received that letter from my aunt here in New York.”

“I see,” said Clinton. “Then, I take it, since you said your aunt was the only blood relation you had left in the world, that your father died in India?”

She turned her head sharply away.

“My father was on his way home about seven months ago,” she said in a low voice, “and—and he was lost at sea—at least the *Orangi*, the ship he sailed on from Singapore, was never heard of again, and——”

She was still speaking—Keith was conscious of that, but he was listening to another voice now. He was no longer in Clinton’s sitting-room. He was in that room with Blackie and the man in evening clothes. And it was Blackie’s voice he heard again—only Blackie’s voice wasn’t faint now. It was thudding like a succession of hammer blows beating at his ear-drums. Just one word out of the dying man’s incoherencies. Over and over again. “Orangi . . . orangi . . . orangi . . . orangi . . .”

“What did you say the name of that ship was?” he burst out hoarsely.

She broke off in what she was saying to stare at him in a startled and amazed way.

“The *Orangi*,” she said.

“Yes, yes!” he cried excitedly. “That’s it! I see it now! They were all on the *Orangi*! That’s how they got on the island. Here, Bob—quick! Lend me your knife!”

Clinton fumbled mechanically in his pocket.

“What’s up? What is it?” he asked.

Keith snatched the knife and ripped open the lining of his coat. The one thing, because they had not found it, that they had left in his possession when they had emptied his pockets in that house to-night, was the page from the diary of the man who had been murdered on the island. His hand shook a little as he passed the piece of paper to Doris Marland.

“Look at that!” he said huskily. “Look at it carefully, and tell me if you ever saw the writing before?”

For an instant she studied the paper, then her face whitened and her eyes dimmed suddenly with tears.

“Dad!” Her voice was so low that it was barely audible. “I could never be mistaken. I would know it anywhere. The man who wrote this was my father.”

It was breaking day when, leaving Doris in the care of Clinton’s housekeeper, Rookie Dyke and Canary Jim returned to their rooms in the squalid tenement that housed them.

CHAPTER XV

The Chase

ANOTHER day—and the small hours of the morning again.

Keith, kneeling in the darkness on the fire-escape outside Blackie's window, tried the window cautiously. It was locked, of course—the police would scarcely have left it otherwise. His lips twisted in a grim smile. Well, he had come prepared for that contingency!

In his pockets now there reposed another automatic, and another flashlight and mask, to replace those that had been taken from him last night—and, in addition, a small steel “jimmy” provided for the present occasion. He took out the “jimmy,” and after a few minutes' work raised the window.

There was no one inside. He knew that quite well. Blackie was dead; and he, Keith, had taken the precaution to assure himself that the police, after searching the place and locking it up, had long since gone away. Hours ago, as a matter of fact. That afternoon!

He swung himself through the window and into the room. He was conscious, more than of anything else, of a sense of futility in what he was doing. Blackie had been found in the passage leading to Kee Wong's, pending, no doubt, the ultimate disposal of the body somewhere far removed from that neighbourhood; and Clinton, in view of his, Keith's, story, and before returning to the tenement to assume the guise of Canary Jim again, had telephoned his subordinates, identifying Blackie. These, in turn, had passed on the information to the police. The police had thoroughly searched Blackie's two rooms here; but had found neither the slightest clue as to the whereabouts of the Weasel or the Magpie, nor a thing to indicate where the other two had their quarters. He, Keith, was aware of this because that afternoon Clinton, as Canary Jim, in spite of the fact that his arm had shown signs of infection and that he should never have left the tenement at all, had gone out to a public telephone booth and had received a full report from his men who were in touch with the police activities.

Keith's flashlight played around the room. He was not fool enough to imagine that he was more acute than the police, that he was, as it were, a sort

of fictional super-sleuth who made the police look ridiculous by desecrating the obvious where, in their poor blindness, the police had seen nothing. Where they had searched and failed, he had no real expectation of finding anything himself. There was just the possibility that by chance or luck something might come of it. It was purely a case of desperation on his part—a sort of grasping at any straw. Again, the trail had been lost, and he had no more to guide him now in respect of the Weasel and the Magpie than he had had in the beginning. True, Rookie Dyke, as a *character*, had served him well; but the nights and days he had spent in hunting through the various dives had, in themselves, been barren of results in so far as bringing him face to face with any of the four men had been concerned, for each time that he had been in actual touch with any of them it had come about in quite an indirect way.

That was why he was here. He would begin all over again if there were no other way; Rookie Dyke would haunt the dives again just as tenaciously as ever if that were the only chance of success that offered—but, in spite of the search the police had already made, there *was* the possibility, however remote, that he might discover something tangible here to help him, something to point him directly on his road. It had been the only move he could see to make; and, though he was honest enough with himself to expect little from it, he was none the less determined to put it to the test.

He began his search—only to discover that the police had removed all of Blackie's personal effects. The flashlight wavered for a moment uncertainly in his hand. Perhaps he should have expected this, perhaps he should have known—but it left him now staring blankly around him. Was it worth while going on? There would be nothing left in the two rooms except the furniture, would there? What could he expect to find, say, amongst those old dishes piled up there on that shelf?

And then he shrugged his shoulders and began his search anew. He was here now, and, though it appeared to be more hopeless than ever, he would go through with it—even to these old dishes on the shelf!

And so he searched. He searched every inch of the two rooms. He overlooked nothing. And at the end of an hour of intensive effort, his search at an end, he stood by the open window preparatory to making his way out onto the fire-escape again. He had not found anything—or at least anything that was in a real sense either tangible or concrete.

He had not even kept the little he had found; nor had he found that little through any display of keen-sightedness on his part. If it had been worth

finding at all, then it was through pure and unadulterated luck that he had found it. He had nothing to flaunt in the eyes of the police. He had been down on his hands and knees under the bed. Some loose change had dropped out of his pocket—and the floor cracks were wide. A coin had rolled into one of these cracks and he had dug it out with his “jimmy”—and with the coin had come a broken chip.

Merely a gambling chip! That was all—except, of course, that he had recognized the chip. There was enough of it for that. It had a blue center and a broad white border studded with small red stars. Every gambling house had its own porcelain coinage. It had come from Sailor Lafitt’s place, sometimes known as the Lighthouse. He had dropped the chip back into the crack and had continued his search.

But he had kept on thinking about it, and he was still thinking about it now as he clambered out on the fire-escape and carefully closed the window behind him.

It was a very meager reward for his effort. In one sense, it meant nothing, changed nothing. Rookie Dyke was back again where he had begun—there was nothing left for him to do but take up the search once more in the dens, the speak-easies and the dives of the Bad Lands. At its best the broken chip could be taken only to indicate that Sailor Lafitt’s was one of Blackie’s stamping-grounds; and, if that fact were granted, it would be but fair to presume, a stamping-ground of the Weasel and the Magpie as well. On the other hand, the broken chip might never have belonged to Blackie at all. It might have reposed in that crack for many months—the somewhat sorry relic of some former tenant.

But that was putting the worst possible complexion upon it, and he could not afford to indulge in any such degree of pessimism as that! It was worth a trial anyhow. It cost nothing. If he were not in the Lighthouse, he would have to be in some other place where, certainly, his chances of success were no better. He must start somewhere. And, besides, he had never really devoted any particular attention to Sailor Lafitt’s gambling joint—not so much perhaps as it deserved. But there were so many places! He had been in there casually, and had spent half an hour at a time there on several occasions, but that was all.

He descended the fire-escape, and gained the street. He would spend the balance of to-night anyhow in Sailor Lafitt’s. Perhaps, who knew, and quite apart from the broken chip, luck would break for him!

He swung off at a brisk pace, heading deeper into the East Side. The Lighthouse was a misnomer. Far from being a beacon, and blazoning abroad its existence, it had sought out one of the darkest and dingiest of side streets, and had modestly hidden itself away therein.

And now, his objective decided upon, Keith's mind reverted to the happenings of the previous night. Doris, Clinton, the Weasel's escape, the mahogany box! There were so many things—so many conflicting and apparently contradictory elements. As Clinton had said, the pieces did not fit together.

Apart from such sleep as he had had, for it had been almost daylight when he had left Clinton's house, he had been trying all day to fit those pieces together. But they would not fit. He had discussed the problem with Clinton, gone over all the facts in their possession—and had got nowhere.

How, for instance, had Whitie got track of Doris? That Doris was the daughter of the man who had been murdered on the island and from whom the mahogany box had been taken would account for the four knowing her name, would account for the effect it had had on Blackie and the Weasel; but it did not account for Whitie's knowledge of the fact that she was not only living in that particular house, but that she was even in New York. She had been living in California when her father was murdered!

That was one piece that would not fit. Here was another—more than one!

No matter how Whitie had discovered where Doris was, *why* had he sent for her? He had not given her the mahogany box; she had never even heard of it. Bowery Sal, of course, had lied to suit her own ends; but she *had* taken a message from Whitie. Had Whitie sent for Doris with the *intention* of giving her the box—as a sort of dying act of restitution? Was that it? But if that were so it must have been in his possession when he sent Bowery Sal to Doris, and in the interval before Doris came—not a very long interval—the mahogany box had vanished. Who had taken it? Tiger Claws? How could that be? Why, if Tiger Claws already had it, should he have tried to reach Doris last night ahead of Blackie and the Weasel?

Keith's face hardened as he walked along. He could find no answer to these questions; and, with Clinton, did not like the situation. He was worried and anxious about Doris. Last night, she had passed on his warning to the men who had answered the signal indicated by Hin Wu, and they had lain in wait for Blackie and the Weasel. And then, just before Volner had arrived, Blackie and the Weasel—old hands at that sort of surreptitious game

obviously—had made an entry into the house. Blackie had been caught; but overeagerness on the part of the watchers, so Doris had gathered, had given the Weasel a chance to get away. They had fired at Blackie without waiting for the Weasel, who was following, to get actually into the house as his companion had done—with the result that the Weasel, then but in the act of climbing in through the rear window that had been the point of attack, had instantly dropped to the ground again, and had made his escape.

The point was that the Weasel *had* got away—and was certainly as anxious as ever to get his hands on the mahogany box; and certainly believed as firmly as ever that Doris either had it or knew where it was. Furthermore, with Blackie gone, the Weasel, instead of attempting to play a lone hand, was much more likely to explain speciously that it was due solely to the Magpie's own condition that he and Blackie had acted alone, and so enlist the Magpie in the search from now on. But whether he did this or not, the Weasel himself still remained in the field—and there was also Tiger Claws! They would leave nothing undone to find Doris!

Keith jerked nervously, anxiously at the brim of his battered slouch hat. It was the danger she was in, or would be in if her present whereabouts became known, that he was thinking of now. They had talked that all over last night, thrashed it out from every angle, and they had decided that temporarily, for the time being, she should remain at Clinton's house, but should keep close within doors.

It had seemed the safest and the wisest thing to do, and circumstances had lent themselves admirably to this arrangement. Clinton was going back to the tenement as Canary Jim, and Doris would have the house to herself with the housekeeper to look after her. A boarding house or an hotel was a risk. The only alternative had been to leave New York immediately. But she had no home of her own; she had nowhere to go unless it were to friends. It was not a question of money. Her father had left her quite comfortably off, she had explained; but, even between the closest friends, an unexpected visit was not always convenient. Would a few days make any difference? She much preferred to communicate, by wire at least, with the people she had been visiting when she had left California to come east.

Keith pursed his lips a little dubiously. California! In a few days she would be on her way back to California. And meanwhile, though she was here in the same city with him, he could not even see her. Rookie Dyke, the pal of Canary Jim alias Bob Clinton of the Secret Service, could not visit Clinton's house. But he could telephone her here—which he couldn't do if she were in California! He *had* telephoned during the day—more than once.

In fact—he grinned suddenly, and complacently to himself—the pay stations had reaped quite a harvest!

The grin vanished—his face was sober again, wistful. He did not want her to go. He did not think she wanted to go. Last night had brought them very close to each other. As she had told her story, so he had told his. Did she care—as he cared? They had seen so little of each other—yet how intimately their lives were linked together! Her father—his brother—that lonely island the width of the world away! He believed she cared—and thanked God for that belief.

In a few days she would be gone. And some day when his task here was finished, he, too, would go—to California. It was on the way, he hoped for both of them, to the far East—*his* home. The Weasel and the Magpie! He had an added incentive now to carry on to the grim end. Her father's death as well as Allan's lay at their doors.

Again Keith's emotions found vent in a sudden jerk at his hat brim. He did not want her to go, and yet he would feel easier in his mind when she had put the continent between herself and New York. Perhaps his anxiety was groundless—no doubt it was, but he could not wholly throw it off. She ought to be safe in Clinton's house. They had all agreed on that. There had been no publicity; the newspapers had not mentioned her for the simple reason that they were unaware there had been a woman in Keloe's house at all last night—and even Clinton's own men did not now know where Doris was. What likelihood was there, then, of the Weasel or Tiger Claws finding out what had become of her? Very little, it was true—but still he was uneasy.

