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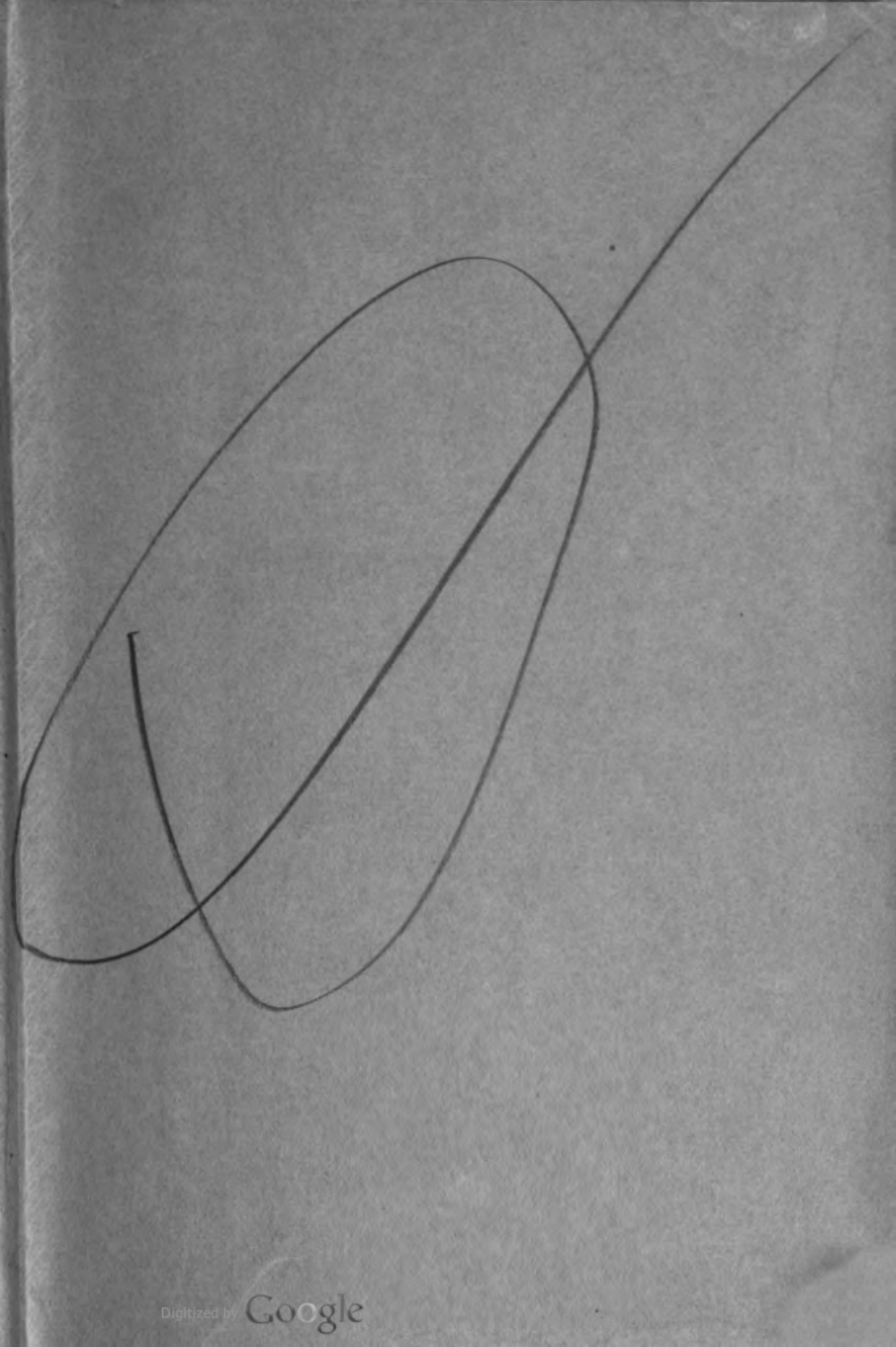
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THE GRAY MASK

BY

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"THE ABANDONED ROOM"

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FRONTISPIECE BY

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GARDEN CITY NEW YORK

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THE GRAY MASK

CHAPTER I

GARTH IS SHOWN A GRAY MASK

GARTH, in response to the unforeseen summons, hurried along the hallway and opened the inspector's door. As he faced the rugged figure behind the desk, and gazed into those eyes whose somnolence concealed a perpetual vigil, his heart quickened.

He had been assigned to the detective bureau less than six months. That brief period, however, had revealed a thousand eccentricities of his chief. The pudgy hand beating a tattoo on the table desk, the lips working at each other thirstily, the doubt that slipped from behind the veil of the sleepy eyes, were all like largely printed letters to Garth — letters that spelled delicate work for him, possibly an exceptional danger.

"Where were you going, Garth?"

"Home. That is —"

Garth hesitated and cleared his throat.

"First — I thought I might drop in on Nora for a minute."

With a quick gesture the inspector brushed the

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mention of his daughter aside. Abruptly he verified Garth's hazard.

"How much do you love your life?"

The inspector's voice possessed the growling quality of an animal. A warning rather than an aggressive roar, it issued from a throat remotely surviving behind great masses of flesh. Garth had rarely heard it raised, nor, for that matter, had it ever deceived him as to the other's amiability and gentleness of soul. It s present tone of apologetic regret startled him.

"On the whole I value my life rather highly just now," he answered, trying to smile.

"Then turn this down and nothing said," the inspector went on. "It's volunteer's work. No gilt-edged prophecies. It's touch and go whether whoever tackles it eats bacon and eggs to-morrow morning."

"What's the job?" Garth asked.

The inspector glanced up.

"You've heard of that fellow without a face?"

Garth stared until he thought he understood.

"One of those Bellevue cases? Awful burns?"

The heavy head shook impatiently.

"No. This fellow Simmons in Chicago — several years ago now — experimenting with some new explosive in a laboratory. He got his arm up in time to save his eyes."

"Seems to me I remember," Garth began.

"Worn a gray mask ever since," the inspector said.

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He drew a telegram from a pile of papers at his elbow, spread it on the writing-pad, and tapped it with his thick forefinger. Garth wondered what was coming. A feeling of uneasiness compelled him to lower his eyes before the other's steady gaze. There was something uncanny about this thought of a mask, worn always to hide a horror.

The inspector's tapping quickened to an expression of anger. His voice exposed a cherished resentment.

"No doubt about your having heard of our friend Hennion?"

Garth started forward, resting his closed fists on the desk top. His face was excited, unbelieving.

"Mean to say there's a chance —"

The inspector ceased his tapping. He looked up slyly.

"A real one at last. You know what that means. It's the job. Take it or leave it. I won't ask you to go where I mightn't have cared to go myself at your age."

Garth thought rapidly. His chief had been right. The man who tried to trip Hennion needn't worry about to-morrow's breakfast until his eyes greeted the sun in the east.

