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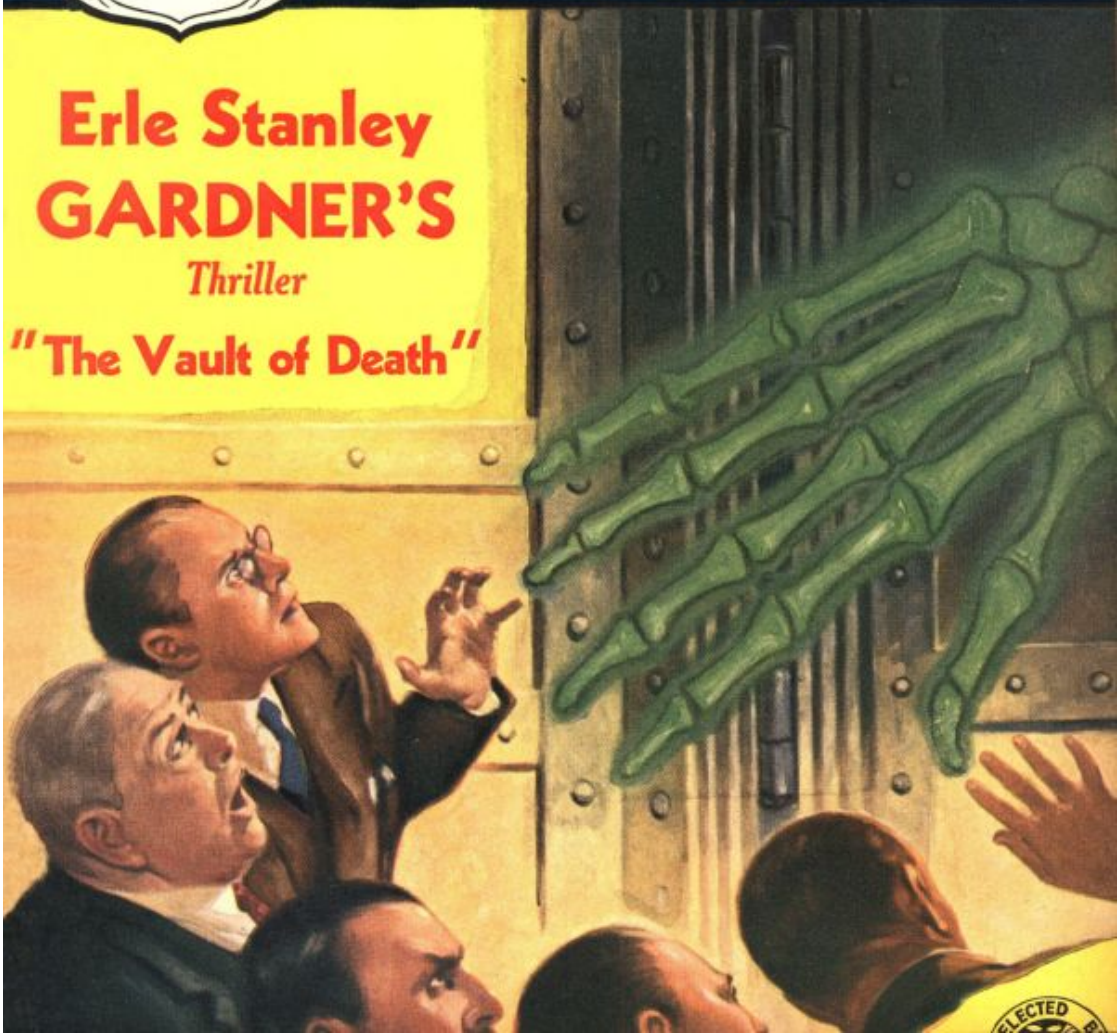


Formerly Flynn's

**Erle Stanley  
GARDNER'S**

*Thriller*

**"The Vault of Death"**



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“Get back!” he shouted to Nell McLane

# The VAULT of DEATH

Also published under the title *The Man Who Couldn't Remember*.

By

Erle Stanley Gardner

First published *Detective Fiction Weekly*, March 9, 1935.

*Locked Within a Vault of Steel, Five Millionaires Fight a Grim and Frantic Battle with  
the Murderer They Cannot See*



Gale regarded the shattered window, then shuddered

## CHAPTER I

### The Besieged Millionaires

The five men sat huddled around the big directors' table over which so many dividends had been declared. George Millers, fat, ponderous and wheezy, occupied the chair at the head of the table. Harrison Gale, nervous, dyspeptic, irritable, watery-eyed, sat in the chair on Millers' right. Pitley Simms, shrewd, selfish, grasping, miserly, was on the left. Next to Simms sat C. Wright Delamy, broad-shouldered, open-faced, clear-eyed. Across from him sat Taber Boxman, well-dressed, sophisticated, suave, but with restless, watchful eyes.

In the center of the table reposed the letter which said these five men would die unless a sum of two million dollars was placed at the disposal of the sender of the letter.

Harrison Gale cleared his throat.

"We can't call in the police," he said.

"Not the police," Millers remarked. "They would be out of the question. They would be certain to bungle it. I was referring to a good firm of detectives."

Taber Boxman's voice was high-pitched. The words came from his lips in rapid sequence.

"Not even a private detective," he said. "We can't let the insurance company get hold of this."

"Why the insurance company?" C. Wright Delamy inquired. "What have they got to do with it?"

George Millers nodded his head in ponderous acquiescence.

"Boxman is right," he said. "The five of us constitute all of the partners of the Betterbilt Investment Company. That company, as you know, has purchased some of the larger office buildings in the city, and is holding them against the time when business will pick up and the offices in the better class of structure will be at a premium.

"Virtually all of these buildings were purchased at foreclosure sales. We have secured them for the amount of bonds which represent a fraction of their original cost. It is possible for us to make billions when . . ."

"What's all that got to do with it?" Delamy said impatiently. "Get down to brass tacks, Millers. You're not making a political speech to a women's club. Good Lord, we, all of us, know the details of our business."

Millers flushed. His glassy, bulgy eyes showed resentment.

"Apparently, *you* don't know the details of the business," he said, "or you'd remember that the partnership carries business insurance upon each member. We are insured against accident, sickness and death. It's a form of group insurance under which the companies have the right to cancel the policies, in the event it should appear that business or social conditions have made us an unsafe risk."

"Is that clause in the policies?" Delamy demanded.

"It is," Millers said, "and was put in against just such a contingency as this. The amount of insurance is too large for the companies to take chances with."

"Ridiculous," Gale snorted. "But remember they have to give us back the premiums if they cancel the policies. Those premiums amount to a pretty penny by this time."

"The insurance is more valuable," Boxman said. "We can't let some fool fanatic upset our business plans."

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“Perhaps,” Pitley Simms suggested, “some of you gentlemen would like to buy me out. I’d be willing to sell my interest at a considerable sacrifice.”

“What’s the idea?” Delamy asked. “Getting frightened over an anonymous letter?”

“No, I’m not frightened. But you’ve got to admit we’ve been waiting a long time for our profits. We’ve got a lot of obligations to meet when these liens begins to mature. We . . .”

“Oh, forget it,” Delamy said. “We’re all in the same boat together. The investments are just as good as they ever were. There isn’t any one of us but what can afford to carry his share. Look at the list of buildings we’ve got—virtually every attractive business structure that could have been purchased for under thirty per cent of its original cost.”

“It isn’t that,” Simms said quietly. “It’s the fact that I want to get out of the country. There’s too much lawlessness, too much social unrest, too many kidnappings.”





## THEY COWERED TOGETHER IN THEIR STEEL FORTRESS

GALE, nervous, dyspeptic . . .

BOXMAN, suave, restless, watchful . . .

MILLERS, fat, ponderous, wheezy.

SIMMS, grasping, miserly . . .

DELAMY, clear-eyed, competent.

DEATH HAD LAID SIEGE TO THEM ALL!

“It’s your country, isn’t it?” Delamy asked.

“I’ve made my money in it,” Simms countered, “if that’s what you mean.”

“That’s what I mean,” Delamy said. “If it was good enough for you to make your money in, stay with it. Taking your money to a foreign country isn’t going to do you any good.”

Taber Boxman reached out a long, well-manicured finger and tapped the note which lay in the center of the table.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “there’s no use becoming unduly alarmed about this thing, but I suggest we take reasonable precautions.”

Harrison Gale laughed nervously.

“Undue alarm,” he said, “is all a question of personal opinion. As far as I’m concerned, I’ve seen lawlessness develop from bootlegging to kidnaping. God knows what will be the next step.”

---

Millers said, “Someone has suggested that we get down to brass tacks. We can’t handle this situation by discussing the social conditions of the country. Gentlemen, is it your pleasure we employ the police?”

“No,” they said almost in chorus.

“Shall we consult some private detective?”

There was a moment of hesitation; then Boxman leaned forward and said with quiet force: “Let’s use our heads. This letter is obviously written by someone who has been misled by the extent of our operations. Because we have purchased a large number of important buildings he evidently has the idea we have a large surplus of ready cash available.

“I guess there’s no question but that the five of us could scrape up a great deal of ready coin, if we were in a position where we *had* to do it. However the point I’m making is that this man picks on *all five of us*, not one of us, but all five. He is, therefore, someone who has a general idea of the partnership arrangement under which we are working. He is, therefore, someone who may be dangerous.

“We own and operate a string of high-class buildings. Among others is the Midwick. You will remember that recently, in order to cut operating expenses, we closed up the top five floors of that building—the forty-sixth to the fiftieth inclusive.

“Gentlemen, my suggestion is that we move into the top five floors of that building. With the facilities at our command we can fix up very comfortable living and office quarters. We can arrange for proper guards. We will close up the stairs from the forty-sixth floor. We will operate only one elevator above the forty-sixth floor. We will station guards in the foyer of the building. We will see that two men are always on duty in the elevator. We will have our meals sent up, or, if you prefer, we can have them cooked on the premises. We will hold ourselves virtually in a state of siege. We will have ample office space to provide for living quarters for such personal help as we wish to employ.”

Boxman looked around the table and saw, from the expressions of those about, that his words carried weight.

“Will that cause newspaper comment?” asked Millers.

“Absolutely not,” Boxman said quietly. “The newspapers will be told that the Betterbilt Investment Company has taken over the top five floors for its executive offices.”

“Suppose some of the reporters try to interview us?” Simms suggested.

“Anyone who wishes to come to the offices of the Betterbilt Investment Company will be welcome,” Boxman said with a quiet smile. “*But*, when he leaves the elevator he will find himself in a reception room which is fitted up with comfortable chairs, couches, deep carpets, and a supply of the latest reading matter ready to his elbow. He will be asked to wait.

“What he will notice is that the walls of that room are of steel; that the doors are of steel and electrically controlled; that a guard, with a machine gun in a concealed cage, will be able to spray the room with lead at a moment’s notice. One of the secretaries will wait upon that visitor. He will be politely informed that the person he wishes to see is busy. That person will, however, consent to an interview over the telephone, if it is a matter of importance.”

Millers looked about him.