That mahogany box! Curse the thing! If it were not for the mahogany box he would have nothing to fear on her account. What the exact nature of its contents were altered nothing, though, after last night, he thought he could make a fair guess at what the box contained. The work Doris' father had done in India had been for one of the small, independent native states. John Marland had been there almost four years. In that time he might have stumbled across one of those fabled stores of wealth for which India was famous and the secret thereof be in that box. That was one guess; but it was much more likely it contained something that was intrinsically of great value in itself—a lavish gift, say, bestowed both in friendship and reward, by the native ruler with whom the engineer had spent those years, for Doris had said that her father's letters made constant reference to the friendship that was ripening between himself and his royal employer, though he had never mentioned anything about either a mahogany box or a gift. They had speculated no further about it. In any case, whatever the box contained, it

was something valuable enough to have already been the cause of more murders than one. The Weasel and the Magpie, knowing what was in it, had been ready to sell their souls for it, and would certainly continue to do murder or anything else to recover it. And now Tiger Claws was in pursuit of it, too. That was perhaps the worst feature of it—the most to be feared. Tiger Claws, from his record, was a type of criminal far more dangerous than the Weasel or the Magpie—there seemed to be something almost uncanny in the way he outguessed even his own kind.

Yes, undeniably he was uneasy about Doris—and would be whether she were here in New York or on the other side of the world until these men were caught and an end put to them. The Weasel and the Magpie he, or the police, *would* get sooner or later—but Tiger Claws was another matter! No one had ever been able to describe Tiger Claws, and there was nothing, no single thing, to serve as a clue to the man's identity. Nothing! And yet he, Keith, had fought with this same Tiger Claws last night in Herman Keloe's house!

Keith turned the corner of the next street. He had almost arrived at his destination—halfway up the block was the Lighthouse. The Lighthouse—yes! Sailor Lafitt's! It brought his self-communion to an abrupt close. It was not Tiger Claws he was after to-night!

And—this was curious! Instinctively he slowed his pace. There was only one other pedestrian in sight at the moment—a man who was just a little way ahead, and who was walking in the same direction. The street was murky, and the figure ahead none too clearly outlined, but, as though through some strange subconscious prompting, this man had arrested his attention instantly.

He felt the blood begin to quicken in his veins. It couldn't be! By only the most amazing and unprecedented piece of luck could it be possible! The Magpie! Why the Magpie? Merely because he, Keith, had found a broken chip that had come from Sailor Lafitt's, and that this man was in the vicinity of Lafitt's place—and walked with his right hand hidden in his pocket? No, there was more than that! What was it Gur Singh had said? "Sahib, he walks always with little steps, and with his head bent downward as though he sought always for something upon the ground; and yet, sahib, if there be need, he can run with great swiftness like unto the swiftness of no other man that I have ever seen."

The man ahead was walking with little steps—and, as well as he, Keith, could tell in the darkness, with his head bent downward. The Magpie! The

Magpie! A grim, unholy joy took possession of Keith—and subsided. He wasn't sure. It *might* be the Magpie—that was as far as he dared allow himself to go. If the man would only take that right hand out of his pocket! If he could only see the other's face: "A thin face, sahib, and thin lips; and the hair is very black, and the eyes are of a color that is lighter but of which I know not the name," Gur Singh had said.

Keith drew suddenly into the protecting shadows of a doorway. The broken chip! He would have ample opportunity to see the other's face! The man had stopped at Sailor Lafitt's house, and was knocking at the door. He had only to wait until the other had gone in, and then, after a moment or two, go in himself. And if this were the Magpie—his optimism was getting out of hand again, wasn't it?—the Weasel might be in there, too!

But the man did not go in. He spoke for a moment to whoever it was—Sailor Lafitt's black-faced familiar, probably—who had opened the door; and then, turning away, walked on down the street again.

The man's right hand had never left his pocket. Keith stole across to the opposite side of the street, and, hugging the shadows of the buildings, took up the chase. If it were the Magpie, he was going to know it. He would settle the question one way or the other before he lost track of the man!

Block after block, turning now one corner and now another, Keith followed the other. He was not called upon to exercise any particular ingenuity, for the man never turned his head nor looked anywhere save, apparently, at the ground beneath his feet. He, Keith, had only to accommodate his pace to the other's, keeping a little in the rear, and always in the shadows of the houses on the opposite side of the street. Nor was there any crowd in which by ill chance he might lose sight of the man, for, at that hour, there was scarcely a soul about, and, except for a stray pedestrian now and then, the streets were empty.

And then suddenly, coming to a corner, Keith's quarry, for the first time, became apparently interested in his surroundings. He halted and peered in all directions around him. This did not appear to satisfy him entirely, and as though seeking an excuse to stand there while he still continued to look about him, he drew a cigarette from his pocket with his left hand, and, still with his left hand, struck a match.

Keith, crouched behind a tenement stoop, watched intently. He would, at least, get a glimpse of the man's face now. No—a breath of wind had extinguished the match.

And then a second match was lighted, and, to aid in shielding it from the wind as the flame was applied to the tip of the cigarette, the man's right hand came out of his pocket.

The Magpie!

A strange, cold, and, it seemed to Keith, an utterly inconsonant composure settled upon him. He made no movement. He kept his eyes rivetted upon the figure standing there across the street. There were no fingers on the right hand—only a thumb. There was no need to see the face. It was the Magpie.

Some inner voice began to scream that information in his ear—but the cold smile remained fixed upon his lips. Yes, it was the Magpie. He knew that. He knew what it meant. But he needed now a cool, quick brain—not the prod of passion. The Magpie was probably on his way home. Well, the Magpie would be permitted without hindrance to go there! There was still the Weasel! It was the same story over again that it had been with Blackie. Knowing Blackie's lodging, he, Keith, had counted on easily running down the other two. Only Blackie was dead—under circumstances that had made his rooms the last place in New York that his associates would ever go near again. But that sort of thing would not happen twice. Track the Magpie to his home where a close watch could be kept, and it was only a matter of hours before the Weasel would come to the Magpie, or the Magpie go to the Weasel, and they would both be caught.

Keith's eyes had never for an instant left the Magpie. And now, as though the man were fully satisfied that he was unobserved, Keith saw the other fling both the match and the cigarette into the gutter, then turn quickly and retrace his steps back along the street. Instantly Keith rose to follow—and instantly sank back into hiding again behind the tenement stoop.

The Magpie had not gone far—he had disappeared inside a house almost opposite Keith's place of concealment. For a moment this startled Keith; and then, as he stared across at the house that the Magpie had entered, he became conscious that there was something familiar about it. The next moment he recognized the house definitely—and experienced a keen sense of disappointment. The Magpie certainly did not live there. The chase was not over yet!

He had been too intent in his efforts to keep the Magpie in sight without being observed himself, to pay any attention to his surroundings, or even to the neighbourhood that he was in. He had not even noticed the house on his way along the street, although it was one of the few in which any light at all

was showing. But he knew now whose house it was, or, at least, who occupied the ground floor where that light showed dimly from behind a closely-drawn window shade.

Keith nodded grimly to himself. He knew quite a bit about that house. He had been in there himself. On one of the nights when Tony Larfino was “introducing” him in various resorts, the hand-organ grinder had paid a visit here—but not for the purpose of an introduction. Tony Larfino had been out of funds, and had called to replenish his exchequer by exchanging a certain piece of jewellery, questionably come by, for hard cash. The man who lived downstairs, in that small two-story house across the road, was one Jacob Shinler—as crooked an old “fence” and receiver of stolen goods as could be found, probably, anywhere on the continent!

Again Keith nodded to himself. He quite understood the Magpie’s caution now. One’s visit to Jacob Shinler was always a surreptitious matter—by reason of the nature of the business that was transacted there. Tony Larfino had been equally careful in entering the place! Shinler specialized in high grade gems, minus their setting, preferably first-water stones. He was said to have amassed a fortune, and, having never been caught, or, rather, having never been convicted, was looked upon by the fraternity as “safe.”

What had the Magpie gone in there to sell? Well, it didn’t matter! The proceeds of some scoundrelly piece of work undoubtedly. In any case, there was nothing to do but wait until the Magpie came out again.

Keith waited. The light burned on in the window. These were Shinler’s recognized business hours, but no other visitor entered the house.

Half an hour passed. Keith could picture the rascally old patriarch haggling and whining and wrangling over the bargain that was being driven, as had been the case with Tony Larfino—but the haggling seemed to be taking an unconscionably long time. Perhaps, though, it was his own impatience.

Still Keith waited. Another half hour passed. It was too long, altogether too long to be accounted for merely by Shinler’s propensity for haggling. What was it, then? What was keeping the Magpie?

Keith sucked in his breath sharply as a disturbing possibility occurred to him. Had the Magpie, after all, been aware that he was being followed—and had neatly given him, Keith, the *slip*? There was a back door to Shinler’s—as there was a back door to every other place!

Keith's jaws clamped suddenly together. Well, he would find out! If the Magpie were still there and they were still haggling, he could hear them by stealing in through the front door himself. And at the worst, even if he were seen, the Magpie would have no cause for suspicion—Rookie Dyke could have business, too, with Jacob Shinler!

There was no one in sight; no sound of approaching footsteps. Keith ran silently across the street. The front door, as witness the Magpie's entrance and as he knew from his own experience with Tony Larfino, was never locked during "business hours." He opened it quietly and stepped inside.

A draught of air blew in his face. A back door at the end of the hall was obviously open! He heard no voices. The door of the room whose lighted window was to be seen from the street, and which was Jacob Shinler's "office," was also open.

Something was lying on the floor in there—something that brought a clutching sensation at Keith's heart; something that grayed his face as he stepped into the room.

The safe was open—looted. And on the floor, close against the wall in a pool of blood lay Jacob Shinler. The man still clasped the stub of a pencil in his right hand, and there were some pencilled words scrawled on the wall plaster just above the baseboard. Keith bent down to examine them.

"Tiger Claws"—he deciphered the writing with difficulty—"whispered name——"

The words ended there—as the dying man's strength had obviously ended, too.

Keith's brain was whirling.

He turned from the room and went out into the street. He walked unmindful of his direction.

The Magpie, the man with the mutilated hand, was Tiger Claws!

CHAPTER XVI

By Word of Mouth

IT was just growing dark as Keith entered the tenement, and, thinking that Clinton might be asleep, tiptoed into the other's room.

"I'm not asleep," said Clinton. "Light the gas!"

Keith complied, and for a moment regarded the other in silence. Clinton's condition was not serious, but the infection in his arm had reached a stage where he, Keith, had insisted that a doctor be called in. Clinton had protested vigorously; but had finally consented, providing that it be a certain doctor who had attended him once before, and to whom he was already known as Canary Jim. The doctor had dressed Clinton's arm, promptly put him to bed, and had ordered him to remain there for the next three or four days.

"Yes—you look better than you did, Bob," Keith observed at last critically. "You were beastly white all day. I think that going out in the early hours when I got back this morning was about the last straw."

Clinton grunted.

"It had to be done, hadn't it? There was only one way to tip the police off about Tiger Claws." He made a sudden wry grimace. "Blast this arm of mine, anyway! Just as my own slate is cleared, and I am counting on sitting in with you in your game, here I am gone flat as a bust balloon!"

"You've done a lot more than your share, as it is," Keith answered. "Besides, you'll be around again in a few days—and the game isn't finished yet."

"No—that's right!" Clinton's face was suddenly troubled. "That vague notion you once had that Tiger Claws might be one of the four has, after all, come true; but, in spite of having now linked up the Magpie and Tiger Claws as one and the same man, I'm afraid it's *not* finished, as you say. As a matter of fact, I'm more worried than ever."

Keith nodded.

“So am I,” he agreed. “Meanwhile, however, I’ve ordered some supper to be sent around to you from the Chink restaurant on the corner. Loo Ching’s looking after it himself. Invalid diet”—he grinned suddenly—“chicken and that sort of chow. Any news here?”

“No,” Clinton answered. “Just the usual run of visitors dropping in to offer condolences—Tony Larfino, two or three others, and the Turk. I don’t think you know the Turk—he’s pure American! He was the most sympathetic of all. He offered to bump off the cop that plugged me if I’d give him the cop’s name! And what about you? How many nickels, dimes and quarters did the telephone slots get this afternoon?”

“Doris is all right,” said Keith good-naturedly, “I didn’t have any luck anywhere else.” He took a newspaper from his pocket, and tossed it on the bed. “They’ve dug the ‘Crime Wave’ slogan out of the archives again. The Stalls, then Keloe’s house, and then Jacob Shinler’s murder last night. They seem a bit wild over it! There’s the latest, with all the detail in fine etching, about the Shinler affair. You can read it at your leisure. Tiger Claws is center stage. But the police haven’t given anything away. The gist of the newspaper information is that Tiger Claws is as much of a mysterious fiend in human shape as ever, and that there is no clue to his identity.”

Clinton picked up the newspaper, glanced at the headlines casually, and laid the paper down again.