He, with the rest of the bureau, could point to half a dozen men as vassals of this almost mythical figure. He, like the rest, had frequently diagnosed obscure crimes as the workmanship of the Hennion group. But he knew also that nothing had ever been proved against this organization of criminals,

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which was unique, because, in addition to prosaic brutality, it appeared to be informed by brains of a brilliant and inscrutable character.

"How much of a chance?" Garth asked.

All the drowsiness left the inspector's eyes.

"Maybe to sit in with them to-night. I've never had a ghost of a show with a stool before, and this is the night of all nights. One of these crooks has been boasting. He said — and I have it straight —'To-night we play our ace.' Get that, Garth! What must an ace mean to that lot, eh? And the president's here, but he'll be well looked after. Still there are lots of big men in this town whose sudden death would make a noise more like a home-run than a funeral. Or, if it's burglary, play it to scale. These fellows would unlock the gates of Hades while Satan slept in the vestibule. I've been saying to myself all day I've got to find out what that ace is and stack the cards, and at the same time I've been asking myself what the devil I was going to do about it. But the luck's changed."

Garth breathed hard.

"How do you expect to throw sand in the eyes of that outfit?"

"Give me," the inspector answered slowly, his rumble approximating a whisper, "someone with no nerves to speak of and a build like this faceless man Simmons."

He looked up. His eyes were very sleepy again.

"You have that build, Garth. All you need is a plain, dark brown suit."

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He raised the telegram.

"This is Simmons' description as he left Chicago last evening. He expects to arrive on the Western express to night. He's looking for someone to meet him and take him to the headquarters of the Hennion gang."

Garth's face lightened.

"Has he a record?"

"A suspect, chiefly because he's tied up with that anarchist crowd out there — an analyst of explosives, a chemist, cursed by this hideous accident — dangerous as giant powder itself! That's why his mail's been watched, how they got onto this move. But they've no details for us. Maybe Simmons himself doesn't know what he's up against."

With a secretive air he opened a drawer and lifted out a tightly-woven gray cloth. It was pierced by two holes above and a long, narrow opening below. From its edges four elastic straps dangled.

"I had it made," he said, holding it out tentatively, "so that, perhaps, you might find out instead of Simmons."

Garth took the cloth and fitted it over his face. It left visible a small scar on his neck. The inspector pointed at this with a pleased, wondering smile.

"That scar peeping will fetch them. Put on a brown suit and you'll pass."

"Where," Garth asked, "does Simmons change cars?"

"I'll have the express stopped at the end of

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the bridge above Garrison. Not much chance of spies there. A couple of my men will take him off and keep him out of mischief while you get on. Understand? You'll go up on the West Shore and ferry over from West Point. You're on?"

"Sure. You'd jump at the chance yourself, sir."

He removed the mask. The inspector handed him a piece of frayed white paper.

"Did you notice me fingering this just now?" he asked anxiously.

Garth shook his head.

"Then take it, and, when the time comes, play with it that way yourself. Scratch your instructions on it with a match, a toothpick, anything handy. It will stay white, but I can make whatever you put on it as visible as headlines in a war extra. You'll reach town after ten. I'll hold back instructions until eleven in case these fellows have any spies in the department. But after that you can drop it near a uniformed policeman with a fair chance of its reaching me."

"You'll try to trail us, too?" Garth asked.

The inspector grinned sheepishly.

"Of course I'll try. I'll probably have to let it go at that."

"Yes — slippery," Garth answered.

Now that his offer was accepted, and his plan understood, the inspector gave way to a disquieting nervousness. He stood up and stepped around the desk, putting his hand on Garth's shoulder.

"Watch out for yourself," he faltered. "I

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don't want another Kridel case on my conscience."

The name dampened Garth's enthusiasm. He had never known Joe Kridel who, a year ago, had been the ascending star of the bureau. But the manner of the young man's death was depressingly familiar to him — found stabbed through the heart in a private house whose dwellers had heard no alarm. The key to that puzzle had never been discovered. Even the inspector had harbored the nature of Kridel's assignment that night of his murder.

"I hate," the inspector continued, that note of regret in his voice again, "to give a man I like such an ugly risk."

This reached Garth as definite encouragement to words which he had restrained for some time with difficulty. To loose them, now, however, would be, in a way, unfair to his chief; would, in every sense, form no fitting prelude to his formidable and dangerous task. He contented himself, therefore, with an unsatisfactory compromise.

"If I've time I may drop in for a chat with Nora after all."

"But you won't alarm her with this?"

"Certainly not."

The inspector was very friendly.

"You know I wouldn't be surprised if Nora had taken kind of a fancy for you herself."

Garth's face reddened. He turned away.

The inspector sighed.

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"Oh, well. There's plenty of time to think of that when you bring yourself back — alive."

Before making his arrangements Garth called at the inspector's flat. This was, in fact, a preparation. Without seeing Nora he felt he would not be armed to enter these unfair lists with death.

He found her by the window in the sitting room. She looked, he thought, more Latin than usual, although the black clothes she habitually wore accentuated her dark hair and flashing eyes, the olive complexion and regular features she had inherited from her Italian mother.

She smiled up at Garth, and, as always in face of that smile, he recalled the unexplored neutral ground where their minds had never really met. This impression had unquestionably retarded the development of their relations. It had until now held their emotions in the leash of friendship. Garth had no idea of snapping that cord at his entrance, but Nora's proximity and the suddenness of an unexpected gesture distilled logic and fairness for the moment's irresistible intoxication.

Their hands, reaching for the book she had dropped, met. The quick contact was galvanic to Garth. An unconquerable impulse possessed him. If he was to risk death that night it was folly to shirk life to-day. So his hand closed over hers while he sought for words.

After a moment he became aware of the impassivity of her fingers within his violent grasp.

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He saw grave trouble and an unanswerable doubt extinguish the excitement in her eyes. A premonition reached him. He fought against it desperately. His voice swayed a little.

"Don't look at me like that, Nora. You're going to marry me."

She shook her head. All at once there were tears in her eyes. Her hand lightly brushed her black skirt.

"Jim, you've often asked me why I wear these dark clothes. Now you make me tell you. I can trust you? Because no one knows unless my father guesses."

He nodded. She spoke with an effort.

"For the man I was going to marry, Jim. You see he — he died."

Garth arose and turned to the window. He leaned there, staring at the busy street, listening to its jarring discords. Among the children at play one boy, unkempt and filthy, stood braced against a railing, crying at the top of his lungs. In his abandonment to disappointment Garth accepted the picture as typical of his life — a crying out for the unattainable, a surrender to despair. The night's work lost its terror. Its issue became a matter of callous indifference.

Then her hand was on his arm, drawing him around so that he saw her face, which had lost its colour, and the growing doubt in her eyes.

"Try to understand, Jim. I think I scarcely do myself. I only know it hurts to see you unhappy.

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Six months ago when you first came I never dreamed a man could make even that much difference to me again."

Without warning the colour rushed back to her face. She clenched her hands. The determination in her tone was overwhelming.

"Is that inconstancy to him? Don't think that. I'm not inconstant. I wouldn't be that."

