



ROOM 1313

Maxwell Grant

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CHAPTER I

SNAPPED from his deep concentration over an involved table of precedency, Lamont Cranston for the first time in over an hour looked out of the window of the plane. Darkness split by an occasional flicker of stabbing light from the airport were the only signs that this was not a trip through the stratosphere.

Those travellers who are always prepared to leave hours in advance were leaning forward eagerly as they had been from the time the stewardess called out, "Croydon, on time"; the others, the habitual leave-it-to-the-last- minutes, like Cranston, didn't even give it a thought till the wheels spun on dry ground.

Cranston threw the copy of Burke's Peerage he'd been reading into his suitcase and snapped it shut. His only baggage, besides that, was his brief case.

A polyglot murmur of tongues around him said, in as many languages as there were passengers, the same trite things that are always said after a safe and quiet trip - be it on bicycle, train or plane.

That attitude was shared by most of the people whom Cranston could see without being rude. The girls, the few in sight, were proof of the superstition that the wet climate was good for the complexion. But he could not help wondering if it was the fault of that same climate that the women were one and all so dowdy-looking.

Perhaps, he thought, it's the fault of their dressmakers. It just didn't seem possible with the pictures of the New York women so fresh in his mind, that a sex could be so dissimilar.

As for the men, the myth of the English tailors was just that, as far as he could see. If this was the famous drape that all tailors would give their arms for, he just didn't care for it. The men's jackets were bulky and to his American eye, unsightly.

The underground went on its way with a lot more speed than he had given it credit for. It rattled along at the rate a regular train would.

As usual in any air flight, there was a dissimilar amount of time wasted in getting from the plane to the real point of the trip. Perhaps, Cranston thought, the helicopter would be the answer to that as yet unsolved problem.

By an obvious mnemonic, that got him to worrying about the problem that faced him. An unsavory one it was too... However, the underground was pulling into... He squinted out the window to see the name of the station.

From the airport at Croydon to the underground was of short duration and Cranston, eyes wide, absorbing all there was to see, went towards what would be the beginning and not the end of his mission. As he seated himself in the underground train, he smiled at the sight of a pompous looking electric locomotive which was determinedly pulling a string of what in New York would have been called subway cars. The ads in the train that held Cranston were colorful, almost as gaudy as the ones in the town Cranston had flown from, but the products advertised were strange to him.

Ministry of Food posters clamored for attention next to ads for braces. The people, a little shabby, but completely unconscious of it, in a society where clothes were dependent, still, this long after the war, on coupons, were sitting each in his own aura of insulated privacy.

Knowing as much as Cranston did of the English, it was still hard for him to remember what staunch, kind, and exceedingly brave hearts were hidden behind those imposing, frozen facades.

One face in particular intrigued him. The man's face was built on the lines of an isosceles triangle. The point of the long lines of the triangle was the most awe inspiring nose that Cranston had ever seen outside of the stage versions of Cyrano's noble proboscis. The rest of the face, as though frightened by the size of the impossibly huge nose, wavered and vanished away from the peak of the nose. His chin was weak, a vague thing that vanished into a high, almost varnished white collar. The man looked with his watery blue eyes, past the tip of his nose. His eyes were focused on nothingness with an intensity of effort that was worthy of a better cause. Cranston could almost see the man praying that no one, no upstart, would have the effrontery to speak to him and break in on his sacred quiet.

Engraved on Cranston's memory were the directions he had been given. So, as though a Londoner of long standing, he had no trouble in remembering that he was to get off the Underground at Marble Arch.

He followed the man with the nose which would have shamed Durante out of the cellar they were in and up a long flight of stairs. Out in the open the man walked away with a brisk, almost penguin-like waddle and, while Cranston looked about for his bearings, vanished into the fog.

The fog, Cranston felt, was overdoing it a bit. It was so apposite as to be corny. Here he was fresh in from America on a mission of startling importance, and now, just like the hero of any thud and blunder, here he was near Hyde Park corner in the middle of a pea soup night.

Not that the fog was any worse than lots that Cranston had experienced in America, for, down past Los Angeles, towards Laguna Beach are manufactured the granddaddies of all fogs. But, and Cranston looked around for a bobby, the fog could have held up till he got to Eton Chambers.

Beside him a sound that was right out of the early nineteen hundreds in the States, rasped in his ears. It was a horn. A Klaxon. Cranston was sure they hadn't been made for twenty years. A glance at the decrepit cab that sported the horn was proof that he was right.

"Can you take me to Eton Chambers?" Cranston called.

The London counterpart of Cranston's friend the taxi driver, Shrevvie, looked out at Cranston and snapped, "Yup."

Cranston stepped forward to get into the cab but was restrained by a gesture from the cabbie. "I could take ye there, but I won't."

"What?" Cranston was really startled.

"I'm no crook."

Wondering what there was in the nature of driving a cab that made a driver so argumentative, Cranston resigned his soul in patience and asked, "What's your being an honest man got to do with it?"

The cabbie leaned a bulky forearm out the window of his ancient vehicle and pointed across the street. "Yonder's the Underground. This is Marble Arch, right?"

Cranston nodded.

"See..." The pointing arm, ending in a long forefinger, pointed at a modern looking apartment house that was directly across the street. "If I was a crook I could 'ave driven yer all around Robin Hood's barn and then dumped ye there, couldn't I?"

"I get it." Cranston smiled. How often in New York had an out-of-towner, fresh from Pennsylvania Station asked for the Pennsylvania Hotel that was across the street and been driven to it by way of the Bronx. Evidently this was what he had been saved from. He thanked the cabbie who grinned after him as he made his way toward the Eton Chambers.

The fog prevented Cranston from seeing what surrounded the lovely house till he was almost on top of it. Here in the heart of London, more than two years after the cessation of the European war, was a grim reminder to all beholders of what had been. For the house, which could only have been designed by Courboisier, was an island in the middle of bomb craters. What freak of fate had protected this one house when all around it perished was more than mortal can know. Cranston, his spirits damped, walked by the commissionaire into the building.

"Ruddy fog, what?" that functionary asked.

Nodding, Cranston went into the lobby and realized that it was as though he had been transported on a magic carpet by a geni. For decor, everything, was exactly like any expensive smart apartment hotel right in the center of the New York which Cranston had quitted so little time before.

Still following his directions, Cranston asked the little elevator operator with a discharge button on his uniform jacket, to take him to the thirteenth floor.

Out of the elevator and down a lush carpeted hallway he walked. He pressed a button that had on it a neatly lettered sign, Louis Yorke.

In that split second before the door opened, with that lightning speed that thoughts have, Cranston reviewed what little he knew of the case that had brought him flying here post haste.

In New York, rumors that gained in the re-telling as a snowball plummeting down the side of a snow-covered mountain, had brought whispers to Cranston's man Friday, Burbank, that something huge and unsavory was stewing in London. That a member of the House of Lords was implicated in one of

those huge gem robberies that have followed the dislocations of war. Worse than that, the rumor said, this same august member of the ruling body of fair Britannia was set for the gallows, for there had been murder most foul!

Burbank, sensitive to the ebb and flow of rumor real and fictitious, had known from the ragbag of odds and ends that was his brain that this would make for an international stink of no mean dimensions, for not in two centuries had a member of the nobility been in jeopardy. The case would make front pages all over the world, for it was part of the prerogative of the gentry that they only can be tried by a jury of their peers.

And then the door opened wide and a good looking man in his early forties stood behind the door. "Come in, come in," he smiled. In the room proper, sitting with all his muscles slack, his head forward at a despondent angle was another man.

Cranston said to the man at the door. "Mr. Yorke?"

"Right. And you can only be Lamont Cranston."

Entering the room, Cranston realized that the man who slumped in the chair was not even aware of his presence. Yorke said, "Buck up, Jackie, I want you to meet your potential savior."

There was a pause, a long pause, and finally the young man looked up. He was startling. He was so good looking that he missed the adjective pretty only by a jaw that was a trifle too broad and firm.

He said, "How do you do." His face didn't break in its lines of set misery.

Yorke said, "Cranston, this is the right honorable, the Earl of Bostick, possessed of so many given names and odds and ends of titles that they are of interest only to a snob or a genealogist. Call him Jackie and let's carry on."

Bustling around the room, Yorke made Cranston comfortable and once he was set in a low chair with a scotch and soda in one hand and his back to a lovely fireplace, said, "Now let's buck up and see how Mr. Cranston can help."

"Oh, Louis, what's the use of carrying this pretense any further? You know I argued against bothering to get this man all the way from the States when it's so completely a dead-and-gone thing. You know as well as I do that they're going through all the old forms down at the Yard just to be sure they don't make any error in arresting the sacred person of a belted Earl! If I were some ordinary bloke I'd have been in the pokey days ago.

"It's just that they don't want to slip up on any of the interminable forms and ancient and musty laws that they have delayed!"

"Defeatism is hardly the order of the day, old dear. Now pull yourself together and regale us once more with the horrid and..."

The dispirited young nobleman interjected before his friend could go on, "Horrid and completely incredible story that I have been telling, why don't you say it? Everyone is thinking it! You see," he turned to Cranston, "none of my friends will believe me, but neither will they do me the credit of having at least enough brains to have cooked up a lucid lie if I were going to lie! That's what defeats me. No one can believe my story. I don't... not really... not deep down inside of me. It couldn't have happened. And yet... it did. And because it did, I am going to be tried by a jury of my peers and then taken out and hanged by the neck until dead!" The boy's face was livid as he glared at Cranston, daring him to believe his story.

Cranston said, "Take it easy, son, I'm like the White Queen in Alice in Wonderland. Every morning before I get out of bed, I try believing something just a little more impossible than I believed the day before. Relax and say your say. Let me be the arbiter of what is true and what is not."

As the young man opened his mouth, cleared his throat and quite obviously tried to get his thoughts in order so that he could tell his story lucidly, out in the rain and fog across the street from the expensive apartment, a man stood and stared off into space with an expression of almost unbelievable effort. He was quite obviously staring at nothing at all and just as obviously was hoping no one would come up to him and break in on the sanctity of his thoughts. His nose, which was so long it projected out past the brim of his hat, had a single rain drop running down its length. His eyes crossed as he looked down at it as it roller-coasted from the bridge of his nose all the way down to its tip.

He sighed. He shook his head a trifle, but the drop lingered. There was nothing else to do, so relaxing his grip on the gun in his pocket, he took his hand out and flicked the drop away. Then he again stared off into space seemingly lost in his thoughts.

They weren't very complicated thoughts, for he wasn't a very complicated man. All he was thinking was, "If that blighter doesn't come down soon so I can shoot him, I'm going to catch my death of cold."

He had a mental image of the "blichter." It was an easily recognizable face.

Strong, sharp, with wide set eyes, it was the face of the man known as Lamont Cranston.

CHAPTER II

WARM, feeling as though caught in some eddy of quiet, Cranston relaxed and gave his whole attention to the young Earl's story. It caught him up and carried him along with it, for the Earl was a good story teller, and somehow in the telling, because of the very bizarreness of what he had to tell, he recovered some of his equanimity.

"Louis knows this," he said, "and will just have to bear with me again. You see," he looked at Cranston for understanding, "I was young enough so as to be a little disgusted with my elders in that period that followed the first world war. I remember the way they whined and carried on about how they were the lost generation.

"I want you to understand that I don't want to be included in a new generation of whiners... but..."

Yorke broke in, "Jackie had it pretty rough in this war. He was at El Alamein and had almost all of his company killed... He broods about it on occasion."

"Brood? Not that... but after that scruffy show in the desert, I got a bellyful of the European war." He paused.

"I see," Cranston said, and he did.

"I'm not asking for understanding and I don't want you to think I'm psycho on the subject, but every once in a while it gets a bit too much for me; it gags me. I have to wipe the taste out and I know of only one way to do that."

"What Jackie's trying to say is that he tied one on the night that all this happened. He was stinko."

"Precisely... so you will have to bear in mind that the whole affair had that soft, woolly feeling that you get sometimes when you've had one over the nine. I had meandered around London going from pub to pub as they closed. I finally wound up at a bottle club that I save as a last resort when everything else is

closed up..."

Cranston knew that a bottle club was the English equivalent of a speakeasy and nodded.

"It was mucky out... about the way it is tonight. I was fairly contented, or as contented as I can get when I have that particular bee in my bonnet."

And then it was as though Cranston was at the young man's side. The room faded away and the scene was that of a London street. Not far away was the Embankment, that veiled road that parallels the course of the muddy Thames.

It was almost hypnotic. In the grey wool fog he could see scenes being re-enacted which he'd have been happier forgetting. Men, wounded, dying in agony, without ever having known what they were fighting for...

With a sense of real relief he looked down the street and saw a dog gambolling along. He thought he knew the animal and whistled for it.

It paid no attention to him. He pushed away from the parapet and walked down the street, whistling to the dog. He called, "Come here!" The dog looked back over its shoulder, wagged its tail and continued on its way. It was like a game of blind man's buff. The man losing sight of the animal occasionally and then catching a vagrant peep through the eddying fog.

The heavy feeling was still with Jackie; the dog had not been able to wipe out what he had been seeing in his mind's eye. It was then, with a feeling of real relief, that he saw that the dog had brought him within ear shot of two men who were rolling along arm-in-arm singing at the top of their voices.

They were singing Sweet Alice Ben Bolt, as the dog, with a flirt of his tail ran off into the fog and was completely lost to sight. The singing was more loud than musical. They staggered up to Jackie and beamed at him. One said, "Hi, we need a tenor."

Smiling, the youthful Earl cleared his throat and began to sing along with them. They joined arms on each side of him and carried him along with them.