“I don’t think this interests us very much,” he said. “Such as it is, we’re already in on the ground floor—only the trouble is that the ground floor is full of holes! As I said this morning, the fact that the Magpie is Tiger Claws, or vice versa, only seems to make the pieces of the puzzle look more out of proportion than ever. Why, for instance, when he killed Whitie, which I think we can fairly assume he did, did Tiger Claws, which is to say the Magpie, allow himself to indulge in that vicious whispering habit of his with a victim who, being an old pal, would then know him for who he really was—and might by some chance pass on the information?”

Keith sat down on the edge of the bed.

“Is there any use in going over all this again?” he asked a little helplessly.

“Yes!” said Clinton emphatically. “There is every use in going over it, and we’ll have to keep on going over it until we can see daylight. It’s like a problem in mathematics that’s sticking us, but which *can* be solved. We have got to try to formulate an equation which will give us our desired ‘x’.

The more the factors elude us, the harder we have got to get after them. Talk, discussion, over and over again, may bring out something previously overlooked, may give us exactly what we want—in a sudden flash.”

“Well, at least, then, I can answer your question,” said Keith. “He thought Whitie was as good as dead; and before he left the Stalls was no doubt sure that Whitie *was* dead. I can understand that, for, as I’ve told you, when I first saw Whitie I could have sworn he was dead myself. The answer’s rather obvious, isn’t it? It’s in line with everything else that Tiger Claws has done.”

“Exactly!” Clinton smiled faintly. “But I’m beginning—at the beginning. It’s a bad place to make a mistake. The Magpie believed, then, that Whitie was dead *before* he brought Blackie and the Weasel back to the room in which he claimed he had found Whitie. Does that mean that he had killed Whitie merely to keep Whitie’s mouth shut? In that case, if he had first got the mahogany box from Whitie, it would be plain enough—simply a double-crossing of his own pals.”

“There was plenty of double-crossing, all right,” said Keith grimly. “Think of the night before last with Tiger Claws on the fire-escape outside Blackie’s window, and Blackie and the Weasel inside putting one over, as they believed, on the Magpie.”

“Admitted!” nodded Clinton. “And that is precisely what tangles up the problem. The Magpie is the first one of the three to break into Keloe’s house when he hears that Doris Marland has the mahogany box, which, as we’ve both agreed a dozen times, would indicate that the Magpie, after killing Whitie, was as much at sea regarding the whereabouts of the box as the other two. Why, then, *did* the Magpie kill Whitie? Out of revenge for having stolen the mahogany box in the first place? That doesn’t fit, either. Logically, he would first have extorted from Whitie the secret of where it was. What did Whitie do with it? Did he give it to some one? Or did he merely hide it away somewhere? Where is it now?”

“It sounds worse instead of better every time,” said Keith heavily. “I don’t know. But, in the main, it all comes back to the fact that both the Magpie and the Weasel believe that Doris has it. I said a little while ago that she was all right, and so she is for the moment, but I don’t mind admitting I’m getting more and more uneasy about her all the time. Neither of them will ever let go for a minute, and they’ll move heaven and earth to find her, if they can. And we’re at a dead end again so far as their trail is concerned. Stumped! Nothing to do but start out again to-night! Still—a man with a

mutilated hand! And with the added incentive that the police now have through the knowledge that that man is Tiger Claws, we ought——”

“I’m not so sure,” Clinton interrupted soberly. “I don’t want to paint the picture any blacker than is necessary, but we might as well look the facts in the face. For some time, even if only casually up to now, the police have been looking for a man whose right hand was minus all its fingers save the thumb. Furthermore, they had his general description. And they never found him. He now turns out to be Tiger Claws, who had eluded them so successfully over a long period of time some years ago. His hand may have been maimed since he was here before, but that is not important. You have been searching for him, and devoting everything you have in you to the search. What is the result? Once in the Stalls you saw only his hand; and once last night you saw him in his *natural* person. I say ‘natural’ because I have come to the conclusion that he is very seldom to be seen that way. Do you agree with that?”

Keith wrinkled his forehead.

“I’m not quite sure I understand,” he said.

“Well, it’s this way,” explained Clinton. “No man could move around constantly with his right hand invariably hidden in his pocket without causing comment. You never heard any such comment, did you? Neither did the police. Occasionally he could get away with it—but not habitually. That accounts for last night. He was forced, of course, to show his normal self to his own pals, the other three, but I fancy that was mostly done under cover in his own diggings, wherever they may be, except for the ‘occasionally’ that I have admitted. Let us go further. According to you, Blackie and the Weasel were at one time suspicious of the Magpie and watched him. How, then, did the Magpie first find Whitie in the Stalls unknown to the other two?”

“You mean,” said Keith quickly, “that he generally goes around in some sort of disguise?”

“I would be willing to bet all I own that he does,” Clinton asserted. “Two or three of them, perhaps. That’s why I say that, in spite of his hand, I’m not so optimistic about running him down. The Weasel—yes! But, leaving everything else aside other than his past record if you like, Tiger Claws, in vicious cunning and intelligence, soars miles above the Weasel. They are not in the same class. One thing, however, is fairly certain. While a chance remains to get back that mahogany box, neither of them will leave New York, and in time, we——”

“That brings us back to Doris once more!” interjected Keith bluntly. “Well?”

“That’s true—of course!” Clinton picked absently at the fluff of his blanket. “I don’t know what to say about it.” He was silent for a minute; and then suddenly, irrelevantly: “Shinler obviously regained momentary consciousness last night after Tiger Claws made a getaway through the back of the house, and I am still wondering why, when he was writing those few words on the wall plaster, he did not make an outcry as well?”

“Perhaps he did,” Keith answered; “but I imagine he was too far gone to make any very loud outcry—certainly, I heard nothing from where I was across the road. Anyway, if he did cry out, the answer as to why no one in the house heard or answered him is there.” He jerked his hand toward the newspaper on the bed. “He lived alone, and the upper flat had been vacant for a week.”

“I see,” said Clinton tersely. “A fact, no doubt, of which Tiger Claws was well aware. His methods——” Clinton stopped abruptly—a footstep was approaching the door. The next instant it was Canary Jim who was speaking: “Youse gives me de pip, Rookie! Ain’t I told youse for de eleventh time dat de cop didn’t see me map, an’ dat he ain’t got a hope of stickin’ anything on me?”

A knock sounded at the door.

“Push it in!” invited Canary Jim.

A Chinaman with a well-laden basket entered.

“Hello, Loo Ching!” greeted Canary Jim. “Come yerself, have youse? Youse do me proud!”

“Hello, Canary!” returned the Chinaman with a friendly grin. “You bletter?”

“Naw, I ain’t!” complained Canary Jim. “Dat’s de hell of it!”

“That all same velly too much dlamn bad,” said Loo Ching sympathetically. “Mabbe”—hopefully—“you bletter to-mollow.”

“Maybe!” admitted Canary Jim pessimistically.

The Chinaman contrived a makeshift table by placing together the only two chairs the room contained, and laid out thereon the contents of his basket.

Keith paid the man—but, instead of departing, Loo Ching stood hesitant, his glance travelling from Clinton to Keith and back again to Clinton.

“Got something on yer mind?” inquired Canary Jim.

Loo Ching pointed to Keith.

“Him call Rookie, eh?”

“Dat’s wot!” said Canary Jim.

“Me not know him velly well,” said Loo Ching cautiously. “Him velly much all light?”

“Youse’ve said a mouthful!” declared Canary Jim with finality. “He’s all to de good, and dere’s no secrets between Rookie an’ me. Spill it!”

“Me got little piece news,” said Loo Ching. “Velly bad business! You know house behind Kee Wong where catchee Doctor Volner? Sometimes me buy, mabbe sometimes you buy. Chinaman fliend just say they catchee white woman, too; and him say she kept up at house of velly high officer call Clinton, so they make her tell all names. I not likee that. Mabbe you not likee that. Velly bad business.”

Canary Jim’s face was impassive.

“Thanks for puttin’ me wise,” he said; “but I ain’t interested, ’cause I ain’t no coke-fighter. An’ say, take it from me, youse don’t have to worry none, neither. Youse keep de stuff hid, an’ dey can’t hang nothin’ on youse little fellows.”

“That velly good way look at it,” said Loo Ching with some relief. “Me all same do that.” He moved toward the door. “Good-nlight!”

The door closed behind Loo Ching.

The two men stared at each other as the Chinaman’s footsteps died away—and then, hands clenched, Keith was on his feet.

“That settles it!” he said hoarsely. “If that news is going around, how long do you think it will be before Tiger Claws and the Weasel get it? They may have it already. I’m going up there now. Doris gets out of New York to-night!”

“And I’m out of it—my blasted arm!” Clinton’s face was set, his eyes hard. “Yes—go! There’s nothing to it now but to get her out of New York. And here”—he reached with his good hand under the mattress and produced a key which he handed to Keith—“here’s the key to the back entrance. You

know—the way Canary Jim gets in and out when he has to—the way we did the night before last. Rookie Dyke mustn't be seen going in through Clinton's front door! The door in the fence on the side street that leads into that bit of a backyard garden of mine is never locked.”

Keith's hat was on his head; he was already at the door. “I understand!” he jerked out. “You'll see me again, Bob—when I get back! That's all I can say.”

“Wait!” said Clinton in a suddenly lowered voice. “If there's trouble up there and you need help, telephone K Double-Three and use my name—but keep Rookie Dyke out of it!”

“K Double-Three, right!” Keith repeated—and ran from the room.

CHAPTER XVII

A Lock Is Forced

AS KEITH swung around the corner making for the side door in Clinton's backyard fence, he had seen from across the road the table lamp aglow in the sitting-room; and through the open windows, as the light breeze blew the curtain slightly to one side, he had even caught a glimpse of Doris herself seated at the table, writing. He became suddenly cheerful. He had telephoned her before starting, and, though he had been a little disturbed to learn that the housekeeper had "gone out for an hour or two in response to a telephone call," he had been reassured by Doris' statement that nothing had happened and that she was quite safe. But there had been the interval in getting here! Between coming uptown in the subway and completing his journey in a taxi, which latter he had dismissed half a block away, he had lost not a minute; but, quickly as he had come, it had taken time—and that light in the sitting-room and the sight of Doris at the table afforded him immense relief.

It was like a load that had been dropped from his shoulders, for he had good reason to believe now that the tale of Loo Ching's friend about the white woman who had been caught in the dope raid and taken to Clinton's house had spread, and spread swiftly, through the underworld far beyond the confines of Chinatown. Unless he were very greatly mistaken, Bowery Sal knew it; and, again unless he were greatly mistaken, she was on her way here now to Clinton's house. What else would have brought the old hag uptown and into this neighbourhood from her lower East Side haunts? He had seen her in the subway as he had got out of the train—but she had not seen him, for he had instantly drawn back behind a little knot of people. He had seen her again from the window of his taxi a minute or so later, thanks to the rays of a street light. Well, it would take her quite some time yet to get here, for she had a good many blocks to walk! He had been in no added hurry on her account—nor in any added anxiety, either, so far as she personally was concerned.

There was almost a chuckle on Keith's lips now as, noting that there was no one in the immediate vicinity, he crossed the street, and, opening the door

in the fence, stepped through into what Clinton had called his "bit of a garden." Far from being caused any anxiety at the sight of Bowery Sal, apart, of course, from the fact that the visit he presumed she was about to make was proof that Doris' story had gone about everywhere and was almost certainly known by now to the Weasel and the Magpie, the prospect of her coming to Clinton's house afforded him amusement. Another hundred dollars—more or less—whatever she could get! What sort of a story had she cooked up this time? It would be specious, that went without saying, and probably would revolve around the then very obvious fact that Doris' whereabouts had been discovered; while her good faith in whatever she had to sell would be established by the fact that she had herself brought that warning! A wily bird! He would be intensely interested in listening to what she had to say, and he intended to do so—unknown to Bowery Sal! Doris would manage that.

He stood now for a moment looking around him, though he could see little or nothing in the darkness. That door in the fence! It was very convenient—and far less innocent than it appeared. He wondered how many times it had served Canary Jim? And this back door to the house leading into the basement where Clinton and Canary Jim exchanged identities! He had seen that take place with his own eyes, had even helped Clinton, handicapped by his wounded arm, perform that metamorphosis the night before last preparatory to returning to the tenement as Canary Jim. And tonight these doors served—Rookie Dyke! Queer!

The rear entrance was on a level with the ground floor, and was built out in the form of a small enclosed porch—this also for reasons that very particularly served the interests of Canary Jim, or Clinton in his own person, as the case might be. Set into the sides of the porch, quite decorative in appearance, were narrow oblong windows, hardly more than slits of glass—but the one nearer the street commanded an unobstructed view of the door in the fence. Keith nodded appreciatively to himself. Clinton never left anything to chance. The word wasn't in his vocabulary. It was no wonder that Canary Jim had never been exposed!