Garth waved his hand helplessly.

"What difference — Never mind, Nora. It's finished."

"But you — It's so unfair. And I want you for my friend."

She sat down, hiding her face.

"Later — I don't know. How can I tell? How can anybody?"

Garth saw her shoulders commence to shake. This emotion fired a tiny hope, yet it angered him that she should suffer, too.

"Stop that," he said roughly. "It isn't worth it to you. I'm sorry I spoke. I ought to have had better sense, but I'm going out of town to-day on a job —"

He paused. He turned back to the window.

"That's why I spoke, because — because I may be away a very long time."

She controlled herself.

"How long, Jim?"

"God knows."

"Where? West?"

He shook his head.

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"Up the state. It's just as well now. I've got to go. I ought to be getting ready."

She arose. She spoke wistfully.

"Then good-by, Jim. And you'll try to understand? Maybe you'll come to see me just the same when you get back?"

He swallowed hard, forcing back his craving for abandonment, for revelation.

"When I get back," he said.

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CHAPTER II

IT OPENS NORA'S EYES

GARTH waited at the end of the bridge above Garrison. At eight o'clock it was dark, but the river, glass-like between the rugged hills, retained a pallid light. At a short distance two men smoked and chatted. They had withdrawn themselves in response to Garth's moodiness. He fancied they discussed him as one already dead.

A whistle shrieked. The hills rumbled. Flinging their cigars in the water, the men rejoined Garth. He slipped the mask from his pocket, and secreted his features behind its gray protection.

The train dashed across the bridge, sparks grinding from its wheels. When it stopped, panting sullenly, the two men sprang aboard.

Garth flattened himself against the side of the car and watched them reappear, leading a third who wore a grey mask above a plain brown suit. He heard a croaking, unnatural voice issue from behind the mask.

"Didn't look for you so soon, friends."

Excitement drove the melancholy from Garth's brain. The undertaking had begun reassuringly. Simmons had no suspicion that he was in the hands of the police. Garth noticed also as he entered the

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car that the passengers were not aware of the substitution. He resented the repugnance in the glances they turned on the mask. Simmons' attitude toward life became comprehensible. But, as the journey extended itself interminably, Garth grew restless. He realized he was in the position of a man entering a cavern without a light. He must feel his way step by step. He must walk blindly toward innumerable and fatal pitfalls.

At last the train paused for the change from locomotive to electric motor. Although he knew that normally no passengers would board it at this place, he gazed anxiously from the window. A man stood close to the track with the evident intention of entering the train. Garth saw him elude a brakeman, saw him grasp the railing and swing himself out of sight. A moment later the man walked into the car, stopped dead, and turned sharp, inquisitive eyes on the gray mask.

About the figure was a somber air, accentuated by a black felt hat, drawn low over the eyes. It let Garth see, however, a sharp and colorless face which conveyed an impression of uncommon forcefulness.

After a moment the slender man leaned over and spoke with a leer.

"You must be a star gambler, judging from your face."

He continued to stare as though expectant of an answer. Perhaps some countersign was demanded. If that was so the whole enterprise swayed in the

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balance. Garth concentrated his thoughts with difficulty. One word had strayed circuitously from the gang to him. He used it at random, trying to approximate the voice he had heard at the bridge.

"That depends on whether I hold the ace."

The slender man continued to stare. Garth's heart sank, but at last the other straightened with a nod.

"Suppose you take a little stroll with me."

Garth arose and followed him down the aisle. He didn't know whether to interpret that quick command as acceptance or condemnation. He might be going to the work for which he had been chosen, or — and he realized how likely that was — to an execution. Yet he had no alternative. He must follow the slender, sinister figure into dark places not knowing.

They paused on the platform. Garth thought it likely that one of the inspector's men was in the car, but of course the fellow would not confess himself by stepping to the vestibule at their heels. It would be enough for him to know that they were on board and that the train was not scheduled to stop before reaching the Grand Central Station.

Garth knew that, too. Therefore he could not understand why his conductor stooped and with an air of confidence opened the vestibule door and raised the trap. Garth started, for, as if the engineer were an accomplice and had received some subtle signal, the brakes commenced to grind while the train lost its speed rapidly.

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The slender man grasped Garth's arm, and, as the train stopped, leapt with him to the right of way and hurried him into the shadows at the foot of the embankment. Any men the inspector might have had on the train had been outwitted.

He saw ahead the red and green lights of an open draw-bridge. He understood now, and marvelled at the simplicity of the trick. Certainly it would not have occurred to the inspector to post his men at the Harlem River where express trains were seldom detained at night. Yet it had been only necessary to send some small boat to loiter in the draw at the proper moment to assure the security of the conspirators.

Immediately Garth lost all sense of direction. The other led a stealthy, circular course through a lumber yard, across a fence, around darkened buildings, and finally onto a small wharf. A craft was moored there — a barge, Garth thought at first. It lay in darkness except for its navigating lights, and, as Garth looked, even these were extinguished.

The slender man glided across the wharf, and, Garth at his heels, stepped to the deck. There he reached over the railing, dropping something from his hand. Garth heard three splashes at regular intervals. A blade of light flashed sharply athwart the darkness and became an open doorway, framing a troubled face.

Garth, shoved from behind, stumbled over the sill into the presence of five men who circled about him, like cats, wary and suspicious. He would

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know now. One word from his conductor would deliver him to the inevitable judgment of that circle.

But the slender man slipped in after him, closing the door.

"The cops are drunk with sleep," he said.

Garth breathed again. But into that moment's respite crept the thought of Nora, suddenly become unobtainable. Resolutely he fought his depression back. At a gesture from the slender man he sat on a bench against the wall.

He saw now that the apparent barge was a rough houseboat, unpainted, unfinished, with windows closed and heavily barred. The only furniture was this bench and another opposite with a deal table between. Fumes of gasoline and cylinder oil came through an open doorway forward and mixed repellently with an atmosphere already poisoned by tobacco. For all five smoked, not with enjoyment, Garth noticed — rather in an abandonment to nerves. It impressed him that these men, who unquestionably were the cleverest and most indomitable of the Hennion group, should expose this restlessness, this apparent fear, on the threshold of the night's work. His conductor, indeed, was the only one immune to the contagion of suspense.

Garth glanced at these others with a sharp personal curiosity. They varied amazingly from his anticipation. One, a sallow youth with untidy yellow hair and large-rimmed eye-glasses, might have been a student of the most devoted species. Another cunningly resembled a well-to-do business man,

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while a third had the clothing and the air of a tramp. The fourth, with his dapper tailoring and ferret-like face, was more familiar to the expert in crime.

These, however, Garth passed over quickly for the fifth, perhaps because, with the detective's extra sense, he foresaw there a special and unintelligible menace.

This man brought his huge, handsome figure forward and leaned heavily on the table. His close-cropped hair, dampened by the heat, curled about a bronzed forehead from beneath which inquisitorial and threatening eyes challenged.

The slender man, who clearly was the leader, crossed the room.