He hadn't noticed it in his walk through the fog from the bottle club, but he was near Marble Arch which was near his home. At a break in the raucous singing, he asked the men if they wanted to come up to his digs for a drink.

The one on his right snorted drunkenly, "Wouldn't think of it, old bean. We're right near my humble domicile. Join us."

They wouldn't hear of any refusal, so, still singing they meandered up a street that Jackie realized vaguely paralleled his own.

There was no one around, he saw as they staggered into the lobby of the big apartment house. Ahead was the elevator. Jackie looked up at the indicator blearily and saw that the building was high for a London house. It was... he squinted his eyes and tried to focus them on the dial... twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen stories high.

There was no elevator boy. It was self run. They banged into the small car, all jollity and good feeling. They were on the eighth verse of Venal Vera from Ghezira by now.

Then it happened; and Jackie, even while it was going on, could not help but feel that it was preposterous as the man on his right, a red-faced beefy looking individual, leaned over and grinned as he reached up

and grabbed the front of Jackie's hat. He yanked on the brim and it came down, cutting into his eyes. Blinded as he was, still thinking it was some kind of hold-up and hoping to have some clue to what was going on, he looked down his nose at his feet. In front of them was the lacy grillework of the elevator cage. Through the grille he could see the floor numbers race by. They were on the tenth floor and still going up.

He raised his hands to try and pull his hat up, but the men, suddenly completely sober, prevented that by holding onto his arms like grim death.

He relaxed. He was outnumbered. No use trying to fight against the impossible. Still peeking down his nose, he saw that they had passed the twelfth floor and... there, he could see the number plainly, they were stopping at the thirteenth floor.

Still holding his arms so that there was nothing he could do, they walked him down the hall.

They came to a halt and one of them reached up and pushed his hat back. He blinked his eyes to get them working again. He was standing in front of a door. The numbers on it danced but finally resolved into 1313.

The men were smiling gaily again and as the red-faced one pushed the door open he began to hum to himself. Flanked on each side by the men, he was forced into the room.

Here the young Earl paused in his story so long that the spell was broken for the nonce. Cranston waited and then cued, "Yes?"

"So far, there's nothing particularly unbelievable about my yarn, but this is the point where my friends start to look away. You see, the room did not belong in a modern apartment house. This was no flat.

"I blinked my eyes, for there was no electrical illumination. Candles, bright and white, were the only source of light. The room was long and gracefully decorated all right, but it was decorated for the eighteenth century... not the present. The people who walked around a circle in the center of the room were not of our day, either. They were dressed for the period that the room represented.

"The two men forced me along the side of the room - and here it begins to get improbable... Picture..."

The room was deadly quiet. The only jarring notes were the two men who hustled Jackie along. For that matter Jackie thought, he was a jarring note himself. These three were the only ones not in costume. The women, tiny-waisted and bare-bosomed with high white wigs and beauty spots on their faces, were intent on the ring of people in the very center of the room.

All told, there must have been a hundred people. The men almost danced as they walked along, getting closer to the circle that was about ten feet from Jackie. The men were dandified past belief - wielding lorgnettes, taking snuff, or gracefully holding their canes which were as tall as they were. They primped and posed.

But, and this was what horrified, amazed, and made the nightmare-feeling so pronounced, not one of the gaily bedecked people looked up, looked at, or even seemed to be aware of the presence of three men whose modern clothes were, in those surroundings, an anachronism.

Jackie was closer now, to the circle which attracted every eye. He looked, and his brain refused to credit what he was seeing. For the inner circle of people sprawled on cushions on the floor. They faced a sort of brazier. Emanating from the brazier were long ribbons of every conceivable color. The ribbons spread out from the bronze object and made a spider web as they ran out. The far end of each ribbon was in the

hand of a man or woman.

Most horrifying to Jackie was the fact that the people who clenched the ribbons were seemingly in some kind of ecstatic state. Their faces were blank and tremors coursed through their bodies. Their hands trembled, their bodies shook as though they were afflicted with the medieval dancing mania that at one time swept all Europe before it and left in its wake horror and death.

Two women, the prettiest of all the lovely women there, stepped to one side and revealed the grand high panjandrum of these esoteric goings on.

The tremors that shook the people who held the ribbons seemed to re-double as a man reached forward and placed his hands deep in the brazier. It was as though he were some kind of dynamo for recharging the batteries. They shook increasingly and the look of blind, idiot happiness on their faces became uncomfortable to watch.

Jackie tore his eyes from the participants in this strange ritual and looked up at the man who was now withdrawing his hands from the brazier.

The man said, "The Odic force will now gradually decrease. You will become more and more aware of your surroundings. And then, you others, who have waited so patiently, will have your turn." He smiled and it made his face hideous.

Jackie wondered how so fat a man could look so much like a mummy. His hands, awkward and ugly, were like a butcher's. His stumpy body was graceless inside of the garish gown he wore. Around his bullet-shaped head there was a curious crown. It was made of iron evidently, and from what Jackie could see of the designs that were wrought in it, he was not anxious to make any closer inspection.

One of the women near him threw herself flat on her face and, reaching up, touched the hem of his highly ornamented gown. She said, and her voice was husky with repression, "Count... I beseech you... the touch direct!"

He shook his head wisely. "Nay, you are not prepared for that yet, child. In your ecstasy you would die..."

"To die such a death were the only life worth having," she said, and Jackie was made squeamish when she banged her forehead on the floor.

"I know best, my child... soon... soon." The obese, almost funny figure waddled away. But funny or not, Jackie thought, the oaf does emanate some kind of force. He overcame his ridiculousness and somehow made it pay dividends.

The men and women sprawling on the cushions on the floor were relaxing more and more. In some cases their limp hands released the ribbons that they had been clenched on.

The two men on each side of the young Earl pushed forward. He saw an old, old man at the side of the fat man. He was brushing the ground that the fat man was about to step on with a peacock fan. A woman lolling near spoke in a whisper to the old man.

The whisper carried, and Jackie heard her ask, "How old is the Count?"

The old man looked down and smiled a gentle smile. He said, "I am sorry, my dear, I don't know. I have only been with him for two hundred years."

The following moment Jackie was forced through a doorway into a small study. The fat man leaned back

in a big, sturdy chair and his small pig-like eyes were closed. He said, and his voice was low, "You got one?"

One of the men who had kidnapped the Earl said, "Of course; hearing is obeying."

"Good. I have large plans for this little innocent." The eyes opened and Jackie felt as if he had been hit with a hammer between the eyes. Never in his life had he felt the force of anyone's gaze. But this was almost a physical thing.

"Wasn't it dangerous bringing him in past those?" he jerked his finger at the people outside.

"Tcha... what danger from my lambs? I am sure none of them even saw him, for so I willed it. No, le Comte Germain is not to be trapped that easily."

And now the nightmare-feeling was in full sway for, of course, Jackie had heard the name of that notorious charlatan before. But, and this was the drawback, the infamous Count Germain had been dead for more than a century! He had followed that other even more notorious sorcerer Cagliostro.

It had even been whispered at the time, among the adepts that the Count was the resurrection of Balsamo, better known as Cagliostro. The air pressed in on Jackie so that he had difficulty in breathing.

Around the walls of the room, draped as though at an art exhibition, were tapestries. Jackie eyed them uncertainly. The pictures didn't go with that ancient art form. In tapestry one is used to seeing the death of a stag, with suitably accoutred knights and villeins all around.

It was probably the anachronism between the art form and the subject matter, that made it so terrifying. The pictures belonged at an exhibit of modern surrealistic art and not on the walls of a room.

Embroidered over and over again, making a border for all the tapestries, were words. Muggily blinking his eyes, the young Earl cleared his vision.

The man who styled himself the Count Germain, smiled. His fat broad face creased up in ugly wrinkles. It was as though Santa Claus had gone through some horrid transmutation and his jolly fat had become all evil.

He spoke: "You have done well, my braves. You will be suitably rewarded."

The response made Jackie feel unclean. It was not healthy to see men with that look on their faces. They seemed obscene in his eyes as they bowed and scraped their thanks. Their eyes glittered. If the reward was to be money, then these men were misers - but somehow, Jackie had an idea that not even money would have brought this avid gleam. And if it was not money... then what?

The room began to whirl around him. The fumes of the liquor he had drunk earlier were weaving in and out of his dazed brain cells. He sank his fingernails in his palms till the pain made his brain function a bit better.

The Count said and his voice was low and caressing, "Observe, my brave, there on the desk before me, there is a snake..."

It was a carving and an exquisite one. It seemed to have been made from ebony, its mouth was curled up in a sneer, its eyes, sparkling in the dull room seemed alive, implicit with menace.

The young Earl, staring at the serpent's eyes, realized in some dim chamber at the back of his mind that he was being hypnotized. This would never do. He knew very well that you can't be hypnotized against

your will. There was no danger here. He was no hysteric, no borderline case who would pass out at the first whispered suggestion.

Or was he? He felt his eyes closing against his will. He staggered.

"Ah, our young friend does not feel well. Jamison, get him a drink of brandy."

It was no Napoleon brandy, but its raw strength cut through the fog that was descending on him. He coughed and as it went down looked up at the count and said, "Thanks, I needed that."

This time when Jackie paused, he did not go on. Cranston said, "Well?"

Yorke interjected, "That's all! He doesn't remember anything else till he came to in that damned room with the murder knife in his hand and the gems in his pockets!"

The Earl said dully, "A bloody knife in my hand, a corpse on the floor near me... and a blank mind."

CHAPTER III

CRANSTON started to say, "There doesn't seem to be anything extraordinary here - you were obviously doped and left as the scapegoat," but before he could go on, there was a knock on the door.

Yorke opened it and Cranston had a great deal of difficulty in remembering he was in London, for the girl that walked in might just as well have come in from Forty-seventh Street and Madison Avenue. She was so completely American in body, face and dress that it wasn't a shock when a voice, unmistakably Yankee, came from her lips.

She said, "Hi, kiddies, what goes?"

"If you were carrying a hat box, I'd swear you were out on an assignment for Harry Conover," Cranston said.

She smiled and it brightened the unhappy room, "You mean it shows?"

He nodded.

"I never worked for him, but I did model for a couple of months before I came over here on U.S.O. I'd probably have gone back to the treadmill, but Beautiful, over there," she smiled at the young Earl, "talked me out of it. Seems his rusty old dungeon needs a new head matron."

"She means," Yorke explained although no explanation was necessary, "that she is affianced to Jackie."

She sat down and Cranston turned back to the miserable young man. He had brightened momentarily, but was now back in the doldrums.

"That's the most obvious frame-up I ever heard of."

Yorke said, "There, didn't I say so?"

"Fine, I know it was framed, but how are you going to convince the police?" Jackie asked.

Deep furrows were in Cranston's forehead; he knew very well that London has one of the best police forces in the world. It wasn't like them to have the wool pulled this far down over their eyes. There must be more to the story.

There was.

"I can see that you're puzzled. Let me say," the young man's face beamed as the girl who had been introduced as Bobby Rawson took his little finger and held onto it, "that if that was all there was to it, I wouldn't be in the funk I am.

"It was pretty unpleasant," he made a face at the memory. "I came to as the police came into the room. I stood up, staggering, looked at the knife... looked at the hole in the dead man that it had made, and dropped the knife. It was the only sound.

"I reeled as I stood there trying to get my scattered thoughts into some kind of order. At that, one of the men leaned over and sniffed at my mouth. He said, 'Drunk as a lord.'"

"Just parenthetically," said Yorke, "I've always wondered how much the old earls must have drunk to have made that cliché part of the language."

Bobby said, "In the States, we say drunk as a skunk... maybe it followed the same pattern here."

"Could be," Jackie smiled. "Of course, I am not the exception that proves the rule by any means."

"Let's get back to the story," Cranston insisted. "You were hazy and foggy and came to in time to see the police examining the room. Whose was it?"

"A nouveau riche war profiteer who had somehow come into possession of the most fantastically lovely collection of gems I have ever seen. And I saw them all right, for they were in all my pockets when the police got around to searching me.

"Their owner was the gentleman who lay on the floor with a sort of dead mackerel look in his eyes. He looked most peculiar in death, because his face obviously called for an apoplectic flush; but the lividity of dying had drained all the blood away." The Earl made a face of distaste.

"I watched," he went on, "as the specialists went about their singular work. They took pictures, examined the entire area for fingerprints and in general earned their stipends.

"The officer who seemed to be in charge, introduced himself to me as Inspector Lalage. Things went a little more smoothly when I identified myself. There was less of a handcuff look in their eyes after I had convinced them that I really was an M.P.

"But Lalage did not at any time take his eyes off me. It was quite disconcerting for he obviously expected me to make a try at escaping. Of course, I had no intention of so doing. I didn't even know what had happened, really.

"When they had finished their work, the Inspector sat down, filled a pipe, relaxed a bit and said, 'Now laddie, let's hear your story.'"

"Quite an assignment," said Yorke.

Jackie nodded and seemed reassured as Bobby grasped his hand firmly. "I didn't enjoy it, but I went right down the line with it. I told him all the things I have just told you. When I had finished he had an odd, quizzical expression on his face. He looked at me for a moment... then at the table where he had placed the loot he had taken from my person, then at the dagger which lay nearby, and finally at the spot where the owner of the gems had been stretched. They had taken his body away by now."

Cranston interrupted, "What was the dead man's name?"

"Briarly. Why?"

"No reason. Go on with your tale."

"As I say, I finished telling my completely unbelievable yarn and waited."

The inspector sighed, knocked the dottle out of his pipe and said, "This is going to be quite easy to check up on. You realize that a fifteen story apartment house is a rarity in London."

"Of course," said the young Earl. "I think I know just where it is."

