

MURDER IN WHITE

by Maxwell Grant

As originally published in  
The Shadow Magazine #312  
February-March 1947

THE MAN in the tightly-belted trench coat, hat turned down all around in a futile effort to prevent the pounding rain from slashing at his eyes, made his slow way through New York's maddening traffic.

He was in the middle of the street when the light changed. He stayed where he was in the center of the trolley tracks and let the speeding cars swirl past him. There was nothing to do till the light changed back to his favor. His pants were dripping from the muddy water thrown up on them by the scudding cars.

He looked from side to side. So far so good. No one in sight who could possibly know him. In the blinding rain people were contented to make their own way along. They weren't interested in anyone else in the world.

That is, they weren't till a speeding cab, trying to jump the light, cut around the corner and clipped the man in the trench coat. The cab sped on as the man twirled like a ballet dancer and then fell heavily forward on his face. The mud splashed up around him. He lay there perfectly still, while the traffic cop on the corner made apoplectic noises on his whistle. The cab hurried on unheedingly.

The same people, who a second before had hurried so on their anonymous errands, now paused and eyed the fallen body. They stood, all with a certain "there but for the grace of God" look in their eyes.

The policeman, huge and burly in his black shining raincoat, made his slow way to the call box on the telephone pole at the corner. He called for an ambulance and then, sighing, walked to the fallen man's side. He bent over, but his rain coat got in the way. He had to get down on his knees before he could feel for the man's pulse. It was steady and strong.

He didn't dare do anything else. He knew that in the case of a broken neck or a badly injured back it might well be fatal to attempt to move the man from where he lay. He went back to his post and did his best to route traffic around the area. All the while he waved his arms and blew his whistle, he was vaguely conscious of the clammy wet feeling in the knees of his trousers. It made a counter-irritant to the annoyance of the rain and the accident.

The ambulance halted next to the prone body and the attendant dropped to his knees in the rain. The cop grinned. His wouldn't be the only soggy wet pants.

At one time, internes rode the ambulances in New York, but during the war, because of the scarcity of doctors, they had to adopt the plan that other big cities had. They sent orderlies, trained only in first aid, out on call. It had worked well and they had continued it.

The attendants knew enough not to try any snap diagnosis. All they had to do was determine whether or not to take a person to the hospital, and for this they were well qualified.

Slipping a stretcher under the man, the attendant and the driver got him off the street into the ambulance. A keening whine and all sign of the accident was gone as though it had never been.

The crowd split up, became separate entities again and wandered on with that hasty step that is so identifiable in any New Yorker. It doesn't matter where a citizen of Manhattan is going, haste is of the essence. Even if he is just scurrying from watching a building being constructed to another site where a building is being torn down, he hurries.

Eeling through traffic, the ambulance made its way. The clang of the ambulance bell rode high and clear over the other variegated street signs, making its presence known in the nick of time to drivers of cars who pulled

over to the side of the street to give way to the white car.

Inside the ambulance, the man who had been knocked down lay perfectly still. If, inside the broad brow, any thoughts were shaping and re-shaping, there was no visible sign to denote it. The muddied trench coat, still drawn tight at the belt, rose and fell gently with his breathing. As the ambulance cavorted on its way, he was thrown from side to side. The attendant had to lean over and hold him still as he bounced from right to left.

Rabout's Memorial Hospital was just ahead. The gates fell behind them as the ambulance, slower now, made its way up to the receiving door. The stretcher was transferred to a wheeled cart and an orderly in starched whites rolled it down one of the long corridors.

The man, eyes still closed, was stripped now and covered with a white drape that matched the walls and the cart on which he was being rolled.

The cart was wheeled into a room. The orderly turned to the completely exhausted looking interne who stood and dragged on a tiny bit of a cigarette which seemed glued to his lower lip.

The orderly jerked his thumb at the body and said, "Accident. Car. Forty second and fifth."

The interne nodded and let a pale gray stream of smoke dribble out of his nostrils. "D'ja look at his identification?"

"Nothin' on him. No laundry marks in his clothes. Money loose in his pocket. No wallet. Nothing but a gun. A John Doe if I ever saw one."

The interne nodded as he bent over his patient. He busied himself while the orderly yawned. "Hey, doc... "

"When did you get a night's sleep last?"

"What day is this?"

"Monday."

"Monday? Mmmm... seems to me I had about four hours sleep two nights ago. . . . Yeah, I'm almost sure I did."

"What's with the John Doe?"

"So far nothing but shock. I better have Dr. Mavis take a quick look."

The man opened his eyes for the first time. He looked around and the interne, nerves frazzled, prayed that he wouldn't ask the usual 'where am I?' He was one in a million. He looked around the room and asked, "What hospital?"

"Rabout Memorial."

The man on the bed nodded thoughtfully and asked, "Is Dr. Bennit on?"

The interne nodded. "He's the resident."

"He's a good friend of mine. Could I have him look me over?"

"I'll see if he's busy."

Flatfooted with fatigue, the interne went out into the corridor. The man who remained on the white bed looked around him carefully. So far so good. But what lay ahead?

The door re-opened and the resident physician, Dr. Arnold Bennit came in. He was in his middle forties and his bedside manner was not of the best. His face was drawn in a tight-mouthed sour line. His narrow, intellectual forehead was creased. Aside from that he was as anonymous as is anyone who wears a long white jacket.

He walked to the side of the bed and said, "Thank God . . . or Aesculapius, you are here. I'm just about really to burst at the seams. I'm depending on you."

"The first step I should think," said the man on the bed, and if he was in any pain it certainly didn't show in his strong features, "is to transfer me into the men's ward. I'm completely isolated from the life of the hospital here."

"I think you're right. I'll have it done. Have you decided what the extent of your injuries is?"

"Why, doctor," the man on the bed grinned, "isn't that a rather remarkable question to ask a patient?"

"You know what I mean... by the way, are you sure the accident went off all right?"

"I'm quite sure no one knew it was a fake, if that's what you mean."

"Good enough. But you still haven't answered my question."

"I think a broken arm will be all right, if you'll go to my clothes and get the gun that you'll find there."

Minutes later the man on the bed had his left arm strapped up in approved hospital style. The bandages were, perhaps to the discerning eye, a little bulky around the hand, but there certainly was little chance that anyone except someone with x-ray eyes would be able to see the hunk of blue steel that was responsible for the bulge.

Dr. Bennit looked at his peculiar patient and said, "How much do you know about this mess?"

"I know that you are being held morally responsible for the death of a patient on the operating table."

"Ummmm." Bennit said and his face became even more sour. "Almost right, but he died after he left the table and I'm being accused of faulty asepsis. I swear to you that I observed all the many necessary requirements. I was as germ-free as it is humanly possible to be... and yet Thomas Melltin, man about town and prominent industrialist died from an operation that was a hundred to one in his favor."

The man with the bandaged arm moved it slightly in its sling and said, "That's all you have to tell me, doctor?"

The doctor ran his hands down the sides of his white smock and his face was bitter. "I have no idea how much you really know. You're as poker-faced as that young lad we have down in the dispensary. What do you know?"

"I know that you were involved in some kind of business transaction with Melltin before his death."

"Then you know that besides everything else I have a motive... a money motive. For we had an agreement among the three of us that if one of us died the others would divvy up the dead man's share."

"Who is the other survivor?'"

"You know him. He's stock promoter, Francis Jolas. If he dies they'll put me in the chair before I have a chance to turn around."

"Is there any chance of his dying?"

"From anything medical? No."

"You're in a tight spot anyway. One last thing . . . .No one has any idea of my identity?"

"I'll put you down on the records as Larry Crimmins. That way your initials will be the same. See you later," he said from the door. "See you later, Lamont."

Cranston lay back on the bed and looked at the ceiling. This was going to be tough. Here in the hospital, on foreign ground, his Shadow disguise would be worse than useless. How could he fade into the shadows, into the darkness, in a place where the walls, the ceilings, even the floor were painted a bright white?

Yes, it would be tough. But even under these conditions, a mocking laugh, a whisper of a laugh, floated around the corners of the spotless room and died away as though they had never been.

For The Shadow knew more than any could suppose...

## II

A HOSPITAL, an efficient one, is first of all a masterly run hotel. After that it is a factory specializing in the mass production of the conquest of sickness and pain.

As Cranston was wheeled along a seemingly endless corridor, he had plenty of time to be impressed with the way Rabout Memorial Hospital was run. Nurses, head nurses, attendants and orderlies, internes and doctors all went on their endless interminable ways with the quiet precision of a well-made machine.

Of course, he knew from experience gained in a thousand institutions and business organizations of all kinds, that under this well-oiled surface there were sure to be little squabbles, personalities that clashed, internecine warfare, attempts to promote feuds in order to gain in self-importance, but all these were far enough under the surface, like an iceberg, so that all that showed was the shiny, efficient top layer.

He was almost to the ward proper when he noticed a door that lead to the dispensary. He saw a young man of perhaps twenty-eight or thirty, and he remembered his friend Dr. Bennit comparing his poker face to that of the young lad in this room.

He called out, "Hi... "

The man in the dispensary looked out and his face was like that of a Benda mask as he said, "What?"

Cranston asked, "Don't I know you?"

"I doubt it. My name's Jesse Barren, mean anything to you?"

Cranston pretended to look thoughtful and said, "I've heard what name, but the one I know was a promising young metallurgist... "

The poker face was unchanged. "You can call me the unpromising young metallurgist, if you want to."

That was that. In the ward, in a bed that was flanked on each side by aged men who shook so with Parkinson's disease that their covers quivered like a tree in a gale, Cranston wondered what, if anything, he had accomplished by letting Barren know that he, Cranston, knew him.

While Cranston lay in bed and gazed thoughtfully at the boring whiteness of the ceiling, in another part of the city his name was being mentioned.

Shrevvie had called Harry Vincent to report on the happenings of the day. Vincent, The Shadow's good right hand was saying, "How did it go, Shrevvie?"

"Like a breeze, Harry, like a breeze. I whiffed right past, and you'd a sworn the boss was a regular movie stunt man the way he took the floperoo."

"I see. I'm glad you called. I've been worried about it all day. But this is only the beginning. I'm afraid this is one little job where the boss is going to be strictly on his own."

"Yare," Shrevvie agreed, "he ain't likely to need a cab when he's in the hospital."

"Okay, I'll check with Burbank. He can at least call the hospital and let us know a little of what's going on. See you later, Shrevvy."

But not even Burbank, that fount of information, could be of much help. Not even the variegated threads that ran through his hands in the telephone answering service which was the cover-up for his extracurricular activities, was of any help in this case. For, outside of a muttered, 'doing as well as can be expected,' what can you ever get out of a hospital?