"Seeing ghosts, George?" he asked. "Or maybe you're anxious for a glimpse of what Simmons hasn't got any more. Why not show him the big event, Simmons?"

His laugh, scarcely audible, was like the wrath of a gigantic sneer.

Garth's hand crept to his pocket and closed over his revolver. George drew back.

"Look yourself, Slim, and it ought to be done."

The other swung on him angrily.

"Do you think I'm bringing him here without checking him up. He doesn't have to take his mask off to show you a scar. The lot of you look like sudden wealth for a nerve specialist. Sit down. We'll get to business."

He swung on Simmons.

"I know how you feel about that. Now, listen.

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All you know is that we wanted a scientific fellow who doesn't use his profession exclusively for the benefit of humanity. Also one without any nerves. I've always heard that of you."

Garth nodded, smiling a little to himself. Lack of nerves had been the inspector's chief requisite. Now the criminals demanded the same quality. He stood, as it were, between two deadly fires. He wondered if murder was on the boards. He recalled the slip of white paper in his pocket, questioning if he would be able to finger it, to scratch upon it those vital invisible directions before these sharp and overcurious eyes.

The slender man hurried on, glancing at his watch.

"We're waiting for one more. At first all you have to do is to keep close to George. We're going to crack a safe."

His voice colored apologetically.

"No jewelry or bags of gold. George falls for that cheap stuff now and then, but you needn't be ashamed of this job, Simmons. By the way, I don't have to ask you if you duck your lid every time the band blats 'Oh, say, can you see!'"

Garth shook his head.

"Say, Simmons," George broke in, "you talk yourself to death. That explosion must have hurt your voice something fierce."

Again Garth tried to approximate the croaking tone he had heard at the bridge.

"Talk's as cheap and easy as cracking safes."

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He risked it for its effect on the others. Moreover it was an antidote for his nervous strain to give that much rein to the antagonism he already experienced for the huge, dark fellow.

Secretive laughter greeted his daring. A gesture from the leader halted George's movement, almost instinctive, to resent the affront physically. Then three faint and regular splashes came from the water.

They all held their poses of the moment statuesquely until, at a nod from the leader, the intellectual-looking youth arose and moved towards the door.

During that moment of waiting Garth tried to fashion what he knew into a recognizable pattern, but the pieces were incomplete. He could only wonder why they had sent to Chicago for an anarchistic chemist to connive with this expert at a task as simple as cracking a safe.

The youth turned the lock and opened the door a little. It was pushed boisterously against him, and, beyond his amazed back, Garth had a glimpse of a gaudily colored skirt. The others had risen. The leader, grasping the youth's elbow, shoved him to one side, and Garth, his view unobstructed now, gazed incredulously at Nora's blazing, painted face.

His first impulse was to cry out and warn the girl back from this ambush into which she had unaccountably strayed. He gripped the edge of the table. He half arose. For a moment the room went black. All at once he realized that her presence at this unique rendezvous must be without the

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slightest ambiguity. Perhaps it was an ill-advised attempt to rescue him from the net. He waited tensely for some word. His heart sank. She couldn't recognize him behind the mask.

He wouldn't lie to himself any longer. Nora, whom he had always seen in black, wore a flashy dress. She had given the conspirators their own signal. She received from them a welcome of anxiety.

The room darkened again. He sat in a frozen silence. He saw and heard as from a vast distance.

"Whole force at your heels, Nora?" the leader asked gently.

Closing the door, she faced them breathlessly. Her eyes flashed, but fear lurked there, too.

"No," she said, "but it might be tramping on the dock without your guessing it. Listen, Slim."

She raised her clenched fists.

"There's a bull here. There's a cop with his hand at your throat."

"Nora! You're having a nightmare."

"Hold on," George said. "Nora ought to know."

"Yes," she gasped, "and it's straight."

Slim relaxed.

"From your father?"

She nodded.

"How in —"

"I don't know," she said, "but he was sure he'd have a stool with you to-night. He's tried so long I know he wasn't bragging. Slim! We can't trip

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up now. I've worked too hard. You've told me what a mess you made last time, when that cop, Kridel, was croaked. Where will we be if anything like that's pulled again?"

"Easy, Nora," Slim said. "Maybe we wouldn't be any worse off than we were then. Has anybody burned in the chair for that? Does anybody know who croaked Kridel? Well — the man who did it. Don't lose your nerve. The cops would have a fine time getting a witness in a murder case out of this crowd. And, if what you say is so, maybe the same thing will happen to-night, only in a more convenient spot."

"What are you going to do, Slim?" she asked. "Tie him up, but no more murder. I quit at that."

"Leave it to me," he muttered. "Show me the bull."

Garth received the words as a condemned man probably hears the voice of a judge who wears the black cap.

The girl glanced rapidly around. Then, advancing steadily to the table, she raised her hand and pointed at Garth.

He stared fascinated at the finger which, a few hours ago, he had held violently in the rush of his passion. He was aware of the flashing eyes which that afternoon had been wet with tears. But his brain was dull. He waited patiently for the exposure which now appeared unavoidable because of the woman he loved.

She spoke evenly.

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"Who could it be but this man that hides his face? There's no doubt about the rest of you. You only have to see, Slim, whether this fellow, Simmons, has got a face."

"He had the word," the leader answered, "and look at that scar. But you're right, Nora. If there's a bull here he's behind that mask."

"Then make him take it off," she said.

Garth raised his hands. His croaking voice was torn with dismay.

"No. I warn you. Spare me and yourselves that. It's not pretty, what you'd see."

"Take it off," the girl repeated.

"I hide it," Garth cried. "For years — Listen, you. If you don't let me keep a little pride you can do your dirty work without me."

The leader put his hand on Garth's shoulder.

"Now, now," he said soothingly. "Depend on it, Simmons, if you're all right we don't want to hurt your feelings."

"All right!" Nora mocked. "And I tell you there's a cop here. And you know as well as I he's the only one. You're crazy, Slim."

"Good thing one of us is then," the leader sneered. "If this isn't Simmons we're out of the running for to-night anyway. If it is, what do we gain by making a show of him? That's what I was going to propose. Only one of us need look."

"That'll do," Nora agreed. Well! Who?"

"George here was anxious."

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"Look yourself," George answered. "I'm no dime museum fiend."

Suddenly Garth arose.

"Maybe the lady—" he croaked. "She's so set on it. A pleasant sight for ladies."

Nora flushed angrily.

"I'll call that bluff."

She waved the others back towards the end of the room.

"And be quick about it," she said to Garth.

Garth caught the expressions of the others. He noticed their ready hands. While his fingers rose to the fastenings of the gray mask he turned slowly and faced Nora.

For a moment he hesitated. Even after all he had seen he shrank from forcing on the girl the responsibility of tossing him to those waiting hands. He was tempted to spare her that, to confess himself to the others. But the stamping of her foot, the tone of her voice, impatient, commanding, decided him.

"Hurry, I say! There's no way out."

So, holding her with his eyes, he slipped the gray mask aside.