“You, gentlemen, have heard Director Boxman’s suggestion,” he said. “Is it your pleasure . . .”

Four heads nodded in solemn unison. There was no necessity to put the question.

“That’s settled, then,” Millers said, glancing at his watch. “We will leave the construction details to Frank Menloe?”

“He can put on a force to work day and night,” Gale said. “It won’t be necessary to do a great deal of changing around. The main thing to do is to see that the reception room is proof against any sort of a surprise attack, and I presume we’ve got to watch out for a bomb. We can . . .”

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A knock sounded at the door, which was opened a moment later. A tall, slender individual, with a modest, self-effacing manner, extended a telegram.

“This,” he said, “is important, and . . .”

George Millers pounded the table with his fist.

“Damn it, Crail,” he said, “I told you that we weren’t to be disturbed! This conference takes precedence over any and all individual business. A telegram, bah! What the hell do we care about telegrams?”

“I beg your pardon, sir,” Ashley Crail said, “but if you’ll notice the contents of this telegram, Mr. Millers, you’ll see that it’s vitally important to this conference.”

Millers jerked the telegram out of the man’s hand, read it, then let his mouth sag slowly open.

“Good heavens!” he said.

“Well,” Harrison Gale demanded, “what is it?”

He reached over and snatched the telegram from Millers’ hand.

“We’re all interested, you know,” Delamy suggested affably. “Suppose you read it.”

In a high-pitched, piping voice, Gale read the telegram: “Members, Betterbilt Investment Company. Gentlemen: I am listening to your plans with a great deal of amusement. Go ahead, by all means, and adopt every precaution which your fear suggests. You have ample money at your disposal to surround yourselves with every reasonable safeguard; if my communication causes you to start spending this money, it will have put that much more coin into circulation.

I am sorry to say, however, that the precautions you contemplate are woefully inadequate. In order to show you my power, I will give you forty-eight hours to prepare to avoid my demands. At the expiration of that time I will demonstrate to you the complete futility of your plans. After all, I can deal with four much more easily than with five.”

The telegram was signed, “I. B. Letterman.”

C. Wright Delamy spoke without the slightest trace of emotion.

“That,” he said, “would not sound like a fictitious name to a telegraph company. To us, however, it would indicate that the sender had also sent us the anonymous letter.”

“Observe,” Boxman said, “that it is general in its terms. It doesn’t say what we are planning. It merely runs a bluff by trying to make us *think* that he knows.”

“Nevertheless,” Harrison Gale said, clearing his throat nervously, “it does show that the man has some knowledge of our activities. He knows that we are engaged in a conference on this thing at the present time. I don’t like it.”

“Hell,” Delamy said with a wry grin, “we’re none of us crazy about it.”

Millers turned to Ashley Crail.

“Trace this telegram,” he said.

“I’ve already done so, sir,” Crail said. “It was telephoned in. The person telephoning gave a fictitious name and telephone number. That is, he gave the name and telephone number of a banker. I have communicated with the banker. He knows nothing whatever about the message. He insists that it could not have been sent from his telephone.”

Boxman scraped back his chair.

“Mr. President,” he said, with a droll smile, “I have a motion to make in connection with this telegram.”

“What is it?” Millers inquired.

“I move you,” Boxman said, “that we file the telegram with the letter.”

He made a rather exaggerated bow to the other partners.

“There is,” he said, “nothing else you can do about it—not one damn thing.”

## CHAPTER II

### A Threat

The broad-shouldered man stared about the room approvingly. Behind him five men filed from the elevator.

“Well,” Frank Menloe said, “there it is, all ready to move in.”

“It’s impossible for anyone to rush through these doors?” George Millers asked.

“Absolutely impossible.”

“They look frail.”

“They’re not. They’re the toughest steel obtainable. The frosted glass is shatter-proof. It’s also reinforced with what appears to be chicken wire. It isn’t—it’s tough steel wire reinforcement. Back of that door is another door. They’re arranged so they can only be opened by an electrical contact. That contact is controlled by the man who occupies the concealed cage back of that fresco work. That cage is steel lined. There are two machine guns in there trained on the room. You folks can’t make them out, but they’re there just the same.”

“Our furniture is here?” Pitley Simms asked.

“The furniture, files, wardrobe, everything is all in. You, gentlemen, have your valets, your secretaries, your private files. There’s a vault room on the forty-eight floor to which you have joint access. It’s not exactly burglar-proof, but it’s proof against anything except an expert cracksman with proper material and a good deal of time at his command, and an expert cracksman isn’t going to get in here. You can keep whatever sums of cash you want there, and such private documents as you don’t want to leave in your files. Each one of you has a separate compartment in that vault—each compartment with a separate door and a private combination.”

Millers rubbed the head of the police dog at his side.

“Well,” he said, “I’m going to keep Tiger Boy with me at all times. I put more reliance in him than I do in all of these other precautions.”

Menloe stared at the dog appraisingly.

“I guess he’s all right,” he said. “Personally, I never had much use for police dogs. I think they’re treacherous.”

“You’re thinking of Great Danes,” Millers said patronizingly.

“Some of them are treacherous,” Boxman announced. “Some of them aren’t . . . But, gentlemen, we’re wasting time here. This is just the position we don’t want to be in. We’re all together here in this room. If anything should happen . . .”

They nodded, moved with one accord toward the electrically controlled doors.

---

Unseen hands worked the electric connections which released the sealed doors. They swung silently open. The besieged millionaires marched through the passageway.

C. Wright Delamy spoke to Elizabeth Crail, his confidential secretary.

“I’m not particularly keen about the idea,” he said. “We’re virtually putting ourselves in jail in order to safeguard our wealth. Harrison Gale’s got a son. That son doesn’t have any normal play life whatever. He’s constantly guarded as a protection against kidnapers. If our wealth means that we’ve got to endure this sort of an existence I’d prefer not to have wealth.”

She was in the late twenties, a woman with a willowy figure, quick, alert eyes, chestnut hair, a vivacious manner, and a quick smile.

"I wondered if you wouldn't feel that way about it," she said.

George Millers stood in the center of the room.

"Sort of a club room, eh?" he asked Menloe.

Menloe nodded.

"I figured you folks could get together and talk things over here," he said. "Of course, you each have your private sitting rooms. You can entertain guests there if . . ."

"There aren't going to be any guests," Millers said determinedly. "Not until this thing is cleared up."

An electric bell sounded stridently in the steel-lined room which they had just left. Fainter reverberations were heard throughout the corridors.

"What's that?" Millers asked.

"That," Menloe said, frowning, "is the warning that someone is coming up in the elevator."

"I thought people weren't to come up in that elevator?" Millers said.

"Only those who can get past the guards on the lower floor," Menloe agreed, "but you must remember that we don't want the general public to feel that you people are in a state of siege. A reasonable attempt is made to segregate callers. People who haven't business of some importance are told to write for an appointment. And now, if you folks will go to your various rooms I'll explain the manner in which this thing works out.

"There's a loud-speaking intercommunicating telephone system between the various rooms. Then there's a special amplifier by which the person who wishes to listen to what is being said in the reception room can plug in on the conversation, hear it just as plain as though it were in the same room with him. There's also a periscopic attachment, so that you can see the person who's asking for an audience."

Millers patted Menloe on the back with a chubby hand.

"Menloe," he said, "it's fine work. I don't think I've ever been better organized to live the sort of life I want to live. I think I'll stay here."

C. Wright Delamy gave a shake to his shoulders as though trying to throw away some disagreeable thought.

"Personally," he said, "I'm staying here simply because you folks feel we should all be together. I'd prefer to take my chances in the open."

Taber Boxman nodded slowly.

"I know exactly how you feel, Delamy. I'd be inclined to take my own chances in the open, only I realize that it's a question of playing the thing safe."

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Harrison Gale rubbed his hands together.

"If the cost isn't prohibitive," he said, "it's remarkably efficient."

"Well," Millers remarked, "let's go to our various rooms. We can try out our telephone system, and we can see who this first visitor is."

Delamy swung open the door to a suite of rooms.

"Why not all come in here with me," he said, "since I seem to have drawn the lower floor? We'll look this thing over together and see how it works."

Millers hesitated, but Pitley Simms nodded his head vehemently.

“Now,” he said, “you’re talking sense. Whenever anything happens which seems to affect us, we can all be together and see what’s going on.”

They sat around a big desk in the room which had been fitted up as C. Wright Delamy’s private office.

“If you wish,” Menloe said, “you can see what’s taking place on a screen. The illumination isn’t as brilliant as I would like to have it. That’s due to the presence of prismatic mirrors which reduce the image in size and then enlarge it through a series of lenses. However, here it is.”

He pressed a button. In a dark corner of the room light sprang into brilliance on a silver screen. Spread out before the members of the Betterbilt Investment Company was a view of the room into which the elevator opened. A messenger, in uniform, was delivering a telegram to Ashley Crail.

“Let’s make a pool,” Boxman said. “We’ll put in a hundred dollars apiece. The man who gets the first telegram delivered here wins the pool.”

They nodded their heads. Menloe pressed a switch. A vague humming sound filled the room, and then the voice of Ashley Crail, sounding greatly amplified, but, nevertheless, speaking clearly, and without distortion, said, “Who’s it for?”

The image of the messenger boy on the screen moved slightly. The head came up. The men, watching the screen, could see his features clearly, could see his lips move as he spoke. Then his voice hummed in over the loud-speaking system.

“It’s for the Betterbilt Investment Company,” he said.

Delamy turned to Elizabeth Crail.

“Skip out there and see what it is,” he said.

She nodded, left the room; a moment later they saw her image come on the screen. They could even hear the rustle of paper as her fingers ripped the envelope open. She stared at the message for a moment, and her face showed on the screen as a picture of consternation.

Delamy gave an explanation.

“Two to one,” he said, “that it’s a telegram from this man who signs himself I. B. Letterman.”

There were no takers.

Ten seconds later the men stood in a circle staring moodily down at the telegram, which read, simply:

ELABORATE PRECAUTIONS, GENTLEMEN. THEY ARE NOT ELABORATE ENOUGH. WITHIN THE NEXT TEN HOURS I WILL DEMONSTRATE TO YOU THE FUTILITY OF ATTEMPTING ESCAPE. TOMORROW I WILL DEAL WITH BUT FOUR. BY THE TIME I HAVE NARROWED THE FIELD TO THREE I WILL GET WHAT I WANT. IN THE MEANTIME YOU MIGHT DRAW STRAWS TO SEE WHO WILL BE NUMBER TWO ON THE LIST.

I. B. LETTERMAN.

## CHAPTER III

### The Man Who Screamed

The bell which announced the arrival of a visitor clanged through the steel-walled reception room. A few moments later a rather shabbily-dressed man, about thirty, with penetrating, steady eyes, stepped from the elevator into the reception room. A young woman glanced at him.

“Mr. Millers,” he said.

“Your name?”

“Carl Draper.”

“What did you wish to see Mr. Millers about, Mr. Draper?”

“It’s rather personal,” Draper said.

“I’m sorry, but you’ll have to give me an outline of what it is.”