He stepped now to the porch door, and took the key from his pocket. Doris, due, of course, to his telephone message, was expecting him, and had suggested leaving the door unlocked; but he had not at all liked the idea of her being alone in the house with an unlocked door, and he had told her to remain upstairs. He found the keyhole after an instant of fumbling in the darkness, opened the door, stepped inside, and closed it quietly behind him.

He locked the door carefully again—and, in the act of withdrawing the key, became suddenly motionless, with his hand poised and still outstretched before him. It might be merely fancy, of course. It was too dark to distinguish the door in the fence; but, as he had instinctively glanced through the narrow glass slit on that side of the porch, it had seemed to him that he had seen a shadowy form pass by out there.

Keith waited, straining his ears to catch the slightest sound. Perhaps half a minute passed. Yes, there *was* some one out there! Stealthy as it had been, he had unquestionably heard a footstep. And now some one was at the door itself.

There began a faint rasping, metallic noise. Whoever was out there was working at the lock. Keith's lips drooped grimly at the corners of his mouth, as his hands stole into his pockets. Any lock that Clinton endorsed would worry even a master craftsman in the art of lock-picking! It would certainly take another moment or more anyhow—and meanwhile he, Keith, could put that moment to excellent service. Rookie Dyke must be protected. Whatever happened, he could not risk a chance of Rookie Dyke being seen or recognized in Clinton's house. He moved noiselessly back a little way from the door, then drew his mask from his pocket and slipped it over his eyes and nose. The next instant his automatic and flashlight were in his hands. He was quite ready now.

The manipulation of the lock continued steadily for another few seconds—then suddenly ceased, and the door began to open slowly and cautiously.

Keith, waiting in the darkness, watched intently. The door opened wide. A man's form bulked there, hesitated for an instant on the threshold, then stepped inside the porch; and the door, with the same caution that had been employed in opening it, was closed again.

And then the ray of Keith's flashlight cut through the black, and, with a sudden step forward, he thrust the muzzle of his automatic into the other's face.

For an instant there was no single sound; the man, with eyes staring wildly into the weapon's muzzle, seemed spellbound with shock and surprise—and then Keith spoke with an ugly quiet in his voice.

“Ah, the Weasel!” he ejaculated softly. “Put your hands up over your head! Now, turn around with your back to me—and *keep* your hands up!”

In a startled, frightened, mechanical way the Weasel obeyed. The automatic's muzzle shifted to the nape of the man's neck. Keith dropped his

flashlight into his pocket.

“I’ve only two hands,” he explained coldly—as his free hand, searching the Weasel’s clothing, removed a revolver from the other’s pocket. “Now”—as he pocketed the Weasel’s weapon, and took out the flashlight again—“you may turn around. Yes, and you may drop your hands; but”—a sudden fury seethed up within Keith—“if you make the slightest move I’ll drop *you!*”

The Weasel, obeying again, turned around—and, shrinking back against the wall, licked his lips.

“Say—I—my Gawd!” he stammered thickly. “You——”

“Not so loud!” Keith interrupted in a low, savage tone. “There’s a lady upstairs alone—but perhaps you *know* that! I’d rather not cause her any alarm. Do you understand? And now you’re going to answer a few questions; in fact, a good many of them! First, where’s that pal of yours, the Magpie?”

“I don’t know no Magpie,” replied the Weasel entreatingly. “You got me wrong, mister, whoever you are. Honest to Gawd, you have!”

“Have I?” murmured Keith. “Well, in any case, he isn’t with you tonight; nor is any one else, for that matter—otherwise you wouldn’t have closed that door behind you when you came in. Now then, again! I want to know about the Magpie. Where does he live?”

The Weasel seemed to regain a little of his lost composure. There was almost a hint of defiance in the gesture as he shook his head.

“I don’t know no Magpie, I tell you,” he protested stubbornly. “And if I did, and he was a pal of mine the way you say he is, I wouldn’t double-cross him by splitting on him, anyway.”

“Really!” Keith’s lips thinned. “You didn’t hesitate to double-cross him the night before last, though, did you?”

“What d’you mean—the night before last?”

“In Blackie’s room,” said Keith sternly, “when you discussed Bowery Sal’s story, and Miss Marland, and the mahogany box, and your friend the Magpie whom you were going to leave out in the cold, and Whitie—and, yes, Tiger Claws.”

Fear was creeping into the Weasel’s eyes again; they widened now, and, in a sort of hunted way, seemed striving to see the face hidden behind the

flashlight's glare.

"Who—who are you?" he whispered. "Tiger Claws—did you say Tiger Claws? There's no one else who knows about that mahogany box, 'cause Blackie's gone, and so's Whitie—and—and you ain't the Magpie. I—I lied about the Magpie. I—I ain't fool enough to try to put that across any more when you know all that. Say"—his voice split curiously—"say something, can't you? If you're Tiger Claws, for Gawd's sake say so! I—I'll come clean! I'll tell you all I know!"

"No," said Keith grimly; "I'm not Tiger Claws—though it might perhaps be more fortunate for you if I were. You'll come clean all right—and to the last word! Do you remember a schooner called the *Malola*? Do you remember a signal fire that was lighted on the beach of a certain island? Do you remember the four men who were lured ashore, treacherously attacked, and left there for dead, while their boat was taken and the schooner stolen? Do you remember John Marland, whom you murdered, and from whom you took the mahogany box that you've come here to-night in the hope of getting? Do you remember Gur Singh who afterwards escaped from the schooner?"

The man had wilted under Keith's merciless arraignment. He made no attempt at denial; rather, in his eyes and his gray face was an expression that seemed to hold almost the *expectation* of death. His own code! He knew no other. With the situation reversed, were he under like circumstances standing there with an automatic in his hand—it would be death.

"You're not Gur Singh," he said hoarsely.

"No," said Keith, "I am the only one who was left alive when Gur Singh got back to the island. I am Keith Wharton, the brother of the man whom, together with two of our crew, you and your companions murdered that night."

The Weasel circled dry lips with the tip of his tongue.

"What—what are you going to do?" he mumbled.

"I'm going to spend the next few minutes," Keith answered evenly, "in listening to some things I want to know—about how you came to be on the *Orangi*, and about John Marland—and afterwards you'll 'come clean' about the Magpie, too, and tell me where to find him!"

"You know about that, too—the *Orangi*!" The Weasel forced a sickly smile. "It—it looks like you'd got us cold."

“I’ve got you cold”—Keith clipped off his words. “Come on—talk!” He thrust the muzzle of his automatic suddenly closer to the other’s face.

“You needn’t do that,” said the Weasel bitterly. “I’d fight if I had a chance, but I know I ain’t got none. And I’ll say now I wish to Gawd we’d made more sure of you that night! But I can take my medicine, too! There ain’t nobody yet ever said the Weasel was yellow, and I’d tell you now to go to hell instead of spilling anything only that seeing you know so much the rest don’t make any difference—except about putting you wise to where you can get your paws on the Magpie. Maybe Blackie and me would have done a little pinch act on him, but I ain’t doing him down all the way. I’d kill any bird that did that to me, and it’d be coming to him plenty—and I ain’t that kind of a bird myself. That’s straight, and if you had a couple of more gats in my face it wouldn’t make no difference.”

“I may possibly be able to give you a little information about the Magpie myself before we’re through that will make you change your mind,” said Keith significantly. “In fact, I think I’ll tell you now. Your friend the Magpie has done *you* down all the way. He wasn’t drunk or sick with fear because of Tiger Claws the night before last—he was outside Blackie’s room on the fire-escape listening to the two of you. It was the Magpie who killed Jacob Shinler last night. You understand what that means, don’t you? You’ve read the papers! The Magpie is Tiger Claws himself.”

“What did you say?” gasped the Weasel.

“You heard me! The Magpie is Tiger Claws himself.”

Into the Weasel’s face there came a surge of angry red, and into his eyes a sudden fury.

“Is that on the level?” His voice shook with passion. “So help you Gawd, is that straight?”

“Yes!” said Keith tersely.

“So that’s how he knew, was it? And it was him, then, that croaked Whitie!” The Weasel cursed in low-voiced abandon through working lips. “I’ll get him for this! I’ll open up wide—all the way! I’ll tell you anything you want to know. I’ll get him for this! I know I’m nipped; but now, blast him, he’ll go through, too!”

“Begin with how you—the four of you, of course—came to be on the *Orangi*,” Keith prompted curtly.

“Yes!” snarled the Weasel. “Tiger Claws—my Gawd! Yes! We all met up in Singapore in a dump called Java Dick’s. Maybe you know the place since you come from around there?”

“I’ve heard of it. You mean you didn’t know each other until then?”

The Weasel jerked his head in affirmation.

“Yes, that’s what I mean. That’s where we ran into each other and got chummy. I don’t know where Whitie came from. According to him, he’d done time all over the lot. Me, I’d ducked out of Sydney in a hurry. Blackie and the Magpie was both from New York, but they’d never been wise to each other there. I don’t know just how Blackie landed up in Singapore; but the Magpie beat it out of New York on account of getting his fingers blown off with some ‘soup’ he was using to crack a safe with. Anyway, that’s what he said. He hadn’t been caught, but things was pretty hot for him there, and it was going to be a good many months’ job before his flapper got healed up; and, from what he let slip, I figured it out that for some reason or other he was scared to stick around there while he was crippled like that. I can see why now, curse him—him being Tiger Claws! I think he spent a couple of years in England, but I ain’t sure about that, and he never said what chased him out to Singapore. But, anyway, when we got together in Java Dick’s, he’d doped it out that it was time to hit New York again. He put it up to us that there weren’t no pickings anywhere else like there, and that we’d all get some of them together.”

“So the four of you sailed on the *Orangi*, via Hong Kong, for ‘Frisco?” suggested Keith. “Is that it?”

“Yes.”

“Well, what happened to the *Orangi*?”

“I don’t know,” said the Weasel. “I don’t think anybody knew—and there ain’t nobody ever been heard of again that was on her.”

“Except you four—and John Marland,” amended Keith shortly.

“Yes, except us,” said the Weasel. “Some said she’d struck a stray mine, and others said it was something in the cargo, or the boilers, or something. Anyway, there was an explosion that tore hell out of her, and it must have put her wireless out of business right from the start ‘cause we found out afterwards that there wasn’t nothing ever heard of her. It was the third night out from Singapore, and everybody’d gone to bed. She began to sink. It was bad weather, too—a big sea. There was a panic. They rushed the boats, and a lot of ‘em was swamped. There wasn’t many of ‘em ever got off at all;

they”—the Weasel suddenly circled his lips again with his tongue—“they was too crowded.”

Into Keith’s mind flashed Blackie’s rambling words: “Rush ’em! . . . Go on! . . . Shoot! . . . Look at ’em! . . . Only chance! . . .” There was no doubt now in his mind as to what the man had meant, for the first word he had heard Blackie say had been “orangi,” the ship’s name. He could picture the scene—an ugly one.

“The boat you four rushed wasn’t crowded—when you got away, I take it!” said Keith savagely.

“No,” said the Weasel—and his eyes now seemed to be trying to avoid the searching ray of the flashlight. “No—there weren’t many in it—just a few. And one of them the Magpie knocked into the boat himself. That was Marland. Marland had been fighting with a couple of the officers to hold us back, and the Magpie, not having any shots left, smashed Marland in the face with his revolver, and Marland went over backward into the boat that was swung down level with the deck, and——”

“I think you’d better leave the other details until some time when I haven’t got *this* in my hand,” Keith broke in with a curious unsteadiness in his voice, as he indicated, with a sudden forward thrust, his levelled automatic. “Go on from where you got off in the boat.”

“Sure!” said the Weasel—and to his credit flushed a little. “There was a few women and a few kids—and Marland lying in the bottom of the boat stunned, but he came around all right as good as ever, and we was making him row inside half an hour. We was three weeks in that boat, in bad storms, and in sun that’d burn your eyeballs out, and nights when your teeth would chatter with the chill and damp. There was plenty of biscuits and water ’cause there weren’t many of us, but that didn’t let us out. Queer enough, the kids seemed tougher than the women and lasted longer, but they all went out—and the rest of us went loony. We was just the five of us, Marland and us four, when we saw that island. Whitie and me was the only ones that had any strength left, but we got the boat there. We was over two months on the island. We had some biscuits left, but we kept saving ’em. There was plenty of fruit and other——”

“Never mind those details, either,” said Keith crisply. “I know pretty well what happened, for I found part of John Marland’s diary. You kept watch for a passing vessel, and you signalled us. John Marland had a mahogany box which you took from him. You killed him, not merely on account of the mahogany box, though, from what has happened since, you

would have killed him for that anyhow; but, it is obvious now, you also killed him to prevent him from being a witness against you for your acts on the *Orangi*. And for that same reason, when you saw that the *Malola* was only a small schooner with a small crew, you decided to wipe us out too, escape with the schooner, and get back to civilization somewhere without ever having to give any account of yourselves at all. You would undoubtedly have been wanted for murder that night on the *Orangi* if anything were ever known about it—and you did not know when you left the island but what there might have been other survivors besides yourselves who would have spread the tale. You would have got rid of Gur Singh, too, when he had served your purpose, if he had not managed to escape from you.”