In the big central ward, Lamont Cranston lay at his ease and got his thoughts in order. Dr. Bennit had not told him all he should have, of that he was sure, and the longer he brooded on the subject, the more convinced he became.

He was fascinated by the way the nurses and orderlies went about their difficult jobs, never by any chance allowing any of their personal difficulties to show, always putting forward a nice smile and a cheery word.

The problem which needed immediate solving was how to get up and about without having sixty-eight nurses jumping on his neck. The reason it had been necessary to go through the farce of the faked accident was because of the difficulty of getting any information about a hospital without being in and part of it. They were like medieval locked and barricaded fortresses.

So far the killing, if it was a killing and not negligence on the part of Dr. Bennit, assumed the proportions of a perfect murder. How to trace back and

find out who had contaminated the instruments or the gloves, or the surgical apron, or whatever it was?

Almost super-human precautions are taken in the operating theatre. For anyone to upset those same precautions would not be too hard, for all the care was taken against infection from bacteria, not from human interference. It would be taken for granted by any nurse that sterile gloves, coming out of the sterilizer, were sterile. If someone substituted infected gloves in the sterilizing machine at the last moment, how could the nurse know that?

No, this was not going to be easy. The first step--getting out of bed--would have to depend on Dr. Bennit making his rounds after the visiting hours were over.

Lamont Cranston composed his soul in patience and waited. All around him were the relatives of the ailing men who peopled the ward. They brought presents... pathetic little presents... an orange, a banana, some ice cream... and it was obvious from the clothes, and their care, and poverty-worn faces that each present was a sacrifice. That made the oranges and the bananas more important than whole steamer baskets full of fruit in private rooms.

Each bed was the center of an island of humanity, the voices of patients and visitors were low.

There were real islands... individual patients for whom there were no visitors, who lay with their gaunt faces pointed at the ceilings, lay there and pretended that they didn't mind that they were alone... forgotten... unloved.

It was painful to watch.

Then, the bell clanged and the visitors left. Their feet stepped a little faster. They moved more freely as, released from the bondage of pain, they unconsciously reassured themselves that they were not sick.

No matter how well-loved the patient that they had visited, there was still a trace of what a cynic has said is the only reason why people go to the sick . . . and that is to be made conscious of how well the visitors are.

Freed of the interlopers, the routine of the hospital reasserted itself. The nurses and the doctors were again in evidence. The bed pans and the other necessities of sickness were again out in the open. Thermometers, drugs, sphygmometers, the whole paraphernalia came back into sight and with them the resident physician.

He went from bed to bed. His bitter face brought no reassurance to the bed-ridden, but he was doing his duty as well as he was able. Cranston, watching him, realized that Bennit must be an awfully good doctor to have overcome his obvious personality defect.

Finally it was Cranston's turn. Bennit sat down on the edge of the bed and sighed. He pitched his voice low so that it could not be heard even at the next bed and said, "You've got to hurry. I feel as though I have an albatross around my neck. I don't know how much longer I can go on with the unspoken suspicions all around me. I feel as though I were living under water... the slightest move requires all my effort. I never knew that an intangible thing like suspicion could become so real!"

"Then how are we to get me out of this bed and about as a free agent?"

"Oh... that's fairly easy... because of the man-power shortage, most of the ambulatory patients help out as much as they are able. We can list you as an ambulant and let you putter about with pots and things, if you don't mind being a pot walloper."

"That's okay with me. I'm just anxious to get up and around. I can see that I would not be the ideal patient if I were in for some real disability."

Bennit nodded and wrote brief notes on the card at the foot of the bed.

As he left, a bright-faced young nurse came up and looked at the card. She said, "Oh, fine, you can get up and around now, Mr. Crimmins, or shall I call you Larry?"

"Larry, by all means. But I've heard that the basis of good relations is

reciprocity."

She looked puzzled for a moment before she smiled and said, "Oh, I'm Terry . . . Terry Whelan."

He got up out of bed, reaching for his hospital bathrobe as he felt a draft on his back and realized that hospital nightgowns are not the most modest design in the world.

"What can I do to help?"

"Ummm... we don't want you to strain that bad arm of yours... I know, they need some help in the dispensary."

Cranston wondered if that had been arranged by Dr. Bennit, so that he could get next to the young poker-faced lad, or if it was just a fortuitous coincidence.

Either way it would be handy. He followed the girl's trim form down the length of the ward and out into the corridor. He kept his eyes open, secreting in the back of his mind an accurate map of the location of salient points.

In the dispensary, surrounded by bottles and chemical reports, the young lad with the immobile face looked up as they entered. The nurse introduced them.

"You're the one that thought he recognized me aren't you?" Barren asked Cranston. Cranston nodded. "How can I help you?"

Barren eyed Cranston's bandaged arm and said, "Well, I guess you can't be expected to grind anything with a mortar and pestle. Perhaps you can use your one hand to fold these slips."

Accurately weighed-out prescriptions lay in tidy pyramids on three-inch squares of paper. Cranston bent his energies to folding the papers over into individual packets.

They worked silently after the pretty nurse had left. Cranston, out of the corner of his eye, watched Barren's face for any sign of expression, but there was none. To all intents and purposes the man was wearing a mask that never changed.

Using his thumb as a pivot. Cranston folded away as though his life depended on it, and all the while he was weighing up what he knew of the case. Three men had been involved originally

Dr. Bennit, Thomas Melltin, since deceased, and Francis Jolas, stock promoter.

Cranston knew that Jolas was coming to the hospital that night to visit Bennit and he was determined somehow to be a silent third at that meeting.

If Cranston's nerves had been made of anything but the case-hardened, manganese steel that they were, the immobility of Barren's features would have had him scatty as a cat.

He had given up trying to make light conversation with the man. It was useless. Remarks dropped into that void, like a rain drop into the Grand Canyon, and were gone.

Finally Barren said, and his lips barely moved, "Half an hour more and you'd better get back to bed. No sense in over-taxing yourself."

The half hour finally dissipated itself and, nodding a goodbye, Cranston left the strange young man and walked out into the now silent corridor. Silent, that is, for a hospital. For, of all the misconceptions in the world, one of the biggest is that a hospital is really quiet. There is always, even in the dead of night, an undercurrent of sound, a busy quality that is the result of all the people involved, the pacing of feet of the nurses, the calls for help, the night bells calling the orderlies; all combine to make a stir that never stops.

The completely deserted corridor was eerie at this time. Cranston could barely hear the breathing of rows of patients as they fell into a sleeping respite from the pain.

Then, just as Cranston was making his quiet way around to the office where Dr. Bennit was waiting for Jolas to make his appearance, there was a shout that might well have stemmed from a violent ward in an insane asylum. It froze Cranston in his tracks as he tried to remember whether this hospital,

Rabout Memorial, had a psycho ward. It didn't, to the best of his knowledge... all the same, the sound continued like a drowning cry from the seventh layer of hell.

Ahead, near the foot of a staircase, Cranston saw something white. He ran to it. It was a strip of bandage. He looked up the stair well. The bandage ran like some Minotauran clue up the stairs.

The very end of the roll of bandage was at Cranston's feet as he started up the stairs. It looked as though someone had held one end of the roll and thrown it. It had unrolled and made its snake-like way down the stairs. Up above, Cranston could see the white trail going from the stairs out towards another corridor.

The scream, that masculine call for attention, pitched so effeminately high, had come from here. He traced the coiling strip of white. In the distance, at the far end of the trail he could see a slumping bundle that might have been a package of old clothes.

It wasn't of course. It was Francis Jolas and he had not kept his appointment with Dr. Bennit.

### III

POUNDING feet behind Cranston made him turn just as he reached the end of the macabre trail of bandage. He chanced a swift glance at the thin body of the fallen man before he whirled to see the set face of the man from the dispensary.

Barren clipped, "What's up?" But although his voice was breathless, his face was emotionless.

Cranston shrugged. "You know as much about it as I do."

They turned from each other to look at Jolas. The man on the floor stirred. His eyes opened and there was a wicked glint in them. He smiled. His face was flushed, his breathing stertorous.

Incredibly, from his prone position, he leaped to his feet. He laughed and it was like no sound that Cranston had ever heard. He said, while the laughter bubbled p like pain from his stomach, "On your knees, serfs, do homage to your master!"

His arms swinging like pendulums gone mad, his hand brushed against Cranston's face. It was ice cold. He was close enough so Cranston could smell the alcohol on his face. His body was jerking as though a galvanic current had gone through it.

His eyes, unfocussed, looked off into space about a foot over Cranston's head and he said, "Why should there be an iceberg with a polar bear on it?"

There was such reasonableness in his outcry that Cranston had to resist the impulse to turn and look. Then the look on Jolas' face turned to one of quaking fear and he backed towards the wall with his shaking hands in front of his face saying, "Get it away. Snakes should crawl on their bellies. They have no right to fly!"

That stage passed and suddenly he began running. The maniacal desperation made him strong enough to bowl Cranston and Barren over like beer bottles. They smashed against the wall. Jolas, all humanity drained from his face, raced to the stairs. There was a projection coming down from under the stairs.

His taut fingers grasped at the projection and he swung off into space and all the while a weird whispering came from his tight throat muscles.

Slamming doors and racing feet heralded the approach of some internes. Dr. Bennit was in the lead as they ran up in time to see Jolas' swinging body catapult off down the stairs.

They waited for the crash, but by some freak of a weird fate, the man landed on his feet at the floor below.

They raced down after him, Barren and Cranston in the lead, with Bennit behind them, closely followed by the internes.

Quivering and shaking, Jolas was rocked off his feet by an internal spasm that knocked him to the ground. His body lay there writhing. His head smashed back against the floor with a sick crack, but it did not stop his convulsion.

Bennit said between taut lips, "Get him to the accident ward. I've got to get a stomach pump into him before he dies of alcoholic poisoning"

Carrying the twitching body was no pleasant task, but if the internes felt any revulsion, their code did not allow them to show it.

In the accident ward, stomach pump ready, Bennit, face drawn and cold, waited till the internes could hold the wildly jerking body still enough for the stomach pump to be inserted.

Cranston, realizing that he had no right to be there, left before he could be ordered to. Outside, in the corridor, he leaned back against the wall and took a deep breath. He'd seen too much of life to be upset by anything ordinary, but this had been too far outside his experience. All well and good for the doctors to go about their business. That was their job; but he had had an emotional jolt. He didn't care for it.

Barren came out and found him leaning there. Face composed, he said in stony-faced immobility, "You've had a rough time of it. Come on, I'll help you back to your bed."

