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The City of Peril

By

Arthur Stringer

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Chapter I—THE TIME CHOPPER

I stood with my hand on the bronze car-rail, staring up at Natalie Stillwell. She, in turn, stared down at me. I was only too acutely conscious of those calmly judicial eyes, of that mild look of appraisal which was all the more penetrating for being impersonal.

By the very poise of the white chin, I knew that I was being weighed in the balance. If a silence fell between us, it was at least an eloquent silence.

As she leaned above me there, alone on the car platform, immured in her own thoughts, some creeping spirit of isolation seemed to surround her, as though she stood looking down at me from the last lonely promontory of a receding world. I would miss her. And she in turn would miss me. We did not even need to articulate that decision. Our ever paralleling planes of life had bestowed on us what I can only describe as a hyperaesthesia of silence. Just as a violinist's trained ear, I suppose, can detect quarter tones and sixteenths, so Natalie and I could catch the subtler vibrations of each other's moods. There was something both compelling and comfortable in that sense of silent companionship. We were of the same world. We had the same habits and the same outlook on life. We had many things in common, as men and women already married are said to have.

And some day, I had always felt, Natalie and I would be husband and wife. How or where or when it was ordained, neither of us seemed to comprehend. But I think we each accepted it, tacitly, no more stopping to question it, in our secret souls, than we stopped to question death. Yet it was a rule of the game that she should elude, and that I should pursue. We were compelled to dramatize contingencies which did not actually exist, to the end that a decent interest in life might be preserved, very much as chicken-feed is tossed into a straw-bed to keep fowls from going flabby.

There were moments, however, when we both rebelled against what seemed a conspiracy of environment. There were times when she distrusted me, just as there were moods when I questioned if she, with all her beauty, could forever stand between me and those adventuring seas which are eternally enticing to the eternally idle. And she was beautiful; of that there was no doubt. She was consciously and calmly beautiful. She possessed that languorous and ivory-toned loveliness which so often made me feel that she should have been painted by Monticelli, strolling through the dappled light and shade of a lovely park. If she seemed quiescent, it was at least the quiescence into which the imaginative mind could read the attributes it sought. To the thoughtful, she would always be full of thought. To the emotional, she would always seem a deep well of emotion. To the spiritual, she would always possess a soft aura of spirit.

"You have no wants, Rebbie," I suddenly remembered that she had once said to me, "and therefore you have no incentives." For as I looked at the coldly judicial eyes which even her answering smile did not soften, I saw that the thought of separation from her was touching our relationship with a new poignancy. She, too, must have known some vague shadow of that feeling. I "sensed" it in her general attitude. The moment demanded something of me which I had failed to contribute. The blight of the Laodiceans was on us both. Yet it was easy, as I looked up at the soft chin above the white furs, to give what was expected of me. I extemporized a Romeo-like dolour and tried to take her hand through the bronze grating.

"For the nineteenth time, Natalie, will you--"

She cut me short, with a laugh that was not without its wistfulness. I have often enough been compelled to think of her as a sort of replacing switch, to keep my erratic ponderosities on the rails of reasonableness.

"For the nineteenth time, dear Rebbie, I will not. And I'm afraid you're in the way of the men who want to ice the car."

"Then this is final?" I demanded, as I stepped aside to let the ice-truck swing past.

Natalie laughed at the gloom in my voice. The wrinkled-nosed, hairy-eared and altogether ugly little King Charles under her arm showed his teeth at me, resentfully, as though he, too, had an inkling of the situation. I could have wrung his peevish little neck for him.

"Then this is final?" I repeated, quite as tragically as before. Women, as a rule, are strangely like ruffed grouse; when too closely pressed they invariably fly in a corkscrew line. So once again I repeated my lugubrious question.

Natalie remarked that I was as reiterative as the Bellman himself. Her little hand-grenades of humour, in some way, usually seemed able to quench my hottest fires of affection.

"Is anything ever final, Rebbie, in this world?" she demanded, growing quite serious again.

"Everything, but my love for you," I solemnly averred. Whereupon the King Charles once more showed his teeth at me. "I'm like the old Roman that Seneca spoke about," I had the audacity to continue, "who was drunk only once in his life."

"But it lasted forever, didn't it?"

"Yes, and that's what my devotion to you is--a lifework!"

Natalie emitted a scornful little laugh. Yet some ghost of a tremor in her voice, as she first put her question to me, made my spirits rise a bit. I dare say that was why I was bold enough to essay a second effort to take her white-gloved hand in mine. But Natalie out-manœuvred me by interposing the King Charles and stepping to the farther side of the bronze-railed car platform. Our friendship, she had once said, was brazen, with a silver-plating of politeness to keep the tarnish off.

"But why won't you?" I persisted, as I saw her deep and studious eyes once more looking down at me from the car-steps. They were very beautiful eyes. I had heard foolish women describe them as being exactly like turquoise velvet. Some studio-rat of a minor poet with a Gallicized name had once called them "pansy gold." But to me they were the softest violet, which deepened at times into the purest sapphire.

"You are a nice boy, Rebbie, and there are times when I almost like you," Natalie was saying in the most calm and cordial of tones.

"Boy?" I repeated, in disgust.

"Yes. I know you are thirty-one, but you're still a good deal of a boy," continued Natalie, with the dispassionate candour with which she might size up a third-rater of a hackney at the Garden. "I even like you very much, at times. But you see, Rebbie, you have never learned to take life seriously. You've only played and toyed with things." She paused for a moment and sighed. "And I have always imagined that it would be safer to be the avocation of a busy life than the vocation of an idle one."

She stood as calm and austere as a marble statue, sizing me up with her shadowy, sapphire-coloured eyes, in which I could see just the faintest touch of troubled thought. Somewhere about the softly curving lips, however, I could detect the familiar smile of scorn. Because a whip has been tied with baby-ribbon is no reason for assuming that it cannot sting. She hurt me, and hurt me a lot--yet no one could or would be so foolish as to lose his temper with Natalie Ethelwyn Stillwell.

"Hasn't my devotion to you been a lifework?" I inquired.

"The trouble with you, Rebbie," went on the placid and implacable goddess of the car-steps, quite ignoring my question, "the trouble with you is that you're not a good American. You should have been a Valencian grandee with a moth-eaten title and a mortgaged sherry-farm. Then you could thrum guitars and idle about the four quarters of the globe to your heart's content."

"I'd thrum anything, if you were the audience," I persisted.

"Precisely," argued Natalie, "you'd make a plaything out of affection itself. You'd even toy with love, the most sacred thing in the world, until you grew tired of it as you grow tired of everything."

"Marry me, and I'll grow serious."

"You're serious enough now, Rebbie, only it's always about the wrong things."

"Then marry me and make it the right thing."

"Wouldn't that be terribly like buying violets for the sword-knots, or Chianti for the bottles? You see, I've never denied that you weren't ornamental."

"I handled the *Attila* for the Kaiserlicker Cup," I retorted with a pardonable enough touch of pride.

"Which was merely another plaything! Of course I know you shoot and sail and ride well. And I know you're going to tell me about the Temagami moose, and those two Arab stallions you brought over from Suakim, and the Inter-Urban tennis trophy--"

"And the challenge cup for the Sewanhaka Corinthian fifteen-footers," I gently interpolated.

"Yes, and the same old seven-foot tarpon you brought to gaff off Boca Grande, and the Florida motor-driving and all the other playthings you take up and get tired of. No, please don't interrupt me, Rebbie. I know that you're going to say that you've always been studying life, whatever happened."

"Slander away!" I mocked, resignedly.

"But you see, Rebbie, you've made even that a sort of luxury. You've stood away from it and looked at it just as you'd look at a picture in a shadow-box."

It was plain that I was not getting on very well.

"Then hadn't I better go down to Wall Street and do stenography, say, for your father's firm?" I suggested. The interrogation was meant to be doubly barbed, but Natalie took it without wincing. She herself had once tried toying with the interests of her father's office, and at the end of a month had given it up as beyond her.

"No," she said meditatively, "I shouldn't care to see you working like father. That's only the

other extreme. Work carried to the point of obsession can be as bad as no work at all."

It was the person addressing me, I remembered, who had once implored me not to work so hard over the experiments with a new giant-powder for my Aguacate copper-mines. But such is the inconsistency of woman. I could also recall the time when I had played engineer for a season or two in those same Aguacate mines. After electrifying the lower galleries in a new-fangled way of my own I had come north with tunnel-fever. It was Natalie who had forbidden me to return to Costa Rica, although the mines were going to the dogs and every operating engineer south of Guatemala was stealing my electrical ideas. No, Natalie was not always consistent.

For here was the Stillwell private car side-tracked in the Pennsylvania yards, sandwiched in between a string of Lehigh Valley day-coaches and a South Bethlehem milk-train; here was this abode of indolence on wheels, heaped with Jacques roses and winter violets, waiting to be stocked and iced and manned for its migration to Palm Beach and Miami. In half an hour it would be gone, humming and drumming on its way southward, and with it would go the only woman I had ever been able to love.

"The only woman I could ever love." I repeated the phrase, thus modified, to myself, and then aloud to Natalie, as she stood looking down at me with her troubled sapphire eyes--for when once the choice of a man's life has been decided, the more inextricably that choice can be identified with destiny, the better for his peace of mind.

The unresponsive Natalie gazed out across the yards to where a train-load of Jersey City commuters twined and curled out from under the great glass-roofed vault of the terminal station like a snake creeping out of a cave. A yard-engine pulsed and jolted across the serried lines of track that stood as close and straight, to the eye, as the strings of a grand piano. A high-shouldered engineer, wielding a long-pointed oil can, swung down from the steps of his cab. I could see Natalie's eyes rest on him as he stood there, huge, titanic, stained with grease. Then her gaze came back to me, and once more I could detect that unconscious curl of the lips as she studied my hand-laundried linen and the high lights on my patent-leathers. I knew quite well what she was thinking.

"Then supposing I do turn stevedore or scow-trimmer or white-wings or steel-puddler," I suggested.

Natalie sighed.

"There it is again, you see! You can never be serious, Rebbie."

"Try me!"

"How?"

"I mean, marry me and see."

"That might be too much like burning the house to roast the pig!" replied the aphoristic Natalie. She turned away for a moment to thrust her restive King Charles into the coach-door. The yard-engine was backing down for the Stillwell car. There was not much time left for me.

"Just what is it you want me to do?" I asked her, more seriously, as she once more gazed down at me out of her abstracted eyes.

"I only want you to be worthy of yourself--I mean worthy of the chances that you have been given," she replied with a tremor of reproof in a disturbingly earnest voice.

"But I wish you'd show me where these chances are," I protested, wondering if after all I was unable to see the forest of duty because of the trees of opportunity.

"There are always people to help," answered the girl, quite simply.

I always loved Natalie in her solemn moments. She was so admirably self-contradictory. Here she was fluttering off to Florida for a month of palm-strewn ease, yet enlarging on the altruistic life as she went. Some new turn of her spirits was always surprising you. But as Natalie herself had once said: "When you eat game you have to be ready to bite on bird-shot!"

"You are the only person I have ever hungered to help," was my response.

"Putty squaw--gimme ten cents!" said Natalie. The point to this cryptic exclamation rested on a Western trip we had made three summers before. A red-skin Chesterfield not above begging from passing tourists, had thus diplomatically accosted Natalie at my side. The insinuation was that I was doling out "squaw-talk." But again I saw that more serious look of troubled thought return to Natalie's face as she came a step or two closer to me.

"I wonder if you mean that about wanting to help me?" she asked, studying me as Hamlet must have sometimes studied his inadequate Ophelia.

"Put me to the test," I answered with alacrity.

For once she had taken me seriously. She was fumbling in the gold-initialed morocco bag that had swung over her white-gloved wrist.

"It's too foolish to be called a test," she said. "It's so utterly trivial. Yet it has been worrying me for over a week, now."

She drew a worn and closely folded slip of paper from her bag. This she opened and thoughtfully regarded before she surrendered it to my hand.

"Well?" I asked at last. I noticed her embarrassment, although she did not answer me directly as she handed the paper to me. "Am I to read it?"

"Yes, you must read it," she answered. "It's one of those letters that sometimes come to all men of affairs, I suppose. But, for some absurd reason, it keeps making me more and more uneasy."

I glanced down at the slip of paper. It contained nothing more than two typewritten lines. "Why, uneasy?" I asked.

"Because it came in father's mail. It came that last week I was trying to do secretarial work for him. It came to me first, of course, and it sounded so foolish that I didn't even worry him about it. He has so much on his mind, as it is."

I read the two typewritten lines carefully. They were to this effect:

"Cease assailing United States Rubber or a greater blow than the loss of a fortune will fall on you!

"THE HAMMER OF GOD."

There was no date-line, no salutation, no signature. I read the puzzling message again, quite in the dark.

"Where is the envelope?" I asked.

"I didn't save it," Natalie explained. "It didn't seem important."

"Can you remember anything about it."

"Yes, I made a point of looking it over carefully. I can remember that it was a plain envelope--addressed of course to father, in typewriting, and that it had the cancellation stamp of carrier station "B" on it. I remember that, distinctly, because I thought it might give me an inkling of where the letter came from."

"That at least is something. It is true, then, that your father has been pounding United States Rubber a bit?"

"I went to the trouble to find out that he has been identified with the bear movement in rubber for two or three months past. A foolish threat like this, of course, would never influence him. But I keep wondering what it can possibly mean."

"I wish I had that envelope."

"It meant nothing, or I should have saved it," explained Natalie.

"The thing seems to be what you call a crank letter. But since you say I'm not to die of dry-rot, and--"

"Rebbie!" cried the girl.

"--And I've got to have something to shake it off, why, I'm going to keep this slip of paper and try to find out where it comes from. I intend to make sure of what it means, just to set your mind at rest."

"But how can you?"

"It may not be easy, of course, but I'll stick at it even though it takes me a week of Sundays and leads me to the purlieu of the longest-whiskered Bolshevik or the youngest parlour-socialist in all Manhattan! And besides, 'what's time to a shoat?'--as your father's North Carolina mountaineer said."

"I can't have you putting yourself in danger!" cried the girl on the car-steps, ignoring my tone of mockery.

"I'd go through hell itself for you," I said quite soberly, as I looked up into her glorious eyes.

"Oh, Rebbie," she cried. What she meant by that exclamation heaven only knows; Natalie, herself had no chance to explain. For even as she uttered it there came a muffled jolt and a grind and whine of brakes that carried the glory of her brooding face slowly away from me. The yard-engine had backed into the bumpers of the Stillwell private car. My time was up. But I still clung to the step-rail.

"Aren't you sorry?" asked the inconsequential Natalie, as the car gained speed.

"Will you marry me?" I reiterated as the moving car dragged me implacably along over a path of oil and iron and coal-clinkers.

She did not answer in words, but her eyes dwelt on mine during that last moment or two. I could see the familiar violet of the iris deepen into that softest sapphire which foolish women had said was so like turquoise velvet. The imperiously curved lips themselves seemed to undergo no change; they knew no relaxing. The judicial poise of the head was as uncompromising as ever. But surely those half-mournful and half-mysterious eyes said that

some day she might learn to forgive a few of my transgressions; surely they seemed to imply that I was not so base and ignoble and worthless as the gently scornful and uncapitulating lips implied. I caught her hand as the car swung forward.

"Wait and you'll see!" I cried with a sudden fierce determination.

"What does that mean?" she asked, trying to free her hand.

"It means that I'm going to work--to work for you!"

"Good-bye!" she said as the car swung out on its track.

"Good-bye!" I answered while the yard-engine, with open throttle, carried the only woman I ever loved down the line of harp-string tracks, to swing the low-bellied car against the rear of the Washington Limited. I saw the flutter of her white-gloved hand across the drifting billow of steam from the engine. It seemed almost as though she had thrown a kiss to me. Then the clangour of bell and steam passed away behind a signal-tower.

Chapter II—A MATTER OF WATER-MARKS

When I reached those bachelor apartments almost across the Avenue from Brentano's, where I reconciled a life of loneliness with the inadequate consolation of clubdom, I found Davis packing my bags. To call Davis merely my "man" would be both to make use of a misnomer and to leave the gentleman in question altogether undefined. For Davis seems to operate with all the unerring punctuality, regularity, and passivity, of a piece of cap-oiled, ball-bearing machinery.

"We'll not go down to Lakewood this afternoon, Davis," I told him. He did not even raise an eyebrow.

"Very good, sir," said Davis, starting as methodically to unpack the bag as he had been methodically filling it.

"And I'd like you to phone the Country Club and say I'm out of the drag-hound run this week. And get Hill of the Racquet and Tennis on the wire and ask him to make the committee-meeting Monday week."

"Yes, sir," responded the ever-dependable Davis.

I began to realize the extent of the problem I was facing. I was not a story-book sleuth. I saw no hope, by those processes of superhuman deductive reasoning peculiar to the human bloodhound of hearsay, of ever building up one of those thrilling and compelling cases which eventually piece together with the mathematical precision of the last cards in a successful solitaire layout. I felt that I would scarcely prove to be one of those miracle-working detectives who comprehend and master a case from some amazingly trivial clue, such as a missing vest-button or a scratch on a watch-case.

Once, indeed, I had somewhat blindly prided myself on the possibilities of the microscopic clue in the ferreting out of crime. It was on the occasion when practically all my ship's plate was carted off the *Attila*. I had seized on my clue, worked out my case and scudded across the Atlantic on a wild-goose chase after a Scotch steward, whom I enmeshed in a web of circumstantial evidence, practically found guilty, and was on the point of arresting in Glasgow,

when a cable overtook me saying my plate had been recovered and the real culprit caught in Hoboken.

In the present case I felt puzzled and helpless; I admitted as much to myself. But I did not feel hopeless. My knowledge of the usual procedure, under such circumstances, was woefully limited. My old-time friend, Lieutenant Belton of the Tenderloin force, had often enough taken me along on his underground excursions. On many occasions, too, "Lefty" Boyle, the Chatham Square stool-pigeon, had smoked my Havanas and shown me a little of the wonders of midnight life as seen through the eyes of a plain-clothes man. But there my experience of the undergroove came to an end. The game, I confess, had its allurements. But I had to confess also that I was new at that game.

My first move was a visit to carrier-station "B". This office I found on the southeast corner of Grand and Attorney Streets. To the south lay Division Street and East Broadway, and on every hand stretched that crowded and mysterious lower East Side where, I knew, more drama was enacted in an hour than in all the Rialto playhouses in a season.

My inquiries at the office, as I feared, resulted in nothing enlightening, beyond the discovery that in Manhattan and the Bronx alone the city employed over two thousand letter carriers, and that each one of these handled weekly thousands of letters of which no record was kept. A typewritten letter delivered at a down-town business office was as destitute of individuality, to the postal authorities, as a grain of sand on a Jersey coast sea-dune.

My next move was to order out my car and hurry down to the head of a typewriting agency whom I chanced to know. This superintendent, who was a member of the Carrelian Club, gave my two brief lines scarcely more than a glance before he declared the type to be that of an "Underland." Twenty minutes later I was at the "Underland" head office. The acting manager of the company, as I entered, was about to leave for an up-town luncheon at the Biltmore Hotel. I offered to run him up in the car and he gladly accepted. He was a quick-witted, prematurely bald, shrewd-eyed man between thirty-five and forty.

"These two lines, I've been told, were written on one of your machines," I explained as I handed him my slip of paper. "And I'm rather anxious to find out where that machine is."

I slowed down while he studied the words for several minutes in silence.

"Then you've got an uncommonly hard job ahead of you," was his brief and somewhat discouraging reply. He handed the slip back, then turned and looked at me somewhat curiously.

"Merely a crank letter, I suppose," he ventured.

"I hope it's nothing more," was my answer as I swung out of the noise of Broadway into Madison Square west and on up Fourth Avenue. "I firmly believe it's nothing more, but it's my duty to make sure."

"I'm sorry I can't help you out," he answered, politely enough. "But, you see, we have a good many thousand of these machines in operation in this city at this very moment."

"Then you would say there is no individuality of touch, no character of type, or make of ink, to distinguish it from any other?" I asked.

He took the slip from me and once more studied the somewhat worn and dimmed lines of writing.

"It seems the touch of a normal operator. There's nothing amateurish in the key-impressions. I mean by that, it hasn't been picked out by a novice, letter by letter."

"That is something," I acknowledged.

"I may also say that this machine must have gone out from our works at least three years ago. It's that long since we gave up using this particular make of type-die. The ink, of course, is that of the ordinary commercial ribbon."

I took the paper from him again as I swung into Forty-third Street and drew up at the carriage-entrance of the Biltmore. I still held the well-thumbed sheet in my hand when a new thought occurred to me. I raised the paper and held it up against the sunlight. I could discern a barely distinguishable water-mark. It was that, apparently, of a broad cross on an almost square escutcheon or shield, like that which you will see at the center of so many national coats-of-arms. Above the shield I made out a helmet with open visor, surmounted by a crown. The mark, I knew was distinctively Italian; it was almost a rough duplicate of the coat-of-arms of Italy.

The discovery was a small one, but it was at least a discovery. It took me back to college times and the days of my Shakespearean research work in the Bodleian, when I had shown from the water-marks in two supposedly rare volumes that they were only Shakespearean reprints. And there are people who argue against the advantages of higher education!

I took my leave of the manager with a somewhat lighter heart. The letter, then, was supposititiously written by an Italian, and by an Italian of the East Side. But the East Side covered a great deal of ground. And it was very crowded ground, I remembered to my growing dismay; for its population included over two hundred thousand Italians.

Chapter III—THE SCENE IN THE OFFICE

My next move was a visit to the Wall Street offices of Stillwell, Hundley & Fysh. The senior member of that important firm, let me hasten at once to explain, had even further claims to distinction in being the father of Miss Natalie Ethelwyn Stillwell. I remembered that during such unsettled times in the business world he would most likely be on the floor of the Stock Exchange in person, for Marvin Stillwell was strong-minded and old-fashioned enough to defy the *fin-de-siècle* tradition that all such trading should be left to the younger and nimbler minions of the business world.

So I timed my visit accordingly, and found myself one of several waiting for the aged financier when he stepped into his office, with a gardenia still in his button-hole. He was a very spick-and-span old gentleman, but I could not fail to notice that tell-tale greyness and finely pebbled pallor which told of overcrowded days and over-strained nerves. He caught my eye at once and made a half-humorous sign for me to be patient until he had dispatched the mob.

He was one of the fighting financiers of the old school, both proud and conscious of his power in the business world, and yet equally conscious of his obligations to that silent and somewhat neglected Goddess called Honour. More in keeping with the newer century and school, however, seemed his insatiable passion for work. He still was, despite his years, one of the sprightliest and most aggressive members of the Exchange. His "bear" movements against Missouri Pacific during the past few weeks had been the subject of much talk and editorial

comment. His activities in United States Rubber, apparently, had been almost as marked. So there I was, I thought, just a tinge of banter, a touch of the busy man's condescension for the idler, in his tones as he accosted me.

"Why, Woodruff, is it you--and south of the dead line?"

I assured him that it was.

"But the *Herald* had you at the Lakewood meet this week."

Then I noticed that he glanced down at his watch.

"May I have five minutes of your time?" I asked in a spirit of fit and proper meekness.

"Three times that much, if you like," he answered as he began signing a pile of typewritten letters which a secretarial youth, with eye-glasses and a narrow white forehead, had left on the desk before him.

"Have you any idea who wrote this?" I asked, as I handed him my two short lines of typewriting.

He took the well-worn sheet in his hand, read it, and then dropped both the paper and the tone of condescending impersonality with which he had greeted me.

"For the love of God!" he gasped. "Are you getting these things too?"

"I have this one, as you see," I replied.

He gazed at me over his *pince-nez* for a silent moment or two, then swung about and opened a drawer in his rosewood desk. From this drawer he took out three letters. These he removed from their envelopes and handed to me without a word. I felt it my duty not to seem too interested.

"Where do these things come from?" I casually inquired.

"That's what I want to know."

"Before I read these--" I interposed. "Your time is limited, is it not?"

"I should be at the Republican Club at four," he answered, with another glance at his watch and a still longer glance at the sheet I had first given him.

I read the letters he had taken from his desk-drawer. Each was typewritten: the type was, so far as I could tell, the same as that in the letter which his daughter Natalie had intercepted. And I knew, as soon as I read the first message, that her effort at guardianship had been for nothing. She had not been altogether successful as a shock-absorber, for the words before me read:

"When the Hammer of God once strikes, it obliterates! You were given one week to make amends! Unless this is done, both you and your kind will be no more!"

"That came in my morning's mail today," explained the financier.

I read the next message.

"That came a week ago," interposed Marvin Stillwell.

"You are robbing the poor to enrich those already over-cursed with wealth. You are closing the rubber plantations of Colombia and taking the bread out of the mouth of a starving countryside. You are grinding a people under a heel of gold. Unless the heel

is lifted the end of the path is before you!

"THE HAMMER OF GOD."

The third note was a duplicate of the one that had already come into my hands.

"This is rather--well, interesting," I said as I handed the three sheets back to Marvin Stillwell.

"Yes, rather," he answered--indifferently, as I thought.

"Then this sort of thing doesn't disturb you?" I asked.

"It might, if I had nothing to do; but I haven't time to give matters like this much thought, you know." He looked over at me leniently. I had a strong suspicion that at that precise moment he was sharing in Natalie's estimate of my shortcomings.

"About four years ago a sort of anarchistic Black Hand rascal called MacGirr sent me a specimen of the real article," he explained, a little impatiently. "It might have been very romantic. But this isn't Sicily, and I soon put a stop to the romance. I got in touch with the district attorney's office and had him sent up for six years."

Here was a new turn to affairs.

"And this man MacGirr is still in State's prison?" I asked.

"He is."

"And you have no knowledge whatever of the person who is favouring us with these vague yet gently persuasive epistles?"

"Not a jot. Nor can I quite understand in what way hammers are associated with the activities of the Deity!"

"You have been pounding United States Rubber down for some time, I understand."

"My dear Woodruff," solemnly answered the august diplomat before me, "I never pound things down, as you put it. It is not my vocation!"

"You have merely been legitimately active on the bear side of the market in connection with this particular stock, I take it?"

He snapped off his *pince-nez* and wheeled about on me.

"I am one of those who not only hold that Wall Street cannot always indulge in that missionary work peculiar to the Sunshine Society," he retorted, "but also that there are excellent reasons for assuming United States Rubber stock, common and preferred, to be inflated beyond its natural and reasonable figure."

"And so believing," I suggested, almost unwittingly affected by the tone of his oration, "you have merely attempted to readjust that figure."

"Precisely," was his answer. "There's no law, you know, compelling any one to entertain undeviatingly cheerful views."

"But I've sometimes noticed that there's a law penalizing those who are tardy in doing so," I added, ruefully recalling a certain dip of my own in a one-time promising "short" market.

The old gentleman's appreciative laughter was interrupted by the entrance of the secretarial youth with the narrow forehead. He handed Marvin Stillwell a card and a note, with a terse and

quiet-toned word or two of explanation.

"Send him in, then, right away," said Marvin Stillwell, once more attacking the letter pile with his gold-banded pen.

"You'll excuse me, I know," he explained without looking up. "But this is the third time I have kept this young man waiting, and it's more a matter of courtesy than commerce."

Before I had time to answer, the office door swung open and a youth of about twenty-one entered. He was a seemingly mild-mannered and yet distinguished-looking boy, with a touch of the poet about him, dressed in black as he was, with a roll collar and a flowing black tie. His hair was dark and long, and brushed back from a high forehead across which ran querulous lines of thought. His delicate black eyebrows might have been arched and painted by a Japanese. Yet he seemed more of the Parisian artist type--or, rather, as a Parisian artist in mourning might look. There was something strangely melancholy and aloof about his pale, shy face, something rapt and unworldly in his deep-set eyes. His dome-shaped head, narrow at the base and wide at the crown, seemed like that of a lonely bloodhound in its moments of most pensive repose. I could see that he was a little surprised and discomfited by my presence in the office.

Marvin Stillwell looked from the young man to the note which lay open before him.

"You come from the Italian consulate?" he asked.

"I do," replied the youth.

"I'm always glad to do anything for my friend Nicchia over there."

"Thank you."

"And this won't cost me much, will it?" said the Wall Street man, jocularly, as he reached for one of his cards and adjusted his *pince-nez*.

"No, it will not cost much," replied the youth, in his slow and deliberate tones. There was scarcely a trace of foreign accent in his speech. Yet I noticed that he did not smile at the other's well-intentioned sally.

"The visitors' gallery of the Exchange has been closed for repairs," continued Mr. Stillwell, as he handed the card that he had signed to the youth before him. "But it opened again sometime during this week. All you will have to do is to present this card."

"Thank you," said the youth, with his eyes still on the man.

"By the way, what is your--your vocation?"

"I have been a journalist," answered the visitor.

"In the city here?"

There was a pause.

"No, I come from Trieste, originally."

"Are you an Austrian, then?" asked the other in surprise.

"No, my parents were Italians in exile--Trieste is almost an Italian city."

"And since then you've--"

"I have lived in Spanish America. I was a *cronica*-writer on the Buenos Ayres *El Dairio* for two

years."

"Buenos Ayres!" I said surprised. "Then you know Brecchia of *La Prensa*?"

He hesitated.

"And little Cicui of *La Nacion*?" I asked.

"No," he answered shortly.

"That's odd," I murmured as I thought of the city of the Avenida Sarmiento and its four-rowed crush of carriages, of the Calle Florida strung with electric globes, of those rustling, flashing, glittering, Paris-like Sunday *fêtes* of the Jockey Club Hippodrome.

"There are one hundred and eighty-nine newspapers printed in Buenos Ayres," replied the youth, with a Latin-like shrug of his narrow shoulders.

"But only one Brecchia," I contended.

"I know nothing of that," he retorted, shortly, with what seemed a flush of mingled anger and embarrassment. Yet his eyes were still turned in the direction of Marvin Stillwell's desk. My own glance happened to fall on the sheet of official note-paper that lay open on the polished rosewood. I could just make out the design embossed on the upper portion of this sheet. Something about the wide cross imposed on the escutcheon and surmounted by a crown, took me back at a leap to the business I had in hand. It brought to my mind the thought of the watermark in the first "Hammer of God" letter. It suddenly suggested something which I scarcely dared to formulate.

My interest in that mild-mannered young man became unaccountably keen. I was on my feet the moment he had withdrawn.

"By the way, could you spare me one of those cards for the visitors' gallery?" I casually asked.

"Of course, if you find any amusement in us," said the man of business as he handed me the card.

I had no time to parry that muffled thrust. I had no time to explain my departure. I merely called back to the man with the *pince-nez*, as I started for the door, that after all I'd have to cut out the pleasure of running him up to the Republican Club. I had just time to see him look at me with the same gentle scorn which I had seen more than once creep into his daughter Natalie's eyes. I disliked the thought of unnecessarily puzzling that particular man at that particular time; but I had to sacrifice him on the altar of a higher duty.

I was out and after the pale-browed youth with the roll collar, like a hound after a rabbit. I missed him in the elevator, but caught up with him, luckily, before he had reached the corner of Broadway. There, to my joy, I saw him climb into a surface-car. I concluded that it would be easy enough for me to shut down my speed and keep the car in sight as long as need be.

Chapter IV—THE UNKNOWN PARTNER

I had plenty of time to think things over, for it was not until he reached Fourteenth Street that the rapt-eyed young man who said he came from Trieste stepped from the car-platform and transferred to a car going east. For some inexplicable reason he alighted in turn from this cross-

town car at the corner of Fourth Avenue and continued eastward on foot. I crawled gradually after him with my motor slowed down.

It was between Second and Third Avenues that I saw my man turn sharply into a basement bookstore and disappear from sight. I promptly decided to follow him.

Leaving the car at the curb a few doors back, I walked quietly and casually into that basement store. I could see at a glance that it was nothing more than a mart for second-hand books, a dingy, crowded, shelf-littered cellar where the scholarly ignored the dust and the learned forgot the bad light.

I turned to one of its shelves, with a pretense of studying the serried titles before me. In reality I was watching the enigmatic young man whom I had followed into that dimly lighted store. I saw him drift carelessly along between half-screening bookshelves and print-littered tables, until he came next to a wide-shouldered man stooping over a yellow pamphlet. Almost immediately they were speaking together quietly and unobtrusively.

I asked the clerk who approached me in a tentative manner, if he chanced to have anything interesting in anarchistic pamphlets. He must have very promptly sized me up as an outsider, if he did deal in such wares; for he declared with a faraway look that they handled no such goods. Then I casually inquired if he had any *Shakespeareana*, or even a first edition of Heine.

I continued my observations while the clerk went off to make his search. The mysterious two were still talking together in low and guarded tones. I saw the bigger man look up once or twice, as though to make sure that their words were not being overheard. This gave me a better chance, every now and then, for a studious glance at his face. It was not a prepossessing one. Like his frame, it was large and bony. But what most struck me, at the time, was its pallour. His eyes, in some way, reminded me of a duck's eyes; they were so ludicrously small, and set so wide apart in the bony white forehead. His mouth was thin-lipped and large. In the whole face there was something cold and hard and glittering. It was the sort of face a sensitive woman would shudder over, as she would shudder over a case of surgical instruments.

The big man was the first to leave the store. I saw to it that my face was turned and my body bent low over a table as he was followed out by his younger colleague. Then I made my way to the street. I was intercepted, however, by the somewhat mystified and indignant clerk, who showed me a Heine translation in hand-tooled calf, a Blackwood first edition, which I promptly bought for a couple of dollars--strange as it may seem, I was always proud of that bargain--and a creditable 1798 copy of *De mes Rapports avec Rousseau*, by Dusiaux.

For all this interruption, I succeeded in reaching the street in time to see the big man with the colourless face turn from Fourteenth Street south into Third Avenue. A couple of hundred feet behind him walked the younger man. As I trailed after them in the car, I saw the two come together again a little below Fifth Street, where Third Avenue runs into that rehabilitated highway of trade and commerce known as the Bowery.

The strange couple continued along the Bowery until they came to Delancey Street, and then turned eastward. It was not until they were some eight or nine blocks nearer the East River that they turned again. Then I saw the younger man enter a Suffolk Street tenement house. I looked closely at its iron-slatted fire-escapes and uninviting doorway, to impress the appearance of the place on my memory.

When I turned my gaze back toward the wide-shouldered man I saw him drawn up at the edge

of the sidewalk. His great gorilla-like shoulder leaned indolently against a gas-lamp standard; he lounged there and regarded my machine with an eye as cold and calm and slothful as that of a snake. I was conscious of two things. One was that the gentleman beside the curb lamp-post was in no way an inviting enemy. The other was that it would be foolish to give this mysterious individual any further ground for suspicion at that particular time, secure as I felt behind the obliterating mask of my motor goggles.

So I kept on my way past him, with a preoccupied and abstracted stare ahead, and swung from Division Street westward along the more open spaces of Canal Street, to Broadway, where the atmosphere seemed more breathable and the sunlight in some way brighter. It suddenly dawned on me that an eight cylinder touring-car was not exactly the best vehicle with which to indulge in a still-hunt on the East Side after an unnamed and unknown despoiler of the criminally rich.

Chapter V—THE DIVE IN THE STREAM

It was the next morning that I was able for the first time in recorded history to take Davis unawares.

"No, Davis, I'll not shave this morning," was my greeting as he appeared with the customary matutinal apparatus.

"You will not shave, sir?" he asked, coming to a full stop. He might with equal incredulity have inquired if I were declining to breathe for a day.

"It is quite likely, Davis, that I shall not shave for several days."

Davis, as I had hoped, was thoroughly scandalized, though he struggled heroically to conceal his true feelings.

"And I shall be out of town until at least twelve tonight, Davis--to everybody," I explained as I ran through my mail.

"Yes, sir," answered Davis, once more himself.

"And will you please get Lieutenant Belton of Police Headquarters on the 'phone for me?"

Getting Lieutenant Belton on the 'phone at Headquarters was no easy matter. I could hear the patient and tireless Davis having his temper tested in the ninth Dantean hell of aggravation as I opened and read a brief note which bore the cancellation mark of Washington. It was from Natalie Stillwell. The tinted sheet enclosed in the envelope bore but two lines from Browning:

"And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost
Is the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin!"

My reply to this peculiarly anarchistic thrust was two hurriedly penned little sentences from Thoreau, two little sentences that had always strangely appealed to me and now seemed to fit the case:

"A broad margin of leisure is as beautiful in a man's life as in a book."

"Keep the time of the Universe, not of the cars."

The ink was still wet on the envelope I had addressed, when Davis came to inform me that Lieutenant Belton was on the wire.

I knew better than to waste time with that deep-voiced official during business hours. So I drove straight to the heart of the matter.

"What do you know about a Black Hand named MacGirr, who was sent up about four years ago for threatening to blow up Marvin Stillwell?"

"He did more than threaten, my boy! He hanged near *blew* him up," was the lieutenant's reply.

"But he's still in 'stir,' as you call it?" I next asked.

"Parson MacGirr, alias Red-Flag Mack, alias Socialist Connell, was sent up for six years on two charges."

"Then he's still in Sing Sing?"

"I'm sorry to say he's not. Certain East Side 'politics' got him out five or six weeks ago. I mean, the ropes were 'greased' and a 'fixer' secured his discharge."

"And he's now in New York?"

"That's not for me to say, my son. Officially, you see, there are certain things we've got to know, and certain things we've got not to know."

"You mean that MacGirr is a--well, a rather dangerous man to interfere with?"

"No man, my son, is dangerous to the law."

"Then he has a pull behind him somewhere?"

"If you care to put it that way," came the answer from the wire. I could hear the lieutenant chuckling. "Wait till you've had a peek at him!"

"What is the gentleman like?" I asked.

"I never heard of him taking beauty prizes," answered the officer at the other end of the wire.

"Isn't he a big, wide-shouldered man with a figure a good deal like a gorilla's? With long arms and small eyes, set deep and wide apart, and a high bony forehead, and a big, thin-lipped mouth?"

"That's Red-Flag Mack to a T! That's Parson MacGirr about as close as the Bertillon system could get him," laughed back the lieutenant. "By the way, are you thinking of playing a game of racquets with him?"

"I am," I replied. "And I imagine it's going to be a game worth watching."

"What's up?"

"That's what I am going to find out."

"Well, tell me what you know."

"I will in a week's time. At least, I hope to."

"Then take my advice and don't try to pump too much of the Golden Rule into the game, or MacGirr'll make it a love-score," warned the man of many experiences, as he said good-bye and rang off.

I made ready for my morning excursion into Suffolk Street with a new and strangely mounting spirit of exhilaration. I had at last found something on which to focus attention. But there were still many points about the case that bewildered me. I could not see the motive behind the movement. This foolish sheet of paper which Natalie Stillwell had placed in my keeping could scarcely be called a Black-Hand letter in form or intent. It was not the customary pin-pricked epistle of some rapacious and ignorant threatener. Nor could it be construed as the instrument of a man seeking merely money or revenge.

The very phrase, "The Hammer of God," was the expression of consciousness not untouched with imagination. It seemed, in a way, to reflect the thought of a visionary. It was too poetic in colouring to be associated with the underworld activities of a man like Red-Flag Mack. And in what way, I pondered, could the mild-spoken and rapt-eyed youth, who described himself as a sometime journalist of Buenos Ayres, be identified with any movement of MacGirr's--if this man were indeed MacGirr? The pursuit of that knowledge was the first step of the work which I found before me.

It would scarcely have taken a mind-reader to see that Davis was pained at beholding me deliberately clothe myself in trousers, devoid of creases, and a coat, borrowed from a wiper at the garage, long undisciplined of the tailor's iron. Equally dismaying to him was my donning of a two-day-old collar and the discarding of so essential an ornament as a scarf-pin. But to me it brought a wholly unlooked-for sense of emancipation. Man takes a strangely primordial joy in masquerade.

As I scuttled away from my apartment under this transparent enough disguise, I think I felt all the delight of a Hallowe'en youth who ventures forth with a *papier-mâché* false-face and a coat turned inside out. I began to get an inkling of the fact that, after all, there might be something in life worth while.

Chapter VI—THE THIRD FIGURE

The lower floor of the Suffolk Street tenement to which I directed my attention seemed to be given over to sweat shop workers. Its dimly lighted halls hummed like a hive of bees. From behind closed doors I could hear the continuous drone of the busy sewing-machines. Occasionally, too, I caught sight of a worker carrying a bundle of garments, the fruit of some little colony's labours with the needle.

Outside of this strange mania for work, there seemed nothing remarkable about the people who came and went along the narrow stairways and the dim, odoriferous hall-ways. I had made a passing effort to pick up some information as to the building and its character from a neighbouring cigar-store. But the olive-skinned young Jew behind the counter seemed to know nothing about the house and to care even less for my casual inquiries. So I sought out the janitor himself. He was a Swede with receding chin, palish China-blue eyes, and hemp-coloured hair. I could see that his habitual slowness of action and uncertainty of thought were accentuated by his being at that lamentable period of intoxication which is known as a "hang-over." He merely blinked his pig-like, pale-blue eyes at me from under the yellow bristles of his lowering eyebrows, and reiterated again and again that the house "vass full."

"Which leads me to assume," I finally retorted, "that you are in what may be termed perfect

harmony with your abode!"

I might as well have hurled my sarcasm at the marble statue of Peter Cooper twenty blocks away. The man merely blinked at me with uncomprehending, sullen eyes, and once more declared that his house "vass full."

So I wasted no more time on him, deciding to reconnoitre on my own account and leave my mission unsuspected by even these harmless outsiders.

How long I might have loitered about those halls with nothing to show for my trouble, it would be hard to say. I might have idled about that crowded and preoccupied neighbourhood until night-fall, had it not been for the advent of a young woman wearing a heavy black veil.

She was not an ordinary young woman; I knew that at the first glimpse of the over-alert and nervous bearing of her slender figure. I was also struck by the paleness of her skin, even through her heavy veil. Her step was not the labour-sapped step of the ordinary tenants of that hive of work, and although the darkness of her thickly massed hair seemed to hint at some foreign origin, and her mere presence there seemed to mark her as one of "the people," the tender contour of the line running from ear to chin marked her as an "intellectual."

There was no chance for me to dog her up four flights of steps. But I followed her as closely as I dared and listened as intently as I could. I was able to make out that she went to the top floor, and felt sure that she had turned, when once there, toward the back of the building.

It was fifteen minutes before she came down again. By the time she had reached the ground floor I was screened from her sight by the stairs leading to the janitor's basement. As she hurried down and out to the street, I slipped after her.

After carefully adjusting my distance to shadow her, I was somewhat startled to find that she went only five doors to the north and then turned sharply into a dingy red-bricked building with a windowed shop-front, covered by an iron grating fronting the street. Above the rusty grating I noticed a sign in Yiddish. Below this were the Italian words:

SI FANNO LAVORI DI STAMPA.

Under this, in equally faded lettering, was the further proclamation, in English, that printing was done within. The lower part of this shop's door, like the window, was grated and shuttered, so that my saunter past it brought me little in return.

Nothing was to be learned from that bald front of unwashed window-panes and water-rusted ironwork and dingy red bricks. Nor did I seem to gain anything by waiting. I also felt that little could be gained by showing my hand this early in the game.

So I returned to my dispiriting surveillance of the tenement-house. Climbing to the top floor, I proceeded cautiously along the narrow hall, listening at each door. From one came the sound of sewing-machines, from another the crying and wailing of a child, from still another the sound of several people arguing in English, with angry and high-pitched voices.

The rear door on the left gave forth no sound at all, though I listened there for several minutes, with an envelope or two from my morning's mail held ready in my hand as a blind to cover my presence in case of surprise.

As I stood there, however, something happened to change the entire complexion of that

altogether uninspiring situation. From the door behind me came a low and muffled sound, or, rather, a *staccato* run of sounds. I knew, as I listened, that I was overhearing the clatter of a typewriting-machine in operation. It was apparently this rear door on the right that I wanted. There was something pregnant and satisfying in the sound of that typewriter.

Yet nothing happened, and I saw nothing to do. A half-hour dragged by and I began to feel hungry. A contemptuous regard for such Peeping-Tompastimes began to creep through me.

This mood of irritable self-resentment, I finally concluded, was due to the emptiness of my stomach. So I slipped out for three ham sandwiches and a glass of milk in a near-by delicatessen-shop. Then, after a tranquillizing puff or two at a cigar, I bought an afternoon paper, in case I should have time to kill; and ten minutes later I was back, watching that fifth floor door, like a dog watching a groundhog's hole. I could still hear the occasional *staccato* clicking of the typewriter and, from time to time, the sound of steps as someone within impatiently paced the floor.

It was well after two o'clock before the door was opened. I was standing in a none too light corner of the narrow hall, where an equally narrow stairway led to the roof. The occupant of the room stepped out, locked the door behind him, and then placed the key on the lintel-moulding above.

It was the pale-browed young man who had obtained the member's ticket of admission to the visitors' gallery of the Stock Exchange.

I waited until he had time to be safely clear of the building, then went straight to his door, reached up for the key he had hidden and inserted it in the lock. It was dangerous work, but it was no time for half-measures; and I was tired of so much empty waiting and suspended action.

Chapter VII—THE INNER ROOM

A moment later I was inside the room with the door securely locked behind me. It was only reasonable to expect the apartment to be unoccupied. But that leaving of the key above the lintel implied that some other than the man who had left it there on his departure was expected at any moment. So I felt the necessity of making my visit a hurried one. It was not hard to imagine the natural embarrassments of the situation if I should have the misfortune to be discovered in my new whereabouts.

I found myself in a series of three small rooms, none of them any too well lighted, and all of them plainly furnished. The first and largest room of the three was the one that most interested me. It was, obviously, a cross between an author's library and a student's living-room. On the wall before me hung a print of Mirabeau, the French radical. Beside it was a crayon drawing of Lenine, the Russian dictator, and an unnamed companion picture which was unknown to me. The wall on my right showed a portrait of Prince Kropotkin, a quarter-page from a Chicago Sunday-paper supplement which purported to be a photograph of Emma Goldman, and a red-typed poster which said: "Remember March 18, 1871."

My busily circling glance next noticed, on the table which occupied the centre of the room, several copies of a cheaply printed magazine in pamphlet size, bearing the title, *Mother Earth*. Beside these lay Lenine's "*The Proletarian Revolution*," the *India Rubber World*, with an article on Colombian rubber industries blue-penciled and stippled with question-marks; a

couple of copies of *Tropical America*, an account of a bomb-throwing outrage on the Bourse in Rome, and a heavily underscored lecture by Shroeder on "*The Advocacy of Crime*." My eye next caught the significant title of "*La Question Sociale*," a Bolshevistic publication of which I had heard not a little. I found also an edition of Pushkin's poems in Russian, a signed copy of Kropotkin's "*Modern Science and Anarchism*" and a faded volume of Voltaire's "*Candide*." Next to this again I came upon a typewritten article or essay entitled "*The New Fabianism*," and a number of typewritten poems in both English and German. One glance through these verses was enough to convince me that my erudite young friend, whatever his aesthetic inclinations, was at least a communist of the first water, a student of Bolshevism as naive as he was passionate in his protests against existing conditions.

All these things were interesting enough. But they were not the things I was after. I had keyed myself up for surprise and yet none of them surprised me. There was still a missing link or two in my chain of conjecture, and until those links were found my chain was worthless.

In days gone by, Lieutenant Belton and Lefty Boyle had often enough introduced me to that type of Bolshevik which holds out, for example, in the little Schwab saloon on First Street. These transplanted "Reds" usually posed as members of social or literary societies, kept cheap printing-presses busy with their fiery lubrications, and had a more or less continuously occupied "committee on quarters," which was supposed to look after the ubiquitous fugitives of this ever-migrating Brotherhood of Earth. An executive committee, composed of "those best fitted," carried on the bulk of the underground business of the New Commune. "Those best fitted" might best be described as half-starved and half-witted fellows with befuddling dreams of some future life of ease, shot through with embittering memories of past oppression, and of their "idealized" Russia of today, to which Emma Goldman had been so unwillingly deported.

Yet the rapt-eyed young man whose room I had entered seemed neither half-starved nor half-witted. That he was a dreamer, a deliriant, wrapped in his foolish Utopian visions of some impossible future, was evident enough from his verses. What form his revolt was to take I had yet to find out, and the present was the time to do it. Since I had made the plunge of once entering the room I decided to make a more thorough search of its contents.

In the drawer of the work-table on which stood his typewriter was a printed speech by Herr Most and a folded page from a Sunday paper, showing a photographic group of the "eighty wealthiest men in America." Next to this lay a package of letters tied with tape. They were written in a woman's hand-writing; the top one, I noticed, came from Paterson, New Jersey; the bottom one, oddly enough, from Trieste. I turned this package over in my hand, a little reverently and yet a little curiously; but I had not the heart to untie the green tape and invade the little sanctuary.

I suddenly looked up from these letters, however, for a thought had struck me. Taking out the slip of paper which Natalie Stillwell had given me, I inserted it in the typewriter on the table. Then, just below the two lines already there, I repeated the message, word for word. I withdrew the sheet and examined what I had written.

There could be no doubt about it. The very defects of alignment were the same in each copy: the very peculiarity of the oblique "h" and the partly curtailed "m" could be detected in each inscription. Both messages had been written by that machine. My time had not been wasted.

A cursory glance about the rest of the room convinced me of what I had already suspected.

This youth, sometimes known, if his business letters were to be depended on, as Cono Di Marco, and sometimes apparently as Rosario, and still again as Eduardo Perez, was one of the younger of the "Reds" who hoped to rebuild the world out of blasting-powder. He was a perfervid and passionate Bolshevik, convinced of the heroism of his attitude and the righteousness of his cause. It was he who, for reasons as yet unfathomed, was threatening the life of Marvin Stillwell. And there lay my difficulty. The chasm which I had not yet been able to bridge was, why he should direct his hatred against this one man. What unknown conditions, or what outside influences, I asked myself, had been responsible for his determination to centralize his threats on a person who had already befriended him?

The only answer to that question seemed to be Red-Flag Mack, or Parson MacGirr, as he was more often called. My deduction was that the older man was making a cat's-paw of the rapt young idealist, that he was making use of the youth's impersonal Bolshevistic theories for the furthering of his own selfish and personal ends, whether those ends meant mere intimidation or extortion of money, the accomplishment of revenge or death itself.

I had achieved nothing brilliant, had effected nothing definite, yet I knew that the circle of past uncertainties had narrowed down to the two figures I had followed out of the Fourteenth Street basement bookstore. My problem now was to decide on my next move.