"You do? I don't know of any such building!"

There was a tight quietness that seemed alive in the room, The Earl wrenched at his collar. He had been so mixed up that he hadn't taken time to think about this factor. Of course, this wasn't New York. There were few office buildings in the skyscraper class, let alone apartment houses.

"If you know about where this mysterious building is, suppose we get about looking for it." The Inspector stood up. His very bearing had about it a let's-have-no-more-nonsense-me-lad air.

They left the death room. Out on the street, the Inspector helped Jackie into a police car. They drove off into the night. The scene was a strange one to Jackie and he asked, "Where are we?"

"Down near Limehouse. This is about the only respectable square for miles."

"I see." The scene became more familiar and he got his bearings. They were heading for the section of the Embankment where he had met the two singing kidnappers.

"This about right?" asked the Inspector.

He nodded. Looking around he got some guides to his whereabouts. The car meandered along at about ten miles an hour. Ahead, Jackie saw a tall building. "That's it."

The Inspector made a sour face. "I thought you'd pick on that, however, there is a slight drawback."

"Drawback?"

"Yes, that is the tallest apartment house in London, but it is only thirteen stories high."

That was a crack between the eyes, for the Earl clearly remembered the face of the dial on the elevator. He closed his eyes and could see it in his mind's eye. Surely, he couldn't have been that muddled.

Leaving the car they walked through the lobby that he remembered so clearly. There, that was the elevator. And there was the dial. The inspector looked at him as his eyes grew frightened. For the highest number on the elevator indicator was 14.

"Ready to give up?"

"Wait, didn't you say this was 13 stories high?"

The Inspector nodded. "Come ahead. I'd like to see how you account for this."

They got into the car of the elevator. The Inspector pressed the proper button and they started up for the top floor. The nightmare didn't really begin to send long black fingers into the brain of the Earl till they got to the twelfth floor and he leaned forward looking through the iron grillework of the car at the floor

number on the wall of the shaft. Twelve... and now should come his ill-fated floor... but it didn't!

There was no thirteenth floor! The car went directly from twelve to fourteen. At that Jackie's mind began to spin, this couldn't be happening and if it was, he was mad as a March Hare. Mad...

In the room where Jackie had been telling the story of his bizarre adventure there was absolute quiet. Cranston looked at the tormented face of the young man.

"Did you investigate any further?" Cranston asked. "Did you look for the strangely decorated room?"

"We looked. The only room that seemed to me to be in the proper place was 1414. The Inspector with an air of give-him-enough-rope-and-he'll-hang-himself, rang the bell. It opened and a very strait laced looking butler was there. He asked us what we wanted.

Jackie thought as he looked into the room at the thin slit that he could see, there goes all my hope... I am a dead duck. The whole world seemed to be spinning topsy-turvily. He knew now what his old Scot grandma had meant by 'spinning widdershins'.

This was the end. He must have slipped a cog. Maybe you don't get over the terrific bombardments he had lived through. Perhaps war leaves one scar that none can see. It must be like a crack in an egg that doesn't become obvious till the egg hits boiling water and then all the white of the egg sneaks out through the tiny crack for all to see.

Perhaps his brain was like that... seeping out... rotten. If this was the truth, then in a momentary aberration he had thought up that whole wild episode in this apartment and then - still in a psychotic state - gone out and killed a man. Stabbed Briarly and attempted to escape with the gems, only to fall a prey to the fault in his brain and collapse with some kind of an amnesia that wiped out all the reality and left the nightmare.

None of this showed in his face, schooled as it was by the war. Lalage looked from the butler to the Earl and his eyes were quizzical. But he said nothing.

Jackie paused again in his story and they waited till he cleared his throat and went on, "That moment lasted forever and ever, time without end. It was with a feeling of relief that I heard Lalage speak." To some extent it stopped the room from whirling around him.

He thought, then aloud, he said: "The Inspector cleared his throat with a horrendous sound and...

"He asked for the butler's indulgence, showed him his badge, and we entered. I took one look and turned away."

The room was small, a veritable jewel box of a room. It was exquisitely furnished in the modern manner. There was not the slightest resemblance between it and the site of the room where the Earl had been conducted. He bowed his head to the inevitable and said to the Inspector, "Let's leave. This isn't it."

The Inspector thanked the butler and they left. The Earl was as completely licked as anyone the Inspector had ever seen. He said, "Ready to tell me what really happened now, laddy?"

"I... I assure you, I have told you what happened to me. I can't help it if everything has conspired to make a liar of me. I... Oh what's the use? Are you going to take me to the Yard?"

The Inspector was tempted, but he'd had his fingers burnt by the Home Office too often to take any chances with a member of the landed gentry - particularly when that part of the gentry was a belted Earl. He said, "Don't leave London; don't go anywhere as a matter of fact. You'll be under constant

surveillance."

"And," finished up the young man, "that's where it stands. I am being watched twenty-four hours a day. It's just a question of when they get all the old rigamarole straight in their minds and then I'm in for it!"

There was a scratching on the door that led to the bedroom. Everyone jumped. Yorke got to his feet. "Good heavens! That's Marvin."

He opened the door.

Marvin stalked into the room. He stalked about with a green-eyed stare that took in everyone. Then he walked very sedately to the foot of Cranston's chair and sniffed at his legs. Marvin was a dachshund. He was champagne-colored and very temperamental. He decided that Cranston smelled properly and stalked off, tail carried glumly, dragging behind him.

"Isn't he lovely?" Bobby asked Cranston. "I adore him. He always seems to have the cares of the world on his shoulders."

"Well, he does," said Yorke. "After all, he has a great deal to do. He has to keep an eye on the furniture so no one steals it, he has to bark at any untoward sounds, he has..."

"Stop it," the Earl said, and he sounded peevish. "You don't have to get cute to get my mind off what's facing me. Relax. I'm all right. Look, my hand is absolutely steady."

It was. But that's not the sign that laymen think it is. A strong-nerved person can hold onto that control even though his insides are churning with fear.

Cranston watched the girl playing with the stumpy-legged dog while he went over the Earl's wild story in his mind. He added, subtracted, and finally came up with a question. "Jackie, in this strange room where the so-called Count Germain held his rites, were there any mottoes, signs, or the like?"

Without pausing to think, the Earl said, "Right! I'd forgotten that. It seemed completely out of accord with the rest of the furnishings. There were what looked like tapestries on some of the walls with bizarre and outre figures worked into the design. The motto that was repeated over and over again was 'What you do is right.' It seemed to be their only law."

"The creatures in the designs," Cranston asked, "could they have been representations of what is described in the Book of the Apocalypse?"

For the first time since Cranston had met him, the young man looked cheered up. "You are a wonder-worker! How in the name of all that's holy, could you know that, I can't imagine. But they could well have been the Beast of the Apocalypse!"

"There, didn't I tell you he was quite a guy?" Bobby asked. "I know about him, I've read a lot of the doings of the estimable Lamont Cranston."

Yorke asked. "How could you know that, old man?"

"I almost hate to tell you," said Cranston smiling, "it's like finding out how a trick is done. It's always disappointing. The Count Germain sounds uncommonly like a charlatan who operated in New York for a while. He ran a cult and he was caught peddling drugs to his infatuated followers. He was making drug addicts of them under the guise of leading them in the path of what he called 'the only way'. I've often wondered where he went after he crashed out of a Federal prison."

"He is a well known criminal character, then?" Yorke asked.

"Yes, indeed. A desperate and dangerous criminal mind. In his own way, he is a genius, I am afraid. The trap he has enmeshed Jackie in, is typical of his diablerie."

"At least, we have some kind of a lead now." Yorke looked jubilant. "Now will you cheer up, Jackie?"

The young good looking man smiled and nodded. "This is the first rift in the clouds that have been encircling me. I leave myself in good hands."

Cranston wished that he felt a tenth as optimistic as the Earl, Yorke and the girl. He got up and bowing made his good-byes. At the door he said, "One word of warning, don't try to elude the police who are watching you. They make good guards, as well as watchers."

Down in the lobby of the building, Cranston paused for a moment and tried to remember the name of the hotel that had a room ready for him. It came to him in a moment. The Marble Arch. It was right nearby. No sense in getting a cab for that.

He stepped out into the night, completely unaware that death waited for him across the street.

CHAPTER IV

LIGHT poured from a strange candelabrum onto a plume that was grasped in a pudgy hand. The plume was a quill pen and it waved to and fro as the hand that held it wrote secret thoughts in a bizarre journal.

The light made a circle. Outside of the circle there was nothing but blackness. Within the circle, in the words, was even more blackness. The quill wrote... "Most Godlike of all is the random striking down of a relentless and capricious fate. Murder per se, murder as a fine art has been consistently overrated. Even that fine essay of de Quincy on the subject fails to approach the truth. Wilde, in 'Pen, Pencil and Poison' comes closer to it, for he makes a hero of the man who killed a woman because her ankles were too thick.

"But none of these come within the range of the objective that I have made mine own. The ancients almost appreciated my feeling. Their belief that lightning bolts, thrown at random by a careless Zeus struck the unwary down, was a fine thought. But still the God concept gets lost in a morass of religiosity.

"When I was in my American period, the chewing gum came close to it." The quill paused in its scurrying and the man thought, there was an idea... to take advantage of man's cupidity and kill him because of it. How fine.

So simple too, like all good things. He had poisoned sticks of gum, carefully rewrapped them in their gaudy paper coverings and then, a careless approach to the chewing gum dispenser... a penny inserted... the switch of the poisoned gum for the real... push it up a little into the inside of the machine... and the next person who bought a piece of gum got two pieces for his penny. The one that came from the machine pushed down the deadly one.

No one ever failed to take advantage of the free piece, and they walked off feeling a little cheered about getting something for nothing.

And the fine rapture of not even knowing who it was who had taken the fateful gum. Just to leave death waiting and walk off, never knowing who was to be the recipient of the deadly favor.

He sighed. There was ecstasy. And safe ecstasy at that. For how could the blundering police ever work back? Could they find all the people who bought gum from that particular machine, that is, if they had

ever been aware that the venter had been responsible? How find a killer who killed not for revenge, not for money, but just for the sheer, superhuman joy of killing?

The quill raced again along the pages of the journal.

"Then, on the other hand, the motivated murder requires so much more care, for the same safeguards which protect the god-like killing turn around and become dangers when it becomes necessary to kill for any of the sufficient reasons that control my decision to end the sorry life of Tommy Bratkin tonight...

"Looked at in its proper context, I am conferring a boon on him by ending his miserable existence. It might, looked at realistically, be difficult to convince him of this philosophical truth, so it will be under the guise of reward that he meets my bony brother... Death."

In the yellow, almost sulphurous-looking fog that whirled in slow eddies in the street, the long-nosed man opened his eyes wide as his quarry stepped out of the doorway into the street.

Should he shoot the blighter in the belly, to make him pay for having kept him waiting out in the cold and miserable night? But the orders were instant death. He took the gun from his pocket, and the fog misted the blue steel almost instantly as he raised it at arm's length and aimed at Cranston's head. Right between the eyes would be nice.

His finger tightened on the trigger. The strain made the skin across his knuckles whiten. His eyes were cold as dry ice. There was something Antarctic in the kind of killing that he was committing. Here was no sudden outburst of passion, but a cold, calculated, pounds-and-pence kill.

The flash of the powder was lost in the all-encompassing wetness. The aim was perfect. There was no conceivable reason for the bullet to miss, he thought dully, but miss it did. For as he shot, Cranston, his clay pigeon, dropped his briefcase and bent down to pick it up.

The first warning that Cranston had was when flakes of concrete cut across his face. Then there was the hollow sound of the shot. The bullet ricocheting off the face of the building made an ugly whine as it skittered off.

Without thought, his conditioned reflexes took care of him. He fell face forward on the ground and rolled into the slight protection of a concrete abutment near him.

He squinted his eyes in an unavailing attempt to penetrate the yellow-grey shroud that had come so close to being his last sight of the earth. He could barely make out a shade of motion across the street. The motion seemed to melt back into the muck.

Crouching low, moving like a broken-field runner, zigzagging as he went, he ran to the spot that his potential killer had just quitted. A bit ahead of him, he could see the swirl of a raincoat as it rounded the corner.

Sure that he was unseen, Cranston ran through the night and as he ran his agile fingers ripped open his briefcase. He swept that black all-encompassing cape from its confinement and at the corner where he paused to make sure of his quarry, he swept the cape around his shoulders. It was followed by the cavalierish black hat turned down all around. The briefcase was swept into the secrecy of the cape and Cranston was gone.

Instead, running on silent feet, the frightening form of The Shadow was at work. The hunter had become the hunted! And this was a hunt which of all others The Shadow was the past master. The man hunt!

Through the secret fog the two figures went.

The man with the sharp nose was thinking, "Blast it, missing at a range like that! I'll have to try again as soon as I can! Lucky he couldn't see me in this pea soup."

Off through the foreign streets, foreign to The Shadow that is, the twisting, turning chase led. Under the conditions, The Shadow was soon lost. He had a twofold reason for not losing the man: one was the obvious one, to find out who was interested enough in him to want to kill him; the other, so as not to be left in the confusing streets, lost.

The man slowed down by now, sure that there was no one at all interested in his progress. He looked at his watch, holding it close to his eyes.

In the darkness, the phosphorous on the dial was enough to light his face with a green luminescence. The Shadow, not six feet away smiled a wry smile as he recognized the man whose nose had intrigued him on the Underground.

The nose was unmistakable. The man swore under his breath. He was late for his appointment. It was all that guy's fault. Keeping him out in the cold wet streets, making a bad target and now making him tardy.