“It has to do,” he said slowly, “with Mr. Millers’ safety. It has to do with the safety of all of the five men who are here.”

She stared at him steadily, and he met her gaze without flinching.

“Can you be more specific than that?”

“You might tell him,” he said, “that it is a matter of importance to him. If he wishes to know anything about me he can find out from Mr. Ashley Crail, who is, I believe, in his employ.”

She nodded and pressed a button.

“Just a moment,” she said.

Nell McLane, George Millers’ secretary, picked up the telephone, listened for a moment, then turned to Millers.

“A man,” she said, “to see you who says his business has something to do with your immediate safety.”

“What’s his name?” Millers demanded.

“Carl Draper.”

“Never heard of him before.”

“Would you like to take a look at him?”

“I think I will,” Millers said.

He strode into the room which was set aside for his private use, snapped over a key, observed the image which appeared on the screen.

Slowly he shook his head.

“I not only don’t know him,” he said, “but I don’t want to know him. He looks suspicious to me. I’m going to stretch out and smoke a cigar. You can talk with him. Get him to tell you exactly what he has in mind. I’ll listen in on the amplifier.”

---

Nell McLane nodded, picked up notebook and pencil, and took the inter-office elevator to the forty-sixth floor. The electric doors opened at her signal. She advanced to Carl Draper.

“I’m Mr. Millers’ secretary,” she said. “You can tell me exactly what you have in mind.”

“I’ve been an officer,” he told her. “I’ve been a prize fighter; I’ve smuggled arms; I’ve been a revolutionist; I’ve been a bootlegger and I’ve been a hijacker. I happen to know that Mr. Millers is in need of a personal bodyguard. I want the job.”

She shook her head slowly.

“In the first place,” she said, “you’ve been misinformed. In the second place, Mr. Millers wouldn’t hire a bodyguard who applied for the position. If he wanted a bodyguard he’d select one carefully from men who would have no idea that they were being considered for the position.”

Draper’s face showed disappointment.

“I’m friendly with Ashley Crail,” he said. “I’ve been friendly with him for a long time. He can give me plenty of character references. Crail works for Mr. Millers, doesn’t he?”

“He’s in the employ of the Betterbilt Investment Company, of which Mr. Millers’ is a member.”



HARPER

“Listen,” Draper said. “I want to talk with Mr. Millers. If he listens to me for five minutes he’ll give me the job. I know he will.”

“But,” Nell McLane pointed out, “Mr. Millers has no need for a bodyguard, none whatever.”

“The other fellows have bodyguards,” Draper said defiantly. “Harrison Gale has two bodyguards for his son and one for himself.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“I’m afraid, Mr. Draper, that the interview is ended. After all, I’m very busy, and there is absolutely nothing which we have to offer.”

She turned toward the door.

Draper hesitated for a moment, made a quick step after her.

“Look here,” he said, “I’m going to tell you something. I’ve had an opportunity to get into a racket which was *against* Mr. Millers. I could give him some information about . . .”



Miss McLane turned.

“You can give me some specific information?” she asked.

“Not to you,” he said. “Only to Mr. Millers.”

She hesitated a moment and said, “I’d have to ask Mr. Millers personally before I could consent to an interview.”

She waited expectantly, then said, “Would you mind being seated for a few minutes? I’ll see if Mr. Millers would care to talk with you.”

She paused for a moment at the desk where the young lady who sat behind the sign marked “*Information*” controlled the switchboard.

This young woman knew nothing whatever of the steel walls, of the machine guns which were in a position to spray the room with lead. The members of the Betterbilt Investment Company had felt it would be better to secure some stranger who would accept the work as routine employment. In that way, prying newspaper reporters would be unable to get any information from her, for the simple reason that she wouldn’t have any information to give.

---

When no call was received from Millers, Nell McLane moved toward the electrically controlled doors. They swung open, one at a time, clanged shut behind her. She got to the inter-office elevator which ran only between the forty-sixth and the fiftieth floor, nodded to the uniformed attendant, entered the cage, and was just leaving the elevator at the fiftieth floor when it happened.

There could be no mistaking the sound.

It was Millers who had screamed. The booming, vibrant quality of his utterances was sufficiently distinctive to stamp even a scream with his individuality.

Above the scream was a roaring sound—a peculiar harsh, snarling undertone of vicious noise.

Something crashed to the floor. Millers screamed again, gave a shouted cry which was inarticulate. The cry terminated in a second jarring thud. A half second later glass crashed outward.

Silence seemed even more sinister than the noise which had preceded it.

Nell McLane stared at the uniformed elevator man.

“Get help,” she said.

She ran toward the door, flung her weight against it, twisting the knob. The uniformed elevator man shoved with his own shoulder against the door.

“No, no,” she gasped, “get help!”

“Not until we find out what’s happening,” he said. “I won’t leave you here alone.”

“The door’s locked. We couldn’t smash it down in a hundred years. Get the others. Get Mr. Menloe; he’ll know how to git in.”

She pounded on the door with futile knuckles, shouting, “Are you all right, Mr. Millers? Tell me if you’re all right!”

There was a faint noise from inside—a noise which was audible through the ventilating cracks in the door, but it was not a definite sound—nothing upon which the ears could focus, merely a vague rustling of motion.

The elevator man ran for his cage. Neil McLane continued to stand at the door, rattling the knob, twisting it in her fingers, pushing her slender shoulder against the massive door.

Menloe came up the steps on the run.

“What happened?” he asked.

“We don’t know.”

“Millers’ police dog,” he said, “was thrown out of the window. He fell fifty stories to the sidewalk.”

“Good God!” she said.

Menloe ran to a closet.

“It’s going to take a crowbar,” he said, “to get that door open; even then we’re going to lose about five minutes.”

He found a bar, started work on the door, wrenching, twisting and hammering.

There was no sound from the room now, nothing but silence.

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Taber Boxman came up the stairs, his face white, his eyes wide. A short distance behind him Harrison Gale appeared, puffing from his unaccustomed exercise.

“What is it?” he asked.

“We don’t know yet,” Menloe told them, straining his shoulder against the crowbar. “I’m afraid we’ve got to get a torch and burn through this steel door. There’s only one chance in a hundred that I can . . .”

He gave one final lunge against the bar. The door lifted, remained still for a moment; then, with a sound of metal pulling from metal, the lock let loose and the door shivered inward.

Millers was lying on his face in the center of a great, welling, red pool. He was motionless.

Menloe ran to him, turned the figure on its back, then gave a startled exclamation.

“Get back!” he shouted to Nell McLane. “His throat’s gone!”

“Cut?” asked Taber Boxman.

“I said it’s gone!” Menloe cried in a voice which was high-pitched with hysterical excitement.

Harrison Gale walked across the room, carefully skirting the pool of sinister red. He regarded the shattered glass of the window.

“Someone,” he said, “threw the dog out of the window.”

He leaned forward and looked down, then shuddered.

“Fifty stories,” he said.

Menloe wiped his face with a handkerchief.

“I saw it,” he said, “after it hit the sidewalk . . . the dog . . . that is, all that was left. It was like a big red pancake smeared all over the sidewalk.”

Nell McLane indicated the door and the windows.

“No one,” she said, “could possibly have got in here. No one could possibly have left.”

Menloe grunted, stared at the sprawled figure.

“Are you,” he asked, “telling me? I designed the damn place.”

“We’ll have to telephone to the police, Miss McLane,” Boxman said.

Menloe stood with his hands clenched, staring down at the corpse.

“But, he said that no matter what happened we were to keep it out of the newspapers,” Nell McLane remarked.

Boxman’s hand rested lightly, and in a kindly manner, on her shoulder.

“Poor kid,” he said, “I’m afraid you don’t understand. All that’s been changed now.”

It was Harrison Gale who, with watery-eyed cynicism, crashed the idea home to her consciousness.

“He’d want it that way,” he said. “He’d want a big obituary.”

## CHAPTER IV

### The Man Who Couldn't Forget

Four millionaires sat in the conference room. Four millionaires who talked in low voices, and who kept their heads close together, as though by huddling they could, in some way, shut out the menace of that which had happened, and that which threatened.

"You can't tell me," Boxman said, with quiet finality, "that the fellow who came in to see Millers didn't have something to do with it."

"But he couldn't have gone into the room," Gale protested. "He was sitting right there in the reception room all the time."

Boxman shrugged his shoulders, a gesture of suave finality.

"No one," he said, "could have entered that room. At any rate, that's what Menloe says."

"I'm not so sure about Menloe," Pitley Simms remarked.

"Nonsense," Boxman said. "If there's anyone who's under suspicion, it's that man Draper."

"What happened? How long did he wait?" Delamy inquired.

"He didn't wait," Boxman said. "Nell McLane went to ask Millers whether he wanted to pump this chap personally. The chap seemed to have some information, or else he was running a pretty good bluff. Nell thought that Millers might want to talk with him personally, and then, perhaps, turn him over to the police."

"We've got to keep the police out of this just as much as we can," Boxman announced.

"The cat's out of the bag now," Delamy said.

"Then, we've got to work fast and get this straightened out before the insurance company changes the classification of us as business risks."

Delamy said slowly, "I wonder if you fellows have seen 'The Man Who Couldn't Forget'?"

"I have," Harrison Gale said.

Boxman raised his eyebrows.

"It was a revelation to me," Delamy told them quietly. "I went to the show because I felt like vaudeville. I didn't know what was on the bill at the time.

"Most men try to remember. This man tries to forget and can't do it. Anything that he sees once he remembers indefinitely. He can go through the audience, pick out faces, and tell where he last saw them—in different cities, riding on trains, whizzing by in automobiles, pounding the sidewalks."

"Incredible," Pitley Simms said.

"It may be incredible," Delamy told him, "but the man does it. He sees everything and forgets nothing."

Harrison Gale said slowly, "I can tell you fellows something. It's not supposed to be known, but I got it through Edward Brent, the lawyer. It was this Man Who Couldn't Forget that cleared up the Skyscraper Murder cases last month."

Boxman turned inquiring eyes to Delamy.

"You were contemplating consulting this vaudeville actor?" he asked, in a voice which showed polite incredulity.

"Yes," said Delamy shortly.

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Pitley Simms lowered his voice.

“Look here,” he said. “Here’s an angle that we haven’t gone into. Miss McLane tells me that Carl Draper said he was friendly to Ashley Crail. Now, Ashley Crail is a brother of your secretary, Delamy. In fact, it was through Elizabeth Crail that you gave him a position with us.”

“What about it?” Delamy asked.

“Just this,” Simms said. “I think Draper had something to do with that murder, and I think that Crail is mixed up in it somehow.”

“How?” Delamy inquired in an uncordial tone.

“I don’t know,” Simms said irritably. “If I knew how the murder had been committed I’d know enough to make my suspicions sound convincing.”

“They certainly don’t carry conviction now,” Delamy told him shortly.

Taber Boxman met C. Wright Delamy’s eyes.

“They do to me, Delamy,” he said. “You’re prejudiced. You think anything Elizabeth Crail does is all right.”

Delamy flushed.