“That’s about the way it was,” admitted the Weasel. “We was afraid a lot of beans was spilled when Gur Singh got away, and the Magpie had the wind up bad with that bum hand of his sticking out a mile to identify him.”

“What did you do with the boat in which you got to the island?” demanded Keith.

“When we saw you first in the afternoon, we hid the boat good and careful. She had the ship’s name painted all over her, and we didn’t know what kind of a yarn we might have to tell.”

“You weren’t so careful about hiding John Marland’s body!” said Keith.

“A boat like that was a lot harder to hide than him, and would take a lot longer,” the Weasel answered; “and, anyway, there hadn’t nothing happened to him until after we’d sized you up and figured what we was going to do, so then there wasn’t no need of hiding him particular.”

“Good God!” Keith exclaimed under his breath; then coldly: “Now about the mahogany box—tell me about that. What is it? Why are you all after it? What’s in it?”

The Weasel blinked his eyes in genuine amazement.

“Say, you’re stringing me, ain’t you? You’re here in this house with her, and she’s got it, and you’re asking me about it!”

“I know that’s what you came here for,” said Keith evenly. “Miss Marland, however, not only has not got it, but she never saw it in her life and knows nothing about it.”

“She ain’t got it?” There was a stunned note in the Weasel’s voice.

“No!”

“Who—who has, then?”

“I don’t know.”

“And”—the Weasel was obviously struggling desperately with the incomprehensible—“and you don’t neither of you even know what’s in it?”

“I can make a guess,” said Keith brusquely. “Jewels, probably—and probably a gift from the Rajah with whom John Marland had spent practically the last four years.”

“Jewels!” The Weasel suddenly sucked in his breath. “Sure, they are! You’re right about that; and you’re right about where they came from. Marland was bringing ’em back as a surprise for the girl. But they’re jewels like what you never seen before. Diamonds! My Gawd—a *rope* of ’em! They’re worth”—the Weasel’s voice choked—“they’re worth——”

“Never mind what they’re worth—now!” Keith cut in sharply. “I merely wanted to know what was in the mahogany box. Carry on with your story! What did you do with the *Malola* after Gur Singh got away? How did you get here to New York?”

“Sure! Yes! That!” muttered the Weasel, apparently wrenching his mind away from the “rope of diamonds” with difficulty. “That was tough for a while, and then we struck luck. We landed on an island, and got a crew of natives, and one of ’em could navigate a bit—enough anyhow. We’d figured on going down to Surabaya and getting a Dutch steamer there; but after Gur Singh got away that was all off, and we didn’t dare show up anywhere where there was steamers in those parts, ’cause we knew the story’d be all over the lot. So we decided to sail the schooner itself to America. And that’s what we did. We paid the crew for the job by giving ’em the schooner. We came ashore one night about six weeks ago somewhere along the coast of California—and no one the wiser. The natives sailed away again with the schooner, and the four of us beat it for New York. If we’d known from the start that we could get a crew the way we did, we’d never even have thought of doing anything but sail the schooner here ’cause, besides it being the best way to cover up our tracks, it was the easiest way to get them jewels into the country.”

“You said you landed about six weeks ago in California,” plied Keith. “How long have you been in New York?”

“Over a month.”

“What did you intend to do with those jewels?”

“Sell ’em, of course—and divvy up!”

“Why didn’t you, then?” Keith, though his tones were subdued, was snapping out his questions now.

“That was on account of the Magpie!” The Weasel’s eyes narrowed suddenly. “Maybe he lied about that, too—I dunno! There was a lot about it in the papers. He showed it to us. How the government had got sore over the millions in duties they was losing over the sparklers that was being smuggled into the country, and was closing down tight on all the ‘fences.’ He said the ‘fences’ was all leery, and wouldn’t touch nothing at a decent price, and that the thing for us to do was to wait until the scare was over, and then horn in good.”

“I see!” murmured Keith—and a smile in which there was no mirth curved his lips. “The Magpie, at least, is an opportunist!”

“I dunno what you mean by that,” growled the Weasel viciously. “That ain’t what I’d call him now that he’s this Tiger Claws, and after what he’s done to Whitie!”

“Never mind about what you’d call him,” said Keith icily. “We’ve got to the point now of where he is, where he hangs out here in New York, where he can be found *to-night*, and——”

From somewhere near at hand in the basement the front door bell was ringing.

CHAPTER XVIII

Bowery Sal

KEITH had paused abruptly in what he was saying. Bowery Sal! He had forgotten the woman for the moment, but there was little doubt in his mind that it was Bowery Sal who was at the front door now.

He stared for a moment speculatively at the Weasel.

“Unless I am mistaken,” he said shortly, “it is Bowery Sal who rang that bell; and I am enough interested in overhearing whatever story her ingenuity has devised for her own benefit and Miss Marland’s ears to-night to defer the rest about the Magpie until she’s gone.”

“Bowery Sal!” The Weasel’s lips thinned unpleasantly. “If Marland’s daughter here don’t know nothing about the mahogany box, Bowery Sal handed Blackie a steer the night before last that got him bumped off—and I’d have got mine, too, if I hadn’t been lucky! Me, too, I’d like to hear what she’s got to say!”

Keith smiled queerly.

“I have no objection to having you hear what she says,” he stated coldly; “in fact, I don’t see how I could prevent it any way—and still listen in myself. I have no means of tying you up, and I certainly do not propose to let you get away. The stairs are just over there to the right. You’ll walk ahead of me—and make no noise. The stairs lead into a little cloak-room which in turns opens on the rear of the hall. I do not imagine Miss Marland will invite so disreputable a creature as Bowery Sal into the sitting-room; and, if the woman gets no farther than just inside the front door, she’ll be in full view and hearing from the cloak-room—if the cloak-room door into the hall is open. If it’s closed, you’ll open it without a sound. Understand?”

“Yes,” said the Weasel.

“March, then!” ordered Keith grimly. “And no tricks! For, Bowery Sal or no Bowery Sal, *you* don’t get away!”

They went up the stairs, treading lightly—with Keith’s automatic pressed against the small of the Weasel’s back. As they reached the head of

the stairs, Keith extinguished the flashlight, and replaced it in his pocket. The cloak-room door leading into the hall was open, he could see; and, at his whispered injunction, the Weasel moved over to a position where, from inside the cloak-room, though well back from the door itself, the whole length of the hall was in plain view—thanks to the light in the front of the hall; a light which, however, left the rear end of the hall in shadow and the little cloak-room itself in complete darkness.

Standing a little to one side and slightly behind the Weasel, his automatic still significantly pressed against the other's body, Keith could see Doris at the front door. She had only partially opened the door, and an altercation of some sort appeared to be in progress. He could not catch the words. This altercation ended abruptly, however. Doris stepped aside, and threw the door wide open.

"That's her!" whispered the Weasel savagely. "I'd know her from what Blackie said she looked like. That's Bowery Sal—blast her!"

"Hold your tongue!" Keith cautioned sternly.

He had no need to be told that it was Bowery Sal who had just stepped forward into the hall! He was quite well acquainted with that bedraggled figure with the matted gray hair, the crumpled bonnet, the broken, steel-bowed spectacles, the shabby black shawl which enveloped her from her bent shoulders to her waist, and which, clutched with hands hidden in its folds, was drawn tightly around her as she stood peering now inquisitively about her in all directions.

Doris closed the door, and, coming back into the hall, took up a position in the sitting-room doorway.

"Well, what is it?" she demanded coldly. "You asked for five minutes."

"Sure, I did," snickered Bowery Sal; "but now dat I'm in, mabbe it'll take longer. An' mabbe youse won't be in no hurry neither to have me get through. Say, dis is a swell joint! D'youse think I'd spoil de furniture if youse asked me in dere?" She indicated the doorway of the sitting-room with a jerk of her head. "I ain't de long-distance walker I uster be in me youth, an' I've come a long way, an' I'm tired, an' I got a lot to tell youse."

"I have very little reason to put much faith in anything you have to tell," returned Doris quietly; "but if you wish to sit down, you may do so on that hall chair there."

"Well, thanks—I will!" Bowery Sal snickered impudently again, as she seated herself. "But I hates to sit down wid a nice young lady like youse

standing up. Me manners wasn't neglected—it's only me old bones. Won't youse get a chair for yerself?"

"Thank you, I'm quite all right," said Doris stiffly. "Please say what you have to say as quickly as possible."

"Listen to that!" Bowery Sal's raucous voice, that Keith had diagnosed as a "gin voice," rose in hurt expostulation. "An' me comin' here to slip youse de tip dat de whole bunch knows where youse're hidin'! An' dat dis place ain't any good any more, 'cause dey knows youse're here! An' say, mabbe youse ain't lucky dat it was me got here first! Suppose it'd been some one else!"

And then Keith, watching, listening, smiled applause as Doris gave a sudden and well-simulated start of alarm. The girl of the Stalls! On guard now! Alert! In a battle of wits, Bowery Sal was not likely to fare over well!

"How did you find this out?" Doris asked.

"Dey're talkin' about it in every dump in de burg, dat's how I found it out," said Bowery Sal. "An' de minute I hears it, I beats it for here to wise youse up. See?"

"I see," said Doris. "And who do you mean by this 'some one else' who might have got here first?"

"Youse're takin' it cool, all right," smirked Bowery Sal; "but I guess youse knows who dat is as well as me. It's de birds, of course, or wot's left of 'em, dat bust into Keloe's after youse and dat mahogany box de night before last. Seein' dat Blackie got snuffed out, who else would it be but de Weasel, an' Tiger Claws—yes, an' de Weasel's pal, de Magpie."

"How do you know Tiger Claws was there?" Doris probed swiftly.

"Aw, say!" sniffed Bowery Sal. "Dat ain't half wot I knows! Say, d'youse think it ain't known in de upper circles of society wot I frequents who croaked dat Chink, Hin Wu? Ain't I tellin' youse? An' ain't I tellin' youse I've come straight here?"

"For which, of course," said Doris coolly, "you expect me to pay you. How much do you want?"

Bowery Sal cackled suddenly.

"Sure, youse'll pay! Dat's wot I'm here for. An' youse'll pay a lot more dan youse thinks youse will! But I ain't namin' de price yet. Youse waits till youse hears de rest. I knows de whole works from de inside out. I knows all

about youse an' de mahogany box, an' all about de Weasel's gang, an' I got de whole dope on de Magpie which counts most of all. An' I guess dat's worth a lot to hear, ain't it?"

Doris for a moment made no answer; and Keith could see that, despite her effort to disguise it, she was genuinely startled now. But now Keith smiled quietly to himself. Bowery Sal had surpassed herself. This was a rather tall order! It would certainly put a strain even upon her vicious ingenuity to make her tale plausible, to say nothing of making it convincing!

"I don't see how you can possibly know all these things," said Doris at last, as she shook her head in a puzzled way.

"Youse'll know before I'm through how I knows," stated Bowery Sal with insolent complacency. "But I guess youse're ready to listen anyway, ain't youse?"

Doris nodded her head.

"I am listening," she answered.

"Sure, youse are!" said Bowery Sal, with a significant grin. "An' youse'll be listenin' harder in a minute. I'll begin wid de beginnin', which is de mahogany box dat yer father was shipwrecked wid on a little island wid de four ginks wot croaked him for de box, an' afterwards croaked most of de crew of a schooner which dey pinched an' sailed to California in, an' den came here to New York. An' de four ginks was Whitie, wot youse saw in de Stalls, an' de Weasel, an' Blackie, an' de Magpie. But *youse* don't know wot was in de mahogany box"—Bowery Sal cackled suddenly again—"though some of 'em even thought youse *had* de box itself."

"No," said Doris faintly. "I do not know what was in the box."

"I knows youse don't, an' dat youse ain't never seen it," agreed Bowery Sal with a self-satisfied chuckle; "an' I'll tell youse first wot's in de box. Dey was 'white ones,' beauties, dat yer father got presented wid by some high gazaboo out dere in India, an' was bringin' home to his little girl. A string of diamonds, dearie, wot ain't possessed by no lady in dis land no matter how rich she is, an' dat 'ud make de bank-roll of the swellest financier in dis little old town look sick."

Bowery Sal paused—evidently to enjoy the sensation she was creating, for Doris was staring at her now wide-eyed. Keith found himself suddenly tense. The sense, one almost of contemptuous amusement, in which he had set out to listen to the old woman's efforts to make her story plausible, was gone now. This wasn't plausible—it was the *truth!* The amazing thing was

how she came by her knowledge. He realized that he was waiting eagerly for her next words, wondering how much *more* she knew!