He saw her stare while the angry color left her cheeks. But at first her expression did not alter. It seemed to him a long time before terror twisted her face, before she screamed. He watched her cower back, crossing her arms over her eyes; watched her fall against the wall, where she bent, trembling.

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Garth replaced the mask, shrugging his shoulders, and turned to the others. The leader laughed lightly, with satisfaction.

"Never dreamed it was as bad as that, Simmons. You're right. Don't blame you, but you must see we had to be sure."

Garth nodded. He sat down. Let the girl speak. Until then he would play his part.

"Looks as if the stool lost a leg somewhere," he said.

He studied Nora. Her face hidden, she remained shrinking against the wall. Still she did not speak.

George stepped to her side and put his arm around her.

"Forget it, little girl. Wish I'd looked for you."

She shook his arm off and pushed him away.

"Forget it yourself, George," the leader warned. "You ought to have learned that won't go with Nora."

"She knows I'm no butterfly," George answered sullenly.

His touch had aroused her. She straightened and turned wild eyes on the gray mask. Garth waited then for her to betray him, but she only stammered a little.

"He's right. A pleasant sight for ladies! Boat — must have thrown them off the track."

She laughed hysterically. She sank on the end of the bench.

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Garth was surprised, now that the strain was broken, not to experience any exceptional relief. In spite of the game's vital stakes it had interested him chiefly because of the various effects it might have had on Nora. Yet it had yielded him no key to her presence here, to her disgraceful marketing of her father's confidence, to her assumption at home of black robes and grief, or, finally, to her apparent decision to let the night's work continue in spite of his presence. Probably she hoped he could not get help until the job had been done. Or — and the thought struck him with the shameful tingling of a slap — perhaps she thought he would let the others go rather than capture and convict the woman he had craved in marriage.

He pressed his lips together. He beckoned to Slim. He took the whip in his own hands.

"Is the safe here? Are we going to spend the rest of the night on this boat? If the cops are awake it isn't wise."

"All right," the leader said. "George, you and Nora and Simmons wait here. The rest of you start out."

The studious-appearing youth, the tramp, the dandy, and the elderly man filed through the door and silently closed it. The leader spoke to Garth quickly.

"George will unlock the safe without any trouble. He's the best in the business. Your job's to open it and handle what you find without blowing the lot of us to everlasting dirt."

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Garth stirred uneasily.

"Explosives!" he said. "I see why you wanted me."

"The pay's high," Slim answered. "The fellows that are after this stuff don't trust diplomatic talk. Everybody wants it if only to be sure that nobody else gets it, for they claim that the nation that has it, could make a league of all the rest look like Tod Sloan fighting Dempsey. The inventor thinks Uncle Sam ought to have it, if anybody, but he's been holding off. It's new, and he's either afraid of it himself, or he thinks he can perfect it."

"He's afraid of it," Nora breathed. "He told me it was a sin to invent it."

"The point is, Simmons," the leader said, "can you handle the stuff with a degree of safety after you have read the formula? A man of your experience —"

"I am not afraid to tackle it if I can see the formula," Garth answered quietly.

"Say, Simmons," George put in with a wry face, "if there's anything phony about your education, drop off here."

Garth fingered a frayed sheet of white paper.

"I am not afraid if I can see the formula," he repeated.

The leader turned to Nora.

"You're sure there's some of the stuff in the safe with the formula? The foreigner wouldn't dicker without a sample to analyze."

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"I saw the formula and the sacks put in the safe to-night," she answered.

George shook his head.

"Nora, you're a wonder."

"No wonder," she said contemptuously. "Nothing but hard work. An imbecile could have made friends with the housekeeper, but it took drudgery to get at the old man. I won't waste that. If there's any slip —"

The leader glanced at the gray mask.

"That's up to Simmons now," he said.

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CHAPTER III

IN THE STEEL ROOM

GARTH'S fingers played with the piece of white paper.

"You haven't told me where the house is," he said.

The moment the leader had answered Garth was standing on the bench. He waved his arm. Suddenly he blew out the lamp.

"On the dock!" he stammered to the darkness.

"A noise!"

As the others crept to the door he scratched rapidly and silently with a match on the piece of paper the location of the house, the nature of the job, and an appeal for help. When he was through he heard the others coming back.

"If your nerves jump like that, Simmons, what a chance we'll have!" George said. "Not a sign. Light up."

Garth struck the match and relighted the lamp.

"I never take unnecessary risks," he said simply.

Nora, he knew, would guess that his excess of caution was a police trick. His eyes sought her anxiously as the lamp flamed, but she gave no sign. After a moment she whispered:

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"Let's start. It — it frightens me here."

The leader opened the door.

"It's time," he said. "They're asleep in the house by now."

They followed him, threading obscure spaces and alleyways to the unlighted end of a street which deployed into a stone mason's yard, and always Garth asked:

"Will she whisper my life away to the others?"

A taxicab waited there. Garth manœuvred so that he had a seat by the window. He let his hand, which clenched the piece of paper, dangle through. Such policemen as he saw were indifferent until crossing One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street he noticed one who looked straight at the cab. He let the paper flutter from his fingers, but he did not dare glance back to see if the policeman had picked it up.

The cab halted in a dark side street off Lexington Avenue. A man stepped from the shadows and waved his hand. They alighted and walked with an unconcern that surprised Garth to the servants' entrance of a large house. This Nora unlocked. They entered and waited in the alley while one by one the four from the boat slipped through after them.

Garth understood what these numbers meant. In order that Nora, George, and he might accomplish their task undisturbed, these men would bear to each inmate of the house chloroform, or, under necessity, something more permanently silencing.

Walking heavy-hearted through the alley at

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Nora's heels, one last saving possibility occurred to Garth. Could this be another police trick? It was likely that the inspector had denied him his full confidence. Could Nora be on the same errand as himself, working for her father?

When she had unlocked the house door he found himself brushing against her in the hall. Impulsively he reached down and clasped her hand. But her hand was like ice. She snatched it away. In her action and the sharp intake of her breath he felt his doubts resolved.

Then he was flung into a stealthy, sure, and dreadful whirlpool of action. He heard feline movements on the stairs, a muffled thud in the darkness ahead, from the second floor a shrill cry, all at once strangled and beaten back into the heavy silence.

He waited, panting. Upstairs someone rapped sharply three times. A pocket lamp flashed ahead, throwing a white shaft against finely-grained mahogany.

A hand in the shaft signalled him, and he crept forward until he stumbled over a round, inert mass which lay just outside the room where the white light searched the mahogany.

The light, wavering around to greet him, disclosed the obstacle. It was a man, deftly bound, and bandaged about the mouth, the ears, the eyes.

"Shut the door."

Garth closed the door on this disturbing vision.

The mahogany formed the doors of a large and very wide cabinet. George knelt in front of this,

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inserting slender, gleaming tools in the lock with the adroitness of a watchmaker. To one side Nora crouched, playing the light on his illicit undertaking.