All thought on this matter suddenly fled from me, as attention flies from a roof-garden audience when a fire-gong sounds; for as I stood leaning over the open drawer there came a sudden knock on the door.

It sent a little tingle of shock up and down my backbone as it was repeated, more peremptorily. Then a voice called, sharply and impatiently, and the door was shaken.

"Cono!"

It was a woman's voice, but this did not detract from the difficulty. I was trapped.

Chapter VIII—THE LITTLE PRINTING-SHOP

I stood irresolute, wondering what to do. The door was shaken again, more impatiently than ever.

"Cono, I must come in," said the woman's voice outside. It seemed an unusually soft and mellow voice. But I had little time to luxuriate in its cadences.

"Quick, Cono!" said the woman outside. Then there was a space of unbroken silence. Once she got away from that door and discovered her mistake or gave the alarm, I knew my time in the room would have to be brief.

I crept over to the door and listened with my ear against the panel. I could hear the sound of her breathing as she waited outside, with her hand on the resisting knob and only a thin panel of pinewood between us. The problem was a serious one. I peered about the room, puzzling over some means of escape. Then an idea came to me.

Noiselessly crossing to the open typewriter, I sat down before it and wrote as follows:

"This place is being watched by the authorities. We are under surveillance. Meet me at the Fourteenth Street bookstore in twenty minutes.

I slipped the sheet of paper under the door so that only one corner of it remained in sight. I stood for a second or two, watching it. Then I saw the remaining corner slowly pulled out. And still again I stood watching, with my heart in my mouth.

It seemed an age before there was any sign. Then I heard the sound of a pencil on the door-panel, and a minute later saw the sheet, folded close, slipped back under the door. But still I waited until I heard the sound of a woman's departing footsteps. The ruse had worked. I stooped and picked up the paper.

"Be careful. I will wait."

These words pencilled on the bottom of the page, caught my eye. I breathed once more.

I waited for two minutes by my watch. Then I turned the key in the lock, secured the door, replaced the key, and made my escape from the building. I had evaded one possible danger. But I was already too far out in my sea of adventure to think of resting on my oars.

My next move was on the mysterious printing-shop with the grated front, into which the veiled woman had disappeared earlier in the day.

If this veiled woman and my caller were one and the same person, the coast would be clear. In five minutes at the outside she would be on her way to the Fourteenth Street bookstore. Before all things I intended to find out something more about that innocent-looking printing-shop.

The first thing that struck me, as I opened the door, was the smell of benzine. Mingled with this came a less powerful odour--an astringent odour which I did not at first recognize.

Then my eyes fell on a carboy of sulphuric acid, standing in one corner of the room. In a flash of memory the familiarity of that more elusive smell came home to me. It took me back to old times. It reminded me of the fulminate-sheds at my Aguacate mines, where I had fitted up the little wooden-walled zinc-roofed experimental laboratory for certain highly explosive agents which would not deteriorate in the humid air of the tropics.

A bald-headed man with a furtive eye stepped out from behind an old-fashioned hand-press, where he had been distributing type before a black bank of slovenly little flat-lying pigeon-holes. He wore a soiled apron of striped ticking, burned through here and there as though with acid. On a table near him stood a bottle half-full of stale beer.

"You do printing here?" I inquired.

He shrugged a fat shoulder and pointed at the hand-press. It was as though he had asked if I expected it to be a sausage-machine. I felt tempted to point to the sulphuric acid carboy and mildly inquire if that was what he inked his rollers with. But the retort discourteous was a luxury now denied me.

"I want three-hundred business cards in a hurry," I found myself saying to him, with a facile mendacity that was a little disturbing to me when I thought it over later. "What will they cost?"

"Write out what you want; then I'll tell you," the heavy-shouldered man answered, in a guttural voice coloured with the faintest tinge of a German accent, as he indulged in an indifferent hand-wave toward the small, paper-strewn, ink-stained table that held the beer bottle.

I sat down at this table and tried to think of just what my business was.

While I sat there studying over this more or less intimate and interesting problem, the door of the shop opened and closed. I looked up casually. Then quickly I bent low over my paper again, for the man who had entered the door was Red-Flag Mack--Parson MacGirr himself.

He stepped to a door in the rear, took a key, unlocked the door and disappeared within. Not a word passed between him and the other man. I could hear the click of the bolt as he locked the door behind him. I had noticed that he carried a large-sized paper-wrapped package.

Instead of studying out my new business-card I rose from the chair, laughed deprecatingly and told the furtive-eyed man behind the press that I'd actually forgotten my new address. It was not until I got to the door that I stopped and looked back at his heavy, sphinx-like face. I knew it was useless to try to get anything out of him.

"You'll be back, maybe?" he said, without looking up from his type-font.

It struck me that he had put quite unnecessary emphasis on the "maybe."

"I'll be back," I answered, doing my best to control some inner devil of perversity which kept prompting me to add, "And I'll make it hanged hot for you when I come, too!"

Ten minutes after I had escaped from that odoriferous little shop, I was back under the same roof and in the same building, but my entrance this time was by means of another door, which opened on the stairway leading to the floors above.

A brief interview there with two industrious and wren-like little French women, on the top floor, who eked out a precarious existence making polka-dot veiling, brought me face to face with the gratifying information that the "second-floor rear" was vacant. I further learned that the owner was one Dennis O'Higgins, a thrifty saloon-keeper on the next street-corner.

Chapter IX—LISTENING IN

A visit to a store up-town provided me with a valued accessory which I knew I would require--a microphone. I had experimented with this at various times in a desultory sort of a way. I knew of course that the microphone used in the American adaptation of the Poulsen wireless-telephony apparatus was more sensitive than that made use of in the speaking-apparatus of the ordinary telephone. It was a surprisingly expensive little instrument, but I carried it back to my room with the suspicion that it would yet pay for itself.

My first task on my return was to take the tattered green cushions from the Morris chair, place them on the floor, and lie with my ear pressed flat against the boards. There was not a sound to be heard from below. I next measured off the room, so as to strike its exact centre. I could tell by the exposed nail-heads where the joists supporting the floor-boards ran. With my brace and bit--the advantage I had anticipated from this tool was that it would do its work silently--I bored a row of half-inch holes side by side across two of the boards. This, when repeated at the next joist, permitted me to lift a segment of the flooring away as quickly as though I were lifting the top layer from a strawberry shortcake.

There stood revealed an expanse of lath and plaster and cob-webs, bisected by a three-quarter-inch iron gas-pipe. The T-joint, showing where the jet ran from the ceiling into the room below, lay almost directly under the opening I had made. I had not yet reached my goal, but I was progressing. I would have given a good deal to know just what lay beneath that plaster. To

attempt to pierce it or interfere with it, however, was out of the question.

The discovery of that gas-pipe, I told myself, ought to be considered good luck enough; for, unless I was greatly mistaken, that hollow iron tubing, attached as it was to a sounding-board of a ceiling, and projecting down into the very room itself, should prove almost as sensitive to sound vibration as the *antennae* of a wireless receiving station.

The moment my microphone was satisfactorily attached to the pipe, I knew I was right in my assumption. No sooner had the little watch-case receiver been pressed to my ear than I distinctly heard the rhythmic sound of the hand-press in the front printing-shop. There was no stir or sound in the room directly below. But I was at least prepared for any séance which might take place there.

When I stood up and brushed the dust from my clothes I suddenly realized that I was both tired and hungry. So I made my way to the street, drifted southwards with the six o'clock crowds, purchased a window-blind and a box of candles, and finally dropped into an oyster-house where a pyramid of unopened oysters reposed invitingly under a huge cake of ice. The tables of this caravansary proved to be Saharas of marbled oilcloth, each centering in an oasis made up of a mug of grated horse-radish, a bowl of crackers and a pewter-topped bottle of catsup. Over one of these marbled Saharas I dined hurriedly and frugally, thinking a little regretfully of the Baltimore terrapin, the Salvini filets, the braised sorrel and the Gruyère and Chablis which should have been mine.

But ten minutes after I had left that little oyster-house, I remembered that I had work--real work--ahead of me.

Chapter X—THE CONSPIRATORS

My first task, once back in the bald little room which was to play the part of my tower of observation, was to replace the two boards I had taken up from the floor, cutting away enough of the wood to leave space through which to pass my microphone attachment.

Over this open wound in the timber I carefully adjusted the hemp rug, one of the holes in it making a convenient aperture through which to pass my wires. Then I pushed the faded green Morris chair over beside the rug, sat down in it, lighted a cigar, and felt very much like a Cheshire cat calmly contemplating the hole from which its evening meal of mouse is to proceed.

I had not long to wait. My simply improvised little instrument at once telegraphed the sound to my ear when the second or inner door of the printing-shop was cautiously opened and closed. Then came the noise of shuffling feet and what must have been the snap of an electric light-switch. The footsteps passed restlessly back and forth about the room. Once or twice I heard what seemed to be the clink of glass against glass, and sometimes less distinct sounds, like those of a pestle rubbing in a mortar and water running from a faucet. These sounds were suddenly interrupted by a louder one. It was, obviously, some one giving a cipherlike knock on the street door without. I heard the steps cross the room, the inner door open and close, then the shutting of the second door, and the steps of a newcomer. For the first time the sound of voices came up to me.

"Get that cigar out o' here!" it warned. The moment I heard it I knew that the voice belonged to the furtive-eyed printer with whom I had had my encounter in the afternoon.

The other man only laughed, and must have continued to smoke.

"Get that light out!" repeated the printer, with an oath of irritability. "D'you want to blow the whole shootin'-match up?"

The newcomer crossed the room to the back window, apparently fumbled with its sash-lock for a moment or two, opened it and obviously tossed away his lighted cigar. It was equally obvious that the window could not have been locked again, so quickly did he swing about and return to the other end of the room. This was a point worth remembering, I told myself, as I sat there intently listening for the next word.

"Does that make you feel any better?" demanded the new voice. Its tone was a jeering one.

The moment I heard it I knew this voice was Parson MacGirr's. The other man merely grunted in a preoccupied way.

"What's keeping that kid late?" he demanded, after a pause.

"That kid's having troubles of his own."

"They're not likely to last long," was the grimly laconic reply to this.

"No, I imagine not," was MacGirr's placid retort.

Then came another pause.

"Anything to drink lyin' round?"

"Not a drop!"

"Then I'll rush the can while you're bottlin' up that soup."

"That kid's goin' to throw you down, Mack," averred the fat-necked man of the printing-press. "He's going to put the kibosh on the lot of us! I tell you, Mack, that kid's nutty!"

"Supposin' he is nutty," tranquilly replied Red-Flag Mack. "What's that to us, as long as he turns the trick?"

"It's not a job for dippy people," argued the other.

"Would a man do it who wasn't dippy? He wants to be used, and we can use him. That's the whole thing in a nut-shell."

Then came another pause.

"What's his bug, anyway?" asked the printer.

"Oh, his people lost their money in some fool *caoutchouc* venture down on the line between Peru and Colombia."

"*Caoutchou*--what's that?"

"He says it's a tree-milk they make rubber out of, down there. But the Rubber Trust got busy, doped up a disputed boundary gag and had a gang o' Bogota mercenaries take over the whole mint-patch."

"But where does he come in?"

"Instead o' goin' to Paris as a rich planter's son, he was shoved into a cuartel for half a year, for resistin' government troops. And broodin' over not bein' able to study abroad, and his folks

losin' their coin, and all that, I suppose gave him bats in his belfry."

"Huh! Then you say yourself he's bughouse?" triumphantly proclaimed the printer.

"Sure, he's bughouse, Beansy! He'd have got Stillwell himself for me the other day, only some stiff in the old man's office spoilt his chances."

"That's *your* ax, not mine! How'd he ever get next to his nibs?"

"With a cooked-up letter, supposed to come from the Italian consulate."

"Another fool risk!" commented the lethargic printer.

"But think what this is going to mean to us all!" persisted MacGirr's voice. "Gettin' the whole gang o' them at one crack o' the box! Gettin' the whole floor, man--the whole floor! Think o' that, Brother Beansy Schmidlapp!"

I sat up with a jerk. Could this man, called Beansy Schmidlapp, be the notorious Schmidlapp who had been held for the Union Square outrage? Was this fat-necked and slothful setter of type the "Pepper Schlatter" who had once terrified the police of St. Louis and escaped conviction by turning State's evidence? The continuation of their talk below, however, gave me little chance to think over such possibilities.

"That's all right," the man denominated as Beansy was saying. "But we'll both live to see this kid squeal, and squeal everything, the minute he's pinched."

"But he'll never be pinched," flung back the other. "Don't you see what's going to happen? He'll have nine or ten pounds o' pure soup soaked up in the wheat bran of that bag, and he's got to go with the rest o' them! Everything's got to go--the whole stiff-necked, lyin', cheatin', bullyin' lot o' them!"

There was a second or two of silence.

"Mack," calmly and solemnly said Beansy at last. "There's moments when I kind o' get the feelin' you're not so far from bein' a little dippy yourself!"

"Maybe I am," conceded Mack, with an offhand oath. "But I know who I'm after and what I'm gettin' at. I ain't struttin' round talkin' about bein' the Hammer of God! I've never stopped to dope myself out any o' that hot air."

Again came that pregnant silence.

"You'll have to lay low for a while," calmly suggested the other.

"Oh, I'll lay dead, all right! And I'll keep clear o' this joint, too!"

I could hear him take a turn or two across the floor.

"What'll you do, Beansy?" he finally asked.

"Me? Oh, I'll yegg it for a month or two," was Beansy's indifferent response.

The knot was untying itself. The situation was flashing and leaping into one complete and coherent whole, like a pyrotechnic set-piece after the light had once been applied. I strained forward listening for the next word.

"I wouldn't scoff too much at that Hammer o' God idea," Beansy was sagely protesting. "It's goin' to help him die a damned sight easier than you or me'll die."

The other man laughed.

"I don't intend to die for a while yet. I've got some evenin' up to do first."

"Maybe you have, but in this particular line o' business you--"

"Shut up--there's the kid!" was Mack's sudden ejaculation.

Chapter XI—THE HAND BEHIND THE MALLET

The same cipherlike knock sounded on the outer door. I could hear one of the men hurry to answer it. A moment later I was listening to the voice of the rapt-eyed youth whom I had followed from Marvin Stillwell's office to the Fourteenth Street bookstore. His words were nothing more than a perfunctory regret for being late.

"You look sick," was the next remark that crept up to me. It came from the man called Beansy.

"I have been through enough to make me sick," answered the young man, in his world-weary monotone.

"Been through with what?" demanded MacGirr.

"Elvira Paladino," was all he answered.

"What she been doin'?"

"Begging me to withdraw from the Circle. She wants me to leave New York--at once--tonight."

"You're stuck on that woman!" was MacGirr's disgusted comment.

"Pardon?" said the younger man. Even my receiver transmitted the haughty iciness of that one word, foreignized by its transposed accent.

"I say you like that girl," reiterated MacGirr, in more qualified language.

"I fail to see what my attitude toward Elvira Paladino or any other woman has to do with what's before us," was the youth's deliberately challenging retort.

"Then what's she tryin' to stop us for?" persisted MacGirr. Something in the heaviness of his tone reminded me of a battleship manœuvring ponderously about a torpedo-boat.

"She claims we are being watched," answered the other.

"Who by?" put in Beansy.

"That she cannot tell; she does not know."

"Of course she don't," said MacGirr.

"But this afternoon when she went to my rooms she found some one inside. She was not admitted, yet this bit of paper was slipped under the door as she stood waiting outside."

My two typewritten lines, apparently, were being passed about the little circle in silence.

"This is a trick o' hers!" suddenly proclaimed MacGirr. "She's gone in there and doped this out herself."

"For what reason?" asked the impassive youth.

"First, simply because she's stuck on you. And second, simply because she's got cold feet, the

same as any woman'll get when it comes to a show-down. She's playin' you for a sucker!"

"I never knew Elvira Faladino to lie," was her champion's calm retort.

"Any woman'll lie, if it suits her game," was MacGirr's sage generalization.

"Did you ever know this woman to lie?"

"I don't know her as well as you do."

"She is not lying," replied the other, with what seemed his first touch of passion.

"Then who t' hell is buttin' in on our strawberry bed?" loudly demanded the ponderous MacGirr. His customary caution had deserted him.

"That's right; holler your business all over the ward!" reproved Beansy.

"But if we're being watched, who's watchin' us?" reiterated the bellicose MacGirr. No one answered him. "I'd like to see anybody try to sidetrack this game. I'd blow him higher than the Singer tower! We're in this too deep now to have--"

"S-s-sh!" whispered one of the men suddenly. A silence fell over them. It was broken by the muffled sound of the same strangely methodical rap on the outer door, the rap which I had already heard that night for the third time.

"Who's that?" whispered one of the men.

The knock was repeated, much louder than before. Some one tiptoed to the end of the room.

"Elvira Paladino," said the youth.

"Then she stays out," averred MacGirr.

"That she-dago'll have the whole precinct force in here if she keeps up that poundin'!" complained Beansy, the responsibilities of proprietorship apparently weighing heavily on him.

"For the love o' Heaven, get her in, then," sulkily conceded MacGirr.

It was apparently Beansy who tiptoed through to the front door and let her in.

The woman must have followed him into the back room, though all I could make sure of was the man's heavy tread.

The next sound that greeted my ears was the girl's exclamation of "Cono!" In that word seemed to be a world of reproof and pleading, contending torrents of anger and adoration. "You have not been honest with me!"

"I have never lied to you," answered the youth--doggedly, it seemed to me.

"You were not open with me," exclaimed the girl. "You did not tell me you would be here."

It was MacGirr's voice which next spoke.

"You can't expect a man to keep philanderin' round when he's got hard work ahead of him."

"Philandering?" echoed the girl.

"Yes--numphin', zootin', goo-gootin'--if that makes it any easier!"

I could hear her impatient little cry of contempt.

"Then you cannot stop to philander until you have been a jailbird?" she demanded.

"Cut that out!" cried the angered MacGirr. The girl apparently turned away from him.

"Cono, I want you to come with me," she pleaded in her deep, full-noted voice, the more musical because of its minute trace of foreign inflection. "You must come!"

"Your Cono's got Circle work to do, and you know it," broke in MacGirr once more.

"But he cannot do this work!" cried the girl. "It's no longer fair to him. It is not safe!"

She burst out into a sudden tumultuous torrent of what must have been Spanish. What she said I could not tell, but I felt that she was pleading with the obdurate youth, who kept replying to her only in dogged mono-syllables.

A vague impression of the unreality of the scene crept over me as I sat and listened. It did not seem that I was overhearing the talk of actual persons, with their conflicting aims and passions and interests. It seemed more like some strange drama that had been lived years and years before, and was now being reproduced for me from the unemotional record of a talking machine.

"Of course it's not safe," MacGirr's rough voice was saying. "There wouldn't be room for us all in the Circle if it was writin' sonnets and makin' paper flowers.

"Cono, I tell you these men are making a tool of you!" cried the distracted girl.

"We are all instruments of destiny," was the impassive answer of the unmoved young man.

"But I tell you we are being watched," persisted the girl. "You are being watched this minute."

"How d'you know that?" some one asked.

"I know it--I feel it! There is something hanging over us--something impending."

A woman's intuition, after all, is not a thing to be despised. MacGirr, however, felt otherwise.

"Let 'em watch--let 'em watch till the cows come home! It won't stop this business from goin' through. The boy knows it and he's goin' to stand by it."

The frantic young woman was by this time crying quite openly. Nothing was said, but I could hear the uneasy shuffle of the men's feet, as though her sobs disconcerted them.

"I thought you were one of us?" It was Cono Di Marco who spoke; there was a touch of bitterness in his reproof.

"If it were not you, Cono!" sobbed the young woman.

"You're done out," said MacGirr, in a somewhat milder voice. "You're kind o' tired and unstrung. What you want is a good night's sleep."

"Sleep!" scoffed the young woman.

"And I've got to get this place shut up some time," suggested the practical-minded Beansy.

Then I heard the woman once more address herself to Cono. Again she spoke in Spanish. I knew little of that language, unfortunately, but I could judge of the stress of her feeling by the rush and tumult of her full-voweled words, by her hurried ejaculations and answers. It ended in another storm of crying on her part, and what seemed to be an embarrassed silence on the part of the three men.

"What in hell's the use o' carryin' on this way?" pleaded MacGirr. "You'd think you were screwin' the boy down in his coffin. He's got all day tomorrow with you, if he wants to take it.

There's nothin' doing till Friday, anyway."

"It's not tomorrow morning?" demanded the woman.

"It's Friday morning at ten," answered MacGirr. "That gives you a whole day to chew over this trouble o' yours together."

There was further talk between the two in Spanish; it ended in the still-protesting woman being led away by Beansy Schmidlapp.

The moment the outer door had closed behind the two, MacGirr was back, cross-questioning the younger man.

"You've got everything worked out?"

"Everything," answered the other.

"You're sure there can't be a hitch?"

"There will be no hitch. If this man has prepared the bag as he said, the Circle's order will be carried out."

"Oh, Pepper Schlatter knows his business, all right, all right! Don't you lose sleep about him not dopin' out the bag. It's fixed and waitin' there behind you."

"It should be locked."

"And why locked?"

"In case I should be stopped with it for any reason."

This seemed to leave MacGirr silent for a second or two.

"Look here," he said at last. "Supposin' you're held up with this bag--I mean, supposing they should happen to get you with the goods on, what're you goin' to do?"

"Do?" repeated the youth in his dreamy monotone. "There's only one thing to do."

"What's that?" cut in the other.

There was no audible answer to this. The reply to MacGirr's question must have been given in pantomime.

"You know what it means?" asked the older man, seeming a little incredulous.

The youth answered that he fully understood. "We are the instruments of destiny," he averred.

"The Hammer o' God!" assented the hypocritical MacGirr.

I would have given a good deal, at that moment, to have seen the faces of those two men. The silence was interrupted by the entrance of the returning Beansy.

"I suppose we've got to shut up for the night?" said MacGirr.

"Don't light that cigar in here," warned the sharp voice of the printer.

"Right you are, Beansy," answered MacGirr. "Who carries the key for that bag?"

"It's on the hook in the ink-cupboard; it's not needed. That bag is complete from soup to caps."

"All right--then let's beat it. My throat's as dry as a lime-kiln."

I heard the shuffling of feet, a snap of the light-switch, the opening and closing of doors, and I

knew that they had gone for the night.

Chapter XII—THE BASE OF SUPPLIES

I waited until I knew the coast was clear. Then for the second time in a somewhat varied and extensive career I became a house-breaker; uninvited, unlawfully, surreptitiously, I entered on the property of another man.

I cannot say that I felt at ease while doing so. My hands were shaking as I quietly raised the back window that opened from my room upon the rusty iron fire-escape. I tried to fortify myself with the assurance that this was due more to the excitement of accomplishing my purpose than to trepidation over an initial plunge into the gentle art of the second-story man. Indeed, all thought as to my own emotions was quickly submerged in the joyful discovery that MacGirr had, as I suspected, left the lower window unlatched.

It took but a moment to raise it and work my way inside, feet first. I closed the sash after me, and stood in the unbroken quietness of the empty room, listening.

It was as still as a tomb. The air was heavy with an indescribable, acrid, pungent smell, a penetrating and all-pervading aroma of acid salts stronger even than the benzine smell of the printer's shop. My first impulse was to strike a match and get at least a vague idea of my surroundings. But on second thought I decided otherwise. I reached to the top of the window and drew down the double blinds which I found there. Then I tiptoed across the room toward the door, which I found after a few moments of padding around in the pitchlike darkness. As I had hoped, it was furnished with a huge metal bolt on the inside. This I promptly slipped home into its socket. Thereafter I groped and felt along the walls until my fingers came in contact with the electric light-switch. Listening again to make sure that everything was safe, I turned the switch and flooded the room with light.

I stood against the wall accustoming my eyes to the glare and peering about at the scene before me. It took but a momentary inspection to show that my vaguely formed suspicions were not altogether incorrect. I had forced my way into what was nothing more or less than the "gun-joint" or fulminate factory of some unknown East Side gang. Whether they were mere Black-handers or "Reds" I could not make sure. I had often heard that many of these little East Side printing shops were hotbeds of Bolshevistic literature. The youth called Cono Di Marco, I felt, carried more the characteristics of an obsessed "Red" than those of a yeggman turned footpad. The boy was obviously being made a tool of by this out-and-out highwayman known as Red-Flag Mack, this "gun-shover" who had served time, this vindictive and malevolent criminal seeking his own selfish ends. And there was also Beansy Schmidlapp, alias Pepper Schlatter; but I would know more of Beansy, I felt, when I had seen a little more of that odoriferous back-room powder-shanty of his.

To the casual eye there was, about this room, little that could be called striking. Along one wall ran a sort of long work-bench, at one end of which was a tier of shelves, at the other end a tap and sink. About one-third of the shelf was covered by a piece of white oilcloth. At one side of this stood a jagged piece of plate-glass, on which lay what looked like a long-handled wooden salad-spoon. Close beside this rested a small cedar paddle which might have been cut out of a roof-shingle. Behind these again stood a pair of chemist's scales, a mortar and a pestle, a retort

or two, a mixing-bowl and a disorderly row of japanned tin boxes. On the other side of the room, between two forms of unused type, stood a carboy of nitric acid, a rusty slice-galley, a yellow calfskin valise, a can or two of cylinder-ink and a few bales of dust-covered paper.

I looked more closely at the shelves next the work-bench. I saw quickly enough that the hard silver-white crystals in the bottle before me were crystals of antimony, and that the copper capsules in the tin boxes were fulminate detonators. I next found an envelope-box half-filled with electric detonators, made of a stretch of copper wire with a piece of platinum resistance-coil in a plug of ground glass and sulphur. Next came a fuse-crimper, a chunk of still moist modeling-clay, a cigar-box holding giant caps, a canister nearly full of sal-soda, a partly dismantled clock-bomb and a vial of mercury.

I wondered, as I remembered the nitric acid, if this rough-and-ready chemist had been reckless enough to attempt in such surroundings the blending of mercury fulminate. Its manufacture, I knew, was a simple enough process, the sole difficulty of which was that the resultant greyish powder had to be washed and air-dried. To play steam laundry to such a mixture meant danger; for, besides being one of the strongest explosives known to modern science, mercury fulminate also has the disagreeable trick of detonating under some slight friction, at its own sweet will.

My next discovery almost caused me to admire the owner of that little East Side arsenal. For the fact that before me stood a vial of potassium nitrate, cheek by jowl with another of chlorate, and that under the bench stood a box of carefully cleaned wheat-bran, convinced me that the man had actually been attempting the manufacture of asphaline, one of the most dangerous and unstable of all high explosives. To make such an explosive under such conditions was more than toying with death; it was, as Lefty Boyle would have put it, flirting with a tombstone.

So my next discovery did not surprise me. The man had actually manufactured nitric-ether with a wooden paddle! Had he deliberately made that oily-looking fluid whose concoction is not ended until glycerine is stirred in? This stirring--seeing that the result is nitroglycerine, and that if the instruments are dirty or the glycerine impure there is every promise of spontaneous explosion and equally prompt annihilation of the mixer and his building--is usually done by means of compressed air, with the most scrupulous exactitude and under the keenest inspection.

Laid out on a sheet of white paper were three familiar-looking tubes. I bent over them gingerly, for I had seen such things before. The man had been making dynamite cartridges. Instead of using infusorial earth or fossil-flour for a "dope," he had used wheat-bran--which was, of course, to cushion the explosive against possible shock. But I could see where the free nitroglycerine had leaked down from the cartridge paper and stained the white sheet, so clumsily was that "dope" soaked with the pure "soup," and so awkwardly were the malignant little cylinders filled with their million devils of imprisoned force.

When my eye fell on a bunch of tape-fuses not five feet away from these grease-soaked dealers of destruction, I felt that I had seen enough of the place. No wonder Beansy Schmidlapp had commanded MacGirr to put out his light! I wanted to get away, to be where I could breathe fresh air and move in safety. I suddenly grew nauseated at the thought of all these hellish instruments of torture with their suggestion of mangling and rending. And I had suddenly awakened to the fact that the danger of outside interruption was almost as great as the danger from that venomous table over which some bristling fatality seemed to brood and frown.

I pulled myself together and groped my way to the ink-pantry. There, after a minute's search, I found the key that the printer had spoken of to MacGirr. Then I cautiously lifted the little calfskin valise to the middle of the floor and as cautiously unlocked it.

The valise contained what must have been the rubber bladder from a football, and about a dozen detonating caps buried in a cushion of harsh-feeling cotton-fibre. This fibre, I saw, was gun-cotton. The rubber bag, which was filled with a thick and oily liquid, must have held, I judged, between three and four quarts. I lifted it carefully out of the valise, and slowly and cautiously poured its contents into a wooden pail standing under the water-tap. I held my breath as I did so, for I could see that this honeylike liquid was whitish and opaque. When nitroglycerine is not as clear as water it is always impure; and when impure it stands amenable to the laws of neither God nor man.

I next carefully washed the wooden paddle, for the first problem before me--no easy one to solve--was to get rid of that ugly-looking nitroglycerine. Such "soup" could not be hidden away. It could not be thrown into a garbage-barrel to lie like a mine until some shock detonated it; it could not be burned; it could not be poured down a sink or permitted to flow through a sewer, to be a danger to all New York and a menace to Hudson River shipping even when on its way to the sea.

But I remembered the sal-soda. Reaching up for the canister, I made sure of the nature of its contents. Then, by carefully stirring a solution of sal-soda in the proper quantity of water into the oily "soup," it was quietly and gradually decomposed. It was left, in the end, as harmless as a pan of dish-water.

After dumping the stuff into the sink I carefully washed the paddle and the rubber bag, until not a globule of grease remained. Then I carefully picked the detonating caps from the yellow calfskin valise and restored them to their mates in the tin box. The gun-cotton, I knew, was harmless enough when wet. So I soaked it with water, wrapped it in a clean sheet of printing-paper and stored it away on the dusty top shelf of the ink-pantry.

I stood in the centre of the room for a minute or two, puzzling over what my next move should be. I soon reached a decision. If I had drawn the teeth of Beansy's little tiger of destruction, it was only too evident that the valise had been interfered with. So I took the empty rubber bladder, filled it with water from the tap and carefully tied it at the top. I next made sure that the calfskin valise was quite empty and quite clean. Then I placed in the bottom of it a few handfuls of wheat-bran and adjusted the bladder full of water so that it would nestle in this. I locked the valise, restored it to its original position and replaced the key on its hook in the ink-pantry. Then I slid back the bolt, switched out the light, put up the double blinds, climbed guardedly out through the window and up the rusty fire-escape to my own room.

I felt, as I made my way home at midnight, tired and hungry, that my day had not been a wasted one, from any standpoint. I felt, indeed, very much as a general must feel who has planned his formations and movements and defence-lines, and is waiting for the opening gun to mark the enemy's advance. But for one whole day, I suddenly remembered to my humiliation and bewilderment, I had not stopped to think of Natalie Ethelwyn Stillwell.

Chapter XIII—THE LAST DAY

"Davis, do you think you could secure a pair of handcuffs for me?"

I looked up from my iced grapefruit, the following morning at breakfast, as I sat before my own damask, fittingly tubbed, shaved and clothed, revelling in the familiar but never quite appreciated luxury of an unhurried meal.

Davis, of course, showed no emotion at my casual question.

"I think so, sir," he answered. "Will you want them at once, sir?"

"I'd like them some time before tonight," was my answer.

"Yes, sir," said Davis, as he opened and folded my morning paper and adjusted it against the toast rack. I have never known him to vary a degree in the angle at which he placed that carefully folded paper.

"And could you get hold of a couple of thirty-eight calibre Colts?" I added without looking up.

"Yes, sir, I think so," answered that paragon of outward apathy. I must confess, however, that there were rare occasions when Davis and his imperturbability almost exasperated me. This was one of them.

"And I may need your help a bit, Davis," I continued.

"Yes, sir," was his impassive reply.

I began to wonder just how we two could work together to the greatest advantage. I wanted the entire movement and the entire triumph to be mine. It would be easy enough to call in Lieutenant Belton or to get in touch with Lefty Boyle. But that would be nothing less than a surrender of the case into professional hands. I wanted to work the tangle out with my own head and in my own way. I would see the thing through to the end now; I was as jealous of it as a bird-dog is of his first "point." I resented the mere thought of interference from outsiders.

I began to rehearse the case in my mind leisurely, as a gourmet might turn over and over on his tongue some complicated triumph of the culinary art. It was now half-past nine in the morning. That left me twenty-four hours in which to perfect my plans. The amiable gentleman known as Beansy, *alias* Pepper Schlatter, did not count, for the present. This was equally true of the young woman of the black veil, though I stored away in the pigeon-holes of consciousness a firm resolution to find out more about that young woman, when occasion should permit. Somewhat regretfully I felt that she would have to be left for later and more leisurely investigation.

MacGirr himself was the man I wanted. His tool, Cono Di Marco, was equally dangerous, as things went, but he would be easier to handle. They would not be together, luckily, when the time for the final *coup* arrived. That, of course, would be in twenty-four hours. The Stock Exchange, I remembered, opened at ten. Cono Di Marco would then present himself at the entrance to the visitors' gallery, show his card, and be admitted.

I suddenly jumped from my chair. I was a fool. I had taken an oily and tricky enemy at his word.

"It's *today*! It's this very morning!" I declared, as the truth of the one thing flashed through my bewildered brain.

"It's today!" I repeated aloud. Even the impassive, black-clad Davis had stirred a little uneasily.

"Davis," I cried. "Get the garage on the phone. Tell them to have my car at the door as soon as

they can--at once! If they can't have it here in five minutes, tell them to send anything that's outside and ready--any old car on wheels."

I looked at my watch. It was twenty-eight minutes to ten. I had been sitting there wasting time, mooning and preening like a green parrot, when the fate of the most essential and dominating body of men in all the world of business lay in the balance. My mistake was imperilling the existence of the men on whom depended the perpetuation of a nation's trade and prosperity. And ten to one I had already lost my chance.

It was plain enough that the man had lied. MacGirr had simply misled the girl. He had glibly told her a day later, to throw her off the track. Everything had been made ready; they had no reason for further delay. The *coup* was under way at that very moment. And I remembered Pepper Schlatter's words to the other conspirators: "I'll see everything's O. K. for the kid!" That meant that a minute's inspection of the bag might show him it had been tampered with. Another minute's work could replace the bladder of water with enough of one of his cursed fulminates to blow the dome off the Exchange and send its six fluted marble pillars tumbling and crumbling into Broad Street.

I had been too sure of myself; I had crowed too soon. By overlooking one link in my chain of deduction I had endangered the lives of a thousand men. I was threatening, not only New York, but every acre of America where grain grew--every factory where a wheel moved, every family where a meal was eaten--with a cataclysm unparalleled in history. I was crushing the central heart that fed a nation's farthest arteries of commerce; I was flinging a blight on a whole continent's thrift and hope.

"The car will be at the door, sir, by the time you are down," announced the matter-of-fact and steadying voice of Davis. I caught my coat and hat and gloves from him, and turned back at the door.

"Come on, Davis!" I cried.

"With you, sir?"

"Yes, quick!" For I remembered that he could drive a car, even if it was in an over-scrupulous and snail-like way. I preferred, for the present at least, keeping the story strictly in the family, as it were.

I was in the car and swinging down Fifth Avenue before Davis was fairly seated. I pedalled the accelerator when I saw an opening in the traffic-lines, and skidded round into Twenty-fifth Street and then down the west stretch of Madison Square.

"Officer is warning you, sir, I think," said Davis, as I bounded and pounded over the Twenty-third Street car-tracks while I still had a clear roadway.

"I can't help it," I cried. "We've got to get to the Stock Exchange before ten!"

We were in the canyon of Broadway itself by this time, and when I saw its morning tangle of traffic I cursed my luck that I had not kept straight down University Place to Washington Square.

"We can't make it, sir," said Davis, studying his large and intimidating silver watch. I felt this to be true even before he spoke.

"Could I do it by subway?" I asked, for the car took up most of my thought.

"By an express at Fourteenth Street, sir. But you would lose time again getting from Wall Street station."

"I'll have to--there's no chance with this traffic!"

"It's too bad, sir," said Davis, for just above Union Square a jam of trucks and cabs and crawling four-wheeled things held us up again, and a mounted traffic-squad "canary" ordered me behind a snail-paced taxicab.

"I'm going to swing out and around to the east of the square and then dive for the subway," I told Davis. "You stay with the car. Get to the Exchange on Broad Street if you can. If that 'canary' causes trouble, get MacMullen on the wire."

"Yes, sir," said Davis.

I defied the traffic regulations of the City of New York and cut sharply across the line, lifting a florist wagon's hind wheel as I went. An astounded patrolman ordered me to stop, but I did not even answer or look at him. In the open spaces of the square I threw on full speed again and swung down Fourth Avenue until the Fourteenth Street jam once more hemmed us in.

"Smooth down that officer, Davis, if he gets after you," I said as I dived for the subway entrance.

It was sixteen minutes to ten when I took a seat in the south-bound express. I seemed to be carrying that train down on my shoulders. I sat there with my watch in my hand, staring at the second-hand as it wheeled off the precious minutes, torturing my mind with the problem of whether or not I should be too late.

Chapter XIV—IN THE VISITORS' GALLERY

At four minutes to ten by my watch I was once more in the open air. I peered down the narrow valley of gloom between the towering cliffs, momentarily wondering when my eyes would see the heavens about me split by some sudden eruption, schooling my ears to be prepared for the roar and shock which would tell me that somewhere between New and Broad Streets the worst had happened.

Men looked after me as I ran. Jocular messenger-boys called and whistled and jeered; the surging morning crowd through which I darted and elbowed my way must have taken me for a madman or a drunkard pursued by the fiends of delirium. But I neither looked aside nor wavered. I neither stopped nor permitted myself to be stopped until I had plunged, hot and panting, into the round-arched doorway that led to the visitors' gallery.

The necessity of convincing the doorkeeper of my right to enter, even with the essential member's card in my hand, and then later the slow ascent to the gallery itself, seemed a tragic waste of time. I was almost tempted to announce to the placid-eyed attendants about me the somewhat melodramatic information that any moment might be their last. But life was too short even for that consolingly theatrical side-issue.

At last I was in the eastern loft of the exchange known as the visitors' gallery. My watch said one minute past ten. And still the Exchange stood.

But, as I made my way down toward the railing that guarded the gallery-edge from the pit itself,

I heard a gong strike. It sent a thrill and a quiver of startled nerves through my body; and it was a second or two before I realized that it was simply the ten o'clock signal for the day's business on the floor to begin. Still I saw no signs of disaster.

The market held every promise of being an unsteady one. The day, like the days that had preceded it, threatened to be troubled. For, even as the gong struck, a sudden babel of sound exploded up out of the pit, echoing to the panelled roof of the great, high-ceilinged room. I looked about for a glimpse of Cono Di Marco. But still I could see no trace of him. And still the Exchange stood.

About the sixteen posts that studded the wide valley of the floor were groups of suddenly frenzied men. Some posts held but few; others seemed to cause human particles to fly back and forth and cling about them like iron-filings about a magnet. Pages in grey uniforms ran hither and thither. During each momentary lull of the storm the telegraph-keys, in the booths at the far end of the great chamber, rattled and cluttered and droned. The clustering black masses of humanity boiled and erupted and fell back. Hands waved and writhed and semaphored; the sound of the contending voices became a sustained and continued monotone. The vice-president occupied his official post. The movement and excitement increased; the uniformed sergeants kept watch over the hurrying messenger-boys; dispatches were more feverishly received and delivered; pads were scribbled on, sheets of paper were waved and tossed and shredded and thrown broadcast about the floor. It was like looking down into the crater of an immense volcano seething and bubbling with restless and wasteful fires. It was pandemonium let loose, pre-Adamitic chaos restored to the world.

Fully two-thirds of the floor-members--and I knew there were eleven hundred of them--must have been engulfed and fighting in that frenzied maelstrom. There they writhed and shouted and grimaced and signalled and scribbled on order-blanks, the slaves and emissaries of their thrice-veiled goddess known as Fortune; there they bought and sold, little dreaming of what hung over them. They only knew that they were the buyers and sellers of half a world, a nation's testers of values, the blindly moving barometer of a troubled hemisphere.

They seemed to me like strange pagans fretting about the floor of their over-stately and over-pillared temple, as heavily columned as some Doric home of earth's most ancient gods. They shouted orders and shook fingers at one another; they menaced their fellows with darting pads and open throats, like angry snakes at the coil; they tore up order-slips and showered their friends and foes until the vast floor was white with their fall, like a valley in the Rockies after a snow-storm. There they burrowed and builded and worked and wasted, as blindly as a hill of restless ants on whom the prostrating ploughshare of an outside world was soon to descend.

They seemed to take on an indescribable pathos--the pathos of a people unconscious of their tomorrow, blind to its possibilities and its perils. And still the Exchange stood. The blow might not have fallen, but it was destined still to fall.

Then my eyes, which all this time had been searching the gallery about me, no longer noticed the tiers of faces at my side or the far-off movements and shadows of the floor. For, as I watched, a gallery door opened and closed and two newcomers entered.

The first was Cono Di Marco. His hands were empty. But under the flaps of his short overcoat, hung there apparently by a strap about his shoulders, was the calfskin bag. I could not actually see the bag itself, yet I knew it was there, as plainly as though my eyes beheld it.

I also knew that the figure behind him was Elvira Paladino, the woman of the black veil. And my heart almost stopped beating for a moment; for as I saw them I knew that the drama had narrowed down to its last movements.

Chapter XV—THE LAST MOVE

I knew that I could never have got to the side of that insane youth. I knew that I could never have intercepted him, even though I had leaped for him openly and recklessly at the moment when my eye had fallen on him. The next thought that flashed through my mind was that it had been foolish of me to come unarmed. I might at least have taken a chance of winging him before he could make the last move of that mad plan of his. Then I had a vague consciousness of the woman coming to a halt half-way toward the railing.

It could only have taken a second or two, yet I had time to notice the nervous movement of her hand as she caught up the folds of her veil over her black hat-brim. I could also see the blue veins in her temple stand out against the ivory-like pallor of her face. Some strange agony of uncomprehending revolt, some look of mute terror in her wide and shadowy eyes, made her face a fitting model for a mask of Tragedy itself. It seemed apocalyptic, Cassandra-like. It must have been some such look that Joan wore at Rheims, or Sappho knew in that last moment before she leaped from the Leucadian rock.

I couldn't see the steady quiver of the woman's lips where the slender oval of her chin merged into the tender and troubled hollow between mouth and cheek-bone. Yet there was some strange transfiguration. A deadly white calm of resignation was on her face, the resignation of a soul so crushed by pain that any further sting of fate could seem but trivial to her. I remember, too, that she gave one stifled little cry as she raised her hands and covered her face with them. That cry brought every eye in the gallery round to her. A rustle ran through the tiers of peering visitors as they gaped at that strange figure, unable to decide whether they were beholding a "bargain hunter" whose fortune had been wiped out on the floor, or merely a woman grown faint as she staggered out for fresh air.

But it was at the precise moment of that broken cry that Cono Di Marco had reached the gallery railing. His entire advance, since he had first entered the door, had taken up but a few seconds of time. Between us crowded a cluster of "rail-birds" and anxious-eyed "lambs" and "bargain-hunters" watching their brokers. There was also a line of wonder-stricken Cook's tourists, and what I accepted as an out-of-town delegation of school-teachers being shown the intricacies of an active day on the Exchange. The passing figure of that white-faced youth with a small hand-bag under his coat-flaps meant nothing to them. But to me, as I saw that figure at the rail, he spelled one stupendous and unanswerable Perhaps, as thought and counterthought flashed back and forth across startled consciousness. Was or was not that yellow calfskin bag as it had been left and locked by me, the night before? Had it been opened and interfered with? Was its descent to mark the ruin of a great structure of stone and steel where seven hundred men contended and shouted or was it a quart or two of tap water to fall harmlessly to the paper-littered floor? Was that shouting and seething mass of human beings to be obliterated; were they to be wiped out as the blot on the Brotherhood of Man that their contention and madness seemed to make them? Were they to be crushed by the hand of a half-mad youth in the most frenzied moment of their pursuit for power and gold? Or was the unexpected to intervene, and

in some way still stop that ominous little bag of yellow calfskin from falling?

The unexpected did not happen. There was no wait, no hesitation, excepting for one brief fraction of a second as the calm-eyed youth swung the bag up to the top of the railing. That short moment, however, allowed the tableau to form and fix itself in one ever-memorable picture. The floor below still gave up its roar of careless sound; the battling and buying and selling went madly on; the grey-clad messengers still came and went; the telegraph-keys still clicked and pounded and cluttered; the "rail-birds" still peered wonderingly back at the figure of the white-faced woman, and through the huge windows still streamed the kindly light of open day.

Then the bag fell.

I crouched down and back, mechanically, instinctively pressing away from the cauldron of sound which was doomed to become a crater of suddenly rending fire. I remember the sudden and ominous lull that swept over the tumult of the floor. It seemed to me, at first, like some high-roofed cathedral when its great organ has ceased to sound. I can never forget that silence, as though some huge dynamo had come to a standstill, as though the power-belt had suddenly fallen from some Gargantuan mill.

But it lasted for only a second. One explosive and derisive shout arose from the pit, one jeer and volley of laughter. Then the tumult of voices began again, with renewed fury. The telegraph-keys clicked and clattered; the grey-clad pages dodged and darted back and forth; upthrust hands waved and semaphored at upthrust hands; orders were given and taken and given again; and those strange things called "shares," those strange values for which negroes sweated in tropical suns and bleached men laboured in mines and children sickened in factories, were once more bought and sold. The writhing ant-hill went on with its blind and uncomprehending life, and the same kindly light still streamed in through the huge windows.

There are moments, even potentially cataclysmic, which seem to benumb memory. The bag had fallen. Of that I was certain. I was equally certain, too, that it had reached the Exchange floor in the same condition as when I had locked and left it. But what followed that discovery has always seemed misty and dream-like, a procession of unco-ordinated impressions.

I remember hurrying towards the gallery door, I remember coming up with the grey-lipped youth and his stare of wonder as he saw my face--which, in fact, may have been as white as his own. I remember his quick movement as I advanced towards him, his sudden backward step until he stood flat against the bare wall of the corridor. As he did so his hand went down to his pocket and came up again quickly, with a glimmer of metal as it came.

This must have rather terrified me, although, as I remember it, there was neither anger nor resentment on his face. He seemed so bloodless and fragile, so possessed with the lassitude of utter weariness, that the ferocity with which I fell on him would surely have looked foolish to an onlooker. The force I made use of was absurd. But I did not fully understand. I imagined, in my blindness, that he intended that gun for me. And I must have leaped for it with the whole-souled alacrity which only blind terror, and the knowledge that life is sweet, can inspire.

I leaped at him like a lunatic, carrying him to the floor of that empty corridor with the force of the impact, grabbing and clutching for his gun hand as we fell. I could feel the gun-hammer snap and pinch the flesh of my palm; I could hear his half-moaned "Let me die!" But I did not stop until I had that revolver in my possession.

How I got him to his feet, and then out to the street, I can scarcely remember. The youth himself

seemed so dazed and weak that at first I thought I had in some way stunned him during that none too gentle scrimmage. Then I even began to suspect that his lassitude was due to his being under the influence of some drug. But in the end I concluded that it was more the dull narcotic of that terror which comes to man when he has once deliberately peered over the brink of Death itself, when he has once keyed himself up to confronting the Unknown. And I felt almost sorry for that mad young "Red" as I held his arm firmly in mine and helped him out across the sidewalk.

There I found Davis, the efficient and self-effacing and ever dependable Davis, waiting for me in the touring-car as patiently and placidly as though I had left him but a minute before to purchase a ticket for the opera.

I swung the tonneau door open and forced the passive boy into the car. I tapped the coat pocket where the captured revolver rested. Then I took my seat beside him, with my hand still on the revolver.

"Where to, sir?" inquired Davis, without so much as looking at us out of the tail of his eye.

"To Police Headquarters," I said, slamming the tonneau door shut.

Chapter XVI—THE PRISONER OF WAR

The privilege of being the arm of the law is not always a pleasant one. The prerogatives of authority carry with them their own perplexities. And the paths of duty, either official or personal, are not always as straight and clear-cut as a street-car track.

These sadly axiomatic truths came home during the hour that followed, as I sat closeted with my friend, Lieutenant Belton.

My own expedients already seemed absurd to me. The thought of "shanghai-ing" Cono Di Marco, of carrying him off for a few days at sea on the *Attila*, assumed a more and more ridiculously melodramatic complexion. The temptation to send him out to Beaumaris, my country home, had also been dismissed as impracticable. Nor could I keep him locked up in my city bathroom, poking food gingerly in to him, as one might with a poodle suspected of the rabies.

And yet I wanted him to be a prisoner quite as much as I wanted the cause of his detention to remain unknown. I could not afford to have the meaning of his *coup* become public property. It would be equally hazardous to me and my ends to allow him to communicate with his unsavory Inner Circle associates. I suspected, on the whole, that he would be willing enough to remain quiescent--quiescent, at least, with all but his own friends. And even those friends could not afford to be too openly inquisitive.

Lieutenant Belton puzzled me a little, so prompt was his appreciation of my problem. I entertained no suspicion, in my gratitude at his respect for my own reticences, that he himself knew more than he cared to say. In fact, I was not thinking a great deal about him. My mind was concentrated on one point, on one fixed determination; and that was to keep the "Hammer of God" and his friends my own personal and particular case. So if there were certain things which I confided to Lieutenant Belton, there were other things on which I decided to remain silent.

"I guess we can fix you up, all right," was the lieutenant's easy acknowledgment.

"But how?" I demanded, still puzzled by some vague trace of humour on that officer's countenance. His powers, I knew, were not imperial. He was small fry, compared with the officials under the same roof where we sat.

"Oh, I'll have Finley phone over to Hulsart," he explained. "We can always count on Hulsart in a case like this."

"And then?" I asked, remembering that Hulsart was a "Tammany" magistrate with a *penchant* for disconcertingly plain talk from the bench.

"Then we'll have your man brought up before Hulsart this afternoon. You'll have to lay a charge of assault, or--"

"But my dear man, he didn't assault me," I interrupted, beginning as I was to learn how circuitous were the ways of justice, how thin sometimes stood the partition between the criminal and the so-called protector of society.

"Well, supposing he didn't! You've got to have something to hold him on. If you don't want to make it assault, make it joy-riding in your machine, or grabbing an overcoat, or any old thing that sounds reasonable. That'll hold him till you've straightened out what you want to. Between ourselves, we've just held a bath-tub-murder-suspect for three weeks on trick charges like that."