He scurried off. The Shadow was right behind him. Never before in all the times that his black outfit had made him to all intents and purposes invisible, had he been quite so sure that he was unseen. Even if he'd been wearing white, the man would have had trouble in spotting him. Swathed as he was, there was no earthly chance of recognition.

The chase, murky, and nightmarish, led them to a section that The Shadow realized must be near Seven Dials. The man was going down a flight of stairs that led to a basement. The Shadow hovered at the railing waiting till the man had gained admission to the door on which he knocked with a peculiar double tattoo.

Waiting only a minute after that, The Shadow cast his eye around. No help in any direction, not even from the way the building was laid out. There was no help for it. He would have to waste some time.

Moving silently down a bit, till he got to the next house, The Shadow raced up the front flight of stairs. The lock on the front door didn't even warrant the use of one of his beautiful picks so he used a piece of stiff celluloid that made a cover over his identification in his wallet. He slipped the celluloid into the space between the door and the jamb and jiggled it.

Leaning on the door knob and pressing with the celluloid at the same time, he opened the door. The celluloid had pushed the faulty lock mechanism back.

The hallway was silent of sound but noisy with the smells of departed dinners. There was a heavy odor, that seemed to penetrate through his clothes, of old stale fat and other cooking smells that tautened his nostrils and made his gorge rise.

Passing closed door after door, he made his way to the end of the long hallway. Ah, one break at least. There was a window at the back of the hall. And if he guessed right, it should look down over a back yard.

It did. He eased the cranky window up and then down behind him. He held onto a narrow sill for a second and then breathing a prayer that he wouldn't land on a garbage pail or something, equally noisy - he let go and dropped into the yard.

Nothing remained between him and his goal but a fence about seven feet high. If it was as rickety as it looked this might be dangerous. He navigated it safely.

Meanwhile up at the front of the other house, Big Nose entered.

The door opened and the man went into the warmth and light gratefully. He said, "Whew, what a night!"

Down at the end of a hall, the other man who had opened the door to the latecomer said, "Better walk easy. Himself is annoyed at your being late."

"I can explain all that!"

"Can you?" a menacing voice said and the tone was soft.

"Uh... well you see, he didn't come down till just a few minutes ago. I had no chance to shoot him till then."

It was the man who was known as the Count Germain who looked up from the table over which he was bent and sneered, "Would it be too much trouble for you to report? You killed him?"

"You got to listen to what happened. I was all set; I aimed. It was a set-up... you couldn't miss!"

"But if I have any knowledge of humanity, as difficult as it was to miss, you managed it?" The Count's voice was even lower.

The man with the ridiculous nose nodded sadly.

The room was still. Dangling from a frayed electric cord, a single yellow bulb cast its twenty-five watts feebly. The rest of the room around the single circle of illumination was in shadowed darkness.

The bulb acted like a spotlight, emphasizing the horror of what lay on the table. The product of the handiwork of the Count Germain. The Shadow, who had worked his way around to the back of the house and was looking in through a slit in a tattered window blind, sucked in his breath in anger as he saw what the light showed.

Count Germain straightened up. The scalpel was blackened. Only an occasional spot of glistening steel still reflected light. He walked towards the man who had failed in his execution.

His fat arm hung at his side. The scalpel was but an extension of his fingers. He stared at the man. His eyes were heavy, almost hooded. He said, and his voice was a whisper, "You must never do these things in anger, therefore be reassured that I am no longer angry."

The period to his sentence was a swipe across the face of the man with the scalpel. He sank to his knees in moaning agony. The Count looked down at his bowed back and said, "If you fail me again, there will be but one thing to do, and be assured I will do it. But not in anger. Never in anger!"

The Shadow had involuntarily moved at the sight of what he thought was to be a murder, but when the chastisement ended with that one wicked swipe with the knife, he sank back again to watch.

Hands clutched his outraged face, the man stumbled from the room. His moans were low and animal-like. The Count turned to the other man, a fat, rather jolly looking, red faced man who had opened the door and said, "See that he doesn't leave." There was a pause. "I don't mean to kill him, just be sure his face is patched up before he goes out on the street. I will finish up here. The sheer beauty has been disrupted. Now it is just a job." He sighed and returned to the horror on the table.

He was alone now with the corpse of Tommy Bratkin. He was flaying him and while he had been in the mood, it had been quite pleasant and artistic. But the failure of his emissary to kill had broken the mood.

Now it was just something that had to be done. He smiled at his cleverness. Let the police examine this cadaver for identification. There would be none. The dead man's teeth were in a jar. No possibility of dental identification. The flaying would remove his features and all the scars that might aid the police. Let them find the body in the river. The water would finish the job for him.

He bent over the cadaver again. It was then, right at that second that a weird, eerie, almost otherworldly sound impinged on his consciousness.

It was a laugh in which there was no humor. It was a sound that was a composite of bitter malice and graveyard chuckling. It was the laugh of The Shadow and it sent fingers up and down the spine of the monster who stood frozen with the death-dealing scalpel, quivering in his suddenly affrighted fingers.

CHAPTER V

IN YORKE'S apartment, Bobby stood up to leave. She said, "Now that I've seen Jackie looking a little more human, I think I'll be able to get a good night's sleep, and I can stand one."

Leaping to his feet, Jackie said, "Hold it, I'll walk you home."

But there was no chance of that. Yorke, smiling, said, "Nonsense. You are in need of some rest too, old boy, or had you forgotten? You pile right into bed. Marvin has to stretch his legs one more time. I'll combine his jaunt with tucking Jackie in."

"Yes, I think you should, dear." She bent down and kissed him lightly. "After all it isn't as if I lived in the next county. It's only down the street. I think Louis is right."

Smiling, Jackie acceded. He realized that the emotional debauch he'd been on had taken it out of him. He was undressed and in bed asleep before the dog and his friend and girl were out on the street.

Yorke, Bobby and Marvin went out of the apartment into the elevator. In those narrow confines, Bobby stifled a shudder. She said: "Ever since this all happened, after what happened to Bobby in one of these things, they give me the horrors."

"I'm glad I don't have any claustrophobia, that's all, or it might affect me, too," Yorke said and his face was set.

The elevator boy turned around and looked at them as if they were crazy. He thought, leave it to these rich ones. They ain't got nothin' real to worry about so they gotta get claus - whatever it is. If I had a boloney like that and the dough this one's got I wouldn't worry 'bout nothin'.

They left the elevator and strolled out through the lobby with the operator looking daggers at Yorke's broad back.

"More fog," Bobby said gloomily as they reached the canopy of the building.

Yorke nodded and breathed a deep lungful. "You'll get used to it in time. I rather like it myself."

Bobby shook her head. No accounting for tastes. If left to her own devices she'd have liked to be baking on a sunny beach somewhere instead of swimming through fog.

The dog ran happily along, sniffing and investigating. Bobby and Yorke came along after him at a more sedate rate. She said, "You know, Louis, I really feel for the first time that there is a chance, no matter how small, for Jackie to escape this whole horror."

"Good man, Cranston. Like his bearing. Knows his business, if I'm any judge. Yes, it is a relief."

He looked at her and smiled gaily: "Perhaps soon it'll be the three musketeers again? Eh?"

She squeezed his arm and said, "One for all, that's the ticket. It can be fun again... I hope and pray."

He waved a cheery good night as she ran up the steps into her house. Marvin was concerned at that moment with a cat which had the temerity to snarl at him. He growled at it and almost sneered as the cat arched its back, and spitting vanished down a cellar.

"Come on, boy, time for us to go to bed too." Yorke walked leisurely back up the street. He was feeling a bit better than he had. He whistled as he finally forced the errant dachshund back into the building that roofed their apartment. Above, the young Earl of Bostick slept as though the menace that had made his life hideous had been completely removed. Cranston had that ability of giving complete confidence. He had never failed.

But never is only until the first time.

Across London an eerie scene was being enacted. The Shadow had underrated his opponent. This can be a fatal error. Count Germain, warned of an intruder, had mobilized his forces. He had leaned across the body that he had been working on and pressed a button. The Shadow could not know it, but this button apprised Germain's men that danger threatened from the rear of the house. Before The Shadow could turn from the window through which he had been spying, two men came toward him from different sides.

The Shadow whirled as he heard their heavy breathing. The one on the left was a hooligan out of the old days. Beer-bellied, sweated, he wore a cap on the side of his head. The other was taller, slimmer and seemed to The Shadow to be the more immediate menace. For a slit of light cutting through the window shade showed that his hand was raised.

Puzzled by the fact that the raised hand held no weapon, The Shadow waited. His hands were raised chest high in preparation for that cross-draw of his that out-speeded even fabulous gunmen like Wyatt Earp.

He thought he had the situation under control. He was wrong. He realized it as the man's upraised hand came closer. He could see that dreaded Cockney weapon flashing at his eyes.

Under the man's grubby fingernails, narrow crescents of razor blades were adhesive taped. The five fingers were in effect claws.

They raked down at his face. He backed a step to escape and from the corner of his eye saw the other man slip his cap off his head. He held the visor of the cap in his hand almost like a knife.

He slashed out with it and the edge of the visor cut through The Shadow's sleeve. Razors again. They were sewn in under the lip of the cap.

Behind The Shadow the window slammed up with a sound like a clap of thunder. Count Germain said, and still his voice was well modulated, "Cut him to ribbons, boys." Then he turned off the light.

They moved in to fulfill the order. They were so close that The Shadow's elbows were clasped to his sides. His draw was out of the question. There was only one thing to do. He did it.

To the men at his side it must have seemed that he disappeared like a stage magician. For what he did was throw himself backwards at the now open window. He dove backwards, the way an accomplished

diver would.

The men had been crowded so close to him that as he went backwards, they struck and cut each other. They swore and turned. The sound of The Shadow landing in a crumpled heap inside the room apprised them of what had happened.

Inside the room, getting to his feet, his guns now in his hands, The Shadow wondered whether he had leaped from the proverbial frying pan. For in the darkened room, he could hear someone moving with definite purpose.

Using the gun in his right hand as a feeler, The Shadow moved his hand in front of him. The barrel of his gun touched something that could only be the table on which he had seen the corpse.

There was a sound from the window. The razor-wielding men were coming in after him. There were now at least three men in the room with one desire, and that was to wipe out The Shadow.

In the darkness, he smiled. He threw his head back and laughed. For, instead of the odds being three to one, they were the reverse. He could strike at anyone and be sure of hitting an enemy. How could they be sure?

On the heels of his disconcerting laugh, he lashed out with his gun at a sound near him. It landed with a satisfying thud. The sound was followed by a larger sound as a body fell to the floor. He leaned over and picked up the unconscious man. He got his arms up under the man's arm pits and lifted. His guns projected out in front of his shield.

The room was as pitch black as though light had never been invented. The fog cut off any possible light that might have crept in from outside. There just was no illumination in that cellar. If the men had tried they could not have picked out a situation under which The Shadow was better fitted to function.

In that dangerous moment, The Shadow's lips were curled in a smile. They didn't flatter his intelligence. Someone had thrown something across the room. It sounded like a shilling. They hoped that he, on edge and nervy, would shoot at the sound and thus reveal his position.

He made no move. In his arms the man moaned. Instantly the blackness was cut by the orange flare of a gun. The Shadow felt his human shield jolt as the bullet battered into the man.

Both of The Shadow's guns chattered in answer. The man who had revealed his position died where he stood. His body stiffened with shock and he fell face forward with a crash. It was the man who had slashed at The Shadow with the edge of his cap.

Then there was complete silence made more quiet by the violence that had preceded it. The Shadow made absolutely no noise. His breathing was shallow so that the sound of respiration would not tag him "it" in this deadly game of tag that was being played.

He stood there with the heavy body of the man in his arms getting heavier by the minute. The random bullet had hit its mark. The man was dead. Two down and only the Count to go. But this silence...

The Shadow strained his ears to the utmost. No matter how careful the other was, he must reveal his presence by some rustle of clothing. But there was no rustle.

Perhaps ten minutes passed, ten minutes that might have been years. The Shadow came to a decision. He slid the man in his arms to the floor and proceeded to risk his life. He drew his fountain pen flashlight and pressing it, sprayed the room with light.

Body instinctively tensed against the bullets that he feared might greet this step, he waited. It was anti-climactic. The room was empty but for the body of the man he had dropped to the floor and the other whom he had shot.

The table, which had been used for that evil dissection, was cleared. The flayed body was gone! There was no sign of Count Germain.

The only thing that could have happened was that the Count had cleared the body away before he put the light out, and then in the darkness, while his two hired hands were trying to get The Shadow, he had made his getaway.

The Shadow looked around the room which had become a charnel house. It had no signs that would tie it to Count Germain. Going to the window, The Shadow took a last look. He thought, at least one thing is clear, the one who used the Judas goat technique on the young Earl is implicated.

Then he left behind him his haunting laugh, for The Shadow knew!

CHAPTER VI

WALKING down the long hotel corridor, Lamont Cranston, tired as he was, smiled at the line of shoes that were set in military precision outside the doors of the rooms. He must remember that if he wanted his shoes shined, he'd have to leave them out for Boots.

He must remember too, he thought as he opened his door, to call the elevators, lifts, that gasoline was petrol, that the police were called constables. He was still smiling as he undressed and got into bed.

He realized he was falling asleep. For against that slowness he had to match as much speed as he could. If this case was ever to be solved it had to be fast.

One of the first things that Cranston did after breakfast on the following morning was to wander into a large stationery store near Davenport's in downtown London. All he wanted was a single piece of carbon paper but he had to buy a dozen. It cost sixpence and he promptly proceeded to get involved in the fantastic monetary system that is Albion's own.