“I think,” Simms said, glancing at Boxman, “we understand each other perfectly. I think we owe it to ourselves to have a complete investigation made.”

Delamy pushed back his chair.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “let’s not have any misunderstanding about this thing. As far as I am concerned, you can all go to hell.”

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Ben Harper, peering through the windshield of his automobile, saw his name blazoned in electric lights over the Palace Theater, yet he received no thrill of satisfaction from the sight. The truth of the matter was, Harper was getting fed up with his vaudeville career.

Three times a day Ben Harper put on his act. Three times a day audiences sat spellbound. Men who tried in vain to remember names, dates, figures, faces, things, stared with open-mouthed wonder at the man who could forget nothing.

There was a traffic snarl ahead. Ben Harper knew that he had several minutes to spare, so he kicked out his clutch to let the motor idle, and closed his eyes.

Whenever possible Harper kept his eyes closed. The things that he saw he remembered—not in the laborious manner in which most people try to cultivate memories, by association of ideas, by trying to figure out some sequence, but effortlessly and endlessly.

Ben Harper’s mind was as thoroughly receptive as an unexposed film. His eyes stamped images upon his brain. Those images were, in turn, seared into his consciousness. He could recall the scenes, just as a motion picture can be run backwards, and he did this without conscious effort.

The traffic officer blew his whistle. Slowly the traffic crawled into motion. Harper opened his eyes, but kept them raised above the level of the string of traffic. He knew, from sad experience, that if he glanced down at license numbers his memory would seize upon the figure, as a magnet grabs iron filings. Sometimes in the small hours of the night, when he wanted to sleep, a stream of automobiles would slide through his memory, each car decorated with its proper license plate, and with such distinguishing marks as tire covers, dented fenders, wire wheels, and particular makes of tires.

Harper eased the clutch into place. His car crawled forward. He sensed action on his right, felt the car sway over as someone jumped to his runningboard. A woman's voice said, "Please forgive me, Mr. Harper, but I must see you at once."

Harper kept his face straight ahead. The traffic officer blew his whistle once more. Traffic came to a halt. The young woman leaned across the open door of the roadster.

"Please," she said, "look at me. I know you. You're Ben Harper, The Man Who Couldn't Forget. I've seen you in the theater. You describe faces of people in the audience. You can stare at the spectators in the first five rows, then close your eyes, and let anyone call out an aisle and seat number and you can describe the person who's sitting there. You can . . ."

Ben Harper reached out and slipped down the catch on the door.

"Don't stand there on the runningboard," he said, "or you'll get brushed off."

The traffic officer blew his whistle again. Harper slid the car into low gear, stepped on the throttle, and shifted to second. The young woman crawled inside of the car and pulled the door shut.

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Harper negotiated the street intersection, snapped the car into high, and made the turn into the parking lot back of the theater.

"What is it you want?" he asked.

"I want you to solve a murder."

"I'm not a detective."

"This is a duty you owe an innocent man."

"Who's the innocent man?"

"My brother."

He turned then to stare at her, saw a pleasing profile with an upturned nose, a saucy mouth which seemed designed, by nature, for quick, vivacious smiles, but which was now held into grim, purposeful lines at the corners. A brown hat was tilted to one side of the head.

Underneath the upturned brim on the high side, chestnut hair fluffed out in soft curls.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Elizabeth Crail."

Suddenly Harper laughed.

"You're too late," he said.

"Too late?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "C. Wright Delamy, your boss, telephoned me more than half an hour ago. I promised him I'd come in immediately after the theater."

"I don't understand," she said.

"He told me," Harper went on, "that some of his business associates were trying to fix the blame of a murder on a man named Ashley Crail, the brother of his secretary. He said he wasn't satisfied with the way his associates were handling the thing, and wanted me to look in."

"You promised him you would?"

Ben Harper's hand dropped down upon hers. His fingers gave her a reassuring squeeze.

"I promised him," he said, "that I would."

## CHAPTER V

### Death on the Pillow

C. Wright Delamy performed the introductions. One by one the millionaires grasped Ben Harper by the hand.

One at a time, they encountered the gaze of those diamond-hard eyes with the needle-pointed pupils—eyes that seemed like the twin lenses of a camera.

Harper closed his eyes, leaned against the wall, and said almost meditatively, “The muzzles of those machine guns, gentlemen, are just a little bit bluer than the ornamentations which surround them. It’s just a detail, but it might be well to have it changed, particularly if some observant newspaper reporter happens on the scene.”

Gale gasped, looked at the others, and sputtered, “Someone’s been tipping him off! Which one of you?”

Delamy shook his head, and placed his finger to his lips in a warning gesture.

“We might,” said Harper, “take a look at the room that Millers occupied. It might help.”

“The police have gone through it. They’ve looked for finger-prints and all that sort of stuff,” Delamy said.

Harper nodded wearily, and remarked, “I wasn’t going to look for finger-prints.”

“What you’ve got to look for, and find,” Pitley Simms said, “is the man who wrote those letters. I’ve made arrangements with the telegraph company so that any more telegrams sent in by Letterman will be handled in a special manner. The call will be traced while the man is on the line. Police will be notified. They’ll pick him up—not for threatening us, but for obtaining telegraphic service under false representations.”

Harper yawned.

“We will,” said Delamy, “go take a look at the room.”

They went through the electrically controlled doors, up the elevator, and Delamy indicated the splintered door jamb.

“That’s where Menloe pried it open with a bar,” he said.

The Man Who Couldn’t Forget stepped into the room, closed his eyes, and took three steps toward the center of the room. Then he opened his eyes, slowly pivoted about until he had completed a circle.

There was a slow deliberation in his motions, as though he had been actuated by some clockwork mechanism, as the lens of a panorama kodak will swing in a circle on its tripod mounting.

When he had finished, he closed his eyes again, and stood for a matter of several seconds. Then he said, “Very well, gentlemen, let us look around at some of the other rooms. I’d like to see the entire lay-out.”

They took him through the palatial suites, and in each room The Man Who Couldn’t Forget went through substantially the same procedure.

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Boxman went to the window of the lounging room, looked down at the street.

“It’s inconceivable,” he said, “that the dog could have been thrown through that window. It would have taken a man who possessed terrific strength. I wonder if the dog could have jumped.”

“The police think the dog attacked Millers?” Harper asked.

“That’s their theory now. The wound in the throat looks as though it had been done by some animal. My theory is that in some way an animal was introduced into the room—an animal which attacked Millers. The dog, in turn, attacked the animal, and when he found he was overpowered, jumped through the window. Or, the animal may have jumped through the window and the dog may have gone after him.”

“In that case,” Harper remarked, “the question naturally arises: what was the nature of this animal, and what became of it?”

Boxman shrugged his shoulders.

“Gentlemen,” Harper said, “you have called me in on this case because I possess certain peculiar powers, or gifts, if you desire to call them that, which are not possessed by the average man.

“I do not need to mention these particular powers. Such as they are, they are well known. Therefore, you will pardon me if I seem to digress.

“Three months ago, in Cranston, I saw something which impressed me as peculiar. A dog was attacking a dummy figure. His manner was most peculiar. He showed every evidence of rage. He was literally tearing the dummy figure to pieces.

“At first I thought it was merely a part of a training for a motion picture stunt, and that the animal was being trained to demolish dummies. But, suddenly, the dog dropped to the ground, stared at the dummy, started to whine, then turned tail and ran as hard as he could run.

“A man’s voice said, ‘That’s enough. Lie down!’ and the dog dropped to the ground. He was quivering in every muscle. The man who had given the order hadn’t seen me. He was concealed behind some shrubbery, watching the dog from such a position that the dog couldn’t see him.

“Now, then, gentlemen, we come to the peculiar part of the entire affair. The man snapped his fingers, the dog got up and started running away—not as he had been running before—but as a dog trots away upon some casual canine mission of no importance.”

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Boxman’s tone showed impatience.

“What the devil has all this got to do with it?” he asked.

“Simply this,” Ben Harper said. “I am satisfied the man behind the hedge wasn’t the owner of that dog. I am satisfied he was merely someone who had picked up a strange dog for an experiment.”

Boxman said, impatiently, “Who was this fellow, anyway?”

“I don’t know,” Harper said. “I never did see his face. He saw me through the hedge then, and turned and took to his heels, just as the dog had done. But this much I do know about him—he was expensively tailored.”

“What,” asked Pitley Simms, “has all this got to do with the death of Mr. Millers?”

Ben Harper said, slowly, “It may have a lot to do with it. You gentlemen will notice that there’s an inter-office communicating system, with a loud-speaking device.

“What of it?”

“Millers was throwing a switch on that device,” Harper said slowly, “when the dog attacked him.”

“What makes you think so?”

“You can see a dent on one of the keys. It’s a dent that was freshly made. There’s a similar dent on the other side of it. Those dents were caused by teeth. The animal clamped his jaws on

either side of the key.”

Gale snorted.

“Bosh and nonsense,” he said. “I happen to know enough about hypnotism to know that it’s impossible to hypnotize an animal. Even if it were possible, the explanation, if it is an explanation, is altogether too bizarre. Personally, I think we’re wasting time—a lot of time.”

Boxman nodded his head. Delamy turned to Harper and said, quietly, “What is it that you suggest?”

“I suggest,” Harper said, “that you send trained investigators to the city of Cranston, find out everything you can about a man who lived there three months ago who practiced hypnotism. See if there were, perhaps, an excessive number of mad dog complaints. Doubtless the demolished dummy was found where the man had left it when the dog got through with it. It was in the East Side Park. Talk with the park authorities, find out whether they are still holding the dummy, or what was done with it, and whether an attempt was made to trace the clothes that it wore. Do everything possible to locate this individual.”

“You think it would have something to do with the murder?” Delamy asked.

Harper shrugged his shoulders, closed his eyes.

“Do you think animals can be hypnotized?” Delamy asked.

“I know they can,” Harper told him. “It’s simply a question of finding an animal intellect that can hold a certain idea. For instance, put a chicken down on a table with its beak touching the table. Restrain it there by force. Take a piece of chalk and draw a straight line out from the chicken’s beak along the surface of the table. Use a fairly rough surface so that the chalk will make a brilliant line. What happens? The chicken finds itself incapable of raising its head from the table, but stares in steady concentration at that line.

“Dogs are far more intelligent than chickens. I’m satisfied they can be hypnotized. I don’t know how far a person can go in implanting an idea in a dog’s mind while the animal is under the influence of hypnotism.”

“Then,” Delamy said slowly, “you’re of the opinion that Millers’ dog was hypnotized so that it attacked its master. Is that your theory?”

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Harper opened his eyes and said, wearily, “I have no theories. I am only asking that you collect certain data. If you wish to work with me, gentlemen, it will be necessary for you to collect such data as I suggest from time to time.”

Delamy whipped out a notebook.

“That,” he said, “will be taken care of.”

“Look here,” Boxman said, “if your contention is correct, Harper, this Draper, who called in the office, must have been the one who hypnotized the dog.”

“Well,” Harper asked, “what of it?”