“An’ de reason,” resumed Bowery Sal impressively, “why I knows youse ain’t got de mahogany box, an’ ain’t never seen it, is ’cause I knows who’s got it, an’ who’s had it all de time. Say, listen! De Magpie’s got de box, only he’s got it hidden now where no one ’ud ever find it even if de Magpie was copped. De whole thing was a plant put up by de Magpie. Whitie never lifted de box at all de way de Magpie said he did. It was de Magpie dat croaked Whitie in de Stalls, an’ it was de Magpie dat sent me after youse to bring youse to de Stalls, so’s to make de others, meanin’ Blackie an’ de Weasel, fall for wot he was puttin’ over on ’em. See? Yes, an’ I’ll tell youse something else. De Magpie is Tiger Claws.”

Keith caught a sudden muttered snarl and execration from the man in front of him. He poked the Weasel warningly with the muzzle of his automatic.

The Weasel turned his head.

“Gawd!” he whispered fiercely. “I ain’t going to shout so’s she’ll hear me, but you let me get out of here, and I’ll fix the Magpie for this! You give me the chance, and I’ll get him good—to a finish!”

“Keep quiet!” Keith whispered back curtly. “Listen!”

“I—I don’t see”—Doris’ voice was a little unsteady, and full of perplexity—“how he knew where I was.”

“Dere wasn’t nothin’ to dat,” said Bowery Sal with a sniff. “Dat was easy! When yer father was on de island he said he had an only daughter in California an’ some relations by de name of Keloe livin’ in New York. When de Magpie gets here he ain’t spendin’ all his time wid de other three. He’s only *usin’* ’em, see? He’s got business of his own to attend to—seein’ he’s Tiger Claws. Get me? But dat hand of his wid de fingers off worries him something fierce ’cause it makes him an easy mark for de cops if dey’re on de hunt for him. He knows dat de murders on de island was reported to de police on de other side of de world, but when he gets here de papers are dumb about it, an’ he don’t know how hot de police is after him here in New York. So he figures dat de ones who’d be stirrin’ up de bulls an’ know wot was doin’ anyway, ’ud be yer father’s relations. So he noses out de house where Keloe lives—but as soon as he gets his lamps on de house, he don’t make no inquiries at de front door! He knows a better way dan dat! Don’t youse forget dat he’s Tiger Claws, an’ when he was livin’ here before he

knew about dat house an' Kee Wong's, but he didn't know nothin' about de name of Keloe. So he sticks around Kee Wong's a few nights an' makes a play at hittin' de pipe, an' he finds out dat Keloe's niece has come on from California to keep house for him. Dat's how he knows where you was. See?"

"Yes," said Doris slowly. "Yes, that is plain enough; but if the Magpie is Tiger Claws, why should Tiger Claws have broken into the house the night before last to get the mahogany box from me. You said the Magpie has had it all the time."

"Sure, he's had it all de time, an' he's got it yet," asserted Bowery Sal with a malicious grin. "He didn't go dere for no mahogany box. He went dere for youse, dearie—just to bump youse off!"

"To kill me!" Doris' face had whitened. "Why should he want to do that? I didn't have the mahogany box. I didn't even know anything about it."

"Dat's de answer," said Bowery Sal, her grin widening. "Dat's wot he wanted to bump youse off for—so's youse couldn't tell nobody dat youse didn't know nothin' about it. An' dat's why he wants to bump youse off now just as much as ever he did."

"I don't understand," said Doris miserably.

"Dat's 'cause youse don't wait for de whole spiel," complained Bowery Sal sharply. "I've been tellin' youse as fast as I can. Youse listen now, an' I'll give youse de dope from de start. When de Magpie was livin' here before, he used a lot of disguises. Don't youse forget dat! An' he begins to use 'em again widout de other three knowin' nothin' about it, an', besides, he's got to keep under cover a lot on account of dat mauled hand of his. Well, he's takin' care of de mahogany box for de bunch—an' he don't mean de others *ever* to get it again. See? But he has to dope de play out right, an' dat takes time. So he stalls on de divvy by handin' de others a spiel about de 'fences' being leery 'cause dey're bein' watched so close dey won't come across wid a fair price. Dey falls for it, an' den he picks out Whitie for de goat 'cause Whitie ain't so useful to him as de other two, an'——"

"I don't know what you mean by that!" Doris had drawn herself erect, her hands clenched at her side—her voice cold and composed again.

"Don't youse! Well, de Magpie was de leader of de bunch, wasn't he? An' he was workin' 'em on a lot of jobs; an' Whitie wasn't no good at crackin' a crib like de others, dat's all. Den de Magpie looks around for a place to pull off de stunt, an' he finds Old Cully's room down at de Stalls. Den he slips it to Whitie dat he thinks de police is gettin' nosey about where

Whitie lives, an' dat Whitie'd better duck to a new place. He takes Whitie down to de Stalls an' gets Whitie to rent Old Cully's room. Den he gets Whitie in dere an' taps him one on de nut."

"You mean—*killed* him?" The words came in a sort of horrified gasp from Doris.

"Naw!" exclaimed Bowery Sal disdainfully. "Youse oughter know better from wot youse seen yerself. De Magpie wasn't as raw as dat. It wasn't den dat he bumped Whitie off. Dere had to be a few days to make de thing look right, an' so's it'd look like Whitie'd had de time to get next to *youse*. Just 'cause Whitie an' de mahogany box does de vanishin' act at de same time don't prove dat Whitie pinched it, though it rolls de score up pretty good for a starter. An' 'cause Whitie's found dead dere widout any mahogany box don't prove it, neither! Dere had to be something more. An', besides, Blackie and de Weasel was gettin' dere fingers crossed. Dat's where youse come in. If Whitie's found dead after two or three days which 'ud make it look like he'd had de chance to run acrost de *daughter* of John Marland somehow, an' den de daughter was found in de room wid him, it 'ud be a cinch to de Weasel an' Blackie dat youse had de mahogany box somewhere between youse. An' if de Magpie takes de other two down dere den, an' busts in on youse an' de dead man, an' bumps youse off by chokin' de life outer youse while he's pretendin' to scrag youse so's youse'd tell de truth, dat leaves 'em guessin' forever where de mahogany box is, don't it? Mabbe de Weasel and Blackie is sore dat de Magpie went so far wid youse dat youse can't never talk anymore, but dey *knows* den dat de Magpie ain't got de mahogany box—an' dats all de Magpie cares about!"

"How do *you* know all this?" Doris demanded, her eyes blazing.

"'Cause I was down dere," replied Bowery Sal coolly. "If youse wanter know it, I was workin' for de Magpie. It was me dat slipped de word around de Stalls dat I was lookin' after de sick man, an' dat he wasn't to be disturbed, 'cause after de Magpie puts Whitie to sleep wid dat tap on de head, he keeps him doped all de rest of de time until de end of it when he whispers to Whitie who he is, an' he finishes Whitie off for keeps, an' den bandages him up to make it look like it hadn't just been done. He thinks Whitie's dead, an' he sends me off wid dat message to youse, 'cause he's told Blackie an' de Weasel to meet him down dere at about dat time. But Whitie wasn't dead—he didn't really die until youse came."

Bowery Sal paused, and inspected Doris through her spectacles as though to estimate the effect of her words. Keith stirred a little restlessly. He

did not for an instant doubt anything the old woman was saying now; but there was something about it all that made him strangely uneasy, something that he could not understand. If Bowery Sal had worked hand in hand with the Magpie, why should she come here to disclose that fact, to accuse herself practically of being an accomplice in a murder; and why should she now have turned against the Magpie? She was incriminating herself. What did she expect to gain by it? He prodded the Weasel again with his automatic. The Weasel was muttering savagely under his breath. He looked at Doris. It was a long way up the hall there, too far to catch her every expression, but her face was very white and set.

Bowery Sal suddenly began to cackle once more.

“But de Magpie was out of luck on dat deal, an’ de whole works went on de blink,” she said; “ ’cause when de Magpie gets dere wid Blackie an’ de Weasel, Whitie ain’t dead an’ is yappin’ about Tiger Claws, an’ dere’s another man in de room wid youse, an’ den de police butts in, an’ youse gets away. But dat don’t put de crimp in de Magpie none. He don’t care who de guy was dat was wid youse, ’cause *he* knows de bird don’t know no more about de mahogany box dan youse or Whitie did, but he lets de Weasel an’ Blackie fall for de idea dat it was Tiger Claws. Den I goes to Blackie an’ hands him a spiel about Whitie sending me wid a message to de girl wot he *gave* de mahogany box to, an’ I tells Blackie who youse are, an’ where youse lives. Dat sets de deck up again for de Magpie—so long as youse don’t get a chance to *talk*. Dey’ll go down dere after youse fast enough, but de Magpie’ll be dere *first* an’ youse’ll hear Tiger Claws *whisperin’* in yer ear, dearie. Dat’s de next play, but it’s a misdeal, too. De Magpie only gets his knife into de Chink, an’ misses youse. But Blackie gets his, an’ dat leaves only de Weasel. Well, de Weasel’s after youse an’ de mahogany box as hard as ever, so de Magpie’s still out to bump youse off before de Weasel gets to youse. Of course”—Bowery Sal began to laugh strangely—“de Magpie could croak de Weasel now instead of youse, dere bein’ only one left; but youse ain’t no use to de Magpie, an’ de Weasel’s de whole cheese wid locks an’ things. Dat’s why de Magpie is after youse again to-night—an’ he’ll get youse sure, dearie. I thought youse’d like to hear de whole story seein’ as youse’re going to pay for it.”

“Pay for it!” Doris’ face flushed angrily. “Pay you! You’re as bad as this beast you call Tiger Claws.”

“Sure, I am!” Bowery Sal was rising from her chair. “Dat’s why I’m here! Dat’s why I sent dat fake message to de housekeeper. Don’t youse

know who I am? Take a look, dearie! Youse'll be de first one dat's ever seen wot's beneath Bowery Sal's shawl! Look!"

Two hands were thrust swiftly out from under the shawl—a hand that held a revolver; and a hand with no fingers save the thumb that was pushed tauntingly forward for the girl's inspection.

CHAPTER XIX

K Double-Three

A CRY came from Doris; it was echoed by Keith—and was drowned out by a scream of fury from the Weasel as he plunged out into the hall. And, on the instant, Keith too leaped forward behind the Weasel.

“The Magpie! Tiger Claws!” the Weasel screamed. “That’s how you worked it, eh? Pay! Gawd, yes, you’ll pay! You’ll——”

The Weasel’s words were lost in the roar of the Magpie’s revolver, as, with incredible swiftness it seemed to Keith, the Magpie, at the sight of two men rushing toward him along the hall, darted to the front door, and, as he opened it, fired shot after shot back into the hall.

Came then a crowded second—less than a second, it must have been. Keith could not fire. The hall was narrow. He could not fire past the Weasel. He shouted to Doris to get back into the sitting-room. And then the Weasel threw up his arms and pitched to the floor. Keith fired then—his one shot—a useless one! The front door was already closing. The Magpie was gone. He leaped over the Weasel’s form, continuing his rush for the door—and with a low, shocked cry turned toward Doris instead. She was swaying there in the sitting-room doorway, her hands slipping nervelessly from their hold as she clutched at the door-jamb for support. But before he could reach her she had gone down in a crumpled heap on the floor.

“Doris! Doris!” he cried out piteously, as he dropped on his knees beside her. And then relief came, and he cried out in fervent gratitude: “Thank God! Thank God!”

She was stunned—not seriously hurt. The bullet had just grazed the skin. There was a mark there across her temple like a weal, only it was bleeding slightly. He picked her up in his arms, and, carrying her into the sitting-room, laid her down upon the couch.

His mind was racing. He tried to force composure upon himself. Tiger Claws! There was no earthly use in running out into the darkness after the man now. No one seemed to have heard the sound of the shots—there had

probably been no one near-by on the street at the moment, and the house next door was detached. But there was the telephone! Yes—and the Weasel!

He went back into the hall, and bent down over the Weasel. He stood up a moment later grim-faced. The Weasel was dead!

The telephone was in the cloak-room. There was running water there, too—he could get some wet towels, or something, for Doris at the same time. But the telephone first! That number Clinton had given him! Help was needed here badly enough. And there was Tiger Claws! He couldn't make a move himself until he got help here.

He ran into the cloak-room, and, switching on the light, picked up the telephone.

“Give me K Double-Three,” he said, as central answered. “Hurry, please! K Double-Three!”

Perhaps a minute passed, and then a man's voice came over the wire.

“What is it?” asked the voice.

“Is that K Double-Three?”

“Yes.”

“I'm speaking from Clinton's house,” said Keith tensely. “Send help up here at once—and a doctor. Tiger Claws has just killed a man and slightly wounded a lady. Tell the police that Tiger Claws came here disguised as a woman—that Bowery Sal is Tiger Claws. He hasn't been gone more than three or four minutes.”

“Who is speaking?” demanded the voice tersely.

“A friend of Bob Clinton—Keith Wharton,” Keith replied. “For God's sake, jump to it! Hurry!”

He hung up the receiver. Doris now! There were several towels on the rack. He snatched these up, wet one of them, and ran back to the sitting-room.