He wound up with thrupenny bits, farthings and some other odds and ends of currency which baffled him. On the street he hailed a cab and went to the apartment house where the young Earl was living with Yorke.

Marvin, the dachshund, greeted him ecstatically. He jumped up and cavorted around. Yorke looked surprised.

"Never saw him make such a to-do about anyone before."

"I think the secret of making friends with an animal is not to pay attention. Then they have to do the courting," Cranston said. He smiled as he watched the dachshund stand up on his hind legs and beg. "I never knew a dachsel could do that."

"Marvin has a whim of iron. He saw a poodle do that one day and came home and practiced till I thought he'd break his back. But he managed it."

The young Earl, looking considerably refreshed, came into the room in lounging pajamas and a robe. He grinned hello. "What's on the schedule for today?"

"You sit tight," Cranston said, "and let me do the worrying. I just wanted to be sure you were all right."

"Why shouldn't I be?" Jackie asked in some astonishment. "Do you expect something else to happen?"

"Remember," Cranston said cautioningly, "the longer the constabulary delay in arresting you, the more upset the plans of those who framed you will be."

Yorke said, "You mean..."

"I mean they may think that their plan has fallen through. The obvious step to me, would be for them to kill Jackie, plant a fake suicide note and make it look as though he had been unwilling to live in disgrace." Cranston watched Jackie carefully to see how he'd respond to this bluntness. He took it like a trooper.

"They've found it easy to push me around so far, because all the advantage of shock tactics was on their side. But now my eyes are open, they won't find it quite so easy."

"Good, keep on thinking that way and we may be able to bobble their plans up at that," Cranston said.

Petting Marvin, Cranston looked up at Yorke who said: "Are you sure you're not needlessly alarming the lad?"

"If I'd thought it was needless I wouldn't have spoken."

"Brrr... All right, I deserved that. I'm sorry. From here on in, mine is not to reason why, mine is but to do or die."

"If you don't mind, old fruit," Jackie said, "I could do with less conversation about death. I'm too close to it to be able to jest very much, I'm afraid."

"I seem to be putting my foot in it all the way around. I am sorry." Yorke was contrite.

Jackie said mildly, "Don't look now, but do you know today was to be my wedding day?"

"So it was!" Yorke said. "But cheer up. With Cranston here, I am sure you'll be prancing up that narrow one-way aisle soon - much sooner than you think."

"It can't be too soon for me," Jackie said brightening a bit. "It seems to have taken about twenty centuries too long as it is."

Cranston smiled.

"I wish you'd best-man me, Cranston," the Earl said.

"I may not be in England by then, I am afraid," Cranston said. "Besides, hadn't you someone picked out?"

"Just a stuffy cousin whom it would have been politic to please."

"That stuffy second cousin can stand some pleasing," Yorke said warningly. "Remember we need his signature on that deed for your estate."

Jackie nodded wanly. "I remember."

Feeling the two two-inch squares of carbon paper which he had cut from the carbon he bought, Cranston thought, 'Curious that it can move one of two ways from here on in. I hope this will tell me which...'

Aloud he said. "May I use the phone?"

"Surely," Yorke said and pointed to the other room, "it's in there."

"Thanks." Cranston went into the bedroom and closed the door behind him.

He was following the wire from the phone to the bell box. It was down behind one of the beds. Leaving the phone off the hook he leaned down behind the bed with a screw driver in his hand. He had come prepared. It was simple to take the cover off the box. He put a piece of carbon paper, backed by a piece of white, unprepared paper, in between the striker and the bell proper. That done, he put the cover back and screwed it in place. He finally put the phone back on the hook and went into the other room.

"Bad luck. Your phone seems to be on the blink. I finally got the operator and she said that you wouldn't be able to make any outgoing calls till the repair man came.

"Isn't that just dandy," Yorke swore.

"You can get incoming calls all right."

"Mmmmm... have you any idea how long it takes for a repair to be affected?"

"Of course, he hasn't," Jackie interjected. "It'll be a week at least."

Yorke shrugged and said, "What will be, will be; no sense in getting upset."

"There is some business for you to attend to today before I go out." Yorke reminded the Earl.

"I remember. In the middle of all this fuss the affairs must continue. Business going on as usual despite alterations, eh?" Jackie was being cynical.

"No use getting bitter about it. When you come out of this you'll still need your estate, you know. This is no fairy tale with a happy ending assured." Yorke looked every inch the barrister.

"Bobby should be along any second now," Jackie said looking at the clock. It was nicely timed.

There was a tap on the door and Jackie flew to answer it. It was Bobby. She was radiant. "Council of war?" she asked after she had kissed her fiance.

"Just about," Jackie smiled. "If you should find me, let's say hors de combat, my love, with a note that says I did the Dutch, why don't believe a word of it."

Although he said it lightly, Bobby was no fool. She understood the connotation and turned white. She put her hand to her throat and turned to Cranston. "You think...?"

He nodded. "But we're going to prevent it from happening. Don't worry about it. I just wanted the Earl to be trebly on his guard."

But on guard against whom? That was the question. It could be answered only after he made a trip to Bobby's apartment and made the same arrangements he had made in the phone here in Yorke's apartment. There was no time to waste either.

He put his hat on and explained that he'd see them later. After he left, the three sat and stared at each other helplessly.

Jackie asked, "Are all Yankees as abrupt as he is?"

"Even more so, if it's possible. Don't want to waste any time, you know." She smiled at him.

In the apartment house where Bobby lived, a peeping Tom would have had the pleasure of watching a master burglar at work. It was Cranston and the way he handled a pick would have made a Fagin's heart joyous. He inserted the pick, applied the pressure tool and in about the same length of time it would have taken a householder to open the lock with a key, he was inside the apartment.

This phone was near the window and as Cranston put the carbon paper inside the bell box, he kept an eye peeled at the street. So it was that he saw Bobby and the young Earl walking down the street. They were airing Marvin.

Watching them to be sure that they were not coming up to the apartment, he dialed Ma-4326, which he had seen was Yorke's number.

Taking his gloves from his pocket, he stuffed one into the mouthpiece. From here on in, it was on the laps of the gods. He heard Yorke say, "Hello" and not, "Are you there", which Cranston had read was the salutation. He found out later that this was one of those myths.

He waited. Yorke said, "Yes?" He was a little impatient, but obviously was blaming it, in his mind, on the phone being out of order.

Cranston said, and it was as though he risked a fortune on the fall of the dice, "What you do is right."

There was a long pause and then Yorke said irritably, "What kind of nonsense is this? Who is this? Some idiot of a practical joker?"

Cranston sighed. It would have been too much to hope for. He hung up.

He left Bobby's apartment as quietly and as unobserved as he had come. On the street he watched as Jackie guided Bobby to the door and then went back down the street with Marvin. A uniformed Bobby kept a casual eye on his progress.

Assured that Jackie was being kept under guard, Cranston made his way to a tobacconist's, at least that's what it said on the window. Inside, he entered a telephone booth and was greeted by a baffling arrangement on the pay phone. There was the money slot for a tuppenny, but under it, there were two buttons, A and B. Reading the directions carefully, Cranston dropped his twopence in the slot. Then dialing the phone in Bobby's apartment which he had just left, he waited.

When he heard her say "Hello?" he pressed button A. If he had not gotten an answer he would have pressed button B and had his money returned. Jamming his glove in the mouth piece, he repeated the cryptic sentence he had just said to Yorke.

She repeated it thoughtfully. "What you do is right..." There was a pause, then she said hesitantly, "Go ahead..."

Distorting his voice as much as he could, Cranston said around the ball of his glove, "Go to Trafalgar Square, in ten minutes. I will contact you there." He thought a second and then said, "Make it on the steps of Saint Martin's in the Fields."

He slammed the phone down on the hook and hard-heeled his way out to the street. He was furious. Why did it have to turn out this way? Unless... he scowled with concentration, and a peddler who had been about to proffer some bedraggled shoe laces for sale, thought better of it and got out of the way.

Taking the train, he made his way to the appointment that he would have been happier not to have made. Ahead was the monument to Nelson and off to one side the Admiralty Arch.

His appointment was the tiny church whose very name was an anachronism. There hadn't been any fields here for many years. He waited off to one side. He wanted to be sure.

Then, as he waited, watching the passing throng, the anonymous faces which were in their way the hallmark of London, as are the faces of any New York crowd, while he listened to the speakers who were letting go with all barrels on every subject under the sun from Free Love to the deficiencies of the present Cabinet, a smile crossed his face.

The smile was not because of the resemblance between Trafalgar and Columbus Circle, for Bughouse Squares are part and parcel of any democracy, the safety valve for pent up emotions. His smile was not because of them, but because he spotted Bobby down the street and she was not alone.

She was in conversation with a man who could only be a plain clothes detective. The breed is universal as are the stigmata. Cranston was sure he could spot a flat-foot anywhere in the world.

He smiled again and pushing his way through the crowd made his way to Bobby's side. She had left the officer and was hurrying towards the steps of the church. She looked at her wristwatch hurriedly.

"Hi... this is a coincidence!" He doffed his hat with a cavalier gesture.

She looked at him dully and then said, "What a lousy break meeting you right here!"

She glanced over his shoulder at the steps of the church anxiously. She repeated herself. "Of all the rotten lousy breaks! This does it!"

CHAPTER VII

CRANSTON looked around and then returned his gaze to her face. "What's upset you so?"

She sighed, took a last look all around and said, "Well, it's all fouled up now. But I had a lead to whomever is behind this nightmare. Just bad luck ruined it. I'm sure once they saw you they vanished."

Pretending ignorance, Cranston said, "They?"

She told him of a mysterious phone call she had received. She had thought that she was being smart in pretending to understand the salutation, so she had made arrangements to meet the man with the muffled voice, but en route, she had called Scotland Yard. With the Yard man along, she was sure she'd be able to nab whoever had called.

Right then, before Cranston could say anything, a heavy hand descended on his shoulder. "You are under arrest."

"Oh no," Bobby said irritably. "This isn't one of the gang." She explained Cranston's position.

The detective looked slightly disbelieving. He said, "Seems like a pretty strange coincidence that... Mr... ah, Cranston, was it? should come along just at the right time. London is rather a large place."

"Oh this is too absurd. Mr. Cranston flew over from New York just to help us. He can't be involved. Besides I have an appointment!"

The three of them walked down the street. The detective still looked as though he was ready to clap the cuffs on Cranston.

Back at Yorke's apartment, Jackie, returned from his walk around the block, was sitting looking out the

window rather empty. Yorke was bustling around the room.

"What's up?" Jackie asked lazily.

"Well, we must not forget that I am your barrister and despite all the things that have been going on there are some of your affairs that need your attention."

"More papers to sign?" The young Earl was bored.

Nodding, Yorke spread some documents out in front of him. "This is the income tax on your estate in Cholmondely." Of course, he pronounced it 'Chumley.'

"Let me glance over it."

Jackie read the fine print carefully, signed when he saw the amount of his income that was going out in taxes and then fumbled for his pen.

"Here, try mine. It's a new Yankee invention. A pen that writes for five years without filling and with which you can write under water."

The Earl looked stunned. "What in the name of the seven demons would anyone but a deep sea diver want to write under water for?"

Yorke laughed, "I'm sure I don't know. But that's the way they are advertising it."

"Writes easily, doesn't it?" Jackie asked, scrawling his almost indecipherable signature.

"Yes, I've grown quite attached to it. You see it's a ball point and the ball rotates, picking up, by capillary attraction some ink from a lozenge of solid ink that is under the ball."

"Ingenious, like most Yank contrivances. I wonder sometimes whether all of the States will one day be inundated by their production of gimmicks and all the people will sink under the weight of all the labor-saving inventions they have."

Yorke laughed. "Might happen at that." He took the signed papers and went over to his desk and slipped them into an envelope. "What are your plans for the day?"

"You jest, old man. What can I do, but sit here and put my trust in Cranston? I can't go out, that's a sure thing."

"Keep under cover. I'll be back about tea time."

The door slammed behind Yorke and Jackie was alone with his thoughts... and the imminence of death - although there was no way he could know this. He sat in an easy chair, his head nodding. He was tired. He figured, as his eyes closed, that he needed about a fortnight's rest before he'd be over the strain that he had been living with.

The windows were closed to keep the brisk air out of the apartment. This made it easy for death to creep on silent feet, closer and closer...

His head fell forward on his chest. He was asleep. His consciousness faded away... and death came closer...

It took a lot of arguing and identification at Scotland Yard, which is neither Scottish nor a Yard, before Cranston had assured them of his bona fides. That done, however, he finally met Inspector Lalage who

was in charge of the case.

"Better to be safe than sorry is our motto, Mr. Cranston."

"Of course, Inspector, I understand." said Cranston. "But now that you are confident that I am a criminologist and not a crook, is there any slightest chance that you can bring me up to date on what's new?"

Lalage had to think that over. Of course, when he had first heard that Cranston was visiting the Earl, he had cabled to New York to the police commissioner there. Since Weston was Cranston's good friend, there was a glowing reply. Weston had asked the Yard to extend every courtesy that they would have to him.

A wire photo had been sent over just an hour earlier, so there wasn't much chance that this was an impostor. Even so, it went against his grain. "We've been doing the routine things."

Since he seemed ready to stop there, Cranston cued, "And?"

"The spectrographic analysis shows that the blood on the dagger is from the dead man. Since we use the ten-finger system of fingerprinting here, why the prints, although blurred on the dagger, cannot be definitely identified as the Earl's, but just between us there are eleven of the twelve classic identifications in the prints."

The classic twelve, Cranston knew were a series of whorls, indentations and the like. If twelve items of a fingerprint correspond, it was assumed by the laws of probabilities that the fingerprints were the ones in question.