George opened the doors and nodded to Garth. The light glowed now on the sleek, steel belly of a safe; and, as Garth, a trifle confused, reached out a steadying hand, he realized that the walls of this room were of steel, too. The cold, uncompromising feel of the metal was another warning to him. His only chance was that the safe might balk George for some time.

The man's first words, indeed, encouraged this hope.

"May take a little time," he muttered. "Might's well be comfortable, Simmons. Nora, toss us a couple of those sofa pillows."

Nora reached to the divan behind her and passed the cushions to George. He arranged one to his satisfaction before raising his hand to the combination.

"Plenty of time, isn't there?" Garth croaked anxiously.

"Ought to be," George answered. "Everything's covered now. Didn't expect to find the watchman where we did though. If he hadn't been half asleep — Nora, maybe you doped him at supper."

The girl gave no sign. She remained crouched at the side. She was like an animal, ready to spring at the first alarm.

Garth was aware of an unusual tension himself.

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It was not quite the suspense he had forecasted. Perhaps this sharing of criminal labor for the first time accounted for its nature. He appreciated the amount of courage demanded. He received, as it were, George's disturbing point of view of the moment.

Garth had caught a new stammering quality in the man's voice. He wondered at the perspiration which bathed his face in spite of the comfortable temperature of the room. He studied the shoulders, squared as for an attack, momentarily expected. Only the fingers at their facile work displayed no emotion.

Garth questioned if George always worked under this strain. Did any of the responsibility rest with this room? Since his first entrance over the prostrate form of the watchman, since his first touch of those unyielding walls, he had himself experienced a distaste for the apartment. This may have been accounted for in part by that single, brilliant shaft of light, which, illuminating the nest of this perilous booty, deepened the shadows elsewhere.

Garth could make out little. His eyes failed to explore the corners, succeeded only in reaching the divan and one or two easy chairs — furniture altogether incongruous in a chemist's laboratory.

Although the water streamed from George's face, he saw the man shiver. It started an expository train of thought. The last time this job had been attempted Kridel had been killed — in this house.

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almost certainly in this room. He recalled the superstitious fears of many criminals. Perhaps that accounted in a degree for the other's bared nerves.

"May take time," George jerked out again. "If I could only use a drill and a touch of nitro."

He whistled softly.

"None of that rough business here. Good Lord, Simmons, don't let that stuff go off."

Nora leaned forward.

"Scared, George?"

The question brought fire.

"Show me anybody else who'd do this stunt with more nerve."

"Slim must think a lot of you to put you at it twice."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Didn't you fall down on it last time?"

"Ask Slim," he said shortly. "This is the time I'm interested in, and if we pull it off —"

He reached over, tapping the mahogany with ritual precaution.

"If we pull it off, Nora, you're going to quit fooling with me. I've dangled a long time, and we'll have plenty of money then."

Physical greed for a moment drove the uneasiness from his eyes.

"Maybe, when I get the door open, you'll give me that kiss I've been waiting for."

Garth felt shame that he had the impulse to risk his mission for this woman he should have loathed. He wanted to take the burly, glistening throat be-

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tween his hands. He controlled himself with an effort. But he could not experience for the girl that just loathing.

She had altered subtly. At George's question her form had lost its alertness and had assumed the unyielding lines of a somnambulist; and her voice had the colorless tone of one who speaks out of a dream.

"Maybe when you get it open, George. Time enough to think of that then. I'm not so sure you'll open it. I'm not so sure of your nerve."

"Wait and see," he said. "You're a pretty one to talk about nerve. You look as though you'd seen a ghost."

She sank back in a heap. She screened her face with her hands. George stared.

"Now what —"

"Don't say that, George," she whispered. "Not here. Ever since I've been in this room — it — it doesn't feel right."

She trembled.

"Hurry! I'm afraid here."

"Hold the light up," he said roughly. "What's the matter with you? This isn't a graveyard."

He resumed his manipulation of the knob. Garth noticed that from time to time he glanced quickly over his shoulder at the somber corners of the room.

Nora had, to a certain extent, startled Garth. Her barely audible words still breathed disquietingly in his ears. They had been like a bow drawn across a string too tightly stretched.

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She kept her face hidden now while George worked. The only sound was the muffled clicking of the balls in the combination; the only light, the shaft from the lamp which she held unsteadily. The thought of the steel walls added to the oppression of the air. Garth breathed with difficulty. He fancied once that something moved behind the divan. George caught his start and demanded an explanation. He scolded querulously.

"Well," Garth croaked, "I agree with the lady. I don't like the room."

"I looked around," George said.

Nora lowered her arms.

"George," she said, "sometimes you can't see everything."

She straightened. That disquieting, colorless whisper came again.

"I know what it is. That cop was killed here, wasn't he?"

"What do I know about it?" he asked angrily.

She leaned closer and grasped his arm.

"Right here, George. And if he — It must have been just like this — this time of night — when he — George! Can't we turn on the lights?"

He swallowed hard.

"Why not send out a call for the patrol? What do you mean, if he —"

She shivered.

"I don't like places where people have died hard. That's what I felt when I came in here. But you — you're not afraid?"

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He turned momentarily from his work. He tried with indifferent success to fill his voice with challenge. Afterwards he looked up expectantly as though he was far from certain the challenge might not be accepted.

"Afraid! A man with a red heart afraid of dead ones! They never come back."

"Don't say that. I know. My mother told me such things. She was Italian. She knew. She saw. George, don't say that. It's like cursing the dead. And he lay right there, didn't he, George, between you and the safe? That's why Slim stayed outside. Maybe Slim killed him. I want to go, too. Let Simmons hold the lamp."

"No," George said. "That thing he wears isn't human company. You stay."

Garth wondered that in that fantastic light the girl's manner should set a cold anxiety rippling along his own nerves. He looked with an unnatural curiosity at the place which she had indicated.

Evidently she had yielded to an excess of terror. In spite of George's command she was trying to pass the lamp to Garth. It slipped from her fingers, and the white shaft circled swiftly downwards. She caught the handle before it reached the floor, but now the only light in the room was a narrow circle which bored into the carpet and exposed a dark, irregular stain.

Nora cried chokingly.

"Blood! George! That's his blood!"

Cursing, George reached forward, caught her

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arm, and swung the light away from this desolate reminder of tragedy.

"No wonder!" she whispered. "No wonder Slim didn't have the nerve to come back and do those same things. He'd have seen the man he'd killed between him and his work."

Garth could scarcely catch her voice.

"If I thought you had that much nerve, George, I might — I believe I might —"

She broke off abruptly. George stared at her, then turned back and fumbled for the knob.

"Try to keep the light steady, Nora."

There was a beseeching, child-like quality in his tone. He worked with difficulty now. His hands were no longer perfect mechanical tools. They wavered about the knob. His lips twitched. Perspiration thickened on his face. Garth saw drops glitter and fall slowly to the stained carpet.

Garth caught himself paradoxically wishing George to hurry. For a moment he was relieved when a new sound came from the combination, and George with a sigh turned the handle.