It made Cranston feel a little better to see that Barren's hands were shaking a bit. Let his face hide his feelings, Cranston thought, his hands show that he's upset too.

In complete silence, Barren, walked with him to the door of the ward. Cranston said, "Thanks."

Barren said nothing. His hands, if anything, were shaking a bit more than they had been. Suddenly, and Cranston was to puzzle over this for a time, Barren turned and still without saying anything, began to walk away.

He walked faster and faster till, just as he reached the middle of the corridor, he began to run. It was a strange, flat-footed run. Brow furrowed, Cranston made his way past the sleeping patients to his bed. He'd seen that strange run before... but who had run that way?

Lying back in the high, hard hospital bed, Cranston sighed and composed himself for sleep, hoping that his subconscious, in the course of a night's sleep, would dredge up where he'd seen someone run that way. He closed his eyes.

Soon, the only sound in the ward was the never-ending sound of respiration, of bed clothes moving around as people tossed in their sleep.

Then Cranston was no longer aware of even that. He slept.

There was a feeling of dislocation when he awoke; that feeling of nightmare insecurity that you have when you awake in a strange bed. Cranston lay there with his brain reeling for a moment, till the feeling dissipated itself and he realized that he was in the hospital and the sounds that had awakened him were those that herald a new day in those white precincts; the sounds of bed pans, of people stirring, of moaning... awakening to pain.

The pretty nurse, Terry, was at the side of his bed. He looked up and she smiled at him. "The washroom is down the corridor."

As she turned to walk away he asked, "Have you heard anything about Jolas?"

"Who?"

"The man who had alcoholic delirium last night."

"Oh, the internes were talking about him. They got the stomach pump on him in time. He's full of paraldehyde now, but he'll be all right."

"I see. Thanks." Cranston made his way out of the bed, his gait awkward because of his bandaged arm. Ahead of him, coming on his morning rounds was Dr. Bennit. If his face was any indication, he'd had no sleep at all.

He gestured a sort of vague hello to Cranston. "Good morning." His voice was empty with fatigue.

"Hi. You look as if you'd been pulled through a knot-hole backward."

"It was touch and go with Jolas. I don't understand it. He's never been a heavy drinker."



"Perhaps he's scared and drank to forget it. Is he afraid of you?"

"I... oh... I don't know. He got the horrors when he came to and saw me sitting next to him in the bedroom."

"Where is he?"

"In a private suite. Suite B."

"I'll see if I can't find some pretense to get in to see him sometime today."

They separated and Cranston, looking at the corridor, was amused to see how the night terrors faded with the sunlight washing the walls. It didn't seem possible that just the night before, Jolas had been as near dementia as a normal man can come.

The dispensary door was wide open. The pale poker face of Barren was set in its usual lines as he went about his business. Cranston waved hello. It was not returned.

Coming out of the washroom, Cranston saw Barren exiting from a door down the hall from his work room. He wondered about it, but didn't worry about it until he came even with the door and saw a letter B neatly lettered on a bronze plaque. This was the room that Jolas was recuperating in.

He opened the door and looked in. The stench of paraldehyde was almost overpowering. Jolas lay in deepest slumber. Face completely relaxed, he looked singularly defenseless. But he was okay. Cranston realized that he was getting pretty nervy and closed the door. After all, what motive would Barren have for hurting Jolas? There was, of course, the fact that Dr. Bennit had not been completely truthful. He had not found it necessary to tell Cranston something; something that Cranston had found out on his own before coming to the hospital. That was that Barren had at one time been in the employ of the three men. He had worked for the combine of Melltin, Bennit and Jolas. A good metallurgist, he had been sent out on an assignment for the three of them.

If that had any connection with the puzzling death of Melltin, it was up to Cranston to find it out. It was such a tenuous thread that Cranston was following. For all he could know, Melltin had died accidentally. He had only the doctor's word that the death was abnormal. The police certainly hadn't felt that way. They had written it off as accidental death.

The day dragged by as all days drag in the hospital. Cranston realized that never before, never in any case that he had been involved in, had he ever been so circumscribed, so little a free agent. His motion was encircled by the hospital walls. He could see now why people in a hospital are so loath to read papers. It's because the world outside is so far away that it might as well be on another planet. For the first time since he could remember, he really didn't give a tinker's dam about what was going on in the world at large; he didn't care whether there was a new international incident that was threatening war, or if a border incident in Bessarabia was being blasted up into gigantic proportions. It just wasn't important enough to brood about.

He was mooning out a window, looking at the silent, deserted street pegged with signs that said, "Hospital Street, Quiet Please". He felt a touch at his shoulder. It was young Barren.

"Would you come with me, please?"

Cranston nodded. "What's up?"

The still-faced man said, "I don't know. Dr. Bennit wants to see you." Silently, they walked past Suite B. A raucous radio proved that Jolas was sitting up and taking nourishment. Cranston asked, "All better?"

"Far as I know. He had his butler bring his radio to his room. He looks okay. He says he feels as if he had the world's worst hangover, but that's all."

In Dr. Bennit's office, Barren left Cranston and the doctor together. When the door closed on his back Bennit said, "I haven't told you all I should have, Lamont."

"Make it Larry. You don't know who may be around."

"Very well, then, Larry. I think you should know that the young man who works in the dispensary got a dirty deal from my partners. Originally when the

syndicate was formed they promised Barren that if he discovered any of the ore we were interested in that he would be dealt in on the syndicate."

"And?" Cranston prodded. He was feeling irritable. His hand encased in bandages, with enough plaster of paris on it to make it look like a real broken limb, was itchy and felt as if it were going to sleep.

"'And... well, after he located the ore and we had established all the legal formalities on the claim, my ethical partners decided that a three-way split would be more to their liking. Their agreement with Barren had been verbal. He had no witnesses and they just told him to go whistle in the wind for his share."

"I see." Cranston had found this out on his own. But he was pleased that the doctor was finally coming through. "But you still are in the ugly position of benefiting by the death of Melltin."

"I just don't know what I would have done last night if Jolas had died while under my care... "

"He's all right?"

"Sure, he's got the constitution of an ox. He's probably all set to go out on the town tonight, if I'd let him."

"Let's get back to Barren and you. In the first place, what are you, a doctor, doing in the big league with boys who play as rough as Jolas and the deceased financier?"

"I don't know whether you know it or not, but we doctors are considered prime suckers by almost any kind of stock promoter or hustler. And in the majority of cases they're right. A successful doctor makes a tidy bundle with his hands and his brains, and then by the time he gets to be forty or so, he begins to wonder what he'll do with it.

"It's right at that point that the average doctor reaches over his head. His whole training, his profession itself, has made him completely ignorant of business and its ruthless tactics. It's as easy to take him as it is to shoot fish in a barrel.

"My father, a good doctor, was wiped out financially by one of those sharks. I determined not to fall into the same trap. The result is that I am not only a good doctor, but I am a good business man too."

A knock on the door interrupted Dr. Bennit. He scowled and asked, "Who is it?"

"Me, doctor, Johnny Higgins."

"Come in." Bennit made a face of exasperation at Cranston. "Sorry."

Higgins came in and said in a soft voice, "You're wanted in surgery, doctor."

Cranston, looking at Higgins, wondered about him. He was tall, but curiously soft and frail-looking. It wasn't that he was particularly fat, he just didn't seem to be made of muscles. His face was soft and unlined.

He left as soon as the doctor nodded. Bennit had seen the question in Cranston's face and he said, "How old do you think Higgins is?"

"Why, very young. As a matter of fact I was wondering how come he was working in a hospital."

"He's thirty-five."

"Whew... I almost can't believe it. Has he discovered the fountain of youth?"

"More like the fountain of death. He's a pituitary case. When he was young enough for glandular therapy to have helped him, science didn't know as much as it does now. His physical type generally doesn't live as long as we do. He's perfectly normal otherwise, though."

"I see. Very curious. But let's get back to Barren and your business acumen."

Bennit cleared his throat. "I'll have to hurry. I must get up to surgery. I didn't think they'd be ready this quickly. To be brief, I have invested wisely and I have quite a bit of money. When Jolas and Melltin saw a chance of a quick clean-up they dealt me in, for like most men of their type their real money is so tied up that it's hard for them to lay their hands on it. I've

been in on quite a few deals with them, so it was quite ordinary for them to have come to me."

"Barren found the manganese and they rewarded him by booting him out."

"Yes, exactly." Bennit agreed, and then his face changed. It was exactly like a delayed double-take in the movies. He said, "How... where... I never told you it was a manganese deposit!"

"I like to do some research of my own before I take a case. I know that you have a manganese mine and I know where it is. Pennsylvania."

"Then you must know how important manganese was during the war."

"Of course. It's used for hardening steel. You really must have cleaned up on it. But all of this doesn't explain why Barren wound up working for peanuts in a hospital dispensary... and particularly in a hospital with you!"

Bennit got to his feet. "I've never quite understood that. But he came to me and said that he was completely defeated by my partners machinations and asked for a job till he got back on his psychological feet. I couldn't refuse."

They left the room and Cranston left the doctor at the elevator that took him up to the operating amphitheatre.

Left to his own devices, Cranston for some reason, was reminded of the child's game of "heavy, heavy hangs over my head," but this was no case of fine or super-fine... in this case it was menace, impure and unsimple, that made him anxious about what the future held!

He passed the unlined-faced, young-old man with the glandular disturbance. He was hurrying about his tasks, his face in its youngness as hard to read as the mask which Barren presented to the world.

Of course, we all present masks to the world and it's just as well we do, for if the truth were on our faces for all to see...

Deep in thought, Cranston walked past Suite B. His stunned ears almost failed to react to the sound that emanated from the room. A high voice, piercingly-shrill, was screaming, "Get them out... take them away... or I'll jump... "

#### IV

CRANSTON slammed the door open. The first thing he saw on the floor was an empty witch hazel bottle. Framed in the window, thin arms widespreading, was Jolas, face squirming with madness.

He was talking to the center of the room and his eyes were insane. "You've followed me long enough! I won't have it! Death is sweeter than life! 'For what are these when the race is run and ye pause at the farthest door. Ah, better be dead than alive; but best is ne'er to be born'!"

As the last word left his mouth his body hurtled forward. Cranston, forgetting his bandaged arm for a moment, leaped through the air. He tried to grab the crazed man's ankles as his body tilted out the window.

His one hand grasped at the skinny ankle. His other bandaged hand flapped at the air helplessly. Arcing downward, Jolas' body slammed into the side of the building. Teeth gritted, Cranston held on with his left hand.