Doris opened her eyes, as he bent over her—and for an instant, stared at him in a half-dazed, half-startled way. Then she lifted her hand weakly, pointing her finger.

“What is it?” he asked, looking sharply behind him.

“No, no—you!” she said faintly.

He put his hand to his face. Of course! His mask! He had forgotten that! He took it off and put it in his pocket.

“It’s just as well I had it on,” he said with a cheery smile. “Bowery Sal was quite well acquainted with Rookie Dyke!” He laid the wet, cool towel against her temple, and with a woman’s gentleness wiped away the trickle of blood. “Better, dear?” His voice shook a little now. “I—out there—I thought for a moment I had lost you.”

She raised her hand and laid it over his.

“I will be all right, presently, I am sure,” she said. “It isn’t very bad, is it?”

“It’s bad enough,” said Keith tenderly; “but, thank Heaven, it’s not serious. I think the bullet just grazed the skin, but I want a doctor to look at it, anyway.”

“Did he”—she closed her eyes suddenly—“did he get away?”

“Yes,” said Keith.

“And—and that other man? I—I saw him fall.”

“I am afraid he’s dead,” said Keith soberly. “That was the Weasel. I caught him as he came in downstairs.”

Her hand closed tightly over his.

“Oh, Keith,” she whispered fearfully, “will—will this ever end?”

“Yes!” There was a sudden grimness in Keith’s voice. “I have telephoned Clinton’s men. Some of them and the doctor will be here in a few minutes. Meanwhile a police alarm has been sent out. We’ll get him! That ghoulish propensity of his to gloat over his victims has cost him more than he can afford this time! He can’t be Bowery Sal anymore! We may perhaps even get him to-night.”

“*We?* To-night! You—you are not——”

He placed his fingers gently over her lips.

“Yes, I must!” He smiled reassuringly. “I could not stay in this house, anyway. Rookie Dyke must not be found here, in any case, when those men arrive. It was a different matter when I brought you here the night before last and nobody knew it except Clinton and the housekeeper. To-night, with what’s happened, with the Weasel killed, there would be an investigation. It would be all over the underworld in less than no time that Rookie Dyke was

mixed up with Clinton—and that is the one thing above all others which, for Clinton’s sake, must be avoided. There are some things about Clinton that you do not know—that even his own men do not know. I can’t explain, for I have no right to do so. Perhaps some day he will tell you himself.”

“What are you going to do, then?” she asked.

“That depends a great deal on you,” he answered. “If, for instance, you were able to let Clinton’s men in? Otherwise, I’ll unlock the front door now in readiness so that they can get in themselves—and I can get away when I hear them coming.”

“I am sure I could do that,” said Doris—and sat upright on the couch.

“All right! That’s fine!” smiled Keith. “But”—he drew her head gently down again—“they’re not here yet. And now just one more word about this. You will be asked a lot of questions. You can tell them your whole story, all about yourself, everything—except that you must not mention Rookie Dyke. When they ask you where Keith Wharton is, say I have gone out after Tiger Claws. Tell them I am a friend of Clinton, but that you do not know where I live—which is perfectly true. Don’t worry about anything. Clinton will straighten it all out through the heads of his Department. Is this quite clear?”

“I shall be very careful of Rookie Dyke,” she said, half wistfully, half shyly, “because—well——” She hesitated and stopped.

“Yes?” Keith prompted eagerly. “Because?”

“Because”—a sudden mischievousness was in her eyes—“because he is such a strange, strange man.”

“No!” Keith cried. “That was years ago! Have I failed so utterly when I said I would teach you another adjective than that?”

“What is it?” she asked demurely—but there was color in her face and her eyes were averted now.

“You know!” he pleaded. “Say it!”

“Well, then—because,” she whispered, “because he is such a dear, dear man.”

She was in his arms, held close to him as though he would never let her go again. The improvised bandage was forgotten. He laid his cheek against hers. Her arm had crept around his neck.

“Doris!” All the world was in that name. “Doris!” He said it over and over again: “Doris! Doris!”

CHAPTER XX

The Mahogany Box

As the car with Clinton's men had rolled up to the front door, Keith had made his way out to the street by the side door in the fence, and, losing not a minute on his return trip downtown, was now approaching the tenement that Rookie Dyke called home. Clinton, of course, must be told what had happened, but there was another reason for coming back here before making any other move. Tony Larfino lived in the basement below.

He had not thought of Tony Larfino until on his way downtown. Perhaps it wouldn't result in much anyway. There wouldn't be any more Bowery Sal. Tiger Claws would have shed that disguise without any loss of time; but it was Tony Larfino who had come to him, Keith, in the first place about Bowery Sal. Tony had said, and shown by his actions, that Bowery Sal was a very good friend of his. There was very little probability indeed that the hand-organ grinder had the least idea, any more than he, Keith, had had, that Bowery Sal was anything other than she seemed; but Tony would at least know where Bowery Sal had lived, and certainly know something of Bowery Sal's habits and acquaintances. Whether this would lead anywhere or not was questionable, but it was better than plunging blindly in the dark.

Under ordinary circumstances, Tony probably wouldn't want to talk, and it would be hard to get anything out of him, but this was quite a different matter. There was no question here of snitching on a pal. Tiger Claws had no pal. He was as much anathema to the underworld as he was to the police. His reign of terror had inspired only hate and a thirst for revenge in the Bad Lands. He had killed his own kind without compunction—witness Jacob Shinler! Tiger Claws was fair game!

Well, anyway, he, Keith, would go on—to the end; go on until Tiger Claws, or the Magpie—it didn't matter which the fiend was called!—was cornered and caught. There was only one of the four left now—just one! The other three had died either directly or through the instrumentality of that one. But that *one* was left!

All the way downtown his mind had been dwelling on that. If he had had no reason before for wanting to get to grips with that one man, the last man, the Magpie, Tiger Claws, he had a reason now that alone would drive him on irrevocably to a final accounting! Doris was safe—he knew great gratitude and deep thanksgiving for that, the greater and deeper now for the knowledge that love, too, had come to her—but it was only by a miracle that she was safe. Deliberately and in cold blood the Magpie, this Tiger Claws, had gone up there to crush out her life! That alone would urge him on! But he needed no urging. There was Allan . . . and Taipi . . . and Hoka. . . .

He had reached the tenement now, and, descending the four or five steps from the street level to the basement that was Tony Larfino's habitation, he knocked upon the door. There was no answer. He knocked again. There was no sign of any light, and he could hear no sound from within. Tony Larfino was obviously not at home.

Keith mounted the steps again, entered the tenement, and, running along the hall, burst into Clinton's room.

"Hello! Good Lord!" exclaimed Clinton, coming bolt upright in bed. "You look as though there'd been doings! What's up?"

Keith told him—in a few rapid, concise sentences.

Clinton whistled low under his breath. And then for a moment he was silent, frowning meditatively at Keith.

"Well, anyway," he said finally, "there is no need for any more worry about Doris. The police, of course, will be in charge up there, but they won't disturb her—I'll see that they don't, in any case. The police, however, will be rather curious, I should say, at the non-appearance of a certain Mr. Keith Wharton."

"I dare say!" admitted Keith laconically.

"How about letting Mr. Keith Wharton appear on the scene, then?" suggested Clinton. "There is only one of the four left. What do you say to relegating Rookie Dyke to a memory, and leaving Tiger Claws to the police? They'll be after him bald-headed now!"

Keith's jaws came together with a snap.

"No!" he flung out intolerantly. "Not till Tiger Claws is caught! Police or no police, and whether anything I can do makes any difference or not, I'll carry on till then!"

Clinton smiled gravely.

“Sorry, Keith!” he said. “A bit thick of me to suggest it. I ought to have known better. All right! I can fix things up so far as the police and the house are concerned, even if I can’t get to a telephone. A code wire will do. But you’ll have to wait a bit. Besides working it out, there’s a lot to say and it takes time.”

“Go ahead, then, and work it out,” Keith agreed hurriedly; “but I won’t wait for it now. They wouldn’t get it until the morning, anyhow; and I’ll send it then. I’m off now!”

“Off? Where to?” demanded Clinton.

“Well, first of all, to find Tony Larfino,” Keith replied. “He’s not home, for I’ve just been there. He hasn’t by any chance been in here since this afternoon, has he?”

“Yes,” said Clinton, “he has. As a matter of fact, he hadn’t been gone more than three or four minutes when you came in. But what do you want Tony Larfino for?”

“Because he is, or was, a friend of Bowery Sal, and knows a lot about her,” said Keith. “I say ‘her,’ but you know what I mean. It was through Tony Larfino, wasn’t it, that I met Bowery Sal?”

Clinton shook his head.

“Bowery Sal doesn’t exist any more,” he stated decisively. “After what has happened to-night, you may be absolutely certain of that. Her shawl and her bonnet and her wig and her spectacles may be found sometime, somewhere—as mementoes!—but that’s all. I don’t see what you can expect from Tony Larfino. You don’t imagine, do you, that he knew Bowery Sal was a fake, or knew who ‘she’ was?”

“No,” said Keith bluntly; “I don’t. Furthermore, from what I know now of Tiger Claws, I am certain that, until to-night, there was only one man in the world knew who Bowery Sal actually was—and that was Tiger Claws himself.”

“Right!” said Clinton tersely. “Well?”

“Well, it’s a chance, the only one I’ve got, and I’m going to take it,” said Keith. “Tony Larfino may be able to come across with something that will help. Did he say where he was going?”

“He said he was going down to Baldy Mack’s—the Crystal Bowl. Know the place?”

Keith nodded.

“Yes, I think so. There’s a dance-hall upstairs over the restaurant, isn’t there, and a roof garden of a sort that’s just been closed for the season?”

“That’s the place.”

Keith moved toward the door.

“It’s a little better class than the ordinary run,” he commented. “I wonder what he’s going down there for? They wouldn’t let him play that hand-organ of his in the Bowl, would they?”

Clinton smiled queerly.

“As a stunt and a bit of camouflage once in a while—yes,” he said. “You remember what I told you about Tony Larfino the first night you were here, don’t you? Dope peddling. I am afraid Tony has about run his race—and so has Baldy Mack. They’re both on the list our friend Loo Ching was afraid of, but we had to land the big fish first. When you get down there you’ll probably find Tony Larfino and Baldy Mack in Baldy’s private sanctum on the top floor near the entrance to the roof garden. I’m not saying what they’ll be doing, but I don’t think it would be healthy for you to burst in on them unawares!”

Keith smiled grimly.

“Thanks for the warning,” he said, as he opened the door; “but Tony won’t make any record time toting that hand-organ, and if he hasn’t been gone any longer than you say, I’ll probably catch up with him before he gets there. ’Night, Bob!”

“Oh, curse this arm!” grumbled Clinton. “Out of it again, and I——”

Keith did not hear the rest; he had closed the door and was hurrying out of the tenement.

Reaching the street, he set himself a brisk pace—and stuck to it. Clinton had been anything but optimistic over Tony Larfino; he, Keith, was not particularly optimistic himself. He could only wait and see. He would hear what Tony Larfino had to say, anyway. There was no use in speculating about it. Doris stole into his mind—and remained there.

He had quite some little distance to go, but at the end of twenty minutes he turned the corner that had brought him to the street in which Baldy Mack’s Crystal Bowl was located—and, as he did so, he caught sight of the hand-organ grinder just entering the place, a little way down the block.

Keith quickened his pace. It was a rather good street for its locality, a busy street, well-lighted, and, it being scarcely nine o'clock, the stores and shops were still open and in full swing.

The Crystal Bowl, as Keith had already remarked to Clinton, was, in outward appearance at least, of the better class of restaurant and dance-hall. One needed no gangland visé here. All were free to enter—and the greater proportion of Baldy Mack's customers were innocent partakers of moderately priced meals, and equally innocent, if at times hilarious, dance fans. It was a three-story building; the ground floor being devoted to an "instalment plan" furniture store which, at the moment, as Keith came abreast of it, appeared to be doing a thriving trade—Baldy Mack occupied the two floors above, using them respectively for his restaurant and dance-hall. One entered the Crystal Bowl by a door adjoining the furniture store.

Keith entered, mounted the somewhat narrow staircase, passed the entrance to the restaurant on the first floor, and continued on up the second flight, where, in turn, he passed the entrance to the dance-hall. No one paid any attention to him. And now he again caught sight of the hand-organ grinder. Clinton had been right! Tony Larfino's business, since the roof garden was no longer open, was obviously a personal matter with Baldy Mack in the latter's private room above. Tony was at the top of the third flight of stairs that led to the roof level.

Keith followed. He had no intention of barging in on any unhallowed conference between Tony Larfino and Baldy Mack; but his business with Tony Larfino was private, too—and there was nothing *but* privacy up there! He would wait, of course, until Tony Larfino had finished his business with Baldy Mack, and then take Tony aside. Baldy Mack might not be over-complacent if he discovered any one else up there—but Tony himself would smooth that over all right if necessary.