"But what am I going to prove, when the case comes up?"

"You needn't prove anything much, if you don't want to. You can merely let the case fall through. But in the meantime, the trick's been turned. You've held your man, and neither he nor his friends know why."

"It doesn't seem quite honest and above-board," I still objected, losing a little of my respect for the law even while I attained to a new admiration for the resourcefulness of its officers.

"A house-dog has to have sharp teeth," was Lieutenant Belton's laconic explanation. "And when you know the criminal as well as we do, down here, you'll understand why we're satisfied to fall back on the dog-eat-dog idea so often!"

"But how about the details?" I asked, still puzzling over the Jesuitic contention that two wrongs could make a right.

"Oh, we'll fix things up for you," he averred, with the calm confidence of the hierophant not caring to disclose his discretionary powers to the mere neophyte. "And the first thing to do is to steer the newspaper boys off the trail, and keep 'em off."

And just how efficiently that "fixing up" and "steering off" was done became manifest to me as I went through the daily papers, early the next morning, and on the second page of one found nothing more than a brief item to the effect that some excited or over-jocular tourist had the day before dropped a leather hand-bag from the Visitors' Gallery of the Stock Exchange.

"The joker escaped in the excitement that reigned on the floor," continued this item. "The falling bag, however, just grazed the shoulder of Mr. Gustave Loeb, the younger member of the firm of Loeb, Silverthorn & Loeb. As it remained uncalled for it was opened in an effort to discover its owner, and oddly enough was found to contain a rubber hot-water bottle and a sample of breakfast-food. This caused several interesting rumours on the street, the least improbable of which was the intimation that the accident was in some way intended as a symbol of the drop in wheat, combined with this morning's liquidations resulting from the

Stillwell movement in U. S. Rubber."

Having perused this enlightening paragraph for the second time, with the smile of those who know more of a passing mystery than is permitted to the world at large, I opened a day-old telegram which I found to be signed "Natalie."

"Why have I never heard from you especially on the matter of the Hammer?"

I suddenly realized that Natalie Stillwell and her existence had completely passed out of my memory. This discovery brought with it a certain mental discomfort, for Natalie was not the sort of young lady to be lightly neglected. Yet, as I thought of her, I was able to think of her as only something aloof and ornamental, as something remote from the dustier world and the sterner issues into which I had plunged. So there was, I fear, a slight note of condescension in my attitude as I sent off a telegram to her, at Palm Beach, announcing that the Hammer of God mystery had been cleared up and no further cause for anxiety remained. And to this message I appended, not the familiar sobriquet of "Rebbie," but the more dignified "Alfred Rebstock Woodruff."

Chapter XVII—A VISIT AT MIDNIGHT

"A lady to see you, sir," said Davis, my man, with that self-effacement which could leave him so dependably automaton-like when the occasion seemed to demand it. With some inward irritation I glanced up at my tiny Louis XIV clock. It showed eight minutes to midnight. The theatres were little more than out; the opera was just over. I was about to be invaded, apparently, by the Wilmer-Gibsons or the Van Alstyne's. The situation, after all, was simple enough.

But the achieved immobility of Davis' face still somewhat disturbed me.

"Is she alone?" I ventured to inquire, with considerable emphasis on the last word.

"Quite alone, sir," was the solemn answer.

"But what name, Davis?" I asked, a little impatiently. Davis flickered an eyebrow like the signal disc of an annunciator. It was a mute but aggrieved protest against any derision of his dependability.

"She gave none, sir."

I put down my volume of Turgenev. Then I looked up at Davis. He put his clustered fingers to his lips and gave vent to a ghost of a cough.

"But just what kind of a lady?" I mildly inquired.

"She's wearing a veil, sir. It's a very heavy one."

"That is interesting."

Davis looked over his shoulder a little uneasily. "She's bent on seeing you, sir."

I arose from my deep-cushioned reading-chair. The most interesting things in life, after all, do not come from between the covers of a book.

"Show her in, please," I said to Davis, in my most matter-of-fact tones.

The funereal black figure withdrew, with a second annunciator-like flicker of the aggrieved eyebrow. I leaned back and gazed about my curio-hung walls, with a pretence of *ennui*. But I wondered if Davis had seen through my hypocrisy as I had seen through his. Midnight visitors with heavy veils do not always leave you as calm as you may pretend to be.

I swung about to my old Florentine writing-table, and made a move as though to begin writing a letter. I knew well enough that the movement was nothing more than a feint to hide my ever-increasing impatience. Scarcely had I dipped my pen in the ink when my portières were drawn back and a woman stepped into the room.

I arose from my chair as she advanced toward me without speaking. Even before she caught her heavy veil up around the rim of her dark hat, it flashed over me just who my visitor was. There was no mistaking the poise of the slender figure, so severely clad in black; the forward bend of the torso from the narrow hips upward; the unequivocating directness of movement; the almost child-like impersonal candour of outlook. With my first glimpse of the white face beneath the uplifted veil, I knew that I could not be mistaken; it was the young woman who called herself Elvira Paladino.

She came to a standstill in the centre of the room. There seemed to be something defiant, and yet something almost pitiful, in her attitude.

"You are Rebstock Woodruff," she began, looking me straight between the eyes.

I bowed in acknowledgment of that somewhat curt salutation. Her sense of pallid detachment from the ordinary things of earth, her weary indifference, her embodiment of a listlessness that was as unfeigned as it was exquisite, made my mind go back to one of Botticelli's Madonnas.

"It is very late, I know," she said. "But I must see you."

I knew from the tremor in her voice that she was more embarrassed than her words might imply. Nor was I less ill at ease. I had the presence of mind, however, to bow again and point toward my deep-cushioned arm-chair. I knew that in this position the light of my reading-lamp would fall directly on her face. And I was particularly anxious to see the face more clearly, to study it more intimately, more leisurely.

The young woman sat down, with something that was almost a gesture of weariness. The face that I saw in the lamp-light was thinner than when I had last seen it, but the clarity of the profile was unchanged, and the raptness of the eyes had not altered. The contour was the same slender oval, tapering to a chin that was too sharply defined to be called pear-shaped. It was neither this profile nor the Greek chin with the small cleft in it, I decided, that made her face remind me of a statue's. It was, rather, the deep shadow under the soft, yet severe, brows, which seemed to leave her face veiled in inscrutabilities, touched with mystery, like the face of a great artist's *Hosea*.

"What can I do for you?" I found myself asking, in a more kindly voice than I had at first intended.

"You caused the arrest of Cono Di Marco," she began, without looking up at me. She spoke in a defiant monotone, which seemed to denote recognition of a disagreeable task being faced only through coercion.

"I did," was my reply.

Her earnest eyes lifted and studied my face for a moment before she spoke again. I could see that it was not easy for her.

"Why did you?" she asked.

"Need I answer that?"

"I should like to know," she replied.

"Is there anything unnatural in a desire to protect my friends from the operations of a criminal?"

"You are not protecting your friends," she retorted, with what was almost a touch of defiance.

"I am at least doing what I can to protect them. But we'll have to let events themselves speak for that."

There was another moment or two of silence. The woman seemed to be reining in some impulse to say out what might not be the best for her. Then she looked up at me again.

"You are the chief witness against Cono Di Marco."

Again I bowed without speaking.

"You are the only witness against him," she went on, more passionately. "It will be you alone who will secure his imprisonment, for what was only a mistake of judgment, only a sort of madness."

"No, madam; for a crime, one of the most carefully planned and diabolical of crimes."

"No, no; it was not a crime!" she cried. "It was only an obsession."

"Then far too dangerous for me to run the risk of its being repeated."

"He is only a boy," she declared, slowly drawing one black glove through her white fingers.

"Yet quite old enough to imperil seven hundred human lives!" I retorted.

"He scarcely understood," she said in a lowered voice. "His judgment had been warped. His mind had been unsettled by worry. He had been made a tool of by the real culprits. He was not responsible any more than a drunkard would be responsible."

"And you were sent here, I assume, by those real culprits?"

"No, I was not," she answered.

"Then why are you telling me all this?" I asked.

She leaned forward in her chair, and her thin hands came together with a gesture that seemed half appeal and half helplessness.

"I want to ask you--to implore you not to appear against Cono Di Marco!" She uttered the words hurriedly, as though ashamed of the emotion which had crept into them. "I want to plead for him, to make you promise not to be hard on him."

"The matter has passed out of my hands."

"Out of your hands?"

"Yes, it is the authorities alone who now control Cono Di Marco's destiny."

"But you are to appear against him! It will be you and you alone who will send him to prison!"

"One has duties to perform, however disagreeable they may prove."

"But you will gain nothing by it."

"I expect to gain nothing by it," was my retort.

She looked up at me suddenly, her rapt yet impersonal eyes direct on mine.

"You will only bring peril closer about you," she said, almost in a whisper.

"Am I to interpret this as a threat?" I inquired, with a pretence of being quite unmoved by either her words or her attitude.

"Why should I threaten?" asked the woman. "I am saying it for your sake--for your sake quite as much as for his."

"That is very gracious of you," I retorted, but my sarcasm seemed to be lost on her.

"There is danger," she said; "far greater danger than you imagine."

I laughed a little, and she looked down at her hands again--a trifle puzzled, a trifle uncertain how to proceed, I saw.

"You are already a marked man," she warned me. "Just as Marvin Stillwell has been a marked man, just--"

I cut her short.

"Were you sent to tell me this by that gang of bomb-throwing Reds, that gang of Bolshevistic brigands, for whom you and he have been working so zealously?"

"I have been working for no Bolshevistic brigands," she slowly and quietly corrected. "We are not bomb-throwers. If we worked with men who were not what they should be, we did so without knowing it. We had a higher cause to work for--our own cause."

"Was that--er--murder?"

"We were made tools of by these men," she continued, ignoring my interruption. "They used us for purposes we did not understand. But it will never happen again. I can promise you that."

"I, too, can promise you that."

"Can't you see that it was all a mistake?" she said, with a new note of appeal in her voice. "Neither he nor I quite understood. He had almost lost his power to judge, through worry and study and trouble. He has not been himself."

"You mean that he is a phrenetic? You claim that he is irresponsible?"

"He was irresponsible," she answered. "He sees his mistake, I think--what madness it all was. He will promise to give up everything. He will leave America; he will go away out of the country for ever, if you will let him have this one chance. I can promise you this compact will be kept, if you will only not be hard on him."

She sat looking at me with her tragic and helpless gaze.

"You can believe me, can you not?" she asked, with her child-like directness. The eyes, I began to see, were strangely beautiful.

"Yes, I could believe you," I answered; "but how am I to believe him?"

"I myself will see that the promise is carried out. I will give you my word of honour that this young man will never be seen in New York again."

"Pardon my asking--but what control have you over this young man?"

She found the question, apparently, not an easy one to answer. "I ask this," I explained during the silence that ensued, "because I have no wish to seem vindictive in this thing. I only want to do what is right. I want to help you if I can. But if, as you have already practically acknowledged, Cono Di Marco is quite irresponsible, how can you make him responsible? I mean, what claim have you on him?"

Again she looked at me with her great eyes and again I had to confess to myself that they were very extraordinary eyes. I began to wonder if this was why I had gone so far as to try to excuse myself to her. It was like a judge stopping to apologize to the prisoner at the bar.

"I have no claim on him," she said, very simply.

"You are, perhaps, in love with this young gentleman?" I had the brutality to suggest. Again there came one of her pregnant silences, shot through with a gasp of indignation.

"Or this young gentleman, obviously, is in love with you?"

"Cono Di Marco does not believe in love," was her reply, her forced calmness of voice strangely at variance with her restless eye-flash of indignation. "He is a Social Bolshevik--he says love is foolish and selfish, that it cannot be thought of in the Inner Circle."

"And you agree with him?"

She shook her head from side to side, slowly.

"I don't know what to think--everything has changed so much."

"Don't you mean that *he* has changed so much?"

"Yes, partly that. But I know that his selfishness has been for the Cause," she maintained. "I know he is not selfish by nature. I feel sure of it, just as I feel sure he's not criminal by nature."

"Will you be so good as to tell me what the Inner Circle is?" I asked. My use of the words seemed to startle her a little, and I could see a more guarded look creep into her face.

"They are friends, working together," was all that she would admit.

"A party of embittered and envious Socialistic Bolsheviks that is secretly planning and working for this cause which you have already mentioned," I suggested. "A party which may even include a jailbird or two--a man, for instance, like Red-Flag MacGirr?"

She made a little gesture of protest.

"No, no--we were not that kind!" she cried. "We were dreamers--we were workers--we were giving our lives for what we thought was right. You are not one of us; you could not understand. But we were never *that*."

"Then tell me what you were," I asked, more gently, realizing that my brusqueness was letting me make very little headway. "You have asked me to help you. I want to help you. It is only fair that you should be open with me."

"I cannot tell you," she answered, without looking up.

I suddenly asked myself, as I hesitated over my next line of advance, why I was sitting there slowly trying to undo my work, actually planning to defeat my own ends. I even began to wonder if my head had been turned by a mere pretty face.

Yet Elvira Paladino's was not a pretty face. It was more than that. It was the face of a woman, I felt, who had risen above the crude thinking and primordial passions of the mere Bolshevistic hater of wealth; the face of a woman who had loved beauty more than beautiful things. It was the index of a soul which had known and nursed a flame of aspiration, which had laboured and grown wise and walked with sorrow, which had yearned upward toward that ideal state where the hungers of flesh and spirit are fed on better things than the husks of anarchistic brotherhoods. It was a face still crowned with some touch of that glory which the unfrustrated sacrificial spirit of her sex achieves always with martyrdom and occasionally with motherhood.

"If you cannot speak of this Inner Circle, tell me about yourself," I said.

She looked up quickly, somewhat at a loss.

"There is nothing to tell."

"Pardon me, but I must insist," I declared, clutching at a pretext that might excuse me to myself. "You come to me without explanation, after a first impression that was unenviable enough, and expect my help at the same time that you decline to explain yourself?"

"What must I tell you?" she asked, after a moment or two of silence.

"What you feel free to tell, of course. About your earlier life--your birth, your childhood--anything."

She sat there torturing her glove between her nervous fingers. It was several seconds before she spoke.

"My mother was an Austrian, who married a Petrograd refugee--a political refugee. She died when I was quite young, in Budapest."

"Go on," I said, for she had come to a stop.

"We wandered about Europe--father and I--from Budapest to Vienna, then to Paris, then to London. We were three years in London. Then my father's work took him to Brussels and back to Budapest again."

"Then you are not an Italian?"

"No--I was compelled to take an Italian name when I did brotherhood work in Rome. My father died there of typhoid fever, two winters ago."

"What was your father's name, your own name?"

"His name was Saboureff," was her answer.

"Then your real name is Elvira Saboureff, and not Elvira Paladino?"

She sat there in utter silence, until I prompted her to continue.

"And after your father's death?"

"I was brought to New York by one of Trotsky's early comrades, who had worked with us in Petrograd. We were not allowed to land. We were turned back. A week later I found myself alone in England."

"And then?" I again prompted, for again she had come to a stop.

"Then I went to Prince Kropotkin. I should have starved, I think, if it had not been for him. He interested himself in me, more on account of my father, and found work for me with a London publisher, translating Russian and German monographs into English. Then an American socialistic lecturer offered me work in New York. I came here the next spring. But it was impossible for me to take the position--I cannot explain why. There were several of my father's friends in the city, his old colleagues. I went to them. They were very kind to me. I became one of them."

"And Cono Di Marco?" I asked.

"I had known him three years before in Austria, and later in Rome. When he returned from South America he became one of the Inner Circle. We worked together in many ways. He helped me, and I helped him."

I saw that I was on the better tack. I did not flatter myself that I could at once win her confidence. There would, I knew, always be reservations and evasions. But I was at least progressing.

"And will you tell me why you became a--Socialist and now have Bolshevistic tendencies?" I asked, choosing the mildest words that would fit the case.

"I have told you," she insisted, with a touch of weariness in her tones.

"But I should like you to tell me the inner reason, the real reason."

"Because I have worked in factories here by the day, in bad air and bad light--yes, in bad company. I have learned that honest labour is not paid as it ought to be. My father was driven from a country because that country's rights were denied him. I used to dream that America was the home of justice. I came here hungering for justice. I found only the same tyranny, the same greed, the same oppression!"

I began to feel that she, too, was a dreamer, a visionary, though one who was being more and more touched with disillusionment. I began to realize the unuttered pathos of her life, as I sat there following her restless and unhappy gaze while it flitted about my comfortable room, with its curio-laden walls and its book-lined shelves and tables.

She seemed to look at those books of mine a little enviously, and yet a little abstractedly, as though the warm tones of the old bindings and the gold of the hand-tooled morocco and calf typified something which had been denied her.

As she sat there, I again studied her drooping profile, its pure outline relieved against the dark cushion of my reading-chair. I noticed the smooth, candid brow under the caught-up veil; the heavily massed hair; the shadowing and almost over-scholarly brows, which only the delicate curve of the eyebrow redeemed from severity; the brooding eyes themselves, which the thickly-planted black lashes made darker than they really were; the purplish shadow underneath them, merging gradually into the ivory whiteness of the cheek. I saw her eyes rest a little hungrily on my royal *écusson* and almost caressingly on an old Etruscan-shaped majolica of which I was inordinately proud. She was once more looking at me, however, and I had to break the silence.

"But what can you do?" I asked. "What can one woman do for a cause which contends against things that have always existed?"

The momentary look of passive weariness went out of her face.

"I can at least die for that cause," she answered. She tried to say it bravely, but I thought I detected an undertone of bitterness in her voice. I felt that she regarded me as an unemotional and unregenerate materialist, to whom the finer things of the spirit must always remain inscrutable.

"But what good will that do either you or the cause--to die for it?" I demanded.

She turned on me with what was almost a flash of anger. But instead of the outburst I had expected, a veiled look of forced indifference crept into her face. She sank wearily back in the cushioned chair.

"I don't think you would understand," she said, in her subdued and even tone. "And this is so far away from the problem I came here to face." She glanced, with a look of alarm, at my little Louis XIV clock. "And it is very late," she murmured, as she rose to her feet.

Her pallor caused me some uneasiness.

"You are tired?" I said, standing, also, and facing her. She flashed at me an almost grateful look, at that more intimate tone of interest. It made me feel, in some way, that life had taught her to expect little from her fellow creatures, for all her communistic ideals, for all her dreams of universal brotherhood.

"I am--a little," she confessed. "And you see it is so late."

I poured a glass of sherry for her, and put it in her hand. She shook her head, but I insisted. There was a moment's silence as she sipped tentatively and nervously at the wine. I decided, as I watched her, on a still bolder line of advance.

"In what part of the city do you live?" I asked her.

A look of alarm once more came into her face, at my sudden question.

"On the East Side," was her vague response.

"But in what part of the East Side?" I insisted.

"Nothing could be gained by your knowing that," she answered.

Mistrust begets mistrust. I began to be aware of my old suspicions whimpering at their chains. Perhaps I was being duped.

"But I can't let you return there alone, at this time of night," I explained to her.

She smiled a little.

"I'm used to going about alone at all times," she answered, putting down the sherry-glass. But she remained standing before me in a hesitating and detaining way.

I began to comprehend why that particular Inner Circle was anxious to keep her as one of its members. Her mere appearance was too potent a factor to be disregarded. She was too handsome a tool to be lightly ignored. Yet, through all her years, I felt she had still retained some inner and subjective element of innocence.

She had, it is true, come to achieve her own ends--to ask a favour of me. But she had not flaunted her sex at me. I felt grateful to her for it. Unleash as I might those whimpering suspicions, I still felt strongly drawn toward her.

She opened her lips as though about to speak, but I interrupted her.

"I think I know what you are going to ask," I said, anticipating both her question and my own possible objection to it. "If you will sit down for a couple of minutes, until I finish writing this note, I will answer you at once."

I motioned her toward the chair, and she still again sank into it, a little perplexed, a little ill at ease.

I sat at the table and scribbled off a few lines. Then I sealed and addressed the envelope. Then I rang for Davis.

The young woman in black was watching me closely as I handed the note to my man, and continued to watch me as he disappeared with it, without a word. I don't think she dreamed that the note was addressed to Davis himself, and that it contained the following message:

"Get into my motor-coat and golf-cap and follow this woman wherever she goes. Let my cane fall on the hall floor as a sign that you understand."

I felt a little ashamed of that subterfuge, but a burned child dreads the fire; I had to make sure of my ground.

Then I turned to my visitor. It would be necessary, I knew, to keep her there for some little time.

"You have asked me not to push the case against Cono Di Marco," I said.

She moved her head a little, to signify that what I said was true.

"I will not push this case against him, on certain conditions."

"On what conditions?" she asked.

I was astonished at her lassitude, at the fact that there was no discernible note of elation in her voice.

"On the condition you have already spoken of--that Cono Di Marco leave America at once. Also that you no longer take an active part in what you have called the Inner Circle."

I was watching her very closely as I spoke. It was my last words alone that caused her any alarm.

"They would not release me," she hurriedly explained. "They would hold me even against my will."

"On the ground, I take it, that you are too closely in touch with a number of their secrets."

She assented to this by her characteristic movement of the head. I heard the cane fall to the floor in the hall outside.

"What would you gain by any such apostasy on my part?" she asked, a little belligerently, and also a little surprisedly.

"It is not what I should gain; it is what you would gain by it," was my answer, which in no way seemed to abate her feeling of wonder. I noticed her quick movement of unrest as she looked at the clock.

"But, after all, this can be left for us to talk over at some later day," I conceded.

"I am afraid I shall not see you again," she said.

"I am sorry," I answered, "but I must insist on seeing you again."

"For what reason?"

"It will be some little time, I believe, if Cono Di Marco is released, before he can actually sail from America. So I must ask--let us say merely as a guarantee of good faith--that you report to me daily, in person, until that young man's departure."

I concluded, from her expression, that she had not intended to go with him. It annoyed me a little to find that this conclusion carried with it a foolish sense of gratitude and relief. But several things had happened to annoy me that night, carefully as I kept my feelings under control. The oddity of standing there, considerably after midnight, calmly dictating the future conduct of an unknown young woman, came home to me for the first time.

"You insist that I must come here?" she was asking, with a troubled look.

"If it is not impossible.

"It is not impossible. But it might be dangerous--for you, I mean. It cannot help being dangerous."

"I am willing to run that risk," I answered. The candour and the calmness of her studious eyes disconcerted me a little. She was being more honest with me, I felt, than I had been with her.

"Then I must be here tomorrow?" she asked, with that perfunctory and impersonal tone which a prisoner might have used to a probation officer.

"I should like to see you," I answered.

"At what time?"

"Would between five and six suit you?"

"Yes."

She raised her hand and let down her veil. I watched it fall regretfully, as I have watched a curtain fall on the last act of a stage-romance. But I stopped her as she turned away toward the door.

"Does any member of the Inner Circle know that you have come here tonight?" I demanded.

She stood pondering the question. I felt annoyed that I could not see her eyes. Then slowly she shook her head from side to side.

"They do not know I am here," she answered.

"Then this remains a personal matter between you and me?"

"Yes," she said slowly. She paused for a moment as she turned away. "I--I must thank you for what you have done--for what you have promised me. Good-night."

"Good-night," I answered, as I opened the door for her.

Chapter XVIII—THE SECOND VISITOR

It could have been little more than five minutes after Elvira Sabouroff's departure that my door-bell rang sharply. Davis had not returned.

I suppose it was more the lateness of the hour than any actual premonition of the unexpected which prompted me to answer that ring without loss of time.

A man's figure confronted me as I swung open the door. I knew at a glance that it was Red-Flag MacGirr himself.

"I'd like to see you for a minute or two," he said, with a softness of voice that surprised me almost as much as did his appearance on my threshold.

He must have noticed my hesitation, for he laughed in my face. The effrontery of the man was overwhelming; it was past belief.

"You don't know me, I guess," he said, in the same suave tones. "But, after all, that needn't count so much."

"Of course it needn't," I said, deciding to play him at his own game. "But be so good as to step inside."

He preceded me through to the warm and softly-lighted library, where I motioned him to a seat. But he preferred to stand. He looked at me keenly, knitting his brows together in an effort to get a better glimpse of my face in the half-light of the shaded reading-lamp.

"You've got a boy named Cono Di Marco down at the Tombs," he began, with calm-eyed insolence.

"Such a boy, I believe, is now being held by the police--whether at the Tombs or not I cannot say."

"And I understand you're going to appear against him?"

"Am I?" I said, reaching over and taking a cigar from my humidor.

"You think you are. But you're not."

"I'm not."

"No; you're not. And I'm going to give you a little advice in plenty of time."

"I sincerely trust it will be helpful."

"Oh, it'll be damned helpful. And it won't be hard to understand. All I'm here to say is that if you send that boy upstate, you're going to be blown to hell and back."

I could not help laughing. Then I stopped to offer him one of my cigars. He promptly declined it.

"Can you guarantee the return trip?" I inquired, noticing that my facetiousness left him more than ever puzzled.

"You'll get it--that's all I'll guarantee."

"And on whose authority do you make this assertion?" I asked. I had been thinking both hard and fast as I stood smoking.

It would be a foolish move, I felt, to close in on him then and there. I first wanted to gather up the rest of my evidence. And I did not wish to bring the game to such an early and altogether unsatisfactory close.

"For whom do you happen to be speaking?" I repeated, resenting his attitude of growing

impudence.

He took a step closer. "I'm speakin' for the Inner Circle--for a brotherhood that could make any Black Hand gang in this burg look like an also-ran."

Once more I laughed a little. I had never been much afraid of the man who makes threats. A threat, I usually felt, was a sign of weakness. The man with the intention to strike gives no warning; the man with the power to strike at will needs no resort to words.

"Is that all?" I asked.

"Ain't that enough?" said the ex-convict, with a sneer.

"Then I can give you the information which you are after. It may both satisfy and delight you to hear that I am not going to pound young Di Marco."

"Of course you're not," observed the sapient MacGirr. I noticed that his gruffness of voice, used a moment before, had passed from him. I had noticed on several former occasions that MacGirr kept two voices in his locker--the glib voice of the curbed orator for those who would appreciate it, and the gruffer and rougher voice which made him more at home with his underworld colleagues.

"Of course I'm not," I acquiesced. "But I am going to *pound you!*"

His little wide-set, duck-like eyes opened at this. Then he recovered himself and laughed as he watched me open the door for him.

"I guess I'm used to pounding," he retorted, as he passed through the door and slowly turned until he faced me again, "so you can get busy, as soon as you like!"

I had a hankering to have it out with him, man to man, then and there. But such was not the method of modern warfare, I was slowly but surely learning. So I had to control my feelings, though it cost me an effort.

"Good-night," I said, quite cheerily and companionably.

"Good-night," he answered, shifting one wide shoulder up towards his ear-tip.

He did not move. He stood studying my face. I seemed both to exasperate and mystify him.

"Would you mind telling me just how you got wise to so much of my business?" he asked. I thought I detected a note of seriousness in his mockery. It was flattering to think that I had even stirred the apprehension of such a man.

"Ah, then it was your business?" I retorted.

He continued to stare at me.

"You're too wise," he said at last. "Too wise to last long."

"I'll run that risk," I retorted, "and even increase it."

"How?"

"By proceeding to increase my area of wisdom."

"And where'll that take you?"

"We'll discuss that at our next meeting."

"Perhaps," he announced, with his ironic stare of appraisal.

"Good-night," I repeated, as I closed the door.

"Good-night!" he announced, a little mockingly, over his massive shoulder.

Chapter XIX—THE TANGLE IN THE WEB

My next day was far from being an idle one. Davis, in his account of Elvira Sabouroff's movements after she left me, had nothing extraordinary to report.

He had followed her down Fifth Avenue to Madison Square. There she had hurried eastward across the Square into Twenty-fifth Street. At Fourth Avenue she had stopped to catch a surface car. It was at Twenty-first Street that she had stepped from this car again. Then she had walked eastward for nearly two blocks, and, taking out a latch-key, had quickly entered a red-brick apartment-house of passably modern appearance. It seemed a quiet and respectable neighbourhood, Davis explained, after he had given me the house number. He said he felt sure he had not been seen.

My next move took me down to Lieutenant Belton's office, and still later into Hulsart's court-room, and still later again before the Center Street officials. This entailed many explanations, involved several consultations, and resulted in considerable telephoning and counter-consulting and passing from office to office, before I was able to say that Cono Di Marco could once more face his liberty. Flinging hand-bags down on the floor of the Stock Exchange, apparently, was not a practice to be encouraged; and the wheels of the law, once started, are not always easy to stop.

Lieutenant Belton himself took the collapse of the Cono Di Marco case with a great deal more tranquillity than I had looked for. The whole thing, I suppose, was very small potatoes to him. And it would have meant a month's hard work, he explained, to round up the outsiders.

"What do you know about those outsiders?" I demanded.

"Nothing for publication," he laughed back.

"Then I'm going to enlighten you, before long," was my answer.

"You're too young at the game to start bucking against that Bolshevik gang," he good-naturedly declared.

"Well, I intend to try a round with at least one of them," I answered, a little piqued by his lightness of tone.

"Which one of them?" he asked, still amused.

"The one they call Red-Flag MacGirr," was my answer.

"He'll keep you busy for a while," remarked the lieutenant, this time a little puzzled, as I had wished him to be. "And I guess you'll find it almost as exciting as some of your tarpon-fishing," he concluded, patronizingly, while I sat looking at him and wondering if I would ever live down my over-luxurious past.

My next move was a guarded visit to the Second Avenue room above the German printing-shop; the bald little room where I had first heard MacGirr and Di Marco work out the details of

their plot.

As I had expected, I found the shop locked and shuttered. Beansy Schmidlapp, *alias* Pepper Schlatter, had obviously decided to lie low until the excitement of the Stillwell affair had died down. But I concluded that my little back room would be worth keeping in hand. It made too good a tower of observation to be lightly abandoned.

I next made my way to Twenty-first Street, sauntering along its south side between First and Third Avenues, to fix in my mind the house which Davis had described as the home of Elvira Sabouroff. A sign, swinging on an iron rod wired to the janitor's basement-steps, said:

FOUR ROOM FLAT TO LET

This, I decided, would make a good excuse for investigating that house a little more closely. I found it hard to explain to myself just why I was doing this. I seemed to resent any lurking suspicion as to the integrity of Elvira Sabouroff, or the truth of what she had told me.

I was standing in the doorway of a German restaurant, pondering the perversity of this feeling, when something caught my eye. It was something which drove all such sentimental quibbles quickly out of my head. For I beheld the huge figure of MacGirr walking rapidly westward along Twenty-first Street.

I saw him look guardedly about as he came to a stop, as though to make sure that he was not followed. Then I saw him turn sharply and swing up the narrow steps of the apartment-house which Davis had pointed out as that in which Elvira Sabouroff lived.

The discovery was more of a shock to me than I dared to confess to myself. It seemed to open up such untold possibilities, such puzzling and unsettling complications. It almost justified the suspicions which I had begun to resent.

I walked casually into the little German restaurant and took a seat at one of the tables near the window. Having done this, I ordered a meal which I had neither the appetite nor the courage to attack. But I sat before it for three-quarters of an hour, sipping the *café-au-lait* and inhaling the odours of Teutonic cookery.

I saw MacGirr come from the house, walk eastward, and disappear into First Avenue. Two minutes later I saw Elvira Sabouroff herself come out and follow him.

The fact was forced home upon me that this strangely incongruous couple were still colleagues, still held together by some compact that was as secret as it was subversive. It made me feel that I had been duped, that my movements for the liberation of Cono Di Marco were little more than a foolishly emotional and over-generous playing into the hands of the enemy.

Chapter XX—THE PERSONAL EQUATION

I cut the VanAlstyne tea at the Plaza, nevertheless, and bolted from a committee meeting at the Cosmos Club in order to be at home during the hour appointed for Elvira Sabouroff's call.

When six o'clock came without her, and another half-hour had dragged by, I began to feel that I had indeed been duped and deceived by her. It came home to me that I was not progressing as famously as I had hoped for.

I waited until seven. I was on the point of ordering my car from the garage when what Davis described as a small Italian boy left a note at my door, without waiting for an answer. The note was brief; it came from Elvira Sabouroff. It said:

"I cannot come to you. I cannot explain the reason now, but I must see you at ten o'clock tonight.--E. S."

I read these lines over several times, each reading leaving me a little more puzzled and uncertain. I could not deny a feeling of almost appeasing satisfaction, however, at the possession of this first recognition of a personal relation. So with a more contented mind I told Davis to order in dinner, and instructed him to admit no one save the woman, and to be especially guarded in answering all rings. I think the mystery of the thing appealed to the placid-eyed old hypocrite mightily; for when I suggested that it might not be altogether amiss if he went armed, for a few days, at least, the faintest ghost of a smile flickered about his straight-lipped mouth.

It was a few minutes to ten when he admitted Elvira Sabouroff. I knew, the moment I clapped eyes on her, that she was struggling under some undue excitement. Her breath came quick and short; there was a feverish alertness in her movements. But what most altered her was the absence of that abstracted tranquillity which I had so often noticed about her eyes. She even seemed unwilling to let her gaze meet mine. I wondered just how much MacGirr's visit to her had to do with this. I also wondered, now that she had won her point as to the Di Marco case, what changes there would be in her manner--what her newer attitude toward me would be.

"I cannot--I dare not come here any more," she said, without looking at me. It surprised me that she still had enough conscience to trouble her.

"Why not?" I asked, as I pushed forward a chair for her.

"I cannot explain. But it will be impossible."

"Which means that you intend to break your part of the compact between us?"

"No--not that!" she cried, disturbed, apparently, by the touch of scorn in my voice. "There were older compacts than mine with you--I think I had almost forgotten them."

She raised her eyes to mine for the first time, and I could see the unhappiness in them. There was also something strangely like terror on her face. I could scarcely believe that she would stoop to the way of deceit and lies.

"Do you mean the Inner Circle?" I asked, less brutally.

She moved her head slowly up and down, but did not speak.

"Have you seen any of the Inner Circle since you left this place last night?" I asked.

I knew that question was putting her to the test. My anxiety grew as the seconds dragged by and she did not answer. Then she looked up at me, with a deep breath, as though bracing herself for some ordeal which I could not as yet comprehend.

"Yes, I have seen two of them," she said at last.

A barely perceptible tremor, too slight to be called a shudder, passed over her.

"Had those visits anything to do with the promise you made to me yesterday?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

"Could you explain how?"

"No."

"Then could you explain why it was impossible for you to come here at the hour you first mentioned?"

"I was being watched."

"But why did that frighten you?"

"It did not frighten me. But it was not fair to you."

"To me?"

"Yes--they know that I was here last night. They may even know that I am here now. They are on the watch, spying and shadowing me everywhere."

"But you misunderstand the situation. I'm not afraid. In fact, I rather enjoy the excitement of it."

She looked around at me again, this time in mild wonder.

"You do not know them!" she broke out, in her low and tense tones, with that vague touch of some foreign inflection in their cadences which, I had noticed, so often returned to her in moments of deeper emotion. "They have no law save their own. Oppression has made them cunning and cruel. Poverty has exasperated and crushed them. They are lawless and ruthless. They believe in outrage and violence. They glory in it. What you might call murder is almost an ideal of conduct to them."

"This is not Sicily," I said laughingly. My lightness of tone did not dispel her sense of terror.

"But still they can carry out their plans. They can do their work under the pretence that their acts are mere Bolsheviki efforts. If they are once convinced that you are against them, they will never leave you one safe hour."

"But why should you worry about that?" I asked, with a laugh. "I'd enjoy it, as I have already told you. We can't live without excitement, you know. I used to travel across a continent for my sensations--pay good money for them--even go wandering about shooting big game, and all that sort of thing, just for the sake of the hardship and the occasional hazard. Yes, I actually used to pay good money for thrills--for something to shake the *ennui* out of life!"

"I don't understand," said the puzzled girl.

"Then let me explain. If I am going to find just as good a sensation here, in this city--why, it's going to save me a lot of trouble. I won't need to travel, you see, when it's going to come and meet me at every street corner."

"But it's peril. There's always the peril!" she cried.

"I'm not altogether afraid of it. And I rather imagine that this gang you speak of has moved and lived and had its being mostly through fear. I imagine that when they are fought with their own tools they won't put up such a brave front. You must pardon me if I say these things even while I remember that you are still one of the Circle."

I could see the blood surge up to her face and leave it even paler than before. A rebellious light came into her eyes, but it showed for only a second or two. I could see, too, that she was making a great effort to contain herself.

"The Circle you speak of is no longer the Circle."

"And why not?"

"It has been invaded and made use of by selfish men, by criminals who are using it to gain their own ends."

"And one of those men is Red-Flag MacGirr," I declared.

She acquiesced to that declaration by an almost imperceptible movement of the head.

"And it was Red-Flag MacGirr who sent you here to me," I broke out, as I noticed her shift of uneasiness at the mention of the name. She cowered back a little. I could see that the blow had struck home.

"No--no!" she murmured, white to the lips.

"Then why did this man MacGirr, *alias* Socialist Connell, visit you at your home in Twenty-first Street, between two and three o'clock this afternoon? And why did you go out, not five minutes after he did, hurry to the rooms of Cono Di Marco, and meet there a German bomb-maker named Beansy Schmidlapp, *alias* Pepper Schlatter--the very man who in the back of his printing-shop on Suffolk Street prepared the explosive which Cono Di Marco was to make use of in the Stillwell outrage?"

My outburst left her gasping a little, for there was many an hour of pent up indignation let loose in it. The completeness of my information, too, must have startled her. But it was not guilt and humiliation that I read on her face; it was revolt, bitter and indignant revolt. She threw out her hands with a little gesture of repudiation.

"I can't go on with these lies," she said, with almost a moan. "This endless chain of lies! I can't let you think that I am as bad, as low as that! It has come to an end--and it may as well be now!"

I waited for her to go on, without speaking. It was still costing her an effort to face me, but I knew I could not help her.

"It is true that this man you call MacGirr came to me," she began, her voice so low and constrained that it scarcely carried past the table on which she leaned. "He knew I had been here--he knew that I left your rooms, last night, long past midnight. He took advantage of that knowledge to threaten me."

"How threaten you?" I demanded, as she came to a stop and her gaze went down before my belligerent stare.

"He is low--he is little more than an animal."

"Well?"

"He said that unless I got you to keep out of all Inner Circle affairs he would lay the matter before the Emergency Committee."

"But what made him think that you had influence with me? Why should he assume that you had control over my future actions?"

She bent her head lower, and did not look at me as she answered this question.

"He said that if you were willing to do what you have already done, you could be made willing to do a great deal more. He said it was my fault, my fault alone, if I did not convince you to do

the right thing by the Circle."

"And?"

"He said that I should come to you--and that I should stay until I had won my point."

She flung the words from her with a gesture of loathing, as she might have cast off a bemired garment. I could tell by the tremor of her hands what it was costing her to make that declaration. And there grew up in me an almost horrified conception of the baseness and depravity of Red-Flag MacGirr.

I found it hard to meet the girl's eyes as she stood in front of me. I felt that in some way she had stepped up to a higher plane than mine. It seemed that her tumultuous confession had carried away with it the dross that still left me the coarser and baser metal. Yet it was not the confession, I told myself on second thought; it was more the profound and abysmal revolt of her whole nature, the suffering through which she had passed in its enunciation, which was counting so much in her favour.

"The beast!" I ejaculated, against my will, as my thoughts once more went back to MacGirr, and to the part he was playing. I found it hard to break the silence, yet I felt the necessity of saying something. "And this is the Circle for which you are willing to work?" I asked, as gently as I could.

"No, I cannot work for them!" she burst out. "That is over. There is no longer anything to work for. They are only idle and envious spirits railing against order and decency. They have no constructive ideal behind them; they are fretting about in a low fever of unrest, sustaining life on the milk-and-water of cheap oratory. I can see it now."

"Then why should you dread leaving them?"

She looked up quickly, in surprise, as though I had failed to understand the obvious.

"They will never let me leave them," she explained. "They will say I know too much about them and their plans. It's not that I am afraid of them. But they will always have to be reckoned with, to the end."

"Would that be your only regret?" I asked.

"One can't give up one's lifework without a pang," she answered, and on her face was the wordless anguish of the dreamer who has failed in her dream. "It will leave me so terribly alone! It will leave all my life empty."

I felt sorry for her, yet I knew that she stood infinitely beyond the range of my foolish pity.

"Couldn't I do anything to help you to keep that life from being empty?" I asked, meeting her eyes as they were lifted to mine, touched with wonder and surprise.

There was, indeed, something bewildering in the pale beauty of her face. The moment, in some way, registered itself on my memory as epochal, as though life had narrowed up to one of its rare and memorable crises.

"You?" she murmured, her shadowy eyes still sad with that troubled disillusionment. "How could you do that?"

"Let me try," I asked, and the solemnity of my voice surprised me a little. "Men and women have helped one another long before this."

"I need a friend very much," she murmured, but the impersonal and abstracted tone in which the words were uttered made them almost a dismissal of my offer. Life already seemed to have taught her that friendship was seldom disinterested. The candour with which she had learned to face the world had cost her much. It may have made her fearless of convention; but it had made her also fearful of comradeship with her own kind.

"No," she said, "I could not repay your friendship." Then she drew back a little, as though recoiling from the force of a new thought. "But, after all, we may both be helpless in this. We may be compelled to stand together, to save ourselves. We may have to be friends because from now on we will have the same enemies."

"Then you will stand by me?" I said, with a note of humility. The humility, I felt, was some not unnatural response to the very nobility with which she seemed to invest her loneliness of spirit.

I found myself impulsively holding out a hand to her. She looked at me for one pregnant moment, and then permitted her hand to drop into mine. It lay there, for only a second or two, almost as quiet and helpless as a wounded bird.

It was the morning's mail that brought me a characteristically acidulated note from Natalie Stillwell, somewhat imperiously demanding the meaning of my neglect.

"Let this new-fangled criminal research work of yours go for a week or two, and come down and enjoy the surf-bathing with us. It's beautiful. And we are getting up a camping party for a week at Duck Inlet. Can't you come down and help amuse us while we're there?"

"NATALIE E. STILLWELL.

I thought of her in her wheeled chair, with her slender parasol and her fine linen and laces, gliding through her upholstered life on that consummately perfected machinery which ground each passing sand-grain of time into sensation. But, for some reason or other, I had not the heart to write that day.

Chapter XXI—THE FOOTPATH OF FRIENDSHIP

It was the second unexpectedly busy day after Cono Di Marco's discharge from custody that my desk telephone rang and Elvira Sabouroff herself spoke to me from the other end of the wire.

I knew at once, from the mere tone of her voice that came to me through my receiver, that something of importance had happened. Yet the consciousness of this did not bring with it any feeling of disturbance. I was, in fact, possessed by a vague sense of gratitude at the thought that there was to be no break in the chain of hurrying events. A life of action was, after all, getting its grip on me.

"I must see you at once," said the voice which now and then reminded me, in certain fleeting and flute-like notes, of an old English quail-pipe which I kept among my curios.

"But what is it?" I asked, after I had assured her that I could see her at any time. She gave me to understand that the situation was one which could not be explained over the wire.

"Will you come here?" I asked.

"No; that is impossible," was her hurried answer. "I must meet you somewhere."

"Where are you now?"

There was a moment's pause before the answer came.

"I'm speaking from Third Avenue."

"But from where on Third Avenue?"

"From a chemist's--what you call a drug-store."

"And what must I do?"

"When I leave here I shall get into a car, to make sure I am not followed. Could you not take the subway to Brooklyn Bridge, cross the promenade on foot at eleven o'clock, and meet me somewhere east of the first tower?"

"I could, quite easily."

"Then I shall carry a folded newspaper. I shall be walking from the centre of the bridge, toward the first tower. If I drop the newspaper you must not stop. Do not even speak to me."

"I understand. I'll be there," I answered.

I heard her murmured "Good-bye," and hung up the receiver, indescribably exhilarated at the thought of this new and undefined movement in our opening drama.

It had been many a long day since I had crossed Brooklyn Bridge on foot. The February morning air was clear and crisp with cold. The East River far below me was dappled with drifting ice-floes. Billowing clouds of steam, white and fluffy, like cotton-wool, floated up from the drifting ferries. The slips and wharves of the harbour stretched away on either side, like a tooth-lined mouth that opened into the maw of the hungering city. The bay flashed silver and opal in the thin winter sunlight; the passing ships spoke of high enterprise and foreign ports and the appeasing spice of danger. It seemed good to be alive. The zest of adventure could still keep life clean and wholesome.

All of earth's spirit of uncertainty, touched with romance, seemed to focus and rest on the black-clad figure which approached me between the great swaying bridge cables and crawling trains and rattling cars and wagons. The cold air had brought a roselike touch of pale colour to her cheek. The quick look of relief and gratitude, too, that sprang into her eyes as she saw me, did not escape my notice. Instead of dropping the folded newspaper which she carried in her hand, she swung about and joined me. We walked onward toward the centre of the bridge. The footpath was slippery with patches of frozen snow, and she took my proffered arm in silence. A smile lurked for a moment somewhere about her usually mournful eyes. Then her old-time gravity returned to her.

"Wait," I said, as we stopped to look out over the sparkling bay. "Don't spoil it--don't shatter the moment, until we've seen this view!"

"It's worth seeing," she said with a little sigh. "It's worth waiting for."

We stood side by side, letting our gaze wander back and forth, from the sombre greys and greens of Governor's Island to the black cobweb of the Williamsburg Bridge, from the creeping and puffing harbour tugs to the canon-ends of the crowded cross streets. Then we moved on again in that strange aerial solitude, poised between the roar and tumult of two great cities.

The contemplation of Manhattan's serrated skyline did not seem to add to my companion's peace of mind.

"It will never be safe for us now," she said, with a troubled movement of the head toward the city. "It will never be safe--there."

"And why not?" I asked.

"Because it has come--at last! What I was afraid of has happened. They are against us now, all of them."

It was not fear that shone in her eyes; it was more the bewildering spirit of some new and utter isolation, the desolation of a soul which had not altogether learned to accept loneliness.

"Cono Di Marco has turned against me. He blames everything on me. He claims it was I who caused the miscarriage of his plans--of that insane plot of his. He would not listen to me. He has seen MacGirr, and MacGirr has lied to him, has strengthened him in his belief. He says I have defeated their plans, that I have been openly working against the Inner Circle."

"And a blessed fine thing to work against!" I suggested, as lightly as before. She looked at me reprovingly out of her troubled and inscrutable eyes.

"But it has brought them together on a new understanding," she explained. "And MacGirr and Schmidlapp have met. They have had a conference over it. They have decided, as they put it, to take you on the wing."

"They are quite welcome to," I retorted. I tried to be nonchalant. But in spite of myself, at those pregnant words, a tingle of something that was neither fear nor dread erupted and ramified through the nerves of my body. "But how do you know these two worthies have had a conference?"

"I gathered it from what Cono Di Marco implied--from what he said. They met in Schmidlapp's, on Suffolk Street, in the printing-shop there. They seem to think New York will be too dangerous for them. They have sent a message ordering me to come and talk things over with them."

"Why should they send for you?"

"MacGirr insists on using me. He says he will give me one more chance to do what he proposes. He intends to give me one chance, with you, before he makes his final stroke."

"One more chance?" I echoed, alarmed at the abject bitterness with which she flung out the words.

I could see that her face had grown quite colourless.

"I want you to know this, so that you will know the kind of man who is your enemy. I told him certain things. It was the end--the end of everything--between me and the Inner Circle."

"What is this final stroke to be?" I asked, a little too promptly, I fear; for the very roots of my being seemed to stir and revolt against MacGirr's satanic baseness.

"To strike you and me down together now, if they can, at one blow. They know that it can never be safe for them now, even with what MacGirr calls his Tammany pull. They are to meet tonight to talk things over, at Schmidlapp's."

My spirits brightened up a bit at this last information, though I succeeded in keeping my own

counsel. I felt reluctant, for some reason, to explain my system of espionage on Schmidlapp's back-room arsenal. It would sound a little ignoble, I feared, to confess that I had hired an empty room, removed a part of the flooring, and quietly attached a microphone apparatus to the gas-pipe of the chandelier below, for the sake of overhearing what was not intended for outside ears. And I dreaded the thought of ever appearing ignoble in the eyes of Elvira Sabouroff.

"It would be better for you to leave New York until this MacGirr nonsense has been put a stop to," I suggested.

"I have friends in Paterson," said the girl at my side, after several paces of silent thought. "One of them was secretary to Emma Goldman before she was deported. They secure translating for me to do now and then."

"You will pardon my asking, but is that how you have supported yourself?"

She had long since risen above the little hypocrisies of her sex. The calm deliberation of her reply showed that my question had not been resented.

"Partly by that, partly by teaching. I do library research work also, and occasionally translate articles from the German scientific papers. Then I write a weekly letter for a journal in Rome, a Socialist journal, which pays me eighteen dollars a month."

"That seems very little."

"It can always keep me from starving."

"But life owes you more than that--more than being kept from starving, as you put it."

"I'm not sure of that," she answered, with her gravely wise smile of derogation. "I have seen so many people who were not even owed that by life."

"Do you like your library work?"

"Yes, better than any other, except reading to my factory classes. I brought over from Austria the idea of reading to garment-workers while they sewed. But the American superintendents have never taken kindly to it."

"Would you care to undertake cataloguing a library of mine, and tabulating a pile of old curios I've been gathering about me for the last five or six years? It would be a couple of month's hard work--perhaps three months--I hardly know what I've got packed away in my home out at Beaumaris. But it's all in great disorder."

Her dark-grey, sober eyes, luminous with unspoken gratitude, were lifted to mine. I wondered, with what was almost a pang of jealousy, if Cono Di Marco had often brought that look into her face in the past. Then I pondered how love itself would transfigure that pale and troubled face, how the softer and homelier things of life would crown her wistful abstraction with contentment. I felt suddenly envious of all her past, of all the years of her youth that had been lost to me.

"Yes, I could do it, I think," she was saying to me. "I must do something until I can arrange to go abroad."

"Abroad?"

"Yes, until I can get back to Rome."

"But you must not go abroad."

"Why not?" she asked. I was studying the black rings around the pupils of her eyes as she looked at me.

"There's so much you can do here," I answered vaguely, scarcely knowing what to say. Yet I saw that she was thinking the matter over quite seriously.

"Yes," she agreed; "it would be cowardly."

"And I feel sure this cataloguing of mine will keep you busy until Spring--if you'd care to do it."

"I would," she answered without equivocation. "I noticed your Rhodian wall-tiles. And I saw your Leynier tapestries and the Italian Renaissance panels. They made my heart ache. It's wrong, I know; but I love old things."