It was just a question of time. His fingers were biting into the bony ankle of the man whom he was saving from certain death. Cranston strained his ears. He thought he heard a sound out in the hall. He raised his voice, and it was an effort with the strain he was undergoing

"Hello... c'mere! Hurry... "

The door opened leisurely and a young interne came in. His eyes popped open and it would have been ludicrous had the circumstances not been what they were. He was galvanized into action by the sight of a man in a patient's bathrobe standing at a window with his arm out the window.

Cranston's teeth were biting into his lips as the interne raced to his side. He looked down and saw the thin form of Jolas flapping against the side

of the wall.

Reaching down on top of Cranston's one hand, he grabbed the other ankle and they began to pull Jolas back into the room. It was hard, for Cranston's good arm was starting to give out.

Once they had the man back in the room, the interne looked from the spittle that foamed at the corners of Jolas' mouth down to the witch hazel bottle on the floor.

He sighed and said, "Leave it to an alcoholic..." He went out into the hall for a second. Cranston picked up the bottle and held it up to the light.

When the interne returned, Jolas had thrown himself flat on the floor and with red cheeks was talking to a crack in the floor. He said, "C'mon out... aw... c'mon... don't be bashful little worm."

The interne said. "We'll have to leave the worm. You're due for a date with the pump again, bud."

Cranston got out of the way as an orderly helped the interne with the crazed man. Out in the hall, Dr. Bennit, still in his surgical gown and completely anonymous in his antiseptic mask, gloved hands at his sides, helplessly watched as Jolas was brought out.

"I got a call just as I was finishing up in the operating room. What can happen next?"

"Did you know Jolas was an alcoholic?"

The white-masked face shook from side to side. "I never had any hint. But if he's at the stage where he'll drink witch hazel, why, the end is near!"

Behind them, Barren, face empty and tight, staggered up to them with his hand at his heart. The doctor did a double take and asked. "Good lord, man, what's wrong with you?"

Barren gasped and even at this point his face was uncommunicative, "My heart... it...".

He fell to the floor.

Dr. Bennit said, "Help me... "

Cranston, using his one hand again, picked up Barren's feet. Bennit held his shoulders and they got him into the bed just quitted by Jolas. Down the hall outside the door, Cranston heard feet pounding. Barren's face was white and drawn as Bennit took his pulse.

An interne ran in with his stethoscope dangling around his neck. "Doctor, you're needed for that patient Jolas. He's on his way out!"

"So's Barren." Dr. Bennit whipped the surgical mask off his face and took the stethoscope from the interne's neck.

He said, "His pulse is so thready I can't feel it any more. Let's see about his heart."

Snapping the stethoscope into his ears, he put the disc on Barren's chest on top of his shirt. The doctor's face was grave.

The interne said, "If he's a goner, you better not waste any time. Jolas is on his last legs."

Bennit looked undecidedly from Barren's still face to the interne and then, sighing, he whipped the stethoscope off and said, "All right. Let's go. There's not a trace of a heart beat."

Cranston followed them out in the hall. They hurried to the elevator and vanished. Cranston, mind in a whirl, walked back towards his ward.

He didn't like the idea, but it looked as if he was all wrong. He'd have to start all over again at the beginning. The hospital, instead of being reassuring, a refuge from pain and horror, was rapidly turning into a pest house.

And this pest was one that could not be removed by antiseptic. This was a killer running amok. He lay down on his bed and resigned himself to casting out every idea he had had about the case. Back to prime causes. Thomas Melltin, since deceased, Francis Jolas, on his way out, Jesse Barren, dead... and Dr. Bennit had been involved in the discovery and exploitation of a manganese deposit in Pennsylvania.

The manganese had paid off fabulously. The men involved had pulled a fast

one on Barren. That would have been a good motive for Barren and it had been on that concept that Cranston had been proceeding. Too, there was the puzzle of Barren's mask-like face and that strange run of his...

But that was secondary with this new development. Cranston hoped that the post mortem on Barren would give some helpful indication. If Jolas died... who then could be responsible but Dr. Bennit? The police, in view of all this, would have to enter the case. But how they could function in the hospital was the question.

As things stood, Dr. Bennit would profit terrifically by the deaths of his partners. Cranston could not quite believe that Jolas, a man as much in the public as he had been, could have been a hopeless alcoholic. But how else account for his symptoms? The flushed face, the wild ideas, the lack of proper ideation... the desperation, the suicidal desires. All could be part of alcoholic dementia... and yet...

Cranston looked up and saw Dr. Bennit approaching. The man's face was heavy. His stride was even heavier. He said, in a low voice, "Jolas died. The hard way... in convulsions."

Cranston said, "I see."

"Don't look at me that way. I know how it looks, but I swear I didn't... would I be so insane as to..." Bennit looked around impatiently at an orderly who had come up next to him.

"Well? What is it?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, sir, but did you give orders to move Jesse's body?"

"Barren?"

"Yes sir."

"No, of course not. I told you to bring his body down to the morgue. I wouldn't give the same job to two people."

The man, it was the young-faced glandular case, gulped and said, "Well, he's not there."

"Now don't be absurd. How could he not be there?"

"I... I don't know, sir. But his body is not in Suite B where you said it was."

Bennit turned to Cranston and said pleadingly, "I'm not losing my mind, am I? You saw him too... didn't you?"

"Of course. We'd better go take a look." Cranston got up off the bed.

The suite, but for the mussiness that had followed the removal of Jolas in his deadly convulsions, was as it had been before, with the slight exception that the body of Jesse Barren was not to be seen. What's more, there was not even an indentation in the bed clothes to show that he had ever been there.

Dr. Bennit's face was a picture of deep, deadly despair. He ran his hands through his hair and his voice was distraught as he said, "Someone is obviously out to ruin me, and whoever it is has succeeded. I am ready to call it quits. I know when I'm licked."

The youthful-looking orderly had left Cranston and the doctor to their puzzle. Cranston, eyes alert, went over the room for any indication, however slight, of what had been behind the stealing of Barren's body.

But of physical signs there were none. Bennit watched him and his eyes were empty pools. "Find any hint of who may be behind this?"

Cranston shook his head. "What about Jolas?"

"Died in an alcoholic convulsion. Turned blue."

"I see. You intend to perform a post?"

"Why no. I hadn't thought of it. But in view of what's been going on, I suppose it would be best."

"Please do." Cranston's face was set. "Have you called the police?"

"Call the... Why no... should I?"

"Don't you intend to do anything about your body snatcher?"

"Of course, but I thought you... "

"This has gone beyond that. There has been an actual crime committed. You

have to report

it. But... you might wait till after you've gone over the whole hospital with a fine-tooth comb."

Leaving the search to the hospital people, Cranston made his way back to his bed in the ward. He realized that there couldn't be much of a secret any longer about the fact that he was more than just a patient. Anyone with half an eye would have seen that Cranston was being called in; was accorded a degree of respect from Dr. Bennit that was not in keeping with the role he was playing.

To all intents and purposes the whole faked accident was wasted. Sighing, Lamont put his hands behind his head and relaxed. In the bed next to him, an old gentleman, wasted to the bone with age and arterio sclerosis, made his painful way off the edge of the bed. He staggered as he got his feet under him.

Cranston jumped up out of bed as the old gentleman teetered on his wasted legs and then tilted forward. Cranston got to his side as he fell. His feet had out-raced his body.

"Whoa, take it easy. Here, can I help you where you're going?"

"Thank you so much. I hate to bother the nurses. They're so busy. But the minute I get on my feet I have trouble. They have a tendency to go their own way..."

The old man laughed at his own infirmity. "I wouldn't mind if my feet ever went the way I want to go."

"Here, lean on me." The man's weight was almost nothing.

"Just down the hall. I want to go out on the sun deck."

Cranston got him firmly ensconced on the porch and walked back toward his place. A young, self-important looking interne was walking alongside of him. Cranston said, in the tone of one who makes idle conversation, "Why do old people have so much trouble with their balance? Does something happen to the balancing mechanism in their ears?"

The young interne almost sneered in reply, "That could happen, but in the average case, arterio sclerosis induces Parkinsonism and it's the result of the Parkinson's disease that gets their balance wheels out of whack."

Smiling his thanks, Cranston masked the sudden feeling of clarification that lifted a curtain in his brain. For the first time he saw behind the mask of a fiendish, ruthless killer!

Once again, The Shadow knew!

V

THAT dark side of Lamont Cranston, that was known as The Shadow, was forced to stay in abeyance. For here, surrounded by whiteness that was dazzling, there was no hiding place for that figure of blackest night. Night never comes to a hospital. It never gets really dark. The one real sign of night in the outside world is the fact that most of us go to sleep. But here in the hospital at no time in the twenty-four hours were all eyes closed at the same time. The night force was almost as busy as the day.

The interne had given Cranston a clue, a hint that was like lifting a curtain, but it was tiny, it was as though it had just lifted the very tip of a long drape. The majority of the drape still concealed the killer. It was up to Cranston to rip the drape aside and allow the cleanness of the light of day to wipe across the darkness that festered in an embittered brain.

The search of the hospital was futile as Cranston had been sure it would be. The searchers had given up. Bennit had called the police.

Cranston was waiting in Bennit's office with the doctor. He said, "Doctor, I think the masquerade has served what little purpose it has had. You may as well take these bandages and the cast off my arm."

"Why?"

"I'm sure that whoever is involved in this maddening charade has seen through my excuse for being in the hospital."

"Oh... but wait... you're not going to leave me to this horror, are you?"

"No, I'll see it through."

"Then by all means keep the bandages on. It'll keep any talk amongst the staff to a minimum. They have accepted you as an accident case. If I take the cast off, they're going to wonder what you're doing here."

"If you think it'd be wiser, why all right. But I must say it's a nuisance. Did you find out anything at all when you looked the place over?"

"Not a sign of Barren at all! To all intents and purposes he might as well have changed into smoke and vanished!"

"No one saw anything out of the way at all?"

Doctor Bennit shook his head. "Not unless you'd call this remarkable." He took a golf ball from his pocket and rolled it across his desk towards Cranston.

"A golf ball? Where was it?"

"One of the cleaning women found it in a corner of the hall... about a hundred feet down from Suite B."

It was a perfectly ordinary-looking golf ball and yet the expression in Cranston's eyes as he looked at it was strange. He stared at it as though to ask it what it had seen lying in a corner of the hall. If it could talk it would have a bizarre tale to tell, he thought.

"You don't really think that has anything to do with the disappearance of Barren's body, do you?"