Keith gained the head of the stairs, and paused to look around him. The stairs here gave on the rear end of the building, and the somewhat confined space in which Keith now found himself standing was a small, roofed-in enclosure that had manifestly been built as an entrance or portico to the roof garden. It was rather garishly decorated in a cheap Moorish style. There were large double doors a few yards away and across from the head of the stairs that, gaudily painted and fastened by a huge swinging bar to give a grandiose effect, unquestionably led out onto the roof garden itself. Just beside these doors was a sort of kiosk that seemed to serve a double purpose—for the sale of tickets for the performances when the roof garden season was on, since it had a little wicket grill; and also, since it was the only place

up here where it *could* be, obviously did duty as well for Baldy Mack's private conferences.

The door of this somewhat bizarre structure was open, and a light showed out from within. Keith listened. There was no sound of voices. Baldy Mack, therefore, was probably being detained below; and Tony Larfino, being a favored personage, had presumably been told to make himself at home pending the moment when the other could find an opportunity to join him.

"Hello, Tony!" Keith called quietly. "You there?"

Tony, his hand-organ, and the monkey appeared in the lighted doorway. He stared for a moment at Keith in a startled, furtive way; then, hastily shutting the door behind him as though there was something within that was not for the profane eye, took a step or two forward.

"Hello, Rookie!" he said suspiciously. "What da hella you do here?"

"Oh, that's all right," Keith smiled reassuringly. "I'm not trying to butt into anything. That's straight, Tony! Canary Jim told me you said that you were coming down here, and I followed you. I thought I'd catch up with you, but I didn't. You were just going in as I got to the corner. What I want to see you about has nothing to do with this place or anybody here. Get that out of your head. I just want to talk to you on the quiet."

Tony Larfino's rather strained expression relaxed.

"It's about Bowery Sal," said Keith. "Where she hangs out, and all that."

"Bowery Sal!" Tony Larfino grinned suddenly. "You maka da change in da mind, eh? You wanta little piece of da mon' for da other night, after all, eh?"

"No," said Keith. "I want to know about Bowery Sal—all you know about her."

Tony Larfino shook his head.

"I not knowa ver' much. I just knowa what all da rest knowa—dat she's Bowery Sal. Dat's all."

"Oh, no, it isn't," said Keith patiently. "You know a lot more than that. Come on, Tony, spill it! Come across!"

The monkey on Tony Larfino's shoulder began to chatter volubly. Tony's grin broadened.

“Aska da monk!” he suggested. “Dat just as gooda. Maybe I talka my head off lika him, but just da same tella nothin’, ’cause I not knowa nothin’ more about Bowery Sal dan da monk.”

The man was stalling, of course. Keith stepped close to the other.

“Look here, Tony, what’s the use of this?” he demanded a little sharply. “You told me yourself she was a good friend of yours. You worked one deal with her to my knowledge—you’ve probably worked a lot more. Come on now, open up!”

Tony’s grin gave place to a scowl.

“If she gooda da friend of me, dat ver’ gooda da reason for keepa da mouth shut. For what you aska da questions about Bowery Sal?”

“I’ll tell you,” said Keith curtly. “It’ll probably make you change your mind about that friendship stuff. Bowery Sal is Tiger Claws.”

Tony Larfino stared with suddenly narrowed eyes, and then an expression of pitying incredulity swept over his face.

“You gotta da bats up here, eh?” he inquired contemptuously, tapping the monkey’s head with his forefinger. “Or maybe you maka da joke, eh? Well, dat damma da fool joke!”

“It’s not a joke,” said Keith evenly. “I tell you that Bowery Sal is Tiger Claws.”

Tony Larfino’s face began to work unpleasantly.

“What for you tella me dat lie?” he demanded angrily. “You playa da double-cross, eh? You wanta knowa something you thinka I not lika tell; an’ you try for pulla Tony’s leg to getta it!”

Keith curbed a short retort. This wouldn’t do. Tony Larfino seemed to be genuinely convinced that an attempt was being made to make him betray Bowery Sal by unfair means, and in consequence was losing his temper. The only thing to do now was to pacify the man.

“Now, listen, Tony,” he said pleasantly, “you know that I——” He stopped short. Something cataclysmic, something as instantaneous almost as thought was taking place within him. A wild surging of his pulses came, and in a flash he whipped his automatic from his pocket and thrust it into Tony Larfino’s face. He had reached out in friendly fashion to lay his hand on the other’s arm, unthinkingly had grasped the empty sleeve—and felt *the arm itself* against the man’s side. Mad? No, he wasn’t mad! Tony Larfino—

Bowery Sal! It fitted like a glove! That visit of Bowery Sal to Blackie when he, Keith, had accompanied Bowery Sal at Tony Larfino's request—and had been the cat's-paw to prevent any violence on the part of Blackie from disclosing what was beneath the shawl. And Tony Larfino's specious excuse for not going himself because of the inadequate protection against trouble that would be afforded by a man with an empty sleeve! And the eyes! Why should he have never noticed them before? He had never suspected Tony Larfino until this moment—and Bowery Sal had worn spectacles! They were fair with a tinge of green in them. In certain lights they would undoubtedly appear yellowish-green—like the eyes he had seen at Blackie's window! "Don't move!" he said hoarsely. "We'll have a look at that arm—and *hand!*"

Tony Larfino's face was livid. He was snarling like a beast—snarling as that man had snarled in the fight on Herman Keloe's stairs. The monkey, sensing peril, cowered on the hand-organ.

Keith tore open the other's coat. It wasn't any surprise now, he had expected to see it; but there was a strange whirling in his brain as a hand with a thumb and the stumps of four fingers came into view.

"Tiger Claws!" he said through thinned lips.

"What are you going to do?" The snarl had given place to a sudden whimper—the broken English of Tony Larfino was gone. "You're a crook yourself, Rookie—I'll make a deal with you. Yes—eh? Yes! You'll do that, won't you? You won't split, Rookie? I'll make it worth your while."

Keith for a moment made no answer. He felt rapidly over the other's clothing, and possessed himself of the man's revolver. Physically he was quite in control of himself, but his emotions were in riotous confusion. It had all begun back on that lonely beach. This was the final scene. Queer place for it! This was the man he had fought with then for the first time—but the man had not worn false mustachios then! Nor had there been any hand-organ, nor any monkey. Steady! That seething something within him was twisting his mind all out of gear. A crook like the other! Yes, of course! Rookie Dyke was a crook. He was still Rookie Dyke. Well, for the time being, he must remain so. He couldn't let Canary Jim down. The man was whimpering again. All the fight, all the resource seemed to have gone out of him—all he seemed able to do now was to whine and cringe and plead spinelessly.

"You're going downstairs." There was no inflection in Keith's voice. "The one chance you've got is the police. If the crowd get you they'll tear

you to pieces!”

“But you ain’t going to snitch, are you?” whined the other. “We’re all crooks together, Rookie. You’re one of us. And—and I’ll make it right with you.”

“The crooks would make shorter work of you than any one else,” said Keith grimly. “You ought to know where Tiger Claws stands! Come on!”

The erstwhile Tony Larfino began to fumble miserably with the broad leather strap of his hand-organ.

“Listen, Rookie! Listen!” he pleaded piteously. “Give me a chance, won’t you?”

“Come on!” ordered Keith laconically.

“Oh, God!” groaned the man.

He lifted the hand-organ as though to adjust the strap—and, in the winking of an eye, canted it outward, and drove the wooden leg of the instrument with all his force into the pit of Keith’s stomach.

It doubled Keith up like a jack-knife; it hurled him backward, and he fell to the floor at the head of the stairs—and, winded, he writhed helplessly there in agony for a moment. Then he picked up the automatic that had fallen on the stairhead beside him, and struggled desperately to his feet—but the double doors leading out onto the roof garden were open and Tiger Claws was gone.

Keith followed—grimly, painfully. Tiger Claws had been very far from the end of his resources—and the whining, the pleading, and the cringing had not been the least of those resources! But the man had not yet got away! How *was* he going to get away out here on the roof garden? It had been merely a last desperate move for, as Tiger Claws had obviously realized, there had been no chance of escape by way of the stairs, since he, Keith, if he could have done nothing else, could have shouted, and a shout would have brought everybody swarming out upon the man by the time the first landing was reached.

Keith stared around him. It was not so dark out here as he had expected. There was a sort of diffused glow that came up from the lighted store windows and street lamps from below—just enough so that one could see very indistinctly. He could see in a shadowy way the uneven line of roofs that stretched both up and down the block; and, in his immediate neighborhood he could distinguish the permanent fixtures, such as the

uprights for awnings and lights, pertaining to the roof garden; and—yes! There was Tiger Claws just climbing over a low balustrade that enclosed the roof garden! The man was getting onto the next roof.

He started in pursuit. So that was it, was it? He suddenly appreciated the fact that the man had had something in mind besides merely a momentary escape from a desperate situation—a skylight or roof-scuttle somewhere, no doubt, that Tiger Claws had hoped to reach before he was seen, and so get clean away through another building!

Keith made his way across the roof garden. He could not go very fast. He was still half-winded. But Tiger Claws wasn't making very fast time, either. What was the man still hanging on to that hand-organ for? Why didn't he fling it away? Couldn't he get the strap off—or what? No man could run at any speed with that thing to hamper him!

As Keith clambered over the balustrade, Tiger Claws was halfway across the adjoining roof. He could have fired at the other; but he was loath to fire at an unarmed man, even though that man was Tiger Claws—and, besides, Tiger Claws had no possible chance of escape. Keith was running now—his wind was back. He would be up with Tiger Claws long before the other could have any dealings with skylights or roof-scuttles!

The roof of the next building, Keith could see, was lower than the one which both he and Tiger Claws were crossing now. How much lower? Was it negotiable? Tiger Claws had looked back several times in the last minute and knew that he was being followed—and he was just at the edge of the roof there now. No, it could not be very much lower, not dangerously so anyway, for Tiger Claws, without pause or hesitation, had appeared to jump; at least he had disappeared from view, and——

A man's cry of terror was ringing in Keith's ears. It was echoed and re-echoed by a monkey's screams. Keith spurted, and, reaching the spot where Tiger Claws had jumped, halted and looked over. It was not far to the roof below, not more than twelve or fifteen feet, but what Tiger Claws had perhaps not noticed in his mad haste, or had perhaps deliberately risked, was that the roof below was metal-sheeted and sloped steeply toward the street.

Keith's hand went to his forehead—and wiped away the spurting beads of sweat. Whether, because of being cumbered by the hand-organ, it was partly due to loss of balance, or purely because it was the smooth slippery surface which gave no hold for either hand or foot, he did not know—he knew only that a man's despairing cry and a monkey's screams were ringing

in his ears again, as he saw Tiger Claws slide over the roof edge to pitch downward to the street below.

Keith turned and raced back along the roofs and into the Crystal Bowl again. He made his way down the stairs. He paid no attention to any one; no one paid any attention to him. The man was dead, of course. Couldn't help but be! The last of the four! This was the end of them all! Whitie, Blackie, the Weasel, the Magpie—and the mahogany box. What made him think of the mahogany box? Well, it was the end of that, too! What was it Bowery Sal had said? That it was hidden where it would never be found. Did it make any difference? It was all over now!

He swung his hand across his forehead. It was still wet and damp. He went out into the street. A crowd had gathered. He pushed his way into the inner circle. He stared at the scene before him. It was real, every detail was being seared upon his brain, but he was conscious of the feeling that somehow or other it all seemed to be unreal. *But even the mahogany box and the "rope of diamonds" were here!* And he had wondered why Tiger Claws hadn't thrown the hand-organ away on the roof! It was quite true that nobody would ever have thought of looking in a hand-organ for the mahogany box! But the hand-organ had been smashed in its fall, and from the gaping side of the hand-organ protruded the mahogany box whose top was split open, and whose contents, even in the light of a street lamp nearby, glistened like living fire. Tiger Claws was lying there dead—not prettily. The monkey was dead. He looked longer at the monkey—the little creature was still fastened to the hand-organ by its tethering cord. And over all a policeman stood guard.

Keith listened in a detached way to the comments of the crowd—it was all epitomized in one word.

"Gord!" gasped the crowd in awe-struck whispers.

"Gwan! Stand back, or I'll run a bunch av yez in!" ordered the policeman monarchially.

Keith made his way blindly out of the crowd. This was the end of the chase, the end of it all. Tiger Claws was dead! That was the thought which ought to be obsessing him, but his mind seemed to be strangely abnormal. He was concerned about the dead monkey. That was beastly luck. The monkey had been an innocent by-stander!

There came fairer days. In due course of time, a certain amount of red tape having been unwound by Bob Clinton of the Secret Service, the mahogany box and its contents came officially into the possession of Doris Marland. But, meanwhile, a Mr. Keith Wharton had arrived in New York from the Orient—and one Rookie Dyke had departed, so the underworld was confidentially informed by Canary Jim, for his old haunts somewhere in the West.

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.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Tiger Claws* by Frank L. Packard]