"I love them too. That's why I live in an old-fashioned shaded building without elevators and onyx pillars and gilded burlap. I always like my own things about me."

I noticed the shadow that suddenly crept into her face.

"But it may be impossible," she cried. "It may already be too late. We have forgotten the Inner Circle!"

I tried to laugh away her fears. I wheeled about on the footpath of the bridge, still holding her hand on my arm, and pointed to the sober walls and orderly streets of the city.

"Does that look like a town where Terrorists rule?" I demanded. "Can a half-mad jailbird like MacGirr make that a mediaeval Sicily?"

"He has made it worse than a mediaeval Sicily for me," was the girl's response. "He is half-mad. That alone makes me afraid."

"Then, to prove that it's still safe, we are going to eat luncheon in the very heart of it."

She did not answer me but I could feel her hand suddenly tighten on my arm. I misinterpreted the actual meaning of that pressure, until I glanced down and caught sight of her face.

She was looking guardedly back along the footpath to where a sharp-nosed, short-bodied man in a black cape overcoat, with the collar turned up high about his chin, walked slowly and impassively along in the direction in which we were going.

"We are being followed!" she whispered. "Don't look back. It is Pavel Sitnikov, a Russian Jew Bolshevik who was deported from Paterson. He works for the Inner Circle. They call him Max. He's watching and shadowing us, even now!"

"Then we'll give him a run for his money," I declared, as we moved on toward the New York end of the bridge and passed into its vaulted caverns of unrest. "We'll see that it costs the Circle several copecks to keep on our trail!"

Turning into the hurrying crowds of Park Row, I signalled to an idle taxicab and instructed the driver to take us to the Lackawanna Ferry. From there we doubled through to Park Place, rattled up Broadway to Canal Street, circled westward again, turned north, sought lonely side streets where even the sound of a street-car was unknown, détoured up through Washington Place and University Place, and rattled into Broadway again at Seventeenth Street.

Then we scurried up that crowded artery of traffic to Madison Square, and from the Square swept into Fifth Avenue, coming to a stop with a jolt before my own studio-apartments building.

"There is more than one way, you see, to escape the Inner Circle," I exclaimed triumphantly, as I helped her alight. But my words seemed almost frivolous to me when I caught a clearer glimpse of her disquieted and tragic face.

Chapter XXII—THE THREADS OF INTRIGUE

As I made my way to the Suffolk Street room that evening I experienced the feeling which sometimes used to creep over me in big-game shooting. It was the feeling of expectancy which every hunter knows when he makes his "blind"--the beginning of the game which marks the battle of instinct and fear against intelligence and force. Like most game-stalking, too, it had its discomforts; for the room was penetratingly cold. Its air was as cheerless and depressing as a vault.

MacGirr, after all, seemed to me little more than an animal. But I knew that it was his privilege as an animal to be free from any sentiment of pity. So my one concern was to reach the little room above the printing-shop without being detected or intercepted. I no longer felt ashamed of my carefully worked-out plan for spying on that back-room bomb-factory. The amenities of ordinary life no longer held good. It was now a case of ambush and counter-ambush, of victory to the intelligence which constructed the subtler covert and struck the more unexpected blow.

Schmidlapp came first to the little printing-shop. He must have slunk back and let himself into his old quarters with the utmost caution, for no sound of his actual arrival crept up to my ears. All I heard, even with my microphone apparatus attached to his gas-pipe and the receiver held close to my ear, was the quiet closing of the door which separated the printing-shop proper from the back-room beneath me.

Then I heard the sound of an electric light-switch, and a low grunt of approval from Schmidlapp himself as, apparently, he examined the room and saw that everything remained as he had left it. I could hear his cautious footsteps as he moved guardedly about. I knew, from the sound, that he had tested the fastenings of the window opening on the fire-escape at the back of the room.

The precision with which my little instrument caught and registered every sound that arose from the room below did not surprise me, when I remembered how even an ordinary microphone will make the scraping of a fly's leg on a sheet of paper as audible as the sound of a file rasping on sheet-iron, or how in the ordinary telephone-receiver it magnifies the tap of a pencil against a transmitter-diaphragm into what seems almost like a blow against the ear-drum of the listener. My one regret was that I could not see what was taking place beyond the lath and plaster which shut me off from the restlessly moving Schmidlapp.

I assumed, however, that he was busying himself with packing away some of his apparatus--perhaps the fulminates themselves. I could hear the occasional click of metal, the clink of glass, the rustle of wrapping-paper.

His wait was a long one. It must have been almost an hour before the familiar cipherlike knocking sounded on the printing-shop door. This was followed by Schmidlapp's cautious advance to the centre of the room, where apparently he reached up and turned out the light. Then cautiously he opened the back door of the printing-shop and stood just inside the street door, either peering out or listening; for the cipherlike knocking was repeated, this time more impatiently. Schmidlapp turned the key in the heavy lock, slid back a bolt, and admitted a

second person. Not a word was spoken until the door was relocked and the electrics were once more lighted in the back room. Then I heard the sound of an impatient oath on the lips of MacGirr.

"This is worse than stir itself!" he ejaculated, as he flung down something, presumably his hat.

"What's wrong?"

"It's a wonder Creegan didn't spot me right at that door! I could've grabbed his night-stick as he went by."

"Not so loud!" cautioned Schmidlapp.

"It's too much for my nerves," protested MacGirr. "I can't keep on buckin' up against this much longer! I tell you, I'm going to make my *coup* and make it quick! And when I get enough money to travel, I'll travel fast--straight down to N'Orleans and on to Rio again!"

"For the love of Heaven, then, get busy and quit beefin' and chewin'!" was Schmidlapp's apathetic retort.

"I got to have money."

"So do I," said Schmidlapp.

"But I'm goin' to get busy," said MacGirr in a more triumphant tone. "I got my pipes laid, and I'm goin' to get my two birds with one stone!"

"I suppose that means I've got to beat it, too?" suggested the half-disgusted maker of bombs.

"We've both got to beat it, Beansy, and beat it quick. But we'll leave a few souvenirs as we go, I guess."

The ex-convict laughed quietly. It seemed to me, though, that the laugh was almost a sob.

"I'm sick o' this! There's nothin' in keepin' up this night-crawlin' act!"

"What have I got to do?" demanded Schmidlapp.

"Beansy, you got to fix me up a soup-bag with a timer-squib attached. Then you got to dope me up a box of giant-caps with a bottle of sulphuric to make 'em do the job. Then I jump the dead-line and enter society again."

"You're still goin' to get that old mug, aren't you, no matter what happens?" remarked Beansy, with just a touch of mockery in his heavy voice.

"I'm goin' to get him if I have to go to the chair for it!" declared MacGirr with sudden passion.

"Not so loud!" cautioned Schmidlapp, "or you won't even get that far."

"I came here for oil, Beansy, not advice."

"And you're going to get Woodruff and the woman?" continued the other, ignoring MacGirr's sarcasm.

"At one crack out of the box!" gloated the ex-convict.

One of the unique experiences of a man's career is sitting still and overhearing a fellow-man calmly explaining how he intends to end that career. So I listened with considerable interest, though there were times when I could not grasp all of Schmidlapp's questions or catch every detail of MacGirr's replies to them. Much of their talk was by sign and gesture. But what most

impressed me was the calmness with which the two Reds sat planning out their crimes. It verified my once vague impression that all criminals were essentially egotists as well as egoists, that their ever-narrowing aura of consciousness left no room for what saner men would call the imaginative faculties. It was simply wolflike stealth and foxlike cunning, untouched by those altruistic feelings which make the normal man a social being.

I began to feel like a hunter watching above the lair of two wild animals.

"Then it's Weirhauser's or Sheeny Chi's in May--the first week in May?" MacGirr was asking.

This seemed so much Greek to me, until I remembered from certain talks with Lefty Boyle that "Chi" was criminals' *argot* for Chicago. The two men, apparently, were appointing some future place of meeting.

For several moments their talk was again too enigmatic for me to follow. Some of it was whispered, some of it must have been in motions and signs, and some of it was in a thieves' *patois* still unknown to me. Only occasionally could I catch an intelligible word or sentence with any shadow of meaning. I heard "time-fuses" mentioned once or twice, something said about "nitro-soup," and one reference to "rod"--which I knew to mean a revolver. But I could not quite catch what would happen to "that Paladino snitch." I gleaned, however, the information that MacGirr was sore on "the Woodruff rumble," which meant my own interference with his activities, and that he intended to "hit the old duck's harnessed box" before he took his departure.

Beansy Schmidlapp interrupted at this point to inquire just what "pipes" the other had laid.

"I've got that ground covered all right, all right," was MacGirr's contented reply. "Max is goin' to work it with me. I got Sitnikov on the other job. All he does is handle the oil--that ferret-eyed little Russian's just whimperin' to get his hand on a bomb-case!"

Again I heard MacGirr's quiet and easy laugh. "He'll get his dose of it while I'm workin' the old duck's joint. And crowbarrin' a little rhino out of a capitalist ain't goin' to be against the ideals o' your Inner Circle, I guess."

"You tried that game once," cautioned Schmidlapp, impassively.

The other man did not seem disturbed by his companion's criticism.

"There won't be any raw Black Hand business about this *coup*," declared MacGirr. "It's goin' to be a combination of overhead guerrilla and porch-climber work, with a few extra frills."

"What are the frills?" asked Schmidlapp.

"I got the layout o' the house. He's alone there, you might say, every night. His family's down South somewhere. His boy's beatin' the pavement and foolin' 'round with a sea-goin' yacht. All the old mug keeps at the house is a dough-faced English butler and his own valet. The valet's a Frenchman, or a Belgian who talks French. I'm gettin' him out o' the way with the old till-tapper trick, sendin' him kitin' over to Brooklyn where his sister's s'posed to be dyin'. Little Trudeau's doped me out the letter for it, in French, s'posed to come from the girl's landlady over there in Lonely Town. Then I'm goin' up to that gilt-edged mansion with a pump and a gas company uniform. The dough-faced butler won't be there; he sleeps out. But, if he does happen to be in, I got to persuade him that his pipes must be pumped out. The rest is easy, once I get in the house. The old duck himself won't land until late."

"Then what?"

"I'll make my haul and get away before the blow-up."

Schmidlapp grunted--a grunt of derision, it seemed to me.

"I never yet saw much in this revenge graft," he exclaimed.

"No; there's no meal-ticket in it, Beansy. But we aint all stomach, you know. By which I mean there may still be a lot o' spiritual satisfaction in it for me," was MacGirr's placid retort.

"Mac," said the slow-spoken Schmidlapp, with a prophetic solemnity in his voice, "you're going to get pinched at that job!"

MacGirr laughed again.

"That job's goin' to turn my luck," he averred. In his next words, however, I could realize the bitter and desperate malignity of the man. "And even if it's the last kick, I'll make it a hell of a good kick. I'll get my man, anyway. I tell you, Beansy, I'm sick o' bein' hounded and pounded by every sapper who swings a night-stick. I'm sick o' this street-cat life and dodgin' from garbage-barrel to garbage-barrel. I can't stand it. And if I can get the man who sent me up there and spoiled my life for me before I begin the lake-o'-fire-and-brimstone act, I guess I'm gettin' enough."

There was little pathos in the words themselves; but, for some reason which I could not fathom, the dead and sullen voice in which they were uttered made them indescribably pathetic. It was the pathos of barren ignorance and blindness, of a life of warping malevolence flowering into one vindictive curse that was only a wail. It was the futile and foolish pathos of the teased rattler, turning and sinking a fang into its own side.

I listened intently, for Beansy was speaking again. "Mac, you're dippy on that old sucker. It wasn't him who sent you up to dump, and you know it. It was yourself. But you're throwin' over your chances for a getaway just to bomb a man who don't even remember your name. I tell you, Mac, you're just as dippy on this as Cono Di Marco."

MacGirr only laughed again.

"Didn't I tell you I was goin' to crack his keister on the way?" he asked.

An audible sniff came from Schmidlapp.

"And get Pinkertoned out of America for it, no matter what your haul is! You can't come this game on a man like that and expect it to be lived down in the same century. You can't do it."

"It's too late to have any amount of chewin' stop me from doin' it," averred MacGirr.

"Well, that's your own funeral," was Schmidlapp's answer. "All I know is that I'm goin' to shut up this little shop for good, and beat it! I'm goin' to beat it, and beat it quick!"

"Then fix me up with that oil and some giant caps, and climb on to your rattler knowin' you eased down a dippy man with the only dope that could make him sleep well."

Again MacGirr's quiet laugh sounded up out of the stillness of the room below.

"Oh, I'll do up the soup and stuff for you," said Beansy with the deprecatory generosity of a nurse indulging a fretful patient. "But I hate to see you gettin' off your trolley like this."

There was a silence for several seconds. Then I could hear the chink of glass against glass, the

slow shuffle of feet, the running of tap-water, a soft scraping as of a spoon against a metal basin, the mouselike squeak of a drawn cork, the clink of glass again, and the sound of nails being hammered into wood, then once more the unbroken silence persisted. I knew that in that arsenal of fulminates directly below me Schmidlapp was tranquilly and deliberately preparing the explosive for MacGirr's two bombs while the latter waited.

"How about a smoke?" I heard MacGirr inquire fretfully.

"Smoke? Of course you can't smoke!"

MacGirr swore a little. Then a voice sounded again.

It was Schmidlapp's. He must have stopped and looked up in the midst of his work.

"But where is this man Sitnikov now?" he inquired.

I could hear that hateful, placid, ever-ready laugh of MacGirr's again before he answered.

"He's layin' for the Paladino welcher with a can o' soup."

"Where's he layin' for her?"

"Up where he's stalkin' that amateur gum-shoe mash o' hers. He's waitin' and frettin' for 'em like a terrier shiverin' over a rat-hole."

I could hear the sound of mixing still going on below me. But I did not wait for more.

Chapter XXIII—THE GUEST AT THE THRESHOLD

My one concern, now, was to get away from that Suffolk Street room while the coast was still clear. That barren and unheated room had been as cheerless and devitalizing as a tomb. It had chilled me to the bone before I realized it. My legs were cramped, my fingers numb. I was glad to be on the move again. I felt a hunger for the press and stir of humanity. I wanted to feel the life of my kind close about me again.

I saw, when I gained the street, that a flurry of snow had passed over the city, blanketing and muffling the pavements and making walking a hardship. Such a thing as finding a taxicab, in that neighbourhood, was out of the question. So I hurried south to Division Street, making sure that I was not followed, and turned into Canal Street. There I caught a cross-town surface car which carried me to Broadway, where I cut back a block to the subway. I was glad of the companionable warmth and light and faces of an up-town "local." It was life, sane and material life, after three hours of phantasmal monstrosities and nightmare.

Rapidly I matured my plans. My first task, I felt, would be to get Elvira Sabouroff safely away. It was my duty to get her out of that atmosphere of intrigue and peril which was ever closer and closer surrounding her. It was no place for a girl, under such conditions, with such men as MacGirr and the rat-faced Sitnikov on her trail. I would send for my car, I decided, the moment I saw the way was clear, and hurry her out with Davis to Beaumaris.

Davis was to be trusted. I would miss him, but I could not send the girl there alone.

That would leave the field clear between me and MacGirr. My next task would be to locate Marvin Stillwell. There was no time to be lost.

I was on the point of turning into the entrance of my apartment, keeping a careful lookout as I

went, when I heard my name called sharply. At the next moment, a motor-car rumbled up to the curb beside me. It gave me a bit of a start. But I breathed freely again when I saw that the cab held only young Harvey Stillwell.

"Hello there, Rebbie!" said Natalie's brother, with a boyish and genial grin. "Come on! I'm going to pick you up and run you over to the club."

He swung the car-door open, as though there could be no doubt as to my going with him. But life, at that moment, held sterner purposes for me. Any constraint that may have shown in my manner did not seem to trouble him.

"I'm just running up to my rooms," I explained, keeping my eye on each figure which passed me and the wide doorway.

"Then I'll run up with you," he genially suggested. "For one smoke."

I saw no way out of it, so we went up together. I kept wondering just how the youth at my side would relish the information that at any step a rat-faced Russian might drop a bomb between us.

It would have startled him a little; but I doubt if it could have disturbed him more than the sight of Elvira Sabouroff calmly standing before my Caen-stone mantel. There was no sign of embarrassment on her part. The fires through which she had passed seemed to have burned away all the decorative little conventions of feminine habit. Her quiet impersonality, in fact, did not altogether fail to give young Stillwell the momentary idea that it was meant as a tacit sign of proprietorship.

But I could not explain; I always hated explanations. Harvey was gentleman enough to bury his wonder, though it seemed to take a dozen sextons of coercion to perform that prodigious rite. He showed a little disappointment, however, when I informed him that I could give him only five minutes. His candid young eyes told me, as plain as print, that something surely must have happened to make Rebstock Woodruff in a hurry about anything! I said nothing, but passed him the cigarettes instead. He took one, with a shrug, and was once more himself.

"I've got something on--something big," he explained to me. "I didn't want to talk about it down there in the street, of course. But it can wait, I think."

"Anything I can help you in?" I asked.

He looked at me through the smoke of his cigarette. He seemed uncertain of his ground, as though he were holding something back.

"Natalie's got the pater to let me run the *Amorita* down to Miami," he said, after a silence. "Then we'll cruise over to Havana and get to New Orleans in time for the Mardi Gras. And Natalie told me to bring you along."

I expressed my regret.

"But, Rebbie, I tell you I've got something big on, something besides running a nickel-plated schooner-yacht between bathing-beaches and watering-places."

He glanced back at the third figure behind us.

"I can't explain it now. But you've knocked about South America, and I know you're game, when it comes to adventure. Then why not swing in with me?"

"When?"

"Now--right away."

"It's out of the question, my boy," I told him, remembering that he was always having "something big on," as he preferred to express it. "My time is scarcely my own now."

Again I saw that infinitesimal shrug of the shoulder as he arose from his chair. It reminded me of his sister Natalie. It even irritated me a little.

"I was almost forgetting," he said good-naturedly; "I'll drop in some other time, when you're free."

"Yes, do," I said, as I went to the door with him. "By the way, where and how can I get your father over the wire?"

"Tonight?" he asked wonderingly, almost suspiciously.

"At once."

He looked down at the Persian prayer-rug on my hall floor.

"Why, it's hard to tell where the pater is after eight o'clock. But it's safe to say he's talking U. S. Rubber, wherever he's holding out."

I could not quite understand his reservations. But he was holding something back from me.

"Well, I'll try the house. Peterson will be there, anyway, I suppose?"

"Yes, Peterson's there, I think. I'm hanging out at the United Athletic now, you know--the house seems so barny with every one away."

I had opened the door for him as he spoke, and he turned to go. I should have closed that door again, sharply, only young Stillwell's body was interposed between the jamb and the doorway. For in the hallway outside stood a figure in a foreign-looking cape overcoat.

This figure was hurriedly lighting a cigarette. There was nothing extraordinary in that. But the sight of that familiar narrow-eyed, rat-like face reminded me of the dangers which surrounded me. It flashed through my brain what his presence there portended. I realized that a critical moment had come. But I had no time to act, beyond catching instinctively at the boy in front of me, as though to drag him back from danger.

He must have thought I had gone mad, for he jerked away from me sharply and wheeled about. The rat-faced man, as he did so, flung a paper-wrapped parcel between us. It rolled along the Persian prayer-rug and lay there spitting, audibly, mysteriously, as though it contained an angry snake.

I recall having the impression that it would be unwise to cry out, for a cry would bring Elvira Sabouroff from the next room. I remember young Stillwell's sharp exclamation as I clutched at him, even as I told myself that merely pushing him back a few feet was a waste of energy.

It was not ten seconds from the time when the paper-wrapped parcel was thrown, but the thought flashed through my mind that it was already too late--that the thing was over. I remember the quick stab of irritation which shot through me as I saw that young Stillwell's cry had already brought the woman in the next room out to us. I think I even raised my hand and shouted to her to keep back. But she did not seem to understand.

"Go back!" I must have cried.

I took a deeper breath and tried to think of life comprehensively, as dying men do, or as lost souls should.

It rankled a little to remember that I had been beaten at the game I had chosen as my own. I tried to think of the rending power of one quart of nitroglycerine. I tried to tell myself that there might be a chance, if there were only a wall between us and the cursed spitting thing on the prayer-rug. Thought, at such moments, flashes like lightning. Action, beside thought, seems snail-like in its movement. I only knew that it was a moment of supreme crisis. But, like so many such moments in real life, there was little about it that was outwardly spectacular.

I saw the girl fall on her face directly over the hissing, snake-like thing. My chief concern was that she would be the first to suffer, that her beautiful body would be dismembered and shattered, that it would be torn and obliterated. It was more than I could endure. I wanted to have the business over and done with. I closed my eyes until the blow should come. But that seemed cowardly, and I promptly opened them again.

I noticed that I was holding my hands stretched out before me, like a base-ball-player in the act of catching a ball. I saw Elvira Sabouroff's white hand flash about and caress the paper-wrapped menace. I saw her quick fingers catch at something and tear it loose. It seemed like pulling the fangs from a snake. I heard her little cry as she held the spitting, hissing fuse up in her fingers, away from the thing so cleverly wrapped up in paper.

She had not worked and lived with and acquired the secrets of the Inner Circle for nothing. She had torn out the fuse within half an inch of the fulminate. I had missed my moment. The amateur mouchard had lost his presence of mind!

It was young Stillwell's voice that brought me back to life--a voice in which wonder, raucous humour, and dismay all seemed to be mingled.

"What kind of a game do you call this, anyway?" he demanded, as he backed slowly away. "Does your laundryman *always* attach a fire-cracker to your shirts that way?"

I did not wait to answer him. Turning to the door, I sprang through it and down the stairs, in pursuit of the man Sitnikov.

Chapter XXIV—AN EFFORT AT INTERVENTION

My attempt to overtake or find Sitnikov proved a fruitless one. We had given him time to slip away; he obviously had made the most of his chances.

I think I was pretty well myself again by the time I had climbed the stairs and re-entered my apartment. I began to see the duties and difficulties that lay before me.

My first difficulty was young Stillwell, whom I met at my own door.

"Look here, Rebbie," he said. "Please never startle me twice in one hour that way!"

"Twice?" I said, resenting his tone.

"Yes," he answered, with a backward movement of his head. The motion, I assumed, implied the unexpected presence of Elvira Sabouroff in my apartment. Harvey Stillwell was very young.

There was no use being indignant with him.

"I want you to help me find your father," I said.

"Is it anything about Natalie?" he asked, growing more serious. All the world, with the exception of that young lady herself, seemed to assume that Natalie Ethelwyn Stillwell and I were duly and formally affianced.

"No, it's nothing about Natalie. But I can't explain it here. I must see your father at once."

His aristocratic young eyebrows went up--at the touch of peremptoriness in my voice, I suppose--but he held himself in.

"I've got some rather important stuff to attend to myself tonight," he replied, with irritating calmness. "And the governor's rather hard to get hold of these days, you know."

"But I've got to get hold of him," I retorted.

"Well, if I run into him I'll phone you," answered the youth, as he drew on a dog-skin glove.

Time was too precious for me to pay attention to his sulks. The moment he had started downstairs, I was back in my library ordering out the car. Then I called a telegraph-messenger, and while Elvira and Davis wrote out a dozen telegrams to Marvin Stillwell, directed to as many hotels and clubs, I sat at the phone and rang up every possible quarter, from his own office to the Cosmos Club. It was slow and tedious work, and my efforts resulted in nothing.

It exasperated me to think that I was losing time, but it was essential that I should first find Marvin Stillwell. Before all things, he must be warned of his danger. I even called up the different hotels where I was known and requested that the financier be "paged" in each. While waiting for these movements to be carried out, I asked Davis to bring me my German magazine-revolver, a new-fangled sporting gun of which I was especially fond. It was a smokeless, small-calibre gun that carried a mushroom bullet, and was compact enough, for all its magazine-space, to be held comfortably in the pocket. As I sat waiting at the phone I looked it over, making sure that it was fully loaded. I had just slipped it into my pocket when my call-bell rang sharply.

"Hello," I cried into the transmitter.

"This is Marvin Stillwell."

"This is Woodruff--Rebstock Woodruff speaking. Could I see you tonight?"

"I'm at a corporation meeting at the Biltmore. It's a rather important conference."

"When could I see you? I mean how soon could I see you?"

"It will last until quite late," was the answer, not without its note of impatience, I thought.

"Could I see you as soon as it's over?"

"Couldn't you make it tomorrow?"

"Not very well. This, too, is more or less important."

There was a second or two of silence.

"I might say that I've just received a rather extraordinary wire from you, some ten minutes ago. Is this a new form of practical joke?"

"I can explain that when I see you. But it's far from being a joke."

"I've had rather a tiring day, Woodruff, as you know. The market is taking every moment of my time."

"This is more important than the market!"

"I'm tired and I want to go home and go to bed."

"That's the one thing you must not do!"

Marvin Stillwell laughed, crisply, shortly, condescendingly.

"Is it?" he retorted. "Then you'd better tip me off quick, for I'm keeping seven short-tempered millionaires waiting here. And I still stick to the habit of sleeping at my own home, you know!"

I could detect the ring of sarcasm in his voice.

"This is not the sort of thing I can talk about over the wire," I told him. "But you--"

His voice suddenly changed as he cut in on me.

"Nobody in trouble, is there? You don't mean Harvey?"

"No--no," I answered. "I--"

"Then who is it?"

"You!"

"Me? What kind of trouble?"

"There's a bomb-thrower named Red-Flag MacGirr about to break into your house. He may already have broken into it!"

"Into my house?"

"I believe so. It's the same man who was sent up for the bomb outrage in your office a little over four years ago."

"But my servants are in my house, taking care of it. This is impossible."

"Will you promise to keep away from that house until I can make sure of this?" I demanded.

He laughed again, a little scornfully. He still refused to take me seriously.

"Are you one of the gang?" he asked.

"We're wasting good time here, Mr. Stillwell. What I want to know is, will you keep away from that house until I make sure it's safe?"

"My dear Woodruff," came the caustic reply over the wire, "I'm now attending a corporation meeting, and I intend to remain at that meeting until its business has been dispatched. My house, I think, you'll find in excellent order, and a very unpromising field for the exercise of those romantic--"

"This is too important to trifle over," I broke in. "You know what MacGirr has been--what he's already done!"

"My dear Woodruff," answered Stillwell, "I'm not worrying over these things. I've existed for fifty-nine years without worrying over them. And I rather imagine I'll exist for a few years more, even though sentimentally inclined persons continue to enlarge on the vicissitudes and uncertainties of a brigand-infested metropolis like our own!"

"Very well," I said, holding myself in, but with difficulty, as that characteristically Johnsonian period came over the wire to my ear.

"Good-bye," concluded the crisp voice. "But don't let me interfere with any of your amateur detective amusements!"

No, I decided as I hung up the receiver; I would not let that obsessed and narrow-visioned money-grubber interfere with my amateur detective amusements. And I intended to make him feel grateful for that resolution.

A moment later, I was on my feet, struggling into my overcoat and catching up my hat and gloves.

"Davis," I said, "you must stay here and keep an eye on the apartment. Miss Sabouroff will stay with you."

"Yes, sir," said Davis as he held the portières back for me.

I turned to Elvira.

"You will not mind staying here?" I asked. "I'm afraid it will be almost necessary, under the circumstances."

Her eyes met mine. Her face, at first sight, seemed without emotion. And yet into it crept a momentary timidity, a mute acknowledgment of intimacies understood, of possibilities that could not be ignored. Then the look passed, as quickly as it came, and she was herself again.

"If you think best," was her answer. It was her continuous contact with men intent on the sterner ends of life, I felt, which had stripped her of so many of the little feminine fripperies of conventionality. I liked her all the better for that utter honesty of heart. She was almost boy-like in her matter-of-fact acceptance of me.

"Could I not go with you?" she asked suddenly, and for the second time I saw some vague sign of agitation on her face.

"To meet a man like MacGirr?" I demanded.

"I met with that type of man much earlier than you did," was her answer.

"But not in the way I'm going to meet him," I protested, as I started toward the door. The telephone-bell rang before I had quite reached it. I turned back. It was Marvin Stillwell speaking.

"I've been trying to get that house of mine," he said with a deprecatory cough; "but no one seems to answer."

"I'm not surprised at that."

Again I heard the deprecatory noise that was neither a cough nor an articulate sound.

"What did you say was wrong up there, anyway, Woodruff?" he asked.

"I can't wait to explain," I replied.

"What's this bomb-story you were trying to tell me?"

"That's what I'm going to find out!" was my brief retort, "but don't you go into the house until you find out!"

Then I rang off and sprang for the door.

Chapter XXV—AN ESSAY IN EXPLORATION

Twenty minutes later, I was passing quietly along in front of the Stillwell home. There was nothing to give me any indication of what might be taking place inside it. I saw merely a gloomy brownstone front, similar to that of many another New York mansion. It was the customary flat-walled, curtain-windowed, respectable solemnity behind which the Knickerbocker merchant of thirty years ago preferred to hide his joys and sorrows from the eyes of the world.

It was not a fashionable house, nor could the neighbourhood in which it stood be called fashionable. Its street was lapped by the creeping eruption of sky-scraper and office building, of hotel and apartment-house. But Marvin Stillwell had refused to shift with society's shifting centre. The house had been good enough for him and his wife; it ought to be good enough for his children. It held, behind its gloomy front and impassive oaken doors that frowned over the wide sandstone steps, all the romance of his younger days and all the best memories of his married life.

Often and often I had passed that house and looked up at it, and wondered what its inmates were doing, what scenes and movements and emotions its taciturn walls were shutting off from me. But never was I so eager to know what lay inside those walls as when I walked past the sandstone steps and wondered if MacGirr were yet within that impassive panelled door.

I walked on until I came to the Merryfield house, three doors to the west. Then I turned up the steps and rang the bell. It was an electric bell, adjusted at some late date beside the staid, old-fashioned entrance-door which should, by rights, have borne a brass knocker. It seemed as incongruous to me as the fact that such a house could shelter Catherine Merryfield--that such an austere and forbidding cocoon could hold so bright and many-coloured a butterfly.

I had known Catherine Merryfield since the day when our schooner-yachts first fouled each other off Whortleberry Island, in the Huguenot races. We had danced and motored together, as fate continued to throw us into the same house-parties. We had golfed and played bridge together, as accident involved us in the same weekends. She was a good-hearted and companionable young woman. And she would not be too inquisitive.

The door was opened by a lean, shrewd-eyed man in livery. He was far from being a dolt, that man. So a new determination took possession of me as I saw him standing at attention under the shadow of the tinted electrics.

"I am Rebstock Woodruff," I told him, "and until this moment it was my intention to ask for Miss Merryfield."

"Yes, sir."

The man still stood respectfully attentive.

"Do you chance to remember my face?" I stopped to inquire.

"Yes, sir--quite well," he said, without emotion.

"What I want to do is to go up through this house to the roof. And I want to go in a hurry."

I reached down into my pocket as I spoke, and felt for my wallet. I always hated carrying a wad

of money about with me; I had no need to do it, when a reference to a check-book was a convenient open-sesame. But, to my disgust, I found I had nothing but three two-dollar bills and some loose change.

"What I want to know is, will you permit me to go up to your roof?"

"I'm afraid not, sir," was his quiet but none the less prompt response.

"Why not?" I asked, wondering if a check would possibly soften him.

"It's against orders, sir."

Here was a cropper, indeed. And there was no time to be lost.

"Will you please see if Miss Merryfield is at home," I said, restraining my natural impulse at revolt, and once more speaking in the casually authoritative tone of the social caller.

"Yes, sir," he answered, following my lead in a relapse to the triteness of things. He led me with dignity into the gloomy reception-room, which I had always claimed was no more like Catherine Merryfield than a mud nest is like the swallow that has flitted and fluttered about it.

He returned in a few minutes to announce that Miss Merryfield would be down. Then he disappeared.

The house was very quiet. A full minute dragged itself away, then another, and another. I went to the door and looked out.

The silence was unbroken. I stepped out and walked to the back of the hall, where the incongruous modernity of an automatic elevator caught my eye. I promptly pressed one of the mother-of-pearl buttons.

The car descended, in obedience to the summons, to the floor where I stood; the door opened automatically; the electric globe flashed into light, and I stepped into the cage. Pressing the button marked III, I rose silently and swiftly upward, stopped mechanically at the floor designated, and beheld the door automatically open for me.

I groped my way through the darkness, heard the sound of heavy snores, and promptly retreated. I must have stumbled and padded about for another precious and perilous two minutes before I found the narrow stairs leading to the roof-transom. This transom, I found, was held down by a chain which was caught and tied through a staple originally meant for a hasp and padlock. It took me but a minute to free the chain, push up the transom and gain the roof. Then I carefully closed the transom again, looked about to get my bearings, and cautiously worked my way eastward along the house-tops. It wasn't until I felt the cold night air on my head that I remembered I had left my hat in Catherine Merryfield's decorous and gloomy reception-room.

But I had more material difficulties and embarrassments to hold my attention. A new moon hung like a silver shaving in the west, and gave me enough light to see by. I had a wall-coping to scramble over, and then a "cat-teaser" of pointed iron rods to circumvent. Then came a climb of five feet of brick wall, for the Stillwell house stood high above its neighbours.

But, once on the roof, I seemed on familiar ground. I could remember the odd skylight of many-coloured glass, covered with its protecting network of wire--the very glass through which young Harvey, ten long years before, had sent a bullet from my old army revolver. And there was the servants' narrow little hand-power elevator, by means of which I had once enacted the

perilous rôle of Santa Claus. And there were the remains of the stanchion-sockets where Natalie and I had once built a roof-garden, in the year when I came home from Central America with fever. The red earthenware pots of the palms and flowers which I had sent up for that forlorn little garden, still stood in a row beside the wall-coping.

Down that elevator, I knew, I should have to make my descent--a descent both dangerous and undignified, but one which would get me into the stronghold of the enemy.

I stopped beside the roof-transom to take off my overcoat, not caring to be encumbered by that garment. I removed my magazine-revolver from its hip pocket to the side pocket of my coat. Then I folded the overcoat neatly and placed it beside the transom. It struck me, as an afterthought, that this was not the best possible place for it. As I stooped to pick up the overcoat, some sudden impulse prompted me to test the transom. It might be possible to force the lock.

As I reached over to throw my strength against the heavy door covered with galvanized iron, it came away promptly, without resistance. It was unlocked and open.

Chapter XXVI—THE SECOND INVASION

That open transom, meant both a new advantage and a new danger to me. It made my way into the Stillwell house easy, but it also left in my mind little further doubt as to MacGirr's presence there.

The heavy lock, I found, had been "jimmied" open. It was plain to see that this had been done from the inside. The natural conclusion was that MacGirr, after effecting his entrance from the street and making sure that the coast was clear, had crept up to the top floor and pried open the transom, so that an avenue of escape would lie ready in case of any sudden surprise at his work.

I let myself down through the transom and closed it after me. Then I went cautiously down the slanting iron ladder that led to the floor, feeling my way along a wall of piled up trunks until I came to a door.

Carefully and silently I opened this door and stepped out into what must have been the hallway. There I groped my way forward until I came in contact with a stair-banister. I leaned over and peered downward, listening.

The house was in utter darkness. There was nothing to be heard; not a sound crept up out of the gloomy gulf beneath me. So I slipped my revolver back into my side pocket and felt my way toward the head of the stairs. On second thought, I turned back to the storeroom and felt to see if there was a key in the door. I found it, half turned in the lock, on the inside. My first impulse was to lock the door and pocket the key, but on thinking it over I decided that it would be better to leave the way of escape open in case of emergency.

I had to be very careful. I wished to think out every point beforehand and leave no contingency unprovided for. There would be dangerous work ahead, and I wished to face it with as free a mind as possible.

So I groped my way step by step down the stairway, listening every now and then for any sound that might betray the enemy or give me a hint as to his whereabouts. As I made my way

deeper and deeper into that house which I knew so well, I felt more and more at home in it. Familiar rooms and corners and furnishings kept confronting me, filling my mind with teasing memories of old times and old scenes. The very perfumes of the place were reminiscent of other days--the subtle and indescribable odours of cut flowers, of furniture-varnish and tapestry-dust.

I came to a sudden stop. Somewhere out of the silence there smote on my ear a faint and muffled pulsation of sound. It was a sort of throb of noise, slower than a pulse-beat, and not persistent in its regularity. But it sent a tingle of nerves up and down my spine and brought my revolver out once more. Feeling sure that the source of that sound was somewhere below me, I advanced guardedly down the wider staircase which led from the second floor to the first above the ground floor.

I was not mistaken. The sound grew more distinct as I descended. At the bottom of the stairs I looked about, point by point, trying to fix the direction from which came that mysterious and muffled throb.

My search was rewarded by a narrow pencil of light showing through a door in the rear. There could be no mistake about it; the room behind that door was lighted, and in that room was taking place something which gave rise to the sound I had heard.

At the foot of the stairway I stood waiting and listening for a minute or two; then I tiptoed toward the door, revolver in hand. The sound continued; it could be plainly heard now. I put my hand on the door-knob, turned it slowly but firmly, cushioning it against any sudden click of the bar-latch, and tried to swing it open an inch or two. But it was securely locked on the inside.

I stooped and pressed an ear flat against one of the panels. The sound seemed to leap suddenly toward me; it seemed to be the methodical and regular blow of a mallet striking on metal. It reminded me of the strokes of a diligent stone-mason fashioning a block of granite. What further bore out this impression was the occasional rattle of solid fragments against the surrounding walls and pieces of furniture.

But the secret of that mysterious sound was more than I could fathom. The room from which it came, I remembered was Marvin Stillwell's private den--though "den" was scarcely the word to be used in connection with so commodious a chamber. It was, rather, a combination of smoking-room, library, and sitting-room. Its two large windows faced the south, opening on the roof of a one-storey addition where the remaining thirty feet of the Stillwell lot had been utilized for a billiard-room, abutted by a diminutive conservatory. These windows, I knew of old, carried slender but impregnable trellises of steel scroll-work, as a defence against possible sneak-thieves and porch-climbers. But otherwise the room had no means of ingress or egress beyond the door directly in front of me. It became my duty, therefore, to get through that door.

I felt the surface over carefully, in search of some point of attack. It was divided into four panels, I found. The hinges were on the inner side. The lock was a mortised one; the key, half turned on the inner side, made it impossible for me to use a second key from the outside.

Near the newel-post at the head of the broad stairs which led down into the old-fashioned hallway, I remembered, was an electrolier made up of a bronze wood-nymph blowing from a reed a bubble, which was the light bulb. I groped my way toward it and stood there, with my finger on the button, weighing the possible danger and profit of turning on the light.

Some impulse which I could not altogether analyse prompted me to leave the hall in darkness. I crept back to the door, taking out my pocket-knife as I went. Then I pushed the slender steel blade into the lower and outer corner of the upper panel.

I found, to my delight, that the panel was of either pine or whitewood; for the knife-blade sank slowly into it under my steady but cautious pressure, until the point must have protruded from the inside surface of the wood. The occupant of that room, I decided, was too intent on his own work to take notice of my silent emulation of the homely woodpecker. So quietly and patiently I began my task of cutting out a small section of the panel, carefully timing my knife-strokes with the strokes of the mallet within.

Almost five minutes elapsed before I had whittled out a rough oval, large enough to admit my arm. When it hung only by a mere fibre or two of wood, I ceased my operations abruptly, because the sound of the mallet no longer came from within. I heard a sigh--a very human and impatient sigh--an echo or two of heavy footsteps on the polished hardwood floor, and then the scrape of a chair being pushed back. I drew away a little, with my gun well up in front of me, wondering whether or not the door was to be flung open.

But a minute later I heard the steady, muffled blows of the mallet again, and I knew that my presence had not been suspected. I wrenched off the hanging section of wood and placed it on the floor beside the door-frame. Then I stooped and peered through the opening.

I found my view obstructed by what could be nothing else than the back of a tall pier-glass which had been pushed over toward the door, to act as a screen in case of surprise. But it was plain to see that the room was fully lighted. It was also apparent that the occupant of the room was busily engaged in chiseling his way into something which was more or less successfully defying his attack.

He could not have been more than six or seven paces from where I stood. My problem now was to get to him; and the closer I could get to him before being discovered, the better it would be for me.

I reached a hand in through the opening I had made and quietly turned the key in the lock. I waited and listened again, to make sure that I had not been heard. Then cautiously I turned the knob, opened the door and stepped inside, closing the door after me without appreciable sound. My pulse quickened a little, for this movement had brought me within the same four walls with Red-Flag MacGirr.

Chapter XXVII—THE FIGHT IN THE DARK

The tall pier-glass, luckily, still stood between me and the enemy. It gave me a chance to get my bearings before making my final advance. I could see the two windows at the back of the room, securely shuttered and curtained; the wreck of a hand-carved oaken door; and the gaping rent in the wall beside the wide-mouthed fireplace, where Marvin Stillwell's house-safe had been torn away from its setting. Peering still further past the tall glass, I saw the steel box standing bottom-side upward on a flowered silk coverlet, and beside it, facing me, the huge figure of Red-Flag MacGirr, in the cap of a gas company's inspector.

He had removed his coat, and placed it on a chair beside him, a little toward the rear wall. On top of the coat rested a huge revolver, with the handle pointing toward him. It took but a glance

to show me that he was chiseling his way through the concrete bottom of the safe. To blow off the door, apparently, had seemed too dangerous a proceeding for that neighbourhood. This present method was, I knew, a "yegg" trick long approved in case of assault on low-powered strong boxes—a highly expeditious way of forcing an entrance into "keek-house keisters," which are usually bottomed with a shell of sheet iron reinforced by a bed of concrete filling. It was not a mallet with which he was working, but a pair of heavy pipe-tongs. About these he had wrapped what seemed to be a pillow case, to deaden the sound. But his repeated blows on the slender chisel, which he held in his left hand, had reduced the linen to shreds and tatters; and he stopped, from time to time, to readjust the muffler.

As he worked, small chips of the concrete kept flying and spraying about the room, striking on picture-glass, furniture and wall-paper.

I watched him for several anxious moments. When I saw him step to the nearer side of the upturned safe-bottom and begin chiseling along its northern edge, I knew that my time for action had arrived.

I sidled out from behind the pier-glass and tiptoed into the centre of the room. I stood prepared for the final spring at any moment that his eye might fall upon me. But he bent over his work, hammering on his chisel as artlessly and industriously as though he were a day-labourer in a quarry. I crept closer, and still closer, until I knew that it was dangerous to delay any longer. I was within four feet of him when he looked up sharply and saw me.

He might perhaps have reached his gun on the chair before him, but the mere sight of a stranger in the room with him seemed to paralyse every muscle in his body. It left him spellbound for a second or two.

He stood there blinking at me in the helplessness of utter surprise. That immobility on his part lasted only for a heart-beat or two, at the most, but it gave me a chance to leap for the glimmering revolver.

I caught it and wheeled as I landed, so that, as the chair went tumbling and spinning across the room, I turned on him with the two revolvers in my hands. He stood, half-crouched, but not daring to spring.

"Stay there!" I ordered, a little foolishly, I felt, but keeping him carefully covered.

He must have seen that the game was up, for he gradually relaxed, took a deep breath and stood upright, all the while keeping those ludicrous little duck-like eyes of his fixed on my face. But the sheer bewilderment of my presence seemed to ebb out of him slowly as he fell back, step by step, sidlingly, until his back was against the wall itself. There he stood, his face working and twitching, without speaking.

"Put up your hands!" I commanded, for I knew he was not to be trusted. I saw the hands move away from his hips upward, in answer to my command.

But his right hand paused on its upward journey, and the thumb turned outward and downward until the back of the hand faced me. It was not until I heard the sudden snap of a switch button that I comprehended the meaning of that movement. MacGirr had turned out the lights. He had backed along the wall until he had come opposite the wall-switch, and had then snapped off the electrics. The room was in utter darkness.

I did not wait for the incandescence to die out of the light globes before springing for the door.

I half expected the same movement from MacGirr, but for some reason he did not start or move forward from where he stood. He might have dropped to the floor or swayed to one side--of that I had no means to judge. But I assumed that he was afraid of my revolvers, deciding that it would be better not to risk a shot at close quarters.

Of one thing, however, I was sure, he was still in the room. I knew, as I stood with my back against the closed door, that he was somewhere before me, crouching and waiting in silence.

I dropped one of the revolvers into my pocket and pushed the pier-glass a little to one side. The suspense was beginning to tell on my nerves. I was now master of the situation. But I was getting a little impatient of that prolonged inactivity, of that sullen quietness on the part of the enemy. The fact that I knew I had him safe made me all the more indignant at his trickery of silence. He was merely postponing the inevitable. Even though it was possible for him to creep about the room without a sound, he could make no move that would lead to escape. Any interference with the curtains, or with the shutters of the two windows at the back of the room would be at once detected by me. And outside of these windows, from top to bottom, were the impregnable guards of steel scroll-work.

I had no intention of equivocating with him, so I spoke into the darkness that surrounded me. There was something eerie in the sound of my voice, authoritative as I tried to make it.

"MacGirr," I cried, into the empty and unresponding darkness, "I've got you here! And I'm going to keep you here! Turn on those lights, and turn them on quick!"

There was no answer to this--not the slightest sound or movement. The suspense was becoming uncanny. The whole thing was childish and theatrical and I resolved to put an end to it.

"You heard me," I said, again addressing myself to the utter blackness that seemed to stifle and wall me in. "I've got enough ammunition here to rake every foot of this room. And I'll do it, unless you turn on that light! Do you hear--turn on that light!"

There was no reply.

"I'll give you just ten seconds to turn that switch!"

I steadied myself with my left hand against the door-knob, waiting, counting under my breath. But still there was no stir from the blackness in front of me. The pregnant click-click of my raised trigger broke the silence. I counted to ten, and balanced the heavy revolver in my hand. But I did not fire.

For, as I stood there, I felt the door-knob, on which my left hand rested, slowly turn. The next moment I felt the door itself swing forward until it pressed against my shoulder-blades, until my resisting body stopped its advance.

A sudden galvanic thrill scampered and tingled through all my startled body. Just what hand or what power was moving that door, I could not tell. There was nothing to break the tomb-like silence. But I knew that something was stirring and moving against the door behind me. With that discovery came the thought that I was surrounded by new and unlooked-for peril. I had to arrive at some definite plan of action. I had to act, decisively and quickly.

My first decision was to send a bullet through the panel. But the sheer uncertainty as to the person who stood outside, whether friend or enemy, made this seem dangerous. My next and

more reasonable decision was to swing the door back sharply, have my gun ready, and be prepared for any suspicious movement from the intruder.

I had made ready to carry out this intention, when again the unexpected happened.

I found the coat-sleeve of my left arm jerked suddenly tight against the door-panel, held there by some powerful hand that reached inward through the very aperture I myself had made. Instinctively I struggled to free that pinioned arm; but the grip was like the grip of a vice.

Before I could swing my right arm about to bring the revolver into play, the full weight of a body was hurled against the door. The sudden movement flung it back, the pier-glass went over with a crash, and I was pinned between the wide-swung door and the wall. I heard a second crash like the falling and breaking of bottles. But still I struggled to free my imprisoned arm and raise my right hand to get my revolver into play. Then a cry broke from the blackness beyond.

"Max!"

There was no answer to that sharp monosyllabic bark of sound.

"Sitnikov--is it you?"

"Yes!" came in a gasp from the unknown.

"Have you got him?"

It was MacGirr's voice again, from the far side of the room. Even as it sounded, I felt something striking and beating about my head, and a huge hand pawing and gripping at my half-raised revolver.

"Quick!" gasped the man who had clinched with me. "Quick! I have heem."

And that worthy continued his efforts to throttle and brain me, while MacGirr closed in beside him and wrenched the gun from my benumbed fingers.

It was not a pleasant encounter. The pair of them were too much for me. The man called Max had me safe when MacGirr fell back and switched on the lights.

I could not have been a pleasant thing to look at. My face was bleeding, and my hand dripped blood. My clothing was torn, my collar was gone, and I could see blood-stains on my shirt-front. But I did not altogether give up. I remembered the revolver in my coat pocket. I remembered, also, that the criminal is almost always a man without imagination, unable to visualize contingencies outside of what his narrow experience has conventionalized for him, unable to fortify himself against that element of uncertainty which enters into any problem with the entrance of the human equation. Therefore I still hoped for my fighting chance, however slim it might be.

The fact that it was indeed to be slim came home to me as I looked up and saw the colourless, mirthlessly grinning face of MacGirr.

"So it's you--the amateur gum-shoe!" he said, with his malignant sneer. He stood over me, digesting his victory. The man called Max swung the door shut, then stooped and picked up my revolver. It was nothing that he said or did that caused me suddenly to stop breathing. It was merely the expression on his white-skinned, Asiatic-looking face, with its pale, slanting eyes, its short, blunt nose and bulging low forehead. There was neither passion nor hate nor

venomous malignity in the face. Yet I knew, from the moment I saw it, that the man intended to shoot me where I sat leaning against the wall.

The game was up, after all, was the thought that flashed through my mind--a thought followed by a great sense of injustice that it should come to an end in such a way, and through an instrument so blind and unlovely.

But MacGirr saw the man and laughed as he waved him back with an imperious movement of his ape-like arm.

"No, Max!" he cried, with an oath. "Not that way, my friend--not that fool way!"

Max stopped and looked at his confederate. I breathed once more.

"Shoot heem! Eet ees best!" argued Max. This colleague of MacGirr's had apparently been dispatched to the lower parts of the house, in search for refreshments some time before my entrance. He had returned with biscuits and a pot of cheese and an armful of wine bottles at the time when I had stood with my back to the door. I could see the remnants of his would-be meal lying scattered about the floor. One of the bottles had broken and the wine had soaked into the thick-napped silk rug.

"I'll show you a better way than shooting," declared MacGirr, holding out his hand for the gun, "something more in keeping with that Hammer of God idea!"

The other man surrendered the revolver, but with a frown. I could see that even MacGirr, for all his air of nonchalance, was breathing quick and short. He looked the gun over leisurely, and as leisurely slipped it into his pocket. But I noticed that his hand still rested on it there.

"Get into one of those bedrooms and get me a couple of towels," he ordered. He backed away a little as Sitnikov went to do his bidding. Then he let his eye coast about the room for a moment. I took advantage of that moment to get my hand a little nearer my side pocket. But he saw the movement. It brought his gun out like a flash and he was covering me again.

"Sit up in that chair!" he commanded. I did as he ordered; my position had become an uncomfortable one.