Cranston started to nod yes, but before he could speak the door opened. His close friend, Commissioner of Police of the city of New York, was standing there. Weston eyed Cranston for a moment before he spoke. "I call your house fifteen times in a day and a half. Your servants have no idea where you are... no idea at all... I suppose they don't know that you're right here in the Rabout Memorial Hospital?"

"Mmmm... if they do, they know better than to tell anyone." Cranston grinned at his friend. "This is the police commissioner, Dr. Bennit."

Bennit's face lit up momentarily, "I am honored to think that you felt this was of sufficient importance for you to come in person." But the smile faded instantly.

"I have a motive. I've been giving money to the hospital for a good many years. I don't want any scandal to hurt it. I had my appendix out here, you know, Lamont."

"I didn't, but I'm glad you have a personal interest in this mess."

Weston sat down and lit a cigar. "Tell me about it. All I heard from the teletype was some nonsense about a body getting up and meandering off. Now, that's ridiculous, you know."

"Yes, isn't it?" agreed Dr. Bennit. "But nevertheless that is what we are faced with."

While Cranston was sketching in the background of the case from the death of Thomas Melltin as a result of an operation by Dr. Bennit, followed by the death of Barren and the death of Jolas, a knock came at the door.

Bennit opened it and took a slip of paper from an orderly. It was the glandular one and his young face looked worried. "It's the p.m. report, Dr. Bennit. Dr. Sanderson did it."

"Thanks. From the look on your face, you've glanced at this."

The orderly nodded. "Well, don't brood about it."

As Bennit closed the door he said, "That's the worst of people working in a hospital, they all begin to think that they're M.D.'s after a while."

His face grew drawn as he looked at the report.

Cranston leaned forward. "What's up?" Weston took a deep puff on his cigar.

Bennit muttered to himself as he read, "Cause of death, asphyxia, definite signs of unoxidized blood... "

"That fits in with a diagnosis of death through wood alcohol, doesn't

it?" asked Weston, proud of the medical knowledge he had picked up in the course of his affiliation with the police.

Bennit looked from Weston to Cranston. "Oh, yes, the clinical picture fits that... but it also fits atropine poisoning!"

Cranston whistled. "Very cute..."

"Sanderson," said Bennit, "knew Jolas fairly well, and couldn't see him as a drunk, so when he saw these signs, he looked further. He found microscopic traces of atropine."

"Why microscopic?" asked Weston.

"Why? Because a tenth of a gram of atropine will kill a strong adult!"

"Is there is a parallel between the picture of alcoholism and atropine poisoning?" asked Cranston and his face was set.

"Parallel? Don't you see? The killer, seeing Jolas really badly drunk last night, gave him the one drug that would imitate exactly the same symptoms, with the slight difference that... you can over a bad drunk... but you don't escape a tenth of a gram of atropine."

"The business of seeing hallucinations, the wild talking, the cold hands, all are part of both alcohol and the drug?"

"Yes, yes. They climb chandeliers, see bats and rats, all of the symptoms, even going into convulsion and then coma... all are the same in both cases. This is even more horrible than I had thought! The man behind this is not only deadly, he is fiendishly clever."

"Sounds to me," said Weston, and Bennit looked as if he were hearing his death knelled, "as if a doctor was behind all this. Is there a doctor concerned in the case, Lamont?"

Cranston didn't answer. He just looked at Bennit. Weston followed his eyes and then gulped and said, "I didn't mean that..."

"Of course you didn't, but it's the only conclusion you can come to," said Bennit. "Every clue, every bit of motivation points directly at me. But Lamont, I wouldn't have called you in, wouldn't have asked for your help, if I were the killer, would I?"

All Cranston said was, "It doesn't seem very probable." But of course there had been that case not long ago where a killer had called on Cranston, presuming on his friendship, when all the time he had wanted to use Cranston as a cat's paw.

Weston cleared his throat, he was always embarrassed by any display of emotion, and said, "Come, let's get on with it."

Cranston finished up the picture with a few broad strokes. Weston said. "I see. The first problem then, is to find where and why this Jesse Barren's body was taken. Big as a hospital is, I should not think that it would be too easy to hide a big object like a body."

"The best place to hide a tree is in a forest," said Dr. Bennit thoughtfully.

Weston and Cranston turned and looked at him. "What are you thinking of, man?" asked Weston.

Saying nothing, tight lipped, Bennit got to his feet. They followed him. He walked stiffly out into the hall. They got into the elevator after him.

He said, "I've been getting too emotional about all this. I haven't been using my head. I just wondered before where I'd hide a body if I were given the problem."

"The basement," he said to the elevator operator.

The elevator door, crashing closed behind them, was the only sound as they stood in the cellar. Off to one side, dimly lit, a door opened away from the basement. Weston and Cranston followed after the doctor's lean straight back.

Weston pointed to Cranston's bandaged arm and said, "I'm sorry so much has been happening that I haven't had time to ask what's happened to you."

"Tcha, it's a fake. I needed an excuse to get in here."

Then they were still.

Dr. Bennit stood to one side holding the door open. They were in the



morgue of the hospital.

It was clean and sparsely furnished. The single bulb hanging from the ceiling was the only light. Set in the wall were a long series of doors. Small doors, perhaps three feet square.

Weston said, "If you want to hide a tree, hide it in a forest. If you want to hide a corpse, put it in the morgue."

## VI

BUT FOR the doors in the walls, which might well have been file drawers, there was nothing in the room at all. To one side, forming part of it, but separated, there was an alcove. In the center of the alcove, in a patch of semidarkness, there was a high table. It was black stone topped.

Cranston walked closer to it and could see the channels cut in the sides of it. The channels led down to one end. Hanging on one end was a bucket.

Next to the table there was an instrument cabinet. Gleaming steel sent off glints of lambent coldness. From the cursory glance that Cranston gave it, there seemed to be all the usual surgical instruments there. The scalpels were laid out in serried rows.

Behind him, Cranston heard small crashing sounds as Bennit pulled out and shoved back six feet long drawers and then sent them slamming back into place. Weston, Cranston saw when he turned around, was paying in a great deal of attention to the careful re-lighting of his cigar.

His eyes were focussed on the narrow perimeter of the flame of his lighter. He was taking no chances of seeing into one of those long steel drawers.

Bennit said, and he sounded querulous, "We'd get this done faster if you helped me, Cranston. You know what Barren looked like."

"Right."

Cranston pulled out the nearest drawer. As he did so, Weston gasped. He hadn't been able to avoid this. In the drawer, piled helter skelter, were heads. Just that, heads. No bodies at all. Clipped into the right ears were identification tags.

Weston said around his cigar, on which he was puffing rapidly, "What in the name of the seven toes of Beelzebub are those for?"

The doctor glanced around impatiently. "Those? Examination of carcinoma of the brain."

"I see... but why... why are they like that?"

"Because the cancer is just in the brain. We're not interested in the rest of the body."

"But..."

"Oh, I see. The usual question. When we've finished the serological examination, the heads are sewn back on their respective bodies. They're not patients. They come from the city morgue. Does that satisfy your qualms?"

None of the heads had in any remote fashion resembled the poker face of Jesse Barren. Cranston pushed the drawer to. He went on around the room. Finally, but a single row of drawers were left between Dr. Bennit and Cranston. They paused and looked at each other.

Bennit sighed. "If he's not in this last set, he's not here, and my brainstorm was abortive."

They both paused a second as they came to the last drawer. Then Cranston shrugged and yanked the handle. It was Jolas' body. The autopsy scars had been nearly sewn up.

"That's that. It was a good idea but that's all," Weston said and left the room.

Cranston paused for a last look around. The morgue was about the only unfrequented part of the hospital. It was the sensible place for a hiding place of any kind. He finally followed Weston's broad back out of the morgue. Bennit came along behind him.

Off to one side, bright white light seeped out from under a broad door. "What's that?" asked Cranston.

"The boiler room," Bennit answered. "A hospital uses a lot of heat."

"And that?" There was a bulking shadow ahead.

"A sort of supernumerary furnace. This hospital has grown fast." Bennit shook his head in admiration. "You wouldn't think that only ten years ago that little thing supplied enough heat."

They were closer now and the shadows resolved themselves into a furnace. Cranston looked at the door of it. Dust made a pattern around the grate. But the dust had been disturbed. That was all; it was as small a thing as that.

If it hadn't been for the dust, Cranston might never have been able to solve the biggest puzzle of all. He leaned forward, and without disturbing the dust at all, using a handkerchief he borrowed from Weston, flipped the door open.

Bennit was still speaking. "You see, this hospital started as a private nursing home. The hospital as a whole has grown up around the tiny nucleus of a five story house."

Inside the furnace, lying on top of some coke, was a rectangular object.

Still using the handkerchief, Cranston reached in and brought it out. It was too dark to see more than that it seemed to be a board, about a quarter of an inch thick by about eight inches wide and ten inches long.

Weston reached out and touched the surface of it. "Ugh." He grunted and pulled his fingers away. "What a horrid feeling!"

Taking it over to the light near the elevator, Cranston, Weston, and Dr. Bennit looked at a thing that might have come straight from a surrealist display.

Primarily it was a board, soft flexible compo board. But the surface had been flocked with short hairs about an eighth of an inch long. The hair was seemingly horse hair. It was black and bristly.

Weston said, "Well, Dali had a fur-lined bath tub in an art exhibit, maybe this is a surrealist bread board."

Neither Cranston nor Bennit returned his smile. They stood and stared at it while Weston pressed the button for the elevator. He said a trifle querulously, "Maybe you two ice-blooded creatures like this section, but I don't! Let's get back upstairs."

In the elevator, Cranston broke the silence. He asked. "Ever seen anything like this, Doctor?"

Bennit shook his head. "Never, never in a long career have I seen anything so bizarre. It must have a function; no one would go to all that trouble for no reason."

"And no one would have carefully placed this where they thought it would be destroyed by fire, unless they wanted it completely destroyed."

"This doesn't narrow things down very much, you know," said Bennit. "You could work here for five years and not know that the old furnace was never used."

"It's a pity." Weston looked at the furry board and shivered a trifle. "What in the name of all that's holy or unholy would anyone make up a gadget like that for?"

The elevator let them off at the floor that Bennit's room was on. They walked towards it. Cranston asked, "Would you be likely to be disturbed if you chose the morgue to do something that you didn't want prying eyes to see?"

Bennit shook his head. "It's rarely used and you'd get plenty of warning by the sound of the elevator stopping there. No one uses the stairs if they can help it because they're very steep."

"It would only be if a corpse were being brought down, or if a doctor had some post mortem work to do that anyone would be there, is that it?"

"Yes, we aren't like a city morgue; there's no need for an attendant down there. We don't have many unidentified corpses for people to view."