“We know,” Boxman said, “that Millers was switching in on the lower office, because this man had asked for him. Now, that brings up the fact that this man, Draper, was a friend of Ashley Crail. Crail got his job largely because of Delamy’s insistence. He’s a brother of Delamy’s secretary. Aside from that, we don’t know a single thing about him.”

“That’s all you need to know,” Delamy said, with dignity. “The fact that he’s Elizabeth Crail’s brother shows that he’s above suspicion.”

“Bosh,” Boxman said, irritably.

Pitley Simms nodded.



“Yes,” he said, “we should have some investigation about this Crail business. After all, it may be that you’re right about the dog. In that event, this Draper knew that Millers would be listening to him. He knew that the dog could hear his voice.”

“But,” Delamy pointed out, “Draper couldn’t have said anything in particular. It must have been only the sound of his voice that started the dog attacking Millers. You fellows forget that there was an attendant in that room all the time. It was impossible for Draper to have said anything which could have been construed as a signal for the dog.”

Harper was on the point of saying something, but checked himself as Elizabeth Crail entered the room. She was white-faced. Her glance shifted to Ben Harper, The Man Who Couldn’t Forget, for a brief flicker of grateful recognition—then she handed C. Wright Delamy a letter.

“This,” she said, “was picked up in the lobby by the guard. He hasn’t any idea how it got there. He simply saw it lying on the floor. It was folded just as you see it now. He opened it, read it, and sent for me immediately.”

Delamy unfolded the letter, read it casually, and nodded.

“A letter,” he said, “from our friend Mr. Letterman. He says that I am the next on the list. That, after all, he can deal with three as easily as he can with four.”

Boxman reached for the letter. Harrison Gale heaved a sigh.

“That settles it, Delamy,” he said. “If anything happens to you I’m going to insist that the two million dollars be paid.”

Boxman nodded thoughtfully.

“Yes,” Simms said, “if that devil can contrive to get past the precautions we’re taking and do anything to Delamy I’m going to see that the money is paid.”

Delamy laughed, and, while there was a strained note about his laughter, as though his throat muscles were slightly constricted, his voice was hearty.

“Well,” he said, “I seem to be the human guinea pig. All right, go ahead.”

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Ben Harper, standing in the middle of the room, sighed and closed his eyes in thought. After a moment he said, “You lock yourself in your room at night, Delamy?”

“And put a bolt on the door,” Delamy said, “after I’ve first searched the room. I’m not a coward, but I don’t believe in taking any chances.”

Harper consulted his watch. “You’ll be turning in shortly?”

“Very shortly after you leave—yes.”

Harper said, slowly, “I think it might be a good plan for me to take a look at your room, Delamy.”

“But you’ve already seen it.”

“Something he’s forgotten,” said Pitley Simms, and snickered.

Delamy led the way toward the room.

“It’s just around the corner,” he said. “You remember that you looked at it, then went through the bathroom into the adjoining room, and came back.”

“No,” Harper said, “we didn’t go back. We moved over to the window of the communicating room to look down along the fire escape. We *started* to go back to the other room. In fact, one or two of the party had actually gone into your bedroom when you suggested that there was another door which led to the corridor and I might like to look at that.”

“That’s right,” Delamy said, “I remember now.”

“But the room hasn’t changed any since you’ve seen it,” Harrison Gale protested.

Harper said nothing, but followed Gale’s broad shoulders down the corridor. Delamy took a key from his pocket, unlocked and opened the door. Harper stepped inside, looked about the room with that slow, deliberate scrutiny of his, then nodded his head slowly.

“Just as I thought,” he said.

“What’s just as you thought?” Boxman asked, irritably.

“The room,” Harper said, “is not the same.”

“What the devil do you mean?”

“When we were here before,” Harper said, “the pillow on that bed was turned so that the opening of the pillow slip was toward the window. Now, you’ll notice that it’s toward the door.”

“Well, what if it is?” Harrison Gale demanded. “There’s a valet who enters the room whenever he wants to. There’s Delamy’s secretary. She was looking for him with that letter. She may well have looked for him in his room.”

“She has the key?” Harper asked.

Delamy nodded.

“How many other keys?”

“Three or four,” Delamy said, “but understand, Harper, whenever I’m in this room I don’t rely on the keys. I turn that bolt on the inside of the door.”

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Harper nodded, strode to the bed, picked up the pillow by its two corners, raised it and shook the case violently.

The pillow dropped out of the case, and, as the pillow struck the bed, something separated itself from the pillow.

Delamy gave an exclamation, and lunged forward. Harper grabbed his hand.

“Don’t touch it,” he said, “until we find out what it is.”

He took a pencil from his pocket, turned the object slowly on the bed, nodded his head thoughtfully.

“A rubber sac filled with some deadly poison. You notice there are half a dozen hollow needles attached to the sac. When you put your head down on the pillow, at least one of these needles would have penetrated your cheek. You can imagine what would have happened after that.”

Delamy stared, wide-eyed.

Harrison Gale coughed nervously, clutched at his throat.

“I’ve seen enough,” he said. “My life is worth more than two million dollars. I don’t know how you fellows feel, but . . .”

Taber Boxman nodded.

“Yes,” he said, “I believe in giving the man the money. We’ll try to find out who he is afterwards and let the police arrest him, but let’s give him the money first.”

Ben Harper shook his head slowly.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “if you’ll go to your rooms and stay in them, I think I can promise you that you will be safe. It is only necessary for you to promise me that you will go to your rooms, bolt the doors, and not open them to anyone for twelve hours.”

“Bosh,” Boxman said explosively. “You and your stunts! I’ll admit that your photographic memory came in handy just now, but if someone is going to guarantee my safety I want it to

be someone who has more claim to distinction than merely being a unique vaudeville performer. Moreover, I don't intend to have anyone keep me a prisoner in my room."

Pitley Simms nodded his head in nervous acquiescence.

"Pay the money," he said. "Pay the money. That's the only way. Pay the money and get it over with."

Harper bowed his head.

"If," he said, "you gentlemen feel that way, I would suggest, by all means, that you pay the money. In the meantime I trust you will pardon me, as I'm rather tired. You certainly have no further need of my services."

"But, wait a minute," Gale said, "we want you to use your peculiar talents to find out just who it is that's at the bottom of this."

"I thought," Harper told him, "that you were going to delegate that to the police."

"The police are all right in their way, but they can't do anything with this kind of a man," Simms said.

"On the contrary," Boxman drawled, "I think they can. But I think you'll find that when the man with whom we are dealing lays down the conditions under which money is to be paid he'll specify that nothing is to be said to the police for a period of time that he will specify. Otherwise I would say he wasn't very intelligent."

Harper nodded his head slowly.

"Yes," he said, "I think you'll find that such a condition is a part of the tribute which is to be levied. And, gentlemen, remember that you're dealing with a *very* intelligent man."

## CHAPTER VI

### A Dead Man in an Alley

Ben Harper was conscious of the car which followed him, almost from the moment when that car took up its pursuit.

One moment his glance in the rear view mirror had shown him a city street, with half a dozen pairs of headlights coming in his direction. The next glance had shown seven pairs of these headlights, and the seventh pair of headlights had kept the same relative distance from his car over a period of half a dozen blocks.

An ordinary eye would merely have seen a tangle of traffic, snarling along the boulevard, but Ben Harper's mind was so constituted that he could never see a tangle of anything. His photographic memory etched every individual unit upon his consciousness.

At the end of fifteen blocks the car was still there.

The car made no attempt to lessen the distance, but kept in an advantageous position, where it could keep the tail lights of Harper's machine in sight.

The Man Who Couldn't Forget did not vary his speed. When he reached the block in which his apartment house was situated, however he did not follow his usual custom of parking his car in front of his house and letting his Japanese valet take the car to the garage.

Instead, he turned the car into an alley, drove to a vacant lot, back of a billboard display, switched off the lights and the ignition, and jumped from the car to the protecting shadows of a doorway, waiting to see what would happen.

Nothing happened.

There was no trace of the other car. Harper heard a car slide to a stop in the street, but could not be certain whether it was the car which had followed him.

He waited some ten minutes; then, still hugging the shadows, he followed the alley to its intersection with the street beyond.

When Harper had left the Midwick Building, he had worn a distinctive fur coat and a gray velour hat. When he had left his automobile, he left both coat and hat in the machine, and wore on his head a dark cap which he kept in the glove compartment of the car.

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He was within some twenty feet of the door of his apartment house when there was the flurry of motion near the door, and a man stepped out from the shadows.

Harper braced himself, prepared to lunge forward in the event the man should raise a weapon, but the man's hands were at his sides as he stepped into the light.

"Mr. Harper," he said in a low voice, "I must see you at once."

Harper glanced at him swiftly.

"Your features," he said, "are familiar. I have never seen you before in my life, but I have seen features similar to yours . . . You must be the brother of Elizabeth Crail."

"I am," Ashley Crail said. "And I guess by this time you know why I'm here."

"What," asked Harper, "do you want me to do?"

"I want your help. They all suspect me."

"I can't clear you. You must do that yourself."

"Can you advise me?"

"Yes," Harper said. "But let's go to my apartment."

Harper fitted his latch-key to the door of the apartment.

“That your car parked over across the street?” he asked.

“No,” the young man said.

Harper’s eyes bored into Crail’s face.

“Look here,” he said. “Do you mean to tell me that you didn’t follow me here in that car which is now parked across the street?”

“Absolutely not.”

“How did you come here?”

“In a taxicab.”

“Why did you leave before I did?”

“I knew that you were coming here, and I wanted to see you.”

“Why did you hide in the doorway?”

“I didn’t want anyone to know I was here. I was afraid that some of those men might have been following you, to see whether you went directly to your apartment.”

“Why should they follow me?”

“They wouldn’t follow you, but they’d have you followed. They’d have someone like Menloe follow you.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re suspicious of everything, everyone.”

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Harper said nothing as they rode up in the elevator. Not until he had seated his visitor in his apartment and had Koshioto bring highballs, did he encourage further conversation.

“Are you certain,” he asked, “that Mr. Gale or some of the others didn’t tell you to come out here and talk with me?”

“Absolutely not. I’m here on my own behalf, because I’m under suspicion. I’d quit in a minute, but I don’t want to quit that way. The way it is now, everything that goes wrong they blame onto me.”

“How about Draper?” Harper asked, closing his eyes.

“I’d known Draper when he was a traffic officer. Then he got involved in a bit of a scandal and had to leave the force. As a matter of fact, he changed his name. He was looking for an opportunity to begin all over again, but he couldn’t seem to get started. He’d been a gun runner and a rum runner. He’d gone in for bootlegging, hijacking, and a little bit of everything.”

“Go ahead,” Harper invited, his eyes still closed.

“I knew that these millionaires were hiring bodyguards. I thought it would be an excellent opportunity for Draper. I gave Draper a letter to Millers—a letter which Draper never presented.”

“Where’s Draper now?” Harper asked.

“That’s just the point,” Crail said, fidgeting uneasily. “Draper knew that something serious had gone wrong. It didn’t take him long to find out what it was. He knew at once that he would be held by the police for questioning. He didn’t give a damn about anything in connection with Millers’ death, because he could prove that he couldn’t have had anything to do with it; but there were one or two other things that he didn’t want to have the police inquiring about, and he knew they’d make a searching investigation. So he slipped out.”