"Now fold your arms!" was his next command. I did so, with as much dignity as the situation allowed. But I did not give up. There was still the ghost of a chance that Davis might disobey orders and in some way follow me up. There was still a hope that Marvin Stillwell as he grew less preoccupied and less skeptical of what I had reported to him, might send a message to police headquarters; or that even the disconcerted Merryfields might venture forth to make inquiries as to how and when I was returning for my forgotten hat. No, I told myself, the game was not yet up. But my enemy, I saw, did not permit its action to lag.

"Have you got anything to say?" demanded MacGirr, standing beside the overturned safe, his deep-set, duck-like eyes squinting thoughtfully down at me. I resented the valedictory nature of that brusque question.

"Before what?" I asked.

"Before you have a pleasant last hour or two," he retorted, with his mocking and satanic laugh.

Sitnikov came back into the room with a cluster of towels over his arm. MacGirr merely nodded and stood regarding me with that studious, baleful leer of his.

"This game's not up!" I defiantly retorted.

MacGirr laughed again.

"No, this game's not up. But your part in it's up!"

He stepped forward, impatiently, as though he were tired of quibbling about side issues. But his revolver-barrel, I noticed, still pointed directly at my head.

"Max," he said sharply, "put down those towels. Now take off his coat."

My heart sank at the words. For with my coat, I knew, would go the revolver in the side pocket. And with that revolver would go my last chance. I saw that it was useless to struggle; but I warned myself to be watchful and save my strength.

The coat was handed to MacGirr. He took out the revolver with a grimace of triumph, and calmly proceeded to go through my pockets. Then he flung the empty coat to one side.

"Now take his shiner and his watch. Good! We may need a few things like these! And he won't, I guess!"

Sitnikov handed my possessions to MacGirr, without a word.

"Now see what he's got in his pants' pockets!" was that worthy's next injunction.

He gave vent to one of his blasphemous ejaculations when he saw that the search resulted in nothing more than three two-dollar bills and some loose change. He held the money in the palm of his hand, and gave a grunt of contempt.

"You make a hell of a showing for a mere millionaire, don't you?" he said, as he kicked the bundle of towels over to his colleague.

"Now tie him up," he commanded. "And tie him good. This means we've still got to crack that keister!"

The other man was tearing a couple of the heavier towels down the middle. One of these strips he twisted together and knotted tightly in the centre, tying it again and again, until the knot was almost as big as an orange. MacGirr took out my watch and looked at it.

"Get a move on!" he said impatiently. "And don't be afraid of trussing him up too tight."

The other man's work could not have disappointed him. He first twisted my arms sharply behind me so that they stretched across the hollow of my back, one hand under each elbow. Then he took his twisted towel-strips and pinioned and swathed and knotted them there, drawing the fastenings so tight that the very blood seemed to stop circulating in my finger ends. He did the same to my feet, binding and trussing them tightly together from the ankle to the knee.

Then he pulled me sharply over on the floor, and before I could quite divine his intention he had thrust his knuckles into my cheeks between the upper and lower molars. One savage grind of this wedging fist forced open the jawbone, and at the next moment he had that odious knotted-towel gag in my mouth and was tying the loose ends of it tightly behind my head.

I could see MacGirr's sullen nod of approval as he sat back on the edge of the safe-bottom and rested the arm that had been holding the revolver.

"What're you doing that for?" he suddenly demanded. Max was placidly and deliberately

unlacing my shoes.

"I need heem!" was the brief and anarchistic retort, as Sitnikov pointed to his own worn and unattractive footwear.

"Then cut it short," warned MacGirr, getting up again with a quick look about. He disappeared through the door into the hallway, and I listened intently as I lay there. I heard him turn on the light at the head of the stairs and go down. What he did below I could not tell; but I thought I heard the sound of an opening door. In a couple of minutes he was back in the room again, leaving the hall lighted behind him.

"Give me a hand!" he commanded, as he thrust his great paw into the crook of my right arm. The other man turned with a look of interrogation on his face.

"We're going to leave him down at the door," MacGirr explained. "We'll leave him there, nice and handy for his friends to call for!"

I could see the look of comprehension that spread over the other's apathetic and animal-like face. It seemed to spread wider and wider, until it erupted and broke into a laugh—an unholy, pitiless, altogether fiendish laugh.

It was not until they had half-lifted, half-dragged me out into the lighted hall and down the wide stairway, that I fully understood what MacGirr intended. It was not until I saw the familiar rose-tinted newel-lamp of the lower hall and the two inner doors that opened on the old-fashioned vestibule, that I fully comprehended the enormity of his intention. He was to leave me there, bound hand and foot, side by side with his giant-cap bomb. He proposed that the very man I had tried to deliver should be the means of my death.

Chapter XXVIII—THE BRINK OF DESPAIR

Not a word was said as my two captors let my inert body sag down upon the floor of the vestibule. MacGirr merely pushed me with his foot closer in along the right-hand wall, so that I faced the two outer doors as I lay there. To one of these outer doors, I saw, a screw-eye had been fastened, at a distance of some two or three inches from the floor. To this screw-eye had been attached a piece of stout cord, about three feet in length. The other end of the cord was made fast to a roughly bent bit of wire which protruded from a slit in an oblong wooden box about fourteen inches long and six or seven inches high.

That box, I knew, was Schmidlapp's infernal machine, composed of giant-caps. All that was necessary to detonate it was a tug on the string tied to the wire hook, which was made fast to the cork of a bottle of sulphuric acid. The moment that cork was pulled and the sulphuric acid released, the explosion would take place. And nobody could open that street door—nobody could attempt to enter the house—without detonating this devilishly planned mine. I was to be left there, unable to make a movement or sound, until Marvin Stillwell returned to his home and opened the door which was to send us simultaneously to death.

All this I saw and knew in the brief moments during which the malignant MacGirr stooped over me, as though to carry away with him some consoling memory of the anguish that was written on my face. Then he emitted his animal-like grunt of satisfaction, and quietly closed and fastened the two inner doors. I knew, by the sounds, that he had once more climbed the stairs

and taken up his work on the overturned safe.

The one thought that now terrorized me was that at any moment Stillwell might come in. I felt sure that I should be able to hear his approach on the sandstone steps without. The knowledge that I should hear him--that I should know when the pass-key was inserted in the lock, the door-knob turned, and the door itself swung back--and yet be utterly powerless to warn him, seemed more than my overtaxed nerves could bear.

It took a great effort to steady them. There was a struggle, such as one seldom goes through, before I could master my feelings and forget the ache in my body and the infinitely keener anguish of my mind. Death itself could be little darker than that battle between hopelessness and hope, before I learned to fix my attention on the situation before me. For the second time I warned myself to be calm, to think clearly and quickly.

First I tried each hand and leg, methodically, limb by limb. But any hope of liberating myself had to be abandoned. Then I compelled my attention to the vestibule that surrounded me.

It was as bald as a vault, with the exception of the wooden box bomb and the slender Villona palm that stood opposite me in the inner left-hand corner of the entry, growing in an antique Greek amphora of early Cretan workmanship. The vase was one which I had brought back from abroad three years before; I had given it to Natalie Stillwell on her birthday. It had always hurt my feelings a little to behold this almost priceless find of mine relegated to the duties of a lawn terra-cotta or a landing-step flower-pot, since it was an exquisite example of early Greek cameoware in white and blue, overlaid on preclassic earthenware with naive Dionysian decorations. But it was not for me to point out the gold in a gift horse's tooth.

Its slender base stood on a circular slab of cork, to protect the marquette flooring. Beyond this, and the infernal machine, the vestibule was empty. It was as empty as a coffin, destitute of resource, barren of any possibility of delivery or relief. I studied the walls, one by one, with the nauseating despair of a man who knows that he has reached the end of his rope.

As I lay there, one faint glimmer of hope came to me. It was a glimmer and nothing more, but the longer I thought of it the more feasible it became.

The first movement in my plan of action was to work my body, slowly, painfully, inch by tortured inch, away from the wall until it lay at right angles from it, directly across the entrance. Still another five minutes of torturing worming and writhing brought my feet within touch of Natalie Stillwell's amphora. Then I rested, and once more studied the situation.

Again I began my wormlike contortions, until I was close enough to the tall vase to raise my two bound feet between it and the wall. One sharp downward sweep of my legs between the wall and the vase sent the slender piece of earthenware toppling over on the hardwood floor. I could hear it crash as it fell, breaking into a dozen pieces. Then I rested again, listening and waiting to make sure I had not been overheard. Then I decided to carry out the rest of my plan.

I rolled over several times, until my back rested on the jagged base of the fine-grained earthenware pot. It took several minutes to adjust my position to suit the purpose I had in mind. But when once I found myself placed as I had planned, I began the second movement of my campaign. It was nothing more or less than a movement of abrasion--a stubborn, soul-worrying, nerve-racking inferno of sawing up and down on the serrated edges of that jagged piece of ware.

But the knowledge that my bonds were being worn away, thread by thread, taught me patience. The thought that any moment might restore to me the freedom of my hands--that blessed freedom which is better than the gift of sight to the blind--steeled me to endure the aches that throbbed and racked through my body.

But when I had severed the twisted towel-strand, and knew that my hands were free again, I had to lie motionless for several minutes before life came back to my arms, before I could raise them as far as my face.

Not until I had rested a little and once more felt the blood pulsing through my arms did I think of the danger still hanging over me. Yet my emotion was more of a sullen and vindictive rage at the humiliations through which I had been dragged than any recognition of danger.

It took but a minute or two of patient struggle to release the gag that still held open my aching jaws. I felt like a patient who had escaped from an afternoon in a dentist's chair. I flung the sodden cloth to the floor and sat revelling in the luxury of freely opening and closing my mouth. To release my pinioned feet involved a longer and fiercer struggle. But I succeeded in the end and was once more a free man.

With that emancipation, with that power to walk and move about, seemed to come back to me some vaguely estranged sense of manhood. And with this came a consuming indignation, an ever-increasing anger at the insults with which my body had been visited. Luckily I had no time to brood over my injuries, for the most difficult and dangerous part of my work still lay before me. That was to take the menace from MacGirr's engine of destruction at the door beside me.

The safest way to destroy his bomb, I felt, would be to remove the bottle of sulphuric acid from above the giant-caps. This required, I knew, manipulation of the most delicate character. I pried open the crack in the box with a piece of broken pottery, after making sure of the location of the wire attached to the cork.

But once that insignificant glass vial was safely lifted out of the box, I felt safe. I was another man. My spirits rose with a rebound as I felt about for the earth of the Villona palm and carefully poured the acid into it.

Then I turned and unlatched the outer door, though I no longer had any thought of making my escape to the street. The mere idea of crawling out into the open in the condition I was in--coatless, shoeless, tattered and blood-stained--became repugnant to me. I had a score or two to even up, I told myself in my new born spirit of audacity; and I intended to lose no time in the balancing of that ledger.

The two inner vestibule doors still shut me out from the rest of the house. My impression had been that they were possibly held shut with a spring lock. I was not a little relieved, on trying the knob, to find that they were not actually locked, that I could step back into the hallway without resistance.

Above me, beyond the head of the stairway, I could still see the glimmer of light from Marvin Stillwell's sitting-room. I could also hear the steady sound of MacGirr's pounding on the concreted safe-bottom. He was evidently finding it a harder task than he had expected. I felt grateful for the fact that he was still there, but I did not stop to luxuriate in my emotions. Instead, I groped my way quickly but quietly back to where I knew the library to be, the second door to the right of the stairway on the ground floor. I slipped into this room and locked the door behind me.

I turned on the electrics and ran to the desk-telephone which stood glimmering on a wide rosewood reading-table. I caught up the receiver and called for central-only to find that the instrument was "dead." It required but a moment's examination to discover that the astute MacGirr had not only cut the wires, but had carried off or secreted a large enough section of the circuit to make a "splice" impossible.

But the difficulty did not trouble me for long. Not three feet away was a droplight, swinging from its twisted green wires. It took but a jerk to bring these wires loose, and then but a twist or two to free them from the lamp. Another minute's work sufficed to connect them with the broken ends of the ruptured telephone circuit beneath the phone. Thirty seconds later I had secured my number.

"Is that you, Davis?" I all but whispered into the transmitter; for, above everything, I did not want to be overheard in that house.

"Yes, sir," answered Davis, and I knew from his voice that he had recognized me.

"Come to the Stillwell house at once. Bring a revolver. But get here quick!"

"Shall I ring when I come, sir?" asked Davis, and I thought I detected a note of concern in his voice.

"No; don't ring. The door will be open. Come right in, but come carefully. Do you understand? Quick!"

"Yes, sir!" said Davis, and I pressed my hand down on the call bell as I hung up the receiver, in case it should tinkle out an alarm.

A moment later I was out of the library again and creeping cautiously up the stairs, step by step, past the door of the room that held MacGirr, onward up the second stairway, and again up the third, until I came to the door that opened into the storeroom and the way to the roof. I turned the key in the lock, saw that it was securely fastened, withdrew the key, slipped it into my pocket, and once more noiselessly descended the stairs, knowing that MacGirr's road of escape in that direction was cut off.

Chapter XXIX—THE HOUSE OF CONTENTION

As I felt my way down the second stairway, I heard MacGirr's hammering come to a stop, and what seemed to be a muttered oath or two of fatigue and exasperation.

"This is like eatin' into a sub-treasury vault," I heard him complain. "It'll take a quarter of an hour to get that sheet iron off!"

"Ze door--blow eet off!" suggested the voice of Sitnikov.

"That'd take a quarter of an hour, too, just to get your soup in and your timer attached. And it's too risky for this neighbourhood!"

I knew by the sounds that he had again taken up his improvised hammer and chisel. Then he stopped to speak to the other man.

"See if everything's all right," he suggested, before the sharp sound of his chisel cutting into sheet iron once more broke the silence of the house.

I waited in the darkness like a cat, and saw the man loom in the lighted doorway, step out and peer down into the darkness below.

I could see the glimmer of his revolver in the dim light as it swung loosely in his hand at his side. I could see him lean farther out over the banister in an attitude of listening. Then I sped across the intervening space on my shoeless feet and leaped for him.

My arms clutched and clasped his, as the leaning body received the full impact of mine. We went down together, I scarcely know how; but he had no chance to raise his hand and use his gun as we went.

My fighting blood was up now; I was drunk with the dizzy memory of the indignities he had already heaped upon me. I got his gun away from him, then lost it again in the darkness. But I fought him, foot by foot, like a wildcat--fought until I had him helpless against the stair-head banister. Scarcely knowing what I did or why I did it, I heaved him bodily up and over. He fell with a howl of pain, rebounded, toppled weakly forward, and went down the stairs in a heap, rolling and tumbling to the bottom, where he lay without moving.

But I did not stop to watch him. I was on my hands and knees, clawing and padding and groping about on the floor to find that lost revolver. I did not stop to look up until it was once more safe in my hand. But before I could rise and stand on my feet, I saw the light go out in the room where MacGirr was. For the second time, I knew, he was sheltering himself in blanketing darkness. But this time we were more evenly matched, for he had his own revolver. He also knew what he was facing, and just what to expect.

I sidled closer in to the wall, waiting. The blackness about me was unbroken by one single ray or glimmer of light. Not a sound crept through the house. It was impossible to say when or from what quarter the bolt would strike. All I knew was that the bolt was inevitable--that somewhere in the gloom MacGirr was waiting and watching, just as I stood waiting and watching.

The suspense became almost unendurable. The very silence seemed to ache with it. I felt an insane desire to shout or send a volley of shots cannonading about the blank walls. I could feel the sweat trickle down my face and itch in the cuts and scratches on my hands. But I still waited, under the looming crest of that awful silence which seemed to gather and build on itself like a great wave that rises and rises until the crash of its finally overtopping wall spells the sheerest music of relief.

Yet the break in that tortured silence came from an altogether unexpected quarter. It came from the foot of the stairs, where a stunned man, recovering his senses, half-staggered and half-crawled up toward his colleague. Whether or not that colleague misunderstood the movement, whether the sheer delirium of utter panic prompted him to do what he did, I cannot tell. But as the crawling figure reached the head of the stairs, I saw the darkness stabbed by a sudden jet of flame. At the same time, the roar of a revolver-shot struck my ear.

I was not the only man who had suffered by that strain of inaction. It had proved too much for even the nerves of MacGirr. He was now shooting wildly, irrationally, down through the darkness of the hall, "going Berserk" at what seemed the approach of a new peril.

I heard the snap of his gun-hammer on the exploded caps, and his animal-like gasp as he turned and went pounding and pawing and running for the stairs that led upward to the roof. Whether or not any of those flying shots reached Sitnikov I had no time to determine. I only knew that my enemy had emptied his revolver and was in flight.

So I started in pursuit, flinging on the newel-post light as I passed it. The sudden illumination caused MacGirr to look back over his shoulder. He saw my upraised revolver as I ran. He must have seen my face as well, and understood what I intended, for he suddenly wheeled about and leaned weakly against the wall.

"For the love of God, don't shoot!" he cried.

I did not stop or lower the gun.

"I'll come down. Don't shoot!"

I was up to him by this time, two steps below where he cowered and blinked and shivered.

"Throw up your hands!" I gasped. Vaguely I felt it was a lucky thing for him that he did what I asked without hesitation and without equivocation.

"Come down!" I ordered.

He came down--but not as I had counted on his coming. He came in a sort of flying leap, which carried us both to the floor and sent a bullet from my revolver spitting and ploughing into the wall plaster. We rolled over twice, fighting like terriers as we went. I could feel the pound of the man's great fist on my face. But this did not seem to trouble me. My one thought was not to lose possession of the revolver. That, above all, was the thing I needed.

We clawed and writhed and tugged; we rolled and struggled, dealt stroke and counter-stroke. I felt my breath coming in painful gasps, and one eye blinded by the drip of blood. But still we fought, hand to hand, tooth and nail; still I held the revolver in my bruised and blood-stained hand. The great paw of MacGirr's still retained its clutch over my fingers, leaving them powerless to use the weapon. But I could feel that this clutch was minute by minute weakening. I threw all the energy of my tortured body into one supreme effort.

Suddenly I writhed and twisted away from him, so that his clutching fingers slipped from my own fingers up to my wrist. There the hold was more uncertain. It left my hand free; all that remained for me to do was to force that hand slowly upward and inward, until the gun-barrel could be directed against the gross body Under me.

I was dimly conscious of figures moving about us, of voices calling, of lights growing brighter. But all my existence centred in one maddening passion to wrest away that clutch on my wrist, to swerve my gun-barrel in against the beaded white face that stared up so pantingly into mine.

Then I gave a drunken cry of joy, for I knew that I had won. I closed my eyes to shut out the sight, for something told me that it would be unlovely.

But I opened them again with a mumble and gasp of rage, for the revolver was being taken from my hand before I could pull the trigger.

"No--no! Don't!" said a pleading voice in my ear.

On one side of me stood Davis, a revolver in his hand. On the other side stood Elvira Sabouroff, stooping close over me.

"You must not kill him," she half-whispered admonishingly, as she caught my arm. "I cannot have you kill a man!" she repeated. Slowly she drew back with my revolver in her hand.

"Leave him to me, sir!" said Davis, half-dragging, half-lifting me to my feet. "She's right, sir! You don't want murder on your 'ands, sir!"

It was only in his moments of intensest emotion that Davis neglected the aspirate. That tell-tale elision, more than anything else, I think, brought me to my senses. It gave Reason time to climb once more into her shaken and ill-used throne. It also gave me a chance to regain my wind, though I preferred resting on the solid floor until its return.

I looked about me, weakly, to see Elvira gazing down into my face. I could catch the forlorn commiseration in her eyes, and even at that untimely moment the consciousness of her loveliness crept through me. It became a sort of ache, indeterminate, and yet keener than any ache in my tired and throbbing body. The intrusion of tenderness, in the midst of all that blood and tumult, seemed to leave me light-headed.

I think I tried to take her hand, as she stooped there at my side. I felt a wayward impulse to declare to her how beautiful she was, and what balm seemed to lie in her merest touch. I think I should have told her, then, how I loved her--had I not been brought back to reality by a glimpse of Davis quietly and deliberately throttling the life out of the still struggling MacGirr.

"Don't kill that man!" I gasped. "No one's going to do it if I can't!"

"I'm only choking a bit of the fight out of him, sir," was Davis' answer. And the next moment I was conscious of the approach, from heaven knows where, of Marvin Stillwell himself. His face, I remember was the unwholesome colour of a well-ripened cheese.

"Are you hurt, Woodruff?" he gasped.

I did not answer him, for at the moment Elvira was bending over me and trying to wipe the blood-stains from my face. She was using her little absurdity of a handkerchief for this, it is true, but there was something sweet and consolatory in its touch. Stillwell, apparently, had wheeled quickly about on Davis and MacGirr.

"Here, you, get that man in here," I heard the owner of the house call out to my servant, as he threw open a door on the right. "Get him in there under lock and key!"

"You watch that man!" I managed to cry out, disquieted by the thought that MacGirr was leaving my sight. "And watch the other man too!"

"What other man?" demanded Stillwell.

"Sitnikov, the man on the stairs," I sleepily told him.

"There's no other man--he must have got away," were the words I heard from the stair-head.

I must have been more done up than I first imagined, for the quick voices about me seemed to recede into space, the moving figures became more and more mist-like. I heard the voice of Davis, thin and far away, ask where the telephone was. I also heard Elvira command someone to bring water.

I was awakened from my torpor by an explosion of sound that shook the floor on which I lay and brought a sudden shift to the entire scene about me. I could once more hear voices and steps, calls and cries.

I saw a blue-clad figure block the doorway through which the shackled MacGirr had been thrust.

"Don't look!" commanded this figure, peremptorily barring back Marvin Stillwell and Davis. "It's no use--it's all over!"

"But what is it?" gasped Stillwell, struggling foolishly and ineffectively to gain the doorway.

"He bit on a giant-cap o' some kind, no bigger than a dog-whistle. It blew his whole head off--but for the love of God, keep out--don't look!"

I remembered, with dreamy unconcern, that once, in my Central American mining days, I had seen a Jamaican negro, too indolent to use a "crimping iron," close his teeth on a mercurial fulminate cap. It had detonated under that pressure, blowing away the negro's jaw.

And MacGirr, I told myself, had declined to be taken alive. He and all the perils he stood for, were a thing of the past. But I seemed too weak and tired to give the matter much thought.

Chapter XXX—THE PATHS OF PEACE

As a result of my impromptu "at home" in the Stillwell house I had to take a rest of three weeks, out at Beaumaris. Nearly one-half of that time, in fact, I spent in bed, succumbing to a most unheroic attack of weakness. A more leisured appraisal of my bodily injuries could show a broken collar-bone, a torn wrist-tendon, three loosened teeth, and enough minor contusions and lacerations to excuse the attentions of a very prim and thin-lipped trained nurse who plainly resented the fact that Elvira Sabouroff could adjust a pillow much more delightfully than could her own over-professional fingers.

That enforced exile from the outer world practically cut me off from the more sordid aftermath of that sordid enough struggle--from the coroner's investigations, the police conferences, the newspaper exaggerations and perversions.

The most deft perversion, however, was that which seemed to emanate from official quarters, insisting that the man who had reached such an untimely end in Marvin Stillwell's house had been operating merely as a burglar. The identity of MacGirr, in fact, was never fully established--and in this, of course, I recognized the hand of the capitalist himself, naturally averse to exploiting either his enemies or their activities. There was, of course, the battered safe to back up this position--and many were the photographs and flash-lights of that battered safe to appear in the evening papers.

But the nine-day wonder wore itself out, as wonders have the habit of doing, in a great city where the tides of calamity so ceaselessly beat and break on the cliffs of *ennui*.

The thought of escaping it all was not repugnant to me. The thought of having Elvira there, safe in my own home, was also a source of consolation.

As the soreness went out of my body, and the listlessness out of my spirit, I made it a point to be more and more with Elvira. I saw, from the first, that she was innately averse to idleness. While she found that rambling old house at Beaumaris attractive enough to the eye, she found her greatest delight in the performance of some definite and actual duty. So she seemed strangely happy in her elaborate task of sorting and cataloguing my Tanagra *figurines*.

She would have to run in to the city for a day or two, she told me, to consult the collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A day or two of research work in the city library would also be necessary, she felt, before she could make sure of her classification.

I could see, from the way she spoke, that the task was one that engrossed her. I felt a longing

to share that work with her; but equally strong was my reluctance to force myself on her, or to give her the impression I was taking advantage of what she might have interpreted as her helplessness. I was quite willing to go slowly. There were certain things, I knew, which she would have to forget, certain inconsiderate missteps which would have to be forgiven.

I could detect that subtle shrinking from all personal relationship, for the present at least, in the very enthusiasm with which she spoke of the Tanagra *figurines*. It seemed unbelievable, she told me, that a few rows of terra-cotta figures could hold so much history packed away in their crudely baked clay. It seemed wonderful to think that on these little mud images of gods and men and animals hinged the history of classical art. It left her speechless to think they were the forerunners of all the glorious sculpture of Greek civilization.

Once her work was done as she hoped to do it, she confessed there would be a woeful shaking up of the Salting collection in London, and a relabelling of many of the Mycenaean museum specimens in general. And she went on to tell how so many of the figures reminded her of the half-jocular mural *amoretti* which she had once studied at Pompeii. She even claimed they should receive more attention than hitherto bestowed upon them, since they so clearly showed how Greek art-types first became secularized, and how art was once borrowed from city to city.

I had groped over much of that ground myself, and I was inordinately proud of my *figurines*. Only a few of my own family, in fact, knew what a small fortune had been frittered away on the foolish things. I felt repaid for them in the thought that they were serving as a link that might hold Elvira and me a little closer together. I wondered, too, if mere flesh and blood interests, if any commonplace man of today, could ever bring the same eye-glow of emotion as she spoke of my little terra-cotta *Nike* with its missing nose and its sadly broken pedestal.

Those were days of contentment and quiet happiness at Beaumaris. The stampeding March winds and the cold rains kept us much indoors—but this was not a hardship.

Then our tranquillity was ended by an unexpectedly disturbing note. This took the form of a telegram from Natalie Stillwell, saying she was on her way home from Palm Beach and asking if I would run over to Jersey City with the car and meet her.

Chapter XXXI—THE END OF THE ARMISTICE

Three nights later I sat in *Adolf's*, waiting for Elvira. The evening was thick, and unwholesomely warm for early March.

Through the misted window-glass I could see the fretting and jostling street-crowds ebbing past, drifting homeward at the day's end, stamping and pattering the pavement-slush into a disconsolate black batter. I felt suddenly grateful for the assuaging orderliness and quiet-toned hangings of the dining-room about me, for the sense of comfort and cleanness in the white-draped table rows, for the warm light from the rose-shaded candles. Somewhere, outside in the slush, a barrel-organ was converting Mascagni into ragtime madness. The clatter and throb of sound seemed to mock the greyneess and weariness of a world grown suddenly old.

The barrel-organ moved away through the mist, and began again, more wearily, remotely, the distance mellowing its two-year old Casino waltz-song into a pulsing and plaintive theme. The bedraggled streets emptied themselves, like a closed sluice-way, until nothing but a thin trickle of humanity seeped through it. A waiter in funereal black put a carafe down on one of the near-

by niveous squares so brightly damaskeened with cutlery. I heard a tinkle of silver as he moved about the table, the faint squeak of his boots on the carpet as he passed out of hearing. Then I swung about so that I faced the door, and waited.

I waited expectantly, minute by minute. A diner or two drifted in between the serried rows of damask. An odour of cooked food, neither gross nor disagreeable, smote on my nostrils. I realized how hungry I was, and meditated, lazily, on how much that rudimentary appetite of hunger meant to human life. Then I looked at my watch again.

It was already fifteen minutes past the time. That was not an exceptional margin to leave for the accidents and exigencies of city travel. I warned myself against impatience. I sat back idly watching a woman in a plumed Gainsborough dabbing grated horse-radish on her Blue Points. I pondered if the table linen about me took on its different pattern from each different aspect simply because of its double set of parallel twilled threads. I wondered if waiters really had souls. I watched the newcomers who straggled in out of the night, by twos and threes, subdued into quietness as they came, dignified by the tangible decency of a plush carpet under their feet. It was a very quiet café; the *pop* of a champagne cork would have been almost a shock to the nerves. It was too far down-town for the frivolous; it was more a deep-water port for the human freighters of city life. And it was macaronic in more ways than one, was *Adolf's*, for it was a German establishment with a French *chef* noted for his Italian dishes.

I turned my back to the door and waited. Then I looked at my watch once more.

It was thirty minutes past the appointed hour. That, in itself, was not a momentous situation. But never before had I known Elvira to fail me. Never before had she kept me waiting in this way. I remembered that it had been her own suggestion that we meet at *Adolf's*. She had even appointed the hour, and had repeated it to me, as though to impress it on my memory.

I probed about for possible reasons; but could find none. And as I sat there, with my watch still in my hand, a slow but persistent sense of apprehension began to well up within me.

I wondered if Elvira could have misinterpreted my natural reticence on the matter of meeting Natalie Stillwell. Elvira, on that same day, had motored in from Beaumaris with Davis, to go to the Metropolitan Museum and begin her study of the figurines there. I had sent her a bunch of Cattley orchids and a line or two leaving my town apartment at her disposal. Davis, in fact, had made tea for her there, and she had even left one delicate *Cattleya Trianae* in the Myrina vase on my study table. It had filled me with a sense of guilt, that solitary flower, for I had not altogether explained the reason for my absence. It would have been rather hard to explain; though Elvira, I had learned during those last few weeks, neither welcomed excuses nor looked for explanations.

Yet I had my excuses for meeting Natalie. In the first place, I wanted to cast the die for all time. I wanted to turn the page, and turn it honestly, by explaining everything.

Natalie, however, gave me no opening. There was not even a touch of the old imperiousness to fortify me in my resolution. If other things were troubling her, she gave small sign of it. She never was the sort of woman to be exigent, under any circumstances. She darted as lightly over the surface of things as a water-spider over the surface of its familiar pool. If any deeper feeling was stirring within her, she guarded it with her bristling facetiousness, just as her father guarded his reticent Long-Island acres with ornamental *chevaux de frise*. She even gently coerced me into staying for luncheon, that she might show me her water-moccasin skins and

her baby-alligator pelts. She told me the gossip of the Beach Club and how good the tarpon fishing had been. And I listened with attention and answered with studied interest, and tried to tell myself that after all it was very much like old times.

But I knew it was not. I also knew that I had missed, for that day, the chance of meeting Elvira, and wondered why the memory of it should make me miserable. I thought of the pale-faced, girlish figure, with all its contradictory aura of vigour and vitality, drifting through the rooms of the high-walled museum, so rich with its memories of the dead, of things so timelessly old. I tried to picture her as stooping above musty show-cases, as the figure of warm and pulsing Youth gazing into the dust and relics of the dead Past.

No, I decided, it was no feeling of pique that was keeping Elvira away. I could never imagine anger or chagrin in that statue-like impersonality of hers.

I looked at my watch once more. It was almost eight o'clock. My feeling of anxiety became one of alarm. It was no longer a mere matter of a spoiled dinner. It was a situation calling for immediate action on my part. For I could not forget the life out of which Elvira had so recently emerged. I could not shake off the memory of that once malignant figure, Red-Flag MacGirr; I could not rid myself of the thought of such delirians as Cono Di Marco, or obliterate the Inner Circle and its machinations from my mind. I even stopped to wonder what tentacle of that older and darker life could possibly reach out and hold her back.

I got up from the rose-shaded table and made my way through to the office of *Adolfs*. There I called up Beaumaris on the long-distance telephone. I was answered by Mrs. Berger, the housekeeper.

"I would like to speak to Miss Sabouroff," I said, as calmly and casually as I was able.

"Miss Sabouroff is not here," came the answer, and my heart went down into my boots at the words.

"She must be there," I persisted, a little foolishly. The voice that trickled out of the wire explained that Miss Sabouroff had left early that morning for New York; she had been driven to meet the nine-fifty train.

"What did she take with her?"

Mrs. Berger could not exactly remember, but she thought it was nothing more than a small hand-bag. Yes, she had seemed in normal spirits. She had given them to understand that she would be back that evening.

I somewhat startled the placid-eyed Mrs. Berger by ordering her to go at once to Miss Sabouroff's room and report to me what was there. Then came what seemed an interminable wait. When Mrs. Berger spoke again it was to tell me that everything was there as usual. But no note or letter had been left for me.

Yes, Mrs. Berger was quite sure all Miss Sabouroff's personal belongings had been left in her room. She had not returned, and she had sent no message. That was all.

The situation was becoming inexplicable.

I left word at *Adolfs* that if anyone called for me or any message came, to send word at once to my city apartment. Then I faced my ruined dinner, made a farce of eating some of it, and had my waiter order a taxicab for me.

All the way up Broadway and the Avenue I was stubbornly hoping against hope that I would still find Elvira there in my rooms, that some unthought-of side issue would explain the whole foolish dilemma. But the moment my door was opened by the imperturbable and melancholy-eyed Davis I knew that he was alone there. This very calmness exasperated me, at first, as he stood with his fingers hooked together, replying to my impetuous volley of questions with that ox-like placidity which can sometimes make precision doubly hateful.

Yes, Miss Sabouroff had been there. She had come at noon, had asked for me, and had seemed in excellent spirits. She had expressed a wish for paper, to copy some notes, and she had apparently written a letter or two. Davis had gone out, to look after my dogs at the Kennels' Infirmary, a task which confronted him twice each week. He had left Elvira still writing at the desk. It was three o'clock when he returned, and she had gone. There was no sign that any one had visited my apartment in the meantime. There was nothing to show when and where she had gone. No word or message had been left. She had disappeared, completely, as mysteriously as though she had walked to the edge of the earth and stepped over into illimitable space. It was more than a puzzle to me; it was a calamity.

I fretted about the room like a leashed beagle. But there was no clue to follow, no trail to take up. There was nothing for me to do. I could only wait until the morning, blindly hoping it was all due to some simple and foolish little blunder.

Chapter XXXII—THE ARM OF THE LAW

I entertained a not unnatural aversion to making the news of Elvira's disappearance public. Hers was not a name I cared to see bandied about either club-rooms or street corners. I still hoped to stumble on some timely clue. I still thought that a few hours of organized inquiry and search would solve the mystery.

The entire morning was lost, accordingly, in a wild-goose chase about the city. It was a chase which resulted in nothing but weariness of body and bewilderment of mind. Then, suddenly realizing that I had already lost much precious time, I went straight to police headquarters and sought out my friend Lieutenant Belton.

He was busy at the telephone as I entered, and this gave me a minute or two to pull myself together. I had a chance to shake off that newer depression born of the official austerities of Centre Street, of stolid and intimidating door-men, of a grim machinery of justice which seemed to grind the amenities out of ordinary intercourse even as it ground the evil-doer out of society.

I began to wonder, as I watched the figure at the telephone, just how I could explain things to him without explaining too much. The Central Office atmosphere is not one to encourage intimate confession, except under the thumb-screw of the law.

"What's the trouble?" asked Belton, with mock solemnity, as he hung up the receiver and swung about on his chair. He faced me, looking as pink and fresh and fit as an athlete just off a running-track. He even laughed a little as he reached out jovially and shook hands with me. I could only assume that his hilarity arose from a contemplation of my woebegone and worried face.

"A friend of mine has disappeared," I began at once, without any beating about the bush.

"Friends have a habit of doing that now and then, you know," he answered, with the casual smile still on his full-blooded and deceptively boyish-looking face.

"But this is an unexpected, an inexplicable, disappearance."

"They often are--until they walk home and explain things."

"This is not that kind of a disappearance. It's more than a puzzle. It's a mystery, and I've got to find her."

"Her!" repeated the lieutenant, with a quick little side-glance in my direction.

"She seems literally to have dropped out of sight, without leaving a trace of her whereabouts, without any known reason for disappearing."

"Are you responsible for her?"

"I feel, in a way, that I am responsible. It's at least my duty to find her, at once, and at any cost."

The lieutenant curled the ends of his moustache, with infinite care and deliberation.

"That shouldn't be so hard," he murmured, in no way disturbed by the information I had given him. "But suppose you tell me a little more about the lady?"

"Her name is Elvira Sabouroff," I began.

For the second time, the lieutenant let his quick side-glance play over my face.

"The 'Bolshevik' woman of the Cono Di Marco case?" he inquired promptly, yet casually.

"Yes, that is the woman," I admitted.

"The 'gay-cat' for that anarchist gang called the Inner Circle--the 'floater' for Red-Flag MacGirr and his crowd--the 'stick-up' for men like Mutashenko?"

"She was one of the Inner Circle, I believe, but she has broken away from them," I explained, as calmly as was possible. To speak without impatience meant somewhat of an effort on my part.

"You mean she said she'd broken away?"

"I know she had," I declared.

"How do you know that?"

There was no mistaking the note of flippant scepticism. His query was barbed with a contempt which I hotly resented.

"I know it because I took her out of that life myself. I know it because she has for weeks been acting as a sort of private secretary for me. And I know it most of all because I know she is not a woman who could be happy with a gang of outlaws."

"Miss anything worth while when she went?" he had the effrontery to inquire, without looking up.

"Of course not!" I cried.

My anger seemed to amuse him. He sat pulling at one end of his moustache, with his lips puckered.

"Those 'Bolshie' gangs are usually rather close corporations," he ventured. "They don't stand

for deserters, I mean."

"That's precisely why I don't want to lose time in getting on this girl's track. I've got to find out if that Inner Circle has in any way interfered with her. I want to find out if any of those Bolshevistic agents are mixed up in this."

The lieutenant still meditated.

"Of course, you're aware of the fact that this city's full of little revolutionary circles like that," he explained, at last. "We're growing into a sort of second Switzerland, over here, for Terrorists and Bolsheviks and expatriates of all kinds. They raise most of their money here, and print their stuff and work out their plans. They don't welcome police visitors. They prefer doing their work quietly and secretly."

"But most of them must be known? They can't get over Ellis Island without being sized up?"

"By no means most of them. They'd never get over Ellis island at all if they were sized up. You don't find people making bombs in public. They have their burrows, and they dive for them when they spot anything that looks like a spy. So all we can do is to scratch and bark around these burrows, like a dog watching a chipmunk's hole."

"But some tab must be kept on their movements?"

"When it's possible, yes. But you must remember we have a good many of these people among us. We've Russians and Armenians, Hungarians and Syrians, Macedonians and Czechoslovaks, Mexicans and South Americans, Hindus and heaven knows what all! We know that a revolutionary federation has its headquarters at a certain number on Fourth Avenue, and that what they call 'The Hunchakista' hangs out at East Twenty-fifth Street. But until one of those Hunchakista gentlemen commits, say, a murder like that of Tavshanjian, the Union Square merchant, we can't do much. They live like a gang of gophers--they've always a hole to drop into, when the scare comes."

"It's not a certainty," I explained, "that the woman in this case has actually fallen in with any of those people."

"But you say she knew their ways. And you also say that she has disappeared."

"Yes, without excuse or reason."

"And you still think that something may have happened to her?"

"I can't tell. That's what we've got to find out. That's what brought me to your office."

"Then tell me more about the case."

It took me but a minute or two to report everything that remained unexplained. What I had to say did not seem to add to Lieutenant Belton's perplexity. But he looked up at me, a little curiously.

"Do you know the first answer the police would give to a case like this?"

I told him that I did not.

"Drowned," he said with an almost brutal candour.

"But why talk about her being drowned," I indignantly asked, yet with an involuntary tightness about my throat. "She's not the sort of woman to take to drowning."

"Well, that would be the usual answer," he nonchalantly continued. "I don't suppose you realize the number of 'reported missing' cases we get down here. Last year, for example, we'd practically twenty-two hundred of 'em. We have a regular bureau for taking care of 'em. And we find about nine out of every ten of those missing persons. We find 'em, that is, either dead or alive."

"How would you proceed with this case?" I inquired with a sense of growing uneasiness.

"As soon as a reported-missing message is sent from a precinct station-house to the Central Office here, it is turned over to what we call the M. P. department--the 'missing person' department."

"And then what?"

"Then a blank is filled out at headquarters, and your case is given a number. Everything about that case is filed under that number--letters, pictures, data, and all that sort of thing. Then a summary's made out and printed on a separate card by our police printer."

"Then the thing couldn't be kept confidential? This search can't be kept a secret one?"

"It can, if you don't actually want the help of publicity. Of course it can. We send out a general alarm by sending these printed slips to every station-house. Confidential alarms are sent out with instructions not to go beyond the force. Then one of our trained detectives gets to work on the case, and, of course, the first thing is a look through the morgue, and then a round-up of the hospitals and sanitariums and that sort of thing. Then we move on to a wider circle, and then we try a still wider one. In fact our M. P. department's practically an international one. Nowadays we can start the machinery moving in London or Paris or Rome, once we're sure our man or woman has got away from America."

"But I don't think this woman has left America. I don't think she would leave," I protested.

"You can never tell what a 'Bolshie' will do!" declared Lieutenant Belton, swinging back in his chair and looking me over with easy condescension. "But we can start the wheels moving and find out, any time you say so."

"Then I'd be obliged to you if a general alarm is sent out at once. And I'd be very glad to offer any reasonable reward."

"But why the reward?"

"Because I've got to get trace of this woman," I replied, with some heat. "I've got to get her."

"It's not for--well, for sentimental reasons?" he inquired.

"It's for very material reasons--if you'd call the fact that I know her life is in danger a material reason."

"Ah, now we're getting down to 'hardpan,'" said the officer, once more swinging around and facing me. "Where is this danger you speak of, as far as you know?"

"I don't know. That's why I've come to you. Elvira Sabouroff has worked with this anarchist band called the Inner Circle. She realized that the leaders of that band were really criminals masquerading as Bolsheviks. She knew their haunts, their aims, their secrets."

"Which always has its drawbacks!"

"Precisely! Then she broke away from them, and they knew she had broken away. Doesn't it

stand to reason, then, that when she suddenly and mysteriously disappears her disappearance may be due to the activity of these old friends who have become her new enemies?"

The lieutenant thought the matter over for several seconds.

"Yes, it is possible," was his non-committal answer. He was about to say more, I felt, but for some unknown reason decided to hold his peace.

"And isn't it equally reasonable that the longer any search for her is delayed, the greater the danger will be--the danger to her, I mean?"

"That's equally true, if your original assumption is not at fault."

I assumed that years of such things had left him thus casual and callous before all such dilemmas. In vain I searched his face for any sign of eagerness, for any more intimate trace of interest. All I saw was an official and unfathomable immobility.

"Then why not set the machinery in motion at once?" I asked.

He nodded, after another few seconds of thought.

"The machinery will be set in motion, if you say so," he agreed. I watched him as he reached out and touched a push-button above his desk.

"It will be impossible for me to give you a photograph," I explained. "But I can make the description very definite."

"The photograph will not be necessary," was the lieutenant's reply.

"But it would help, of course?"

"Not so materially, in this case."

"Why so?"

"Because we already have the woman's picture--and, if I am not greatly mistaken, also her finger-prints."

"You have her picture!" I echoed, as a hot flush of anger swept over me, followed by a slowly subsiding glow of resentment.

"As an active and dangerous criminal who has been under the eye of the police for some two years now," was the dispassionate reply, though I felt a touch of theatricality in the lieutenant's forced calmness.

"You mean because of her--extreme Bolshevistic beliefs?" I asked, with a resurgent touch of indignation. "Because she has been what you call a Nihilist?"

"Bomb-throwing is a little extreme, as you call it. And neither of us has forgotten the Cono Di Marco case."

"She was not a party to that. She fought against that, from the first. That is one of the reasons she broke away from their cursed gang!"

It surprised me to find myself pleading her cause with such vehemence. It angered me to think that she even needed my advocacy. But my hauteur, on Lieutenant Belton, was like water on a duck's back.

"I've been bumping into these Bolsheviks, Woodruff, every day, almost, for two or three years

now," he went on, with the same imperturbable calmness. "And I've found the woman 'Bolshie,' as a rule, even more tricky and unreliable than the man."

He held up his hand at my quick start of protest.

"Wait," he continued, motioning me back into my chair. "Let me finish. It's not my affair what your friend is, has been, or ought to be. She's lost, and it's our place to find her for you. I'm uncommonly fond of you, Woodruff, and you've done me a good many decent turns, and that's why I wish you were well out of this whole underground mess."

"Find that woman, and I shall be out of it."

"Very well, I'll start the machinery at once. And the moment anything turns up, you'll get a report on it."

He held out his great hand. The grip he gave me seemed to be eloquent with understanding, with a commiserative condonation which I resented.

"You'll do me the turn of my life if you find her," I said, realizing the futility of all explanation.

"People can't step off the earth nowadays without something to show for it."

"I hope not."

"Of course not. We've certain pet corners we look into first, in cases like this. I'll see Dugan himself, and have him put McAllister on the case."

Dispirited as I felt in leaving Lieutenant Belton's office there was a certain indefinable satisfaction in the thought that the complex mechanism of the law was allied with and active in my cause. It seemed to take the hopelessness out of a prospect that had as yet given me little cause to hope. It brought the fortitude which the consciousness of reinforcements must bring to the actor on any impending battlefield.

By the time I had made my way back to my apartment that evening I knew that the machinery of the law in all its countless ramifications had been put into motion. I knew that the immense nervous system of the city had been electrified into action.

But, as I stood at my high studio windows that night, looking out over the light-spangled gloom, I could not keep from wondering, with a touch of wistfulness, if Elvira Sabouroff rested somewhere in the midst of that great wilderness of humanity.

Chapter XXXIII—THE INTERVENTION OF LEFTY

A new day brought with it a new energy. My first realization was that I was no longer a dilettante along the dubious ways of the underworld. This could no longer be called merely the game for the game's sake. I was no more "the amateur mouchard" meddling in other people's affairs. I faced a problem of my own, a dark and forbidding problem demanding a quick and complete solution.

I did not intend to rely only on the police. The machinery at their command was extensive, but all official action in such a case, I decided, would have its handicap. My faith in the miraculous powers of the detective had long since been shattered. As Lefty Boyle, the stool-pigeon, had so often said: "It's nine-tenths guess-work and one-tenth gall."

So I went to Lefty himself, and laid the case before him. I told him everything, my only reservation being a natural silence as to the extent of my attachment for Elvira. But Lefty, I am afraid, was able to make a shrewd guess or two at that.

He sat whittling a spindle from a broken office-chair, and eyed the product of his handicraft for several moments of silence. But I knew he was deep in thought.

"Those Bolshevik gangs are like water-mains," he observed. "They've all got to travel underground, I mean."

"But why should this woman be travelling with any of those followers of Trotzky? She left them! They're enemies now!"

"She might be travelling with them unwillingly, mightn't she?"

I had to confess that she might. In fact, that was the thing of which I stood most in fear.

Lefty suddenly stopped whittling.

"Was this woman sore on you for anything? Did she have a grouch?"

The question struck me as an odd one, but it was easy enough to answer.

"She had no grouch, as you call it."

"You're sure of it?"

"I feel quite sure of it. I heard her say, in fact, that her last week at Beaumaris had been one of the happiest weeks in all her life."

Again Lefty stopped whittling.

"Have you made the first rounds--I mean the morgue and hospitals and those joints?"

"They were canvassed this morning. There's nothing to lead us to believe the woman was the victim of any accident or sudden illness."

Lefty sat pondering his finger-nails.

"Except drowning," he added meditatively. The persistence with which they all harped on the possibility of a happy and wholesome-minded girl meeting with death by drowning was beginning to get on my nerves.

"Can you give me a list of her friends, the people she knows?"

It was not a long list that I had to give him.

"I imagine they're a sweet lot, that Inner Circle gang!" was his comment. "Those 'Bolshies' have five centres in this country. You'll find each of 'em denying it, but they're there, just the same. New York comes first, of course; then comes Hoboken. Then there's Paterson, and then Pittsburgh. Chicago makes the fifth, and a mean fifth, too. Just about the same places the Reds and the anarchists infested."

"I don't care how many there are, Lefty, and I don't care how mean they are--we've got to get into each one of them!"

"Assumin' the lady's there."

"If she's not there, we've got to find where she is."

"There's one thing. This case is likely to take time, and perhaps a little money. It may end in a day or two, or it may drag on for a month or two. I want you to know what you are up against."

"The money side needn't count, Lefty, if you can give it the time."

He looked into a well-thumbed note-book, rubbing his stubby chin as he consulted the pages.

"I'll make time," he said, with a nod of the head. And with that nod I knew that I had the inimitable Lefty Boyle engaged in my service.

"So don't you crowd me," he went on, with his indifferent drawl. "You just let me amble quietly along in my own way. It's the *only* way, in a case like this. When there's anything to report, I'll come to you and report."

I left him, feeling more at ease, more hopeful of the end. But I did not relax my own activities. That same day I cabled to London, and then to Rome, giving data and forwarding instructions for a reliable man in each city to be on the lookout for Elvira Sabouroff, *alias* Paladino. I next cabled to Buenos Ayres, at a flat rate of a dollar a word, and sent a message to *La Prensa* of that city, asking for information as to either Cono Di Marco or a woman named Paladino.

This done, I made it a point to visit my old room over the Schmidlapp laboratory. Nothing came of that visit, except the discovery that the little printing-shop was closed and locked, and the conviction, after an hour of guarded espionage, that the place was indeed empty and deserted.

It was two hours later that McAllister of the Central Office called on me. He was a quiet little man, who looked like a waiter in street clothes. He asked a number of questions as to the points I had already given Lieutenant Belton.

But I felt, all through his talk, that he had come there more for the purpose of sizing me up, of making sure there was not some secondary meaning in the entire movement.

Nothing, of course, had yet been accomplished. A feeling of irritation took possession of me at what I felt to be the law's delays. I wanted action--at once. I wanted to see tangible returns, forgetting that the more cumbersome the machinery the more slowly it could be got under way.

One result of this mood of resentment was a hurried message to the garage for my car. The next was an equally hurried excursion down into the lower East Side, with a dip into those places, from the public libraries to the rooms of Elvira's old lodging-house where anything might possibly be picked up. Once, as I climbed out of a Second Avenue cellar café that was the haunt of a band of so-called Bolsheviks, I came face to face with a quiet little man, who carried a couple of books under his arm. He wore old-fashioned spectacles with polished steel rims, and might have passed for a studious waiter returning to his room. But, as he looked up at me, I saw it was McAllister, of the Central Office. He made a little movement as a sign for me not to stop and talk. So I watched him go quietly on his way, curiously consoled at the discovery of an agent thus surreptitiously working in my behalf.