"Do you have a list of all the gems that the murdered man had in his collection?" Cranston asked, with the shred of an idea in the back of his head.

"They were insured, so it is with definite assurance that I can tell you that all the gems in the collection were recovered in the Earl's pockets. There is nothing missing!"

That sent the glimmering of an idea shattering.

"See if I get this straight. There was absolutely nothing stolen from the premises?"

"How could there be?" Lalage sounded cranky. "The Earl was found before he could escape with any loot. Unless," the Inspector thought of Miss Rawson who had left, "unless, he had an accomplice who escaped before our constables arrived."

Cranston snorted, "You've just told me that nothing was stolen. Even if there was an accomplice, what could have been taken?"

Shrugging, Lalage turned to some papers on his desk. The intimation was obvious. He was a busy man and this was taking up his time.

"Then there has been nothing that would indicate in the slightest that there were any other people involved in the attempted robbery?"

"Not a speck. I'm afraid that your friend is in for the long jump."

In the cab that Cranston had hailed, Lamont sat and wondered whether he had been wise to keep secret his knowledge of the presence of Count Germain in London. But the Inspector had been so determined

to find the Earl guilty that he couldn't see how that would have helped any.

He rode along through the crowded streets in silence. He passed a row of theatres and Cranston was amused to see some buskers, street corner entertainers, busy at work for the queues that lined up waiting for their turn at the box office.

The busker is of all entertainers a breed apart. They were down-at-the-heel magicians, arthritic acrobats, singers whose voices had been left on the streets years before, all of whom broke their hearts to try to snare some ha'pennies from the unresponsive lines that philosophically waited for their turn to buy a ticket.

Cranston said, "When a performer is too old for the Halls in London, he is old, for the stars of Variety all seem to be in Methuselah's class."

The cabby turned around indignantly and in a voice that proved he'd been born in sound of the Bow Bells said, "Now if that be'ent just like a Yank! What do yer do when a entertainer gets old? Shoot the blighter?"

"Us feels that if a guy was funny to Dad, he's funny to us!"

Having spoken his piece, he returned to driving. But the hike of his shoulders was eloquent of his disgust. In the back of the cab, Cranston smiled wryly. "That'll show me. I should keep my big mouth shut!" Cranston thought.

"We never have any right, I suppose, to question another nation's mores, or their way of life. I suppose that life in America must be a dazing experience to any foreigner."

The driver nodded to himself.

The cab stopped in front of Yorke's apartment house.

Looking up at the closed window, Cranston had a premonition and, as a result of it, hustled out of the cab and up in the elevator. At the door, he paused and his narrow nostrils flared. He snapped, "Gas!"

Cranston took a hook shaped object out of his pocket and inserted it in the keyway of the lock. Another peculiarly shaped object went beneath the pick and he applied pressure on this, the pressure tool. The lock snapped open. A sickening odor flowed out and around them.

Cranston whipped a handkerchief out of his pocket and tied it across his face. It would have been better if it had been wet, but there was no time for that.

Making his way through the sickeningly sweet waves that encompassed him, Cranston ran to a window and put his foot through it. No time for any amenities at the moment. Slumped over in his easy chair, the young Earl looked as if he were sleeping peacefully.

Grabbing him up in his arms like a child, Cranston, still holding his breath, ran back to the door. Out in the hall, still holding the motionless form in his arms, he said to a woman there, "Call the emergency squad and be sure they have a pulmotor with them."

Not taking any time for questions, the woman ran down the hall. She banged on the first door she came to and demanded to use their phone.

Waving aside the man's shocked expostulations, she ran to a phone and put the call through.

Out in the hall, Cranston dropped Jackie to the floor, and balling up a scatter rug, he put it under his stomach. Then he dropped to his knees, legs astraddle the Earl. He placed his hands on the back of the young man's lungs and began to press and release the air that he was forcing into Jackie's tortured lungs.

The elevator door slammed open and Cranston heard a step behind him. Thinking that the London squads worked fast, he called, "Slip the pulmator down here. I don't want to stop till you're ready."

There was a second's dismaying pause, before Cranston heard Louis Yorke say, "God in heaven, what's this? That smell..."

"Gas. Get out of the way. The emergency squad should be here soon."

Yorke took a dismayed look into his apartment, saw the broken window, looked down at his friend's body, at the strange color of his ashen cheeks and gasped, "Jackie!"

Bobby, who had come up behind him, said, "Do you think he..."

"Nonsense," Yorke rejected the unspoken question. "Jackie would no more do the Dutch than I would!"

Cranston's arms were getting weary, by the time the pulmator arrived. They had come rapidly, but when a man's life is at stake, time drags as though on leaden feet.

He gave up his position to the experts. The pulmator was applied and life giving oxygen was forced down into the lungs which had given up their job.

Some of the men who were free went into the room and threw the windows high. With the door open and the draft at work, the noxious gas was dissipated rapidly.

In the kitchenette which in that bachelor household was enough for the daily needs, Cranston found the jets of the gas stove wide open. It was one of the police however who found the note.

It was typewritten, but the signature was in ink and unmistakably the Earl's.

It said. "This farce has to end. Now that Cranston is here, I am more afraid of exposure than ever. I am sure that he just pretended to place credence in that wild story of mine in order to give me enough rope to hang myself. I deserve the hanging, but I shall not so stain my family's honor. Forgive me, Bobby, and forget me."

The signature was the indecipherable scrawl that was the Earl's identification. A trifle faint, but his own.

CHAPTER VIII

AS CRANSTON watched the men at work dragging Jackie back from the very edge of the Styx, he thought, this is one of the most fantastic combinations of cross purposes I have ever seen at work. Given, one gem theft in the course of which a man is ruthlessly stabbed. Given, that the theft is unsuccessful because no gems were stolen. Given, a thief who has more money than he knows what to do with.

Looking at Jackie's drawn face, Cranston could not see him in the role of killer and crook.

Given, a cult where an imposing phony runs the deal like the long defunct Count Germain. Given; that Germain has killed a man whose identity is still to this second, undiscovered. Given, a suicide that is not a suicide. Given, a suicide note which I don't believe.

Before Cranston could go any further, Jackie's eyes opened. He said, "Hello, Bobby dear, how are

you?" It wasn't till after he had spoken that he realized the circumstances. He looked around wildly and said, "Don't tell me I've gone into another attack of amnesia. And..."

His hand clasped in her tanned lovely one, she grasped it firmly and said, "No dear, this time you were the victim. You didn't try to commit suicide, did you?"

He shook his head muzzily and looked frightened. "That's the farthest thought from my mind." And it was. All he wanted to do was marry his love and forget the whole nightmare chain of events that had followed that incredible evening.

She rubbed his temples. "Relax, darling. They failed again. We'll keep you safe till this is over."

He was still not functioning properly, or he mightn't have said this where the world could overhear it. "Dearest, you know that if anything should happen to me...and it doesn't seem as preposterous now as when I made my will, that you will be taken care of. You will get everything but my estate in Cholmondely, which is, as you know, entailed."

The silence was like a live thing. It coiled in eddies that were not broken till one of the constables said, "The Inspector was wondering about that end of it."

The silence descended again. Cranston thought that's torn it. If Lalage has the slightest idea that Jackie is not really the murderer he will now suspect that Bobby is behind the plot. Aloud, "Speaking of the Inspector, will you have him come here? I have two things to show him. One is the vanishing room and the other - the other can wait till he gets here."

The gas had completely vanished from the rooms now. Inside, Bobby still fussed over her love. Yorke was busy mixing some drinks and Cranston just sat and stared off into space.

Cranston had just put his scotch and soda to his lips when the buzzer sounded. It was Inspector Lalage and his mouth was cynical. He said, "Hear we've been having some fun and games here, eh?"

Bobby's eyes spit fire. She said, "You... you... I just wish your lungs were filled with gas and you felt as wretched as Jackie does!"

Cranston held his hand up. "Inspector, I wanted you to witness something which I shall ask in a second or two. In the meantime, will you accompany me, if I essay to find you the vanishing apartment which seems to make a liar of Jackie?"

"Will? Of course I will! I'll follow you to the ends of the earth to see a miracle like that!" The twist to his lips showed that he thought the miracle was just a lie.

"Before I forget," Cranston said casually, "Mr. Yorke, did you receive any phone calls this morning between say, eleven and eleven-thirty?"

"The phone hasn't rung all day to the best of my knowledge. I can't know what happened when Jackie was here, but this morning, it did not ring."

"I see. Then perhaps you can explain something to me." Cranston rose and went into the bedroom followed by the others. He sat on the edge of the bed, took a small screw driver out of his pocket and while the Inspector watched closely, he leaned down and unscrewed the bell box cover.

"Inspector, will you remove the two pieces of paper that I inserted there this morning?"

The whole room was tense as the Inspector, using a gloved hand removed the carbon paper and the

white paper. He looked at the white paper closely. "It's all smudged with carbon from the duplicating paper!"

"I see," said Yorke. "Very ingenious. When the clapper of the bell rings, the clapper hits the carbon paper and leaves an impression. But what does it prove?"

Cranston said, "It proves the bell on the phone rang, I should think..."

"But of course," Yorke was lighting a cigarette. "It doesn't, can't prove when the phone rang. You failed to build a time clock into your apparatus, Mr. Cranston."

Inspector Lalage moved his head from one man to the other so that he seemed to be watching a tennis match.

Cranston said, "But you see, Mr. Yorke, I know that your phone rang this morning between eleven and eleven-thirty." He paused. "I know, too, that you answered it. You see, I didn't want this to be an evenly matched contest between our two opinions."

"How could you know that his phone rang at that time, Mr. Cranston, if you weren't here," Bobby asked. "That seems impossible to me. Unless, you could see into the apartment from some hiding place."

"You are avoiding the obvious, my dear," Cranston smiled. "There's one sure way for me to know he answered the phone and that is because it was I who called him." He paused again. "Just as it was I who called you."

"No wonder you showed up at the proper time for the appointment!" she giggled. "Whew, that's a load off my mind. I thought sure that I had ruined our chances of contacting the..." She stopped and stared at Cranston. "You were testing me. Testing me to see what my response would be when you pulled that line about 'What you do is!...'"

She looked stunned.

"You," Cranston accented the word delicately, "you went straight to the police. Mr. Yorke on the other..."

Yorke said briskly, "Come now, I remember. That silly, melodramatic business of the muffled voice on the phone. Of course. It was so absurd that I dismissed it from my mind. As you will remember, I slammed the phone down!"

"We have established," said Cranston and might not have heard the man speak, "that the phone did, in fact, ring this morning. That is all I wanted to fix in your mind, Inspector. And now, if you will take me to the only thirteen floored building in London, we will proceed with the revelation of the modus operandi of the vanishing room."

Turning at the door, Cranston smiled and said, "You will find, Mr. Yorke, that I lied to you about your phone. It is not out of order."

They left, the Inspector burly, compact and competent looking and Cranston, tall, lean and finely tempered as a good sword, looking like the enemies of crime that they were. One a bludgeon, the other a rapier. Each fitted best for the way that he functioned best.

The room that they had just quitted was like a stage tableau, just before the second act curtain. Yorke finally said, "Now both of you stop looking at me that way. The very idea. You know that I have nothing to do with all this. What possible benefits would accrue? Stop and think for a moment. Jackie, you are a

good account for my firm and me while you are alive, but dead... what do I stand to gain? Truly, I forgot all about the blasted call!"

Jackie thought for a moment and then threw his arm around his friend's shoulder and said, "Relax, Louis, of course you had nothing to do with it. And as a matter of fact, Cranston didn't say you did!"

Bobby's suspicions waned too, as she looked at the well known countenance of the man who had been her friend for longer than her fiancé. "Heaven only knows what Cranston has on his mind. He accented only that the phone had rung you remember, for all we know that may be important to some theory he is developing. You, Jackie, get right down on that couch!"

Jackie obeyed. He had a thought, "Say... where's my suicide note?"

"One of the constables took it along with some samples of your handwriting. They are all prepared to prove it a forgery. Now forget all about it. I've called a doctor from Harley Street to check on you." Yorke smiled as he went into the bedroom.

Down at the Yard, in the technological laboratories, two handwriting experts were staring at a movie screen, where enlarged, perhaps a hundred times, was a photograph of the signature on the suicide note as well as another of Jackie's signatures.

They were comparing the height of the loops in the l's, the size of the stroke that slashed across the top of the t's. One of them shook his head and said, "I don't know what the Inspector had in mind when he sent these down, but I'll give testimony that we have no forgery here. How do you feel about it?"

The other nodded in complete accord. "We are in agreement. That is no forgery."

Cranston and Lalage were in the elevator. The car was approaching the disputed floor. Lalage said, "It was idiotic for a Londoner to even pretend that there was a fifteen story apartment house. After all, this is not New York."

"The very idiocy of the statement is what originally made me think that the Earl was telling the truth - or the truth as he saw it, which is a very different thing.

"You, convinced of his guilt are going on one assumption. I, as equally assured of his innocence, am proceeding in a diametrically opposed manner. I have no proof but logic that my theory about the room is right."

The car stopped at the thirteenth floor. Cranston did not immediately leave the car. Instead, he took out a small magnifying glass and looked very closely at the number 14 which was painted in black on the wall of the elevator shaft. He said, "Hmmm."

Lalage said. "Very informative. What does that mean?"

"It may mean proof. However, let us get to room 1414. I see that the 13 superstition has continued here as well as on my side of the Atlantic."

The Inspector nodded. "What few tall buildings we have are generally without the thirteenth floor. Either they make it 12A or as in this case skip thirteen and pretend that the floor is really 14."