Harper nodded slowly.

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There followed an interval of silence, which was, shattered by the ringing of the doorbell, the shuffle of Koshioto's feet, and then the sound of a feminine voice. A moment later, Koshioto opened the door.

Before he could speak Harper nodded.

"Show her in, Koshioto," he said.

Skirts rustled in the corridor. There was the quick click of high-heeled shoes, and then Elizabeth Crail stood staring accusingly at her brother.

"I thought you'd do this," she said.

She turned blazing eyes to Harper.

"I want you to understand," she said, "that my brother is absolutely innocent of any wrongdoing. He's as honest as the day is long, but he doesn't know much about human nature. He makes all sorts of foolish friendships; This man, Draper, is a shining example. Draper is no good.

"I wanted to intercede with you on behalf of my brother, but I don't want my brother to intercede with you on behalf of Draper. As far as Draper is concerned, I want you to find out what he knows about this thing. Draper would sell his soul for money."

"Now, Elizabeth," her brother protested, "don't . . ."

"Shut up!" she said. "I know what I'm talking about. Draper is absolutely no good. He's imposed upon you for years."

Harper raised his hand for silence, then said to Elizabeth Crail, "How did you come out here?"

"I drove out."

"Was there," he asked, "a car parked on the opposite side of the street, about twenty yards to the north, when you came up?"

"No, there wasn't any car parked in the entire block."

"It was a Buick," Harper said, "with a license 9J8496. The tire on the left rear wheel was a Goodyear; the one on the right rear wheel was a Miller. The left rear fender had been dented and straightened."

She shook her head and said, "No car there."

"Then," Harper told her, "I think I had better retrieve my own car."

He nodded to Koshioto.

"Koshioto, my car is up the alley by the signboard. Here's the key to the ignition. My overcoat and hat are in the car. Put the car in the garage and bring me my coat and hat."

Koshioto knew his master too well to show surprise. His teeth flashed in a smile. He said, "Yes, sir," and vanished.

---

Harper stared at the girl.

"Did Delamy know that you were coming here?" he asked.

"No one."

"Where do they think you are?"

"They don't know."

"You're allowed the opportunity of coming and going as you please?"

"So far I have been, but I don't know just what's going to happen. They may put themselves in a state of siege."

Her brother spoke viciously:

“Damned bunch of money-grabbers!” he said. “All except Delamy. I wouldn’t care if someone shook them down for all of their money. They’re capitalizing on the misfortune of others and . . .”

“That’s not getting you anywhere,” she said. “Don’t you realize how foolish you are to voice sentiments like that? If you don’t respect those men, don’t work for them.”

“I give them plenty of value for every dollar they pay me,” he told her.

Harper glanced over at the girl.

“Have they locked themselves in their rooms?” he asked.

“No, they were having a terrific argument when I left.”

“Know what it was about?” he asked her.

She smiled and said, “After all, Mr. Harper, I’m an employee, you know.”

He nodded his head, said slowly, “Yes, and a loyal one.”

“And what does it get you?” her brother asked bitterly.

She kept her eyes fastened on Harper.

“Will you,” she asked, “please tell my brother that he’s got to turn Draper up? If they talk with Draper they’ll find out that Draper couldn’t have been guilty of Millers’ murder. In the first place, Draper couldn’t have the brains. But Draper is a bad egg. I don’t like him. If Millers had given him the job I’d have gone to Mr. Delamy and asked to have Draper discharged.”

“One of these self-righteous, nasty-nice individuals, aren’t you?” sneered her brother.

“You know I’m not!” she flared. “I’m trying to protect you from yourself, that’s all.”

“Thank you,” he told her. “I don’t need any protection from you.”

Harper kept his eyes closed.

“If you wish to brawl,” he said, “you’d confer a favor on me by doing it somewhere else. Personally, I’d like to think.”

“I beg your pardon,” she said with quick contrition.

Her brother said nothing.

Harper sat for several minutes, his eyes closed, his face tranquil, his forehead unfurrowed. But he gave the impression, nevertheless, of a concentration which considered carefully every angle of the problem he was turning over in his mind.

Abruptly, he opened his eyes and smiled.

“I think,” he said, “I have a plan of campaign . . .”

The door opened. Koshioto appeared in the room, bowing and smiling.

“Master,” he said, “a dead man in the alley.”

---

“A dead man?” Harper asked.

Koshioto nodded, sucked in his breath. He laughed nervously.

“Dead man,” he said, “wears your overcoat and hat. He is very dead.”

“In the alley?” Harper asked.

“In the vacant lot between alley and car.”

“What did he die of?” Harper asked.

“Little hole in back of neck.”

“Bullet hole?” Harper asked.

“Very little hole,” the Japanese said. “Does not go through.”

Harper frowned for a moment, then got to his feet.

“Why,” asked Ashley Crail, “should a dead man wear your coat and hat?”

Harper said slowly, “No, you’ve got that wrong. Why should a man who wears my coat and hat be killed?”

“Good heavens!” Elizabeth Crail said. “Do you think that was it?”

“I’m virtually certain of it,” he told her. “I would suggest that you two youngsters call a taxicab. The less you know about this, the better.”

“Can I help you?” Elizabeth Crail inquired.

“No,” he said, “but you might look through the books of the Betterbilt Investment Company and see if the company owns a nineteen thirty-two Buick.”

She nodded her head.

“And should I say anything to Mr. Delamy,” she asked, “about the dead man?”

He shook his head.

“You’re not notifying the police?”

“Probably not.”

“But,” she said, “murder is serious.”

“I am,” he told her, “going to try and prevent more murders.”

“Whose?” she asked.

His lips tightened into a grim line.

“My own—among others,” he told her.

---

The body lay some twenty feet from the paved alley. It was lying face down, the arms sprawled out above the head.

Ben Harper did not leave the paved alley, but stood on the edge of the pavement. The beam of his flashlight circled slowly about the body of the dead man.

“You took my hat and coat, Koshioto?” he asked.

“I took the hat and coat,” Koshioto told him. “Not well for hat and coat of mastah to be found upon dead man.”

Harper stood staring at the body.

“Koshioto,” he said, “the ground is muddy from rain this afternoon. Your footprints show in the ground. The footprints of the dead man show in the ground. There are no others.”

“One footprints when I came,” he said.

Harper, standing on the paved alleyway where his feet would leave no prints, said slowly, “It will make trouble, Koshioto, with the police.”

“Police do not know Koshioto’s footprints,” the Japanese pointed out.

“Be certain that they don’t,” Harper said.

“Koshioto’s shoes go in furnace at once,” the servant remarked, bowing and sucking in his breath with a hissing noise.

“The police,” Harper pointed out, “seeing the tracks of only one man near the dead body, will be convinced that those tracks are the tracks of the murderer.”

“Police cannot arrest tracks,” Koshioto said.

“They can arrest the man who made the tracks.”

“Excuse, please, but must first find man who make tracks.”

Harper went on almost musingly, “That will be the logical deduction for the police, but what is the logical deduction for us?”

“Deduction,” Koshioto asked, “is when two is taken from five, leaving three?”

Harper shook his head and said, “No. A deduction of one fact from another fact. If this man is dead, who killed him?”



“Hole in the back of neck.”

“But how did the hole get there?”

Koshioto shrugged his shoulders.

“There is,” said Harper, “the track of no human being within twenty feet of the dead man. You can see his tracks coming from the automobile. He walked steadily until he got within some ten or fifteen feet of the place where his body lies. Then he staggered, took two lurching steps and fell.”

The Japanese nodded.

“Can’t see steps,” he said. “Man is a thief. His clothes are very poor. His face grows whiskers. Shirt is very dirty. Pockets have no money.”

Ben Harper turned to stare at the Japanese.

“Do you mean to say you searched his pockets, Koshioto?”

The white teeth flashed in a grin.

“Koshioto,” he announced, “always searches pockets of dead men.”

Harper smiled, stared thoughtfully down at the corpse.

“It is,” he said, “a good time for us to get out of here. I will not be home again tonight. If anyone wants to see me, you don’t know where I am. And—remember about those shoes, Koshioto.”

“The furnace,” Koshioto said, “awaits shoes with fiery impatience.”

## CHAPTER VII

### And Then They Were Three . . .

Elizabeth Crail drew the silken robe about her, saw that the chain catch was on the door, and opened it to stare at her visitor.

"You," she said when she saw Ben Harper's face.

"Yes," he told her. "I think this affair is coming to a showdown. I want you to go with me to the Midwick Building. I want to talk with Mr. Delamy. I think I prefer to talk with him alone."

She unhooked the chain.

"Come in," she said. "You'll have to wait while I dress. Make yourself comfortable."

She slipped into a bedroom, leaving the door half open. He could hear her quick steps on the floor, the running fire of questions which she asked him.

"Was that anything significant," she inquired, "the thing you found?"

"I think so," he told her.

"Was it, perhaps, someone who was mistaken for you?"

"It looks very much like it."

"But why should anyone want to kill you?"

"To keep from being discovered; of course."

"Then you must know something that is particularly important."

"Perhaps I do."

"Is that what you want to tell Mr. Delamy?"

He laughed and said, "Go on with your dressing, young lady. You know that curiosity killed a cat."

She finished her dressing in silence, appeared within less than a minute, ready for the street, her hand on the light switch.

"What did you do with your brother?" he asked.

"I sent him to find Draper."

"He was going to make Draper surrender?"

"He was going to try to."

"Do you think he'll be successful?"

"No."

"Then what is he going to do?"

"I *want* him to tell the authorities where Draper is. That is what I told him to tell Draper—that if Draper didn't surrender voluntarily, Ashley would tell the police where to find him."

Harper frowned.

"Your brother," he said, "may not be upon a very safe errand."

"Ashley can take care of himself on anything like that. It's when someone starts imposing on him that he's helpless."

"Well," Harper said, "we'll try to get this damned thing cleaned up, if possible, in time to prevent any more murders."

"Do you think there's danger?"

"Great danger."

---

He escorted her to the sidewalk, into a taxicab, refused to answer any more questions until they had reached the Midwick Building, where Elizabeth Crail secured admittance for him. They rode in the elevator to the steel-walled reception room.

The elevator door clanged behind them. Elizabeth Crail moved with assurance toward the electrically controlled doors.

A man's voice said, "Stick them up—both of you. Keep 'em frozen. Stay where you are!"

From the inside corridor came the piercing scream of a woman. A man's voice was raised in a shout. Feet pounded upon the floor.

"You heard what I said," shouted the belligerent voice of the guard in the secret cage. "Get your hands up until we get this thing straightened out. Pitley Simms has been killed."

Slowly, Elizabeth Crail raised her hands. Harper's hands were already in the air.

Someone pounded on the electrically controlled door. The guard in the steel-lined cage shouted, "Stay where you are. No one goes in or out until this thing has been cleared up. Those are orders!"