I even came to take a sort of satisfaction in drifting idly yet determinedly about those lower East Side streets, although my movements resulted in nothing. I felt, however, that something was being gained with each inch of ground that I covered; I was at least narrowing the area of the unknown.

I was congratulating myself on this fact, when a hand suddenly caught me by the arm and swung me sharply into the shadow of a doorway.

It was Lefty Boyle, with his hat tilted over his eyes and a villainous-looking cigar-end in one side of his mouth.

"Where did you drop from?" I demanded, looking up and down.

"Drop from? I've passed you three times in an hour and a half!" Then he grew suddenly serious. "What are you doin' down here?"

"The same thing that you are doing, I imagine."

He made no effort to conceal his look of disgust.

"Then git off that Irish linen and those twenty-dollar shoes. Do the thing right, if you're goin' to do it at all. You're only advertisin' yourself."

"That doesn't worry me."

"No, but you're worryin' me. You might as well go out to shoot ducks in a scarlet huntin'-jacket! And for the Lord's sake, cut out the *chauffeur* and tourin'-car when you're east o' Fourth Avenue. That's worse than--than tryin' to hunt moose from a Pullman platform!"

"But we haven't seen the moose yet!" I objected.

"And we never will, gunnin' round with brass bands!"

"But I never bring the car all the way over with me."

"Keep out of the car, altogether! Keep low! Get into your blind, man--get into your blind! Get under cover! This is the kind o' work you've got to do without announcing it in the society columns!"

Chapter XXXIV—THE FACE IN THE CROWD

I accepted the advice of Lefty Boyle, and at once got under cover. The nature of my disguise, I soon saw, was the cause of considerable mental perturbation on the part of Davis, who with the exception of my one lapse some weeks earlier, had limited my sartorial prerogatives to the mere choice of a morning cravat.

When a man has once come to look on the laying out of your linen as a matutinal rite, and has grown to wield your daily razor with all the solemnity of a Buddhist priest steeped in the mystery of implacable and esoteric exercises, it is no easy matter, I have discovered, to divorce him from such ceremonials. Davis tacitly mourned for the exhumation of my evening clothes; he pined for a laundered shirt-front or a fancy waistcoat to embellish with onyx buttons; he grieved at heart to see me tog myself out in the same disreputable garage-suit which had served its purpose during my meanderings in the Cono Di Marco case. His sensibilities were wounded at the sight of my going about in deplorably soiled linen, in outlandishly unpolished shoes, in an oil-stained cap that would have been scorned by a tinker.

But the effect of that new attire, I must confess, proved in one respect little short of miraculous. I was no longer a marked man on the street. I was one of the people. When I sauntered into an East Side café, men no longer turned to stare at me, drinkers no longer edged away from me. Ash-blond waitresses no longer tittered when I ventured into a cheap restaurant. Even the patrolmen now let me pass without that searching second glance, which, I suppose, brings

disquiet into the breast of all evil-doers. I was spoken to now and then, as I went my ways, with the *camaraderie* of true undergroove fellowship. Card games went on while I stood by. Street gangs no longer dispersed at my approach. I no longer put a damper on dice throwing, or called forth comments from my neighbours in a slum fight.

But if I became less a subject for impolite observation, I became even less an object of polite treatment. I had never revelled much in that subserviency which accords the rich smooth going and soft corners simply because they are rich. I had never luxuriated in those hypocrisies with which so many of their lives are upholstered. And now I accepted things as they came. I took my joy in being one of the people. It was a new and in many ways a novel experience.

But at no time was I altogether idle, just as at no time was I altogether happy. There was that ceaseless gnawing anxiety, that eternal doubt as to the outcome of my quest, which kept my restless days from any touch of contentment. Each day opened and closed with an unanswered interrogation.

The tension of this feeling of suspense increased as time went on. No solution of the mystery appeared. At stated intervals I received reports from the police authorities. Periodically Lefty Boyle made his appearance before me. But nothing came of the quest. Replies to my cables dribbled in from foreign cities but no information came with them. Lieutenant Belton drew my attention to the deportation of one Madame Trina Pobloff, who among other things, was accused of being a member of "The Brothers of the Woods" in the Riga district. She had also been a member of the Central committee of the Second Soviet. There had been an exchange of notes between Petrograd and the Federal officials at Washington in 1917. Lieutenant Belton wanted to make sure that this woman was not Elvira Sabouroff under another name.

Then came a vague hint that an American woman had joined *El Progreso*, a newspaper published at Chivilcoy, near Buenos Ayres. After much cabling and questioning, the woman in question turned out to be one Senora Maria Abella Sarraaga. She was a Bolshevistic Free-Thinker of forty, who had migrated from *La Consciencia Libre*, at Malaga, and had never so much as set foot on North America.

The search was still a blind one. Not a jot of information had come to me; not an inch of ground had been gained. But my resolution was not shaken. I kept doggedly on the move, each day planning a new field of exploration, or, at least, a new examination of ground already gone over.

The mere law of probability, I argued, would some day bring me in touch with my quarry. The more I kept moving, the greater my chances must prove. It was equally important, I decided, that I should keep open every possible avenue of observation. I felt that my true hunting-ground was along the unordered ways of the underworld, yet I could not overlook the fact that things often came to us from the most unexpected quarters. A hint or inkling of Elvira Sabouroff's whereabouts, I felt, might, through the operation of some perverse law of irony, come to me from that very upper world with which she had been so little in touch.

So for one day out of each week I came up, like a whale, to breathe. I patrolled the Avenue in my car. I drifted from club to club. I visited tea-rooms and knocked about a few of those studios where art is considered a silent partner of conviviality.

But for the other six days of the week I wandered about the City's underworld. I went untidily dressed and unshaved, and became one of the people. I made myself acquainted with the lower end of East Broadway, and bit by bit picked up information as to the different organizations of

Russian revolutionists. I located the Bolshevistic "Bunta" at its modest temporary quarters in East Broadway, and across the way, the so-called "Social Democratic Party." One block south, on Henry Street, the home of the "Social Revolutionary Party" was of equal interest to me.

I loafed and talked and made friends in drinking places, stood in bread-lines, got on speaking terms with different gang members, and dropped in at dance-halls and smoking-cribs. My visiting-list gradually extended to fiery-tongued Finns and Poles and Jews, to say nothing of a Sinn-Feiner or two. I was made, after a substantial contribution to the "cause," a probationer in the "Mother Earthers," that cosmopolitan revolutionary sect led by Samuel Gicca. Acute and conscienceless demagogue that he was, Gicca interested me. I sized him up as a charlatan, from the first, but his loose-jointed audacity, his cunning and pertinacity, were not to be denied. He had drunk deep, like the rest of his "Mother Earthers," of many a frothing theory; he was a ferment of all the balms and poisons of modern "free thought."

I grew depressed at times, and lonely for things which I could not quite fathom. A sense of guiltiness also took possession of me, as I saw more and more clearly how unequal the distribution of earth's wealth had been. I had never before understood what poverty entailed. I had never had the imagination to put myself completely in the place of those restless souls of the underworld until, even in pretence, I became one of them. And I made certain resolutions as to what was going to be done when my time once more became my own. I sat up, night after night, altering and adding to my working plan of a tenement-house reform which I some day hoped to see under way. I consoled myself by planning out hygienic sleeping-halls, and a soup-kitchen for the winter months. I began to study how I could turn my Long Island stock farm into a community settlement for East Side city workers. And in the meantime I added repeatedly and recklessly to the coffers of the Macauley Mission.

But nothing of this brought me any nearer to the end of my quest. I stuck to my irregular circle of inspection as doggedly as a patrolman sticks to his rounds; yet I stumbled on nothing to reward me for my search. I have said that I did not despair. It is useless to deny, however, that the flame of hope dwindled down into a very faint glimmer. I suffered more than usual, I suppose, because I had always been denied so little in life. I had never been taught to endure defeat, had never experienced that stern subjugation of the ego which schools use to bow to powers other than our own.

So there were times when I rebelled blindly against my helplessness. There were times, too, when I felt that the whole thing was useless and hopeless, that the search was nothing more than a mockery--a foolish rite which must slowly initiate me into the conviction that Elvira Sabouroff was lost to me, for all time, that she no longer lived, that the vast tides which swept her away had long since buried all trace of her, obliterating all links that bound her to her old life. I had reached the end of my tether.

It was then that I learned my mistake; it was then that the unexpected came about. It happened in a way so unlooked for that it all but dumbfounded me. It made me realize how incongruous the event and its environment may often be, how seldom the great moments of life come to us in a setting that is harmonious.

It was at the end of a warm and showery April afternoon, when even the bald canons of the East Side streets seemed softened and mellowed with the spirit of spring. I drifted into a crowd that blocked the curb near the corner of Second Avenue and East Houston Street, idly speculating on whether it was a fallen truck-horse or a gang-fight.

It turned out to be nothing more than a couple of street pedlars selling a tin musical-instrument known as a lutophone, a small contralto-noted mouth-whistle on which one vendor rendered the popular airs of the day, while his companion accompanied him with barrel-organ *obligato*. The music, as the odd couple struck up their plaintive duet, filled the quiet valley of the street, and caused the evening crowd to come surging thicker and thicker about them.

I stood there in the April twilight, watching the mass of colour and the faces of the men and women and children about me. They were of all nationalities, Hungarian and Italian, German and Greek, Russian and Irish and Syrian; even a negro, and a slant-eyed Asiatic or two. They stood there circled about the music, listening, relaxed, wistful-eyed and mournful, touched with the spirit of the sound that throbbed and pulsed up through the quiet April dusk made golden with floating dust.

I let my eye wander over this little sea of saddened faces. Then suddenly, as I peered across the crowd, a tingle of shock swept through all my body, and seemed to burst like a light-globe in my very brain.

For there, not thirty feet away from me, stood Elvira Sabouroff. At her side, at her very shoulder, I saw the face of Sitnikov, the Red. He stood abstractedly wagging his head to the time of the music. I noticed, in that one quick eye-flash at him, that his whole face seemed on the oblique, as though some diabolical instrument of torture had at one time forced the skull back from its undershot jaw, as though it had been shifted and flattened in its framework under some great pressure.

In the next heart-throb my eye was back on the girl's face, as Sitnikov turned on her his child-like and almost inane smile. The unexpectedness of the vision confronting me left me fixed and rooted there, incapable of movement. But it was, indeed, Elvira. I could see the statue-like pallor of the oval face under the shadow of the heavy black veil thrust up over the black hat-brim, the soft little hollows under either cheek-bone--the hollows which had always lent a touch of tragedy to her face. I could see the deep and wistful eyes, with their brooding and wordless hunger--the eyes which had always given her an apparent touch of the deliriant. I could see the full, deep-red under-lip, which always had the habit of squaring itself as she talked, giving her face both its child-like note of ingenuousness and at the same time its appearance of inward revolt. I could see the gently sloping shoulders, beside those of the rough men of the street--the relaxed and gently sloping shoulders that seemed so tragically inefficient for opposing the world. I caught a glimpse of the slender young body backed by the great bulk of a van-driver's figure. I saw her, the woman I had loved and lost, with her dreaming eyes gazing absently and idly at the figure of the street musicians who stood beside the crowded curb.

Then thought returned to me. Whether or not I cried out, I cannot say. But I remember battling and fighting my way through the crowd. I remember Sitnikov's start, and the change that swept over the girl's face as she looked up at the sudden commotion. I remember that she turned quickly away, with what seemed almost a look of fear in her eyes, and loosened the heavy veil from her hat-brim. And it was then that I flung myself against the human barrier that separated us.

My one passion was to reach her side; my one impression was that to lose time would be to lose everything. But in this I defeated my own ends.

The closely packed crowd resented my incomprehensible assault. Shoulders and elbows barred

my way. A hand caught at my coat, and playfully held me back. I had to drill through them, like a football player bucking the line. I had to fight every inch of the way.

When I reached the spot where the white-faced girl had stood, she was no longer in sight. She had disappeared through the quiet evening dusk as completely as though she had been a timid ghost affronted by the sheer frenzy of my advance. What became of Sitnikov I could not tell. But I nursed the vague impression that he had not fled with the girl. Some subliminal conviction told me that she had turned away alone, of her own will. She had not been shackled or dragged away from me.

I shuttled back and forth through the crowd. I hurried into side-streets, circled about neighbouring squares, doubled on my tracks, and resumed the chase in still other directions. There was not a trace of Elvira to be found. I had lost her again.

But a drunkenness sang in my head and danced through my veins as I paced the evening streets, soft with coming Spring. I had seen her; she was alive and well. At least I knew that she and I, that night, were both somewhere housed by the walls of the same city.

Chapter XXXV—THE OLD AND THE NEW

I lost no time in advising both Lieutenant Belton and Lefty Boyle of the new turn of affairs. A second general alarm for 'Elvira Paladino, *alias* Sabouroff' was at once sent out to the police.

The day was still young when Lefty Boyle and a chosen few of his kindred spirits were going over the entire East Side, burrow by burrow, like rats through a wheat-bin.

I was a new man, myself. I had now something on which to centralize my activity; something tangible to fight for. I was no longer a disheartened idler. I seemed more like a Meadowbrook hound after a good sniff of his "worry meat." I could not be happy until I was once more on the hunt.

But, on second thought, as the morning wore away and nothing came to reward our different movements, new perplexities presented themselves. I knew that Elvira was alive. I felt sure that she was a free agent, that she was not denied the right to come and go on the city streets, that she was not being held a prisoner against her will. Yet for some unfound and unfathomable reason she had let herself drop away from my life. She had made no effort to come to me when accident had brought us face to face. She had evaded and escaped me.

Was there not something more disturbing in this, I kept asking myself, than in the earlier thought of her disappearance against her own will? Could the mere suspicion of death be less disturbing than the actual death of all her old self, her old sympathy and feeling, everything that had seemed to leave her so vital and so essential to me? Was not this separation in spirit, whatever it meant, much worse than the mere separation of space? And what, of all things, had given rise to such an attitude on her part?

It was more than I could fathom, a mystery beyond my power to solve. But I felt that it was based on some stupendous mistake. I still struggled to coerce myself into the belief that it had arisen out of some misapprehension, which even a moment of talk might set right. I let the riddle stand, and went on with the indeterminate chase. Then for the second time the unlooked-for thing took place, to impress on me again how often the wheel of accident drops unexpectedly

into the groove of destiny.

It occurred on the third afternoon of my renewed search, as I stood north of the Brooklyn Bridge approach, scanning every face that drifted back and forth through that tide-gate of restless humanity. I heard an unexpected little shriek of wonder and then my name called, as a wine-coloured limousine circled from the bridge approach into Park Row. I would have dipped into the crowd and lost myself at once, but I saw the car slow down, swing about and shudder up to the curb within ten yards of where I stood. I saw a plumed hat held in by a pearl-tinted veil, and then a second veil-covered hat as a gloved hand was waved to me.

I knew it was the Stillwell limousine, and that one of the women seated in it was Natalie Stillwell herself.

"Why, Rebbie, is it you?" cried Natalie, as I stepped to the opened door of the car. The woman with her, I saw, was Nannie Washburn. I surmised, even before they told me, that they were on the way home from Westbury, after a glimpse of the trial heats for the cup race at Garden City. It seemed one of the trivial things of life now, that fiercely fought contest on a muddy parkway, where wolfish faces under leather helmets and goggles whirled about a race-track for the mere sake of demonstrating that one thing of cranks and shafts and wheels went faster than another.

"Aren't you under the weather, Rebbie?" asked Nannie, as she made room for me on the deep-cushioned seat.

"Yes, do," said Natalie, as I still hesitated. "And we'll drop you at your door."

Natalie herself, I noticed as I took my seat in the car, was different and yet the same. There was the same undisturbed sense of well being, the same full-blooded languor which careless observers might call laziness, the same impression of being a spectator of life rather than an actor in its movements. Yet, in some way, I seemed to miss the familiar touch of imperiousness, the old-time careless joyousness which had always made her air of one born to the purple so easy to forgive. There was the same casual yet queenly poise of the alert head, the same wonderful light in the deep, sapphire eyes.

"Well, you *have* been keeping Lent!" was Nannie's prompt declaration. The sapphire eyes were on me, watching me closely. They made it no easy matter for me to have my retort a laughing one.

"Or is this the sackcloth and ashes of repentance?" pursued Nannie.

"Or the disguise of a modern Dupin in search of a clue?" suggested Natalie. She joined in Nannie's laugh, yet something in both her tone and her words brought my glance up to her face. She returned my look, steadily.

That feeling of an old affection which has paled and withered, of an old friendship which has suffered change and loss, is not a pleasant one. Nor is it easy to step back, at a lift of the hand, into those grooves of life which you feel you have outgrown.

I found it hard to explain what had kept me so preoccupied. I marshalled a number of vague trivialities that were as foolish as they were unsatisfying. It angered me to think that I was making such a mess of the thing.

"We have missed you," said Natalie, with a simplicity and directness which left my own weak duplicities all the more hateful to my eyes. Whatever Natalie Stillwell was, I felt she was always

a thoroughbred.

Nannie must have detected the spirit of some repressed and unspoken drama in the air about her, for she suddenly demanded that she be dropped at the door of the Colony Club.

There were several minutes of silence as Natalie and I sat alone in the car, and it went swinging and purring northward again.

"What's the new game, Rebbie?" she said at last, without looking at me.

"There's no new game," I answered, truthfully enough. "I'm tired of games."

Again there was that pregnant silence, and I almost thought I heard a ghost of a sigh escape from the woman at my side. She must, at that moment, have felt that our old, more intimate intercourse was in itself a sort of game--a game where I had light-heartedly pursued because she had always light-heartedly fled. Then she spoke.

"Rebbie?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Would you mind telling me what has become of your protégée--the girl with the advanced ideas about--about Bolshevism and such things?"

She was looking at me quite bravely as she asked the question.

"Why do you ask?"

"I've heard her spoken of--even Harvey said he had met her, you know."

"She's here in New York," I answered.

Natalie's eyes widened a little, and then grew even more narrow than before.

"Not making bombs?"

I should have felt thankful if there had been something in the tone of that question to call forth my anger. But there was not. The woman at my side seemed only to be seeking information.

"She never made bombs. She merely accepted certain communistic ideals of life and conduct."

"Which means she is an anarchist?"

"She is no longer an anarchist," I answered.

Again there was a moment or two of silence.

"Has she friends?"

"Yes, many of them--too many of them," I replied.

"You are interested in her, of course?"

"Yes, I am interested in her."

I knew the sapphire eyes were looking at me.

"Do you think there is any way in which I could help her?" asked Natalie, very simply. It was a question that was not very easy to answer.

"I know of no way in which your help could be extended to her," I replied at last, feeling a little ashamed of my pomposity, even as I spoke. I had not meant my answer to seem a rebuff, either

veiled or open, but three of Natalie's white teeth were compressed on her full and softly lined under-lip.

"She is Russian, is she not?" was the next question.

"Partly Russian--partly Austrian."

"A sort of daughter of the people?"

"Yes," I answered. It was my turn to look up, and Natalie's turn to look away, out of the limousine's misted window.

"I suppose she eats herrings and sunflower-seeds with salted pickles?" Natalie mildly inquired.

I felt more at ease after that equalizing touch of emotion on her part.

"There have been days, I rather imagine, when she has not even had that to eat!"

We were two blocks farther north when Natalie spoke again.

"Rebbie," she cried, with a sudden gush of deeper feeling breaking into her voice, apparently against her will, "let me help you in this, won't you? Let me feel that I can be of use to you in something that counts! Let me try to repay some of the things you have done for me!"

It is usually not regarded as one of the bitter ordeals of life to have a wonderfully beautiful woman turn to you and plead to be of service. I could feel the tug of the old vague affection at that moment. But I knew it was useless. There was no need even for a struggle. It was like a breath playing on ashes and dead embers; there was no warmth left to revive.

"What can either of us do?" I asked, in a vague effort to evade the issue.

Once more Natalie looked at me out of her sapphire eyes, and her face was a little paler than before. Her hand moved toward me. I might have taken it, but I could not. It was quietly withdrawn.

"Are you changing, Rebbie?" she asked, with the ghost of a smile. Like all ghostly things, it was not merry.

I felt that one of life's big moments was confronting me, and that I was failing to meet it as I ought. I tried to sweep back an engulfing tide of depression with the mental declaration that it was at least my duty to be honest. But I could not divorce my mood from the memories of the past, from that life which the woman at my side had once seemed to illuminate. Life without those memories seemed as thin and cold as northern sunlight after the genial warmth of a tropical winter.

I thought of the girl listening to the lutophone music in the April twilight, with the street dust golden above her, with the city teeming and throbbing about her lonely spirit. And with the memory of that face went my last doubt. It was greater to give love than to receive it. Expenditure, in this life, was the only law of acquisition. I sat there, wondering how I could express a change so implacable and yet so cruel, a conviction so plain and yet so paradoxical. Then I looked up, for I saw the car had at last stopped in front of my door.

Natalie was the Natalie of old, holding out her gloved hand to me. She had, I could see, put on her old armour of humorous indifference. She sat cuirassed and helmeted in the invisible steel of convention. Pride waved like a plume of chivalry, intangible yet towering, above her beautiful head.

"Come and see me when you can," she said, with a smile that was engaging in its very abstractedness.

I promised to do so, as I shook hands with her, quite solemnly, through the open limousine door. Then she called me back.

"I'd like to talk to you some time," she said, "about Harvey."

"What about Harvey?" I asked.

My question seemed to bring the cuirass and helmet once more between us. There was no conscious movement, as of wounded sensibility drawing into its shell, but I knew she had deferred saying what impulse had first prompted her to say.

"It's nothing that can't wait. We'll talk about it when you're free again!"

The limousine swerved in a graceful curve out from the sidewalk where I stood. I watched it join and merge into the Avenue's line of evening traffic. Then I turned and went up to my apartment with a wordless feeling of discontent and depression.

Davis met me at the door. One glance showed me that something had disturbed that usually imperturbable spirit.

"What is it?" I demanded. Davis, at times, was not hard to anticipate. His spoken word often came to me like the sound of a distant whistle over which I had already seen the steam-blast flower and fade.

"Lefty Boyle has been here," was his answer.

"And?"

"He told me to tell you at once, sir, that he has located Sitnikov!"

"Sitnikov?"

"Yes, sir, Sitnikov, the man who threw the second bomb," explained Davis.

"Sitnikov!" I repeated triumphantly.

The name seemed to fall like a portcullis between my old world and the new.

Chapter XXXVI—THE COAST OF SILENCE

Twenty minutes later, I had started out in search of Lefty Boyle. He was to meet me at ten, but the thought of an idle and wasted night was too much for me. Inactivity was now impossible. So Davis hurriedly ordered the car from the garage while I had a bite to eat. In half an hour's time we were dragging the city for Lefty, very much the same as life-savers drag a lake for a lost body.

It took two hours of quick and continuous search before he was brought to the surface. Then, by the sheerest good luck, I caught sight of him interrogating a patrolman on the upper side of Chatham Square.

He made no effort to conceal his annoyance when I drew up and called out to him.

"I wish you'd run that devil-wagon into the East River!" he said, with an unsavoury expletive or

two. He climbed in, nevertheless, at an impatient sign from me. I had no time to lose in talk.

"You've got Sitnikov?" I demanded.

"Have I?" he retorted. "Then I wish you'd tell me where I've got him."

"I only go by what you told Davis."

"I guess I crowed too soon," admitted the little man, with still another soft yet blasphemous interjection.

"You mean he got away?"

"He ducked and ran, all right. But we've found his outside fence, and we're after him again."

"Then let's get him."

Lefty Boyle looked at me and laughed a little.

"There's no special use trying to hurry these things; it only balls you up. This man's a fugitive from justice, and he's going to fight before he'll be cornered."

"But we've got to corner him, fight or no fight."

"We've got to get him when he's not looking for fight, or for us!"

"Where's his fence, as you call it?"

"Among the Island dagoes, somewhere between Bath Beach and Sea Gate."

"That means most of Coney Island, doesn't it?"

"Yes, most of the water-front, at any rate. There's a couple o' shootin'-gallery men out there who supply material to some of the *Mano Nera* bomb-makers. Sitnikov worked with a man named Schmidlapp, who's the smoothest soup-mixer in the business here."

It was a link, but nothing more.

"What are you going to do about it?" I asked.

"I'm working it up from the New York end. I want to locate those two shootin'-gallery men."

"Then I'm going to get at the Coney Island end!" I averred, with a decision and promptness which caused Lefty to look me over a little sceptically. He shrugged a shoulder.

"What can you do?"

"Try to find Sitnikov."

I was thinking of the last time I had seen that slant-faced Slav; but, most of all, I was thinking of the figure that had stood at his side.

"Then cut out this cursed car, whatever you do!" said Lefty, with a touch of disgust. There was nothing subservient about him. He believed in candour, at any cost.

It was a full hour's run out Ocean Parkway to the Island, even with Davis' studied forgetfulness as to the speed law on side-streets and open stretches. The night air seemed damper and cooler once we had left Prospect Park behind us. Few indeed were the travellers we met as we swept out over the lonely flatlands dotted with gas-lamps, and then across a miasmal-smelling creek into streets of wooden buildings that reminded me of a Neapolitan slum.

Coney Island was still in the chrysalis stage. Surf Avenue had not yet opened up into its

butterfly gaiety of Spring. The blank-windowed hotels still hibernated above the ocean tides; the parks were still unlighted and unpainted, looking dingy and spectral in the faint light. Only along Surf Avenue itself were there signs of life. An occasional shooting-gallery, a sprinkling of moving-picture halls, a few drinking-places and photograph-pens, a gloomy array of stalls that suggested the peanut-roaster, the candy-seller, and the sausage-vendor—these made up the still wintry cocoon of Coney Island.

My first thought was to stow away the machine in an empty parking-shed. My next was to make a round of the shooting-galleries, while Davis drifted about the water-front. Then I swung back to Surf Avenue, the one artery of traffic that still held light and life.

I explored that avenue carefully, block by block. I went over it, first on one side and then on the other, as an oysterman rakes his beds, foot by foot, always looking for the one face, always hoping for a glimpse of the one figure. The wind blew in from the Atlantic, cold and raw, bringing a drizzle of rain with it. I was glad of my fur-lined motor-coat. I felt that a smoke might prove equally consolatory, though I had to turn into the shelter of a doorway, out of the wind, before I could get a light.

My eye rested idly on a thin and stoop-shouldered figure of a man entering an Italian grocery-store. It was a huddled and forlorn figure, with the rain dripping from its black hat-brim. Idly I watched the man as he made his frugal purchases, two pounds of macaroni, an Italian loaf, and a quart of red onions. I watched him as he took the paper bag under his arm and turned toward the door.

Then I stepped quietly but quickly back into the shadow until he had passed.

For the man with the bag under his arm was Sitnikov.

Chapter XXXVII—THE FIGHT IN THE DARK

I had found again the first link in the unknown chain. I had made my first actual step toward some solution of the mystery before me. I felt like a miner who had stumbled on the outcroppings of a long-sought mother-lode.

I waited with quickened pulse, for I would have faced anything rather than lose that one slender link. I followed the thin and stooping figure as it beat against the wind and rain westward along the lonely stretch of Surf Avenue, and then north, and then west again, until it emerged on the water-front facing what must have been the Ambrose Channel. Before me was nothing but gloom and silence and empty street-ends, dunes, and the hollows of white sea-sand, punctuated here and there by the ghostly sign of a land-agent. Far away on my right I could see the vague glow of New York and Brooklyn against the sky, in auras of misty gold. Before me, where the sea-front merged into marshland and open water, I could see the lonely twinkle of shore-squatters' lights, the grey mass of an occasional tarpaulin-covered launch, and a ghostly schooner or two.

I saw Sitnikov cross to the water's edge, look guardedly back, and then whistle out into the darkness. A light appeared on what seemed to be a derelict house-boat. A door opened and closed, and a voice called cautiously back across the water. Then came silence. Presently I heard the thump of an oar, two voices in mumbling talk, and a sound like the grate of a keel on a bed of oyster-shells. Sitnikov had dropped into the boat.

There was more mumbling and talking, a sound of quiet rowing. The two men were apparently returning to the stranded house-boat. I heard a door open and close. I could see a thin plume of smoke from a stovepipe-end above the cabin. Then I caught a glimpse of light from the window, and heard the splash of something thrown into the water. I had never dreamed that, anywhere within the circle that held Greater New York, such solitude could be found.

I walked along until I came to three oarless punts chained and padlocked to a wave-lapped, water-logged piece of timber embedded in mud. I chose the weakest of the three locks, and forced the staple. Next I found a piece of board--a strip from a lemon-crate--that would serve as a paddle. I knew that I should have no tide to contend against in such a quarter, and I felt grateful for it as I made my way as quietly as I could toward the house-boat. I swung about under her stern, and caught at the rotten deckclip with my hand, in order that there should be no noise. I tied my boat and stepped silently on board. Then I approached the cabin window and reconnoitred.

The scene that met my eyes was unassuming enough. On a small cook-stove raised from the floor by means of bricks, a half-dressed man in a dull, red undershirt was frying fish in a pan.

On the back of the stove steamed a pot of macaroni. Behind this stood Sitnikov, drying his wet coat. I saw him take two Italian "rat-tail" cigars out of his vest pocket and hold them up before the man frying the fish. His lean Slav face broke into a grin as he did so.

The fat man shifted his position, and I could see him better. I took him to be a Greek or a Syrian--he was so swarthy, his hair so black. But when I heard him speak, I decided otherwise. I thought, for a moment, that he might possibly be a Bulgarian. He was thick-shouldered and of medium height, dressed only in a woollen undershirt and a pair of lime-stained trousers. I finally decided, however, as I studied his face, that he was an Italian. He contemplated the frying fish with placid contentment. Sitnikov took an appreciative look into the macaroni-pot. I felt sorry that I was to spoil so good a meal.

I did not care to face the two of them at once, yet I would feel safer if neither of them got away. I knew my chance was at hand, however, when I saw the fat Italian lift the pot from the stove and approach the door, to drain the water from the macaroni over the side. So I waited for him, as close beside the little cabin door as could get.

I thought that I should be able to do the business silently, without betraying my presence to the second man inside. But in this I was mistaken. The Italian squealed like a stuck pig the moment I fell on him. Even when I had the breath half choked out of his fat body he bubbled and groaned with huge seismic noises.

I had to put him out with my bare knuckles--with a quick, hard punch just above and forward of the ear. He rolled over and relaxed, like a clubbed seal.

It was none too soon, for I could see that Sitnikov, inside, had already blown out the light. I knew there was trouble impending from that quarter.

It came more promptly than I had expected. It came in the form of a revolver-shot almost beside my ear, and a stab of flame through the darkness not five inches above my head. The shot was repeated before I could duck. I felt it sweep my motor-cap from my head. Then I came to my senses, and made the only counter movement possible--a quick drop and a dive for the man's feet.

I caught him by the ankles with a quick outward pull, even as my fingers clamped on his thin legs. It brought him down on the base of his spine, with a shock that must have stunned him for a second or two. His revolver went off for the third time as he fell, but I had my hand on his pipe-stem of a wrist before he could use it for a fourth shot. I knew that he would not have hesitated about putting a bullet through my head.

He seemed to be equally sure of my intentions as we fought and twisted about the narrow deck, for with a sudden side-movement of his body he flung the gun from his pinioned hand, and kicked and pawed at it until it was pushed to the edge of the deck and fell overboard. He intended to make sure that it should not be turned on him, I suppose, though I could have throttled and shaken the life out of him with my bare hands as he lay there. But I needed him for other things.

Had I been left alone, I might have got him to his senses and reasoned with him, and shown him that I meant him no harm. But no such chance was given me. My mind had been too taken up to give much thought to the fat Italian stretched out by the cabin door. My first intimation that he was once more himself came with his reassuring call to Sitnikov. It was a sort of yelp of rage and defiance. I caught sight of the flash of his knife-blade in the gloom.

Since the day I saw a Mexican sea-gambler disembowel a rival in Acapulco I have always nursed an irrational and deep-seated horror of naked steel. I have hated the thought of a knife-blade as an Indian hates the sight of a rattler. So I broke away and fell back as I saw the Italian run forward. It was not a graceful retreat, but it served its purpose. My one idea was to get distance between us. Half rolling, half crawling, I reached the little cabin door. There I got to my feet. Then I slipped inside, and groped and padded about in search of some means of defence.

The only thing I could find was the long-handled frying-pan of pressed steel. Even as I picked it up, I heard Sitnikov's cry of triumph and his hurried call for the other man. I knew, as I swung about, that the two of them were already in the cabin, and that neither of them intended to hold back from the fight.

There was nothing said after that first cry and call from the little Russian. The silence, for a second or two, was ominous; then the trouble began.

We might have been three naked savages on some lonely island, so primitive was that struggle. They both came at once, and my weapon was nothing but a ludicrous scullery implement. They came at me like a couple of terriers, or, rather, like a terrier backed up by an overfed Great Dane.

I could see that Sitnikov was scarcely a follower of Tolstoy in his theories of non-resistance. He came at me with what was either the end of a broken oar or a table-leg. I had to receive and ward off its blows with my fatuous steel frying-pan. I fell back, dodging from side to side, watching and wondering when I could get in the stroke that would count. The Italian, trying to take me unawares from behind, made my position precarious. Movement alone could save me.

A table went over in the tumult, and with it the lamp. Then a chair, flung by Sitnikov, crashed against what must have been a row of crockery dishes. The stove went tumbling and rolling down from its base of piled-up bricks, scattering live coals along the broken floor. The smoke from these, and from the disjointed stovepipe, made the cabin air almost unbreathable. Then the two closed in on me again.

Once a ribbon of sparks showered through the dark, where the Italian's knife struck and rasped along the handle of my pan. I dodged back and swung out madly, bringing the flat steel down

on his hand. It must have disabled his fingers, for the knife fell, and I could hear his grunt of pain. But Sitnikov--and whatever else he may have been, he was assuredly a courageous little rat--closed in on me, to cover the other man's movement as he stooped to catch up the fallen knife. He kept striking wickedly for my head, making me wonder how much longer I could hold out, or by what means I could divide the two and deal with them one by one.

My breath was now coming in painful gasps, and blood was running from somewhere on my wrist where a side-stroke of the knife had made itself felt. It was now merely a matter of time; they could tire me out between them, and make an end of the business as they thought best. Lefty Boyle had been right: I had indeed gained nothing by my interference. I had spoiled and ended the game.

I decided on a last move while I still had the strength to essay it. My chance came as Sitnikov missed a stroke. Before he could raise his weapon again I sprang directly at him, encircling his neck with a half-crook of my arm. I pinioned him against my chest, for I was much the taller man, and continued the pressure until I could hear the crackle of his tortured joints. He fought blindly and uselessly, clawing and scratching and biting at my heavy motor-coat until his breath gave out. But still I hugged him there, as an infuriated grizzly might hug a captured hunter. My right hand was free, and with it I wielded the frying pan, flail-like, warding off and beating back the Italian in the ludicrous red undershirt.

I wondered how long I could thus hold him off, racking my brain for some strategic move which might still help me out. I had given up all thought of offence. I was thankful enough for strength to hold my ground, though some anxious voice in my agonized body kept asking what the end would be.

Chapter XXXVIII—THE THIRD DEGREE

What that end would have been, it is hard to say. But as I stood there in the darkness I heard the sound of a calling voice, the hurried chug-chug of rowlocks, the impact of a boat against the deck on which I stood. I listened dazedly, wondering whether it meant friends or enemies. Then I heard a voice that was strangely familiar to me.

"Mr. Woodruff!" came the anxious cry through the darkness. "Mr. Woodruff! For the love of God, sir, where are you?"

It was the voice of my man Davis--dependable, reliable, faithful old Davis.

"Here, Davis!" I called back to him. "But be careful!"

"Where, sir?"

"At the end of the cabin."

"Which end?"

"Opposite the door. But get a light--quick, get lights!"

I heard the thump of running feet on the deck, and a moment later a lantern was swung in at the open door. Above lit glimmered and shone the barrel of my large revolver. The expression on Davis' face rather disturbed me.

"Steady there," I cried. "Don't shoot the man--don't shoot him!"

I spoke none too soon. Davis had already sized up the situation. He saw the Italian in the red shirt crouching back as though to spring; he saw, through the drifting smoke, the clawing Sitnikov pinned under my arm like a pullet. He saw the blood on my hands, my torn clothing, my face wet with perspiration.

He lowered his revolver a little, reluctantly. Then he swung about on the Italian thrusting the lantern up into the oily face with his left hand.

"Drop that knife!" he said, with a savagery of which I had not thought him capable. "Drop it, quick!"

The knife was dropped.

"Now, back up into that corner!"

The order was obeyed.

"Now stand there, without moving, or I'll blow your frog-eating 'ead off!"

As I have said before, it was only in moments of intense excitement that Davis omitted the aspirate.

"What now, sir?" he asked, turning to me.

"Watch your man," I told him, "but knock out that cabin window first. We've got to have air in here."

"Very well, sir," was the answer. The tinkle of glass told me that my order had been obeyed.

"Now, give me the revolver. I'll watch this man. You stamp out that fire along the floor."

I flung Sitnikov into the corner beside his red-shirted comrade, and stood over them both, taking great lungfuls of the fresh air that came through the broken window. It was all so useless, so foolish, so without meaning or purpose, that now it was over I could almost have wept like a schoolgirl.

"How did you get here, Davis?"

"I heard the shots, sir, and hired a boat."

"Who's out there with you?"

"Two boat-house men, sir,--an old man and a boy."

He turned and waved a hand toward two shadowlike figures in the cabin doorway.

"Shall I call an officer, sir?" he asked as placidly as though a patrolman were within whistling-distance.

"No, we don't want an officer in this."

I turned to the two pair of eyes gleaming out through the dim light at me. They stared as two harried water-rats might stare from a sewer-end. Automatically, I picked up my cap, and straightened my collar and tie.

"Oh, you fools!" I cried. I suppose I was unnerved. "You hopeless fools!"

I had to take myself in hand with an effort. The thing was over with. Nothing was to be gained by such a display. My own moves had not been so wonderfully felicitous, my own actions not so gentle. And there was still serious business ahead of us.

"You're the man I want, Sitnikov--you, you drunken-brained Bolshevik."

I stepped toward him. He watched me. There was no fear on his face, but he watched me very intently. He was shivering a little--not with alarm, I knew; but more from nervous reaction and the cold draft that was blowing in on his overheated body.

"You could have saved all this if you'd had an ounce of reason in your head, if you'd been anything but a scatter-brained bomb-thrower!"

He neither winced nor drew back. He simply looked at me out of his closely set rat's eyes.

"Listen to me," I said, "and answer, or you'll still get what's coming to you."

I shoved the revolver-muzzle up into his lean and colourless face.

"Where's Elvira Sabouroff?" I demanded.

He did not answer. My heart seemed to sink in my body, as the seconds dragged past and his upturned face remained a blank.

"Where is that woman you call Elvira Paladino?" I demanded once more, with a ferocity which somewhat startled him.

"I do not know," he said at last, without emotion.

Could the little rat be telling me the truth, I asked myself. I had risked too much to be put off without reason, to be tricked by mere stubbornness.

"You do know!" I declared.

He backed flat against the wall and looked up at me out of his close-set eyes.

"Eet ees not true," he reiterated, with maddening calmness.

"Where did you leave her?" I asked, still crowding him flat against the wall.

Again his eyes blinked up into mine. But he did not speak.

"You were not with her three days ago on Second Avenue, I suppose?" My mockery did not seem to disturb him.

"I wass," he said.

"And you stand there and tell me you haven't seen her since then?"

"I haf not seen her."

"Why were you with her?"

"We met een the street."

"How met in the street?" A chilling tide of disappointment was slowly sweeping over me.

"She went for bukes."

"Do you mean books?"

"Yess--bukes een the publeek library."

"Had you seen her before?"

His head moved from side to side, in negation.

"Have you seen her since?"

Again he shook his head slowly from side to side.

"Where did she go?"

"W'ere she go?" he asked vacuously, and again he shook his head. "She deed not tell me."

"And you don't know where she is--have no idea where she is?"

"No," he answered. There was something in his voice and manner which half persuaded me that he was speaking the truth.

"Has any member of that Inner Circle gang seen her?"

"I t'eenk no," he answered.

"When have you seen or talked with any of that Inner Circle gang?"

He moved his shoulders a little, and turned his palms outward, so that they faced me.

"T'ere ees no Eenner Circle," he said.

"They're under cover, you mean, the same as you've been?"

He looked puzzled and did not answer. I repeated the question.

"Schlatter ees t'ere," he answered.

"Does this Schlatter know anything of Elvira 'Paladino'?"

"I t'eenk so," came the slow response.

"He knows where she is?" I demanded.

"I t'eenk so." And that maddeningly apathetic answer was all I could bully out of him. But even as I stood there a new light seemed to appear in the disheartening darkness that engulfed me. Pepper Schlatter, I remembered, was an *alias* for Beansy Schmidlapp. They were one and the same person.

"You've seen Schlatter?" I demanded.

"No--I see heem tomorrow."

"When? What time?"

"Tomorrow night."

Here was news at last.

"Where?" I demanded.

The man remained sulkily silent. The red-shirted figure said something in an unknown tongue. What it was did not interest me. All I wanted was three short words from Sitnikov.

"Where?" I repeated, with the menacing revolver barrel within an inch of his forehead.

He shifted his eyes and looked from me to Davis, and then at the revolver.

"Where?" I said, for the last time.

"Hees place--hees old place," he said, his voice once more lacking emotion.

"Tomorrow night you meet Schmidlapp at his bomb-factory, in Suffolk Street."

The man's head moved up and down.

"Are you to wait there for him?"

Again he nodded. I put two and two together.

"Hand me the keys to that place--the two keys, for the upper and lower lock!"

The man looked frightened. A studied look of inanity came into his rat-like eyes. He and the red-shirted figure broke out into a clatter and gabble of syllables that were incomprehensible to me. I took it to be Rumanian, or perhaps Yiddish. But I silenced it with a wave of my revolver.

"Quick!" I commanded. "Those keys!"

Sitnikov raised his hands, palms upward, in a gesture of repudiation, implying that he knew nothing about the keys.

I repeated the order, quietly, as I cocked the trigger.

He reached into his slatternly vest, and from one of its pockets produced two keys wrapped in a piece of frayed and soiled cotton. I had already decided on my new line of procedure.

"Davis," I said sharply, without looking about as my fingers closed on those precious keys, "send your two men outside for the police. Tell them to phone Ulmer Park first, then the Coney Island precinct. But tell them to be quick!"

"Yes, sir," said Davis from the doorway.

"Now, I want you two men to listen to me. You've both been fools enough for one night. Nothing's going to happen to you. Nothing's going to be said against you, or laid against you, so long as you keep quiet."

In broken English the Italian sulkily demanded to know just what he had done.

"Look at me and see what you've done! Look at me, you idiot, and call this your lucky day!"

He began to denounce me, passionately, as an assaulter and a house-breaker.

"Perhaps I am, but that's not the point. The point is that I've got to know just where you two gentlemen are to be for the next twenty-four hours. So I'm going to have you both held on the technical charge of assault. If you take your medicine you'll be out in twenty-four hours or so. If you don't, you'll be deported as undesirable Bolsheviks, or, I have enough bomb-throwing evidence to keep you in your home jail for twenty years."

The Italian did not take to the suggestion. He had friends who would make it hot for me. He was an honest labourer whose home had been outraged, whose body had been threatened and assaulted.

I held up his wicked-looking knife before him.

"That's proof enough of your honesty," I told him. "And I'm too tired to argue with you, anyway. I want you to hurry up and take your choice, that's all."

I could see a sign or two pass between the men. These signs were Greek to me, but I kept on my guard. Neither of those gentlemen, I felt well assured, could be trusted for a moment. They were still wary and watching.

Sitnikov wanted to know what assurance he had of my promised immunity. For answer I took

from my pocket a bill of generous dimensions, and handed it over to him.

"You need food and clothes, you poor devil. Keep that to buy 'em with when you get out."

The emaciated little rat looked at the bill, then at me, and turned to the red-shirted figure beside him, with a gesture that clearly implied that I was a madman. But the Italian immediately became garrulous and eloquent on the theme of his losses, his devastated supper, his broken stove, his wrecked home, his ruined reputation.

Another bill mollified him, as a bottle might mollify a crying child. He looked at it several times, with much satisfaction. Bolsheviks, I was beginning to learn, were not without their human weaknesses. The fine theories of the future are apt to flatten out before the material Juggernaut of the moment. Sitnikov even reached for his cigars a little wistfully, and found them ruined.

I took out my own case and offered it to the men.

Each of us took a Havana. Each of us lighted up. The three of us were sitting together smoking when the police arrived. I still had the huge revolver in my hand, however, as the dismantled cabin was invaded by the uniformed figures with ready night-sticks.

"These are your men," I said. "You won't need to club them! They'll come quietly enough!"

And they went without a word.

It was three o'clock in the morning when Davis and I reached home, tired and chilled after the long ride through the raw night air. Neither of us made a very respectable showing. I felt as I viewed myself in the glass that I cut a somewhat sorry figure for the lofty-minded redresser of social wrongs which I pretended to be.

It was noon when I wakened. I did not feel altogether easy in mind until Davis told me that he had already been in communication with Lefty Boyle. That restless stool-pigeon, in fact, was to be at my place at two o'clock. So I went about perfecting my plans for the coming encounter. A sense of impending climax took possession of me; I felt somewhat like a Wellington on the eve of his Waterloo.

Lefty and I talked the whole thing over quietly and thoroughly, for an hour and more, with Davis in the background. Lefty was of the opinion that Schmidlapp had just returned to New York. He might not have got in touch with the Inner Circle people as yet. The spring fever had struck him, as it strikes all the underworld spirits. He had grown tired of "Sheeny Chi's" and the Windy City, had migrated, and had come back to his old hunting-ground. Ten to one, he was back for trouble. And, on the whole, Lefty advised me to do nothing without the co-operation of Lieutenant Belton and the Centre Street authorities.

I did not agree with this suggestion. Schmidlapp, I knew, was a dangerous man. But, above all things, I felt he must not be scared away. He was the next natural link in the chain. We had him in ambush, practically, and with ordinary precaution there should be no great risk. There would be nothing official in our meeting. To attempt to *lung-chi* or "third-degree" him into talking was not altogether expedient. We had to corner him and squeeze him, squeeze him gently but relentlessly, until he should give the information we were after.

Our next task was to look over the ground. This had to be done quietly and discreetly, for once we were in Suffolk Street we were in the land of the enemy. An incautious step might mean discovery, and discovery would surely mean defeat.

So it was that, at four o'clock that afternoon, Lefty appeared before me in the leather-peaked cap and soiled suit of an express driver. Even a book of way-bills protruded from his ragged coat pocket. Davis, at considerable sacrifice of dignity, toggled himself out in a suit picked up in a Sixth Avenue second-hand store, with a very rakish-looking, small-rimmed derby. I put on the well-worn garage-suit that had already stood me in such good service. We all went armed with revolvers, and I carried a storage flash-light.

The understanding was that I should look over the ground first, in a general way, and then report to the other two, who were to meet me in O'Higgins' Suffolk Street café at six o'clock. We were then to revise our plans, act on any new information, take up our different positions, and await the arrival of Schmidlapp. What was to happen after that, only time would show.

I went quietly up to the room above Schmidlapp's printing-shop, the room from which I had made my observations at the time of the first "Hammer of God" *coup*. It took only a few minutes of careful listening to convince me that the room below was unoccupied; that the little laboratory of fulminates, like the pressroom in front of it, was empty.

My next movement was on the printing-shop itself. I waited under cover until the street was passably clear of pedestrians. Then I strolled to the shuttered front of the shop and turned into the narrow doorway.

Twenty seconds later I had unlocked the door and was inside. I stood in the darkness on guard; for scarcely any light percolated through the shutters. I stood there, with my fingers closed about the revolver butt in my side-pocket, making sure I was not to be the victim of some new and as yet undivulged ambush.

But no sound broke the silence, and nothing stirred within the room. The air was still heavy with the smell of benzine, thick with the dust of disuse and neglect.

I wheeled about and carefully locked the two doors. Then I took out my flash-light and explored the room, from wall to wall. I saw nothing but a disordered and paper-littered printing-shop, with the black mass of the hand-press, the fonts of type, the untidy shelves, and over everything a thin powdering of street dust.

I made my way to the door of the inner room, and opened it. An indescribably acrid and sickening smell smote on my nostrils--a penetrating odour of stale grease, of acid salts, of souring chemicals, and mouldy woodwork. But otherwise the room was as it had been when last I had seen it. Nothing had been disturbed.

I crossed to the window at the back of the room, unlocked it, and threw up the sash to let in a little fresh air. Then I circled the room a second time with my search-light, more carefully, more studiously. I saw the rubber-sheeted work-table, the row of acid-bottles and mixing-bowls and canisters, a pan of dried clay, a dismantled pair of scales, a wooden paddle, a carboy of sulphuric acid--all the familiar implements and ingredients for the compounding of nitroglycerine and those other fulminates so familiar to the bomb-maker. The sight reminded me of the fact that my meeting with Schmidlapp was going to take place in a diminutive arsenal; that our encounter, whatever its nature, was to come about in a disagreeably uncertain and menacing environment.

It was with no little relief that I locked up that little den of horrors and got into the comparatively fresh air of Suffolk Street. I was glad to meet Lefty Boyle and Davis in O'Higgins' café and make my report that so far all was well.

Nothing remained for us now but to wait. In the meantime, I decided, a substantial dinner for the three of us would not be amiss. Lefty agreed with my suggestion of the Hotel de Vigne, in Irving Place. There our humble attire would pass unnoticed in the midst of those strangely clad Latin-American expatriates who made that hostelry their headquarters. We could regale ourselves on Spanish cookery, without getting too far away from our objective point.

So thither we went. We sat inconspicuously in a corner, Lefty and I with our backs to the garrulous and gesticulating company, Davis, a little against his will, facing me. It was a very good dinner indeed, and I was beginning to feel rather comfortable, facing the black coffee and cigars, when Lefty spoke to me sharply, without looking up.

"We're bein' shadowed!"

His words gave me a disagreeable start. "Don't look round yet," he warned me.

"What's up?" I demanded.

"Somebody back there's on to us. Somebody knows you're here!"

"What makes you think so?"

"I heard your name. Then I kept my ears open, to make sure. I just heard it for the second time."

Lefty went on placidly stirring his coffee as he spoke.

"There's a tall young fellow in a dress suit three tables back from us. He's with a couple o' Mexican fire-eaters, and they've been talkin' Obregon, Villa and concessions."