Weston said, "Funny how many sightseers there are in the morgue. Has some kind of outre fascination for them. Gimpy, the attendant downtown, is always

complaining about them. Calls them the creeps."

Cranston placed the furry board on the desk in Bennit's office. He said, "I've been holding out on you, Dr. Bennit. Did you know that Barren had a brother?"

"Why... no. Why should I have been interested in his private life?" Bennit looked puzzled.

Cranston gestured with his thumb at the attendant who was passing the open door. It was the pituitary case. He meandered along down the hall, his young face unlined.

"You may be interested to know that his real name is Barren! He's Jesse's older brother."

Bennit gasped. The air went out of his lungs with a whoosh. He called out, "Come in here!"

The man smiled as he walked in. "You want me, doc?"

"Why are you masquerading here under a name that isn't yours?"

The voice was sullen, but his face retained its young innocence as he said, "You know blame well, doc, that it ain't no crime to change your name."

"Not as long as you do it for no dishonest reason!" said Weston and his voice was like a file going over steel shavings.

"So," the man shrugged, "prove that I've done anything dishonest. Till then, I'm needed down in the kitchen."

He turned on his heel and slouched out. Bennit whirled on Cranston. "Why did you keep me in the dark about this?"

"Would it have served any purpose if I'd told you till now? Would you have fired him because he was related to the man who worked in your dispensary?"

Bennit let his shoulders slump as he said, "Oh, you're right. It's just my nerves, I guess. He's got a right to call himself Salome if he feels like it."

"His real name is Odell Barren, just for the record."

"We shouldn't have let him go. We should have questioned him about his brother. He must be the one that moved the body." Weston puffed his cheeks out so he looked like Colonel Blimp.

"And if he did it, do you think he's going to say so, no matter how sweetly you ask him?"

"I suppose not," Weston agreed grudgingly. "But you must admit, Lamont, that this whole thing should be cleaned up rapidly for the sake of the reputation of the hospital."

"To say nothing of my sanity," said Bennit as he ran his hands through his rumpled hair.

Cranston looked around the book-lined walls of the room and said, "Have you any single volume on Parkinson's disease here?"

"Ummm . . ." Bennit looked around. "I doubt it, that's not my specialty. Donaldson is the neurologist here. That's right down his alley. All the post-encephalitic diseases are his babies."

"Encephalitis?" asked Weston. "Isn't that sleeping sickness? The kind you get from being bitten by a tse-tse fly?"

"Yes... and I wish it were still true that you could only get it in some romantic hell hole like Lake Tanganvika in Africa. But ever since the influenza epidemic that followed the first world war, encephalitis has become almost common."

"What's the relation between flu and encephalitis?" asked Cranston.

"Would that we knew. I have no idea. Its real dread to me is that you can have just a light cold, nothing more... and then, a couple of years later, you come down with Parkinsonism or some other post-encephalitic ailment."

"Don't tell these things to Weston," Cranston smiled. "He's the worst hypochondriac in the world. Tell him three symptoms and the following day he thinks he has the disease."

Weston puffed out his cheeks again. "Now Lamont, you know that isn't true. I just am not a

well man, that's all!"

"Go on," Cranston ribbed him, "you're made of iron. You'll outlive us all!"

"That won't be hard if I am not cleared in this... this... " Bennit narrowed his lips.

"Tut, tut, you have nothing more to fear," said Weston. "We'll have it all cleared up in no time, won't we, Lamont?"

Cranston nodded. "It better be fast or it'll be never. As soon as I have a chance to read up on Parkinson's disease, I think a lot will be cleared up."

Weston and Cranston left Dr. Bennit. He sat and stared at the hair-covered board. The golf ball! He'd never had a chance to find out any more about it from Cranston!

A golf ball and a board with stiff bristling hair set in it. These were the only physical clues that the master man-hunter had! With them he had to weave a net so strong that a crafty killer could not escape!

## VII

HEAD spinning with medical terms, Cranston got up from the desk where he had been reading. The neurologist had given him a standard text on Parkinsonism. Cranston now knew why Barren's peculiar staggering run was so familiar; knew now why the old gentleman had reminded him so of Barren.

He'd found out that Parkinson's disease is a generic term for a lot of different symptoms. There are a variety of causes for it, despite the fact that the commonest is simply old age, caused by the hardening of the arteries that is so far the concomitant of age.

Basically, the disease is characterized by a tremor. The shaking of the hands that the layman thinks of as palsy is really part of Parkinson's syndrome. The hands quiver, the head shakes on the body and the gait is likely to be staggering as they try to get their balance. It's as if their feet, being uncontrollable, tried to run out from under their bodies.

Knowing what he did now, he was faced by an ethical puzzle.

Was it more despicable to kill outright or to doom a young, healthy man to slow lingering death in life?

On the floor below him, Dr. Bennit sat at his desk with his distraught face in his hands. He was as frightened as a human being can be and still live. He could feel his heart battering at his chest cavity. He'd taken his pulse over and over again.

His breath was coming in short shallow gasps. His face was bloodless. His eyes were staring, almost starting out of his head. It couldn't be, but it was. He knew of a kind of insanity where you torture yourself by sending yourself threatening letters, because one part of your brain is making you pay for something which the other part has tried to keep hidden.

But this was worse. This was suicidal. There it lay on his desk. A fat envelope addressed to the police commissioner. Of itself innocent, it might have held some advertising matter. You could tell nothing from the outside of it. But inside, in his own handwriting, was a confession of his part in the despicable plot that he had been involved in. But was it his handwriting? Had he written it or had someone forged his writing? Even that wasn't so much the question as how it had gotten on his desk.

Jesse Barren's brother, Odell, could he have done it, anxious for revenge? But if that were the case, why leave it here where he was sure to see it? Why not just drop it into the mail box?

Or was this a subtler form of torture? Was he supposed to find it and then, having read it, to decide that this was the honest course and mail it of his own volition?

He sneered at the very idea. He was stronger than that. He couldn't be caught in a feeble trap like that. Or could he? He found, as he picked up the

fat envelope, that he could not bring himself to destroy the evidence.

Besides, if this was something that emanated from his own insane brain, destroying it would do no good, for that other part of him would calmly proceed to duplicate the material and keep on duplicating it till he cracked.

He snorted at himself. He wasn't insane. He was sure of that. He'd seen too much of it. He knew the symptoms too well. No, he was, if anything, too sane. Nevertheless when he got to his feet he placed the envelope in his filing cabinet. Filed it under G for guilty. Meanwhile, in that building that had been designed as a barricade against illness and death, there was one whose whole mind was devoted to reversing the natural order of things. Whose every waking and sleeping moment was spent in planning how best to kill... and when!

Cranston, deep in thought, again was conscious of a feeling of strain. A hospital is dependent on its staff for the smooth functioning of all its parts. Those parts were having grit thrown in them, and the wheels were slowing down. The internes, feeling the strain that emanated like a cloud from Dr. Bennit, were getting on each other's nerves. This communicated in its subtle way to the nurses. They, in turn, passed on their feelings of malaise to the orderlies. From cellar to sun deck, the hospital was feeling and beginning to show the fact that something was wrong.

Patients, used to the courtesy and kindness of the nurses, were taken aback when the nurses, nerves on edge, snapped at them. It was only a question of time until people coming at visiting hours would find out that something was amiss.

Looking out the window rather blankly, Cranston thought of these matters and resolved to end the matter out of hand. He now had all the missing strands. He was prepared to act in the strangest case he had ever taken on.

His arm was itchy from the bandages and the plaster cast. He was a little irritable from having to meander around in a bath robe. He was completely upset by the turn the case had taken. It was a question of how many wrongs make a right. And in a way he felt that this was not a matter for him to decide. He sighed.

Odell Barren was one thread that would lead through the labyrinthine mazes to the only conceivable end. Up ahead, package in hand, Odell, his smooth, pleasant face smiling, was making his casual way about his rounds. So far, Cranston had managed to make it seem accidental that his path was congruous to Odell's.

In his bathrobe pocket on the side where his good arm could hang down straight, Cranston ran his fingers over a small bottle that he had prepared carefully in the dispensary. It had been risky, for he had not wanted anyone to see him where he had no right to be at all. But he had managed what was necessary and the reward was the little bottle.

The path was leading now through the ward that was devoted to accident cases. The beds, lined up in parade formation, seemed almost endless. Bandages swathing them in some cases from head to toe, the accident cases lay on their beds of pain. Limbs racked up in the air, arms bent around curious forms, they lay, and the only sound was that of their voices as they tried to make conversation. Most of their voices were light and thready.

Odell, package in hand, was standing next to a bed where a man lay with both legs immobilized in a cast. Odell said lightly, "Santa Claus is looking out for you a little early this year, Jim."

The patient on the bed made a wan face. He reached up feebly for the package that Odell had brought him. He was flanked on each side by cases that looked worse than his own. To the right, a head case had his entire skull and face swathed in bandages. To the left a man who looked like a refugee from an Egyptian museum lay completely comatose with his bandages rendering him mummy-like.

Cranston had to cause a diversion if his plans were to go through. It was

an unpleasant thing he was about to do and he wanted to get it done and off his conscience.

The head case, eyes a slim line through the quarter inch of space in his bandages, was looking at the patient next to him, the mummy-like man. To the right of the head case was the little cabinet that is allowed to hold your possessions when you are in a hospital. Here it is that you keep your magazines, your pitcher of water, your tissues and the few other things that are yours and yours alone.

Getting as close to the cabinet as he could, Cranston leaned forward to Odell and whispered so that it wouldn't carry past a bed or two.

"Odell, you're wanted upstairs. The police want to question you."

Odell's body stiffened. His young face with the old eyes turned slowly. He said nothing. He stared at Cranston with his double chin on his chest. Then slowly he nodded.

The patients on all sides who were within hearing distance watched his broad fat back as he turned and walked flat-footedly off. Now was the time if ever. Cranston had his back to the head case's cabinet. His hands moved swiftly.

When Cranston, a few seconds later, followed in the footsteps of Odell, there was again a little bottle in his bathrobe pocket.

But it was not the same one.

He had done all he could. The mess was in the lap of the fates who turn the wheels of time. Outside, in another of the interminable corridors that honeycomb a hospital he ran into Weston.

"Hi," Weston's voice was pitched low. "Thunderation! Why do you always whisper in hospitals and museums?"

"There's certainly not much reason out here," Cranston said. But he was obviously preoccupied.

"Lamont, what in the world is in the wind? You don't seem to be doing a single thing! How much longer is this going on? Three men have died."