"Will you," asked Elizabeth Crail, "kindly tell Mr. Delamy that Mr. Harper is here, and that I'm here?"

"Don't worry, sister," said the man's voice, "I'm taking care of those things. That information went in over the telephone as soon as you hit the place."

A moment later he said, in a somewhat less truculent tone, "You can take your hands down, you folks, and go in. But you're to stick close to Delamy. He's taking the responsibility."

The electrical doors clicked open. A half hysterical woman tried to push her way out. The guard worked the switch which slammed the door behind the incoming pair and said, "No you don't, sister. People can go in, but no one's going out any more."

Harper tried to quiet her, but the woman was beating on the panels of the door with her bare hands.

They entered a long corridor. A door opened. Delamy appeared in the doorway of the reception room. His face was grave.

"Come in," he said. "Poor old Simms just got his."

"How did it happen?" Harper asked.

"He was in the vault room, looking at some papers," Delamy said. "We found him there, lying on the floor."

"Was there," asked Harper, "a small hole in the back of his neck?"

Delamy gave an obvious start.

"How the devil did you know that?" he demanded. "There hasn't been a bit of information go out of this place."

"The reason I asked," Harper said, "is that someone tried to murder me by that same method about two hours ago . . . However, that can wait. I want to see the body."

Delamy said, slowly, "Harper, I've got confidence in you, but the others are inclined to feel that you . . ."

"Had you done exactly as I instructed," Harper said, "gone to your rooms, bolted the doors and stayed there for twelve hours you would have been out of danger."

"But Pitley Simms had to go messing through some documents for some reason or other. I don't know what caused him to be in such a hurry, but that haste cost him his life. If you folks refuse to follow instructions, I don't see why you should blame me if things go wrong."

Delamy shrugged his shoulders and said, "You don't need to convince me of the logic of that statement. I'm simply telling you how the others feel. This way, please."

He opened a door.

---

Several people were moving about a room, in haste and obvious confusion.

Harrison Gale stared at Ben Harper with his watery eyes. He cleared his throat nervously.

"A lot of protection you turned out to be," he said.

"Shut up!" Delamy told him. "If we'd followed instructions there would not have been any trouble."

"We don't have to take instructions from a vaudeville artist," Boxman said, his face twisting savagely.

"You didn't have to employ a vaudeville artist, in the first place," Ben Harper told him.

"Having employed one, you should have followed instructions."

He glanced inquiringly at Delamy.

Delamy nodded, pushed forward through the group of people and opened a door.

Harper stood in the doorway, looking about the room with slow, steady gaze. His eyes swung from the man who lay face down on the floor, half in and half out of a vault, to the various windows.

Delamy, at his shoulder, offered explanations in a low voice:

"You can see," he said, "the way the room was laid out. It was a vault. Each of us has his private safe inside of a private, locked compartment. We have joint access to the vault. All of us have the combination to it. The private safes, on the other hand, have individual combinations. These are possessed only by the individuals who own the respective safes."

"And Simms wanted to open his safe?" Harper asked.

"Apparently."

"Had it been opened?"

"No."

"What had he done?"

"Just opened the vault."

"Then what happened?"

"We don't know. This much we do know—the lights in the room went off."

"What caused that?"

"Some sort of a short circuit, which apparently had been ingeniously arranged. You can see where the door, swinging open, struck a bit of copper wire. That wire is connected with the lighting system. It blew out the fuse."

---

Harper stared moodily at the prostrate figure.

"You're going to notify the police?"

"Yes, we've got to."

"You think, then, that electricity has something to do with the thing?"

"How do you mean?"

"You think the electrical short had something to do with the manner in which this man died?"

"I don't know, Harper, I'm sure," Delamy said. "It's too complicated to figure out hurriedly. The thing is utterly incredible. There simply couldn't have been anyone in this room. I know that for a fact. Simms stepped in the room. I happened to be near the door when

he entered. He said something about getting some papers out of his safe. It wasn't until after he had been in there some twenty or twenty-five minutes that I thought I'd better look in on him."

"Just when did you discover him?"

"Just a few minutes before you came in."

"What did you do?"

"I got in touch with Harrison Gale; the first one that I met. He suggested that we keep it quiet until we could work out some plan of campaign, but the help got wise to it. There was quite a commotion."

"Yes, I heard it," Harper said.

He stood for a moment, staring about the room, then said slowly, "Look here, Delamy, this is the second mysterious death in this building. If the police are called in now they're going to smell a very big rat. They're going to tip off the newspaper reporters. There's going to be a big story released about how you fellows are up here in a state of siege, about the mysterious death which strikes so mysteriously it can't be located, and all that sort of rot.

"Now get your gang together. I've got a proposition to make them. It's probably not strictly legal, but I'm willing to take a chance on it."

Delamy nodded. He stepped back a few paces and said to someone, "Get Mr. Gale and Mr. Boxman here immediately."

When the other two men stood at Delamy's side, Harper spoke to them briefly:

"You chaps are on a spot. There's some peculiar form of death that strikes here and you don't know what it is. It isn't uniform. It's in one form one time, another form another time. That's what makes it so deadly. It's obvious that we can't keep the facts from becoming public now.

"I've got a proposition. I want to have the murders solved before we call the police. Now, I'm satisfied that the dog attacked Millers. I'm satisfied that he received orders while in a hypnotized condition. Those orders must have come in over the telephone . . ."

"And," Boxman interrupted, "this man, Draper, was the one whose voice was coming over the telephone."

"No," Harper said, "I don't think so. You see, there wasn't anything that Draper could say that would interest Millers over a long period of time. Millers listened just long enough to find out what it was that Draper wanted, and then switched off the telephone. That's proven, because, when Millers' secretary asked a question and then waited, thinking that Millers would telephone down the answer, there was silence. She had to go up, in order to see what Millers wanted to do.

"Then, again, there's this death of Simms. It's a weird form of murder, and . . ."

"Wait a minute," Boxman said. "Do you understand the implication you are making when you talk about that telephone conversation?"

Harper stared at him.

"What?" he asked.

"Ashley Crail," Boxman said simply. "He could have rung the telephone. He could have deliberately planted Draper in the visitors' room in order to make certain that Millers would be sitting by his telephone."

---

Harper nodded slowly.

“Right at the present time,” he said, “I’m not interested so much in the identity of the murderer as I am in catching the murderer red-handed. Now, I have an idea that the possibilities of this chamber of death are not exhausted. I think that Simms set off some diabolically clever mechanism which brought about his death. I propose to enter the room in just the manner that Simms did. We’ll move the body so the vault door will close. We’ll close and lock the vault. We’ll put a new fuse in, but leave the wire so that when the vault door is open it will make a short circuit which will blow out the fuse and plunge the room in darkness. You fellows can give me the combination of the vault. I’ll go in and turn the dial, just as Simms must have. I’ll stand in exactly the same position. I’ll open the door, just as he must have, and I’ll stay in there for twenty-five minutes if necessary, if I can’t discover anything before that time has elapsed.”

“But what do you think you can find?” asked Delamy.

“Frankly, I don’t know.”

“We should notify the police at once. We’ll have an awful job squaring things if we don’t notify them at once.”

Harper said, “I am not attempting to minimize that responsibility. However gentlemen, I think it is of greater importance to ascertain something about the method of murder than to call in the police and confront them with a baffling enigma.”

Boxman said slowly, “I’m in favor of doing as you suggest, Harper, providing you wait ten minutes, during which time we open all the windows and air the place out. After all, there may be something in the atmosphere—some poison gas or something which should be eliminated from the room.”

“What the devil has gas got to do with it?” asked Delamy. “You . . .”

“Perhaps a lot more than you think,” Harper said seriously. “I don’t know just where you got that gas idea from, Boxman. It may have been telepathy, but I was on the point of making such a suggestion myself.”

Delamy looked from one to the other, shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s all foolishness,” Gale said. “A lot of damn foolishness. There’s nothing in that room that had anything to do with Simms’ death.”

Harper stared at him, eyes cold and hard.

“Then, just how *did* Simms die?” he inquired.

Gale cleared his throat and was silent. Boxman said quietly, “I take it, then, that it’s settled. I’m going to assume personal responsibility for seeing that you run no unnecessary risks, and I’m going to make just one more suggestion. That is that you talk with Ashley Crail before you go in there.”

“Why?” Harper asked.

“If he’s got a guilty conscience, I think you can tell it. You’ve got uncanny powers of observation.”

Harper said, “Thanks, I will,” and moved away.

---

He found Ashley Crail in the corridor leading to the reception room. Crail was white-faced and shaking.

“Snap out of it,” Harper said. “You look positively guilty.”

Crail gave a quick start, tried to say something, but his tongue refused to function. Then he got control of his organs of speech and said, “Don’t you make any accusations like that, or, by God, you’ll regret it!”

“I wasn’t making an accusation,” Harper said. “I was merely telling you that you should snap out of it.”

“How the hell can I snap out of it when we’re locked up here with some unseen death? I came back here after I saw you, to get some things, and they wouldn’t let me leave. Did you see Draper after you left me?”

“No.”

Crail shook his head slowly.

“Don’t lie,” Harper said. “You know that you saw him.”

“Well, what if I did?”

“Are you going to tell us where he is?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because if I did I’d be killed. I’m not going to turn rat.”

“Do you know who killed Simms?” Harper asked.

“Good God, no! Of course not!”

“Do you know who killed Millers?”

“His dog.”

“I know, but do you know who incited the dog to the attack?”

“No,” Crail said, and lowered his eyes.

There was a moment of silence, then Crail went on, “Damn it, I wish you wouldn’t stand there and third degree me like that! I know what you have in mind, and it makes me nervous. It makes me act guilty. I can’t help it. I’m not a smooth actor.”

Harper stared at him for a moment, then abruptly turned on his heel and walked away.

“You had,” he said, “better be very, very careful during the next hour. Stay close to some one all the time.”

“Good heavens, why?” Crail asked.

But Harper had already moved away.

Harper caught Delamy’s eye.

“Everything’s ready,” Delamy told him, “if you’re going to follow out this crazy scheme. Here’s the combination of the vault.”

“The vault is closed?”

“Yes.”

“No one is in the room?”

“No one except . . . the body.”

Harper nodded, stepped to the door of the room, opened it and turned to smile at Delamy.

“I’ll be seeing you,” he said casually, and closed the door.

## CHAPTER VIII

### The Secret of the Vault

He stepped over the body of Pitley Simms, went at once to the windows, closed every one of them. He stood for a moment, listening. Everything was quiet. He stepped to the door of the vault, put a handkerchief over his fingers so that he wouldn't leave finger-prints on the nicked dial and slowly spun the combination through the series of figures which Delamy had given him.

When the dial had swung over to the right until it stopped, Harper placed a handkerchief over the handle in the door and tugged with his weight against it. He heard the bars click back as the handle swung over to the left.

Harper did not immediately open the door of the vault, however.

He crossed the room once more to a door which led to a hallway. That door was locked, bolted from the inside, as it had been when Simms was in the room. But now Harper quietly slipped the bolt so that he could noiselessly open the door. When he had done that he took a coil of light, strong twine from his pocket, looped one end around the knob on the door of the vault. He unwound the cord so that he still held an end in his hand as he reached the door which led to the connecting room—the door which he had previously unlocked.