"I can't see anything especially disturbing in that."

"No, but they're dopin' the dude--they've been pourin' him full of aguardiente and talkin' gold-claims to him. Swing around as careful as you can, and size him up."

I swung casually and carelessly around. Then I breathed more freely, for as I looked I found myself face to face with young Harvey Stillwell. His tie was misplaced, his cheeks carried the unhealthy flush of the inebriate, and there was a febrile heaviness in his eye that rather disturbed me. But I had no time for side-issues that night. I made a motion for the three of us to rise and get away.

Young Stillwell must have seen the move and, for some reason or other, must have been inordinately annoyed by it. He swung over to our table with unsteady steps, and accosted me. His utterance was not thick, but his tone was insolent.

"Still chasin' that soul-mate?" he asked.

"Chasin' what?" I demanded.

"Still chasin' that young Austrian, or Pole, or whatever she is, with the soulful eyes? Found that comic-opera anarchist yet?"

I swung about on him as he stood there.

"What do you know about that girl?" I asked.

I did not like the hardening light in his unsteady young eyes. I resented it, just as he was resenting my tone of authority.

"I know a hell of a lot about that girl," he said.

"Go home and go to bed!" I cried in disgust, catching up my coat and hat and signalling to Lefty. "You're making a fool of yourself!"

"Not half the fool you're makin' of yourself!" proclaimed young Stillwell, supporting himself on the back of my chair.

And there I left him, for I had serious things before me that night.

Chapter XXXIX—THE MAN WHO KNEW

It was after ten when I installed myself in Schmidlapp's innocent-fronted printing-shop on Suffolk Street. When I was once inside that sinister little hole, Lefty Boyle had taken the keys and locked the door, for I wanted him to cover the street-front and be free to come or go at a sign from me. Davis took up his position on the iron fire-escape outside the window of the back room, which had been left unlatched. Like Lefty, he was to wait and make his appearance only when he heard my signal.

I took up my position beside the door of the inner room. When the door opened it would hide me from Schmidlapp as he entered, even though he carried a light. On the other hand, I could be close beside him as he stepped to the electric-light switch. I could also have him covered before he had time to look around. In case Schmidlapp did not come alone, I would be given the signal by Lefty, and was to pass it on to Davis, who would join me at once, while Lefty would close in from the street, and we three would confront the intruders without any preliminary reconnoitring.

It took considerable mental effort on my part to coerce myself into calmness when I heard the tell-tale click of a key in the street door. Then came the sound of a second key being turned in its lock. The door opened, and as quietly closed again. A key was again inserted, turned and cautiously withdrawn.

I held my revolver ready, well up in front of me, and waited. Then came a moment or two of unbroken silence. The man who had entered was apparently looking about him, peering quietly through the darkness, listening for any betraying sound. Then I heard the scratch of a match, and saw the wavering light fall through the partly opened door that shadowed me. I heard a heavy sigh, the sort of a sigh a man emits when he finds that his alarm has been groundless.

I heard the half-groping slide and shuffle of Schmidlapp's feet as he crossed the printing-shop. I heard his hand feeling and padding about the door-frame at my side. I could hear his heavy breathing as slowly he pushed back the door and passed into the second room. We were together then, within the same four walls.

I stood ready, with my revolver well up at "half-arm" as I heard him grope and feel for the light-switch. He found it, and the light flooded the room with a suddenness that made my eyes ache.

And still I stood there, waiting and ready.

It was several seconds before he saw me there, so close to him. Minutes seemed to elapse before his startled and preoccupied mind actually visualized me.

I saw his hand swing down and back to his hip pocket. But I was waiting and ready.

"Stop!" I told him.

He raised his slow eyes to the glimmer of steel in his face, almost languidly, with the preoccupation of a sleepwalker. Then he turned his face farther about and looked at me impassively, almost insolently. His calm stare was like the waiting immobility of a snake, startled, yet fortified with the knowledge of his own venom.

My first conviction was, that it was all a mistake, that I had the wrong man. On the fat and chalky-skinned face was a pale red beard, sticking out aggressively, at a point in line with the jaw, not pendant, but almost at right angles to the plane of the profile. Across the thick nose rested a pair of spectacles. The wires that held them in place, by hooking over the large ears, indented the flesh of the white-skinned cheek. The clothes of sober black added to the man's pallor, and seemed to give him a touch of the scholastic. He looked, on the whole, like a German scholar with tobacco-heart.

He must have stood there for several seconds, peering at me out of his slowly blinking eyes. There was something ludicrous in his look; something almost laughable about the relaxed jaw, the fat and furtive face, the utter inarticulate bewilderment of the figure. The old-fashioned spectacles focused on me like a pair of search-lights. I laughed a little.

He found his tongue, and looked me over, incredulously, with a murmured: "Well, I'll be damned!"

"I'm sorry to intrude," I said.

"You will be!" he retorted in his thick guttural; and I knew that his words were a threat. He looked about the little room questioningly, probingly, as though in search of some explanation of my presence there. I could almost see the wheels of his brain as they worked behind his high white forehead. It was the same wise and wary Schmidlapp as of old.

"What are you doin' here?" he inquired, with a return to his immobility.

"What are you doing here?"

Again he looked me over slowly, quietly, impassively, as though sizing me up, as though weighing me and my chances against him.

"I have a right here," he said, in his non-committal monotone. "Have you?"

"Suppose we sit down and talk it over."

"I didn't come here to talk."

"But you're going to talk," I suggested.

"Am I?"

"You are!"

"Who's goin' to make me?"

"No one's going to make you. You're going to do it of your own free will."

"So? Then supposin' we get it over with!"

"Then let's sit down and have it over with, as you say, quietly and decently."

"What do you want?" he said, without moving.

"First thing, I want you to be reasonable. Look here, Schmidlapp, *alias* Pepper Schlatter, I know

you, and I know your record. I know your connection with the Cono Di Marco case, your association with MacGirr and the Inner Circle gang, and enough to carry you down to headquarters and put you through a third-degree examination that would make you wish you were back in Sheeny Chi's again!"

His eyes moved a little uneasily, but otherwise there was no change of expression on his face. Again he stood wrapped in thought. When he looked up once more, I motioned toward the two wooden chairs beside his work-bench. He gave vent to what was almost a grunt, raised his shoulders in a resigned hunch, and sat down.

"What do you want?" he repeated, eyeing my revolver with his mildly protesting stare of abstraction.

I offered him a cigar. He blinked at it heavily and took it from my fingers. I lighted one for myself, and leaned back in my chair. Schmidlapp still looked down at his cigar, then took out a match. But apparently he changed his mind, for he reached about and put the cigar on the work-bench behind him. He did not intend to smoke.

"Well?" he said.

"Where is Cono Di Marco?"

His heavy eyes slowly widened and then narrowed again.

"Gone to hell, I hope," was his answer.

"Would it be possible to be more explicit? I mean, where was he when you last saw him?"

"Sailin' for South America."

A feeling of relief surged through me at this unlooked-for answer. It put a new complexion on things; it simplified the problem more than I had hoped for.

"Are you sure of that?" I demanded.

"I'm sure of it," he answered. I watched him closely as my next question cut the silence between us.

"Where is Elvira Paladino?"

His response was not immediate. I could see that there was a second or two of hesitation before he answered.

"I don't know."

I felt that he was holding something back.

"I want the truth!"

"You're gettin' it," he grunted.

"You don't know where she is now, or where she has been?"

"I'm not day-nursin' young women, this season," he retorted, with a sniff of disdain.

"Couldn't you find her?" I asked. He looked up, hearing the note of anxiety in my voice, and blinked at me through his spectacles.

"Sure," he said, without a trace of emotion.

"You can get her?" I asked.

"Sure. What do you want with her?"

"I want *her*!"

"So have other people! They all have! But she's not that kind!"

"I know she's not that kind. And that's why I'm going to get her away from that Inner Circle gang!"

"How d'you know she's with that gang?" asked the wary Schmidlapp, ignoring my bait.

"How can you get her, if she's not?"

"Oh, I can get her, all right!"

"How soon?"

He was taking up his ground very guardedly.

"When I see it's going to pay me."

"What's it worth to you?" I asked, trying to coerce myself into the same calmness which he was displaying.

"To hand Elvira Paladino over?" he reiterated, as though making sure of the task under discussion.

"Yes."

He sat in deep thought for a few seconds. I sat facing him, wondering what lay stored in the narrow prison of his mind, so close behind the undulating white-skinned forehead above the flashing spectacles. But it was a prison that could never be forced; what lay in it, lay there inviolate.

"Five thousand dollars," he said at last. "Five thousand dollars, cash down."

I could have laughed outright, my sense of relief was so overwhelming. The figure was not one quarter of what I had expected. But I knew that nothing could be gained by seeming too eager.

"That's nonsense!" I told him.

"Is it?" he asked.

"I mean it's a devil of a lot of money," I objected.

"I've got a lot of use for it." His tone was disconcertingly offhand and careless.

"Is there anything so difficult about this job?" I asked.

"Maybe--maybe not."

"You know where she is?"

"I can find her!"

"How soon?"

"You'd have to give me a couple of days."

"Why two days?"

"Because she's hard to get at."

"Why hard to get at?"

"I'm not a damned fool. I've done enough explaining."

"Suppose I make you do a little more explaining?"

"You can't!" was his placid reply. This was true enough.

"Then for five thousand dollars you'll bring Elvira Paladino and me together face to face?"

"I've said I would."

"Where?"

"Here in this room if you like."

I wanted to make sure of my ground while I still had the chance.

"But what assurance have I that, even though you know where this girl is, you're able to get in touch with her?"

He smiled his careless and half-sneering smile.

"I don't suppose it'd satisfy you any to know it was on the morning of the thirteenth of March she left your house, out there at Beaumaris, and worked for three hours in the Astor library on Greek art books, and met your man and young Stillwell in your rooms the same afternoon?"

The man was right in all but one detail. She had come to my rooms, but she had not met young Stillwell there. The Inner Circle, apparently, had lost nothing of cunning at their old game of shadowing.

"You're wrong there, you see," I pointed out to him. "She didn't meet young Stillwell there. She met nobody there except my servant."

Schmidlapp did not seem to be disconcerted by this correction. He thought it over for several seconds and dismissed it, apparently, with a shrug.

"Well, that doesn't count, anyway. She went there. And what you want to know is *where she went after that*."

"That's what I intend to know."

"All right--that's what I intend to show you, when the time comes."

He was as placidly obstinate as a porcupine. His position was too well fortified for assault; he had a quill of indifference for every bark of impatience. I suddenly thought of Sitnikov and the necessity for immediate action.

"Why couldn't you make it tomorrow night?"

He eyed me through his spectacles meditatively.

"I could, but it would cost more."

"How much more?"

"Just twice the sum we mentioned."

His nerve was colossal. I couldn't help admiring the man.

"I prefer sticking to the original figure, and I prefer tomorrow night. Then I'll give you two hundred dollars for your extra trouble. That isn't such bad pay for one day's work, is it?"

He thought it over, point by point, before he answered.

"All right," he said at last. "I'll do it."

"This is business?"

"Of course it's business."

"And I'll stick to my side of the bargain if you stick to yours. There'll be no side-stepping, no crooked work?"

"You want the girl, don't you? Well, I want the money. We'll both get what we're after. That's the end of it, isn't it?"

"It is--if you act straight in this. And I want to warn you right now, Schmidlapp, that this means a good deal to me; and if you do any dirty work, or try to juggle out of this thing, I'll make you wish you'd never been born!"

He nodded his head as placidly as though I had been offering him a cigar, with the ghost of a smile on his sleepy, fat, serpent-like face.

"But supposin' I decide to draw out of this between now and tomorrow night?" he had the audacity to inquire.

Like most human beings, he objected to being coerced, he had a natural enough craving to indulge his final prerogative of free-will.

"You can't draw out," I warned him. "And there's no use haggling about it."

"Why isn't there?"

"Because, Schmidlapp, I've got you hemmed in so close you can't get away if you want to."

He gave vent to his placid sneer. It seemed to me about time to clinch the matter of convincing him.

I reached over and idly picked up a box of time-fuses from his work-bench, lifted one of them from the box, looked at it carelessly, and emitted a sharp whistle. It might very easily have been interpreted as an expression of my astonishment at finding such things within arm's reach. The trick was a theatrical one, but it worked.

I had the immediate and unqualified satisfaction of seeing the sash of the unlatched window slowly rise, before Davis appeared, gun first. It wasn't until he stepped to the floor that Schmidlapp swung about with a start. Davis' face, as he stood there, was as devoid of expression as a totem-head. But for once the same could not be said of Schmidlapp's.

I gave him no chance to recover, but repeated my whistle through the door that led into .

It seemed scarcely three seconds before the street door was opened and Lefty Boyle with his huge revolver out, stood before us, ominously ready for action.

"Well, I'll be damned!" breathed Schmidlapp for the second time that night, as the slow-moving eyes behind the steel-rimmed glasses took in the tableau that surrounded him.

"This is only a part of the machinery," I said, emulating his own placidity of utterance. "If you

want to see the rest of the wheels going round, just say so."

He blinked his eyes at me, with his habitual stare of abstraction. Then he viewed the two intruders with undisguised and unmistakable annoyance.

"If we're goin' to do business together," he said, slowly, turning to me again, "we've got to do it without all New York buttin' in?"

"There'll be no butting in," I assured him. "There'll be no butting in from either side and this is to show you one small reason why there won't be. I think you understand, don't you?"

He blinked at me for a meditative second or two, then almost relaxed into a smile.

"I'm wise," he said.

Chapter XL—THE TWILIGHT OF THE GOD

It was not until I had left Schmidlapp, and had begun to review the scene in the printing-shop, speech by speech, that attention scraped bottom, as it were, on the name of Harvey Stillwell. The possibility of young Stillwell entering into the situation had seemed too remote to waste thought over. Schmidlapp himself had not been sure of the name. But, on the other hand, there was the scene in the Hotel De Vigne. And the more I reviewed it, the more it puzzled me.

I decided, after a night's sleep, that nothing would be lost by seeing young Stillwell face to face. I also decided that it would be better to approach him unannounced. So I had Davis drop me at the Stillwell house, and was on the point of running up the wide brownstone steps when the door opened and Natalie fluttered out, followed by a booted and liveried "tiger" carrying her King Charles spaniel.

Her greeting was cordial, but non-committal. Yet I had to confess that she looked very beautiful, perilously beautiful, in her plumed hat and grey velvet gown.

"Whither so early, Rebbie?" she asked, with her gay little ripple of a laugh, meeting my gaze with her sapphire eyes, with all their soft and dangerous shadows.

"I was hoping to catch Harvey at home," I explained. I thought I detected the shadow of a frown on her smiling face.

"He's here, of course. But he's still in bed. And I warn you that he's a bear if he's awakened early!"

It was exactly half-past ten. I wondered what that high-spirited youth regarded as early.

A landaulet swung up to the curb below us.

"I'm off to order my flowers," explained Natalie.

I went down the steps with her.

"Don't you want to drop in at the Plaza and meet Afrida Ponzanna--that's the Perkins girl, from Saginaw, who sang with Renaud last winter!"

"I've really got to see Harvey," I explained.

"Well, you can't for an hour, anyway," she responded promptly. We were at the landaulet door by this time. I handed her in.

"Come along, won't you, Rebbie?"

"I feel out of touch with that crowd nowadays," I answered, a little dejectedly and also a little ungraciously. Yet they did, indeed, seem very distant and unreal, that busy circle of pleasure seekers, flitting about the city like troops of butterflies about some many-coloured gardens.

"I know you do," said Natalie looking down at me with her unfathomable sapphire eyes. "And out of touch with other old friends!"

"It's not that, Natalie," I pleaded. "But I have been busy, and worried."

She was no longer smiling. She started to speak, stopped, looked at me again, and swept her skirts to one side on the upholstered seat.

"Come along," she said, very gently.

"I'm afraid of missing Harvey."

"Come as far as the florist's," she persisted. "Wilson can get you back in plenty of time."

She was a young lady who seldom had to argue for her own way. She could throw a touch of imperiousness into a request even. And no sane man could ever be unwilling to sit beside Natalie Stillwell.

I wondered, as I took my seat, what had become of all my former light-heartedness. I found it hard to summon up that facetiousness with which people of Natalie's circle faced even the discordant things of life. One good laugh, I felt, would have shaken the incipient tragedy out of the situation. But flippancy, for some reason, was sadly beyond me.

I tried to pick up a serious topic or two, after Natalie had stopped to give her morning's orders to the florist. But my efforts were as awkward as those of a girl stealing chocolate from a candy-counter. Natalie refused to help me. She let me flounder along, with her eyes veiled. So I evaded the entire issue by reverting to the theme of her brother Harvey. I asked, seriously enough if she had been in any way worrying about him.

"Yes, Harvey worries me horribly," she confessed.

"Can you tell me why?"

She took a deep breath and looked out of the car window. Then she laughed her golden ripple of a laugh. It was musical and good to listen to; but it was not disingenuous.

"Don't you think you've had enough of our family troubles on your shoulders, Rebbie?"

I told her that I had always been particularly fond of that particular family. She did not respond immediately to the impersonal and somewhat conventional declaration, but fell to gazing out of the car window again as we bowled along up the Avenue.

"I want to ask you for something, Rebbie," she said, at last, without turning toward me.

"Well?"

"I want to ask you for my release."

"From what?"

Her hand lay on her knee beside me, listlessly. The gloved fingers moved a little, and then were still.

"From--from any understanding there may have been between us," was her answer.

I felt my throat tighten, for reasons I could not fathom. The tendrils and roots of the feeling stirred by that speech seemed to lead back into all the years of my lost youth, into all the careless and happy and glittering past which I had in some strange way outgrown.

"Why do you say this?" I heard myself asking.

She looked at me now, quite herself, both a little imperiously and a little pityingly.

"Because my engagement to Wilbur Syndham is to be announced in tomorrow's *Herald*."

I sat looking at her. It puzzled me to think that I was experiencing no upheaval of emotion, that neither a sense of depression nor a spirit of release was sweeping through me.

"Don't!" cried the girl at my side. "Don't be stupid and try to congratulate me! I don't mind you being indifferent, Rebbie, but I *won't* have you obvious!"

"I'm not indifferent!" I tried to tell her. But she stopped me in the midst of my futile efforts.

"Here's the hotel, and I'm late. Wilson will whisk you back, to have it out with Harvey."

We shook hands, after a rather solemn and valedictory fashion.

"Please don't *act*!" she cried, rather rebelliously, perhaps a little hysterically. Then she sent the clouds of sobriety scattering with an impish mockery of a shudder, a theatrical and prolonged shudder that left us both laughing.

"It's not my funeral they're going to announce, you know, Rebbie," she cried gaily enough, with a good-bye wave of her gloved hand. "And don't be too hard on my big bear brother!"

Driving back, I had many things to think over. Few of them were of a nature to leave me frivolous-minded. None of them left me any lighter in spirits.

I felt as though somewhere in the house of life a door had been softly closed, but closed forever.

Chapter XLI—THE GLIMMER OF TRUTH

I had to wait in the library for some time before Harvey Stillwell appeared. An indefinite sense of loneliness took possession of me as I sat peering about at the familiar walls. It was, to me, a room with many memories. Yet for the first time in my life I was able to look at it in that spirit of detached calmness with which a sea-traveller might take a farewell look about a liner's overdecorated saloon.

Then all thought on the matter was interrupted by the entrance of young Stillwell himself. His face was a little haggard and drawn, and his eyes were not clear. The look of concern which he tried to conceal beneath a pert and casual bearing did not altogether escape me.

"What the devil are you doing out at such an hour?" he demanded, with a pretence at a yawn.

I had no time to waste, so I came to the point at once.

"I've been waiting to see you."

A servant entered, as I spoke, with what appeared to be a brandy-and-soda.

"Pardon me," said the youth, as he took the glass.

"Certainly," I answered, watching him.

He downed his "eye-opener," waved away the servant, and sank into one of the wide-armed chairs opposite me.

"I haven't had breakfast yet," he explained, with a pretence of boredom. "But fire ahead!"

I concluded that, on the whole, it would be better to fire ahead without equivocation.

"I want to know when you last saw Elvira Sabouroff."

He slipped a little lower between the arms of his chair and shaded his eyes with his none too steady fingers.

"Look here, Rebbie, why're you so confoundedly interested in that woman?"

I had neither the desire nor the time to take issue with his flippancy. I was even willing to attribute it to his empty stomach and his belated "eye-opener," and let it go at that. But he repeated the question with more insolence than before.

"I have a very vital reason for being interested in that woman," I answered him, quietly enough.

"Same old Rebbie!" he cried, in his fatal and purblind facetiousness. "But you're too green for this sort of game! You're out of your class! You don't know the type, my boy!"

"You haven't answered my question."

"Oh, I'll answer your question, all right. But nothing's to be gained by getting uppish about it. In fact, you only let your feelings blind your better judgment. That's what's been wrong with you all along, Rebbie! *That's* what's kept you from seeing that this woman's not your sort, and never was and never can be!"

"Not my sort," I repeated, still trying to hold the brake of expediency against the wheel of impulse. "Not my sort?"

I was thinking of Elvira Sabouroff and her ready sympathy with suffering, of her passionately cherished and overcostly ideals of life, of her struggle to bring light to the people she knew, of her reading in crowded factory-rooms, of her work for the submerged and illiterate creatures who groped for help all about her, of her talks at labourers' meetings, of her delicate figure in its sure armour of duty passing immune through such sordid scenes of life as would nauseate this delicate-nerved youth.

"They're all a loose-jointed lot, you know," he went on quite blindly. "You can never pin them down. They drift about from gang to gang--I mean from graft to graft--playing the same old shell-game. Oh, yes; they're good mixers, all of 'em! And the first thing they put a bomb under, every time, is the marriage-law!"

Again I had to take a grip on myself, a mighty grip. It would be foolish to make a mess of things at the very beginning. But there was a limit, a human limit, and he was almost over it.

"All this has nothing to do with what I came here to see you about," I told him, and I noticed that my hands were shaking a little as I spoke.

He seemed to resent what he construed as a more pedagogic note of finality in my voice.

"Oh, yes, it has," he retorted hotly. "It's got a lot to do with it. For the woman you're kicking up

such a lot of dust about is just that sort of woman!"

Anger is a foolish and unlovely thing. But once it touches off the volcanic old Adam just under our over-thin incrustation of civilization, it leaves us one with the beasts again. It brings the savage out of his grave.

All I know is that, when reason returned to me, I had young Stillwell by the collar of his quilted house-coat. I had that collar twisted up close about his throat, till the silk facing, split and torn, was strangling him like a hangman's knot. He was pawing and clutching at my fingers to let him free.

"You fool!" he gasped, as I flung him away from me, back into his chair, like a rag. He was white and weak and shaking.

"You fool!" he repeated, his breath still coming in quick, hard gasps.

"I'll make you eat every word you said!" I cried. "You'll take them back--now, here, where you sit--or I'll break every bone in your body!"

He had his breath back by this time, and I could see the flame of hot rage and hate in his staring eyes.

"I'll take nothing back," he cried, as he got to his feet again. "You'll make me take nothing back, you barroom brawler. D'you suppose you're coming into this house to bullyrag me about a woman like that?"

"Stop!"

"I'll not stop! I know this woman. I know her better than you. I know what she's doing now. I know it, and she knows I know it!"

"What's she doing now?" I demanded.

"She's doing what she always did--doubling up with one of those damned Bolsheviks!"

"What Bolshevik?" I made a clutch at him, but he got away from me.

"Don't you try any of that mauling game on me again!" he threatened, still quivering with blind rage.

"What Bolshevik!" I reiterated.

"That dirty little rat called Mutashenko--that heroic, high-browed revolutionist who headed the mutiny on the *Kniaz-Potemkin* in the Black Sea!"

"That's a lie!"

"It's not a lie; so you needn't fret about her. She's back among her own people. You'll find them down on Fifth Street, mooning over the East River, and inditing a history of his mutiny for the delectation of their sweet-scented Red circles."

His tone of mockery, high-noted, unreasoning, seemed more and more the sheer outcry of irresponsible fury. It had a tendency to teach me calmness, to compel me to some shadow of sanity.

"Go down and find them!" he taunted. "Doing light house-keeping up on the skyline. And when you find them, come back and apologize to me for this insult."

"I'll go when you answer the first question I asked you. When was the last time you saw Elvira Sabouroff?"

He laughed a short, mirthless laugh.

"I'll tell you that, too, if it's going to make you any happier. The last time I saw the woman was in your rooms--quite alone there, and quite at home there!"

"When?"

"I'm not a police blotter! I guess *you* didn't see her after that!"

A great light dawned on me. It came from nowhere, out of nothing. But all at once I saw and understood.

"*You* set that woman against me!" I burst out. "Your either lied or threatened or coerced her into leaving the work she was at! *You* came between that woman and me!"

He actually seemed to be enjoying my agony.

"That's more fool's talk! How could I coerce a woman of that breed?"

"Then what did you say--what did you tell her?"

"Among other things, I pointed out your position, your obligations to your friends!"

My instinct had not been amiss.

"And did you mention your sister Natalie to her?"

My question brought him up short. He paused a second or two before he answered it.

"Why should I mention my sister's name to a woman of that sort?" he demanded.

"You told that woman I was to marry Natalie Stillwell!" I flung out.

He swung about on me, all the pride of his family burning in his febrile young veins.

"You'll never marry Natalie!" he burst out, with one of those oaths which callow youth deems so essentially manlike.

"Then why did you dare to say I was going to?"

"I'd see her dead and buried before I'd see her tied to a cad like you!" he cried.

I was not thinking of him now. I was thinking of Elvira Sabouroff, of all that she had been subjected to, of all that she had passed through, of the blind and foolish trails I had been struggling to follow, of the mess that this interfering and irresponsible young rake had made of two lives. And it was my turn to swing about on him and cry out, from the very bottom of my heart: "Oh, you fool--*you fool!*"

Instead of responding to that cry, he strode across the room and pawed at the electric bell-button.

The movement brought me back to a semblance of reason. I could see what he intended to do.

"Where is Elvira Sabouroff?" I demanded with sudden passion.

His face now was blue-grey and drawn, horrible to look at. It held nothing but hate--the irrational, irresponsible, illimitable hate of outraged youth.

"Find her!" he cried explosively, as once more he pounded on the bell-button.

"You refuse to tell me?"

"I don't want to talk to you! I refuse to face such a cad!"

"What a mess--what a colossal mess you've made of this!" I cried, advancing on him unconsciously.

"Keep away from me! I'm done with you! This whole family's done with you!"

He was shaking like an unstrung and hysterical woman. I saw his hands close like claws on the back of a slender rosewood chair. At first I thought it was to support himself, but I realized, as I saw him lift it from the floor, that I was mistaken.

"Greene, show this--this man out!" he was sputtering to the amazed servant who appeared in the doorway. "Show him out, or by God, I'll kill him!"

Chapter XLII—THE OUTWARD TRAIL

A few moments in the open air of that fresh spring morning brought me back to my senses. My brain had cleared by the time I reached the corner of Fifth Avenue. I hailed a taxicab, climbed in and started for home.

More and more I realized the problem before me, as I went hurrying southward along the crowded Avenue. I began to comprehend how the entire situation had changed. Again it called for action--immediate action. It meant a revision of every plan and movement. Too much time had already been lost. Already, at that very moment everything hung in the balance. The very cab-wheels seemed to be singing: "I must get her--get her--get her!"

I calmed myself and checked off my new discoveries, point by point. The first was that Elvira had deliberately and voluntarily permitted herself to drop out of my life. She had done this because she suspected that it was for my own welfare. The next point was that she was in hiding with a man who was a revolutionist. That hiding-place was on an East Side top floor, somewhere at the extreme end of Fifth Street. The name of the man who lived on that top floor was Mutashenko. He was one of the Black Sea naval revolutionists, in exile. It was, indeed, something to work on.

I lost no time in sending out a hurry call to Lefty Boyle. His face as he walked in on me, wore no expression beyond one of dreamy satisfaction at the cigar he was smoking.

"Do you know anything of a man named Mutashenko?" I began at once.

He smoked for a minute or two meditatively.

"A Bolshevik? An ex-anarchist?"

"Yes, a ringleader in that Black Sea mutiny--one of the executive committee of what they call the Social Democratic Party!"

Lefty nodded.

"What made you ask that?"

"Why shouldn't I ask that?"

"Because I imagine a general alarm was sent out for that man two days ago. Janoff

Mutashenko--that's the man they've been tryin' to extradite!"

"What else do you know?"

"His wife went to Washin'ton to straighten things out, so he could be let off as only a political refugee. The Petrograd people claimed he was a criminal and nothin' more. They kicked up such a row about his extradition that Commissioner Hitchburn had a hearin' in the Federal Buildin' here. But before anything was done, Mutashenko and his wife slipped away!"

"You're sure he had a wife?"

"Dead sure. Married her at Fiume, before the two of them got away for America. She went under the name of Musya Siganoﬀ, or Tsiganok. She was wanted for bein' mixed up in the Livarn revolt."

"And this woman is living with him?"

"As far as I know, she is. But don't ask me to prove it. Even the authorities here wouldn't be able to verify a thing like that." Then he added, significantly: "You remember the Gorky case!"

I preferred to remain silent.

"They don't even know where Mutashenko is hangin' out. The Washin'ton people aren't doin' much to protect him, and he knows it. So he's been lyin' low, hopin' Coudert or De Lodigensky will let the thing blow over."

I vaguely remembered an evening paper's editorial to the American people, enlarging on how the Bolsheviks had beaten this fugitive "girl-wife" and demanding American justice to resist the new Tyrant of Russia.

"And if they do round him up, he'll be deported?"

"That's what."

"And that means they'll shoot him or hang him?"

"Sure thing."

"Poor devil!"

"But it's ten to one he'll never be taken alive. You know what those Bolshies are!"

Yes, I had an inkling of what those 'Bolshies' were. I tried in vain to fathom such obsessions, to understand by what process of self-hypnosis those rapt and impassioned spirits could fortify themselves to face such an end.

"Would he be a hard man to round up?"

"No worse'n a she-grizzly after a hard winter."

"Lefty, we've got to find that man."

He looked up at me, studying my face.

"That's hard luck," he said.

His tone, I thought at first, was merely one of mock solemnity. But his face was plaintively serious.

"And what's more," he continued thoughtfully, "nobody's got an inklin' where he's holdin' "

out."

Again he looked up and studied my face.

"Why d'you want him?" he asked.

"Because he and Elvira Paladino are together."

Lefty framed his lips for whistling, but emitted no sound from them.

"He's writing some sort of history of his revolt, apparently for home consumption," I explained. "Elvira Paladino has been hired to help him carry out that work. They have to do it in secret. They're at work on it together, at this moment. And there's the whole mystery in a nut-shell."

"That doesn't help us out any," suggested Lefty, after a dispassionate study of his cigar-end. "Even though we're dead sure he's still in New York it doesn't make our job any easier."

"But I am sure he's in New York. What's more, I know the particular part of New York."

The stool-pigeon's crafty little eyes shifted quickly in his crafty little head. Then he relapsed into indifference.

"I know they're in this city, and in one part of it!" I repeated.

"It's a sizable burg," qualified the cautious Lefty.

"They're on a top floor on the east end of Fifth Street."

"But what particular floor?"

"That's what we've got to find out."

"How about Schmidlapp? Is he on this trail too?"

"That's something I can't say. My personal impression is that Schmidlapp doesn't know anything more than we do. He may not know as much. But *now* Schmidlapp doesn't count!"

"But he's got his contract to deliver the lady over to you."

"He's not able to carry out that contract," I suggested. "I don't believe he ever intended to carry it out."

Lefty continued to look worried. "You mean you intend to forestall him?" he asked.

"I mean it's my duty to find that woman. I've got to find her. I've got to reach her without loss of time."

"Then we'd better be gettin' over and muckrakin' that Fifth Street skyline," suggested Lefty. "There's still the danger of Schmidlapp throwin' a scare into Mutashenko and gettin' him on the run!"

"That's one thing I'm afraid of."

"And there's a bigger danger than that. If the authorities should happen to nail Mutashenko, *they'll nail any woman they find working with him*. They'll make their extradition papers cover Elvira Paladino as well."

"They can't," I cried. "They daren't! There's nothing against her!"

"There's her old Inner Circle work against her. They've got that--she's been listed with the local people for over a year."

"But that doesn't make her a criminal, simply because she once believed in what they call social democracy!"

"An anarchist is always a criminal--to the police," was Lefty's retort.

"Then we've got to get her!" I cried. "We've got to reach her at once. We've got to save her from herself!"

Lefty stopped me on my way, with a half-contemptuous jerk of a thumb over his shoulder.

"You'd better get rid of those glad rags," he suggested.

It was a suggestion upon which I began to act at once. I kept on talking through an open door, however, during that hurried change of attire.

"Can you tell me anything more about this Mutashenko," I asked.

"Only that there is an old order for his arrest," was Lefty's reply. "He and a socialist called Osolin started a good deal of newspaper talk, six or eight weeks ago, by claimin' the protection of the American flag. He said he thought he was comin' to the land of liberty, and people who didn't know anything about him began feelin' he deserved protection in this country. Even some of the newspapers took it up and began kickin' against the idea of a political refugee bein' given back to his home folks."

"Do you know what he looks like?"

"I can't remember any police description. But I've heard it said, somewhere, that he wears his hair long, and used to write nice little love-poems in Russian before he got to pinchin' navies!"

Another deliriant, was my inward remark--which I felt Lefty would not have fully understood.

"Do you know East Fifth Street?"

Lefty was thoughtfully silent for a moment or two. "That's too far north for dance-halls and such things," he ruminated. "But it's somewhere along there that they've been having those gang-fights these last few months!"

"What have dance-halls to do with it?" I asked, unable to bridge the break in his thought.

"Well, you see, we get most of our tips from women, street-women and the like. Fifth Street's too far north to look for much outside help."

"There's nothing in that neighbourhood you know?"

Again there was a moment or two of silence.

"I stand in with a cobbler on Avenue D, somewhere about there."

"What is he?"

"He's a Livonian. Outside of that, between you and me, he's the neatest counterfeiter in New York."

"Couldn't *he* help us along a bit?"

Lefty was doubtful.

"He'd only freeze up. They forget everything they ever knew when it's a case of Black Hand or Bolsheviks."

"Then *I* might try him," I suggested.

"Nothin' to be lost in a try."

"Any other line of advance come to your mind?" I inquired.

"Nothin' I know of much, till I have a look over the ground."

"I don't want to feel that we're leaving a stone unturned," I explained to him. "This is the biggest and I hope the last movement of this whole tangled wild-goose chase."

"You'd better take your man along," said Lefty.

"I've told him to be ready."

"Have you got an extra gun?" casually inquired the little man in the other room.

"I've got a German model of a magazine hammerless, if that'll do?"

"Size of a street-car?"

"No; pocket size. It throws a thirty-eight mushroom, long, with a nickel head."

Lefty chuckled in quiet appreciation.

"That sounds ugly enough."

I stepped out, a walking example of what ten minutes of hurried democratization can do.

"All ready?"

"Ready," he answered.

I looked at my watch. It was fifteen minutes to two.

I wondered in a sudden mood that was half anticipation, half unrest, what life held in store for me during those next few hours.

Chapter XLIII—THE HOLE IN THE WALL

That neighbourhood which lies between East Houston Street and the gas-tank district on the one side, and Avenue D and the East River on the other, can scarcely be called New York at its best. It might more appropriately be called the back yard of the city, with its feed-stables and horseshoers' cellars, its shabby foundries and factories, its narrow and slatternly-looking streets so crowded with refuse and children, its overlooked garbage-barrels and neglected pavements. Yet at the point where Fifth Street crosses Lewis and dips toward the open spaces of the East River, the sunlight is less obscured and the air less tainted.

It was along this section of the street that Lefty and I took our casual way, noting how the roar of the more open avenues was subdued to a rumble, how we seemed to be at rest in a strangely isolated and murmurous back-water of the great city. It was indeed a choice corner of New York for a fugitive.

We pursued our way carelessly, yet cautiously, with eyes open for any and every sign that might be of use to us. We wandered on, almost to the water's edge, where we could see the tall masts of schooners and smell the cargoes of fresh pine lumber and hear the shrieks of the children at play on a near-by recreation-pier. Then we worked our way back again, back into the

smell of street dust and curb-side offal and the odour of scorching horse-hoofs. But we stumbled on nothing that gave us any inkling of what we sought.

A house-to-house canvass was out of the question. Even to be seen a second time on that street had its disadvantages. There was always the danger of "moccasin telegraph"--of an alarm being given. As Lefty had said, we had always to hunt from cover.

"I'd like to see what we could do with that Livonian cobbler," I explained to Lefty, as we swung northward into Avenue D again.

"He has a hole-in-the-wall in the next block. You'll have to break away from me, though, if you're goin' to brace him!"

"I've got a better plan than that. He knows you're connected with the force. He doesn't know me. I'll try breaking through his reserve by dodging into his shop. You pass his window, look in, and give me a chance to show you're after me, and that I've given you the slip."

"And then what?"

"I'll get anything I can out of him. But what's his name?"

"Jan--Jan Sydow. He's nobody's fool, you know. He drives pegs in that dirty little hole-in-the-wall of his; but he can speak five languages."

"I'll be careful," I told Lefty, as we swung apart and made ready for our movement.

It was carried out without difficulty, once the cobbler's door was located.

I flung it open and stepped inside, breathing heavily. Quickly shutting it behind me, I crouched back in the corner, in an attitude of suspense, listening.

The cobbler sat on his low stool pounding a slab of leather that had been soaking in a pail of dirty water. He did not look up at my entrance. He did not even seem to shift an eye at all my theatrical attitude of waiting. Nor did he move when Lefty appeared before the narrow window and stopped. The stool-pigeon even peered in, but the hammering did not cease. There was not a word until Lefty had passed on. The brisk and preoccupied pounding on the wet sole-leather continued. The man's bleached face still bent over the huge flat-iron which he held anvil-wise between his gripping knees. But I could hear his voice distinctly as he continued at his work:

"He's gone. It's all right."

I made a gesture for caution, and still waited. The cobbler, still wielding his hammer, looked up at me for the first time.

He arose from his stool, reached over, and pulled down the blind that covered the windowed half of his little door. Then he struck a match, and lighted the single unshaded gas-jet that stood out from the bald brick wall above his stool. I made a gesture as though to lock the door, but he stopped me, with a shake of the head. It was not the first time, I felt, that this little den had been made use of as a refuge in time of need.

"What is it?" he asked, and I noticed his tone was still non-committal.

"The police," I told him.

"Who?" he asked.

"A plain-clothes man," was my answer.

His unblinking stare was still a tacit interrogation. It said, quite plainly, that it was time for me to explain myself. He was beginning to suspect, I felt, that his visitor was not one of his own class. I noticed, too, that there was something untamable and Ishmaelitish in his make-up, despite his general mildness of appearance.

So I threw him the cabalistic password of the Mother-Earthers--the Open Sesame of East Side social democracy that I had picked up from Gicca.

My weeks of idling about the East Side, after all, had not been without advantage. It had not been altogether wasted time. For no lover's face at a word of endearment after a quarrel could have relaxed and lighted and changed as that mild-eyed Livonian cobbler's face changed when the word I uttered fell on his ears. It was a key to his innermost reserves. It made me one of a brotherhood.

"What's wrong?" he said, and this time there was no apathy in the question.

"Mutashenko!" I answered, with studied vagueness.

But I was watching his face with the yellow gaslight playing over it. I could see that the name was not new to him. It brought no look of perplexity into his mild and troubled eyes.

"I was afraid so," he said, with equal vagueness. I had hoped he would be more explicit.

"Has anything been said?" I asked, perplexed.

"They were here an hour ago, looking."

It seemed reasonable to assume that such search could emanate from only one quarter.

"Schmidlapp?" I interrogated.

I knew by the man's face, that my guess had hit the bull's-eye.

"Did he get to him?"

The man shook his head.

"I must warn him in time," I rattled on. "How do I get up to that top floor?"

The man eyed me hesitatingly. "You can't get up!"

"But I must!"

"They will let no one through the factory."

"But I've got to get up!" I protested, wondering what he meant by the factory.

"That's what Schmidlapp said. And he's not up yet!"

"Does Schmidlapp know *where*," I demanded.

"He thinks it's the picture-frame factory," was the indefinite and equally unsatisfactory response.

"Then there's still time!" I protested.

The cobbler shrugged his shoulders. It could mean anything.

"Why can't you help me?" I asked. "If I make it worth while?"

The man showed his white teeth in a peculiarly indifferent and yet peculiarly engaging smile.

"I am--what you say?--standing pat," he said, in the idiom of the street. "I'm 'under the eye.'"

"Then I'll try it alone," I declared. The man had reseated himself at his little low stool. I was still in doubt if by any word or gesture I had betrayed myself to him.

"You go up through the factory to get to him?" I asked again, in desperation.

He did not deny it.

"And you say he won't see me?" I persisted.

All the man's thought seemed wrapped up in his hammer and sole-leather.

"*His house is mined!*" he said, without looking up. But beyond this disturbing laconicism I could get nothing out of him. And time was precious.

So I opened the door and looked through as though to make sure that the coast was clear. Three minutes later, I had rejoined the anxious Lefty, and was scanning the skyline of Fifth Street.

"He said it was above a factory," I explained as we went. "How many factories are there in this last block?"

"Here's a mouldin' or a picture-frame factory, from the smell of the banana-oil," said Lefty. "And two doors closer to the river's a bum cigar-factory. Those're the only two."

"Then we've got them!" I declared.

"Where?"

"At the top of that cigar-factory."

Lefty peered up at the place, with its sullen five-storied wall and weatherworn Italian sign, in open disgust.

"They're there, and we've got to get them," I declared, feeling that the end of the long trail was almost in sight.

"Well, that's a mean place for a round-up," said Lefty plaintively.

Chapter XLIV—THE ASCENT TO THE ROOF

I posted Davis on the corner of Avenue D, to act in the capacity of a "gay-cat," as the yeggmen would call it. Lefty I sent into the cigar-factory itself, for a guarded reconnoitring of that territory, while I circled the block, with the understanding that we should come together in fifteen minutes, at the latest, under the portico of a street-corner saloon.

My excursion about the block resulted in no solution of the difficulty. Rows of crowded tenements, shouldering close together, made up the three sides of the square of which Fifth Street, west of Avenue D, was the base. I saw nothing to suggest a new line of attack. Neither did I see anything to arouse my suspicions. Nothing met my gaze beyond the homely labours and pastimes of an East Side street. Nothing cropped above the surface. Nothing gave any inkling of the culminating drama that was being enacted behind such sordid and unconciliating brick walls.

I joined Lefty and Davis as they dipped casually into the gilt-porticoed saloon. I saw gloom

written on the face of the stool-pigeon.

"They've been handed a tip-off," said Lefty, in little more than a whisper. "He's got a gang of dago cigar-rollers to back him up, and you'd no more get up into that joint than you'd get into an armoury."

"But we've *got* to get up there."

"Good heavens!" said Lefty. "He's not only up at the top of that whole bunch of Bolsheviks; but he's got his upper stairway armoured with a door full of gun-shells!"

"How do you know that?"

"I stumbled up into it before they could haul me down. He's made that door into a regular machine-gun, borin' it full of half-inch holes and pluggin' them with loaded shells. Then he's gone and clapped perforated boiler-plate or something like that over 'em, and ten to one he's tapped a light-circuit, to set 'em off by electricity. That stairway's the only way up--and he could rake it like a Gatlin' gun!"

Davis discreetly suggested a search-warrant and the police in force.

"A search-warrant!" scoffed Lefty, under his breath. "You might as well talk of a search-warrant for a hawk in Central Park."

"Look here," I said, only too painfully aware of the precious time we were losing. "I'm going to tackle this place from the top. I'm going to get up to that roof and work down!"

"By airship?" inquired Lefty.

"I don't know how yet; but I'm going to get up there. I want you two to keep watch below, east and west of that cigar-factory; and if I'm not back in thirty minutes, or haven't given you a sign, you'd better send in a general alarm and get a police cordon established. But remember, that's only a last resort. The best way to do this thing is to do it quietly. It's the *only* way, as far as I can see."

"Make your sign a revolver-shot," suggested Lefty. "And remember this Mutashenko's most likely got that joint o' his *mined*!"

He called me back for a moment, as I started for the street.

"You know what you're up against?" he asked, with a more intimate note in his customary offhanded way of speaking.

"I haven't any choice left in this, Lefty. I've got to do it!"

"Go ahead," he retorted, quite cheerily.

"And be so good as to keep Davis from following me up," I warned the little man at my side. "There have been times when his feelings have rather run away with him."

"I'll hold him off," said Lefty, with a grin. "We'll have some trouble of our own down here, maybe!"

My intention, on leaving the other two men, was to go to the picture-frame factory and dodge or bribe my way up to its roof. But even while I was lamenting the time this would take, a new plan came to me. It came as I turned into Lewis Street and let my glance fall on a black and grimy figure hauling a bucket of tar up to the roof of what seemed to be a feed and boarding-

stable. This stable was some five or six doors north of the Fifth Street corner. Beside the curb stood a smoking tar-tank, on little iron wheels. Three or four planks, nailed together, beetled out from the roof-front. The men, obviously, were engaged in tarring the roof of that shabby-fronted boarding-stable. I saw my chance, and seized it.

The empty black bucket came swinging down just as I reached the workman's side. I thrust a bill into his hand, and pointed to the roof.

"Pull me up, quick!" I said.

He looked at the bill, and then looked at me. He set me down at once as a generous-handed madman.

"I can't do ut," he said, still eyeing the bill.

"You've got to," I told him.

"Phwat for?" he demanded.

"I've got a box-kite stranded up there," I told him, glibly enough.

"Then Mike'll throw it down to yez."

"That'd ruin it. For the love of heaven, get me up."

"I haven't the stringth, annyhow," he parried.

I repeated the movement of pressing a bill into his tar-stained hand. Then I called to a hulk of a youth overturning bales of pressed hay with a short iron hook.

"Give Tim a hand here," I told him. He looked up, put down his hook, and came sauntering leisurely over to where we stood. I thrust my feet into the tar-fouled bucket and caught the rope. A look passed between the two men, a look of amusement touched with craftiness.

"Make way for the inspecthor, Mike!" called the man who had pocketed the bill, with an indifferent grin, as the rope tightened and I swung up through the air.

"Inspector av phwat?" demanded the tarry figure called Mike, as he swung me in upon the narrow plank landing.

"Of light and power-wiring," I answered, as I freed myself from the bucket.

"And phwat are yez afther?" he demanded. "There's no wirin' on *this* roof!"

"But there's going to be," was my mendacious retort. "And here's a dollar for your trouble."

He took it with the utmost gravity, as though it had been well earned and long overdue.

"Don't be side-shteppin' on that bit av fresh roofin'," he warned me, as he once more lowered his bucket and bawled for more tar.

I was over the wall-curb before he could look around. Then quickly I crossed a surface of sloping red-painted tin, and climbed upon a second roof some four feet higher than the first. I kept rising in a series of steps, past water-tanks and chimney-tops and wall-tiles, swinging around with the line of roofs as they angled off and followed the line of Fifth Street.

A soft spring sky of robin's-egg blue arched over me. I could see the East River, a wide ribbon of beryl green, dulled here and there with the greys of passing ships. I could see a Greenpoint ferry circling up against the tide, north of Bushwick Inlet. The sounds from the city were

muffled and far away. A sense of loneliness seemed to lie over all New York. I seemed to be alone in a city of sleep and ruin, as I clambered on and on, until I found my way blocked by a blind wall of red brick, ten or twelve feet in height. It held nothing up which I could clamber. There was not a trace of water-pipe or wire or woodwork to help me out. Yet not one hundred feet beyond that wall, I knew, was the roof of the Italian cigar-factory--the roof where my journey would end.

I leaned against that unlooked-for parapet and studied the situation. I had not come prepared for an escalade. And I might have found no way out of the dilemma had I not, after scrambling inquisitively back over half a dozen roofs, stumbled across eight feet of rusted and discarded fire-escape stowed in under the shadow of a wall-curb. It taxed my strength to lift this cumbersome ironwork, but I succeeded in getting it to the blank wall and resting it against the bricks. Even then I found it necessary to exercise the greatest caution in mounting that precarious scaling-ladder, for many of the rods were all but rusted out, and the entire fabric was perilously loose-jointed and unstable.

But it got me up and over to the next roof, upon the highest point of the skyline along the south side of the block.

On second thought, I stopped and leaned back over the wall-end, drawing the rickety fire-escape section up after me. I felt as alone as a sailor wrecked on a South Pacific island. Nothing was in sight, outside of a chimney-top or two, a saddle-backed wall-coping, a flat stretch of tinned roof. I noticed that one wide oval of this roof was worn through. This discovery puzzled me at first, until I saw that the tin had been eroded by the passing to and fro of restless feet. In the centre of this strange oval I noticed a transom, opening like the bulkhead of a ship over a flat deck. The roof, apparently, had been used for a place of exercise, for many weeks.

I tiptoed over to the transom, and examined it minutely. It was locked down from the inside, I discovered, but years of exposure had left its two hinges well rusted about the screw-heads. So I tiptoed back to my section of fire-escape, and wrenched free one of the rods. Then I made my way quietly back to the transom.

Before I ventured on my next move, I took my revolver from my hip pocket and dropped it into the side pocket of my coat. Then cautiously I inserted the end of my rusted iron rod under the transom-hinge, and gently pried it free. This operation I repeated with the second hinge. Then slowly and guardedly I lifted on the transom-door, to make sure that it would come away without undue resistance.

It took considerable force to strain the lock-hasp; but in the end it came, and without any loud report. I restored the door to its place, and dropped to my hands and knees, pressing an ear against its tinned surface. I could not detect anything suspicious. There was, as far as I could make out, not a sound or movement below.

Then I lifted the door entirely away, and waited, scarcely breathing, wondering if the volcano I was uncovering was to prove extinct or active.

But nothing broke the silence; nothing revealed itself. So I leaned over the open transom, inch by inch, prepared to draw back at the first sign of danger.

No danger manifested itself, however. I peered down into a dark and narrow hall, as cramped as a well, out of which opened a door covered with sheet-iron. An iron ladder, from the transom side, led almost to the foot of this door. But otherwise the little room was bald and empty.

I watched that iron-sheeted door for a minute or two, studiously. Then slowly I lowered myself through the transom, carefully replacing the covering as I did so, leaving the place in utter darkness.

I went down the ladder, cautiously step by step, until my exploring toe came in contact with the wooden boards of the floor. Then I took out my revolver, turned to the door, and listened for another minute or two.