"You realize," said Cranston, and his voice was heavy, "that we will probably never prove that the death of Melltin was murder? It was as perfect a thing as there can be in an imperfect world."

"Tcha, the old hocus-pocus about a perfect murder! There is no such thing!"

"No? Well, let's allow Melltin's death to stand as one until we find the slightest shred of evidence, shall we?"

"I'll allow you the perfect murder, but what about Barren? What about Jolas?"

"The only chance of proving that would have been fingerprints on the witch hazel bottle which the killer planted after he had poisoned Jolas' medicine. That, you know, he was not kind enough to do. No one saw the killer going into Jolas' room. Jolas was asleep when the killer was at work. How prove anything?"

Weston's face was worried as he gazed at his friend. "Cranston, this isn't like you. Have you given up? Or have you done anything about proving that Dr. Bennit was behind all this? He seems to be the only one with motive left, outside of Barren's brother, Odell."

## VIII

IN HIS office, Dr. A. Bennit was about to meet his Maker. His face was contorted. His eyes held all knowledge in them. The scalpel that had made a new mouth for him about five inches under his normal mouth, lay on the desk in front of him.

He could feel life escaping from him and he did not want to die. He tried

to scream but nothing came out... nothing but a horrid gurgling sound that he knew would never reach beyond his door.

Right next to the scalpel lay a note. It was an outline of the whole case. A confession, and the signature that made a sprawling almost indecipherable scrawl at the bottom of it, was Dr. Arnold Bennit's.

His reaching fingers scrabbled crab-wise for the scalpel. He wanted to throw it from him... leave some clue that this abrupt departure was not of his own choosing. But his fingers, walking slowly, came to a halt about three inches from the shining instrument. But for a thin line of red it might have been on display.

His hand slid off the desk and dangled at his side like a tired pendulum. It swung in slow arcs for quite a while after he died. Then, finally, it came to a halt.

Bennit's fingerprints and thin line of red were the only marks on the surgical instrument. His were the only fingerprints on the confession. His eyes, set in that look of quiet desperation that had been his last conscious wish, stared with pop-eyed concentration at the closed door.

His head, after a while, slumped forward as though he were dozing.

It was Weston who first opened the door. Weston had been determined to wrest from the doctor the truth about his participation in the case. Aflame with the conviction that Cranston was dodging it and imbued with the idea that he was right and that Cranston was wrong, Weston was completely convinced that Bennit was the killer.

He came roaring into the room, arm upraised, face flushed with anger. "Now look here, doc," he harangued, "I want the truth out of you, see. I don't often..."

His voice ran down like a broken phonograph record. At first he had been deceived by the relaxed air of the corpse, but it had gradually dawned on him that there was something wrong. He saw the scalpel and then the confession.

He read the confession, read it over. Then he looked from the paper to the scalpel and finally to the gaping wound in the doctor's throat.

"Perfect murder" . . . bah! Here was the method that had been used to kill Melltin: a description of how a bacteria culture, stolen from the laboratory of the hospital had been smeared on the surgeon's gloves; the inevitable result when Thomas Melltin had died, "as a result of the operation."

Details followed on Jolas' death; the way the atropine had been dropped into the medicine that was designed to bring Jolas back to health.

Then the story of the silenced bullet that had torn into Jesse Barren's chest; smashed into him from the rear and been hidden by his own body as he lay on the bed; the need for destroying the body and the bullet so neither could be used as proof.

Finally, there were details of how Barren's body had been dissolved in a vat of sulfuric acid in the laboratory.

There were globules of sweat on Weston's green forehead when he finished the macabre words that pictured the way the body had been eaten up by the steaming acid.

Wiping his forehead with the back of his hand, Weston stared at the dead man. He had been a monster! How else to account for a man of medicine so denying his Hippocratic oath? The whole thing had been done so as to leave all the manganese money in Bennit's possession, according to the signed confession.

Leaving the room, Weston closed it carefully behind him and went to a window. Down the street, one of the beat cops looked up at his call.

"Get the staff up here in a hurry!" Weston called down.

"Yes, sir! Right away, sir." The cop, still holding his hand behind him, ground out the forbidden cigarette he had been smoking. Cripes, to be found smoking by the commissioner himself. That would be pretty. But Weston was too occupied with his thoughts to notice any infraction. It is improbable that he would have noticed if the cop had been without his trousers.

Turning from the window he looked for Cranston. It took him quite a while. He finally found him in bed with his hands behind his neck looking at the ceiling.

"Lamont," he called and waved the confession in the air. "Look at this. Now tell me about your perfect murders! The killer's conscience caught him, even though we couldn't!"

Cranston looked up at the commissioner's excited face and said, "What now?"

"Bennit! He's killed himself and told the whole story."

"So? Tell me about it."

Cranston didn't look too perturbed at the news of the doctor's death.

Weston told him of the gory scene in the office. "What do you think of that?" he concluded.

"I think it's the last perfect murder!"

"WHAT?" Weston's boomed out like a trumpet in the silence of the ward.

"Murder." Cranston's face was relaxed.

"Lamont, I think you're out your mind. You haven't seen Bennit. He cut his own throat, I tell you!"

"His throat may well be cut, I'm not arguing about that. I'm telling you that someone else's had wielded the scalpel on the doctor."

"You'd better come and see before you say anything else silly." Weston was furious.

Cranston looked at his watch. "You'd better come with me before you do anything else silly."

There was such calm corn in Cranston's voice, that Weston followed the man as he got from the bed and slowly made his way towards the accident ward.

"Lamont," Weston pleaded at his friend's back, "listen to me... won't you read this confession? Although I don't know why I should want you to get the cold horrors the way I did when I read what that monster did to poor Barren."

"Shh." Cranston cautioned. "We're almost there."

They walked down through the aisle of beds. Ahead was the bed where the injured man had received his package. To one side was the bed where a man lay swathed from head to toe in bandages. On the other was the man with the bandaged head. Nearby was the cabinet where Cranston had done his sleight of hand work.

"But Lamont, won't you even look at this?" Weston waved the papers in front of him.

"No. And I want you to be still."

In Lamont's eyes was the expression that must come to those of a state executioner. It was inhuman. They were cold and calculating.

"It's all over," he said and the words were like a razor cutting at the rope that holds up the blade of Madame Guillotine.

The man on the bed, eyes a slit between the tiny aperture that the bandages made, looked up. His hands, palms up on the bed were dancing madly.

He sat up on the edge of the bed and his head shook on his neck. It was pitiful. The hands and neck shook but not in unison. It was a clinical picture that you can see anywhere a group of old people are gathered.

Weston, eyeing the involuntarily shaking figure, squinted his eyes and then turned to Lamont. "Are you out of your mind?"

Cranston shook his head. "No, I'm not, but I wouldn't blame this man if he were. He's gone through a great deal."

The hands shook even more. The head, lolling and shaking, was over on one side. When he spoke it was a voice that Weston had never heard before. He said, "You..." the head shaking interfered a little with his speech. "you... are bluffing."

"No," Lamont's voice was almost gentle. He spoke in a "this-is-going-to-hurt-me-more-than-it-will-you" tone. "No, I'm not bluffing. You should have destroyed the hair-covered board. You should never have dropped the golf ball."

"So it didn't burn up and you did find that confounded ball!" The figure



tried to shrug. It was grotesque added to the tremors that already shook it. "That's the breaks. "'

"Most of the breaks were on your side," said Cranston. "So it isn't too surprising that we got a little help from the goddess of luck. You were perfectly in the clear in the death of Melltin. There's no evidence that we could ever use to convict you for the murder of Jolas. But..."

Cranston pointed to the confession that Weston held, "That will convict you. No matter how well-forged, your own handwriting will show through. Particularly because of your disease. Even cases of heart disease can be determined from a person's handwriting... so you can imagine how easy it will be to identify you!"

The voice that came through the bandages held a sneer. "Despite my use of the atropine sulphate?"

"Despite that, the tremor will show through." Cranston paused, "Just as it does now."

The bandaged anonymous head looked down at the shaking hands. "The degenerative process has speeded up. I didn't think it would be like this for another year."

The shaking increased for a moment and then, by what was obviously a tremendous effort of will power, ceased for a moment. The figure drew itself up and its head was thrown back proudly. "You must admit," the head was still, "that I gave you a run for your money!"

"I admit it, if it will do your ego any good where you're going!"

A hollow rattling laugh came through the bandages. "Do you think that there is any threat that would move me? Have I anything to look forward to?"

Lulled by the calmness of the man's voice and the obvious truth of what he asked, Cranston and Weston were completely unprepared when the man's hand flew down and came up with a bedpan.

In a whirling move that blurred his figure, the man threw the pan at them. They ducked instinctively. In that split second, the man ran for the window. Before Cranston could do anything, the man was framed in the window, his arms outstretched so he looked crucified.

Cranston said, "Come down off there or I'll shoot you in the leg. That will prevent you..."

The man paid no attention as Cranston raised his bandaged arm and pointed it.

Cranston could not miss at that range. But there was one thing that he had not taken into account. His hand, bandaged and immobile as it had been, was paralyzed. It was agonizing. He exerted all his effort, but he could not pull the trigger of the gun that had been part of him since he had entered the hospital.

Weston said, voice tense with strain, "Shoot, shoot why don't you? He'll go through the window!"

As Weston said the word window, there was a crash. The man, unable any longer to control his tremors, had begun to jerk all over. His bandaged head tilted over and he looked at his shaking hands. Then he shrugged and turning around threw himself through the window.

Weston said between his teeth, "The fool. It's ten stories to the street!"

"Sure death." said Cranston, "Just what he wanted."

## IX

BY SOME freak of fate, the smash of landing burst the bandages from the man's head. His body looked like jelly, but his poker face was uninjured. There was a jeering twist to the lips. He had gone to his fate sneering.

Weston and Cranston, having hurried down, turned away. "Lamont, who is he?"

"The man you thought had been dissolved in acid. Jesse Barren. The man who committed nothing but perfect murders,"

Two men in white hospital uniforms came up behind them. They carried a stretcher. "That's convenient," one said. "We don't even need an ambulance."

The other whistled between teeth. "A D.O.A. if I ever laid my pretty blue eyes on one."

The body swaying between them, they returned to the hospital. The gathering crowd made Cranston aware of the fact that he was on the street in carpet slippers and a bathrobe. "It'll be a relief to get this off," he said shaking his bandaged arm as they went back into the hospital.

Upstairs, Weston sat on the edge of Cranston's bed as an interne sliced away the bandage.

"What about Odell? Jesse's brother? Is he involved?"