They stopped outside the door which had 1414 on it. Through the wood of the door they could hear a phone ringing. The Inspector raised his finger to press the bell. Cranston held his hand up. He put his ear to the door. But it was futile. He could not hear the voice of whoever answered the phone.

"You may as well go ahead, that would have been too much luck to hope for."

A sturdy, official finger pressed the bell hard. Behind the panels they could hear sudden activity. Cranston looked at the official.

"Curious?"

The Inspector nodded but said, "I have no warrant."

"Look away." Cranston waited till Lalage had turned his eyes the other way and then went to work on the lock with his picks. The door swung open.

"All right, Inspector. Look! What do you think of the Earl of Bostick's story now?"

Frenzied activity on the part of three or four people in the room beyond them almost obscured for the moment the realization that before them lay the room just as Jackie had described it, up to and including the brazier in the center of the floor. Ribbons descended from it disconsolately.

CHAPTER IX

THE INSPECTOR did a double-take. Then, all authority, he stepped into the room. He held up his hand and the men who'd been moving around frantically stopped in their tracks. They had been attempting to change the room around. Leaning against the walls, were flats, like stage sets. Painted to look like the walls of a room, the Inspector remembered them from his last visit.

It was obvious how he had been fooled. The long room was easily cut off by the flats. It was completely different with the flats in place. The walls, the size of the room, when put in place changed everything.

Cranston would have given a pretty penny to have known who it was who had phoned while they were outside the door. For it was clear that the phone had been a tip off. The men, when interrupted, had been trying to make the room over so as to look like the innocent interior that had appeared to the Inspector when he had come with the Earl.

Look as they might however, here was no sign of the infamous Count Germain. However, there was one bit of luck, and it showed how confident the Count had been of fooling the police.

Strolling around the rooms, while the Inspector interrogated the men, Cranston found one room that seemed to be set off as a study. On a desk in this room, near a replica of a snake that must have been the one that Jackie had commented on, was a tooled leather bound book.

Opening it idly, Cranston saw that it was handwritten and seemed to be a journal of some kind. His gaze froze when he saw a characteristic entry.

"The successful charlatan is the one who is in character all his waking hours. There must never be any let up in the role. Not to the most intimate must the bars ever be lowered, for if they are, the role is lost.

"From Raymond Lully, to Theophrastus Bombastus Paracelsus, the path is clear. Obscurantism is the order of the day. If there are two ways to say a thing, clearly and obscurely, one must always take care to be obscure. Only in this kind of darkness can the charlatan come into his own."

"In the case of the cult with which I have been so successful it is essential that my hypnotic powers be hidden beneath the pretense of the revivifying bowl. Mesmerism is infinitely more impressive than straight hypnotism."

Flipping through the pages, straining his eyes over the thin spidery writing, Cranston saw what seemed to be an essay on the fine art of murder. He read it carefully. Then, using great care so as not to destroy any potential finger prints, he brought the book to the Inspector.

The interrogation was not going successfully. "Then according to all you innocent little birds, none of you know for whom you work. You haven't the vaguest idea why this apartment is so set up as to be able to present two different appearances..."

Watching the men, Cranston thought to himself, either the Inspector is a very brave man, or he doesn't realize what the pin-point pupils of their eyes mean. As far as Cranston could see the men were so loaded with dope that they were likely to erupt like pin wheels.

"You evidently work for love, is that it?" asked the Inspector. "You never see your employer. How does he pay you?"

One of the men whose face was gray and drawn and whose hands were twenty years older than his face said, "Ya won't get nothin' out of us, so why don't you quit?"

Thinking of one of the notes in the dreadful book he held under his arm, Cranston asked, "Inspector, have you found any floaters in the Thames in the last twenty hours?"

The Inspector nodded. "It would be an odd night if we didn't find one."

"This floater would have been a little off the beaten track." Remembering the desecrated body he had seen on the table, Cranston stifled a shudder. "You see the one I am interested in was flayed..."

The Inspector swiveled his head around rapidly. "What do you know about that?"

"Just a little."

"It's had us completely puzzled. There isn't a clue left as to his identity!"

The men in the room exchanged a secret glance. It was clear they knew what Cranston and Lalage were talking about and were cynically amused.

"I think you will find," said Cranston, "that his name was Tommy Bratkin."

That wiped the smiles away. It mobilized the men. You could feel them tense.

Lalage was no fool. He sensed the change in the atmosphere. Walking to the phone he dialed the Yard. "We'd better get these men downtown."

Cranston wondered how long the inbred fear that the English have of their bobbies would hold the men from some desperate move. The English police force patrols its beats minus guns. Whether this is because the English are basically law abiding or whether it was due to the severity of the law was a question to Cranston.

Whichever it was, it held the men motionless till some men came and took them away. Cranston and Lalage were left alone in the room. Cranston opened the Count Germain's journal to the entry about the proposed murder of Tommy Bratkin.

Lalage read it with a muscle in his jaw jumping. He slammed his fist down on the table when he had finished it. "The perfect ecstasy of choosing a victim at random!"

"If you will remember in the Earl's testimony, Count Germain said when the Earl was brought to him, 'Ah,

you got one.' Not, if you notice, 'Here he is', or anything that would indicate that Jackie was a chosen victim. The two men were sent out to get any unaccompanied man whom they could persuade to come along with them. They did and that man happened to be the Earl of Bostick!" Cranston said.

"Sure, that would account for a lot. They must have been surprised when they found out the identity of their scapegoat!"

While Cranston was leading the Inspector's thoughts, he himself was thinking how much cleaner it might have been if that had been the case. If it had really been pure chance which had dictated that the Earl would be the victim... instead the Judas goat technique had operated on him.

Lalage puzzled over something aloud. "But why go to all that trouble just for a 'pure' murder. Why kill a man and pretend to steal his gems, and then leave all the loot in the Earl's pockets. If they had stolen some of the gems, I'd be able to understand it better."

"Ah," said Cranston, "now we get to the crux of the matter. I think there was a gem robbery!"

"But... I checked. Every insured gem was in that batch we found in his pockets."

"Uhuh. Would you insure stolen property?"

"No. You mean..."

"I've wondered all along about this. Suppose in this dislocated era which has followed the war, a soldier in a defeated country stole some jewels. It's happened."

Remembering a case which had filled the headlines of the world only a short time before, Lalage nodded.

"Suppose that his name was Tommy Bratkin. I wish you'd check on his military career, by the way, and see if he might have had access to anything like this."

Lalage interrupted, "You think this Bratkin may have stolen a flock of gems and then sold them to Briarly who, like most collectors, have been willing to buy the gems even though he'd never be able to show them to anyone."

"Right. Then the murder starts to make more sense. Steal the stolen gems; leave the ordinary collection in Jackie's pockets so as to cast an impenetrable screen of suspicion around and leave him there as the obvious killer. Nasty, isn't it?"

"And you think this insane Count Germain is the brains behind this?"

"Who else?"

That was the question.

That was the question that only Cranston could answer. The police would find the Count, for England is an island and it is necessary to carry identification on you. Because the English can watch all sea ports, can have an eye on all airports, can draw a dragnet right around the isles from which escape is impossible.

Count Germain would be caught in time. But would the dragnet be tight enough to include the real villain? It would be a question for the courts to decide... for if you make your hand fire a gun, you are responsible for the death of the person whom you fire at, but if you use instead of a gun for a weapon, a

maniac, then what?

CHAPTER X

"You see now," Cranston asked, "how the hocus-pocus was managed with the room?"

"Pretty obvious now," Lalage answered.

"They merely substituted the number thirteen on the wall of the elevator shaft and the indicator dial for the fourteen which is really there."

"And similarly, they switched the numbers on the door of 1414 to 1313." That was overwhelmingly clear to the Inspector now. He felt for a moment that he had been a bit stupid, but then who, in the course of run-of-the-mill crimes, would ever expect to find such a set up? He felt better about it, as he solaced himself with the thought. The Earl had looked as guilty and told as guilty a story as he had ever heard in all his years on the force. He was struck with a thought.

"Then, since Count Germain really chose his victim at random, and since he is obviously a maniac, we're not going to be able to use the rope on anyone?"

"Don't be too sure. We may find an occupant for your loop soon." Cranston hooded his eyes and thought hard.

"Nothing more to keep us here. I shall post a guard in case Count Germain should by some chance show up here."

"I don't imagine you'll get him that way, but of course, you have to observe elementary precautions. It might help, too, if your guard was fairly big. For you may be interested in the members of the Count's cult for whom the room was being rearranged. Obviously, they planned a meeting for tonight.

Staring at the brazier with the peculiar ribbons hanging from its perimeter, Lalage agreed that the cult must have meant to meet that night. This part of the case was so far removed from his ken that he found it hard to believe that people would surrender money and their time to a faker who mesmerized them.

Interpreting Lalage's thoughts, Cranston said, "Remember, most people have a strong will to believe in anything that is outside the ordinary explanations. Look at your spiritualists, your astrologers - all your other fakers. They don't have to work hard to fool people. It's like hypnotism. You are not hypnotized by anyone, you allow yourself to become hypnotized. Just so your charlatan doesn't have to work very hard to take people in, they are working overtime to help him."

Thinking of the wave of fortune tellers, of spirit mediums that had followed the war, Lalage had to agree.

They left the apartment together. "That call that tipped them off," Cranston said reflectively, "if we could only know if another such call has already tipped off Count Germain."

"If he hasn't been tipped off, he'll walk right into the hands of my men that are on guard."

"I hope they are prepared for anything. The Count is a ruthless killer."

"Don't worry about them. Picked men all."

They walked down the street together, both deep in thought. Lalage said, "A couple of times you've made reference to someone else being involved. Someone who is really responsible in a legal sense for his actions. Who is it?"

"The only person with a real motive for the removal of the Earl."

That stopped Lalage. "You mean the girl? She's due to inherit under the terms of his will."

"I'd rather not say till I have all the threads in my hand. But it should come to a head this evening. If it doesn't I have means to force the issue."

The means, Cranston bought in a stationary store. He had wondered how long it would be before some criminal mind would take advantage of the potentialities of a new American invention.

That night, London was like a new city. The fog was gone and with it most of the depression that had weighed down on Cranston. He knew now where he was going and why. All that remained was to prove it, and a canny and completely unscrupulous killer would dance on the air.

He rang the bell of Yorke's apartment. Lalage was with him. They entered the room and while they were observing the amenities of civilization, on the other side of the city, Lalage's men were dueling with death.

Because of the real modus operandi the official police have a great advantage over the most talented amateur. A man had squealed! Face bandaged, needle-like nose twitching like a frightened rabbit's, the man had talked. He was scared. The one slash of the scalpel across his face had resulted in this...

He gave them the address of the hideout of the Count Germain. And then he asked to be put in the strongest cell that the city boasted of. Even with the bars and concrete rising about him protectively, he sat on the edge of his iron bed and quaked. His stomach danced a rigadon. He was sick with fear.

Without his gun, which he had ridded himself of, before he squealed, he was a coward. He was dying a coward's death. Agonized and long suffering. It had exhausted his slender store of courage to come in to the police and rat. Now there was nothing left but fear. He knew, now that it was over, now that the police were on their way to arrest the Count that he would never sleep peacefully again whether the police caught Germain or not.

His clenched hands sweated as he wrung them in an agony of apprehension. Suppose that the Count was killed in trying to evade the bobbies, then what of that other one who was known only as a voice on the phone. The one who had tipped them off to some of their best suckers, who had bird-dogged them to some of the richest members of the cult.

The brave man dies a single death, the coward hundreds...

Unused to trigger responses, conditioned to crooks who gave up promptly when caught, the two plain clothes men who knocked on the door that the squealer had tipped them off to, were completely off stride when the door slammed open and a blast of gunfire raked out at them.

One of the men gasped and his hands clenched in his assaulted stomach. The other managed to get his gun out as another shot battered at his arm.

Inside the room, Count Germain stood with his back to a window. He thought dully, "Someone ratted." His eyes narrow, his piggy face blank, he held the Parabellum in his hand loosely. He had seen his shots land.

He threw his shoulders back. Was it for this he had fought his way back from madness, for this he had quitted America? For this, he had set up the biggest racket of his life?

Was he to allow himself to be arrested, be carted off to the prison? He sneered. His madness shone from his eyes as he pictured himself as a Napoleon of Crime. If he couldn't out-think these men, out-fight

them, then he deserved his fate.

The detective whose arm hung at his side, slid the safety catch off his revolver. He called out, "Drop your gun and come along quietly. I have a warrant for your arrest."

The Count shot him through the forehead. As the detective slumped to the floor, Germain stepped through the window. Outside, a fire escape waited. He started down the stairs.

Outside the house, the cordon the police had thrown around the building, was waiting, all prepared by the sound of the shots, for their brother officers to come out with the criminal between them.

Then time passed and there was no sign of them, they redoubled their vigilance. One of them spotted a squat form making its way down the fire escape. A warning shot fired high over Germain's head failed to stop him.

He drew his sensual full lips tight over his vulpine teeth and whirled and reversed his motion. The roof... that was the way.

Pounding up the stairs, all emotions smothered in the need for escape, he pictured the roof. If he could get there, there was a building nearby. An agile man could jump from one roof to the other. Once there, let the stupid cops try to find him.

On the top fire escape with the roof above him he looked across. The next building was about twelve feet away. There wouldn't be any trouble. It was lower than this building. He would be jumping out and down. That was a cinch. His teeth gleamed in his mouth as he grinned.

But the police were staked out on the roof. As they saw him approach, one leaned over the edge and showed his gun. "Stop right there, laddy me buck."