"Ready to open," he said.

He swung on Nora.

"Talk about Slim! Crying, Nora? Good Lord —"

"Don't, George," she said. "If I half close my eyes I can see him through my tears, lying here in the shadows. Can't you?"

He clasped his arms about her. He hid his eyes in her hair.

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"Hush," he said hoarsely. "And, while Simmons does his work, give me that kiss."

Garth's fingers reached out, then he thought of the frayed piece of paper possibly in the inspector's hands and already urging the night to a successful climax. This anguish, too, he must suffer. So he drew back profoundly shaken.

Nora, however, was protecting her lips.

"You promised —" George began.

"I said if you had that much nerve. But I know you haven't. Even if you had croaked him you wouldn't dare acknowledge it here. Why, George, you're kneeling where he lay."

He threw back his shoulders. He laughed demonstratively.

"What difference does that make? I'm kneeling to you. And let Slim rave. I'll give you your price. You needn't be ashamed to kiss me, Nora. It wasn't Slim. I did it. The cop jumped me from behind that sofa, and I let him have the knife."

He raised his lips expectantly.

Garth didn't understand at first. He only realized with a savage joy that their lips did not touch. Yet he questioned why the big man, instead of answering the temptation of that mouth, half-open and inviting, drooped backwards until he lay stretched on the floor.

George's cry in his ears aroused him, and he saw in the reeling, drunken shaft of light that blood flowed and joined the ancient stain in the carpet.

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He arose. He knew what that scream would unloose upon them.

Springing backward, he grasped the handle of the safe and opened the doors.

"Nora," he whispered. "Come here."

She obeyed him with mechanical precision; but when he took the lamp from her listless hand, turning it upward to examine her face, he read in her eyes awakening realization and horror.

He snapped off the light. Still grasping her hand, he seated himself on the floor with his back to the open safe. He drew her down. For a moment he thought she would resist, then she yielded and sank passively to the cushion at his side.

"Why?" she asked.

"They will be here," he said. "There is no way out except through that door which they will use. It is safer to wait here. Why don't they come?"

"They are careful," she whispered back. "They will come slowly. They will take no chances."

He felt the quick shaking of her body.

"I know what I have done," she said, "what I have done to you."

He realized that his hand still grasped hers. He released it gently.

"I understand a little," he answered, "but if you cared enough to accomplish this madness for him, you should have been even less kind to me than you were this afternoon."

"Perhaps," she answered. "Oh, I don't know.

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I don't know. I was so young. I loved him so much, and my father said his murderer would never be punished — justice must fail. Maybe it was my Italian blood, but I swore over his body the day they buried him that, if there was no other way, I would get justice for the poor boy. We were practically certain it was this gang. I said nothing to my father. Through a girl I had helped I met Slim. It pleased his vanity to have a spy at headquarters. I made him trust me. But I couldn't find out who — Yet sooner or later I knew the time would come. That's why I worked so hard for to-night, why I wouldn't let anything interfere, because I thought in this room — Well! You see — Listen!"

She breathed hard for a moment.

"Since I've known you I've doubted, but I couldn't turn back. You despise me, Jim, but in a way I have done good. I made them respect me. I have restrained them. I think, because I have been with them, I have saved lives. And always I had planned at the end to punish them as they deserved. But now — in a trap. We're like mice in a trap, Jim. I've done that to you. They'll find me out now, and what's behind the mask, too. They'll kill us both. They'll have to. Listen!"

"We'll make a fight of it, Nora," he said grimly. "No matter what I do, trust me."

"Hush!" she breathed. "I think the door is open."

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"I'm going to flash the light," he answered.

"No. I know they are here. I know they are in the room. I hear —"

He snapped the button. The white shaft pierced the darkness. Nora had been right. Slim and three others with ready revolvers were half way across the room. Garth put his finger to his lips.

"Sh — h," he said. "Wait! Don't come any closer."

"What's wrong, Simmons?" Slim whipped out. "Who called? That's George. What —"

"He got fresh with the girl," Garth answered.

Slim waited, taking in the details of the tableau, weighing Garth's words and manner, studying Nora's collapsed figure and its proximity to Garth's.

"You're bluffing, Simmons," he said at last. "I'm after facts now. Toss up your hands."

He raised his revolver, aiming at Garth's body. Nora gave a little cry. Garth laughed.

"You don't quite understand," he answered slowly, "and you're usually so observant, Slim. Look around. The safe is open behind us. Your bullets would clip through Nora and me into those sacks of army destroyers. What then? So you won't be surprised when I take my hands down."

He lowered them. He took his own revolver from his pocket.

"But," he went on, "there's nothing behind you but a steel wall, and if one of you comes a step closer I'll shoot."

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The four gathered together, whispering, inaudibly to Garth; but this tense grouping, this excited council warned him of their only possible answer.

"If you try to rush me," he cried, "or if you try to get out of the room, I'll turn the revolver on the safe and blow the whole lot of us to powder in this pleasant steel shell."

Slim turned, white-faced.

"You wouldn't have the nerve," he said. "After all, you're a bull."

"Just to show you," Garth answered quietly, "I'll put the whole pack on the table. You've called the turn, Slim. I'm that."

He snatched the mask from his face, and took a police whistle from his pocket. He raised it to his lips. He blew a call which he felt would penetrate beyond these steel walls. It was the first unrestrained sound the room had heard that night. It thrilled Garth. It was like a tonic. He laughed outright.

"No more fighting in the dark. Thank God!"

The four men stared with the helpless rage, the abandoned suffering of snared animals.

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CHAPTER IV

GARTH BUYS A BOUTONNIÈRE

GARTH wondered if relief would ever come. He was afraid that the slip of frayed white paper must have gone astray. Otherwise, it seemed to him, it would have brought help even before he had sounded his shrill alarm.

He glanced at Nora. She had placed her hand on his arm. She gazed at the open door.

"I thought I heard —"

Then Garth heard, too — a tramping in the house, a struggle outside the door, a voice whose roar betrayed excitement and triumph.

"Where's Garth?"

The door filled with men in uniform.

Nora covered her face with her hands and turned away. With a start Garth grasped the reason. Planning vaguely, he arose and leaned over the prostrate figure of George. The man breathed. The wound was in the shoulder and appeared of little real consequence. He straightened to find the inspector standing over him with a look of pleasure. It hurt Garth to think of that expression's vanishing for one of unbelief and revolt.

"This fellow will stand his trial," he said.

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He added gently:

"For the murder of Joe Kridel. It was here, you know."

The inspector puffed.

"Garth, I'm proud of you."

His eye caught the figure of Nora, crouched against the safe. His voice grew hard and business-like.

"Bring that woman here."

Slim, bound and at the door, laughed.

Garth grasped the inspector's arm.

"Don't," he said. "Don't bother about her. Let her go."

But the inspector strode to the safe, raised Nora, and drew her hands from her face.

He gasped and leaned heavily against the divan. All at once he appeared old.

Garth sprang to his side. He knew the inspector must not speak now.