"To the extent that he bandaged Jesse's head after his "death" and subsequent resurrection here in the accident ward. I suppose," said Cranston, "he got some dry bitter satisfaction out of using the same device to stay right here in the hospital that I did. He faked the head injuries; and while we tore the place to pieces looking for him, he rested and watched us. He must have seen through my disguise early in the game."

"You realize that you've got a lot of explaining to do?"

Cranston agreed and said, "I'll feed it to you while I'm getting dressed. I want to get out of here, and if I never have to come to a hospital again, it will be too soon."

"I realize now," said Weston, "that the faked confession which Barren forged as Dr. Bennit's was really a description of what he had done. The only lie was the business about his own dissolution. By the way, was Dr. Bennit in cahoots with him? How could a doctor have thought a man was dead when he was really alive?"

"That was a puzzle, wasn't it?" Cranston asked as he massaged his hand. It was dead-feeling. It had been motionless so long that the circulation was affected. Soon darting needles would signal that the blood was pounding back into it.

"I can see," said Weston thoughtfully, "how a layman might be fooled about a person being dead, but a doctor!"

"I don't know that I ever would have figured that out if Barren hadn't had the bad luck to put the hair covered board in a furnace that wasn't used. Too, his dropping the golf ball helped."

Weston watched as Cranston rolled a handkerchief up into a ball and put it way up deep under his armpit. That done he called a nurse; it was the pretty red-haired one, over to the bed.

He said, "Would you do me a favor?"

"Sure, what is it?" With the case finally resolved, the hospital's staff was coming back into its usual form.

"Take my pulse, please." Cranston held his arm out.

She reached for his wrist and moved her finger around. She found his pulse and looked at her wrist watch. Her face was composed. Suddenly she looked frightened. She said, "It's getting very weak... it's thready... it's..."

She looked from Cranston's passive face to Weston's. She said and it was a gasp, "His pulse is gone! It's stopped completely!"

Cranston grinned and said, "Take it easy and I'll make it come back."

She was, if anything, more amazed. "It's back again strong and steady! How can you do that?"

Cranston reached up under his arm pit and drew out the handkerchief. "This is a rather primitive arrangement, a hard object like a golf ball is even surer. You see, there's a whole mess of blood veins up in your armpit. The pressure of your arm against the object makes a sort of tourniquet that, stops off the blood; therefore, you can't feel my pulse!"

"For Heaven's sake," said Weston. "When Dr. Bennit tried to find his pulse it was gone! But wait, a doctor wouldn't go just by a pulse."

"Oh dear no," the nurse agreed, "there are too many heart cases where the pulse becomes so faint that you can't feel it. No doctor would ever assume you were dead without using a stethoscope."

"Precisely," said Cranston, still rubbing his arm. "That was the reason for the hair covered board. A stethoscope is so delicate that even if you had an object like a hot water bottle on your chest the instrument would pick up your heart beat through it. But all the modern research on sound absorption proves that short hair-covered objects completely kill sounds! The board was thin and flexible as you remember, Commissioner, so that it would fit around his chest. But the hair killed the sound of his heart beat!"

Weston said, "I see. Add on the fact that it was just a cursory examination because Dr. Bennit was called out by the death throes of Jolas and you have a perfect set up. No wonder Bennit thought that Barren was really dead."

"You see," said Cranston drawing on a sock, "Barren had gone so far in his revenge campaign that there weren't enough suspects left. To that must be added the fact that he wanted to use Bennit as the fall guy and you have his reason for feigning death and his subsequent vanishing."

"Clever guy," Weston said. His face was perplexed. "I think I have the sequence straight in my mind. He killed Melltin earlier, using the bacteria method that he credited to Bennit, then he arranged for the death of Jolas at just the time he was going to pretend to die himself. But wait, how could he know that? The time I mean?"

"You forget," said Cranston with an all-embracing gesture, "this is a hospital. If there's one thing you can know in advance, it's when a person is going to be given his medication. It's written down on the chart at the foot of your bed, isn't it?" he asked the nurse.

"Of course. Either Jolas would have taken the medicine, if he felt well enough at the time, or a nurse would have given it to him."

"And in giving it to him... killed him" Weston made a face.

"He had to guess how long it would take for the atropine to get to work, but he was an expert on atropine."

"Expert?" asked Weston.

Cranston put on his shoe and answered. "He had to take atropine to live any kind of an existence at all. Without it, he was the shaking wreck that you saw just before his death."

"Why was he in that condition?"

"I didn't like doing it, but I substituted a harmless drug for his atropine. You must realize that we had almost no evidence against him. I had to weaken him in any way I could. I don't think he would have fallen for that guff about the forged confession, if he hadn't been so upset about his physical condition. Not knowing that he hadn't any atropine in him, he thought that his disease was entering its last and most fatal stage.

The nurse looked at Cranston with dawning distaste. "I don't think that was very sporting."

"I'm afraid, my dear, that this isn't a game we were playing. I didn't like doing it, but it was the only thing I could do. His brother unsuspectingly led me right to him. I realized he would have to have some kind of concealment on his face that would still leave him able to move around for the last kill. He couldn't be completely bandaged. He was the only one in the ward that fitted the condition."

Weston said, "I see. You substituted some other fluid for the medicine which he took to stop him from shaking. That leaves only two questions in my mind. "What was wrong with him? Why should a man twenty-eight or nine have what looked like the palsy of old age? And what was his motive? Just revenge for being cheated out of the share in the manganese mine? He was completely out of the arrangements; even with the three dead, he didn't stand any chance to profit by their deaths. Or did he?"

"No, there was no profit in it," said Cranston and his lean face was harsh. The planes in his face made it look like a rock carving.

THE NURSE left them. It was quite obvious from the expression on her face that she didn't care for what Cranston had done to Barren. All her training having been in the opposite direction; she could not be in accord with the way any man-hunter must feel.

Cranston struggled into his trousers. His hand was just now beginning to come back to useful life. Weston waited for his friend to go on.

"These three murders," Cranston said, "you must understand, were for revenge. No matter how you feel about the subject, you will admit that Jesse Barren had a right to feel vindictive as he did."

"Just because he'd been cheated on a business deal? If everyone felt that way, there'd be damn few businessmen left alive," Weston said.

"No. That was completely secondary. The disease that Barren had is Parkinsonism. Understand that this is generally a disease of senile old age. It's part of your arteries getting hard. It precedes death. One of its first symptoms is what is called 'mask-like facies'. If you remember the descriptions of Barren, you will remember that he was always poker-faced. He couldn't help it. It was all he could do, by a mighty effort of will, to cause his lips to turn up."

"Well, good heavens," said Weston as Cranston threaded his tie. "Wouldn't Dr. Bennit have recognized that as part of the symptoms of this Parks-whatever-it-is disease? And anyhow, twenty-eight is hardly what I'd call senile old age!" Weston puffed his cheeks out. After all, he was on the far side of fifty and he didn't feel a day over forty

"Barren, of course, did not get the disease from odd age. And the reason that Dr. Bennit didn't say anything about what was obvious to him, was that he was responsible for Barren having the disease! He..."

"You mean that Dr. Bennit did that? Why..." Weston's opinion of the doctor as a monster, untrue to his oath of Hippocrates, returned.

"Here was the situation." Cranston set his hat on his head. "After Barren located the manganese deposit, the three men concerned decided that they were not going to cut him in on the pie. They finagled him out on a technicality. But they couldn't be sure that he wouldn't try to get even. So they arranged for his murder!"

"How do you know all this? This isn't in the faked confession."

"It's the only way to account for the set up. The way I get the picture is this, and you'll agree with me as soon as you see what I've found. They probably got Barren drunk at a celebration of some kind. Then, once he'd passed out, they put him in a closed car in a locked garage and let the carbon monoxide go after him."

"No." Weston shook his head. "This is black magic. There is no earthly way you could know this!"

Cranston held up his hand for Weston to hold on a second. He was completely dressed now. "Wait. They left him to die of carbon monoxide poisoning. Many people have died that way. But he was found before he died. We'll never know how or under what circumstances. In any event he was brought here to this hospital. I found that in the records."

"Now we get to the reason for my being certain of my hypotheses. Cranston looked away as he saw the nurse, the pretty red-haired one, come back into the ward with a slip of paper in her hand. She was walking towards them."

"There are four causes for Parkinson's disease. Encephalitis, old age, that is arterio sclerosis, carbon monoxide poisoning and hold onto your hat, manganese poisoning! Men who have worked in mines have come down with it, although it is rare. There are only about forty cases on record."

"Then you think that having given him Parkinsonism through the CO poisoning that..."

"That they told him, or rather Dr. Bennit told him, that it was caused by manganese poisoning. That made it his own fault for not having worn a mask at the manganese diggings. It also left them in the clear for their attempted murder! Pretty?"

"Foul!"

"As long as he thought the disease he had was his own fault, he would be occupied, too occupied with the course of the disease to do much about getting even. I think that's why Bennit gave him the job here in the hospital. So he could keep an eye on the course of the disease. What's particularly horrible, you see, was that their murder was just put off. It was only a question of time till the Parkinsonism would kill him as surely as a bullet would!"

Weston made a grimace of distaste.

"Slow death, creeping death. A gradual loss of all his functions, the day by day increase of his tremor. The slow deadly degeneration of his mind... that was what they doomed him to!"

"I can see that he had quite a motive once he found out what they had done to him. But how did he know?"

Cranston shrugged. "How can I tell? He was here in the hospital. The knowledge was here in the same book that I read it in. He was intelligent. There's no question but what he would look up his own disease. And once he had, he tied up the time he got drunk with all the other factors and came to the same conclusion that I did. I almost can't blame him too much for running amok."

The nurse had been standing nearby. At the pause in their conversation she proffered the slip of paper to Cranston. He looked at it. Then he began to laugh.

Wondering what was up, Weston took it from his hand. It was a bill from the hospital for the time that Cranston had spent there.

"Guess I'll have to pay it, too," said Cranston, a smile on his lips. "After all, it was Dr. Bennit who asked me here and he's hardly in a position to do anything about it."

"Hardly," Weston agreed.

The bill paid, Weston walked with Cranston to the street. At the curb there was a parked cab. In it was Shrevvie, a broad smile splitting his face in half. He'd been waiting for this. Waiting anxiously. Never in any of Cranston's cases had he and Cranston's other agents been so left out of it.

As Cranston turned to leave Weston, the commissioner said, "All I can think of is the old cliché about two wrongs not making a right."

Cranston, anxious to get to the cab and back into his stride-back to the kind of crime he was more accustomed to dealing with said, "How true. They were all wrong. Melltin, Jolas, Dr. Bennit and Jesse Barren. Wrong... and now they're dead wrong!"

THE END