Germain looked up, straight into the mouth of the gun. Without a flicker of emotion, he turned and leaped straight out into the air. He thought, if I can grab the fire escape on the other building, I can still get away. I can still get away and grab the cache of loot.

He was still thinking that as his grasping fingers caught the narrow bar of the fire escape he had jumped for. He was still thinking of escape and luxury as a random bullet fired from the opposite roof bit into his hand. He relaxed it, or rather his nervous system relaxed it. He had no control of it. The other hand was not equal to supporting the weight of his gross body.

His fingers of his one good hand relaxed one by one. He grinned. The stupid cops were in for a surprise. He had never let anyone in on his biggest secret. No one knew that he could fly.

His last finger wrenched free. It left some of the skin on the railing he had been grasping. He began to fall and as he did, he smiled to himself. He wanted to see the stupefied look on their faces when he flapped his arms and flew away.

He was still giggling with delight at the mad thought, as his head crashed into the concrete areaway. The sound that went up the airshaft was like that of a melon splitting.

In Yorke's apartment the phone rang. Yorke answered it. He said. "Inspector Lalage, just a moment."

Picking up the phone from his host's hand, Lalage grunted, "He did? I see. Thank you for calling."

He set the receiver down and walked back into the living room. Cranston looked up curiously. "Anything new?"

"Count Germain will never have to go to an insane asylum."

"No?"

Lalage shook his head. "He died trying to escape."

Taking a notebook out of his pocket, Cranston used his new pen to make an x mark next to Germain's name.

"Whew... am I glad to hear that. You may not believe it, but I've been having nightmares about that man," Jackie said and he looked immeasurably relieved.

Bobby said, "Darling, the whole thing is over. No more nightmares, no more fear of standing up in the House of Lords and being sentenced. Oh, it's wonderful!"

"Congratulations," Yorke said. "Inspector, you've done nobly."

Lalage made a sour face. "Don't congratulate me. If I'd had my way the Earl would have been on trial now. Cranston is the one to thank."

"There is one more nightmare," said Cranston heavily, "and this is the real one."

The room was silent. Out of the corner of her eyes, Bobby looked at Cranston who was looking off into space. His face was set. It was lined.

"Here is the crux of the real problem."

CHAPTER XI

YORKE poured out drinks all around. He handed them out. Lalage was watching Cranston. Bobby was quiet. Jackie's young face was set again.

"The man who posed as the Count Germain," Cranston said, and his voice was low, "I wonder if we'll ever know what his real name was. But," he shrugged, "that's not important. The man, I say was criminally insane. No court in the world would have held him legally responsible for his acts. But, by the same token, he needed a guiding hand. He needed someone to direct his madness... and profit by it."

The only sound in the room was the ice tinkling in Bobby's glass as she sipped her drink.

Holding the fountain pen in his hand, like a pointer, Cranston said, "That same hand, that controlling force, has moved throughout with care and expedition, but always at one step removed. By remote control."

"Have you ever seen one of these, Inspector?" Cranston asked as he threw his new fountain pen across the room.

Catching it, Lalage opened it and looked at the point. "One of those ball pens. I've seen them advertised. Why?"

"Write your name with it."

Obedying, Lalage was perplexed. The pen wrote freely and easily. Cranston rose and walked to his side. He looked down at the signature. He took the pen from Lalage and on another piece of paper wrote, "I.O.U. one thousand pounds!"

After writing the I.O.U. he pressed his thumb down on Lalage's name. The room watched as he transferred his thumb from where Lalage had written the I.O.U.

He pressed down with the thumb and then quietly handed the paper to the Inspector.

"Why... this thing says I owe you a thousand pounds!" He stared at his signature. "And this is my signature!"

Tearing it up, Cranston said, "It is one of the peculiarities of these pens, that if you wet your thumb and press it on a word, it transfers to your thumb and you can then imprint where you will!"

The Earl of Bostick's face tightened as he looked at his friend Yorke. He remembered very clearly writing his name at the end of the tax papers with just such a pen. No wonder his name was on that fake suicide note!

"I think," said Cranston, "that clears up the problem of Jackie's 'suicide' note."

Marvin, the dachshund, was upset as Cranston walked around the room. He nuzzled into Cranston's legs. Cranston looked down and bent over and petted him.

"The Judas goat, as you may know, is used in stockyards. Some wise old billy goat is given the job of walking the sheep down a long incline. At the bottom of the incline there is a little doorway. The billy goat, the Judas, walks through that door and it closes. The other sheep following on his heels, quietly and peacefully, have no way to go but forward. This they do and are killed."

"Very informative," said Yorke, "but what has it to do with the matter at hand?"

Still petting the dog, Cranston asked, "Jackie, that night when this all started and you were walking along in the fog, you said you saw a dog which you thought was familiar. You followed it..."

Jackie said bitterly, "Like one of those sheep. Yes, I followed the dog and it led me to those two men who kidnapped me."

"What breed was the dog?"

Jackie pointed to Marvin. "A dachshund. I thought it was Marvin... What a fool! Of course it was Marvin!"

Cranston nodded. "Having led you to your fate, he went back to the person who had trained him for his performance. You went on to Germain's apartment and the frame up."

"But," Lalage's stolid face was set, "why would anyone use such a risky way of leading the Earl to the kidnappers?"

"Because of this business of acting at one step removed. Remember the beautiful part of this to the conspirator, was that Count Germain did not know, never knew that Jackie was anything but a random victim chosen by blind chance!"

"Then the person who sent the dog to lead the Earl knew of Germain's plans?"

"Oh yes. I am sure that person picked out Briarly, the unfortunate gem collector as the victim. But that is all. Having proposed the victim, Germain was then allowed to work out in his mad ingenious brain, the rest of the details. That way, if anything went wrong, what was there to connect the instigator with the frame-up that encompassed the Earl? Testify as Germain might, he could not say anything about Jackie

being picked out as a victim. His notes prove that he thought Jackie was a chance person. Only someone who knew Jackie's routes very well could have planned it. You said," Cranston turned to the Earl, "that you generally ended up at this after-hours bottle club when you were in the depressed mood that you were in that night?"

Jackie nodded. "Yes, my close friends would know that. Know it very well." His voice was bitter. "After all, when the pubs close, where else can you go?"

Lalage said, "But that was so risky. Suppose just that one time the Earl had not followed his usual route?"

Cranston shrugged. "What of it? In that case, the kidnappers would have picked up some other poor soul. Then, the plan could be put in operation some other time. This was an elastic plan. As a matter of fact, with a careful operator like the one in question, there may have been three or four other attempts along different lines. This just happened to be the one that worked."

Looking at Yorke, Jackie said with loathing, "A knife in the back some dark night would have been clean in comparison with the fate that was selected for me!" He almost spat as he said, "How did you think it would work out? I'd be jailed for murder, I'd hang, then you'd give solace to Bobby and in the midst of her sorrows, marry her on the rebound and inherit everything I left to her?"

Yorke's face was white. He said, "Jackie, don't look at me that way. Are you mad, man? Do you think I'd be party to such a scheme?"

Thinking of the fountain pen, Jackie said, "Yes."

CHAPTER XII

LALAGE took his Bean handcuffs out and swung them in his hand. He said, "Not much use in dragging this out any longer, Cranston. I'll cuff him and take him down and book him."

Yorke flattened his back against the wall and looked at them wild-eyed. His voice was a croak. "The pack of you... your eyes... now I know how Jackie felt. Don't any of you believe me? Listen... I am as fond of Jackie as though he were my son. I couldn't do these dreadful things you have thought of me! Please... a word... Jackie..."

He ran down like a tired phonograph. "You don't... none of you believe me!" He dropped his hands to his sides and stood resigned.

Lalage walked toward him with the cuffs open. "Hold your hands out."

Cranston said, "Come, come, Inspector. The point of what I have tried to tell you about the case is that the guilty person at every opportunity has worked at least a step behind. It is like some involved chess game where the chess master always moves and moves in advance."

Turning around with a stunned look, Lalage said, "What? You mean Yorke is not the person behind this?"

Cranston shook his head sadly, "No." He looked from Yorke's face which was a mixture of confused emotions to Bobby who stepped back from Jackie's chair.

"What is the meaning of this?" the Earl of Bostick asked and his voice had a tremor in it.

"I am afraid that your fiancée is the guilty person."

Bobby looked at Cranston as though he had gone stark raving mad. "Me?" She still held her glass in her hand.

"Yes."

That was all. It was anti-climactic. She shrugged, turned to Jackie and said, "You don't believe this, of course?"

He held her hand and said, "Don't be absurd, darling."

She sipped her drink and waited patiently. Lalage was too confused. He made a tentative step in her direction and his hand started up with the handcuffs, but then dropped to his side. He said, "Cranston, you've been one hundred percent right all along. But this is too fantastic. And even if your hypothesis is correct, how are you going to prove it? The dog is Yorke's, the pen and the signing of the papers was done under Yorke's direction. There is no connection between the girl and Count Germain."

"None but the fact that he worked under her orders. She had the entree to all the big homes because of her being affianced to the Earl; she spotted loot and mapped out a plan for the Count to follow; she trained Marvin to act as the Judas goat; she had all the time in the world because she often takes him out for walks."

Jackie threw his arm around her protectingly. "But these are all guesses. You have no proof! None at all! You can't have any... besides, don't you remember when you put that trap in the phones? The carbon paper. It was Bobby who went to the police and tried to trap the person whom she thought was guilty. It was Yorke who pretended not to remember the call!"

"But Yorke told the truth. He did forget under the stress he was under. He knew that in time suspicion would turn to him because he was the executor of the Earl's estate. He had a real motive." Cranston looked almost sleepy. His eyes were slits. He was watching Bobby Rawson closely. So far, no guilty start, no indication showed that her cherished and ingenious plans were being made to fall to shreds around her head.

He said slowly, "Lalage, you remember the journal which Count Germain kept?"

"Yes. But I haven't, in the pressure of events, had time to read it all yet."

The only indication that this had struck home, Cranston saw, was that Bobby tautened her grip on the glass she was holding. He said, "In that journal is all the proof of her complicity that you will need. That was the one eventuality for which she could not be prepared because she did not know that Germain was so far gone in madness that he kept a journal of all his criminal activities.

"You see, gentlemen, Bobby is Germain's daughter." This was bluff made up of whole cloth. Cranston, searching for some conceivable connection between the madman and the girl had thought that this would explain a great deal.

"Like father, like daughter," Lalage said. There was no emotion in him. This whole thing was unraveling despite him.

"He was a great man," his daughter said. "It's idiots like you who refuse to recognize a great man's genius. It's no wonder he cracked up. The whole world was against him. No one appreciated him but me."

Jackie dropped her hand as though she were a leper. As a matter of fact, she was a moral leper, devoid of a sense of what differentiated right from wrong.

"But despite the fact that you 'appreciated' him, you were all ready to use him as a 'fall guy' in case anything went wrong." Lalage was cynical.

"In the journal," Cranston went on, "Germain brags of the intelligence of his daughter, writes about her potentialities, explains the way her criminal plans worked out."

Yorke looked like a man reprieved at that last split-second before the noose tightens finally. He said, "But in all this, how are you going to place the blame. In reality she did nothing. She just used her father and his gang to carry out her plans."

"Oh yes, she did something. We may not get her for murder, but we can get her for attempted murder. You see, after you left yesterday she sneaked in here, found her fiance asleep in his chair, worn out from what she had involved him in, and found the papers with his signature on them. She knew of Yorke's new pen. She typed out the suicide note, transferred the signature, walked out to the kitchen, turned the jets on the gas stove on, and left.

"Knowing her father's voice, of course, I could not fool her, even though my voice was muffled. She smelled that something was up and did the clever thing. She went to the police."

Lalage said thoughtfully, "Even if she doesn't swing - English juries don't like to hang women - she'll spend all her youth and beauty in the narrow confines of a cell. That may be worse than a quick death."

The moment that Cranston had been waiting for came. She swallowed the rest of her drink in one gulp. This was right after her fingers had passed over the mouth of the glass. Her ring hung open. It was obvious that she had emptied whatever was in the compartment under the big stone into her glass.

Lalage was mobilized into instant action as she fell to the floor.

Cranston said, "Don't bother. If I know her shrewd, canny mind that was cyanide and it's all over."

It was. She was dead before she hit the floor.

"What a pity. The papers will ride me rough-shod for allowing this to happen." Lalage was concerned.

"Not half as hard as they would have ridden you had she lived," Cranston said. "You see, there was no evidence against her at all, except in my mind."

"But," Lalage gasped, "what about her father's journal?"

"There's no reference to her in it at all. It would have been out of character for that megalomaniac to give anyone any credit. He never wrote a word about her!"

Lalage sighed. "So, that's the Yankee bluff I've heard about so often. You didn't have anything to hold her on. Whew..."

"I had to drive her hard, keep hitting and throw her off her stride mercilessly. If I had given her a second to think, she would have realized how tenuous my attack was. She might have out-bluffed me to the end!"

"That's why you let her and us think that Yorke was guilty. You lulled her into a feeling of security and then when she felt the land safe under her feet, you pulled it out from under her."

"That's right. A last point. The initial problem was set early when the gunman with the long nose attempted to shoot me. How could anyone know I was in London and on the trail of Germain unless he

had been tipped off by someone close to Jackie? Only the Earl, Yorke and Bobby knew I was here and what my mission was."

Cranston did not look happy. He turned to Jackie and said, "This, son, is the end of the last nightmare. If you had lived long enough to marry her..."

The Earl of Bostick, brave man that he was, who had lived through the worst the Germans could throw, who had engaged at one point in hand-to-hand combat with the foe, who had somehow survived all the horrors of war, shuddered at the thought of being married to that which lay in a crumpled heap in the center of the room.

THE END