"I'll tell you," he cried. "You have to thank Nora as much as me."

He glanced at the girl.

"That is, we put it over together. It was a winning combination, but we didn't have the nerve to put you wise."

The color rushed back to Nora's cheeks, but the inspector's face did not alter. He looked doubtfully from one to the other. At last he seemed to gather his emotions in a volley of wrath for Garth.

"You dragged a woman in this! You ought to

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be horsewhipped. Dragging my daughter into this hell!"

Garth took the girl's hand.

"Cheer up, chief," he said, "because if you and she would only let me I'd drag her into a lot worse than that."

He turned to her anxiously. There were tears in her eyes. He questioned if they had sprung from pity for him. She touched his hand. He looked away, for the quick pressure expressed only thanks, and a friendship troubled by his persistence.

During the next few days Garth saw little of Nora, meeting her only once or twice by chance in her father's office. He was not inclined, indeed, to urge a more intimate opportunity. He had let her see rather too much of his heart, and he shrank from an appearance of seeking advantage from her gratitude.

That gratitude existed abundantly, and the inspector shared it. The affair of the gray mask had altered a good deal for Garth. It had placed him all at once apart from his fellows in the bureau. The newspaper publicity, which, unlike most of his kind, he would have preferred to avoid, had swept his reputation far beyond the boundaries of his own city. He acknowledged a benefit in that. Such notoriety might deter the desire for revenge of any of the friends of Slim and George who remained at large.

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A very real danger for Nora and himself lay there. It created, too, a tie that the inspector visualized with an increasing friendliness and confidence.

"If Slim and George go to the chair," the big man said on one of those mornings when Garth had stumbled into Nora in the office, "you two are probably safe enough. With those birds salted away the weaker brothers aren't likely to take any wild chances, at least until the thing has been pretty well forgotten."

Apprehension clouded his sleepy eyes.

"But, young people, if Slim and George escaped conviction or managed a getaway, I'd look for a new first-class detective, and —"

He took Nora's hand and studied her face, whose dark beauty remained unafraid.

"I guess I'd need another daughter, which I couldn't very well have."

He laughed brusquely.

"Slim and George are tight enough now, so why borrow trouble."

Garth saw the foreboding of his chief's eyes turn to curiosity, a trifle groping.

"Wish you'd kept out of it, daughter."

"Don't scold," she laughed. "You did enough of that the other night."

"I'm not," he grumbled, "I'm only wondering where you got the nerve, and the brains."

"Some from you, father."

"Not as much as all that. I guess your mother

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gave you a little that we hum-drum New Yorkers don't quite understand."

"If," Garth said, "anything develops, "you'll have to send Nora away."

"If there's time," the inspector agreed.

He turned back to his papers, shaking his head.

It is, perhaps, as well, when one fears, that the march of routine brings new and destructive demands. It was only a few days afterwards that Garth and Nora were involved in events that drove their minds for the time from the threat, which they should never have quite lost sight of. Yet the Elmford murder didn't leave room in one's mind for much else.

On the afternoon before that tragedy Garth, leaving headquarters, made an unaccustomed purchase. Not long ago such affectation would have appealed to his sturdy, straightforward mind of a detective as trivial, possibly unmasculine. He reddened as he handed his ten cents to the shapeless Italian woman whose fingers about his coat lapel were confusingly deft. He had no illusions as to the source of this foppish prompting. The inspector had called him in and told him that Nora would welcome him at the flat for dinner that evening. The event appeared a milestone on the amorous path he sought to explore hand in hand with the girl. He realized his desired destination was not yet in view, but such progress required a deviation from the familiar — some peculiar concession to its significance. So he turned away from the cheap sidewalk stand, wear-

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ing, for the first time in his life, a flower in his button hole — a rose of doubtful future and unaristocratic lineage.

Before following Garth with his blushing decoration it is serviceable to know what happened at Elmford.

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CHAPTER V

WHAT HAPPENED AT ELMFORD

THAT night on the edge of winter it was thoroughly dark when Dr. John Randall left New York for his Long Island home. Trev-ing had unexpectedly detained him at the club. The interview had evidently projected more than the unforeseen, for Randall's habitual calm, which car-ried even to his hours of relaxation a perpetual flavor of the professional, was suddenly destroyed by the color and the lines of a passionate inde-cision. He crossed the Queensborough bridge and threaded the Long Island city streets with a reckless disregard of traffic which probably went undisci-plined only because of the green cross on the radia-tor of his automobile.

His house, although just within the city limits, had an air, particularly under this wan starlight, remote and depressing. It stood in wide grounds not far from the water. Heavy trees, which clus-tered near, appeared to shroud it.

The doctor, scarcely slackening speed, swung his car through the gateway and glided up the drive. At the turn the house rose before him, square, frowning, black. It was only after a moment that a nebulous radiance from a curtained window up-

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stairs defined itself as light. Usually there was much light and the companionable racket of a busy household.

Randall's hands trembled while he arranged the levers and shut off the engine. Yet the radiance, at last, was somewhat reassuring.

He sprang out, and nearly running, stumbling a little, climbed the steps, crossed the verandah, and pushed the electric button. From far away the response echoed as through an empty house. No sound of hurrying feet followed it. Randall, after waiting for a moment, took out his latch-key and entered.

Because of his impatience he didn't stop to fumble for the switch. Instead he flung his hat haphazard through the darkness, felt his way across the hall, and climbed the stairs.

"Bella!" he called.

Immediately the relieving answer came:

"Here — in my dressing-room, John. Why are you so late?"

He leant weakly against the wall.

"I was detained. What's the matter?"

"Why don't you come in?" she asked.

He straightened and opened the door. The light, shining upon his face, showed it still scarred by anger and indecision. The relief of finding his wife at home and safe was not, then, wholly curative.

He closed the door behind him and stared at her, lying in a reading-chair, a book open on her knees,

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her dark and lovely face upraised to him, expectant, questioning, a trifle startled.

"Where are all the servants?" he demanded.

She stirred. The youthful fluency of her body in the mauve dressing gown must have impressed itself upon the excited man by the door.

"I had to let myself in. I — Not a light. It frightened me."

"You've forgotten," she answered. "We talked it over a week or so ago, and I thought you had agreed. Ellen's wedding. Naturally they all wanted to go. I had an early dinner and packed them off. But I counted on you. I was growing afraid, all alone in the house. What kept you?"

"Old Mrs. Hanson — at first. She's very ill. I should really have stayed the night. I went to the club for a bite —"

He broke off. He walked closer, looking down into her eyes which did not quite meet his.

"At the club — I knew I must come home tonight. I — I sent your cousin, Tom Redding, to Mrs. Hanson."

Her eyes wavered even more.

"Why? That isn't like you to — to turn a critical case over to another man. I could have managed. Anyway, you'd forgotten about my maid's wedding. So it wasn't that. What — what happened at the club?"

She shivered for a moment uncontrollably.

"John! What's the matter? Why do you glare at me like that? Why do you look so — so —"

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