As I did so a faint sound broke on my ear. It reminded me, at first, of the merry tapping of a hungry woodpecker. It sounded like a dozen little hammers playing on a dozen muffled anvils. It reminded me of something I had passed through before--of some moment similar to the moment before me.

It all came to me in a flash. It was the sound of a typewriter to which I was listening. It was the same muffled and metallic staccato I had heard as I stood outside the locked door of Cono Di Marco. And something suggested to me that the same fingers were striking on those same keys. Then I heard a canary sing unexpectedly, incongruously, and a woman's voice speaking to it. Some instinct, as compelling as vision itself, told me that the woman who had spoken--the woman in the next room--was Elvira Sabouroff.

We were together under the same roof. She was there before me, with nothing but a door between us. The tangle of uncertainty had at last come to its solution.

My work was not over; my danger was not yet a thing of the past. But the long and seemingly hopeless trail, with all its blind gropings and unlooked-for turnings, had come to an end.

Chapter XLV—THE SUPREME DEMAND

I took a deep breath, and turned the handle of the door that stood between us. I turned it slowly and noiselessly, holding it back to soften any click of the released latch as it opened. I could hear the canary still singing; the sound of the quickly tapping keys did not cease.

I opened the door, back and out from me, quite as cautiously; for I was still in doubt as to what might face me in that unknown room. And I wanted to be on the safe side.

I stepped inside quietly, with my back to the wall, and the door still half-open. The sound of the typewriter went on without interruption. In front of me sat Elvira bent over her work. We were alone in the room.

I dropped my revolver back into my side pocket, somehow ashamed of it. But I still stood there, watching the woman in front of me, studying the face bent low over the little machine that had sounded so like the drumming of a hungry woodpecker, still rising and falling in its little spurts of speed.

She sat at a plain deal table, covered with a litter of papers, with here and there a book of reference, a blue-print or two, and a sprinkling of yellow-bound pamphlets. On the floor lay a large wall-map, unrolled, as though recently consulted. To the right of the table, were two high windows, with the shades drawn up to the top. In one of these windows hung a bird-cage. In the other stood a row of potted plants. There was little furniture in the room, which was almost jail-like in its baldness. And yet it carried a persistent sense of cheeriness, whether it was the canary, the strong spring light from the open window-squares, or the valiant row of potted

flowers--I could not say.

But my eyes kept returning to the girl bent over the typewriter. I could see the dark hair parted plainly in the middle, leaving a straight white line back to where it coiled and massed in a heavy crown. I could see the familiar soft oval of the face, with the tender hollow under either cheek-bone, the hollow that had always given to her face its impalpable yet persistent note of tragedy. I could see the translucent pallor of the skin, with its strange under-glow of warmth; like ivory played on by some pale rose light, so pale as to be almost imperceptible. I could see the lines of the mouth delicate, sensitive, yet not without their touch of audacity; too wistful to be youthful, too softly curved to be ascetic; humanized by the suggested weakness of the under lip, that had the habit of squaring itself, in an almost child-like movement, when it framed itself for speech. I could not see her eyes; yet I seemed to feel their presence, as the essential culmination of the luminous vitality that crowned the entire face. And I could see that it was a face on which peace rested; yet peace, I felt, achieved only through abnegation.

She looked up suddenly, when I was least expecting to see her move; her eyes, as they rested on me, widened slowly. I raised a hand to silence her; for I thought at first that she was about to cry out.

"You!" she murmured, under her breath, turning white to the very lips, until her hair looked blue-black against the pallor of her face. "You!"

So motionless did she sit that for a moment or two she seemed more like a Milanese Campo Santo figure than like a living and breathing woman.

I shut the door and stepped out to the middle of the room.

She did not move, but her eyes followed me. Then she seemed to awaken. She started up, with a quick side-glance at the inner door.

"Why are *you* here?" she asked. The mere fact that she spoke in little more than a whisper warned me that I was still in the midst of danger, that there were still obstacles to be overcome.

"Why are you here?" she repeated, crossing to the inner door and standing with her back to it.

"I have come for you," I told her. The words seemed inadequate, even as I uttered them; they seemed bald and commonplace. They seemed to express nothing, when there remained so much to be said.

"For me?" she repeated.

"Yes."

"I cannot go with you," she said quietly, her eyes still studying mine.

"You must come," I told her, wondering at the unhappiness, the wordless sense of rebellion that welled up in her face.

"That is impossible," was her reply, uttered as quietly as before. "And you must not stay here. You don't know the danger you are facing."

"You are facing greater danger," I warned her. "And this is more than a matter of expediency. I have something to explain--something I *must* explain. Can't you lock that door?"

Her fingers groped for the key, though her puzzled eyes were still on mine. I saw the expression in them suddenly change; the wonder and perplexity in them died out, and fear leaped into

them.

"Quick!" she whispered, motioning toward the door through which I had entered. "Quick--or it will be too late!"

"But I must talk with you."

"Yes, later," she gasped. "But you must not be seen here. Quick!"

I backed through the door and closed it after me. A moment later I heard the sound of footsteps on a bare floor, and then a door opened and closed. Then came the quick murmur of voices--the rich, muffled tones of the woman; the harsh, throaty, and almost guttural notes of a man, speaking in a tongue which I could not decipher, speaking hurriedly, impatiently, almost dictatorially.

I heard the steps pass out through the door again, the slam of the door, and then the uneven tapping of the typewriter's keys. I listened for a moment, and then stepped back into the room. A thin veil of cigarette smoke still hung in the air; I knew, by the aroma, that it was Russian tobacco.

I crossed straight to the inner door and turned the key in its lock. Elvira watched me with troubled and questioning eyes.

"Why have you followed me here?" she asked, almost defiantly.

"Don't you know?" I asked in turn, crossing the room to where she sat.

"No, I do not. All I know is that you are making it dangerous for yourself, and doubly dangerous for me. Why--why have you come here?"

"I have come for you."

"But why?"

"Because I love you--because I have always loved you, and always will love you!"

I bent over her--defiantly, almost--as I said it. Her face was within four feet of mine; her eyes were looking up into mine. But her face was of the colour of paper, as cold and dead as ashes. Yet I could see by the heaving of her bosom that her breath was coming in hurried gasps.

"You have no right to say that to *me*!" she whispered at last. "You need not have come for that!"

"I had to come for that--so that you would understand."

She was on her feet now, facing me.

"It's you who do not understand. You do not know where you are, what this place is, what being discovered here would mean to you!"

"I understand everything perfectly; I know what is here; I know why you are here. And I know why you must not stay here. Yes, don't stop me. I know Mutashenko and all his story. I know what he is, and what he intends to do. I know why you are with him, what your work with him is. And I know what the end of it will be!"

She gave no notice to my implication of impending danger. It must have been an old story to her.

"Then why have you followed me here, if you know all this?" she demanded, with the first touch of resentment in her tones. "Why are you here, against my wish? Why are you planning to rob me of what happiness I may have found in my work? Why do you wish, for the second time, to make me miserable?"

"Wait!" I said, forcing myself to calmness. "This means too much to me to let foolish pride come between us. I'll answer your question, but you must first answer one of mine."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Why did you drop out of my life the way you did?"

She did not look at me this time, and I could see the effort it cost her to frame her reply.

"Your life was full," she answered, a little bitterly.

"Not until you came into it!" I cried.

"It meant nothing to you," she went on, in her studied monotone. "It was--it meant everything to me. It wasn't until I realized how little it meant to you that I went."

"What made you realize that? I mean, what made you think that?"

She looked at me now, and if the tones of her voice had been disturbed and bitter, the calm wistfulness of her great eyes now doubly atoned for it.

"I had been blind and very foolish. It was pointed out to me by some one who could judge better than I did."

She came to a stop, and I caught up the thread of her explanation.

"It was Harvey Stillwell," I cried.

"Hush!" she said, in alarm, with a terrified glance toward the locked door.

"It was Natalie Stillwell's brother who came to you," I went on, "and gave you to understand that I had obligations elsewhere--that you and I could never be friends--that I was not fit for you!"

"No," she corrected, with her courageous determination to have the whole truth out once and for all. "It was that *I* was not fit for you!"

"Then that's as easily answered as the other. The fact that I am here, that I've found you, is answer enough. The fact that Natalie Stillwell is marrying another man is still further answer. It means that I've come for you. It means that I will not go away without you."

The canary swinging in the window sang and trilled for a little time. Elvira did not answer. I stepped nearer to her, but she drew away from me.

"It's too late," she said, with one hand on the back of her chair, speaking slowly, yet with a tremolo of disquieting feeling in her voice. "I must finish my work here with Mutashenko. He needs me. Then I am to go back home--back to Europe. There's work for me there--oh, so much work!"

I looked at the slender figure so apparently ill equipped for struggle; at the girlishly sloping shoulders; at the shadowy eyes that carried their indefinable sense of feminine fragility--and the sheer injustice of it all made me reckless.

"Are you so essential to these people?" I cried.

She stopped me with a gesture, before I could go on.

"Yes, if I must tell you, I am essential to these people. Mutashenko is helpless without me. His wife is ill; she may be dying. He can not carry out his work alone, by himself. He believes himself to be the Trumpet of God--he calls himself the Trumpet of God."

"Not the Hammer, this time?" I scoffed. But the woman before me ignored my interruption.

"And he is right, in a way. He has a great message to deliver to his people. But he has broken his health--*they* have broken his health. He needs me. It is not so much duty on my part as pity--for my own people in misfortune."

"But no matter how you pity them, you can't stay with them. It's known, even now, where he's hiding. This very building is being watched, even while we stand here talking."

"That doesn't disturb me. I'm not a criminal or a fugitive."

"But you are co-operating with a fugitive--a fugitive whose extradition papers are even now made out. That means that he will be deported, sent back to Russia--and what follows that, you know."

She did not seem as disturbed as I had expected. She did not even seem surprised. She stood, in deep thought, for a moment or two.

"Are you sure of this?" she said.

"I am sure of it," I told her.

"He will never be taken alive," she murmured, as though to herself. The extent of her dilemma seemed to be coming home to her slowly, minute by minute.

"That is why you must come with me--now, at once, when we can still get away," I tried to explain to her.

"Why must I go with you?" she asked looking at me as though she had seen me for the first time.

"Because I want you. Because I need you more than this man Mutashenko does, or any of his kind. Because I love you!"

"And where would we go?" she asked, in her dead monotone.

"Wherever you say--anywhere--so long as you come with me--so long as you marry me!"

She fell back a step or two.

"Marry you!" she said, in a sharp soprano, unlike her natural voice.

"Marry me--yes. Why not marry me?"

She covered her face with her hands and stood there, as though in torture, swaying a little unsteadily. I tried to take her hands from her face. Then she looked up, once more white to the very lips.

"But me--you couldn't marry *me*. You couldn't marry me as I am?"

"Just as you are!"

"No--no!"

"I love you! I have always loved you!"

"No--no!" she repeated in some strange agony of spirit, as she groped blindly for the back of the chair. I took her groping hand in mine, and held it there.

"I love you!" I repeated inadequately, foolishly. I could see her trembling under-lip square itself, as though she were about to speak; but she said nothing. She stood there with her troubled eyes staring into mine, perplexed, almost stunned. I looked back at her, feeling my throat constrict. I am not an emotional man; I have looked on a few strange tragedies in my day, and on brutal sights, and have not been moved. It almost humiliated me to feel the hot tears running down my face.

"I want to take you away from all this," I said, putting out my arms to her hungrily, until my hands rested on her shoulders. "I want to make your life what it ought to be. I want to make you happy. I love you!"

Her head sank low as she stood before me, and I could feel her body shaking with a gush of sobbing. She did not step toward me. I did not draw her closer. But our two relaxed and weary and unhappy bodies seemed to move and merge together, as quietly as two streams meeting and mingling. She was in my arms, the tears still on her face, her body still shaking, her trembling lips still distorted as though with pain. She was in my arms, her wet face turned up to mine, and all the precious warmth and weight of her clinging to me.

"I know it's wrong--it's wrong--but I have always loved you!" she was saying.

I held her there, almost drowsy with the mounting anesthesia of happiness, murmuring, as I pushed back the tumbled hair from her forehead: "I love you! I love you!"

Then her arms closed above me; they seemed to surround and enfold me like wings; they seemed to weigh me down, until my face was close above her upturned face--above the trembling scarlet lips that whispered so weakly: "I love you!"

Her eyelids drooped over her shadowy eyes, and as I held her there our lips touched and met and clung together, and the world and time and space were forgotten.

"It's wrong," she murmured wearily, half-heartedly, altogether happily.

"Love is never wrong!" I told her, holding her head back so that I could see into her eyes.

"Never?" she questioned.

I did not answer that question; for even as she spoke there came to our ears the sound of a sharp and peremptory knock on the locked door behind us, followed by the crash of a great blow.

Chapter XLVI—THE ENEMY INTERVENES

I had no time to turn. My instinctive movement was to thrust Elvira behind me, to stand between her and possible danger. But it was already too late for this. There was the sound of a second crash before I could move, and the door swung back with a shattered lock.

Through it stepped one of the strangest figures I have ever looked upon. It was that of a

leather-belted, thick-set, black-whiskered man, in grotesquely loose trousers and a blue flannel shirt on which shone mother-of-pearl buttons, with a brightness that seemed almost incandescent against their dark background.

The first impression this figure gave me was that of a huge form in some strange process of deliquescence. The skin seemed to cover his frame as loosely and unevenly as a suit of clothes hangs over a too diminutive tailor's dummy. The blackness of the bushy and almost patriarchal beard accentuated the cadaverous pallor of the man's skin. On his face I could see anger and fear and distrust. His eyes, in fact, looked like those of a hare, with their high-arching brows above and their curving yellow pouches below, leaving a number of concentric lines about them, like the lines of a target. Between them stood a flat cartilaginous nose with distending nostrils.

I noticed, for the first time, that the man was holding a long-barrelled revolver in his hand--a sinister weapon, of a make once much used on the Continent for duelling.

The intruder, I knew, was Mutashenko. I could not see much about the man to admire.

What I liked least of all was that black-barrelled revolver with which he began to gesticulate as he broke into a gabble of some unknown tongue. I assumed the talk to be Russian, but I had no way of making sure. It did not escape me, though, that as he advanced into the room Elvira changed her position so that she stood between us. And as she stood confronting him, some argument which I could not comprehend was shuttle-cocked back and forth between them. Some spirit of his vehemence seemed to impart itself to her as they carried on that verbal warfare; for I could see the rise and play of a new fire in her eyes. Her replies became more and more tempestuous; Mutashenko's charges seemed to grow more and more passionate.

"What is it?" I demanded; for I preferred, if there was fighting to be done, to be a party to it.

She answered me with nothing more than a quickly upthrust hand, as though to wave me out of the action, as she faced Mutashenko and flashed out her retorts at him--almost in defiance now, it seemed to me.

"What are you cackling about, anyway?" I demanded of Mutashenko.

He paid no attention to my question, but still harried and shouted at the woman in front of me.

She fell back, until her body was almost pressed against mine. I saw her hands clasp and unclasp in what was a little wringing motion, as though utter terror had taken possession of her. It was then I decided that the time for me to act had arrived.

"He will not believe me!" cried Elvira, in despair, as I drew her to one side and stepped forward.

As I did so, I saw Mutashenko's face harden and change. Before I could comprehend his intention, his hand swung forward and up, and the villainous black-handled thing in his hand flashed out its stab of flame.

I ducked and dropped as he fired, with the powder-flash stinging the bare flesh of my hand, unconsciously thrown up before my face, in the blind instinct to protect the head. The woman sprang between us before I could recover myself. She must have caught at his arm and thrust it upward, for the second shot spit into the plaster of the ceiling, and brought down a little dribble of mortar. She must have caught at his arms then in desperation, for when I gained my feet he had one great blue-flannelled paw about her. I saw the hand with the black-barrelled revolver

rise above his head and come down on the girl's smooth upturned brow. And as I saw that cowardly blow my whole soul sickened and revolted.

How I got to him I never knew. All I felt grateful for was that I had no time to draw my own revolver; for I knew that in that first passion of hate and retaliation I should have sent a bullet through his head without hesitation. I remember that we met and clutched and swayed; that I bore him back to the wall, inch by inch; that we panted and writhed and contended for the black-barrelled thing which he struggled to retain; that I twisted and wrenched it away from him in the end; and that I got my fingers clamped about his flaccid neck. Then I brought the metal stock of the revolver down on the black mat of his head--brought it down insanely, time and again, until he went to the floor like a clouted rabbit, and lay there without moving, unconscious, repulsive in his disheveled and passive hideousness.

My one obsession then was escape with Elvira while I had the chance, when the way was still clear.

I lifted the girl from where she had fallen, and carried her through the iron-covered door to the foot of the ladder leading to the roof. Then I put her down gently, and quickly slipped the bolt in the door behind me. Then I groped for the ladder through the darkness, climbed to the transom and thrust to one side the door that covered it. The grey light of the late afternoon fell into that dark little well as I did so.

Then I went back and knelt beside the girl, wondering where I could find water, torn at heart by the pitiful pallor of her face, foolishly asking myself why the drooping eyelids did not open. Then came a wayward sense of gratitude at the thought that I was forever delivering her from such things, that we were escaping together to the sanities and the realities of the open world. Devoutly and silently I thanked God that all such things were now over for all time.

Chapter XLVII—THE MENACE FROM ABOVE

As I knelt there, some unnamable sixth sense carried to the seat of consciousness its mysterious warning of new danger, of possible and impending disaster.

I had heard nothing; I had seen nothing. But that telepathic warning had come home to me, had flashed inward to my wondering mind, with the quickness of light. For in some intuitive and underground manner I knew, without looking up, without moving or turning that an ominous something was above me, that some unknown third person was peering quietly and deliberately down on me from the open roof-transom.

Something stronger than intuition also told me that this intruder was not a friend; for no friend, before such a tableau, would remain silent and inactive. Yet I waited there, without the betraying movement of a muscle for I knew that the silent something still bent above me, watching. I felt like a rat in a trap. I told myself that, being human, I was expected to show more intelligence than the rat in such a predicament. I had to plan out quickly what would be best to do, as suspense and terror stretched the seconds into illimitable lengths, like a wire-roller stretching hot metal. I might have bolted for the door and got through it in time.

But I had not myself alone to think of, and the door was already locked. I knew that, long before I could get under cover with Elvira, that silent and unknown something still above us could do what it had planned to do. I saw what this would be, as I heard the quick double click-click of a

raised trigger. The whole thing struck me as being tragically unfair. A spirit of blind protest burned through me. Then I thought of the rat again, and warned myself to wait and fight for my chance.

Slowly, inch by inch, as I stooped impassively over the unconscious woman, I let my right hand creep up to my coat pocket. My fingers reached the cloth flap; they sank slowly toward the waiting revolver; they touched the cold steel of it.

Even as they did so, the little room was convulsed with a deafening roar of sound. At the same moment, too, I felt a blow on one side of my chest. A sudden sharp sting of pain shot along my left side, a little under the armpit. The figure at the open transom had fired down and hit me. The bullet, tearing through my coat, had ricocheted on a rib, and had fairly knocked the breath out of my body with the sheer force of its impact.

I fell flat on my face along the floor, for I remembered the trick of the "dummy-chucker." I even let a shiver run through my limbs as I lay there motionless, waiting, scarcely daring to breathe. I counted off the seconds, aching with apprehension; wondering, with a sort of mental wince, just when the next more calculated shot would put an end to everything.

An eternity of silence seemed to drag by; yet no second shot came down. I could feel my shirt wet with the slow drip of blood. I was wide enough awake, nevertheless, and I could breathe without pain. So I knew that the bullet had done nothing more than glance on the bone. But I knew also that the figure above me was still waiting there, watching for the first sign of life. The cut of pain itself was like the sting of a whiplash to me. It reminded me how slim were my chances; it warned me that life itself depended on how I acted out my part during the ordeal that was still before me. It kept admonishing me to lie there, relaxed and inert, with my face flat against the dusty boards, counting each heart beat, wondering when the dreaded second shot would come. I realized, as I lay there, that my prostrate body was being played over by a pair of searching and doubtful eyes. I still waited, not daring to move. Then I scarcely breathed, for I knew from the sound that the intruder was coming down the iron ladder, step by step. But still I waited. I felt his foot, as it prodded against my side, insolently, brutally inquiring. He stood there, studying me for a moment or two. Then he stooped, as though to turn me over.

It was then that I twisted and rose and clinched with him. It was then that we seemed to lock together automatically, ferociously, involuntarily, like two wildcats. Before he could free himself to make use of his gun, I had the thick-fleshed thumb-joint of his hand between my teeth. My opponent, I saw, was Schmidlapp.

I knew that it was no time for half-measures. To hold out long was impossible. My fight would have to be brief and bitter. I was a wild man, a caldron of raging hate and savagery. Human pity was as far from me as from that she grizzly after a hard winter, of which Lefty Boyle had spoken. It maddened me to see the touch of his body polluting the helpless woman beside me. I fought him away from her, inch by inch, and as I fought the ghost of a chance seemed to come to my frenzied brain. This chance, and it was my only one, did not become a reality until I had worked and fought and rolled the man's face up against the very foot of the ladder leading to the roof. Then, as we panted and writhed about the dusty boards, I gave one sharp side-wrench of my body, and brought the bare blond head of my assailant square against the iron ladder-stanchion.

He wilted down without a sound, much as Mutashenko had done. The strangling fingers

slowly relaxed on my throat, the strength went out of the encircling arms, the great body subsided into momentary passiveness. I sat there weakly, fighting for breath, indifferent to everything in life; vaguely realizing the danger that still surrounded me, but quite unmoved by it. The others might come at any moment. But the thought of their coming caused me no passing qualm of fear. It was as though some fatigued operator in the central office of consciousness had fallen to drowsing at his lonely post. The warnings of ordinary intelligence went unrecorded. Even when I heard a sound above me I did not move. Overtaxed nerves refused to respond. But again I heard the sound, and this time it was accompanied by a hurried and anxious query.

"Are you hurt, sir?"

I looked up, but did not answer.

"Is it you, sir? I'm here to help, sir," called down the reassuring voice.

It was Davis, dependable and usually level-headed Davis, so wrought up that he had obliterated no less than two aspirates in as many minutes.

"Thank God!" I cried, pulling myself together.

"Then quick, sir!" Davis was calling down to me. "For there's trouble outside, sir!"

"Trouble with what?" I inquired languidly.

"They haven't held Sitnikov! And I'm afraid it means trouble, sir!"

Chapter XLVIII—THE SKYLINE RETREAT

"What kind of trouble's ahead?" I asked of Davis, as he lowered himself down the ladder and stared with puzzled eyes at the scene about him. I had already thrown off my coat, and was buckling Schmidlapp's wide leather belt about my waist, well up under the armpits, where it held a folded handkerchief tightly against the scratch on my rib.

"I can't be sure, sir," said Davis, giving me a hand. "But it's Sitnikov and his Inner Circle gang, I think."

The next moment I was stooping over Elvira; for she was half-conscious by this time, and moaning a little as she lay there, still dazed and helpless.

"Where's Lefty Boyle?" I asked hurriedly, as I loosened the collar of her blue serge coat.

"He's gone for Lieutenant Belton, sir, for as many men as he can get."

"Why isn't he *here*?" I demanded, as I gathered Elvira up in my arms.

"He told me he was helpless alone, sir. There was both Sitnikov and Schmidlapp. Schmidlapp has made a good job of it, he said, with men from the Inner Circle and ten floaters from the gas-house gang. They think there's good money in it for them; they mean to get their slice. They have a cordon around the block."

"What do I care for their cordon?"

"But they say you'll never get through the line alive, sir."

"Quick!" I called, as I turned to the ladder. "Get Schmidlapp's gun. And see if he carries any

extra cartridges."

I was at the top of the ladder with my relaxed and quietly moaning burden before I heard Davis speak again.

"He 'as a box of them, sir--thank God! And hose are some of his floaters, sir, coming up through the factory. I can 'ear them smashing the doors."

I stopped to listen over the open transom. I, too, could hear the sound of blows and what seemed to be the splintering of wood.

"Quick!" I called to Davis again, waiting to replace the transom door the moment he was through the opening.

"Is she badly hurt?" asked Davis, as we started across the tinned roof.

"The brute clubbed her," I explained. "She's stunned."

"If we could get to the street, sir," said Davis, steadying me over the coping-tiles to the next roof. "There'll be an ambulance there any time now!"

"An ambulance?" I queried.

"I telephoned for it from the saloon, sir, when I heard that first shot, before they cut the wires."

"What'd you do that for?"

"I thought it best to have it 'ere 'andylike."

"You meant it for me?"

"Oh, no, sir!" protested the dissimulating Davis.

"But I imagine some of this sweet-scented gang will travel in it before we do!" I cried drunkenly, as I staggered on.

"I 'ope so!" said Davis devoutly. Then he added, with a backward look over his shoulder: "If we could only get to that feed-stable roof, sir! Then we might work our way down to the side street!"

I turned my head to answer him; but to my surprise he caught me by the sleeve and swung me sharply about, under the shadow of three loose-bricked chimney-tops, stained with smoke and smelling of creosote. He ducked low as he did so, and jerked at me to do the same.

I heard the bark of a pistol and the plaintive whine of a bullet over our heads as we dipped behind that embrasure. The bark was repeated--twice, three times--and one bullet sent the mortar flying from the chimney-corner at my elbow.

"They're up through the roof!" cried Davis. "We should have guarded the transom-'ole, sir!"

I caught Schmidlapp's revolver from his hand, still holding the drooping figure of the girl over my left arm. Then I edged my way to the right end of the chimney-row.

The shots sounded again as I showed myself, a little fusillade of them this time. I could see men crouching back and drooping behind wall-ends and water-tanks and chimney-tops.

I tried to shoot deliberately, as I saw them swarming for cover ludicrously, like water-rats skulking from object to object. But my nerves were unsteady, and my arm was tired and shaking. When I had emptied the revolver, I thrust it back into Davis' hand.

"Load it!" I cried, catching my own gun from its pocket; for already I saw a skulking form in a corduroy cap advancing across the nearest roof. I caught him half-way, in the open. It took all six shots to bring him down with a broken ankle. And again I called to Davis to hand me the other revolver, for the fever of fight was raging hotly in my blood by this time. I saw the man in the corduroy cap crawling back to cover on his hands and knees.

Then came a shower of bullets, pinging and whistling about us, as the wounded man was dragged back behind a water-tank. The shots, I could see, were coming from an ever-wider and wider area. Our position was getting precarious.

"Davis," I said sharply, "take this girl and carry her on to where the roof drops below that blind wall. There's a piece of fire-escape ladder against the coping. Let yourself down by it. I'll stay here and cover your retreat."

"Yes, sir," said Davis.

"Then you can wait for me behind that nearest wall-top. I'll drop back and join you when the chance comes. We'll have a clear wall-end to face, then; it'll be easy to hold them back, or pick them off as they try to drop over."

"Very well, sir," said Davis, taking my burden from me.

"Keep low," I warned him, "and go quick. Quick, while I'm showing myself."

I stepped out with both revolvers in my hands. The result was what I expected. I could hear the flicker of shots from the different parapets, the spatter of bullets against roof and wall and chimney. I could even see a steady gush of water from the lower end of a water-tank, where one of my shots, going wide, had pierced the pine. The fact that impressed me most was the quietness of the whole thing. There was no shouting and calling, no noise and tumult; nothing but the sharp report of pistols, the quiet whine of bullets, and from somewhere farther along the water-front the shrill shouts of children at play on one of the recreation-piers.

I waited until I knew that Davis and his burden were safely over the parapet. Then I began to fall back, as best I could. I seemed to become almost unconcerned, as the running fight kept up--from barrier to barrier, from lonely housetop to housetop. It reminded me a little of shooting big-horn in the Rockies; it was almost as wearying, almost as foolish.

Then, for some reason which I could not understand, the game came to a stop. The swarming figures seemed to fade away. Even before we got to the roof of the feed-stable, where Davis reported that we might make our descent to the street, the firing pattered out and ceased. I thought at first that I had won--that I had driven them back, discouraged, beaten.

"They've dropped off, sir," said Davis. "They're drawing away and going to the street. They'll try to cut us off and hold us there, sir."

"But we'll get through them--we've got to get through!" I cried.

"It will be hard, sir, if Lieutenant Belton isn't there with the men."

I took Elvira from his arms, and crossed the tarred roof to where a transom stood open. I was just dropping down through this transom, when Davis stopped me.

"Listen, sir," he said. "It's a bell, the bell of the ambulance."

"There's one man there who'll need it," I told him.

"I was hoping it was the police," said Davis, a little dispiritedly.

Chapter XLIX—LIFE AT LAST

Never before had I known Davis to shirk an unsavoury task. But things no longer surprised me; a sense of unreality had crept over the world about me. I seemed to be a ghost acting and moving in a land of ghosts.

"Hadn't we better hold back, sir, until they come?" I could hear Davis saying close beside me; but his voice sounded as though it reached my ears through a wall.

"Hold back!" I cried. "With those rats swarming thicker and thicker down there--with them gathering every thug and highbinder on the East Side? No! *We've got to fight our way through, now, while we can!*"

"I'm afraid it will be 'ard to do, sir," demurred Davis.

I swung about on him, a little impatiently, a little angrily. Then, for the first time, I saw a slow trickle of blood from his limp arm. His coat-sleeve was stained with it. A streak of tell-tale red ran down across the back of his hand.

"You've been hit!" I said.

"It's only a scratch, sir," he said, a little apologetically.

"But where?"

"A spent bullet, in the forearm, sir. It caromed off a chimney-tile."

I noticed with relief, that it was his left arm. I gave him my revolver, fully loaded, and turned back to the transom.

"We can still fight for it," I said reassuringly, for he was looking a little sick and white. "We may be able to get through to an Avenue D car--out of that gang-fighting slum. Or we may get to a telephone somewhere. Even a fire-alarm box would help us out. Or we may be able to get in between good solid brick walls and still hold them off."

"I'm a bit uneasy about bombs, sir," said Davis. "Mr. Boyle said *that* would be the thing to expect from a couple of soup-makers like Schmidlapp and Sitnikov."

"That's a risk we've got to face," I told him. We were already down through the roof of the feed-stable, picking our way over a criss-crossing descent of cleated planks. Parts of this descent were covered with tattered sections of worn-out rubber hose, convincing me that it was an inclined runway for horses. I had to pick my way carefully, for the light was bad. My strength, too, was not what it had been. Ammoniacal stable-odours smote on my nostrils. I could hear the stamping of horses in their stalls. But nothing stopped us; nobody appeared to interfere with us, or to challenge our descent.

Then the body that lay against my shoulder moved a little.

"What is it?" came from the lips that were so close to my face, in a weak and faltering voice.

"It's all right," I assured her. "We're going home."

"Home?" she asked dazedly, with an effort to lift her head.

"Yes, yes; it will be all right," I tried to tell her, in as steady a voice as I could command.

But her wide eyes saw the black-barrelled revolver in my hand, and the blood on my clothes, and the slow drip from Davis' left hand. I could feel her arm tighten a little about my neck convulsively. I knew that she was sobbing on my shoulder.

The sound of that sobbing reminded me of what I had to fight for. In some way it gave me new strength, as wine might have done.

And still we made our way downward, foot by foot, floor by floor.

Davis, who had dropped behind, came running toward me again.

"We must 'urry, sir," he called warningly. "I'm afraid it's Mutashenko, or Schmidlapp, coming by the roof with the men!"

"Quick, then!" I said, tearing open a sagging wooden door, and finding myself in a gloomy and foul-aired chamber, crowded with an array of carts and wagons and mud-laden trucks. Another door led in turn to a cleated wooden runway; and this, in turn, led to what was surely the ground floor of the stable.

"There ought to be a policeman," I gasped. "There ought to be help!" I hated to give in, but I was beginning to feel that I wasn't good for much more.

"Mr. Boyle said as how the officer on this beat's a welcher, sir, and wasn't to be depended on. They had it 'ot and 'eavy, sir, before I came up."

We were threading our way through two irregular rows of delivery-wagons and black-bodied hacks. Then I staggered on through a dimly lighted and odoriferous harness-room, and, turning to the left, swung open the door that faced me.

Then I came to a full stop, for there in front of me I saw the blessed light of open day. There before me lay the wide doorway of the open-fronted stable. Blocked out against this stood a line of human heads, in silhouette; and even as I looked I saw these heads part like stubble before a farmer's mould-board, and the black body of a hospital ambulance sweep authoritatively about in a short half-circle, under the stable's wide doorway. I saw a huge coatless man, with a neck-yoke in his hand, flailing and crowding and fighting back the angry line of heads. I heard the crash of glass as a stone went through a window, and the derisive shouts and catcalls of the street crowd as an empty taxi was overturned, with a second crash, against the broken stones that marked the curb.

Then I forgot the street crowd. For I saw the unconcerned and calm-faced ambulance-driver back his vehicle about, as though making ready to turn westward again on Fifth Street. And as I saw that wide-mouthed black body backed in under the door of the feed-stable, a new thought came to me, and with it came a new hope.

I called to the white-coated and nonchalant surgeon with all my strength. He swung his head about, without letting go of his strap-loop.

Then hurriedly I whispered to Davis to fall back and stand guard at the door of the harness-room. My one fear was that Schmidlapp or Mutashenko might yet overtake us.

The ambulance surgeon swung slowly down from his seat, and came striding back through the half-light.

"What's up here?" he asked peremptorily. "Where is this row, anyway?"

"The roof," I told him, as he stood back to survey me and my burden. "There are two on the roof."

"Are you hurt?" he demanded, not moving.

"No, not much. We're all right. But get your driver and go to the roof, quick."

He would be safe enough, I knew, safer even than a uniformed police-officer, as safe as a Red-Cross on a battlefield.

"What's this blood?" he still demanded.

"It's nothing."

"Let's see if it's nothing."

"It's not *us*," I all but howled at him. "It's the men on the roof."

"Is that woman hurt?" he persisted. It maddened me to think of the precious moments we were losing.

"Yes, she's hurt, but I can attend to her. Only leave me something to stop blood. Your coat, quick!"

"My what!" he exclaimed, struggling to draw back from my hand, which already clutched and held his collar.

"Your coat!" I cried, lying like a conjurer, as that inspired idea came to me. "I'll tend to her! You get to the roof, for God's sake, or it'll be too late!"

He wriggled protestingly out of the immaculate white garment all the while eyeing me as though I were a madman. Then he ran back to the ambulance-seat for his bag.

I could hear him calling sharply to the driver as he caught up the bag and turned and bolted through the harness-room. The driver swung nonchalantly out over the cramped wheel, clambered to the ground and followed the surgeon.

I shouted to Davis as they passed. I noticed, as I turned, that a pair of looped up traces hanging from a harness-hook had brushed the driver's peak cap from his head. He did not stop to recover it.

I sprang for it and caught it up. Then I tossed my own hat into an empty stall, flung on the white duck coat, and staggered forward with my burden to where the empty ambulance still blocked the doorway, like a pine log locking and barring a flume-head. And on the other side of that ambulance, I knew, were my enemies, still waiting.

"Help me, Davis, quick!" I cried, with a new tingle of energy through all my tired body.

"How, sir?" he asked, a little weak and bewildered.

"Into that ambulance," I told him. "For I'm going to drive through that mob."

He could use but one arm as I passed the girl up to him. But it took only a moment to let her sink gently down on the waiting grey blanket.

"What is it?" she asked, as her widening eyes caught sight of me on the ambulance-step.

"It's a fighting-chance," I told her, quietly yet exultantly.

"It's what?" she asked, still dazed.

"It's escape--it's life!" I called to her, in a reassuring whisper, as I circled about to the front of the ambulance.

"What must I do, sir?" asked Davis, while I was swinging up into the driving-seat. For the first time I caught a clear sight of the scattered street-mob before me. That mob, I knew, was stippled with armed and waiting enemies, ominous in their sullen expectancy.

"Keep down," I warned Davis, as I caught up the reins. "Bend in over your patient, out of sight. But be ready for anything if we're stopped--for anything, Davis, while we've got a bullet left!"

I found that day, that it is not always alcohol that intoxicates a man. For the next moment the well-trained horse had responded to the reins, my toe was feverishly working the foot-trip that operated the ambulance-gong, and we swayed and swung out under the door, into the very heart of that sinister and waiting mob.

I caught up the whip and charged into their very midst, the gong clanging and throbbing as we went. And as we advanced on them I beheld the enactment of one of those apparent miracles of modern life which go to demonstrate that men, however emancipated, often remain subconsciously and unwittingly subservient to constituted authority. I witnessed the all but unbelievable power of established tradition, the mysterious operation of habit that has merged into instinct.

For as my horse plunged into the midst of those waiting thugs and high-binders and gang-floaters, the line of faces, evil and expectant, sullen and watchful, broke to right and left like sea-waves before a ship's cutwater. On either side of me the crowd fell away, without hesitation, without thought, as though the clanging of the gong were a thousand invisible hands beating them back.

The waiting crowd parted and still parted as I pressed forward through it. There was no violence, no thought of interference, no sign of resistance. A dozen obsessed Bolsheviks, who would have shot me where I sat, stepped impassively back, or called to their comrades to make way for me. A dozen "drum-snuffers" and "white-liners," who would have sent a bullet into my head from under cover of that street-jam of a slum's riff-raff as cheerfully as they would have dropped a stolen dollar into their pockets, crowded quietly back to make room for my wheels. All their suspicion subsided before that peremptory-noted vehicle which their streets had so often heard, and their crowded corners had so well learned to respect.

I was Mercy winging to the relief of wounded Life. I was Law and Duty and Pity, endowed with a Mercury-like speed. I was Authority touched with mystery, with the mystery of reticent white walls and white-figured magicians and white-covered beds, and the occasional white wonder of Death himself. I was, for the passing moment, master of the situation.

I could even see a hurrying blue-coat, at the corner of Avenue D, run to the corner and wave all traffic aside. Cars were halted, drays were side-tracked, delivery-wagons were warped in toward the curb--all to let a drunken and dizzy-headed man and the woman he loved pass free and unhindered through that sinister crowd of enemies.

But it could not last long. I knew that the unwarranted theft of that ambulance would be discovered at any moment now, that the surgeon or his driver would get to a 'phone, and that a

general alarm would go tingling through all the thousand-wired nervous system of an awakened city. No, I decided; it could not last for long. Yet, even as this disturbing thought registered itself, a way continued to cleave open for us as we swept out across the car rails of Avenue C. A channel of escape kept defining itself, as though by magic, before the mere clangour and rattle of our gong. I passed three patrolmen in uniform, unchallenged, as they made their way eastward on the double-quick. On we raced, without a stop, without question or delay, without a spoken word.

I heard suddenly what seemed to be an echo of my own gong-rattle, and looked back in time to see a second ambulance swing about into Fifth Street. I had no time to study it, no time to verify any hurried first impression; but I knew that it had come from the north. This meant that word had already gone out, that the theft and flight was already known, that we might be intercepted now at any moment.

Yet as we swung westward I felt like a choked and half-drowned man who was climbing up to dry land. I felt like a flounderer through stagnant morasses slowly but surely making his way to more solid footing. I welcomed the cleaner streets, the less polluted air, the more orderly house-fronts, the casual and more methodic rows of traffic on either side of us, the sense of law and right which in some way seemed to creep over things as we left that ragged East River waterfront farther and farther behind us. I felt like a swimmer desperately splashing and battling his way out of a shark-infested road-stead.

Again I heard an echoing and answering throb of sound, and peered forward to see another ambulance bearing down on us. It came up with us and passed, with a throb of motor cylinders. I could see the gold-braided cap of the driver as he swept by, and his brief glance of wonder and doubt at my face. But all I knew was a slowly mounting sense of weariness, shot through with the recurrent question: "Are we free yet--are we free?"

Then, almost as though in reply to that question, I heard Davis calling to me, as we still swept westward.

"They're after us, sir!" he warned me. Then I noticed, to my dismay, that the pace was beginning to tell on my horse. He could no longer respond to my urgings. Even as I pondered who our pursuers might be, I heard the clattering crescendo of galloping horses behind me. They were up with us, abreast of us, before I could reach Fifth Avenue.

I saw then that they were two mounted policemen, two "canaries" of the traffic squad. And a great sense of relief welled up in me as my staring eyes fell on the blue uniforms braided with yellow facings, and the winged-wheel ensign on the outstretched arms. Even before I could let my fagged horse slow down, they closed adroitly in on me from the right and left, and, catching my taut reins just behind the bit-rings, brought the ambulance to a sudden stand still.

"You're under arrest!" the shorter and ruddier of the two officers was shouting in my face.

I only leaned back and grinned at him, wearily, gratefully, contentedly.

"And thank God for it!" I cried.

He brought his horse about with a sudden sidestep like a waltz-movement, and caught me by the collar.

"What's that?" he cried, as his great paw closed in its grip; and I could see by his face that he had written me down as a madman, as a dangerous lunatic who should have no leeway.

"I say thank God for it!" I repeated, happily and wearily. For I was very tired. It was all over and done with now. We were safe; we had escaped. There would be other tasks for other times, there was much work still to be done, and other ends to be achieved; but they seemed suddenly far off and trivial. All I knew was that Elvira was safe, that we were there under the very arm of the law itself. All I knew, as I reached back and caught her hand in mine, was that I had won in the end; that life, ordered and wholesome life, lay before us again.

And while we waited there, drawing a crowd about the three steaming and panting horses as mysteriously as a magnetized steel bar attracts iron filings, Lieutenant Belton and Borough Inspector McCain came up in a motor-car, scattering the sea of upturned faces like chaff as they pulsed up beside the ambulance. I can remember the dull red motor-car, for all the world like a boiled lobster on wheels; and Lieutenant Belton standing beside it, covering his pink and plump-cheeked face with one large and seemingly hilarious hand as he looked up at me, silent and unprotesting and supine, in the clutch of that traffic squad officer.

Chapter L—THE HAMMER OF GOD

I could never quite remember whether it was two hours or ten minutes later that the parleying and questioning and counterquestioning came to a stop.

But I know that, while a green motor-car was being conjured up from somewhere in the neighbourhood of Tompkins Square, the ever-thoughtful Davis, bad arm and all, slipped aside to a telephone and had my limousine brought scurrying down from the garage. I also remember Lieutenant Belton, after installing the reluctant Davis in the motor-car, flailing and pushing back the curious crowd, and at the same time advising me over his shoulder to get off home while I had the chance. I can recall the thick-shouldered and fatherly figure of Inspector McCain lifting Elvira up through the limousine door. I remember stumbling as I was thrust in through the same narrow door, and being caught as I lurched forward--being celestially clung to and supported by a pair of waiting arms, which were made for clinging, as a bird's wings are made for flight.

Then somebody handed in a flask and told me in a guttural and rumbling voice that I'd better give a nip to the lady as well. I remember the pink and puzzled and still somewhat amused face of Lieutenant Belton, as he slammed the door and told us to be off. And I knew as his uncomprehending eyes rested on my face for one questioning moment that from that day forward there would always be a gulf between us--there would always be a dead-line beyond which his thick-set and full-blooded sympathies could never wander. To him I would always be the whimsical and erratic idler along the shallows of life. I would never seem to him anything but "the amateur gum-shoe," the calamity-chaser who had blundered and waded too far out from his native shore-line.

He knew nothing of that newer light which was to illumine, or of that newer purpose which was to unify, my days. He knew nothing of the awakening which had come to my idle and stagnating existence. He knew nothing of the angel who had stooped and stirred the pool.

I turned to that angel herself, to hear her still pitifully and brokenly asking if she ought not to go back to Mutashenko. I could feel the quiet sob that shook her body as I told her that it was too late, as she still questioned if there were not time to do something to help them--if we were not cowardly to be running away.

I could see the tears welling through her eyelashes--tears of utter weariness, of self-reproach that was abysmal because it was without foundation, of overtaxed nerves only laggingly adjusting themselves to the security and quietness in which at last she found herself.

I unscrewed the thimble-cap of the flask and filled it.

She sipped at the liquor with uncertain lips, spasmodically, like a bird drinking at a fountain. She kept taking microscopically small draughts of it as I commanded--reluctantly, with her eyes always on mine, in mute and child-like protest.

Then I took the little cup from her and filled it and drank twice. Her eyes were still on my face as I did so; and I could see in them the commiseration, the soft pity, the feeling even stronger than pity itself, as I sat back against the rocking car-seat and felt the jaded hoofs of life strike up into action under the lash of the fiery liquor.

Her hand was fluttering about my shoulder like a butterfly against a trellis, as she watched me.

"Are you hurt?" she implored. "Are you badly hurt?"

Her voice was so low, so tear-muffled and mournful, that it seemed almost like a pigeon's cooing.

I took the restless hand prisoner in mine, and clung to it, with an ache of happiness in my very bones. I no longer resented the past. I no longer revolted against what I had been through. Each blow had in the end served to bring us together. The Hammer of God, the true hammer of God, had welded our lives into one.

"We're going home!" I told her, and in that word *home* there seemed to glow all the warmth and colour and peace that ever burned in the hearts of sea-worn and travel-wearied exiles.

"*You* are going home," she murmured desolately, like a prisoner refusing freedom when the whole blue dome of heaven stood inviting her to it. She seemed to be touched into sudden pathos by that great iron chain of duty which still weighed so incongruously on her. "I must still go back--to them!"

"To them!" I cried, a little drunkenly, I think; for I could hear the brandy beginning to sing in my ears like bottled bees. "You'll never go back to them."

"I must!" she persisted, though the wavering breath that fell from her lips--the breath that was neither a sigh nor a sob--seemed to leave the edge of her decision swathed in uncertainty, like a knife-blade wrapped in silk.

"You went back once, and you know--you can see what came of it!"

"They need me," she said, in her whisper of pitiful and persistent abnegation.

"And *I* need you," I told her, more humbly, more quietly, as I saw that afterglow of unhappiness which still burned in her eyes. "There's nothing you can do for them now. From this day forward they're beyond our help, for good or bad. The Inner Circle and Mutashenko and Schmidlapp have passed out of our hands now, all of them. They belong to the police!"

"To the past," she cried, a little bitterly. "To my past!"

"Yes; they belong to your past, to our past; to that poor, tangled, blind old past that is over and done with; the past you coffined and buried with your own hands when you said five blessed words to me, back in that room where the canary was singing in a cage!"

"No--no!" she was still protesting, with almost a sob. "That past is never dead--we can never bury it!"

"It will bury itself," I told her, "under all these new tasks we have before us. For there's so much, so much to be done! There are so many things that we must do together!"

"*We* must do?" she echoed, as though still uncertain of everything about her.

"Yes; we two, together. I'd be worse than helpless without you. And there's so much hunger and want and ignorance for us to fight against!"

I still held her hand in mine, and she was now no longer sobbing. And the same constriction of the throat that had overtaken me in Mutashenko's room returned to me, and for a minute or two made it impossible for me to speak. Never again, I knew, could I idle and eat my way, like a buffalo-moth, through the fabric of some outer world's labour. Never again would there be that anesthesia of indifference which had once translated life's underworld into a sort of shadowy ghostland through which only our slumming-cars hurried like foxhounds through a cemetery.

Yes; that had been the trouble, from the first. I had seen too much of the world through window-glass. I had looked out on my own kind from too many softened and padded seats. But now it would all be changed. There would be no hair-shirt and self-flagellation, no gallery play of parlour socialism, no flinging of fortunes to the four winds of hysteria.

I still valued wealth and the power that went with it too much to abjure lightly its agencies. And I still hungered, a little childishly and waywardly, to show the woman I had learned to love how this thing which was evil only in excess could be made to minister to happiness. I could never lead her round-eyed and wondering into the ways of luxury, like street-children into a nickelodeon.

She had drunk too deeply of the bitter wells of life ever to thrill at the mere mimicry of such things--I could never entrance her as I used to entrance Nannie Washburn's two little nieces, when I led them tingling and gasping into the wonders of afternoon vaudeville.

The dark and brooding eyes, studying my face as I sat there, could never be long veiled or blinded by the subtly organized narcotics of that city, as I knew it, which threw a nebula of illusion about the ways of despair, and converted even art into a lethal chamber for its dying and stifling souls.

She had seen too far into life ever to be satisfied with its husks. Yet she had known discord and unrest and unhappiness for too long. Now peace would be doubly sweet to her. And the thought that I might bring quietness to her after turmoil, that I might throw a shelter about her troubled soul after its dark and lonely battles, sent a great sense of gratitude welling up into my heart. The very carriage in which we sat, as it sped and rocked and purred so softly homeward, shuttling its course through the thousand-wheeled tumult of the streets, became a symbol of that peace and quietness which I hoped some day to bring to her. Like wealth it could await and serve and shelter us, but in itself it could not bring us happiness.

More and more that complex mechanism of hurrying steel and copper, of wood and glass, became an emblem of what thought and care and labour might some day weave about her. In that pliant and docile motor seemed to centre and flower all the cunning of civilization, all the patience and toil of the unknown and nameless men whose blood was forged into its shafts and bars, whose breath of life had been lost in the making of its gases. It carried us through space

as a bird might fly, yet it circumscribed us with peace. It wafted us about the world without struggle: for the struggle had been that of hearts and brains that were unknown to us.

And all this I tried to tell the woman at my side. She must have understood me in some way, for slowly I saw one of her rare smiles creep into her face.

It was a wistful smile, pale and wintry. It fluttered about her lips for a moment or two, like a bird afraid to alight.

"Why will you do all this?" she asked me, as I went babbling on, foolishly enough, I suppose.

"For you!" was my answer. I was still holding her hand in mine. And as I did so I felt like a Crusader grasping his standard.

"For me?" she echoed with a fluttering little sigh. Her face, almost white against the green broadcloth of the limousine upholstery, was like the face of a saint. Yet above the saint I saw the woman emerge, tangible and material, like sunlight after starlight.

"Do you love me?" she pleaded, a little hungrily, with the old look of wearied abstraction gone from her face. "Do you?"

"I love you," I told her, at that human and endearing cry of her woman's heart, swaying towards her where she seemed more a soft and heavenly perfume of twilight roses than a thing of flesh and blood.

"I love you," I repeated, as the indrawn sigh of her parted lips seemed to make my emotion godlike and infinite. "Oh, I love you more than life itself!" I cried. And as our eyes met she wavered and melted and sank into my arms.

As she lay there I seemed to hear the looms of destiny weaving our two relaxed and weary bodies together. Filaments, infinitely strange and slender, seemed to enmesh and web together our strangely divergent lives, as a nesting oriole weaves and binds together two drooping branch-ends for a home that is to be the home of Song!

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