Harper pulled on the cord. The door of the vault swung slowly open. As it opened the edge of the steel door came in contact with the copper wire. There was a sputtering flash of greenish light, then the room was in darkness.

Harper slackened on the cord. The loop slid down the polished handle of the vault to the carpet. Harper jerked open the door to the connecting room, stepped into the second room, and pushed the door shut behind him.

---

From his previous inspection of the place, Ben Harper had familiarized himself with every detail of his surroundings, and his mind never overlooked even the smallest detail which he had once observed. He was, therefore, able to move soundlessly through the darkened room until he came to another door which led to a corridor. He opened this door a crack, placed his ear against it, and listened.

He could hear voices in the corridor. Apparently, several of the employees had clustered there in an expectant group.

“. . . wouldn't do it for a million dollars. I don't think his life is worth a snap of my fingers."

"Bosh and nonsense!" another one said. "I'd do it in a minute. That electricity business is all hooley. How could an electrical connection with a vault door make a hole in a man's neck?"

"Well, we'll find out pretty soon," the first voice said. "The fuse blew out two or three minutes ago. That shows he opened the door."

"How long are they going to wait?"

"Twenty-five minutes, I think," the other said, "unless he opens the door sooner."

Steps sounded in the corridor. Then Delamy's voice said importantly, "All right, you folks, just keep away from the doors, if you will. I think you'd better go down to the room at the end of the corridor and wait down there."

"Yes, sir," said one of the voices.



There was the sound of more footsteps, then the sound of Harrison Gale's voice as he said, "I suppose we've got to wait the twenty-five minutes out."

"Unless Harper calls before that, yes," Delamy answered.

Suddenly, from the far end of the corridor, there sounded a woman's voice raised in shrill expostulation:

". . . can't let him do it! You've got no right to! Your lives aren't worth that much. He's taking chances that you wouldn't take. I'm going in there with him."

There was the sound of a scuffle, a masculine voice that boomed authoritative protest, then the slamming of a door.

Several seconds elapsed. Then there were feet once more in the corridor, and a woman's voice, shrill with excitement, said, "That was Elizabeth Crail. She insisted she was going in there with him."

Harper stiffened to attention.

"She's gone in there?" Delamy asked.

"Yes," said the woman's voice. "We couldn't stop her, and . . ."

Harper waited to hear no more. He turned and rushed back across the dark room, his hand groping for the knob of the door which led to the chamber of death.

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He found the knob, wrenched the door open.

From the inner room all was darkness and silence.

"Miss Crail," he called softly.

He heard the sound of a startled gasp.

"Are you all right?" he called.

"Y-y-y-yes," she said, and her voice was choked with sobs.

"Where are you?"

"Over here. I thought this was your body. I thought you were dead."

"No," he said, "that's Simms. Walk toward the sound of my voice. Keep beating your hands in the air."

"B-b-b-beating my hands in the air?" she sobbed.

"Yes," he said, "and that's important. That's important as the very devil. Come toward me at once."

He stepped into the room and started flailing his own arms up and down, brushing himself with his hands.

Suddenly he heard her give a choked scream, and, a moment later, she said, "I t-t-touched something. Something was trying to get to me. There's something else here in the room."

"That's all right," he told her. "Hurry! Come toward me."

He heard her stumble once. Then she lurched forward and fell into his arms.

"It's all right," he told her. "Just keep your hands moving and . . ."

He broke off as the door of the room behind them opened and then closed. Steps hurried across the room. A flashlight stabbed its way through the darkness. Then the beam was extinguished.

"Hush!" Harper whispered, and threw his arm around her shoulders.

A figure glided across the room.

Suddenly the beam of the flashlight stabbed up toward the ceiling, and, across the beam of the flashlight flitted a huge silent shadow, a black ominous something which left a vague,

indistinct impression of a silent menace, a death which flitted through the air, casting grotesque shadows but making no sound.

The beam of the flashlight swung in a half circle, came to rest upon Elizabeth Crail.

A man's voice said, "You damned little she-devil! You *would* have to interfere."

Harper caught the glint of blued steel in the light which sprayed out from the flashlight.

"Look out!" he shouted, and lunged forward.

The gun spurted flame. The roar of the explosion filled the room.

---

Harper, unarmed, flung himself upon the man who had fired the shot. He heard Elizabeth Crail scream and drop to the floor.

"Keep up beating about you with your arms!" Harper shouted.

A second shot singed his hair with its flame as the man swung the gun and fired.

Harper lashed out with his left. The flashlight was flung upward, slipped from the man's hand, pinwheeled up into the air, throwing its beam in a twisting circle, and then crashed to the floor and went out. The room was in darkness.

There were steps in the corridor. A voice screamed some inarticulate warning.

Arms encircled Harper. He sensed that his adversary was trying to swing the gun so that he could use it to advantage. But Harper was close to the man's own body. He slammed his heel down on the man's instep, swung his arm around so that he could grab the gun wrist.

"Damn you!" the man screamed, and struck with the gun. The barrel crashed down on Harper's temple. He felt the floor rock and sway beneath him, felt great waves of black nausea engulfing his consciousness. He tried to hang on, but felt the strength ooze from his arms. He realized that he was slipping, and then felt fingers at his throat. He crashed to the floor. The other was on top of him. The fingers pressed against his windpipe.

Harper was conscious of men storming at the door. He tried to shout to the men to go around the other way, through the communicating door, but he could make no sound.

He tried to push off his assailant, but there was no strength in his arms. He felt his wind was being shut off. Then, suddenly, the grip relaxed. The man above him swayed, gave a low moan and pitched forward.

Harper sucked welcome air into his lungs, kicked off the inert body, screamed to Elizabeth Crail, "Get that door open!"

But she needed no instruction on that score. She had already thrown the bolt on the door. Now she flung it open. Light streamed into the room. Spectators stood in a startled circle in the doorway.

A police whistle sounded from somewhere in the corridor. Steps pounded along the floor. The door of the connecting room was pushed violently open.

Lights blazed in the adjoining room, and the illumination through the two doors was sufficient to show some circling body flitting about the ceiling of the room—a great winged creature which flitted silently in a hysteria of circular motion.

It dropped toward Harper. Harper, on one knee, struck at it with his arm, smashed his fist against the creature, sent it hurtling across the room, where it crashed into the door of the vault and dropped to the floor.

Three uniformed policemen and two plainclothes men came pushing through the door of the connecting room.

"What the hell's going on here?" one of the men demanded.

Harper turned his face to the circle of white, frightened faces which had clustered in the doorway.

Taber Boxman lay inert on the floor. A small hole in the back of his neck was the only visible wound.

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“It stood to reason,” Harper said, “that the five men in this company were being preyed upon by one of their own number. Everything indicated it. Millers was killed by the attack of a dog. The dog was incited to that attack by the voice of some man who was not in the room. It was, therefore, a voice which came over the loud-speaking telephone. An attempt was made to blame that voice on Carl Draper. That was merely a stall. Millers wasn’t listening to the conversation which was taking place in the reception room at the time of his death. The testimony of his own secretary indicates that. Therefore, he must have been called by someone who had access to that telephone. That *might* have been an employee. It was more probable that it was one of the members of the partnership.

“When we consider that the partnership was so arranged that, by a system of insurance, the assets virtually vested in the survivors, we can appreciate what a clever scheme was perpetrated. Boxman made demands for two million dollars. Otherwise he threatened to kill off the members of the partnership. He stood to win either way. As a matter of fact, the other two were about ready to pay off the money. Boxman would have written another letter, in which he would have been designated as the man to make the contact. The other two would have turned over two-thirds of two million dollars. Boxman would have pocketed it.

“Boxman had studied hypnotism. He had been able to hypnotize the dog which Millers owned. Perhaps some people would consider that it was merely a clever act of animal training. I prefer to consider it hypnotism. At any rate, Boxman knew that I was on his trail as soon as I mentioned the fact that I had seen a dog similarly trained in Cranston. Therefore, he wanted to get rid of me.

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“His next campaign was rather clever. The vampire bats are well known in various tropical countries. In South America there are species of the Javelin Bats. These are known as *Phyllóstoma Hastátum*.

“These are true vampire bats. They live on the blood of animals and men. They particularly attack men when asleep, by biting a small round hole with very sharp teeth, either in the tip of the nose or at the end of the big toe. However, when the bats are starving and do not have an opportunity to attack sleeping men, they have been known to fasten upon the back of the shoulders and bite in the back of the neck.

“A peculiar thing about these bats is that they have a species of local anæsthetic which prevents the victim from feeling pain. The wounds which they make are usually clean and seldom become infected, although the victim will become very weak from loss of blood. What Boxman did was merely to keep these bats in a starving condition, so that they were in a veritable frenzy for food. Then he put a peculiar active poison, probably one of the type that is used by the natives in blow guns, on the outer gums of these bats. As soon as they bit a victim and the blood started to flow the poison from the outer lip of the bat was picked up by the blood stream of the victim and resulted in almost an instantaneous death.

“He tried to kill me by liberating a bat which would have access to me as its first victim. He was foiled in this attempt merely because someone had stolen my hat and overcoat, and because I had my suspicions aroused by the fact that a car was following me.

“He put one of these bats in the vault and left the windows of the room open. He knew that, sooner or later, one of his associates would enter the vault. When that was done, he had a switch arranged so that the light would become short-circuited. As soon as Simms opened the door of that vault of death the lights went out. Therefore he couldn’t see the bat. The bat fastened on the back of his neck. The man died almost instantly. The bat flew out of the window.”

“A potential source of death to others?” asked Delamy.

“I think not,” Harper said. “The poison on his lips would have been dissolved in the blood of the first wound.”

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“How did it happen you suspected Boxman?” Delamy inquired.

“I didn’t at first,” Harper said. “I only knew that the guilty person must have been one of you five. I knew that person would realize I was getting close to a solution, and would try to kill me, inasmuch as he had already made one abortive attempt. Therefore, I decided to close the windows, shut myself in the room under conditions identical with those which Simms had encountered, only I protected myself by opening the door of the safe with a cord.”

“But,” Delamy asked, “why did you desire to wait for twenty-five minutes?”

Harper hesitated.

“Was it,” Delamy asked, “that you expected the man who had set the trap would be the first one to look in the door? He’d look in to see whether the bat had escaped before letting the others in. Then, when Miss Crail entered the room, it forced your hand. You rushed in to rescue her. Boxman ran in to make certain she didn’t discover the bat, or, if she did, he could kill her and then escape before he could be apprehended.”

Harper shrugged his shoulders and looked away.

“That,” he said, “is merely your inference, Delamy.”

“But,” Delamy said, “isn’t it the way you planned to play the game—to have the murderer come in to see that the coast was clear and then have the starved bat attack him?”

Harper, looking at him, said a strange thing:

“Gentleman,” he said, “that is something I can’t remember.”

THE END

[The end of *The Vault of Death* by Erle Stanley Gardner]